

No Assistance Required

by Subversa

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One-Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This story was a gift for my daughter, written to her tastes, on the occasion of her twenty-third birthday. There is nothing canon about this story, so please do not bust my chops over it. I have thrown out virtually everything about DH that I didn't like, kept a few things I did, and even the dates of birth for the children are not in accordance with what JKR has revealed in interviews and whatnot. Suspend canon-reality and come in for a bit to eat at the Burrow. I understand everyone will be there ...

No Assistance Required

Or (Mostly) One Big Happy (Weasley) Family

The day dawned bright, the cool of the morning invigorating Hermione Granger as she Apparated to the Burrow. It was the fifth anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts, and Dumbledore's Army and friends were gathering at the Weasley home for their annual commemoration. Hermione knew that many people had arrived the day before and spent the night, but she had worked late. After a good night's sleep in her own bed, she was ready for a pleasant day spent in the midst of her friends...her family.

A slight mist rose off the back garden pond, and the frogs inhabiting it seemed to croak a greeting to her. A low stone wall had been built to keep the grandchildren out of the pond, and Molly's fat brown hens now lived on that side of the wall, as well. They clucked and pecked in the dirt, looking for worms.

'Hermione! Good morning!'

She turned from her contemplation of the rising sun to smile at Percy Weasley, who came out of the Burrow with a baby on his shoulder.

'Hi, Percy!' she replied, coming forward to receive a one-armed hug. 'And who is this?'

Percy shifted the baby from his shoulder and cradled the bright-eyed pink blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms. 'Hermione, meet Miss Emily...she's two months old today.'

Hermione stroked the infinitely soft cheek with the knuckle of her index finger. 'What a pretty girl you are!' she cooed, feeling a tug of longing. She smiled up at Percy, whose blue eyes were fastened on the face of his baby daughter. 'She looks just like Penny.'

Percy looked up with a quick grin. 'Penny's really chuffed, too,' he said. 'Chloe and Oliver are both ginger-haired; she said it's about time she got one with her colouring.'

The back door opened and two energetic pre-schoolers barrelled into the yard followed by a coffee cup-wielding Bill Weasley. 'Slow down, Victoire!' he called to the silvery-

haired little girl who led the way, holding the hand of a slightly taller turquoise-haired boy. Bill shook his head, making his long red ponytail swing against his back. 'Teddy would follow her over a cliff, I'm afraid,' he said musingly before swooping down and giving Hermione her second one-armed hug of the day. 'You look awfully pretty for it to be so early in the morning,' he told her.

Hermione quirked a disbelieving smile at Bill before turning to watch Teddy obediently pushing the rubber-tyre swing into which Victoire had scrambled. 'I can't believe how big they've grown!' she marvelled.

'If you visited more often, it would not be such a surprise to you,' a French-accented voice scolded.

Hermione hurried to relieve the heavily pregnant Fleur of the strawberry-blond toddler riding on her hip. 'I mean to come more often, but I get so busy at work ...'

Bill waved his wand, and a squishy armchair, complete with matching pouf, materialised on the dewy grass. 'Rest,' he admonished his wife.

Fleur sat down with a thankful 'oomph' and smiled when Bill lifted her feet onto the pouf.

'Our boy is due next month,' Bill said, unable to keep the pride from his voice.

Hermione placed the wriggling two-year-old Dominique on the grass, where she scampered over to wrap her arms about one of her father's long legs. 'Why don't you go in and have a bit to eat, Hermione?' he encouraged. 'Mum and Angelina have an assembly-line going in there, and they're looking for someone to eat all the food they've prepared. Most of the lazy sods are lying in this morning.'

Hermione's tummy rumbled and she flushed, laying a hand upon her midriff. 'I think I am hungry,' she admitted with a small laugh. 'I'll see you later,' she added and entered the Burrow kitchen.

'Hermione!' Molly cried, hurrying over from the stove to wrap her up in a hug. 'I don't think I've seen you since Christmas!'

Hermione hugged back. 'I was here at New Year's,' she protested.

Angelina Weasley smiled from her place at the end of the big table, where she was spooning porridge into the mouth of a caramel-skinned baby with enormous eyes. 'Don't quibble with Mum,' she advised, wiping a bit of cereal from little Conor's chin. 'Just agree you've been a bad girl and sit down to eat.'

The former Cho Chang sat across from Angelina with a nursing infant at her breast. 'Come sit by me, Hermione,' she said with a friendly smile. 'I want to hear all about your new job.'

Hermione went forward and sat down in the proffered chair, thankful to have escaped further scolding from the Weasley matriarch. Ever since Hermione's parents had elected to remain in Australia after the war rather than return to England, Molly had taken a very motherly interest in Hermione's affairs. Hermione appreciated the concern, but now and again she felt a bit impatient with the attention her life drew from her friends. At times, they acted as if she were the only single career woman in all of wizarding Britain. Well, she was quite content with her life, thank you very much! She didn't need a nursery full of babies to validate her existence...although one baby might be nice ...

A plate came zooming her way from the stove, sent by Molly with a flick of the wand most often protruding from the pocket of her apron. The plate was covered with eggs, toast, and fat sausages. Hermione picked up her fork and began to eat.

'Fred heard from Ron that you got another promotion,' Angelina said, sending Conor's empty bowl flying to the sink before plucking her son from his high chair.

Hermione took a drink of pumpkin juice, nodding. 'I'm the Head of the Fugitive Squad,' she said, taking up another forkful of egg.

Cho placed her baby on her shoulder and began to pat him on the back. 'That sounds really important,' she said. 'Is it an office position, or do you actually go out looking for fugitives?'

Hermione frowned and picked up her napkin, fastidiously wiping her lips. 'I do both,' she said, 'but the Head of the Aurors thinks I should have someone with specialised experience to lead the raids.'

Baby Callum emitted a loud burp, drawing praise from his grandmother, who swooped down and plucked him from Cho's arms, bearing him off with the promise of a nice bath. Cho picked up her fork and speared a sausage from her own plate. 'The Head of the Aurors?' she said. 'But wouldn't that be ...'

'Me,' said a voice from the doorway.

Hermione looked up at her boss, unable, as always, to resist Harry's irrepressible grin. 'Oh, get over yourself,' she grumbled good naturedly, snagging a jar of plum jam and beginning to spread it on her remaining toast.

Harry came further into the room, making a beeline for the coffee pot. George Weasley followed him in, slipping into the chair beside his wife. 'Where's the baby?' he asked Cho. 'Has Mum already kidnapped him?'

Cho nodded, allowing George to take a sausage from her plate.

'And that is the beauty of having the youngest grandchild,' he said to no one in particular. 'Mum just can't keep her hands off him.'

Ron's voice preceded him into the kitchen. 'Well, don't get used to it, bro...Lavender's due in a week.'

Lavender could be heard shushing her husband, but Ron entered the kitchen alone.

'Did you lose your wife?' George muttered, sounding rather hopeful.

Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing as Cho nudged George's arm with a warning look and a shake of her head. George retaliated by kissing her.

Ron rolled his eyes. 'I put her in the parlour where she can be comfortable,' he snapped. He went into the larder. 'Where're the leftover parsnips from last night? Lavender fancies them for breakfast.'

Hermione rose to her feet and slipped behind Cho and George, heading for the parlour. She found her former dormitory-mate ensconced in the best armchair, with her swollen feet upon a matching pouf.

'Hi, Lavender,' she said softly, going over and sitting next to her. 'How are you feeling?'

Lavender smiled tiredly. 'Like a whale with feet,' she said, 'and the baby isn't letting me sleep very much.' She indicated the sofa. 'Sit down and tell me how you're doing,' she urged.

Hermione sat down and the two girls had a cosy gossip about all their mutual friends. After a few minutes, Ron came back into the room with a bowl of warm mashed parsnips and a cup of hot tea. Lavender waved the tea to the end table but began to eat the parsnips as if she were starving. Ron lifted Lavender's feet and sat on the stool, lowering her feet into his lap and beginning to rub them. Hermione watched them with a half-smile on her lips. It was rather sweet to see how devoted Ron was to his wife. He caught her eye and gave her a fond smile.

'Head of the Fugitive Unit,' he said. 'Impressive.'

Hermione smiled back. 'Thanks...I'm enjoying it, so far, even if Harry does think I need help.' She cocked her head to one side. 'Do you like working at the shop?' she asked. Now that Ron had left Magical Law Enforcement to work with the twins at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, she scarcely ever saw him.

'Oh, yeah,' he said. 'Ten to six, at the shop; Lavender likes that about it.'

Lavender nodded emphatically, swallowing a bite of parsnips before saying, 'I never knew when he'd be home with he was an Auror...regular hours will be better for the baby.'

'So,' said a querulous voice from the stairwell, 'are you saying that an Auror can't be a good father?'

A sour look passed over Lavender's face, and she let out an exaggerated sigh. Ron looked over his shoulder and opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione forestalled him, standing and crossing to the stairs, where Ginny stood with a child on each side, clinging to her hands. The taller of the two little ones held out his arms to Hermione, and she lifted him gladly. 'Good morning, James,' she said, and the ginger pre-schooler with the messy hair hid his face in her shoulder and giggled. She smiled at Ginny. 'And good morning to you,' she said to her friend.

Ginny grimaced at her, still miffed with her sister-in-law. James began to squirm in Hermione's grip, so she set him down, and he trotted towards the kitchen, calling, 'Daddy!'

Ginny's other charge made a lunge for freedom then, crowing in imitation of her older brother, 'Da!'

Ginny lifted her daughter onto her hip, her expression softening. 'She adores Harry,' she said, descending the rest of the stairs with a pointed glance at Lavender.

Hermione smoothed the dark red hair back from little Lily's face. 'Of course she does,' she said soothingly. 'Who else is still up there?' she asked, glancing curiously up the stairs.

'Dad's puttering around in his office, and the Lupins are lying in,' Ginny said. 'Tonks has morning sickness something awful, and little Grace had nightmares; I heard Remus walking the floor with her at around four this morning.' She moved Lily from one hip to the other. 'Fred was on his way to shower when I passed the bathroom. I think that's everyone.'

Harry's head popped around the doorframe. 'Where are my girls?' he demanded cheerfully.

Lily squealed and squirmed until Ginny put her down. On chubby legs, the youngest Potter careened her way into the arms of her father, who knelt to receive her joyful greeting. Hermione's heart felt as if a giant hand had given it a fierce squeeze; it made her painfully happy to see her best friend wrapped around the tiny little finger of Miss Lily Luna Potter.

'Are Luna and Neville here?' she asked, her memory pricked.

'They're coming this afternoon,' Ginny replied. 'Minerva will be along this evening, as well...she said she's bringing a surprise guest.' Ginny looped her arm through Hermione's, brusquely ignoring Ron and Lavender. 'Let's go drink a pot of tea,' she suggested.

By lunchtime, all of the inhabitants of the house were up and about. Hermione was delighted to see the Lupins, whom she had not seen since New Year's Day. Tonks was over her morning sickness by noon and starving; Hermione persuaded her to go and sit out in the back garden with Fleur and Lavender, who had moved outdoors as the day became warmer, and Hermione invaded Molly's kitchen to pinch a sandwich for her pink-haired friend from the platter Penny and Angelina were piling high.

'Can't you wait?' Penny teased, turning to wash her hands at the tap.

'It's for Tonks,' Hermione said defensively.

'Oh, let her have it,' Angelina said. 'I could hear poor Tonks throwing up this morning; you know she has to be starving!'

Molly hurried in and pulled a treacle tart from the oven. 'It's too hot for treacle tart, but it's Harry's favourite,' Molly announced to the room at large. Angelina rolled her eyes as Hermione and Penny exchanged grins; it was obvious that Ginny's mother still favoured Harry. Molly turned to the girls, wiping her hands on her apron, and said, 'Take the platter out, Hermione...Fleur and Lavender might be hungry too, and you know how testy a witch can be in her last month.'

Hermione didn't, but she did as she was told.

The afternoon passed in a desultory way, the adults sitting about in small groups, chatting as the children played. The pregnant women dozed in the shade of a spreading elm, and Hermione saw Harry and Ginny steal away for some time alone, leaving James and Lily under the watchful eyes of their grandparents.

Hermione alternated between helping in the kitchen and watching the children in the back garden. There was something very comforting about being at the Burrow again, crowded in the small kitchen with friends, preparing party food under the direction of Molly Weasley; it strongly reminded her of the summer she was seventeen, when she and Harry had helped prepare the food for Bill and Fleur's wedding.

When she was in the garden, she found the increased activity of her friends' children to be somewhat disquieting. Not only were Teddy and Victoire, the oldest, getting up to new and alarming activities, but many of the smaller ones were now becoming frighteningly mobile, as well. If she wasn't preventing Teddy Lupin from poking at the garden gnomes with sticks...a dangerous pastime, because the muddy-potatoes-with-eyes were not above biting pre-schoolers!...she was picking up the wee ones whose newfound walking skills still left much to be desired.

By the time Neville and Luna arrived by Floo, Hermione was sitting within a large enclosure, the edges of which she had charmed so the toddlers could not escape. They were quite happy to play with the toys scattered about in the grass and to wallow on Hermione, who was quite tired. The older children, whom she had dubbed in her mind as "the runners," were able to run in and out of the invisible barriers which kept the toddlers safely within their confines. Luna Longbottom came quickly through the grass with little Frank in tow. Hermione rose to greet her, and the two friends hugged.

'Did the boys trap you in here?' Luna asked seriously, waving her hand to indicate the charmed barrier. 'Would you like for me to let you out? Sometimes their jokes aren't very funny!'

Hermione laughed. 'I'd like to see them try to trap me somewhere,' she said. 'None of them could best me in a charm contest, Luna, I promise you!'

'I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you,' a sardonic voice commented.

Hermione's first noticed the expression of open curiosity on Luna's face as she looked at the speaker; Hermione turned as well, and surprise rendered her momentarily speechless.

Standing at the edge of the invisible enclosure, more relaxed than she had ever seen him, was Severus Snape. He wore Muggle jeans and a white lawn shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and he smirked at her, his hands in his pockets, as his eyes flicked from her to the babies and back again.

'Hello, Severus,' Luna said tranquilly, allowing two-year-old Frank to let go of her hand and scamper over to investigate the blocks currently being shared by Dominique Weasley and Grace Lupin.

Hermione realised her mouth had dropped open only because Snape's eyebrows went up so high. 'You call him Severus?' she hissed out of the side of her mouth to Luna.

'Of course...it's his name,' Luna explained, as if Hermione were not quite bright.

I know it's his name! Hermione thought, exasperated. But since when do you use first-names with Snape?

Luna gave Hermione a placid smile, her slightly protruding grey eyes warm with affection.

'Luna and I have seen quite a bit of one another lately,' Snape said smoothly.

Hermione's eyes swivelled back to him, in spite of her resolution not to look at him again. Something about the weight of his gaze on her skin made her feel warm...too warm, by far.

'Severus has been teaching Neville how to grow Whistle Thistle in his herb garden,' Luna added.

Hermione's memory stirred, and she couldn't resist blurting out the information her mind served up. 'Whistle Thistle is used in invisibility potions,' she blurted.

'Full marks,' Snape murmured, somehow making the words sound like a personal provocation.

'Why does Neville want Whistle Thistle?' she asked Luna, refusing to acknowledge Snape's teasing.

'Oh, he doesn't,' Luna said. Ginny, back from her stolen hour with Harry, waved to Luna from the pregnant witches' bower beneath the elm tree. 'Excuse me, Hermione, Severus...I'm going to see what Ginny wants.'

Luna ambled away, but Hermione knew Snape's eyes were on her...not Luna. Swallowing nervously, she resumed her seat upon the grass, where the youngest Potter promptly crawled into her lap and began to play with her hair.

Snape surprised her when he squatted down on his haunches, still remaining squarely behind the magical barrier enclosing the babies. Hermione had no idea why the intense scrutiny of her one-time teacher made her feel so jittery. To cover the awkwardness, she untangled the baby's hands from her hair and lifted her into the air, eliciting happy squeals.

'I don't suppose I need to ask who she is,' Snape rumbled.

Hermione set the baby down again, and the little one crawled as far as she could toward the growly-voiced man, then stood on her chubby baby legs, looking at him with unabashed baby curiosity. Hermione turned toward them, watching the man and the baby girl study one another; the man dark and harsh-featured, a deep furrow between his brows as he pondered the baby; the tiny girl staring back at him with her daddy's almond-shaped emerald green eyes, her dark red hair shining like burgundy wine in the May afternoon sun.

'Lily Potter,' he pronounced solemnly.

At the sound of her name, baby Lily clapped her hands together and crowed, then held up her hands to be picked up. Hermione's emotions were pricked; she knew all about the memories Harry had viewed about his mum and Severus Snape. How must it be for him to look at Lily's granddaughter and namesake?

Abruptly, Snape stood, and Hermione stood as well, lifting Lily into her arms. 'I must speak to the others,' the impassive wizard said, his manner suddenly formal. 'I'm sure I will see you again, Miss Granger.' He inclined his head stiffly and strode away across the grass, lifting a long-fingered hand in response to Arthur Weasley's called invitation to sit and have a glass.

Penny Weasley came out of the house and paused beneath the elm tree to deposit baby Emily in the welcoming arms of Nymphadora Lupin. With a final pat upon the sleeping infant's head, Penny came into the toddlers' space.

'You've been locked up with this lot long enough,' she said, kneeling to enjoy the ecstatic reception of little Oliver, who hurled himself at her with a gleeful, 'My mummy! My mummy!'

'Go visit with the adults,' Penny encouraged her. 'If you're lucky, you might just find a conversation that isn't dominated by Quidditch or childbirth!'

Hermione stood and dusted down her jeans. 'Well, I won't hold my breath for that,' she said, slipping through the enchanted barrier.

Minerva McGonagall had arrived, and Hermione went directly to her old Head of House, bending down to address the seated woman. 'Hello, Headmistress,' she said and gratefully returned the embrace bestowed upon her by the elderly lady.

'Hermione,' McGonagall said, 'it's so good to see you!'

Hermione beamed fondly and sat down in an empty chair between the headmistress and Molly. 'I'm glad you could get away from Hogwarts,' she said. 'Tell me all about how things are there.'

McGonagall promptly launched into a recitation of the current glories and woes of the wizarding school. Hermione had the leisure to listen while she watched her other friends, as well. Harry, Ron, and Ginny had pulled out the broomsticks and were gathering the willing for a pick-up Quidditch game. Molly rose and went to scold, only to be quieted by Arthur. Teddy Lupin and James Potter ran between the two elder Weasleys, in hot pursuit of a garden gnome; the two boys chased the creature into the shadow of the garden shed. Hermione half rose from her chair, worried that one of the boys would receive a bite, but there was a blur of motion to her right, and suddenly, the garden gnome was gone. Glancing curiously around, Hermione saw Snape with his hands laced indolently behind his head, his eyes on her. Their eyes met with a flurry of something that felt oddly like a swarm of butterflies travelling from her throat to her fingertips, leaving her with goose bumps. She jerked her gaze from his, determined to look at someone...anyone!...else, only to see that the two boys had been corralled by Arthur and carried off, one under each arm, with the promise of a kip before tea.

Hermione smiled as she watched Arthur effortlessly handling the boys, then she turned to resume her conversation with Minerva...but the headmistress had followed Molly and Arthur into the house, and her seat was now occupied by Snape, whose eyes regarded Hermione steadily, his face expressionless.

'I don't have a garden,' he said, as if he were continuing a conversation that had been interrupted.

'I'm sorry?' Hermione said, confused.

'Neville is cultivating the Whistle Thistle for me because I have no garden at present,' he elaborated.

Hermione blinked. What an odd piece of information for him to convey. She could think of no reply.

From the orchard came the muted sounds of the Quidditch game; under the elm tree, Tonks, Fleur, and Lavender dozed; beyond the elm, Penny had conjured a thick rug and spread it over the grass, where she and all of her charges had subsided into slumber. Hermione and Snape were the only wakeful adults in the garden, now. She shifted tensely, wondering if she could make an excuse to return to the kitchen. She had no idea what to say to Snape ...

'What office were you with before you became Head of the Fugitive Unit?' Snape asked.

Hermione considered him. The idea that the least pleasant human being of her experience wished to have a cosy chat about her job was unnerving...and laughable. He was up to something...what was it? And how could she best deflect him? She had no desire to discuss her career path with Severus Snape.

'We weren't expecting you, today,' she said brightly. 'I understood you were living out of the country, now.'

Snape chuckled, and Hermione was struck by the incongruity of it. Truth to tell, she had never seen the man when he wasn't as tight as an over-wound watch.

'I think you'll find that Arthur and Molly were indeed expecting me,' he replied. 'And Potter knew I would be here. You may be the only person here who was unaware of my intention to attend...I wonder why it was kept from you?'

Hermione felt indignation flare and had opened her mouth to retort before she realised he was baiting her, just as he had always done. Swallowing her annoyance, she stood. 'That's right!' she said as she walked away. 'Harry told me, and it completely slipped my mind.'

Snape chuckled again, and Hermione was acutely aware of his eyes on her as she walked away from him. Was he looking at her bottom? If she turned around, would she catch him eyeing her up? She couldn't decide if the notion was pleasing or disturbing. Could it be both?

Reaching the door, she fled thankfully into the kitchen.

The long shadows of late afternoon were stretching over the back garden when Hermione next heard Snape. She stood at the sink, washing her hands after assembling the salad, and out the window, she saw Snape sitting with Bill, Percy, Ron and Remus. It appeared that Ron's older brothers were taking the piss regarding impending parenthood.

'... and you don't want to forget to baby-proof the house,' Bill said.

Percy pushed his eyeglasses back up his nose. 'A baby-proof house is a must, Ron.'

Ron's nervous eyes looked from his brothers to Remus, who nodded gravely. Hermione snorted. Couldn't Ronald see how Remus' eyes were twinkling? After all these years, couldn't he tell when his brothers were winding him up?

Percy cradled Emily against his chest; Bill bounced Dominique upon his knee; Remus held a drowsy Grace upon his shoulder. Behind them, Teddy, James, Victoire, and Chloe engaged in a noisy game which seemed to consist of chasing one another in circles until hilarity brought them to their knees, where they rolled about in the grass and giggled.

Hermione could not help but notice how gravely Snape's gaze wandered from the laughing pre-schoolers to the child-burdened men around him. After a moment, he said, 'Am I to understand that each of you...save Ron, apparently...have "baby-proofed" your homes?'

At the general assent, a frown creased Snape's forehead. 'Well, what wards are you using?'

Penny walked through the middle of the men with a murmured, 'Excuse us', carrying Oliver on her hip and leading Lily by the hand. Snape's hand gesture encompassed the nine children in sight at that moment. 'I only ask, because I may be able to suggest different wards...obviously the spells you are using have failed miserably to proof your homes against babies!'

Hermione was glad to see that even Snape joined in the roar of laughter which greeted his pronouncement. The volume of merriment drew nearly all of the family and guests out to cluster around the seated men, and the repetition of Snape's remarks brought on another round of laughter when Bill related it to the newcomers, between chuckles. When the group quieted, Snape crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the entire group.

'Well, it's good to know you weren't attempting birth control by way of putting protective wards on your doors and windows,' he said with a mock air of superiority. 'I thought it was going to fall to me to explain the ... root of the problem to you.'

As dusk fell over the Weasley's back garden, Bill, Fred, and George arranged two long tables on the grass while Ron and Percy levitated the fairy-lit globes into the trees and directly over the tables. Arthur and Remus began to carry out the bowls and platters of food Molly and her helpers had prepared. The children had been fed their tea, bathed, and put to bed, and Headmistress McGonagall had called Dobby from Hogwarts to watch over the sleeping children whilst their parents sat down to a cosy supper.

When they had all taken their seats, Hermione took a deep breath and looked about the table at the beloved faces assembled around her. She worked long hours and focussed all her energy and attention on her job; it was only at night that she became aware of how lonely she was. But when she was here, at the Burrow, amongst her dearest friends, her heart was at peace. Seeing the numerous happy couples negotiating the shoals of marriage gave Hermione hope for a future that might be filled with more than just work and holiday visits to the Burrow.

'Sweetie?' a warm baritone voice rumbled near her left ear.

Hermione jerked her head quickly to find Severus Snape sitting in the chair which had, moments before, been occupied by Harry. One corner of his mouth jumped, as if plagued with a tic; in his hand was a bowl of boiled sweets in colourful wrappers.

'I think Molly meant those for after-dinner mints,' she said, and the butterfly contingent began its impromptu swirl in her the vicinity of her lungs. Merlin, but it was hard to catch her breath properly!

'My mistake,' he murmured, replacing the bowl in the middle of the table.

Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing at him, turning instead to accept the salad passed to her by George.

As the leisurely meal progressed, Snape drew Hermione out, bit by bit, until she was speaking at length and in detail about her plans for reorganising the Fugitive Unit. He evinced sincere interest and posed such intelligent questions that it was not until the arrival of a latecomer distracted her from their conversation that Hermione realised they had been deep in conversation for the entire meal.

With a resounding crack, Kingsley Shacklebolt Apparated into the Weasley's back garden.

Cries of 'Kingsley!' and 'Minister!' erupted from all around the table, and several people stood, but the Minister for Magic came towards them with a huge smile, gesturing that they should all be seated again. Arthur Weasley conjured a chair and set it at the head of the table, whilst Molly busied herself serving up a plate of food; soon the Minister was eating and chatting as he had done so many times over the years, both in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place and at the Burrow.

Hermione and Snape did not resume their interrupted conversation; they sat quite close to the Minister's seat, and they listened to what news he brought of the happenings in his office. After a while, he pushed back from the table and patted his still-trim tummy. 'You're the best cook in wizarding Britain, Molly,' he said, 'and I'm including my mum in that, so don't tell her, eh?' He looked down the table, nodding at his Auror Head, and his gaze came to rest on Hermione.

'Settling into the new job, Hermione?' he asked, his manner friendly, but his eyes keen.

'Yes, Minister,' she replied.

He inclined his head towards Snape. 'I see you found her, Severus,' Shacklebolt said.

'Indeed,' Snape responded, slanting a glance at Hermione.

Harry spoke up. 'Minister, Hermione and I haven't ...'

Hermione looked from Harry to the Minister. 'What are you talking about?' she asked.

Shacklebolt spoke again to Snape. 'I heard that Longbottom has been able to produce a thriving crop of Whistle Thistle for you, Severus.'

'Yes, Neville does an excellent job of cultivating magical plants,' Snape responded.

The Minister nodded. 'And have you successfully brewed the potion we spoke about?'

Hermione leaned towards Snape and hissed, 'What potion?'

Shacklebolt heard her. 'The invisibility potion for the Fugitive Raid Squad,' he responded. 'Haven't Harry and Severus spoken to you about it yet?'

Hermione sent an angry glare down the table to Harry, who grimaced and mouthed, 'Sorry.'

Kingsley Shacklebolt uttered a deep belly laugh. 'Hermione, those two told me you wouldn't be happy about having anyone else stepping in to lead the raids...but surely you agree that no one is more experienced than Severus in how to track and capture fugitive Death Eaters and other Dark wizards?'

Hermione's mouth dropped open. No wonder Snape had been cozening up to her all day! She turned her sternest glare on him next, only to be met by his blandest look.

'Hullo, boss,' he murmured respectfully...but there was an impish light in his eyes, she was positive of it!

'Hermione?' Shacklebolt said.

Hermione turned to the Minister for Magic, in full professional mode. 'You're absolutely correct, Minister; no one in all of England has more experience with Death Eaters and Dark wizards than Snape.'

Kingsley gave her an approving nod. 'Good...I'm glad you see it as I do, Hermione. You and Snape will build a top rate Fugitive Squad...the best in all of Europe!'

Conversation became more general again, and Hermione began to think of how she could best escape and go home. She sat rigidly beside Snape, wishing she could hex him; to keep from embarrassing herself, she clasped her hands together in her lap and held on tight.

'I think you'll be very pleased with the invisibility potion,' Snape said quietly.

Hermione didn't look at him. 'Don't talk to me,' she snapped.

'It's a new formula,' he continued, as if she had not spoken. 'Magical Law Enforcement officers and Aurors will be able to use it to do surveillance, and it will be invaluable for the Fugitive Raid Squad.'

Against her will, Hermione was intrigued. 'Are you able to produce it in quantity?' she demanded.

'Yes,' he replied, seeming somehow relieved. 'Although not much is needed; it is highly concentrated, and the dose is very small.'

She turned her eyes to his face; he was watching her with the strangest look in his eyes.

'You've been trying to ingratiate yourself with me all day long,' she said grimly.

'One might interpret my behaviour in that way,' he said evenly. When her only response with a snort of disgust, he added, 'One might also think I was attempting to renew my acquaintance with you.'

A commotion at the end of the table drew Hermione's attention. Ron stood abruptly and turned to his mother. 'Lavender's water broke!'

The mothers rose as one being and converged on Lavender, helping her to her feet and moving with her toward the house, a birthing honour guard. Arthur rounded the table and placed his hands on Ron's shoulders. 'Let's go fetch the medi-witch midwife, Ron,' Arthur said bracingly. 'We'll be back before you know it.'

The two Weasley men Disapparated, and those remaining at the table began clearing the dishes and leftover food.

'Are you going to assist in the birth?' Snape inquired of Hermione.

'No!' she said, horrified. 'I don't know anything about childbirth...and I don't want to know, either!' She looked up at the window to Ron's old bedroom and saw the figures of Lavender's sisters-in-law moving back and forth purposefully. 'I think I'll go home.'

A feather light touch at her elbow solidified into Snape's hand. 'May I see you home?' he asked.

Hermione felt the butterfly ballet begin in the pit of her stomach. 'I've rumbled you now, Snape; you can't butter me up.'

'As intriguing as that sounds, I actually thought you might be interested to see a demonstration of the Whistle Thistle Potion.'

Hermione turned to face him, looking up into his hawkish face. 'You have it with you?' she asked.

He patted the pocket of his jeans. 'I do, indeed,' he agreed.

'All right, then,' she said.

Another crack of Apparition sounded and Ron and Arthur reappeared, followed by an efficient-looking medi-witch. Ron and the midwife hurried to the house, but Arthur came up to Hermione and Snape.

'Thank you for coming today,' he said, first hugging Hermione, then shaking Snape's hand. 'It's good to have you back, Severus,' he added. 'You're both welcome to wait it out with us...Minerva says she won't leave until the baby's born.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I'm going to go, Arthur...tomorrow's a work day.'

Arthur smiled his understanding, then hurried into the Burrow, and Snape turned to Hermione. 'I propose that we each swallow a dose of the potion and go for a stroll in Diagon Alley to test its efficacy,' he said, producing a small phial from his pocket.

Hermione felt excitement rising in her, as if the butterflies had invited a flock of hummingbirds to join the party in her chest. Was it because a tall, appealing wizard was standing so close and looking at her so intently? Or because she was terribly excited about trying out the Whistle Thistle Potion?

Did it matter? It beat the stuffing out of spending one more moment of her day babysitting or awaiting the arrival of a new baby. She glanced one more time up to Ron's bedroom window, glad that Lavender had someone with her and doubly glad that it wasn't her.

'You're on!' she said, looking back to Severus Snape just in time to catch the look of triumph in his eyes: there, then swiftly gone. Hermione's tummy swooped, and the disturbance within escalated, the flying ballet of butterflies and hummingbirds segueing to a tango, accompanied by the rapid beating of her heart.

