

Becoming Silhouettes

by rhiannononthemoon

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty

Chapter 1 of 10

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Prologue

Two pairs of booted feet bent blades of dry, brittle grass as they trod out of the dense forest into a glade conspicuously absent of life. Not only had the grass died, patches of clover, tufts of dandelion, and one thistle, as forlornly brown as the dusty ground, populated the little clearing. Even the few jagged rocks that poked out of the once lush grass looked malnourished, and that was quite a feat for stone. The only thing that seemed to have survived the localized blight was an unassuming ring of small pallid mushrooms.

"Merlin, does this place reek," one voice proclaimed with that particular mixture of disgust and awe that only a man in his late twenties could produce. He nudged the body of a black rat, desiccated and shrunken, with the toe of his boot. "It's worse than when you left that pair of dirty socks at the back of your locker."

"Very funny," his companion said in a tone that was not amused. He pulled a sack from a pocket in his Auror's uniform and guided the body of the rat into it with a non-verbal levitation spell.

The first man, tall, pale and freckled with a shock of red hair, eyed him pityingly, shaking his head as he watched his friend tuck the rat into another pocket. "I hope you don't forget *that* in your locker." The other man only sighed, an irritated sound that whistled through his lips. "Come on, Harry," the redhead complained loudly, scratching at the back of his neck where he was sure one of the miniature dragons that passed for the Forbidden Forest's mosquitoes had just extracted a pint of blood, leaving a welt the size of a Snitch.

"We were sent here to do a job, Ron, not play silly buggers on the Ministry's time."

"This isn't a job. This is bloody *busy work*. Couldn't Hagrid have done this?" Stomping into the clearing, Ron glared into the forest as if it had sent him to the clearing just to make his life more dull. "A *job* would be tracking down a Dark wizard, not bagging dead rats or taking statements from old widows who think their cats are possessed by Voldemort." He spoke the name without flinching, but neither man noticed.

The order to investigate this section of the Forbidden Forest had been initiated by a wide-range Dark Detector, several of which had been set up in the Forbidden Forest after Voldemort had camped there over a decade ago. The devices were unreliable at best, having once sent several Aurors on an adrenaline-packed, low-speed wild goose chase literally. However, as the current Minister for Magic's motto was "rather safe than sorry," a couple of Aurors were assigned to take a look. Harry and Ron had drawn the short straw.

"Some people would consider the lack of Dark wizards a good thing," Harry said mildly as he stepped into the ring of mushrooms, careful not to disturb any of the sickly white caps. Crouching down, he gave the fairy ring a close examination with narrowed green eyes and a small grimace. They were ugly at a primal, visceral level. Had he been asked, Harry would have been at a loss to describe exactly *how* they were repulsive. He only knew that they disgusted him.

"Right, like I'll be able to pull one of the birds at the Bending Spoon with an engaging story of how I took mushroom samples."

"Watched *me* take mushroom samples," Harry corrected him as he levitated a mushroom into another bag, and Ron snorted rudely. "You have to admit that this dead clearing is strange. Can't you just make something up? You have before."

"Says the bloke with the live-in girlfriend. *My sister*, I might add," Ron said with a bite to his tone. Having heard that dig many, many times, Harry did not feel the need to respond. Ron was at his most bitter between girlfriends and during nookie droughts. However, Ron did have a point: Auror work had gotten less and less dangerous (or exciting, depending on whom you asked) since the last of the Death Eaters and their supporters had either been sent to Azkaban or quietly faded into the background. Harry didn't particularly mind; he had had enough excitement during Voldemort's rise and fall. Ron, however, was restless and bored, a volatile combination for a strapping young man of twenty-nine with women to seduce. Sometimes, Harry wished that Ron and Hermione could have made it work, but it had been a relief to everyone when the constantly bickering pair had finally called it quits.

"If I say that a wild Hippogriff attacked us and I fended it off with my bare hands, would you corroborate?" Ron asked as he gave the mosquito bite another good scratch.

Harry grunted noncommittally and, using a fresh bag as makeshift gloves, plucked a hank of dead grass. "What about your wand?"

"Oh, well, the Hippogriff would have kicked it out of my hand on one of its lunges to bite off my head... Do you think a duel would be more impressive?" Drawing his back straight and puffing out his chest, he brandished his wand in a practiced arc.

"I don't think... Ron, watch it!" Harry shouted as his friend trod on several of the mushrooms, crushing them under the heel of his boot as he dodged an imaginary spell. Unconcerned, Ron scraped his boot against the dead grass and swore as a small cloud of gray spores floated up from the ground. Backing away with a corner of his robe covering his mouth, Harry said, "Don't breathe that stuff; we don't know what it is."

"They're just mushrooms, Harry. They like dead things." Despite his words, Ron batted at the cloud that was drifting toward him like a swarm of minuscule gnats. "Let's get out of here."

Nodding, Harry led the way out of the clearing into the Forbidden Forest, smiling as Ron hastened out of the clearing pretty quickly for one unworried. Neither Auror noticed the new mushrooms push out of the ground to replace the old.

Chapter 1 Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty

Hermione Granger stared hard into the mirror, examining the skin at the corners of her eyes for the first signs of crow's feet. She had always thought that she would turn thirty with grace and poise. Instead, as the milestone approached, she found the onus of her third decade settling on her shoulders like a sodden, wool mantel and had caught herself more than once looking for wrinkles and gray hairs.

Much like she was doing now.

She blinked and leaned away from the mirror. Rationally, she understood that the accoutrements of approaching middle age hit witches in their sixth or seventh decades and that she had no real reason to fear a slowed metabolism, slackening and thinning skin, lapses in memory, or an increase in the chance of down-syndrome babies for many more years. However, the Muggle notion had been drilled into her at a young age. Her mother nearly had a nervous breakdown on her thirtieth birthday. Hermione had been five and had been scarred for life. As a result, while her appearance hadn't meant much to her in her teens and early twenties, it had become increasingly important as her thirties loomed on the horizon.

In retrospect, especially when she was on a wrinkle-hunt, she supposed that her choice of career might not have been the best decision. She wasn't sure that it had even *been* a decision more a natural progression from a frustrating job to an innovative, largely unexploited field that would make her lots of money. Lots. What choice had there been, really?

It had started innocently enough. As a young Healer-in-training, Hermione had worked the Magical Accidents ward at St. Mungo's. One afternoon, a hag who had suffered a disfiguring hex had asked her to adjust her chin after Hermione had finished Charming her features back into place. Remembering the fiasco with her own teeth, she had obliged the old witch. Hermione had modified a charm on the spot to shorten her jutting jaw to a neatly rounded chin, removing the warts for good measure. The witch had been so pleased that she had asked her to do her long, hooked, slightly green nose as well.

"Give me a Verdandi Zabini," the witch had told her, referring to the famously beautiful mother of her old schoolmate, Blaise Zabini. Two hours and several permanent Transfigurations later, the hag had walked out of the Magical Accidents ward of St. Mungo's a handsome witch. Her new nose proudly held high, she hadn't made it out of the ward before Hermione's superior had hit on her.

"I can make money doing this," Hermione had thought as she had listened to her supervisor deliver one of the worst pick-up lines she had heard that year. She had turned out to be right.

The wizarding world had not yet caught on to the idea of Cosmetic Transfiguration. Her private practice had started out slow at first, many witches and wizards being offended by the idea, but she now had a waiting list over two years long and a clutch of minions working under her. All of her body Transfigurations and Charms were of her own creation. Other witches and wizards had tried to jump on Hermione's coattails with their own brands of spells, but Hermione's were inarguably the best.

For people to believe that she could make them beautiful, Hermione had to be beautiful herself. She took pride in the fact that she had not magically fixed anything about herself since her teeth. She *had* learned to dress well, manage her hair and apply cosmetics, and had a stringent skin-care regimen developed for her by Brown and Longbottom Cosmetics. Being beautiful was *hard work*.

And, on occasion, attracted attention from the wrong sorts of people.

She sighed, turning to glance through the one-way window in her office door. Yes, he was still in the hall, looking suave and dapper as he chatted up one of the nurses, all the while keeping an eye on her door.

Most women would have swooned at the sight of his lean form artfully posed for best viewing, melted as he graced them with a straight toothed, white smile and itched to run their fingers through his thick mane of pale hair.

Hermione was not one of those women.

She remembered the sour, rude boy who had insulted and belittled her through school, disparaging her status as a Muggle-born and generally making her life unpleasant. The aftermath of the war had seen a more subdued Draco Malfoy. That had lasted only for as long as it took for his early-twenties male libido to kick in. Based on the tabloid

stories covering her former classmate's exploits and the centerfold of a shirtless, oiled and ripped Malfoy in last year's Witch Weekly, he had interpreted the decline of pureblood politics to mean that half-bloods and Muggle-borns were now open season, and he had some catching up to do (not that Hermione had actually *read* the stories or ogled the sexually suggestive movements of the magical centerfold).

Hermione started as her eyes met Malfoy's through the window before she remembered that he couldn't see her. However, he was *looking right at her*. Ugh.

She was pretty sure that he had followed her up from the first floor lobby where his mother had been booking a Face Tightening (appear twenty years younger in one hour!). Hermione was now slightly less sure that he hadn't recognized her. She had changed a great deal in appearance, and he could have only caught sight of her back. Her name, however, was carved into a beautiful brass plaque on her door, just above the words "President and Founder." He must have seen *that*.

Yet he was still loitering outside her office. Ridiculous.

What was even more ridiculous was that she was hiding from Draco Malfoy in her own office instead of ignoring him like the detritus he was and going about her business. Rising to her feet to balance expertly on her fashionable heels, she smoothed her hands down her dove-gray pencil skirt and straightened the collar of her white silk blouse. She took a brief moment to examine her tidy chignon for stray hairs. None stuck out, nor were gray. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, exiting her office with the stateliness of a queen, her eyes determinedly fixed away from the man who was now gliding toward her like jewel-collared jungle cat.

Now *there* was a suggestion to send in to Witch Weekly: a shirtless, oiled and ripped Malfoy wearing *collar*...

"If it isn't Hermione Granger," he said with a smirk as oily as his chest had been.

"Mr. Malfoy. I didn't see you there," she lied smoothly.

His smirk widened into a lopsided grin that she had a hard time not calling charming. "Come now, we're old school chums. Call me Draco."

"Chums."

"Something of the sort."

"Hardly."

"How about I buy you a drink and we rectify that?" His cool, gray eyes were assessing her as his smile upped in wattage. A flush of warmth began to creep up her neck, and it took a moment to find her voice. She hoped he didn't notice.

"I think not," she said with as much disgust as she could muster around the fluttering in her stomach. It had been a while since such a handsome man her own age had openly flirted with her, and it disturbed her how quickly her body hummed at a little attention from the opposite sex. Alright, a *fine specimen* of the opposite sex, if one only took his body into consideration. She wondered briefly if his centerfold was still tucked into her underwear drawer and if it might need some airing.

Being an entrepreneur, inventor and president of a flourishing company might be excellent for the vault, but currently, her personal life left something to be desired, namely an existence. Oh, she had dated after her breakup with Ron, and she had explored the new and exciting world of her own sexuality with the same intensity and determination with which she approached any subject of study. As she climbed the ranks of the wealthy and powerful (the two went hand-in-hand), she gained a reputation for brilliance beyond bookwormishness. Fewer and fewer men (the respectable kind, anyway) would approach her or respond to her advances. So, the amount of sex she got was inversely proportionate to her bank account and appearance. What the bloody fuck? She could hardly blame her body for revving up in anticipation.

A blond eyebrow quirked. Malfoy slid long-fingered, manicured hands into the pockets of his expertly tailored, black trousers. His cotton shirt was a deep blue that reflected in his eyes and had a faint sheen that spoke of quality. Unbuttoned as it was, she could catch a glimpse of collarbone and smooth chest if she chose to look. Which she didn't. As sexually frustrated as she might be, Draco Malfoy wasn't an option.

"I think you misunderstand me," he said after a moment and flicked an errant lock of long, blond hair over his shoulder with a toss of his head. "My intentions are purely professional."

Hermione experienced an acute moment of embarrassment, but smoothed her features to bland amusement and attempted to save face. "Of course they are; what else would they be? That doesn't mean I'm interested."

"Ms. Granger!" a strained, male voice called down the hallway. Hermione dismissed Malfoy to follow the voice, spotting one of her nurses, a Mr. Perry-something (she would have to check his nametag again), anxiously awaiting her attention.

"I'll be right there," she said and then turned back to Malfoy, intending to send him off as rudely as she could manage, and yet still seem civil. He didn't give her a chance, extending a business card between two perfect fingers.

"My associate is a manufacturer and distributor of the finest Potions in wizarding Britain. Send me a note, and we'll discuss a possible arrangement."

Hermione raised a disdainful eyebrow and took the card gingerly, as if it had been contaminated with Dragon Pox. "I've already got one, but... thanks," she said, emphasizing the last word with as much distasteful condescension as she could muster, which was quite a lot after heading her own company for the last five years.

Malfoy winked at her.

Bastard.

Tucking the card into a pocket into a skirt pocket, fully intending to throw it in the first rubbish bin she found, she stalked toward the nurse, who was fidgeting as he glanced between his boss and the nicely dressed man who was now eyeing her bum.

"You know that they have Healers at St. Mungo's who specialize in this kind of thing," Hermione said irritably as she used her wand to prod at the livid rash that crawled up her ex-boyfriend's shins to his thighs, splayed across his chest and back, and continued the trek down his arms. Even his face had a scattering of the tiny, purplish welts, and she had little doubt that the parts of him still clothed would be similarly affected. He was running a fever: not dangerously high, but enough to give him the chills. She wondered snidely if it was putting a cramp in his social life.

Hermione, Ron, Harry and Nurse Perrysmithe (Hermione had checked his nametag) were crammed into the only examining room available, which really only fit two comfortably. Ron was perched on the gurney in his underpants, red-faced and miserable, while Harry, fully-clothed, stood to the side and as out of the way as he could manage. Perrysmithe hovered nervously at Hermione's elbow (she had that effect on the new staff), handing her whatever she asked for with a shaky hand.

"They're slammed our entire Auror division has this," Harry said, scratching the wheals on his neck. His were slightly larger, more red than purple, and several had clustered on his distinctive, lighting-bolt-shaped scar. "Whatever this is."

"The other Aurors didn't say?" Hermione asked, glancing up briefly. "Stop scratching; you'll make them bleed."

"The Healers at St. Mungo's couldn't tell them," Harry said, scratching the *airabove* the welts with an aggrieved grimace.

That statement made Hermione pause a moment. There were many highly competent Healers at that famed institution. The fact that no one recognized the cause of the

rash was disconcerting. "It looks like a pox of some sort. When did you first notice the symptoms?"

"Ron broke out a few days ago, and I started getting them the day before yesterday." At Hermione's accusing glance, he shrugged. "We thought they would go away. The rest of the Aurors came down with it shortly after I did."

"Any idea what might have caused it?" The boys exchanged a glance and shrugged. "Any other symptoms?" Another glance and shrug.

"It itches," Ron volunteered between chattering teeth.

Hermione sighed. She had been looking forward to going home early today. "I'll need you to tell me exactly what you've been doing for the last two weeks."

Draco sipped at his ridiculously expensive Firewhisky and tried not to show how pleased he was with himself. It was a state of being with which he was intimately familiar, for he didn't do things that didn't please him when he could possibly help it. He was fiercely intelligent and brilliantly sneaky (in his opinion), which also pleased him. So, feigning an air of boredom while trying to contain an explosion of self-satisfaction was old hat. This evening in particular, however, he had set in motion the chain of events that would bring about the impossible. He would accomplish the unachievable. He would possess the unattainable!

He would prove wrong one Severus Snape.

It wasn't that Uncle Severus was never wrong. Draco could name several instances in which he had been mistaken. Take the Elf-wine Incident, for instance. Draco, who had been raised on expensive, imported alcohol, had insisted that his godfather not drink two bottles on an empty stomach. The Potions master extraordinaire had dismissed his advice, confident that his age and experience had suitably hollowed his leg. To this day, the resultant massive hangover was still attributed to a twenty-four-hour stomach flu. Uncle Severus would not *admit* to being wrong, so therefore he wasn't, QED.

In *this* case, dear old Uncle Sev would have to concede defeat, and Draco planned to rub it into his face as ungraciously as he could.

It would be a daunting task to a lesser man, especially for one who often shared a living space with him, but Draco was up to it. He was primed. He was prepared. He had two hundred Galleons riding on it.

"Why are you so smug?" his dear uncle asked from the depths of the next leather chair, his black eyes flat pools of tar wreathed in the smoke from his equally ridiculously expensive cigar. "Stolen sweets from babies lately?"

Draco didn't bother to feel disappointed that Uncle Severus had seen through his airs. One did not survive twenty years as a spy without being able to size up one's companions. Granted, it had been a close call at the end. Draco allowed a grin to stretch his lips as he lounged back in his own leather chair. If he had been a cat, he would have had yellow feathers stuck to his lips. "In a way, I suppose so."

Tossing back the last of his Firewhisky, Draco touched the round of inlaid mahogany in the teak side table at his elbow, signaling another drink. It appeared without a sound on an agate coaster, his tab being automatically adjusted by the exorbitant price of the drink.

All the cigars and Firewhisky in this particular gentleman's club were expensive. One could buy similar smoke and beverages at other clubs for less, but this club offered the best privacy that money could buy, and for his uncle, privacy was priceless. The man loathed the general public on principle, many of his acquaintances with vehemence, and journalists most of all. Even more than a decade after the defeat of the Dark Lord, an aspiring, young reporter would occasionally get it into her head that she could unlock the mysteries of Severus Snape and his secret of Stopped Death or catch him pants-down in a torrid affair with his godson.

Draco had never heard anything more ridiculous! Even if Draco *did* swing that way, which he didn't, Uncle Sev would never be his type. He simply imposed on his uncle's less-than-goodwill by crashing at his pad between girlfriends. He had considered acquiring his own residence, but a hefty chunk of his earnings was going to help his parents, despite the fact that his father had thrown him out of the Manor for "dallying with filthy Mudbloods." Draco thought that if his father paid less attention to where he put his cock and more to the family affairs, then the Manor wouldn't be mortgaged and the Summer Estate sold at auction (war crimes were expensive). His father hadn't appreciated *that*, either.

This club was one of the extravagancies that Draco refused to relinquish. Each dark, cozy niche had its own fireplace (not connected to the Floo Network), furred rug, and sumptuously comfortable furniture. The niches were safe from prying eyes and ears and offered their occupants a respite from the rest of the world. For the gentleman who preferred a bit more intrigue, there were larger rooms where vast sums of money were lost and won at cards, dice or Mahjong. The only witches to be found in the club were in these rooms, granting the best tipping patrons winning smiles and good-luck tweaks on their ears. At the front of the club, a wizard could dine in opulence on the wizarding world's delicacies, from smoked mermaids' eggs on baguette to Phoenix a l'Orange. Only the cream of wizarding society was allowed membership, and Draco had very nearly lost his after the trials following the Dark Lord's defeat. It had been Uncle Sev's sponsorship that had kept him on the roster. Apparently, being instrumental in the routing of a megalomaniac Dark wizard and being the wealthy owner of several potions patents was more important than being descended from a long line of megalomaniac purebloods. It was one of many object lessons that Draco had taken to heart.

"Dare I ask?" Uncle Sev grumbled after the silence had stretched with Draco's grin. Flicking the tip of his cigar over a crystal ashtray, he glared into the fire. He never actually smoked the cigars; he lit them and let them burn until they extinguished, enjoying the scent of the tobacco but not the taste or damage to his palate.

"You are a paranoid old man," Draco said pleasantly.

"With reason. You are plainly up to something," his godfather snapped. "And I'm not old."

"You live like a castrated hermit."

"I again remind you that I am no longer your teacher and that the rules preventing me from transfiguring a student do not apply. Unless you'd *like* to spend more time as a ferret."

"A *grumpy* castrated hermit, then," Draco conceded, knowing full well that dear old Uncle Sev would not turn him into a ferret. Severus' wand hand twitched, and Draco had a squirming moment of doubt before the other man lifted his tumbler of Firewhisky to his lips with a small smirk.

Much had remained untouched about Severus: his long, hooked nose; black eyes; barbed tongue; and predilection for black, old-fashioned clothes among them. Yet, many things had changed. His temper had evened with prosperity, resulting in a cutting wit and wry sense of humor. With Draco's help (or as Severus put it, tiresome meddling), he had begun to take better care of himself. His hair had lost its greasy lankiness and had grown long and lustrous, and his teeth, though still crooked, had lost their yellow stains. A healthy diet (rabbit food) and morning walks (forced marches) had improved his complexion and physique, though little could be done about his small stature.

Though witches could smell his burgeoning Gringott's vault through brick walls, he remained so staunchly single that Draco had to wonder if Nagini's venom had had unfortunate *side effects*. Surely it wasn't the potion that Severus had used to sustain his life after her snakebite. It had occurred to Draco that he might still be mourning Lily Potter, but he simply couldn't relate. And he had no idea what that had to do with sex.

Severus waited until Draco was taking another sip of Firewhisky to say, "The state of my testicles is none of your business." Spluttering and choking, Draco dabbed at the Firewhisky that now dotted his shirt. It was blue, so it only left darker spots on already dark fabric, but now he would smell like booze until he Scourgified it. "Your devilry, however, is."

Draco regarded him calculatingly over the rim of his tumbler, as if he were not bursting with excitement at his little scheme. He supposed it wouldn't hurt to give the old man something to put him off his scent, something true and therefore deceiving. "I've acquired a new account."

"Acquired?" Severus asked suspiciously, familiar with Draco's exaggerations.

"All that is left is to draw up the contract and sign." With the experience of years of Occlumency, he kept Granger's face locked firmly behind the walls of his thoughts. It wouldn't do to spoil the surprise or his imminent victory with the leakage of incriminating thoughts. He also Occluded a brief meeting held in Nocturne Alley with two faceless thugs that would ensure that Granger *would* need a new Potions supplier. "We'll be meeting sometime next week. No need for you to be present."

His scowl twisting, Severus shot him a narrow look. Draco beat back his grin with a carefully contrived expression of bored indifference. "When and where?"

"Really, Uncle, there's..."

"Draco..." the man growled menacingly, and he capitulated with false resignation, internally cheering his own deviousness. Winning was so much more fun when the loser was present to witness his trouncing.

"Next Thursday at seven, Liliplut's."

"Very well." Severus levered himself out of the chair, stubbing out the cigar and tucking it into his pocket. With a formal nod at Draco, he swept out of the little room, his black robes billowing behind him. Suppressing a snicker, Draco fondly watched the ripple of black fabric as it disappeared through the door. In a day and age where the clean-cut lines of Muggle fashion had begun to infiltrate the wardrobes of the wealthiest and most powerful of wizarding society, Severus Snape still favored theatrics.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas ann1982 and thyme_is_a_cat, without whom none of my work would actually make it off my computer.

This fic has elements of Prompt 19 and Prompt 100. It probably isn't what the prompters had in mind, but I'm enjoying myself, and I hope you do too. The title comes from the song "We Will Become Silhouettes" by the Postal Service. It's a strange song, but fits. :)

For your reference, the text of the prompts:

19. Hermione has made her way rather successfully in the Wizarding World (own business, whatever). She has the clothes, more shoes than Imelda Markos, pretty blonds to give her a foot massage whenever she feels so inclined, and eligible wizards galore on her arm vying for her attention. But Hermione being Hermione wants someone special in

her life someone who is her intellectual equal and she knows just the wizard. Trouble is, he's living as a recluse (could be at Hogwarts but doesn't have to be) and has shunned the world. How does she manage to get Severus Snape out of his semi-monastic existence and to take an interest in her? (No magical compulsion of any kind allowed). Canon compliant would be good, but not essential.

100. "Love, Actually" inspired. Some witch is watching her wedding video and realizes that some wizard is CRAZY about her... Example: Hermione somehow gets into Severus's quarters at Hogwarts and finds PAGE AFTER PAGE, PICTURE AFTER PICTURE of herself in his rooms? Because he has been in love with her since forever, but he wasn't going to mess up her life by letting her know that? In the movie, the man says, "It's a 'self preservation thing actually.'" Use this in your story.

The Fine Art of Schmoozing

Chapter 2 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 2 The Fine Art of Schmoozing

"What do you mean, 'They have defaulted on our contract?' We signed for three years!" Hermione snapped at her administrator, who favored her with a long-suffering look over the tops of his half-moon spectacles.

"They have defaulted on our contract," he repeated. "Apparently, they can no longer handle our large orders and wish to concentrate on smaller clients."

"That doesn't make any sense." Squeezing her eyes closed, she pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to will away her newly forming headache. "They've never had a problem before." They would certainly have problems now. Oh, would they have problems. Hermione would see to it.

"Indeed," Mr. Quince said griggishly and unrolled the bottom of his scroll a few more inches, allowing the top to curl over itself. "However, we are now short on Anti-Swelling Solution, Complexismooth, and Engorgement Elixir, to name a few."

"Bugger."

"Quite. I have taken the liberty to contact Brewer and Brewer, Slug and Jiggers, and Moonshadow Solutions, but none has the inventory or personnel to take our account at this time."

Hermione winced and slouched deeper into her chair. Of all the things to happen now, she had to lose her Potions distributor. It wasn't enough that she had droves of Aurors marching through her doors led by her best friends so that she could take a look at their rashes for next to nothing. It also wasn't enough that four sleepless nights of research and experimentation had not disclosed the nature of the rash, nor its origins, and for all their training in gathering and analyzing evidence, none of the Aurors had been able to give her enough information to draw any educated guesses. Yesterday, she had had to have security remove two Aurors from her clinic after they had started a brawl over the attentions of one of her staff. Deplorable behavior, honestly!

"However, you have an appointment with a Mr. Draco Malfoy, the representative from Wyrn and Prince Brewing and Distribution, to discuss a new contract."

Groaning, Hermione let her head fall heavily to her desk. Of all the Potions distributors, it had to be him. Why hadn't she burned that business card instead of handing it to Quince? Because Quince was her scheduler, organizer and overall enforcer of sanity now that A New You Cosmetic Transfigurations had become too impossibly big for one person to manage. Quince made it possible for Hermione to continue doing what it was that she loved: research, inventing, and the more difficult Transfigurations and Charms. After two years of a working relationship, it still didn't cease to amaze her how effortlessly things were accomplished without her immediate supervision. Even had

she cloned herself, she couldn't have been happier.

"Wyrm and Prince?" Hermione mumbled, her voice muffled by the top of the desk and the locks of hair that had escaped from her fashionable twist. "What kind of a name is that?"

"You would have to ask Mr. Malfoy or Master Snape."

Hermione took a long, exhausted moment to absorb that piece of information. She had forgotten that Malfoy represented Prof... Master Snape's thriving Potions business. The last time she had seen him in the flesh had been when she thought he had died in a puddle of his own blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. The guilt of leaving him there for dead, only to learn later that he had taken a potion to preserve his life and was waiting for a Good Samaritan to help him, had haunted her for the first two years after the defeat of Voldemort. Oh, she had seen pictures of him in the *Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, and countless tabloid rags, but she hadn't ever worked up the courage to face him. To apologize.

"Will Master Snape be at the meeting?"

"Mr. Malfoy did not specify."

Groaning, she thumped her forehead against the desk until the rest of her hair tumbled free.

Harry Apparated to the steps of number twelve, Grimmauld Place with a sigh of relief, glad to be home after a long, tedious day at the Ministry. The Rash (and one could hear the capitalization of the word when it was spoken about the office) and accompanying fever had gotten so nasty that he had had to call in sick for several days, and his desk had become a veritable fortress of stacked papers as the work had piled. It hadn't helped that half of the Auror department, including Ron, had also stayed home to nurse their purple hives, so that unfinished paperwork simply lingered instead of being addressed by one's backup. He was just thankful that Ginny hadn't managed to contract the Rash. Yet.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed brightly as she entered the hallway, taking his Auror's mantle as he shrugged it off and hanging it neatly on the polished oak coat rack. Ginny had moved in last year, following her retirement from the Holyhead Harpies. Immediately thereafter, Grimmauld Place, the dark, dirty London house left to him by his late godfather, had had a facelift. Being her mother's daughter, Ginny had scoured the place, painted, redressed the windows, removed the house-elf heads (though he suspected that Hermione had had a hand in that), permanently silenced the vile portrait of Madam Black, and planted a small herb garden in the backyard. That's not to say that he and Ron hadn't touched the place while they had lived together as roommates, but Chudley Cannon posters a home does not make. "I've just put supper on the stove. We're having stew."

"Brilliant," Harry said, inhaling the savory smell with relish. Ginny had an ingrained need to feed him, and for a man who had spent his childhood starving, that was just fine by him.

"How was work?"

Harry pulled a face. "I'm up to my bollocks in paperwork. And someone nicked a sample I had gathered in the Forbidden Forest." He followed her into the basement kitchen, rolling his shoulders and stretching his neck as he spoke.

"Oh? What was it?"

"Mushrooms."

"Exciting."

"That's exactly what Ron said." Watching as Ginny retrieved the ladle and gave the stew a stir, Harry leaned against the new granite countertop and crossed one foot over the other. "The funny thing was, the thief took the mushrooms and left the bag. Probably forgot his lunch." Ginny scrunched her nose in distaste and Harry chuckled. There was very little about Ginny that he didn't adore. "I accidentally dumped the leftover spores on my robes, too."

"They will wash out."

Nodding, Harry hummed in agreement. "Any news from the family?"

Ginny glanced up and grimaced, though her eyes twinkled through the red fringe that hung in her face. A spattering of freckles danced across her nose and cheeks, contrasting against skin that was as smooth and pale as fresh milk. "Dad has the Rash. It seems to be spreading through the rest of the Ministry now, though it seems contained within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Bloody hell," Harry groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'll have to tell Hermione if she doesn't already know. Either way, it will hit the *Daily Prophet* any day."

Shrugging, Ginny said, "It's just a rash, and it starts to clear up eventually. Ron is almost pimple-free! At least the purple kind." Harry chuckled and gave his five-o'clock shadow, which still had a spattering of purple Rash, a good scratch as he sniffed the stew. With a noise of protest, Ginny shoved him away and gave him a nudge toward the stairs that would take him to the living room, which contained the only fireplace still connected to the Floo network. "Go Floo Hermione and keep your purple beard germs out of my cooking."

On his way out of the kitchen, Harry snagged a round of carrot from the cutting board and slouched up the stairs, still laughing. Ginny shook her head, smiling at his retreating back as she absently set down the ladle and scratched at her palm.

Hermione entered the trendy grille and bar named Liliput's wearing a falsely confident smile (though no one but Harry or Ron would have guessed) and a suit as trendy as the restaurant. She found that the better she dressed, the more powerful she felt, and she needed a good dose of courage this evening. If it were just Malfoy, then this meeting would go smoothly. If Master Snape were there, however...

She ducked through the short doorway and glanced around the lobby of the restaurant, noting the small portal windows and child-sized plush sofas. A fancily dressed couple was seated awkwardly on one of the sofas, the wizard's knees almost reaching his chin. The witch was fighting a losing battle to keep her dress demurely covering her thighs. Hermione was very, very glad that *her* skirt reached past her knees.

She hated this place; she considered it a ridiculous, decadent waste of money, but it was a popular new spot in Diagon Alley and Malfoy was paying. Reservations were always required, even for lunch, and Hermione hoped that the novelty would wear off the wizarding population before she had to come here for another meeting.

The maitre d', a man dressed in a blue satin tunic belted at the waist with a scarlet sash, waited behind a short podium crafted of oiled mahogany, a tiny book opened on its slanted surface. Being a scant three feet tall himself, the podium fitted him perfectly. He cleared his throat obsequiously and smiled when she glanced his way. "Madam has reservations?" he asked in voice that should have been an octave too high for a man.

"Yes, under Malfoy or Wyrm and Prince, I'm not sure which."

"Ah, of course," he said, bowing slightly at the waist. Hermione had to resist the urge to sigh. "Your party is waiting for you." He turned smartly on the heels of his polished black boots and goose-stepped her through the restaurant, his yellow satin trousers blousing and swishing as he moved. She rolled her eyes. This was just silly. Leave it to a git like Malfoy to choose this restaurant.

The entire restaurant was furnished with pieces too small for the average witch or wizard. Mixed and matched formal dining sets, only slightly larger than one would buy for a child, were scattered randomly about the room. The bone china place settings and silver cutlery were also miniaturized, and wealthy witches and wizards laughed as they struggled to get comfortable in their too-short chairs and sipped from tiny martini glasses.

She spotted Draco from halfway across the restaurant, his blond hair gleaming like spun gold in the semi-dark of the restaurant. He made sitting in a miniature chair look easy and elegant with one gray wool-covered leg sprawled at an angle to the table and the other crossed casually over it. Wearing a creamy colored shirt that utterly failed to wash out his pale skin, he looked comfortable and smug. Hermione drew herself up straighter and lifted her chin.

It was then that she noticed his dinner companion, but it took her a moment to recognize him. His hair was pulled away from his face in a long queue down his back and shone blue-black in the candlelight, his skin glowed olive with health and his features were severe, but regal and relatively unlined. Ultimately, it was his scowl and solid black wardrobe that identified him. Though he was shorter than Malfoy, his ramrod-straight back, upward pointing knees, and vicious, black glare spoke neither of ease nor elegance. In fact, he looked right furious to be seated there, a feeling with which Hermione would have commiserated if she could have swallowed the nervous lump in her throat. She blinked away the image of his thin frame crumpled on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, blood pumping from two holes in his neck and his eyes uncharacteristically blank.

As they approached the table and the maitre d' pulled her chair out for her, those glittering eyes turned unpleasantly on her. This was going to be a lousy meeting; she could feel it in the roiling of her stomach.

"Ms. Granger, so glad you could make it," Malfoy said solicitously, extending his hand as he rose smoothly from his chair. She shook it and smiled venom at him, earning her a smart wink. "Another round of Firewhiskies," he told the waitress, a tiny witch, perhaps an inch shorter than the maitre d', in a tight bodice and full skirt. She bobbed a curtsy and scurried away. Hermione resignedly took her seat, folding her legs to the side as comfortably as possible.

Snape spoke next, his words clipped and angry, not even giving her time to work up a good fit of guilt. "I must enquire, Miss Granger..."

"Ms.," Hermione interrupted him. She wanted to establish her role as a professional as quickly as possible in this conversation. "Or Healer, whichever you prefer."

"Fine. I must..."

Malfoy interrupted him this time, sending him an irritated glance as he said, "Of course, he didn't mean any offense. Old habits, you know." Snape looked very much like he *did* mean offense. As Malfoy was speaking, the waitress arrived with their drinks and a tiny platter of escargot in what smelled like a garlic-butter sauce. She served them each several shells and disappeared without a word.

"Ms. Granger," Snape growled slowly, and Malfoy shot him another glance. Hermione wondered what was wrong with these two; this certainly wasn't like any other business dinner that she had attended. Malfoy was every bit the fawning Marketing rep (though the haughty lift of his nose never faltered) and seemed to be stepping it up with every unpleasantry that Snape uttered, but Snape... didn't seem to appreciate her presence. Odd, for someone who wanted her money. "What are you doing here?"

She blinked at him and took a burning sip of Firewhisky. Though she didn't care for the stuff, most wizards and witches in the business world drank it, so she, too, had learned to drink it. "I am here to discuss the terms of a Potions distributions contract between A New You Cosmetic Transfigurations and Wyrms and Prince Brewing and Distribution," she said finally and cocked her head as she gave Draco a questioning stare.

"And I've got the contract right here," Draco said as he patted a scroll that was resting on the table. "I had the solicitor draw it up yesterday; I'm sure you'll find everything in order."

"Right," Hermione drawled. "I'll want my own solicitor to examine that before I sign anything."

Draco saluted her with his drink and gave her a rakish grin, as if they were great friends and sharing an inside joke. "As any good businesswoman would, though I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by the generosity of the terms." Hermione was beginning to suspect Polyjuice this wasn't the Malfoy *she* knew. "Though perhaps you might throw in a free nose job for the good Master." Snape emitted a strangled, gasping sound, then immediately dissolved into a fit of coughing. "I said 'nose job', not 'blow job'," Draco said with another grin and a sideways glance at Hermione.

She rolled her eyes. If Draco thought to unsettle her and gain an advantage by talking dirty at the dinner table, then he had another thing coming. When Harry and Ron weren't discussing their own tadgers and their adventures, then they were discussing their co-workers', and no occasion was sacrosanct.

"How about neither," she said irritably, and Draco's grin wilted slightly. "What, did you think that a little sexual innuendo or discussion of the male anatomy would embarrass me? Do you know how many penises I have Enlarged? Testicles I've Tightened? Oh yes, quite the rage. No one likes a saggy sac." Draco was beginning to look uncomfortable. Snape had turned beet red and was still trying to catch his breath. "You don't get those procedures for free, either."

Not to be outdone, Draco said casually, "No need for them! Though I'm sure you haven't done as many Penis Enlargements as Breast Augmentations."

"Well, of course not," Hermione said just as casually. "The Breast Aug was the first popular Transfiguration, starting with the Muggle-borns. Then Breast Lifts, with or without Nipple Relocations." She gestured over her own bosom (which was not insignificant if Draco's and yes, she had caught Snape looking as well, though it had been quick and surreptitious attention was any indication) with her fingers circled, demonstrating the relocation of said nipples.

Malfoy's gaze lingered on her generous cleavage longer than necessary before returning to her face. He nodded sagely while Snape sent furtive glances to the restaurant's exit. "I've seen your boob work very nice, if I may say so myself."

"Thank you," Hermione said primly, awkwardly crossing one leg over the other. This was beginning to be fun.

"If we could move on to the matter at hand..." Snape growled through clenched teeth. Obviously, *he* wasn't having any fun at all.

"Excellent feel, as well," Draco cupped his hands and made a massaging motion.

"For which a critical potion is necessary, in conjunction with one of my Charms." Feeling somewhat sorry for her ex-professor, Hermione took mercy on him and steered the conversation back on topic.

From the corners of his eyes, Draco watched his godfather shift in his seat and settle in relief that the conversation had strayed back to safer waters. His scheme was going much better than he could have ever imagined. Uncle Sev had never been easily embarrassed by crass discussion, so his discomfort was an unexpected delight. That Granger was entertaining company was just as surprising, and he certainly couldn't complain about the view. For such a frumpy thing in school, she had matured admirably. He had little doubt that she would sign with Wyrms and Prince Brewing and Distribution, proving dear old Uncle Sev irrevocably wrong: Hermione Granger, best friend of Harry Potter and defeater of the Dark Lord, *would* willingly do business with two ex-Death Eaters. Blaise Zabini didn't think so either. He had bet one hundred Galleons that Granger would spit in Draco's face before signing the contract and one hundred Galleons that Voldemort would be resurrected before Severus Snape admitted to fallacy.

"A critical potion that we cannot supply," Snape stated firmly. "That, or any other."

It was Draco's turn to choke. Hermione's eyebrows shot up to her hairline, and Draco caught her quick glance between the two of them through his spluttering.

"Excuse me?" she asked politely, but in disbelief.

"Are you deaf, girl? I plainly said that we aren't interested in being your supplier."

Swallowing the rasp in his throat and the spasm in his chest with hot tears in his eyes, Draco jumped back into the conversation. "Now, wait!" he half rose in his seat as Granger began to stand indignantly, placing one of his hands over hers to stop her.

Glaring at him with narrowed brown eyes that were darkening in anger, she sat back down. "If this was some kind of sick joke, Malfoy, then rest assured, I am not amused. Remember, you approached me first."

Like the promise of a mangled leg from the closed mouth of a shark, Draco heard the threat in her voice. Unspoken, but real nonetheless. This wasn't Granger the swot with a mean slap, sidekick of a celebrity freak. This was Granger the President and Founder of one of the fastest growing niche-market businesses in wizarding Britain, who could turn the tables of the market against him so fast that it would make his little Potions distributor prank look like a minor inconvenience. She reminded him of his father, powerful and dangerous, and it sent a delicious shiver down his spine. He had to stuff a sock in Severus.

"Just a slight misunderstanding," he said conciliatorily, giving her hand a small pat and noticing that her fingers were as well manicured as his own, though her right index finger had a splotch of ink on it. Protest almost seemed to boil out of his godfather, so he cast a quick Muffliato to deal with the man who had suddenly become self-destructive.

"There is no need for this nonsense, Draco. Send her away so that we can leave. And from now on, I want to know all the names of potential clients before they sign." He was glaring as hard as Granger, but Draco wasn't nearly as impressed. For one thing, he didn't have the knockers for it. There was something about powerful women with brilliant racks...

"Uncle! I am the representative for this venture. You make the potions; I acquire the clients, right? Because *you*," he said, emphasizing the word with a jab of his finger, "couldn't sell Sheppard's Pie to the starving. What you are doing is *anti*-selling. Alienating a client who would not only increase our revenues by twenty percent, but put us on the cutting edge of medicinal-cosmetic brewing!"

"I'll have no part in this ridiculous Cosmetic Transfiguration business!"

Draco was struck by a sudden thought. "Is this because of the nose comment? It was just a joke."

"That has nothing to do with it! I simply *will not*..."

"Splendid," Draco interrupted before his dear old Uncle Sev could work up a true fury. "Then stick to brewing and leave the Marketing to those of who can!"

Snape shut his mouth with a snap and sprang to his feet, knocking his tiny chair backward with a noisy clatter, which attracted the attention of most of the restaurant's patrons. Without acknowledging either Draco or Granger, he swept toward the exit with long, angry strides.

Many years working with his godfather had taught Draco an interesting lesson: Severus Snape was used to obeying orders. Having lived under a master (or two) for most of his life, he tended to do what he was told if the command was properly delivered. That wasn't to say that he was gracious about it. Severus Snape was at his most foul-tempered when carrying out an order if it was something that he did not want to do. The point, however, was that he did it, regardless. Draco only hoped that he had gotten Snape and his unreasonable objections out of the picture before he lost Granger's account.

Canceling the spell, Draco turned a particularly charming smile (usually only reserved for potential bedmates and the editor for *Witch Weekly*) onto his would-be client. "Ms. Granger, please allow me to apologize on Severus' behalf. He is a difficult man, but an excellent Potions master, as you well know."

"Mr. Malfoy," Granger spat between her teeth, her face hard and her eyes snapping. "Perhaps you should reconsider bringing your associate to business meetings if he cannot employ a civil tongue." Climbing to her feet, in the process flashing him a tantalizing view of the tops of her stockings through the slit in her skirt, she sent him a final, glacial glare and then stormed out of the restaurant, her hips swaying with every step.

Draco took a thoughtful sip of Firewhisky, already planning damage control and his next meeting with the fierce Ms. Granger.

A/N: Huge thanks to my betas you guys are the best! Thanks to those of you who reviewed, as well. As Southern says, we anonymous writers love to hear from you!

H.U.R.L.

Chapter 3 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 3 – H.U.R.L.

Wave of Purple Rash and Violence Sweeps Ministry!

Following on the heels of a rash of rashes in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the entire Ministry of Magic has contracted the virulent purple contagion! Reports of dueling in the halls by distinguished members of the Ministry staff, resulting in many grievous injuries, have been flooding the Daily Prophet *since early yesterday morning*.

One eyewitness, his jowls aquiver with fright, told this reporter, "It was Undersecretary Umbridge, without a doubt! She hexed a clerk until he had more arms than toes! Just for knocking a pile of papers to the floor!"

And where are our intrepid Aurors during this crisis of skin complaints? At home, nursing their own rashes!

The Minister for Magic was unavailable for comment, but...

Hermione snorted rudely as she abandoned the article mid-sentence and jabbed her spoon between the pulp and membrane of a section of grapefruit with all the disdain she held for Ms. Rita Skeeter. Several droplets of juice splattered onto her portrait at the bottom of the article, and the photographed woman glared balefully out of the

photo, wiping ineffectually at the drops with two-dimensional fingers. Smirking, Hermione popped the section into her mouth and chewed with relish. She was determined to enjoy her breakfast because it was very likely the only thing about her day that she *would* enjoy.

She was no closer to solving her long-term cosmetics Potions shortage than she had been a week ago when she'd had that disastrous meeting with Malfoy and Snape. Quince had managed to finagle enough of their staples to keep A New You running for a couple more weeks, and she had spent long hours in her lab brewing the trickier ones herself, but they couldn't continue like this. For one thing, she needed to sleep once in a while.

'When I get my hands on those contract-breaking bastards, I'm going to give them the worst case of jock itch they have ever known and then light their hands on fire,' she promised herself. In actuality, she knew that she wouldn't actually light their hands on fire, but as soon as the Ministry settled down after its crippling bout of Rash, she would drag them through a legal process so painful that they would *wish* for something as trivial as a burning groin.

Now that her company wasn't going to chug to a halt come Monday morning, she could continue her investigation into the mysterious Rash. She had determined that whatever the irritant was, it had to come in contact with one's skin, and from there, it rooted into the tissue, forming the notorious purple hives. Though many of the infected Aurors had stopped coming to her clinic, she was now being inundated with the overflow of Ministry staff that couldn't be treated at St. Mungo's. This bleary dawn's breakfast was actually a very late midnight snack.

Hermione gave her loose, dirty hair a good scratching with her nails, grimacing at the feeling of oil collecting at her roots. She hadn't pulled all-nighters like this in many years. She had only just gotten home thirty minutes ago, when a spreading stain of periwinkle light was extinguishing the final few faint stars. The pristine white walls of her tiny kitchen and dinette were now glowing a pale pastel pink that would have irritated her had it actually been paint. Five stories below her kitchen window, the street was still relatively quiet. The most ridiculously tempting smell of baking bread was wafting through the small gap she had opened to let in the summer morning breeze.

Something cold and wet touched her shin, and she jumped, jerking her leg away and slamming her toes into table's center pillar. Cursing, she twisted to glare under the table at her cat Crookshanks, who was giving her a yellow-eyed look of effrontery. He twitched his orange bottlebrush tail and leapt onto the chair next to her, proceeding to sniff the table and eye her breakfast with interest. Smiling sweetly at her long-time familiar, she offered the grapefruit to him. He looked away disdainfully, turning his back on her to circle in place on the seat of the chair until he had found the perfect position in which to lie down. Smiling fondly, Hermione gave him a good scratching behind his ears, which he tolerated with an air of forbearance.

The whole fiasco had begun to remind her so much of her years at Hogwarts – the disaster, research, and late nights – that in a fit of sleep-deprivation induced delirium, she had run to the bathroom to verify that she hadn't suddenly re-grown buck-teeth.

She snorted again and sipped from her mug of strong, scalding hot, black coffee. It amused her to think that Snape, who was so adamantly opposed to the "ridiculous Cosmetic Transfiguration business," had been part of the instigation of her first foray into it. Had he actually *helped* her when she had been struck by the Densaugeo instead of making nasty comments, then she might not have been moved to help the old witch with her appearance. Perhaps she should send the old black bat a coupon for a free nose job after all.

It also amused her that neither Snape nor Malfoy had realized that she had cast a countercharm to the Muffliato, hearing every word that they had intended to share in private. She had developed it years ago to deal with staff that thought it funny to snicker about the boss behind her back. Not even Harry or Ron knew about it, and she was pleased to keep it that way.

Her satisfaction in her small victory only partially ameliorated the sting of Snape's comments. She supposed that she shouldn't have expected anything more, and goodness knew that she didn't deserve *anything* kind from him, but his contempt for her was demoralizing. He had seemed so *changed*, so unlike the greasy git of her school years, that she had been caught off guard. He could actually be appealing if he quit scowling and kept his mouth shut.

They were quite the matched pair, Malfoy and Snape: the honey-tongued golden boy who could charm the knickers off a marble statue and the razor-tongued dark wizard who probably hadn't seen a pair of knickers for decades. They were so different that they fit together like puzzle pieces. Or bookends. Her eyes slightly glazed, Hermione smiled goofily at the shelves of books that lined her living room wall. They could sandwich her collection of historical vampire romances... Hermione frowned and blinked.

She really needed sleep.

Sighing wistfully, she took another slurping sip of coffee and shuffled through the dinette and into her living room to the fireplace. Sleep would have to come later.

Saturday at dawn or not, Hermione suspected that Harry would be at the office. Tossing a pinch of Floo powder into the fire, she waited for the flame to flare green before sticking her head into it. "Harry, are you there?"

"Ginny? Oh." Eyes as bloodshot and unfocused as hers felt, Harry heaved himself out of his desk chair and slouched to the office Floo, grinding his fists into his eye sockets.

"Sorry to disappoint." Harry grimaced at her and blinked hard several times. His uniform was disheveled and wrinkled, and he had a splattered, brown stain on his chest. "Long night?" she asked.

"And an early morning. Ginny brought me breakfast," he said, gesturing at the stain with a tired smile. "Are you bringing me a cure?"

"I wish that I had better news... And if you are working these hours, then I assume Skeeter wasn't exaggerating the state of the Ministry as much as I had hoped."

"If by exaggerated you mean demolished by a stampede of drunken trolls, then yes, she exaggerated."

"Try Umbridge hexing extra arms onto an underling? Everyone out sick with the Rash? Dueling in the halls?"

Harry nodded and gave his eyes another good rubbing. "Dogs and cats living together. Mass hysteria."

Chuckling, Hermione shook her head. "You really need to get some sleep." He sent her a pointed look. "I know; you don't have to say it." Magic surged around her, the green flame engulfing her head and neck and crackling against her skin like static electricity. Someone else was trying to use Harry's office Floo.

Immediately, he noticed her discomfort. "That's probably Ron," he said apologetically.

"Right. Goodnight, Harry."

"Morning."

"Whatever." She pulled her head out of the Floo with a sigh of relief, fingering the frizzy harpy's nest that her hair had become. Nothing had the ability to undo the effects of expensive, leave-in conditioner like Floo traffic collisions. She couldn't muster anything more than resigned irritation and, deciding that she might as well add snarls to frizz, flopped onto her back on the hearthrug and gave her own eyes a thorough rubbing. She still had things to do this morning, but the thick pile of the rug was much more cushy than she had remembered, and a short moment of relaxation wouldn't do any harm...

Before the last traces of Floo green had been burned from the hearth, Hermione had fallen fast asleep.

Severus Snape was in a foul mood this afternoon, a condition that was much more atypical than most of his acquaintances would think. Usually, he was happy to putter about his garden trimming herbs, watering, weeding, and the like. The sun warming his dark hair; the cool, moist feel of the earth on his hands; the scent of flowering herbs and fertilizer, all were so far removed from his life under the Dark Lord that he relished each and every sensation. Even the caress of soft cotton against his skin, the tee

shirt and jeans he had adopted as his gardening clothes, was a reminder that he was free and alive to enjoy it.

He had thought that he would hate gardening when he had first started it as a necessity for acquiring potions ingredients. It had been during the war crimes trials when most of wizarding Britain howled for his blood and he dared not show his face in public. By the time he had been exonerated and had become famous for his work as a spy and the potion that had saved his life, his bit of garden had become his solace, and his brewing merely a means of supporting himself.

It had started out small and functional, just large enough to support the basic necessities of small-shop potions brewing. Now, he had a greenhouse that he was ever expanding to accommodate more plants and an outdoor garden that overtook the backyard of Spinner's End and half of the neighbors' yards on either side of him (not that they noticed). Two years ago, he had extended his back porch into a sort of atrium where he kept his more ornamental varieties and a wicker table and chair set.

He even had a small pot of tiger lilies in memory of Lily Potter, to which he gave the most diligent and dedicated care. Finally living as a free man after so many years under two masters' yokes, Severus had learned to be happy, and with that happiness had come acceptance of her choices and her death. That wasn't to say that he didn't still miss her and that a piece of his heart wasn't irretrievably lost with her passing, but he could finally think about her without tearing fresh wounds. He could honor her with these flowers and remember what a brilliant being she had been. It made him happy, so he did it. It was a good feeling.

This week, however, he had lost his equilibrium such that he could not even relax in his own garden. The blame rested solely on the shoulders of his tosser of a godson. He did *not* want to work with Miss Granger, and he didn't owe explanations to anyone. He wasn't quite sure how he had lost the argument at Liliput's, but since the little wanker hadn't shoved a signed contract under his nose, he assumed that he had been sufficiently nasty that Miss Granger had taken her obscene company and gone elsewhere.

He could throttle Draco for that nose job comment, even if he *had* misheard it.

Severus glared at the tray of fireweed seedlings that he meant to transfer to a freshly mulched bed, absently wiping his hands on a rag. He couldn't quite remember if he had added one brick of brimstone to the bed or two, compounding his vexation. If he added another brick after already adding two, then the plants might spark as they grew, possibly causing a fire in the herb garden. If he left at as it was, but had only added one, then the plants would be sickly for lack of sulfur. Growling to himself, he crumbled half of one brick over the dirt and mixed it with his hands.

Planting this particular herb was always a little off-putting. It was a key ingredient in his famed Stopped Death. He had developed it during the quiet between the Dark Lord's death and resurrection mostly because he had wondered if he could. It put the drinker in a form of stasis just before the moment of death: blood ceased to flow, organs shut down, the heart ceased beating, but the fireweed kept the body warm and the brain oxygenated while shavings of bezoar neutralized almost any poison that had entered the bloodstream. The only person with whom he had shared its existence was Dumbledore, and the old wizard hadn't gotten around to taking it before his death. In the end, it probably wouldn't have saved him.

After the Dark Lord had made his reappearance, Severus began dosing himself, just in case. By the time Nagini had bit him, her venom had been almost instantly counteracted and his body had been held in stasis until the Aurors had found it, albeit several pints low. It had been Potter's words at the final confrontation with the Dark Lord that had earned him immediate medical attention and saved him a trip to Azkaban. Although he did wish the little prat had kept the part about Lily to himself. He later learned from Poppy that Dumbledore had told her about his potion, which was how she had known to treat him. In the rush to save him, she had inadvertently leaked the knowledge to the Aurors that had brought him in. He was now quite famous (or infamous, depending on one's audience) for his little pet project. The name had premiered in the *Daily Prophet*, assigned by one of his prior students, and had stuck ever since. All things considered, it wasn't a bad name. It was also one of his most expensive products and had already earned him enough to live comfortably for a long, long time.

For more than ten years, he had managed to steer clear of the trio that had been both a prime source of aggravation and final salvation. He'd kept his eye on them, of course. Potter shouldn't have lived. The fact that he had, even though the Horcrux had been destroyed, meant that a piece of the Dark Lord would always live, even if it was only in Severus' own mind. Weasley was ever the sidekick, and he doubted that the boy would have made much of himself if he hadn't had Potter's coattails to ride. Miss Granger, though... She was something else. What, he wasn't sure, but certainly a force unto herself. No Muggle-born witch had climbed quite so far so fast in the wizarding business world. She bore watching, and watched her he had – from a distance.

At the ill-conceived meeting at Liliput's, he had caught from her mind the lingering guilt she held for her inaction when she had thought he had been killed by Nagini's bite. He hated it. He wanted neither her guilt nor her pity. He wouldn't have wanted her help either, even if she had offered it. What he wanted was to be left alone and to live life on his own terms. Simple enough, unless one's marketing rep was Draco Malfoy.

"Severus!" His godson's voice intruded on his ruminations as surely as if he'd summoned him with his thoughts. He blinked down at his fireweed seedlings, still in their tray. For that past several minutes, he had been absently massaging brimstone into their new bed, and it was now more than mixed.

'Blast. Now, was that one brick or two?' he wondered, stoically ignoring Draco's insistent calls. 'Ah, yes, I added that half-brick...' It would have to do. Carefully twisting the tray, he eased the first seedling out of its cubby and into his hand.

"You know I hate it when you ignore me," Draco stated as his tall body blocked the sun and cast a dark shadow over his work. Severus did know and chose not to answer. Instead, he prepared a small hole with his free hand and deposited the seedling into it, tamping down the dirt with light pressure from his fingers. "Uncle, I am going to start whinging, and I know that *you* hate it when I whinge."

That was also true, and Severus debated for a moment whether annoying Draco was worth being further annoyed himself. Apparently unwilling to wait, Draco sighed and shoved a newspaper into his face. Severus decided that the sooner he dealt with whatever his godson deemed so important, the sooner he would go away. Surely there was some skirt out there that he had yet to poke.

Wave of Violence and Purple Rash Sweeps Ministry!

Following on the heels of a rash of rashes in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the entire Ministry of Magic has contracted the virulent purple contagion! Reports of dueling in the halls by distinguished members of the Ministry staff...

"And?" Severus asked as he pushed the paper aside. He had seen the article in yesterday's paper and had had a good chuckle.

"Have you seen this?" Draco shook the paper in his fist as his voice rose in incredulity.

"Yes," he said as blandly as he could manage.

"We need to be the ones to invent the treatment! We'll make vaults of Galleons when we charge top-of-the-market prices to all of the medical facilities in Britain!"

"I'm sure St. Mungo's has it well in hand." Severus really didn't want to be bothered by this. It had Trouble written all over it, and he liked his quiet life. The wizarding world could sort this one out on its own without any help from him. As far as he was concerned, he had paid his dues. "Besides the fact that one must know the cause of the infection to produce a cure." He narrowed his eyes and fixed his godson with a determined frown when the boy opened his mouth to speak. "I want no part of this. Do I make myself plain?"

Dismissing Draco by turning his back, he pulled a sizable handful of dragon dung fertilizer from the bag at his thigh.

"Potter and Weasley work for the Ministry – I bet Granger has an inside track." The way the boy said her name disturbed him, and Severus glanced up to see a decidedly wolfish smile stretching his face. He had termed it Draco's Hunting Smile, and it was, indeed, Trouble. "Excellent. I had intended to drop in on her tomorrow, anyway. I'll see what she knows."

"And why would you do that?" he asked guardedly, knowing that he wouldn't like the answer.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Business. Remember, I acquire the clients and *you* brew the potions. Though," he paused thoughtfully, and Severus did not like the combination of consideration and Hunting Smile, "I wouldn't mind knowing Granger on a more... personal level. She is a formidable woman with exceptional assets. We would make an unstoppable— Hey!" Draco backpedaled swiftly, shaking manure out of hair. "What the fuck? Hey!" Ducking, Draco watched another handful of manure sail over his head.

"Get out!" Severus roared and plunged his hand back into the bag of dragon dung for another clod, lobbing it at his godson's retreating back.

"What did you give these rats, Hermione?" Ron asked as he crouched in front of a glass aquarium. In it, two hairless rats mottled with purple hives wobbled about on a bed of shavings. Two others, almost covered with the Rash, were curled into tight balls in the corner. "They look stoned." Wrinkling his freckled nose, Ron tapped the glass with his fingernail. One of the rats gave him a disinterested glance and then flopped onto its back to roll in the shavings. Another aquarium, this one divided in half with a shimmering magical barrier, contained two infected rats with their sharp teeth bared and specks of foam around their mouths. In a flash of glowing red eyes, one the rats threw itself against the barrier, where it was held immobile for a moment before being dropped twitching to the shavings. As it lay inert, the second rat attempted to attack it, but like the first, it hit the barrier with similar results. Ron shuddered. He'd never like Hermione's lab.

A bizarre amalgamation of Magic and Muggle, the room was something out of one those late-night "movings" (Ron thought that was the word) that Hermione used to make him watch, complete with hulking machinery, various magical implements for weighing, measuring, and who else knew what, a complicated Potions rig with more tubing than he had ever used in all his years of Potions classes, and crazed animals scurrying in cages. All it was missing was the stretcher with the patchwork man on it, hooked up to wires that would bring him to life when lightning hit the roof. It already had the mad doctor with wild hair.

'Not so wild anymore,' Ron thought fondly as he eyed his ex-girlfriend. She had cleaned up much more elegantly than he could have ever guessed. Even in her lab coat, she had her hair slicked back into a tight bun that accentuated her high cheekbones and large, brown eyes. And she wasn't *really* mad, though she did seem irritated that they had sought her out in her inner sanctum.

"They are not rats, Ronald," snapped Hermione as she snatched his hand away from the aquarium. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't interfere with my work."

"They *look* like rats." Folding his arms over his chest, he shot Harry a long-suffering look behind Hermione's back as she jotted something down in the notebook she always carried while in the lab. "Except for being bald."

Sighing loudly, Hermione straightened and propped a fist on her hip. "I *told* you *months* ago that I had developed a way of testing without using live animals. They are Transfigured cotton balls, and I designed them to behave like humans when treated with potions, Charms and Transfigurations. They Transfigure back to their original form instead of dying. It's much more humane than using real rats." Hermione sniffed when Ron rolled his eyes, then turned back to her notes.

"Maybe you should start a club," Ron suggested casually. "Humanitarians Unite for Rattish Liberation."

"Well, erm," Harry interrupted before Hermione could do anything she would later regret with the long-needed syringe she was holding in one hand. "We won't be here long. We just wanted to check up on your progress."

Depressing the plunger of the syringe until a thin stream of liquid squirted from the tip of the needle, Hermione lifted the top of the divided aquarium. With a gloved hand, she grabbed one of the rats, still unconscious from its most recent altercation with the barrier, and inserted the needle into the flesh at the back of the neck. Once the syringe was empty, she deposited the rat back into the cage and shut the lid.

"I've managed to infect these specimens with the Rash from samples of blood collected from patients." She popped the needle out of the syringe and dropped it into a small, plastic container. Tossing the container into a bin marked "Hazardous Waste," she set the syringe on the counter and gave them her full attention. "Most of them get spotty and feverish, but improve in a few days. A couple have died from the fever."

"I've not heard of anyone dieing," Harry said quickly. He frowned and glanced at Ron, who shook his head.

"Nor have I, but we shouldn't discount the possibility."

"And these rats over here?" Ron pointed to the divided aquarium. The rat that Hermione had just dosed was now sitting calmly in the shavings, watching with twitching whiskers as its cellmate threw itself at the barrier again.

Pausing for a moment, Hermione pursed her lips as she stared intently at the more aggressive rats. Finally, she spoke. "What do Pleatherby, Umbridge, Davenport and Watson all have in common?"

"They're all being held at St. Mungo's for violent tendencies and a nasty case of the Rash," Ron said, proud of himself for knowing the answer to her question.

"And?" she asked in that tone of voice that made Ron feel like an idiot. He frowned at her.

"They're all right bastards."

"Davenport isn't that bad," Harry corrected him. "He's just a bit..." Harry shrugged.

"Dark," Hermione finished for him. "I would bet all four of them dabble in the Dark Arts." Three pairs of eyes turned to the two aggressive rats, one sitting in place and one laying on its side as it recuperated. "I cast a minor Dark spell on both of those rats during their Transfiguration."

Ron gasped, his face twisting in horror and disgust. "Hermione, you—"

"Dark Magic in and of itself isn't evil, Ronald. Only when used for evil purposes," she explained impatiently before he could finish. Ron didn't agree; he had been raised to believe that anything Dark was evil. Hermione, being Muggleborn, hadn't been taught that. They had had many arguments over the years regarding the inherent goodness or evil of magic, and he found many of Hermione's thoughts on the subject much too liberal for his taste. Though he agreed that most any spell could be used for evil purposes, he was convinced that Dark Magic was evil, and even if used with the best of intentions, no good would come of it.

"Just as long as you're careful," Harry interjected before Ron could continue the argument. Snapping his mouth shut, Ron frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. He'd let it go for the moment, but this conversation wasn't over. He did *not* like the fact that she had gone beyond the rationalization of Dark Magic into practical use.

"I know what I'm doing," Hermione said, a trifle defensively. "I've done a great deal of reading on the subject of Dark Magic, and—" She cut herself off, steering the conversation back on topic. "Only the rats treated with Dark Magic show increased aggression, and though the Rash eventually goes away, they exhibit violence and symptoms similar to rabies. The foam at the mouth, for example." She pointed at the untreated rat, which was pacing the barrier and baring its teeth at the other.

"What did you give that one?" Harry asked, gesturing at the one that remained seated and unaffected by the other's display. As they watched, it climbed to its feet and stumbled away from the barrier in a drunken lurch.

"The same thing that I gave these three: Malum Quiesco." She set her hand on the top of the aquarium that held the four other rats. "Except for these two; they remain untreated." She pointed to the rats huddled in the corner. They looked as miserable as hairless, purple-spotted rats could look, which was very, very miserable.

Ron and Harry nodded, familiar with Malum Quiesco, a potion often administered to Dark wizards on capture to make them easier to handle. It inhibited their ability to use the Dark Arts and made them a bit dopey. Once, just after being dosed, a Dark wizard had enthusiastically embraced Harry. The wizard had proclaimed his undieing

affection for the young Auror, giving him a sloppy kiss, and Ron had promptly Stunned him into unconsciousness. It was something about which he still gave Harry shit when they were in their cups.

"It doesn't cure the Rash, but it temporarily suppresses the violent tendencies in the Dark ones," Hermione said quietly. "You might consider keeping it on hand at all times."

"We're one step ahead of you," Ron said flippantly and grinned as he pulled a tiny unbreakable phial of the potion from a satchel on his belt. It wasn't often that he could one-up the brilliant witch.

"But we appreciate the advice." Harry was quick to jump in when he spotted the storm clouds brewing behind her eyes. "We wouldn't necessarily have thought to use it against Rash victims." He elbowed Ron to forestall any more Hermione-baiting. "You'll notify us when you have anything more?"

"Yes, of course," she said edgily. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Through a curtain of long red hair, Ginny stared at him through hooded eyes as she dragged the swollen head of a purple mushroom across her bottom lip. Harry sat hunched in his office chair, his head pillowed on one arm that was folded on his desk as he gazed longingly up at her, but he was unable to move. Sprawled across the drifts of paperwork on his desk, she was wearing nothing but one of his Muggle undershirts and was close enough to touch. Despite his best efforts (and they were Herculean), he could not lift his arm to reach that small distance. She seemed to know this. Smirking, she tongued the ridged underside of the mushroom's cap, watching him intently with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

It wasn't just the promise of what her mouth was doing – he did NOT want her to eat that mushroom. The sight of its mottled, purple skin filled him with unreasonable dread, but did absolutely nothing to cool his libido. When she bared her straight, white teeth and began to nibble on the stem, he almost piddled himself. With a leisurely swipe of her tongue, she wetted the head of the mushroom and then reached across the short, impossible distance between them to wipe it across Harry's lips. Shuddering with revulsion and need, he clamped shut lips that seemed to be the only part of his body that could move.

Her eyes flashed, and her lips turned down into a pout as she shifted on his desk to sit up, sending an untidy stack of scrolls clattering to the floor. Glaring at him from behind locks of hair, she flicked the mushroom at him, pegging him between the eyes. Harry jerked in his seat, but could not even make a noise of protest. Retrieving another mushroom from somewhere on his desk, she threw it at him, this time hitting one of his cheeks. As if hit by a muscle-spasm spell, his body convulsed, and he wrenched out of the chair, falling supine to the floor.

"Ow, fuck," he groaned and felt at the back of his head for a knot with hands that suddenly obeyed his commands.

"You better not have been dreaming about Ginny," Ron's voice intruded on his foggy thoughts, and he opened crusty eyes to see his friend perched on the edge of his desk holding a bag of peanuts. He flicked one at Harry, and it landed in his stubbornly tousled black hair.

"What?" Ron shot Harry's tented trousers a pointed look, and Harry closed his eyes again, letting his head fall back to the floor.

"And here I was, thinking you were working, feeling sorry for you," Ron said as he tilted a handful of peanuts into his mouth and chewed with a minimum of smacking – Hermione's influence, Harry was sure. Toeing several scrolls that were scattered on the floor, he eyed Harry's desk with disdain. "You know they have a supplementary file for this kind of stuff," he said, fluttering a large stack of forms and wrinkling his nose at the clouds of dust that shot from the pages. "It's called a rubbish bin."

"Unless you've got real food or are willing to help, go away," Harry said from his supine position on the floor. He'd get up in a minute. Just not *this* minute.

"I've got something better for you, mate: we have a skulker in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures." Ron grinned widely and much too enthusiastically for Harry's taste.

Groaning, Harry covered his eyes with his arm. "Maybe someone came in to do some actual *work*, Ron. You know, that stuff you do at the office?"

"Like sleeping at your desk? No. For one thing, it's Sunday afternoon and all the Floos are blocked. And for another, that entire department is sick with the Rash."

"Fine," Harry grumbled and heaved himself off the floor. His joints popped so loudly that Ron winced in sympathy. Upon standing, Harry realized that he had a crick in his neck and couldn't turn his head to the left. Fantastic.

"Blech. Did the squid get stuck in the U-bend?" Harry whispered to Ron as they splashed as quietly as they could through a long puddle that stretched the stone corridor and around the bend. The intruder was just around the corner near the lavatories, which were always flooding. Rumor had it that a pygmy squid had escaped from one of the department's tanks and had taken up residence in the pipes. No one in the department would admit to keeping a pet squid in the office, however; nor could anyone explain how a squid could jump out of a tank and crawl to the loo.

Ron put a finger to his lips and sidled along the hall with his back to the wall. Reaching the corner, he pointed at the corner and crooked his index finger, then jerked his thumb toward Harry; the Auror gesture meaning that he intended to confront the perpetrator and that Harry should back him up. Harry tapped his temple and then pointed to the row of doors lining the corridor, meaning that Ron was being an idiot and that it was probably just someone there to catch up on work. With a frown, Ron pointed to Harry's drawn wand and held his thumb and forefinger one inch apart: Harry should have a mid-range Stunner prepared. Rolling his eyes, Harry pointed at the corner and then made the international sign for wanking: if Ron Stunned whoever it was, then there would be paperwork to file, and Ron would be doing it solo. Ron gave him the two-finger salute and slipped around the corner. Resignedly, Harry slid along the opposite wall, his wand held steady and ready to return fire or cast protections.

Ron stopped dead, staring in amazement at the woman kneeling on the floor, her long, blond hair trailing in the puddle of water. Her forest green robes were also wet where her knees touched the stone. She was leaning over, peering at something along the base of the wall. "Luna!" he exclaimed, his voice echoing down the stone corridor.

"Hallo, Ron." She glanced at him over her shoulder, smiling invitingly as if she had been waiting for him.

Harry sighed heavily, his heart still beating more quickly than normal. It was a Pavlovian response to sneaking around, and it made him feel immensely silly. Tucking his wand into his sleeve sheath, he leaned against the wall and scowled hard at his best friend's back.

"What are you *doing* here? And how did you get in?" Ron asked the questions ungracefully, still pointing his wand at the blonde. He realized it a moment later and shoved it up his sleeve, belatedly taking an authoritative stance that was wholly lost on the woman at his feet.

Planting her hands on her thighs, she levered herself off the ground and cast a quick drying spell on her robes. "I just Flooed in at the entrance."

Ron and Harry exchanged incredulous glances. The Floos in the front entrance were blocked against anyone but Aurors. That and many other security policies had been implemented since the final fall of Voldemort to restrict access to undesirables while there was no one about to keep an eye on things. All employees who wanted their Floos open after hours were required to fill out a form and have the Minister himself sign it.

Luna blinked owlishly at them. "I had dropped by to see if the Ministry had an infestation of Exotic Bluebodied Skin Mites. They cause the appearance of a rash, you know. They enter your skin through the pores, and then send up tiny snorkels to breathe. As they get bigger, they push up the skin, forming what looks like hives. You can see the purple color of their bodies through your skin." Unconsciously, Ron began to scratch at a patch of rash on his shoulder that had not quite healed. She watched his hand curiously and Ron dropped it, blushing. She continued, "I haven't found signs of a Mite infestation, but you do have some strange mushrooms—"

"Mushrooms?" Harry interrupted, pushing off the wall and walking quickly to the spot where she had been kneeling.

"They seem to have killed the mold that has grown due to the flooding."

Harry's stomach had begun an uncomfortable churning. Kneeling down, he peered at the wall where it connected with the floor. Sure enough, a patch of pallid mushrooms was flourishing in a tiny ring where a slick of mold had gone dry and brown. Even the stone blocks that made up the wall had lost their polished luster.

"I hate this place," Ron said with a shudder. He had actually *seen* the department's collection of rare and poisonous spiders.

"Ron, did we tell Hermione about those mushrooms we found in the Forbidden Forest?"

"What mushrooms?"

Sighing, Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He hadn't, either. It had simply slipped his mind, that errand having been one of many that day, and certainly the least exciting. He now had a suspicion as to where his mushroom sample had disappeared. "I think we need to go back to the Forbidden Forest to take another look."

"Oh, *those* mushrooms."

"Alright," Luna agreed.

"You aren't coming," Harry said unequivocally.

"Of course I am," Luna said just as firmly. Her pale blue, slightly protuberant eyes regarded him steadily, and he felt his resolve weakening. Another Pavlovian response, he supposed, ingrained in him by Ginny and Hermione.

"What's the harm in it? She's already been exposed," Ron said, eyeing the woman more than casually.

Flabbergasted by Ron's thickheadedness, Harry was silent for a moment, his mouth gaping open. "What's the *harm*? Some of Hermione's rats *died*! Ron, this is a serious matter, not an opportunity to chase—"

"They weren't rats!" Ron shot back. "And there have been no cases of human death—"

"You are putting civilian lives at risk, you—!"

"Are you suggesting that the mushrooms and the Rash are connected?" Luna interrupted before Harry could shout to the rafters just how stupid and selfish he thought Ron was being.

"Perhaps," Harry said. "Which means that you might have already caught it! Did you touch them?"

She shook her head. "So no worries then. If I catch it, I'll end up in bed with a fever and purple hives. If I don't, then I don't."

"Alright, then!" Ron grinned at her. Seeing that Harry meant to protest again, he added, "We caught it, and now we're fine. Honestly, Harry, it's just a rash!"

"That seems to incite violent tendencies and has crippled the Ministry with mass absenteeism!"

"The Forbidden Forest, you said?" Luna said thoughtfully. "If the mushrooms are somehow the cause, then the Rash might have spread to Hogwarts."

A/N: Many thanks to my betas! I also appreciate the reviews that you have left. I like to know what I'm doing right and what could be improved.

House points to those of you who can place Harry's comment about cats and dogs. ;)

Much Ado About Fungus

Chapter 4 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 4 Much Ado About Fungus

"So there *are* Aurors on duty," Madam Pomfrey said as she eyed Harry, Ron and Luna as they waited in the lobby of the hospital wing. She obviously didn't like what she saw, for she clucked her tongue and pulled two bottles of Pepper-Up from one of the pockets of her starched, white pinafore and handed them to the men. "Drink these before you collapse, the both of you."

Harry accepted the potion gratefully, chugging it in one gulp. Once his ears had stopped steaming and he had wiped his streaming eyes, he said, "Yes, ma'am, though we're short-staffed as you know."

Madam Pomfrey looked as though she could use some Pepper-Up herself. Her eyes red-rimmed and her face pale and wan, she looked as though she had been keeping the same hours that he had. On prior visits to the school, he had received much warmer greetings from Pomfrey, but today, she seemed harried and on her last nerve.

"So I've read. I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Ms. Lovegood, but I really must get back to my patients. It seems that your Rash has struck Hogwarts as well." Ron cursed colorfully, and her face tightened as her gaze became more intense. "You aren't contagious, still, are you?"

"No," Harry said quickly, speaking through the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "That is, I don't think so. But you said that the Rash is at Hogwarts? Who..."

"Hagrid came down with it first, poor man, two weeks before we read about it in the *Daily Prophet*. He's fine now, but several students have contracted it in the meantime, and I've had to pull beds out of storage! St. Mungo's can't tell me what it is, how to treat it or anything! I've even had to isolate some of the students because they were

fighting in the medical ward. Merlin knows how difficult it has been to keep it out of the paper."

"Madame Pomfrey," Luna interjected when the flustered woman paused to breathe. "Does Hagrid still have Fang?"

"Of course he does. Though how that old dog has survived this long..."

Ron's eyes widened, and he interrupted Pomfrey with an excited gleam in his eyes. "Oh! If he somehow got into those mushrooms and brought back whatever it is that infects people..."

"Didn't you get spores on you last time?" Harry interrupted this time, and Ron flushed hotly before he turned back to Luna.

"Are you sure you didn't touch them?" he asked her, eyeing her from head to toe in a manner wholly unlike his previous examinations. Harry was glad that he was finally taking this seriously.

Luna just shrugged. "A mushroom spore is smaller than the eye can see and is ejected from the gills. If the spores are truly the mode of infection, I might not have to touch them. It would depend on the *amount* of spores needed to infect."

"We need to tell Hermione. It will help with her research," Harry said and then turned to Pomfrey. "You should have someone search the castle for patches of small white mushrooms. Filch, maybe," he said with a slightly wicked grin and then added, "but make sure he knows to quarantine them once he's found them." He paused a moment to collect his thoughts. "They grow in rings on vegetation, but kill everything around them. Has anyone seen Fang lately?"

His face falling, Ron whispered, "The dead rat in the forest..."

Harry nodded his head once, sharply, and Luna's blue eyes saddened. Pomfrey had begun to wring her hands. "I really don't know, but I could send someone to check..."

"Better not," Ron advised with a sad shake of his head. "Harry, we should find that patch and destroy it. Burn it. There are probably others..."

"I'll collect samples, first..." Luna started, but Ron cut her off.

"You should stay here. We'll collect them and burn the rest."

Ensnared in her office and deep within the Zone, Hermione was furiously jotting notes into a college-ruled, sewn-bound Muggle notebook. She hadn't been able to progress much further than temporarily alleviating the effects of the rash in her Labrats. She took a moment to smile smugly and draw the trademark symbol next the name of the product that she fully intended to market once this Rash fiasco was over. This was one of the most extensive tests she had performed with the creatures, and their reactions to the infections and potions had been in line with the results she had obtained from her own observations of Rash patients and data collected from St. Mungo's.

She hoped that the increase in cash flow from the Labrats would offset the loss she was taking by shutting down the clinic. She was out of most of her base potions and could no longer treat victims of the Rash. Because of the time she'd spent in the laboratory researching the Rash, she had not been able to brew what she needed to stay open, and most of her employees had called in sick. Most probably *were* sick. Come Monday, the A New You would be temporarily closed for business.

'Not that anyone has come for a Transfiguration in over a week,' she thought glumly. All of her recent patients had been Rash related, and the humanitarian in her had forced her to charge no more than a nominal fee that barely covered her expenses.

Sighing heavily, she focused on her notes. The death toll amongst her subjects was relatively low, and only the rats created in conjunction with Dark magic showed no signs of improving. She had been able to pinpoint the cause of infection to foreign particles in the blood, but what those particles were, she couldn't say. They seemed to be organic, but she had found nothing like it in her research of parasites, both magical and mundane.

The odd thing was that she had not been infected, despite the fact that she had been exposed to the Rash innumerable times. It had taken actual blood transfusions to infect her rats. The highest concentration of infection seemed to be in the Ministry of Magic and had spread from there. The first reported cases were among the Aurors. But how was it spreading? She was pretty certain that Ministry employees were not in the habit of swapping blood. Something just didn't quite add up. Perhaps a visit to the Ministry was in order...

A sharp rapping sounded on the door, startling her. The nib of her quill snapped, and Hermione swore loudly, throwing the useless thing at the door from which the sound had originated. On silent hinges, the door cracked open wide enough to admit a handsome blond head and two silvery eyes.

"Was that an offer or a demand?" he asked with a smirk and a wink.

Hermione cursed again and threw the notebook at his face. He pulled it out of range just long enough for it to hit the doorjamb in a flutter of pages and then stepped through. "I'll take a rain check, then," he said as he settled into the leather-upholstered chair in front of her desk.

"Please, have a seat," she said with false magnanimity. "No, this isn't a bad time. How kind of you to ask."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. Ignoring her sarcasm with a smile, Draco leaned back in the chair, crossing an ankle over his knee. She couldn't help but notice how well formed his thighs appeared to be under the lightweight wool of his chocolate brown slacks. The first three buttons of his cr me linen shirt were unbuttoned, and the effect was that of an iced mocha topped with whipped cream. Her stomach chose that moment to growl, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since a very early breakfast.

"Malfoy..."

"Call me Draco. My most valued clients do."

Pursing her lips, she considered and quickly discarded the idea of throwing her inkpot at him. There was a good chance that she would miss and stain the plush white area rug under her desk. "I'm not a client."

"Yet," he drawled, raising a thin, blond eyebrow at her. She wondered if the rug might need replacing, anyway. "I think we got off on the wrong foot the other night. My dear godfather is not known for his people skills."

Hermione gazed at him for a long moment, her features schooled into impassivity. She honestly couldn't say what the smarmy blond was up to, and it bothered her. Part of her wished that he would call her Mudblood filth not fit to lick his boots so that she could slap him. Another part, the one that was mentally calculating the inventory of her potions supplies, wanted him to whip his contract out of his pocket so that they could review terms. Then she could have Security escort his smirking face out of her facility. After a brief mental tug-of-war, the businesswoman in her won. She settled forward in her chair, her elbows propped on the polished mahogany surface of her desk, which was barely visible under a slew of paperwork.

"Funny, I hadn't noticed."

"That's my girl."

It took patience learned from years of being best friends to two impulsive young men to not reach over her desk and wring his pale neck. Her foot twitched in sympathy. "Malfoy..."

"Draco. I insist." Her stomach rumbled again, much to her mortification. His grin stretched. "But enough about business. I've stopped by to take you to a late dinner. This

time for pleasure." He purred the last word as if he were rolling a bite of sinfully delicious chocolate mousse over his tongue.

"I don't think so." Gurgling loudly, her stomach disagreed. Apparently, it was of the opinion that the possibility of forthcoming mousse was more appealing than preserving her pride. Not to be directed by minor gastronomical discord, she settled back in her chair and applied her best stonewall face. It was an expression that could repel even the mightiest of siege towers and had been used to thwart proposed all-night beer fests at her flat.

Draco Malfoy cocked his head to the side and regarded her thoughtfully, tracing the ridge of his lips with an index finger. It was a gesture that she had seen Snape perform many times while she had been in school, and her younger self had wondered if he had washed his hands after handling potions ingredients all day. Now, the movement was decidedly sexy, and she suddenly wanted another chance to watch the old Potions master do it to see if it looked as good on him as it did Malfoy. She had a sneaking suspicion that it might look better. He had thin lips, it was true, but they were well formed and clearly defined with a sharp notch just below the nose. Many a witch and wizard had had that notch Transfigured onto their own lips. Draco's lips were plump and had a tendency to pout. They were cute, certainly, but lacked the character of Snape's lips.

Quirking the feature that she had been so avidly watching, Malfoy abruptly sat forward in his chair. "It would annoy Severus. Last time I mentioned taking you out, he threw shit at me."

Startled out of the analysis of lip shapes by his sudden movement, she asked distractedly, "What? What kind of shit?"

"Dragon dung. He was in the garden."

"Alright, then." Hermione wasn't quite sure what came over her for her to have agreed, but it might have been the sudden mental image of Snape and Malfoy in loincloths wrestling in a muddy garden. Shifting restlessly, she tugged at the hem of her skirt. The lascivious paths that her thoughts tended to take regarding the two men were beginning to disturb her by their frequency; she was a sexually starved creature indeed, but they were starting to get out of hand. Belatedly, she realized what she had just said and quickly added, "If it will annoy Snape."

He stood with a lean, toothy smile, and she was once again reminded of a jungle cat. She was hungry anyway. If she did accompany Malfoy to dinner, perhaps they could get back to the safe, dry issue of potions distribution. Taking his extended arm, she asked, "Is that why you want to take me out? Because it will annoy him?"

"No, it's because you have a rack almost as brilliant as your business sense. Annoying Severus is just a bonus."

Hermione chose not to comment. She was fairly sure that, brilliant rack or not, if Malfoy knew what had just gone through her mind, then he would have run screaming.

Unfortunately for her stomach and Malfoy's scheme, St. Mungo's chose that moment to Floo. When she had first moved into this building, she had chosen this particular office for herself because of the tall, narrow fireplace in the corner. On most days, she found it convenient, if somewhat prone to shoot soot onto her rug. This evening, however, it became a potential new target for her inkwell.

"Ms. Granger," a disembodied woman's head said from the green flames. She stopped when she saw Hermione arm-in-arm with Malfoy and blinked distractedly for a moment in seeming disbelief.

Irritated that the Healer was surprised to see her going on a date (though it really wasn't, but how was the Healer to know?), Hermione's reply was more waspish than usual. "Yes, Healer Foulweather?" she snapped over her shoulder, her hand still resting on Malfoy's arm and her back to the Floo.

Healer Foulweather was either more adept at interpreting social cues than Malfoy or less inclined to ignore them. "I apologize for interrupting, but we've noticed an interesting development amongst some of our patients infected with the Rash. I'll Floo back, later, though, because you look busy..."

"No, that's fine," Granger said, and much to Draco's chagrin, she dropped his arm and turned toward the Floo. With a parting dismissal, she gave it, and the Healer's head within, her full attention. "Maybe another time, Malfoy."

Draco stood behind her, forgotten for the moment, simultaneously seething and exalting. Granger was researching the Rash. This was a perfect opportunity to learn more about it. However, he did not appreciate being so casually set aside or ignored. Reclaiming the leather chair in front of Granger's desk, he tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. Not an easy feat for a Malfoy.

"Is there a problem? Has the Malum Quiesco stopped helping?"

"Yes and no. We ran out of it two nights ago and it takes over a week to brew. But that's not what I wanted to talk about." Foulweather took a deep breath, running a hand over her slicked back hair, which was surely twisted into a tight bun. "As you know, we decided to keep several of the Ministry Staff overnight the ones that were showing unusual inclinations for violence."

Granger's head bobbed, her own elegantly coifed hair beginning to leak wayward, chestnut curls. Draco admired the way the expensive golden silk of her blouse clung to her torso and contrasted becomingly against the creamy column of her neck. Her pert posterior was sheathed in coffee-colored cashmere ending at the shapely curve of her calves. A demure slit at the bottom of the skirt tempted his fingers to tweak it open and peer higher. Would those pearlescent stockings reach all the way up or terminate in lacy bands across her thighs? It was a question almost as pressing as the goings on at St. Mungo's and was making his mouth water.

"It was a good thing we did. As the hives began to lessen, they began to develop... *things*... under their skin."

"Things?" Granger asked. He could tell by the tone of her voice that she didn't approve of the non-technical term.

The Healer shook her head and smoothed her hair again. "I've not seen anything quite like it before. It's as if they have tiny worms or snakes under the skin. When we tried to remove them with a simple extraction spell, they dodged the spell and then *swam* away!"

"Interesting." That wasn't the word that Draco would have used. He shuddered and resisted the urge to scratch at the sudden itch behind his right knee. "Did you try anything else to get rid of them?"

"Yes, of course, but to no avail." Her face turning away from them, the Healer addressed someone behind her for a moment, and then turned back to them. "Sorry, that horrible Umbridge woman just tried to take a bite out of her nurse," said the Healer as she shook her head. "We have them all confined to Benjamin Barker's Ward for the Violently Insane, it's gotten so bad." Glancing around quickly, the Healer lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Hermione, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but..." she darted a last, quick look over her shoulder, then continued, "we have word that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is suggesting that Hogwarts be evacuated!"

"Evacuated?" Hermione asked incredulously, her weight shifting from one foot to the other to thrust one hip to the side. Draco tucked his hands under his thighs to prevent them from wandering.

"Apparently, one of the Aurors I think it was Harry Potter!" she whispered excitedly, "found the cause of the infection on the school grounds." Her face disappeared again, then reappeared a moment later, her skin pale and eyes wide. "And I agree with him. I'm supposed to keep this quiet, too, but..." she lowered her voice to the barest of whispers, "seven people have died of fever. We couldn't do a thing for them." Through the Floo connection, Draco heard the sound of a door slamming against a wall and raised voices. Foulweather's face paled. "I have to go. I'll Floo later."

The fire sputtered green sparks and then banked to a bed of orange embers. Granger stood motionless, still staring into the hearth. Clearing his throat and pulling his hands out of their confinement, Draco made his presence known.

She whirled, almost losing her balance on her slim heels, and fixed him with an annoyed frown that would have made his godfather proud had he liked the chit. "You're still here!"

"Where would I go?"

"I'm sure there is a lonely rock out there waiting for you to crawl back under it," she said, crossing her arms under her breasts. Draco made a mental note to induce that particular action more often. It really did offer a spectacular view.

"Your wit never ceases to amuse. Come on." he picked up the pot of Floo powder on her mantle and offered it to her.

"I don't have time for dinner, Malfoy..."

"One must *always* make time for dinner," he said authoritatively. "However, I assume that we are going to pay Potter a visit at the Ministry first." When she opened her mouth to protest, he interrupted once again. "I have a vested interest in this 'evacuation of Hogwarts.' And, if what that Healer said is true, the Ministry might not be the safest place for a woman alone, however capable she may think she is."

Hermione scowled at him but chose not to respond to his last comment. "I was going to see if Harry were in his office, yes," she said slowly, reluctantly, tapping her fingers against the silk that covered her folded arms. "You might as well come, since you would probably follow on your own, anyway." Sighing loudly, she snatched a pinch of powder and tossed it into the fire, saying, "Ministry of Magic, Harry's office!"

Draco smirked and followed suit.

Harry was not in his office, although he had obviously been there recently, and it appeared that he had not been idle. Giant maps covered every bit of free wall space: one of London and one of Hogwarts and its surrounding grounds. White pins had been stuck into many different locations, including deep within the Forbidden Forest, several sections of the castle, and the Ministry of Magic's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Purple pins also dotted the maps. Clusters of purple pins seemed to radiate from the white pins. In the center of his desk, which was miraculously cleared of papers (though Hermione later spotted them piled haphazardly in a corner of the room, Ron-style), sat a glass aquarium with several sealed bags of white mushrooms stacked at the bottom. A glass cover had been Spellotaped to the top. The rubbish bin was full to overflowing with empty Chinese take-out cartons and sticky bottles of butterbeer. The room stank of greasy fried rice.

Malfoy wrinkled his nose delicately and looked around in disgust. "Not the tidiest bloke, is he?"

Ignoring his comment, Hermione frowned as she read a bit of parchment that had been tacked to the wall over a presumably unimportant section of map. So engrossed was she that she did not notice Malfoy silently un-spelling the tape off the aquarium and levitating one of the smaller bags of mushrooms into a trouser pocket.

July 9th R.H. contracts Rash

July 10th H.P. & R.W. collect mushrooms in Forbidden Forest

July 11th R.W. contracts Rash

July 13th H.P. contracts Rash

July 14th Mass infection of Aurors/Hogwarts

July 20th infection of Ministry

Symptoms purple rash, violent behavior, foaming at the mouth

Grows on vegetation kills it and animals (but not Hermione's Transfigured rats)

Incubation 24-72 hrs

Spread contact w/ mushroom spores

Immune G.W.?

Contact: St. Mungos, H.G.

"They think that the Rash is caused by mushrooms," Hermione said after she had digested the odd list and maps. Her voice was suffused with wonder and, if he wasn't mistaken, a hint of jealousy.

"Fascinating," he said dryly. It really wasn't, but Severus might find it so once Draco told him from where the sample had originated. Considering the man's reticence about getting involved with anything to do with the Rash, Draco should probably put off revealing that bit of information until *after* the Potions master had begun his research.

"Yes, I've never heard of mushroom spores that could cause skin irritation, violent behavior, and *snaky things*," she twisted Healer Foulweather's non-technical term in her mouth with a grimace of distaste, "under the skin. Many are poisonous, but..."

She darted a glance toward Malfoy, who was standing near the desk with his hands in his pockets. Chewing the inside of her lip, she debated the wisdom of taking a sample of mushrooms back to the office. She supposed it would be safe enough if she decontaminated the outside of one of the bags and then took it straight back to the lab where she could quarantine it properly. Studying it would give her the perfect opportunity to use her new HAZMAT suit, and having a sample could certainly speed up the development of a treatment, perhaps even an inoculation. It concerned her that she had yet to observe the parasites Foulweather had mentioned in her own subjects. Was a proper infection, one from the source, required to get this result or were the rats too small to observe such a symptom? She would have to check.

Harry had probably tried to contact her earlier, but she would have been incommunicado in her lab. Quince was home sick, nursing his own infection and therefore not available to take messages. The thought of her invaluable assistant with writhing subcutaneous parasites made up her mind. She would take a sample. Harry surely would have given her one had he found her, and she did not want to disturb him at home...

"Well, the Boy Wonder seems to have turned in for the night. Shall we move on to dinner?" Malfoy asked as he wandered the small, cluttered room, his hands still stuffed in his pockets, stopping a moment to peruse Harry's list. Shrugging, he stepped up to her and offered her arm.

"I suppose," she agreed, though the promise of productive research was almost more enticing than satisfying her grumbling belly. Consoling herself with the decision to collect a sample and start anew on her research after dinner, she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. After all, she was famished and would have to eat *something* before starting her research.

Harry sat on the sofa in the living room of number twelve, Grimmauld Place in an exhausted semi-stupor for ten minutes before he could place what was wrong.

He didn't smell food.

It was evening pushing midnight and he could not smell what Ginny had prepared for supper. Nor had Ginny come to greet him. No matter how late he came home, Ginny was *always* there to kiss him and feed him, even if she had dozed off on the very sofa on which he sat and had to scrub the sleep from her eyes first. He had always figured that the habit would fade in time and that he would eventually have to sneak into a Ginny-warmed bed and try not to wake her as he wrapped her in his arms (not that he would complain!). This break in routine was more disconcerting than he would have thought.

Lugging his aching, tired body off the sofa, he lumbered up the stairs and into their bedroom.

The bed was empty, untouched.

Harry stared at the collection of oddly shaped throw pillows, which, every few months, somehow seemed to breed another pillow. The girl pillows had lace; the boys had tiny rosettes. The ones that had both lace *and* rosettes, well...

Where was Ginny?

"Ginny? I'm home!" His call was swallowed by silence. Harry peeked into the closet just in case and then stepped out of the room, glancing up and down the empty hallway.

"Ginny!" Adrenaline began to wash through his system, carrying away the dulling fatigue to leave only stark, sharp-edged clarity. With energy he hadn't possessed minutes before, he flew through the house, giving each room a professional searching and moving onto the next without ceasing his shouting. He ended up in the living room, panting and slightly hoarse, and did the very next thing that came to mind: Flooded her mother.

"Mrs. Weasley? Hello?" he yelled into the Floo, knowing that he would wake the household and not particularly caring. The matron eventually wandered into the room yawning and clutching a worn, patchwork dressing gown around her middle.

"Harry?"

"Is Ginny with you?" he asked without preamble. "She's not at home."

Mrs. Weasley managed a disapproving frown at Harry's reference to their living arrangements through her next yawn. "No, Harry, dear." Twisting her girth for a view of the kitchen, she squinted at something Harry couldn't see. Turning back to him, she said, "But the clock says that she is traveling. She probably went to visit a girlfriend and ended up staying later than she had expected. She's an independent young woman, Harry Potter, and her world doesn't revolve around you, you know. And haven't you been working beastly long hours, lately?" She said this last with another frown and the knowing kind of look that a mother has when her children have been complaining to her.

Feeling foolish and neglectful, Harry blushed. "Well, yes, but wouldn't she leave a note?"

Mrs. Weasley yawned again before answering. "Perhaps, if she thought you would arrive first."

"Right," he mumbled. "Sorry to have bothered you."

"Go to bed, dear," she said kindly, relenting a little. "I'm sure she'll be back any time now."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Harry pulled his head out of the Floo, watching the flames lose their green cast with a sheepish grimace. He was a heel, wasn't he? Flying off the handle just because Ginny wasn't around to wait on him. No doubt she had been feeling lonely these last few days, and she had just wanted a little companionship. Though it was quite late, he had been coming home much later recently. He had taken for granted that she hadn't come down with the Rash and had soaked up her pampering like a greedy sponge. Though now that he thought about it, she had seemed distant and withdrawn. She hadn't complained (at least not to him), but she hadn't been happy.

He would simply have to make it up to her.

Instead of following Mrs. Weasley's advice and going to bed, Harry turned down the lamps, the fire in the hearth the only light in the room, and curled up on the sofa. He would wait for *her* for a change.

The kitchen in Severus' house on Spinner's End was awash in cheery, yellow sunshine, and the refreshing fragrance of mint from the garden wafted in through the window over the sink. It was a humble Muggle kitchen; the counter and floors were tiled in simple white ceramic, a utilitarian faucet arched over a smallish porcelain sink, and plain cabinetry painted the same crisp white of the tile lined the walls. It was not at all similar to the lavish kitchen of Malfoy Manor, with enormous hearths that could accommodate ten-gallon cauldrons and wrought iron woodstoves whose grilled fronts glared like demons when lit. There was something about being able to fix a cup of coffee in his godfather's Mr. Coffee without the aid of a house-elf and reading the *Daily Prophet* at the tiny dinette that made Draco feel liberated. It was such a simple thing, but one he couldn't explain to his friends like Blaise, who still had his morning tea delivered to him in bed.

It had become a ritual for Draco since he had begun to live with Snape after his father had banished him from the Manor. Even on gloomy days when the kitchen was lit by electric light and the windows were shuttered against the rain, he would read the paper and listen to the stuttered gurgling of the coffee machine as the kitchen filled with the aroma of rich brew. He still didn't know why his godfather let him stay, giving him exclusive use of the second bedroom when Draco was not shackled up with his latest squeeze. Severus said that it was because he made the coffee in the morning. Though unaware of such a thing as coffeepot timers, Draco was still sure that there was something more to it. Severus was unwilling to elaborate, however, so Draco left it alone.

Scanning the litany of bad news screaming from the *Prophet* as he sipped at his mug of strong coffee, Draco felt the cheeriness of the sunlight speckling the tabletop dim slightly. All was not well in wizarding Britain.

"Draco, I want you to tell me *exactly* where you got those mushrooms."

Glancing up from the morning paper at his godfather's forbidding tone, Draco blanched and dropped it into his oatmeal. "Merlin's balls..."

Severus stood halfway through the doorway to the kitchen, his body partially hidden by the door and the shadows that tended to gather in the parlor. A sheen of moisture glistened over lips that were pinched and drawn down into tight frown. His normally immaculate white lab coat was splattered with a purple substance and hung sloppily open, revealing his gray undershirt, dark with a spreading stain of sweat at his chest. Severus raised a shaky hand to push his hair out of his eyes, and Draco's eyes widened at the sight of large purple welts dotting the backs of his hand and marching across his face. The lines around his mouth and across his forehead had deepened since Draco had seen him the previous evening, and heavy bags hung under his eyes. Glaring at him through a curtain of lank black hair, Severus had a sinister air about him that Draco had not felt in years.

Pinching the bridge of his nose in a futile attempt to alleviate his headache, Severus felt his eye twitch at the gobsmacked look on his godson's face. He knew what he must look like: the Rash had infected him within hours of opening the bag of mushrooms that Draco had so casually handed to him the previous day, the spores seeping through a tiny tear in his gloves. His skin teemed with itchy purple bumps that stung when his clothing chafed against them. The fever had started not long after, and he alternately shivered and burned as he sweated himself to dehydration. He hadn't been more furious with the boy since the death of Dumbledore.

The young man clambered to his feet, but Severus raised a dissuading hand and tried not to lean too obviously against the doorjamb. Enunciating the words very slowly and precisely, forcing the sounds past his parched throat, he repeated, "Where did you get them?"

Draco gaped at him for a moment before recovering himself and plucking the paper out of his oatmeal. Folding it carefully, he set it on the table, his face schooled into

impassivity and his gray eyes never leaving his godfather's face. He exhibited all the signs of a Slytherin preparing himself to get out of trouble. "As I mentioned earlier, they were collected from the Forbidden Forest."

"And as I mentioned earlier," Severus growled hoarsely, anger roughening his voice as much as the effects of the fever, "I wanted nothing to do with this newest epidemic."

His Adam's apple bobbing the length of this throat, Draco swallowed convulsively, but his gaze and voice remained steady. "You might have. I don't recall." Rising to his feet, he slid the chair under the table with the barest scraping of wood on tile. "But you obviously aren't feeling well. Let me..."

"*Silence!*" Draco flinched and covered reflexively, but the effort it took to hiss that word made Severus sway on his feet. "Explain yourself."

All at once, the years of maturity melted from the young man, and he was left a terrified first year confronting his furious Head of House. Had Severus not had a pounding headache and burning fever, not to mention skin that felt like it would crawl off his flesh, he might have chuckled. Like a punctured balloon, Draco spewed forth his story in a great, undignified rush. "I got them from Potter... I *nicked* them from Potter's office. He and the Weasel were researching causes of the Rash and had samples..."

"So you thought it wise to bring such a sample into my home?"

"No! I mean, yes!" He shook his head as if to throw off his momentary lapse into childhood. With a deep breath, he continued calmly, "I *intended* that we be the first company to develop a cure. How did you get infected? Didn't I tell you that they were poisonous?"

"I didn't do it intentionally, idiot boy!" Dry heat suffused his body, and sweat began to bead on his brow and above his lips. His head throbbed with so much pain that it felt as if his eyeballs were being pushed out of their sockets. He was assured that they weren't, however, because Draco would have said something. "Though if I had known *exactly* what they were, I would have incinerated them on the spot! They must be tracked down and eradicated. All of them, before this infection has a chance to spread any further."

"Uncle, I think that you might be overreacting..."

Severus wanted to shake the boy, but was having too much difficulty standing on his feet to be manhandling uncooperative godsons. His fever was blisteringly hot, burning through his fury, leaving nothing but exhaustion like ashes and wisps of anger that vanished like smoke. "You don't understand," he said wearily, fighting to swallow as the lining of his throat tried to stick together. "They are suffused with Dark magic. Unnatural. Evil." From Draco's worried look, he thought that he must sound like he was raving, but he was deadly serious.

"You're not feeling well. Let's get you..." Draco had taken several cautious steps forward and was about to grasp his elbow when Severus summoned the energy to slap his hand away.

"I will not be patronized!"

"Alright! But you're hardly able to keep your feet. I'll let Potter and Granger know..."

"What has *she* got to do with this?" he asked quickly, fighting to keep the sudden, gnawing alarm out of his voice. The floor underneath his feet tilted to the right and he swayed, clutching at the doorjamb with hands slippery with sweat.

"She was there when I took them... Severus?" Draco reached for him again, but Severus stumbled away, backing into the living room. He hated that Draco was witnessing his weakness, but he had to know...

"Severus, let me help!" Draco said as he followed him into the parlor, his arm extended and his face a mask of concern.

Ignoring him, Severus licked lips that were as dry as his throat and rasped, "Has she touched them?"

"I don't know!" Draco snapped as he ran a hand through his hair, tugging out the ribbon in worried frustration. Severus was one of those constancies to which he could cling when he needed a bit of reassurance in his fast-paced, fluctuating life. The future to which he had looked when he was a teenager was vastly different than his current existence. Most days, he thanked his ancestors that he wasn't kowtowing to a soulless snake-man with delusions of grandeur. Those relatively few moments when he regretted that his path hadn't followed the prescription of his father, he could mope to Uncle Sev and receive exactly what he expected: a kick in the pants. That He-Who-Never-Caught-Colds was deliriously ill and bandying about words like "evil" in reference to a packet of mushrooms was unsettling, to say the least. He hoped that Granger formulated some sort of remedy soon, even if that meant he couldn't corner the market. "I don't think so. Though I *do* know that she has been working on something to help with the symptoms with limited success." Pausing to think, he added, "I wouldn't be surprised if Potty has given her a sample of her own."

Severus staggered and caught himself on the back of the sofa, though only just. The few patches of olive-complected skin that wasn't swollen with purple hives had paled to the color of snow, and his bloodshot eyes were two embers burning from deep within his skull.

"She... she can't..." Severus shook his head and listed against the sofa, his body seeming on the verge of collapse. Deciding to disregard the man's protests, Draco strode forward and steadied him with an arm around his shoulders. "Unhand me, you foolish twit of a..."

"Shut it, Uncle. I'm putting you to bed. As long as you've cleaned the spores off your skin, I should be fine... You did Vanish them, right?" Severus' head had dropped forward, his long black hair obscuring his face, but Draco thought that he heard a grumbled affirmative. "Then there you go. I'm sure Granger will be careful."

Draco pulled him from the sofa, surprised at how much of Severus' weight he had to support, and guided him to the narrow staircase that led to the bedrooms. His head jerked awkwardly when he said Granger's name, and Draco shook his head. When the old man felt better, they would have a good laugh about how he, in his delirium, focused on the bird's safety. Well, *he* would. He wasn't sure how funny Severus would find it.

A/N: Thanks to my betas, readers, reviewers and especially the mods, who correct and post our fics despite inclement weather and shortness of hands!

Hermione to the Rescue

Chapter 5 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a

curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 5 Hermione to the Rescue

"Ron? Ron! Oof!" Harry tumbled through the Floo into Ron's tiny flat, yelling his best friend's name. He landed hard on his hands and knees, ash choking the air around him and his glasses skittering off his face to land several feet away. With an aggrieved sigh, he extricated his glasses from the thick pile of the tacky orange Shag Rug (it was named for its purpose as opposed to its style) and shoved them on his nose. Floo travel had never quite agreed with him—he much preferred a broom.

Climbing to his feet, he glanced around Ron's apartment, his eyes sliding over the old Chudley Canon posters and newer Holyhead Harpies poster (Ginny had given him a copy signed by the whole team) that still adorned the walls. Ron was not sprawled over the green suede sofa, so Harry made a beeline for his bedroom. Ron's voice sounding from the kitchen stopped him in his tracks.

"Harry? What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?" Disheveled, but more or less awake, Ron wandered into the living room in a pair of old jeans and a holey tee shirt. He was carrying a mug of tea in one hand and a half-eaten croissant in the other. Despite his panic, Harry had to take a moment to process the incongruous sight of his friend up at dawn on a day he would normally sleep until the crack of noon (they had decided to take Monday off, as they had worked two straight weeks without a break). All was explained when a woman wearing another pair of Ron's old jeans and a tee shirt that proclaimed "Beware of the Leopard" in a bright red scrolling marquee padded through the kitchen doorway.

"Tea, Harry?"

"Erm... No thanks, Luna." Harry had accidentally walked in on Ron in various states of undress with a number of different women, but this was the first time he had actually *known* the woman. He could only be thankful that neither was actually undressed, but this was beyond awkward. "Sorry to, um, interrupt, but..."

"You aren't interrupting anything. Ron was kind enough to invite me over while we waited to see if I was infected." Against his will, Harry's eyes darted to the Shag Rug, scanning it for wet spots on which he would want to avoid treading. "I don't think I am."

Ron caught his glance and rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Harry. We've been talking all night."

"Talking, right..." Finding nothing on the rug, he eyed the sofa. The clash of retro green and orange made his eyes water, so he gave up and shot his friend an incredulous glance. Sometimes he wondered if Ron were a little color blind.

"Talking, right," Ron confirmed irritably and took a sip of tea. Not even batting an eye, Luna smiled blandly. "So, what is it that you wanted?" Harry got the impression that if he were anyone else, he would have already been shown back to the Floo.

"Ginny didn't come home last night. Nor this morning," he said, running a hand through his messy black hair, the panic that had been distracted momentarily returning in full force.

"Where did she go?" Ron asked around a bite of croissant. Luna disappeared into the kitchen, and Ron's eyes followed her backside.

"I don't know! She didn't leave a note."

"Did you Floo Mum?"

Harry nodded. "Last night. She said that Ginny was an independent woman and that she was traveling." Pursing his lips, he stared at Ron in entreaty, but for what, he didn't know. "I was sure she would come back last night! She never does this!"

"Never is not for a very long time, Harry," Luna said as she returned from the kitchen with a steaming mug of tea and pressed it into Harry's hands. "More accurately: she hadn't done this until last night. Otherwise, 'never' would have come and gone, which it hasn't."

Ron nodded sagely.

Harry blinked and wondered how that was supposed to help him. "Yes, but..."

"Mum's right, you know. Ginny knows her own mind. She's probably pissed that you missed your move-in anniversary and went to a girlfriend's to sulk."

Paling as the bottom of his stomach dropped, Harry smacked his palm to his forehead. "Shite! I completely forgot! That was two days ago, wasn't it? We were going to go out to celebrate, and what with the Rash and all... Fuck!"

Ron nodded again and took a knowing sip of tea. "It was all she could talk about." He raised his voice to a squeaking falsetto. "Can you believe Harry and I have been living together for a whole year? Isn't it wonderful?" Shaking his head at the theatrics of the fairer sex, he rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Of course, she didn't say it when Mum could hear... Strange though—she hasn't mentioned it in at least a week. I'd forgotten about it myself."

"I am such an arse," Harry muttered and mussed his hair again. He hadn't been this far up shit creek in a long, long time.

"Hm, yes," Luna agreed. "It seems to be a fairly common affliction among wizards. Fortunately for you, Ginny is the forgiving sort."

"I hope she makes you beg," Ron added unhelpfully.

"She will," Harry assured him. Groveling and debasement, not to mention expensive presents, were looming on his horizon, and he was happy to do it so long as Ginny came home. In the meantime, he thought he might be sick. His stomach was churning, and his knees had become as sturdy as overcooked spaghetti. He was about to excuse himself to visit the washroom when something clattered in the kitchen, closely followed by the distinct sound of shattering ceramics.

Swearing, Ron darted into the kitchen, closely followed by Luna and Harry. Standing on the kitchen table was one of the scrawniest looking newspaper owls that any of them had seen. Its feathers were dirty, unkempt and ragged, its toenails a decidedly un-regulation length, and it was making short work of the remaining croissants. Upon the humans' entrance, it screeched and snatched the last whole croissant in its beak and bolted for the window, not even waiting to be paid. A rolled up *Daily Prophet* lay on the floor next to the table, soaking up the tea that had once resided in the pot that was now scattered in pieces across the linoleum.

"Damn owls can't deliver a paper properly anymore," Ron grumbled as he cast a Reparo on the teapot and Vanished the tea from the floor.

"I'm surprised that they are delivering at all. Look at this." Luna unfolded the newspaper and held it up. Headlines screamed from the front page to the point that they crowded out the stories, but they didn't need them to get a feel for the state of the wizarding world.

"Bloody hell," Ron said unnecessarily. Harry only nodded, speechless.

"Looters Vandalize, Rob Jewelry District in Diagon Alley!"

"More Reports of Disappearances, Dark Arts Suspected!"

"St. Mungo's Cover-up - Twenty Dead of Fever, Maybe More!"

"Hogwarts Evacuated by Order of the Ministry!"

"Minister Trout Among the Missing?"

"He's just working from home," Ron said derisively when he read the last one. "Coward."

Harry shook his head, his eyes fixed on the word "Disappearances." The panicky feeling was returning in full force. "Do you suppose she would have gone to a friend's in all this chaos?" he asked, willing his friends to reassure him, though doubtful that they could.

"No," Luna said, and Harry's face broke out in a cold sweat. "But she might have left not realizing how bad things were and simply stayed where she was to ride it out." She pointed out a smallish headline that instructed, "*Stay Home and Off the Streets, Instructs Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement.*"

"We didn't get that memo," Ron complained with a frown.

"It's probably in our in-boxes at work where we're sure not to read it." Harry chafed his palms nervously, his tone sarcastic and slightly bitter.

Ron nodded glumly and scratched the back of his neck, his features tightening with worry. "I'll Floo the office and have the Aurors on duty keep an eye and an ear open for Ginny. They'll contact us the moment they learn anything."

The rest of the day they spent contacting Ginny's friends and family while Harry made obsessively frequent trips back to Grimmauld Place to see if she had come home. Eventually, they decided to relocate there, as Harry couldn't sit still while at Ron's flat, and his constant pacing was making Ron nervous. Luna was as unflappable as ever, though she offered no empty platitudes. No one had seen hide or hair of Ginny; however, the entire Weasley clan had snapped to high alert. The Weasley family clock still reported her as "Traveling," and Mrs. Weasley became convinced that Harry's late hours had driven her to run away to Paris (sometimes it was Rome) to seek a proper romance. Hermione was not to be found, but that was common enough for her; Harry wrote her a quick note and left it under a glass paperweight on her desk.

It was after midnight when the three finally got to bed: Ron in his old room, Luna in the guest room next to Ron's, and Harry once again on the sofa. None of them slept well.

Draco eyed his godfather from the entrance of the greenhouse, watching carefully for signs of the debilitating fever that had gripped the man for the last twenty-four hours. Though wan and spotty, Severus moved fairly steadily as he watered an arrangement of rare swamp orchids with a mister. Draco might have been fooled to believe that he was almost recovered had he missed the slight tremor in his godfather's hands, and had he realized that Draco was standing there, watching him.

One could not sneak up on Severus Snape, Super Spy.

And yet he watered his orchids with unfocused detachment, oblivious to Draco's presence. It gave him the willies, but he couldn't help but watch and wait for Severus to notice him, morbidly fascinated by his livid purple hives and blank black eyes. Draco shivered despite the humid heat of the greenhouse and smoothed the goose bumps that prickled his arms with the palms of his hands.

"Uncle," he finally said, the word popping out almost of its own volition. Severus' head snapped up, and his eyes fixed flatly on Draco, his lips slightly raised in a snarl. Draco's hackles sprang to attention and stood on end, and he had a sudden impulse to high tail it out of the greenhouse. Had this been anyone other than Severus, Draco would have made himself scarce, but he was unwilling to let his godfather face whatever this was alone.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked warily. The man was watching him unblinkingly, like a feral dog readying itself to attack. A vein in his temple was throbbing beneath the faint sheen of fever sweat. Draco shifted nervously, the urge to flee singing in his veins.

"You," Severus whispered venomously through bared teeth.

"It usually is." Laughing nervously, hoping to lighten the mood, Draco snuck a quick peek over his shoulder in case there was someone else around. He almost wished there were, just to distract his godfather's ire, though he hadn't a clue what he had done to incur it.

His eyes glassy with fever, Severus glared at him as he slowly tightened his grip on the mister, his purple-spotted knuckles whitening under the force. "You want her."

Draco wanted lots of women. He usually got them, too. Who and what was this about? "Erm... who?" he asked finally when he drew a complete blank. As far as he knew, the only woman that Severus loved was long dead, and he hadn't cared about Draco's lovers any more than to state firmly that if he got one of them sprogged up, then he was moving out. Draco had no worries on that point as he diligently took one of Severus' contraceptive potions each morning.

"You can't have her," he hissed. Draco shivered again, taking a step backward, the madness crawling behind Severus' eyes like a slathering, mindless beast. The vein at his temple stretched the skin and then twisted.

Draco's eyes widened and the words "Benjamin Barker's Ward for the Violently Insane" drifted through his mind as he took another step backward and surreptitiously eased his wand out of the pocket of his trousers. Droplets of liquid fear slid out of his hairline to glide down the back of his shirt. Still clueless as to whom "she" was, he was quick to assure him, "That's fine, I don't want her!"

The thin plastic body of the mister cracked loudly in the silence that followed. Draco startled, his wand snapping up to point at his godfather's chest. An instinct born of a more violent period of his life, he hadn't realized he had done it until Severus bellowed like a bull and lunged for him, his hands outstretched and reaching for his neck.

"*Stupefy*," Draco yelled, and the red jet of light hit Severus square in the chest, dropping him in his tracks. Severus' arm knocked into one of the planting benches on the way down, upturning the bench and scattering a bag of potting soil over Severus' chest and the greenhouse floor.

"Merlin, Severus, I'm so sorry," he whispered as he bent down to check the man's pulse, easing his body into a more comfortable position. It was fast and fluttery, and his skin was hot to the touch. Draco swore colorfully and felt his forehead sure enough, the man's fever had abated only slightly. How he was up and about, Draco could not guess. Being Stunned couldn't have helped. He hadn't *meant* to draw his wand on him, and he certainly hadn't wanted to hurt him... but he was obviously ill, both in mind and body. The Rash seemed to be infecting his system at an accelerated rate. Movement caught his attention, and he focused on a small serpentine form writhing beneath the skin of Severus' bare forearms.

Sitting back on his heels, Draco considered his next actions. He could have Severus committed at St. Mungo's, but his skin crawled at the idea. They may be able to help him, but he would be miserable there. Malfoy Manor had secure holding areas where he could be prevented from hurting anyone, but the last time he had seen the dungeons, the floors had been a foot underwater.

Granger perhaps *she* could help.

Not wanting to waste the time levitating him to bed when Granger might just have him transported to her clinic, Draco cast a quick binding spell on his godfather in case he woke up and found someone else to attack. He would probably have the swot back here before Severus even woke up. Relieved to have a plan and unwilling to consider the fact that Granger might not *want* to help the man who had shown her nothing but unpleasantness, Draco hurried back into the house and Flooed directly into Granger's office.

The office was devoid of life and strangely quiet when Draco stepped onto her hearth and knocked the soot from his shoes. He was soon to realize that the odd silence stemmed from the fact that the clinic was deserted not even the receptionist was at her post at the front desk. Had he been thinking more clearly, he would have wondered

why the most popular Cosmetic Transfiguration clinic would be closed on a Tuesday, but he wasn't, and therefore didn't give thought to anything other than where the President and Founder might have hidden herself. He seriously doubted that she was having a mid-week lie-in, but the image of a sleep-mussed Granger in a short nightgown made searching the deserted clinic somewhat bearable.

He found the door to her lab very much by accident.

He had gotten lost. Though the clinic was small, all of its halls looked very much the same, painted a reassuring creamy color and hung with soothing watercolors of pastoral landscapes or still-lives of flowers and fruit. Even the potted palms placed tastefully in the corners looked alike. On the third time he had wandered past a particular painting featuring a ripe red apple sitting on a chipped blue-and-white china plate, he kicked the wall under the painting and swore very long, loudly and colorfully. It was then that he noticed a fat fly perched on the apple, its wings fluttering periodically as its proboscis tasted the apple's skin. Just for spite, he pushed his thumb against the canvas, as if to squash the fly... and that section of wall swung open. Startled into immobility, he stared in surprise through the secret door into a garishly lit hallway as the fly buzzed angrily about the painting. Eventually it reclaimed its spot on the apple, and the door began to swing shut. Needing no invitation, Draco slipped through the narrowing entry and into the hall, the door sealing itself after him.

The light was harsh and artificial, lacking the warm glow and softening effects of candlelight. Gleaming whitely, the spotless walls of the short hallway seemed sterile and grim, and the brushed metal door at the end was imposing in a way that none of Malfoy Manor's grand, arched double doors could attain. Nor would he want them to; he did not like this place. He palmed his wand, just in case.

A small portal window set at eyelevel in the door broke the monotony of metal. Next to the handle were several round, white buttons, almost lost against the background of white wall. Peering through the window, he saw a figure clothed from the top of the head to the toes in a baggy white suit. The room was filled with equipment, some that he recognized and others that he didn't. The shelf of cauldrons, scales, beakers and tubing were familiar, as were a number of instruments that Severus also kept in his lab. Several glass aquariums sat on one of the workbenches, each containing a number of hairless mice.

The large metal contraptions were wholly unfamiliar. One of them, an enormous hinged arm that ended in serrated pincers, gave him the screaming heebie-jeebies. If he hadn't caught site of a telltale bag of mushrooms sitting at the bottom of a sealed glass jar, he would have left the way he had come and poured himself a very stiff drink. As it was, he had either found Granger or someone who was likely to know where she would be.

Draco pushed aside his unease and tried to open the door, but the handle wouldn't budge with any amount of jiggling or cursing. Raising his fist to the window, he rapped on the glass with his knuckles. The figure didn't seem to hear him, for it was bent over a round thing that spun so fast that it was a blur. He rapped again, but to no avail. Pounding on the door with both fists did nothing but make his hands hurt, and opening spells fizzled against a complex network of wards. Sighing in exasperation, Draco leaned his back against the door and slapped the wall with his palm, accidentally catching the buttons with his forearm. A distorted grating sound filled the hallway, making Draco nearly jump out of his skin. A moment later, the door behind him opened with a depressurizing hiss, and he spun on his heels, leveling his wand at this new threat.

Granger glared at him through a transparent faceplate, apparently not impressed and more than a little irritated. With a hollow thud, the door shut behind her. She pressed one of the buttons on the wall. The narrow hallway suddenly filled with an acrid mist, and Draco coughed as he tucked his wand back into his trousers. Granger peeled off the hideous white suit and hung it on a peg near the door, scowling fixedly at him the entire time.

"Thriving business you've got here," Draco said, trying to dispel his nervousness with the familiarity of sarcasm.

"We're *closed*. Which begs the question: what are *you* doing here, Malfoy?" she snapped as she planted her hands on her hips, drawing his attention to the short trousers she wore, exposing an indecent length of legs. Smalls or something; Draco loved those things. She'd topped it with another brilliant Muggle garment of stretchy material held up by two thin straps. Her face was pale and drawn, though, and there were dark rings under her eyes. "Well?"

Her querulous voice called him to his present predicament. "Severus has been infected with the Rash. Badly."

"Did you contact St. Mungo's? I'm not taking patients anymore."

"No, they'd just put him in that ward," he said with distaste. "You said you were working on something, and you obviously have some of the mushrooms..." He noted her rising flush with amusement, wondering if Potter had given her that sample or if she had acquired it like he had.

"I *have* been working on a treatment, but I haven't tested it on anything living yet." Sucking her bottom lip between her teeth, she fixed him with a worried look. "Malfoy, if he is bad enough to be committed at St. Mungo's, then he has the Snakes, yes?" At his nod, she continued. "It's the second stage of infection. These mushrooms aren't natural. They were created with Dark Magic to infect via their spores, creating the Rash. If a host has a proclivity for Dark Magic, then the spores take root, spawning the subcutaneous parasites the Snakes that travel under their skin excreting a raw form of Dark Magic, inciting violence and insanity. He's dangerous at this stage, Malfoy."

"I know." The blond rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "I left him Stunned on the greenhouse floor. He was raving. Is there a third stage?"

She pursed her lips, her brown eyes warm with compassion. "I don't know yet."

"Does your treatment work?"

"As I said, I haven't tested it on anything living. But the lab results have been very promising," she said, brightening. "I thought the infection was caused by some sort of parasite. Very stupid of me, really. Once I knew that mushroom spores were the source of infection, I was able to Charm an anti-fungal potion to attract and destroy the Dark Magic in the subject's system. The anti-fungal kills the infection." Her excited grin dimmed somewhat as she added, "In my Labrats, that is."

"Well, I've got your first human subject lined up."

Hermione still had significant misgivings about doing her first live test of her treatment on Snape when they Flooed from her office into the parlor of Spinner's End, but she had to admit to a certain level of tingling excitement that quickened her heartbeat and sent adrenaline rushing through her exhausted body. She had spent much of the last couple of days and nights studying the mushrooms and their spores and had been horrified by what she had found. Many plants were poisonous or aggressive, but she had never encountered one that had been bred of Dark Magic. This, more than anything else, spurred her to distill a potion that would kill the infection.

St. Mungo's had been more than cooperative, allowing her to observe patients in Barker's Ward and run her own set of diagnostics. She had managed to extract one of the parasitic entities from under Umbridge's skin to take back to the lab. It had been a tricky thing, requiring the use of borderline Dark Magic, and her skin had raised with a new parasite moments after Hermione had bottled her sample. From Umbridge's screaming, the extraction had hurt like hell. Hermione had been unsuccessful in her attempt to feel sympathetic. The result was a Charmed potion that would kill the spores, deflate the hives and dissolve the parasites until there was no Dark Magic left. Of course, all of this had been accomplished in her lab under controlled conditions.

The fact that the first living subject was *Snape* was probably the biggest damper on her enthusiasm; she doubted that he would be pleased to see her or be used as a guinea pig. His vitriol she could take, but if the treatment had side effects that she had yet to discover or failed completely, then she would be injuring a man who had already suffered at her hands. Then again, if it worked, and he made a full recovery, maybe some of the guilt she had been harboring for the last decade would finally be absolved.

She could only hope that he still lay unconscious on the greenhouse floor where Malfoy had left him.

"The entrance to the backyard is through the kitchen..." Malfoy trailed off, and Hermione mumbled an acknowledgement as she followed him through the house, digging through her tote for the fever reducer that she wanted to use first. Not paying attention to where she was going, she bumped into his broad back.

"Malfoy, what..." And then she saw "what." The white porcelain sink was smeared with blood, as were the tile countertops surrounding the sink. A braided rug was

crumpled and pushed away from the cabinets, so splattered with red that its original color was indistinguishable. Its movement had left a red smear that traveled from the sink to its final resting place under a chair. Atop the rug rested one booted foot.

"Uncle?" Malfoy asked, his voice quavering. His body was trembling, and Hermione was beginning to wish she had brought a sedative or had had a sedative to bring. Nudging him out of the way, Hermione darted across the kitchen to the fallen man, wondering what she might find. Would it really be Severus Snape, or had he gone murderously insane and brought his victim back to the house like a cat would a headless mouse?

She regretted her uncharitable thought the moment she laid eyes on his pale purple-spotted face, which was contorted in uncharacteristic horror. Shredded and oozing blood, the skin of his forearms bulged and writhed as if a nest of maggots burrowed beneath it. A pair of bloodied cutting shears was still clenched in his right hand. His gray tee shirt was splattered with dirt and gore, and his jeans were in no better condition.

Though her Healer's training helped her to distance herself from the gruesome sight, she was taken aback momentarily by his attire. The Severus Snape that *she* knew dressed chin to toe in unrelenting black. It was silly, she supposed, to assume that he always wore it about the house or while... gardening. Another odd concept when associated with Snape, though Malfoy had mentioned it before.

"Malfoy, get towels and hot water!" she snapped over her shoulder as she cast a quick diagnostic spell. He was alive, but unconscious, feverish, low on blood, and riddled with infection.

Malfoy whimpered, but hurried to comply, his hands shaking so badly that he had trouble opening the drawers. It took him many tries to actually find the towels, and when he did, he wadded several in his hands and then tottered over to Snape's fallen form, dropping to his knees. Hermione had to pull the towels from his grasp and snap her fingers in front of his face to regain his attention.

"Malfoy. *Draco*," she said softly, but firmly, staring into his haunted gray eyes. "He's going to be fine. Boil water so that we can clean him up." She didn't really need the water, but she did need Malfoy out of the way and busy so that she could patch up Snape. He nodded and rose unsteadily to his feet, and she patted him encouragingly on his calf. As he reluctantly wandered away, she began to cast cleaning charms to clear the blood off Snape's arms and healing charms to seal the cuts.

What at first glance appeared to be a botched suicide attempt was actually something else entirely. There were many gouges tracing up his arms, some deep and some relatively shallow. Several of the cuts followed a serpentine pattern, and Hermione had a sick feeling that he had actually attempted to *cut* the parasites from his body. The lacerations were concentrated on his left arm where Voldemort's insignia had once been branded on his flesh. She wondered if he had recognized the evil of the infection and, in his delirium, mistook it for the Dark Mark.

Snape moaned quietly, and Hermione's eyes snapped to his face. Dark strands of hair were plastered to his forehead and cheeks in vivid contrast against his sallow skin. His eyelids fluttered, and long thick black lashes that she had never noticed before danced against his cheeks. She tucked several of the towels underneath his head for cushioning, and with a quick *Aguamenti*, she wet one of the towels. Carefully, so as not to chafe the swollen hives, she swabbed his face clean of sweat, only realizing when she was done that he was watching her with bloodshot black eyes.

"Hey," she said softly, aware that he probably had a terrible headache. He caught her wrist in one of his clammy hands, but wasn't strong enough to prevent her from dabbing the cool cloth across his forehead. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Ms. Granger," he said hoarsely, his voice barely above a whisper. Malfoy dropped to his knees beside her a moment later, staring into his godfather's ashen face.

Smiling in relief, she said, "No, that's *my* name." Scooting the fingers of her free hand under his head, she tilted it slightly forward and hovered her wand above his mouth, allowing a slow trickle of water to leak from the tip and over his lips. He licked at it greedily, and she increased the flow so that he could have a proper drink. "Draco, hand me the fever reducer and Blood-Replenishing Potion; they're in my bag."

He did, even having the forethought to remove the corks so that she could tip one after the other into Snape's mouth. He swallowed obediently, his glassy eyes still fixed on her, and she wondered how long he would be such a good patient. Probably up until he found out about her untested treatment. "We need to move him somewhere comfortable," she said to Malfoy, who was still very pale but had stopped shaking. "I'll Levitate him, and you grab my bag and lead the way to his bedroom."

"I can walk on my own," Snape protested as he scowled up at her, struggling to lift himself off the floor. It was rather like watching a fly on its back, wiggling its legs uselessly in the air. Snape hardly had the energy to lift his head from Hermione's hand. "Draco, give me a hand..."

"Don't make me Petrify you first," Hermione said sternly as she grasped his shoulders and pressed them into the floor. She doubted it would come to that; he was in terrible shape and was as weak as a newborn kitten, but fighting him didn't appeal to her. He scowled and grumbled, but ceased his struggling, and Hermione Levitated him from the kitchen floor to hover at hip-height. Following Malfoy, she directed an irritated but cooperative Severus Snape through the house, up the stairs and into his bedroom. With hasty movements that shook the tiniest bit, Malfoy drew back the bedclothes and stacked the pillows so that when placed in the bed, Snape would be gently reclined.

"Does he have anything to sleep in?" she asked Malfoy, who was standing next to the bed as she hovered Snape over it, wringing his hands and trying not to appear useless. Somewhere along his journey, Snape had dozed off again.

Malfoy grimaced and walked over to a low battered dresser and began yanking open the drawers. The room was sparsely furnished; other than the dresser, a wooden chair had been placed in a corner, and a tattered trunk sealed with two leather straps sat at the foot of the bed. Blackout curtains shrouded the room in gloom, though the faded gray wallpaper wouldn't have looked cheery even in the brightest of sunshine.

"I'm sure he's got one of those hideous night shirts around here... Here we go." He pulled it out and gave it a quick shake, presenting it to Hermione. It truly was hideous: graying and threadbare, it had a gathered neckline, blousy sleeves and would cover him from gullet to shin.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but chose not to comment on the garment. "Let's get him changed before he wakes up."

"I can..."

"He hasn't got anything I haven't seen before," she said as she silently cast the spell that would divest the floating supine man of his clothes and replace them with his nightgown, finally lowering him to the sheets. It was over within a matter of seconds, and Hermione had had precious little time to ogle. It was a pity; from the brief glance she did get, she suspected that Snape had been hiding a fine masculine figure underneath his bulky robes. Perhaps she would have occasion to undress him again, prone this time, and get a look at his arse. For purely professional reasons, of course.

First things first, she had to wake him again and acquire his permission to use her experimental treatment.

"Master Snape?" she said softly as she placed a damp rag Malfoy had thoughtfully provided on his forehead. "Master Snape, before you go to sleep, I need to ask you a question." Those impossibly long, thick eyelashes fluttered again, and he squinted unfocusedly up at her. "You've been infected with the Rash; you're in the second stage, now."

"... Know that, silly girl," he whispered, but his head lolled until his cheek was resting against the back of her hand. Unconsciously, she stroked his cheek and smoothed back the hair that had become tangled in his stubble.

"I've been working on a cure, and I think it will kill the infection, but I haven't tested it on a live subject yet."

"Give it to me."

"Are you sure? Because..."

"Now!" he croaked, his eyes widening, and she could see a hint of the madness that Malfoy had mentioned.

"Alright, then. I should have you sign something, but... alright. It's going to make you feel a bit loopy." Draco handed Hermione her bag, from which she removed a flask of luminescent green fluid marked "D5" and a spoon. Pouring carefully, she filled the spoon and tipped it into Snape's open mouth. He hardly flinched at the taste, and moments later, his eyes slipped closed.

"Now what?" Malfoy whispered, eyeing his godfather anxiously.

Hermione shrugged and readjusted the damp cloth on Snape's forehead so that the coolest side was touching skin. "We wait. He should show improvement in a matter of hours."

Sighing, Malfoy scrubbed at his face and slumped against the wall by the bedroom window, sliding down until he was sprawled on the floor. "To see him like that, after so many years... I thought it was over, you know?"

She wanted to remind him that though Voldemort had been vanquished, evil always had a way of coming back, but what she said was, "Perhaps you should take a sedative. I would offer you some, but I ran out last week."

"Actually, I was thinking in terms of a large brandy. Want one?" Surprised, Hermione found that she did, indeed, want one and nodded. Though her training as a Healer had exposed her to much worse, Hermione was disturbed and shaken by the violence that Snape had perpetrated against himself.

"A small one, though. I haven't gotten much sleep lately, and I want to keep an eye on him."

Malfoy grinned suddenly, shaking off his fright as he rose gracefully to his feet. "Speaking of running out of potions... I have some contract terms that might help keep you awake."

Groaning, she grabbed the back of the old chair and dragged it to the head of the bed, lowering her tired body onto it. Of course she would consider his contract, having no other potions suppliers lined up, but she simply couldn't deal with legalese at that moment. "Just go get the drinks."

A/N: Thanks again to my betas, the TPP mods and all you wonderful readers and reviewers. You guys are the best.

More chances for House Points! Place the source of "Beware of the Leopard" on Luna's tee shirt and Benjamin Barker from "Benjamin Barker's Ward for the Violently Insane." It's a challenge fic, right? :P

Pictures of You

Chapter 6 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 6 Pictures of You

Harry sat at the table in the basement kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and glared angrily into the cup of weak tea that Luna had set in front of him. He couldn't quite figure out how things had gone so pear-shaped so quickly.

Ginny was still not to be found. Hermione was neither at home, nor in her lab. Hogwarts was being evacuated and the Forbidden Forest had been put under quarantine, stretching the ranks of the Aurors so thin that a mere skeleton crew was left to handle the frequent flare-ups of violence across wizarding Britain. The Ministry was under lock-down along with all his notes regarding the contagion. No one could enter the building without a password set by the Minister himself. The coward was holed up with a retinue of bodyguards in his Manor in the Highlands of Scotland and wasn't taking visitors. Harry's squad was forced to meet at the unsecured Leaky Cauldron for lack of anywhere better, and he and Ron were due in ten minutes.

His one consolation was that he knew Hermione had managed to procure a sample, for she had left a note on his desk to that effect. Since the woman herself was out of reach, that didn't exactly help him at the moment.

Parchment rustled across the table from him as Luna flipped through the *Daily Prophet*. How the paper still managed to print and distribute (this particular paper had arrived this evening, despite being the morning edition) was anyone's guess, though there certainly wasn't a lack of news.

"A quarter of Hogsmeade has been burnt to the foundations," she said quietly. Harry glanced up from his tea to stare at her in shock. Their eyes met over the top of the paper, her characteristically dreamy gaze clouded with worry. "It says there was a riot last night. A group of wizards... eyewitness accounts say that they were clearly infected with the Rash and... foaming at the mouth?" She frowned and looked questioningly at Harry.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, Harry said, "Hermione's rats exhibited symptoms similar to that of rabies."

"Ah," she said, staring contemplatively into space for a moment before continuing. "They attacked the Hog's Head Inn, which was full of families that had come to collect their children from Hogwarts. Most of the families were Muggle with Muggle-born children. One of the Muggles had a hand gun."

Harry groaned. She didn't have to finish the story; he could guess where it had gone from there. Someone had gotten shot at, and perhaps the bullet had even hit its mark. Regardless, the Muggles would have found not only the crazed infected at their throats, but also the rest of the town united in defense against the evil of Muggles. The war had done little to eradicate prejudice against Muggles and Muggle-borns; it had simply submerged it to fester until wizarding kind was given a reason to strike against the group that so many still feared and hated. This incident could very well be the match thrown on kindling already primed with lighter fluid.

"Aurors were in the area, seeing to the evacuation and quarantine of the forest, but there wasn't enough of them to stop the riot. They barely managed to contain the damage. None of the infected were apprehended, and many of the Muggles... and Muggle-born children... were killed." Luna's paraphrasing limped to a halt. Carefully folding the newspaper down the middle so that the story was prominently displayed, she set it aside. "Does this seem familiar to you?" she asked in the following silence.

His eyes squeezed shut and his hands clenched into fists, Harry didn't answer. '... Nine... Eight...' he counted silently to himself, willing the anger to flow out of him so that he would not send his teacup hurtling at the wall. '... Four... Three...' Finally, there was blackness behind his eyelids instead of red, and the high-pitched buzzing had faded from his ears. '...One.' He was still furious, but rational enough not to scream his rage to the rafters. When he opened his eyes, Luna was watching him with thoughtful, slightly protruding eyes.

"You've learned to control your anger better," she commented approvingly. "You were always such a hothead in school."

"It was part of my training," he said when he could trust that his voice to emit at a sane volume. Anger management had been one of the more difficult lessons he had learned as he had trained to be an Auror, and one of the most valuable. Rarely did he have to fall back on such devices as counting anymore, but in moments like these, it was a necessity. Guilt and anger had always mixed within him to create a volatile solution. He knew he shouldn't feel guilty for the riot and resulting deaths. Hogwarts had been riddled with patches of mushrooms, and removing the children and staff had been the only decision to make. He hadn't put the gun in the Muggle's hand, and he had not been in the squad that responded to the riot. Still, the deaths weighed heavily upon him.

"It's not your fault, Harry," Luna said quietly and reached across the table to pat his hand gently.

"It is if you ask Mum," Ron said as he entered the kitchen clean-shaven and fully dressed in his Auror's uniform. "She's sure that Ginny has eloped with a Muggle, now..." He trailed off as Luna tapped the story about the Hogsmeade Riot. "Bloody hell."

Harry snorted and downed his tea in one gulp, wishing there was something stronger in it. Rising to his feet abruptly, he said, "We should get going. The squad will be waiting for us."

Ron nodded and followed Harry to the fireplace, donning his mantel in a practiced sweep.

The main dining room of the Leaky Cauldron should have been much more full of people than it was. The small number of bodies clad in Aurors' uniforms was a more concrete testament to the devastation of the Rash than any of the newspapers articles he had read. Granted, his squad's numbers had been steadily dwindling since the start of the infection, but less than half had recovered and returned to their posts.

Chief Griswold nodded his grizzled gray head at them as Harry and Ron took their seats at the back of the room. The Aurors had spread out, many sitting at tables alone in what Harry thought was an unconscious attempt to make the group look bigger. It only had the effect of accentuating the absences. Two Aurors had gone missing since their last squad meeting on Thursday: Lightfoot's partner Hackleman, an odd character who knew more hexes and jinxes than anyone Harry could name, and a lovely young recruit who went by the unlikely nickname of Stick. Lightfoot was sitting alone at a table sharing significant glances with Stick's partner, who Harry suspected had been smitten by her within hours of the assignment.

With a quiet clinking of glass, Tom the barman finished putting away the glasses he had been cleaning and exited into the back of the bar, giving the Aurors their privacy. They waited another five minutes in relative silence, the easy banter that usually held the noise level of a squad meeting to a dull roar as noticeably absent as the squad's members. Finally, Griswold cleared his throat, garnering the instant attention of every person in the room.

"As you must be aware," Griswold rasped, his voice having suffered permanent damage from a hex years prior, "Wizarding Britain has gone tits up." Someone snorted and Griswold raised an eyebrow so bushy that it appeared as if a small rodent had taken up residence on his forehead. "From this moment on, all of you are on call around the clock." He paused to glare at the assembled witches and wizards, his eyebrows seemingly fighting for dominance over his bulbous pockmarked nose. "Your wand will vibrate for up to five minutes when you are being summoned. While it is vibrating, you are to Apparate; the spell sent to your wands will guide you to the correct location. It will stop vibrating once you have reached your destination. Yes, St. Germaine?"

The man in question had his hand raised, and upon being recognized, he lowered it to the table with a thump. "What if we can't Apparate in those five minutes?" Griswold's scowl deepened, so he was quick to add. "You know, if we're in the loo or..."

"Having a ride!" one Auror interjected. He received a couple of snickers and several disgusted glares, including one from Griswold. A leather glove sailed through the bar and struck him in the back of the head.

"Then I suggest you finish quickly," Griswold growled. Every Auror in the group slid a little further down in their chairs. "If you miss the summons, then your wand will vibrate again after a five minute break. If you must wait for the second summons, then you'd better have a damn good reason."

Harry and Ron exchanged glances and nodded in silent understanding. Finding Ginny was their highest priority. If their wands happened to start vibrating at an inopportune time, then the squad would have to wait.

"Potter! Weasley! Do you have anything to add?" Griswold shouted abruptly. Both men started, and it was Harry who was first to answer.

"Ginny is still missing, sir." Even to his own ears, the words sounded truculent and querulous, but he didn't care. It was also very true.

"Lots of folks are still missing," Griswold snapped. "My own son..." He cut himself off when his wand began to glow with brilliant red light and vibrate in his hip holster. "Blast!" he swore, drawing his wand and brandishing like a torch. "All right, time for the first test."

An instant later, every wand in the room began to pulse with the same red light. The room exploded with noise as eight Aurors leapt to their feet with varying degrees of grace and profanity, withdrawing wands and regarding the shaking lengths of wood with everything from irritation to revulsion.

"They couldn't have found a better way to do this?" Ron whined as he held his wand loosely and eyed it as if it had been replaced with a garden snake.

Harry grimaced, sharing in his friend's dislike. It was as if his wand had become possessed with a malevolent spirit, and Harry had had enough of possession in his teens to last him a lifetime. Like it or not, there was nothing he could do about it. Clearing his mind, he focused on Apparating, letting his ensorcelled wand guide the way.

Within two minutes, the dining room of the Leaky Cauldron was empty and silent.

Hermione dragged a damp sponge across the naked chest of her patient, sopping up the oily black sludge that had begun seeping out of his pores several hours ago, and received the most beatific smile she supposed Severus Snape's face had ever produced. She couldn't help returning the smile. As out-of-place as it seemed, it was as infectious as the Rash that was being eradicated from his body. His eyes actually twinkled in a dazed, half-awake kind of way, and his thin lips stretched wide, sweetly, and slightly crooked, as if his mouth knew that it shouldn't be doing this, but couldn't be bothered to resist. It was Hermione's not-so-humble opinion that stoned bliss was a brilliant side effect of her treatment when dealing with this particular patient.

So far, she had been treated with a rambling dissertation on the enhanced properties of lavender when harvested on a new moon; which brand of dragon dung imparted the highest concentration of iron to a flowerbed; Malfoy's entire sexual history (she suspected that there had been more editorial than fact in that one, but since Malfoy had left the room at that point, she would likely never know); his thoughts on a Muggle science fiction series that she had read years ago and vaguely remembered; and in which orifice Minister Trout had sequestered his head. He had dozed often for no more than a couple hours at a time, and when she had grown exhausted to the point that she could no longer prop her eyelids open, he had sung her a slow sad lullaby in a slightly out of tune minor key. His deep silky voice had melted her bones.

Their conversations were far from one-sided. He asked her any question that popped into his head, whether it was suitable for polite company or intensely personal. She had been hesitant to answer at first, wondering how much he would remember later, but the more he shared of himself, the more she was inclined to reciprocate. When she had explained how she had started in Cosmetic Transfigurations and his small part in it, he had laughed so loudly that Malfoy had flown into the room and demanded to know what was wrong. Snape had shot him a mysterious grin, followed by an even more mysterious comment: "It was *me*. You've lost." After Malfoy had flounced out of the

room in a huff, Snape had launched into the Life and Loves of Draco Malfoy.

In a matter of a day and a half, Hermione had found herself becoming more intimate with this man by words alone than she had ever experienced with another human being. And as his eyes followed her hand as she swept it across his chest, tangling the scattered dark curls that dusted his pectorals, she wondered if it would be very unprofessional if she kept Snape doxed and took him home with her.

"That feels divine," he purred muzzily, slurring the slightest bit.

Malfoy pulled a face from the chair. Positioned as it was by the head of the bed, Snape couldn't see him, but Hermione could (she was perched on the edge of the mattress, her hip aligned with Snape's), and she scowled at him reprimandingly. Making an even more horrid face, he said, "That *sounds* obscene."

"You're one to talk, boy." Snape stopped watching Hermione's hand long enough to wink conspiratorially at her. She didn't bother to stifle the giggle that tickled her throat; she wasn't one for giggling, but it made Snape smile and she was fast becoming addicted to those smiles. This time, he not only smiled, but chuckled quietly as well, blinking long and slowly.

Dipping her sponge into the pan of cool water charmed to stay clean, she rinsed the sponge of ichor and wiped down his arms, still latticed with shiny scars. Snape's face grew pensive and his gaze more focused as he watched the sponge traverse his left forearm.

"I thought it was *him*," he said, almost dreamily. "I felt him under my skin, in my veins, in my head."

"Not any more though," Hermione confirmed. She touched his cheek gently, marveling at how he leaned into her hand instead of striking it away. She would miss this.

"No, not any more."

"Severus," she started, but was somehow caught breathless by his tender expression.

"Hermione," he said almost singsong, lengthening the 'i'. They had progressed to first names rather quickly at his insistence. She loved how he said hers, as if he relished each syllable.

"I just wanted to say..." She paused, remembering that Malfoy was in the room. However, she couldn't let this chance pass her by. Taking care of him had help assuage some of the guilt to which she'd clung since the night in the Shrieking Shack, but it was important that he hear her apology. Perhaps he would even remember it when the treatment had run its course. "That night, when Nagini bit you and we left you there... I'm so very sorry. We should have done more. Something. Anything! Except what we did..."

He shushed her, patting her gently on the hand that was still washing his arm. "Silly girl, I neither wanted your help nor needed it."

"Yes, but we were simply *horrible*..."

"Will you hurry it up? This is disgusting," Malfoy grouched from his chair, and Hermione was forcibly reminded of his spoiled Hogwarts persona. "He had better be back to normal when your cure wears off or I'll be quite put out."

Hermione frowned at him. "You don't have to stay." In fact, she would prefer it if he left. Snape wouldn't be so pleasant for much longer, and she wanted to enjoy it while it lasted. All too soon, he would be back to insulting her and, more likely than not, send her packing without so much as a word of thanks.

He snorted derisively and raised an eyebrow. "I'm saving these memories for a rainy day," he said with a wink much more mischievous than the one Snape had given her. "They'll be good as gold. Besides," he said as he leaned back in the uncomfortably hard chair and stretched like a cat, "I'm here to spell you. You've got to rest sometime."

With a sigh, Hermione dropped the sponge into the basin. "I suppose. I could use a lie-down in a real bed."

Snape patted the mattress next to him and smiled up at her through sleep-fogged eyes. The fact that he was falling asleep, and therefore not able to keep her such excellent company, sealed the deal.

"You have no finesse, old man." Malfoy shook his head in mock disgust and folded his arms together as Hermione stood up. "Take my room. It's down the hall to the right."

Sleep didn't come as easily as Hermione would have guessed, despite the fact that Malfoy had a sinfully soft down-feather-topped mattress and his bedroom was decorated much more sumptuously than Snape's had been. Layers of off-white gauzy curtains softened the twilight into a purple haze, and a thick-piled Oriental rug in muted blues and greens covered the hardwood floor. The air was warm enough that she simply flopped across his duvet, luxuriating in the relief that it gave her back and the feel of soft cotton under her skin. She knew that she should have taken a shower first, but couldn't be bothered, expecting to fall asleep straight away. Instead, she lay awake staring at the ceiling and thinking about Snape.

It had never occurred to her that he had the capacity for anything but viciousness. It probably should have come as no surprise that he was human underneath all his spines, but she couldn't recall giving it any serious thought. Nothing in her treatment for the Rash had any personality-altering ingredients in it per se, though she had added a sedative that lowered inhibitions it tended to make difficult patients more tractable. The nature of the potion also played a part in his pleasant demeanor. It destroyed Dark Magic in order to kill the infection. The result was that all traces of Dark Magic were temporarily eliminated. For one so inclined to the Dark, Snape was undoubtedly feeling disoriented and disconnected.

The brilliant, funny man sleeping in the next room was a part of Severus Snape, just one he wasn't comfortable showing her. It was a shame she *liked* this man; they got on smashingly, and she would jump at the chance to see more of him. Just the same, he wasn't Severus Snape without the bite to his wit and the glitter to his fathomless black eyes. He wasn't what one would call devastatingly handsome or even very attractive, but his features were striking and he was leanly built, if a little short. One couldn't have a decent conversation with physical beauty, anyway. As a package, he was just about as perfect as any man could be.

She had no delusions that he wouldn't go back to being horrid to her once the potion had been flushed from his system worse than horrid if he remembered any of what they had shared. Not to mention the fact that he had been in love with Lily Potter since he was a schoolboy and surely still was. He would certainly be a tough nut to crack.

'Understatement of the decade,' she thought with a wry twist of her lips. The question was: would she be up to it?

Sighing in frustration, she slapped the duvet with her palms and glared at the ceiling, resigned to the fact that she was not going to fall asleep and probably should take a shower instead of moaning over Snape. She rolled off the bed and padded out of the room, debating whether she should ask Malfoy where the fresh towels were kept or simply start opening doors. There were only five in the narrow hallway: one to Snape's bedroom, one to Malfoy's, the loo, and two that she had yet to open. Though a bit uncomfortable with the feeling of snooping through their house, even if it was to simply find a towel, she opened the door closest to the bathroom and peered in.

It was a small room hardly bigger than her walk-in closet and jam-packed with bookshelves, leaving just enough space for a worn oak chair and roll-top desk. With the blinds open, the large picture window had an excellent view of the garden, which almost seemed to shimmer with life and vitality in the failing light. Churning sluggishly beyond his backyard, the river was as polluted and ugly as the garden was beautiful. The air was stuffy, close, and heavily scented by old parchment. It reminded her of the library down the street from her parents' house, and for that reason only, she stepped in, leaving the door cracked behind her.

The shelves reached from floor to ceiling and covered every inch of available wall space, much like the parlor downstairs. Yesterday, on her way to the kitchen for a glass of something cold to drink, she had taken a moment to peruse the titles on those shelves. There had been a number of Potions textbooks for various school years, a set of encyclopedias on the history of Magic, and a number of grim titles that could only contain information on the Dark Arts. Here, the selection of books was completely

different: a leather-bound set of classic science-fiction novels, the kind one would receive piece by piece in the post, was wedged next to a hodge-podge of worn Muggle paperbacks, some with spines so creased that she had trouble reading their titles. Another shelf held a seemingly random collection of non-fiction on subjects from astral projection to hydroponics to *Twenty Daytrips in the Highlands of Scotland*. He also had an old CD player crammed into one shelf, almost engulfed by an eclectic collection of CDs. Like the paperbacks, their covers were scratched and worn, and several had prices inked with Magic Marker. She wondered if he wandered the local thrift stores and simply bought what looked interesting.

It was a set of matched photo albums that caught her eye, however. They were sewn-bound, leather monstrosities with static-cling pages, the kind a scrap booker might use (her mother kept them by the dozens). Intrigued by what Severus Snape would deem worth keeping, she lit the small electric lamp on the corner of his desk and slid the first off the shelf with a guilty, covert glance at the door. Pushing it shut, she hoped that Malfoy wouldn't notice the faint light under the door. There was no way she could rationalize this as "looking for towels."

The first several pages had old Muggle Polaroids of a skinny, awkward black-haired boy and a lovely girl with auburn hair and bright green eyes. Occasionally, another girl, sour-faced and not nearly as pretty, was in the background, often glaring at the boy.

"Snape and Lily," she breathed, staring with rapt attention at the photos. Even then, his crush on her was obvious, though Lily seemed hesitant and lacked his enthusiasm. His Hogwarts letter took the entirety of one page, and across from it was a photograph of Lily and Snape on Platform Nine and Three-quarters in their school robes, lacking any house insignia. Lily was smiling nervously, but Snape had a wide, happy grin plastered across his face. As the pages progressed, there were fewer and fewer pictures of them together. Most were of Lily alone, posing shyly, or a candid shot of her amongst friends, seemingly unaware of the camera.

Hermione watched Lily mature as she flipped through the book, the posed pictures dwindling until they ceased completely, the candid shots increasing in number and distance from their subject. Several were oddly shaped, as if they had been cut. Others were torn. She suspected that he had removed parts that he hadn't liked. Near the end of the book were a few wizarding photographs: one of Lily crossing the street in Diagon Alley, the wind blowing her auburn hair across her face and thwarting her every attempt to brush it back, and another of her sitting in the sun on a blanket at a park, a book in her hand and a picnic basket at her hip. She was quite obviously past school age, and when Hermione looked closely, she could see the small rise of her stomach. The last photo in the book was of Lily standing outside of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, rocking an infant on her shoulder. Her lips moved silently, she supposed in song, as she swayed and bobbed. Harry would kill for this photo. The final few pages were blank.

Smiling sadly, Hermione slid the album onto the shelf and pulled down the next one. It held his Masters Certification in Potions and the birth announcement of Draco Malfoy to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. There were several Wizarding photographs of a tow-headed chubby baby, then toddler and then young man. Grimacing as the boy's pointed face grew more sneering and smug (she remembered that quite well, thank you very much), she flipped through the pictures of Malfoy until a newspaper clipping caught her eye. It was one of those published in the *Daily Prophet* during the Tri-Wizard Tournament; she was hugging Harry just before he performed the first task.

Frowning in consternation, she turned the page to find two more photos of her from that same year: one of her and Victor Krum posing together and one of the all the Tri-Wizard contestants and their dates. The event photographer had been taken them mid-way through the dance when she had still been relishing in the glory of her makeover before Ron had spoiled it all by being a blockheaded prat. Flipping through the pages quickly as confusion and unease began to tighten her chest, she found several more photos of her through her years at Hogwarts: patrolling a dark hallway, standing on the train platform as the Hogwarts Express steamed into the station. These were intermingled with many more photos of Malfoy, usually posed family portraits.

Hurriedly thrusting that album into place, she grabbed the next and opened it to see a clipping from the *Daily Prophet*, her young face beaming with triumph that they had defeated Voldemort. The rest of the pages were filled with her: candid Wizarding photos like the ones of Lily, clippings from various newspapers, even a tiny cutout from her company's brochure a glamorous black-and-white headshot.

"Hermione, what are you doing in here?"

Hermione's head snapped up, and she spun around, the photo album still open in her clammy hands and her heart in her throat. Malfoy stood in the doorway, his hand on the doorknob. An eyebrow rose when he caught sight of what she was holding.

"I was looking for towels," she said unconvincingly. It was still odd to hear her first name coming from Draco Malfoy's lips, and it wasn't nearly as pleasant as hearing it from Snape. Just as nursing Snape had brought them closer, she and Malfoy had developed something that resembled a real friendship. He wasn't half bad if one overlooked a number of character flaws.

"You aren't going to find any in there." He nodded at the album in her hand. "I do believe that you are snooping. Not very good at it, are you, Hermione?"

Refusing to deny the obvious, she shrugged. "I thought you were supposed to be watching Severus."

"He's sleeping. Like *you* should be." Tucking his hands into his pockets, he sauntered over to her with a wicked smile. "However, if he knew that you had been in here, looking at these..." He froze when he saw the picture on the page: an artsy shot of Hermione leaving Flourish and Blotts, her hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun as she gazed off to the side. "What...?"

Seeing that Malfoy was as surprised as she was, she turned the page to see herself yet again. In silence, they thumbed through the album to see picture after picture of her: alone, with friends, but never aware of the camera.

"Well, I'll be buggered," he said finally.

"The first picture was from *fourth year*, Draco. There's many of Lily, too." She nodded at the bookshelf containing the albums.

"Pervert," Malfoy said with a certain amount of awe. "And I thought he was a eunuch."

Hermione pursed her lips and met his eyes over the book. "He lived most of his entire life at Hogwarts. He graduated at what, seventeen? Eighteen? And began teaching at twenty-one? He's been surrounded by students for most of his life. It makes sense that it would be a... former student about whom he would choose to... obsess."

"Full of ourselves, aren't we?" Malfoy asked, but his laughter had lost its derisive edge and sounded sad more than anything else.

Hermione shrugged and turned back to the last photo in the book. She was around twenty-five in that photo, just starting her Cosmetic Transfigurations clinic and personal makeover. Her hair backlit and glowing like a corona, she was strolling through a park with a book in her hand, the wind stirring a cyclone of orange autumn leaves around her body. He had developed a particular style and artistry as a photographer over the years, and she was sure that he could have had some submitted to a gallery if he found more subjects, that is.

The initial creepiness was fading as she absorbed the reverence with which the pictures were taken. She was never in a compromising position; there were no photos of her on the loo or undressing by her window. In his pictures, she was truly beautiful. Part of her was quite flattered that she had somehow caught his eye, though she was still unnerved that he had been able to take so many photos for so long while she had remained oblivious.

Or, perhaps, was he having her followed? She couldn't imagine why. Pausing her slow tour through Snape's hidden hobby, she allowed another thought to roll through her mind: perhaps he wouldn't be as impossible a challenge as she had anticipated. Her breath caught in excitement, and she forced herself to exhale in a calm, measured breath.

"Am I to understand that you have never seen these albums before?" she asked, sure of his answer, but wanting to confirm it nonetheless.

"Of course not. I hadn't actually noticed them before in all this junk." He waved a hand at the crowded bookshelves. "It does, however, shed light on a few things."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, shutting the book and replacing it. Shaking his head, Malfoy slouched out of the room, for all appearances deep in thought.

"The towels are in the basket above the toilet," his voice, muffled by the wall, carried back to her.

"Right," she mumbled to herself, deciding to leave the last album unopened and to take that shower. "Draco," she called, hurrying out of the room after him. "Were you looking for me?"

He paused at the end of the hallway, his hand on Snape's bedroom door as he pushed it open. Staring hard at the man inside for a long moment, he shot her a wry grin. "You could say so. I wanted to see how you looked sleeping in my bed."

He shook his head before disappearing into the room, leaving Hermione alone in the hall with her thoughts.

A/N: Big shout-out to my beta, who has seen this chapter several times! Thanks also to the mods of TPP for hosting the challenge and reviewing all of our work, and to you readers who give an anonymous reader support. :)

Several of you got House Points for Sweeny Todd, but no one got "Beware of the Leopard!" That was from the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams.

This title of this chapter is from the Cure song of the same name.

A Self-Preservation Thing

Chapter 7 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 7 A Self-Preservation Thing

It took Harry a precious few seconds to recognize his surroundings when he popped into existence at his destination. He hardly had time to cast a *Protego* before one of the blank windows that served as St. Mungo's Muggle front blew outward in a spray of glass and violently hot flames. Dust and smoke stung his eyes and poured into his lungs despite his shield. Gasping and wheezing, his eyes streaming with tears, Harry covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve and cast a silent *Aguamenti*, showering the top of the fire with a heavy mist. Cursing loudly through his cough, Ron aimed his *Aguamenti* at the base of the flames, a thick stream that killed the root of the fire as Harry smothered it from above.

Surrounding them, disembodied shouts and screams slashed through the smoke, and tiny shards of glass carpeted the pavement, winking colorfully as they reflected the firelight. To their right and lost in the thick haze, Griswold shouted something that sounded like an order, but a thunderous explosion drowned out his voice and shook the ground beneath their feet. The dense gray smoke turned the twilight to night and began to glow with an eerie red-orange light that flickered with flashes of green and blue. Grotesque elongated shadows danced through the haze like demons on holiday.

His pulse pounding in his ears almost as loud as the roar of the fire, Harry grabbed Ron's elbow and jerked him out of the way just as one of the shadows condensed into corporeality. Both men had their wands trained on the figure until they realized that it was a Healer, her robes hanging in singed shreds and her mouth gaping in a rictus of terror. She barreled past them, her hands slapping their helping hands away in her haste to flee. Neither man had time to wonder on her behavior before her pursuer coalesced from the smoke: a man in the linens of a resident of a secure ward, his pupils burning as red as flame and his lips coated in white froth.

Without pausing, the rabid man changed course and lunged for Ron, his fingers crooked into claws as he swiped at Ron's face.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry roared the curse and struck the man in the back, knocking him unconscious, but his voice was almost lost in the din. With a move more nimble than most people would expect of him, Ron dodged the dead weight of the man falling to the ground. Simultaneously, he pushed Harry's shoulder *hard*. Stumbling to the side, Harry watched the tail end of Ron's *Stunner* shoot into the smoke and hit a burning-eyed shadow that had been rapidly approaching.

"What the bloody fuck?" Ron shouted, sending Harry a bewildered glance as they both cast binding spells on the unconscious wizard. Immediately after, their eyes snapped back to the smoke, scanning it for new threats. Harry pressed his back against Ron's, giving them the advantage of a full three hundred sixty degree view of the situation not that they could see much further than a few feet. Another explosion shuddered through the earth, and several shards of glass that had remained in the large picture window now cascaded to the ground with barely audible tinkles. Twin pinpoint of red blinked at them from the smoke and then disappeared into the gloom.

"St. Mungo's was detaining some of the more violent Rash patients in one of the secure wards!" Harry yelled back through the stinging in his throat. He inhaled a great lung-full of smoke and choked with the need to cough it back up.

"Hermione's bloody rats!" Ron twisted his head to stare at him in sudden understanding. Harry nodded, remembering the red-eyed foaming rats in Hermione's aquarium that repeatedly slammed themselves against a Magical barrier to get at each other. They shuddered in tandem. "You don't think they could've prepped us?" he shouted, gesturing at a cluster of shadows from which jets of red light emanated.

Harry shook his head. Having advance warning about the situation at St. Mungo's before they Apparated *would* have been nice, but he doubted that there was time. He doubted even Griswold knew they were simply responding to an emergency call.

One of the shadows broke away from the group, and both Harry and Ron had their wands trained on it until they recognized Auror St. Germaine loping towards them.

"This is madness! Are you two alright?" he wheezed through the smoke. His dark blond hair was gray with ash, and his face was streaked with soot. When Harry and Ron nodded, he smiled grimly. "Good, because the Muggle-Repelling Charms and location glamours have failed. Muggles are starting to gather... What's that?" he asked suddenly, cocking his head and furrowing his brow in consternation.

Harry wondered how he could hear anything through the commotion, but then he caught the faint wailing of sirens and strobing lights in the distance. "The Fire Brigade," he said tersely. Just what they needed: a crew of Muggles armed with axes and high-pressure hoses added to the mix of terrified Healers and patients, rabid wizards, and Aurors on hair-trigger.

Grimacing, St. Germaine opened his mouth to comment, but screamed instead as his back erupted in deep gashes, showering Harry, Ron, and the pavement with fine droplets of blood. He pitched forward, screaming, and Harry caught him just before he hit the pavement. Over their heads, Ron riposted with a Stunner, catching the approaching madwoman with a glancing blow on the shoulder before she ducked below a windowsill still fanged with jagged shards of glass.

Allowing Ron to cover them, Harry eased the semi-conscious St. Germaine to the pavement and settled him on his side. With his gloved hand, he quickly brushed shards of broken glass away from St. Germaine's face. Like an abstract stained-glass window, they shimmered in the muted firelight, reflecting dazzling bursts of red, green and gold where they weren't spotted with blood. St. Germaine coughed, a sick, rattling sound, and Harry cursed. Knowing that the man needed more help than he could give, he sang the counter-curse to Sectumsempra, tracing the deep gashes with his wand. He had been flayed to the bone and one rib was broken cleanly as if it had been sliced with a giant cleaver. Coughing again, the rattle becoming more of a gurgle, St. Germaine opened eyes hazy with pain and gave Harry a mute look of panic.

"We must get you to the Leaky Cauldron," Harry said, so close to St. Germaine's ear that he did not need to shout. "I think you've got internal injuries." St. Germaine's eyes rolled in their sockets, his gaze fixing on something beyond Harry. Glancing up, Harry was relieved to see Auror Woodworth, an Amazon of a woman and St. Germaine's partner, cast a Protego as she skidded to a stop next to them.

"Bugger," she said abruptly as she knelt next to them. "How bad?"

"Broken rib, punctured lung?" Harry guessed. "I've healed the external damage, but he's also lost a lot of blood..."

"I've got him," she said, cutting him off. Slipping arms that bulged with muscle under her partner, Woodworth gathered him to her chest as if he weighed no more than a child and then Disapparated with a crack.

With no dying colleagues to distract him, Harry realized that some of the flashing lights were mounted on the top of two fire engines that were barreling down the street toward them, sirens screaming above the infrequent explosions.

"Ron!" he yelled through the racket as he pushed to his feet. They had to contain the Muggle interference with this mess before they were hexed, either accidentally or intentionally. As it was, he and Ron were in for a long night of Obliviates.

Ron grunted in reply as another curse hit the shield that he was maintaining between them and the attacker that Harry had momentarily forgotten. Feeling foolish, Harry waited for the moment that she would rise above the windowsill to hex them. Only moments later, she popped up from behind her cover like a jack-in-the-box and vaulted the sill, casting a volley of multicolored hexes that powdered the glass at their feet and charred the pavement. Ron's protective shield shattered under the onslaught, but not before Harry lunged to the side out of range of the shield and cast a well-aimed Incarcerous. Hissing and spitting, the woman tumbled to the ground trussed in thick cords.

Grabbing Ron's elbow, Harry dragged him toward the fire engines, which rose out of the smoke like flashing-eyed leviathans. Already, Muggles were swarming out of the trucks dressed in thick plastic suits and wide-brimmed helmets. Several firefighters were setting up a temporary barrier to hold off the crowd of Muggles that were collecting in a loose circle around the disaster that was St. Mungo's. Clustered to the side of the Muggles and standing distinctly apart were awkwardly dressed people that could be none other than witches and wizards. They cast fearful glances at St. Mungo's, the fire engines and the Muggles in turn. Harry noted with dread that most had their wands drawn.

A startled shriek emanated from a woman at the fringe of the crowd. The press of bodies surged as a wild-haired man tied into a battered straightjacket tore out of the smoke and leapt the barrier, crashing bodily into her. Harry was only able to catch a glimpse of glowing red eyes before the man sunk his teeth into the screaming woman's arm. The mob exploded into shouts and converged on the man, ripping him away from the woman and beating him into the pavement.

"*Relashio!*" Harry shouted as he sprinted toward them, Ron hot on his heels. Several brawlers were hurtled backward, and several more were startled into retreat by the sparks alone, but as one Muggle was pushed away, another was ready to take his place. Dread knotted in his stomach as Harry realized that the violent crowd was swiftly growing in size. There were already more Muggles than just he and Ron could handle without hurting anyone.

The small gathering of witches and wizards seemed to swell as their muttering grew louder, the very air around them crackling with static. From the depths of the group, an angry shout, surely the result of a Sonorous, rose above the roar of the Muggle crowd. "You there, Muggles! Unhand that man!"

A hex flashed red and rocketed into the violent throng, and several Muggles dropped to the pavement unconscious. Following on its tail, three more hexes hit the crowd of Muggles. Ron cast a Protego between the Muggles and wizards as Harry cried, "Cease and desist!"

Several hexes at once hit Ron's shield, and it expired in a flicker of light. In tandem, the two groups, Magical and Muggle, rushed towards each other, the Muggles with raised fists and the Magical with raised wands.

Severus stirred against the soft cotton of his bedclothes, his unshaven cheek snagging in the fine weave. The light was bright against the backs of his eyelids, and for a moment he wondered if he had fallen asleep with the lamp lit. That was ridiculous, however, because the last thing he could remember was taking the gardening shears to his arms in an attempt to cut the Dark Lord out of his flesh. Which was also ridiculous, for the Dark Lord was dead, and he felt fine. Terrific, even. He must have dozed off while reading one of those Muggle horror novels, then, and dreamt the whole thing.

Groaning softly in protest of having to move, he swung his arm over the side of the bed and reached for the lamp's cord, giving it a sharp tug. The light only increased, but Severus gave a few good jerks to be sure that it wasn't the lamp lighting his room.

It was morning, then, and he had overslept. Preferring to be up with the sun, Severus wasn't one to have a lie-in, but he felt too good let it irritate him. Blinking sleep-crusted eyes open, he met the warm brown gaze of Hermione Granger.

He let his eyelids slide shut again. So, he was still mostly asleep. It wasn't the first time he had dreamt that Miss Granger had snuck into his bedchamber wearing one of his white button-down shirts, though she usually wasn't wearing gray sweatpants underneath. It was a nice dream, second only to the one where he finds her in his garden pruning the begonias in nothing but an apron. However, Miss Granger was not in his bedroom, nor would she ever be. When he opened his eyes again, she would be gone.

He opened his eyes.

She was still staring at him, smiling gently and offering a tantalizing view of the tops of her breasts through the gap in his white button-down shirt.

"How are you feeling, Severus? Well enough to get out of bed?" She brushed several damp strands of black hair from his face and placed her palm on his forehead. Severus lay silent in shock, both at the informality with which she had addressed him and the tender caress of her hand. It had the surrealism of a dream, but the tactility of real life and it felt eerily familiar. "Your fever is almost gone." She smiled and patted his cheek. "Draco has made toast and tea. Perhaps you're up to joining us in the kitchen? What's wrong?"

He clamped his lips together for a long moment to prevent himself from gaping like a fish or sputtering like a fool. She could not be in his room! And yet here she was as if she had every right, and wearing his shirt, no less! As she leaned closer to him and frowned with concern, an unsettling sense of vulnerability tightened his chest and shortened his breath, robbing him of his earlier euphoria. He had managed to keep her at a safe distance for years with her none the wiser of his observation. He had been sure that their most recent personal encounter was to be their last. Why, then, was she here? It was unacceptable; he had to drive her way properly, this time, for the sake of them both.

Pushing himself up until he was sitting propped against his pillows and not laying in such a defenseless position, he crossed his arms over his chest and tried to ignore that he was dressed in one of his older, rattier nightshirts. When he was confident that he could form whole, appropriately vicious sentences, he hissed, "What's wrong, you ask? You stand in *my* bedroom wearing *my* shirt, and you dare to ask *what's wrong?*"

She straightened, her frown sharpening as the concern fled her eyes. "I see. You're fine, then. And you remember nothing of the last two days?"

"Of course I remember," he snapped, though he was beginning to suspect that he might have lost some time. Then suddenly, he did.

"Moonflowers are particularly potent when collected before pollination. Then, their magic is pure and untouched in the ovules. Once the flowers have bloomed and are pollinated, their magic transforms," he said languorously, basking in the attention of a rapt Hermione Granger, who was perched on the edge of his bed. Her curly hair was loose, backlit by the mellow glow of the lamp on his dresser to form a corona of rich amber around her face. She shifted, and one thick curl tumbled over her shoulder, which was bare except for a thin strap that held up her top.

"In the ovule," she repeated with a somewhat silly smile, and Severus returned it without a second thought. He felt as if he were suspended in a pool of warm Jell-o and his soul had been scrubbed clean of all the Darkness that it had possessed. His thoughts were clear, but the filter between his brain and his mouth had been shut down. He couldn't work up the initiative to miss it; he felt much too good and was absorbed in the attentions of a woman whom he had been watching for over ten years.

"It is an organic, feminine word, is it not, Hermione?" He loved to say her name. Each syllable had its own distinct flavor. And when he said hers, she almost always said his in return. He loved to hear his name on her tongue. She didn't disappoint him.

"I suppose, Severus," she said. He was hard-pressed to name a more beautiful sound. "And how does the pollination of ovules change their magic so drastically? Wouldn't fertilization and development into seeds simply strengthen or mature it?" She was teasing him, playing devil's advocate and it felt remarkably like flirting.

"Ah, but the flower's magic is channeled into growing the seeds and creating a nurturing environment. The flower becomes something new, as does its magic. At that point, one should leave the flower and collect the seeds later."

"Poor flower, neglected and becoming a plump fruit heavy with seeds," she mocked him.

"Never neglected," he purred in his best bedroom voice. It actually felt like a purr, rumbling deep within his chest and vibrating through his sinuses. Perhaps she, too, felt the throb of his voice, for her cheeks were stained a becoming pink.

"Severus..."

"Are you coming down for breakfast or aren't you?" Draco's snippy question issued from the doorway.

Blinking dazedly for a moment at the intensity of the memory, Severus came back the present with unaccustomed sluggishness. Hermione... Miss... Ms. Granger was still leaning over him, but the blush of his memory had been replaced by a tense, irritated expression, and her eyes were dark with disappointment. He stared at her blankly, mortified by his behavior and shocked by her responsiveness. It must have been something in her treatment, he decided, for only when very drunk did he become so... Well, he wouldn't think about that right now. He wished that the memories had been suppressed, as had some of his more inebriated moments.

Despite the embarrassing nature of many of his recollections, he realized several things at once. Draco's mushroom sample had infected him with the Rash, and its evil had pervaded his system within an hour, rooting into the Darkness of his being and growing tendrils of evil that had twined through his bloodstream and wound through his thoughts, writhing under his skin and choking his reason until his sanity had snapped under the pressure. Draco had taken the brunt of his breakdown, and if the boy had been slower with a wand, it might have been *him* who had been carved by the gardening shears. Draco's hex had momentarily knocked some sense into him, but only enough to recognize the evil that was consuming him. Perhaps worst of all, considering the intimate nature of his memories, Ms. Granger had been nursing him for the last two days.

What had the boy been *thinking* to bring *her* into this catastrophe?

Ah, yes. *She* had developed the cure.

Glad for the momentary distraction from her censure, he narrowed his eyes and glared at the young man standing in the doorway. Draco's pursed mouth was widening into a delighted smile as Severus' frown deepened.

"Uncle! Glad to see you coming back to your old self. I dare say I would have strangled you if I had to listen to much more of your sappy rot."

Severus had been accused of many things over the years, but spouting "sappy rot" had never been among them. His knee-jerk response was to deny it, but when he looked back at his interactions with Ms. Granger, he had to admit that they might have passed for sappy to the kind of incompetent boob that Draco sometimes chose to be. Schooling his face into pained forbearance, he spoke slowly in a sarcastic drawl. "Well, Draco, I am *so* sorry to have offended your delicate sensibilities while drugged into insensateness."

"I thought he was pleasant enough company," Ms. Granger said casually too casually in Severus' opinion as he watched her from the corners of his eyes. Her face was strangely blank, and her brown eyes glittered with calculating intelligence.

Grimacing at her, Draco exaggerated a roll of his eyes. "You've never had the best of taste when it comes to character. Take Potter and Weasley, for example."

"Is insulting my friends part of your master plan of seduction?" she asked dryly as she tilted her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest. Snape couldn't help but surreptitiously follow the curve of her breasts under his shirt. Her words registered a moment later, forming an icy casing around his heart.

Draco barked in short laughter and strode across the little room to take Ms. Granger's hand. Bowing shallowly over it, he brushed his lips over the top of her knuckles and gave her a sultry, bedroom variation of his Hunting Smile. The ice around Severus' heart leached into his veins, sending spider-like tendrils of frost through his chest and into his extremities. He concentrated on keeping his hands relaxed, rather than clenched, on the bedclothes. "Hermione," Draco purred. With a dizzying lurch in the pit of his stomach, Severus remembered saying her name in much the same tone. "I have no need of a *master plan* of seduction."

Hermione pulled her hand out of Draco's grasp and wiped the back of it on her shirt, but her smile was wry and amused. "Overconfident, much?"

"How very touching," Severus said silkily around the catch in his throat. "And you accuse *me* of 'sappy rot.'" He could *not* watch his godson attempt to debauch Ms. Granger in his own bedroom. Of course, he had watched as she had entangled herself in relationships, only to send the sods packing. None of them had suited her, and it was always with relief that he noted her ascension to the rank of single witch. Draco, however, was off limits. He would charm her, use her and then discard her, as he had all of his other women. And as Severus had to suffer through the travesty that would be their fling, she would be too close, her presence a temptation that would threaten his carefully delineated boundary of just when and how he would come in contact with her. So, distracted and agitated as he was, it didn't occur to him to question why it was *his* shirt she was wearing.

Draco grinned at him, but Hermione only sighed, brushing past Draco on her way to the door. "I think I'll have that tea, now," she said over her shoulder, the playfulness having vanished from her voice. She sounded slightly exasperated, and the chill in his blood slowly began to thaw.

"You might have a look at the *Daily Prophet*," Draco called to her retreating figure. He, too, had discarded his flirtatious mean to regard Severus with equal measures of pity, disgust and amusement. "She saved your sanity, you realize," Draco said when they could no longer hear her footsteps. "Quite possibly your life."

"I do," he confirmed with little grace. "And now that I am better, she may leave with my... ah... *heartfelt* thanks."

Raising an eyebrow, Draco watched him in silence for a moment. "You want her to leave," he repeated slowly, as if measuring each word for its veracity. Severus felt the vein in his temple twitch as his temper quickened. And to think that he had awoken feeling so damn *good*. "I believe I made myself plain on that point."

"Interesting," Draco said as he nodded to himself. Severus struggled to maintain an indifferent expression; it would not do to encourage his godson by reacting to whatever game he was trying to play. He was seriously beginning to consider feigning sleepiness when Draco's next words hit him like a sucker-punch in the gut. "And when did you take up photography?"

The ice was back, but this time it swept through him like a winter storm, leaving his extremities numb and his heart beating at a frantic rhythm. He felt the blood drain out of his face, but he locked his features into immobility. There was a chance that Draco was not referring to his collection of photographs that he had hidden in plain sight in his office. Perhaps he had left his camera out and the boy had stumbled across it. Or, a less desirable scenario: a member of Draco's social circle had seen him taking photographs. It was unlikely, for he had perfected the art of not being seen when he didn't want to be, a necessity for continuing his little hobby undetected.

Severus cleared his throat and met his godson's cunning gaze directly, hoping that his thoughts weren't completely Occluded. Unfortunately, Draco's mind was locked down. Deciding to play it cool, he said dismissively, "I have always had a camera, though I hardly see how that counts as 'taking up photography.'"

"Yes, you did like to take pictures of me when I was young. Father gave you that camera, didn't he?"

"You know he did, Draco," Severus said sourly, wishing he would get to the point already, but fearing what it might be.

"Why don't I fetch it and Hermione for you? You haven't nearly enough pictures of her." Against Severus' will, his lips drew back from his teeth as his molars ground under the pressure of his clenched jaw. The vein in his temple seemed to throb audibly, and his hands twitched, as if they would spring up on their own and wrap themselves around Draco's throat. Through the red that was clouding his vision, Severus watched Draco take an unobtrusive step backward as he fingered the wand that was suddenly in his hand. "Easy, Uncle. We wouldn't want the good Healer to dose you again in fear of a relapse."

It took an enormous amount of willpower, but Severus managed to stay in bed, panting and sweating in anger. With a satisfied smile, Draco tucked his wand back into his pocket. "Very good. You are clearly on the road to recovery, and you'll be back on your feet and brewing in no time. Hermione will need a dedicated Potions master to produce the quantities of her cure required to treat so many ill wizards."

Severus' lips were still quivering with rage, but his voice was deadly soft and steady. "Understood."

Severus closed his eyes and spent the next several minutes calming down by imagining all the ways he could hex the little viper. Despite his liberal views concerning Muggle-borns (liberal when compared to his father, anyway), Draco was certainly a product of his upbringing. Severus didn't necessarily blame Draco for blackmailing him; it was what any young man would do if he were raised to scheme and manipulate his way to his desires. If presented with a similar opportunity, Severus himself would have taken advantage of it. He blamed himself for not protecting his collection with more diligence. He should have *expected* Draco to snoop sooner or later, instead of counting on the boy's aversion to anything that resembled a text to keep him away. No, it was Draco's motives and Severus' possible exposure that worried him.

"A question, Uncle." Draco's cheerful question broke the strained silence as if Severus had not been imagining his body covered in weeping pustules. Severus opened one eye and stared at him discouragingly. Draco wasn't fazed, of course, and continued, "Why not simply approach her? She's not as scary as all that."

Severus disliked the implication that Ms. Granger might frighten him. It was a notion as ridiculous as initiating social contact. Brewing for her would be bad enough. The fact was, Severus preferred his solitude, his freedom, and his collection of silent photographs. He would always have them. Through his photos, he could live vicariously with the woman that meant the most to him without endangering her with his actions and poor choices. Having loved and lost once already, he chose to remain alone. It was safest for all involved, and he could live in contentment with his decision. None of this would make the slightest sense to Draco, however, and he certainly didn't owe him the effort to explain. Closing the one eye he had held open, Severus settled back into the mound of pillows. "It's a self-preservation thing, actually," he said finally. "Now get out of my bedroom. And if I catch you in my office again, I will personally see to your new career as pest control."

With a small chuckle, Draco slipped out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

A/N: Thanks to my dedicated betas and the mods who have made this challenge possible! Thanks also to you readers and reviewers who give an anonymous author some love. :)

"It's a self-preservation thing, actually," is right out of Love Actually.

The New Feel Awful

Chapter 8 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Chapter 8 The New Feel Awful

Hermione startled guiltily as Draco stepped out of Severus' bedroom and into the hall. Two blond eyebrows shot to his hairline, but he lifted a finger to his lips, signaling silence. Flushed with embarrassment, Hermione could only nod and tiptoe after him as he led the way downstairs. She had heard the conversation between Draco and Severus winding to a close, but still she had lingered by the door, anxious to catch anything else that might have been said. Not that what they had *said* had meant much; it was what they had left *unsaid* that was most important. They had been able to communicate so much with a few casual phrases and significant pauses. Despite her good sense, she had developed grudging respect for Draco for not only blackmailing Severus without actually stating as such, but for leaving the room with all of his limbs attached.

Her younger self would have been horrified by the whole situation: a friend of hers blackmailing a family member with lies and her shamelessly eavesdropping in order to learn how to snare said family member after having just rifled through his personal possessions. Her older self simply gave a figurative shrug and chalked it up to life in the real world where one did what one must to attain one's desires. She did wonder just what *Draco* was willing to do and where he drew the line at decency. Could *she* blackmail a member of her family? She liked to think not. However, from Severus' reaction, she had a feeling such actions were par for the course for Malfoys and Snapes.

"A self-preservation thing," she muttered quietly to herself as she followed Draco into the sunny kitchen. What did that mean coming from a man who had been all but stalking her for years, collecting her image in album after album? What made her so appealing visually, yet repulsive in person? She *knew* that they could get along well the last two days had proven it. She *wanted* to get to know him better; she simply had to convince him that he wanted to know her in the flesh, that is.

The sound of a chair being dragged across the floor pulled her from her thoughts. She glanced up at Draco, who was watching her with an unfathomable expression reminiscent of his godfather. He gestured for her to take a seat, and she dropped into it, uncomfortably aware of what he had just caught her doing. He must think her a sneak. Worse yet, an *inept* sneak. She hated to appear incompetent.

It was then that she noticed how carefully the table had been set. Several pieces of toast were piled on a plate set in the middle of the table next to a steaming pot of tea. A cube of butter, a small jar of jam, sugar and milk were clustered near the teapot, each with a separate utensil. Two place settings were arranged at opposite sides of the table, the plates and teacups positioned symmetrically with obvious concern for detail. In a heavy blue glass vase, two enormous sunflowers lit the kitchen with color almost as much as their namesake. Next to her plate was a folded *Daily Prophet* and a scroll that looked suspiciously like a contract.

"Looking for towels again?" Draco asked dryly, referring to yesterday's excuse for invasion of privacy, as he took his seat across from her.

Hermione blushed, but met his eyes, raising her chin a little. "Why didn't you tell him?" she asked instead of trying to defend her behavior. There weren't any good justifications, for one, and she really was quite curious as to why he would take implicit blame for something she had done.

He shrugged with one shoulder. "There is no guarantee that I won't."

Swallowing noisily, Hermione watched as he slid a piece of toast onto her plate and smirked at her. Then, the implications of his statement sunk in. She frowned and plucked the butter knife from the dish, pointing its dull tip at him. "I won't sleep with you," she growled.

Draco blinked, seemingly in honest surprise, and then shot her an annoyed grimace. "Don't be ridiculous. I don't need to blackmail women into my bed any more than I need 'master plans.' However, my little eavesdropper, I do have some paperwork for you to look at."

"Oh," Hermione said, nonplussed. Was that all he wanted? She could hardly believe it. A sudden idea occurred to her, and she schooled her features into what she hoped was a cowed expression. Feigning reluctance to cover a small frisson of excitement, she unrolled the scroll and skimmed the contract, her eyes searching for a particular clause one that would give her, as the client, rights to drop by the contracted master's lab to inspect the brewing of her patented potions. It was a common enough clause and would give her a pretense to spend time Severus. However, she couldn't let Draco know that she was now eager to sign Wurm and Prince as her supplier he would surely try to gain an advantage.

Finally, she found it near the bottom of the scroll as part of the guarantee of quality control. Smiling internally, she sighed and tried to look resigned as she took the peacock-plumed quill from Draco's outstretched hand. Usually, she had her solicitor check the contracts before she signed, but before A New You had become so successful, she had learned to read them for herself. She had to give Draco credit it was a well-developed contract, much more fair than she had been expecting. The only things that she did not like were the duration (ten years) and the sole supply agreement, meaning that Wurm and Prince would be the only Potions distributor that could brew and supply her potions. Her previous supplier had had a similar clause, and look where that had got her: signing a deal with a devil to further her goal to get under the robes of an ex-Professor.

Exclusivity for a decade or not, she would sign. As accommodating and companionable as Draco had been, she didn't trust him not to go to Severus if he thought it would be in his best interest. Besides, it might take her ten years to get under Severus' robes.

'Draco had better keep his mouth shut,' she thought as she scrawled her name at the bottom of the contract in glittering purple ink. The moment she was finished, it rolled itself closed and disappeared in a cloud of sweetly scented purple smoke. She knew that two copies would be made: one for her, which would appear in her office; one for him, which would go wherever he stored such things; and the original would be archived at the Ministry.

Exuding smug satisfaction, Draco poured her a cup of tea and added a dollop of milk, just as she liked it. They had shared several meals over the last couple of days, sometimes in Severus' room as he slept and others at this very table. His willing domesticity had shocked her at first, as had their easy camaraderie. She was actually getting to like him not that she trusted him. Correction: she trusted him to be a conniving, manipulative snake. She supposed it was just as well that she liked the prat, considering her plans for his godfather.

It did concern her that Draco seemed to have similar plans for her. Whether or not he would truly stoop to blackmail was anyone's guess, but she hoped it wouldn't come to that. Even more concerning was Severus' reaction when he found out about her short foray into his office. She didn't doubt that it would come to light sooner or later, and she thought it very important that he find out in a controlled environment one controlled by her. Hermione took a large bite of dry toast and pondered her next step. She might as well get the un-drugged Severus used to her company...

"To a bright new business future that will make both of us piles of Galleons," Draco announced as he toasted her with his cup of tea, his gray eyes gleaming with avarice and something else.

Hermione raised her teacup in return, returning his smirk. "To a bright new future," she repeated, adding silently, 'that will include seducing the reclusive Master Snape.'

Draco's eyes narrowed as he regarded her from over his teacup. "Now why am I getting the impression that that was too easy?"

"You consider chasing me with a contract for over a week and then blackmailing me to sign 'easy'? I'd hate to hear what you define as difficult." Draco shrugged one shoulder, winking at her, and Hermione rolled her eyes. He was teasing her, of course. "Speaking of difficult," she said as she took another bite of dry toast, "I want large-scale brewing of my Rash treatment to start as soon as Severus is well enough. Of course, I will be on hand to assist with and supervise the first several batches."

His eyebrows rising toward his hairline, Draco blinked speculative gray eyes at her. "Sev is more than competent when following written instructions. He rarely allows *me* into his laboratory when brewing," he cautioned her.

"You haven't signed a contract that granted you rights to supervise the brewing of your own potions," Hermione pointed out. "And considering the fact that it was partly due to your carelessness that he was infected, I'm not terribly surprised."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I was not the one that put damaged gloves on his hands. I simply declined to mention certain... ah... *properties* of that particular sample." Taking a sip of tea, he regarded her over the top of the cup. "He will not be pleased."

"He'll manage," Hermione said with a wry smile. "And he should be able to start tomorrow morning if he takes it slowly. I would rather he stay abed longer, but we just don't have the time to wait. I'll be back at... say, half-past nine?"

Shrugging carelessly, Draco topped off both of their cups. "Alright, then. It's your funeral. I'll see that Severus is prepared."

With a nod, Hermione polished off her piece of toast and chased it with the entire contents of her teacup. Draco's face fell slightly, but she ignored him. Rising out of her seat as she dusted crumbs from her fingers, she said, "I should check on my patient one last time before I track down Harry with the good news that I've got a cure."

Hermione tapped lightly on Severus' bedroom door before pushing it open, her smile fixed firmly in place. She was determined to show him that no matter how unpleasant he chose to be, there was no chasing her away. It was a matter of wearing down his resistance, she figured, until he gave into his obsession with her and accepted her as a part of his life. As Harry and Ron could attest, she was nothing if not persistent.

She almost sighed in disappointment when she saw that he was sleeping, his head tilted to the side and the air whistling through his long nostrils with the faintest of snores. Then again, he might be faking it. Brow furrowing, she leaned over him, watching for the small signs that would betray him. If anyone one could fool a trained Healer to think that that one was asleep, it would be Severus Snape. After a long moment, her shoulders slumped slightly, and she surrendered to the urge to sigh. She couldn't tell one way or the other.

She hadn't been lying when she'd told Draco that she needed to check on him. Claiming her favorite spot on the edge of his mattress, she pressed her palm against his cheeks and forehead, checking for a residual fever. He was a little warm, so she eased her hand under the nape of his neck. The skin was hot and moist, and fine black hairs, sticky with sweat, clung to her fingertips.

"Still slightly feverish," she muttered, trailing her fingers along his hairline behind his ear. She felt confident that the fever would be gone within a couple of hours, and he would be well enough to start brewing in the morning for a short while. If the situation hadn't been quite so desperate, then she would have recommended that he stay abed for another day or so. Unfortunately, she really did need the help, and as long as he took it easy, he should be fine. She would see to it that he took care of himself. However, she'd let *Draco* break the news of the cooperative nature of their project.

Smiling to herself, she brushed the high planes of his cheekbones with her fingertips. Even with a faint flush, his skin glowed with an olive tan. He had probably acquired it while gardening, she thought wistfully. He was sure to be a sight for sore eyes in a tee shirt and jeans, sweating and grubby up to his elbows. She would insist that he take a shower before touching her, and then she'd follow him upstairs...

"Ms. Granger, I must insist that you unhand me at once!"

Hermione blinked at him, startled to realize that not only were his eyes open and his face drawn into a fulminous glare, but that her hand had buried itself into his somewhat oily hair. Reaching over with one clammy hand, he latched onto her wrist and pulled it free. She didn't resist, reclaiming her wayward hand as if it had every right to be in his hair in the first place.

"I was checking for fever, as you well know. *You* were faking sleep," she said with a small, wry smile. "I suppose I would too, if I had Draco around to play nursemaid. Though, you are well enough to have attempted breakfast with us."

"*You* were taking liberties with my person," Snape said silkily as he crossed his arms over his chest and scooted backward until he was reclining at a steeper angle. Hermione had noticed that he'd done it earlier that morning when he had awoken sober and clear-headed. Perhaps the vulnerable position of lying on his back bothered him.

"Would you like to sit up?" she asked solicitously. "I could bring more pillows." Snape shot her a black look, and she smiled back. "I had to put your favorite set of pillowcases in the wash, but they are probably dry now." Severus didn't answer, choosing instead to stare out the window.

Sunlight slanted in through the curtains, illuminating the patch of comforter under which his feet formed a tall peak. He had big feet for a man his height, lean and dusted with wiry dark hair like the rest of him. Each toe was long and well formed, the toenails trimmed and healthy. The rough calluses Hermione had expected to find were absent, and his skin was soft and smooth.

"I could give you another foot massage," she offered without thinking about it. Her hands were itching to touch him again and for him to receive her touch with pleasure.

He flinched away from her, drawing himself even higher on the bed and pulling his arms closer to his body. His voice was deadly soft when he finally spoke. "I suggest you leave."

Hermione sighed heavily, not bothering to hide her disappointment, and stood. "Alright. Draco can handle it from here." She walked to the door and then paused at the threshold. "The offer will remain open."

Spinner's End was oddly quiet now that it was just the two of them. Draco was surprised by the unexpected emptiness that Hermione had left when she had Flooed home. In certain ways, Draco enjoyed the peace, though Hermione hadn't been a noisy or boisterous houseguest by any means. She simply had a presence to her that was now noticeably absent. He missed having someone around that would talk to him; Snape had remained steadfastly silent since breakfast.

She had left in haste, too. After finally getting a glimpse of the *Daily Prophet's* cover story regarding the fall of St. Mungo's, she had grabbed her belongings and dashed off with a quick parting word that she'd "be in touch." He could only assume that she was anxious to find her two buffoon friends.

All in all, Draco considered the pursuits of the last couple of days a solid success. Severus was well on his way to a full recovery and was as difficult as ever. Blaise owed him one hundred Galleons for the bet he had made against Hermione willingly working with Death Eaters, and he was on a sure path to another one hundred Galleons. When he presented the contract to his recalcitrant godfather, Severus would have to admit to being wrong.

The only feat he hadn't yet managed was to coax Hermione into his bed. He had been encouraged when they progressed to a first name basis, but she still held him at a wary arm's length. In fact, she had almost seemed oblivious to his advances, interpreting his flirting as a joke.

'She was distracted by Severus' illness,' he thought, somewhat consoled until a realization struck him. 'She was distracted by *Severus!*' He tried to imagine how a woman could be drawn to his godfather when he, Draco, was in the same household. He was smart, funny, devastatingly handsome, wildly successful... and he hadn't spent his lucid moments belittling the swot... well, recently, that is. Unable to fathom it, Draco decided that he was simply being too subtle. She might require the direct you're-a-witch-I'm-a-wizard-let's-get-drunk-and-screw approach. It was a waste of his talent, but he supposed it was the end result that mattered. Then again... she might want old-fashioned wooing: stolen kisses in the shadows, small sentimental presents, that kind of rot. Draco was obviously out of practice with that technique, for most women came running when he crooked his finger at them. He had told her the truth when he had said that he did not have to resort to blackmail. Regardless, he had to be forthright about his intentions.

And if she really was taking an interest in Severus? Draco paused at the mantel above the parlor hearth to give the notion serious consideration. He now knew that his godfather had an obsession, borderline unhealthy, with her. "Self-preservation," Severus had said. He must not have wanted to reveal his unrequited affections to a woman that he expected to reject him. Instead, he used each personal encounter to drive her away. It made sense in an anti-social, Severus sort of way. If Severus thought that Hermione shared his regard, would he change his mind and pursue her? Draco shrugged, pulling a pinch of Floo powder from the ornamental pot on the mantel. Either way, Draco had the A New You account in the bag, and he was up to a little competition. Obsession or not, a man had to strive for what he wanted, and if Severus wasn't going to bother, then Draco had no compunctions against snatching her up for himself. Inactivity on Severus' part was as good as declaration of surrender.

Draco grinned toothily. Wouldn't his father be furious?

"Malfoy Manor, library," he enunciated clearly as he tossed the powder into the small fire. Settling onto his knees on the hearthrug, he pushed his face into the green flames. As he had expected, his mother and father were seated in two matched brocade wingbacks, each with an expensively bound book in his and her hands. His mother glanced up first, and upon spying his head in the flames, carelessly discarded her book on a delicately carved end table and rushed to the fireplace.

"Draco! Finally! I've been worried *sick*, what with the..."

"Calm yourself, Narcissa. He's a grown boy making his own *decisions*," his father sneered from his chair. She tilted her face slightly away from her husband and rolled her eyes.

"You know where I'm staying, Mother," Draco said with a sigh, bracing himself for a pecking. His mother had the worst case of empty-nest of her entire peer group, doubtless due to his exile from the Manor.

"The last time I Floored, Sev told me that you were with some girl named Caroline and that she didn't have a fireplace connected to the Floo Network." Narcissa grimaced prettily, her wrinkled nose indicating what she thought of a person without a Floo.

"Another Mudblood bitch, no doubt," his father grumbled from his chair. Narcissa waved a quelling hand.

Draco resisted the urge to rub it in she *had* been Muggle-born but Draco hadn't Floored to irritate his father. "Carol-Ann, and that was over a month ago. I'm back at Uncle Sev's. But that's beside the point. Have you been following news of the Rash in the *Prophet*?"

"Some new scourge released by the Muggles," his mother said with disgust, wrinkling her nose again as if she could smell the scum responsible. His father snorted in agreement. "Maybe now something will be done..."

"Muggles didn't do this, mother." In a rush of words, Draco explained the source of the contagion, its inherent evil, and how quickly Severus had fallen ill. He also made a point to mention that Hermione (and he called her by first name, much to the apparent displeasure of his father) had developed a cure and had brought Severus back from the brink of who-knew-what. As he spoke, Lucius grew paler and paler, leaving his chair to stand in front of the fireplace by his wife.

When Draco had finally wound down to the end of his story, Lucius, in a voice notably lacking its characteristic drawl, said, "It sounds disturbingly similar to a project that I worked on before the end." Draco frowned at him; by "the end," Lucius always meant Voldemort's final defeat. Draco despised the euphemism. He looked back on it as more of a beginning. Narcissa blanched to the color of a sheet and wrapped long white fingers around her husband's forearm.

"Project?" Draco asked sharply. "What do you mean?"

Lucius grimaced in remembrance as he absently patted his wife's rigid hands. "When the Dark Lord..." Narcissa gasped reflexively, and this time, Lucius began to pry his wife's hands from his arm as he winced in pain. "When *he* was holed up here during those final months, part of the punishment for my... *disgrace*... was to assist with research and experimentation in the transference of... essence."

Frowning in confusion, Draco asked, "What kind of essence?"

"The essence of a human being, Draco," Lucius said as if Draco were being dense on purpose. "Specifically, his."

"Hadn't he already made several Horcruxes?"

"A Horcrux is a fragment of soul placed in one object, and if that object is destroyed, then so is the fragment of soul. This was the transference of the *entire* soul, as well as memories, personality, will a possession of sorts. I suspect that his eventual goal was to reform his soul and transfer it to a younger, healthier body when his dominion was secured. In the meantime, he wanted another failsafe in case events didn't unfold as he had planned.

"He expressed frustration and disappointment with his experience using that idiot Quirrell as a host for his essence the possession was incomplete and uncomfortable. He charged us with finding a method of preserving one's essence and then joining that essence with a suitable host."

Lucius took a deep breath, ignoring his son's impatient glare from the fire, tinted green by the light of the Floo connection. "We were not able to complete our task, but we did come close. I won't go into the details of our experiments," he said darkly and shuddered. Narcissa shook her head emphatically.

"Father, that's all very... ah... *interesting*, but..."

"We found an obscure strain of magical mushrooms that was all but extinct," said Lucius, interrupting him. "Centuries ago, it was used by a Dark wizard to gather a small horde of thralls. The mushrooms were infused with the wizard's essence and used to ensorcelled all those in his territory who had a natural talent for Dark Magic."

Draco stared at him in silence for a long moment. "Are you saying that the Dark Lord is alive, well, and recruiting with fungus?"

"No, idiot boy!" Lucius snapped. "I told you that we didn't succeed. The Dark Lord is dead. He wouldn't let us use anything of himself until we had surety of results, and as I said..." He trailed off, staring into space for a moment with horror flickering at the backs of his eyes.

"Who was the Dark wizard? What happened to him?" Draco asked when he was sure that his father was not going to finish his sentence.

Lucius raised an eyebrow, and for a moment Draco thought that he wouldn't answer. Finally, he said, "Ah, but therein lay the tragedy. A filthy Muggle mob armed with farming equipment overwhelmed the thralls and murdered them. Fearful of discovery, the Magical community struck his name from all records and destroyed his lab, trapping the wizard within and immolating him."

The three Malfoys fell silent, the only sound in the room the quiet snapping of the wood as it burned. The flames reached a knot in one of the logs, and a sharp *pop* broke the stillness with a cascade of green sparks. Lucius and Narcissa startled in unison, their eyes haunted. Draco watched them solemnly, his mother clutching at his father and his father internally battling the ghosts of past demons. In that last year of the Dark Lord's terror, Draco's parents had protected him from projects such as these. He hadn't objected; after his experience with trying to plan the murder of Dumbledore in his sixth year at Hogwarts, he had had enough of Dark Lord sponsored extra-curricular activities to last him a lifetime. He hadn't known what his father had been working on in the bowels of Malfoy Manor, and he hadn't wanted to. He didn't regret his parents' protection, but knowing some of this sooner would have been helpful. Regardless, his father had given him much to think about, and he wanted to talk it over with Hermione and Severus.

Running a hand through his hair, the Floo magic crackling along the roots of his hair with the gesture, Draco suggested wearily, "Perhaps you should consider taking a holiday until this is all over. The beaches in Spain are particularly lovely at this time of year. I know that you can get around the restrictions that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has placed on travel in and out of Britain."

Lucius remained silent for a long moment as Narcissa wrung her hands. Finally, she spoke in a voice strained with worry. "Of course we can. But, Draco, it doesn't sound like you plan to go with us."

Taken aback, Draco stared blankly at her for a moment. She was exactly right: it hadn't even occurred to him to leave town. Even knowing the seriousness of the epidemic and watching the crumbling of order in Wizarding Britain, he had been busy trying to find a way to profit from it. Moreover, he had accomplished that feat. Hermione had signed his contract, so Wurm and Prince would be the brewer for each and every unit of treatment to quell the Rash. Unless...

The giggling worry from earlier in the morning when Hermione signed the contract returned in full force. 'Unless she intends to sell the cure at cost, or worse yet, give it away for *free*.' Draco had to smother a groan. If Severus went along with the idea, and he just might because he was annoyed by Draco's blackmailing, then he would have no recourse. A New You would still be a cash cow of a client, but he had better stay to make sure that his business associates didn't fall too far into the red pit of altruism.

Draco shook his head, hating to see his mother's fearful expression, but knowing that his decision was for the best. "No, Mother. I have to stay here and keep an eye on things. If left unobserved, Hermione," Draco's lip twitched when his father flinched, "and Severus will bankrupt me."

Lucius nodded stiffly. "It would be only what you deserve for fraternizing with Mudbloods, but at least you have decent business sense."

Harry sat in the bathtub and stared blankly at the tiny bathroom window. The steam from the hot water had clouded the glass, and tiny droplets of condensation were slowly creeping down, leaving clear, spidery trails that seemed to tear at the orange-lit London night beyond. Harry thought that the fogged window and polluted night sky must be a sort of analogy of his own mind: clouded with exhaustion, but if he was to start thinking clearly, his thoughts would be dark and tainted. Suddenly, the bath didn't feel as

good as it had a moment ago.

Ginny had been missing what, three, four days? Harry couldn't remember: the days and nights had blurred, stitched together with skirmishes against murderous wizards with glowing red eyes and mass memory modifications when Muggles got too close. Occasionally, they were called to protect Muggles from *uninfected* wizards convinced that Muggles were responsible for the infection. During one such fight, the wizards had refused to back down, choosing to attack the Aurors who were only trying to defuse the situation. One Auror had been killed, and the mob of wizards had Disapparated so quickly that no arrests had been made. Then, the entire squad had been reprimanded for not setting Anti-Apparition wards.

When he wasn't performing his duties as an Auror or eating (sleep had become a luxury he couldn't afford), he and Ron, with help from the rest of the squad, searched for Ginny. All of the Aurors still on duty had been instructed to keep an eye and an ear out for her. Her friends and family had also been put on alert and had promised to contact him or Ron if they heard anything (Mrs. Weasley wasn't speaking to him anymore). He still made a point to visit her favorite places to eat and shop, though most of them had been closed down. Unfortunately, with no leads, they made very little progress.

When he had been a teenager and Sirius had been on the run from the law, he had wondered why wizards as powerful as Aurors could not find one man. The notion had disturbed him when he had thought Sirius was out to kill him and delighted him when he had been revealed as his loving godfather. He was sure it frustrated the living piss out of the Aurors assigned to hunt him down he was feeling that very frustration now. The fact was that a clever wizard could thwart even the Aurors if he didn't want to be found.

Harry's train of thought stumbled to a halt. Could Ginny not *want* to be found? Was she *hiding* from him? Harry shook his head with enough force to slosh water out of the bath. No, Ginny wouldn't do that to him, no matter how angry she was. She wouldn't do that to her family, either.

His next thought struck him hard, and Harry grew cold despite the warm water in which he was soaking. Could someone *else* not want her to be found?

Harry leapt out of the bathtub and snatched a towel from the rack as he wrenched open the door. Dripping wet, he pelted the down the hall holding the towel haphazardly in front of his groin. "Ron! Ron!" he shouted, reaching the stairs before hearing a response.

"Shut your gob!" Ron hissed from Luna's bedroom doorway. "Luna's just fallen asleep... aw, mate! Cover yourself, will you?"

Glancing down, Harry realized that he had grabbed a small hand towel instead of a bath towel. Futilely trying to wrap that tiny thing around his waist, he settled for holding it in place, leaving a large gap at one thigh. He lowered his voice to a whisper and padded over to Ron.

"I think Ginny has been kidnapped!" Harry hissed with a quick guilty glance into the room where Luna lay sleeping fitfully. Even in the low light of the bedroom, Harry could see the purple rash that spoiled her complexion. She had fallen ill yesterday and now had a fever. It wasn't severe, and before retiring, she had assured them both that she didn't feel all that bad, but Ron felt horribly guilty for brushing off the possibility of her being in danger. Harry was quite sure that if Ginny weren't missing, then Ron would be playing the devoted nursemaid. As it was, Harry had to listen to him moan about what a cad he was and then reassure him that Luna had been exposed before Ron had done anything insensitive or stupid.

Harry really, really hoped that Hermione came through with the cure sooner than later.

"What makes you think that?" Ron asked, his face paling as he slipped out of the room and closed the door softly behind him. Goosebumps raced down Harry's arms and legs as the water cooled on his skin, and he clutched the towel tighter around his hips. Ron pointedly did not look down.

"Think about it: we can't find her, she hasn't contacted us. None of us really believe that she ran away." Ron pulled a face and rolled his eyes. "Except for your mum," Harry added. "It's as if someone doesn't *want* her to be found!"

Ron leaned against the wall, his skin gaining a green tint behind his freckles as the energy seemed to leach from his limbs. His voice trembling faintly, he asked, "But who would want to kidnap Ginny?"

Harry shook his head, but before he could reply, a familiar shout traveled up the stairs.

"Harry, are you there?"

"Hermione!" they exclaimed in unison and bolted for the stairs. They entered the living room at a dead run, skidding to a stop with a flourish of long limbs.

Whirling to face them, Hermione greeted them with a wide smile. "Harry, Ron! I... Oh, honestly, Harry!" Folding her arms under her breasts, she rolled her eyes. It was at that moment that Harry realized that he had lost purchase of one corner of his hand towel. He was now flashing his bits and bobbles at his best female friend.

Ron barked out a laugh. "Ha! Maybe you should put some pants on, mate."

Flushing red, Harry turned on his heel and pounded back up the stairs to do just that. Ron kept his eyes averted, theatrically shielding his face with a hand. He tore into his bedroom and dressed in a flash, throwing on the first pieces of clothing that he could find. Scant minutes later he was running back down the stairs and into the living room. Ron and Hermione had seated themselves on the couch, and Ron was filling her in on all that had happened since they had last seen each other. From his wild gesticulation, Harry guessed that Ron was re-enacting their last battle. Hermione looked far from impressed.

She glanced up at him as Harry took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs. He didn't like the speculative look that she was giving him as if she were sizing him up. Blushing again as he remembered just what it was she could be sizing, he said defensively, "It was cold."

"I'm sure it was," Hermione assured him with a patronizing tone that he knew well.

"Ginny's had no complaints." He wasn't sure whom he was trying to reassure, and it hadn't come out as confident as he would have wanted.

Ron interrupted with a smirk. "Well, actually..."

"Shut up, Ron." Harry didn't want to know what those complaints were or how Ron had heard them. They also had much more important things to discuss. Hermione seemed to agree.

She squeezed her eyes closed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "So, in a nutshell, wizarding Britain is tearing itself apart, Muggles are being blamed for the Rash, Luna is sick with it upstairs, and Ginny has been missing for four days, possibly kidnapped." Harry and Ron both nodded. Setting her bag on the couch next to her, she withdrew a small vial. "I can help Luna now."

"You did it?" Harry exclaimed, scooting forward to sit at the edge of his seat.

Hermione grinned. "Yes, it's been tested on a human subject and seems to work."

Ron crowed and reached for the vial, but Hermione pulled it out of reach. "Not so fast. I'll administer it myself after I've examined her properly."

"*Hermione*," Ron whined, pouting as he made another grab for the vial. "We know what the problem is!"

"Knock it off, Ronald!" Planting her empty palm against his forehead, she pushed him away.

"Come on, don't be this way!" Ron had devolved from whining to downright petulance.

"Could we *please* get back to the important issues, here?" Harry said, his voice intentionally quiet as he fought with his rising temper. It was at times like these that he was wholeheartedly glad that Hermione and Ron had broken up. "Ginny has been *kidnapped*."

Hermione stood abruptly, robbing Ron of his prop and sending him face-first into the couch cushions. Ignoring his muffled cursing, she said, "Your right, Harry. I'll check on Luna and give her the first dose. Then, we'll discuss the Ginny situation."

Slinging the strap of her bag over her shoulder, she strode purposefully toward the stairs. Clambering off the couch in jumble of long limbs, Ron trotted after her. Harry stared after them, mouth slightly agape in disbelief that she wasn't staying to hear him out. It didn't even sound like she *believed* him!

"Ow, Ronald!" Hermione's voice floated down the stairwell, accompanied by the thudding tread of Ron's big feet. "Watch where you're stepping!" His mumbled apology was unintelligible, but sounded unrepentant.

Left alone in the living room, Harry shut his mouth with a snap and slouched into the chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Would it have killed her to let me finish?" Harry grumbled to himself. Yes, Luna was sick, but she wasn't *that* sick. Her symptoms were not even *close* to the severity that his or Ron's had been. This, after hiding for days in her laboratory, doing who knows what... Oh.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head into his hands. "Idiot," he muttered. "She was creating a *cure*." She was also a *Healer*, and he had a sick resident. She was only doing her job. Feeling supremely selfish and exhausted to the bone, Harry allowed his head loll against the cushion. Closing his eyes, he decided to give Hermione a couple of minutes to reappear before going after her.

"I think we should let him sleep," a female voice whispered near his head, sending ripples of sound through the rich blackness that had enveloped him. On some level, Harry recognized the voice as Hermione's, but couldn't quite recall why that was important or why it might irritate him. He was sure in a distant, fuzzy kind of way that he should pull himself out of the buoyant darkness and answer her, but he was far too comfortable. In fact, if he were to simply sink a little further into the dark, then he wouldn't be bothered by disembodied voices...

"Maybe." That was Ron's voice, Harry thought muzzily. Good old Ron. "He's been stretching himself pretty thin, what with being on call and searching for Ginny."

At the sound of Ginny's name, Harry's body jolted violently, the peaceful half-doze shattering like a delicate crystal goblet dropped on the floor. Wrenching himself upright, Harry blinked his eyes open at his two friends who were hovering over his chair. Hermione shot Ron a glare.

"Harry, you look done in. Perhaps you should go back to sleep," she said soothingly. Leaning over him, Hermione peered into his eyes and pressed her palm against his forehead.

Shaking his head, Harry stifled a yawn widely and batted her hand away. She pursed her lips and gave him an impatient look, but waited for him to speak. "I can have a kip later. The important thing now is to figure out who took Ginny and how to get her back."

"Luna's doing well, by the way," Ron muttered as he sank back into the couch.

Instead of joining Ron on the couch, Hermione took a seat in the other overstuffed chair. "But you don't know that she's been kidnapped for certain," she said, now all business. Harry didn't like the skepticism that was gathering in the corners of her eyes.

"It's the only thing that makes sense." Harry watched disbelief flit across her face and continued, his voice gaining volume, "Otherwise, she would have contacted us by now."

Hermione gave him a somewhat pitying look. "Harry, who would want to kidnap Ginny?"

It was the same question Ron had asked, but delivered in a much different tone. Standing abruptly, Harry began to pace his living room. "I don't know! But I know I'm right!" And he did the gnawing worry that had been chewing on the back of his mind had latched onto the idea with tooth and claw and refused to let go. He knew that something horrible had happened to Ginny, and kidnapping fit the bill.

"Doesn't it seem more likely that she simply got stranded somewhere? Her owl is probably on its way, just detained by all this Rash business." She waved a hand, dismissing fire, death and chaos with an airy gesture.

"Luna said that it could be caused by the Fearsome Japanese Fungus Demon, known for overtaking gardens and chasing families from their homes," Ron said with a confident air. Smothering a groan, Harry scrubbed his stubbled cheeks with the palms of his hands. Ron had clung to everything that Luna had said recently as if her ideas were the best things since the invention of racing brooms.

Hermione stared at him impassively. "Japanese Fungus Demon?" Turning to Harry, she raised an eyebrow. "You think Japanese Fungus Demons have kidnapped Ginny?"

Refusing to answer such a ridiculous question, Harry stomped over to the fireplace and lit the hearth with a quick spell. "I'm alerting the squad to my theory. How much of that cure do you have, Hermione, and when can you make more?" he snapped.

"One other vial besides the one Luna will need. I have a new supplier lined up I'll see about getting enough to treat about one hundred mild cases in forty-eight hours. For severe cases, the same amount would treat no more than twenty."

Ron hissed through his teeth. "We'll need a way to dose the crazy ones, too. They won't sit still to take their medicine. More likely try to bite your hand off."

Turning to him with a startled expression, Hermione said, "You are absolutely right, Ronald. The brewer is top notch; I'm sure we'll be able to come up with something quickly. Nebulize it, maybe. Yes." She blinked several times as she stared off into space, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth to nibble on it as she thought. "Though I'd have to... unless I powdered the bezoar... and I would have to increase the potency... hmm."

Ron leaned forward to snap his fingers in front of her face, and she scowled, swatting his hand away. "Earth to Hermione. You aren't making any sense."

Still glaring, Hermione stood imperiously and smoothed her hands down her pants. It was only then that Harry realized that the usually immaculate and fashionably dressed (according to Ginny anyway, Harry hadn't a clue about fashion) Ms. Granger was wearing a rumpled pair of gray sweats and sported a messy bun held in place with two tongue depressors. He wasn't sure, but her shirt might have been a man's button-down several sizes too large. He didn't have a chance to comment, however, because she pinched a tiny amount of Floo powder from the pot on the mantle and cast it into the fire.

"I'll keep you posted on my progress," she snapped over her shoulder, just before stepping into the green flame. "Hermione's flat!" she exclaimed and vanished with a *whoosh*.

Blinking at the heart of the flames where she had just stood, Harry waited until the fire was a healthy orange before tossing in his own pinch of Floo powder. Of all the things happening, Hermione dressing like a slob was the least of his worries.

A/N: I apologize for the long silence. This story is *not* abandoned, simply neglected. A gift fic in another fandom snagged my attention and creative efforts. I know, not an excuse.

The title for this chapter comes from the song *Love is the New Feel Awful* by the Dandy Warhols.

Thanks to my beta, ann1982, and to those of who are still following the story after months of no updates!

As the World Falls Down

Chapter 9 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

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Chapter 9 As the World Falls Down

"Draco, are you there?" Hermione called from the parlor fireplace of Spinner's End. She hoped he would answer soon, for her carefully coiffed hair would not last long in the Floo before it started to frizz. She had spent a few extra minutes on it this morning, knowing that she would be spending the day with Severus closeted in his laboratory. Her hair serum could withstand steam, dry heat, and most fumes, but Floo magic was murder. She had also taken great care on her attire: her forest green blouse was clingy, yet sophisticated, bringing out flecks of green in her eyes, and her black slacks were well tailored to her figure. A thin silver belt wrapped around her waist. She hoped her statement wasn't too obvious.

Harrumphing in irritation, she stepped into the parlor. Draco should be expecting her; she was punctual for the appointment that they had set up yesterday. Unless... Had Severus had a relapse?

Anxiety gripped her with cold fists as she strode toward the closed kitchen door. "Draco!" she shouted, her voice strained to her own ears. Attempting to modulate her tone to something more like professional concern, she called, "Is Severus alright?"

Shooting a quick glance over her shoulder at the bookcase that hid the stairs as she contemplated whether she'd rather just head straight upstairs, she missed seeing the kitchen door swing open. Her right hand grabbed for the doorknob from memory, her focus still on the bookcase. It wasn't until her hand wrapped around something soft, yet weighty not a doorknob at all that she realized that she was no long facing a door. Startled, she swung her head around to meet the gray eyes of an equally startled Draco.

"Gah!" she yelped, snatching her hand away as if it had been burned and taking a hurried step backward.

"That isn't the usual reception it gets," he drawled, his surprise rapidly evaporating into amusement.

"Merlin, Draco, I'm so sorry!" Hermione gasped as she placed the hand that cupped him on her chest and took several quick breaths. Her face felt aflame, and she couldn't quite remember the last time she had done something quite so embarrassing.

Stepping backward into the kitchen and welcoming her in with a courtly half-bow, Draco leered at her. "No, by all means, consider yourself welcome to that part of my anatomy. I have several others that you would find of interest, as well."

"I didn't *mean* to do that. I was just..." Walking into the kitchen, Hermione halted her explanation when her eyes rested on Severus sitting at the table, a cup of tea in hand and black eyes glittering unfathomably at her.

'Oh, bloody hell,' she cursed silently. That was not the impression that she had wanted to make this morning.

Draco continued as if she had not just stopped in her tracks to gape at his godfather. "In fact, I think I quite like your new method of greeting," he said and tweaked her bottom. The pinch shocked Hermione out of her trance, and she emitted a strangled gasp, whirling on him. Draco had already glided away and slid elegantly into his chair, smirking up at her.

At that moment, Hermione realized that she had several avenues of reaction open to her. She could smack Draco silly and storm out of the house satisfying, but unproductive, and more than a little unfair, even if her own groping had been accidental. She could dissolve into a puddle of mortification, reminding the man on which she had set her sights that she had once been one of his awkward students. Or she could pretend that the last few minutes had never happened and move on with business in the hopes that they would be forgotten amongst the truly important matters at hand. It had been an accident *surely* Severus had seen that. If she were truly going for a man's bits, she certainly wouldn't apologize for it.

After vividly imagining her handprint red and swollen across Draco's face, she schooled her features into nonchalance and smoothed her hands down her pants. There was little she could do about her flush, but if she pretended *very hard*, perhaps that would be forgotten as well.

Easing into her seat, she pulled several leaves of parchment from her bag and cleared her throat. Glancing up, she caught Draco's mischievous gaze and stared coolly back.

"You have nice arse," Draco said conversationally as he propped his chin in his hand.

He just wouldn't let it go. Smiling sweetly, Hermione kicked his shin under the table. Hard. "Thank you."

As Draco mouthed the word, 'ow!' and blinked tears from his eyes, Hermione turned her attention to Severus. His black eyes darted from Draco to her, then to the parchment. His upper lip curling into a sneer, he sat back in his chair and sipped at his tea, eyeing her with supreme distaste.

"I trust you are feeling better?" she asked politely. He looked better; his skin was a healthy olive, his eyes were clear of fever, and his hair was freshly washed and tied back. Even dressed casually in a gray tee shirt and dark denim, he had a commanding presence. 'I'm good,' she thought with pride. 'In a matter of days, I brought him back from the brink of madness to make a full recovery.'

"Passable," he said finally, his tone implying that he had been better only moments before, when something had intruded on his well being.

Choosing to ignore his truculence, Hermione slid the parchment toward him and tapped it with one finger. "This," she said compellingly as she met his gaze directly, "is the formula for the cure for the Rash." He made no sign of acknowledgement, simply sipped his tea and glared. Refusing to take his bait, Hermione continued, "You can attest to its effectiveness." At that reminder, Severus' right eyelid twitched.

"It works well for tractable patients who stay in bed to be nursed." Hermione smiled at him, a woman's smile of shared secrets that she had found to both intrigue and unnerve men. Severus stared at her impassively. "However, we need a stronger dose that we can administer to a patient that is much more inclined to tear off one's arms." She caught a small flicker in those black depths; did he remember attacking Draco? "I've jotted down my thoughts on increasing its potency and nebulizing it into a gas to be inhaled by an infected person."

"I hardly see why you need me," Severus said quietly, his eyes narrowing.

Draco sighed heavily from the other side of the table. "Don't be dense, Uncle, you..."

"*Silence*, you ungrateful whelp," he hissed, and Draco shut his mouth with a snap. Hermione wanted to shrink away from the venom in his voice, but she held her position and schooled her features to mild amusement in order to appear that it had not affected her.

"Master Snape," Hermione said as she leaned forward, again catching those dark eyes with her own. "I know that you are under contract only to brew those potions for which I have finalized recipes. I also know that you don't want to be involved with this crisis and that you gave more than you owed in the last one. However," she reached across the table and lightly touched the back of his hand with her fingertips, "I need your expertise on this to create a cure for those infected as you were, but without your fortitude."

It was more or less the truth; his help would certainly speed up the process of producing the nebulized form of the cure. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have considered inviting another person to share in her experimentation. The professional wizarding world was barbaric, and many a naïve wizard had found himself cheated out of a patent by an unscrupulous partner. She considered Severus an honorable man, however, and above stealing ideas. It had also occurred to her that he would take to research and development as her partner better than simply mass brewing one of her patents as a supplier. She just hoped she wasn't laying on the compliments too thickly. Most men loved to be flattered and made to feel invaluable, but this was Severus Snape, and he was not most men, hence part of the attraction.

He slid his hand away slowly as he stared at her, his eyes glittering blackly under a thick fringe of lashes. Hermione considered it a victory that he didn't knock it away, but wished that he hadn't moved or that he'd turned his hand so that she could curl her fingers into his palm...

"You are correct; I don't want to be involved," he said, settling back into his chair and folding his arms across his chest. Draco made a noise of protest, and Severus cut him off with a wave of his hand. "However, new information has come to light."

"It seems that one of the Dark Lord's little side projects has gotten loose and is responsible for our current situation," Draco said with a humorless smirk.

"How do you know?" she asked a trifle suspiciously. He seemed to have come by this tidbit of information rather quickly, and she wondered about his sources. Then again, he had friends and family in low places.

With a small grimace, Draco admitted, "My father worked on it before the Dark Lord's defeat." Hermione only nodded, not wanting to come across as judgmental and stymie the flow of information. With a sigh, Draco recapped his conversation with his father, and Hermione listened in silence, growing more nervous as his story unwound.

When Draco had finished speaking, Hermione asked, "Hesays that Voldemort didn't donate a bit of himself for the project, but what if he did some of his own experimentation on the side without your father knowing?" Both men had flinched at the use of Voldemort's name, and she sighed inwardly. It had taken her a number of months after the Dark wizard had died to be able to say the name without hesitation. She wasn't going to backslide, not even for Severus. Draco was watching his godfather guardedly, his posture tense.

After a long moment of silence, during which Hermione braced herself for a tongue-lashing, Severus broke the silence.

"It is a possibility," he said almost grudgingly as he traced his lips with a fingertip. Her speculation of the other day had been correct: the movement *did* look better on Severus than it did on Draco, and it was dead sexy. Hermione caught herself staring and immediately swung her gaze back to her tea, missing a curious flash in her subject's eyes. "The Dark Lord kept much of his own council, often leaving his followers in the dark. However, it is mere conjecture at this point."

"But we do think that there might be some sort of central figure, correct?" Hermione confirmed, firmly ordering her thoughts to stay on topic.

Draco shrugged carelessly. "That's how the mushrooms in their original form seemed to work. Father was in the process of altering them so that the Dark Lord could acquire a new body."

"Hm, direct possession of one and enthrallment of many..."

"Hermione, are you alright?" Draco asked as her sentence trailed into silence.

The blood had rushed from her face so quickly that it had left her feeling light-headed. Bonelessly, she slumped backward in her chair and stared at Draco in horror. "Ginny," she whispered, then swallowed noisily, pulling herself together. "Ginny has been missing for several days," she said, forcing her voice to be clear and forceful. "Harry swears that she has been kidnapped, but I was sure that there was another explanation..."

"Always about *Potter*," Severus muttered irritably from the other side of the table.

Rising from his chair, Draco acquired another mug from a cupboard and set it in front of Hermione, pouring her a hot cup of tea from the pot on the table. She thanked him as he sat back down, blowing across the surface of the liquid and watching the steam dissipate as her mind whirled.

"There probably still is," Draco said as he topped off his own cup. When Hermione looked at him blankly, he elaborated, "Another explanation, that is. After all, the Dark Lord hasn't been resurrected again. This particular project had nothing to do with Potter. It was another means for him to achieve immortality, but he never got a chance to try it."

"So, hypothetically," she said slowly as she leaned back in her chair and began to nibble her bottom lip. Maintaining eye contact with Draco was far less distracting than gazing at Severus, so she directed her stream of consciousness at the blond. "If Voldemort *had* dabbled with your father's experiment, what would be the possible results? A strain of mushrooms that infects people with essence of Dark Lord? None of the patients I have attended have shown signs of possession. Madness, yes."

"Are you alright, Uncle?" Draco inquired suddenly, startling Hermione out of her train of thought. Glancing over at the dark man, she realized that he had paled to the color of snow, and the skin around his eyes was strained.

Swearing under her breath, Hermione connected the dots between Severus' own brush with the Rash and her musing. He had said that it had felt as if Voldemort had somehow invaded his body. It could easily be attributed the high concentration of Dark Magic, which is what she had done at the time, but now she wasn't quite so sure.

"I'm fine," Severus snapped as he stood abruptly. His thigh caught the edge of the table causing it to shake and the tea to slosh over the rims of their mugs. Without another word, he stalked out of the kitchen toward the parlor. They heard the creak of the bookcase hinges a moment later and then the quiet click as it latched back in place.

Sighing, Hermione exchanged a concerned look with Draco. It surprised her that they were friendly enough to share something like that, but at that moment, she refused to dwell on it. She would have liked to follow Severus to make certain that he was all right, but she had a feeling that her presence would not be welcome.

Draco continued their conversation with a slight roll of his eyes. Knowing that it was simply his way to play off his concerns during serious situations, Hermione focused on what he was saying instead of the man surely brooding upstairs. "It makes sense that there is some sort of ringleader: one that instigated this whole affair... or, if the Dark Lord really did some dabbling on his own, one that was created as a result of the Dark Lord's essence possessing some poor sod," Draco finished with a delicate shudder.

"A new Dark Lord," Hermione said quietly.

"Merlin help us. Let's just hope that he doesn't have such a wicked tattoo to attract the younger crowd," Draco said with a sudden grin. Hermione kicked him under the table again.

"Honestly, Draco, that isn't funny! The Dark Mark was neither cool nor..."

The kitchen window exploded with a deafening crash, spraying them both with shards of glass, and a brick hit the kitchen wall. Instinctively, they both ducked, diving underneath the table as they pulled their wands out of hiding.

"*Protego!*" Draco shouted, only a hair faster than Hermione with his wand. From behind the blue domed barrier, there was little she could do but watch the next brick come careening through the broken kitchen window to land on the table with a splintering thud.

Flinching, Hermione held her wand at the ready and whispered, "How sturdy is this table?" Draco just shrugged as he held the barrier steady against the attack. Hermione opened her mouth to ask another question when the sound of shattering glass erupted from the porch.

"They are destroying the atrium!" Draco exclaimed under his breath, his gray eyes wide with shock. "Oh, is Severus going to be pissed! Though how they got by his wards is anyone's guess."

"Who are *they*?" Hermione hissed the question into his ear, wincing as another brick rebounded off Draco's shield. "What did you do, Draco?"

"What did *I* do? What makes you think they're here for me? Uncle Sev is the unpleasant..."

Something shattered against the kitchen door that led to the atrium, and a dull *whoosh* was scant warning for the fire that began to lick at the small portal window set high in the door. Hermione and Draco jumped, Draco smacking the top of his head against the underside of the table. Cursing, he lost the barrier, but Hermione cast another just as his flickered and died.

"Did he cast protection spells against bricks and Molotov Cocktails?" she hissed snidely as several more bricks flew through the window. Belatedly, her own question startled her: these were *Muggle* weapons being used against a wizard's house! Few magical folk thought in terms of physical attack; therefore few defended themselves against it. Even Severus, paranoid old man that he was, must have discounted a Muggle method of attack because the bulk of his enemies were Voldemort-supporting purebloods. None of them would have considered Muggle means.

'Besides,' she thought with an eerily calm detachment amongst the chaos in the kitchen, 'why would they choose now to start trouble? One would expect them to be cowering in their mansions...' When the identity of their attackers occurred to her, she slapped her free palm to her sweaty forehead.

"Of *course*," she muttered and earned a sideways look from Draco. "The *thralls*." She gestured to the back door with a nod of her head.

Smirking, Draco said, "You're only figuring that out now?" Before she could snap at him, he ducked around the barrier to aim an *Aguamenti* at the smoke that was beginning to seep through the seams between the door and frame. He had only just managed to cast the spell when two bottles trailing flaming tails sailed through the empty kitchen window.

"*Reducto!*" Draco shouted, his spell catching both bottles at once. Instead of being reduced to dust, they exploded into balls of fire, raining the kitchen with tiny fiery comets. The simple curtains framing the window lit up and began to writhe as creeping tongues of flame devoured them.

Hermione screamed and strengthened her force field, extending it to encompass the table with a mental push. Cursing loudly, Draco thrust his wand out of its protection to spray the kitchen with a heavy mist. "We have to get out of here!"

Four more bottles and a bevy of bricks flew through the window and struck the door. The air became thick with smoke, ash and water vapor, and Hermione's eyes stung and streamed as she struggled to recast the barrier through her coughing. Crouched by her side, Draco wrapped a long-fingered hand around her arm and tensed to flee at the first opening. The kitchen chairs were now burning, and it felt as if the small hairs on Hermione's face and hands were curling in the heat.

The moment seemed to come when the barrage of projectiles lulled. Without warning, Draco darted for the parlor door, dragging a startled Hermione behind him. The open doorway was barely visible through the smoke, and she had to trust him that he was leading her to safety instead of an unpleasant fiery doom. Over the roar of the flames, she heard the pounding of footsteps on the hidden stairwell, and the slam of the bookcase hitting one of its mates.

"What in blazes..." Severus's roar was cut off as the whole house shook around them. Draco caught himself on the doorjamb, and his wide eyes met Hermione's frightened gaze.

"That would be the wards going down," he said much too calmly for the situation. An instant later, a flood of red light blew the kitchen door inward, tearing it from its hinges. Heedless of the flames that were destroying the once cheerful little kitchen, several figures lurched through the door. Smoke and ash obscured their countenances, but their eyes gleamed unnaturally red, piercing through the haze like spotlights. Leveling her wand, Hermione started to cast a Stunner when Draco wrenched her around by her arm and pushed her into the parlor. Stumbling with the momentum, she was saved a fall to the carpet by strong arms catching her under her armpits. She latched on to the support, only barely registering the strong bare forearms under her fingers as she coughed and wheezed through the burning in her throat and lungs.

'Smoke inhalation,' she diagnosed absently as she struggled to draw a decent breath. 'Draco too... What do I have for smoke inhalation...' She glanced up at her savior. Severus stared down at her, raking her form with a startling intensity, his eyes sharp with concern. His face was closer to hers than it had ever been, and his lips were parted slightly, showing a glimpse of crooked white teeth beyond. Somehow managing to escape its ribbon, his long black hair hung loose over his shoulders. As her chest heaved with the effort to breathe, Hermione was forcibly reminded of the cover of one of Ginny's romance novels, except that the heroines were rarely covered in soot.

Reality forced its way through her distraction when the large parlor window shattered, and the heavy velvet drapes concealing it transfigured into a swarm of giant bats. The tiny room was caught in a maelstrom of leathery wings and sharp claws as the creatures fluttered about chaotically. Hermione pressed closer to Severus and was gratified to feel one of his arms wrap around her shoulders as he used the other to cast a *Finite Incantatem*. Once the curtains lay crumpled on the floor and the air was clear of bats, it was apparent that the bats had only served as a distraction. The bookcases lining the walls of the parlor were aflame.

"There's too many of them, and I can't put out the flames!" Draco shouted as he abandoned his efforts in the kitchen, emerging from a pall of smoke like a wild-eyed ghost. He was gray with ash from his toes to the tips of his hair. Glancing around, he cursed.

From under Severus' arm, Hermione aimed an *Aguamenti* at the base of the nearest flames. Even as Draco and Severus followed her lead, five more Molotov Cocktails smashed against the bookcases, and the dusty dry tomes caught fire like kindling. It was readily apparent that no amount of spell work would save them. In a matter of minutes, they would be burned alive.

Severus seemed to be on the same wavelength. "We can't stay here!" he said, his quiet controlled voice like a splash of cool water in the heat and chaos of the room.

Hermione needed no more prompting to act. Grabbing Draco's arm with one hand and wrapping her other arm around Severus' waist, she focused on a mental image of her flat. "Clear your minds, I'm Apparating us!"

"Where?" Draco inquired just as all three of them were squeezed through an infinitely tiny hole in space. A moment later, they were standing in her kitchen.

A cool breeze wafted through the window and sunlight sparkled off the chrome faucet. The quiet was deafening after the roar of the fire, and clean, oxygenated air rushed into her lungs, sending her into another coughing fit. Next to her, Draco wheezed and sputtered, bracing himself by slipping an arm around her waist and leaning onto her shoulder. She almost toppled over when Severus stepped away from her, smoothing his clothing as if to remove any trace of her touch. His face was set in deep, angry lines and his movements, usually smooth and graceful, were jerky and abrupt.

"Oh, Severus..." Hermione said, belatedly realizing that they had just abandoned his house to the fire and vandalism of the creatures. He gave her a hard look and moved as if to stalk away, but then paused as he glanced around himself. Hermione watched him sadly as a lost look flickered briefly across his face, gone as soon as she had seen it. He ignored them both as he turned on his heel and strode through the kitchen to the glass door that opened onto her balcony. Crossing his arms over his chest, he stared out at the street below.

Hermione sighed. She had wanted to take Severus home with her, but not like this, and Draco hadn't been part of the deal. "Get off, Draco," she complained as she nudged him away. At his protest, she said, "You're covered in ash. Go take a shower."

Shooting her a sooty smirk, he said, "Shall I find the towels on my own?"

"There are clean ones in the bathroom. First door on the right. Go." She gave him small push toward the short hallway that led to the guest bathroom.

"Scrub my back?" he called wickedly over his shoulder as he opened the bathroom door.

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head, catching a quick glimpse of Severus watching their interaction. As soon as she had turned toward him, he was once again facing the street, for all appearances absorbed with the tableau below. 'Interesting,' she thought to herself. 'Could he be...? No, he didn't seem upset by my accidental fondling of his godson. No more upset than usual, anyway.'

Tiptoeing across her carpet, careful to not drop any ash in her living room, she joined him at the glass door to stare out at the street lit with cheerful yellow sunshine. A bicyclist whizzed by, hopping the curb onto the sidewalk and causing a startled pedestrian to drop an armload of groceries. Remorseless, the bicyclist pedaled furiously forward, narrowly missed the pedestrian in his rush.

"I'm so sorry about your house," Hermione said, breaking the silence. "And all your things..."

"The most important of my belongings are protected with fire-retardant spells," he snapped. "I'll retrieve them when it is safe to do so."

"Draco and I will be happy to help."

"Well, well. Speaking for him, are you?" Severus eyed her coldly, and Hermione took an involuntary step backward. Was he jealous? Or he didn't like the idea of her getting close to Draco? She had had many boyfriends since he had begun to photograph her, and she had seen neither hide nor hair of him, let alone heard a protest. Perhaps he was simply being his unpleasant self. She made a mental note to pay close attention to his reactions when she was with Draco. He might just inadvertently give her the key to getting close to him.

"He's your godson," she pointed out. "Of course he'll help. Some of that stuff was his."

"You always did have a talent for stating the obvious," he sneered at her.

Hermione had to take a deep breath and remind herself that the man had just recovered from a Dark Magic-induced illness and had his house burnt down. She *would not* smack him. In fact, she should expect more of the same if she truly intended to pursue this particular individual.

Bolstering herself with happy thoughts of a future in which he used that sharp tongue for better purposes, she gave him a saucy grin and quipped, "Then you admit that I've got talent." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could say anything else nasty. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." She winked slowly, conspiratorially, and hoped that he realized that she was flirting with him. "You're welcome to the shower after Draco has finished."

Deciding to retreat while she was still ahead, Hermione left him by the window and padded through her bedroom to her sumptuous master bath. It hadn't existed when she had leased the apartment; ambiguously legal and without the knowledge or blessing of the Ministry, she had magically expanded her tiny bedroom closet to a walk-through closet leading to a granite and marble-tiled slice of heaven. Her tub was more than large enough for two and had several rows of Jacuzzi jets, and the shower could convert to a steam sauna when she was so inclined. This bathroom had been the first example of magic that had truly impressed her usually stoic mother. A week after installing her bathroom, she had found herself at her parents' home in Australia working on one for them, too.

Sighing and resting her forehead against the cold cream-colored marble that lined the walls, Hermione had never been so glad that her parents had decided to move permanently. They were safe from this madness much safer than the rest of her loved ones.

"Honestly, Harry! Don't be ridiculous!" Ms. Granger's voice, strident with exasperation, carried through the bathroom door to where Severus was towel-drying his hair. He allowed himself a small smile at the other man's expense. His smile dissolved as his eyes came to rest on the set of sweats lying folded on top of the toilet. The bottoms were his, borrowed by Ms. Granger probably the only other pair of pants that he now owned. The top could not have originally belonged to Ms. Granger, though he wasn't sure which was worse: if it was a cast off of Potter or Weasley, or if it had once belonged to one of her former beaux.

The rest of the bathroom was nicely appointed: spotless, uncluttered, and decorated in neutral beiges and creams. When he had renovated Spinner's End, he had chosen white because it had been the simplest color to choose. Spinner's End...

Severus reeled slightly as the shock struck him once again. His home had been destroyed. His gardens, his atrium, everything had been burned. True, there were certain items that would be salvageable, but for all intents and purposes, he was homeless. He would have to begin his life from scratch. Again.

"It's the safest thing for all of us! I can't believe that you are being so... pig-headed about this!" Another snatch of the Floo call interrupted his thoughts, and he folded the towel neatly, hanging it on the towel bar.

To make matters worse, he was at the questionable mercy of a woman for whom he had harbored a secret obsession since her seventh year in school; a woman who had piqued his interest at the tender age of fifteen (and didn't that make him feel dirty); a woman who his godson seemed hell-bent on conquering. He had kept his distance from this very same woman for years, and she wasn't in his presence for more than a couple of days before she was put in danger. He wasn't quite sure how much of this he could stand.

"You have plenty of extra bedrooms. I bet you haven't even opened the ones on the third floor in years!"

Severus froze with one leg partially inserted into the sweat pants. She couldn't be arguing for what he *thought* she was, could she?

"Thank you, Harry," she said in a softer tone. "We'll be there later this evening."

'Damn and blast,' Severus swore silently. Perhaps he should have just stayed at Spinner's End and let the fire take him. The last place he wanted to be was back at Grimmauld Place. It held too many memories, and none of them good.

"I must admit that I didn't think you could convince him." Draco's voice spoke up. The Floo call must have ended, Severus mused. With a start, he wondered what Draco

was wearing. He hadn't seen the boy leave the bathroom before he entered. How much men's clothing did Ms. Granger have? The thought bothered him more than it should have. He also didn't like the thought of them alone together. Draco was pursuing her; he had no doubt about it.

'But will she succumb?' he wondered. Draco could be very charismatic when he put his mind to it, and he had the intelligence and drive to keep up with a firebrand like her. Though it seemed that Draco still had a chase ahead of him, Ms. Granger was not immune to the boy's charm. She was resisting, true, and he had a deep-seated suspicion that she had flirted with himself several times. Even knowing what he did, Draco would have no compunction against stealing the woman right from under his overlarge nose.

'Not that I've made any claim,' Severus thought morosely. He had never *wanted* to make such a claim and had done everything within his power to avoid this kind of situation. But the memory of her in his arms for those short moments, her strong hands clinging to him for support and safety, her ashy face so close that had he simply leaned forward...

Severus shook his head. Best not think about that. Best not to touch her again. It would be so easy to drown in her. He could still feel that brief innocent touch in the fibers of his being. It had been the least of her touches, but the only one given since he had risen from his recovery.

'A foot massage,' he thought with a tiny shiver, remembering her skillful fingers kneading his arch as he lay in bed, still delirious with fever and cure. It had been heavenly, and her offer had been more tempting than she could know. Down that road lay folly, he was certain. She hadn't been in his life for more than a couple of days before she had been caught in a house fire *his* house.

Where was he to go? He sighed and sat on the closed lid of the toilet, letting his hands drop into his lap. He wouldn't miss Spinner's End the house, anyway. His atrium, Lily's flowers... He sighed again as his eyes prickled with a familiar sting. He would have to start over, find a new place. The idea was a heavy weight in his chest; he had had to rebuild so many times. When would he be left in peace?

Laughter resonated from behind the door; Draco's deep chuckle mixing with the clear honest tones of Ms. Granger to create an incongruously cheerful sound that grated on his nerves. The longer he stayed in the bathroom, the more time his ungrateful godson would have to wile his way into Ms. Granger's heart. He shouldn't interfere; he never had before. He was unwilling to risk Ms. Granger's safety by wooing her himself. The honorable thing to do would be to let nature take its course, and if that meant allowing Draco and Ms. Granger to form a romantic attachment, then so be it.

The question was: could he survive their relationship?

A/N: Thanks to ann1982 for all of her corrections and comments! The title of this chapter comes from the song of the same name written by David Bowie from the *Labyrinth* soundtrack.

Will the New Evil Overlord Please Step Forward

Chapter 10 of 10

Years after the fall of Voldemort, a mysterious illness throws the wizarding world into chaos. While struggling to find a cure, Hermione learns new things about old acquaintances, and Severus learns that self-preservation may not be the path he wants to travel. Harry learns the price of neglect, and Ron learns why "May you live in interesting times" is a curse and not a blessing. Draco learns... very little at all.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, and I do not make money off it.

Chapter 10 – Will the New Evil Overlord Please Step Forward

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Ron grumbled and jabbed at his mashed potatoes until the thin gravy seeped out of the well in the middle and flooded his plate.

"Fraid not," Harry said, watching absently as Ron's gravy stained his green beans brown. It was murky and pallid, made by his own hands; not at all the rich flavorful stuff that Ginny had made... He shook his head and shoveled a forkful of potatoes into his mouth, swallowing them without tasting them and trying not to think about how long Ginny had been missing.

Ron's mouth twisted in disgust before he stuffed half of a thickly buttered slice of bread into his mouth. Chewing noisily, he pointed the tines of his fork at Harry. "Couldn't you have just told them to find their own bloody hideout?"

Sighing loudly, Harry dropped his fork onto his plate with a sharp clatter and placed his fingertips on his temples, rubbing in firm circles. He had had this conversation with Ron three times in the last two hours, ever since Hermione had asked that Malfoy and Snape be allowed to stay at Grimmauld Place while they planned their next course of action.

Having simply passed Hermione a note through the Floo with Number 12, Grimmauld Place's address jotted on the back of an old receipt, he had yet to see the two men. He didn't know what to expect, especially from Malfoy. That Hermione had pleaded for sanctuary for him was mind-boggling in its implausibility. As for Master Snape, well... Harry was eager to mend fences with the man who had spent a great part of his life working in his mother's memory, but was nervous to face him. Just the same, he thought she might like that idea. Whether Master Snape was amenable or not had yet to be seen.

At first, Ron had thought it a joke, albeit a bad one. He had given Harry a courtesy laugh for friendship's sake until he'd realized that Harry wasn't laughing with him. Then came denial in the form of shouting and cursing, a bout of wheedling to convince him to rescind the offer, then threats to go to Hermione's place to jinx some sense into her and curse her houseguests while he was at it. At that point, Harry decided that an early dinner was in order, and sure enough, Ron's stomach had taken that cue to rumble.

"I mean, Malfoy has an entire *Manor* to slither back to, and he can take that greasy git with him. Why must they come *here*? I'm telling you, Hermione is going daft in spinsterhood."

"Ron," Harry snapped, dropping his hands to the table with more force than necessary, but not near as much as he would've liked to have used, "I'm not chuffed about having Malfoy here either, but Master Snape is a *hero* and his *house just burned down*. Have a heart, will you?"

Ron stopped chewing long enough to pull a face, and then stuffed the rest of the slice of bread into his mouth, washing it down with a long pull from the bottle of beer at his

elbow. "I'm just saying—"

"Well, I don't want to hear it."

"Merlin, Harry, you don't have to bite my head off—"

"Then DROP IT!" Harry smacked the table with the flat of his hand. Immediately regretting losing his temper, he folded his arms and dropped his head into the crook of one elbow. His voice muffled by his clothes and flesh, he said, "I'm sorry, Ron. Can we talk about something else, please?"

Ron stared at the top of his dark head for a long moment, then took another swig of beer. "Alright, mate. Who do you suppose those blokes are?"

"What?" Harry raised his head, his forehead creased in confusion. Ron gestured with his beer toward the Foe-Glass that had been modified to display the lawn and street in front of Grimmauld Place. "Shite."

"That's what I thought," Ron said, finishing his beer in one long gulp.

In silence, they watched a humanoid form prowl into view, almost crouching as it eyed the houses along Grimmauld Place. Even with the distortion of the Foe-Glass, they could distinguish the faint red glow of his pupils. The rest of the street was deserted, save for an older model automobile parked on the curb and another figure lurking near it. Harry couldn't remember if that was normal for this time of day or not; the week seemed to have consumed and twisted his life into something unrecognizable.

"You really want Hermione out there with those things?" he said when the silence had become too much to bear.

Ron belched loudly and levitated his empty beer bottle to the rubbish. "It wasn't Hermione I was objecting to."

Before he could continue, a silvery Patronus in the shape of a badger bounded through the ceiling and landed on the table. A moment later, Chief Griswold's voice growled out of the badger's throat. "A makeshift hospital has been set up at the Museum of Wizarding Fashion. Direct all casualties— get your ugly mug out of my face before I break it! —all casualties to the museum no matter the seriousness of the injury. Any captured Infected should be sent to the holding pen erected in Hogsmead. Stand by for further orders."

The badger dissolved into a silver cloud and vanished. Harry and Ron stared at where it had just stood, each man wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"Museum of Wizarding Fashion?" Ron finally asked. Harry just shrugged. Ginny had dragged him to it years ago, but he didn't remember much of it. For one thing, it had been about as boring as de-gnoming the Burrow's garden. For another, he had been watching Ginny's backside almost the entire time.

A thump and a clattering sounded through the ceiling. Both men glanced up, one grimacing and the other sighing with relief. Springing out of his chair, Harry strode toward the stairs. When he realized that Ron wasn't on his heels, he turned to frown at him.

"Coming, Ron?"

"What about *them*?" Ron jerked his thumb at the Foe-Glass. "The Chief said—"

"I heard what he said, but they don't seem to be going anywhere, and they can't get in here." Crossing his arms over his chest, Harry gave him a pointed look. "They can wait. Are you coming or not?"

"No, uh..." the redhead glanced around, then sat straighter in his chair. "No, I'll just wash up. Yeah."

When Harry burst into the living room, Malfoy was studying a curio cabinet that held various odds and ends that had belonged to the Black family for time immemorial. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he had the air of one who had long been welcome in the house. Master Snape was standing dark and awkward near the fireplace, sneering at nothing in particular – or everything in general. It was impossible to tell.

"Harry!" Pouncing on him, Hermione wrapped him in an enthusiastic embrace. "Thanks so much for letting us stay!"

"Of course! I wouldn't have it any other way," Harry said, patting her back until she released him, but unable to drag his eyes from Master Snape, in the flesh, standing in his living room. Master Snape, the man who had spied on Voldemort and almost died for love of his mother. He remembered his hatred of the ex-professor with a deep abiding shame and hoped that he could make some sort of amends by showing him the best of hospitality. He cleared his throat nervously. "Master Snape, welcome back to Grimmauld Place. I'm very happy to have you here."

The Master turned hard black eyes to him and sneered, "I'm sure you are, Mr. Potter." He felt hurt, though why he expected graciousness, he didn't know. Harry frowned slightly.

"Harry," Hermione hissed out the corner of her mouth, and he glanced questioningly at her. She raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes, jerking her head toward Snape.

Realizing his faux-pas, Harry was quick to add, "I'm just sorry that it has to be under these, uh, circumstances. I'm really sorry about your house." It sounded paltry and petty, and he grimaced. "Erm... would you like some tea?"

"Yes, we'd like tea," Malfoy said from his place near the curio cabinet.

Harry was less than pleased to have Malfoy as a houseguest, and his old school rival was far too much at ease for a man wearing borrowed clothes who had just escaped an attack. His blond hair was attractively mused and his pale skin was as flawless as ever. Gray eyes slid critically over Harry and his house, assessing and cataloguing.

"Right," Harry said, staring hard at him. "I'll just go get that. Hermione?" he asked, intending that she join him so that they could catch up in relative privacy. Malfoy was already in motion, escorting his best friend the short distance to the sofa with a hand at the small of her back and seating her before he sat himself.

"Yes, please, Harry," she said, as if being touched by Draco Malfoy was an every day occurrence.

Blinking down at her upturned face, Harry flushed and felt distinctly wrong-footed. Chancing a glance at Snape, he saw the older man watching the pair on the couch with veiled menace. "What on earth is going on?" Harry wondered as he nodded mechanically and wandered toward the stairs that led down to the kitchen.

Ron was still sitting at the table and staring moodily into the fire, the dishes unwashed and a bottle of beer in his hand. He jumped guiltily when he noticed Harry on the stairs, but Harry just waved at him to stay seated.

"I think you should join us for tea," he said, his voice sounding hollow and uneasy to his own ears. Walking to the sink, he pulled the kettle from a cupboard and filled it with water. Once he had set that on the range to boil, he shook several measures of dried tealeaves from the can into a strainer and dropped it into a cracked ceramic pot. "Ron?"

"I heard you," the redhead muttered. "I'd really rather not."

"Something funny is going on," Harry said, shaking his head. Unruly black fringe dropped into his eyes and he combed it back impatiently with his hand.

"Other than having two ex-Death Eaters for tea?" Ron gave the kettle and teapot significant glances.

Harry shook his head. "For fuck's sake, Ron..." he said tiredly. "It's something to do with Hermione. You'll see."

"You've gone around the bend, you have," Ron muttered, but lugged his body out of his chair and downed his beer. With a belch and more clattering than was necessary, he started pulling down mugs and setting them on a tray, ignoring the more formal cups and saucers. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Sitting on the sofa next to Malfoy," he deadpanned.

Ron almost dropped the mug he had been holding, only saving it from an early death on the kitchen floor with a fumbling scramble of his hands. "Shite, mate, don't say things like that!"

Harry remained silent, deciding to let Ron see for himself.

Draco leaned back into the cushions of the cheap sofa, hearing a spring creak under his and Hermione's combined weight. Gracefully, he stretched both arms along the back of the sofa, one just happening to rest behind Hermione's back, and crossed one ankle over his knee. She didn't notice, being too busy staring after Harry with a slight frown of confusion, but Uncle Sev did. He gave the old man a quick wink. Severus, seated in one of the two wingback chairs, merely glanced away, as if it were of no importance to him. Draco knew better.

He hadn't missed Harry's stunned expression when he'd seated Hermione on the sofa. 'Priceless,' Draco thought as he basked in self-satisfaction. He hadn't exactly relished the thought of staying at Grimmauld Place when Hermione had suggested it, but he also hadn't considered the potential for entertainment.

"Oy, you ferret-faced bastard, you get your bloody—"

"Ronald!" Hermione rose from the sofa to confront the wizard that had just barged into the living room in a blaze of lug-headed ginger glory. Draco smirked at him behind Hermione as she read him the riot act. "That is no way to treat a guest! If you haven't forgotten, we were just attacked by red-eyed *creatures* and his home was *burned to the ground*. Have you no sense of decency or good manners? Your mother will hear about this!"

She paused for a deep breath, glancing down at him, and Draco schooled his face into pained indignity. Weasley had flushed red at the mention of his mother and was now simmering with resentment and humiliation.

"Hermione," he began to protest, but she jabbed a sharp finger at him.

"Not a word, Ronald, unless it is in apology," she hissed.

"Fat chance of that," Ron muttered under his breath as he set the mugs and pot of tea on the coffee table, then dropped gracelessly into the unoccupied wingback chair.

Smothering a laugh as only one trained in deceit from birth could manage, Draco rose politely and captured Hermione's fingers in his hand.

"Hermione," he said, careful to pronounce her name clearly in a tone of respect, "it seems that I am not welcome. Perhaps I should—"

"No, no. *Harry* has made you welcome, hasn't he? And it's *his* house." She directed a sidelong glare at Ron. Severus harrumphed from his chair. "I'm sorry that he's acting like such a boor, but his sister *has* gone missing."

Draco grimaced prettily and gently squeezed her hand, guiding her to sit again and retaking his place on the sofa. "I *am* sorry to hear that." He didn't need to feign his sympathy; Weaslette was a fine little thing, completely wasted on a prat like Potter.

Harry entered with a platter of biscuits, obviously the pre-packaged store-bought kind, as Hermione was pouring the tea. Because the sofa and chairs were occupied, Harry remained standing, though as far as Draco could see, he was too wound up to sit still anyway. Wrinkling his nose as he accepted an uncouth mug of orange ceramic, he selected two chocolate biscuits from the platter and sipped delicately.

Hermione quickly summarized their earlier conversation and conclusions, followed by the attack of infected thralls and burning of Spinner's End. Ron endured it in sullen silence, shooting Draco defiant looks when Hermione wasn't watching. Harry listened intently, asking questions about the Dark Lord's project and requesting specifics regarding the thralls' behavior. Draco allowed her to tell most of the story, making sure he received credit where credit was due and filling in details when she lacked them. Near the end of her tale, Miss Lovegood wandered into the living room, looking slightly ruffled in a matching pajama set, and took a seat on the floor, smiling at both himself and Severus. A small scattering of purple welts speckled her face, but they seemed to be in the final stages of healing. Draco just smiled back, nonplussed. His godfather ignored her.

"So this new Dark Lord, whoever he is, has the same agenda as the old one," Harry said after Hermione had finished her tale.

"We don't know that for sure," Draco said quickly. "My father said that they were unsuccessful transferring the Dark Lord's essence. Even assuming that he experimented on his own, we have no idea how successfully he was able to move something as abstract as his politics."

"His goons attacked Master Snape, a known traitor to the Death Eaters," Harry pointed out, sloshing tea over the rim of his mug as he gestured to make his point. "And he's taken Ginny to get to me."

Severus snorted from the depths of his chair. "As always, Potter, you assume that everything is about *you*."

"There are goons lurking on the walkway outside this house," Ron said, his first addition to the conversation since Hermione had stymied him. "Good thing this place is secret-kept."

"If this Dark Lord is anything like the previous one, then you can stop worrying about Ms. Weasley," Severus said darkly. "She would already be dead."

Harry jerked as if he had been struck, but before he could start shouting, Miss Lovegood spoke quietly from the floor. "I don't think she's dead."

"Of course she isn't!" Harry agreed quickly. "What use would she be to him dead?"

"What use would she be to him at all?" Draco asked rhetorically. "This isn't the Dark Lord that we knew. Besides, I don't remember him ever mentioning her. Uncle?" Severus shook his head jerkily in the negative. "If anything, her disappearance is the same as all the others that have been mentioned in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Then why did the Infected attack Spinner's End, and why are they outside Grimmauld Place now? The Ministry, Hogwarts..." Hermione trailed off, cocking her head. "There seems to be some sort of connection to Voldemort's agenda..."

Draco shook his head, not wanting to believe that a piece of the Dark Lord might still exist. From Severus' drawn brows and tight frown, he guessed that his godfather didn't want to believe it either. If Hermione was correct, then his parents were also in danger, his mother having betrayed the Dark Lord to save her son's life. He hoped that they were sunning themselves in Spain by now.

Harry paced beside the coffee table, ruffling his unruly black hair with a nervous hand. "I think it's safest to assume that this new Overlord has enough of Voldemort in him to target those who defeated or betrayed him. I'll inform the team that the Infected might be under the control of a central figure that may want to subjugate and kill Muggles, Muggle-borns and anyone who participated in Voldemort's fall."

"Hermione, we need as much of that cure of yours as possible, and we have to be able to dose them as they are attacking us," he said, turning toward Hermione with eyes that glittered feverishly.

Hermione set her mug of tea on the coffee table. "Yes, I think I have a solution for that, but I wanted to go over it with Master Snape. Between the two of us, we should be able to come up with something ready to test fairly quickly.

"But Harry," she said as she ran her thumb along the rim of the mug, smearing the mark of her lip gloss, "they used Muggle means to start the fire at Spinner's End. I don't think anyone *but* Muggle-borns would use Molotov Cocktails. And besides, Muggle-borns are not immune to the Rash. There were several at St. Mungo's that progressed to stage two."

Harry stared at her, a mulish expression beginning to form in the pinch of his mouth.

'There is a reason that Hermione was considered the brains of the Trio,' Draco mused to himself. It relieved him to know that Muggle-borns hadn't been excluded from the infection; it lent credence to the idea that this new Overlord had nothing to do with the Dark Lord.

"Good point," Draco drawled, earning him a quick smile from Hermione and another glare from the Weasel. "In the meantime, however, you should stop thinking like an Auror and deal more decisively with these thralls. They are dangerous, and they are out for blood."

Almost forgotten on the floor, Miss Lovegood spoke up again. "We don't want to hurt them. They have become infected because they have a talent for Dark Magic, yes?" Hermione nodded beside him. "But they aren't necessarily evil."

'If Hermione hadn't cured Severus, he would be one of those things,' Draco realized in horror. Still, if it came to his life or theirs, he would pick his every time.

Rising from the sofa, Hermione tugged at her jeans to smooth the creases. "Then we really don't have time to waste. My lab is already set up to work on the Rash." Pulling her leather satchel from its resting place against the side of the sofa, she slung the strap over her shoulder. Turning toward Severus, she asked, "Shall we? There is a Floo connection from this fireplace to my office in the clinic."

His lip curling in a sneer of distaste, Uncle Sev rose slowly out of his chair. "If I *must*," he said, his voice thick with reluctance. Abandoning his second biscuit and ugly mug, Draco rose as well, offering a hand to Hermione to lead her to the fireplace. She shot him a look, but allowed his attentions.

"Where do you think you are going, boy?" his godfather sneered.

Draco frowned at him, irritated by the diminutive form of address in front of the current audience. Severus was doing it on purpose, he was sure. "To the clinic, *Uncle Sev*, where else?"

"I think not," Severus snapped. "You will only get in the way, and I've already got *one* former student to baby-sit. I will not abide another."

Hermione rolled her eyes and pinched a measure of Floo powder from the pot on the mantle. "Hermione's office!" she said clearly and cast it at her feet. Turning his back on Draco, Severus followed her lead and disappeared in a blaze of green flame.

Standing indecisively for a moment, Draco considered disregarding Severus' words and following after him – or, more accurately, Hermione. The memory of the dull empty clinic and Hermione's creepy lab made up his mind. Poor company or no, he would stay at Grimmauld Place where he could indulge in creature comforts, though paltry they may be.

After the flames had died down to cinders that glowed a pale green, an uncomfortable silence fell on the living room in Grimmauld Place, broken occasionally by a half-hearted popping from the hearth and muffled crunching as Miss Lovegood chewed on a lemon-filled biscuit. Draco resisted the impulse to shift his weight nervously or draw his wand; he could veritably feel the threat radiating off Weasley. Now that Hermione wasn't around to keep him in line, he might try something imprudent. Draco wasn't particularly worried; he could hold his own against the git, but he didn't want to incur the wrath of Hermione. It wouldn't do anything to further his plans.

Draco assessed the redhead still slumped in the wingback chair. 'If I let Weasley land a punch, Hermione might feel inclined to play nursemaid...' He smirked to himself as he calculated how much reciprocal damage he could do and still appear to be the injured party.

"These are good biscuits, Harry," Miss Lovegood said conversationally after washing it down with a gulp of tea. The tension in the room dissipated like the air in a punctured balloon. "A bit dry, but pretty good." Draco stared down at her, once again thrown off balance by the odd woman. "Would you like another one?" she offered to him, gesturing to the platter still heavy with cookies.

"No, thank you," Draco said politely, wondering what his next move was to be. Weasley was now watching Miss Lovegood with calf eyes, so a fight no longer seemed to be an option.

"How about a beer?" Harry asked, disrupting his musings. Draco glanced up, surprised by the genial question. Harry smiled tightly, obviously uncomfortable with present company but determined to play a good host.

"Sure," Draco agreed. A beer did sound pretty good.

"Good, because I have something I want to ask you." Harry's eyes narrowed fractionally, and Draco was fairly sure that his questions had to do with Hermione. Well. This could be fun.

Standing stiffly at the mouth of Ms. Granger's office Floo, Severus glanced around with carefully concealed curiosity. It was a smallish space for such a successful businesswoman, but it was well appointed. A desk of dark polished wood and many drawers faced the door, and it held several neatly stacked piles of papers. A lush white area rug lay underneath it, and tucked under the desk, almost hidden by the leather upholstered office chair, was a pair of white fuzzy slippers with what appeared to be animal ears and a red bow. On the mantle above the hearth were several framed photographs, some motionless Muggle photos and some with subjects that waved cheerily to the viewer.

"That's odd," Ms. Granger said at his side. "The lighting is off."

Severus waited for her to elaborate, but she only frowned and peered through the window in her office door, cupping her hand above her eyes as if that would help somehow. The lighting was a bit dim, hardly enough to create a glare, and one of the bulbs down the hall was flickering in a menacing manner that candlelight simple didn't possess. He had never liked fluorescent lighting; it was ugly, vulgar and ruined the occasional potion.

Pulling open the office door, Ms. Granger called out, "Hello?" Craning her long shapely neck as she peered down the hall, she glanced back at him and shrugged. Severus stared at her impassively. He did *not* want to be there. His only comfort was that Draco had been left at Grimmauld Place. Half-hoping that Potter and Weasley would gang up on the spoiled prat, Severus watched her closely for a sign that she might miss his godson's presence. What was between those two? The question was gnawing at him, undermining his carefully constructed reserve.

"Anyone there?" she called again. The light down the hall sputtered and hummed, but otherwise, the hall was empty and silent.

"Is something the matter, Ms. Granger?" he finally asked impatiently, injecting as much disdain into his voice as he possibly could, as if to imply that only a fool would consider it, and if there was something wrong, it was surely her fault. The woman glared at him, but he could see apprehensive hesitation lurking behind her deep brown eyes.

"I shut off all the lights except for the emergency back-ups to save electricity costs while we were closed. Someone has changed them... and knocked my paintings off the wall."

"Vandals?" he asked as he stepped over the white rug and joined her in the doorway. Sure enough, three ragged piles of wood and canvas littered the hallway like forlorn corpses of giant butterflies. A black skid mark marred the otherwise spotless linoleum and a splatter of something dark and viscous had dried as it dripped down one wall.

Ms. Granger made a frustrated sound in the back of her throat, reminiscent of a cat's growl. Severus tried to pretend that he didn't find it intriguing as she stalked past him, heading straight for the stain on the wall. "What on *earth*?" she murmured to herself as she bent down to examine it, then straightened quickly and backed away. "It's blood."

"Are you sure?" Severus strode toward her, his borrowed sneakers' rubber soles squeaking against the linoleum and echoing down the empty halls that stretched ahead of him and to his right. At least, he *assumed* that they were empty; Ms. Granger had explained that she had closed her clinic shortly after the epidemic had gained momentum and had locked it up.

Still staring at the stain, she snapped, "I think I can recognize the sight of blood. I am a trained Healer, after all."

"One wouldn't know it," he sneered, but couldn't help but agree with her. It was, indeed, blood, and it had been there for no more than a day at most. Dried to a dark rusty brown, it had the vague shape of a large hand that had brushed carelessly against the wall.

Swearing under her breath, Ms. Granger stomped to the nurse's counter that was positioned right outside her office door. She eased the strap of the leather satchel off her shoulder, setting it on the floor, and then leaned over the counter, affording him an indecent view of her backside in a pair of distressed denim trousers. With her hair twisted into a bun, he could see the long line of her spine start at the base of her skull, arch through the fabric of her thin sweater, and disappear into the waistband of her jeans. She seemed incredibly fragile and breakable at that moment, and he didn't like the tugging feel it inspired in his chest.

Rummaging around with something that was out of sight, but sounded like paperwork, she muttered under her breath, "By all that is... they've dumped the drawers and scattered... This will take hours, maybe days to organize... Bloody hell."

She righted herself and propped her hands on her hips, glaring at him as if he had somehow been responsible. Severus raised his chin and gave her a superior blank stare, offering nothing resembling sympathy or comfort.

"At least they didn't get into my office," she said, continuing darkly as if she didn't expect a response, "and when I find out who 'they' are, I'm going to make them wish they'd been stillborn."

He didn't doubt it; the chit might have been sorted into Gryffindor, but she had a mean streak, disguised by self-righteousness, a mile wide. She also had a cunning that would have made any Slytherin proud had it been tempered with subtlety. Severus kept all of this to himself, choosing to curl his lip with distaste and gesture at her open office door. "Then if your *famed* Gryffindor courage has failed you, perhaps we could end this charade and return."

Ms. Granger gave him a pitying look and shook her head. "Gryffindor? Slytherin. It was just a stupid hat, Severus, and a mechanism to prevent a couple hundred hormonal teenagers from completely running amok. We are *more* than our houses."

At that moment, a flesh-colored blur streaked across the floor, and she shrieked, flinching away from it and leaning against the countertop.

"Obviously," he drawled with scornful sarcasm, not willing to admit that he, too, had been briefly startled. He couldn't suppress his wince when she shrieked again, this time in fury instead of fear and, snatching her satchel off the floor, took off running down the other hallway. Skidding around the corner, she didn't even look back to see if he was following. For a moment, he considered walking back into her office and Flooing to... who knew where, anywhere but her clinic or Grimmauld Place, but before the thought could congeal in his mind, he was pelting after her.

Through several neutrally nondescript corridors and around sharp corners he followed her, taking absent mental note of paintings and landmarks that distinguished one from the next. The habit had helped him as a spy, and he had never bothered to break himself of it. Two more bloody handprints had been smeared across the walls, and a scattering of droplets on the linoleum snagged his attention just in time to almost send him tumbling arse over teakettle over Ms. Granger's crouched form.

She glanced up at him, her brown eyes narrowed and snapping with anger, and he caught himself on the frame of a door that, when closed, would have blended in with the wall. Straightening, her knees popping in the relative quiet, she snarled, "They've broken into my lab!"

On the floor at her feet was a small puddle of a dark substance. Blacker than dried blood, it had an almost ashy texture, as if a puff of breath would scatter it like dust. Fine dark lines radiated from the stain like tiny hairs or roots. Frowning, Severus knelt down for a better look, wishing he had his reading glasses to magnify the odd material.

"What is this?" he asked, only realizing that he had spoken aloud when Ms. Granger's breath wafted across his cheek. She had leaned down to peer over his shoulder, her face startlingly close to his. Unnerved that he hadn't noticed her proximity until that moment, he had to stifle a wince at having her so close. When she started speaking, he fought to pay attention to what she was saying as opposed to the scent of tea on her breath.

"I'm not exactly sure," she mused. "At first, I thought it was more blood, but it's much more desiccated than the other samples, and then there are the tendrils..."

Standing suddenly because her proximity was too much to bear, Severus took a step into the corridor that he assumed led to her laboratory. "It almost appears to be a type of... fungus..."

As he said the words, anxiety closed a tight fist around his heart, and he turned to eye the woman next to him. She had straightened and backed a step away, her face pale as she stared at the blotch in undisguised horror. "They must have smashed the containers holding the mushroom samples." She groaned, pressing her hand against her eyes. "There are spores in the air! The whole clinic must be quarantined!"

"Have you been inoculated?" Severus asked quietly.

Hermione's hand fell limply to her side as she shook her head. "No, and I only have the one dose left. I left it at Harry's. Maybe I won't get ill..." she said, but her tone was neither confident nor hopeful. "I've been *so careful* to not come in contact with those damn mushrooms..."

"We shall return at once, and you will take that dose. I assume you have your notes on the cure," he added with a half-hearted sneer. He simply couldn't work up a believable amount of animosity under the oppressive weight of worry for the slim woman standing next to him. Pain stained red with madness flickered across his memory, followed by brief flashes of rage and blood, *his* blood, drawn by *his* hand. She shouldn't have to suffer through that.

Ms. Granger shook her head, already sidling around him as she walked toward the internal entrance of her lab. "They are in this bag," she said, patting the leather satchel slung over her shoulder. "And what's done is done; a few more minutes won't make a difference at this point. *Damn*," she swore explosively. "I wanted to save that last dose for an emergency. Who knows when we'll be able to make more, now. Or where."

"And this doesn't constitute as an emergency?" he inquired sarcastically as he considered the wisdom of stunning her from behind and carrying her unconscious body out of the clinic. A sudden flight of fancy captured his mind: he would vanish with her, and when she woke up, they would already be far, far away from Wizarding Britain and its unending parade of Evil Overlords. They would start a new life deep in a forest forgotten by human kind—

A string of unladylike curses jolted him out of a vision of himself turning rich soil with his bare hands in a large tidy garden as Hermione handed him a delicate bare-root seedling, her face tanned and scattered with freckles under the brim of her coarse straw hat.

"They've smashed everything! Everything!" She gesticulated wildly, coming close to smacking him in the face with a flailing hand. Her foot *did* make contact with a tangled pile of rubber tubing, sending it writhing into a scattering of sharp shards of glass.

The laboratory was half obscured by thick shadows, the fault of one of the overhead lights hanging wearily from the ceiling. Shattered glass covered every imaginable surface, and liquids of indistinguishable colors pooled on tables and dripped over the edges to form puddles on the floor. Several fluffs of cotton lay in the bottoms of aquariums that had had their walls smashed in and their lids thrown against the walls. In short, the room was a disaster and the woman who owned it was becoming one as well.

"Those no-good rotten bastards!" She grabbed the remains of a burlap sack and hurled it at an upended machine of questionable purpose. Sawdust burst out of the sack, filling the air with tiny golden splinters of wood. When she plucked what appeared to be a hamster wheel out of one of the aquarium carcasses, he snatched at her wrist, catching it before she could send the wheel careening into the sink.

"Ms. Granger!" he shouted over her shriek of outrage. Whirling on her toes, she rounded on him, still brandishing the hamster wheel. "I must insist that you cease this ridiculous behavior!" For a moment, he thought that she might try to brain him with it, but she dropped it instead, glaring at him in white-hot rage.

"Do you realize what this means?" she hissed between clenched teeth. She was the most furious he had ever seen her, and considering the effort he had put into provoking her when she had been his student, that was saying something. With her brown eyes snapping with golden fire and stray curls escaping confinement from the bun at the nape of her neck like tiny serpents, she was a Fury come to reap divine vengeance for the wrongs committed against her. "This will set us back days! Weeks! Who knows?"

Her eyes shimmered with pooling moisture, and she blinked quickly, glancing away from him. Realizing that he still held her wrist, he dropped it quickly. He *should* say something scathing, something that would cut her to the quick in this vulnerable moment and nip whatever sympathetic feelings she might hold for him in the proverbial bud. He should be cruel enough that she would release him from this pseudo-servitude, and he could disappear. This epidemic wasn't his problem. Hadn't he paid enough to save Wizarding Britain from the last Dark Lord? And what had the witches and wizards of England done with their freedom? Buy Nose Transfigurations from the witch before him. He opened his mouth, ready to let fly with a searing invective, but no sound came out. The insult lodged in his craw, and he coughed once to clear it.

Ms. Granger continued to stare at the floor, her eyes vacantly tracing a line of tubing that snaked around a leg of the workbench. He couldn't desert her, he realized. She was undoubtedly infected, and if left to the *tender* mercies of the Boy Wonder and his ginger-haired sidekick, she would not fair well.

"The kitchen at Grimmauld Place could be converted to a laboratory, albeit an inadequate one," he said finally, his tone gentler than he would have preferred. He cleared his throat again. "Come, we must administer that dose in case you have become infected."

"I'll wait for symptoms before I take it," she mumbled, the fight seeming to have drained out of her. "I might not even..." She sighed and then straightened her spine and lifted her chin, speaking with renewed determination. "I might not be infected. We have no way of knowing, not with most of my equipment inoperable. We should, however, go through this mess and salvage what we can."

Severus wanted to argue, but simply nodded instead. It was, after all, her lab. In any case, the resolved smile she sent him quite took his breath away.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, ann1982, and the TPP mods for all of their hard work! Also, thanks to those of you who are still following this, despite my slow updates – and especially those who take the time to leave a note. I value your input!