

# Whom the Gods Annoy

*by richardgloucester*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

This was my submission for the SSHG summer 2010 Exchange, written to a prompt by Tribunicianveto. My wonderful Beta was Subversa.

## One: In which purple prose is no match for red wine

*Chapter 1 of 11*

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Wind-chimes tinkled in the warm breeze. Balmy air wafted between the pillars, stirring gossamer hangings to reveal glimpses of an electric blue sea far below, its surface diamond-studded and frothed with foamy lace. The pale stone of the terrace was warmed by the noontide sun, yet shielded from its furnace intensity by the white silk stretched overhead and draped like angels' wings between the view and the woman ignoring it. Impossible to define this woman's beauty with the rough tools of the writer's trade – yes, even the jeweller's implements of a poet would be as a pickaxe applied to filigree. As she paced the flags barefooted, barely seeming to graze them as she passed, her every movement bespoke ineffable grace; she sighed, and the moist breath escaping her ripe lips perfumed the air.

Her jewel-like eyes lit on the pair of doves that cooed on the balustrade, and they took off in a flurry of feathers. She smiled thinly – it seemed that the fate of the last pair that decorated the stonework had been a lesson well learned.

Glancing at the sun, she halted by an elegant mosaic table on which a selection of flasks and goblets gleamed. Somewhere, surely, it was after six o'clock. And anyway, who was there to gainsay her? There were none in authority over her, all her attendants were hiding from her or lolling down by the spring, and her husband was away. Again. Working. Of course. Her delicate hand hovered above the flasks as she considered her selection. Even that brainless, muscle-bound waste of space she'd once (or quite a few times, actually, let's be fair) taken as a lover to annoy her husband wasn't around. Oh, no – he couldn't be content with the affections of the most beautiful creature in creation. He had to go off chasing yet another bottle-blond bimbo with more tits than brain cells. What on earth, she asked herself, was the use in being Queen of Love when she was routinely left kicking her heels with boredom.

She raised one of the flasks to the light and admired the movement of ethereal colours within the glass. Same-old, same-old. She set it down and reached instead for a bottle with a picture of one of those funny bouncy animals on the label and a screw top. Sometimes humans really did know what they were doing. Sometimes. A glass of wine in her hand, she went to lean against a pillar and watch the sea doing what the sea always did. Poets – annoying, airy-fairy little fellows for the most part – tended to describe the sea as ever-changing. Not from her vantage point. Seen one calm day, seen them all. Seen one stormy wavescape, seen them all. She held the glass up and admired the wine's garnet glints, comparing the colour with the bright Mediterranean. And whatever excuses academics had been making for him for the last few centuries, Homer had been colour blind. She snorted and quaffed.

A little later, she stood limned against the sun, its rays gilding her hair and skin as she contemplated the depths of her swimming pool through a pleasant red wine haze.

The bottle dangled from one hand, and she cradled her wine glass against her cheek with the other while she contemplated her favourite mosaic through the undulations of several cubits of water. It was no good: even booze, too much sun, and psychedelic distortion couldn't alter the fact that she knew every last tessera better than her own reflection – and Narcissus only knew, she spent long enough looking at that.

She sighed and shrugged off the alcohol haze and the sunburn – pretending to be human always ended up being itchy and headachy. What she needed was a change of scene. She needed something completely different. And she needed a project. Her husband was always saying she needed a project, something that would really use her talents. Her chin firmed and her eyes took on a sparkle that outdid the waves far below. She was Goddess of Love, wasn't she? Well, she'd just have to find someone utterly unpromising who really, really needed some love and make sure he got it – whether he wanted it or not. And that would show *some gods* that she wasn't just there for decoration.

## Two: In Which Severus Becomes an Object of Affection

### Chapter 2 of 11

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

"... and you, Severus, are the ideal candidate to oversee the shaping of the next generation."

Severus had become so adept at tuning out the high voice, which had been boring on for hours in a monotonous sing-song, that he nearly missed that part of the Grand Plan. He'd been mentally humming the guitar solo from "Comfortably Numb" and planning an unpleasant and time-consuming errand for Wormtail so he could have his afternoon tea and crumpets in peace. He snapped back to reality so hard he was surprised nobody heard the twang.

"My Lord?"

"Don't be coy, Severus," Voldemort chided coquettishly. "Unless you think someone else here is better suited to the Headship?"

Severus made a show of tugging thoughtfully on his lower lip while surveying the DE High Command. Looking at his colleagues, he wondered how they'd managed to get this far – such a collection of mental, moral, and emotional castrati would be hard to find outside Broadmoor – but he supposed a willingness to cave in to every base impulse could take a person a long way. Just look at Berlusconi.

"My Lord, you realise that it will be nigh on impossible to work productively with the staff at Hogwarts? After the events of this summer ..."

Voldemort dismissed the matter with a wave of one spindly hand.

"If you don't feel you're up to it, Severus, then I am sure that amongst us there are others who feel themselves more than qualified to take on such a prestigious duty."

The Carrows were fidgeting like pinned puppies.

"My Lord, it is not a question of fitness or ability. I merely wished to point out that the task will be no sinecure for whomever takes it on. McGonagall and the others are formidable opponents, even within the constraints placed upon their actions."

"They *will* obey the rules, Severus."

Severus felt the uncomfortable twinge in his guts that meant he was about to start saving people again. It was a habit that was proving impossible to break, and usually gave him severe indigestion.

"And my Lord, taking responsibility for Hogwarts will unfortunately demand that I spend much less time at your side." *And therein lies its unspeakable charm*, added Severus silently, playing a mental game of chicken by looking Voldemort in the eyes while he thought it.

"Needs must, Severus, and I need you ... there."

*I win.*

He bowed his head regretfully, shooting a triumphant smirk at the Carrows as he did so.

"But I agree, you will not be safe on your own, and I could not bear to lose you." Voldemort laid his clammy fingers on Severus' sleeve. "So I will instruct the Minister to appoint Aleco and Amycus to the staff, just as soon as some positions become, shall we say, available."

*Bugger.*

"You are too kind, my Lord."

He went home to find Wormtail ensconced in his chair eating *his* chocolate biscuits. He grabbed the rat by the scruff of its collar and threw it out, telling it to buy Morpheus' Bane and not come back until he had some – a standard way for Potions Masters to lose apprentices for a few hours. There wasn't an apothecary in wizarding Britain who would crack and admit that Snape wanted coffee. He cleaned and disinfected his chair then went through to his immaculate kitchen to make tea. A vintage piece from the rock and roll era, the kitchen was nevertheless a place of beauty and comfort to him. He switched on the kettle, glad of the modifications which allowed it to run in a magical home. Five minutes later, he was nestled amongst his own cushions, sinking his fangs vengefully into an innocent bystander of a crumpet and allowing "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" to help the tea soothe his temper. Every time he thought he could achieve some fraction of wiggle room, just an iota of peace, somebody contrived to ruin it for him. His eyelids drooped, and his last waking thought was, *Thank Merlin for butter.*

Perhaps that was why he came to himself dreaming of the Kerrygold landscape. It was a nice place, with well-laundered cows and polished daisies. But Severus didn't generally do 'nice'. He became aware of far-away laughter and couldn't help but think it was directed at him. His face adopted the shuttered look he'd spent years perfecting, turning his eyes into black holes that took in everything and gave nothing as he swung round to see who had the temerity to giggle at him in *his* dreams. A woman was walking towards him, seeming to float on the grass-tips and flower petals. The sun was behind her, so that at first he could make out very little. She was petite, no – tall; slim, no – statuesque; blonde, no – redheaded; pretty, no – breathtakingly beautiful. And she was holding out her hands in his direction and laughing delightedly. He

turned round to see who was behind him.

"No, my dear! It is *you* who fills my heart with joy," the woman cooed.

He grimaced. He might have known she couldn't be perfect. Cooing really got on his wick.

"Very funny," he said. "What precisely about me renders you so ecstatic?"

"Why, you are exactly the person I was looking for!" This time her voice was firm and slightly husky.

He raised an eyebrow in self-defence.

"Another person who wants me to do something for them. Splendid. Even in my dreams I can't escape being useful."

"You misunderstand me, my love." She laughed, a low and throaty chuckle. "I am here for you, and indeed *here* is here for you, for your enjoyment."

"Then I must be particularly irritated with myself. The leaves on these daisies are inaccurate."

She waved her hand and the daisies corrected themselves.

"An impressive display of wandless magic, madam."

She moved closer and touched a fingertip to the turned-down corner of his mouth, then moved it to tip up his chin so he could look into her eyes. Severus gulped. So tall, so buxom, so vibrant ... this was a veritable Amazon.

"How dare you!" she snapped, her perfect, sapphire eyes blazing. "How dare you compare me to one of those butch, sexless, domineering ..."

"Oh, charming," snarled Severus. He stamped off. "I can't even escape fucking Legilimens in my own fucking fantasies..."

"Your language is uncouth, sir!"

"And what kind of cows don't leave any shit behind them?"

"You are over-precise in your observations! I happen to think it is a pretty landscape. You are ungrateful." Her voice had gone from husky to shrewish, and a glance over his shoulder told him that her arms were folded tightly across her impressive bosom.

"I seem to have worn out my welcome."

And with that he woke, his teacup cooling in his hands, and vowed never to nod off to Pink Floyd again.

\*

The second time he dreamed about her was after the Welcoming Feast.

The staff had no choice but to accept him as Headmaster after he was duly appointed by the Ministry, but there wasn't a single creature in the castle that regarded him with any favour, from his Deputy, McGonagall, who refused to address him unless it concerned business (and even then spoke to the air above his left shoulder, as if he were sporting an invisible hearing-ear parrot), to the gargoyle on the stairs, which showed a tendency to forget his passwords and ensured that the ride upwards on the staircase became predictably unpredictable.

Well, actually, there were inhabitants that would speak to him, but he'd rapidly taken to hiding in alcoves to avoid the Carrows and Argus Filch.

Damn if only he were able to let someone, one single person, know how much of a hero he was being. He'd caught onto Alecto's plans for the Muggle Studies section of the library quickly enough and helped her pack up the books, casting surreptitious charms to ensure their soft landing as she threw them into the crates, all the while with Irma Pince glaring and huffing to keep the tears at bay. He couldn't even tell her why he'd volunteered to be the one to get rid of her precious books. He said it would be appropriate to take them to a Muggle dump, and Alecto cackled lazily and let him get on with it. Oh, he'd made sure he had memories of tipping the heavy crates into a skip, but not before he'd swapped the contents for all the sordid pulp fiction he'd confiscated over the years.

He'd gone blue in the face inventing plausible arguments why Amycus couldn't have Filius' classroom.

He'd ensured that the Carrows had no entry to any House-specific areas save those of Slytherin, despite the fact that traditionally, all teachers were allowed everywhere. *And* he'd made sure he informed them of this 'unfortunate' state of affairs where the other staff could hear. Then, of course, his own eavesdropping revealed Minerva telling everyone that it must have been Dumbledore's doing before he died.

He'd done some very complicated wand-waving to make a replicate of the great volume that recorded all the students' and potential students' names to reveal only the pure-bloods. The original, with all its vulnerable contents, was under his bed.

And so it went on.

He stared out from his position on the uncomfortable cushion that had been sculpted by years of bearing Dumbledore's bony arse and decided that unsung hero was the worst job in the world. He could and did, in the privacy of his triple-warded and soundproofed shower sing it himself,

*(Mama, just killed a man.*

*Put a wand against his head,*

*Said "Avada"*

*Now he's dead...),*

but there was little comfort to be had from the knowledge that Beelzebub did indeed have a devil put aside for him.

"Pass the bottle," slurred Alecto, who was getting a head start.

His colleagues would barely look at him. What about the students? Their numbers severely depleted, leaving acreages of bare wood except at the Slytherin table, they seemed to have little trouble fixing their eyes on Headmaster Snape. Some of the Hufflepuffs seemed to have grown a backbone, if their stiff upper lips were any indication, though the majority shot him fearful glances; the Ravenclaws were, naturally, curious, dissecting him with speculative eyes; the Slytherins were smiling and fawning; and the Gryffindors, yes, the Gryffindors were glaring, of course. Their collective miff, however, lacked the focus to which he was accustomed. Without Weasley's rabbit-in-headlights gawp, Potter's aggression, and most of all, Granger's cool and intelligent challenge, all that Gryffindor could offer was a lot of teenage pouting. In the privacy of his own thoughts, he could admit that school would be less fun without the enjoyment of parrying Granger's questions and then taking points off for cheek.

He stood, spreading his fingertips on the tabletop. He leaned forward until his nails went white and the tendons stood out on the backs of his hands. Silence fell

immediately. No point in explanations, none in justifications, so he'd settle for a warning.

"Be aware that the Ministry has sanctioned a new regime of punishment for contravention of the school rules," he said neutrally. Perhaps those with a few brains would remember the last time the Ministry had taken a hand in the school rules, and that the Headmaster at the time had been active in undermining the policy ... "I advise you very strongly to acquaint yourselves with the rules in every detail, and to remain in your Houses after curfew. Now eat, then go to bed."

He himself ate very little, and went to bed early.

His dream-eyes opened to a view of a sparkling blue sea far below the small temple in which he stood. The temple was perched so precariously on its crag that he was rather glad this was a dream and there would be no messy splatting even if he did overbalance. It wasn't much of a temple just a circle of columns supporting a dome, but it was peaceful and offered a little shade against the bright sun. He eased himself down to sit with his shoulder resting against a column and his legs dangling over the drop. He noted idly that his feet were bare and that he was wearing some sort of silly tunic thing, mercifully black, which was at least comfortable in the hot breeze that lifted his hair. He closed his eyes and listened to the call of a gull far below and a cicada chirping somewhere nearby, perhaps in the myrtles that clung to the rocks.

"Is this more to your liking?"

The woman was smiling, but there was a slight 'it had damn well better be' look in her sapphire eyes.

"Very nice," said Severus, because it was.

He squinted up at her.

She was as he remembered, tall and shapely, the physique of a Roedean lacrosse captain softened by gauzy drapery that shifted in the wind and never quite revealed enough flesh. Her red hair was loosely bound back by a wreath of white roses that let soft tendrils fall to kiss her brow and neck. She seemed unconcerned by the searing light that fell on her pale skin. He became aware that his shins were crisping in the sun and retreated into his patch of shade, which had most inconsiderately for a dream shifted.

"Only 'nice'?" she threatened, plucking a rose from her hair and tossing it to him.

"Very nearly perfect," he said generously.

"Nearly."

"My gran used to say that everything could be improved if you thought about it hard enough."

"Your gran obviously never met me," said the woman. She settled herself gracefully next to him and ran a gentle finger up his forearm, leaning forward so that her wondrous bosom pressed lightly against him.

Severus wasn't used to this sort of thing. He swallowed.

"My gran would also say that you were no better than you ought to be," he squeaked.

The woman frowned, a little pucker gracing her alabaster forehead between the exquisite eyebrows that were just two shades darker than the locks of hair that were now brushing Severus' cheek and trembling lips.

"Your gran clearly didn't know the effect you have on women," she purred, her breath like honey and cinnamon on his mouth.

Severus felt this was a little too unlikely, even for one of his own fantasies.

"Are you feeling quite well, madam?" he enquired. He got to his feet so as to look down his nose at her. That this was a bad move became clear as he realised that the tunic had not come provided with underwear and that she was looking up it at his somewhat enthusiastic member. "Oh, Circe," he groaned.

Not the right thing to say.

"You have *me* right here, and you call for that *pig-loving bitch*?" snarled the woman. She jumped to her feet and advanced on him, backing him across the temple until his heel met a column, and he was forced to stop. "You speak that trollop's name when I am before you, ready to offer you all that I am? Consider wisely, o man, what your next utterance should be."

Her magnificent bosom was heaving a mere fraction of an inch from his nose, and her sapphire eyes flashed down at him, and Severus thought he might be in heaven.

And then his Carrow-alarm went off, telling him there was already a Hufflepuff in trouble.

\*

Hagrid, surprisingly, cottoned on rather quickly. To be fair, he'd have needed as much hair inside his head as out not to realise that almost every single time Severus gave a detention, he sent the culprits for a truly terrifying ordeal (tea and rock cakes) in the Forbidden Forest. Yet even with this suspicion firmly in place, Severus had to affect not to notice Hagrid's subtle wink, and hope that his hint would be taken.

One day, even the Carrows would start to wonder why the students came back looking so healthy.

Severus fretted about alternate punishments. There were only so many disgusting ingredients that needed preparation, and by February the school's Potions stores were in prime condition for the next five years. Writing lines all night made the children look wan and tired, which was good, as well as keeping them out of reach of certain members of staff. Dusting the books in the Restricted Section was quite a good one it left most people pale and trembling, even with Irma there to fight off the most violent tomes. And through it all, the whole school hated him and fought him.

He took to listening to The Smiths.

His dream-woman didn't much like the sound-track, which he carried with him to her temple one night.

"What is this Hades-hallowed keening?" she pouted. "Begone, foul airs!"

"Do you *mind*?" Severus straightened and glowered. He had managed to tug his tunic down far enough to tie it together between his legs. It was uncomfortable, and looked ridiculous, but at least it was some protection. "I was listening to that!"

"No you weren't, my sweet. You were wallowing in it." She walked round him, trailing her hand across his chest. He felt goose bumps rise all over his body at her touch.

"It helps me sleep."

"Not that I have noticed," she said tartly when he refused to relax into the bosom pressed against his shoulder blades. "You barely sleep at all, my hero." Gripping his upper arms, she pressed herself against him and lowered her lips to whisper in his ear. "Let me help you relax ..."

He jerked his head away.

"That's wet. And may I remind you, madam, of my grandmother's words. You are too forward. And I am not in the mood." He attempted unsuccessfully to free himself from her grip. "Release me."

There was a minute pause, and then he felt the air move across his sweaty back.

He turned round to find the woman standing at the far side of the temple, looking as forlorn as someone of six foot nine who makes Wonder Woman look like a pipe cleaner is able to look. Oh, for heaven's sake, there was even a crystal tear running down one damask cheek. Good grief, he hated weepy women.

She stretched one hand towards him.

"You have a heavy, dark, disliking eye," she said tremulously. She wiped the tear from her cheek. "What have I done that you despise me so?"

He sighed. If she thought that making him feel a complete heel was going to help, then she was sorely mistaken. Feeling like that was his life's work.

"You are very lovely, madam," he grumbled, "but I am far too preoccupied ..."

His words were cut off by her burning lips, and he found himself caught between a cold pillar at his back and the best boobs in creation against his chest. He realised that his feet were dangling in the air and his knot had come undone. He pushed hard and was dropped.

"But you called me lovely," she cried dramatically. "Oh, you are so obdurate! I do not understand you! The darkness of your eye inflames me, and yet you are unkind!" With that, she turned on the taps again and sank her face in her hands.

"Oh, Merlin," muttered Severus, making sure the breeze wasn't causing havoc with his hemline. "Time of the month." Then, more loudly, "Spare me the histrionics, would you? It's not as if I'm God's gift to women."

She looked up with a hungry expression.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered. "Look, just calm down, will you? Another time, maybe, when I'm a little less ... embroiled ... perhaps. Right now I just want to get some completely unexciting sleep, with completely unexciting dreams."

Advancing like a warship with her arms outstretched, she did not appear to be listening to a word.

This time he woke up when he backed right off the precipice.

\*

It became very nearly routine. She came on too strong, he fought off the temptation to give in – after all, he had quite enough of being everyone's toy when he was awake she pouted and cried, he wibbled, she pounced, he struggled, they called each other a few names and then settled down to a glass of wine and a game of draughts. She was pants at chess. She did turn out, however, to be rather good at listening to him pour out his tales of unnoticed valour and brilliance, and his complaints about idiot Dumbledore, idiot Voldemort, and cretinous Potter and his cohorts while he lay with his head pillowed on her lap and his eyes turned up to the magnificent vista of her chest.

He held out the promised completion of his dream scenario as his reward when all this was done.

Which was why he was really pissed off that he was sufficiently worn out not to notice Riddle's subtle immobilisation charm, so he couldn't take the anti-venin he'd prepared and instead had to lie spilling out his life on a filthy floor and listening to Potter's and Weasley's footsteps clattering away, returning to drag off the Granger girl while she was rummaging in his pockets (well, she was the brains of the party), and clattering off again while they shouted down her protests about remedies.

Learning too late to adopt a philosophical approach to life, Severus set himself to leaving it as peacefully as he could manage. Unable to feel most of his extremities, he simply assumed they were relaxed, and what pain there was from Nagini's bite had already receded. Shame he couldn't close his eyes and spend his last few moments in his dream. Poison-induced paralysis did present some disadvantages as a way of dying, he decided. Although it apparently also activated an attack of alliteration. He was just considering how long he could continue creatively criticising his circumstances (okay, technically, that didn't work, but he thought a dying man might stretch a point) when a piece of white gauze fluttered in his peripheral vision, and suddenly she was there, kneeling heedlessly in his blood and pressing her cool fingers to his neck. She leant down and kissed his clammy brow as she slipped an arm under his shoulders and cradled him against her body. There were worse ways to go, he supposed. He drew a long, shuddering breath and expelled his final, happy word.

"Bazoombas."

## Three: In which a portable anvil comes in handy

### *Chapter 3 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### **Three: In which a portable anvil comes in handy**

The anonymous glass-and-steel buildings of the Home Counties Technology Park squatted amid their landscaped lawns, radiating heat back at the late-July sun. Traffic was light at this time of morning, and there was no-one about but the postman, trudging back and forth between his van and a series of doors bearing company names that uniformly terminated in "sys", "com", "tec" or "tron". These were blank buildings. Buildings that emitted no sound. Buildings where pallid men with no dress sense got excited about microchips.

The postman slammed the back doors of the van, climbed into the driver's seat and drove away. A strain of anonymous pop music lingered with the exhaust fumes in his wake and faded into the hiss of a sprinkler.

Flip-flops slapped unevenly on the spongy tarmac, breaking the silence. A man in a frayed Hawaiian shirt and saggy jeans was limping along the pavement, his hands in his pockets. He paused from time to time to peer at the titles emblazoned on panels bursting from the lawn beside every entrance.

Despite the limp, he walked with palpable energy, his massive form shouldering the air aside, while the sunlight fell on his head and shoulders and crumpled from the impact.

He stopped outside the last building and read the sign: "Forge Technologies", with a hammer for a logo above the name "Prof. W. Elland" and a few dozen impressive-looking groups of letters. This seemed to be amusing, for he snorted a laugh, and was still chortling as he pushed open the door and wandered into a shady lobby. A young woman sat behind an ultra-modern steel desk, absorbed in a book of feminist diatribe.

She placed an envelope in her book to mark the place before giving him her attention. Plainly, she was not impressed.

"Can I help you?" she enquired frostily. The Professor was most insistent that she should not allow any interruptions to his work unless absolutely necessary. Her job, he explained, was to be the Cerberus at his gate. She wasn't flattered by the description.

"Is Elland in? Tell him John Smith's here to see him, would you, sweetheart?"

One hand on her book for moral courage, and imagining her other two slaving heads in place – visualisation was a prime tool in the construction of healthy self-esteem, according to her therapist – she bared her teeth. Nobody called her 'sweetheart' and got away with it.

"I'm afraid that Professor Elland ..."

The newcomer smiled, and she blushed. That was a smile full of power and promise, backed up by the twinkle of brown eyes above a battered nose and a curly beard.

"Just pop up and tell him I'm here, love. Run along, now."

She found herself obeying. How annoying. Where was Germaine Greer when a girl needed her? Still ... Hmmmm. Was it out of order to invite her boss's visitors for a drink?

She had long given up hope and gone home when Professor W. Elland and John H. Smith strolled out into the balmy air after several hours' stimulating discussion of the latest developments in semiconductors. Elland, also a burly man with an uneven gait, stretched hugely, straining the seams of his expensive suit jacket. He yanked the knot of his silk tie loose and twisted his top button open.

"Fancy a pint?" he asked, leading the way round the side of the building to where his car was parked.

"When have you ever known me to refuse?" replied the other. "Sweet!" he said admiringly, catching sight of the silver E-type.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Smith ran his hand along the car's flank and gestured for Elland to raise the bonnet. They stood a while in pleasant contemplation of the perfect twelve-cylinder V-12 engine.

"Some things just can't be bettered, can they?" said Smith. "You're a lucky bugger to be in this country, Wayland."

They closed the bonnet reverently and climbed in, silent for a moment to appreciate the purr of the motor.

"So, what's Apollo using these days?" Wayland asked as they turned onto the main road.

"He's still got the old quadriga for ceremonial occasions," said the other, "but generally he drives a Porsche. He gets me to service it, but they're all flash and no soul – not like this baby." He leaned his elbow across the top of the door and patted the E-type again. "So – where are you taking me, now I've solved all your knotty technological problems?"

"As if you could, Hephaestus," chuckled Wayland. "To the White Horse Inn. Decent beer, and we can look in at the smithy, seeing as it's Friday."

"People still leave you their horses to shoe?" Hephaestus was surprised.

"Only one or two of the old wizarding families in the area. Mostly it's just local lads with their motorbikes. Had a lovely vintage Triumph last weekend. Tuned up a treat."

A couple of hours and a couple of pints later, the two gods strolled along the path under the summer stars, one with his hands in his pockets again, the other with his Armani jacket slung over one shoulder and shirt sleeves rolled up.

"So your wife didn't feel like making the trip, then?"

Hephaestus harrumphed.

"Wasn't there last time I went home. Left a note to say she'd got some sort of project in hand. I pity the poor mortal ..."

"You never know, mate, she might actually be trying to do someone a favour."

"Rather than following her own whims? Why should she break the habit of eons? Never mind. You not got a girlfriend at the moment? That secretary of yours is quite tasty."

Wayland shuddered theatrically.

"Much too skinny. I like a good pair of hips on a woman, a little flesh. You know – something that says she knows how to make a good meal and enjoys eating it too."

"Traditionalist."

"What's wrong with that? Ah – here we are. No customers tonight, though. Come in – I'll show you around."

They slipped between the neolithic stones and through the dimensional portal into a neat forge, the fires banked down and all the tools perfectly arranged. Wayland slung his jacket across the anvil and went to fetch a bottle of whisky while his guest examined an unfinished filigree tunic that lay glinting on one of the benches.

"That's a commission for the royal family – it'll stop anything: bullets, knives, you name it. Oh, what's this?"

An owl ghosted through the open doorway and dropped a scroll into Wayland's hand.

"Message from one of Athena's girls?" The owl bobbed its head and flew off.

Hephaestus sipped his whisky.

Wayland tossed him the parchment. "Fancy a holiday? That wizarding school in Scotland's in need of some very fancy wrought iron gates. The sort that'll impress the kilt off anyone who sees them and be able to bear the weight of some very strong magic." He looked wistful. "It's ages since I did any wrought iron work."

"Me too," said Hephaestus with a grin. "Back to basics. None of this sub-molecular stuff that makes my eyes cross. Just good old fire and muscle and metal and art." He looked round at the racks of tools. "Shall I help you pack?"

"We'll need the Range Rover for this," Wayland answered. "Good job I've got a portable anvil."

# Four: In which Ron discovers that popularity isn't all it's cracked up to be

Chapter 4 of 11

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

## Four: In which Ron discovers that popularity isn't all it's cracked up to be

Kingsley really had gone all out with the celebrations. Despite the remaining scaffolding, Hogwarts was looking good. The grounds were immaculate and colourful thanks to Professor Sprout and her team of garden elves, abetted by Grawp, who had cheerfully agreed to pull the massive lawn rollers. Not far from Dumbledore's restored tomb, a dais had been erected and decorated with bunting that fluttered and snapped in the brisk breeze. Flitwick was still fussing with the amplification charms the Ministry had demanded for the presentations when the first guests began to arrive. The chatter of voices swelled to drown out the birdsong as people took their places to watch the Order of Merlin ceremony.

In the pavilion set aside for award recipients, Hermione twitched Ron's collar straight.

"Pack it in, 'Mione," he snapped. "You've already straightened it three times. It's straight."

"You don't get to receive an Order of Merlin, First Class, every day, Ronald. I just want you to look your very best," she replied.

"Well, in that case, I don't know why you couldn't have made more of an effort to look the part yourself," he said, looking askance at her defiantly Muggle floral summer dress and linen jacket. "Mum says ..."

"I've already heard your mum's opinion, thank you." She strode off a few paces and took a deep breath. "Several times. But if there's one thing we fought this war for, it's for Muggle-borns to be fully accepted into wizarding society ..."

"Yes, but ..."

"And I think I look nice," she added, examining her reflection in a mirror thoughtfully provided by the organisers.

"You do, dear," said the mirror. "Those colours really bring out your pretty brown eyes."

"Thank you," said Hermione with dignity. "You see, Ronald? Now, where's Ha"

"You'll *never* guess who I've just seen!" Harry burst into the pavilion so abruptly that he had to grab Ron's robes to keep himself upright. Hermione sighed. Ron's collar was crooked again, and she was fairly sure she'd heard something rip.

"Hello, Harry."

"Snape!" he said to their astonished faces.

"Bloody hell!" said Ron predictably.

"Are you sure?" said Hermione. "Snape? Oh, that's *brilliant*! Where is he? I'd heard rumours he'd survived, but then nobody saw him, so I thought they were just rumours, and, oh *Harry*! I'm so relieved!"

"Why, Miss Granger?" enquired a voice in disparaging tones they all recognised. "Because my continued existence gets you all off a charge of manslaughter by negligence?"

Staring at the outline of the Potions Master framed against the blazing sunlight beyond the entrance, Hermione blushed crimson.

"It wasn't like that," Harry rushed to say. "You see ..."

"Spare me your excuses, Mr Potter. The only reason I refrain from pressing charges against you three is that I would have to endure days, even weeks, facing you across a court room. I had quite enough of that in class."

"Resurrection hasn't changed you, I see, sir," said Granger, sounding oddly pleased about it.

"I still retain all my faculties, if that's what you mean. Stop gawping, Weasley. And straighten your collar." Snape half-turned to look over his shoulder. "Ah, there you are." He stepped back and held the tent flap open wide.

There was no hope for the closing of Weasley's mouth, nor Potter's, as Snape's guest, ducking gracefully, entered. This was a woman who would never simply come into a room. She entered. Hermione's jaw snapped shut audibly. Three pairs of awestruck eyes travelled from the elegantly varnished toenails peeping through high-heeled sandals, up and up and up past clinging white robes to here Harry's and Ron's eyes came to a halt a swelling bosom, a perfect column of white throat, and the most beautiful face ever seen on earth, all crowned with a tumble of glorious auburn hair.

Hermione, who until that moment had been feeling tolerably content with her appearance, drew herself up to her full five foot three and made a stab at a social smile. The woman returned a curve of her luscious lips, putting a hint of a dimple in her cheek, just in the place corresponding to where Hermione could feel a spot developing. There was an awkward pause, during which the urge to fidget made itself known. The silence stretched a little longer. Hermione gave Snape an exasperated stare.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said, extending her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms ... ?"

The hand that took hers in a friendly grasp was large, but slim and graceful, with long, slender fingers and soft, smooth skin.

"Likewise, Miss Granger," the woman replied in a sultry voice that sent shivers through the boys. "I am Aph"

"Affectionately known as ..." Snape cut in abruptly, repossessing his companion's hand. It was so difficult to imagine Snape being affectionate about anyone that the boys came to their senses and paid attention.

"As ..." He frowned for a second but barely missed a beat. "Jess. Jessica."

"Lapanne," he added. "Jessica Lapanne. The lady responsible for my resumed good health, when others were, shall we say, indifferent to its continuation."

"There was a lot going on ..." Harry was flustered. "We thought you were ..."

"You looked pretty dead to me," Ron said unhelpfully.

"And your diagnostic skills are notable, are they, Mr Weasley?" Snape paused. "Nothing to add, Miss Granger? No excuses?"

Hermione thought back to the vicious argument she'd had with the Aurors, battling against their refusal to search further for Snape when she'd discovered his body missing from the Shack. She drove away the memory of shame and disgust at the sensation of cold, half-congealed blood on her fingers as she searched the Shack for clues. She recalled swallowing her revulsion sufficiently to ask Lucius Malfoy to use his resources to look for his friend.

"What would be the point?" she said.

\*

McGonagall had to break out her third-best whisky in order to re-gruntle a Minister most definitely disgruntled by having his ceremony overshadowed. It couldn't really be blamed on the people in question, who had behaved in a thoroughly unexceptional manner throughout, but Kingsley was dead set on blaming them, because otherwise he'd have to blame everyone with eyes to see and a tongue to whisper with. Currently, he was also trying hard to blame Minerva, but after half a bottle of the hard stuff, he wasn't sure which of the three or four Minervas he was seeing was the ringleader, so he was leaning (rather more than metaphorically) towards blaming the Fates.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," said a husky voice in his ear. "They're not very good at taking criticism."

He managed to focus sufficiently to recognise Severus Snape's companion, that Miss Something who was definitely at the bottom of all the ... definitely at the bottom of ... definitely ... Merlin, she was gorgeous. How had Snape done it? Kingsley decided to go to sleep. Minerva gently repossessed her bottle from his slack fingers and left him to snore peacefully in the avocado dip.

"Silly boy never could take his booze," said the headmistress, swaying just a wee fraction from the perpendicular. She linked her arm through Snape's and patted his sleeve in the fashion of assertive maiden aunts everywhere. "It's so lovely to see you looking so well, Severus. Just lovely. And I understand we have this charming lady to thank?" She peered up past the brim of her hat at Miss Lapanne, who was sampling the cheese and onion crisps with evident enjoyment. "Lapanne ..." she mused. "I don't believe I recognise the name?"

"No, I don't believe you do," said the lady blandly. "Your castle is most impressive, Headmistress. Do tell me something about it."

McGonagall allowed herself to be diverted, but not into the track intended.

"I can tell you all you wish to know, Miss Lapanne, during the many evenings we will be able to share once you've helped me persuade Severus here to resume his post on the staff ..."

Severus rolled his eyes and tried to repossess his arm.

Some distance away, Hermione and Ginny were observing Snape and his consort converse with the Headmistress. In truth, the girls would have preferred to wander through the gardens meeting old friends and planning the future, but with Harry and Ron apparently transfixed by the spectacle, they were obliged to tag along or feel responsible for their swains doing something stupid and embarrassing.

"How's he done it?" Ron asked for the hundredth time.

"Dunno, mate," Harry shrugged for the hundredth time.

"I mean he's such an ugly git," opined Ron, for the hundredth time.

"Harry, Ron! Stop it! You're acting like she's a bloody Veela or something! I can't imagine the poor woman wants to be stared at constantly by every male in Scotland!" snapped Hermione.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ginny drily.

"And for all we know, she might find an informed mind and intelligence and interesting conversation attractive!"

"Oh, come on, 'Mione," said Ron without looking at her. "Who could possibly go for that sort of a package?"

Hermione snarled wordlessly and stamped off to appropriate a bottle of the Ministry's champagne. During its perusal, Professors Flitwick and Vector came to her with an appealing proposition that mended her mood sufficiently to compel sharing the news with her friends. She grabbed a fistful of champagne flutes and another bottle and returned to find Harry and Ron no longer just staring at Ms Lapanne but horror of horrors attempting to flirt with the poor woman.

To do her credit, she was taking a blow-by-blow account of Ron's try-out with the Cannons in very good part, only yawning slightly, while Snape stood by, gleefully looking as though he was keeping a running total of points lost to Gryffindor. Ginny was stoically squashing every single one of Harry's attempts to elaborate the finer points of Quidditch strategy. She accepted a glass with a grim smile. Hermione served Ms Lapanne with a mouthed "Sorry" before tugging at Ron's sleeve.

"Ron, I've got some good news," she said firmly.

"Just a minute, Mione, I haven't got to the good part yet!" His eyes remained fixed on Miss Lapanne's bosom in the apparent belief that it was fascinated by his seventh amazing save.

"Ron ..."

"And then I ..."

"Ronald."

"Mr Weasley," drawled Snape, "do you really think it appropriate to flirt with *my* girlfriend when your attention is so clearly required by *yours*?"

"Oh, it's quite all right, Mr Snape," replied Hermione, bestowing a full glass and a warm smile on him. "Ronald doesn't have a girlfriend." Even Ron noticed that one. "Not any more." She sipped her wine and added contemplatively: "In fact, I'm not sure he deserves any success with women, the way he behaves."

"Do you really believe so?" enquired Ms Lapanne, sounding genuinely interested. She exchanged a glance with Snape, whose lips curled, but before she could say

anything more, McGonagall returned with two newcomers in tow.

"Here we are, Severus!" carolled the Headmistress, full of the joys of whisky, tra-la. "These are the gentlemen who are constructing the new gates! Severus has agreed to consult about embedding the protection charms," she stage-whispered to Hermione. "Wasn't that nice of him?"

Hermione thought Snape was looking anything but nice as he went to some pains to ensure even distribution of his sneer at Ron, Harry, and McGonagall's friends. For some reason, the beautiful Ms Lapanne was scowling petulantly at them, too, though for the life of her, Hermione couldn't see why. They looked perfectly friendly to her. Rather on the large and muscular side prop forward and then some but one couldn't help the way one was built. They loomed and bulked, taking up half the field while they shook hands and talked about the weather. Hermione decided that her incipient dislike of Ms Lapanne was justified when she snatched her hand away from the one called Elland and wouldn't even say hello to Smith.

"Smith the smith!" said Ron, pleased at his own wit.

"Oh how droll," said Lapanne, getting in a whisker before Snape. Ron flushed.

Hermione couldn't help but agree that Ron was making an ass of himself, but was nevertheless glad that Smith said kindly, "It's funny the first time you hear it, though." She was even more grateful when Snape covered the awkward pause with a query about how the craftsmen were tempering the iron to bear magic.

"Now, now, Severus," said McGonagall. "No shop talk on a holiday. I just wanted to introduce you all. Hermione, I see from the champagne " Hermione had completely forgotten the glass in her hand " that Filius and Septima have spoken to you. You've accepted? I'm so glad, dear. Now, Mr Elland, I do believe you wanted me to find Professor Sprout for you."

"She's quite a wench, that one," he affirmed.

Hermione and her friends couldn't help but giggle, and even Snape's eyes gleamed, but Lapanne sneered.

"And you, Mr Smith?" she said coldly. "You have no other ... projects ... to pursue?"

"None, I am sure, to compete with the importance of yours, my lady," he answered. "I am but a humble craftsman."

Snape caught Hermione in the act of raising an eyebrow in tandem with his. He frowned instead.

"Well, if that's the case, perhaps Severus can take me to find some more stimulating conversation," ordered Ms Lapanne.

"He seems to be very well-trained," observed Smith as Severus offered his arm.

"Merely well-mannered," snarled Snape as rudely as he could.

"Perhaps the little boys can tell you~~all~~ about Quidditch," added the lady. "I understand some people enjoy that sort of thing." She yanked Snape round and the pair of them stalked off.

"*Well!*" said the Headmistress.

\*

Hermione might have regretted the passing of something in her life, had she not been too busy to notice that she had seen nothing of her friends since the day of the awards ceremony. For two months, she had been up to her eyebrows in a programme of advanced studies in Charms and Arithmancy, specially designed to catapult her straight into the Masters programme at Flamel College, Oxford. A few hours acting as teaching assistant to her mentors were as nothing compared to the load of research work they piled on her, augmented by her special project aiding the smiths with the new school gates. At first, she was a little nervous of them, bluff and enormous as they were, but she soon forgot her qualms in the joy of calculating the exact temperature fluctuations during forging to temper the metal to flex with the enmeshed defensive magic in such a way as to render it stronger under attack; or the effort of weaving the subtlest of distraction charms into the subatomic structure of the iron. She came to appreciate the artistry with which the two men blended beauty and utility. And, though she referred to them as men and interacted with them as she would with any wizard with whom she worked, she was doubly intrigued because she was very sure they weren't actually wizards. As to what they were, she had suspicions, but the right moment to ask never seemed to materialise.

It was an evening in early November and Hermione was helping Smith clear up the day's detritus. Elland had been dismissed to bid a prolonged and probably x-rated farewell to Professor Sprout before returning to his business in the south. Darkness had fallen and the night air was frigid, but Hermione was warm, replacing a selection of tools in their racks near the fire. She enjoyed the clink of each chisel and hammer settling into place, like a melody against the accompaniment of hiss-and-crackle from the flames. She slipped the last pair of pliers into its holder and turned to find Smith watching her intently.

"You're getting it," he said. "I'll start teaching you how to inlay the filigree tomorrow."

Hermione beamed at him.

"Really?" Every part of the gates was to be inlaid with elaborate designs built from fine wires, themselves complex structures of many metals and incantations coils of them, the product of Hermione's own painstaking labour, were stacked on the benches at the side of the barn-like structure the Headmistress had had erected for the work. They gleamed in the shadows. "Oh, Mr Smith! This is so ... so ... *brilliant!* Thank you!" She bounced up and down in her excitement.

"Such a display of maturity, Miss Granger."

Smith turned a grinning face to greet Snape, who stepped into the warm forge-light and stripped off his gloves. He held his fingers near the fire for a minute, then started to unwind several feet of scarf from around his face and neck.

"I like to see an apprentice show enthusiasm for her work," rumbled Smith. "I was just about to heat some spiced wine, if you want to join us? Miserable climate to be out working on the walls."

Miserable was indeed how Snape looked as he began to divest himself of his layers. Hermione hung his scarf, hat, cloak, coat, underneath coat and fleece jacket on a peg and set two stools near the furnace. She herself preferred to perch on the anvil when it wasn't in use. Smith warmed a jug of wine by the simple expedient of thrusting a red-hot poker in it, and doled out three mugsful. Snape wrapped his fingers round his drink and inhaled the fragrant steam. He raised an eyebrow.

"I added more cinnamon and sugar, and reduced the cloves," said Hermione. "As you suggested." She sipped. "Though personally I think this amount of sugar gives a pronounced caramelised taste after the poker goes in, and I'm not sure I like that. And I think next time I might try some cardamom, too."

"Stop trying to impress me, Miss Granger," said Snape without rancour, for a change. "You're not my apprentice."

"Don't flatter yourself, sir. If I *were* your apprentice I'd probably be spicing it with arsenic."

Smith guffawed. Snape hid his nose in his drink, though Hermione thought she might have seen a bit of a kink to his thin lips.

"So how is the inspection coming on?" Smith asked.

"Slowly. Some of the damage goes foundation-deep, and it's causing some unraveling of the original wards. I'm going to have to do a lot of research ..."

Hermione leaned forward eagerly.

"Not enough on your plate already?" Snape asked sarcastically.

She was spared answering by an unexpected interruption.

"Oy, Snape! There you are!" Ronald Weasley practically fell through the doorway in his hurry. "They told me up at the school you might be here. I need your hee!lllpp ..."

Snape was winding up for a really choice put-down when Weasley suddenly caught sight of Hermione and a peculiar change came over his face. Nobody in the forge had ever seen such a clear superimposition of eagerness over despair it was a painful sight. Weasley was plainly struggling not to say another word, but at the same time he barreled forward in an embarrassingly puppyish fashion and seized hold of Hermione's hand, managing to spill half her drink.

"Ronald! What?"

"Hermione!" He cast a pleading look at Snape before his eyes were forced back to Hermione's disapproving face. "I have to tell you ..." He tried to clamp his teeth together, but the effort was too great. Hermione tried to free herself and back away. "Mione! I ... I played really well for the Cannons reserves last Saturday! I made a few good saves, but one was absolutely spectacular, you see, what happened was ..."

"You came all the way here after more than two months of silence just to tell me about Quidditch?" Hermione was disgusted.

"You should have seen me, Mione! The Quaffle was coming in a curve really deceptive and had a really wicked spin to it, and ..."

"Ron, you have no idea just how not interested I am," said Hermione stiffly. "I'll be off up to the castle now, I think," she informed the other two men.

"Don't forget to have a bath before dinner, Miss Granger," said Snape. "You look like ..."

"A blacksmith!" finished Smith.

"I'm honoured!" she smiled. "Ron, if you can find another topic ..."

"And I cleared it with a sweeping kick," said Ron, tears standing in his eyes.

"Ron?" Now she was concerned.

Snape was looking closely at the boy. "This may be a matter for me to deal with," he murmured. "A curse of some kind, I think."

"A curse? Ron, who ..."

"Mione, you should have seen my team-mates!" he sobbed. "They think I'm a genius!"

"Go, Miss Granger." Snape bundled her out of the door into the bitter night.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" she heard Ron say. That hurt, she had to admit to herself, as she turned her back to the wind and allowed it to push her back to the castle.

Nevertheless, she sought out Snape after dinner. He wasn't best pleased to be accosted before he returned to wherever it was he went when he wasn't inventing sarcastic put-downs to Minerva's continued efforts to re-recruit him.

"What?" he snapped.

"Well, what's Ron's curse?"

"On preliminary examination, Miss Granger, I'd say, his curse consists of limited talent in most areas of life, a nosy ex-girlfriend who sees him as little more than an interesting experimental subject " Hermione coloured at that. " an enormous family who forget he exists most of the time, too much fame with too little cause, and someone's made sure that all he can do when there's an eligible young female in the vicinity is talk about his sporting achievements. It's quite clever, really."

"Oh, Merlin. Poor Ron he's not really all that good at Quidditch. So I understand why he wants help, but why yours? He can't stand you. No offence."

"Plenty taken."

Hermione grinned.

"It seems he's managed to confuse the entire MLE, and he's on the run from the Unspeakables because they want to dissect him. Well," Snape added, "those he hasn't bored to tears want to dissect him; the rest just want to stuff a Beater's bat sideways up his ..."

"And you're his last hope."

"A vain one, I am not exactly devastated to admit. But your friend Smith seems to think he can help a bit and has taken young Mr Weasley under his wing. Fortunately for me, as the less I have to do with your little friends the better."

Snape finished fastening his layers of outdoor clothing, crammed his balaclava over his head and opened the wicket door. An icy blast whistled through, and Hermione hurried to shut the panel behind him, wondering when it was he'd become quite so nesh, where it was he went, and why these were yet more questions she somehow never got round to asking.

\*

Three weeks later, Hermione hurried down for her afternoon session at the forge with that day's edition of the *Prophet* tucked under her arm. The work she was doing was certainly changing her, she reflected, jogging the half mile easily. She was fitter than she'd ever been, stronger because the smiths insisted that she do some part at least of the heavy work as well as the painstaking filigree, and less obsessive about spending every spare minute with her nose in a book. Sometimes, what a problem needed was that one should simply take the time to *look* at it, rather than haring off to find answers before one even had the questions properly formulated. She would never admit it to anyone, but a few months wielding a hammer had probably taught her a more important lesson than seven years of school work.

All of which was why she had spent her lunch hour staring silently at the photos in the *Prophet's* society pages.

**RONALD WEASLEY: THIS SEASON'S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR** announced the headline, above pictures of Ron with assorted girls, posing with two Veela draped round him, sharing cocktails with Pansy Parkinson, of all people, and in the latest shot, looking vaguely hunted while the opposition's cheerwitches jostled to be closest to him in the photograph.

*Your faithful reporter, Rita Skeeter, has been wearing herself to the bone trailing the ever-more-popular friend of The Boy Who Lived from one nightclub to the next. Young Mr Weasley has become quite the hit this autumn, always willing to share his tales of Quidditch prowess and what other kinds? - with his adoring tangirls. Mr Weasley, we*

find, has blossomed into a young man of great charm now that he is out from under Mr Potter's shadow.

Rita finished by promising her readers a full-colour account of her exclusive interview with Ron, to be held over drinks and dinner at a popular London restaurant.

Clearly, Ron was still talking about his sporting exploits. Equally clearly, something had happened to tweak the curse sufficiently to make him a babe-magnet. Snape was consistent in his denial of any knowledge or responsibility, even on the evening when he finally declared she'd got the spice mixture just right. So the answer obviously lay with Smith, who was good at not answering questions. Spreading the *Prophet* out on his work bench just got her a humorous look and an irresistible distraction in the form of a technique for blending ancient languages while setting the charmed inlays so that attempts to break the spells would be thwarted by the hypercomplexity of their construction. They were deep in a discussion of the possible extension of the theory to include simultaneous casting by more than one magic-user using interwoven cadences as well as languages when Hermione became aware that the last of the newspaper was curling into black ash on the fire. By then, it didn't really seem to matter.

She thought Ron looked very tired in the Sunday supplement's feature.

At the winter solstice, Minerva came to witness the planting of the gateposts and to set the Head's seal on each one. She was quite entranced with the spoken music of the incantations and went on at length about publications and kudos for the school until Elland, who had returned to Hogwarts for the occasion, begged her to take him up to the school to see Pomona. They had moved off a few paces when she stopped, pulled a copy of the newspaper from her cloak pocket, and walked back to hand it to Hermione.

"I'm so sorry you won't be able to visit Mr Weasley in hospital over Christmas, my dear," she said sympathetically.

Hermione grabbed the paper.

"Arthur's ill?" she gasped. "Oh, no!"

"No, it's Mr Ronald Weasley who is unwell!" McGonagall was surprised. "Didn't you know, Miss Granger?"

Hermione flushed. "We don't have that much contact these days, Professor," she said, hunting through the paper. She couldn't see much in the December dusk, so she returned to the forge, where she finally found out that Ron was in St Mungo's being treated for exhaustion and stress, and was not able to receive any unmarried female visitors. Or, apparently, wizards of a certain persuasion as had been discovered thanks to an unfortunate incident shortly after admission. Mr Weasley was under strict instructions to avoid all relationships of an intimate kind for the next six months to one year.

Snape and the smith were celebrating a job well done when Hermione carefully laid down the paper. She turned to face them, her hands on her hips. She ignored the glass of scotch that was offered to her.

"Okay, Smith," she said. "What did you give him?"

"Just a belt," he replied with a shrug. "A simple belt."

"Simple."

"With a pretty buckle. It's hardly my fault if he couldn't work out how to take it off, is it?"

Snape was quick to catch on. "Poetic justice, wouldn't you say, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, stop sniggering!" Hermione snapped. "Both of you."

## Five: In which Severus' Gran expresses an opinion

### Chapter 5 of 11

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### Five: In which Severus' Gran expresses an opinion

Severus checked that his underpants were firmly in place once he'd changed into his tunic. The goddess's assurances about respecting his personal dignity were not, he knew from experience, to be relied upon. Guarding his shreds of dignity also meant that he spent a good few minutes neatly hanging up his suit, robes, and heavy outer garments. It made the nymphs pout that they were not permitted to serve his every need as their mistress had commanded, but Severus was adamant. His Gran had told him that a man was no man if he couldn't do for himself, and by now, everybody on the rocky promontory knew that old Mrs Snape's word was law.

And though Severus was in most ways very appreciative of the fact that he could go back to a sunny Greek isle and a pair of affectionate arms, a mouth made for kissing and a body made for ... It nevertheless discomfited him that his Gran, somewhere, was giving a sharp sniff over the fact that this no-good female was so eager to please him in every way that he was losing his independence. "Fat lap-dog" was the term she'd always used for men like that. Severus took to eyeing his belly uneasily and made certain he got a goodly amount of exercise.

"My love," purred Aphrodite, rising sinuously from her couch. The swan she had been feeding waddled off to the pool and plopped inelegantly into the water. "Come and sit with me! I have had your favourite delicacies prepared, and you shall take them from my fingers and wine from my lips."

Severus felt a perverse longing for soggy chips served in pages of *The News of the World*.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "Doesn't it ever rain here?"

It was night, but a hot breeze was ruffling the draperies. He poured himself a glass of water and followed the swan. He sat on the edge of the pool, dangling his feet in the water and looking out over the shifting shimmer of moonlight on the black sea far below.

The goddess laughed. She signalled her attendants to bring a cushion and settled herself behind him so she could massage his shoulders.

"So disagreeable, Severus! Has that terrible girl been annoying you?" He shook his head, beginning in spite of himself to turn to jelly. "My husband, then?"

"Not at all. I get on rather well with him. Which is unexpected, considering the rather ... awkward ... situation my liaison with you creates."

"That bothers you?" She was now massaging his scalp and frankly there was nothing on the face of the earth that was going to bother him right at that moment.

"Not if he's not bothered."

"He's used to it." Her tone was a little ruthless, but Severus decided that, giving the matter due consideration, he could think about that another time – when he was capable of thought. Aphrodite insisted that he wear the silly tunic largely on the grounds that it was an easy-access garment, and she was busy accessing. She stood and pulled Severus to his feet. Looking lustfully up into her blue eyes, Severus supposed he should be grateful she didn't just tuck him under her arm and carry him off, the way she had that Adonis chap. And look what a sticky end he'd made of things. No point resisting. None at all. Oh, he loved the way her flimsy dress just fell off when she wanted it to, catching just slightly on her nipples and slinking over her hips.

Later, he stared frowning up at the canopy of the bed. Aphrodite slept peacefully at his side, her curves taking on a silver sheen in the moonlight. In repose, her face took on a sweetness it rarely showed waking, when she was plotting, persuading, wheedling, weeping, sulking or smiling. It disturbed him that what she thought she wanted while she was awake made her less happy than she could be. But then, he reflected, wasn't that the case for everyone? So tough titty, and he'd enjoy it while the going was good. Being a goddess's plaything wasn't all bad.

"Lap-dog," said his Gran.

He swung his legs out of the bed and sat up. He had work to think about. He hummed tunelessly as he padded down the narrow pathway to the place he was allowed to store his clothes. He sat on a rock facing the rising sun to pull on his wellies – it was snowing at Hogwarts – and found jolly words spilling from his lips in a Christmassy tumble: "These boots are made for walking, And that's just what they'll do. One of these days these boots are going to walk all over you, dum dum dum dum dum dum dum ..."

## Six: In which Harry isn't Charming

*Chapter 6 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### Six: In which Harry isn't Charming

Ministry shindigs weren't really Severus' preferred way of spending his free time, but the general consternation at his continued survival and apparent happiness had been so enjoyable that he was rather looking forward to rubbing everyone's noses in it again. Even wading through snow for hours, poking his nose, wand, and a variety of diagnostic spells at the damaged walls couldn't cool his anticipation of the Boxing Day ball. It would be especially pleasing to be courted by the Department of Mysteries and the New Magic Committee over the rumours he had planted about his work at Hogwarts. He was in the middle of an ongoing argument with Granger about how to publish without revealing too much of what they were doing. It was fun baiting her, too, so he decided to go and do some more of it before heading off.

Although it was only three o'clock, the usual sounds of hammering, grunting and swearing were absent from the forge. It was the first time, too, that Severus had seen the fire so low. The air within was rapidly cooling, and Granger, engaged in sweeping metal filings and ash from the floor, was sporting a heavy jumper against the encroaching chill. Navy blue did not suit her. She looked pale and out of sorts when she looked up to see who was blocking the light.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Tetchy, Miss Granger. Surely the gates are not finished?" All the tools were neatly away, the plans rolled up in leather tubes to be transported to the security of the Headmistress's office, and the completed sections of the gates were stored at the back of the forge under dust sheets.

"I am being obliged to take a holiday, since it's Christmas," growled Hermione. "Move, would you?" She swiped at his legs with the broom. "And Smith has let McGonagall persuade him to give me some 'well-earned time off'." She mimicked a prissy Edinburgh accent.

"So you are going home to eat mince pies and ..."

Hermione threw the broom into a corner and gave him an evil glare.

"Make yourself useful," she ordered and thrust the plans into his arms while she grabbed her coat and shut the heavy double doors, locking and warding them ferociously. "Thank you," she snarled. Her futile attempt to repossess her work resulted in a brief tug of war and a flounce that Severus, a master of the art, found it in himself to admire.

He followed her up the path, curious as to why she was in such an almighty strop.

She had a good head of steam going and beat him to the gargoyle, though she did stop and wait there. The gargoyle regarded her nervously as she tapped her foot.

The password, "Petticoat tails," came out as the antithesis of twee Scottish dainties. The stairs started to rise with alacrity, and there was a definite cringe from their guardian as Hermione stamped past.

McGonagall's door swung open without any need for knocking to reveal the Headmistress taking a civilised tea with Smith, who looked bizarre in Hawaiian shirt and leather apron, his bulk threatening destruction to a delicate chintzy armchair. The warmth and golden glow of the room were a shocking contrast to the bitter cold of the grounds and the grey chill of the castle corridors. Severus and Hermione both blinked at the heat and the subtle perfume of Earl Grey. The crackle of flames in the hearth and the tinkle of china and silver completed a picture of dainty homeliness that should have brought a smile to anyone's face but Severus was never one for smiling if he could help it, and Hermione looked as though her teeth were better left un-bared for the present.

"Severus! What a delightful surprise! And Hermione, I'm glad you've decided to join us for tea after all."

Hermione, lips pursed, pulled the plans out of Severus' hands and rounded the Headmistress' desk to drop them in an ornate umbrella stand that already contained a broomstick, a purple parasol with a parrot's-head handle, several bamboo canes, a narwhal horn encrusted with jewels, and a bent poker. The parrot's head blinked as she then stalked to the fireplace and flopped down into a chair, all without saying a word. McGonagall let it pass with a shake of her head and held out her hand to Snape.

"Was there anything in particular you needed to discuss before the break, Severus, or is this purely a social call? May I tempt you with some shortbread?"

"I merely came to wish you a pleasant holiday, Professor," he replied, amused at Granger's evident displeasure with her hitherto favourite teacher. Mention of shortbread had been greeted with an audible snort. "Smith," he acknowledged, nodding to the man.

"But will I not be seeing you at the ball?" exclaimed Minerva, surprised. "And Miss Lapanne, of course?"

"Naturally, but I expect opportunities for civilised discourse will be lacking in the crush." Severus noted that Granger had scrunched herself further down in her chair and stuck her legs out. He waited in vain for McGonagall to tell her to sit up.

"Well, it's nice to see you're learning some social graces at long last," Minerva replied. "Now do have some tea."

"And you, Miss Granger?" Severus asked. "Will you be going to the ball?" He deftly picked her pocket as he took the chair next to her, pulling out an invitation badly crushed by its careless insertion.

"I would much rather keep working, as the Headmistress and Mr Smith are both aware," she snapped.

Smith shot her a penetrating look.

"Don't you enjoy Christmas, Hermione?" He sounded merely curious. "Aren't you looking forward to seeing your family and friends after closeting yourself away with your work for so long?"

There was a silence, and it seemed Hermione was not disposed to answer.

"Of course she " began McGonagall.

"My parents decided to stay in Australia. Grimmauld Place will be full of Weasleys, up in London for the ball, and Molly is convinced that it's my fault Ron's condemned to a monastic life, so I won't be seeing Harry and Ginny. I don't have anyone else who particularly wants to have me intrude into their family circle. Nobody is staying at the school. So what's left?" she asked savagely. "Oh, I know I'll book myself into a hotel, show my face on my own at the ball just to stop the papers from wondering why I'm not there, and spend the holidays waiting to be allowed to get on with what I actually like doing." She sat up straight, not looking directly at anyone. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I only have a day and a half's shopping left to find a dress I don't need that nobody's going to look at."

She paused.

"See you at the Ministry, Professor, Mr Snape. Have a good holiday, Mr Smith."

"I had no idea," said McGonagall into the silence left by the door's closing. "Did you, Mr Smith?"

"She doesn't talk about herself at all," he rumbled. "Only about the work, her ideas, her research. She's very stimulating to work with ..."

Snape snorted.

"What's so funny, Severus?" snapped the Headmistress. "You find Hermione's distress amusing?"

"That doesn't stir me one way or the other," he answered. "What's truly funny is that you two particularly you, Minerva, since you claim to like her so much have been so oblivious to it." He leaned back and sipped from his cup. "She's spent the last three months working her socks off; she hasn't been to visit her friends, nor have they troubled themselves to come here, knowing that she's engaged in work that doesn't leave her much free time. She's nineteen. She should be going out and enjoying herself at least occasionally. She should be looking forward to Christmas, to parties, to fun, to presents. Even I had a bit of fun at her age. She's not just a trophy in the Gryffindor cabinet," he added, just to twist the knife a little more.

Minerva was looking stricken. She got to her feet, but the smith forestalled her dash after Hermione.

"Let me," he said, making a 'sit down' motion with his hands. "She might be better for an evening at a good pub and a game of darts. Sympathy probably isn't the best approach."

Severus was surprised. He'd recognised Granger's anger as a barricade against tears, but the smith wasn't generally known for his perceptiveness. He was also vaguely uneasy. Personal interest from a deity generally spelled trouble for someone.

\*

The ball was, as predicted, a crush. Shackbolt had opened up the entire ground floor of the Ministry and drafted an army of caterers to supply wizarding Britain with a buffet so opulent one might die of starvation still trying to decide what to eat first. The decorations looked like an explosion in a tinsel factory. Even Flitwick was wincing at the gaudiness. Competing strains of music drifted from the different ballrooms into the foyer where they met and battled for supremacy. Severus had spent the first half hour finding the exact spot where it sounded worst so he could talk to his least favourite people there. He edged ever closer to the epicentre of discord, Aphrodite placidly keeping at his side, content to share his amusements. McGonagall found them and winced.

"Have you seen Hermione yet?" she asked without preamble.

"Why should I be looking for her? She's not my little protégée."

"Don't be obnoxious, Severus," McGonagall said without bite. "I'm concerned. I haven't heard a peep from her since she left my office the other day."

Severus rolled his eyes.

"I fail to see why you could expect to hear anything. You made it abundantly clear that her preferences didn't meet with your approval."

"She knows perfectly well that I have her best interests at heart!"

"Like exhausting herself with a double apprenticeship?"

"Anyone can see that she is perfectly capable ..."

Snape was enjoying goading the Headmistress, but at that moment Aphrodite's fingers closed painfully round his biceps.

"Ah! There she is!" exclaimed McGonagall and bustled off.

There she was indeed, looking all grown up and gorgeous in a slinky red dress, her lips shining crimson to match, and her hair confined in a crown of plaits. Touches of gold gleamed in her ears as she turned to laugh at something her companion had said. Her companion being the smith, looking as comfortable in formal robes as he did in those idiot shirts he favoured. His arm circled her waist in a manner that his wife seemed to find entirely too familiar, if her frown was any indication.

Severus twisted out of Aphrodite's death grip.

"She has no right!" hissed the goddess. "Little floozy!"

"What's sauce for the goose," he murmured. "I suppose."

"For your sake, because she abandoned you in your hour of need, my dislike of her was pre-ordained," she declaimed, not wavering in her glare, "But now she's really ..."

"Such melodrama," Severus drawled. "People are staring. And besides, you're hardly being consistent, are you, my love?"

"Consistency is a quality highly prized by you mortals," snapped Aphrodite. "Nevertheless, I deem it more politic to choose a better moment to ..."

"To what?" he asked, kissing her fingers and challenging her with a hard gleam in his eye. "To punish someone for doing exactly what you reward me so richly for doing?"

"Don't push it, Severus." She sent one last glare towards Smith and Hermione. "Get me a glass of wine and then dance with me."

"Dance?" He slid his arm round her magnificent form, draped as ever in clinging white. "The horror."

Hermione was enjoying herself. She had an expensive dress in which she looked if the glances coming her way were any indication as gorgeous as she felt, she had an attentive and ruggedly attractive date, and she had spent an unexpectedly good Yule with him, Elland, some powerful folk who weren't witches and wizards but were evasive about precisely what they were, and the White Horse chapter of the Hell's Angels. She thought she might come to enjoy riding a Harley, and the episode with the woad was one she would remember fondly for the rest of her life. There had been dancing, and feasting, and talking, and beer, and games, and nobody expected her not to join in fully because she was 'Hermione Granger, Bookworm' to them, she was just another of Elland's friends, and they all thought her bluebell flames were pretty damn cool, especially for lighting effects on painted skin. Three days of this, and three nights after a whole thirty seconds' discussion of a pact not to change their working relationship under the furs with Smith made for a cheerful Miss Granger, ready to take on the world.

So when Harry and Ginny came charging up to her, she hugged them both enthusiastically.

"Wow, Hermione," said Harry, holding her at arms' length and admiring her. "What happened to you?"

"Nice display of tact, Harry," Ginny chided, "but I have to ask ..." Her eyes flicked towards Smith and she raised her eyebrows in a question.

"Smith decided I should meet some of his friends, and we've had an excellent Yule. I feel all refreshed and ready to get back to ..."

"... work!" finished Harry and Ginny for her.

Smith guffawed.

"Come and ask her that after she's been working the bellows for a week," he invited them. "I guarantee you she'll beg to be kidnapped."

"How's Ron?" Hermione asked. "Have you seen him? Did he get my present?"

"He's starting to get his strength back," said Harry. "Still suffering his odd compulsions, as Arthur calls them, but he can at least lift a cup of tea now."

They missed the reproachful look Hermione gave the smith.

"And he's really pleased with the DVD player you charmed to work on magic," Ginny added. "He loves those old comedies you included. Says he spent most of the war feeling like Harold Lloyd."

"Didn't we all?" Hermione said drily. "What's this?"

Ginny had given her a little velvet box.

"Ron's present to you." She watched Hermione's eyes fill as she opened the box to reveal a silver charm bracelet bearing three charms a book, a hammer and an anvil. "I'm glad you're friends again," she added, "even if Mum thinks it's all your fault, as usual. It doesn't go with your earrings, you know."

"I don't care," said Hermione, fumbling with the clasp. "I like it, and nobody expects me to have any fashion sense anyway."

"Nice workmanship," said the smith, peering closely.

"Well, then let's show it off on the dance floor!"

The smith attempted to excuse himself on account of his lame foot, but Hermione, abetted by her friends, would have none of it, insisting that there would be smoochy music in at least one of the rooms and all he would have to do was sway a little.

"He never danced with me," grumbled Aphrodite bitterly, watching the smith capitulate with a grin.

"Perhaps the music was never quite right," said Snape. He saw the plump bottom lip swell in a pout and knew dismay. A goddess in a snit could make his evening a living hell. "Won't I do instead? At least I can twirl you without falling on my face."

"So you can, my love. Though your speech is rough and unmannerly, Severus, your strong and supple form always gives delight."

Severus winced.

Two hours later, Hermione was dancing with Neville, close to where Harry and Ginny were shuffling in circles. Her feet were hurting, but Neville had asked so nicely and his dancing had improved considerably. She complimented him, and he was telling her about the torment of the lessons his gran had imposed on him when Ginny's exclamation caught their attention.

"Harry, just *drop it!*"

"But Ginny ..."

"I've told you Merlin knows how many times, not yet! I don't want to get married!"

"But Ginny, don't you love me?" Judging by Neville's expression, even to his ears that sounded just a little pathetic.

Ginny stopped moving, though she kept her arms round Harry.

"Listen, Harry. For the last time, 'not yet' doesn't mean 'never'. There's no hurry, that's all. I love you, but I don't want to get married! I'm young! I want to do stuff. And I want to do it with you, yes, Harry, but as a girlfriend, not a wife. Do you understand? A girlfriend is someone you can be adventurous with; a wife is, I dunno, someone you stay at home with. Once you're married, you're waist-deep in babies before you know it."

"But don't you want to have a family with me?"

Ginny huffed. "Of course I do! Just not yet! I've had all I can take of family and I want to be a little footloose for a few years. With you. Footloose but with you."

Harry attempted to draw her closer.

"But family's such a wonderful thing ..."

"Merlin's hairy nutsack!" Ginny wrenched free, uncaring that people were turning to watch. "I sometimes think it's not me you want to marry but my family! You'd marry anyone who'd give you a family. I'm going to get some air come and find me when you've decided you want to be Harry Potter, not Harry Weasley."

Snape and the Lapanne woman waltzed past gracefully, he merely smirking, she looking like the cat that stole a pound of raw steak and ate it dipped in clotted cream.

\*

It wasn't the *Prophet* that brought the news to Hermione it was a weeping Ginny Weasley who burst into her morning study hours in floods of tears.

Hermione moved a stack of books and papers off a chair and gently ushered Ginny to sit. She gave her a glass of water and waited for the crying to subside. Then the story came staggering out through the aftershocks.

"But why would he do that?" Hermione pondered. "He's not even particularly friendly with her!"

"Friendly enough, apparently," Ginny said bitterly. "One week, Hermione. One *week* since the ball and he's off proposing to Parvati Patil."

"Don't tell me she accepted."

"What witch wouldn't accept the great Harry Potter? Her parents have organised a huge party, you know all the cousins and uncles and whatnot from here and from India, and photographers, and ... Oh, Hermione, I thought he loved me! *Me*, you know?"

"I'm sure he does, Ginny ..."

But this produced such a storm of sobs that Hermione could no longer make herself heard. She let Ginny cry herself into exhaustion, then tucked her into bed to sleep it off. She closed the door to her quarters with relief and set off early for the forge. It was unlike Harry to be so mean-spirited. He must have been more deeply hurt by Ginny's refusal to marry him than anyone realised and he'd always been impulsive. But honestly? Tying himself for life to a girl he barely liked? Hermione decided she would consider what to say to him while she prepped some of the iron for the first level of strengthening charms in the new sections. Smith would be glad of an extra pair of hands for the morning's work.

Hermione didn't manage to see Harry before the party, but as it turned out, events rendered irrelevant her carefully-prepared and diplomatically worded arguments. What a good job it was that Mr and Mrs Patil had paid for photographers, otherwise the *Prophet* (uninvited to the event) would never have obtained a full-colour record of both Patil sisters screaming and hexing Harry Potter, who had proposed to the second at the celebration of his engagement to the first.

Half a week later, he was spotted down on one knee in a restaurant, proposing to Cho Chang.

Next in line: Pansy Parkinson.

The Parkinsons declared war on the Bulstrodes the following Tuesday, but by then Harry had already moved on.

Hermione sent owls to him but he didn't reply.

"I think he's been cursed," she said, watching yet another photo of Harry down on one knee, this time being laughed at by everyone else in the frame. He had become a national joke in a few short weeks. "First Ron, now Harry. Someone's clearly got it in for us again but who? Death Eaters still? I suppose I should ask Kingsley to put the Aurors on it. What do you think?"

This was addressed to Severus, who was foolishly waving his wand and thereby floating six thick slices of bread at the optimum distance from the coals. They were on the cusp of February and the weather outside had gone from snowy and bitter to dank and bitter, and even in the forge there was an area to leave muddy shoes. Within, all was warm and welcoming. Charts and plans were back on the walls, the work benches were strewn with tools and books, there was now a tall cupboard in the corner from which Smith was excavating plates, knives and jam, and Hermione had her very own anvil to perch on.

"Potter's not in any danger," Severus pointed out as he flipped the toast over. "I hardly think Shackbolt's going to put resources into sorting out the boy's love life."

Hermione pushed open the door just wide enough to rescue the butter from the box outside. She shivered in the chill.

"Still sleeting?" Smith asked. "We could do with some decent hail hailstones have some interesting properties."

"I read about that in the Norse scrolls Elland sent up," she replied. "But what concerns me most is the element of compulsion. Nobody could find anything like an Imperius or Confundus charm affecting Ron, and I dare say it'd be the same with Harry, but I still think he's got the same kind of curse. It's magic, but not our kind of magic, or there would be something to identify, even if we didn't know what it was. I wish I could talk to him about it, but I don't want to have to sit through an impassioned proposal... Ah, here it is." Hermione pulled a wooden case out from underneath a bench and knelt to open it and look inside. "Hail, hail, hail, ah! Hailstones this is the one. Did it look like hail to you when you were at the gap?"

Severus had been spending a great deal of time at the place where the walls had been smashed to ground level by giants. He put the toast on a wooden board and started to butter it.

"Granger, ever since I got conned into working on this project which, by the way, I would have abandoned if I hadn't in turn conned McGonagall into paying me extremely well, I have been forced to spend much of my time in conditions that lead me to wish fervently and constantly that the sky would not devote so much of its time throwing wet stuff at me. I don't look up."

"Bollocks."

Severus scowled. "Language, Granger."

"No not you. Though what you said *is* bollocks you've got better antennae than ... a thing with very good antennae. *This* is bollocks." She scooped up a couple of lumps of scrap iron to hold the scroll open and poked her finger at the passage that was annoying her. "There's no way hailstones have any of these properties."

Smith and Snape both leaned in to scan the crabbed runes, squishing Hermione.

"Oy," she said, pushing back.

"Merlin, Granger, are those muscles? So feminine ..."

"Oh, grow up, *Snape*, and apply your mind to the problem."

"You're spending entirely too much time with Smith," commented Severus repressively and bent over the parchment again.

"No! *Harry!* Never mind the scroll. Whoever wrote it was clearly barking."

"Elland will be delighted to hear your opinion, Hermione," laughed the smith.

"Oh, shut up. Listen, Professor Snape Harry's under the influence of coercive magic, and that's Dark. I know you can't stand him, but I hate to think of him being the victim of such a nasty sense of humour. I don't know anyone who's better qualified to find out what it is, or at least work out where to start looking. Would you? Please?"

Severus stood back and folded his arms. He glowered at Hermione for hitting his weak spot. He met Smith's challenging look. Yes, if there was anyone who knew how Harry had been cursed, it would be Severus.

"Don't you have any Marmite in that cupboard?" he demanded.

\*

Harry went into hiding shortly after the first rumours that he'd proposed to a house-elf began to circulate. Hermione fretted, and used her precious hours off trying to locate him, to no avail. He'd learned how to hide, and it wasn't until mid-March that Severus found him and hauled him off to see Hermione.

The forge doors were flung open to admit the watery spring light. From within, they could hear a rhythmic *TAP, tap-tap, TAP, tap-tap* of hammer on metal. Snape silenced Harry with an abrupt gesture as they approached and saw that it was Hermione at the anvil, one gauntleted hand holding a piece of glowing metal in a pair of tongs, the other wielding a heavy hammer with surprising strength and precision, while she frowned in concentration and muttered incantations. Dressed in a grimy t-shirt and jeans under a leather apron, her hair in a messy pony-tail, smuts on her sinewy forearms and sweaty face, her conker-coloured eyes alight, Granger looked good. Smith stood to one side, observing the work closely. Flitwick, too, was there, his eyes flicking between Hermione and the anvil while he took rapid notes on a pad of parchment. All of a sudden, for no reason the two at the door could discern, Smith's stance lost its attentive poise, and Hermione stopped hammering. She lifted the curl of iron so she could examine it from all sides, then flung it onto a heap of scraps in the corner.

"Damn, damn, *damn*," she said disgustedly. "I lost it again. *Again*."

"You got further this time, though," Smith said. "You'll have it soon."

"Soon on whose timescale? At this rate I'll be dead before I master the basics."

"Hardly. You learn faster than any apprentice I've ever had."

"It's a highly unusual technique," Flitwick said. "I must say, Miss Granger, you have developed a remarkable facility with wandless magic in a very short time!"

"It was either that or grow a third arm, Professor," she said, stretching, and then doing a perfect double-take.

"HARRY!"

She dashed round the anvil.

"Professor Snape! Thank you so much for finding him! Harry! Where the *hell* have you been? We've all been worried sick!"

"Speak for yourself," muttered Snape.

Harry backed off, hands raised.

"Hermione, would you put down the hammer? And you'd better not come too close ..."

"Don't be silly, Harry. I don't fit the pattern. No family. I take it they've all accepted? How many women is it? What are you feeling when you're under the compulsion? Is it at all like the Imperius curse?"

"*Hermione!*" Harry bellowed. "Snape's already asked me everything, and I'm none the wiser. It's just like Ron no traces. I'm doomed." He scrubbed at his hair with his hands then raised them defensively again as she moved in for a hug. "Hermione put down the hammer."

She lifted the tool in surprise. It felt almost like part of her arm.

Snape and Flitwick escorted Harry up to the school to see Madam Pomfrey and any of the other professors they thought might have ideas to contribute. They gagged him and kept a firm grip on his arms, just in case they should come within shouting distance of any over-age girls with large families. Hermione promised to join them once she and Smith had tidied the forge. They worked companionably, setting tools in racks, sweeping the benches and the floor, tidying scrolls and books away. Smith raised his mighty arms above his head and indulged in a bone-cracking stretch.

"Are we finished for the day?" he asked.

"We are," smiled Hermione, giving him her hands. "Playtime. Or, at least it would be, if it weren't for Harry ..." She bit her lip. "They're not going to find anything are they?"

"No. Clever though they are, this is beyond their skills. I could do something, if you like."

"What? The way you did for Ron?" She folded her arms.

"Hardly my fault if I assumed you would have friends who matched your own calibre."

Hermione got a delicious shiver from the way he was looking at her.

"Flatterer."

"You will want to spend some time with your friend," he stated. "Shall I see you at Elland's place this weekend?"

"I wouldn't want to miss my share in the Equinox preparations, and besides which, Nobby said he'd let me have a go on his Harley. I'll come down on Saturday evening."

"Then kiss me, wench, and go and see your Harry. I'll see if I can come up with something to help. And yes," Smith added, forestalling her, "he will be able to remove it without unduly taxing his brain."

\*

From ***The Daily Prophet***

*Your reporter is pleased to announce that Mr Harry Potter has come out of hiding. Mr Potter, last seen in early February apparently suffering from the mysterious "Romeo curse", has invited all of the young ladies who accepted his proposals of marriage to a meeting to be held at the Ministry of Magic tomorrow. We believe that it is Mr Potter's intention to clarify the matter of exactly whom it is he wishes to make his wife. The Prophet has obtained access to the event and will bring you photographs in Sunday's*

edition.

From *The Sunday Prophet*

*Mr Harry Potter (18), escorted by his former teachers Mr S. Snape (39) and Professor M. McGonagall (73), Headmistress of Hogwarts, and by his friend Miss H. Granger (19), and taking the unusual precaution of wearing a gag to prevent further accidental avowals of undying love, yesterday confronted the fifteen women, three house elves and one lady centaur who consider themselves to be his affianced brides. Also present was Miss Ginevra Weasley (18), accompanied by her parents. At Mr Potter's urging, Miss Granger explained to all present that Mr Potter was now in possession of a certain ring which was Charmed to fit the finger of the one woman whom he truly loved and only hers.*

*Subsequent to a series of scoldings and threats from Mr Snape and Headmistress McGonagall, the applicants for the position of 'Mrs Potter' were induced to form an orderly queue. The ring fitted none of them, and they were dismissed, leaving only Miss Weasley, who tried the ring only at the urgent persuasion of her mother and Miss Granger. The ring fitted Miss Weasley perfectly, but she declined the honour it conveyed, flinging the ring at a visibly upset Mr Potter and leaving the room in a precipitate manner, saying she "never wanted to see his stupid face again".*

*Mr Snape was heard to utter the words, "So much for fairy tales."*

*Mr Potter has retired to St. Mungo's to keep his friend Ronald Weasley (19) company, away from the presence of women for the foreseeable future."*

\*

Hermione and McGonagall trailed Snape out of the hospital after dropping Harry off with Ron. They had taken Ron's rapturous account of his last brilliant match in the spirit in which it was delivered and left with the firm intention of finding a stiff drink.

"It was worth a try, I suppose," Hermione said. "At least we haven't made the situation any worse."

"I'm not sure about that," McGonagall mourned. "Miss Weasley made a good point, I thought, about the quality of Harry's love if it could only be revealed by tawdry knick-knackery."

"I was attempting not to think about that bit. I feel utterly dispirited."

Snape however, sauntering along the pavement ahead of them, seemed positively jaunty. If Hermione hadn't known better, she would have sworn that he was humming ABBA under his breath:

*Love me or leave me, make your choice but believe me*

*I love you*

*I do, I do, I do, I do, I do...*

\*

## Seven: In which participation at certain festivities is disincentivised

*Chapter 7 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### Seven: In which participation at certain festivities is disincentivised

"I thought you were going to have a lie-in."

It was the Easter holidays, and Hermione was down at Elland's place. Considerably more ancient than Hogwarts, it nevertheless felt comfortable and home-like to her. It was, in essence, a large barn-like structure with a few outbuildings, solid, like a weight pinning down the undulating Berkshire countryside, and within a wonderland of carvings and smithcraft and warmth and fun. Berkshire and yet not Berkshire – it was a reality existing alongside her own, with few of the inconveniences or annoyances of her modern world, and to which she was granted access as a favoured guest of the Smith. There were advantages to being a god, she thought, such as being able to live half a step to the side of what most people perceived as real. She hadn't worked it out yet, but for once she thought that knowledge could be postponed. Investigation would puncture the holiday air of being elsewhere; besides which, here she was accepted for what she was, with no expectations or demands, and it would be rude not to reciprocate.

"I'm still in bed, aren't I?"

"Well, let me just look underneath all these books and scrolls to see if there is a bed in here ..."

Hermione grinned. "I'm having fun. And you've been out working, haven't you?"

Smith's broad shoulders and muscled arms glistened with sweat, and a trickle ran down his throat and chest to disappear behind the heavy apron.

"Just mucking about – holiday stuff. After all that iron, it's good to play with precious metals for a while."

"Ditto – mucking about. Though some of this is making me think ..."

"What doesn't make you think, lass?"

The Smith pushed her books aside and joined her on the bed. She ran a finger down his arm to his hand. She traced the nicks and scars it bore, the toughened skin on the knuckles, the calluses on the fingers and palm.

"Why do you do this?" she asked, a puzzled frown creasing her brow. "You don't have to bear scars, or sweat, or even have a heartbeat." She laid her own palm against his chest. "So why?"

Smith paused before answering.

"It's a price," he said, finally. "I don't have to pay it, being what I am, but anything gained, or anything made, should exact a price in effort, in toil, in thought. Or it is worthless. Your ideas, now, that come rushing like cool water from a spring, you pay for them with this line that's coming on your forehead, or with the hunch you're getting from study, or the amount of time you're on your own. Don't cry, lass – they're the badge of something worthwhile, like the scars you're gathering yourself from smithing."

She gave a wobbly laugh. "And whoever would have thought I'd take to that? It's always been theory, theory, theory with me ..."

"Theory's but a barren cow without it be put to breed. You've a talent for putting thought into action, or you wouldn't be the witch you are, but you're one who needs to get her hands dirty to really show what you can do. Your pure academics like McGonagall don't really understand that."

Hermione blinked rapidly. "Let's not talk about me," she suggested.

"And of course the other reason," continued Smith as though she hadn't spoken, "is that I've noticed you've a liking for freshly sweaty brawny men ..."

"What girl doesn't?" she giggled, then shrieked as he tumbled her back into the furs. "My scrolls!"

"Bugger the scrolls."

It was probably around teatime when Smith thought to mention that Wayland was expecting a guest for the Easter weekend. Hermione was a little miffed that he got around to mentioning it only when Wayland and his guest were actually standing at the foot of the bed looking down at them. There was informality, and then there was waking up tousled and smelly with the brain on a three-second delay.

Still, she reflected, once the grey cells had caught up with the fact that the eyes were open and the mouth was talking, if the guest in question finds nothing inappropriate in the situation, then she herself could probably outlive the embarrassment.

The woman Wayland had brought to see them was built on the same statuesque lines as Ms Lapanne, and was as beautiful, but there the resemblance ended. Where Ms Lapanne looked as though she spent twenty-five hours out of every twenty-four at the beauty salon, this woman was utterly natural. Her dark hair tumbled freely around her shoulders and down her back, soft and lustrous yet unbrushed and starred with flowers that were not artfully placed but looked as though they had just been caught up by happenstance. Her robe was of simple green homespun, belted with a broad, flat braid bearing every colour a flower had ever shown, her arms flashed with simple gold bracelets, her feet were bare and dirty with fresh earth. Hermione found herself entranced, and though she blushed when the woman leaned forward to cup her head and play with her hair – it was an intimate gesture – she knew that there was no criticism. Perhaps a little amusement at Hermione's mess of curls and frizz, but no disapproval.

"Dear girl." The voice was light, yet wild. "You make me happy."

She dared to look right into a pair of eyes as grey as storm clouds and knew the statement for simple truth.

"You ... you make me happy, too, ma'am," she stuttered.

The woman smiled. "Then that is as it should be. I am Eostre. Your eyes are the colour of horse chestnuts. So pretty. I think you must not stay here for my party. Not this year. You are not ready. Not yet." Her hand still cupping Hermione's head, she bent and kissed her full on the lips. Hermione trembled. "Soon, little one, soon," said Eostre. "Smith, you will remain here." Then she took Wayland by the arm and left.

"Buh," said Hermione. "Buh."

"She does have that effect," said the Smith. "But she's right – the spring rites can be ... extreme. I wouldn't be much of a protector if I kept you here."

Hermione was still shaking, though she could not yet tell if it was fear, awe, arousal, love, excitement, or a mixture of the lot which was coursing through her. The Smith held her close.

"We tend to hide it a bit better round mortals," he said, "but Eostre's never had much time for manners. Spring – real spring – isn't a very mannerly time of year."

"I noticed that. You know, I think that this year I will be quite happy to sit in the sunshine with nothing but a chocolate egg for company."

"Belgian chocolate?"

"Swiss, please."

## **Eight: In which Hermione shows true grit**

*Chapter 8 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### **Eight: In which Hermione shows true grit**

The first Fortescue's ice cream of the year was an occasion to be taken seriously. Hermione had persuaded Ginny to dress up and come out with her, and she herself had taken some pains with her appearance. It was, of course, just her luck that Snape and the awful Lapanne woman would come and take the last available table on the terrace and that it would be next to hers. Who could compete with a six-foot-nine Barbie, after all? Hermione decided to dismiss Snape's dollybird from her field of consciousness and turned her attention to the important business of choosing flavours.

By mutual consent, the two girls agreed not to talk about Harry and Ron. The day was gloriously sunny, they'd had an agreeable couple of hours shopping, and nothing was to be allowed to spoil the fun of reviewing the new season's creations by Mr Fortescue Jr. Once matters were settled (Hermione chose chocolate-chilli, blueberry and bitter orange, with toasted hazelnuts and whipped cream; Ginny went for the Rainbow Glory, a concoction of seven different colours with dancing, fizzing stars sprinkled on top), they sat back to talk about Ginny's job. After taking her NEWTs early in the fast-track tutoring course run by the Ministry for war veterans, she was working for Cleansweep in the testing department, though she had tried her utmost to be taken on in R&D.

"It's okay, I suppose," she said, pleating a napkin between her fingers, "especially the diagnostics under real-time Quidditch conditions, but I have some ideas I'm sure would bring Cleansweep back into competition with Nimbus, and they just don't want to listen, because I'm a girl."

"But Nimbus and Firebolt both have a lot of women working in R&D, from what I heard," said Hermione. Why didn't you apply for a place with them, instead of your bunch of old fuddy-duddies?"

"What makes you think I didn't?" Ginny replied bitterly. "All I got was the 'we only take people with experience' routine."

Hermione watched her friend fiddling and fussing with the paper serviette.

"Look you've got good ideas, haven't you? You know the principles of broomstick construction. You know people who know wood, and who are good with their hands. And you can use your position at Cleansweep to improve your technical know-how."

Ginny nodded slowly.

"Well, why don't you use your spare time for your own R&D? And once you've made something really good, go and talk to the big companies? Hell you could even start your own!"

Ginny giggled.

"Hermione, you've been at the vodka again, haven't you?"

"At four in the afternoon? I think not, my friend. Four o'clock is a time reserved strictly for highly calorific sweet things. Good grief is that your sundae?"

They picked up their spoons. There was a moment of reverent silence as the first mouthfuls melted on their tongues, and then Hermione began to ask after their acquaintance, since she'd been out of the loop for a while. As they discussed the unlikelihood of Gregory Goyle's decision to train as a Healer, they watched the passers-by, all strolling along at a leisurely pace in the spring sunshine.

"Is that Seamus with Lavender Brown?" exclaimed Ginny. "Jumping Jarveys he must be the fifth new boyfriend since Christmas! Huh. It must be nice to have her looks, and have men just falling over themselves to get a moment of your attention."

"Do you think so?" Hermione asked. "More of an inconvenience, I'd have thought. Such a nuisance when you've got better things to do. And no, Ginny, you don't need to give me an old-fashioned look. I suppose it would be nice to be pretty, but really, when you think about it, being pretty is no kind of *raison d'être* in itself. It takes a heck of a lot of maintenance, and it's bound to fade sooner or later, and then what have you got nothing to fall back on. Nothing to fill the days except thinking about how you used to look and trying to be twenty when you're eighty-five. Ew. No, thank you."

"Weirdo," Ginny said.

Twenty minutes later, they paid and got up to leave. Hermione turned to nod goodbye to Snape and realised she had heard no conversation at all from his table. Indeed, when she looked, he was engrossed in a book and Ms Lapanne was toying discontentedly with the melted remains of her dessert. Perhaps the honeymoon was over. Lapanne raised her sapphire eyes, and Hermione flinched at the expression of open dislike in them. The perfect lips twisted in a smile remarkable more for malice than humour, and she seemed about to speak, but at that moment, Snape closed his book. He assessed the situation with a glance and sighed.

"Did you want something, Miss Granger?"

Hermione pulled herself together.

"Um, yes, Mr Snape. Will you have time tomorrow morning to discuss an idea I've had regarding the repairs to the walls?"

"Is it really all that necessary for you to encroach on my work as well as shouldering the no doubt burdensome load you already possess?"

She grinned.

"Well, yes, actually, when it's something that will benefit both. I've been doing some research ..."

"Of course you have." He rolled his eyes. "Can't you just produce your usual nine feet of parchment, or do you really have to talk to me?"

"The latter, I'm afraid."

"Nine o'clock, then. Goodbye, Miss Granger."

She took the dismissal in good part and left with Ginny in tow.

"How can you stand working with him?" asked the youngest Weasley.

"He's okay. He's ..."

If Severus was curious as to Miss Granger's opinion of him, he was doomed to disappointment, as the two young women moved swiftly out of earshot on the crowded street.

\*

Hermione woke up feeling good. Feeling fantastic, in fact. She swung her slim and supple legs out of bed and practically danced to the loo and then the shower, where she stood for much longer than usual, soaping, shaving, shampooing and conditioning. Then she spent a good half hour drying her hair as she watched herself in the mirror, experiencing a kind of dreamy satisfaction whenever her eyes met those of her reflection. All of a sudden, the look in those eyes took on an edge. She examined herself. Still recognisably Hermione Granger, but the skin was flawless, the hair a slightly richer shade of brown and tumbling in pretty curls around her face instead of doing the usual Gorgon-with-her-finger-in-an-electric-socket thing, her lips were a fraction fuller and redder, her eyes still the same shade and size, but framed by longer, thicker lashes and perfectly arched brows. She sank her face into her hands (soft and smooth and free of ink stains).

"The cow," she said. Even her voice was musical. "The utter, utter bitch-troll from the lowest circles of Hades' cesspit."

She took a deep breath.

"Right, then."

She screwed her hair back ruthlessly into a thick pony-tail. Sheer strength of will pried her hands off her make-up bag. She looked at her watch. Bother! Almost missed

breakfast! Another moral and mental struggle of gargantuan proportions resulted in plain white undies and a set of workmen's overalls. There wasn't anything she could do about the way the overalls somehow clung to her body to accentuate her luscious curves. She crammed a baseball cap on her head, stuffed her feet into a pair of scuffed docs, and grabbed a pair of sunglasses as she dashed gracefully down to the Great Hall for breakfast. She very nearly caught herself preening under the gazes of adolescent and post-adolescent males alike, and, though the urge to make do with a small cup of black coffee and half an orange for the sake of her figure was strong, she forced down her usual bowl of porridge and three slices of toast. Smithing required energy. But oh no! How would she protect her fingernails if she had to work in the smithy?

"Hangover?" enquired the Headmistress archly, gesturing towards the dark glasses on Hermione's nose.

"No, Professor, it's just ..."

"Oh, Hermione, you really must take better care," the older woman said breathlessly.

Hermione extricated herself rapidly, wryly thinking that one of the major causes of speculation during her school years had just been answered, and ran lightly docs notwithstanding down to the forge. She had an hour to sort herself out before meeting Snape. Merlin! She couldn't meet Snape in this state! It had been bad enough preening under the lecherous stares she'd got from Hagrid and Professor Flitwick. The doors were open and she could hear Smith moving around inside.

"Do you think you could possibly stay right back when I come in?" she cooed melodiously. "*Drat it!*" she added for good measure.

"Hermione?" The Smith's voice was puzzled. "What ...? Yes, I'll stay back."

She slunk provocatively through the entrance. Stopping by her anvil, she removed her dark glasses and cap, and tore the scrunchie from her hair, letting it cascade forward, its shining curls catching highlights from the fire's glow.

"Oh."

"Yes, *oh*. Your bloody wife's got me too." Hermione took a deep breath, which caused her breasts to strain against the fabric of her overalls. Smith did his utmost best to control where his eyes went, but a male god is still a male, for all his power. Hermione pouted charmingly.

"Sorry," he said. "Do you want me to see if I can fix it?"

"No." She folded her arms. "No. I'm going to do this myself. I may not be able to do much about the prettiness thing, but I *can* and *will* stop myself *caring* about it. It's just ... Snape's coming in less than an hour and I can't see him like this! I can't see him when I feel as though it actually matters what the hell he thinks of me! We have work to do! I want to feel that it's the work that interests me, not ... not ... *this!*" She ran her hands down her body, revelling in the feel of her own beauty, then abruptly reached for her hammer and tongs. Tears like crystal coursed down her cheeks. "I am going to *beat* this out of me if it's the last thing I do. Just please, Smith, keep him outside until I'm done."

"My respect to you, lady. There's iron for horseshoes in the coals. Firenze wants a new set." He gave her a curiously formal bow and left to keep a lookout. The steady sound of Hermione's hammer filled the air.

When she finally emerged, Snape had been and gone and come back again. He and the smith were sitting on the bench against the forge wall, discussing the reasons why iron was so much better suited as a vehicle for magic than steel.

"As I see it, it all comes down to methodology," Snape was saying. "I suppose that elemental metals take enchantment much more readily because just as in potion-making, you can't simply chuck in anything anyhow you can't just barge ahead with the physical processes regardless of what you want the metal to bear on the level of the *idos magicum*."

Hermione flopped down onto the grass.

"That's exactly what I wanted to discuss with you," she said.

"Finished cobbling?" If Snape noticed any changes in her, he wasn't letting on but then she still didn't compare with a goddess, so she was probably pretty safe.

"Enough shoes for the next three years."

"How do you feel?" asked the smith.

"Much, much more like myself," said Hermione. "My hair's a mess, my nails are broken, I'm badly in need of a shower, and all's right with the world."

"Apart, of course, from your sense of punctuality," interjected Snape.

"Yes, sorry about that," she replied uncomfortably. "Had a bit of an emergency."

"Shoes for Dobbin constitute an emergency?"

"I'll tell Firenze you called him that."

Snape snorted. "So what was it you wanted to discuss so *urgently*, Miss Granger?"

Hermione sat up tailor-style, cradling her hammer upon her knees. She looked up at Snape, eagerness written all over her face. As she spoke, telling him about the ideas she'd been having while raiding Elland's library, he leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming with the same fervour.

"... You see, if we can reproduce the same or similar techniques for binding the potions into the complex structures of the links once you've finished analysing the fragments you've unearthed, of course then we can re-integrate new sections of chain into the foundations where the walls are worst damaged! *And* we can employ the same magics for the gates when we put together the sections to make the whole, and thus build a cohesive defensive boundary!"

"Ta-daaa," said Snape. Hermione deflated a little. "It's one hell of a complex notion you've got there, Granger but it seems sound."

She beamed.

"It is sound," the smith agreed. "I use a great many chemicals in my work as you know, Hermione, but binding in the magical aspect using the subtle processes of potion-making as well as Charms both of which draw on the essence of the brewer or caster, am I right? well, hmm..." He scratched his beard. "I have some scrolls of my own that may prove enlightening, though Elland's collection deals more with your native magic. I'll have to go home and hunt for them. In the meantime, you two will have to get analysing." He stood up and pulled Hermione to her feet. "Good work, apprentice in more than one sense, today. I'll see you later." He squeezed her hand, took off his ever-present apron and gave it to her, then limped off down the path, a big man wearing an eyesore of a shirt.

Hermione watched him silently for a moment, then turned to find that Snape's dark gaze was fixed on her.

"What?" she said.

"Are you going to stand around mooning over Smith all day, or shall we get started?"

Hermione bounced into the forge to lay down the hammer and the apron.

"I'm ready! This is going to be fun!"

"It's going to be hard work, often frustrating, and very difficult. Just try not to be this irritating all the time, will you?"

\*

He was obviously not such an old dog as he had become used to believing, thought Severus, if he could learn such a significant new trick as the one Granger was teaching him though maybe she was also learning it herself. A month filled with arguments, study, experiment and louder arguments, characterised by early mornings, late nights and surreptitious afternoon naps while Granger was down at the forge beating the crap out of iron bars while she hissed incantations into the glowing metal, had brought Severus to the realisation that, contrary to all expectation, he very much enjoyed working collaboratively. Even when he was in a bad temper and fighting a headache, he couldn't resist another battle with Granger over some obscure alchemical twist they'd discovered. He no longer wondered why she had so few friends. She was driven, she didn't know when to let an enquiry drop, and she was damned odd. He didn't know a single other female who, when told "You look like hell," would respond with a radiant smile.

Of course, she didn't really look like hell any more she never had, really just tired and often grubby. He wondered why the goddess had chosen to favour Granger. She obviously didn't like her, and had thrown a huge hissy fit when he suggested firmly that Miss Granger be left alone on account of the fact that she at least had been inclined to save his life the previous year, but perhaps the gift was given as a sideways way of honouring his request.

"Professor?"

He blinked.

"Professor Snape, would you come and be tall for me, please? I don't want to use my wand so close to the brewing."

She was pointing at a set of phials he'd put away on the top shelf.

"You're such a squatty little thing, Granger," he said, reaching for them easily.

"Remind me to wear stilts in future. Thank you."

He returned to his calculations, keeping an eye on Granger's technique as she dissolved a few flakes of corroded metal for the next stage of their analysis. They were both startled into error, and profanity, by a loud knock and the entrance of Miss Lapanne. She swept into the dungeon laboratory and made a moue of distaste.

"Severus, my dearest love, I will never understand how you can spend so much time in a hole in the ground."

"Potions laboratories are traditionally constructed underground, as many ingredients and potions are photosensitive and one needs to be able to regulate the illumination precisely." He reeled off the standard explanation without thinking, as he slashed a thick red line across his ruined page. "What can I do for you?" he added dispassionately.

"We have reservations remember?"

"Oh. That." He dropped his quill. "Do you mind clearing up, Miss Granger?"

"Not at all, Professor. No rescuing this mess anyway."

Hermione watched them leave but didn't relax. It was no surprise when the goddess came back into the room. She closed the door behind her and leant on it, her arms crossed under her bosom and anger in her eyes.

"I should take back the beauty I gave you, you ungrateful little worm."

"Hardly ungrateful, since it wasn't meant kindly. And you can't take back a gift. Once a thing is given, it's given, isn't it? It's mine to do what I want with. Those are the rules." Hermione gave an infuriating shrug and started stacking her implements. "The rest is just compulsion."

"How did you do it? *How?*"

"It's called free will. I don't have to do what you want me to do. Nobody does. Not even Professor Snape he's just being nice to you." Aphrodite flinched a little at that. "For a goddess of Love, you don't seem to do a very good job of it, in my opinion. All you seem to do is try to make sure everybody's unhappy."

"How *dare* you, little girl?" Aphrodite towered over Hermione, who stood her ground. "How dare you question and insult me? Have I not shown love towards Severus, he for whom nobody cared?"

"I don't think so. He's just a project to you, isn't he? You show no interest in anything he actually does or cares about..."

"You will suffer."

"Oh, bite me."

"You know nothing of love!"

"Perhaps I don't," Hermione agreed. "But then I don't think you do, either."

She waited until the door had slammed to collapse onto a stool, shaking violently and pressing a hand to her racing heart.

\*

Hermione and the smith were just leaning a section of the gate up against the stack at the far end of the forge. Despite its weight and size, and the evident physical effort of moving the object Granger in particular was firmly braced against its gravitational single-mindedness there was an astonishing amount of care and even tenderness in the way they finally let it come to rest with barely a whisper of metal on metal. Hermione patted it fondly. She put her hands on her hips and blew upwards in a futile attempt to move a curl that had fallen across her eye.

"Well, done," said Smith, flinging an arm round her shoulders and giving her a squeeze.

Severus, in the doorway, cleared his throat.

"It's finished," he said. He held up a basket containing six large bottles that shimmered with peacock hues. The bottles were carefully padded and stoppered with red wax over the corks.

Hermione bounced across to him, beaming delightedly.

"And so have we! The last section is done look!"

She grabbed his free arm and hauled him over to look at what seemed an assemblage of abstract patterns, layer piled on layer back into the shadows.

"And if you're finished, too, we can start on assembling the gates and making your chain links! But not tonight," she added when both men drew breath to quash her enthusiasm. "Tonight, we celebrate!"

But Smith shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I am called away on family business. I'm sorry to let you down." He tweaked her chin. "But you two should definitely toast your success your effort and your achievements have been exemplary."

"So kind of you," Snape drawled.

"Catch!" said Smith, fishing a flask out of the cupboard and chucking it across to Snape, who plucked it neatly out of the air. "I was saving this for a special occasion, but I think you both deserve it tonight." He hung his apron on a peg and walked out without a backward glance.

"He seems preoccupied," observed Severus.

"He gets like that sometimes," Hermione replied, shaking off her disappointment. "So tell me about ..."

"No, Granger. He's right. No more work tonight. Got a corkscrew in your toolkit?"

"Look ..." She hesitated. "If we're going to celebrate, let's do it properly, shall we? Get right away from work. Go and find some food. Talk about, I don't know other stuff."

Severus looked at his watch.

"It's late. Finding something to eat now might be a problem."

"Well, do you at least know of a good chippy?" She sounded exasperated.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Of course, bringing Granger back to Spinner's End might have been a rash decision, Severus reflected when he saw her eyes widen appreciatively at his overloaded and buckling bookshelves. But it was too late. She couldn't very well take him back to her rooms at the school, and neither of them felt like wandering the streets sharing chips from a bag and swigging wine from the bottle, so his house had seemed like a sensible option. For all of two minutes.

"Ooooooh! You've got the out-of-series edition of *Potions Monthly*! Madam Pince hasn't put that on the shelves yet. Has it got Brightwall and Murgatroyd's new article on the principles of magical decay in it?"

"Yes, and it's complete tosh."

He went through to his kitchen to find plates and glasses. To his surprise, she tore herself away from the books to follow him. It felt uncomfortable having someone in there with him. It was clean, and it was functional, but it was also small and desperately old-fashioned. She ran her finger along the edge of the ancient gas cooker.

"What a lovely kitchen!" she said. "Not at all like the ghastly fitted affair my mum had, and felt she had to rip out and redesign every two years. This has character."

"Have a plate," he said and led the way back to the living room.

The chips were perfect. Just on the edge of soggy, and laden with far too much salt and vinegar. Severus crunched through his fish with great enjoyment, not so much for the pleasure of the flesh within, but more for the perfection of the beer batter his local chip shop used. Hermione had turned her chicken pie upside down so she could pick it up and eat it without the softer bottom pastry collapsing.

"God, I'm starving," she said just before she sank her teeth in. She gave a little moan of pleasure and closed her eyes. She caught Severus watching her closely when she opened them again. "Well, you can't say this isn't heaven," she teased. "Are you going to open the wine, then?"

"I never knew you were such a hedonist." Uncomfortable again, he stood up to fetch a corkscrew from the kitchen. "Swotty little Miss Granger with her revision timetables and homework always on time actually living in the moment?"

"A year of thinking on my feet just to stay alive taught me a lot." She held the glasses while he poured golden liquid into them. "Besides, just because I plan ahead doesn't mean I don't know how to make the most of the moment I'm in. I'd never be so good at learning stuff if I didn't."

There was no boasting in what she said just simple fact. It was nice for Hermione to be able to say it out loud for once, knowing that she'd be understood.

"You have certainly learned a great deal this year a remarkable amount, even for you," Severus said. He put the bottle carefully between two piles of books on his coffee table.

"I've had the very best of teachers and workmates," she replied simply.

She raised her glass and they toasted silently. The wine was extraordinary, full of light and warmth, not sweet, yet honeyed on the palate.

"You know who he is, don't you?" Severus asked. He returned to his fish.

"Of course I do I'm not stupid. I could never have learned so much, so fast, even from the most gifted of mortal teachers. And I know exactly who your 'Miss Lapanne' is, too." Hermione giggled. "Lapanne? *Lapin*? You couldn't come up with anything better than Jessica *Rabbit*?" She laughed outright, then. "I'm not bad I'm just drawn that way..." she quoted huskily, still laughing.

"You must admit the resemblance," he said.

"Yes, but ... but ..."

"And I was thinking on my feet."

She laughed harder.

"Eat your pie, Granger. It's in danger of falling onto my first edition of *Biggles*."

At this, she was helpless. His eyes creased at the corners and he sipped his wine again.

Hermione couldn't remember when she'd had such a good ... No, that wasn't right, but she was having just as much fun as she'd had with the smith at Yule. Severus, who by the second glass *had* somehow become Severus, proved to be just as funny as she'd often suspected. And he smiled sometimes, which transformed his dour face. He

looked positively endearing when embarrassed, as he was when she discovered that one whole bookcase was sporting a glamour. She forced him to remove it, and thereby discovered his extensive and eclectic record collection. Shelves of LPs and, from later years, CDs made her fingertips itch. Soon they were seated cross-legged on the floor with albums scattered around them.

"I got through the war on this stuff. Two wars," said Severus, waving his hand. "Had to be alert the whole damn time just to stay alive, never mind keep you lot alive, but even spies need to switch off sometimes." He slipped *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* into the CD player. Hermione was impressed at the charms that made it run despite all the magic swashing round. "It was horrible having Wormtail here. Unhygienic in whatever form, and no privacy at all. Had to invent things to get him out of the house so I could listen." He leaned back against the sofa and rolled his glass across his forehead, closing his eyes.

"It must have been ghastly. I used to escape into books to shut the boys out. It wasn't too bad before we had to leave Grimmauld Place, but the tent ..." She shuddered.

They were quite for a moment, listening to the music.

"Mind if I use the loo?" she asked, abruptly aware of the need to do so.

"Upstairs."

She got to her feet, swaying a little from the wine. Only two glasses and she felt distinctly floaty. The stairs were steep and a little problematic, but she made it to the spotless bathroom without incident and sank down gratefully, her head resting against the wall next to her. Downstairs, Severus had raised the volume. Words drifted up to her:

*A soul in tension that's learning to fly*

*Condition grounded but determined to try*

Her eyes pricked. Was that what his apparent devotion to the goddess was all about? She flushed the loo and washed her hands, then left the bathroom.

*Above the planet on a wing and a prayer,*

*My grubby halo, a vapour trail in the empty air*

Suddenly she felt very sober. Did he really feel so lost and ephemeral? Clinging to a shred of hope that he wasn't completely ruined?

"Oh, no!" she said to the portrait of an old lady that hung opposite the open door of Severus' bedroom. "Not this." To her, he was solid, and real, and vivid, and above all things, she now knew, an essential part of all that was bright in her life. When had respect and liking evolved into ... *this*?

Severus was clearing away the plates.

"I ... I have to go," she said awkwardly, not quite meeting his eyes and thus missing entirely the disappointment that showed fleetingly in them. "Thank you so much it's been lovely." She grimaced, knowing how stupid that sounded.

"You don't want to finish the bottle?"

"Work tomorrow," was her feeble reply. "Shall I see you?"

"Of course you will, Miss Granger. We do work together for the present, if you recall."

She didn't mind the sarcastic tone, but being 'Miss Granger' again was a bit of a blow.

"Bye, then." She Disapparated from the doorstep.

He shut the door and dropped into his armchair. "'Tongue-tied and twisted, just an earth-bound misfit'," he said aloud.

\*

Granny Snape permitted herself a small smile. She'd never let on that she was a witch. Not to her husband, not to her son, and not to her grandson. Eileen had known immediately, of course, but sometimes men were better left in the dark. Most of the time, really. Wisdom could be passed on without foolish wand-waving, to her thinking. Of course, it was a bore pretending to be plain paint, but if she hadn't then the lad would never have had anyone to unburden himself to. And he'd needed to, when his godawful music didn't do the trick. One pickle after another, silly boy, despite all those brains he was so proud of. And now he was stuck with some strumpet he'd never thought good enough to bring home to see his old Gran, when it seemed oh dear, he'd turned the volume up again, never a good sign there was this girl all sweet on him and him too daft to do anything about it.

\*

Hermione lay awake for some time, pondering the sudden transformation of her feelings. She wasn't the kind of girl to just turn round and think she was smitten. Definitely something fishy going on. Definitely. Well, if she could discipline Ron and Harry to do their homework, she could discipline her own emotions into some semblance of rational order.

She did get some sleep, but in the morning was distressed to find herself still hopelessly in love with Severus Snape.

She brushed her hair savagely, at each stroke telling herself, "*I will* beat this!" until she felt ready to face the world. She stood in the middle of her room with her fists clenched and her eyes shut.

"I beat one compulsion. I'll beat her again. And I'm NOT going to let her drag Severus Professor Snape into her stupid games with me."

## Nine: In which a goddess ponders

*Chapter 9 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix

the battle damage at Hogwarts.

## Nine: In which a goddess ponders

The gentle breeze still stirred the draperies, and the myrtles and roses still scented the air, the sea still glinted below, and the last rays of the sun cast a warm glow on the paving, but otherwise an uneasy hush prevailed on the mountaintop. Aphrodite leaned against a pillar and gazed unseeing across the bay far below. The doves were cowering somewhere, the swans had decamped to a lake on the other side of the island, and the nymphs had fled from the divine wrath, two of them incontinently transforming into flowering shrubs on the way. Which was a nuisance, because these days nymphs were not nearly as expendable as they used to be.

The Granger girl's words still chafed after two weeks.

*You know nothing of love.*

For two weeks, whenever Severus wasn't available to be doted on, the goddess had raged and screamed and cried until she was weary of her own voice.

She knew nothing of love? She showered love on Severus even when he was preoccupied and silent. She caressed the lines away from his forehead and coaxed him to play draughts or to talk of calming things.

And then he went back to bury himself in work and fumes and arguments with That Girl.

It was Severus who knew nothing of love.

She sighed.

Mortals were so flawed. Almost a year of her care, and Severus knew nothing of love. He even chose to spend some nights away from her – like tonight. He wasn't unkind to her, but he gave nothing of himself any more. Not for a long time, in fact. Not since the old witch at the school tempted him with all those stupid repairs she couldn't do herself.

Was it his work he loved? Didn't he need her any longer?

She frowned. Could love be felt for something as mundane and troubling as work?

Or, said a little voice, something as mundane and troubling as That Girl ... ?

Hephaestus was always so bound up in his work, too. No time for his trophy wife after he'd shown her off a bit. So she'd gone and got some trophies of her own, just to show she could.

Was that all love was? Was that all she was for? No wonder existence was so lacking. Nothing to live for but the rage of passion. Nothing to think about but tasting that storm again and again.

But what was there when the storm passed?

She reached for a mirror and studied her flawless face. Through the reflection of her own blue eyes, she seemed to see Eris' carmine twinkle lurking. She replaced the mirror upon the table, face down.

What was there beyond the storm?

She gazed out over the calm and endless sea.

Her foot brushed against a rose that lay wilting and broken where she had thrown it in her rage. She bent to pick it up and held it to her lips, breathing life back into its battered petals.

## Ten: In which links are forged

*Chapter 10 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

## Ten: In which links are forged

Several weeks of experiment had brought them to the point where they knew exactly how to incorporate Severus' potion into the folding, twisting and refolding of the metal as it was shaped; they knew precisely the wording and tonality of the spells they needed to employ; they knew when silence would be essential, and when one voice or a blending of voices and powers would be required. The forge was ready. Coal was stockpiled; herbs and other substances stood ready in jars and boxes waiting to be added to the flames; the floor was swept; the piles of scrap from their earlier, unsuccessful attempts had been taken out. The new iron lay waiting, simple and bare, like an unwritten page, with coils of gleaming gold, silver and copper next to it, waiting to be bound in, bent into runes at the heart of every link. Flasks of the potion gleamed iridescent in the shadows.

Hermione, Severus and the smith sat outside taking the air while they had the chance. Hermione was stretched out on her stomach, her chin on her arms, watching an intrepid beetle trundle through the grass forest. Her feet swung to and fro above her. The men sat on the bench as usual, Severus with his head back and eyes apparently closed, though now and then the sun caught a glint from under his lashes as he followed the tick-tock sway of Hermione's trainers. Smith seemed absorbed in a study of the scuffed ground between his toes. None of them felt a need to break the silence.

Wood pigeons cooed somewhere nearby.

The forge fires crackled.

Smith went to tend them, then resumed his position as if he had never moved.

Severus' chest rose and fell beneath his folded arms.

Tick-tock went Hermione's shoes. Tick...

The roar of an engine made them all look up. Elland's Range Rover swept through the gateway, ushered in by the Aurors who stood permanent guard.

The car drew to a halt on the verge, and Elland stepped down. In grey Armani, a silk tie and highly-polished shoes, he presented an image of understated elegance, but with every uneven pace he took towards the three now standing at the forge doorway, he changed. By the seventh step, they were watching not Elland the prosperous entrepreneur, but Wayland, smith to the gods, bulking large and bare-chested, clad in leather breeches and boots, his energy and power undiminished by the twisted leg that seemed like to buckle under him. It was a surprise that there was no clap of thunder when he and Smith clasped forearms.

"Brother," said Smith.

"This will be a work worthy of our efforts," Wayland replied. He turned to regard Hermione and Severus. "Are they fit?" he asked.

"They are."

"You know what is in store for you?" Elland demanded. "Are you ready?"

Severus gave a tight jerk of his head. Hermione looked from Elland to Smith and back again.

"I'm not ready," she said. "I don't think I ever could be ready for this. But I am committed to it."

A touch on her arm detained her at the threshold. For the first time in weeks, she looked up at Severus unguardedly. Since their evening together, she had attempted to behave as though nothing had happened, but she was no actress, and he knew she was holding back. He had withdrawn in response, and though they had continued with their work, their easy complicity had faded fast. For her part, it had made Hermione profoundly unhappy, but she was steadfast in her refusal to give in to Aphrodite's whims, however painful she found it. Seeing the renewed bitterness of the lines etched into his face, she wondered for the first time whether she had, in protecting herself, been unfair to him. He was not a man who made friends easily, after all.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"No. I never have been not for anything." His mouth twisted. "But why change the habits of a lifetime?"

"Even the bad habits?"

"What do you mean, Granger?"

They were interrupted by the whoosh of the bellows. Hermione held out her hand. "Well, here goes." He took her arm in a warrior's handshake. "Here goes," he agreed.

\*

Here went, indeed. It was the work of gods, tireless and unending. Wayland and the Smith laboured relentlessly, eyes and teeth flashing in the hot firelight, sweaty skin glistening like copper and bronze. The two mortals kept up as best they could. After three days, Hermione wondered whether this undertaking would kill her. After seven, she was sure it would.

She lay on the pallet, clawing her way back from sleep, the abstract patterns of light and dark gradually resolving into the figures of the smiths at work. The iron screamed a white hot glare, and she was grateful when something black intervened before her eyes.

A hand appeared in front of her face, holding a small phial.

"Here you are, Granger you'll be needing this." Severus' voice was rough with exhaustion and overuse. He shook the phial a little to draw her attention.

"You've cut your hand again," she mumbled, attempting to sit up. He hauled her upright by the arm, collapsing to sit down next to her.

She took the phial and downed the contents. The potion flowed cool and invigorating down her throat, bringing her to full wakefulness. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, then accepted the flask of water he held out.

"If you give me a minute, I'll find that pot of salve."

"Don't bother it's just a scratch."

"It's considerably more than that, and must hurt like blazes. You'll use the salve, or ..."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll make sure the gangrene fairy pays a visit. How long have I been asleep?"

"What?" His eyes were closing. "About six hours. There's some food somewhere, I think."

Hermione scooted over to allow him to topple onto the pillow, asleep before he made contact. She smeared his unresisting hand with ointment, then found herself some bread and cheese. She had, she knew, only a few minutes before she was needed. A few minutes in which she floated in a kind of bubble, isolated by the constant noise of the work, the bellows, the fire ... A few minutes during which she allowed herself to study Severus' sleeping face. So sad, she thought, that even now he looked guarded and closed off. And it was her fault. For a couple of hours one evening, he had been her friend, until she'd panicked and thrown it back at him.

"Eat up, lass, we need you now!" said Smith from somewhere far away.

She looked at the almost-untouched sandwich and put it back on the plate, which she placed where Severus could reach it easily when he woke. She got up stiffly. Time to add her own blend of magic and expertise to the link being forged.

\*

Old habits die hard. Even exhaustion could not keep Severus from sleeping nervously and waking easily. He jumped from uneasy dreams roiling in darkness to a vision of chthonian toil backlit by the furnace, voices whispering in the black transforming into rhythmic hammer blows. Above all was the chant of Hermione's voice as she implanted another layer of protection Charms alongside the precious ensorcelled wires that would be stretched and twisted into an ideography of power to lie unseen, embedded in the magic he himself had already forged into the iron in the potion he had created. Human magic, created from intellect and passion and toil, blended with the gods' power to protect the castle for another thousand years.

Each time he woke, the thought of what they were doing took Severus like a blow to the heart. Until this point, his mistakes and achievements had seemed important, and

both recognition and blame had mattered to him. It all seemed less significant now. In a hundred years, the war would be a short chapter in the history of wizarding Britain. In two hundred, nobody but a few scholars would remember who had mended the walls and made the new gates. But even when Hermione and he were long dead, their magic would still be coursing like blood, alive, a benediction.

He sat up and scrubbed at his face. Poetry in a hell-hole. Bad poetry in a hell-hole. He was going loopy. Granger's sandwich, one small bite missing, sent him a siren song. Ravenous, he devoured it. He groaned his way to his feet, heading for the simple comfort of a pee.

Granger looked up and smiled at him through her chanting.

\*

Hermione would never remember finishing the last chain link.

Severus would never forget.

She was on autopilot by then, flirting with physical and magical exhaustion, pouring everything she had into the work. Had he not known that he was doing the same, Severus would have been furious with the smiths for letting her. But he knew it was not a case of 'letting' or otherwise. She gave of herself freely, as he did, for the love of the work and of the school and of ... there were other motivations there, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to examine them. She could have walked away at any time. Nobody held her prisoner. Nobody but her own stubborn will.

He was standing ready when the last charm was laid, but in his own fog of exhaustion not sufficiently alert to prevent what happened.

Her tongs and pliers slipped from her fingers as she exhaled the last syllable of the Charm. Smith flicked the tools away, but Hermione swayed, and her hand came down on the glowing metal. When she snatched it away, twists of wire clung to her skin, hissing and smoking. Severus caught her as she staggered back, but she clutched at his arm and the metal burnt into his flesh too. He remembered both of them screaming. He remembered Elland seizing his arm and plunging it into icy water while Smith dealt with Hermione's injury. He remembered cool wine the wine Smith had given them before running past his lips and over his tongue.

And then he remembered waking on the pallet, stinking and sweaty, with a faceful of sleeping Hermione's filthy hair, before drifting off again.

When they both surfaced, it was plain they were branded for life. Hermione's palm showed a pattern of silver scars, well-healed and flexible. Severus' flesh bore runes for protection, scrawled haphazardly across the mark on the inside of his left forearm, reminding him of nothing so much as his own jagged scribble on a poor essay: "Complete rubbish try again."

\*

From the shadows, unseen by all, a pair of pensive sapphire eyes observed.

\*

Hermione pulled her head out of the bucket of cold water.

"Merlin! That feels *good*!" she said, sitting back on her heels. "You should try it." She gathered her pony tail in her hands and squeezed the excess water out.

"You resemble an Old English Sheepdog that's just come out of a river, Granger. I'd hate to put you to shame by ending up looking like a wet Borzoi."

She laughed.

"You don't have the right profile for it. Pass the sandwiches."

Since the primary magical content of the gates was in the panels, the struts and bindings which would fix them together, while still complex enough, at least allowed a little time to catch one's breath. Hermione and Severus chose by mutual and unspoken accord to remain silent on the topic of their accident. The presence of the scars, and their significance, needed no discussion or at least not for now. The moment was best dealt with in the traditional English manner by avoiding the issue altogether.

"Horrible sandwiches, Granger," he said, guzzling another one.

"Everything is stale. Everything. I've lost track of how long we've been in here, but all the freshness charms are fading." She gingerly raised the top of her sandwich and peered inside. "Well, if this doesn't help us develop a healthy immune system, nothing will. Good job I'm famished."

"Only one more day, Smith says."

"Does it feel like the end of term to you? You know when there's a whole summer ahead, full of possibilities and no timetable to follow?"

He nodded, his eyes creasing.

"I really, really need a bath."

"Yes, Granger, you really, really do."

"Good job you smell even worse, then, or I'd have to be embarrassed."

\*

McGonagall was ready to pounce when they finally emerged, blinking, into the daylight. Elland gave her no chance to waylay them, instead bundling them almost bodily into his car with a shout of "See you on Monday!" before they roared off, leaving the Headmistress to spit out a faceful of dust. Severus glanced back and caught sight of her livid face. Payment would undoubtedly be extracted later. He shrugged.

"Where are we going?" he enquired mildly.

"White Horse Inn, Woolstone," Elland replied. "I think we could all do with a decent pint."

"Drop me off here, would you? I've something I have to see to."

Hermione looked out of the window so he wouldn't see her disappointment.

"I'll meet you there in a couple of hours," he added. Elland stopped the Range Rover, and Severus climbed out onto the lonely verge. Nothing more than a bee nosing at the heather animated the landscape. He raised a hand to them and Disappeared.

He really had no very accurate idea how long he had been absent from Aphrodite's side, though he had warned her that the work could take some time, and she no doubt had other fish to fry, but it troubled him that her temple was deserted when he got there. Oh, the fattest and laziest of the swans waddled over to beg for a titbit and be enchanted by the novelty of an elderly cheese sandwich, but other than that, not a creature was to be seen. Severus wondered whether it was at long last his turn to feel the goddess' displeasure. Intending without much hope of success to avert some of it, he conjured a parchment and quill and wrote a brief note. His prose was at the gentlest of times notable chiefly for its bluntness, so he gathered a posy of flowers and put them into a vase, which he used to weight the paper against the breeze. He

looked around. Nothing was there that drew him to linger, so he Disappeared once again, heading for his own bathroom, some plain soap and experiencing a sudden lightness of spirit Ian Dury and the Blockheads at Herculean volume.

Two tankful of hot water, three bars of soap and a whole bottle of shampoo later, he finally felt clean. He estimated by the length of the beard he scraped off his face that they had been shut in the smithy for a good month no wonder McGonagall had looked furious. Amazing how the time flies when you're having fun, he thought wryly as he wiped the last traces of foam from round his ears. He leaned towards the mirror. Strange to see his features emerge from all the grime and hair: he looked younger, despite the dark circles under his eyes.

*A bit of grin and bear it, a bit of come and share it*

*You're welcome, we can spare it - yellow socks*

*Too short to be haughty, too nutty to be naughty*

*Going on 40 - no electric shocks*

rapped Ian Dury from downstairs.

He wrapped a towel firmly round his waist, because he never felt comfortable about the idea of his gran seeing him naked, and crossed the hall to his bedroom. He turned back at the doorway and held up his arm to the portrait. "Look, Gran I got a new scar! What do you think?" he said.

\*

Hermione was sitting at a table in the pub garden when Severus strolled up. She, too, looked freshly washed and pretty in jeans and a flowery blouse.

"You were quick," he said, glancing at his watch.

"Well, I was travelling in a godmobile," she answered.

He took the place opposite her and leaned his arms on the weathered wood.

"Nice place," he commented.

"Mmmmm." She picked at some lichen. "Severus, I "

Smith plonked four pints of bitter down in front of them and inserted himself next to Hermione. Elland took the remaining seat as he dropped a selection of crisps and peanuts onto the middle of the table. They all raised their glasses.

"What shall we drink to?" asked Elland.

"To teamwork," suggested Smith.

"To surviving it," added Severus.

"Let's just drink, shall we?" said Hermione. She took a long, long pull at her beer and put the glass back down with a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank *God!*" she said devoutly.

"You're welcome," replied both of them. And once she'd started laughing, she found it very hard to stop.

They were deep into a game of cribbage when the peace of the summer evening was broken by the roar of motorbikes. Severus scowled as a posse of Harleys drew into the pub car park. The riders dismounted and strolled proprietorially into the garden, stripping off helmets, gauntlets and leather jackets as they came. The scowl darkened as two of the newcomers made straight for their table and squashed in next to Hermione and Severus himself. He laid down his cards and made sure he could get to his wand in its concealed holster. Then he realised that Hermione looked anything but perturbed. In fact she was grinning at the great, hairy goon next to her and actually asking after his health.

"This is Severus," she said, gesturing with her hand of cards. "He and I have been working together. Cheer up, Severus! These are friends. This ," she elbowed the bearded oik, " is Nobby. That's Haggis next to you, and over there are Gizmo, Hangdog, Pike and Julian."

"Julian?"

"He hasn't got a proper name yet," said Haggis. "And at this rate, he's going to be stuck with 'Julian' for the rest of his life. He's a bit hopeless, really, but what can you expect from someone who left school at fifteen to be a bricklayer? We've been trying to get him to raise his sights a bit."

"And what do you do?" enquired Severus of the tattooed Leviathan.

"I'm a pastry chef," said Haggis proudly.

"Yeah, he makes a mean chocolate éclair," said Nobby. "I run a software business. What about you, Severus?"

"I ... was ... a teacher. Now I'm a sort of ... security consultant, I suppose."

"Is that what Hermione's been helping you guys with?" said the one Hermione had pointed out as Hangdog, leaning over Nobby's shoulder to offer a meaty paw. "Cool. You want to have a drive, Hermione? I brought your helmet."

"Maybe tomorrow, okay? I've already had too much beer, and I'm knackered."

"You'll be fit tomorrow, though? We thought we'd have a sorta solstice party, seeing as you missed the real one."

"Wasn't the same without you guys," said Nobby wistfully.

"What about you, Severus?" Haggis boomed. "You got any plans?"

"Granger, I had no idea," said Severus, covering his astonishment, "that you kept such ... enlightened ... company."

"Hermione here is in a state of major budditude with the chapter," said Pike. He offered his spliff to Severus and was unoffended to have it turned down. "She is beyond the outer reaches of the uber-cool."

"You'd never guess that Pike's the youngest Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature there's ever been at Oxford, would you?" giggled Hermione.

"It certainly doesn't show," he agreed drily.

"Well, Severus? Do you have any plans?" Smith asked him. There was more weight to the words than their meaning warranted, he felt.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Severus, sidestepping the challenge.

"Good then it's your round."

Gods: 1 Slytherins: 0

\*

Severus woke because someone was kicking the sole of his foot. Repeatedly. He deduced from this that the someone was an irritating person and withdrew his foot. Toe-prodding resumed when the irritating person located his ribs.

"Go away, Granger," he growled.

"I'm going for a walk. Do you want to come?" She sounded perky. Yes, definitely an irritating person.

"What time is it?"

"Sunday."

"You interrupt the first decent night's sleep I've had since nineteen seventy-nine and you can't even tell me the time?"

She waited.

He sat bolt upright in what seemed to be a heap of furs. "What happened to Saturday?"

"It'll dribble back into your consciousness in a while. So are you coming for a walk?"

Severus started to throw back the covers, realised he was naked, and burrowed back under, pretending he hadn't heard the snigger.

"I'll wait outside, then, shall I?" She stepped over the snoring forms of Haggis and Pike and flung the door open, letting in a truly offensive amount of morning sunlight.

She didn't seem to mind that he kept her waiting for a long time. He found her propped against the trunk of a horse chestnut, a book perched on her knees and a large sun-hat cast onto the grass by her feet. Slightly scruffy jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt that she had obviously pilfered from one of the lads suited her well. The air around was full of birdsong, and though it was sunny, there was a hint of damp chill that suggested rain was on the way. Severus found the contrast with the hot breeze and silence of Aphrodite's palace rather pleasing. His note and posy had been removed, so he had left another short letter and departed without further ado. Hermione shrank her book, stuffed it into her back pocket, and crammed her hat onto her head.

"Hi," she said. "Come on, then."

They didn't speak again until they were seated on the hillside below the White Horse. Approaching rain clouds scudding in from the south had chased away the sightseers, so that all the company they had was that of a few bees working the flowers of a wild rose entwined with a fence further down. Hermione sat a short distance away, her arms wrapped round her drawn-up knees, her face visible only when the wind flapped the brim of her hat. Severus leaned back on his elbows to admire the view, then plucked a stem of grass and lay down to chew it contemplatively while he stared at the clouds.

"It's been a strange year," she said suddenly.

He grunted.

"I don't think I'm going to pass my advanced studies programme. I haven't even spoken to Vector since Christmas, and Flitwick gave up on me around March."

"Do you mind?" He was genuinely curious.

"Oddly, no." She sighed. "I always used to think passing exams was the best way of showing I was a proper witch, you know? A proper anything, for that matter. I remember how disappointed Mum was when I got a B on something once when I was nine."

Severus recalled the desperate little girl sitting next to Potter, itching to prove she was top of the class before class even started.

"And now?"

"I've made more mistakes in my work this year than I ever thought possible. I've had to go back and re-do *everything* I've started. I've worked my socks off and still barely scratched the surface of my discipline. I've discovered I've got to use so much more than just my brain to get where I want to."

"And?"

She skewed round to look at him cloud-watching.

"And I love it."

"A vocation is a thing of passion, Granger."

She hesitated then rushed forward.

"I've seen that in you, too, these last weeks," she said tentatively. "In the work, I mean."

"What does that cloud remind you of?" he said, pointing.

"Your big nose, avoidance-boy."

"Aren't you supposed to show a certain degree of respect and awe towards a former teacher?"

"You're not in that category any more. Not for a long time. Particularly not after that rendition of 'Stairway to Heaven' yesterday."

"You were asleep."

"Through that?"

They fell silent again. The first few drops of rain fell. A petal dropped from the dog-rose.

"Do you aim to carry on working with Smith?" Severus asked at last.

"If I've met his standards. If he'll have me. This was never intended to be a permanent arrangement." The rain began to fall faster. Hermione raised her face to it, the drops making her eyelashes flutter.

"We're getting cold and wet, Granger."

"Call yourself a Yorkshireman?"

"I'm not a bloody penguin, though."

"Sissy."

"Harridan."

They slithered off down the grassy slope. A slender hand plucked a blossom of the English dog-rose and raised it to bask in the goddess' warm breath.

\*

McGonagall had clearly been working on her tirade for weeks, embroidering it with each passing day that they had been locked in the forge behind impenetrable wards. Severus was impressed with her stamina as she reeled off complaint upon reproach, castigating them for their shortcomings, the lack of information, the state they had been in when they finally emerged, and, as though it were adding insult to injury, that they returned fresh as daisies after a mere weekend away. After a while, he noticed that she was repeating herself and relying more on rhythm than content to provide variety. Such a Gryffindor, using all the weapons in the first attack, with nothing left to fall back on. Any Slytherin worth the name, even Voldemort after his ego outgrew his wit, would have had a far juicier set of insults to draw upon. And Severus, long accustomed to tuning out other people's ranting, paid it little mind. Hermione was wincing from time to time, though, and clearly wanting to be out of the target area. Smith, of course, let it all wash over him. He waited until Minerva ran out of steam, turned on the bluff charm, patted her on the bottom and told her to run along as they had work to be getting on with. Severus knew he would forever prize the memory of her expression, caught between schoolgirl giggle and outraged Vestal. In fact, he decided, he was going to stick that one in his Pensieve collection as soon as he got home.

Two weeks, the smith said. Two more weeks of hard slog, and the gates would be ready. But they had to get started.

Each wing of the gate would bear two panels, each panel being a composite of seven single layers of swirling abstract design, which would be sandwiched together, held nine-thirteenths of an inch apart by the struts containing Severus' potion and Hermione's charmed runes, and set into a deep frame containing blocks of granite hewn from the bedrock beneath the castle. All the binding, welding and riveting required concentration, muscle power, a mastery of yet more complex charms and incantations, and some damn fine ale in the late evening when they shut the forge doors against the increasing thrum of magic from within. The gates were huge, and finally Hermione understood why the forge had needed to be such a great barn of a building. She supposed they would have to knock down the walls to get them out.

Two weeks and three days later, Severus and Hermione together completed the last weld.

"Well, that's it, then," she said. She stood and looked down at the panel she was standing on. "I hope nobody minds the Jackson Pollock aesthetic." Then she burst into tears. "Oh shit."

Severus handed her a dirty rag to wipe her eyes with.

"The only solution is to start thinking about the next project, Granger," he said. "Give me a couple of hours, and I'll meet you at the pub to brainstorm. Can I have my rag back, please?"

Severus left her to Smith's plain comfort and went to pay his now customarily brief visit to Aphrodite's isle. He left another note on the table, fed the swan its sandwich and Apparated home to wash and tell his Gran they had finished. Honestly, sometimes he could swear she listened to him. Aphrodite's continued absence made him more nervous with every passing day. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. Gran always looked less disapproving, though, when he talked about Granger, so he hurried to get changed. Hideous retribution would catch up with him in her own sweet time, whether he enjoyed himself or sat and fretted with a tin hat on his head, so he chose to go and spend the evening drinking beer and baiting Granger. Talking of which ... He stopped by his desk to grab the notes for their paper in refutation of Brightwall and Murgatroyd between the research on the original enchantments in Hogwarts' walls and the observations they'd made as a side-effect of eating stale cheese, he and Hermione already knew far more about the half-life of spells than those two buffoons.

\*

The inauguration party was a sober affair. The British Isles had rolled out some typical August weather for this Friday the thirteenth, and the attendees huddled under a bizarre selection of umbrellas, parasols and hats, Scottish drizzle having the peculiar characteristic of being impervious to Impervious Charms. Smith, having a sense of the dramatic, had swathed the new gates in cloth-of-gold, which hung drably under the sunless sky. Shacklebolt was attempting to give an inspiring speech, and McGonagall looked very much as though she wanted to gag him and get on with the tea and hot cocoa that were waiting in the Great Hall. Hermione, Severus and the smith stood to one side behind a strong Notice-Me-Not Charm, Smith letting the rain cluster in his curly hair and beard while the other two huddled under a huge black umbrella Transfigured from Severus' cloak. Elland, they presumed, was canoodling in greenhouse three with Sprout. Shacklebolt droned on.

"Doesn't he ever tire of his own voice?" said Aphrodite from behind them. "That's the dullerest thing I've heard since Demosthenes."

Hermione squeaked in surprise and turned round to glare at the goddess who, as usual, looked perfect. Severus stiffened as Aphrodite reached out and ran her finger down his cheek, though she did not come any closer to him.

"Dear Severus," she murmured. "I've so enjoyed your letters. Still pretty, then, Miss Granger?" She raised her eyebrows haughtily and didn't wait for an answer. "Husband," she said to the smith, in a curiously formal tone.

He bowed slightly to her.

Hermione and Severus exchanged a glance, wondering what was going on, but any further words were forestalled by a whoosh of fabric and a chorus of "Ooohs" and "Aaahs" as the gate was finally revealed.

Against the steely sky, the traceries of wrought iron looked like black lace, and the abstract patterns Hermione thought she knew so well, superimposed on one another, resolved into vast representations of the emblems of the four houses, Gryffindor and Slytherin above, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff below each animal rendered in a flowing and naturalistic style. Hermione's mouth fell open. She looked up at Severus to see a stunned expression on his face.

"You fraud!" Hermione said to the smith.

"It's not over yet," he grinned, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Look."

McGonagall raised her wand and the gates swung smoothly open on their massive hinges. At forty-five degrees, they stopped. Another chorus of gasps and chatter broke out. Hermione clutched at Severus' arm; he covered her fingers with his own and stared, speechless. The left-hand panel of the gate, seen from this angle, was a single, immense portrait of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger, he holding a phial, she her hammer and tongs. The other panel bore the likeness of the smith and of his wife, hand in hand just as they were standing when the two mortals finally managed to tear their eyes away from the thing they had helped to craft. The goddess, taller than her husband, looked down into his eyes.

"I understand now," she said. "You were always telling me. Not with your words, because frankly you're no poet, and not with your actions, because you have all the romance of a plank, but in everything you ever made." She kissed him on the lips. Then she smiled a little impishly. "Sorry, Severus," she said. "I am rather fond of you, but I think you have learned what I can teach you." She handed him a single wild rose. "Remember take what is freely given, and never doubt that it is yours."

He frowned.

"This is yours, Hermione," said the smith. He pulled a ruined chain link from his pocket. "There's a lot of symbolism in chains," he added. "Especially when the link isn't closed."

Hermione moved away from Severus' side and took the link in both hands, fitting her scarred palm over the absent runes. "I you're leaving, aren't you? Before you go, I want to ask something of your wife, if I may?" Her voice trembled, but she steadied it with an effort. "Goddess, would you please remove the compulsion you set upon me? I've put everything I have into fighting it, and I can't rid myself of it." She raised her chin defiantly. "Will you release me?"

"What compulsion?" said Aphrodite, sounding honestly puzzled. "You threw off the one I ..."

"Not *that* one! *This* one!" Hermione snapped. "This one that's making me love Severus! Merlin knows *he* doesn't want it, and I ... I wouldn't want to inflict ... I mean, he's my friend, I hope, and ..."

Aphrodite was laughing and clapping her hands delightedly in a manner Hermione found disgustingly gleeful.

"This is no doing of mine!"

A blush as hot as a furnace rose up Hermione's cheeks as she looked in horror at the goddess. Resolutely avoiding Severus' eyes, she turned in desperation to the smith. "You?"

He, too, was laughing. "None of my doing," he said. "I never gave you any trinkets, did I? And anyway, who says he doesn't want it?"

Severus seemed acutely embarrassed. But beneath the lowering black brows, his dark eyes showed traces of a hopeful kind of softness that was new to Hermione. His knuckles were white around the handle of the umbrella. She glanced at the rose in his other hand and the heavy iron in hers.

"Freely given ...?" he murmured.

"Never doubt," she replied. She launched herself at him, clonking him hard on the shoulder with her lump of metal.

"Subtle, Granger," he mumbled, his lips glued to hers.

A ray of light pierced the clouds, followed by another, then another until the clouds were suddenly driven away.

"That's a bit cheesy even for you, Wayland," called Hephaestus. Wayland, his arm round the plump waist of a mildly disarranged Professor Sprout, grinned back.

"It's who you know, Brother, it's who you know. I called in a favour from Lugh."

Hermione and Severus broke apart briefly. Sunlight sparkled in the raindrops that clung to the gate. The effect was dazzling.

Severus came close to cracking a smile, and then, rather to everyone's surprise, started to whistle a jaunty tune through his teeth. Hermione didn't recognise it, but it didn't matter.

*Bring me sunshine, in your smile...*

\*

## Eleven: In which the surface of Hermione's desk assumes the role of Narrator

*Chapter 11 of 11*

Ron, Harry and Hermione discover the consequences of their inaction with regard to saving the life of one Chosen by the gods – or in this case, goddess. And it all becomes vastly more complicated when the school hires workmen to fix the battle damage at Hogwarts.

### Eleven: In which the surface of Hermione's desk assumes the role of Narrator

A recyclable carrier bag containing several lever-arch folders, two reams of A4 paper, packs of cards for a card index, coloured pens, a variety of plain quills, three bottles of Everlasting Ink (black, red and green), a pair of dragonhide gloves (small), a large bar of fruit and nut chocolate, and a pot of Marmite.

\*

Exchange of emails visible on the computer screen:

From: Elland@forge-technologies.co.uk

To: h.granger@wowmail.com

Date: April 23

Subject: Training

So you're back, are you? Got a good Greek suntan, then? Ready to work?

Smith sent your papers through yesterday, so you can start the next phase of your apprenticeship at Forge Tech. next week.

W.

From: h.granger@wowmail.com

To: Elland@forge-technologies.co.uk

Date: April 23

Subject: Re: Training

Oh! That's brilliant! I'll be there. Can you send me the details of the apprenticeship – terms and whatnot – in an attachment?

Mr and Mrs Smith send their regards. Greece was sunny, we're brown.

Hermione

From: Elland@forge-technologies.co.uk

To: h.granger@wowmail.com

Date: April 23

Subject: Re: Re: Training

All you need to know is to clear your calendar for the next twenty years. You should make journeyman by then if you work hard.

By the way, Nobby and the lads want to know if you and Severus are free this weekend.

W.

\*

Chat windows open:

**Severus**

Me: Wayland says the apprenticeship is 20 yrs? O-o. Is he serious?

Severus: wtf

Me: yes

that's what I thought

Severus: He might not be joking, though. They're on a different time scale.

Shall I have a word?

Me: Nah. I'll do it. Might try to argue him down to 15

Severus: :-)

Me: I never thought I'd see you using an emoticon

I just told Pike

Severus: You're chatting with him?

Me: he says you're a dude

Severus: \*rolls eyes

Me: there's a party at Elland's this w/e

Severus: there would be

I'll be back at seven to pick you up

Me: ok I'll have a bath now then

See you

:-x

Severus: what is **that** supposed to mean?

**Prof Peregrine Pike**

Pike: he's a dude

Me: \*giggles

Pike: so you think that there's a case for poetry and incantation drawing on the same power?

Me: yes

There's all this stuff going on with cadence and rhythm – the most powerful incantations are also aesthetically perfect.

Pike: and layering and splicing of meaning?

Me: well, duh

Pike: brb – students

Me: talk about it over the w/e?

Pike: yeah. Think about who'll publish it.

Gotta go.

Me: go. go. I'm going to have a bath

Pike: \*leers

Me: I'll tell Severus

Pike: \*runs away screaming

\*

A cutting from the *Daily Prophet's* society pages:

"Miss Ginevra Weasley and Mr Harry Potter yesterday celebrated not getting married. In a somewhat unusual step, Mr Potter and Miss Weasley, recently reconciled after the Proposals Fiasco shortly after Christmas, have announced their intention not to marry for the foreseeable future but to 'live in immoral bliss'. Miss Weasley's parents were not available for comment. The celebrations are to be held at the Ritz Hotel, London, and will feature a selection of Muggle desserts and confectionery created by a Mr. Hilary Hague. All former fiancées of Mr Potter have been invited. We hear that the enchantment afflicting them has mysteriously been lifted."

\*

A small stick, hovering two inches above the desk surface, accompanied by a note: *Hermione, can you give me your opinion on this levitation charm? I think it's an improvement on the Firebolt.*

\*

A letter, on top of ten copies of the new issue of *Potions Monthly*

Hypothesis Magazines

39a Diagon Alley

London

Mr S. Snape and Ms H. Granger

27 Spinner's End

Bingley

W. Yorkshire

Dear Mr Snape and Miss Granger

Please find enclosed your complimentary copies of the next *Potions Monthly*, containing your article "Magical decay in the short and long term: why Murgatroyd and Brightwall are wrong".

I think you will find your research will raise quite a storm.

Yours sincerely

Grendel P. Geier

Editor-in-Chief

\*

A gilt picture frame bearing an educational certificate:

Miss Hermione Jean Granger

Advanced Studies in Arithmancy

Grade:

**T**

(on account of dereliction)

Tucked into the corner of the frame, a card with the words "A milestone for Miss Granger" scribbled in red ink, signed "S.S."

\*

A Harley-Davidson brochure with several corners turned down.

\*

Stuck to the edge of the computer screen with Spellotape, a torn-off letter head:

Severus Snape

Professor of Advanced and Esoteric Potions

Flamel College, Oxford

\*

Also stuck to the edge of the computer screen, a yellow sticky-note bearing a whimsical little sketch of a snake eating a lion.

\*

A postcard from Hollywood.

"Hi Mione!

I was right – there's more

wizardry in these films than

the Muggles think. Got a job with

Pixar.

Love Ron.

P.S. No Quidditch here, thank

Merlin."

\*

A hungry and disgruntled owl, pecking at the remaining fragments of glowing golden seal on a piece of fine parchment thus partially unfolding it to reveal the words:

"... give you notice that you have both, against the explicit intention of the Code of Immortal/Human Relations, been permitted to ingest, knowingly or unknowingly, a substance commonly known as Nectar. Possible side-effects include mild euphoria, accelerated healing, and extended life-span ..."

\*

One unfinished heavy iron chain-link. Resting on it, a single wild rose.

\*