

Magic in Your Veins

by nata

Posh magical babies are in a lot of trouble, and parents intend to "kill" the messenger. Hermione orders Severus to investigate. Written for astopperindeath in the 2010 Summer SS/HG Exchange round.

Care

Chapter 1 of 5

Posh magical babies are in a lot of trouble, and parents intend to "kill" the messenger. Hermione orders Severus to investigate. Written for astopperindeath in the 2010 Summer SS/HG Exchange round.

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Warning: No blood makes direct appearance, but a lot of pure, magical or red blood was hurt in the story.

A/N: Thanks to saschia and pyjamapants for alpha- and beta-reading, and to Clairvoyant for the admin pass. The banner was created by brandy01.

"Do what you must, Healer, just save my daughter." Daphne Diggory sobbed into a silk handkerchief.

"Mrs Diggory, let me stress again that your daughter is healthy. Her life is by no means threatened." Healer Stimpson sat behind her desk, elbows resting on top, fingers interlaced. It seemed she had been frowning for some time already.

"But you said that" Daphne hiccupped and started crying with new vigour.

The healer closed her eyes for a moment, then said, "She can still live a happy and satisfying life. She is healthy. Be grateful for that."

"You don't understand! She is a niece of a Triwizard Champion. People have expectations."

"I'm sure you will be able to deal with the situation given time."

Daphne wailed.

"Would you like a Calming Treatment? It might help you regain your composure before you take your daughter home."

Daphne nodded.

The healer touched her wand to one of the slots on her desk.

A blonde, curvy nurse entered. Her face and figure reflected a shadow of former beauty, but age had started to mar her features.

"Mrs Weasley, kindly escort Mrs Diggory to the Magical Damage Department for their premium Calming Treatment. I'll send the documentation later," the healer said.

Lavender Weasley took Daphne by her arms and helped her stand up. Daphne leaned against her shoulder, and Lavender looked at the healer in alarm.

The healer sighed, nodded and gestured for the women to leave. She remembered Daphne from Hogwarts. From Lavender's year, she recalled. A Slytherin proud of her pure-blood origin. Healer Stimpson thought that a pure-blood Slytherin wouldn't show her weakness or lean on a stranger's shoulder. Daphne must have been even more distraught than her tears indicated.

The healer opened the file of her next patient.

"Mione, did you hear that the Diggory girl had lost her magic?" Ron pulled a roll out of his mouth and put his lunch tray next to Hermione's in the Ministry cafeteria.

"Ron. First, good day to you, too. Second, speaking and eating are mutually exclusive activities. And third, if you continue to shout confidential medical information in a public place, I'll shortly have a complaint against Lavender on my desk." Hermione had worked at the Department of Law Enforcement for close to two decades now, a good part of the time at the Office for Governmental Control. Lunches of sparring with Ron had been a regular occurrence whenever they could squeeze them in.

"Okay, okay." Ron lowered his voice, leaned over to Hermione and scanned the cafeteria with his eyes. "So, have you heard about the Diggory girl?"

Hermione placed her utensils on her plate. "You want to bring out the worst in me."

Ron only looked at her sheepishly.

"Whether I've heard about her problems or not is none of your business." She held up her hand, shaking her head as Ron was opening his mouth to say something. "None of your business."

"So you have! Keep me posted!" He grinned. "Talked to Lavender lately?"

"Lavender is my business partner, so of course I talk to her regularly, as you well know."

"See?"

"But that's not true! Lavender has said nothing about"

"Let it go. I get it. You two amaze me."

"How so?"

"With that tite--tite side business of yours." Ron waved his fork in a wide circle.

"What's wrong with it?"

"That you can work together like that."

"Just because we both have carnal knowledge of your body, Ron, doesn't mean that we can't set up a mutually beneficial business. It's not a conflict of interest, I assure you."

Ron blushed.

"She as a paediatric nurse and I as a legal representative complement each other, and we are both"

"Instrumental for the business. So I've heard. Often enough. You draw up a contract with potential clients, send them to Lavender for the medical procedure, and then you store the vials. I know," he said.

"But it seems to me that you still don't get it."

"I get it all right. You need a St Mungo's nurse, and she needs a Ministry of Magic Law Enforcement official. But, yeah. Amazing. Snape at the Ministry during the day, Lavender at the Life Bank at nights. Amazing."

"It's not as weird as you make it sound."

"Perhaps." He shrugged. "But when you mentioned the conflict of interest, wouldn't it apply?"

"No. Of course not. Why should it?"

"Your office here at the Ministry represents people when they complain against the wizarding government. Your office at Diagon Alley represents people for medical issues, and that's kind of like the Ministry too."

"Not really. My Ministry office isn't actually at the Ministry. We just use the office space. Kingsley set the Office for Governmental Control up as independent investigators to prevent another Umbridge. My Diagon Alley office is a private business. Nothing to do with the Ministry."

"Yes, but you said that you could have a complaint against Lavender for spilling confidential information on your desk. Which one then?"

"Oh. The Ministry one because she spilled St Mungo's confidential information, of course. But we'd have to treat her as any regular charge. Nothing to do with our business."

Ron frowned.

"Just accept it, Ron. Tell me instead what you have been up to lately."

"Besides gathering gossip, you mean?"

"Yes. Besides that." Hermione smiled, and they finished their lunches in an easy camaraderie.

The Headmaster's office at Hogwarts had changed over the years. Granted, it was still round, and the walls were still adorned with portraits. But otherwise, its ancient atmosphere had fallen during the overall reconstruction of the castle. Appointment of a former Ministry official, Phoebus Penrose, as a headmaster cemented the changes of the new era.

At the moment, he was challenged beyond patience by the parents of a first-year.

"Mr Malfoy, you must realise that this solution is for the benefit of your son."

"Don't you give me this nonsense!" Draco Malfoy raised his voice. "As far as I'm aware, Headmaster, Scorpius's essays received highest marks. So, don't try to tell me that he should repeat his first year."

Headmaster Penrose pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes. Your son's academic record is excellent. However, he needs more time to master the practical aspects of magic."

"Do I understand you correctly," Astoria Malfoy placed her manicured hand on the crook of Draco's elbow, "that Scorpius's magic is weak?"

"I'm afraid that might be the case, Mrs Malfoy."

"But that's outrageous, Headmaster. He's a Malfoy." Draco's voice dropped as he struggled to regain composure.

"Draco, dear, would you like a drop of Creamy Calming Draught in your tea?" Astoria whispered.

Draco's eyes narrowed a tiny fraction and his breath caught. "No, thank you, dear," he said and slowly lifted a teacup. He closed his eyes as if savouring the taste. He replaced the teacup on the saucer and addressed the headmaster, "Can you be more specific?"

Astoria gently pressed his arm.

Headmaster Penrose searched amongst the parchments in front of him, adjusting his glasses. He lifted a sheet up and turned it towards a candle. "In Charms, Mr Malfoy mastered the Hover Charm with three weeks training, which is three times longer than Professor Flitwick's usual schedule. He then mastered the Cushioning Charm in two weeks, one and a half times longer than expected, slightly decreasing his lag, but followed by an increase in Pineapple Dancing Charm. Overall, his average time necessary to learn and effectively use new spells is two-point-four times longer than Hogwarts' long-term average."

Astoria blinked.

Draco gasped.

Headmaster Penrose continued without an outward sign that he noticed the parents' reaction, "In Transfiguration, he takes one-point-eight times longer than average, and in Defence Against the Dark Arts one-point-six." Headmaster Penrose raised his glasses and looked at the Malfoys, straightening the parchments. "He is on schedule with the curriculum in Herbology and Potions."

"But that's excellent news!" Astoria exclaimed. "If it's just Charms, Transfiguration and Defence, he can catch up over the summer. We'll hire private instructors, and Scorpius'll be fine for his second year."

"Mrs Malfoy, you do realise that your young son will have no break to rest, don't you?" the headmaster said.

"I always thought the breaks were too long, anyway. And one can always learn more with a private tutor than in a crowded classroom. It'll be for the best, you'll see." Astoria stood up, lacing her fingers in front of her.

Draco followed suit and they departed.

"Daphne," Astoria was holding onto her sister's forearm as they walked up a pristine path that almost looked as if it was not meant to be outdoors, "just remember all your manners lessons when you talk to Mrs Malfoy."

"She seemed nice enough at all the banquets and balls. She can't be that different in private. Surely, you exaggerate," Daphne said.

Astoria opened her mouth to protest, but quickly shut it and plastered a smile on her face as the house-elf opened a large, ornate door of the manor and preceded them into a salon.

"Dear Astoria, it is so nice of you to bring Daphne along." Narcissa Malfoy approached her daughter-in-law at a speed calculated to emphasise welcome to the guest while displaying the hostess's figure to its greatest effect. She touched Astoria's fingers in a facsimile of a warm greeting.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Malfoy." Astoria returned the gesture, but managed to squeeze Narcissa's fingers a tad more than she should.

Narcissa frowned.

Astoria withdrew her hand as if burnt.

"Thank you for inviting me, Mrs Malfoy. It's always an honour to be able to spend time in your delightful company." Daphne remained oblivious to the exchange and offered her own hand.

"I'm delighted to be able to pass on my knowledge of our noble heritage." Narcissa winced as Daphne shook her hand. "A true witch is easily recognised by her manners, so it is very important for all of us to learn from the best."

Narcissa looked straight into Daphne's eyes, but it was Astoria who responded.

"Excuse me, Mrs Malfoy. I," Astoria stuttered, "I forgot myself while greeting you. I'm distressed. Please forgive me for my lapse."

Narcissa stepped back for a moment, hands clasped in front of her, then smiled and said, "Remember for the next time that covering your distress is as much a sign of good breeding as is a proper hand shake."

Astoria nodded, trying to school her features to avoid further censure from her mother-in-law.

Daphne looked from one to the other, kneading a corner of her jacket, suddenly nervous.

"Now, come over and have a seat. You must tell me all about this unpleasantness of yours." Narcissa gestured for the young women to move towards a seating area. Two lush armchairs placed near a matching sofa. All elegant curves and precise shapes, the tea table in between looked more like a sculpture than a piece of furniture. Narcissa sat in an armchair closer to the fireplace, indicating that the others should share the sofa. She smoothed her robes over her knees, crossed her legs at the ankles and placed her hands on the armrests.

Daphne squared her shoulders, mimicking Narcissa's posture as well as she could.

"What has distressed you?" Narcissa asked after an elf served the tea and disappeared.

"Scorpius is having problems at school," Astoria said.

"Astoria, this is a private matter not suited for general discussion."

"Her daughter has the same problems, Mrs Malfoy." Astoria hurried to say. "That's why I brought her. I feel that you're the only one who might shed light in our situation."

Narcissa allowed Astoria to explain Scorpius's situation. Daphne wanted to add her bit, but Narcissa coldly shushed her after Daphne commented, "What would people say to a pure-blood turning to a Squib?"

They were discussing the merits of Hogwarts education when the door on a far side of the room opened to admit Severus and Lucius.

Narcissa turned towards them. "Severus, what do you think of Hogwarts?"

"It was a useful post to hold but decades longer than tolerable, as you well know."

"Of course. I rather meant what you think of the quality of education they provide."

Severus scanned the occupants of the seating area with a quick glance, noting pursed lips here, narrowed eyes there, and made his decision about the most suitable answer.

"Deplorable with the staff they have, no doubt."

"Really?"

"The Board of Governors have very little influence nowadays, and the school should be brought to court for hiring such personnel."

With that he bowed and excused himself.

The three women looked at each other, and a small smile spread on Narcissa's face, slowly followed by less restrained beams from Astoria and Daphne.

"Severus, my office as soon as possible, if you please." Hermione stopped by her subordinate's desk on her way back from lunch.

Severus shot her a grumpy glare, but as she only lifted an eyebrow and disappeared, he began to gather his things. He groaned and unfolded his long body from behind his desk.

Knocking on Hermione's door, he stepped in. "Gobbard's alibi's a fake. He forgot to alter the Muggle surveillance system in the club while he secured his witnesses. You can use the details in here. But"

He paused. And frowned.

"Yes, Severus." Hermione tried to smile at him. "A new case. Diggory vs. St Mungo's, magic theft needs interviews with clients to start with."

She handed him a thin folder, but her gesture remained unrequited. Instead, he Banished the folder he held onto her desk, turned and stalked out without a word. Hermione jogged behind him, squeezing into his office just before he could slam the door closed.

"I know. Too much work. But you're our best."

Severus glared at her and sat down.

"But you are." Hermione searched for leverage to back her up, quickly scanning his office. There was nothing to support her case on his simple desk, quite the contrary, he had several piles of papers, each placed on a single blue folder. She knew the folders. They held case files of clients her department supported. On Severus's desk, the files were mostly about violent crimes that Ministry employees got involved in. The shelf behind him was just as useless for her. It contained a standard set of law enforcement reference books, magical coercion volumes as well as some texts he consulted on criminal profiling. Almost ready to build her case without convincing evidence, she noticed his empty waste bin. As always.

"Here's the evidence."

Severus leaned over in his chair to check where she pointed. "Not that argument."

"I haven't used it in ages, so don't protest. It's valid. You still have it in you. The attention to detail."

"We've talked about this, and making sure that discarded information remains discarded is a basic measure of office security."

"Yes. But you're the only one who always takes time to *Incendio* it and to Vanish the ashes. What the others do at the end of the day, you keep up continuously. "

"Fine. I can see where details of the evidence don't add up. But you said yourself that this case requires interviews with the clients. Jones would be your person then. Her skills with people far surpass mine."

"Oh, Severus, just about anyone's people skills surpass yours."

"And you'd do well to avoid picking up that failing from me. It doesn't suit you."

"I apologise. It was a thinly veiled insult. You do it much better. You offend people, you make them cry, but you can spot the details that they want to hide. I need those. There's nothing in this," she dangled the folder, "I could build a case on. I need you."

He sat without a comment, looking at the folder.

"Daphne Diggory said that you specifically suggested they should sue Hogwarts."

"She must be mistaken."

"I can cite her right here. She said she was visiting Narcissa Malfoy, when you said that someone should sue Hogwarts."

"Ah."

"So?"

"They expected me to say something like that. I was just coming out of Lucius's study when those harridans ambushed me."

"Poor you," she mocked him, but focused on professional tone right after. "You could have the Gobbard file transferred to someone else, so that you'd have time for this. I'll have Jones take on the Stubb file."

"Hermione," he warned.

"Please."

Severus inhaled, shifting his gaze to her.

He took the folder.

"Thank you." She smiled.

He held her eyes for a moment and, saying nothing, opened the folder.

Hermione blinked. She felt as if her victory wasn't his loss, but she had trouble figuring out why she would feel like that. The facts were against such hopes. He was dreadfully overworked, and, she had to admit, it was mostly because of the tasks she set for him. But he was the best in the department, and she enjoyed working with him on cases. She sighed and shook her head before returning to her office, resolving, once again, to decrease his workload before he decided to leave her entirely.

Success

Chapter 2 of 5

Severus looks for answers where parents are at a loss.

□

Severus grimaced as he had to place the tip of his wand into a bell slot carved as a lion head. It was disgusting, but fitting for a too ornate house that tried to appear grander than it was.

"Mr Diggory," he said when a man opened the door.

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Severus Snape, Magical Law Enforcement." Severus whipped his wand, and the translucent logo of the department hovered between them.

"I see. Come in."

The men seated themselves, and after the necessary preliminaries, Severus began the interrogation.

"When did your daughter begin to manifest magic?"

"As a baby, of course."

Severus took a note, intentionally dropping a speckle of ink on the polished tea table. "Can you be more specific?" he asked, watching for reactions. There was none to the ink as far as he could tell; Adrian Diggory kept his eyes on Severus's. The question itself seemed to discomfit him more. Diggory crossed his legs and laced his fingers.

"Er? Perhaps when she started to play? She'd summon her toys, I guess."

"Would your wife be better informed about it?" Severus paused his quill just above the parchment.

"No, I don't think so. She knows as much as I do."

"Shall you call the house-elf?" Severus dropped more ink. It seeped through a crack in lacquer, destroying the wood underneath, but Diggory remained focused on the case.

"Are you implying that we don't take notice of our daughter?"

"Stating the evident isn't necessary in this investigation."

"Mr Snape, you're stepping out of bounds."

"Mr Diggory, let me inform you that you're trying to sue the British magical hospital on a charge for which you have absolutely no ground. I'm gathering information to build a case for you. You might cooperate, or we can cease this farce this instance."

"They stole magic from my daughter."

"And you only care because people would taunt a Diggory Squib."

"Mr Snape!"

His exclamation was met with a resounding silence.

"Fine," Diggory said. "My daughter's healthy, and she could be happy as a Squib. But we resent a Diggory Squib as you said. Our whole world does."

"It doesn't have to. It always starts with parents." Severus wanted to hex Diggory. He had had enough experience with prejudice to last a lifetime.

Diggory glared. "We consider the theft of her magic a crime. Anybody would."

"Thank you. Now, answer the question." At least, it was easier and quicker to force Diggory into submission than it was to overturn Voldemort.

"Let's call the elf, then." Diggory fidgeted and squared his shoulders. "Nany?"

"Yes, master?" A large elf with strong arms appeared at the centre of the room.

"When did Lucinda first exhibit magic?"

"Young Miss Vanished her diaper the first time it got smelly."

"Which day?" Severus said.

"Miss's third."

"The next time after that?"

"Miss Vanished each diaper with poo, sir."

Severus looked at Mr Diggory, who had the honesty to blush. "You don't expect me to deal with excrements, do you?" he said.

"Each diaper?"

"No, sir. Just the smelly ones."

Severus ordered Nany. "Prepare me a list of each instance the child displayed magic."

"The elf cannot remember it all," Diggory said.

"Nany has notes, Master. Nany is a good elf." The elf gave her full attention to Mr Diggory.

"What notes?"

"That we sends to the Ministry for their magical records."

Severus nodded once and got up, thinking that Hermione had been wrong. He was losing his touch with spotting details. He should have gone straight to the Magical Activity Archive since the case was about alleged magic theft in a child. That much was clear. He took his leave of Diggory, wondering why he took her request for interviews at face value.

Hermione stood next to a long table, both too low and too peculiar to be called a bar, and watched the attendants of her banquet. Afternoon had turned into evening, and she had seen several witches swish their wands to release daily robes transfiguration into dress robes. Some children were still around, running between game stands, laughing and yelling. She had to smile. Even though organising a function for the Life Bank clients and their children was logistically difficult, she enjoyed a chance to see the children, knowing her company kept them safe.

A boy, just about short enough to be considered a child rather than a teenager, walked up to the bar with a spring in his step.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," he said.

"Hello, Scorpius." Hermione curtsied to him formally.

"How are you enjoying the banquet, madam?"

"Very much. Thank you for asking." Hermione winked.

Scorpius grinned, grabbed a muffin from the children's bar and turned to leave, only to walk into his mother.

"Huf. Sorry, Mother, for crashing into you."

"Are you being reckless, Scorpius?" Astoria gave him a stern look.

"No, no, Mrs Malfoy, you mustn't think that." Hermione stepped up to them. "We were practising social conversation, and Scorpius tried to make a dignified exit. It's me who sped him up, having unsettled him with my behaviour."

Astoria appraised Hermione for a moment, then gave in. "All right," she said to Scorpius, squeezing his hands. "Go and have fun."

"He's such a sweet boy," Hermione said, looking after him.

"He is, isn't he?"

Both women looked at one another, a spark of common understanding settling between them, and they smiled.

"Who is?" Daphne Diggory joined them at the bar. "Is there any more Dungbarrel Spiced Mead left? I'm tired of butterbeer."

She rummaged through the contents of the bar. "Who's sweet?"

"Scorpius," Hermione said.

Daphne paused, giving Hermione a calculating look. "And have you seen Lucinda tonight?"

"I might have spotted her at your table earlier."

"She's been so well-behaved tonight," Daphne boasted. "Her dress is still white, and her hair's as beautiful as it was when we came."

"Your spell work must be magnificent if it lasted this long."

Astoria covered her mouth with her hand, but Hermione was certain the quiet snort came from her direction.

"Why, thank you. But our Lucinda didn't mess around. She stayed with us all the time where she's supposed to be. In fact, I think she'd be ideal for the photo session for tomorrow's *Daily Prophet*. She's the best-behaved child here. You do have journalists covering this event, don't you?" Daphne asked, seeing an expression of distaste on Hermione's face.

"Yes, I do."

"Fabulous."

"Now, if you'll excuse me." Hermione walked away from Daphne and hid in a dark corner, only to find it already occupied by Harry Potter.

"Hiding?" he asked.

"You, too?"

"Attention never went down well with me. What's your excuse?" He patted a place next to him on a yet unopened box of Ogden's Finest. Catering storage, near the bar, yet unseen by most. A perfect hiding place.

"There's this client that gets on my nerves even on the best of days. I'm so tired today that I ran away rather than tell her something that might upset her," she said, and Harry nodded.

They sat together in silence. A band started to play soft music, and game stands were being taken down. Several couples began dancing. Harry shared his glass of wine with Hermione.

"Tell me again, Hermione, why are you celebrating in such a big style?" He looked around the hall packed with people in evening robes. "I mean, it's just the twelfth anniversary, so it shouldn't be such a big deal. You didn't throw a party two years ago. Why now?"

"Because it's the fifteenth anniversary."

"What do you mean? Albus is hardly twelve and he was your first client, don't you remember?" Harry's eyebrow rose, wrinkling his faded scar.

"I remember all right. The Life Bank lived on paper only for three years until we persuaded our first esteemed client and he got us all over the press."

"Oh. Right. You and Lavender were trying to talk us into giving you James as well."

"See?"

"You're right, of course. We resisted as long as we could. I mean, it's a weird idea."

"Unusual for the wizarding world, but it's medically very useful."

"I know. You said that already. But it was all that crying at the Burrow that did us all in eventually. Every year." Harry shuddered.

"Yes, that motivated me as well."

"What do you mean?"

"Starting the Life Bank. I wanted Lavender to begin getting over her grief."

"Really? That seems extreme for someone you never got along well before." Harry seemed taken aback.

"It was not the only reason, of course. I'd long wanted to bring more Muggle technology into the wizarding world. But Lavender's situation was what ultimately pushed me towards learning about stem cell research, and the Life Bank was just a step further from there."

"It worked."

"For Lavender? Yes, a bit. Speaking of Lavender, have you seen her?" Hermione scanned the hall, trying to pick out an elaborate blonde hairstyle. What she found was red.

"Ron," she called and walked over. "Where's Lavender? We should give a speech soon."

"She went to the loo."

"When?"

"A while ago."

Hermione turned in the direction of bathrooms.

"But she always takes a long time," Ron called after her, but waved her off in dismissal when she ignored him.

Hermione opened the door, tentatively calling out.

A quiet sniff was her only answer.

She approached the cubicle, knocking on the door. It opened slightly.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"I'm a fright."

"It doesn't matter." She pushed at the door and found Lavender sitting on a closed toilet lid, her face blotched and puffed. "I'm here. You're not alone in this. I'm with you." She pulled Lavender into a hug, pressing her, smeared make-up and all, against her dress robes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I know you hate this. I'm so sorry. It's just that Padma is here tonight, and they look so alike. But she's not her."

"Shh. It's all right."

"I just miss her so much."

"Of course you do. Parvati was a sweet girl and a great friend. It's only natural you miss her."

"She shouldn't have died."

Hermione continued to go through the well-rehearsed lines of the exchange. Not much longer now. At least, the breakdowns were rather rare now, unlike over a memorable Christmas Hermione had happened to share with Lavender at the Burrow fifteen years ago.

"Death doesn't choose. Skin cancer is a terrible disease if left untreated."

"But she was so beautiful. She didn't want to wear skin from her arse on her face."

Hermione suppressed a shudder. Parvati's refusal of the surgery seemed pointless and inconceivable for her. She knew from Lavender that Parvati hadn't left her house at all once the cancer lesions started to appear on her skin. If it were her, she would choose a skin graft over cancer any time.

"And that's why you and I have the Life Bank. So that it won't happen to other beautiful girls."

"Do you think she'd approve?"

"I'm sure she would, Lavender. She'd have been thrilled to wear skin grown from her umbilical stem cells on her cheek."

"I believe you."

"Good." Hermione took Lavender by her shoulders and held her upright. "Let's get you cleaned up a bit so that we can go out and talk to our current and potential clients. So that no other beautiful girl has to die."

"Severus?" Hermione peaked around the doorframe into Severus's office.

He looked up from his work and frowned as he saw her guilty expression.

"No."

"You don't even know what I was about to ask." She walked in.

"Did you intend to proposition me?"

A man from across the hall looked up with interest, craning his neck to get a better look. Hermione turned bright red and closed the door behind her. "What was that for? The rumours will fly."

"Do you care?"

"No."

"There's your answer."

Hermione nearly gasped, but kept herself in check. He was baiting her, she was sure. "Should I?"

"What? Care or proposition?"

Hermione tucked back a stray lock of her hair. "Severus, you're making me uncomfortable."

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. His shirt pressed to his biceps, presenting the contour of his shoulders.

Hermione swallowed, wishing she could openly enjoy the view.

"I've a new case for you," she said, clearing her throat.

Severus's relaxed posture disappeared in an instant.

"What part of 'no' don't you understand?"

"Severus, please. The case is almost identical to the Diggory one. Daphne's sister married Draco Malfoy, and they're suing Hogwarts for stealing their son's magic."

Severus groaned. "I hope you didn't take the case. You'll lose both."

"It does sounds preposterous. Why would a hospital or school steal magic? But something so serious warrants investigating, even if I lose a case against the Ministry." She nodded towards papers in front of him. "What do you have?"

"The Diggory girl was gradually losing her magic long before her parents noticed and sent her to St Mungo's. Data from the nursing elf." Severus pushed a folder across his desk.

"I see." Hermione perused his findings, tapping her lips with her index finger.

Severus stared.

"It seems to me that Daphne and Astoria are grasping at straws."

She looked up and Severus sat straighter in his chair, trying to regain his composure and concentrate on work rather than her lips.

"In that case, they'd be better off hiring a detective to uncover what's going on than suing magical establishments. Apparently, logic is beyond the Greengrass women's capacity."

"It's their money. But we need to do something to earn it. Just a few interviews, Severus."

"Fine." He reached out for the folder, knowing that interviews wouldn't be necessary. "Hand it over."

A/N: Thanks to saschia and pyjamapants for alpha- and beta-reading, and to Clairvoyant for the admin pass. Banner is the courtesy of brandy01.

Disease

Chapter 3 of 5

The Life Bank aids in its first case.

□

"Your son has leukaemia," the healer informed a couple holding hands a few feet away from him.

"Leukaemia? What is it?" the wife asked.

"It's a type of cancer, Mrs Scamander, that affects his blood cells."

"Lorcan was born in early in June, so he's a Gemini. Isn't he, Rolf?" Luna Scamander seemed lost and confused. Their son's healer invited them into his office, which was a first since Lorcan got sick. They had always talked in the examination room. About procedures, tests, prognoses. The change of setting itself gave her a notion of solemnity now, but the healer's sudden talk about zodiac signs didn't seem particularly relevant. Or grievous.

"Of course, Luna. But I think this is a different meaning of 'cancer'. Right, Healer Ketteridge?"

"It's a disease. Rare for us, but common amongst Muggles. It's terminal for both if left untreated. Deadly, I mean," he added.

Luna felt blind panic rising in her chest. It squeezed and constricted, fogging her mind until only a single thought remained. Her son was dying, and the healer didn't want to talk about it in front of him. She would do anything, anything, to help Lorcan.

"Fortunately, it can be cured," Healer Ketteridge said.

Luna looked at Rolf and squeezed his hands, silent understanding passing between them.

"We agree to the treatment."

"I'm glad to hear that, but you should first hear what the treatment might entail."

"You just said that our son would die if we didn't treat him. There's no doubt that we want him treated. Even if it's unpleasant or costs a fortune, we want him treated."

"I fully agree with my wife." Rolf patted her hand. "Tell us what the problem is so that we can explain it to Lorcan. He has to know, but for us the choice is clear."

"There isn't enough magic left in him, so we can't treat him magically."

"But he can see Nargles," Luna protested, recalling the first instance Lorcan had exhibited magic. "Do you remember, Rolf, how happy he was on his first Christmas when he chewed on mistletoe? He was playing with Nargles. He's magical. He was even admitted to St Mungo's right after that for stomach pain. He underwent magical treatment then."

"Yes. Well. But he also summoned his toys and turned the toilet into a fountain a few times. There are other things too, Luna, aren't there?"

"Yes. Plenty."

Healer Ketteridge cleared his throat. "This might be surprising for you, but it's possible for a magical child to lose magic in the early years."

"That doesn't seem likely at all." Luna shook her head. People thought her delusional for believing in non-existent creatures. They were right a tiny bit, especially in her childhood, she'd admit, but overall, she was a naturalist just like Rolf. And turning a magical being, a child, into someone non-magical seemed way out of realm of possibility for her.

"We've several documented cases. Nevertheless, the sudden magical loss malady combined in case of your son with leukaemia poses serious problems since it eliminates the option of magical treatment."

"But you said there was a solution." Luna held on to the thread of hope that Healer Ketteridge mentioned earlier. There must be hope for Lorcan.

"Muggles use a set of procedures that might cure him."

There. He admitted it again. Hope. Luna sat at the edge of her seat while Rolf leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Can you explain?"

"Blood cells are created inside of bones, in the bone marrow. To cure the disease, we'd have to take the bone marrow out of your son and replace it with new marrow."

The Scamanders flinched and looked at each other.

"As we said, we agree to the treatment." Rolf reached for Luna. She nodded.

"The question is what the replacement would be. Lorcan has a twin brother, doesn't he? "

"Yes. Lysander and Lorcan are twins."

"Then we might need to operate on both your children. We could use Lysander's tissue for Lorcan."

"Bone marrow is a tissue?" Luna asked, the hope expanding in her chest.

"It is."

"The umbilical blood, Rolf. Hermione said that blood from umbilical cords of our babies could be turned to tissue that could save their lives. This is such a case, isn't it?" She had known it was right to trust Hermione and Lavender and let their company freeze umbilical blood of her children instead of discarding it as witches always did. She had just known it.

He opened his mouth and then closed it without a sound. He stood up and walked around the table. He pulled a book with soft cover from a shelf, casting a Searching Spell on it. Opening it on a glowing page, he read.

"Here." He jabbed his finger into the page.

Luna took hold of the book. It was paper, not parchment, distinctly Muggle, crisp with spotless pages. Luna thought this might have been the first time it had been opened. She was glad that their healer at least had it in his collection.

"Here it says that Muggles can grow bone marrow cells from cells in the umbilical blood. And here," the healer skimmed a few pages ahead, "it says it is even better than the transplantation. Yes, fewer problems later in life. Yes, compatibility. Yes, immune reactions. This looks good. Your son will have a much better chance to recuperate with tissues grown from his umbilical blood cells."

Rolf hugged Luna, the tears in his eyes matching her own.

"He'll live, Rolfie. Our baby will live," Luna whispered.

"The Magical Activity Archive," Severus said without looking up.

"What?" Hermione stopped in her tracks. "How did you know it was me?"

"Footstep pattern." He continued to write.

"Oh. Interesting. Nevertheless, I wanted to talk to you about something else."

"I said, go and check the Magical Activity Archive to see about loss of magic."

"What are you on about?" Hermione approached his desk and placed her hands in his line of vision.

Severus looked up from his work, multiple lines forming around his eyes. "If you're coming in to dump another case on me, forget it."

"I'm not, in fact."

"No?" He placed his quill in its holder.

"No."

"A proposition then?" He sat back.

"Leave off, Severus. We've been going on with this banter for years. And it's not as if anything ever came of it."

"It could."

"It could?" That was a change. She wanted to believe him, but held back. "You're pulling my leg again."

"Not this time. But I do require an evening off to be able to invite you out."

"An evening off?"

"You might not be familiar with the term, but I seem to recall from my teaching career that there, in fact, exist concepts like evenings off, or occasionally even a weekend off."

"I do know of the concept."

"But?" Severus raised his eyebrows.

Hermione inhaled and snapped her mouth shut after a moment, remembering all the instances when she'd seen him ward his office door in the evenings. She would then grab the first paper she saw on her desk and run after him. For a consultation, of course. It was always about a professional consultation that couldn't wait until morning. Or so she convinced herself. "You're right. I work too much, and I'm guilty as charged in forcing you to put in long hours too. I didn't know you might want time off for me." She sighed. "I tried to keep you here with me."

"As you say. You've been much easier to work with than for."

"It's not my fault that they always promote Harry Potter's friends."

"No. But you accept it every time."

"What would you expect? That I'd decline?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"As a Gryffindor, I'd expect you to be noble and self-righteous."

"Then you might perhaps realise that I've outgrown my Gryffindor box."

"Indeed."

"Really?" Hermione lit up with a hopeful expression.

"That wasn't meant as a compliment."

"But it was, Severus, don't you see? You said that you liked me."

"Did I, now?"

Her mobile rang.

"Oh, Severus. I'm sorry, but I have to take this. It's Lavender, and we've got our first case at the Life Bank. I was just coming in to tell you."

He waved her off.

"Hi, Lavender. Yes, Luna called me already. I was wrapping something up with Severus here. Yes, I know. I'll hurry. Okay, okay. Don't fret. I'm on my way there right now."

She turned back to him, holding her phone in both hands close to her chest.

"Severus." A plea in her eyes.

Disappointment in his.

"Luna's son needs his umbilical blood. He's very sick," she tried to explain. "I have to."

"Go. It's your business to run."

"Really? Just like that you're fine with me leaving?"

Hermione edged towards the door, knowing that she should leave, both wishing and fearing he would stop her.

"Yes."

"You won't change your mind tomorrow?"

"I won't. Go."

"Okay. See you then."

Hermione was almost down the hall when Severus came after her.

"Hermione?"

She turned. "Severus?" she said, hoping that he had come to kiss her good-bye.

He paused.

"Good luck," he said and lifted corners of his mouth in an attempt to smile.

"I'll be back," she said and was gone.

A/N: Beta-read by saschia and pyjampants, admin pass by Clairvoyant, banner created by brandy01. Thank you, ladies.

Guilt

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus has a breakthrough.

□

Magic of Greengrass Children Stolen By National Institutions

Exclusive report by Betty Braithwaite

Two cases will go to court next month that address the worst crime known to wizardkind. Diggorys vs. St Mungo's and Malfoys vs. Hogwarts both accuse the institutions of stealing magic from their children. Daphne Diggory (née Greengrass), distressed mother of one of the affected children, shared her experience. "Our daughter was an exceptionally powerful baby until she was admitted to St Mungo's. They took her magic, and she's just not the same any more." The Malfoys make the same charge against Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in case of their son, who struggled to finish his first year in June. "Up until now we thought that the Unforgivables were the most heinous of crimes. But what Hogwarts and St Mungo's did is even more despicable. It threatens the very foundation of our society, and they must be stopped," Astoria Malfoy (née Greengrass) adds to her sister's claim.

While we might dispute the relative evils of the comparison of murder to magic theft, we agree that magic is an inherent element of our world and its loss, whether forced or spontaneous, must be addressed by the best experts we have. Healer Stimpson and Headmaster Penrose were not available to comment. Read more about magical theft on page 5.

Severus threw the *Daily Prophet* away in disgust. He got up, his chair protesting, and set off to take a walk around the department.

His third that morning.

Hermione was still nowhere to be seen.

He planned to catch her before they got immersed in work to continue their talk. He wanted to know when they would be able to be together outside the Ministry. He had plenty of ideas for such interactions.

He was on the far side of the department when the elevator chimed. He turned to see Hermione make a beeline straight for his office, the newspaper gripped in her hand.

"Severus?"

He walked towards her. "Here."

"Hi. I thought you were out."

"On my way," he lied. "It can wait. What did you have in mind?"

"Have you seen this?" Hermione waved the paper at him.

"Do you mean the Greengrasses' stupidity or the insinuation on page five that the Muggle-borns siphon pure-blood magic?"

"Both. What do you think?" she asked as they entered his office.

Severus's hand hovered above the small of her back. Before he could touch her, Hermione turned to close the door behind them.

Severus sat on the edge of his desk, folding his arms across his chest.

"Is it that bad?"

"Why would you ask?"

"Your expression." Hermione sat on the nearest chair. She looked up to him, exposing her throat. "It's murderous."

He looked somewhat lower than her eyes, then turned and sat down behind his desk. She seemed inclined to use office hours for work at the moment, so he thought it best to do the same.

"Talking to the press was ultimately stupid of our esteemed clients. St Mungo's and Hogwarts are bound to bring charges of slander. The insinuation against Muggle-borns? Yes, that makes me rather violent."

Hermione pressed her lips together. "One would think that two decades after the war, people would change their prejudices."

"That's naïve, Hermione."

"Still. One can hope."

"How did your blood bank visit go last night?"

"We call it Life Bank not a Blood Bank as you well know. But thanks for reminding me. Little Lorcan seems to be another child with disappearing magic."

Severus's eyebrows shot high on his forehead, his mind moving rapidly. They had assumed that the loss of magic was linked to the Greengrass sisters. Something inheritable, or the like. A child from another family with the same condition was a major new development. "That changes things."

"Tell me about it. I couldn't sleep last night. We thought it was just the Greengrasses. Do you know if they're related to either Luna or Rolf?"

Severus shook his head. "Not that I can recall, but effectively all pure-bloods are interrelated to some degree."

"Could you check?"

"What happened to my evening off?"

"Well," Hermione fidgeted. "I'll be very busy the next few days with Life Bank, so I thought. You know. Don't you?"

Severus sighed. He knew.

Hermione opened her mouth to continue, but Severus stopped her. "I'll do it, woman. Just don't start to beg now."

Severus spent the next few days completely out of sight.

Hermione received a note from him soon after their meeting stating that the Greengrasses were related neither to the Scamanders nor to the Lovegoods for the last five generations. No word since then. She expected that he would at least acknowledge their talk the other night, but the last time they met, he had stayed focused only on work. Perhaps, she has misjudged him and he was not interested in her the way she thought. He seemed genuine enough, but now there was no sight or sound from him.

The second owl landed on her windowsill the night before the first case was scheduled to present before the Wizengamot.

She unfolded the note in haste as soon as she recognised his handwriting.

We need to talk. Meet me at my office as soon as you can he wrote.

She hurried to his office at the Ministry. A greeting died on her lips.

The office was empty.

Her shoulders sank as she walked further in. She brushed the top of his desk with her fingertips, tracing the contours of his inkwells and quills. She sat down in his chair, laying her head on her forearms.

"Been waiting long?" Severus asked.

"Oi." Hermione startled.

"Sorry. There didn't seem to be much point in knocking on my own office door."

"No problem. I was thinking." She rubbed her eyes. "So?"

"Thirty-seven children between ages four and twelve that I could identify. Follow me."

He gestured for her to join him.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Including three Weasleys and two Potters. Get going. You need to see for yourself."

"Merlin's fucking balls." Hermione gathered her senses and got up, straightening her shirt and skirt.

Severus's eyes followed her hands down her torso and hips.

"Since when do you swear?"

"Seems like a perfect time to start."

"Indeed. Let's go."

They walked to the elevator and Severus summoned it. Looking at the deep crease between his eyebrows, she bit her lip. All this time he'd been looking for the affected children, and she felt ashamed of herself for wishing he was with her instead. There must be a different mechanism that causes loss of magic in children. He knew more, and from his expression she was sure it was nothing pleasant.

"Severus," she whispered.

He shook his head and motioned for her to follow him into the elevator.

"Not here. Wait until we get there," he said, reaching over to pressed the correct button.

"I wanted to ask how you are."

He looked at her. "People could hear."

"It's all right."

"I see," he said just as the elevator halted. "We're here."

They walked a short distance when Severus reached for a door and opened it. A simple desk blocked the width of the door frame, a stocky wizard sitting behind it facing them.

"You again?" The wizard scowled.

Severus nodded and whipped his wand to show the logo of his department. The wizard at the desk made a note into his logbook.

"Her?"

Hermione took out her wand, and the same logo slipped out of it. "Hermione Granger, Head of Office for Governmental Control."

She had never noticed this door. It looked unremarkable, and there was only a small, plain plate stating they had reached the Magical Activity Archive. She suspected that the door might even be equipped with a Notice-Me-Not Charm.

The wizard finished writing, got up and disappeared from their sight on the other side of the doorway. They heard a bit of fumbling, then the tip of a wand hooked at the doorframe. The whole doorway started to widen, following the pull of the wand. When the motion ended, they saw the reception wizard sitting on his desk, holding the doorframe away from the desk with the tip of his wand in his outstretched arm.

"What are you waiting for?" he grumbled.

Severus ducked under the arm. Hermione watched with a surprised expression, but seeing Severus disappear, she followed without further delay.

The room they entered looked like a hybrid between a grand library and the Room of Hidden Things. Rows of shelves were labelled with years dating back centuries.

Hermione spotted an elf with muscular arms disappear between shelves. She found it peculiar to see a nursing elf deep down at the Ministry of Magic. She was almost certain there were no children to take care of down here.

Severus led her in the same direction the elf disappeared. When they arrived at the row, the elf squeaked and snapped his fingers, Disapparating.

Severus approached a tucked-away desk, unwarded a drawer and threw a folder on top. Hermione reached for it.

"The degree of deterioration is variable, but these children manifest a marked decrease in frequency of reports of spontaneous magic."

"What data is this?" Hermione leafed through the files, scanning each page, stopping to take a closer look at each graph. Each was scaled differently, but every one showed a descending curve. She figured it was a demonstration of magical loss, but she could not picture how such data were assembled.

"The Magical Activity Archive."

"You mentioned that before. That's where instances of underage magic get recorded, right? Perhaps it's not reliable for children from magical families. As far as I know, the Ministry," Hermione looked over her shoulder to check the reception wizard, "can track general magic, but they cannot distinguish underage magic from adults in magical families. Can they?"

"They're two separate things. The wizard over there records underage magic of Muggle-borns, issuing warnings for those attending Hogwarts once they've begun their magical training. The children from magical families are reported by their elves."

"Every instance? That seems like a waste of effort. Who would need such data?"

"I don't appreciate that you are trying to challenge me on this, Hermione."

"Severus, don't take offense. It wasn't meant like that. Any attorney would ask about the validity of the data. This is major. You must realise. And the hearing's tomorrow."

"Of course. The elves report underage magic of children in their care directly to the registry. They're obliged to put a record of each instance of spontaneous magic into the child's file from where it'd spur a note in Hogwarts's enrollment list for example. The rule of recording every instance is probably historical, a remnant of some old quarrel, I'd suspect. Given the reliability of nursing elves, I'd expect the records to be exhaustive. Perhaps, pending the one we just scared away."

"I see. So we really have thirty-seven children that someone is turning into Squibs. Severus, that's horrible."

He nodded.

"Whoever is doing this picks the most well-off families. They must be stopped."

"I was about to hand the case over to the Aurors, but I wanted to talk to you first," Severus said.

"I appreciate it. It won't help at the Wizengamot tomorrow, but we knew the Diggorys would lose their case. Gosh, it's terrifying. I know these children, and fucking Azkaban."

"You do?"

"From the Life Bank." A thought surfaced in her mind for a moment, too clear for comfort. But it dissolved, leaving only numb disbelief.

"I have to go and get ready now." She started to get up.

"One more thing." Severus stopped her.

There was something just out her consciousness that her mind was trying to tell her.

"May I check the list of Life Bank's clients? Against the magic registry?"

The feeling was there, brighter than before. She tried to figure out what it meant. The culprit might be specifically targeting her clients. Corporate spy? "Oh. You think?"

"I think we should cover all contingencies."

"Sure. My left bottom drawer. Password is 'Potions Professor'." Hermione blushed.

"It's confidential information."

"Yes. Well. It's out in the open now."

"That, too." He gave her a small smile. "I meant the list."

"Right. But if we're dealing with a corporate spy here... You may look at it. I trust you," she said.

Arrest

Chapter 5 of 5

Hermione saves the messenger. Severus cracks the case. Neither is happy. But they cope.

□

Hermione paced the floor, the click of her heels echoing through Courtroom Three. "The last question, Healer Stimpson. What was the medical condition of Lucinda Diggory when she was admitted to St Mungo's on the 27th of May this year?"

"I already presented her data when Mr Finchley asked."

"Yes, we've seen that her magic metrics amounted to one tenth of the usual value for a magical child of her age. I'm inquiring about her medical diagnosis."

"Ah. She was healthy. Her parents wanted her examined concerning the loss of magic, but there was no medical condition."

"I have no further question for this witness." Hermione inclined her head towards the healer. She returned her gesture with a perplexed expression. She knew she had just ruined her own case but, in her mind, it was justified. There were much greater stakes here than accusing the messenger.

"That was the most extraordinary presentation, Miss Granger." A Warlock adjusted his glasses. "You've demonstrated that St Mungo's did not harm Miss Diggory, that she's capable of a happy life, but in fact her parents, your clients I must add, put unnecessary pressure on the child for appearance's sake. I must say, I am astonished at your performance."

"I believe in justice, Warlock," Hermione said, facing the jury. "St Mungo's did not steal Miss Diggory's magic and all evidence points to that. The fact that their attorney wasn't able to uncover it doesn't mean that loss of magic doesn't exist more often. It's evident, however, that someone *is* stealing magic from our children. During preparation for this case, we uncovered multiple similar cases that haven't been reported to date. It is despicable and, in the long term, could endanger the very existence of the wizarding world. We trust the Aurors will be able to catch the criminal, and that the Wizengamot will be able to judge the one truly guilty and punish him or her most severely for such a terrible crime. Neither Healer Stimpson in particular nor St Mungo's in general are responsible in the case of Lucinda Diggory," she concluded.

The disconcerting feeling from last night did not diminish. If anything, she was now convinced that she was cutting off the branch she sat on. Obviously, that was true for her work position, but she feared that was only part of the picture. The other part she preferred not to think about, hoping that finding the criminal would be someone else's problem. Lavender's face surfaced in her mind again, but she shook her head to clear the image, refusing to let herself stop trusting her business partner despite her emotional instability.

No. Just no.

The Aurors would deal with the crime, and St Mungo's and Department of Mysteries would find a way to stop and reverse the loss of magic.

She wouldn't. She just wouldn't think about it. She didn't have enough information, just feelings.

"Mr Snape, that's private information as you are well aware, given your past career in this institution." Headmaster Penrose pushed his glasses higher on his nose.

"Headmaster, I'm not asking you to divulge information about the academic records of your students without a warrant. All I'm asking is whether you've talked to their parents." Severus sat ramrod straight in a chair in the headmaster's office in Hogwarts. He needed to know if the loss of magic of the oldest children continued during school. Asking the headmaster should have been a quick way to obtain a lot of information, but Penrose insisted on conforming to petty rules that grated on Severus's nerves.

Headmaster Penrose snapped a folder in front of him closed, hitting it with his palm in emphasis. "And what leads you to the conclusion that content of teacher-parent conversations is anything but private?"

"Thank you. That was all I needed to know." The visit was not a complete waste of time, then. He would still have to talk to all parents individually, but at least now he knew that there were problems later on.

"What?" Headmaster's face started to turn red.

"You admitted that you've talked to parents of Albus and Lily Potter and Roxanne Weasley. If you feel like being particularly helpful, you might share if it was around the same time that you called in Mr and Mrs Malfoy."

A vein started to pulse on the Headmaster's forehead.

"He's always been quick, Phoebus." Dumbledore chuckled in his portrait.

"Kindly stay out of this, Albus," Penrose said.

"Then answer his question. It's an innocuous one."

"These portraits are supposed to be helpful," Penrose murmured.

"I also found Albus to be most meddlesome." Severus smiled, looking directly at Dumbledore. He would not have imagined that Albus, of all people, would help him out. He would have bet on Phineas Black.

Dumbledore bowed a bit.

"Fine," Headmaster Penrose said. "I talked to the Potters and Weasleys in the same week I called in the Malfoys."

Severus rose, extended his hand for a handshake and left the office.

"Severus, let's take an evening off," Hermione said, leaning against his doorframe, ankles crossed, a hand resting on her hip. It was not too late when she returned from the Wizengamot, and she hoped for a relaxing evening that would help her shake off the feeling. To let her forget. For a while, at least.

An expression of displeasure disfigured his features.

She straightened up, checking her neckline. "I'm sorry. I assumed. I apologise. I misjudged. We could take things slower. I'll wait."

Severus walked over to her, stopping her mid-tirade. "No. You don't understand."

"Yes, I do. I thought. And it was wrong."

"Hermione, we must talk."

"I guess we do." She tried to smile. This was not progressing as she imagined.

"Would you be willing to accompany me to my flat? To talk. Do you know the way?"

"Yes."

"Apparate to the landing then."

He was already opening the door when she arrived. He admitted her and set heavy wards around them.

"You are scaring me, Severus. What is it?"

He was silent.

"Severus, tell me."

"What did you tell the Wizengamot?"

"The Wizengamot? I hoped we'd talk about us."

"We are. Did you tell anyone there are more?"

"Of course. The whole justice system needs to be mobilised. We must find the one with power and skill and particularly the audacity to steal magic from children."

"You are responsible."

Silence. Her mind refused to process the information beyond relief that Lavender was not the monster she had feared.

"Excuse me?"

"You and Mrs Weasley. The Life Bank."

"The Life Bank? Lavender?" Hermione shook her head, taking a step back. Hadn't he just said that Lavender was out of it?

Severus reached out to touch her, but she continued to move away from him as far as the room would allow.

"All the affected children are your clients. It's highly unlikely that someone would target the same families who decided to store the umbilical blood of their children and only start picking children at the same time that you and Mrs Weasley founded the company."

Hermione slid down the wall.

"It starts to manifest around age two or three and continues at a constant rate until all magic in the child is exhausted."

Hermione burrowed her face in her hands. "No. No. You're wrong. We're helping them. Storing the umbilical blood to help them battle diseases in the future. We're helping them."

"I'd hoped we'd be able to cover it."

"What are you saying?"

"We could have put the company out of business and disappear. But now that you've alerted the authorities to the issue, they'll get to the information fast. We've shown them the way."

"No. We're helping them. We can't just abandon them. We're helping them. We must help them, Severus."

"You did. You helped Lorcan Scamander. He has a chance to beat cancer, thanks to you."

"But the rest of them. He's just one against so many. They're all losing magic, and the parents... They're as good as dead for some of the parents. Severus, we must help them. Get their magic back."

"We can't. We don't know how," Severus said and sat down, leaning against an opposite wall. A comfortable sofa stood between them empty and cold. They stared ahead of themselves, each lost in their own thoughts.

"What do we do now, Severus?" Hermione looked up at him, tears running down her face.

"Now the Aurors will have to arrest you."

"I see." Hermione hung her head, hair hiding her face.

"Hermione. I wish there was another way."

"No, Severus. I'm an assassin. I deserve Azkaban."

"Hermione."

"Just promise me you'll try to find a way to help them. Promise me."

"I promise."

"Thank you." She rose, walked up to him and extended her clasped hands.

He remained motionless, staring at her wrists. "What are you doing?"

"I'd much rather if you arrested me."

He shook his head.

"Severus. Don't make this even harder for me. Please. Do it."

"Hermione." He got up.

"Please."

He brushed a curl back from her face, ignoring her crossed wrists. "As much as I'd like to hear you beg, this is not the situation I usually envision." His thumb grazed her jaw line.

She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes.

"Severus"

"I'll be here when you return," he said and cast a spell to bind her. "As long as it takes. And I'll find the cure for you."

"For them. Please, Severus."

Loss of Magic Reversed!

Report by Betty Braithwaite

The newly founded British research institution Potions Inc., owned by Severus Snape, demonstrated that loss of magic caused by separation of living body parts is reversible in all but the most severe of cases. The last of the clinical trials was concluded, and the study shows that returning stored umbilical blood stopped the siphoning of magic and also dramatically increased the remaining magical powers of twenty-nine children. He was unavailable to comment, but the Daily Prophet's reporter heard a source close to Mr Snape state that he once said about Department of Regulations of the Ministry of Magic, "Incompetent bureaucrats! If they let us return the blood sooner, we could've saved magic of those eight." 'Those eight' refers to the children who remained Squibs after the clinical trials.

Read more about magical ethics on page 2 and the criminal report on page 11.

Magic Thieves Released

Report by Andy Smudgley

Today Hermione Granger and Lavender Weasley were released from custody. They were imprisoned for two years after being convicted of stealing magic from wizarding children by storing frozen blood from their umbilical cords in their Life Bank. The procedure, once fashionable amongst the finest wizarding families, had severe implications for newborns. The children started to lose magic as toddlers, and deterioration progressed until complete deprivation of magical power. The accused were released today based on new evidence obtained during research into the effects of destroyed and stored body parts of magical entities. The condition was shown to be reversible, thus rendering the basis of accusation invalid.

Read more about Loss of Magic on page 1 and magical ethics on page 2.

Merit of Magic

Editorial by Dempster Wiggleswade

The case of Loss of Magic reached a happy ending for most affected. The fact that there is a 'most' in the previous sentence raises dubious questions and forces us to revisit the deepest beliefs of our culture. While we all agree that theft of magic is a despicable crime, the medical procedure that leads to such loss can save lives. The cells from umbilical blood can be used to grow body parts if a person is sick as evidenced by successful recovery of Lorcan Scamander not only from his disease, but also from Loss of Magic. Eight of the affected children were not so fortunate, though. For them, Loss of Magic progressed so far that even returning their umbilical blood could not restore their magical powers. They will remain Squibs for the rest of their lives. The magical community now faces a philosophical challenge: whether the parents would be willing to give up magic for their children in exchange for a chance that one day their children's umbilical blood might save their very lives. Do we care about magic more than we care about our children? Where is a threshold for each individual's choice? We do not know at the moment. The only wizarding company that provided the service is officially out of business, but Muggle establishments remain in operation. The choice is on each parent.

Hermione heaved a large cardboard box onto a pile. She preferred to pack the last of her belongings with her hands, needing the time to experience her closure. Too many memories.

"Is it the last one?" Severus asked, stepping up behind her and embracing her in a tight hug.

Hermione leaned back against him, closing her eyes, and exhaled. "Yes, that's it."

"How do you feel?"

"Empty."

Her stomach grumbled.

"And not only figuratively, I hear."

She chuckled. "No, but mostly figuratively."

"You meant well."

"There's that, yes."

"But?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Am I that transparent?"

"Indeed."

"It backfired, what else? I thought it was a good business plan. The companies in the Muggle world thrive. And it should've helped people. I thought," she turned and grabbed Severus's arms, "I believed we were helping prevent deaths like Parvati's."

"I know, Hermione," Severus said and pulled her closer again. He kissed the top of her head.

"Instead, we threatened the wizarding world."

"That was rather megalomaniac of you."

"Just a little bit."

"All children received their umbilical blood back in transfusions. They're fine."

"Most of them."

"Most of them."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." His arms tightened around her, comforting her.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes, listening to his steady heartbeat. She viewed the empty walls of her apartment. They were about to leave Britain, and she suspected that it would be better for both of them to make the move permanent. The hollow rooms reverberated with her insides, demarcating a dream that had ended, only to make room for new beginnings elsewhere.

Better this time, she hoped.

A/N: Thanks to saschia and pyjamapants for their encouragement, discussions and help with polishing this story. Without you, the story wouldn't happen like this.

This story was adminned by Clairvoyant. She took wonderful care of it, and I'm very grateful for her input. Lyn_f stepped in to wrestle the last chapter into submission. Thank you both.

Thanks to brandy01 who created the beautiful banner for this story.

And thanks to astopperindeath for a fascinating prompt. It made me think about Hermione long and hard, and it was most enjoyable to figure out how the prompt could work. Here it is in her own words:

In a post-War EWE universe, Snape is now a member of law enforcement. He tracks a criminal through a series of heinous crimes, only to find that Hermione is responsible for the crimes. Try to keep as canon-compliant/not-OOC as possible.