

The Left Hand of Fate

by Annie Talbot

Ron Weasley has one final mission to complete. How can Severus help? Will he?
Written for Blue Artemis for the 2010 Summer SSHG Exchange.

Prologue: Fate, Interrupted

Chapter 1 of 3

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"If you like him so much, then you can marry him, instead!" bellowed Ron Weasley from the doorway of the Leaky Cauldron. "Oh, right. You can't, because he's dead. Well, you're stuck with me, then. Better get used to it!"

On that note, he slammed out of the tavern, leaving his humiliated fiancée and startled best friend behind. Furious, he tapped at the bricks that would allow him access to Diagon Alley, bursting without looking through the opening, straight into—nothing.

A very tired-looking owl struggled into the tower, collapsing onto the table beside Clotho. Slowing her spinning only slightly, she gently detached the parchment from its leg with one hand before giving it a treat from the drawer.

"Oh, bugger!" Lachesis and Atropos glanced up to see what had occasioned her angry outburst. "Our sisters in wizarding Britain have become distracted again, and some idiot has gone and got himself killed before his time. This time we'll have to step in."

"Well," reasoned Atropos, "if Shivvy would just stop staring at Lucius Malfoy all the time, things wouldn't be such a mess. People living who should be dead. People dying who should be alive. Britain's tapestry is a right mess, and it's all because of her weakness for pretty blonds. Maybe we should—"

"We are not taking Lucius Malfoy on," interrupted Lachesis. "You'll be just as bad as Shivvy is, and you know it. She's constantly making Slog measure him so she can watch whatever he's doing and whoever he's doing it with. We'll end up in as much trouble as Tonic, Slog, and Shivvy are in now."

"Well," said Clotho, who wanted nothing to do with Lucius Malfoy's thread, "at the very least, we can threaten to take him away. We've got to do something to get everyone's lives back on course. Otherwise, the mess will just get messier."

So saying, she pulled a parchment from the drawer and began to craft an ultimatum to her British sisters.

"Where am I?" Ron wondered aloud as he landed (quite painfully) on his bum in the middle of the tower room.

Three gorgeous women turned to glare at him as a Howler shrieked, "Fix this NOW!" and exploded in a shower of red confetti.

"You're not supposed to be here!" expostulated the pretty one with light brown hair and freckles.

The dark-haired beauty said, "It's one of the Weasleys, I think. Ronald, maybe..." At his nod, she pulled a book off the shelf behind her and began riffling frantically through the pages.

The third, a stunning redhead, looked furious. "What the bloody hell were you thinking? You just leapt through without looking, didn't you? Everything they ever taught you in Auror training—shite, everything they taught you in D.A. training—and you lost your temper and got yourself killed." She waved an enormous pair of scissors. "You just jumped in front of these. I couldn't help but cut your thread. I didn't see you coming!"

"Wait a minute," protested Ron. "I'm not dead. I *can't* be dead. You're just going to have to send me back."

"Well, we're in the toilet now," the one who reminded him of Hermione said mournfully as if he hadn't spoken. "They put us on warning after the Battle of Hogwarts, said we needed to get through the rest of this generation cleanly. I was so hoping to get promoted to Seattle." She peered over the dark-haired woman's shoulder worriedly. "How far are we off, Slog?"

Slog sighed. "Only ninety-five years. He was supposed to get married. On Saturday?" She glanced at Ron for confirmation. "And they were going to be together for the next ninety years, Tonic. Happily, more often than not. This buggers up the next generation, too, as they were supposed to have two children named—"

"Let me guess," Ron interrupted. "Rose and Hugo."

"Yes."

"All right; now I know you're insane. Because those are names I thought up as a joke. When Hermione was mooning over having children... well, I wanted to impress upon her the horror of it all. So I told her that I had always dreamed of having a girl and a boy. Rose and Hugo. A load of crap, really. Send me back."

"We can't send you back," the unnamed redhead said irritably. "It's not allowed."

"Of course it's allowed! You sent Harry back, didn't you?"

"He was a special case," Slog declared. "We're on probation. We don't have any leeway at all after the disaster with the Lupins and Snape."

"Well, I'm a special case, too. I'm getting married."

"You *were* getting married. Now you're dead. And we're in serious trouble."

Shivvy waved him to silence and picked up one of the threads stretched across the table. Ron noted that it was quite pretty: the colour of Hermione's eyes, in fact. The redhead squinted at it and Slog turned to another page in the book while Tonic picked up the spindle the thread was attached to, working it furiously for a moment. The redhead stepped back and spoke at the same time as Slog.

"This can be fixed."

"She still has the same fate."

"See? Just send me back and it'll all be fine."

"Not you," snarled the redhead.

"Someone else, Shivvy?" Slog asked. "It can't be the Potter boy; he's destined for this one's sister, and what a waste *that* is."

"No," Shivvy said, extending a silk-clad leg and contemplating her scarlet suede shoe with rhinestones studding the four-inch heels. "It'll have to be one of the danglers from the Battle. They're all at loose ends, since they're supposed to be dead." She turned to a small table beside the fireplace, lifting a handful of threads and separating them carefully.

"Lavender Brown... no, can't have a female because of the children. Gregory Goyle... no, he was on the wrong side." She lifted a pure black thread from the small cluster, holding it up to the light. "Tonic, come here a second, and bring Granger's thread with you."

Taking the warm brown thread from her sister's hand, she held it against the black. Tonic worked both spindles for a moment while Shivvy stared intently at whatever the threads told her.

Finally, she looked up, a smile Ron could only describe as evil lighting her features.

"Ladies..." She looked significantly at each of her sisters. "And gentleman..." She nodded towards Ron, who felt himself paling. "I have a Plan."

Notes: The Three Fates of Greek mythology are Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. According to the myth, Clotho spins the thread of life, which Lachesis measures and Atropos cuts when the time comes. Their British sisters are pure inventions of the author. Any resemblance to the moderators of the SSHG Exchange is merely an amazing coincidence.

Many thanks to the bevy of wonderful women who hold my hand while I write, among whom are ariadne, dicky, ferporcel, machshefa, mia, mis t, somigliana, and subversa.

This story is dedicated to Blue Artemis, a lovely fangirl whose reviews over the years have brought joy to countless authors. She has recently begun writing, and her stories are wonderful fun!

One: An Unwelcome Guest

Chapter 2 of 3

Six months later, Ron makes first contact with the subject of the Fates' plan.

"Pssst. Snape."

Not by a twitch of a finger or a tremor of an eyelid did Stephen Lang betray a hint of awareness that someone had spoken. Even though he knew the voice was addressing him... even though he had been expecting to be approached at any point in the three years, six months, and twenty-seven days since his "death", he would not grant the speaker (or more properly, the whisperer) the barest of responses.

It must be an Auror, he mused. Death Eaters or Order members would have hexed first, despite this being a Muggle cafe.

He slowly turned the page of his newspaper, taking the opportunity to raise his eyes over the top edge and scan the room. No one appeared to be paying him any attention.

Cloaked, then. Or Disillusioned.

"Snape!" The whisper came urgently; the wizard must be standing right next to him.

He sipped his tea, rather enjoying himself. No Auror would make his move in the middle of Muggle London. He was as safe here as he could be. He wouldn't resist arrest, he decided, but he *would* make the Auror await his convenience.

Ignoring the increasingly frantic pleas, he finished his tea and folded his newspaper neatly before rising. Pulling several coins from his pocket, he laid them carefully by his cup before leaving the cafe.

As he walked towards his flat, his puzzlement grew. He couldn't hear the rustle of a cape or even muffled footfalls. Yet the voice continued to whisper into his ear, demanding that he stop to speak to whoever it was who had found him.

Finally, he reached his flat, unlocking the door and slipping inside, closing it, he believed, in his pursuer's face. Not that a mere door would hold a determined wizard, he thought, however strong his wards might be. Sighing, he followed Moggy into the narrow kitchen to address the animal's seemingly unending need for food.

"Snape!" He jumped as the voice shouted in his ear. How had the Auror penetrated his wards so silently?

He turned. There was no one there. Moggy crunched ferociously on the contents of his food bowl, unperturbed.

"Show yourself," he sneered. "Or are you such a coward that you fear an unarmed man?"

"I... I can't." Yes, the Auror's voice was familiar. As was the whine that underlay it.

"Weasley?"

"Yes." Oh, hell. Could Wonderboy be far behind?

"Ronald Weasley?"

"Yes."

What the...?

"Why can you not show yourself?"

"She only gave me the power of speech. She said that should be enough. And even then, she said that only you would be able to hear me."

"Who is 'she'? And if only I can hear you, why were you whispering?" He was beginning to get a very bad feeling about this... far worse a feeling than he'd had when he imagined he was facing Azkaban.

"Shivvy," was the response, and he froze.

Oh, shite.

"So, you managed to get yourself killed, and it bollixed up Fate. How is this supposed to be my problem again?"

"Hermione and I were supposed to be married. Tonic and Slog say she has some sort of role to play in the future of the wizarding world, but she's left it altogether and is pining away. So Shivvy sent me to ask you to find her and send her back."

"Right. Well, you can just tell Shivvy that Severus Snape is no more, just as *she* instructed. Also per her orders, I'm living outside the wizarding world, so its future is completely irrelevant to me. Miss Granger, although undoubtedly a competent witch and certainly a better than average student, is also none of my concern. Run on back to Shivvy...excuse me, *waft* on back to Shivvy...and tell her that I'm making my life in Muggle London and refraining from interfering with wizardom."

"But Hermione..." The whine was back.

"What about her?"

"She's in a bad way. And... well... you owe her." Weasley's voice was triumphant.

"I owe Granger? For what?" Clearly, death had addled the boy's few wits.

"She and Harry brought your case to the Wizengamot. Because of them, your name has been cleared and you've been granted an Order of Merlin, First Class. Posthumously, of course, but still... I know you always wanted one."

"Tell me, Weasley, what good does an Order of Merlin do me here?"

"Erm... none?"

"Exactly. And, since Miss Granger and Potter assumed me dead at the time, what benefit might they have expected me to receive from such an honour?"

"Justice, Snape. They did it because it was the right..."

"Exactly," Severus interrupted. "They did it to satisfy their own sense of justice. Not to benefit me in any way. So, once again, for what can I possibly owe Granger?"

The boy? ghost? mumbled incoherently as Severus settled back in his chair, stroking the cat, who had leapt up to perch on the upholstered arm. Really, Weasley was just

too easy.

"She always defended you." The voice was truculent.

"Really? So after I murdered Albus, she insisted to the Order that there must be some explanation? Some mitigating factor?"

"Erm..."

"So, once more, we have Miss Granger and Mr Potter assuaging their consciences. I haven't forgotten that they left me for dead. These are not individuals I feel compelled to bestir myself for, to be honest."

Weasley sputtered feebly. Severus smirked.

As the afternoon progressed, Weasley's pleas became more and more urgent (and less coherent). Severus enjoyed himself greatly at his former student's expense. However, the tables were turned when he decided to end the game and send him on his way.

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? Get out now."

"Shivvy said I had to stay."

"Nonsense. No wizard has to tolerate an unwanted ghost. Begone!"

"Erm..."

"Why are you still here? The Moaning Myrtle Statute guarantees that unwelcome ghosts will return to their bases when a wizard tells them to leave. This was never your home. Begone!"

"I'm not exactly a ghost, you see. So I'm not covered by the Myrtle law."

"What do you mean, you're not a ghost? You're dead, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm dead. I've been dead for more than six months. But they're holding me back. I'm not a ghost, but I'm not allowed to move on until I've fixed what got broken when I died."

"How sad for you. Go back to them, then."

"Are you joking? Have you met them? Shivvy has this eye..." Severus could swear he could feel Weasley shudder and found himself doing the same. *"Anyway, they told me that I couldn't come back until you'd fixed Hermione. She needs to go back to the wizarding world. She needs to get married. She needs to fulfil her destiny, whatever it is, and they're holding me here...here, with you...until that happens."*

"Well, then, prepare yourself. In this life, I am a librarian. You caught me on my day off, but if you are going to spend the rest of eternity with me, that will mean that you will spend many, many hours in my library. I know how much you love such places."

"It doesn't matter." From the sound of it, Weasley was almost weeping. *"You've got to help Hermione, You've got to. And if that means I have to stay with you and go to your library every day until you help her, then I'll do that. Because they say you're the only hope for her, and she's grieving herself to death. So you're stuck with me until you help her."*

"Fine, then. Make yourself at home out here. I'm going to bed."

So saying, Severus rose and stomped to his small bedroom, Moggy at his heels. He took great satisfaction at the solid slam of the door, even though he knew that Weasley could pass through it at will. He trusted that his commanding tone would still have an effect on...

"Not so fast." Wonderful. Weasley was now impervious to his former professor's authority.

"Weasley, it's late. I'm tired, and I have to go to work tomorrow."

"Tough. Hermione's in despair, and you're refusing to help her. Why should I care that you're tired?" Too late, Severus recalled the boy's sheer obstinacy.

It was going to be a long night.

Six days later, Severus threw in the towel. Ghosts...or whatever Weasley was...didn't sleep. Neither did Severus, as long as Weasley was around.

The boy babbled. He told stories about Granger... about how wonderful she was and about her current pitiful state. He told the story of Wonderboy's final confrontation with the Dark Lord at least six dozen times. He sang... badly. He confessed to having deserted Potter and Granger mid-quest and to having resisted their decision to redeem Severus's name. He recited the *Tales of Beedle the Bard* as if they were Gospel.

Severus couldn't sleep. He couldn't work. And Weasley showed no sign of relenting... on the contrary, he promised to continue until Severus cooperated.

Finally, the exhausted wizard capitulated.

"All right. If I go to see her, will you let me sleep tonight?"

"If you go to see her, speak with her, and make a plan to see her again, you may sleep tonight."

"You're as bad as Dumbledore. And you know what happened to him," Severus snarled towards the chair where Weasley liked to sit. (Or so he imagined; the voice seemed to come from there more often than not.)

"You can't kill me. I'm already dead."

"I'll find a way."

Weasley sighed. *"Just talk to her. Be kind to her. That's all I ask for today. You may sleep tonight, if you do that."*

Severus was uncomfortably aware of his invisible companion as he entered the Starbucks near Trafalgar Square. He hadn't believed it when Weasley had told him that Granger was working as a barista, but now the evidence was before him.

Or rather, the evidence was that she *had* been working as a barista; now she was being sacked.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I gave you this job because I was fond of your parents. But customers want someone cheerful waiting on them, not a girl who looks like she's going to burst into tears at any moment. Maybe if you get some therapy... perhaps antidepressants... well, maybe when you're better, we can give it another try. But for now, you're in no shape to work here."

The woman's voice was kind. Pitying, even. Severus' teeth clenched at the tone. He braced himself for Granger's inevitable explosion, but it never came. Instead, the painfully thin young woman with the long, bushy ponytail and tear-filled brown eyes untied her apron with reedlike, nervous fingers and handed it to her now-former employer.

"What will you do?" the woman asked. Granger just looked at her before turning away. The woman caught her arm. "Hermione..."

Behind him, Weasley hissed. Granger froze, not turning. Severus decided it was time to intervene.

"Ah, Miss Granger. I'm so glad to see you today," he drawled, injecting as much pleasure into his tone as he possibly could.

He was pleased to see the woman's hand fall away from Granger's arm as she spun to face him, eyes wide with shock. He gave a miniscule shake of his head, and she closed her mouth tightly, no doubt in an effort to control the flood of questions rising to her lips.

He extended his hand to the manager. "Stephen Lang, ma'am. I'm a former professor of Miss Granger's, and I've been hoping to speak with her." After the briefest of handshakes, he continued, "If you'll excuse us?" He took Granger's hand, tucked it into the crook of his arm, and led her towards the door.

"Did you have a handbag? A jacket?" He smiled as kindly as he could when she shook her head slightly. If possible, she looked even more alarmed. "Excellent, then. Let's find a place where we can talk."

He strode into the late summer sunlight, Granger half a step behind. He knew Weasley was there somewhere and hoped he'd have the sense to remain silent.

Severus had a problem to solve.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus is kind. Or not.

Ignoring the hand tugging at his arm, Severus strode down the block, half-dragging Granger behind him. He could hear Weasley chortling in the background like a mad thing.

Finally, she wrenched her hand free, and he spun to face her where she stood obstinate in the centre of the pavement.

"How are you alive?" she demanded. "And where are you taking me?"

"I am *taking* you to the park, where I can answer your first question. However, if you really wish to discuss this with all of London passing by..." His glare encompassed the snarl of traffic as well as the irritated passers-by, swerving to avoid the pair. When she remained stubbornly still, he deliberately softened his approach. "Look, you were in an awkward spot back there, and I thought I'd help. If my assistance is unwelcome, though..."

"No! No, I appreciate it, I truly do." Her fumbled thanks brought a smirk to his lips. Sometimes Gryffidors were so predictable. "But I don't understand how you came to be there. Or here, for that matter."

"All shall be revealed, once we're in a place where we can speak freely." He raked his hand through his short-cropped hair, doing his best to ignore Weasley's whispered advice. "What were you doing, working in a place like that? If you'd asked me a week ago where I could find Hermione Granger, a working as a barista in a coffee bar in Muggle London wouldn't even be on the list."

"I don't see how that's your business," she answered tersely.

"Right, then. My survival is none of *your* concern, either, unless I care to make it so. So shall we part company now?" He paused as Weasley growled angrily in his ear. *Down boy. Let me handle her*, Inner Severus told the spirit. "Or will we purchase chips from that van and have a picnic and civilised conversation in the park?" He queued for the chips van, not watching to see if she followed. His show of indifference decided her, though, and soon she was standing beside him in the queue. Weasley's voice came again. "*Nice... Why didn't I ever learn how to do that?*"

Fifteen minutes later, they were seated on a half-shaded bench in the park, looking out over the green. A sort of truce had been called while they consumed their lunches.

"Mmmmm. It's been a long time since I've had this," Granger said, not-very-discreetly licking a spot of grease from her finger.

"So I gathered." Severus looked pointedly at her empty box. Giving her a "stay put" look, he gathered up their rubbish and carried it to a bin. "*Be nice, Snape*," cautioned Weasley. When he returned, he sat so that he could pin her with his stare.

"Why are you here?"

"You brought me, remember? And anyway, shouldn't I be asking you that question?" Ah, the truce was indeed over.

"I'll explain my survival and current circumstances, but only on condition that you do the same."

Her nod was the only reply he got.

"I survived through an accident of fate." He chose his words carefully, knowing that Shivvy would blast him if he told the entire truth. Under no circumstances was she permitted to know of the existence of the Fates or of Weasley's presence. "I wasn't meant to... I didn't mean to. But when I woke up alive instead of dead, it seemed that perhaps my luck had turned and I'd be able to have a life free of the weight of my youthful errors. To that end, I Transfigured an animal bone into a facsimile of my own corpse and left it to be found by the victors, whoever they might be. And then I Apparated to my home in Manchester, treated my wounds, and gathered up the materials I'd need to make a new life. I created a new identity for myself...Stephen Lang, Research Librarian...and manufactured credentials that would support my finding work in London. Three years later, here I am."

"Didn't you care about the battle? Don't you care who won?" Her colour was high and her eyes were bright.

"Of course I did. I'd given over seventeen years of my life to bring about the Dark Lord's downfall, and when it came down to it, I'd given my life itself. Not my fault that my death didn't take." Hermione's indignation faded in the face of his anger.

"I...I'm sorry. You're right, of course, and I'm being ungrateful."

"In any case, I was able to deduce that the Dark Lord had been defeated simply because nothing happened in the Muggle world; in fact, things became calmer. For all I knew, though, your victory had resulted in a price being put on my head. It's only recently that I learned that my name has been cleared."

"A bit over six months ago, actually, is when the formalities were completed." She looked down at her hands for a moment, then continued, "I returned to the Muggle world immediately after the Wizengamot made the declaration."

"In response to that fact? In protest, perhaps?"

"No! No, it was the last thing that I needed to complete before I left. My fiancé died, and I couldn't bear to stay."

"Weasley? I heard that he'd been killed. I'm sorry for your loss."

"It happened two days before our wedding... the Wizengamot added your hearing to its schedule at the very last minute and called Harry and me to give testimony the next day. Ron wanted me to ask for a delay, because Fleur had volunteered to spend the day prettying me up for the wedding. But it had taken three months to get that hearing on the schedule, and we knew that they'd take advantage of any opportunity not to have to deal with us, so Harry and I decided to go. We argued, Ron walked out, and he never came back. We held a funeral instead of a wedding." Her voice was dull, as if she were reciting an oft-repeated story.

She turned her eyes upon him, and they pierced his heart with the mixture of pain, guilt, and loss he saw. It was like looking into a mirror in those first years after Lily's death.

"I'm sorry for your loss, and I'm sorry that my defence took such a terrible toll on your life."

"It isn't your fault. It isn't anyone's fault, really, except for those two idiots who were duelling in the centre of Diagon Alley. It's just..." She fell abruptly silent and resumed studying her hands.

He gave her a moment to compose herself, then asked, "Where are you living? I didn't think you were a native Londoner."

"Oh, no. I sold my parents' home after the war and purchased a tiny flat in Chelsea when I moved to London. I'm comfortable enough, and it's convenient to work." She smiled wryly. "Or it was, anyway. I didn't really need the job, but it was a reason to get up every day. I'm glad I don't rely on the salary, as things turned out."

Severus stared at her for a moment. Weasley wanted him to be kind, but he found her passivity infuriating. "*Uh-oh*," Weasley said clearly. It pushed him over the edge.

"So, let me get this straight. You spent ten years struggling to be taken seriously in the wizarding world. You were given the best education our world could offer. You worked hard and you excelled. Most of your teachers would name you as the most gifted student they had ever taught... and some of them taught *me*. After the war, you were feted... you could have written your own ticket. You'd won the respect of everyone, even pure-bloods, by dint of talent and sheer hard work. And then you quarrelled with your lover, it ended badly, and you threw it all away. Isn't that what happened, Miss Granger? You've run off to die alone somewhere, because it hasn't all turned out according to plan."

She gaped at him, flushing and paling in rapid succession.

"Weasley had potential. He was a good enough wizard with a decent mind. He'd never have reached it with you, though, because you and Potter both overshadowed him. And you... you were going to have to tone it down, weren't you? Because Weasley didn't like being overshadowed." "*Low blow, there, Snape!*" *Shut up, Weasley.* "So the most brilliant witch of her age...of several ages...was going to hide her light under a bushel. She'd settle for a mediocre job so as to not outshine her husband. He'd settle for one because he had nothing to live up to. And two-thirds of the Golden Trio would in reality be tarnished brass. No heroes here, just move along."

Weasley was screaming at him. Granger stared at him with stricken eyes.

"No wonder you broke your wand and crawled out here to die in the wilderness. *It is* a wilderness here, isn't it, Miss Granger? The Muggle world; the site of your greatest sin. You destroyed your parents here in London, didn't you?"

She finally found her voice.

"How dare you? How *dare* you? I didn't destroy my parents, I *saved* them!" she cried shrilly.

"Did you? Then where are they, Miss Granger? *Where are they?*"

"They're safe in Australia! They're happy!"

"*What are you doing, Snape? I swear, you're not going to sleep for the next seventy years if you hurt her any further. I'll make what's left of your life a living hell, and then I'll turn you over to Shivvy.*" Weasley's rant blended with Granger's angry protest.

"They're happy? Happy without their daughter? How can that be?" he demanded.

"They don't remember me... they're better off without me." The anger seemed to drain out of her, and she collapsed back against the bench. "They're better off without me."

Just as quickly, his anger evaporated, as well. Weasley shut up. "Why? As I recall, they were proud of you and your accomplishments. I'm sure they'd be prouder still to know the woman you became."

She shook her head. "Mr Moody gave me a spell to use to send them away, to protect them from Voldemort. It wiped their memories completely, replacing them with the identities and life events of completely different people. He didn't tell me it was irreversible until after he'd relocated them to Australia."

"Damn him." Severus could feel Weasley nodding agreement beside him.

She sighed. "It was for their protection, I know that. I just wish there had been another way... You're right. They trusted me, and I destroyed them. It *was* necessary; we found their names on Umbridge's lists. But I can't just excuse it based on that, can I? If we begin to accept that the end justifies the means, then where does it stop? What do we become?"

"It doesn't stop. And we become Dumbledore. Or me." He paused. Weasley had nothing to add. "Listen, Granger, and listen well. I know how you feel. All you want, having destroyed those you loved, is to die. Dumbledore was disgusted by me when he saw me wallowing in my own guilt and pain and spite. And rightly so... I was indeed disgusting. The difference between you and me is that I had Dumbledore to force me to stay. I didn't run away from everything, however much I may have wanted to do so."

"No? What are you doing here now, then?"

"I came here to build something, Granger, not to die. I'm living my life. I can't say the same for you, though, can I?" he sneered.

"*For God's sake, Snape!*" Weasley was angry again. Severus ignored him.

"It distresses me to see a witch of your abilities...a woman with your potential...creeping away into oblivion." There. That sounded reasonable, didn't it?

"I don't know what you want from me." She was staring at her fingers again as they twisted helplessly in her lap.

"Too many have died, or have wasted their lives." "*Like you, Snape,*" Weasley jeered. *Yes. Exactly like me.* replied Inner Severus. "For now, I want you to find a reason to get up in the mornings that *matters*."

"I've just lost my job, and I'm not really qualified for anything," Hermione told her fingers.

"We're always looking for volunteers to assist us at the library, if you would be interested in helping out there."

She glanced up, a gleam of interest creeping into her eyes. Satisfied, Severus arranged for her to arrive in time for lunch on Monday and obtained her mobile number, providing his in turn. He watched as she walked to the edge of the park, turning only when she'd disappeared into the mass of people making their way to the Tube station.

As he began walking towards his exit, he snarled, "Was that *kind* enough for you, Weasley?"

A passing nanny looked at him, startled, and pushed her pram more quickly up the footpath.

Weasley, wisely, kept his silence.