

Watching

by richardgloucester

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The first years of exile were peaceful. He continued to observe closely, as had been his habit since he'd first realised that forewarned is forearmed, but he didn't let anyone know he was still around. It was refreshing to be the object of neither remark nor regard.

In himself, he felt better than he had in years. True, his neck itched from the bite, but that was a minor inconvenience – nothing that a good scratch couldn't deal with. And of course, with nobody looking at him, he could indulge in a good scratch whenever he liked.

He watched.

He watched their grief and elation fade.

He watched Potter and his shadow leave for the Aurory.

He watched Granger doggedly complete her studies and depart.

He watched Minerva become the best Head that Hogwarts had ever had.

He watched his world settle down into its customary patterns, a little chastened but otherwise unchanged.

He kept mostly to his quarters, but still, he knew what went on. He supposed he should be grateful that the settling of the castle's foundations had rendered his part of the dungeons apparently inaccessible. Filius and the others had long given up trying to shift the huge blocks of stone. It was peaceful, and calm, and free of children. Once one had the knack of getting in and out, it was, in fact, the best of all places to be. Positively cosy.

For a few years, he was the only one who had that knack.

Then Granger's scraggy old cat showed up.

She had returned to the school to teach, still bossy, still book-obsessed, still single. No Weasley brats for her, then. Ah, yes. A few months after her return, the Prophet carried photos of Weasley's marriage to Pansy Parkinson, of all people. Granger wasn't featured in the photos of the wedding guests. It didn't seem to trouble her.

He kept up his observations, unseen, as he thought, until one day the cat showed up in his living room, curled on the chair where he had been intending to spend the evening immersed in a book. He removed the ugly brute, noting that it seemed to have regained weight and condition, and sat down. Two minutes later, it was back, acting as though his lap was its property. He continued to read while he teased the knots out of its fur.

Granger missed her cat, that much was evident.

She never got herself another, though she kept the orange demon's bed and bowls in her room.

He told the animal it ought to go back, show itself to her, but it remained pressed against his ankles, watching, like him, from the shadows as she mourned and recovered and grew older, settling into her position at the school and progressing inevitably to the headship that awaited her.

He and the cat continued in their comfortable way. A deep armchair, a cheerful fire, books to read, a little undemanding companionship ... That was all that either of them needed in their bachelor existence. Though if they did spend increasing amounts of time silently observing Granger, who seemed to live as separately from the world as they, well, that was just curiosity and fellow-feeling.

He thought sometimes that she might be aware of their scrutiny.

Now and again, her eyes would fix on the shadows they inhabited, and she would tuck that stray curl of hair behind her ear and smile gently before turning back to her work.

He and the cat stayed clear of all the shenanigans following her departure. There was simply too much noise and activity. How they would continue without her, though, was a question he addressed in a lengthy and one-sided conversation over several days, the cat's only contribution being to blink at him and demand to have its head rubbed.

Eventually, he found the castle too confining. He slipped out unnoticed and crossed the lawns, heading down towards the forest path, its borders star-strewn with wood anemones. The grounds were empty at this early hour, so he was surprised when he turned to look back at the source of a sudden burst of birdsong and saw her following him down the path, her cat trotting at her heels.

He let her catch up.

She smiled widely at him. There were a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, but her hair was free of the grey that had marred it for decades, and she had abandoned her cane. She was barefoot, and her hair bounced around her shoulders.

"You took your time," he said. "I've been through the entire library twice."

"I had a few things to finish."

She took his hand, and they followed the cat through the trees to a sun-drenched clearing.