

In Loco Parentis

by ayerf

Severus Snape is no father figure. He wishes Harry Potter agreed.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

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Severus Snape drifted awake, blissfully free from pain, the last thing he had been aware of. That of Nagini's teeth tearing into his throat and the sight of Lily's eyes in Potter's hated face.

He opened his eyes to that same face. And promptly shut his eyes again, groaning.

"So this is hell," Severus rasped. "Eternity with you."

"Professor?"

That wasn't Potter's voice. Severus opened his eyes again, frowning in consternation at the young woman standing beside Potter. What was Miss Granger doing in his own personal hell? Potter made sense, as he'd had a hand in the boy's fate, but Granger? While irritating to teach, she was hardly his idea of hell. Or of heaven. So did that mean, against all possibility, that he was alive?

Looking beyond Potter and Granger at his surroundings, he did appear to be in a hospital, his bed surrounded by green privacy curtains. And that bed seemed to be a standard hospital bed, come to think of it.

"I'm so glad you're awake!" Potter's words brought Severus's attention back to him. He sounded and looked far too happy to be addressing a man he loathed.

Severus pinched himself. This was too ludicrous to be real. But as far as he knew the dead didn't hallucinate.

Which meant Potter was alive; that he'd somehow escaped his fate. And that he had, too. But for how long? If the Dark Lord had fallen and he must have for Potter to be alive then the wizarding public must be baying for the blood of their former oppressors.

He lifted up his left arm, staring at the unblemished skin where the Dark Mark had been. At last, freedom... Until he was thrown into Azkaban for his crimes if he survived that long.

A slender hand tentatively reached out, but stopped before it touched him. Severus raised his eyes to the owner of that hand, meeting Granger's earnest gaze. "It's true, sir. He's dead. For good this time."

"We couldn't have done it without you," Potter gushed, his eyes shining with ... hero worship? Surely not.

At least Granger seemed to behave more normally, if regarding him with more respect than she had at Hogwarts. As a student, she had respected all of her teachers, with the only exception of Trelawney. And Umbridge, but he refused to count that hag.

A Healer pulled back the curtains and stepped inside, allowing Severus a glimpse of two uniformed Aurors outside.

"You're awake. Excellent," the Healer stated, prodding and poking at Severus's throat with his wand. "Good. Your wound is healed, although I'm afraid it has left a scar. You're lucky to be alive." The Healer wagged his finger in front of Severus's nose, as if it was his own fault Nagini had bitten him.

"You may leave. Ordinarily I'd keep you here for at least another day, but we're short on space." He made a distracted shooing motion as he recorded something on a slip of parchment.

"My wand? Clothes?"

Before leaving, the Healer pointed at the foot of the bed. Granger bent down, his black robes in her hands when she straightened up again.

"I have your wand," Potter said. He shifted uncomfortably. "The Aurors wanted to snap it."

"I see," Severus hissed. The Aurors doubtless wanted him unarmed before they took him to Azkaban. The only blessing was that the adoring public would have no chance to tear him apart before he was imprisoned.

He frowned up at Potter and Granger. If he was to be thrown into Azkaban, why were they present? With Potter's behaviour around him, the boy was unlikely to be there to gloat. And while Granger did have a vengeful streak, she was also a champion of lost causes. Perhaps there was some hope left for him after all... but what could teenagers do to help?

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So it was that Severus found himself under house arrest at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, with Potter as his gaoler. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister Pro Tem, had performed the Fidelius Charm himself.

Until his trial, Severus's only company would be Potter. And after that, Dementors, or whatever the new Ministry had replaced them with.

His outburst of "Why didn't you let me die?" at that cheerful thought didn't improve matters. It just made the portrait of Black's mother shriek at him, and Potter linger even more closely on a self-appointed suicide watch.

At least Granger had been granted access to the house as well, although that was a mixed blessing: while a break from Potter, it meant being subjected to Granger's furious concern.

"I did not help save you just so you could wish for death, you miserable bastard!"

"So Potter isn't the only one to blame for my continued suffering," Severus muttered, matching Granger's glare with one of his own.

"There's more to life than suffering! It's about time someone reminded you of that." With that, Granger caught hold of his collar and tugged him down to meet her as she leaned up.

Her lips met his, at first in a chaste, gentle kiss, which quickly deepened to a passionate exchange as he responded. Her hands slipped up to link around his neck as she pressed herself against him.

At the first touch of his tongue to hers, Granger staggered back, covering her mouth with a shaking hand, her eyes wide with horror. "I can't believe I did that..."

Her reaction worked more effectively than a Cooling Charm to return his stirring cock to a flaccid state. That was life as he knew it; as soon as any blessing came within his reach, it was snatched out of his grasp again. Severus scowled, a scathing rejoinder rising like bile in his throat.

Granger pre-empted him. "I'm so sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"Indeed," he spat, "you wouldn't want to dirty yourself with the likes of me."

"What? No, that's not..." Granger trailed off, twisting her fingers together. "I'm... I'm wi...with Ron. And I betrayed him."

Gryffindor. An impulsive kiss, however impassioned, was a minor betrayal at worst.

"Tell him if you must, but why bother? It meant nothing." There was some truth in that. Although he hadn't been untouched by Granger's kiss, his heart still belonged to Lily.

"Nothing?" To his surprise, Granger sounded disappointed and hurt.

"It was enjoyable," Severus allowed. "However, you and I...even if we... Well, I've no doubt that you care, but you are not a free agent.

"Nor am I," he added. After all, Azkaban was hardly conducive to new relationships.

"If you don't mind me saying so, sir, pining for a dead woman isn't healthy."

"So Potter can't keep his big mouth shut," Severus grumbled. Not that it surprised him.

"Sorry, sir. Harry taunted Voldemort just before he defeated him with the knowledge of your true loyalties... in front of just about everyone at the battle."

Severus covered his eyes with his hand, groaning. It was worse than he'd imagined. "Was Molly Weasley there?"

"Er, yes, sir."

Brilliant. That meant the entire wizarding world would know of his feelings for a dead woman. His unrequited feelings, at that. How humiliating.

He blinked at Granger. Why had she brought up Lily? "Regardless, my attachment to Lily is a moot point."

"What do I have to do to talk you out of suicide?" Granger put her hands on his shoulders, her fingers digging into him in her desperation.

"I meant that Azkaban surely awaits me. Death is preferable to that."

Granger stared at him. "Do you mean to say that you're not suicidal?"

"I never said I was!"

She pinched the bridge of her nose, exasperated. "Severus Snape, you knew you were under suicide watch. Why didn't you say something?"

"I don't have to explain myself to interfering Gryffindors," Severus sniffed.

"Insufferable man," Granger muttered. "If you'd told us, we wouldn't have had to interfere."

"I had to put up with Potter's interference anyway. At least you break up the monotony."

"In that case I'll keep visiting. And you should be thankful for Harry's interference; he's doing his utmost to keep you out of Azkaban. You won't lose your case, sir. We won't let that happen."

"How reassuring," Severus mumbled, under his breath. He eyed Granger appraisingly. She just might present a challenge for the Wizengamot. Judging by her recent actions, she was more unpredictable than he'd given her credit for. Come to think of that...

"Why did you kiss me?"

Granger looked puzzled. After a moment's consideration, she shrugged. "It was either that or slap you."

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His trial followed a week later. He was found guilty of murdering Dumbledore, and using an Unforgivable to do it, but pardoned as the act had been tantamount to assisted suicide (frowned upon, but legal in wizarding Britain) and had ultimately helped the war effort against Voldemort.

True to her word, Granger and Potter were instrumental in that verdict being reached, in organising his defence and, especially in Potter's case, giving beneficial evidence. They were so successful in persuading the Wizengamot of his heroism, that not only was he acquitted, but they even awarded him an Order of Merlin (First Class!) for his troubles.

Unfortunately, that award, the accompanying generous stipend and fame (or was it infamy?) meant that he was mobbed by a suddenly-adoring public as a result. While it was a nice change to be greeted by smiles instead of glowers, in the end he found that he much preferred to be feared than loved by strangers. At least then his privacy had been respected; now people continually invaded his personal space, crowding too close for comfort whenever he appeared in public.

Severus had been pleased to escape the masses and Grimmauld Place for Spinner's End. Although just as shabby, at least it didn't reek of Black or feel like a prison. It also had the bonus that Potter didn't know where it was. Nor did anyone else, other than the Malfoys, and they were unable to visit as they were currently under house arrest.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for his bubble of security to burst. One Friday evening he returned from a tiring day attempting to shop in Diagon Alley to find Rita Skeeter waiting for him in his book-lined living room...scantly clad and Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready.

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Potter cleared his throat, adjusting his new Auror uniform robes. "We've charged Skeeter with breaking and entering, and managed to keep you from being charged with anything. I certainly don't blame you for hexing her into St Mungo's..."

"I only wish I could Obliviate myself," Severus muttered, grinding the heels of his palms into his closed eyes, as if that would get rid of the mental imagery that still lingered of Skeeter in lingerie.

"Skeeter'll be lucky not to be squashed like the bug she is when Hermione gets her hands on her," Weasley commented to Potter, ignoring Severus entirely. An interesting approach, considering he was investigating Severus's complaint. Riding on Potter's coattails, he'd been made a full Auror without any NEWTs, and without the three years of training to boot.

To her credit, Granger hadn't joined them. Instead she would be going to Hogwarts to finish her schooling when the new academic year started in a few weeks. As a result, Severus suspected that the Ministry was in for a lesson on how essential she was to Potter and Weasley's heroic deeds. And quite possibly to their continued survival, as not all Death Eaters and Dark sympathisers had been captured yet.

After a day being mobbed by simpering fools in Diagon Alley, it was refreshing to know that some opinions of him hadn't changed. Pity that such people avoided him if they could. Even so, Weasley had loathed him. Now he seemed merely indifferent. Potter and Granger's influence, no doubt, or their obvious support of Severus had made Weasley tone it down to avoid arguments.

There was a way to renew that loathing, but telling Weasley of Granger's impulsive kiss would not be a good way to repay Granger for her help. Besides, it was possible that she had already told him to relieve her guilty conscience. Unlikely, though, as Weasley would surely have tried to attack Severus in that case.

"...I'm afraid there's no way to stop Skeeter from publishing the location of your home in the *Prophet*." Potter's words pulled Severus from his thoughts. "And anyone who tries hard enough could find it even if she didn't."

So Potter had respected his wishes for privacy? Unusual behaviour for Potter. But now that he had been disturbed, Severus doubted that Potter would keep his nose out for long.

Even worse, what was to stop his crazed fans from descending on Spinner's End? Skeeter had managed to break his wards all by herself. Unless...

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"Are you sure you want me to do this? I've only ever seen Kingsley do it, I've never done a Fidelius Charm myself," Granger asked, peeking out of a gap in the curtains at the crowd forming outside Spinner's End. She had arrived by Floo after Potter and Weasley had left, responding to Severus's summons.

"Any others who might do this for me are too busy." Realising that she sounded a little unsure, Severus added: "I have every faith in your abilities, Miss Granger. You only ever needed to read about a spell in order to do it. Having observed it being done isn't much different. Better, as first hand observations are more reliable than any diagram of wand movements."

He wondered where the know-it-all schoolgirl had gone, who would have parroted enthusiastically everything she had ever read about Secret Keeping and added a dozen questions and ideas without stopping for breath. Was that the effect of a year depending upon her wits instead of books? Or had this insecure, vulnerable side to her always been there, but he was only now close enough to glimpse it?

"Did Rita Skeeter manage to hex you, sir?" Granger gazed at him, concern creasing her brow. "I could have sworn you just praised me. You've never done that before."

Severus smirked. "Who would believe you if you told them?"

"Good point," Granger muttered. "All right, I'll do it. We can't have you getting into trouble for hexing people invading your privacy, can we?" Her smile faded. "And there are still Death Eaters at large. Now they'll know where you live."

She drew her wand, brows lowered in concentration as she repeated the complex sequence of movements and incantations Kingsley had recently performed on Grimmauld Place.

With the last downward flick of her wand, darkness enveloped Severus's vision, all light drawn into Granger as the secret lodged in her soul. Severus could no longer feel

the chair below him, or the floor under his feet. The disorientation of the void was even worse than at Grimmauld Place, as this time it was his own home that had vanished.

"The easternmost house in Spinner's End is the home of Severus Snape." Granger breathed the words into his ear, sight and sensation returning as if he was awoken from sleep. He could hear the mob outside making a racket as they reacted to his home disappearing before their eyes.

Granger crossed the room to look outside again. "Looks like you'll need to Apparate or use the Floo network instead of the front door. They know where your house is, they just can't see it or get in."

"At least I can live in peace now," Severus muttered, drawing his wand to tweak the wards with a modified Muffliato so that no sound could get in. "No more uninvited guests."

"Not that it's possible for you to have any guests but me. About that... I'm not about to let you become a hermit. Other people will have to know where you live."

Severus fingered his wand, tempted to try an Obliviate for a heartbeat. But that would be a shoddy way to repay Granger for her help. He also doubted it would work anyway, as Memory Charms worked on the mind, not the soul. While it might make her forget that she'd done it, she'd still know where he lived, as the secret was kept in her soul. And the gaps in her memory would be incriminating. He had no interest in experiencing her encyclopaedic knowledge of hexes.

"I won't be a hermit. Swarming mobs or no, I'll still venture outside. Even with the stipend accompanying the Order of Merlin, I'd rather keep working."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir. But I must insist that you have guests here regardless."

"Very well," Severus grumbled. "Although they must be people I can trust. You did have a point earlier, about the threat from any Death Eaters still at large. They will now know that I have a Secret Keeper, but not who that is. For your protection as much as mine, those I deem worthy of knowing where I live must be able to resist interrogation."

Granger blinked at him. "But only I can tell anyone where you live. Not even you can. So why would your guests need to resist that?"

Before Severus could reply with all the contempt that silly question deserved, Granger answered it herself, her eyes wide, her breathing unsteady. "Oh. Because they would know I was the Secret Keeper, and that knowledge could be extracted by whoever wanted to know."

"And then you would find yourself on the wrong end of a Death Eater's wand," Severus continued. It was imperative that she understood the risks, but now that he thought of it, he had to wonder if Granger was strong enough. Had he chosen poorly? Would she trade her sanity for his safety if she was Cruciated?

"Having second thoughts?" Granger asked softly. "Perhaps I can help there: was there any Death Eater better than Bellatrix Lestrange at torture?"

"No. She was unmatched, especially after Azkaban stripped the last of her humanity..." Severus's brain caught up with his tongue, cutting him off mid-word. He stared at her, appalled. "Bellatrix had you at wand point?"

Granger fingered her neck just inside the collar of her shirt. "And knife point."

His blood boiled at the thought of Granger at Bellatrix's tender mercies. If not for the fact that the sadistic bitch was already dead, he'd kill her himself. As it was, he'd make a point of dancing on her grave if anyone had bothered to mark it.

"How long did Bellatrix hold you under the Cruciatius?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten minutes. I'd have to ask Harry or Ron. Why? Are you worried that I'd still break if tortured long enough?"

While that was a valid concern, it wasn't why he'd asked. "What treatment did you have afterwards? Did you see a Healer?"

"About a week's rest and whatever Fleur could do."

"Fleur Delacour, now Weasley?" Severus shook his head dismissively. "She's no Healer."

"We were on the run!" Granger protested.

"Did it not cross your mind to see a medical professional after the Dark Lord's defeat?"

"There were others in far more need than me."

"I'll take that as a no," Severus muttered, rolling his eyes. "Do. If you were exposed to Cruciatius for longer than ten minutes, it can have after effects that haunt you for the rest of your life if not dealt with soon enough."

"Fine, I'll go to St Mungo's." Granger narrowed her eyes. "But not before you tell me whom you want as visitors."

"You need only write the secret down."

She shook her head. "That's not secure enough. A note can be lost."

"I'll be the judge of that," Severus snapped. "Those I choose to socialise with are none of your concern."

Her lips tightened into a thin line, hurt flashing in her eyes. "If your privacy is that important, fine." Granger turned toward the fireplace, grabbing a handful of Floo powder from the mantelpiece. "I thought... I thought you trusted me." She swiped at her eyes with her free hand, her voice raw.

'*Shit.*' He hadn't meant to make her cry. "Miss Granger, I...Wait!" Severus lunged for her as she threw the Floo powder into the fire.

She ignored him, hiccupping "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," as she stepped into the green flames.

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Chapter 2

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Snape grabbed her just as the brilliant green flames whisked Hermione away. She screamed, but it was choked off immediately by a mouthful of soot. Her flinch, as his hand caught her shoulder, almost hurled them both out of the nearest grate rushing past. Instead she hit the wall.

Coughing, choking, her eyes watering and stinging, and knocked half senseless to boot, Hermione was still aware of when Snape shifted his hold on her, his arms wrapping around her, holding her arms to her sides.

Finally the nausea-inducing view of blurry grates rushing past ended. She tumbled out facedown onto the cold, tiled kitchen floor of Grimmauld Place. Snape was definitely still in tow, landing on top of her and knocking the breath out of her for the second time.

For a moment the warm length of his body was pressed against her even closer than it had been in the Floo. Then he scrambled off her, but not before she felt something stirring against her rear end.

'Interesting... No! Absolutely not. Think of Ron...'

A fresh bout of coughing interrupted her train of thought. Every breath she tried to take fuelled more hacking and wheezing it was almost as if she was still in the Floo Network, where there was more soot than air.

Hermione was dimly aware of a hand touching her back, and then of a brief touch of something hard. The point of Snape's wand, she realised, as she stopped coughing. He'd done something to clear her airways. Now she was merely gasping for breath.

She pushed herself up on her elbows, grimacing. Soot left a foul taste in her mouth, coating her teeth and tongue. It also still stung her eyes. Moving also reminded her of how bruised and battered her body felt. She'd be black and blue for days... if not for magic, she mentally amended, drawing her wand to deal with her various aches and pains. And to clean the soot from her eyes, mouth and clothes, using *Evanesco* instead of *Scourgify* she had no wish for a mouthful of bubbles to replace the soot.

Climbing to her feet, Hermione ignored the helping hand Snape offered. She hoped he'd had to heal bruises of his own. Bastard deserved them; he'd caused them by tagging along in the Floo. Stupid man. They'd been lucky to reach Grimmauld Place in one piece. Floo travel was meant to be individual for a reason!

"Miss Granger, I am sorry..."

"You're sorry?" she hissed. "Good. You should be, pulling a stunt like that."

"I did not intend to accompany you through the Floo," Snape said, his voice tightly controlled. "My apologies for that as well."

That he hadn't initially been apologising for the Floo fiasco reminded Hermione that there was something else to be angry with him about. And hurt *He didn't trust her*

"If I didn't trust you, I would not have made you my Secret Keeper."

"I suppose," Hermione conceded. "But you don't trust me unconditionally."

"Miss Granger..." Snape hesitantly took one of her hands in both of his. "Hermione," he continued, using her first name for the first time. A sign of trust, perhaps? "I have never trusted anyone unconditionally..."

'Except Lily,' Hermione added mentally, feeling a surge of resentment for Harry's dead mother. Snape had obviously been badly burned at some point, and even if Hermione didn't know the full story, she guessed it had something to do with his childhood love.

"...Now that the Dark Lord is dead, perhaps things can change, but is it reasonable to expect me to change the habits of a lifetime so soon?"

Hermione thought about that for a moment. Perhaps it was too much, too soon for him. All things considered, it was a wonder that he trusted her enough to make her his Secret Keeper.

She pulled her hand out of Snape's grip and walked over to the kitchen table. One of her Self-Inking quills was there, discarded on top of a draft of a Howler she'd been composing to Rita Skeeter before Snape had called. Hermione tore a blank scrap of parchment off that draft and picked up the quill. She wrote down the secret, careful to keep her handwriting legible.

Wordlessly, she offered him the parchment. He'd shown trust in her, now it was time for her to trust him. Specifically, to trust his choices in whom he socialised with. Her handwriting could be traced; it was on file at both Hogwarts and the Ministry, thanks to that Muggle-born Act.

Snape took it, his fingers brushing hers. She stifled a gasp at the contact; it somehow made her heart leap more than his grip had. He glanced at the parchment, before looking back up at her.

"Thank you," he murmured. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Hermione gaped, unable to believe her eyes. It took a few incredulous blinks until she comprehended what had happened. Harry had Apparated downstairs, landing right on top of the unfortunate Snape.

She dropped her head into her hands, only raising it when the urge to laugh passed. "Harry, this is exactly why I told you not to Apparate indoors!"

Harry straightened his glasses, frowning up at her. "Wha...? Oh!" He sprang to his feet. "I'm so sorry!" he blurted, helping Snape up. "Are you all right?"

Snape's reply was limited to a rather feeble glower. Hermione would have been worried if not for the fact that it was still powerful enough to make Harry avert his eyes. In doing so, Harry saw something; he bobbed down again, a scrap of parchment in his hands when he stood.

Parchment with her handwriting on it. The secret. *Shit.*

"Give that here!" Hermione yelped, snatching it out of Harry's hands. Snape reached for it as well, his reflexes still dulled by his encounter with the floor.

Hermione passed the strip of parchment to Snape, who pocketed it.

"Did you read it?" Snape demanded. "Potter! Answer me."

Harry had, judging by the guilty flush in his cheeks. "...I won't tell anyone."

Snape sneered. "Idiot boy! That is not an issue."

"I know I can't tell anyone where you live! I meant that I won't tell anyone that Hermione's your Secret Keeper. I'm not stupid."

"Not *that* stupid, perhaps, Potter. Actions speak louder than words, and your actions are imbecilic at best."

Face contorting angrily at that insult, Harry opened his mouth. Before he could say anything he'd regret, Hermione intervened.

"What's done is done. Harry can be trusted, although I know you'd rather he didn't know."

Snape turned his attention to her, crossing his arms. "It is not just a question of trust. Potter's 'skills' as an Occlumens aren't worthy of the name." He shot Harry a contemptuous look.

"I've had Auror training since then! I've improved..."

"I'm not an Occlumens," Hermione reminded Snape. They both ignored Harry.

"Irrelevant. Such information cannot be extracted in that way from a Secret Keeper." He scowled at her. "Regardless of whether Potter can be trusted with your safety, I do not want him as a visitor."

"Oblivate me, then." Harry sounded like a kicked puppy.

"Tempting," Snape drawled. "But your ability to resist the Imperius curse is *legendary*. As such, I suspect any attempt to modify your memory would rebound off your thick skull."

Harry frowned, but said nothing. Hermione suspected that he didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted by that backwards compliment.

Snape looked down his nose at Harry. "I will hold you to your word, Potter. That you will tell no one. Not even Weasley is to know, do I make myself clear?"

"Ron wouldn't do anything to endanger Hermione."

"Not intentionally," Hermione murmured. "Remember what the locket did to him while we were camping? Ron's just not strong-minded enough."

"But you're going to be visiting him, aren't you?" Harry pointed at Snape. There was an undertone of jealousy in his voice. "What are you going to tell Ron?"

"While I'd rather not lie to him, the truth is out of the question." She avoided looking at Harry. She knew from painful experience that his loyalties lay more with Ron than her.

"What he doesn't know will not hurt him," Snape affirmed.

True, but Hermione was well aware that keeping secrets was not conducive to a healthy relationship. But even if Ron was strong enough to share the secret with, she doubted he would feel comfortable with her spending time with Snape. Nor would he appreciate accompanying her even if Snape approved, as Ron wouldn't be joining the Snape Appreciation Society any time soon.

The front door banged open, starting the portrait of Sirius's mother off. Hermione could hear Ron's voice competing with Mrs Black's shrieks as he wrestled her curtains closed.

"There'll be awkward questions if Ron sees you. I'd better go."

"Thank you," Snape murmured, then shot a glance at Harry as if suddenly aware that they had an onlooker. He turned back to her, and sneered, "I suppose I can't stop you from calling at my home whenever you please."

It took Hermione a second to interpret that. She was welcome to visit at any time?

"Well, you do have quite a collection of books I've yet to acquaint myself with," she retorted for Harry's benefit. After all, she really didn't want to put up with a sulky, jealous Harry if there was any way to mollify him.

"You in there, Hermione?" Ron bellowed from the hall.

Hermione dashed up the stairs, reaching the door at the top before Ron could open it. Once through it, she pulled it closed behind her as nonchalantly as she could, shielding her hand with her body as if the door had swung shut by itself.

To her surprise, it wasn't just one redhead waiting in the entrance hall.

"Oh! Ginny, I didn't realise you were here too," Hermione greeted her hopefully loud enough for Harry and Snape to hear her.

"Not surprising with the racket he made," Ginny snorted, poking her brother.

"Hey! It wasn't my fault someone oiled the front door. It used to be stiffer."

Hermione stifled a laugh with her hand, coughing into it to cover up her amusement. Ron had been the one to oil the door, but pointing that out wouldn't earn her any favours. Still, she couldn't resist exchanging a knowing look with Ginny.

"Never mind that, anyway." Ron pulled Hermione into a hug. "The Burrow's empty," he whispered into her ear. "Mum and Dad have gone to visit Aunt Muriel. C'mon, it'll be just you and me."

"And I'll be keeping Harry company." Ginny smiled sweetly when Ron blanched.

"Look, Ginny, don't push it. I'm turning a blind eye on what you're doing, but I could just as easily keep my promise to Mum and Dad."

"Come off it, you want to get laid too much for that," Ginny scoffed.

Hermione hoped that the occupants of the kitchen couldn't hear this, or at least that Snape had left. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to look him in the eye whenever she next saw him. Just in case Snape was still around, she'd better drag Ron off before either sibling said something more embarrassing.

"Whoa! Her-MI-oh-ne, you're eager! Wait until we get to the Burrow!"

'*Too late*,' she thought, her cheeks flaming.

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Hermione escaped Ron's love nest in the Burrow just before his parents returned. While Molly's reaction to her presence might have been interesting, she had no desire to subject herself to a lecture she wouldn't get from her own mother.

Not that she would be lectured by her mum anytime soon. Hermione supposed that she was fortunate not to be disowned after restoring their memories and bringing them back from Australia. Her parents hadn't appreciated her keeping them in the dark, or of using magic on them without their consent. They were no longer on speaking terms with her.

While her parents hadn't thrown her out of the family home, she didn't feel comfortable there. For the last month, Hermione had been staying either in the Burrow or in Grimmauld Place when Snape hadn't been living there. Ron would doubtless have preferred her to make the Burrow her permanent home, but Hermione found Mrs Weasley's presence stifling. Hence her departure before the Weasley matriarch's return.

Besides, she had put off the check up at St Mungo's the one Snape had insisted on long enough. Although that wasn't the reason she gave Ron. If he knew she was going to hospital, he'd only worry. And if he knew the reason why, he'd blame himself for not getting her out of Bellatrix Lestrange's clutches sooner. No, Ron was under the impression she was going to Grimmauld Place to remind Ginny to Apparate immediately into her bedroom.

Except it was high time that Ron grew a backbone and cut the apron strings. If Ginny got back in time to save his and her own skin, it wouldn't be Hermione's doing. Even if this meant that she'd be in for hell when she next saw Ron, it would be worth it; if their relationship was to survive, he had to be his own man.

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Hermione had estimated that she wouldn't be at St Mungo's for long, despite not making an appointment. While she normally despised taking advantage of her association with Harry and exploiting her own fame, she couldn't resist the opportunity to avoid sitting around in a hospital waiting room until the cows came home.

Indeed she was seen almost immediately, as soon as the Welcome Witch realised that she wasn't just a Hermione Granger lookalike. But it was not a short and simple check up. Hermione had anticipated being at Grimmauld Place for lunch; instead, she was discharged from St Mungo's after dinner. What she had thought would be a straightforward check up turned into a whole battery of tests, and then a series of treatments to neutralise the Cruciatus after effects lurking in her body.

Snape had been right. Hermione shuddered to think what would have happened if she hadn't undergone medical treatment within six months of prolonged exposure to the Unforgivable. Aches and pains in cold weather would have been the least of Hermione's problems had Snape not advised her to seek medical attention. Hermione shook herself. The health professionals knew now. And Snape deserved a thank you. In person.

Which had nothing to do with all of those books of his that she'd never read.

*

In retrospect, Hermione considered herself fortunate that she didn't Splinch. She had intended to Apparate into Snape's sitting room, but her determination to read those books of his had messed with her destination.

She ended up behind a bookshelf. Luckily for her it was the one forming a door in front of the stairs, so she hadn't ended up inside a wall. It could have been worse, too, if she'd been thinking more about the man himself instead of his books. Hermione doubted Snape would have appreciated her doing a Harry and landing on top of him.

Hermione was about to open the bookshelf-door when she heard Snape's voice.

"What do you want, Potter?"

"When Sirius and Remus were still alive, the only thing they told me about my mother was that I have her eyes. I want to know everything about her. What she was like, what she liked... and you were her friend. You know these things."

Hermione peeked through a gap in between the top of a book and the shelf above. Snape was sitting with his back to her, only the top of his head visible over the high-backed chair. Harry was standing in front of him, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"I...I wouldn't ask, but... I threw the Resurrection Stone away. I've tried to find it, but I'd have more luck finding a needle in a haystack. Accio doesn't work. Now you're my only hope."

"The Resurrection Stone? As in, the Deathly Hallow?" Snape sounded incredulous. Hermione realised that he knew nothing of Harry's possession of them.

"Yes," Harry wailed. "I had it on the night I defeated Voldemort," ...Snape flinched at the name... "and I used it to summon my parents and Sirius and Lupin to keep me company, and then I threw it away. I could've used it to talk to my mum!"

"Do not regret it, Potter. If the living are meant to talk to the dead, the latter become ghosts."

"Will you tell me about her? Please?"

"I suppose I don't have any other choice, now that you know where I live," Snape grumbled. "I'm certainly not giving you any more of my memories. That was bad enough when I thought I was mortally wounded. Speaking of which, why do I have those memories? I do not recall getting them back, yet I have none missing."

"I made sure the Healers put them back when you were in St Mungo's. No one else saw them, I promise."

"For the love of... Stop fidgeting, Potter."

The chair behind Harry scraped across the carpet to hit the back of his knees.

"Sit," Snape ordered, when Harry failed to take the hint. "I will tell you about Lily, on the condition that what I share goes no further. You are not to tell every Tom, Dick and Harry *this* time."

Hermione only just managed to stifle a gasp. Her legs were shaking; she sat down with a bump. She held her breath, hoping that Snape hadn't heard her. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. Logically, she knew it wasn't possible to be heard without an amplifier of some sort, but the thought that she was discovered made her feel as if her blood had turned to ice.

If Snape found her, he'd think she was eavesdropping. That would ruin her hopes that he would eventually trust her unconditionally. In fact, he'd probably cut all ties with her.

She had to leave. But she couldn't. He'd definitely hear her if she tried to Disapparate: while she could do it quieter than most, there was still a distinctive ~~crack~~ crack. It was a wonder neither Snape nor Harry had heard the *pop* of her arrival.

What could she do? She couldn't retreat upstairs so that she didn't eavesdrop, even unintentionally. For one thing, Snape was sure to have creaky floorboards. For another, it might give him the wrong idea if he found her in his bedroom.

She was stuck. And, to be honest, she was curious.

'Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb...'

Hermione refocused on Snape's voice. She'd already missed some of what he had said in her panic.

"...she was human. I loved her, yes, but even I am well aware that she was not perfect. How could she be, when she chose your father?"

"Please leave my father out of this." Harry's voice was strained. Hermione could no longer see him there were no gaps to peek through lower down but she imagined the strain of remaining civil also showed on his face.

"Potter, you wanted to hear what I have to say. You cannot pick and choose what I tell you. It's either all or nothing. Well?"

"Go on," Harry choked.

"I understand that there are certain home truths about your father that you would rather not contemplate. Personally, I would rather ignore him entirely, but you want to know everything about Lily. My account would not be complete without mentioning *James Potter*." Snape sounded as though he was speaking between clenched teeth.

"But... I know what happened. I know that she chose him, and that my father may have been a bully, and I'm sorry about that, but he did improve. Remus and Sirius told me that."

Hermione dropped her head into her hands. *'Oh, Harry.'* What had she told him about using reliable sources? Just because her advice had pertained to essays didn't mean it was irrelevant to anything else.

"Oh, did they indeed?" Snape sneered. "The only way in which your sainted father improved is that he was careful to make it appear to Lily that he had. The only reason that worked is that she believed his word over mine by that point."

"No, that can't be right. He saved your life."

"Sirius Black's attempt on my life happened before my friendship with Lily was sundered. Think, Potter. What does that tell you?"

"Be...before? No, my father can't have... He can't have been like that." Harry was sniffing as if he was trying to resist tears and failing. "My mother would never have fallen for him if he was."

"Here, Potter."

Hermione had to resist the temptation to push a book out so that she could see. It soon became clear what Snape had offered Harry: a hanky or a tissue, as Harry blew his nose.

"Lily fell for your father because he was a different person with her. As I was, I guess... she had that knack. The ability to bring out the best in people."

'Nothing to do with the fact that by all accounts James Potter had been rich and handsome?' Hermione mentally slapped herself. She had been brought up not to think ill of the dead. But then she had made an exception for Voldemort, so why not slip a little more?

True, Lily Potter died a martyr, protecting her son... but she shouldn't be held on the pedestal Snape kept her on. Even if he had admitted that she wasn't perfect, he was still deluded. Obsessed with an unrequited love. And that couldn't be healthy.

'But how can I help?' Broaching the subject with Snape of moving on from Lily would probably expose her eavesdropping. Unless she only used knowledge that Harry had already revealed to the wizarding world? No. Any interference might make Snape retract further into his shell. Helping him was something to do in the event that he trusted her unconditionally. Not before.

Hermione really did slap herself when she realised that she'd been lost in thought again. She froze as the baritone rumble of Snape's voice stopped. Had he heard her? She breathed a sigh of relief when he carried on talking.

"...she was a very talented witch all around. The brightest witch of her age."

"Like Hermione?" Harry's voice still sounded a little raw, as if he was recovering from a cold.

"Yes. Although more of a natural with Potions. She was also far less of a know-it-all, and did not regurgitate books when answering questions in lessons."

Hermione flinched. That stung. It also proved the old adage that eavesdroppers deserved whatever they heard.

"Sir... Severus... something that's bothered me ever since I saw those memories... Why did my mother never forgive you? I...I know calling her a Mudblood was horrible, but she pushed you right into the Death Eaters' arms."

Hermione hissed through her teeth. So that was why Lily discarded Snape like a used tissue... She put the knowledge aside for future consideration; the conversation was still ongoing. She didn't want to miss anything this time.

"I never deserved her friendship. I certainly did not deserve her forgiveness."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Saint Lily clearly had clay feet if she didn't do such saintly things as offer forgiveness.

"But... if that was me in your shoes, I'd have done the same thing. A bloke's got his pride!" Harry protested. "And if it'd been Hermione, she'd have forgiven me. After she slapped some sense into me, true, but friends stick together, no matter what!"

'You tell him, Harry!'

"You were both in Gryffindor. Lily and I had been growing apart ever since we were sorted into different Houses. If not for summer holidays spent at her home, our friendship would have died long before the OWLs."

"The Sorting Hat's got a lot to answer for," Harry snorted. "Imagine if Tom Riddle had been sorted into Hufflepuff!"

Snape chuckled. "You have her sense of humour." He sounded wistful. There was an uncomfortable, tense silence before Snape spoke again. "You are not your father. He never expressed remorse. You have on his behalf... Although not for your own misdeeds."

"I...I never..." Harry spluttered.

"School rules exist for a reason. As do societal ones. Such as not stealing. Need I say more?"

Hermione winced. The same could be said for her. All the more so, as Harry hadn't actually stolen anything from Snape.

"But unlike your father, you had no ulterior motives to save my life. You..." Snape cleared his throat. "You are more your mother's son, regardless of how much you look like James Potter."

"Thank you, Severus... Ever since I found out that... that my dad was not, well, not the perfect person that Si... that some people made him out to be, I only had the idea that my mum was decent to cling to. It...it's a relief to know that I'm more like her. And to hear that from you means a lot."

"Potter, don't mention it," Snape muttered.

Hermione felt the sting of jealousy stirring. Snape was letting Harry call him 'Severus'. Although to be fair, he hadn't given him permission... and Snape had started to call her by her first name, while Harry was still 'Potter' to him. She'd have to try calling him 'Severus' the next time she talked to him.

A clock tolled the hour.

"It's getting late," Harry remarked. "Could... could I visit again sometime?"

Snape grunted. "I don't suppose I can stop you."

Hermione tuned out Harry's effusive thanks. That meant that Lily's spectre would be continually dredged up for Snape. How on earth was she going to prevent herself from attempting to get him to see sense before he was ready?

She dimly noted Harry's voice call something. The *whoosh* of him Flooing away brought her back to the here and now. Her breath caught in her throat. Why hadn't she Disapparated when she had the chance? Now she was stuck here, and Snape was sure to find her. Unless she was lucky enough for him to drop off to sleep in his chair?

There was the distinct sound of liquid pouring, which prompted her mouth to ache with thirst.

"Cup of tea, Hermione?" Snape enquired mildly.

"Yes, please..." Hermione answered automatically, before she covered mouth, muffling a horrified squeak.

'Oh, shit.'

*

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

Severus Snape is no father figure. He wishes Harry Potter agreed.

Chapter 3

Severus got up from his chair and walked over to his 'secret' bookshelf door. He only wiped the smirk off his face when he opened the door. It wouldn't do to let Hermione off *that* lightly, which would be the case if she knew he was merely amused.

Hermione was sitting on the bottom of the stairs, staring up at him with wide eyes. She dropped her hands down to her lap, babbling apologetically as soon as her mouth was unobstructed.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop! I meant to Apparate into your sitting room, but got my Destination a bit wrong. Then you started talking to Harry and it was too late to come out, and..."

"Why don't we discuss this in a more comfortable setting, hmm?" He extended a hand to pull her to her feet. She took it hesitantly, as if afraid that he would bite. And promptly staggered into him as soon as she was on her feet.

Severus steadied her before helping her to a chair. She had already been punished by the discomfort her eavesdropping had resulted in. Typical Muggle-born mistake...and that was no snobbery: any witch brought up in a magical household would have used a Cushioning Charm to prevent pins and needles.

He poured her the requested cup of tea, pushing it into her hands. It shook, almost spilling hot tea in her lap.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. He meant to let her off...though not too lightly, not scare her. He cast a non-verbal charm, cooling the tea to drinking temperature. At least that way, if she spilt it, she wouldn't be scalded.

"I'm not going to bite your head off, Hermione. Drink."

She took a small sip and opened her mouth to speak.

He raised a hand. "Not another word until that cup is empty." Severus steepled his fingers. "I am inclined to believe that you did not intend to eavesdrop. For one thing, I doubt that you knew Potter was coming. For another, it would not be like you to endanger your friendly relations with me. As such, I forgive you for eavesdropping."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, the tension in her shoulders relaxing.

"But do not do it again." He fixed her with a warning glower. "You will not find me so forgiving if you do, even inadvertently. I would much rather you show yourself. Do you think I will not share with you what I share with Potter?"

He retrieved his own cup, the contents now cooled to optimum temperature.

"I won't do it again, I promise." Hermione gulped down the last of her tea. "How did you know I was there? I mean, I know I wasn't quiet enough."

"You were quiet enough for Potter not to notice you, Auror that he is supposed to be. I, on the other hand, was aware of your presence from the moment you Apparated within my wards. They only allow either you or me to do so, and in your case, I am still notified."

"Sir...Severus, why did you let me eavesdrop?"

"For your own sake. Potter would have come to some, how shall we say *unfortunate* conclusions if he saw you apparently emerge from upstairs." And it had allowed him to

kill two birds with one stone. Potter had wanted to know about Lily. Hermione, with her infernal curiosity, was sure to ask about her, too. It was painful enough to talk about Lily once...

Although... it had been a relief, somehow. A weight off his mind. It was the reason why he'd given Potter permission to come again. That and the boy wasn't as obnoxious as Severus had believed. Furthermore, he did owe Potter. And consummate Slytherin that he was, it could be useful to be on friendly terms with the influential person the boy was growing up to be.

Last but not least, continued exposure to him would hopefully get Potter over his case of hero worship. While it lasted, it was amusing to think of James Potter's reaction. His childhood tormentor must be turning in his grave...

Hermione waved a hand across his vision, attracting his attention. How mortifying. For a man who prided himself on his observation skills, being lost in thought was no excuse.

"I went to St Mungo's today, as you suggested." From Hermione's half-amused, half-annoyed tone, she was repeating something she'd already said. "I came here to tell you that..."

If that was so, surely her thoughts would have been centred on him? Why had she Apparated behind his... Ahah! Fortunate for him that she had the ulterior motive of perusing his books, else she'd have landed on top of him. Severus surreptitiously looked her up and down. *Hmm...* on second thoughts, not so fortunate. Weasley was a lucky man.

"...And to thank you. You were right. Turns out that if I hadn't been seen to within six months, I'd have suffered from some rather nasty things later on in life. Early dementia, for one." She shuddered.

"You're welcome," Severus murmured. The thought of such a fine mind being lost was... unthinkable. "My invitation still stands. You are welcome at any time." Perhaps it would be an idea to warn her not to disturb his sleep without a wand in hand, but she was a sensible lass overall. Potter, on the other hand, could use that warning.

Hermione seemed to take that as a hint to leave. "It is getting late. I should go. Ron will be worried." She looked shiftily. "If he's not too angry to feel anything else," she added sotto voce.

"Trouble in paradise?" Severus murmured.

"Not exactly. I kind of left him to face his mother on his own. He asked me to fetch Ginny, but... I didn't. If he didn't suffer Molly Weasley's wrath, it had nothing to do with me." She cleared her throat. "And I didn't tell him where I was going, let alone why."

"You had better put Mr Weasley's mind at ease, then." Severus crossed to the nearest bookshelf. He ran a finger over the titles and withdrew a slim volume...he found that he didn't mind the prospect of her company again sooner rather than later. "Here. Bring it back the next time you come."

Hermione looked at the title, then back up at him as she hugged the book to herself. "I will! Thanks." She bounded to her feet and leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek. "Bye!"

It was a while after she Disapparated that he lowered his fingers from his cheek, still staring at where she had last stood. Such enthusiasm for a rare book...

Hermione was wasted on Weasley.

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Months passed. Summer turned to autumn, and with it, Hermione's visits were curtailed as she returned to Hogwarts for her final year. She did still visit Severus whenever she could, and she had more freedom to do so than typical seventh years.

Minerva McGonagall, once she had been granted access, sometimes accompanied Hermione, whether to act as some sort of chaperone or as an expression of remorse for believing the worst of him. She also came alone to offer him his job back. Not as Headmaster, the School Governors would never allow that, celebrated war hero though he may be. His choice of Defence or Potions, Head of Slytherin again if he wanted it, plus Deputy Headmastership.

Tempting. But together with his new lease of life after near death at Nagini's fangs, Severus had choices open before him that he'd never had, even before he became a Death Eater. With his Order of Merlin stipend, he had no need to work. He could pursue his interests, although he *would* need some sort of funding if those interests involved expensive materials, like potions research could. Perhaps Potter would be interested?

Potter was. He virtually gave Severus the key to his Gringotts vault, with full freedom to research potions regardless of the cost. He was a more regular visitor than Hermione, so much so that Severus had to invite himself over to the Malfoys every now and then just to escape the near daily bombardment of Potter's head in his fireplace.

Conversation with Potter also revolved around other things than Lily. Although merely average at Potions, Potter expressed a genuine interest in how Severus was progressing in his research. Not that he could actually contribute any ideas like Hermione could.

As time passed, Potter was growing increasingly dependent on him, coming to him for advice before he went to anyone else. Severus looked forward to when Hermione would leave Hogwarts. Hopefully Potter would go to her sometimes, leaving him in peace. And it would be nice to see more of her...

For now, though, Potter seemed to regard Severus as his very own personal Agony Aunt. With Ginny Weasley at Hogwarts, his relations with her were increasingly strained. The same went for his friendship with Ron Weasley, who kept running into trouble at the Aurory.

Without access to help from Hermione, Weasley apparently couldn't cope as an Auror. Potter was doing his best to assist his floundering friend, but that made the quality of his own work plummet.

Severus had to resist the impulse to advise Potter to ditch Weasley. Instead, he told him to use his free time to study the manual all other Aurors used in their training. Potter was enough of a natural Auror to manage without; Weasley was another matter. All Potter could do was set an example, and in the process help Weasley train.

His advice came too late. The Aurory gave Weasley an 'honourable discharge' after his luck ran out and he bungled an attempt to capture a rogue Death Eater. His fame by association with Potter was the only reason he was not fired outright.

George Weasley stepped in, offering Ron a job as an equal partner in the family joke shop. According to Potter, so long as his former job (and Potter's current job) was not mentioned, all was fine in their friendship.

By the start of December, Potter was comfortable enough with Severus to risk moving onto more familiar terms *Sev*. Once more, Severus painfully regretted his careless choice of memories at the time of his encounter with Nagini. He should never have let Lily call him that, either. At least he'd made it crystal clear to Potter, at wand point, no less, that this foolishness was not to be repeated.

Pity it didn't put Potter off visiting... That said, Severus had to admit to himself that he had grown almost accustomed to the boy. He was... tolerable. When he didn't have the cheek to overstep his bounds.

Severus had intended to spend Christmas with the Malfoys, but Potter rose to the occasion and invited him to Christmas dinner at Grimmauld Place, where the Weasleys and their adopted family (Potter and Hermione) were celebrating. Quite what Potter had done to persuade Molly not to hold it at the Burrow was a mystery. It became clear

as it transpired that Potter, afraid of losing his precious Ginny, had proposed. The prospect of another marriage to plan gave him Molly's ear.

Potter had either sought someone else's advice, or had followed his own counsel. Instead of being a relief, that stung Severus. The reckless boy needed someone to tone that tendency down. If that someone was Severus, so be it.

Hermione didn't seem entirely comfortable with the news either. She did her duty as a friend and congratulated them, but Severus could tell that something was bothering her. Unfortunately he had no chance to talk to her alone, and to use Legilimency on her would be unforgivable. He'd have to ask her when she next visited.

Perhaps, like him, she thought that it was not a good idea to marry so young. Hopefully Potter would be persuaded to make it a long engagement. And maybe Severus would be able to sneak him contraception unawares... The idea of Potter-Weasley hybrids was the stuff of nightmares. There could only be one Lily, after all, while the likes of James Potter were all too common.

Unfortunately there would be children. Weasleys were infamously fertile, and Healers would be able to reverse any interference Severus could do. Unless he sterilised Potter, and then there would be a smoking gun. It would not be sensible to do that to an Auror.

At least the bombshell of the engagement meant that the Weasleys were too distracted to resent Severus's presence. Most of them ignored him, thankfully including George. The stark reminder of the accidental collateral damage Severus had inflicted would have had him squirming, if not for his self control.

All in all, it was an informative meal, with the food as good as expected from Molly. That said, it was still uncomfortable. Severus was glad to return to the solitude Spinner's End. Peace and quiet, at least until Potter Flooded within the hour to belatedly seek his approval. It was easier to obtain forgiveness than permission, but Potter seemed to fail to grasp that he didn't need Severus's permission.

"Even if I was your father you would not need my permission, Potter. And before you get any doxy-brained ideas, *am not*."

In retrospect, he really should have taken Potter's sentimental declaration of "I wish you were!" seriously.

Instead, after talking some sense into Potter, who agreed that a long engagement was a good idea, Severus let the matter slide to the back of his mind, after ascertaining that Hermione's thoughts were the same. Life continued, the routine of research, experiments and visits from certain persistent Gryffindors interrupted by dealing with the backlog of fan mail when it burst out of the room Wormtail had used, where Severus had stored it.

At first Severus succumbed to curiosity and examined them. There were marriage proposals, wizarding photographs of scantily clad women (some the age of Dumbledore, making him want to poke his eyes out with his wand) who wanted to show him what true love was. Those were doubtless thanks to Harry Bigmouth Potter, as everyone knew of his unrequited love for Lily. He put those delusions where they belonged: in the fireplace.

After that, his hate mail was refreshing. He dealt with that instantly, rather than letting it pile up and present a fire risk due to stray exploding Howlers. It also let him know that his paranoia for his own and Hermione's safety was for a reason, as some contained rather more serious mischief than undiluted Bubotuber pus and Howlers.

Potter's nuptials were dragged back to the forefront of Severus's mind shortly after the school year ended, and Hermione could once again visit as regularly as Potter.

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"...It just seems too fast. They have the rest of their lives ahead of them; why the rush to tie the knot?"

At first, Severus had wondered why Hermione was repeating a conversation they had shortly after Christmas. Then he stiffened. "What?"

"Didn't Harry tell you? They've changed their mind about the long engagement. Or rather, Molly changed Ginny's mind, and she changed Harry's mind."

Just when he thought the boy was capable of reason and independent thought, or at least took Severus's advice seriously! But then Miss Weasley did have means of controlling Potter that Severus did not care to gain...

"Molly's doing, you say? It could be that she doesn't want to risk anyone stealing Potter. He is the most eligible bachelor."

"But anyone can see that Harry's as mad for Ginny as she is for him!"

"There are such things as love potions."

Hermione looked concerned. "After Harry, you're next on the Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelors." She hastened to add: "I don't read it; Molly sent Ron a clipping of the list, he's number four after Neville."

That was... touching. She seemed more concerned for him than she did for Potter. "There's no risk for me. All fan mail is incinerated now. I only see owl post from approved sources." With the exception of hate mail, but that would only worry her. "In addition, if anyone managed to slip me a love potion, I would deserve the consequences. I *am* a potions master."

He shot her a mischievous look. "Your Weasley, on the other hand, should watch out. He has a history of falling foul of love potions."

Hermione snorted. "If he took in anything he learned as an Auror, he should know not to eat or drink anything from an unknown source. This being Ron, though, I'd better watch out for him. Fond of his food, that one."

"You should take care, too. And not just of food. Books can be laced with potions as well, and they are hardly a secret weakness."

"As long as I stick to your books until the fuss dies down, I should be fine." She smiled warmly at him and casually laid her hand on top of his.

Such touches had become more and more common. Severus had thought that they were the same sort of friendly touches she graced any of her friends with, only to observe that she didn't touch anyone at Christmas. Except for Weasley, and the same way she touched Severus. Casual, seemingly platonic touches. Yet she didn't touch Potter that way. Or anyone else but her boyfriend. And him.

Was she even aware of it? He doubted it. He suspected the only reason she hadn't touched him at Christmas was that she hadn't been seated anywhere near him. Just as well, or all hell would have broken loose. Weasley was infamous for his jealous streak.

If her body language was any indicator, it seemed Hermione felt more than friendship for him. Even though she had made no romantic moves beyond that impulsive kiss. Perhaps all that held her back was her loyalty to Weasley, as it had then?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Hermione's voice interrupted his musings.

"In the wizarding world, the term is 'Knut'," he absently corrected her, searching for something other than the truth to tell her.

Her fingers tapped impatiently on the back of his hand. "That's ducking the issue. I know you, Severus, and when you're this quiet, it tends to mean you're plotting something. So come on, out with it."

Somehow he doubted 'Stealing you from Weasley' would be a good answer. He blinked, blindsided. Where had *that* come from?! His mind went blank. That left him with either telling Hermione the truth or the laughable lie that he hadn't been thinking.

The *whoosh* from the fireplace of Potter arriving...unannounced as usual...saved him.

"I thought you'd be here, Hermione. Ron's looking for you."

Hermione nodded. As she rose to leave, she squeezed Severus's hand as she said her farewells. If she was not tied to Weasley, would she have kissed him instead?

He mentally shook himself. She was Weasley's. Even if the prat didn't deserve her, she was loyal. She would not leave him, and besides, even if she did, Severus's heart still beat for Lily. Didn't it? He was disturbed that the thought of Lily no longer squeezed his heart. When had that happened? Had talking to Potter of her released her hold on him?

"...Severus? Say something!"

Damn! He was slipping. Severus usually had no problem listening and thinking of something different at the same time. It was all Hermione's fault! The discovery that he desired her...He couldn't adapt to such a complete paradigm shift that quickly. He would have to focus on the here and now. Coming to terms with his internal turmoil would have to wait until later.

"Severus, are you in there?" Potter snapped his fingers in front of his face.

"Yes," he snapped. "Continue."

"So will you do it? Please?"

"Better start from the beginning," Severus muttered, his cheeks burning at the admission that he hadn't been paying attention. Better to suffer the blow to his pride than to agree to something unknown.

"I talked to Ginny after she'd finished school, about making it a long engagement, you know? Well, we decided that we might as well get married sooner rather than later. This way I'll be able to live with Ginny, and not create a scandal."

Severus wondered whether it would do any good to inform Potter that he could marry a goat and no one would bat an eyelid. The boy was the wizarding world's darling, after all. If anything, everyone would want to follow his example. Perhaps that was the tack to take here?

"Do you know what a role model is, Potter?"

"It's what a father should be for his children."

That took Severus aback. "Correct," he said shortly. The less he was reminded of Tobias Snape the better. "It is also what you are for almost every member of the wizarding world. Do you really want to set an example for those in less stable relationships that marrying young is a good idea?"

"I have thought about that, actually. I'm not the only role model around. I talked to Hermione, and she's definitely not going to marry young." Potter frowned. "Although I'm not sure Ron knows about that."

Severus slumped in his chair. His slim hope that Potter could be dissuaded was slipping through his fingers like smoke. "And wizarding kind tend to marry young. Too young."

"Maybe that's the case for some people, but *this* is what I want. A family. Is that too much to ask?"

So was that what Miss Weasley had done? Put forward the argument that this was Potter's reward? It was all the more effective for being what was doubtless such a long-held wish. Potter was an orphan. He would have wanted a real family since before he knew what the need was.

"If that is what you want, who am I to tell you to do differently?" Severus wondered if there was a polite way to say 'don't come crying to me when in ten years you discover you're married for life to a hag'. Probably not.

"I do want your blessing for this. All the more so because I'd..." Potter gulped audibly, a sign of nervousness at odds with the determination in his gaze. "...I'd like you to stand in as father of the groom when I marry Ginny."

Severus stared at blankly Potter until he recovered his wits. He realised that his jaw was open and closed it with a snap. "You want me *to what*?" There was a chance that he had misheard, surely?

"Stand in as my father during the ceremony." Green eyes looked pleadingly at him, the effect barely hindered by glasses. "Please?"

So much for hoping that his ears had deceived him. Severus didn't do weddings, for Merlin's sake! Except... maybe now Lily's hold on his heart had weakened, perhaps that was a poor reason to refuse Potter?

But as far as Severus knew, the planning of the wedding was usually the realm of the bride, not the groom. As such, would refusing actually offend Potter? But why would Miss Weasley want Severus at her wedding? There was no love lost there between them.

Come to that, was Miss Weasley really so tactless as to choose a ceremony requiring the groom's parents when Potter was an orphan? How to question that, though, without casting aspersions on the bride? Not mentioning her was probably safest.

"I am hardly an expert on wedding ceremonies, but even I know that there are many different sorts. Why use one where family is a key part?"

"We decided that we want to involve our family when we marry," Potter said, with the rote performance of a line he'd memorised. Either he'd practiced what he was going to say before coming, or it was Miss Weasley's decision. "Hermione's already agreed to stand in as my sibling. But we need a parent for me to make the ceremony binding."

Hermione hadn't mentioned that earlier, an unusual oversight for her. Unless Potter failed to tell her who else would be involved?

"Why me?" Severus asked plaintively. Surely Potter had plenty of other candidates to choose from. Granted, considerably less choice over the years, after Black and Lupin among others were killed.

"Well, you are the last of my parents' schoolmates still alive that I know. And you loved my mother. You could have been my father if not for James!" Severus winced. Potter certainly did not pull his punches. "I'd be honoured to call you my father, even if it's just for my wedding. Please?"

It was flattering that Potter thought him a worthy replacement. James Potter must be *berolling* in his grave... with that thought in mind, and those beseeching green eyes fixed on him, Severus found the words "Very well," slipping through his lips.

Potter clapped him on the shoulder, beaming at him. "Thank you so much! I knew I could count on you! I'll go and tell Ginny the good news!" He vanished in a flash of green fire.

Severus blinked, staring at the space Potter had occupied, the words 'The Burrow!' still ringing in his ears.

"I'm sure she will be *thrilled*," he murmured.

A peck at the window alerted him to the arrival of an owl (unaffected by the Fidelius Charm, although any tracing spells would be deactivated as soon as they passed the bounds of his home). Severus recognised the owl as the European eagle owl that brought the most interesting specimens of hate mail.

The sensible thing to do would be to send the raptor off with tail feathers on fire, but that package it carried was sure to contain some fascinating curses...

Severus had his hand on the window latch when a chill ran down his spine. Potter's wedding and his role in it would be no secret. Other people than Weasleys would be similarly 'delighted' by the news.

And there was the survival rate of Harry Potter's father figures to consider. Or rather, mortality rate, as the boy had worked through quite a few, and using a variety of methods...

'Let's see... it was death by Voldemort, death by a glorified curtain, death by me, death by Dolohov...'

'Fuck.' In giving in to Potter's pleas, Severus had just painted an enormous target on his back.

'And death by Potter, knowing my luck.'

*

AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 4

Severus Snape is no father figure. He wishes Harry Potter agreed.

Chapter 4

Severus was mulling over his options with the aid of the universal panacea when the fireplace flared green. If that was Potter Flooing again, he could simply tell him that he'd changed his mind, and his problem of impending doom would be solved.

Potter's scruffy head did not appear. Instead, an envelope shot out of the fireplace. Severus deftly caught it in one hand, setting down his teacup to open it.

Dear Severus,

Just in case you're having second thoughts... I'm NOT going to take no for an answer.

Ginny will kill me if the ceremony has to be changed, and you're the only father figure I want. With that in mind, count this as paying your life debt to me.

Your loving son,

Harry

The cheeky little bugger! Severus crumpled up the letter and incinerated it with his wand. Merely using the fireplace would not satisfy his temper. The irony of Potter using the life debt did not escape him when he might well end up paying for this dubious honour with his life.

So much for escaping his fate with a simple refusal. What could he do now? Telling Potter the truth would only worry the boy and inflict a 24-hour Auror babysitting service on himself.

Severus poured a fresh cup of tea. He absently took a sip as he eyed the clock on the mantelpiece. Wincing, he cast a cooling charm on his burnt tongue and on the contents of the cup. The caffeine would keep him from sleeping, but the Boy-Who-Fucking-Lived had already seen to that.

How in the name of Merlin was he going to wriggle out of this one?

*

Two teapots later and furthermore fortified by half a bottle of Firewhisky, Severus thought he had a plan. He staggered upstairs to the bathroom, unsurprisingly in need of relieving his bladder.

Ablutions performed, he flopped down onto his bed. Yawning hugely, Severus waited in vain for sleep. Perhaps that much caffeine had been a bad idea, but at that point Potter seemed to have pinned him down.

As sleep was not an option, he might as well use the time productively to go over his options once more.

Treating Potter like dirt wouldn't help. Severus needed all the friends he could get, and now that Potter was more or less over that awful phase of hero worship, he was adequate company. There were plenty of sycophantic fans who were keen to be his new best friend, but they only cared about his Order of Merlin or the accompanying money, not for Severus as a person. Potter, annoying though he could be, liked Severus for who he was.

Making Potter see him as a rival would definitely remove him from the list of doom. Unfortunately it would result in a pack of enraged Weasleys tearing him apart. In addition, he would have to use a love potion to attract Miss Weasley's attentions. That was not something he was prepared to do; the idea sickened him to the core.

Even if he could somehow attract Miss Weasley with his own charms Severus laughed mirthlessly Ginny Weasley might be pretty, but she didn't do anything for him. Lily might have been a redhead, but the women who typically drew his eye were brunettes. With that in mind, perhaps his attraction to Hermione was not so surprising. Back to the matter in hand, he was drawn to brilliant women. Miss Weasley was bright, yes, but in comparison to Hermione? It was like comparing the light of the moon to the sun.

Regardless, the only way he could escape the fate of Potter's father figures by playing the part of a rival was to use a love potion. If he was prepared to do that and he never would he'd end up in Azkaban with Potter as a mortal enemy.

No, his ideal escape mechanism should involve remaining free and on friendly terms with Potter.

Potter had him sorted neatly into a box in his oversized head. That box was labelled 'father figure'. So his way of escaping had to hammer it into Potter's thick skull that Severus Snape was not so neatly compartmentalised. And if he was, *not* in that particular box.

So why did Potter see him the way he did?

The core of the matter was, of course, his love for Lily. His love for Lily. He took a deep breath. If he was brutally honest with himself, if it had been someone else he would have classified the symptoms as nothing but an adolescent crush for a best friend.

His guilt over his role in Lily's death had sustained his feelings for her. Had she lived, his feelings would have long since died a natural death...

...and Potter...

That was it!

If Severus moved on, into a relationship that was clearly more than he'd ever had with Lily, Potter would realise that even without James Potter he would never have been his father. If he courted someone the same age of Potter, the message should be reinforced...

He certainly would not use one of the younger women after him for his fame, or one of the deluded witches infatuated with the idea of liberating him from the chains of his feelings for a long-dead woman. Was it a crime to be wanted for himself?

Besides, why even think of those shallow women when he'd realised that very same day yesterday, strictly speaking that he desired Hermione?

But to choose Hermione... surely that would be to use her as a tool in his Slytherin scheming? No. His interest in her was genuine, and, as far as he could tell, mutual, so that was a poor reason not to pursue her.

However, in the event that he did seduce her, it was possible that Potter would disapprove enough to cut off ties, even with one of his best friends. Something Severus would rather that didn't happen. Would Potter really sacrifice his friendship with Hermione over her choice in men? He had done so in the past, over far more trivial things. But he had also matured since that time.

The confidence-boosting haze of alcohol worn off, Severus thinned his lips. He faced a much more immediate problem than a possible irrevocable rejection from Potter: Severus didn't know how to court a woman.

Pining over Lily hadn't provided the best preparation in that respect, even though he was no virgin either. He also couldn't consult with Lucius, as contrary to popular belief, his friend's only experience was with Narcissa, and she was a very different woman to Hermione.

He would have to rely on the attraction Hermione seemed to feel for him. Severus sat bolt upright in bed as the most obvious problem occurred to him, his heart skipping a beat. How could he have missed that? Whatever Hermione felt for him was a moot point: she was Weasley's. He didn't stand a hope in hell of winning her away from the boy. Lacking in charm though Weasley was, he still had more to offer her than Severus.

Severus flopped back, rubbing tired eyes. He was doomed. Ever since Potter had proposed to Miss Weasley, he'd been expecting to spot an engagement ring on Hermione's finger. Her opinion on marriage did not extend to engagements, after all. When she got engaged, it would merely be a sensibly long one.

Weasley had wanted to speak to her, hadn't he? Potter had said so when he arrived. What if he'd proposed? Typical. Once more in his life, the realisation that Severus truly desired a woman had come too late. He would need to seduce Hermione. It was the only viable plan to escape his fate. Furthermore, he wanted her, regardless. It would have been hard enough to lure Hermione away from Weasley without an engagement to break. Hermione did not break her word... If she was engaged to Weasley, that was it.

Maybe he should just retrieve that hate mail package left on his sitting room windowsill, open it and have done with it. It would be quicker that way, no waiting around for Potter's wedding day.

He turned his bedside light on and was halfway to the door when he realised what he was doing. Panicking. Severus Snape ~~did~~ panic. Hermione might not be engaged to Weasley yet. But he did need to talk to her. Maybe if his feelings were voiced, she might choose him? The idea seemed ludicrous. Weasley was her age, objectively good looking, while Severus was almost twenty years older and ugly.

Still, it was only a choice Hermione could make. But not at two o' clock in the morning. He turned back to his bed. Perhaps he could still steal some caffeine addled sleep...

His anti-Apparition wards sent a jolt akin to static electricity through him as Hermione passed through them to appear right in front of him. If she'd been aiming for the sitting room, she'd once again been distracted. And this time she must have thought of him...

Suddenly, Severus was all too aware that he had prepared for bed as usual at home: no nightshirt. Nothing but his birthday suit, which Hermione was staring at with wide eyes. She took a step back in her surprise, which brought her up short against his bed, and sat down abruptly, as if her knees couldn't support her.

He would have Summoned his robe with a quick *Accio*, but his wand was the other side of Hermione. His robe was folded over the back of the chair next to his bed. Also beyond Hermione. There was his dressing gown hanging on the back of the door... that meant either backing towards it, or turning around. Severus chose the latter. He might as well give her the full view; she showed no sign of looking away anytime soon.

Once he had his dressing gown on, Hermione's eyes could finally reach his face. She looked stunned, although thankfully not disgusted as far as Severus could tell; she had her back to the light source.

"I know I said you were welcome at any time, but couldn't this wait until morning?" Severus asked, lack of sleep and his private dilemma putting an unintended edge into his voice.

Hermione flinched at his tone and looked away. It felt like an invisible hand had closed around Severus's heart when the light caught the shining tracks of tears on her cheeks. Stupid! Of course she wouldn't have come at two o' fucking clock in the morning unless it was something serious.

Much as he hated dealing with tears, at least he had practice thanks to his years as Head of Slytherin. Severus silenced the nagging doubt that his experience was only with adolescent tears, not those of a grown woman. This was Hermione. He couldn't stand by and do nothing.

He sat down beside her, placing a tentative hand on her shoulder as he passed her a tissue from the box on his bedside table. Severus raised an eyebrow when he noticed her attire, but didn't comment.

"What's wrong?"

"Ron," Hermione snarled, angrily dashing away tears and then shredding the tissue in her hands.

What had Weasley done? He'd made Hermione cry. "I'll kill him," Severus muttered under his breath.

She turned her head to rest against his shoulder, sniffing. "He dumped me."

Serendipitous for Severus, but Weasley had hurt Hermione!

"I'll kill him," he repeated, this time loud enough for her to hear.

"Don't bother. It's not worth it." She was no longer crying, her voice still raw.

"He hurt you; he should hurt, too."

"Oh, Ronald does. Particularly after I canaried him."

"Canaried?" Severus echoed, perplexed.

"I suppose you might not know." Hermione sniffed, before she pulled away so that she could meet his gaze. "Back in my sixth year at Hogwarts, Ron, ah, upset me. We had been learning how to Conjure canaries in charms, and, well..."

Now that Severus thought of it, he had heard vague rumours of Weasley being chased through the castle by a rabid flock of birds after the first Gryffindor Quidditch match of the year.

"It was a mutual decision, but Ron did the dumping." A strangled growl escaped her throat. "Bastard also did it after we slept together for the first time since the Easter hols." Hermione covered her eyes, fresh tears slipping down her cheeks.

Severus retrieved his wand and stood up. "I'll kill him!"

Hermione's hand on his arm stopped him from taking so much as a step towards the door. "No. Ron..." she choked on the name with a sob, "...had an excuse. I'm not letting you go after him until you hear it." Her shoulders slumped. "I thought he was lying, but... I'm hardly impartial."

And she thought he was? Severus stared at her. Surely his dislike of Weasley was no secret?

"Please, sit down." She patted the bed next to her. "I need to talk to someone, and I'd rather it was you than anyone else."

He sat down, close enough for their thighs to press together.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I thought he did it because he didn't fancy his chances of 'one last time for old times' sake' after he ditched me. Hence the canaries for old times' sake too."

"Ron claimed that he only decided we should split up after we... afterwards. He said he hoped that the spark wouldn't be gone, but it was." She swallowed audibly, and breathed in shakily. "That much is true."

She fell silent, sniffing occasionally. Severus took one of her hands in his.

"Even if he was telling the truth, he still used me. He deserved that hex," she spat, squeezing Severus's hand tightly. "But..." she loosened her grip.

"But?" Severus prompted, watching Hermione closely.

"But without knowing for sure that the passion's gone, that the sex actually feels mildly incestuous now... would we have split up? I guess I owe Ronald an apology." The admission clearly cost her, the strain on her face mixing with guilt.

"There are better times to end a relationship than when in bed." At her questioning look, he gave her top a pointed look. "You clearly got dressed in a hurry."

Hermione glanced down and groaned. She immediately pulled off the woollen jumper prominently decorated with Weasley's initials. It was a wonder she hadn't noticed before, as it was far too big for h...

Severus almost swallowed his tongue. She wasn't wearing anything under that jumper. He looked away, resisting the urge to stare. Much as he appreciated the view, this was not the time for ogling.

Hermione squeaked. From what he could see in his peripheral vision, she had clutched the jumper to her front.

"Let me get you a shirt." Severus stood up and kept his back to Hermione as he walked over to his wardrobe. Once he had a shirt in hand, he glanced over his shoulder. Good. She was semi-decent. He wouldn't have to walk backwards and risk tripping over his own bed.

Severus passed her the shirt and turned his back once more while she put it on. He turned back when the balled up Weasley knitwear was thrown into a corner.

"Thanks," Hermione murmured. "I guess that's additional proof that I was too angry to think clearly."

He perched next to her again. "Your boyfriend just dumped you. Understandable that you would be upset."

"We grew apart. I think we would have even if I hadn't gone back to Hogwarts. It might have taken longer, but... Ron's right. We're not compatible for anything more than friends that fuck." She buried her face in her hands. "And even that's pushing it. Ron wants to get married. He... he said he wants to do it sooner rather than later, and that's not going to happen with me."

"There's someone else?" Severus asked, tightening his grip on his wand.

"No, he hasn't cheated on me. Ron did meet other girls while I was at Hogwarts, but I believe him when he says that he didn't even think of cheating. Just that since meeting those girls, he knows he needs someone more like his mum than me."

Hermione rested her head on Severus's shoulder. "If he'd only told me about his doubts before he took me to bed, this wouldn't hurt so much. That way we might have parted as friends, the prat!"

She sighed. "Sorry for unloading all that on you. And for disturbing you."

"Don't be. You needed some ears that aren't inclined to give Weasley the benefit of the doubt."

Her arms wrapped around him in an embrace. "Thank you," she whispered.

Severus turned his head towards her; she sounded even closer than he thought she was. Her lips were on his before he could so much as blink.

This was no chaste peck intended for his cheek, for she leaned into him, deepening the kiss. One of her hands slid up his back to cup the back of his head, the other dropping to below his waistline.

Severus kissed her back, drawing her closer still with his hands on her shoulders. *Ohyes*, his attraction to her was definitely mutual... and Weasley was out of the picture.

He froze. Weasley was only just out of the picture. This was wrong. *Taking advantage*. He drew back, using his hold on her shoulders to keep Hermione at arms length.

"Severus?"

"Not now. You need time."

"I don't! There's nothing to get over," she protested. "It hurts to be dumped, yes, but the biggest injury is to my pride. Ron was conscious of the problems before me, otherwise I would have been the one to do the dumping."

"You were in a relationship with him for over a year. Don't deceive yourself; you will need time to..."

"I don't love him that way. In the end, neither of us did. We weren't in love. Ron knew that my heart wasn't in it tonight, just like it hasn't been ever since..." Her breath caught audibly. She stared unblinkingly at Severus, speechless.

If she kept looking at him like that with her heart in her eyes, his resistance would fade like a Boggart under genuine laughter. Thankfully for his self-control, she looked away.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, plucking at the inner thigh seams of her jeans. She grimaced. "You're right. It's not right to go from Ron's bed to yours. Particularly not when I feel used. I should go, I feel in desperate need of a shower." At odds with her words, she didn't move.

"Hermione?" he tilted her chin up so that she met his eyes.

"I don't want to be alone," she whispered.

"Stay, then." Severus bit his tongue. What was it about her that made his common sense leak out of his ears? There was currently only one bed, for fuck's sake. Ever since Wormtail's stay, he'd avoided his spare room like the Dragon Pox. He wasn't about to retract his offer. He would just have to Transfigure a chair from his sitting room into a bed.

"The bathroom is across the top of the stairs. I'll find you a towel and some nightclothes while you shower."

Severus also found himself something more restrictive than a dressing gown whilst the water pipes were complaining of their usage. Spare towel and nightshirt retrieved, he slipped into the bathroom to hang them up, doing his best not to let his thoughts linger on Hermione's attire or rather, lack thereof behind the shower curtain.

He waited at the top of the stairs for Hermione to come up in order to bid her goodnight.

She grabbed hold of his arm before he could slip downstairs. "Where are you going?"

"I thought you agreed it's best not to jump straight into bed with me!"

"We're both adults. I think we can share a bed without jumping each other's bones."

"This is not a good idea," Severus hissed. "I am not made of stone."

"I don't want to be alone," Hermione repeated, hugging herself forlornly.

Severus sighed. "Very well." He offered her his hand and led her back into his bedroom.

'No sleep for me tonight.'

*

To his surprise, Severus slept better than he had anticipated. He awoke in late morning to find Hermione snuggled up against him, still sleeping. Before he had fallen asleep, she had been safely over on her side of the bed.

Much as Severus would prefer to pull her closer still, there was only the thin cotton between bare skin. He gently disentangled himself from Hermione and rolled out of bed.

"Hmm?"

So much for not waking her up... "Bathroom," he muttered to the sleepy lump under his covers.

"Mmm."

Once he had relieved his usual morning erection and the demands of his bladder, he returned to his bedroom. He almost walked into Hermione as soon as he opened the door, her hair even more bushy than usual in a tangle of sleep snarls.

"Morning," Hermione mumbled, the word garbled by a yawn. She gave him a quick hug before slipping past him into the bathroom.

Severus was dressed and had breakfast cooking by the time she emerged downstairs, with his dressing gown as an additional layer.

"When Harry was here yesterday, did he ask you to take part in his wedding?"

"He did," Severus said shortly. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Harry arrived before I could. I know you don't like surprises any more than I do."

With that in mind, perhaps it would be an idea to lay his cards on the table, including the ulterior motive to his pursuit of her. Especially considering how Hermione had reacted to Weasley testing his doubts without her knowledge.

"Concerning the wedding and my role in it... would you consent to accompany me? As my significant other."

She beamed at him. "You know I'd love to."

"You see, Potter has relegated me to his father figure. With the survival rate of his previous father figures in mind, I intend to convince him that I am not remotely paternal."

As he spoke, Hermione's smile had faded until her face was set in an impassive mask. A storm was brewing behind her eyes, the only unguarded thing in her expression.

'Uh oh... keep talking, Snape!' He covered one of her hands with his. "I need your help, Hermione. Potter's way of showing his regard for me will result in my joining the ranks of Potter Senior, Black, Dumbledore and Lupin prematurely."

Hermione snatched her hand back and jumped to her feet, her chair groaning with protest as it shot across the kitchen tiles.

"I'm not going to pretend to be in a relationship with you just because you're paranoid!"

'Fuck!' From the way she turned on her heel, Hermione was about to Disapparate.

Severus vaulted over the table, crockery smashing and his chair crashing to the floor in his wake. He didn't care; he had to stop her. He caught her in his arms before she could leave. She elbowed him in the gut, causing his breath to hiss out of him and a pained grunt to escape, but he didn't let go. He shifted his grip on her so that she couldn't elbow him anymore.

He caught his breath before he spoke, so as not to wheeze. "Who said anything abou... Ow! Stoppit, woman!"

Hermione ignored him and continued stamping on his instep. His hold weakened enough for her to slip out of his arms. Fortunately for Severus, he remembered that he had a wand.

'Petrificus Inloco!' His personal variation of the Full Body Bind stilled her fist right in front of his jaw. Unlike the standard spell, it did not snap her limbs together and minimised the risk of her toppling over.

Severus took a step back, hopping from foot to foot. For someone barefoot and smaller than him, her stamps had *hurt*. He staggered over to the nearest chair and sat down.

Hermione's furious eyes the only part of her that could move followed him.

"My apologies, Hermione, but I need you to listen to me." Severus groaned as he took off his slippers and examined his bruised feet. He met Hermione's eyes again. Was that a flicker of guilt? Difficult to tell with the fixed expression of feral rage on her face.

"Any relationship between us would not be a pretence. My interest in you is genuine. I am attracted to you. Very much so. After our kiss last night, how can you doubt it?"

Severus sighed. He'd done it again, messed up before a relationship could even begin. *'Finite Incantatem,'* he muttered. "There. You can go." He turned away. He didn't care to see Hermione leave.

Hermione's bare feet made virtually no noise on the floor, so Severus was caught by surprise when she dropped into his lap. Lost in black thoughts, it hadn't occurred to him that there had been no twinge from the Apparition wards.

"You idiot," she said, and kissed him.

*

Some time later, Hermione pulled away. She ran her fingers over the whisker burn Severus had inflicted and winced. That wiped the smug grin off Severus's face.

"You need to shave."

He retrieved his wand from the floor, where he'd dropped it.

'Episkey,' he murmured, healing the abrasions. *'Rasito.'* Severus took Hermione's hand and lifted it to his newly-smooth jaw.

"Thanks." She leaned forward to peck him on the cheek. "You've convinced me that you're attracted to me and it's definitely mutual, by the way, in case you have any doubts but... just... with Ron, I was already over him by the time he dumped me. I need to be sure that this is no rebound for you."

"Rest assured, you are the one I desire." Severus caressed her cheek with the back of a hand. She didn't look convinced, though. He couldn't blame her. Lily had been his *raison d'être* for longer than she had been alive. "I recently realised that Lily's hold on me has weakened. She is my past; you are my future."

Hermione launched herself at him with enough force to make the chair rock back.

Severus reluctantly broke away from her impassioned kisses when her hands slipped under his shirt and his own had found bare thigh, dressing gown and nightshirt pushed aside.

Hermione buried her face in his shoulder with a groan. "I know. It's too soon."

"Perhaps after Potter's wedding, provided I live that long?"

She thumped his chest, hard enough to make him wince, but not hard enough to wind him. Hermione obviously didn't approve of pessimism.

What was it that she had said earlier? Oh yes, she thought he was being paranoid.

"It's not paranoia, you know."

She pulled back to give him a sceptical look.

"It's not!" And he could prove it... *'Accio.'* The parcel left on the windowsill stopped beside them as Severus non-verbally levitated it.

"Don't touch it," he warned Hermione when she reached out for it. "This is the latest in a series of cursed parcels sent to me by Death Eaters still at large."

She raised an eyebrow. "It's signed?"

"They're not that stupid! No, the magical signatures give it away."

"I see..." Hermione frowned. "You're not as paranoid as I thought, then, but I think you give them too much credit."

"You underestimate them," Severus retorted. "I was a target for them even before Potter selected me for an early grave."

"And moving from Harry's father figure to his honorary brother-in-law is any safer?"

Severus nearly knocked her off his lap. The implication of marriage so soon in their budding relationship was almost enough to give him a heart attack.

"Sorry. I'm not about to drag you off to Gretna Green. It's just the way Harry will see it, with his family-fixation."

"I...you..." Severus wheezed, rubbing at his chest. "That's a risk I am prepared to take."

Hermione shook her head. "You say the sweetest things," she muttered.

"Concerning that fixation of his, if Potter does not change his mind, would our roles in his wedding make our relationship incestuous?" Presuming he survived that long... though voicing that would only earn him a thump.

She blinked. "I don't think so. That would only be the case if blood was involved."

He had thought that she would know more about weddings than he did, even with her more Muggle upbringing. "Doesn't part of the ceremony involve blood magic?"

"Good point. I'll have words with Harry. I think my need is greater than his."

Before Severus could say another word, she got to her feet and made her way into the sitting room. Surely she wasn't going to Floo Potter dressed like that...

"Number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

She was. Severus rushed to follow her into the sitting room and stumbled to a halt at the sight that awaited him. Hermione's head was buried in the green flames, the rest of her body kneeling in front of the fireplace, the outline of her hips and arse clearly visible under the thin layers of his nightshirt and dressing gown.

Potter wouldn't see her attire, then. Pity. The boy's reaction would have been... interesting. Oh well. At least this gave him an opportunity to admire her delectable rear end.

Severus sat down once the Floo call had gone on for over five minutes. After half an hour, Hermione emerged from the fireplace. She needed his help to stagger over to a chair: after kneeling for such a long time, once again without a Cushioning Charm, her legs had fallen asleep.

"Harry's not happy, but he's happy for us. I mean, he doesn't want to change the ceremony, but he seems to have accepted the idea of us. It helps that Ron did the dumping." She grimaced. "Thirsty."

Severus Transfigured a coaster into a glass and passed it to Hermione.

'Aguamenti.'

"Thanks." Hermione drained the glass and continued. "He seems to think that Ginny will kill him if he changes the ceremony, so we've agreed that you'll attend as my significant other. Harry will come up with another father figure. I suggested Hagrid, but it's not a decision to rush."

Severus took her face between his hands and tilted it up to meet his in a jubilant kiss as he bent down. Wonderful girl! She'd freed him from his doom.

Although there was still the wedding to attend, and every single guest would have a target pinned to their backs in the eyes of the Death Eaters. It was tempting to sequester himself and Hermione in the safety of Spinner's End indefinitely. But even if he shagged her senseless, she would never forgive him if he made her miss Potter's nuptials.

*

Time crept by slowly, Severus's anxiety increasing with each day of the two weeks until the wedding. Hermione clearly thought he was being overly paranoid. It didn't help that they spent most of their time in Spinner's End. That just served to make his anxiety all the more noticeable on the few occasions they went out. He couldn't help jumping at shadows. It was too quiet; no more parcels were delivered. It struck Severus as the calm before the storm.

Potter thought his anxieties had something to do with being a reminder of his age: that Lily's son was old enough to marry, and that he was taking up with a woman half his age. Idiot boy. As if a woman like Hermione could ever be reduced to the symptom of a midlife crisis, or as if a man like him could ever serve as a rewarding 'rebound'. But only time could prove Potter wrong on both counts.

Weasley's reaction was... much more interesting. He must have heard the news, for he attended the wedding with a blonde bimbo on his arm. Had Hermione been alone, that would have been shockingly bad taste. Before the ceremony, Weasley approached Severus. The boy looked pale enough that he might faint or be sick, but instead he shook Severus's hand.

"Good luck," he muttered. "And watch out for canaries."

Fortunately for Weasley, Hermione was well out of earshot, standing beside Potter as he awaited the arrival of the bride.

*

To Severus's surprise, there were no uninvited guests. Neither paparazzi nor Death Eaters crashed the ceremony. But his so-called paranoia was vindicated when the latter burst into the reception and charged the dais.

"I told you so!" In retrospect, it would have been better to tell Hermione that *after* the Death Eaters were neutralised.

A mass of black robes barrelled into him, knocking Severus down. His wand slipped through his fingers, leaving him helpless, crumpled on the floor behind the dais.

The Death Eater Rowle, judging by the sheer size and blond hair escaping his hood towered over him.

"Die, traitor!"

Severus gasped for breath, clutching his ribs, unable to move. He could do nothing but await the green flash from the wand levelled at him.

"Avada Ked..." The incantation was interrupted by the distinct noise of something smashing.

"Unh!" Rowle swayed on the spot for a moment. He crumpled to the floor, further winding Severus as he landed on top of him.

"Sorry!"

"Hermione?" Severus wheezed at the sound of her voice, feebly trying to push the insensible Rowle off.

Grunting with the effort, Hermione dragged Rowle's body to the side. She grabbed Severus's hand, tugged him to his feet and slipped a supporting arm around his waist.

He blinked down at the floor. There were a few mangled flowers and bloody glass shards. A glance at Rowle affirmed the source, from still bleeding wounds at the back of his head.

"Vase of lilies," Hermione explained. "It's what I had to hand."

Severus stared at her.

"What? Would you have preferred to wait until I dug out my wand?"

At the mention of the word, Severus tried to bend down to retrieve his wand. He almost fell back down in the process, nearly dragging Hermione down with him.

"Look, there's no need." She nodded at their surroundings.

The attack was over almost as soon as it had begun. The band of Death Eaters had all been Stunned and bound, or knocked out in the case of his attacker. They would get what they deserved for attacking a wedding attended by war heroes and Aurors... a one way Portkey to Azkaban.

"I admit I overlooked you, but I was right about the threat," muttered Severus.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "As if I'd let anything happen to you!"

Finite Incantatem

AN: Many thanks to my invaluable betas, Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic.

Spells kindly provided by JunoMagic:

Petrificus Inloco: freeze in place. Strictly speaking it should be 'In Loco', but if JKR can mess around with Latin...

Rasito: shave.

Written for Madqueenmab in the Winter 08/09 SSHG Gift Exchange to this prompt: After the end of the War, Snape realizes that Harry has come to view him as a father figure. This alarms him, as those who Harry looks upon as fathers have quite the troubling mortality rate (death by Voldemort, death by curtains, death by Snape, death by Rowling...). Ever the clever one, Snape sets out to prove he's decidedly un-paternal. His cunning plan and how it involves Hermione is entirely up to you.