

The Granger Solution

by TalesOfSnape

Written for Keladry Lupin as a belated birthday gift.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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a very belated birthday ficlet for Keladry Lupin

"You'll have to excuse the mess, I'm afraid," Hermione said, though there was no real apology in her tone. If Severus Snape refused to meet at the Ministry, and didn't want to ask her to his laboratory, then it was hardly her fault if she hadn't had time to finish unpacking before he turned up at her cottage.

"I quite understand, Miss Granger." Snape's patently feigned politeness made it clear he cared not one whit if the cardboard boxes were a permanent fixture.

"If you come through to the kitchen, I'll make some coffee before I have a look at your notes."

She turned away, her hair swishing against the small of her back, her jeans-clad hips swaying as she threaded her way along the hallway between stacks of boxes.

Severus found himself watching. "I really don't see the need for that," he protested, reminding his brain that it was there for various reasons, none of which involved

wondering if Granger's sweater would feel as soft to the touch as it appeared.

"Then you haven't seen me before my morning coffee," Hermione answered with saccharine sweetness. "I could make you tea, if you prefer."

"I mean that there is no reason for you to go through my notes," Severus responded a little more acerbically. "Whilst I may not have specialised in Arithmancy, I have been using it to derive new Potions since before you were born. I assure you that there are no errors in my calculations."

"And I thought I had been assigned to collaborate with you because your Potion doesn't work?" There was an acid edge to her words this time, though she filled the cordless kettle and settled it on its base before she turned to face her guest.

Severus's eyes narrowed and met hers glare for glare, but they didn't fail to take in the noticeable rise and fall of her breasts. There were definite benefits to getting the woman annoyed. "There is a difference between something that is incomplete and something which is a failure, Miss Granger."

"Yes, *Mr* Snape, there is. And you would be well advised to remember that in this case, the difference is me and I am no longer a schoolgirl." She turned away again, lifting down a large cafetière from a cupboard and then taking a storage tin and a plastic carton of milk from the fridge. "Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee. Black. Miss Granger, this is not some academic exercise. I am trying to derive a medicinal potion that will be put into immediate use. You may think that it doesn't matter if it takes you two days to familiarise yourself with my work so far, but to the wizards and witches who are in pain for those two additional days, it matters very much, and to those wizards where that two day period is the difference between sterility and reproductive health, those may be the most crucial two days of their lives."

Hermione's breasts lifted and then slowly lowered as she let out a long sigh. "Severus, I understand your anxiety. I really do. Kingsley told me that Draco had been admitted, but you have to trust me. I'm good at what I do. If I cut straight to where you hit a dead end and we refine your calculations using Laplace two-person techniques, then we *might* get a working recipe. If I go through your notes, understanding everything step by step as I go, possibly branching off at an intervening point and using a different method should it seem appropriate, then the difference could be the difference between Libatius Borage and the Half-Blood Prince. I believe the end quality of the result and efficiencies in the brewing process will compensate for the time I take to get up to speed."

"Very well, I place myself in your hands," Severus answered with not so much grace as resignation.

The kettle neared boiling point, and Hermione switched it off before it de-oxygenated the water. Then she prepared the coffee. She placed the cafetière, the milk and a couple of mugs on a tray. "Sugar?"

"No," Severus answered curtly, and then rather belatedly added, "Thank you."

Hermione lifted the tray. "The study is that way." She nodded back toward the hall, and Severus realised he was blocking the doorway.

"Allow me," he murmured, reaching for the tray's edges, his fingers brushing against hers, her eyes widening and meeting his before she relinquished her grip. "Lay on, Granger," he suggested as he stepped aside.

Hermione watched him place the tray on her oversized desk, and then waved him toward one of the two armchairs that sat at either side of the fire. She took a seat in the office chair behind her desk while she waited for the coffee to brew. "Have you used Laplace's methods before?"

Severus scowled. "No. I did, of course, refresh my memory on the topic when the Minister mentioned you might be able to help, but heretofore I have not had a partner with whom to practice. Professor Vector and I have not kept in touch since I left Hogwarts, and I believe you are the only other female British Arithmancer trained in the technique."

"Very well. I will be perfectly honest, professor. This is a technique which requires cooperation and trust between the participants. As you have the deepest possible understanding of the problem we will be attempting to solve, I am willing to work with you, given your knowledge can only lend itself to the working." She rose to her feet to pour their coffees. "However, this is not a simple process. You should not take it for granted that you will be able to familiarise yourself with the technique in the time available, especially as for the most part I will be busy going over your notes. I cannot devote a lot of time to coaching you. If I do not think you are ready by the time I have assimilated the material, then I will bring in a partner familiar with the technique to take your place."

"I assure you that I will be capable of mastering the material," Severus responded, as coolly as if she had impugned his manhood.

Hermione's gaze raked him from head to toe as she passed him his mug, taking in the black polo neck and dress trousers he wore, and the mid-length, layered haircut that still managed to shield his eyes from view, when he didn't lift his chin in defiance. "If I doubted your intellect, Severus, or your ability to apply yourself, you would not even be in this room. I have no doubt that you will master all the foolish wand waving and incantations you are required to. The rest is beyond anyone's power to teach you." She let her eyes dwell on his briefcase for a second or two, and then held out her hand. "Do we have an agreement?"

"If your assistant will sign the same non-disclosure contract you have?"

"No one is going to claim credit for your work," Hermione sighed. "As you said, this is a matter of some urgency, though."

Severus opened his case and presented her with a thick notebook bound in black leather.

"Thank you," she responded. "When you have finished your coffee, you should find a book by McKinley. He explains the technique far better than Laplace's articles. The boxes the books are in are all marked according to the M.M.D.D.S.. The designation you're looking for is five-one-nine."

"M.M.D.D.S.?" Severus muttered.

"Magically Modified Dewey Decimal System," Hermione explained.

"I know what the letters stand for. I'm just amazed that you would employ such a complex method for a home library."

"I find that if you shelve books alphabetically everyone and their pet Pygmy Puff will feel free to browse and re-shelve at will, whether they actually know the alphabet or not. If they can't find what they want without my help, then I can usually rely on it being returned to the correct place."

"I take it you're still friendly with Potter and Weasley, then."

"With Harry, yes." She sat back down at her desk, using its bulk like armour, and opened the notebook, regarding it with a concentration that intimated all discussion was at an end. Soon she was writing her own notes on pieces of parchment and inserting them between the pages.

Severus was agitated, though he refused to allow it to show. He was capable of great patience when it was necessary. It had, after all, taken years to bring down the Dark Lord, but he had been busy during those years. He had taught. He had kept Poppy Pomfrey supplied with potions. He had watched over Potter, first from a distance and then later much too closely for comfort. He had been at the beck and call of the deranged leader of a messianic cult... and then there was the Dark Lord.

He was not used to doing nothing.

Admittedly, the view was somewhat better than the one afforded by his own study, but there was a limit to how many glimpses down a woman's V-neck a man was allowed before he ruined all hope of ever seeing what was under it, *not*, he conceded, that he harboured any expectations in that respect. It was simply *completely* natural psychological response to the current outbreak, the subconscious's way of telling one to reproduce before it was too late.

He was, however, very aware that a single indiscreet observation from Granger to her juvenile companions over drinks in the Leaky Cauldron on a Friday night would probably be enough to irrefutably label him a cradle-robbing pervert in the eyes of all wizarding society ... especially if Tom hadn't put down any insecticide lately.

He had repeated wand movements as often as was practicable with one's wand hand held out of sight down the side of an armchair. Eventually, he knew she would demand that he perform for her evaluation, but he wasn't about to provide her with more than the obligatory level of entertainment. He knew the necessary incantations by heart, but could not actually practice with *intent* until she had finished her note-taking and was available to practice with him.

When he had suggested that he might go back to his laboratory and embrace trial and error methods to ascertain why the Potion wasn't working, she had countermanded him, saying that she would be finished soon and she might need him to clarify certain points in his notes. In actuality, she seemed to have followed his train of thought with ease, which he would admit he found slightly irksome, only querying on occasion whether a certain equation used 'p' or the Greek letter rho. His writing wasn't *that* bad, he was *quite* certain, but at least when he stood behind her looking over her shoulder she couldn't tell where his gaze might fall on its way to the written page.

In sheer desperation for something to do, he had tidied up their coffee things from earlier and even made a fresh pot. He had washed up again after that. Then, he had even unpacked several boxes of books onto their shelves (each shelf, predictably, being labelled with a three-digit code exactly like the ones he had at home). The last box in that particular stack, however, held not books but general bric-a-brac: framed photographs, some items he thought were possibly Muggle office equipment, quills, ink in enough colours to paint a rainbow and a brass telescope a touch bigger than the ones the students used.

He was just in the process of lifting it to his eye to check the magnification and whether it was an inverting telescope or a terrestrial one when Granger shrieked her head off.

"No! Not that! Put it down!" Hermione yelled as she rose to her feet. He hadn't heard that many exclamation marks since he'd stood on Minerva's tail, and Minerva's howl had been far less shrill, even if it had been accompanied by a claws-out swipe at his shin.

Before he could even tell the ridiculous woman to get a grip, something tried to poke his eye out and he was holding a brass tube with a boxing glove on a spring hanging from it. "What in the name of Morgana's hairy twat are you doing with a juvenile piece of equipment such as this and why the hell did you have to shriek like a harpy in heat?"

Hermione's brows knotted together. "Why I have it is no business of yours," she answered in a cold tone that somehow conveyed both sadness and disappointment. She came over, standing right beside him and yet somehow further away than she had been at the far end of the room. She rummaged in the box until she found a couple of wooden blocks, which she carried over to the mantelpiece. She set them down about a foot apart and then snatched the offending object from Severus's hands. With a practiced series of twists and tugs she reset the mechanism so that it once more looked like a harmless telescope and set it so it rested on the blocks, perfectly level, in pride of place.

Turning to face him again, she set her hands on her hips and tossed her head to clear several stray curls from her line of sight. "And I am not about to stand here and be insulted for trying to protect you from your own rudeness and stupidity. I'm sure you can work out for yourself how to get rid of the black eye. A day or so of trial and error ... or a Floo call to Poppy Pomfrey ... should do it. Given your lack of respect, I see no point in your staying. I shall have my apprentice come over immediately, so that he has as much time as possible to familiarise himself with the Potion. I will Floo over copies of our results as soon as we have completed the calculations."

"Miss Gra..."

"That's Madam Granger, and I believe I asked you to leave."

"Hermione, please..."

"Professor, much as the least likeable part of me might enjoy seeing you beg, this is pointless. I am not asking you to go out of spite. I'm asking you to go because I believe we do not have the sort of empathy required to master the technique together. If you wish, I can return your notes and you could approach Septima..."

"I had thought that sharing a volatile temper might contribute to our understanding of each other, rather than be cited as a lack of empathy," Severus answered.

"My temper may be volatile, profess..."

"Severus. I preferred when you called me Severus."

"Pro-fess-or," she enunciated clearly. "But I don't take it out on whoever happens to be around at the time, or at least I try not to."

"Hermione, I was going to say that if I didn't have the greatest respect for you, then I wouldn't be here, *but that* would not be the truth. The truth is that, while I do have a great deal of respect for your achievements, you are also my last chance. Septima Vector has never forgiven me for the part I played in the war."

"The part you played in the war was vital..."

"Let me rephrase. She has never forgiven me for playing a part, even with her."

"Oh!" Hermione lifted on hand to her mouth. "O-o-oh! I *see*!"

Someone else might have shrugged. Severus allowed the smallest twitch of his upper lip at the left corner. "Hindsight and logic are no balm for bruised emotions, even if pride is the biggest casualty. I should not have snapped at you, and if you would only allow me a second chance, I would offer you my sincerest apologies."

Hermione sighed. "You better do it in the kitchen then," she conceded. "That's where I keep my first aid supplies, and no Charm will work on that." She nodded at the aubergine-coloured bruise covering his right eye, and already beginning to make it swell shut.

Severus waited until she was in the hallway to let the breath he'd been holding escape. When he looked up, she stood in the doorway, watching with a rueful smile, her hair shifting minutely from side to side as if she had just stopped shaking her head.

"You're not out of the woods yet, Snape," she said. "I'm still waiting to see how sincere that apology is when it comes out."

Severus smirked. Snape sounded so much better from her lips than professor, nothing at all like the way it sounded when her friends used it, but he was now determined to ensure he finagled her back to Severus.

She span on her heel, and this time he followed her into the kitchen, waiting when she drew her wand and pointed it at one of the barstools that was tucked under a section of counter. The stool slid out into the centre of the floor and then shrank until it was about four inches lower than when it started out.

"Sit," she instructed, pulling open a drawer and removing a small tin.

Severus sat, and found himself eye to eye with the young woman for the first time. Her face had a fine-boned quality which he'd never previously appreciated, but it was her eyes that captivated him. They were a fairly unremarkable brown, dark and deep, but it was the disarming combination of the intelligence and the warmth, the kindness that seemed to radiate from them that held him enthralled.

She unscrewed the lid from the tin, dipping the tip of her right index finger into its contents as she shifted closer. "Apology?" she prompted as she applied the unguent to the area just below his eyebrow.

Severus closed his eyes, letting the cooling balm do its work as Hermione worked it into the skin with gentle circling motions that gradually shifted lower until she had covered his entire eye-socket area. "I am truly sorry that I shouted at you. I haven't been sleeping much since St. Mungo's contacted me about the outbreak and between that and concern for Draco... and others, I have been rather tense. As you point out, that is no excuse for taking things out on you, but I hope you will understand my outburst and appreciate that it in no way results from a dearth of due respect for either your skills or your person."

Gentle fingers pushed aside a strand of hair, grazing against his forehead and then returning to press more firmly there.

He opened his eyes, to find Hermione standing so closely by his side that he would only have to tilt his head forward and twist his neck to kiss her on the mouth.

"I thought the heat was coming from the bruise," she said softly, "but it isn't, is it?"

"No," Severus replied, "not all of it. I've had a temperature since last night. I estimate that I have another sixty hours, give or take, before the blisters begin to form and I become contagious."

"Severus..." It was a sigh, almost a benediction, even though it held exasperation as much as tenderness.

"I *did* say that I placed myself in your hands."

"Seriously?" she asked in a soft tone, lifting each of his hands with one of hers, a tentative touch, holding just the last couple of joints of his fingers.

Severus couldn't help the infinitesimal widening of his eyes, but he gave a slight inclination of his head. "Seriously."

"Good. Come with me." She slowly backed out into the hall, leading him on without ever tightening her hold. She passed the study and Severus shot her a quizzical glance, especially when he saw that she was leading him into a bedroom.

He lifted a sardonic brow. "While I may agree from a purely intellectual point of view that it is the interests of wizardkind for those such as ourselves to procreate, if only to offset the damage of which an exponentially increasing number of Weasleys are capable, my impending sterility is not sufficient impetus to overcome the hard-won knowledge that children do not thrive unless they have a loving home."

Hermione looked stricken for a second before she realised he had to be teasing. After a shocked moment, she swatted him lightly on the bicep. She pulled away from him to open a chest of drawers and remove a set of men's pyjamas. She tossed them in his general direction. "They'll probably be a bit short on the arm and leg unless you transfigure them, but they should still be more comfortable than sleeping in your clothes. I'll wake you when I've finished reading through your notes, and we can order in some dinner. You can help me if there's anything I have any problems with, and we can discuss a plan of action."

Severus opened his mouth, only for her to press a finger to his lips.

"Yes, yes, we both know you're big and bad and obstreperous, but there's no point arguing when you know as well as I do that you need the sleep."

Severus snapped at the fingertip with his teeth, barely gripping it, and then pressing a kiss to its tip. He couldn't say why. Any such impulse would normally have been sharply quelled unless he and the kisse were *very* well acquainted. So much for his hopes of not being the hot topic of conversation at the Leaky Cauldron. It seemed the fever was affecting him. When Hermione reached up to cradle his jaw with a tiny hand on either side and stood on tiptoe to brush her lips chastely against his, he was convinced. It *had* to be a hallucination. As she closed the door behind her he contemplated the idea that, as hallucinations went, he could do far worse.

"Mmmmmh." Severus responded lethargically to the cool breeze that lifted his hair from his overheated brow. When the 'breeze' ran over his scalp, he awoke instantly and grabbed the arm to which it was attached.

Hermione Granger was leaning over his ... or rather her (probably spare) ... bed. She didn't move any further, as if afraid of what his next move might be, and there was a tightness to her expression that he belatedly realised was probably due to pain.

Severus loosened his grip, and ran his fingertips back and forward over the area of skin he had previously abused, as if to soothe the hurt. "Once again I must offer you my regrets, Hermione. Perchance I might make amends by applying some of the bruise salve for you."

Brown eyes stared back into Severus's, and it didn't take Legilimency to know she was trying to work out whether he had a hidden agenda, and, if so, what it might be. "I merely see no need for you to suffer unnecessarily," he explained. "After your leave-taking, I hoped you would not be averse to my assistance. If you prefer to treat yourself, I shall not press the matter."

Her shyly coquettish smile made something twist under his ribcage. "I think..." she said. With only the briefest hesitation at the network of scars on his throat, her eyes dropped from his face to where his chest had been exposed thanks to his restless movements, before moving on to the unused pyjamas and folded clothes he had set on top of the chest of drawers. "That we might both focus more clearly on Arithmancy if I take preventative measures regarding the bruise, and leave *you* to get dressed." Her eyes sparkled with amusement as she paused with one hand on the edge of the door. "Once we have the cure, *then* we can discuss whether you should *press* the matter."

Severus offered up a silent prayer to whichever deity might accept him that she wasn't simply having fun at his expense. The door clicked shut, and he tossed aside the covers. "I shall hold you to that, my dear Miss Granger," he whispered. "If I'm in any condition to do so."

Severus smirked as he caught the aroma of fresh coffee again as he re-entered the study. "More?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, definitely more," said Hermione. "If you don't object, I imagine we'll be working into the early hours, but first, unless you'd prefer to Apparate to the Leaky Cauldron or the Three Broomsticks, you need to take your pick from these."

Severus's eyes narrowed slightly, and he barely flicked a glance over the assortment of Muggle take-away menus. "How do you feel about French cuisine?" he asked.

Hermione's expression brightened considerably before she seemed to bring her enthusiasm under a tighter rein. "Isn't that rather extravagant for a working dinner?" she asked.

"In point of fact you would actually be helping me to get some value for money out of my guild membership fees," Severus demurred, "and unlike most Muggle take-aways, the food should still be hot when we get it."

"Should I change?"

"Fetching as I find you currently, perhaps it would be prudent to either cover the jeans with a set of robes, or replace them with something a little more formal."

Hermione's eyes darted back to the take-away menus.

"Surely it can't take more than two minutes to take a set of robes from your wardrobe and put them on?" Severus enquired.

"Alright, but if I feel underdressed I'm blaming you," Hermione warned him as she headed back out into the hall. "Make yourself useful and put that notebook, my papers and a couple of different coloured pens in that briefcase of yours. There are a couple of things I want to make sure I've understood correctly."

"Your wish is my command."

Severus immediately sent off a Patronus message to warn the maitre d' of their impending arrival before returning his wand to his sleeve. He scooped up the notebook, filching a rubber band from Hermione's desk tidy to wrap around it and keep her notes in place. He checked a couple of pens on the blotter, having noted that it was already doodled on, and then added them and all the loose parchments from Hermione's desk to his case. That done, he held the case's handle with both hands and leaned back, resting his behind against Hermione's desktop.

Barely had he settled, when Hermione returned to the room. Had Severus not had so many years of practice as a spy, he might have allowed his jaw to drop.

She had left her hair loose and wore the same minimalist make up, perhaps a hint of lightly smudged eye-liner, some mascara and some lip balm or clear lip gloss. However, she had swapped the jeans and jumper for a calf-length black sheath dress and some suede boots which clung lovingly to the curve of her leg. Over the dress she wore a set of dark green robes with the sheen of raw silk.

"Now it is I who should feel underdressed." He held out his arm to her. "Shall we go?"

"Here?" Hermione flicked over a couple of pages, removed one of her place markers and then pointed to a couple of lines. "The Wisniewski Resolution Charm, right?"

Severus inclined his head slightly, allowing himself a small smile as Hermione pressed her thigh to his in the leather-upholstered booth that they shared to better view the notes set out between their place settings.

"I've never known anyone other than a master to skip the intervening steps like that."

"Until now," Severus added in a velvety tone. "Nevertheless, I am hardly alone in having a facility for more than one discipline. Your own work may be centred in Arithmancy, but it touches on many other fields."

"You make that sound like a compliment."

"I intended it as such."

"Once you would have said that it made me an insufferable know-it-all," Hermione reminded him.

"If I saw you as no more than a former pupil, then it is likely my opinion would be unchanged," Severus admitted. "It might even dent my pride when you so easily comprehend the work into which I've put no small effort. In a collaborator, as in a companion, intelligence and knowledge are to be prized."

"It is far easier to follow in the footsteps of another than to cut a new path. A lot of what I do amounts to standing on the shoulders of great witches and wizards."

"You are flattering me, Hermione." Severus smirked and darted her a sidelong glance through his lashes. "Does it matter who makes the greater contribution, if together we are able to reach new heights? I can assure you the afflicted, including myself, will only be concerned as to whether the cure works, not to whom it is attributed."

"And you, Severus, are trying to seduce me." Hermione's lips quirked upward.

One dark elegantly arched brow lifted higher. "Only trying?"

Hermione blushed rather prettily, colour spreading over her collarbones as well as her cheeks. She reached for her mineral water and took a sip as a waiter appeared with their desserts. "I thought, if you agree, that when we return to my cottage, we could go back to the beginning of your calculations and redo them using Laplace. That way we can practice working together before we get to the more complicated variants and provide a check for some of the simpler calculations at the same time, with the bonus that Laplace can account for more variables than the methods you originally used so perhaps if, say, the mugwort has to be harvested by the light of a full moon..."

"Then I am what might commonly be described as buggered," Severus answered with his usual cynicism. "However, I agree that this should be an effective way to approach the problem."

"Muggles have ways to preserve sperm samples, you know?" Hermione suggested in a near whisper, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on her *Moelleux au Chocolat* as it spurted sauce from its centre in a most suggestive manner.

"But not to preserve magic," Severus answered equally softly. "I cannot envision myself trying to retrain in the Muggle world at my age or finding a woman who would wish to live in the Muggle world with me. It is even less likely that, if such a thing were to happen, neither of us would resent the child for being the cause, and it would be cruel to deliberately bring a Squib into this one. Adoption would be a better option, but I appreciate your concern."

"It *would* be a shame if the Snape name were to die out before it made it into Nature's Nobility." Hermione darted Severus a wry smile, accompanied by a sidelong glance.

To her surprise, Severus responded with a loud and indecorous snort of laughter. "I did not change my allegiance during the Troubles, only to recant as soon as the Dark Lord fell. Or perhaps you think that I am merely playing with you as a Kneazle plays with a rat?"

"I think a wizard might say much in a fever that he could regret when his mind is clear," Hermione reminded him.

"Then you had better eat up and help me to find a cure, if I need to be in perfect health to convince you of my sincerity."

Hermione, once more comfortable in jeans and jumper, set up the waist-high flat-topped podium in the centre of the clear space between her desk and the armchairs. "Ready?" she asked, nodding to the parchment which was the right way up from her side of the podium, but upside down to Severus.

Severus nodded and placed his left hand on the page, ensuring that his thumb was at right angles to his fingers and that they enclosed the bottom right corner of the equation they sought to solve.

Hermione placed her left hand to frame the top left corner. "On three," she said softly. "One. Two. Three." As one, male and female, yin and yang began a series of matching and interlocking wand movements that were as intricate as the choreography of any ballet.

The parchment between them began to glow with a soft golden light. Inked characters seemed to peel away from the paper, swirling and spinning in their own dance until no individual character could be discerned. Severus held his breath as magic only half his own flowed through him, passing through parchment and wand tip to wand tip, joining him to Hermione in the symbol for infinity.

Intuitively, he felt the correct instant for the incantation. "*Enoda solutionem!*" he chanted in unison with his former pupil. The whirling pen strokes slowed and then rearranged themselves into a single line of symbols and numbers, and the golden glow faded away to nothing.

When Hermione lifted her left hand and broke the magical link between them, Severus felt as if someone had just yanked off a sticking plaster from his very soul. The woman took the parchment from the podium and carried it over to where Severus's notebook lay open, comparing their results to his earlier work.

"Identical," she confirmed, choosing a fresh sheet of parchment and copying out the initial workings for the next stage of the brewing process. She set it on top of the podium and then took a seat in one of the armchairs by the fire. "Fifteen minute break and then we try again."

Severus itched to continue the work now they had begun, yearned to feel her magic inside him, like the first truly sunny day of spring bringing to life the blossoms that had lain dormant under the earth. He would have liked to ignore the faint tremors in his knees. Instead, he took the chair across from her. Looking through his fringe, he asked softly, "Is it always so... *intense*?"

The response he received made his heart skip a beat.

"That, Severus," Hermione told him, her words a promise, "was only a foretaste."

Severus strode to his armchair with a stiff-legged gait, noticing for the first time that daylight was trying to fight its way through and around the edges of Hermione's ivory and sage brocade curtains.

"Hmmm..."

The thoughtful sound made him lift his head to watch his companion compare the results they had just obtained with his own previous workings. "Stop chewing your lip, Granger." He failed to even invest the phrase with enough invective to startle her out of her reverie.

"It's mine to chew if I want to," she muttered, almost as if she were talking to herself, and truthfully, after a long night where their magic had melded over a dozen times, it was hard to say where she ended and he began. She lifted a fresh sheet of parchment and began scribbling on it. Taking it to her desk, she turned it writing side down, and pressed it to her blotter before she brought the results of their latest magical working over to where Severus sat.

Severus looked at the figures and symbols and sighed. "We need to optimise the stirring sequence at this stage. It requires both clockwise and widdershins agitation, but we will need further calculations to determine the pattern."

Hermione lifted the parchment from her desk and handed it to him. "I concur, but first I think we both need to get some sleep."

"Hermione!"

"Don't even think about appealing to my better nature, Severus, because right now I'm willing to give you about as much leeway as you would give a class full of Gryffindors. My good nature goes just far enough to make cocoa."

"Miss..."

"Madam, you obstinate viper. And no."

"You don't even know..."

"What you were going to say? About how long it might take to complete the brewing process and how you only have thirty-six hours left before you need to be isolated. And how I keep forcing you to take longer and longer breaks between stages in the workings and surely that's enough? Severus, even if I couldn't tell that the only thing stopping you from falling into that chair was your damned stubborn pride, don't you think I would know from the workings? It's slowing. They're taking longer to resolve and it's only partly because the workings are more complicated. And, honestly, I wouldn't give a good god damn if you were as perky as Luna Potter first thing in the morning, I need some sleep. You aren't the only Potioneer in the country. If we can't finish the cure, then there'll be someone at the Ministry who can follow instructions, or if I have to I'll kidnap Slughorn."

"Not Slughorn," Severus muttered. "Fassbender, Hamburg. Get Astoria Malfoy to pay him. Send owl to her now. Even if I do the test batch, we'll need him to supervise the mass production. And that had better be proper cocoa, not that crappy instant stuff with powdered milk and saccharine."

"Proper cocoa blended to a smooth paste with cold milk and then the boiling milk stirred in," Hermione confirmed with a smirk at hearing the ever so correct Severus Snape call something crappy.

Severus gave a grunt and levered himself out of the armchair moving toward Hermione's desk, where he took up parchment and quill. "Well, get on with it, then, witch. Half a spoonful of sugar in mine."

By the time Hermione returned to the study with two brimming mugs, Severus had completed the letter to Draco's wife, requesting that, unless she wished Scorpius to be an only child, she get in touch with Fassbender and make him an offer he would find difficult to refuse. "Sealing wax?" he asked.

Hermione set the mugs down at the edge of the hearth and delved into the mish-mash of objects in the box where Severus had earlier found the telescope. Lifting out what appeared to be a small wooden jewellery box, she placed it on the desk and lifted the lid to reveal sticks of sealing wax in varying colours, a petrol lighter and two seals. Severus lifted the first of the seals, deciphering the mirror-image 'HJG' that was almost hidden in a mass of loops and curlicues. The second, he noted, was much simpler, a stylised mustelid, its head raised as if scenting the wind.

"The otter is for personal letters, the other for professional correspondence," Hermione explained.

For an instant Severus considered contacting Scrivenshafts to commission another seal with the initials HJS. Definitely fever.

"What?"

The damned witch was too perspicacious. "I was simply thinking that with friends like Potter, I suppose it becomes necessary to have a system that tells him whether he is answering as a friend or as a Ministry lackey."

"You're going to have to stop picking on Harry, you know."

"It can hardly be called picking on him when the boy wonder isn't even here," Severus pointed out.

"Then you shouldn't talk about him behind his back," Hermione reprimanded, though she couldn't hide a tired smile.

"I would hardly have sufficient time to amply vent my spleen at the annual Order reunion."

Hermione gently shook her head. "Let it go, Severus. He was never really like James, you know. If we were arrogant, it was a combination of Dumbledore's encouragement and being too young to know any better. Harry and I grew out of it."

Severus ducked his head, taking his pocket watch from his trousers and placing it on the desk, where the miniature seal that was on the fob was readily accessible. "Perhaps," he admitted softly, as he applied the lighter to a stick of red wax and let it drip onto the exposed seam of folded parchment. "You have an owl?"

"She's in my bedroom."

Severus couldn't prevent a smirk at this piece of news. He had slept in the *spare* room, and the men's pyjamas had been stored there, rather than in a drawer in Hermione's own bedroom. Any competent wizard, and, Weasley aside, he couldn't imagine Hermione having the patience to put up with an incompetent one, would be able to Floo or Apparate home at the end of an evening. If a wizard stayed, it wouldn't be because they were unable to make it home. Therefore his earlier deduction that the pyjamas belonged to her father was given further credence. Of course, that didn't rule out the possibility that there was a wizard who *did* share her bedroom, but *she* had

kissed *him*.

With a witch like Hermione...

"Stop scheming and come and drink your cocoa before it gets cold." Hermione's voice cut into his rather complacent train of thought.

Severus took a seat by the fire and made a few placatory sips at his mug before he defended himself. "I wasn't scheming. Actually, I was wondering if we had progressed far enough from this morning to make it worth asking about that again." He gestured to the mantelpiece where the telescope rested, noting with another smirk that Hermione's eyes rested on his hand rather longer than strictly necessary.

She gave a soft sigh. "It's not a huge secret. Just... a silly reminder. When Harry, Ron and I went on the run, Molly packed away everything from the room I'd shared with Ginny that she didn't recognise. She thought I'd left my school telescope, but it was a prototype of Fred and George's that I'd given myself a black eye with the summer before sixth year. By the time she gave me the box with all my odds and ends, Fred was gone..."

"I didn't realise you were particularly close to *that* Weasley," Severus gently probed.

"I wasn't really. I'm not sure anyone was close to him other than George, not even Lee Jordan. But they were hard not to like and they were never spiteful, even if they didn't exactly have much respect for prefects."

"Or for teachers," Severus added with a wry twist to his mouth.

"At least they didn't sulk on the rare occasion you could get the better of them."

"No, they always took whatever punishment they were due when they were caught."

Hermione nodded. "I couldn't open up old wounds by giving it back to Molly or George. It would have seemed disrespectful to throw it out or to dump it in my parents' attic, so I kept it. I'd be a liar if I said that I live each day as if it were my last. I'm just not made that way, but sometimes when I feel like I'm getting bogged down, it reminds me that life is shorter than you ever think it will be, that there's more to life than work, and to take the... That I can be a bit uptight."

"You wouldn't be the only person in the room who's been told they could sweep the floor just by walking past, Hermione," Severus answered softly. "*Not* the twins," he added quickly at her curious glance. "Your former head of house has been known to tell me to take the broom out of my arse on several Gillywater-inspired occasions, most of them when she was gloating over a Gryffindor win of some sort. Unfortunately, by the time I could safely have taken her advice, I think I had forgotten how it was done."

"You've been passable company this evening."

"Passable?" Severus asked, lifting an eyebrow as he sipped at his mug. "I was hoping for pleasurable or interesting at the very least."

Hermione's smile widened. "You were always interesting, even when you were as caustic as Iye. And I did enjoy dinner."

"Perhaps when circumstances allow, you might consider repeating the experience..."

"Ask me again when you're in your right mind." With that Hermione tipped her mug back and drained it. "I'll knock on your door when I get back up."

Severus set down his cup on the hearth as she rose to her feet, but before he could use his freed hands to lever himself out of the soft armchair, Hermione stopped him with a hushed, "Stay." Her lips felt cool against his forehead as she bade him to sleep well. If Severus hadn't been every bit as tired as she had accused him of being, he would have pulled her down onto his lap and kissed her properly.

But they had no time for that, not until they had a working potion. Severus swirled his cup to stir up any grounds that had settled to the bottom and drank it down, knowing that for him they had just one chance. If the process they were working on were inaccurate, if he even made the slightest error in the brewing, there would be no time for him to make another batch...

He couldn't blame Granger for putting him off. Didn't some Muggle say something about it being better to travel hopefully than to arrive? He was already her former teacher and twenty years her elder, impatient, ugly and probably about to get uglier since he doubted St. Mungo's would have sufficient healthy staff to treat all their patients with dittany as the blisters burst, thereby preventing scarring. Sterility would simply be one more reason.

Could he bear to have her inside him again, to feel her very essence within him after she spurned him? Perhaps he could. Perhaps without the fever in his blood he could see her as a colleague, just a younger Minerva, *not* a vibrant, beautiful woman with gentle eyes whose smiles made him want to respond in kind. Perhaps... and perhaps not. Granger was wise to wait until they finished the calculations to cut down his dreams.

Severus pulled himself from sleep as if trying to escape a mire. It took a full minute for the emphatic knocking to make it from his ears to his brain and for his mouth to frame an appropriate response.

"Bugger off!" he called in a sleep-roughened tone before he let his head fall back to the pillow.

"Severus Snape, you have five minutes to get yourself in the shower, breakfast will be ready in twenty, and I better get an apology in twenty-one."

That was *not* a house-elf.

Severus rolled onto his back, felt what, if it were not actually evening, he would term an early morning erection the like of which he hadn't known in at least half a decade brush against the cotton of the duvet cover, and covered his face with both hands. He scrubbed up and down a couple of times before gradually cracking his eyes open to confirm that he was, once again, in Granger's spare room, and in trouble.

He lifted the duvet, casting a look down the length of his body before he let it fall, or rather tent, and covered his face with his hands again. After several seconds spent considering the various options, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and fumbled on the bedside unit for his wand. Cracking the bedroom door open a couple of inches, he didn't even summon up the extra effort it would have taken to cast his spell wordlessly. "*Accio bath towel!*" He caught the material as it swished past the edge of the door and wrapped it around his hips. Thanking whoever had designed the building for not putting the bathroom next to the kitchen or the study, he made his way with careful steps to the shower.

He sighed as he entered the steam-fogged room, inhaling deeply to savour the silk and cinnamon scent *other* hair, the grapefruit of her shower gel, his cock twitching in response. He cut off his longing groan as soon as he was aware of making it, casting a Silencing Charm on himself before he turned on the spray. Discarding the towel, he waited long enough to let the water heat evenly before he entered the cubicle.

Once inside he quickly located the bottle marked conditioner. Turning his back to the spray, he spread his feet apart, squirted some of the thick white liquid onto one palm and rubbed his hands together until the slippery goo no longer felt chilled before he closed his eyes and tried to solve what he was coming to regard as the Granger problem, or at least the most pressing element thereof.

He imagined that hands other than his own stroked and teased him, that instead of running his fingers through the coarse curls that covered his crotch it was the riotous, wild curls on Granger's head that twined around his fingers, and when he closed his eyes and threw back his head in a silently possessive cry, it was kindly eyes the colour of polished walnut into which he imagined looking. It was *her* teasing smile he saw as he slid to the cubicle floor, his legs no longer firm enough to support him.

"So, Severus, is there a way to wake you up that doesn't involve either violence or foul language?" Hermione asked as he took the stool beside hers in the kitchen.

Severus felt blood rush to his cheeks as he flashed on an image of coming awake with his cock in her mouth, rapidly followed by one of her riding him. Gods but this woman would either be the death or the making of him! "None for which we're well enough acquainted... as yet, though I'm not normally quite so irritable when I'm fully rested. I regret repaying your hospitality so shabbily before. Had I been fully aware of where I was, I would never have used that tone."

Hermione gave a huff of laughter as she ate a forkful of scrambled egg. "But you would still have told me to sodomise myself," she added after she had swallowed.

"I wouldn't rule out the possibility, if I felt we shared sufficient familiarity that you would regard it as indicative of my desire to remain abed rather than an objection to your company and I believed you would not take offence at the language. However, I suspect I'd be far more inclined to entice you to join me."

"Are you always this forward?"

"Never."

"So what makes me... *this* different?"

"Well, I *do* have a fever," he answered wryly, rushing on when he saw her eyes narrow and her lips begin to purse. "However, I think it is more relevant that this is the first time I have found myself drawn to a former student. You are an attractive woman, but I see many such and dismiss them as both unlikely to have any interest in me and almost certainly even less likely to keep me entertained for as long as a good book. It is the fact that I am well aware of the intelligence that accompanies your looks, that I know the depth to which your loyalty goes once it is given, and that, knowing all you do of me, you believe me worthy of kindness and consideration... That you appear to find my less than handsome features appealing does make me wonder if there are problems with either your eyesight or your sanity, but I freely admit that being desired is a great aphrodisiac. That when your magic flows through me I feel as if it refreshes my very soul. It's the combination of all those things that make me want to kiss you until you forget to breathe and your knees go weak, just as it's those things which make me hope we might still be sharing kisses far into the future."

Hermione lowered her cutlery to her plate, and turned on her stool so she faced Severus rather than the counter. "Severus Snape..." She stopped and shook her head gently. Sliding from her stool, her food only half-eaten, she cast Severus a look he was at a loss to interpret. "I'll..."

Severus made a grab for her wrist as she turned to go, grateful when she stopped without him having to tighten his grip.

"Hermione, please..." As she turned, he saw that her lower lip was once more hostage to her teeth and her eyes were unusually bright. "Tell me what I did."

She shook her head for a few seconds before she answered in a sombre tone. "Nothing. You haven't done anything wrong. In fact, that may well be the nicest thing any man has ever said to me... I just wish I knew it wasn't the fever talking." She gave a wry grimace. "I'll just... I mean, I'll be..." She waved a hand in the general direction of the doorway into the hall, and Severus used his grip on her wrist to pull her back to him, plunging his other hand into the mass of curls at the back of her head to guide her mouth to his.

He paused briefly as his lips were about an inch from hers. "It isn't the fever," he whispered before he leaned in further, brushing his lips across hers as gently as he could, hoping for a response. He felt the tingle of moving air as her lips parted in a silent sigh and languid touches where her body met his as the tension eased from her frame.

Then she was kissing him back with all the ferocity of her house mascot, as if her desire for him burned so hot she hoped to literally leave her brand on him. Instead, she placed her indelible mark on his formerly shrivelled and blackened heart.

She made his thoughts unworthy of the name and he felt as giddy as if he'd been given an overdose of Elixir of Euphoria. Despite its recent 'seeing to' his cock strained to be near her, to press against the stiffness of her jeans. And then she was pushing him back down onto his stool and holding him at arm's length, one hand on either shoulder as if she thought he would topple over if she let go.

"Can you do this, Severus?" she asked.

Severus fished under his jersey to open his belt buckle. "I'm not *that* bloody old, witch!"

She sniggered. The thrice-damned hussy sniggered at him. "You were swaying, Severus. Now, do I take you to St. Mungo's or do we make a start on those calculations?"

"Bugger St. Mungo's! We've got this far. I don't mind sharing credit with you, but I'm damned if I'm going to pass this over to some cretinous apprentice at this stage. I'll simply... wait for..." He looked down at his lap. "Once I'm feeling a little calmer, I'm sure I will be perfectly fine."

She lifted her hands, letting them hover an inch from their former spot for a few seconds before she evidently decided he was stable. She stepped closer and cradled his cheek before she raised her hand farther and brushed his fringe away from where it fell in front of his eyes. "I'll be in the study," she said. Then she pressed her lips to his forehead and left him to compose himself.

"You should lie down," Hermione suggested as she held out another sheet of equations to Severus. "If I'm right about what this result means, we're going to have at least another four calculations to do."

"And what do you think this means," Severus enquired, grasping her wrist instead of the proffered parchment and pulling the woman down onto his lap.

"Severus!"

"Hmmm?"

Their position placed her ear almost level with Severus's mouth, and the near purr caused a tingling sensation between her thighs. Then she felt him nibble at her earlobe, his tongue turning her earring on its post, and she gave a low groan. "This isn't resting."

"Resting isn't the only way to recharge your power," Severus pointed out.

"Yes, because getting you excited worked so well earlier."

Severus gave a grunt and took the parchment from her hand. He leaned back in the chair, but when Hermione made to regain her feet, he anchored her to him with his free hand. "I missed an ingredient. We haven't found a balance yet. Something that will augment the effect of the mistletoe to counteract the impotency, but won't react adversely with the snake fangs, Re'em blood, meadowsweet or the mint..." He dropped the parchment onto Hermione's lap and wrapped his left arm over Hermione's waist, his hand resting on her hip. This freed his right arm, so that he could rest an elbow on the chair arm and run a fingertip over his lips as he silently considered and discarded various options. Severus would have been gratified to see how avidly Hermione's eyes followed the path of that fortunate fingertip, if he had only noticed. "Yarrow. We need to add yarrow. Mistletoe gives us both healing and fertility in general, but yarrow will imbue the Potion with both the quality of masculinity and male potency. We need yarrow."

"You're sure?" Hermione asked.

"I would hardly suggest it if I weren't," Severus replied. Then, as if he realised that his tone had been rather abrupt, he dropped his right arm behind Hermione's back and clasped his hands together, pulling Hermione slightly toward him. "I *am*, after all, the test candidate. It's yarrow. I am as sure as it is possible to be. If fresh, I'll wager the

quantities are about one quarter the weight of the juniper berries. If we have to use dried, I would say half as much again as it will be less efficacious. I have fresh yarrow in my garden, enough for the test potion, at least, but we should calculate the quantities for both in case Fassbender has to use dried."

"And what if you have an adverse reaction to the potion?"

"Then I suppose that I shall have to let the dunderheads at St. Mungo's provide interim care while you and your apprentice work out where we went wrong," Severus answered blithely, "but I will not have an adverse reaction because we can do this. Can't you tell it's working?" He shifted his hand so that it splayed over Hermione's abdomen, in a gesture reminiscent of an expectant father. "Don't you feel it here when we work together? Can't you feel the pull, as if our magical essences want to be together, as if they're somehow *more* in combination than apart?"

"Severus, the technique works because of the combined magic, but the dynamic is going to be different every time. When I learned from my mentor we worked as a father and daughter team might, except that even though he was teaching me, as the woman I had to take the lead. When I taught my apprentice, my role was very much that of a mother figure. And in both cases we were able to gain satisfactory results. I think you're using the exchange of magical essences as a compensating mechanism for a more physical sort of exchange. Which isn't to say that's a bad thing, but greater emotional intensity doesn't necessarily equate to more reliable results."

Severus gave a dismissive shake of his head. "And I believe that you need to trust less to logic and more to your intuition. Your magic is a part of you. It is at the very core of who you are, and it is telling you something. Tell me that I am wrong, tell me that when my magic enters you, it makes your flesh creep with its corruption, and you will hear no more from me after we finish our work. Tell me that you are not drawn to me, body to body, mind to mind, magic to magic, and I will go..."

Hermione swallowed the rest of his words with a kiss, drawing it out for several seconds before she pulled back. "You really are a drama queen, you know? Your magic is no more corrupt than mine, not really."

Severus scowled and lifted an eyebrow. "And what is it like, *really*?"

"Like rich soil and rainwater. Like somewhere safe and nourishing, like a place to put down roots and grow strong. And maybe that soil used to be dead plants and insects or even carrion, but that's where it came from, not what it is. Home, it feels like home."

Severus turned his head to the side so that he could rest his cheek against her hair for just a few moments before he straightened. "Right then, since you aren't repelled by working with me and since this little hiccup means we have more stages to work through, don't you think it's about time you got up off your rather delicious behind and we did the next bit?"

"Only if you *will* actually lie down for an hour or two between the next stage and the one after," Hermione bargained, frowning as she pressed the backs of her fingers to his forehead.

"On two conditions," Severus countered. "One, that we are correct about the yarrow and, *two*..." He eyed his research partner with a slight upward twitch of his lips.

"Two?"

"That you join me."

By way of a concession Severus had Transfigured the bottoms of the pyjamas Hermione had loaned him and now wore them as he lounged on top of the bed, waiting for her in her spare room. At least they were green.

Her knock sounded timid, as did her, "Are you decent in there?"

"Come in, Hermione."

She peered carefully around the edge of the door before she pushed it open far enough to enter, and closed it behind her.

Severus eyed her marled grey sweatshirt and sweatpants with amusement.

"What?" she demanded as he slid under the duvet and then held up the corner nearest the door so that she could join him.

"I doubt your normal sleepwear is so bulky, which means that either you don't trust me not to ravish you in your sleep, for which I can assure you that, having seen the figure which you are attempting to hide, were I well enough, even those would be insufficient deterrent, or perhaps you don't trust yourself not to ravish me?"

Hermione scowled at him, making no move to get into bed. "Do you want me to join you or not?"

The quality of Severus's smile changed, losing all hint of mockery. "Very much so."

"Then forget about *anyone* doing any ravishing. I put these on because I want you to sleep, not pass out because all your blood has migrated to below your waist."

"If you think you will be comfortable," Severus said in a silky tone that effortlessly conveyed his scepticism on that front. "Hermione, over the past day or two I have begun to harbour hopes that we might come to know each other very intimately indeed, but when it comes to pass, you may be assured that your participation in our love-making will be entirely voluntary, rather than the result of coercion or trickery, at least the first time," he added. "Not only that, but I wish to be able to remember every detail, and to ensure that it is as pleasurable for you as possible. Neither of those eventualities is likely with me in this state. So just come to bed, my little dandelion, and let me hold you."

Hermione gave a snort that was equal parts amusement and exasperation and bent to remove the sweatpants, revealing a pair of baggy flannel shorts underneath as well as a pair of entrancingly shapely legs. Then she sloughed off the sweatshirt, exposing her midriff briefly as she lifted her arms over her head before she pulled down her strappy little top.

She crawled under the covers and rolled so that she had her back to Severus. She stiffened as an arm wrapped itself around her waist, drawing her gently back to rest against Severus's torso, their legs tangling together. She felt his chest swell and knew that he was breathing in the scent of her hair before he sighed gently. She had to strain to hear his whispered, "Trust me, Hermione. I have no intention to cause you harm."

Severus felt her shoulders loosen and her breathing begin to slow. He closed his eyes, feeling more at peace than he had in many a year and when he woke it was to a feeling of completeness and to the scent of her shampoo. This time he met her not with violence or harsh words, but with soft kisses where her neck and shoulder met and with his sheltering embrace.

Ink swirled from chaos into order. The golden light dimmed and extinguished, leaving them in near darkness. Hermione raised her hand and drew back a step from the podium that stood between her and Severus, breaking the flow of magic between them, and Severus found himself clinging to the oaken top of the column as his knees almost gave out under him.

"We did it!" the witch exclaimed, circumventing the podium to throw her arms around Severus's neck, her hand at his nape guiding his head down toward her upraised lips.

Even as Severus returned the kiss, they sank to their knees and toppled sideways from there to lie on the carpet. Severus's long-fingered hand slid through Hermione's surprisingly soft curls and his tongue slipped into her open mouth, tasting and testing, loving the way she squirmed in his arms as its tip stroked her soft palate, the way

her own tongue tried to follow his as it drew back into his mouth, her moan as he broke off the kiss and watched her expressive eyes open, noting how they took a couple of seconds to focus on his face. "Beautiful," he whispered.

Her chin ducked slightly and her cheeks flushed, but she didn't look away. "Now I know that it's the pox talking," she muttered softly.

"Beautiful," Severus repeated firmly before he forced himself to focus on more mundane matters. "Dawn or twilight?" he asked. "How long have we got?"

"Dawn. It's dawn, Severus."

Severus drew in a slow deep breath. He wouldn't be able to finish it. "We have much to do, Hermione, that is if I can impose upon you further?"

"We've come this far," the witch stated with a winsome smile. "Tell me what to do."

"Can you update my journal to show the revised recipe?"

"I think I can manage that."

"Once you have done that, make a copy of it onto loose parchment and bring me it as well as two of the nondisclosure contracts from my briefcase. I will enchant them to ensure that my intellectual property is not subject to misuse. While I do that, you will pen a covering letter for Astoria Malfoy to explain that we have an untested recipe.

"Tell her to have Fassbender make such preparations as he can for mass production without undue waste. On no account should he actually progress to adding the Re'em blood until the Potion is proven to be effective. It is rare and we would not wish to exhaust the supply for no gain. Tell her that in addition to such amounts as she may find on the market, I also have approximately a pint and a half in my stores, and I will pass on to her whatever is left after we have finished the test batch at twenty-five Galleons per gram."

"I didn't think it was as expensive as *that*," Hermione squeaked.

"It isn't, yet," Severus admitted, "but once Fassbender buys up all he can to begin production, that's a relatively conservative estimate of what it will cost to replace."

"Oh, right."

"In addition, give her my word that if she provides the capital and the facilities and Fassbender the expertise, then they will each receive twenty percent of the net profit on the potion supplied to St. Mungo's over the period where I am unable to personally fulfil their requirements. Retail price is to be calculated at two thirds of my normal gross mark up and I will invoice St. Mungo's retrospectively.

"Lastly, tell her that if Draco wishes to be one of the test subjects, then she may send an elf to my study in approximately ten hours where he or she will wait until you bring the potion and the remaining Re'em blood. Do you think you can remember all that?"

The witch smiled at him, tilting her head to press her lips to his in a chaste kiss. "I'm Hermione Granger, insufferable know-it-all. Of course I can."

"Good. And, Hermione?" Severus pronounced her name in a silken tone that immediately brought to mind his promise to make love to her. "I find that, with additional maturity, you are very sufferable indeed. Now, perhaps you would be so kind as to help me to my feet? I choose to believe that accepting your aid would be *slightly* less ignominious than crawling to the armchair."

The witch threw herself at him in an impulsive embrace and their next kiss, though lasting no more than a minute, was far from chaste.

"Are you up to this?" Hermione asked.

Severus grimaced at the question. "Will you stop treating me like an invalid, witch?" he snapped, and then scowled even more. "I've been travelling by Floo since before you were born. Besides, the worst that's likely to happen is that I end up with an excuse to scrounge some brandy off Astoria before I walk the rest of the way."

"You live that close to the Malfoys?"

"The house used to be part of the Malfoy estate, but lawyers of the calibre Narcissa had working on Lucius's case do not come cheaply and the house had been empty since Lucius's grandmother died. I made Narcissa an offer and she accepted."

Hermione gave a little shiver.

Severus sighed. "Lucius and Narcissa are long gone, little one. Draco, much like yourself, has matured far more agreeably than might have been expected. Astoria is guilty of nothing more than marrying Draco, heinous crime though I'm sure you perceive that to be. Moreover, you are invited to *my* home, not theirs. Come or don't come. I have work to do." With that, he took a pinch of Floo Powder from a container on the mantelpiece and threw it into the flames. "Bulkington Dower House," he added as he stepped into the roaring emerald veil.

As the flames settled lower and returned to a yellow-orange glow, Hermione stared into them, worrying at her lower lip.

She should have known, had she given any consideration to the matter, that those friendships Severus maintained were more likely to be with his former Slytherins than with the Order members, who for the most part had heaped him with scorn even before the death of Albus Dumbledore. She *had* known that he had kept up a connection with Draco, but until now Severus's mere presence had overwhelmed her reason.

Her stomach churned at the idea of dinner parties at Malfoy Manor, but the seconds ticking by and the conclusions to which Severus would leap spurred her to grab her own handful of powder and follow him before she had time to ruminate further.

Hermione had a vague impression of chequerboard marble as she stumbled from the Floo, and then she managed to steady herself and grab a swaying Severus before she took him to the floor.

"Never mind, Elise." Severus nodded at the floor. "It appears Miss Granger will be accompanying me after all." It was then that Hermione spotted a house-elf almost hidden in the drape of a tablecloth which adorned a side table. "We'll take that coffee in the private living room when we get back. Tell Jonas to round up the rest of the boys and tidy up whatever mess they've made while I was gone."

"Mister Jonas is gone, sir," the elf squeaked. "He is taking Master Thaddeus to St. Mungo's last night, sir, and he is not coming back."

"Damn!" Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "How bad is the boy?"

"Bad, sir," the elf responded, ears drooping low.

"Alright, tell Peter instead, and then I *order* you to go to St. Mungo's to find Jonas and Thaddeus. *I order* you to take some clear iodine, a bowl, two or three of the large packets of swabs and one of the bottles of dittany from the first-aid cupboard and give them to Jonas to use on the boy. Tell him to strip the boy and use a depilatory charm, embarrassing now, but better than having bald spots later if his scalp scars. Tell him to check the boy head to toe at least hourly, more often if he's awake and able to co-operate. Tell him to dilute the iodine with a little water and use it to disinfect the blisters as they burst before he applies the dittany. You should also tell him we have a new

formula, and we will see he gets some as soon as it's ready. Go now."

There was the tiniest whisper of a pop, and then the elf was gone.

Severus turned back to Hermione, who was just drawing breath to speak. "She came with the house, as did her brother. Would you rather I gave them clothes and threw them out?" he demanded defensively. The whole world knew about Hermione Granger's view on elf rights, after all.

"No more than I'd like to see Harry abandon Kreacher. That *wasn't* what I was about to say."

"Oh." Severus visibly deflated, as if he had focused all his will into meeting a challenge that had failed to materialise.

"I was going to ask where we're going and who Thaddeus, Jonas and Peter are, and how many *boys* do you have?" Her brow furrowed. "And *why* do you have them?"

"I always knew that all that Gryffindor nobility was a front and that their minds are in the gutter," Severus snorted, explaining as they walked. "Jonas is my journeyman apprentice. Peter is next in line of seniority. In all, I have five, one for each year of the standard apprenticeship. Thaddeus is Jonas's eight-year-old half-brother, who lives here simply because he has nowhere else to go." He steered her from the grand entrance hall with its double staircase and down a wide corridor, passing a succession of gradually more informal, homier rooms before they took a right-angle turn through some double doors. These led into a narrower hall where they finally reached an old-fashioned kitchen, complete with a wood-fired range, a huge stripped pine table with nine chairs and a plethora of gleaming copper pans.

Severus pulled open a dresser drawer and extracted two gleaming knives with curved blades, passing one to Hermione and keeping the other. Picking up a shallow basket that rested next to a heavy door, he put his knife into it and then heaved the door open. "Welcome to my garden, Hermione."

Severus could feel her gaze on him as surely as if it were her fingers that searched his face rather than eyes. He feigned interest in his coffee, but, actually, he inspected his warped reflection in the dark surface, hoping for a hint of what the woman found so fascinating. For a second, he imagined a cadaver stared back at him and he lifted his head in surprise, looking straight into Hermione's haunted and haunting stare.

"Severus..." she began.

"My work is not yet done," he told her with what he hoped was implacable equanimity.

"Let me send word to Astoria. Fassbender can make the trial batch. You can't brew like this. It would be dangerous."

"I promised, Hermione, and I will keep my promises. I will delegate the simpler parts to Peter and the others, but I must be there. I have to make the test potion, so that if it fails I know with certainty that my work is at fault and not Fassbender's brewing. I will be able to adjust for the unexpected and make notes for Fassbender to follow. Fassbender would not dare change anything from the instructions as given."

"But Severus..." Hermione gave an exasperated sigh and set down her cup. "You know that if any pupil of yours had turned up in your dungeon looking like you do, you would have sent them straight to Madam Pomfrey before they could even chop a dandelion root. At least let me help."

"You will help. I want you to check over our work stage by stage. You must determine whether we need only change the dosage for a fifty pound pre-pubescent boy, or whether we need to adjust the ratios of ingredients. Then, you must go."

"Go?" Hermione shot to her feet. "You can't honestly expect me to leave now?"

"For Merlin's sake, woman! You will leave, even if I have to tell Elise and Jean-Pierre that you are persona non grata and have you forcibly ejected. Have you ~~been~~ to the Pox wards?"

"Well, no. I haven't had a chance. It's only three days since I left New Zealand. My contract with the Ministry wasn't due to start for another week and a half."

"Well, they aren't pretty, and I'll be damned if you end up in one on my account. You do the calculations we need for Thaddeus and then you ~~go~~*before* you catch this thing."

Hermione ducked her head and sat back down. She picked up her cup, sipped at her coffee and fumed.

And like the teacher he had once been, Severus knew that she fully intended to defy him when the time came, and he made a mental note to do exactly as he had threatened and make sure the house-elves threw Hermione Granger out on her pretty behind, while her skin was still as smooth as sun-warmed porcelain.

"Elise! Jean-Pierre! Come here now and take this woman away!" Severus ordered, his velvety voice transformed into a nearly unrecognisable croak by the swollen glands in his neck.

There were two small cracks, and a young elf with grey-tinged skin seemed to reach out toward Hermione, who, wary of being unwillingly Apparated away, pulled her hand out of the way with a mutinous scowl on her face. Then Elise, the second elf, put her hand on her brother's shoulder and drew him back, whispering into his ear, which shot upright only to quiver at mid-height and then droop until its pointed tip brushed his shoulder. When his eyes turned to Severus his look was distinctly apprehensive, and when Elise stepped forward he kept the other elf between him and Severus.

"We is sorry, Mister Severus, but we cannot be doing that. Mister Severus is telling Elise when he is arriving that Mistress Hermione is to be treated like family. He is saying that she is to be allowed to come and go, and to have access to all Mister Severus's private places as if she is mistress of Dower House. We could not be making the mistress to leave."

Severus felt a pair of arms wrap around his waist from behind and strained to continue counting the clockwise stirs he was making to the potion's base rather than to turn around and reciprocate.

"Well, I rescind that order. She's not your bloody mistress so get her out of here!"

"Elise is sorry, Mister Severus, but you should be knowing that once you is naming someone our mistress, we cannot be taking sides unless you is doing a ritual of casting off. House-elves is not interfering between wizard and witch."

"But we're *not* wizard and witch!" he protested. *Yet*.

"Semantics!" came the muffled word from behind his back.

"If sir is needing us for anything else, sir has just to call." Elise's final word had barely left her mouth before both elves were gone.

"Peter, come here and take over while I deal with this human limpet," Severus called. "Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven..."

Peter's hand took the ladle from Severus and he took up the count. "Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty..."

"Stop at eighty-one and douse the flame," Severus instructed and pointed to the relevant line in his notebook. "If I am not back by then, you may continue with the

instructions so far as you feel *completely* confident to do so. When you have done as much as you can, place the potion under a stasis charm."

"Come, Miss Granger, we have matters to discuss. In private." He took hold of Hermione's upper arm and began to steer her toward a section of blank stone wall, which opened at a muttered word from him to reveal a narrow spiral staircase. Pushing her through the doorway ahead of him, Severus hoped she would stay quiet at least long enough for the door to seal itself behind them. "Climb."

"Severus!"

The Potion Master deliberately stumbled forward as if he had misjudged the height of the step by a fraction of an inch, and the harridan's rant was immediately quelled by a look of concern. "Let go," she suggested. "I can get up under my own power. Just be careful."

The doorway slid closed behind them, torches flared to life and Severus kept his head downturned as if to watch where he placed his feet, so that Hermione would not see his smile.

She hesitated, as Severus had expected she might, when she saw the nature of the room to which the staircase led. "This..."

Severus rested a hand at the small of her back, the slightest pressure enough to make her take the couple of forward steps that she needed to leave the stairwell.

He watched as her eyes darted around the room, taking in the dark wood panelling, the ivory fabrics and the hints of earthy reds, the small pile of books by the side of the bed and the fireplace that sprang to life as soon as she set foot on the carpeted floor.

"Is my bedroom. Yes. It's also one place where the wards ensure we will neither be overheard or interrupted. You may begin your harangue."

"What makes you think that's what I have in mind?"

"Isn't that your method of choice when dealing with recalcitrant males?"

"Not always. You wouldn't listen to me any more than I'll let you convince me to leave." To Severus's surprise she took his hand and began to lead him to the bed.

"Hermione, you have to know that I'm not trying to push you away when I tell you to leave."

Hermione's head turned so quickly toward him, that for a second he was lost in the play of light on her swirling curls. The look she directed toward him when she stepped into his personal space clearly accused him of being a complete dunderhead.

"Isn't it, Severus? Isn't there just a little part of you that's panicking about how quickly this has all happened, a little bit of you that wants a chance to come up for air? Even though it isn't the main reason, or even close to being the main reason?"

"Well..."

"I'm not an idiot. I know why you want me to go. You're protecting me, just like you always have, and that's all very admirable as well as completely patronising..."

"Hermione!"

"No, *professor*. You aren't my teacher any more. Get used to that if you want this to work. My safety *is* my concern. I will not be treated like some *little woman* who can't be trusted to make her own decisions. You might get away with it on occasion, just because you are more competent than I am in certain fields, unlike Ron, but I'm sure you noted my response when you asked if he and I are still in touch."

"And if I told you I had far more selfish reasons?" Severus asked when she finally paused for breath.

"Like the fact you carry so much guilt you don't want to carry any more? You don't want me to catch *from you*. Is that one?" she enquired, but it was obviously rhetorical since she didn't give him a chance to respond. "We'll save what you told Elise for later ... that's a whole new... conversation ... but you've said already you intend to pursue a physical relationship, and I carry enough scars from back then, inside and out. You're hardly going to be hoping I'll get a whole new crop just before we take things further."

"I know the whys, Severus. I just have more faith in you and in us than you do. I believe that I have as much right to stay and to care for you as you have to try to protect me."

"I have faith that your cure will work. I have faith that while I might contract the disease, you will have a working potion before I have any symptoms other than fever. ~~And~~, you stubborn idiot, I would still want to be here for you, even if I didn't think that, because I'm damned if I'm going to put up with *you* being all pock-marked for the rest of our lives when I don't have to. You talk about following my intuition. You talk about listening to the magic inside me. Well, I am." She flicked her wand in Severus's direction and frowned deeply when nothing appeared to happen.

"Really, Hermione?" Severus arched an eyebrow and closed the inches that separated them. "You know I have work to do, and surely you didn't think I would last as long as I did as a teacher if I didn't routinely ensure it would take more than a mere, '*Evanesco!*' to dispense with my clothing?"

"Well, when you put it like that, I suppose I should have, but damn it all, can't you make anything easy?"

Severus's fingertips came to rest at the back and lower edges of her jaw, and he angled her head up to his. "Seldom, I'm afraid. Very seldom," he answered sadly. "Now, witch, why were you so keen to get me out of my clothes? I have more than one set. It's not as if you could imprison me up here by taking them away."

"Because Fate might *not* give us another chance, and because I think if we were to create a child, it would be deeply loved."

Severus's eyes narrowed, his hand twisting into a claw as he held her face and searched it for any sign of falsehood. "You do not love me," he said in a low growl.

"No more than you are in love with me," Hermione agreed, "but I think I could, if you let me. And you so obviously want a family, so much that even without a mother for them, you've made this place a home for Thaddeus and Peter and Jacob and..."

"Jonas."

"Jonas, then. Severus, you told Elise to treat me as if I were mistress of your house. That's as good as putting an engagement notice in the ~~Prophet~~."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Severus blustered. "We've barely known each other on an equal footing for two days." He hated the hopeful wistful quality that was creeping into his voice. "Hardly the basis on which to start a family. I simply wanted Elise to..."

"Make me feel at home? As if I belong? Severus, it doesn't take a house-elf to tell me where I belong, and it didn't take two days. We fit, Severus. I'm not in love with you, but I'm falling. I can see a world of possibilities for us. *You* said that we're more together than we are separately. You said that our magic reaches out one to the other. Severus, I'm twenty-eight. If I put off having a family now, then it's never going to happen. If you come through this without any side-effects, then we can be logical and plan ahead. We can wait and play the courtship game, but if this might be our only chance, we need to grab it."

"You *want* my child? *Mine*, with my hair and my teeth, my awkwardness..."

"Your brilliance, your voice ... if it's a boy ... your eyes, your honour..."

"My nose?"

"Your nose fits very well for your face, I'll have you know. I believe that any child of ours would be remarkable."

"And if he were a complete dunderhead?"

Hermione snorted in disbelief. "We would love *her* anyway."

"This is a huge gamble with a child's happiness."

"No. It isn't. You were meant to love, Severus. From what little I know, life dealt you a pretty lousy hand of cards, but reading between the lines and mixing far too many metaphors, it was the very fact that you wanted to love and be loved that brought you so much trouble. Whatever happens you would love this child. Together or separately, we would both love this child."

"You make it sound almost rational," Severus whispered as he rested his forehead against her curls.

"Not rational. Magical. Sometimes magic just has to have its way."

"And what of when your contract with the Ministry is over?" he asked, trying to keep both the hope and the pain out of his voice.

"Then we will decide *together* whether I should take you back with me to New Zealand or whether I will stay with you, whether we will be like the swallows and spend summer in one place and winter in the other or whether we will find ourselves a place that is neither yours nor mine and make it ours, but I would never keep you from your child. Never, Severus."

Severus shook his head, the movements tiny but decisive. "Why, Hermione? Why?"

And somehow, even as he questioned the wisdom of what they were doing she was leading him to the bed again and pushing him down to sit on its edge.

"Because I have faith in you, Severus Snape. I've *had* faith in you for the longest time." She knelt at his feet, tugging off his boots and then peeling away his socks. "And once I realised *that*, I knew."

'Well, no embarrassing socks and underpants moment, then,' a small voice inside his head supplied as she reached up to remove his sweater.

"Hermione." His voice cracked on her name as he forced out words he didn't want to say. "We shouldn't. People are waiting, suffering..." he protested through a layer of wool, though he lifted his arms. With his polo-neck consigned to a nearby chair, his hands dropped to cover his belt buckle, whether to help or to hinder he had no idea.

"And the potion they need is being made even as you argue." She placed a hand on each of his knees as she pushed up, letting her fingertips graze his thighs as she rose to her feet.

Then, she danced a few steps back. She was pulling that fuzzy, clinging sweater over her head to expose a silky camisole in a peachy shade that might have been chosen for how it would look in this room.

Severus stared transfixed at the tip of the slim white line, which he knew was Dolohov's gift, peeking over the lace, and somehow it all slid into place, just as she had said. They fitted. And he could no more fight her than he could best himself.

She toed off her boots and bent to push down her jeans and socks, stepping free of them in nothing but her underwear.

He searched her face for a sign of doubt, anything that might give him the strength to turn her away. There was nothing. No fear, no indecision, no uncertainty.

The hands at his waist finally made up their mind and worked the buckle. "Come here, witch," he requested as he opened his arms.

"Mmph! Crooks." Hermione gave the furry behind that was in her face a nudge, only to find far less resistance than she expected, followed by feline scrabbling sounds.

"Granger, are you harassing my cat?" asked a rough voice by her ear as the arm around her waist tightened.

Hermione opened her eyes, letting them adjust to the darkness as she reminded herself that Crookshanks hadn't been seen for over a decade. Suddenly, she found herself face to face with a pair of yellow eyes. The poor thing, though every bit as fluffy, was about half the size Crookshanks had been, which explained why she'd been knocked off the bed rather than nudged over a few inches. At least, Hermione assumed that the tortoiseshell colouring meant it was a she. "Only because she tried to smother me in my sleep," she countered, sliding a hand out from under the covers to scratch the cat behind one ear in apology. "I thought you said the wards would give us privacy."

"No ward, no wall, no bolt nor bar has ever kept a cat from where she truly wishes to go. Tillie," Severus coughed, "is not accustomed to sharing her bed with anyone other than me." He placed a kiss on Hermione's shoulder. "She will adjust, or so I hope." He loosened his arm and shifted back from the temptress who had claimed him.

Hermione twisted to face him at this hint of withdrawal. "Severus?"

"We have tarried long enough, my witch," he half-croaked, hoping she would understand the true message in the penultimate word. "I need to go back to the lab. Peter is a boy. One day he may be a master, but his time has not yet come."

"No, Severus." Hermione touched his side, and he flinched as she found a tender spot.

He looked down and saw the blister her fingers had found.

"You can't go back, not unless you want to risk *all* your boys. Tell me what has to be done. I will pass on your instructions. Fassbender should be here by now. If Peter hasn't finished, he will."

"Then you must tell the boys to retire to their rooms before I go down."

"I'll do no such thing."

"Then *you* will endanger them."

"I doubt it. You have more heart than Dumbledore." Severus swung his legs over the side of the bed, turning his back to her in the process, but she continued. "You won't condemn your loved ones for some idea of a greater good. Yourself, yes, you would give yourself, because you value yourself far too lowly, but you wouldn't ask it of another." She laid a hand on his back.

Severus pushed down with his hands, faltering as he tried to rise to his feet and finding himself once more resting on the mattress. With his second attempt, he wrapped a hand around the post at the head of the bed and pulled himself upright. However, he could do no more than hang there, all his will invested into the desperate grip and into keeping his legs rigid. Until he heard her shift behind him and he felt her fingers on his shoulder.

"It is time for you to heed your own advice, Severus. You are already stripped. Now you must be shorn and your sores tended." She leaned forward and kissed him on the shoulder, just as he had kissed her. "My wizard."

His knees faltered at her gentleness, and he sank down to the bed once more.

"Elise, Jean-Pierre," Hermione called, helping Severus back into a supine position and drawing a white sheet up to his waist. A brisk knock sounded at the door from an adjoining chamber, and she scrambled to put on her undergarments before she told the elves to enter.

"Go away," Severus croaked.

"No, stay!" Hermione commanded. "Your master is ill and needs treatment. He is not himself and your conscience must dictate whether you show your loyalty more by doing as he needs than by doing as he says. And I forbid you to punish yourself, whatever you choose to do, though I expect Mister Severus has already told you never to punish yourself. Elise, you know the instructions he gave for Master Thaddeus's care. You must fetch the items you will need and you and your brother must tend to him while I see how Peter is progressing with the cure."

Elise took her brother's hand and an instant later both were gone.

"They... won't come back," Severus argued from the bed, as Hermione found the door to his dressing room and began to open and close wardrobe doors.

"You underestimate them," Hermione answered, emerging from the room as she rolled up the sleeves on one of his linen shirts until they rested midway between her wrist and elbow. She lifted her jeans from the floor and sat down on the edge of the bed to put them on.

"And do..." Severus began to cough, and Hermione instantly conjured a plastic tumbler from thin air, filling it with water from her wand and raising Severus's head until he could sip at it. When he gave a tiny nod, she lowered the glass and set it on his bedside unit. He waved a hand in the direction of her chest. "Do up some buttons. I'll not have you distracting the boys every time you bend over a cauldron. Bad enough that you choose to advertise your debauched state without corrupting them, too."

"As I recall it, I was the one who did the debauching," Hermione teased, leaning forward to kiss the tip of his nose and giving him the exact view he had complained of.

"A situation I *will* make up for at the earliest opportunity, you wanton hussy."

There was another pop, and Elise and Jean-Pierre, both carrying armfuls of supplies, appeared at the foot of the bed.

Hermione took Severus's hand in hers, squeezing it gently as she leaned forward again, this time pressing her mouth to Severus's. She sighed contentedly and angled her head to deepen the kiss when his lips parted under hers. "Take good care of him," she instructed the elves. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"The box ...on the dresser," Severus grumbled, as Hermione stepped back to allow the elves access to their master.

Hermione went where he indicated and was about to pick the box up when he instructed her in a cracked whisper to open it. When she lifted the lid, she found an antiquated looking pocket watch in rose gold, a few rings of varying designs and quality and a silver snake hair clasp with peridot eyes.

"If you insist on going to the lab, at least tie back that mop of yours."

Hermione's eyes stung as she pulled her hair back into a hank at the nape of her neck and caught it with the grip.

Severus gave a grunt, one hand absently fondling the cat curled up at his side. "It'll do, I suppose."

Hermione smiled, taking the grudging praise as a solemn compliment. She paused by the door to the stairs down and did up all but the topmost button on the shirt and tucked it into her jeans. "What is the password to allow me back?"

"If you were right about magic finding a way you will not need one," Severus replied between coughs. "If the house doesn't... recognise your touch, call Elise."

Hermione gave a curt nod of goodbye and darted down the stairs before she could change her mind and decide that being with Severus was more important than keeping the promises he had made. She just hoped that between Fassbender and Severus's apprentices, the cure was already in hand, and she could be back with him in a matter of minutes.

"I' blood 'n' death 'neath a screamin' sky," Severus grated, his voice too rough to hold a tune properly. His lips were cracked and broken, but he flailed out with his arms at Elise and Jean-Pierre as they tried to tend to the sores that were left where some of his blisters had burst. Even Tillie watched the skinheaded madman from the back of an armchair at a safe remove.

"Severus?" Hermione coaxed in a soft voice as she approached the bed, a vial in her hand.

"I lay down on the groun', and the arms..."

"Severus?" Hermione tried again in a sharper tone.

Severus's eyes seemed to turn toward her and then look right through her, continuing his song even louder after only the slightest hesitation. "...and legs of other men were scattered all around."

"Elise, please, can you come down from the bed and hold the vial for me?" She passed the potion to the house-elf once the creature was beyond the range of thrashing limbs.

"Some cursed, some prayed, some prayed then cursed..."

Hermione moved in, grabbing Severus's hand as it seemed to try to bat her away and holding it in both her own as she settled on the edge of the bed.

This time there was no mistaking when his eyes fixed on her and the singing stopped.

"Here?" he croaked.

"Yes, Severus, I'm here now."

"Stay?"

"Yes, I'm staying. Your boys are taking care of everything now. Fassbender didn't make it. He's ill, too, but Peter sent Patronus messages to the apprentices you had before Jonas and the others all came. Dennis took compassionate leave from Beauxbatons and Portkeyed over as soon as he heard. Phillip closed his shop. Lysander might need you to write him some references when this is over because the company he works for didn't want him to come. They're all here. Dennis roped me in to prepare some of the ingredients for Thaddeus's batch. They're still finishing that off, but the adult version is ready to be tested."

"Granger?"

Hermione couldn't help wondering just how much of her explanation he had heard or understood, but he seemed to have calmed under her touch. "Yes, Severus, it's me.

Now, will you take your potion?"

"Really you?"

This time she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his split and peeling ones. "Me," she confirmed. She untwined one of her hands from his and held it out in Elise's direction.

The elf pressed the potion vial into it, and Hermione took it. Using her other hand to raise Severus's shorn head up off the pillow, she held it for him while he drank.

"Elise, Jean-Pierre, I'll take over here for the next couple of hours. I want one of you to get some rest and the other one should take some drinks and something to eat down to the lab."

"No food in lab," Severus protested.

"Okay, make some food and try to get them to take turns to come up to the kitchen and eat," Hermione suggested instead.

"Now, it looks like Elise and Jean-Pierre have finished your front for now," she said, taking a far brisker tone than she had with the elves. She Vanished the contents of the bowl that Elise had been using and tipped some iodine out from the bottle before adding a little water. She dipped a fresh swab in the mixture. "Roll over, so I can check your back."

Seven or eight months later...

"Of course, it's obvious what's going on," Ron Weasley said through a mouthful of sausage as he gestured toward the front page of the Daily Prophet with his fork.

"What's obvious?" Lavender asked.

"Other than her belly? Well, I mean, all this lovey-dovey stuff's just for the camera. It's not like Hermione could really *go* for the Greasy Git, even if he did name his stupid pox cure after her. I mean to say, a pox cure."

"Well, it's not exactly a designer perfume, but I don't remember you complaining about what it was called at the time," Lavender pointed out.

"That's beside the point. I got my dose *before* the blisters came up. Everybody knows when that epidemic was on, Snape had it. That's why he gave her credit for it when she was only really tweaking what he'd more or less done. And Mum says she's way too far gone for it to be his, anyway. They'd have to have been at it as soon as she got here. I reckon she had some bloke back in New Zealand but he did a runner when he found out she was up the duff an' she had to find some plonker to make an honest woman of her. Snapey doesn't want the world to know he can't get it up, and it's not as if witches are queuing up for that miserable git, so they're puttin' on a show."

Lavender sighed. "It was sterility not impotence, and you had to get to Stage Four for that."

"Same diff," Ron muttered under his breath and Lavender lifted the newspaper higher. "No, wait, listen! Baby gets a name, though Merlin only knows why she'd want to give the poor kid *that* for a father, and Snape gets an heir."

Lavender rolled her eyes and decided to wait until Ron had left for work to break out the special colour supplement, otherwise she'd never get any peace. It really was a good thing for Ron's career that most dark magic users were male. No matter how slavishly he tried to follow his cheats' guide, he just didn't understand women.

Additional Author's Note: The song that Severus is mangling is 'A Pair of Brown Eyes' written by Shane Macgowan of The Pogues from their album 'Rum, Sodomy and the Lash'. It tells the story of a WWI soldier, who lying on the battlefield close to death can only think about the brown eyes of the girl he left behind. However, when he returns home, 'labelled parts one to three', the girl no longer waits for him.

For the record, Ron's views in no way reflect the views of the author (or her Hermione) who both think the only reason you should get married is because you want to spend the rest of your life with someone.

[lyrics](#) * [You Tube Video](#)