

Wrong Bettor

by TeaOli

There's no such thing as Fate. The simplest acts can take you places you'd never predict. If life is like a game of craps, wrong bettors wager against the roll. Inspired by Wildcat's Star Trek fic "A Roll of the Dice." Written and posted with permission.

Prologue: I See a Difference

Chapter 1 of 10

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It was a sensation not unlike having something yanking behind his navel that woke him; it was finding himself naked and spooning with an equally naked woman (the placement of his hands incontrovertibly confirmed her state of undress) which told him something had changed. But it wasn't until she murmured, in a voice husky with either sleepiness or satiation (he rather suspected the latter), "Mmm, Severus, that was nice," that he realised something might be very, very wrong.

Although he'd never heard it used with anything close to that inflection, he recognised the voice all too readily. His eyes flew open to find that, although the bed he lay in felt surprisingly familiar, he was in a moonlit room which bore only the most cursory resemblance to the one where he'd closed them.

"What, silence? You must be getting old, darling." She chuckled. It was a low rumbling noise, too rife with sensual flavour to be likened to anything so innocent and annoying as a *giggle*. In spite of a natural inclination toward affront at her calling him "old," he felt his body start to respond to that laugh. With a great deal of effort, he managed to quash the urge to rise to the occasion.

"Or maybe it's been so long, I've finally succeeded in shagging you into a coma," she went on, her voice now as enticing as that... chuckle had been. "I wouldn't mind, only that would mean we probably shouldn't have another go and *that* is unacceptable!"

He had to stifle a groan – half agonised, half-pleased – when she writhed against him. Only the fact that she couldn't possibly get any closer than she'd been when he woke up (well, she could have, but thinking along those lines wasn't at all conducive to keeping a clear head) stopped his shoving her away.

Although...

Instinct told him to hex first and ask questions later, but reason and nearly twenty years of on the job espionage training wormed their way in, suggesting he reconnoitre a bit first. Furthermore, causing her any sort of harm whilst they both lacked clothing and were in bed (and when she was leaning so languidly into his embrace) might be considered unsporting. Not to mention he had no idea where his wand might be.

Besides, he assured himself, *surely this is a dream*. An unusual dream, no doubt; he wasn't in the habit of imagining the softness of Hermione Granger's skin or her (he gave an experimental squeeze with his higher hand) curves. He hadn't been in the habit of thinking about her at all in the years since he'd been released from St. Mungo's

and thereby escaped the bi-weekly visits she'd forced on him for close to half a year.

But why now? he wondered, and twiddled the fingers of his lower hand. Only as another experiment, of course. *Mmm, very nice.*

"Fuck!" she said in a much clearer voice than she'd used before. (This was not the reaction he imagined his imagination would supply, but it was certainly in keeping with what he remembered of Miss Granger.) "Who are you and how long have you been here?"

And *that* was when he decided he probably should have followed his instincts, after all.

"—are you fifty-five? Seventy?" she was demanding, but before he could gather his enough wits to tell her he was "only forty-six years and twenty-five days old, thank you very much," Miss Granger twisted in his embrace so that he could just make out her face in the dim moonlight. "And *when* did you get here? It better have been *after*, or I swear I'll hex your bollocks off and not be afraid to tell your Hermione it was me who did it!"

Too shocked and confused even to pull away from the irate witch — or even to properly Occlude — Snape settled for staring at her, mouth somewhat agape as she continued to spew invective at him.

What the hell was she on about? His *Hermione*?

He must be deep in the throes of a particularly *disagreeable* hallucination or dream, he figured. Although he couldn't stop himself noticing that Miss Granger's bosom, heaving and brushing against his chest as she drew breath to extend her near-incomprehensible tirade, was far from unpleasant, her shrewish words and the shrill voice she used to deliver them helped keep at bay his body's natural response to her proximity and state of dress.

Bugger it! It's obviously been too long.

"We have an agreement, damn you, Severus Snape!" she screeched. "You're supposed to identify yourself immediately upon arrival."

If she recognises me, what does she mean I'm to identify myself?

"There's a moratorium on travelling this week! What was your *Hermionethinking*? And why haven't you answered my questions? Which one are you and when did—? Oh, never mind!"

She reached down between them and curled her fingers round his knob less gently than he'd have liked, but without using enough force to do any damage. Still, it served to bring him out of his temporary stupor.

Just as he was saying "Miss Granger, kindly remove your hand from my—", *she* said, "Dry. That's good, at least," and let go.

A flung out hand — which nearly caught him on the nose — and a muttered spell he couldn't make out caused the electric bedside lamps to switch on. Miss Granger blinked several times against the lights' glare before offering him a glare of her own. Her eyes seemed to rake over his face for several moments then pay special attention to his exposed shoulders. As awkward as it was, considering their respective positions of repose, she gave a half shake of her head.

"Damn it! Who are you?" she asked again.

Severus ignored her question in favour of getting an answer to what was to his mind currently the most vital question.

"Miss Granger, where, in the name of Adhan Windfucker's Unnamed Incubus, are our clothes?"

A/N: Many thanks to longtime Star Trek fic writer WildCat for the encouragement and go ahead with this tale.

Chapter One: Suffering the Know-it-all

Chapter 2 of 10

When approaching an unfamiliar table, it's better to watch a bit before placing a bet.

Part of Severus (a part he was heartily trying to ignore) didn't give a skrewt's blasted end where their clothes might be. The lush breasts pressed against his chest were tipped with pebbled nipples, and the bum beneath his hand was nicely rounded, yet firm. Moments before the same fingers had delved into feminine folds, hot and slick.

She hadn't yet slapped his face or tried to move away from him. He didn't need to ask himself why he hadn't loosened the arms holding her captive.

Merlin, she feels good! Do I ever want to know what the fuck is going on? He inhaled deeply. *Her fragrance is fantastic. I wonder...*

Snape snapped his head back from its collision course with the hollow of Miss Granger's shoulder. Unconsciously, he'd leant towards her, his great nose endeavouring to suss out her scent.

Was that a tattoo? What on Earth is H93 supposed to represent? Probably some Muggle nonsense... Never mind. This is most likely not even truly happening he reminded himself. *I am not lying in a bed that is my own and yet not. I am not holding a naked former student in my arms.*

But as difficult as Severus found it to accept that he could have been Port-keyed into what he could now identify as a close replica of his own bedroom — only the colour scheme and some of the furnishings were different — it was harder to swallow the idea that he was having a bizarre erotic dream about *Hermione bloody Granger*, of all witches.

Third most irritating student in all my years of teaching, and I'm struggling not to play my horn for her!

She wasn't even pretty. Her face was too unremarkable to be ugly, but her nondescript features, accented by mouse brown hair and middling brown eyes, didn't exactly scream beauty. Never mind that the eyes were wide-set and large, the hair was woolly and dishevelled. Almost as if a lover had spent hours...

Do not think about why Miss Granger's hair is horrid!

The hair had always been appallingly unattractive, he was pleased to recall. And her teeth teeth that now abused an invitingly full lower lip used to be rabbit-like, though he noticed there was nothing Leporidian about them now.

As if you have any call to criticise anyone else's hair or teeth a voice in his head one which sounded suspiciously like his own chided.

"Where are our clothes?" he asked again, more to distract himself from the goings on of a certain disobedient part of his anatomy than because he still hoped for an answer.

She was as adept as he was at disregarding bothersome questions, it seemed.

Miss Granger wrenched herself from the arms still wrapped around her, slipped out from under the tangled coverings and climbed off the bed. Without so much as trying to hide her nakedness from his very interested gaze, she stalked around the room in high dudgeon. Muttering a string of numbers which had no magical significance Severus could think of nor any connection to one another he could discern she twisted and turned, clearly looking for something.

The bedside lamps cast an amber glow that, while more illuminating than the moonlight had been, was hardly sufficient to aid her in her task. But the soft light was sufficient to prove Miss Granger marching about naked was even more appealing than Miss Granger standing about naked.

His cock twitched at the display.

I've definitely gone too long without.

Even if everything he was experiencing were real *especially* if it were real he was stuck in a nightmare unlike any he'd ever experienced. Evil megalomaniacs, manipulative do-gooders who thought 'delegate' was a filthy word and giant snakes he was accustomed to. Becoming aroused at the feel and sight of naked former pupils with alluring bodies was uncharted territory.

"Perhaps the Summoning Charm?" he suggested dryly.

She spared him a frown before resuming her search. He tucked the twisted sheet and soft blanket at his waist as he propped himself up against the headboard to carry on watching.

It occurred to Severus that, as the last few minutes were quite possibly an induced delusion of some sort he was not yet willing to declare himself convinced he knew exactly what was happening he needn't hesitate to express his new appreciation for most-likely-a-dream-Granger.

And he certainly appreciated what he was seeing.

The unconscious sway of her hips few women could manage to look that sexy on purpose was captivating and he didn't even try to look away from the sight. It was rude to stare, he was on some level aware, but the code of politesse had never been a particular concern of his. Besides her arse was lovely to look at.

Very nice, Miss Granger.

All of her, in fact (if he dismissed the bushy mop which grew from her head in lieu of hair, that is) was a pleasurable picture. She was fitter than he would have supposed her to be had he not just spent several moments in extremely close proximity with the woman. Despite maintaining what must surely be a stultifying career as a Ministry desk jockey, Miss Granger's form was as lithe as he never remembered it being during her six-year tenure at Hogwarts. Not that he'd paid any attention to her form at the time, but he was fairly certain he would have at least noticed it if she'd looked anything like she did right now.

As if her actions were tied to his thoughts (a point in favour of the night having little to do with reality), she bent over, affording him an even more delicious view of certain parts of her anatomy.

Merlin's gnarled staff!

"You know," she said, snatching up a puddle of fabric which revealed itself to be a dressing gown when she rose and half-turned to toss it in his general direction, "you've mixed up your Merlins."

Was she a bloody mind reader now?

"Rowley said Merlin's mother was a wind-sucker, which is a kestrel but also another name for a loose woman though you wouldn't be the first to mispronounce the old typesetter's *long S*, or *f*, as the *fit* sometimes appears to be but only the oldest version of the *Prose Brut* names her Adhan, and she was a noblewoman in that, so she wouldn't have been a..."

Snape snorted, cutting her off.

"Still talking too much, I see." He could tell from the swotty tone of her voice she'd been warming up for an extended lecture. Some things, it seemed, never changed. "On this topic, you are also partly wrong.

"The original term was, in fact, *windfucker*. Wind-sucker is either an inadvertent mistranscription of the word, or a deliberate attempt to protect the sensibilities of those pretending to be too delicate to say, hear or see *fuck*. You've already proved you suffer no such malady.

"You are, however, correct about the additional meaning of windfucker and about the varied origins of Merlin. But as none of your Muggle legends are the truth, I don't give a wind's fuck which one you think I should use!"

"We'd better talk over coffee," she replied calmly. "This will take a while."

He wanted to frighten the knowing smirk right off her plain little face, but Miss Granger didn't appear to scare easily.

Bloody brat hasn't changed!

At last turning his attention from the annoying witch, Severus eyed the dressing gown silk, black with narrow silver stripes and definitely a man's curiously. Why would Miss Granger be in possession of a man's robe?

"It's my husband's," she said as if he'd voiced the question. "Trust me, he'd rather you wear his clothing than have you lying about naked with his wife."

Husband! Perhaps Granger, or whatever her name was might as well go with the name he knew since she hadn't offered another had more reason than most to take offense at the aspersions cast on Merlin's mother. *Any woman can act the hussy*, he reminded himself, *commoner and noble alike*.

Slipping the gown round his narrow shoulders, Severus pushed his skinny arms through the armholes, never once taking his eyes off the former bane of his classrooms.

Bending again, she *Oh, Merlin!* grabbed two scraps of pearlescent grey material and moved towards a chair under the room's large window.

"Once I saw you haven't got a tattoo," she said, perching on the edge of the chair to pull one of the scraps some kind of silky vest that emphasised more than it hid the pertness of her breasts over her head. "I knew we're dealing with a more serious problem than I anticipated. Of course, I should have realised you weren't you when you didn't start blustering at the word 'nice', but I was distracted, myself, and assumed you were, as well."

Biting back a laugh at her convoluted phrasing, Severus opted not to point out that he was himself and could be no other. She'd already shown evidence she had a temper and that she didn't think there was anything the least bit amusing about their situation.

It was also quite possible she was simply mad. She wouldn't be the first survivor to ultimately go insane years after the war's end. Whatever was going on, he couldn't make sense of what she was saying; truth be told, he didn't even try. At the moment, watching her closely seemed likelier to solve the mystery than listening to her prattle on.

The second grey scrap turned out to be what only just passed for pyjama bottoms. They were obscenely brief, consisting of barely more fabric than the knickers he remembered his mother hanging out to dry when he was little. But they clung in all the right places and, even if this was the strangest dream he'd had in ages, he wasn't about to complain.

Covered, if not decently so, Miss Granger stood and took a half step towards the bed.

"Well?" Her raised eyebrow didn't have a Knut on the disdain his carried (he practised in the mirror, so he should know), but it served to remind him he had better things to do than ogle a half-naked former student.

An irritatingly supercilious half-naked former student, at that. Half-naked, delicious curves and soft skin notwithstanding, even in a dream/his dream, no less she ought to show him more respect!

"Well," Miss Granger?"

"Are you going to get out of bed or do you expect me to serve you your coffee in bed as if you're some sort of maharajah and I'm one of your willing serving girls?"

So much for respect. Severus shook his head and swallowed most of his rising ire.

Mustn't set her off again, he scolded himself.

"I'd rather you explained yourself first," he said as mildly as he could manage. (Which, to be honest, wasn't very.) "And you're hardly a girl any longer." His gaze swept from her shoulders to her bare toes, leaving no doubt about the meaning of his observation.

She huffed out a little sigh and sank back onto her chair.

"I told you, the full explanation will take a long time," she said. "I'd rather not give it to you in our my, that is my and my husband's bedroom."

Severus could put two and two together as well as any dunderheaded first year. He flinched at what her words implied.

How like a Gryffindor: brash enough to cheat, but too consumed with guilt to talk about it at the scene of the crime!

"I still use Granger professionally," she went on, "because, well, evennow his name isn't a very popular..."

He really didn't want to sit through the witch's long-winded explanation of something which had nothing to do with the information he actually sought. "Damn it! I've just been naked in bed with a married woman whose name I don't even know, so excuse me if I'm a little impatient to learn what the hell is happening. Explain yourself!"

She was out of her seat like a first-rate Seeker after the Snitch.

"Be quiet!" she hissed, only inches from his face. "I don't want you waking..."

But the familiar tug to his gut made the room wobble before his eyes; when the world righted itself...

...everything was different. Well, not everything. But enough for Severus to notice.

For one thing, it was much brighter than it had been just moments before.

The walls, starkly white and unadorned in the room where he slept each night but a soft grey in the bedroom where he'd awakened, were now the colour of chamomile tea steeped five minutes longer than was optimal.

The chair by the window was of the same design as before, only now the upholstery colours complemented the new paint.

The room was cooler by far. Almost as chilly as he kept his own. And the tangled sheets and light blanket had been replaced by a thick quilt, neatly spread over the bed. He sat atop it as he scanned his surroundings.

He chanced a look down at himself. A dingy grey nightshirt hung to his calves even whilst he sat. It gaped at the neck, almost exposing his left shoulder. The fabric was nearly threadbare and felt completely familiar. He'd gone to sleep in a garment just like it.

"You aren't supposed to be here, Severus," Miss Granger said, her voice soft and suffused with something which sounded like sorrow. "A curse one we thought we'd mostly contained brought you here. It also took my Severus away, and I need to figure out how to bring him back."

She stood at the foot of the bed, he realised. When he raised his head, her sad brown eyes moved to meet his. She now wore, he saw, a nightgown of the palest yellow. It covered her from neck to ankles and was ruffled at her wrists. Her hair hung over one shoulder in a thick braid.

"That's all I can say for now. That's our usual protocol," she told him. "Would you like a coffee?" She was already headed for the door; Severus clambered off the bed to follow. "I think there's still some beans left from tonight's roast Vienna if you'd like. Or we have that new Ethiopian variety that's naturally almost caffeine-free. Se... my husband would kill me if I gave you any of his genuine kopi luwak, so that's right off the table. But I don't suppose you'd settle for the stuff we keep for guests?"

SS~HG

"What do you know about Muggle computers and the internet?"

They were in an updated and expanded version of what he could only just recognise as the kitchen of his childhood home. Miss Granger stood at the cooker, idly stirring a pot of cocoa as he examined the roaster. "My husband built it. He thinks the commercially available models are all rubbish," she'd explained while he waited for his coffee to brew.

She'd explained quite a bit, as it happened all about his love affair with coffee, rather than telling what the hell was going on.

He'd been about to ask how she knew he was an Arabica aficionado, but she'd turned to him as she finished speaking and had already been rolling her eyes by the time his mouth opened.

"Right," he'd said, as if they'd just discussed his disbelief in detail. "I expect he'd want kill you if you served me any of those except the last// *he didn't already want to kill her simply for talking too much.* "But if *your husband* wouldn't drink 'the stuff you keep for guests', I doubt I want to, either."

With a short nod, she'd led him through a disturbingly familiar passageway and down to the kitchen.

Now, convinced by her question that the night's oddities were certainly the result of a rather bizarre dream, Severus felt more at ease. He decided to play along.

"I know enough," he said, turning from the roaster to watch this frumpier, more reserved Miss Granger work. "I was 'surfing the web,' as they say, before I retired for the evening."

She swung around to face him, spoon held aloft, her mouth agape and her eyes wide.

"Here?" Recovering herself, she turned back to her stirring. "I mean, you were on the internet in your home? I thought your magic would interfere with the electronics."

"Necessity is said to be the mother of invention," he said, knowing he sounded smug and not caring about it in the least. "I long ago found a way."

"Oh. Well, that's good, I suppose. It might make explaining this easier, at least."

Severus said nothing in response because he had nothing to say. Instead, he watched in silence as she continued to prepare her drink. She didn't say anything more, either, but it no longer mattered. He suspected he knew what her delayed explanation would be. Given enough time, she'd either get on with it, or he would wake up.

"Now, let's see about that coffee." She turned off the fire and poured her chocolate into an oversized mug before walking over to check the percolator. "Looks like it's ready," she said without looking in his direction. "Cups are in the cupboard above your head. Go ahead and pour while I get The Notebook. It's best I make sure all the other Hermiones know what's happening whilst I tell you the rest."

More nonsense, he decided, smiling to himself. Only to rearrange his face into its habitual impassivity when she suddenly turned.

"You wouldn't, by any chance, have heard of fan fiction, would you?"

He felt the smile attempting to reassert itself.

Definitely a dream, then.

"I have, as it happens."

He couldn't tell from her expression whether his admission had further shocked the witch or brought her some measure of relief. But she was biting her lower lip, just as her predecessor had done.

"And are you familiar with an author calling herself Wildcat? She writes in the *Star Trek* fandom. *Star Trek* is an old Muggle programme on telly... well, several old programmes, actually. And quite a few fil..."

"I know what *Star Trek* is, Miss Granger. My father was a Muggle!" he snapped, although in truth he wasn't the least bit annoyed at having his suspicions confirmed. "And I also know Wildcat's work. That is what I was reading tonight."

"I see," said she. "I'd better get The Notebook, then."

A/N: I'm not known for writing informative author's notes unless members of my writers' groups bludgeon me into it. I'm making an exception for this chapter of this fic because I feel bad for Hermione getting her lecture cut off like that!

f (sometimes mistakenly called "esh," after the discrete character/letter it resembles when italicised*), and known as the medial or long S, was used when the letter came at the beginning or the middle of a word. In many typefaces, it looked like a miniscule (lowercase) F unless it was italicised, wherein it acquired a left-swooping descender instead of the nubby cross thing you've probably seen on it in some "ye olde textes."

As different modern computer fonts render it differently, I've no idea how the letter appears to you in this fic.

On a similar note, I don't know whether windfucker or wind-sucker is the term William Rowley used in his play *The Birth of Merlin; or The Childe Hath Found His Father* (supposedly written with another, much more famous, Will). But it's fun to have Snape and Hermione debate the issue. If you're curious, under the second entry for wind-sucker, my OED says **SEE WINDFUCKER 2**. I think this means Severus wins by a nose**.

Finally, if you don't already know what *kopi luwak* is, I recommend looking it up only if you've got a strong stomach.

*Just to add to the confusion, with some fonts the italicised *f* (*f*) also sort of resembles the integral symbol ∫. Fun times in typesetting!

**To those of you who know other definitions for wind-sucker, I blush to admit that sad pun was intended.

Chapter Two: I Hope You Are Telling a Lie

Chapter 3 of 10

Playing the dark side will often mean a bigger win, but sometimes betting for the pass can become... oddly appealing.

After Granger left the room, Severus poured his coffee and walked over to the sturdy table dominating the newer half of the kitchen. He took a seat with his back to a row of small, high windows which lined the top of the rear wall of the extension. The dark fragrant drink truly was good, he decided as he savoured his first sip. The beans were of an excellent variety and they had been perfectly roasted. He couldn't have done a better job of it had he chosen the beans and roasted them himself.

As much as he would have liked to just sit in peace, enjoying his coffee, its very perfection its absolute suitability to his own tastes focussed his mind on his odd

circumstances.

It wasn't the coffee, per se, which gave him pause. After all, this was his dream if a dream was what he was experiencing and even if it had been induced for some purpose he could not yet fathom, evidence suggested he might have *some* influence over how the events played out. Look at the change in Miss Granger. Why shouldn't he also dream up a perfectly prepared cup brewed from the perfectly roasted beans of one of his favourite varieties?

But none of that explained why he was dreaming so vividly in the first place. Or why Granger featured so prominently.

Where is she, anyway?

Despite the many and varied questions each passing moment of his nocturnal adventure was generating, Severus didn't doubt he was in his own home. And though he'd completed a number of renovations on the ramshackle house in Spinner's End, the place was still small enough to navigate inside a few minutes. Besides, the small additions he'd had built were at the back of the house and Granger had gone towards the front. Yet, she'd been gone for nearly ten minutes now and he'd almost finished his drink.

Perhaps I've exercised enough will to rid myself of her.

The exchange of the temperamental and disturbingly sexy (*Sexy! It's obviously been far too long.*) Miss Granger for the frumpish, meeker version was most likely a result of his discomfort with the idea of being aroused by the woman. But why was he dreaming of her at all? More important, if the dream was the result of some enemy's desire to torture him, how had it been accomplished?

Drumming his fingers against the polished wood, Severus took another sip.

Potions are right out; I would have detected anything untoward in my food or drink.

A curse was equally unlikely. His duelling prowess was now widely known. Although a few dunderheads had been stupid enough to want to test their mettle against his in the years since he'd been released from St. Mungo's, after the first half dozen or so had proved unsuccessful, the number of challenges had dropped off precipitously.

Against his will, his thoughts drifted back to the differences between the two Miss Grangers. He'd only spent a short time in the company of the first iteration of the girl no, she was definitely a woman but events had seen fit to ensure she'd been burned into his mind much as the Dark Mark had been branded onto his left forearm. The feel of her soft curves was indelibly imprinted onto his own flesh. She was...

For Merlin's sake, control yourself!

In contrast, the current Miss Granger, as far as he could discern from beneath the folds of her voluminous and weighty nightgown, was all angles and flattish planes. At least, he was fairly certain her bosom couldn't compare to that of her predecessor. And her priggish demeanour didn't bode well if he had any hope she'd be grabbing hold of his tadger anytime soon. Not that he was hoping for that. At all.

Still, I needn't spend the remainder of this dream with a scared little swot with a stick stuffed so far up her arse she wouldn't know what to do with a prick if it swatted her on the bum! It's only fair I should get a little entertainment for my troubles.

He ignored the voice in his head trying to remind him he hadn't been any more at ease with Granger who'd curled naked in his embrace. The voice reminding him life was rarely (almost never in his experience) fair also reminded him he was supposed to be figuring out what the hell was going on.

Just as it occurred to him he might do better to wonder about who rather than waste time contemplating *how*, Miss Granger finally returned to the kitchen.

She worried her lower lip with even white teeth as she crossed the threshold. Pressed against her belly with small white hands, and stretching the yellow cloth against her thin form, was a large book bound in leather the colour of his coffee. Something he couldn't work out haunted her large, though largely unremarkable, brown eyes. Eyes that seemed intent on not meeting his.

Severus took advantage of her uncharacteristic diffidence to get a better look at her. His gaze roved from her slipper-shod feet to the high neck of her nightgown before coming to rest again at her bust. Just as he'd thought he remembered, the shoulders jutted out in bony points and the tits were nothing to speak of.

"I suppose you're rather disappointed if you've just come from one of the... more endowed Hermiones," she said.

His eyes snapped up from her disappointing breasts to find her watching him, a resigned sort of look on her face. Before he could tell her he hadn't a clue what she was talking about not that he planned to anyway; Miss Granger had never been quite the imbecile her friends still were and he'd been abominably obvious about what he was doing she was coming the rest of the way into the room and speaking again.

"That's what kept me, by the way," she said, apropos nothing he could think of. "Sorry about that. When I opened The Notebook, the others had already started filling their entries. I haven't read them all, but so far everyone has been properly numbered." She sat across from him, heaving a heavy sigh. "I will explain as much as I can I promise! but first I want to see who had you first."

Miss Granger placed her open notebook on the table and began swiftly paging through it, seemingly uncaring that he hadn't contributed a single word. For that matter, apart from the resignation he'd recognised in her expression, she didn't seem at all disturbed that he'd just been staring at her tits.

Almost as if she's accustomed to being ogled, though I can't imagine why that would be, he thought derisively.

For a few long moments, he watched her read. Her sense of comfort wasn't feigned, he decided. By all appearances, she was perfectly comfortable with her presence in his *her* home, in the middle of the night, and both of them in their nightclothes.

And I thought her timid? Reserved?

After what seemed to be an interminable amount of time had passed, she looked up and smiled.

A smile! For me! Severus rescinded his earlier uncertainty. There's no question; this must be a nightmare.

He went back to wondering which witch or wizard could have done this to him. He'd worry about their methodology once he knew who he was dealing with.

Couldn't be Lucius, trying to get back at me for coming out better than he did in the end. He hasn't the skill, though he might have connections to someone who does. But no, this isn't his style.

"You probably think this is some sort of hallucination or delusion," she said, somehow still smiling as she spoke.

"A nightmare, actually," he replied absently, his mind already on more important matters.

Perhaps someone I actually trust? Those people were few and far between. He could count them on one hand. Filius could have created the charm, but he'd never have the nerve. But if Minerva put him up to it, and put on the pressure...

Miss Granger laughed.

Laughed! As if being the means of his torture the means of his torture without even having a decent pair was somehow amusing.

"Ninety-three and Fifteen figured you'd be concocting all sorts of nefarious plots. Dark potions or curses. But then I told them you'd have read Wildcat, and they agreed well, Fifteen did; Ninety-three was still a little sceptical, but that's just Ninety-three being Ninety-three.

"Anyway, after I told them you know Wildcat and had even been reading *A Roll of the Dice* before bed, they decided I was likely right when I said you'd probably guess it was all a dream."

She clapped her hands together, her expression bordering on gleeful. (Or, perhaps that was mania he detected.) Severus shivered at the thought.

"And of course, while it's odd you'd make your first jump right after that especially as you're not meant to be travelling at all the ~~th~~*ue* significance of your showing up here is due more to the groundbreaking ramifications of..."

He stopped listening to what she was saying in favour of simply watching her speak. So far, nothing she'd said had been of any use to him, but the transformation from hesitant and uncertain to eager and confident came with an intriguing set of physical changes. Enthusiasm brought an almost becoming flush to her once-wan cheeks. She moved her hands as she talked, gesturing exuberantly to punctuate points he barely heard.

Hands meant for potioning, he mused, *wasted on a Ministry drudge. They're probably good at other things, too.*

Uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts were taking, Severus tried to go back to figuring out who was behind this... whatever it was, but Miss Granger's incessant prattle left him too aware of her presence. Giving it up as no use, he decided actually attending to what she was saying was the lesser of two evils.

"What we need to figure out is are you the one who showed up in Fifteen's bath or the one who appeared in Ninety-three's bed."

Or perhaps it isn't. There was that stirring again. That twitch the first one had caused, prancing about his room in nothing but her soft, silky skin. But it wasn't nearly as bad this time, and the Miss Granger still uselessly talking at him was too covered-up to be as much of a danger as the one in his head.

"We still don't know who you are. One seventy-two and I have been charged with that task, you see, and none of us know how much time we've left to do it."

Severus didn't see. Not quite. He was astute enough to suppose she might be referring to the version of her he'd had the pleasu... dissatisfaction of waking up to. But something this one had said...

She spoke in nonsensical numerical prattle without explaining herself. Just as the other one had done.

He straightened in his seat, interest honestly piqued.

"Ninety-three?"

"Or Fifteen. One or the other of them had you last."

Severus swallowed his frustration and tried again. *'Who, or what, is 'Ninety-three'?*"

Miss Granger's dull brown eyes lit with what could only be mischief. Suddenly they no longer appeared so unremarkable, after all. She took a sip of her (surely cold by now) cocoa and smiled a different sort of smile.

An unasked for vision of naked flesh ran through his head. This Miss Granger wasn't nearly so alluring as the last one had been, but there was no denying she was attractive when she grinned at him that way. She should have looked inane; instead, she was... rather enticing.

"Who?" he repeated.

The grin turned crooked and for all that it was annoying, Severus found it even more appealing.

"Well, erm," she began, trying in vain to suppress her smile, "she's me. Sort of, anyway."

SS~HG

Severus didn't bother with trying to hide his bemusement, and when she said (again), "This will take a long while to explain, and you've already finished your coffee." She wrinkled her nose at her own cup. "And my chocolate's gone cold."

Miss Granger cast a warming charm on her cocoa then got up to pour Severus another cup. When she returned with his drink, she took the seat next to him rather than sitting before her notebook. She slid that across the table and, after offering him another of those smiles, turned back several pages, saying, "I hope you don't mind if I get off track a bit first it will probably make more sense if I start in the middle before I get on with the really unbelievable stuff from the beginning."

Since, even now, she didn't appear to require verbal responses from him, he said nothing. He still needed to figure out who was cross enough with him to want to curse him as well as stupid enough to go through with it.

Not so stupid, as it appears they were successful a voice in his head whispered. He decided he needn't heed a voice spouting nonsense. Not even if it sounded just like his voice.

He sipped the coffee, half watching as Miss Granger turned pages back and forth, marking sections with tiny strips of paper. She flipped her braid from one shoulder to the other, causing the heavy rope of hair to brush his cheek in the process.

Unless this isn't a dream, the voice he'd been trying to ignore suggested.

Shut up! the other voice ordered.

But she said it's not a dream. I might try to tell myself she only said that because that's what dream succubae are supposed to say, but...

Stop it! Miss Granger is hardly a succubus, at least this one isn't. And, ofcourse, I'm dreaming! If I weren't if this were real I would...

Severus grimaced as he sipped his coffee. He didn't want to think about what he would do if it turned out he was awake and with Hermione Granger in the middle of the night.

Get on with it, woman!

As if she could hear his thoughts, only moments later, she scraped her chair closer to his.

"There," she said, leaning in till she was almost touching him as she pointed.

She smelt of almonds and honeysuckle. And chocolate.

Oh hell.

"It started approximately half an hour ago." She jabbed a finger at an entry marked 10:53 p.m. "And though most of the Hermiones knew right away, two Fifteen and your Ninety-three were nearly shocked out of their wits. Not surprising, all things considered!"

His head was already aching under the surfeit of pointless information. *Does she ever shut up?*

"I mean, most of us are used to dealing with each other's... erm, problems by now, but this week the travelling moratorium was in place, so they were taking advantage of there being no chance at interruptions." Warming to the topic, she abandoned all pretence of following along in her book. "It would have been better if they'd just started, erm, catching up straight away, like Se... er, my husband and I did, but that was *their* husbands wanting to wait till the kids were asleep.

"Honestly, I don't know how they could stand it. The waiting I, mean. We just sent the kids to stay with Mum and Dad's for the week, rather than deal with worrying about them going to sleep. And glad we did! I would have hated missing out tonight.

"Though, I guess Ninety-three only missed out on the cuddling after, so at least she got something."

His stomach clenched painfully as the pieces began to fall in place. What she was suggesting was...

Nimue's iron knickers!

"But Fifteen had only just got in the bath when you lot travelled this time and he nearly hexed her, only he didn't have his wand!"

Without thinking about what he was doing, Severus reached over and shoved the braid off her shoulder. Fully aware of what he was doing, he turned her chair towards him and reached for the buttons marching down the front of her gown.

She slapped his hands away. "Stop it, Severus! I just told you/ didn't miss out." Then blushing, she said: "Oh. Did you want to check my tattoo?" Quickly undoing the top seven buttons, she pulled enough fabric aside to expose her left shoulder.

"See? I'm Two Eighteen."

He leant in to peer at the tiny H218 printed on her pale flesh.

"I got so caught up, I forgot to identify myself."

Before he could respond, the clench in his stomach was superseded by a wrench behind his bellybutton and his world shifted all over again.

SS~HG

Severus found himself back in what he would have sworn was his own bedchamber, sitting on his own bed, if it hadn't been for two other occupants.

"The problem is," Miss Granger (dressed in a transparent black nightdress which barely covered her bum) was saying, "not even fifty-five or seventy would do tests during a travel-free week without putting it in The Notebook, I used to think. Now, we've reason to question that conviction. I don't like it. It's almost as if I'm betraying them."

The red-haired man on whose face she was applying liberal amounts of what looked like Bruise Paste frowned furiously.

"Well I don't like getting my eye blacked just as I'm about to pleasure our husband," the man the youngest Weasley, if Severus guessed correctly grouched, "so excuse me if I don't bloody care if you think you're betraying them."

Severus squeezed his eyes closed, silently praying the next churning of his gut was due to more of the travelling the Miss Grangers kept bringing up and not a sign of imminent panic (and possibly bringing up his supper) over the implications of Weasley's "our husband". When he chanced opening them again, he seemed to be in the same room, but this time thank God! alone.

He lay back against his pillows. Convinced (and quite thankful) he'd finally managed to rouse himself from his night of horrors, he breathed a relieved sigh. A wandless, non-verbal spell doused the lights, and he considered whether going back to sleep was wise.

His door opened.

"It's quite an ingenious spell, really. And none of us well, expect for maybe Hermiones One, Twenty-six and One Thirty-two were prepared for such a powerful Molly."

Light flooded the room as Miss Granger entered (pink cotton? pyjamas) and gestured excitedly.

"Are you tired? I thought you wanted to hear more about what's happening?"

Severus said nothing.

Miss Granger marched over to the bed and peered down, studying him closely.

"You aren't him, are you? No," she answered her own question. "His hair was longer. Oh! This is so exciting! Wait till the Council hear I got to talk t**both** of you!"

Her exuberance wasn't helping his headache; Severus figured talking could only add to his misery.

But she wasn't paying him any attention any longer, anyway.

Tiny, rapid footsteps sounded outside the open door, and she spun away from him.

He couldn't see her face, but could readily imagine from the stiffness of her shoulders the rage writ on it as she closed in on whoever was outside.

"Violet Eileen Snape," he heard her yell, "what on**Earth** are you doing out of bed?"

This time, Severus knew the twisting of his tummy had nothing at all to do with travelling.

Oh, Merlin.

A/N: "Playing the dark side" is laying maximum odds on the "don't pass", that is, betting against the roll.

Chapter Three: The Usual Rules Don't Apply

Chapter 4 of 10

The "Don't Pass" might have the most favourable odds, but no one likes it when you bet against them. Sometimes it's wiser to wait on the first roll and then go from there.

Miss Granger still stood in the doorway, left hand now on her hip and the leather-bound book clutched in the right as she stared down at whoever waited outside.

Violet Eileen Snape. She can't have meant.. He dared not even complete the thought.

Hoping that it might rouse him from his nightmare at last, Severus Snape focussed or rather, attempted to focus on what he knew to be real and true. If nothing else, enumerating the truths which could not be denied, he decided, would help quell the queasiness threatening to overwhelm his senses. When he was a child the practice had done that much for him, at least.

Fact: The bedroom walls are white, just as they should be.

At the sound of soft murmuring, his gaze was drawn inexorably to the doorway and the back of Miss Granger's head. Neither loose nor braided, her hair was tied back in a careless tail just long enough to dip between finely formed shoulder blades.

Didn't notice the hair before. Odd that. I must be slipping. Still, short and neat shorter and neater, anyway suits her.

"But, I wanted to surprise Daddy!" Miss Granger's (*Or is it Mrs Snape's?... No, no, no! Not Mrs Snape!*) unseen companion whinged in a piping voice. "I couldn't do that while he was awake, could I?"

Fact: The mattress is as firm as it was when I lay down.

"Well, I doubt anyone can sleep with you screaming. Why don't you calm down and show me what you're making?"

Fact: I am covered to my waist with the new duvet Minerva insisted on sending last month.

"No, Mummy! That will ruin everything!"

Fact: There is no comfortable-looking chair with any sort of upholstery beneath the window.

"Will it?" Miss Granger asked, the wry note in her voice sounding very much like a tone he'd use.

Her... husband must be rubbing off on her he thought. Then, when the words caused an unwelcome reaction below his waist, he amended, *Her husband's personality must be influencing her. For the better.*

And *then* he realised thinking about the man who was most likely her husband was hardly any better. He hurriedly went back to surveying his surroundings.

Fact: The battered bedside tables looked the same as they had when my parents slept in this room. I really ought to change that. I'm surprised Miss Granger hasn't insisted on it.

Bugger it! This is not real.

As he wrenched himself away from his faithless thoughts, Severus heard a soft thud he imagined was the stamping of a little foot.

"Why are you always so mean to me? It isn't fair!"

"Come off it, Violet," Miss Granger said with more calm than he'd have thought her capable of displaying. "You've a long way and a lot of practice to go before you can fool me; your father would be ashamed of such a feeble effort. *I* don't like it when you fib at all."

Fact: Miss Granger is not, and has never been, a pushover.

"I'm not fibbing! I was making a gift for Daddy's unbirthday, and you will ruin everything if you make me show you!"

Violet Eileen Snape.

Fact: If those two don't shut up, I'll be stuck here for ever!

"Daddy's birthday was nearly a month ago, Violet. Try again."

"I said it was an *un*birthday present!" the little girl shot back. Snape wondered which of her parents had bequeathed her such a defiant streak. He rather suspected it to be himse...

I am not that child's father!

Severus gave it up as impossible. Too much of his situation was *fake* and *false* for him to effectively fool himself.

For one thing, he realised he was no longer dressed (as he'd initially imagined) in his favourite grey nightshirt. Nor was he wearing a silk dressing gown or whatever he'd been in moments before as Miss Granger had tended to Weasley's *Weasley!* Surely there were less idiotic wizards to whom he might have attached himself if he were so inclined. The grey cotton pyjamas were crisp and unfamiliar, though not at all uncomfortable. Even so, he couldn't imagine they were a personal preference.

For another, although he couldn't imagine that he'd ever *choose* to be married to anyone whose own child dared to speak to her in such a manner not that he was ready to consider that any of this might be actually occurring he couldn't deny he felt inordinately invested in the outcome.

Violet Eileen Snape.

Surely the name was as meaningless to him as this... whatever it was he was experiencing should be.

Isn't it?

"Enough! I am appalled by the way you're behaving," her mother was saying when he returned his attention to the pair. Clearly, she'd reached the end of her tether. "You're to go to bed this instant."

Very nice, Miss Granger! Snape thought for the second time that night. In spite of his conviction that none of this was any of his concern, he felt curiously pleased with her show of parental authority.

Violet her voice still pitched high, although the volume was now blessedly lower responded to the angry witch's rebuke with a sullen, "It's *not* fair. I only want to make Daddy happy."

If the further stiffening of her shoulders was any indication, Miss Granger was a "Daddy" or two from completely losing her temper and recovering a bit more of Severus's respect.

"Bed. Now," she ordered. "And you won't be going to Uncle Harry's in the morning, either."

"But it was for Daddy!" Violet cried mutinously.

Unsure of what compelled him to do so, Severus leapt from the bed before his dau... the little girl's rebellious references to her father could have the effect he'd predicted.

"Violet!" he called sharply, stalking to the centre of the room as he spoke.

A small, pale face, surrounded by a swarm of dark, unruly hair escaping a messily tied braid, peeked around Miss Granger. Its owner couldn't have been more than six years old. More likely, she was even younger.

"Yes, Daddy?" She stepped closer, lifting her black eyes to meet his.

Merlin. Heredity is an unkind architect. Violet Eileen Snape had the misfortune of having her paternal grandmother's eyebrows.

"Is that the way you're meant to speak to your mother?" Severus was shaken by what he saw the stick-thin arms jutting out from the too-short sleeves of a too-large pyjama top; the way Violet's long legs appeared to disappear in the equally too-large bottoms but he knew from experience that both his voice and expression conveyed only the much-dreaded air of severity he'd perfected over so many years.

His double in nearly everything save her nose, gender and stature *Well, the eyebrows, too; I was spared those. And the texture of her hair; clearly, that mess came solely from her mother* merely stared at him, looking curious.

"You're not my daddy," she said after a long silence.

Thank God for that!

"It would seem not," Snape told her, "but that does not answer my question. Does your father tolerate you speaking to your mother in that fashion?"

Her face fell, scrunching up a bit, as if she might cry. Severus knew that face well enough to catch the calculation that had preceded the crumple. When she whispered a morose, "No," as her answer, he wasn't fooled in the least.

"What will he say when learns how you behaved tonight?"

At first, Violet's eyes widened with shock. Then they darkened as look of even deeper cunning crossed her familiar features. Miss Granger, a quick glance told Severus, watched with interest and something akin to amusement.

"Daddy says only a fool shows his hand to any other fool who asks."

Bugger, this child is a menace! She dares throw my own wor... er, her father's words back at me? The cheek comes from Granger.

Snape gave no outward sign of his inner turmoil. *The child would likely sense blood and go in for the kill,* he decided.

"Are you calling your mother a fool?" he asked aloud. "Are you suggesting that I, or your father, would be so foolish as ~~to~~ marry a fool?"

Violet's little face lost all its nascent cunning. Severus felt the tiniest flicker of regret when her thin shoulders slumped and she bent her gaze to her outsized feet.

Poor little Pogrebin.

"No," she whispered.

"In that case," said Severus, "I believe there is something you need to say now."

She turned to Miss Granger and said, in a voice that was as quiet as it was contrite, "I'm sorry, Mummy." Then she turned back and lifted dark, tear-filled eyes to his. "I'm sorry, Undaddy. I didn't mean to call you and Mummy and Daddy foolish."

An unpleasant sensation, only vaguely familiar and from so far in his past he wondered that he even half-recognised it, nearly cracked his mask of neutrality. It was as if his heart had grown too big to fit in his chest.

SS~HG

Severus stood outside the bedroom which had once been his, waiting for Miss Granger to join him. He didn't know why; he knew the house (theoretically, anyway) and what he wanted (for the moment, but anything additional lay on a road he wasn't ready to travel). There was really no reason not to find the kitchen and something to replace the second cup of coffee he'd been denied.

Except, there was... *something* keeping him from walking away. He leant back against the wall, trying without success not to think about what he'd inadvertently found out.

Violet had insisted that her "Undaddy" help "tuck me in," and despite her mother's protestations that they shouldn't impose upon their "guest," he'd given in. He hadn't been able to do otherwise.

He hadn't been prepared for Violet's interrogation, though now he told himself he'd held up well enough.

"Where's your tattoo?"

"I haven't got one. I've never, erm, travelled before tonight."

"Oh." She frowned as she ruminated over that, but remained undaunted in her pursuit of information and (most likely) extra time awake. "Have you got a Violet?"

The corners of his mouth lifted without his permission.

"I have many in my garden in summer, but not one like you."

Violet's nod was strangely solemn, almost sad.

"Undaddy Two Eighteen hasn't got one, either. She died before she was born. Did your Violet die?"

Even now, he wasn't sure how he'd managed to answer without choking over his words. The memory of that second Miss Granger's sad eyes struck like a hex.

"No," he said, sounding to his own ears strangely, criminally...normal. "I never had one to begin with."

"Why not?"

His eyes met her mother's; this Miss Granger's sorrow was different, not as deep.

"I never had a Hermione," he told the little girl, but his gaze didn't waver from the witch.

Miss Granger hadn't allowed any more questions after that. Violet had given them each a good night kiss and advised Undaddy No-tattoo to look for his Hermione when he got home.

"Two Eighteen Undaddy and Unmummy had another baby after their Violet died, you know."

"Sorry," Miss Granger said. Her voice was soft and more cautious than he'd ever heard it sound before. "Sometimes... sometimes she says too much."

"I expect that's a trait she inherited from her mother."

SS~HG

She was Fifty-three, she eventually told him as they sat facing each other across the same polished table he'd sat at he-didn't-know-how-long ago.

Only it wasn't, really. She told him that much. It wasn't the same renovated kitchen he'd sat in two stomach-churning travels ago. Everything looked the same, as far as he could remember that other kitchen. But all he could truly be certain of was that he wasn't in his own kitchen.

He did *not* watch Miss Granger prepare cocoa just as her predecessor had done. This woman disturbed him in ways the other three had not. Everything about this place did.

Violet Eileen Snape was most disturbing of all.

He sipped his coffee, forcing memories of the past twenty minutes to the back of his mind.

Miss Granger wasn't watching him, either.

No surprise there.

He suspected she didn't want to answer the questions he wasn't ready to ask.

"I suppose now you want to know everything," she'd said when they reached the kitchen.

"Not really," he'd said. It hadn't been a lie. Knowing would mean acknowledging he might not be dreaming, or considering he might not be the victim of a curse. He wasn't ready to deal with either possibility. "I'd rather have another go at the coffee that was snatched from my hands or were my hands snatched from it? Whichever, I want another if you can accommodate me."

After a long stare, Miss Granger had only a slight shrug and a nod at the percolator to offer.

"You'll have to make your own," she'd told him. "I do well enough with the cafetiere, but Severus says that's cheating. He says, 'Any idiot even your dunderheaded friends could learn to brew a halfway decent cup using a cafetiere. Doing the same with a percolator takes a master.' I suppose I should be honoured he thinks I'm clever enough to figure it out, but I'm not actually brave enough to keep trying using his coffee!"

Her bark of laughter had rung false, but Severus, not knowing what to say, had simply started grinding the beans.

"I suppose the cat's out of the bag now, if it wasn't already. Two Eighteen said she slipped with one of you. Then, so did I with Violet, I mean so you've caught us out, I'm sure."

He'd moved to the roaster with an assurance that was mostly show, then ground the beans without giving away a hint of the disquiet thrumming through his being. Her voice, unexpected and unexpectedly bereft, had stopped him pouring grounds into the uppermost chamber.

"It's such a simple thing." Her sigh had held the weight of the world. "Doing it that way." She'd been standing at the cooker, already heating milk for her chocolate, and had nodded in his direction.

"It's quite difficult, actually," he'd countered. "Any idiot even your dunderheaded friends could learn to brew a halfway decent cup using a cafetiere. Doing the same with a percolator takes a master."

Severus hadn't been sure why he'd echoed those words or why a comforting warmth had washed over him at doing so.

Twisting her lips wryly, she'd said, "Shut up. You know what I mean." But her attempt to rally her spirits was an utter failure, he'd seen. She'd immediately sank back into herself and her despair. "Why didn't I take the time to learn? It's such a little thing. Why couldn't I be arsed to do that for him?"

And in defiance of all his promises to himself, Severus had wanted to ease away her pain.

"I could show you."

For a moment, he'd thought she'd accept his offer. For the briefest of instants, the fear and anguish had disappeared from her eyes and been replaced by hope.

"I really should tell you what we know."

Once again, her words startled him back to the present. Not that he gave any outward sign.

"We don't know how long I'll have you," she continued. "We can't even figure out what's happening. I should tell you what I can. Now. I should start, at least."

I don't want to know.

He needed to know.

"All right, Miss Granger." He sipped at his coffee to hide a grimace. "Or is it Mrs Snape?" He looked pointedly at her hand before returning to her face.

Fact: Miss Granger does not wear a ring. Had any of the others?

Her smile was, again, wry. But there was less sorrow in her eyes when she glanced up at him this time.

"It's Snape. Severus says there's no sense in me having a ring if he won't wear one. And he won't since he brews for a living. 'The whole world knows our business,' he likes to say. 'Everyone knows you married your greasy old professor.'"

He only had to raise an eyebrow at the unflattering description for her to rush in with more.

"Those were *his* words, you understand." She laughed again, this time with more humour. But she sobered almost instantly. "Before I get started, I want you to understand something, Mr Sna... Severus. I love my husband; he knows that and loves me, as well. We love being a family. It's important you understand that much."

SS~HG

It took the better part of another ninety minutes for her to bring him up to speed. Knowing from experience she could supply far more information than a question warranted, he kept those at the bare minimum. To his surprise, she offered little information that was extraneous to her stated purpose. Still, the process involved lengthy dissertations on theory both magical and scientific as well as select readings from two books she produced for the purpose.

The Notebook, he recognised readily. The second, much thinner volume, she explained, was called "The Account."

"The Notebook is how the Council communicate and where we record our observations. We put all sorts of things there. The Account holds only the research we all agree might one day be made public, though I doubt it will ever be *truly* public in any of our worlds. The Severuses have written as much of it as the Hermiones, actually."

The Council of Hermiones had two hundred ninety-four members. Most of them had a vested interest in stopping the Severuses travelling.

"I'll lend you The Account if you want to understand better, but for now I'll just say any one of the Council *could* have ended with one of you. Molly One keyed the spell that way, though she didn't realise it at the time. If there was ever a chance if there was ever a moment, after the war for us to be together, Molly One's spell affects that Severus."

"You're probably wondering how it happened. Us, I mean. You probably can't see what that 'moment' might have been. None of us have ever really figured it out. Even the most similar of us came together in different ways. But I can't tell if hearing how Severus and I fell in love would help you understand what's happening. I can't tell if you'd want to know."

Severus didn't want to know and told her that.

"Right, then." She straightened in her seat. She'd been leaning towards him as she spoke. He wasn't sure whether or not she noticed. "A little over forty percent of us are Snapes, if you count Sixty-eight, One ninety-eight and Two forty-eight. As you can imagine, most of us aren't keen on sharing."

After learning the "Three Eights" consisted of polygamous marriages which included Weasley "You must have been at the Sixty-eights'. None of the Known Severuses would have struck Ron for that!" and that the Fifty-fives and Seventies were "swingers," Severus hadn't been sure he wanted to learn more.

"That's good to know, actually," she'd said about his short time with the Sixty-eights. "If there's a pattern to this, we'll be able to see it, eventually. As long as the others update The Notebook. Based on what everyone has written thus far, I'd guess you seem to be following the other Unknown."

Except they weren't. He'd been with this... Hermione the name was more accurate than Miss Granger; it was safer than Mrs Snape for more than two hours and the only abdominal discomfort he'd experienced had been in reaction to the revelations she and her daughter offered. How could he be following this other Severus Snape if neither was going anywhere?

She refused to allow The Notebook out of her direct possession.

"It's too important," she explained, her tone apologetic. "Vital. We had to find a way to talk to each other, didn't we? After we sort of worked out Molly's spell, we probably could have done one keyed to the Hermiones, but the Severuses voted that right out. I don't blame them, I suppose."

Several madly curling strands had come free of the hair tie as she talked about what was clearly a favourite topic. She periodically raked them back with her expressive hands, never seeming to pause for breath. He wanted to brush the wild locks back from her flushed face with gentle fingers.

"So, we came up with The Notebook. I guess you could say it sort of works like adding memories to a pensieve. We put in entries through a spell we developed, combining the Protean charm with a sort of memory extraction spell. Only, we get to keep the memories. And once the spell is activated, anything we see is recorded in The Notebook. Hang on." She waved her hands in an intricate series of familiar gestures. "That's how to end it," she told him. "I had to do that when Violet told you about the Two Eighteens."

After another series of gestures, she continued.

The spell a curse, really which started the travelling had been created by Molly Weasley One.

"She goes by Molly Prewett for work purposes," Hermione supplied. "But among the Council it's just easier to use our numbers. We're used to it by now."

Six years earlier, incensed over the break-up of Hermione One and Ron Weasley One and the former's subsequent romantic partnership with one Severus Snape One, the powerful witch had started planning.

"As I was telling the other Unknown when you arrived, the spell she came up with was quite ingenious. It combines Muggle physics and magic. I honestly don't know if anyone other than Arthur Weasley's wife would ever have thought of it."

Hermione was sounding excited again, Severus noted. And it showed in her gleaming eyes, in her inviting smile.

In spite of the pain and anger and sadness she'd revealed, talking about Molly Weasley's spell ignited the scholar in the witch the wife.

"If it hadn't been for his interest in everything Muggle, she might never have discovered Star Trek. Or Wildcat. And our lives never have crossed."

By the time she got that far, Hermione was yawning and Severus wasn't doing much better. It was a lot to take in, but as he hadn't travelled again in he glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall in the past two and a half hours or so, he wasn't worried that breaking off now would be a bad thing.

I am beginning to believe her, accused the voice he'd tried to ignore earlier. He didn't deny himself. The story was compelling. And it was far too fantastical to have been bred in his own imagination. *Moreover*, he snapped back at himself, *I am exhausted. Why would that be so if I am asleep?*

He didn't realise he'd started to succumb to his exhaustion until he felt delicate fingers pushing the hair back from his face.

"Sorry!" She was snatching her hand back even as he was jerking away from her touch. "I shouldn't have... I'm sorry."

She shook her head, then for the third time in as many minutes, her mouth stretched wide.

"Perhaps" he had to force out the words "Mrs Snape..."

"Hermione," she cut in. "Please, Severus."

"Perhaps, *Hermione*," he began again, and saw her close eyes at the sound of her name on his lips. She seemed to savour it as much as he was trying not to do.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "It's only... you're so like him. I mean, of course you are. But the Known*know* of each other, and so they all *try* to be a little different when travelling..."

"Perhaps," he said for the third time, his voice tight, "we could continue this later. Whatever is causing me to...*travel* seems to be... to have gone into remission for the time being. In any case, you've given me enough information to aid me should I find I've been taken elsewhere while we rest."

The truth was, he wanted time to absorb and examine what she'd already told him before more was added to his overwhelmed mind. He needed time away from her from his confusing desire to touch her and let her touch him.

"Oh, of course! Forgive me," she said, rising so quickly, she swayed a bit. It took all his control not to reach for her. "This must be even worse for you than it is for us. We're used to something similar, at least, and we all agreed an occasional bit of separation was a small price to pay. It's just... different this time. Not knowing is..."

The strength of her wretchedness hit him like a blow. He ignored an urge to comfort her. He wouldn't know what to do, anyway; he had no idea what she would find acceptable.

How much more of this must I watch her endure? How much must endure? He didn't ask himself why any of it mattered so much to him.

As if she could read what he was feeling *She probably can! She's married to "you", after all!* Hermione started moving towards the back door, saying, "We built a sort of guest house in the garden. Usually, the other Severuses stay there if we're doing a longish trial. I'll take you there."

His head still whirling with all the information he'd yet to process, Severus followed her out into the winter night, hardly noticing they were both wearing only slippers on their feet.

A/N: It occurs to me that I should acknowledge the fact that *this* chapter has fewer humorous happenings than the others. I've no excuses except to say, "Life isn't all fun and games. A bit of sorrow makes the fun times funner." It sounds like a load of bollocks, but it's true, really. At least, it's the truth as I've lived it.

Chapter Four: A Book Is Not A Mind

Chapter 5 of 10

Seven is a magical number for all wizards and wrong bettors. But only wrong bettors lose when the come-out is a natural.

"Daddy snores louder than you."

Waking up was surprising easy, considering how late he'd stayed up studying Hermione Fifty-three's copy of The Account. The two muffled thumps followed by the distinctive snick of a closing door had barely registered as occurring outside his dream. And though the desire for access to more manageable magic had increased with everything he'd learnt (and with everything he realised he *wasn't* learning) from reading, the childish voice which fully roused him completely didn't set him reaching for the wand he knew he didn't have.

He didn't wonder where he was. Even with his eyes closed, he could picture the plain white bed linens he lay under on the hospital-style bed. The unadorned white walls were as clear in his mind as if he woke to them every day. He knew without looking which corner held the white-painted wardrobe. Hermione had assured him he would find spare clothing in his sizes there.

Situated deep in the back garden, the guesthouse hardly more than a small room and bath stood close to the recently rehabilitated River Tribruit. With so many of the surrounding buildings demolished, there was little to protect it from the sharp winds blowing off the river. In the years since he'd lived most of the years at Hogwarts, he'd grown accustomed to a certain level of warmth and wasn't looking forward to experiencing cold again for however long he remained in this place. The trip from the bed with its thick white duvet to the white-tiled bathroom would be mercifully short, however.

"But your nose is just the same."

He didn't cast a non-verbal hex at the unassuming little girl standing at the foot of the bed he was sleeping in. She was an incongruent black blossom floating on the white pond of the room. Scores of tiny black buttons marched up the front of the high-necked little black jacket peeking out beneath her black puffy parka. Slim-cut black trousers seemed to add to her height. From top (her dark hair was escaping her braid in even messier than it had done the night before) to toe (Who in their right mind would craft dragonhide boots for a *child*? Surely they must be imitation?), it was abundantly clear whose child she was.

It's a good look for her, he decided. *I wonder how she manages the buttons.*

"Sometimes Mummy forgets the Silencing Charm, and he wakes me up when I'm outside their room."

Sleeping with your ear against the door, are you? On the inside he was fighting not to smirk at her innate cunning; on the outside, he cocked an imperious eyebrow.

"Does he?"

The expression utterly wasted on her, Violet nodded solemnly, her unwavering gaze fixed on him the whole time. "He's ~~v~~ery loud," she confirmed.

Severus didn't share his suspicion that her parents knew exactly what she was about and pretended to play into her hands by exaggerating her father's somnolent sonance. He couldn't imagine the sometimes prickly Hermione Granger would have accepted anything less than sound sleep most nights.

He also didn't attempt to explain the Muggle septoplasty he'd undergone (followed by *abloody painful recovery*) to correct a deviated septum even without a Granger as an impetus. Nor did he tell her he probably still snored loudly enough to wake the dead whenever he slept flat on his back in his own bed. Some things just were meant for a small child's ears.

Besides, although he suspected it was the raised head of the hospital-style bed he lay in which had quieted his slumber, the idea of the little one liking something about him brought back that warm, fluttery feeling where his chest met his belly.

Rubbish! I couldn't care less what the brat thinks of me. Obviously, all this "Travelling" has given me a case of indigestion.

Hoping she'd quickly grow bored and spare him her unnerving intense focus not to mention the odd notions and unwanted emotions she drew out of him he made a show of picking up the book lying, open, across his lap.

"That's one of Daddy and Mummy's special books," she told him.

Severus peered at her over the edge of page one thousand seventy-seven. *Of course, Granger would use an extension to make a book appear slimmer.* He cocked an eyebrow that was more elegant than any his counterpart's daughter would be able to lay claim to.

"I'm not allowed to touch it," Violet went on. When she bit her lip, her face changed, showing she'd inherited more than horrible hair from Hermione Granger. Instead of analysing the uncomfortable feeling her expression elicited, he returned to reading.

Whilst all members of the Council of H report similar scores when tested using a Five Factor Model-type personality assessment, in spite of having lived highly disparate lives since the end of The War, H293, H291, H290, H289, H287, H273, H248, H121, H102, H53, H51, H44, H49, H47, H28 and H4 all had nearly identical marks on the narrower Kofia Temperament Sorter ¹. Although the veracity of various non-clinical personality tests, assessments, inventories and indicators is frequently called into question, we believe the conclusions derived from sitting these two tests to be sufficiently credible to suit our purposes and to be significant indicators, as well as reliable predictors, of the sort of lifestyle each permutation of the secondary subject (H) finds most acceptable.

The Account was a surprisingly arid testimony of what the two hundred ninety-four Hermiones and two hundred ninety-two of their corresponding Severuses had experienced over the past six years, but only as their experiences were affected by Molly Prewett's curse. It was nearly impossible to tell from the tedious descriptions of curse dissection and counter-curse development and of the many failures which had set them back before they'd found limited success after almost six months of trying what any of the participants *felt* about the situation.

Curiously devoid of the tangents so often taken by the Miss Granger once he'd taught, The Account also failed to delve into anything approaching the personal. In places it read like a series of annual reports pertaining to a very narrowly defined demographic; usually, it was more like a spectacularly dispassionate treatise on the work of the most boring scholars magical or Muggle on the planet. He hadn't got the sense that the Council and Snapes were writing about *actual people*.

Even the single bright spot in his reading turned out to be rather dim in a purely subjective sense.

He'd been gratified to learn it was the joint expertise of a set of the Severuses which had precipitated the breakthrough that broke the witch who'd caused them all so much grief. *If one can classify extensive knowledge of Muggle fanworks as "expertise," that is.* But even their contribution failed to make the unembellished recitation of the steps the group as a whole the full Council and their respective Snapes had taken to unravel Prewett's magic wasn't the slightest bit interesting as a narrative.

Before he'd reached the passages telling of the Weasley matriarch's confession and co-operation without a single description of how he'd undoubtedly reduced the woman to tears and possibly even hysterical pleading! there'd been hundreds of pages covering hypotheses, procedures for testing their premises, why theories were rejected and how they were revised to get through.

And that was only the first half of the bloody book!

There's confidentiality, and then there's fucking mind-numbing, Granger! They really aren't the same.

Severus skipped down to the first footnote without reading the rest of the section.

1. Very few Hs (e.g. H70, H55) failed to display strong parallelism to the narrower traits displayed in a large number of fellow Hs. Several sets of Hs showed likenesses similar to those detailed above, while others showed a lesser degree of correspondence. See Appendix Q for the full table.

Unconsciously, he shook his head. So far, the appendices had proved to be even drier than The Account proper. Mostly collections of paired Arithmancy equations (contrasting Pythagorean and Chaldean methods), charts and, occasionally, references to sources related to the Council's methodology or analyses, the ones he perused the night before hadn't added significantly to his understanding of what was happening. To be perfectly honest, he skipped quite a few of them out of sheer boredom. The one explaining the bizarre method by which each Hermione of the Council had been assigned a numerical designation was deadly.

"Are you finished reading, Undaddy?"

Putrescent pond slime! Just as he'd managed to (finally!) forget all about the child, she had to go and call him "Undaddy" and bring on the...*indigestion* again.

Narrowed black eyes reluctantly met large black eyes.

"I'm hungry," she said, watching him expectantly. "I'd like sausages and eggs, please. Mummy only makes porridge when Daddy's travelling." Violet shuddered as if Mummy's porridge tasted of Horklump Juice.

It was on the tip of his tongue to snarl, "What the devil makes you think I'll cook for you?" when two things intervened.

First, he recalled Violet couldn't be more than six years old less, actually. The night before (or was it early this morning?) Hermione had said, and The Account had confirmed, Molly Prewett-Weasley's curse had been cast in 2000. He figured none of the Hs and Ss could have produced offspring until late that year at the earliest. (The

Account was kindly vague enough so as to leave that sort of information out.) It was doubtful Violet had been born prior to 2001. At the most, she was five; more likely, he decided after studying her face a bit more carefully, she wasn't even that old.

Those thoughts and calculations only took a few seconds, which was fortunate since his undaughter was already speaking again.

"Are you as good a cook as the rest of the Daddys?" That was the second thing; Severus was just as susceptible to a little girl's flattery as any other doting Undaddy. "I hope so. Mummy's nicer when there's something nice to eat as soon as she wakes up."

Swallowing a curse thankfully, the little girl seemed not to hear him. Severus closed The Account and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

The incompetent alleged know-it-all thinks she can sleep whilst I do her mothering for her, does she? Expected to look after me? No wonder they haven't yet fully explored the Weasley witch's curse; if all the Snapes are willing to do whatever the girls order them to do...

"Look what I've brought, Undaddy!"

Violet had turned and walked away from the bed, bending to pick up something as incongruously black as her clothing just inside the door. Snape watched in growing consternation as she struggled to lift what turned out to be a pair of his size twelve dragonhide boots. It was huge in her tiny hands. He couldn't fathom how she'd managed to bring even the one to the guest house, let alone the pair.

"Miss Snape, allow me to..."

But he was too late. Only reflexes honed over more-years-than-he-cared-to-remember prevented a disaster as she spun round and shakily pitched forward rather than walking as she'd so obviously intended.

There was nothing elegant about his wandless cushioning cum Levitation Charm, and the magic cast was too instinctive to call for a coherent incantation. Violet Snape hung suspended above the tiled floor, boot still clutched to her chest, only inches from a broken nose.

Cursing his overlarge feet, he stomped over to stare down his own long, hooked nose at her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed after a long moment of stunned silence had passed. Then, "Your feet will get cold if you wear Daddy's slippers outside." Tilting her head up to smile at him, she proffered the boot with considerable effort.

Severus sighed and plucked the boot from her hands.

Likely, she got her stubbornness from both Granger and me.

He made sure he had a firm hold of his undaughter before he released the spell.

"Sit," he ordered unnecessarily after boosting her onto the bed. *She's not a dog!* he reminded himself, sneering. "Stay," he said aloud. "I'll be back in five minutes at the most. Don't touch your mother's book."

She looked up at him with another of those disconcerting smiles. "I won't, Undaddy."

He glanced from her to the bathroom door and then back to her. He both liked and didn't like what he saw.

Best not leave one such as her alone with temptation, the voice of reason chided.

If you were truly the voice of reason, you'd be rousing me from this nightmare!

You know you're not sleeping and you don't even mind the child, the voice retorted. Severus thought it sounded amused.

Snatching up The Account in one hand, he stalked over to the wardrobe and snagged several articles of black clothing in the other.

He wouldn't say he distrusted the child. Rather, he trusted she—being too young to fully comprehend the concept of far-reaching consequences—would behave in the manner anyone bequeathed her mother's constant quest for knowledge along with her father's native intelligence would act. Add to the mix both his and Hermione's tendencies towards obsession, and even an older Violet would find it difficult to resist The Account. In short, he expected her innocent curiosity would lead her to get up to no good, and he suspected she possessed the power to make that a very bad thing, indeed.

She probably can't even read, at least not well enough to understand that sleep aid of a book!

Are you forgetting who her parents are?

Three minutes later, dressed and with clean teeth, he left the bathroom to find Violet sitting exactly where he'd left her.

"Where is your hat?" he asked as he sat next to her to pull on his boots. He hoped his tone was suitably fatherly.

Violet only shrugged and smiled again.

"Right."

SS~HG

"Now, be careful not to drop any!"

With his back to the cooker, sausages forgotten and the fire unlit, he eyed Violet and the little platform she'd dragged out from the pantry. It was just the right height to allow her to stand comfortably at the workbench. The whisk lying next to a large stainless steel bowl seemed too big for her hands, even though he could clearly see it was just the right size for her to use.

Despite what evidence the whisk's and the platform's existence offered, and her assurances that "Daddy lets me all the time!" notwithstanding, he found it difficult to believe a four-year-old (Violet also assured him she would turn five in August) should be allowed to help with the cooking. Or that she might *want* to offer her assistance. Such efforts had been expected of him when he was her age, but it hadn't been the happy experience it so clearly was for Violet.

He watched her expertly break six eggs, one after the other, and drop them into the bowl. The shells were piled neatly off to the side. When she reached for the whisk, the teacher in him felt it prudent to speak up.

"And don't over-whip them or the end result will be tough, rather than fluffy," he added when his lips threatened to pull into a proud smile.

"I *know*, Da... I mean, Undaddy!" Before he could stop himself, he was meeting her impish grin with a small smirk of his own.

At last satisfied she had her tasks well in hand, he turned to the cooker and turned on the fire.

The sausages were browning nicely and Violet was standing at his side, proffering her perfectly whipped eggs, when a new voice startled him from a lecture on the caramelisation points of cased meats.

"Severus! I'm so sorry!" He turned in time to see Hermione hurry into the kitchen. "*I never oversleep! Especially not when Severus is travelling!*" She shot a reproving look at her young daughter. "You should have woke *me* up, Violet! What must Mr Snape think of us!" Her eyes met his again. "I'm so sorry. She's usually better behaved than this."

Snape stared, utterly lost for words. Her cheeks were flushed pinker than her pyjamas, and her hair was even wilder than the child's.

Hermione stared back, her supply of exclamation marks apparently depleted.

I wonder if her skin feels as smooth as it looks she wondered.

"Undaddy doesn't mind," Violet stated when it seemed neither adult was going to speak again. "I'm going to ask him to make Mummy Cakes next!"

Severus didn't have a clue what Mummy Cakes might be, but didn't even consider letting Violet know because he was fully preoccupied with wondering whether Hermione's lips were as soft and yielding as they appeared.

"Mummy Cakes are Severus Two Eighteen's not so secret recipe," those lips informed him. "When his son smelled them baking he said, 'Those cakes smell just like Mummy!' and the name stuck.

"The first time he made a batch, he was only trying to use up some extra ingredients before they spoiled. He was making soap, you see. Most of us Hermiones use the same scent, and it takes a Severus to make it perfectly.

"But after Two Eighteen made his little cakes they're scones, really during a few travels, there was no turning back. The kids all liked them so much, he had to tell all the Severuses how to make them. We Hermiones haven't a clue what goes in it. All we know is we only get about half as much soap now!" The lips curled into a wry smile.

Severus didn't realise he was staring again until Violet told him the sausages were at the caramelisation point and in serious danger of burning.

"I hope you're planning on adding a veg to the feast," he heard Hermione say.

"Vegetables aren't for *breakfast*," Violet put in before he could respond. Severus would have bet one hundred Galleons she was rolling her eyes. "I'm going to have orange juice!"

"Nonsense, Pogrebin." *Pogrebin! Has she learnt Legilimency, then?* "Granny and Grandda made me eat at least two vegetables with every meal. You'll have one *and* your orange juice."

He didn't need to look up from scooping sausages onto a platter to know Hermione was smiling smugly while Violet gave her a mutinous frown.

"Speaking of Granny and Grandda..."

SS~HG

Breakfast was a torture mitigated only by Violet's incessant prattle.

No need to ask where she got that. The girl talks even more than her mother, if such a thing is possible.

It was true. Hermione replied to her daughter when necessary, but for the most part, she ate her meal, alternating between sweet smiles for Violet and wistful glances at Severus.

You only wish they were wistful!

Severus's only contributions were to ask what flavours, exactly, made Mummy Cakes Mummy Cakes and to promise Violet he'd attempt a batch before the Grangers arrived to steal her away. He left the table as soon as his plate was clean.

Despite its few cosmetic differences and additional appliances, the kitchen was set up much as his own was. He was able to quickly assemble the ingredients needed to make honeysuckle and almond scones.

Honeysuckle and almond. Of course it's honeysuckle and almond, you twit!

Mother and daughter remained at table, cheerfully debating the merits of woolly hats over hoods while Severus figured out how to recreate his counterpart's recipe. He only sneaked a few glances at the two as he measured and weighed.

What's wrong with you, man? Quit looking at her that way. She's someone else's wife! She's someone's mother!

If someone you, in this case had not looked at her "that way," she would not be "someone's mother."

Not "me"; my counterpart of this world.

As if it makes a difference! Even the girl isn't annoying us.

Oh, so it's "you" when we're talking about impregnating other men's wives, but it's "us" when discussing supposedly good thoughts?

No, it's "you" when you're being foolish. It's "us" when we acknowledge...

Neither voice not the one which he was beginning to believe represented what others might mawkishly refer to as his heart, nor the one which was clearly meant to be his reason completed the thought. That didn't stop him knowing what both wished to say.

"This is what it's like to be part of a family," he whispered aloud.

Hermione's head popped up. She offered him a muzzy smile, shoving a bushy hank of hair away from her face. "What was that, Severus?"

"Nothing. Just talking to myself," he said, and returned to laying ovals of improvised Mummy Cake dough on the tray.

SS~HG

They shared a sofa in a sitting room which, unlike the master bedroom and the kitchen, looked nothing like the one in his own home.

"Well, it was hardly suitable for raising a family, was it?" Hermione had asked when he'd remarked on the disparities.

The silence they also shared would have been companionable if it wasn't for her insistence on looking so bloody delectable! The sickeningly pink pyjamas had been replaced by a clinging black jumper and cream-coloured trousers. Her feet were bare. More than once over the course of the hour they'd spent alone, Severus had only just stopped himself pulling them onto his lap for an impromptu massage.

Now you've developed a foot fetish?

He hadn't, he knew, but something in the atmosphere had changed the moment the front door closed behind the Drs Granger and their granddaughter.

The whole house felt different with Violet gone. It was harder to remind himself the woman seated next to him was a wife and mother when the only evidence of that was a line of photographs smiling and waving from the mantle. Or, in the case of Severus Fifty-three's wedding photos, glaring at him menacingly.

Not even poring over The Account or perusing the few parts of The Notebook she was willing to share distracted him from thinking about Hermione's soft skin or wondering how her plump lips tasted.

Honeysuckle and almond, probably. Rather than leaning in to test his hypothesis, Severus stuffed a Mummy Cake in his mouth.

Inserting a thumb to hold his place, he closed The Account in favour of going over everything he'd learnt so far.

Fact: The Notebook is obviously the real key to understanding what is happening, no matter that The Account includes all the pertinent facts regarding the curse and their attempts to contain and reverse it.

Fact: The Account is the most boring book ever written.

Fact: I could get used to this life, should we never find a way to reverse the curse. That thought made him grimace. *Best not think that way. It's not all almonds and honeysuckle, here.*

Fact: The Hermiones are not the only ones sharing information not included in The Account, else she would know how to bake Mummy Cakes.

Fact: Obviously, Hermione is still hiding something from me.

"How?" he asked.

To her credit, Hermione didn't ask "How what?"

"They have their own sort of Notebook. I've never seen it none of us have. Just after we came up with the spells for The Notebooks, we decided it was wiser for us to keep them separate. We only changed our minds now because there really isn't another way to help you and the other Unknown. I suppose Severus will show me his when he gets home, but it doesn't feel right to ask any of the others to share just yet."

He nodded his understanding, another far more important question already taking precedence over her answer.

Flipping open The Account, he paged through it until he found the passages he wanted.

Incredibly tedious and equally uninformative. Just as he'd suspected they would be.

"How is it that all two hundred ninety-four Hermiones are in communication with each other, but only two-hundred ninety-two Severuses can say the same? The Account is patently unclear on that among other things."

She squirmed in her seat, nibbling her lower lip and looking more uncomfortable than he'd seen her since he'd first arrived. He quickly pushed aside the desire to bite it for her.

"Well?"

"Erm, that's a long story, actually. And, I have to tell you, it was a point of contention among us. It still is."

She closed The Notebook and set it aside. When she drew a knee up onto the sofa and turned to face him, her expression was determined.

"Before I tell you more, I want you to know we didn't make that decision lightly," she said. "Two Seventy-three and Two Seventy-four were against it, but they were overruled. And no one really felt right arguing with the Severuses' decision. Who could know better than them, after all?"

"Some of it has to do with the containment magic we were actually lucky to discover that spell before you were directly affected by the curse but mostly it has to do with you and what the Severuses thought was best."

"I understand," he said, even though he didn't. "Please continue."

Hermione looked doubtful not that he blamed her but went on.

"Well, first I'll need to explain how The Notebook works. Or rather, how we figured out how to get the entire Council to connected to it..."

She was right; it *did* take a long time. Nearly thirty minutes and several Arithmancy equations later, she was still explaining how they'd identified which Hermione Grangers were potentially affected by Prewett-Weasley's curse.

"By the time One had a pretty definite list of three hundred and one Hermiones, she and Severus Two had already figured out The Notebook spell. That part's in The Account. But what's *not* there, is..."

"Three hundred one?" Severus thundered before she got any more caught up.

Her cheeks flushed, but there was only sadness in her brown eyes when she met his gaze.

"That's another thing not in The Account. We didn't include the Seven Dead Hermiones, even though the Arithmancy said all seven had to be Snapes, because there was no chance of contacting them. Hermione One and Severus Two thought it was better to leave those Severuses to their grief, and the rest of us agreed once we were brought on board."

He wanted to know more. *How can I not want to know more?* But let her move on because the topic was so clearly one she found distressing. It would keep until he was officially "brought on board" with the rest of the Severus Snapes.

She must have mistaken his silence for fear because she rushed to assure him, "You're not from one of the Seven. The containment spells we used to keep them out are stronger than the ones we used on Two Seventy-three and Two Seventy-four. You're one of those two." She shook her head, then, "But I guess you'd know that already. I mean, if you'd lost your wife..."

"Right. So, one of the counter curses that hadn't worked was what actually first put them in touch with Hermione Sixteen. No one travelled, of course, but the Hermiones

became aware of each other when they cast the spell. From there it was a simple matter of adjusting the spell till they'd found all two hundred ninety-two of the rest of us.

"Finding the Severuses was simple after that; each Hermione tracked down the one in her universe, and with all of us working together, we had everyone where they should be and you and the other Unknown mostly shielded in a matter of weeks."

But they still hadn't completely unravelled Molly One's curse. Not even that witch could completely explain what she'd done.

"She was upset when she cast it, you see. And she didn't know exactly what she was doing. Not really. Severus One still blames himself because he was the one to introduce Arthur to Star Trek and fan fiction, and she wouldn't have discovered Wildcat if it weren't for that. But even she says it's no one's fault but hers and she's been really helpful to us over the years. We don't use her name in The Account, of course, because the whole point is to make sure no else is hurt by a curse like it, and if we published Molly's name, she'd have to go to Azkaban, of course and that counts as hurting someone." She paused to breathe, staring down at the hands she was wringing in her lap. "And that's sort of why the Severuses decided we shouldn't tell you two anything once we realised you'd never travelled. It was supposed to protect you."

Scores of questions clanged together in his mind, all related to the one question he didn't want to ask. The one question he thought he knew exactly how to answer.

Ask her, damn you!

"And just what did you think you were protecting me from?"

She hesitated for only a moment, those wonderful brown eyes sadder than he'd ever seen them, before she parted those beautiful lips to speak. But an invisible hook pulled at his navel and the rest of her words were lost as he travelled away.

SS~HG

Three years as a true Death Eater, followed by fifteen as the Potions master, one as Defence Against Dark Arts professor and, especially, another as Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, had gained Severus Snape a stomach of steel. A year spent recovering from a devastating snakebite, followed by seven years of relatively peaceful living left him unprepared for the rigours of six travels in quick succession. Especially not as four of them had featured a heavily pregnant Hermione Whatever-She-Called-Herself.

Several moments passed at his seventh destination of the day before he realised he was no longer jumping from universe to universe. A quick glance at the witch seated to his right told him he'd landed with yet another gravid Granger.

"I use 'Granger' professionally, of course," she was saying. He was fairly certain she was aware she was addressing a new man. "It's easier that way, but..."

"You digress, Mrs..." he cut her off, not much interested in being enlightened again. Especially not if her explanation came with an assassination of his character attached.

"Officially, it's Snape-Weasley," she interrupted in turn. The mulish look on her face warned him not to attempt silencing her again. "Ronald and Severus thought I should include the 'Granger', officially, but Snape-Weasley is already a mouthful. They've both taken it as a middle name. Ronald never much cared for Bilius, anyway, and Severus *hates* Tobias but I've enough names, I think."

One of the bloody Eights, then, just my luck. He cursed Fifty-three for not mentioning at least one the three groups of polygamists were expecting a baby.

"Two Forty-eight, by the way." She held out a hand for him to shake. "I did explain that before, but I suppose that was to the one before you. Yes, his hair was longer." She rolled her eyes and grinned stupidly. "Pregnancy brain, you see."

No. I do not see, and I'd appreciate it if you Hermiones would stop assuming I do!

Aloud he said, "So, I see."

Mrs Snape-Weasley-but-not-Granger laughed in seemingly genuine amusement at that. "No, you don't. But it's sweet of you to pretend."

They were naming the child Rose, he learnt. All of the currently pregnant Council members were.

"We got the idea from your Violets," she explained. "Since this one is biologically a Weasley, she's not likely to escape the red hair. We figured we might as well keep the flower motif going while we're at it."

"Though, I can't imagine what we'll get if Sev ever manages to sort out a way for him and Ron to get pregnant! It's hard enough being married to you lot; I don't know if I'm up to being mum to a little one whose part you and part him!"

Snape raised a brow, for a moment completely forgetting her circumstances had nothing to do with him. "You wouldn't be raising it alone," he protested, feeling inordinately aggrieved on his counterpart's behalf. "I hardly think you need worry that your husbands would shirk their share of the work!"

"Thank Merlin, you're home!" The familiar voice came from the doorway. "Hermione has been going *mad* with all these other Sevs popping in and out. You can't imagine how much I've missed you, love."

Severus didn't *need* to turn in order to identify the speaker. He turned all the same.

Ronald Granger Snape-Weasley's face turned crimson in what was definitely not embarrassment. Severus wondered if with this "Eight" he'd be the one to come away with his eye blacked. But Mr Snape-Weasley seemed capable of more restraint than the other Unknown Severus had been.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" he wanted to know. "Another new one, I guess?"

SS~HG

A fucking beard! Why the hell would I grow a beard just to please Weasley?

But it was the beard or the lack of the beard which had saved him from getting an armful of amorous ginger Auror, and Severus vowed never to grow one.

Unless Granger prefers beards.

Merlin's saggy sack! What does it matter what the wench likes?

Only, as angry as he was at the lot of them, he knew it mattered. He couldn't lie to himself about that.

This guesthouse was exactly like the last one had been. His battered stomach clenched at the knowledge that he wasn't likely to wake to a horrible-haired miniature version of himself.

Best not think of that, he thought for what had to be hundredth time since morning.

He settled under the white quilt in the white room and, in spite of his best efforts, dreamed of a small witch with wildly curling hair and remarkable brown eyes who'd never

met a Weasley she didn't loathe.

SS~HG

Waking was not easy torn as he was from a dream in which he half lay between Miss Granger's parted thighs but it was quick and it was complete. He had no idea where he was or who the curly-haired witch frowning over him might be. In light of what he'd experienced in the past two days, the riot of unruly curls was not enough of a clue.

She bit her lip, drawing her frown deeper. Brown eyes flicked from his nude shoulder to his exposed...

Fuck! he thought just as she gave the same word voice. And part of him, apparently as unwilling to be ruled as her horrendous hair, twitched at the sound.

"Fuck!" she repeated, her eyes glued to his disobedient prick. It quivered again under the naked hunger of her stare. "Not again."

Unfortunately, even the tripe-churning wrench of travelling wasn't enough to shock his body from the state her phantasmal caresses and imagined please breathily whispered had educaed. The cool air of this newest place was similarly ineffective. His most sensitive parts were unprotected, vulnerable and all but begging for attention.

She glanced at his shoulder again before meeting his gaze.

"I don't expect *you'd* want to make use of that?" She nodded in the direction of his bare bits.

He tried to sit up, to show he still had *some* dignity as he told her what she could do with her lovely eyes and lovelier skin (far too much of which was on display for him to have any hope of regaining all of his composure). But invisible bonds bound his hands and feet, securing him firmly to the four posts of the unfamiliar tester bed.

Bugger.

A/N: In craps, a natural is a come-out, or first roll, totalling seven or eleven.

Chapter Five: A Not-So-Silly Not-So-Little Girl

Chapter 6 of 10

When it's too late for a "don't pass," would-be wrong bettors must opt for the "don't come."

Fine for her to sit there, in some scarlet scrap of nothing barely covering her bum, grinning at me as if she were the cat and I the canary, trussed up and ready to eat!

To his self-disgust, just the idea of her putting any part of him anywhere near her mouth made his tadger even more alert. She was, in fact, kneeling next to him on the bed, smiling and waiting for an answer he wasn't sure how to give.

Sayyessayyessayyessayyessayyessayyes!

Ignoring the juvenile voice in his head, Snape let his eyes roam over this latest iteration of the woman who had by turns plagued and intrigued him over the past two days and nights.

Or has it been three nights? No, it only seems as if so much time had passed. Bloody Hermione GrangerSnape-WeasleySnapeSnapeGranger-WeasleyGranger-SnapeWeasleyWeasleyWeasley! Snape?

At second glance, this Hermione's attire was more disturbing than alluring. He recognised the short uniform dress. The red velour looked painted on her, calling attention to the roundness of her hips, and the black hose emphasised the slender lines of her thighs.

"You got that bit wrong," he told her, jutting his chin towards the intrepid tresses staging an escape from her haphazard hairdo.

Her smile widened. "I'd like to see *you* try getting this mess to stay in a beehive," she retorted cheerfully. "Never mind the hair. What do you think of the rest?"

I'd like it better in tatters on the floor.

"I was never very fond of that colour scheme," he said aloud. "There's a reason The Enterprise so often lost crewmembers wearing it."

Obviously familiar enough with Star Trek fan lore to catch the reference to hapless "red shirts", she laughed. Softly, but deeply enough to do interesting things to the front of her dress.

With each breath she drew, her breasts smallish, but high and perfectly shaped strained against the low-cut bodice moulded to them.

Ridiculous, he scolded himself. *Delicious!* his ninny-headed knob countered.

He forced himself to meet her searching gaze. She arched a brow when he still didn't answer.

Sayyessayyessayyessayyessayyessayyes!

You can't do that! What if there's a Weasley lurking in the wardrobe?

He tried telling himself, Weasley or no Weasley, *he* was more than a pulsating cock attached to a penile life-support system and deserved to be treated as a fully functioning person. As most of him was restrained, he had a difficult time accepting that argument.

Sayyessayyesforthesakeofallthatisholysayyessayyessayyes!

She leant in closer. The scent of honeysuckle and almond wafted up his overlarge nostrils. He wondered how her bosom managed to not to spill over the confines of the

flimsy fabric.

She must have charmed it to...

Barely breathing himself, he watched her inhale again.

Focus, man!

"Is that... thing you're wearing really befitting a soldier, Miss Uhura?"

The question seemed to catch her off-guard, but only momentarily. Thickly fringed lids quickly shuttered her wide eyes, and the O of her lips softened into a sensual smile.

"All's fair in love and war, after all," she purred. "Weren't we all once soldiers of a sort? Is it really so odd to think I might have become adept in handling" he detected a slight emphasis on the word "the arms of amour?"

Oh lord! Spell broken well, mostly broken he rolled his eyes. "Surely, you've got better lines than that?"

Hermione shrugged as if his disdain were no deterrent. "I don't usually need them," she told him. "I don't do this sort of thing very often."

Severus didn't try to hide his scepticism.

Sitting back on her heels, she grinned impishly. That nearly freed him from his bizarre fascination with her... everything, the smile was so like Violet's.

"So?" She eyed his prick which apparently still enchanted obligingly waved at her once more.

"I think not."

Liar! You'd have her out of that preposterous kit so quick...

"Liar," she said, baring her teeth in an even more playful, and yet somehow calculating, smile. She flicked another glance at his groin.

"I am not inclined to make use of it," he told her. "I said nothing about whether it was inclined to be used. Not that it matters what it wants. I am my own master, at last. Do you honestly believe I'd bow to the wishes of a quivering cock and a dim-witted witch with questionable taste in clothing? After spending nearly two decades spent taking orders from a capering pouf and a psychopathic murderer with daddy-issues? *Think, you silly little girl!*"

He pulled ineffectually against his invisible bonds.

"And what, in Merlin's dubiously exalted name, made you think I'd enjoy being tied up?"

She scowled possibly at the implication behind the accusation; he couldn't be certain and with a few flicks of her fingers, freed him.

"I didn't! It was Severus Two Seventy-four's ludicrous idea." Yanking a wand from her bushy bouffant, she waved it round a bit, and the naughty excuse for a Starfleet uniform dress melted away. "So was the uniform. He thought it might make him feel less guilty about..." Rather than finish the sentence, she flicked her fingers again to indicate her newly naked self. If she used any more magic in the project, Severus didn't notice.

At first, Severus didn't absorb much of anything she was saying; he was too busy noting how much her nude body resembled that first Hermione's. The only difference he could find was the tiny H55 imprinted on her shoulder rather than H93.

What did the tart in the black lace say about Fifty-five? It was a took a super-wizardly effort to pull his thoughts from the sight before him and *remember*, but when he did...
Oh, bloody fucking hell!

"Is this your doing, then?" He waved a hand, an expansive gesture indicating himself and his presence in her home.

"Of course not!" she snapped, wobbling a bit as she scrambled off the bed. "Obviously, you've let the others' opinions prejudice you. Honestly, Severus, I'd have thought you'd learnt better by now.

"We'd never put the entire project at risk by trying something like *this*! We and the Seventies might do the occasional off-Notebook trading, but only amongst ourselves."

The tirade ended as suddenly as it began and she looked at him, huge brown eyes begging for understanding.

Shit! Next, she'll start crying.

"The others look down on us and hint that we're rule-breakers," she continued, her voice now as supplicating as her eyes, "but there's nothing in our guidelines stopping them doing the same. As long as all parties are in agreement, why fault us for spreading our love?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he told her honestly.

SS~HG

As predicted, tears had been shed "Don't look at me like that! These are tears of anger and frustration at being stuck with a stubborn dunderhead!" effectively ending his erection, but to be safe, Severus suggested a change in both location and state of dress.

It was easier to focus once they were both wearing clothes, and when *her* clothes weren't skin-tight, low-cut or otherwise intended to arouse the senses. When he wasn't fighting an internal battle to keep his eyes on her face, he was able to actually take in what she was saying. And he was able to recall what she had said when she'd been distractingly naked or inappropriately attired.

He was pleased to find his borrowed clothing consisted of the white shirt and black trousers he customarily wore in his own world.

They relocated to a cosy sitting room which looked much like Fifty-three's had, although it was evident these Snapes were a little more invested in the television programme which was likely the cause of his recent troubles. She made herself comfortable on the sofa, The Notebook open in her lap. Declining the invitation to join her, he settled his long frame into a wingchair upholstered in Starfleet Science blue, for Merlin's sake! by the fire.

"I thought you said your last visitor was the 'Trekkie'."

"He's the one with the Uhura kink," Fifty-five said with another of those disarming smiles.

"But, I'm willing to bet *all* of you are little too interested in the adventures of Mr Spock and Captain Kirk." She gestured around the room. "It looks good, don't you think? And far more comfortable than it was before I moved in, don't you think?" Unlike her predecessor, she didn't use child-safety as an excuse for storing his Darker books elsewhere. "That's what your study is for!"

The Snape in the wedding photo smiled well, it was nearly a smile, anyway blandly, offering him the Vulcan ta'al. The Snape in the sitting room ignored him and sneered at the pointed ears Violet and a toddling young wizard (barely out of nappies, Severus guessed) wore in another frame. He didn't mind blaming the witch sitting across from him for turning his interest into a family obsession, but he held his counterpart accountable for being unable to resist the witch's wiles.

Although, if the sex is that good...

He was distracted when a portrait of Molly Weasley which had been absent on Fifty-three's mantelpiece winked at him salaciously. Severus tamped down a shudder, but Granger (she used the name privately as well as professionally "so the Sevs can keep us straight; in our family, Seventy is usually called 'Hermione'") noticed and laughingly promised he'd "get it" soon enough.

"Even though we've never met in person, we're closer than sisters," she said of her relationship with Hermione Seventy. "Imagine having two bodies with one mind." She shook her head at his doubtful look. "I suppose you have to experience it for yourself to understand.

"We share everything. Nearly every thought, every emotion and sensation. It was a simple thing to alter the spell for The Notebook so we could keep our private lives just between us. Any of the others could do the same if they wanted to."

He determinedly sipped his coffee kopi luwak at last! while she delved deeper into the workings of her relationship she and her husband shared with Hermione and Severus Seventy. "We consider ourselves to be married, but with four people, instead of two. Is that really all that different to what the Eights have? Only, we're only together two at a time, so if everyone is going to judge us..."

Severus didn't remind her that some of the others judged "the Three Eights" just as harshly. He knew from his visit with the Two Forty-eights that none of them *shared* with anyone other than their legally wedded spouses. "Except for that one time with Sev One Ninety-eight, but that was an accident," Mr Snape-Weasley had let slip. "We stopped soon as we realised."

More to the point, however, even as he drank his deliciously expensive coffee and listened to what she had to say, he was thinking about all the mysteries she might solve for him.

This Hermione has an axe to grind, and it's left her far more forthcoming than others have been. That could be to my advantage, should I play cards carefully.

You mean to take advantage of the girl!

"And they're all so quick to put Saint Sixteen on a pedestal because she was the first after One, but she didn't really *do* anything except help create The Notebooks. It was actually a Severus who figured things out. And of course she's able to keep her head in a travelling crisis; she's with Ron."

I mean to take advantage of the situation, not the woman. Emphasising her current status made him feel marginally better about what he was planning. Besides, it's no more than she deserves than any of them deserve!

"Oh? One of the sixty percent, is she?"

"What?" Shaking her head slowly, she frowned at him. "Oh! Oh, no. No. There's no sixty percent. See what I mean? They tell you forty percent of us are Snapes, but don't explain the rest. Only about another forty percent are with Ron and that's including the Eights. Some Hermiones are... in other situations."

Not sure how far to push, or even how to push, Severus said nothing. She'd say more when she was ready; he was sure of it. Because she *wanted* him to know.

Rationalise it however you like, this woman never did you any harm. In fact, she's been nothing but helpful.

Precisely! So, she shouldn't mind being even more helpful once she realises how truly ignorant they've left me.

"There's just over forty Hermiones who are sort of caught between. You'd think *they* wouldn't have anything to say about my situation or about even about the Eights since I bet they'll be joining them some day. We'll have to come up with a new name for the lot of them if they do, because most of them aren't actually eights."

You still haven't explained why I was kept ignorant of the curse and of the existence of these other worlds.

"Fifteen is one of them, in fact. Two Seventy-four was with her first, but that was before the curse sort of regulated itself or whatever happened and you started following him. I don't think you'll meet her this travel, but if you did, you'd know what I mean."

Or exactly why my Granger never attempted to enlighten me about the situation against her own wishes (now according to two other Councillors of H). Since when did she give up independent thinking in favour of following the crowd?

"She was in the bath when Two Seventy-four arrived and she only realised because she was sure it was a Ron night. She switches off from one bloke to the other, and she has the nerve to call *me* a tart?"

Good lord, this can't really all be about sex! They must have done something more to offend her. All the more reason to get information out of her. I'll be helping her if I allow her to subvert their ridiculous rules.

"You're probably thinking this is all about the sex, but it's not," she said, startling him with how closely her words mirrored his thoughts.

Is it any wonder I might think that when every you avoid telling me anything of any real importance?

"It's about how we each want to go about settling this once and for all. I've just found there's a bit of a correlation between those who don't approve of my love life and those who don't approve of my methodology for studying the curse."

No one has explained to my satisfaction why they have not simply sent me back where I belong. What more are they hiding?

"Where are you hiding Violet?"

His non sequitur didn't seem to faze her in the slightest.

"It's Saturday. She and Abbas always go to one grandparent or another at the weekend. We just sent her a little early this week."

Saturday! Since accepting what has happened is real, I haven't asked whether they've plans to maintain my brewery, and so far no one else has mentioned it. Will I be a ruined man if when I return to my own world? And why on Earth did we name the boy Albus?

But he had little time to worry over that because Granger wasn't done speaking.

"And that's another thing! We don't wrap our children in cotton wool. The world is a scary place, and we want them to be prepared for it. The other four barely let her out of their sights! I mean, you met Fifty-three's Violet though, I suppose she's better than the other three, so perhaps she's not the best example. Anyway, did she strike you as

the sort of child who needed coddling? It's ridiculous the way they treat her! Our two, at least, and to a lesser extent, Fifty-three's, will be fine, I think, but the other three?" She shook her head. "I worry about those little girls. You can't hide anything from a child like Violet. And Abbas is just as clever as his big sister!"

Unable to stop himself, Severus cringed and asked, "What curse did you perform on your husbands to make them allow you to name your son after that manipulative fop?"

"What are you talking about?" She wrinkled her nose at him. *Merlin, I do like it when she does that.* "Oh! You thought I said 'Albus'!" Her laughter was music to his ears. "No, silly. We named him after you — his father, actually. He's called *Abbas*. One of its meanings is 'stern-looking' or 'frowning'."

Seeing that she was at last providing useful information again, he seized the opportunity to learn something else of immediate value.

"How is it that *you* are so certain I belong to the two hundred seventy-third world, when the other Hermiones hadn't a clue?"

Hermione Fifty-five glanced up at him and scoffed at the unseen multitude of other Hermiones.

"Those cows! Sometimes it's hard to believe any of them qualify as 'the brightest witch of her age'!" She shook her head in disgust. "Most of them aren't really *thinking*," she told him, and her expression went from irritated to disappointed and sad. "They would have figured it out, too, otherwise."

I knew this was about more than the sex.

Suddenly, she scooted forward in her seat, looking at him eagerly, earnestly.

"It's not that they're stupid, you see. It's only they're so worried about following the *rules*. I'd never have guessed any of them could end up being such a prig again! It never got me anywhere before I went to Hogwarts!"

Severus was surprised to find himself smiling a little at some of the rules he remembered her breaking as a student. Not all of them had got her anywhere *good*.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, I did plenty of dunderheaded things at Hogwarts — some of which nearly got me killed, and thank god you were there to save me half the time! — but I also learned a lot from not always doing what I was told. I wouldn't have learnt half the things I did if I'd always done the 'right' thing. You see?"

Merlin, she's gorgeous when she's making ridiculous excuses.

But Severus did see she had a point and told her so.

"And sometimes the lessons we learn through our mistakes are the best of all," he added.

"Exactly!" Hermione nearly leapt from her seat in her enthusiasm. "That's exactly what I mean, and that's exactly what they're not doing. Our unofficial, mind — code of conduct says we aren't to tell you anything we hadn't agreed on, but we haven't agreed on anything because we never thought we meet you or Two Seventy-four! And not telling you anything also meant not asking you anything because asking is sometimes just like telling, you see."

Clearly, I've spent far too much time with too many versions of this woman. That last bit actually made sense!

"They sound more like sheep than cows," he said, hoping she'd smile for him again. And keep talking.

She smiled for him again. At first she tried to fight it. Infinitely kissable lips twitched then pursed until he felt himself leaning forward and was forced to snatch himself back. That was when a huge grin stretched across her face and made her brown eyes shine nearly as bright as the fire in the grate.

"Too right!" she said, giggling.

Since when have you found girlish giggles arousing, you pervert?

Then she resumed explaining what the others apparently had missed.

"So, I only had to ask the last Severus one question to figure out which one he was. *One* question! Any of us could have done it."

Caught up in her excitement, even if he had no idea from whence it stemmed, Severus grinned like a firstie at a Hogwarts' Christmas Feast.

"What question might that be?" he asked gamely.

For a moment, Hermione only grinned harder. But then she clasped her hands together and blurted, "I asked him when was the last time he spoke with *this* Miss Granger! And when he said a few days ago, I knew!"

That's it? All that shouting and grinning and hand clasping for that? Snape was more than a little disappointed.

"Because, of *course* Hermione Two Seventy-four is practically *stalking* him, she wants him so bad. While your Hermione goes out of her way to avoid you!"

All at once, he no longer felt like smiling. Or hearing answers to any of his other questions.

He asked them anyway, of course. Eventually.

Spurred as much by his desire to stop Hermione begging his pardon and apologizing profusely — "I didn't mean *it that way*! Honestly, Severus, I have no idea how she really feels about you" — as his need to better understand his situation, he gave in just before the sun rose.

His business was in no danger, she assured him.

"Polyjuice," she explained. "Two Seventy-three is the only one who consistently lives up to our reputation. Even I didn't think it was necessary to take those sorts of precautions, but since it meant going against the sheep, I supported her when she insisted. Though, I'm dying to know how she managed to get hold of your hair. She never said. Still likes the to keep things to herself; we were all that way at school, you might remember, though most of us grew out of it, you see. Except for when it came to you and Two Seventy-four's Snape."

"Funny how the rest of them agreed to keep secrets from you, but think we should share everything else!"

"I suppose I'm sort of in the middle — Seventy and me, both. Which is why Two Seventy-three and Two Seventy-four trust us with their secrets. Like Two Seventy-four mooning over her Snape and following him everywhere."

"Now I think about it, it's probably a good thing none of the others thought to ask him any questions because they think she only sees him about once every other month to your Hermione's once or twice a year when really, it's more like twice a week — but she's only told Two Seventy-three, Seventy and me about *that* — and if the others knew the truth there's no telling *how* they would react."

"For someone who's supposed to be keeping her distance, she spends an awful lot of time in his company. If I know her as well as I think I do — which I do, you know — I

expect she won't even try anymore once everything's back to normal. Not that he'll give her a chance to try, now that he knows."

It's no wonder she needs two husbands and is shopping for a third Severus thought. *It must be maddening to listen to her chatter all the time.* He reminded himself that it was her propensity for prattling which was going to save his arse, and didn't complain aloud.

"Anyway, they keep our secrets, so we keep theirs. Not that your Hermione has a lot of secrets, it's just there are some things she needs help doing research and the like and we help her because she won't go to any of the others. She's not obsessed with you the way Two Seven-four is, but she hasn't given me reason to think she doesn't *like* you. It's more like... I think it's more that she wants to give you your privacy. Once, back before it was absolutely decided they wouldn't tell you two anything, she said something like, 'If we're going to keep a secret that several hundred others are already aware of from just *two* men, I don't think it's fair to expect them to be of any assistance when they won't even know they're helping! If we aren't going to tell them anything, we should leave them alone altogether!'

"Of course, she thought that would make them change their minds about telling you, but the Severuses were pretty insistent. Even the ones with Mollys thought it was a bad idea, and they're usually pretty flexible, considering this all started with a Molly, albeit not a Molly Snape."

Severus choked on his second cup of coffee.

"Molly *Snape*?" he enquired once he was able.

This time, there was nothing impish or innocent or adorable about her grin.

"Scary, isn't?"

SS~HG

In spite of the caffeine infusion and his genuine interest in increasing his information inventory, by the time Fifty-five had clarified the various relationships of all two hundred ninety-four Hermiones and each of the two hundred ninety-two known Severuses including the fourteen who'd died on the filthy floor of the Shrieking Shack, but stuck around as Hermione-haunting ghosts Severus was beginning to feel the effects of two nights of interrupted sleep followed by early mornings.

"Now you're up to date, so to speak, I should probably get on with what some of us think is happening now."

"No."

"No?" She frowned at him, scrunching up her little nose adorably. But he'd had enough and at that moment, the idea of sleep was more appetising than her pursed lips.

"I'm *tired*, Granger. While I appreciate you sharing, I need to relax!

"And I already read your ridiculous Account, so you can't tell me anything I don't already know about your bloody research!"

Granger snorted. "The Account! It's a load of useless rubbish without The Notebook." She patted the space beside her. "Look, why don't you join me over here? I happen to know this sofa was designed for optimal comfort meeting the specifications of *your* body. You can rest and I'll read you the bits the others wouldn't let you see."

She lay down, beckoning him with a wave of The Notebook. "Come on, then," she said. "It's *foresearch*. You always said personal research was more important than swallowing facts to be regurgitated."

There was a major failure to her logic, considering she'd just offered to read to him from a book, but Severus was too exhausted to care much. And ~~he~~^{she} had always been a passionate proponent of personal research.

When she said, "Come here, Severus. I promise not to bite unless you ask nicely," any lingering resistance faded away. He didn't even notice or care when The Notebook dropped from her hand to the floor, leaving her arms free to wrap around him as he lay next to her. There'd be time enough to look up the other meanings of "Abbas" when he was home.

A/N: The "don't come" bet is similar to the "don't pass" bet, but it's made *after* the come-out roll (the first roll, used to establish a point). Mathematically, it's got pretty much the same slightly better odds as the don't pass; it will probably also make you equally unpopular at the table.

Chapter Six: Give Me a Reason

Chapter 7 of 10

When even the "Don't Come" fails to end with the desired results, a wrong bettor may still opt to "Lay the Odds."

In such close proximity, her fragrance was even more intoxicating. Severus doubted many other scents could be as enticing as the mingled aromas of almond, honeysuckle and Hermione.

Heaven, perhaps? wondered Severus, burying his face into the crook of her neck. He was dimly aware he was being ridiculous, but couldn't bring himself to care about that, either.

"Poor you," she crooned. "So tired, but so... tense." Her warm breath against his ear nearly made him tremble. When she smiled, letting her lips brush against the same sensitised skin, he *did* shudder at the pleasurable sensation. "Let's conduct a bit of 'research' and see whether I can help you loosen up if you'd like. You'll never get back to sleep, otherwise."

Actually, he *could* and *would* sleep, no matter how stressed he was feeling; decades at Hogwarts both as student and as teacher had taught him the trick of it. Almost eight years of relatively laid-back living hadn't softened him so much he couldn't do it now.

But if she insists on helping, who am I to refuse? Wouldn't want to hurt her feelings.

Never bothered you making her cry before, did it?

That was then. She was an astonishingly aggravating swot with no sense of true wisdom. Someone needed to put the girl in her place! This is now. She's obviously improved with age. It would be a crime against scholarship and understanding not to acknowledge her progress.

He turned in her embrace without really being aware of what he was about. By the time he realised his nose was hovering only inches above her unruly mane, turning again seemed too much of a chore. Besides, she didn't utter a single complaint.

"When was the last time you had a massage, Severus?"

Never! From the look of her that smug, knowing...*inviting* smile she knew it. He scowled, but his heart wasn't in it, and she only laughed.

"I'll undo a few of these buttons, shall I?" Reaching across the half-inch of space separating them, she matched action to the words. "That's good, isn't it?" The fingers sliding up his chest to caress his shoulders felt better than good. "Hmm, but maybe you should take it off? The trousers, too, I think. Everything being so tight and... stiff can't be conducive to resting properly. This will be easier without them, and you'd be far more..."

Accessible? he wondered hoped as she trailed off. Though he supposed she'd need access to rub and... squeeze away his tension *Enticing?*

"... comfortable," she concluded, instead. But the mischief in her smile left him far from disappointed. "The trousers can wait a bit."

Fifty-five's voice trailed off again, and Severus's eyes drifted closed.

He was too exhausted and too curious hell, and too stimulated, if he were honest with himself to argue with her. Not seeing any other option, Severus gave himself over to Fifty-five's determined and dexterous hands.

She pulled away, just enough to push him onto his back and straddle his waist.

Hands which had once been such an annoyance were now employed in the sweetest torture he'd ever experienced. They kneaded and stroked and soothed from the muscles of his neck her touch was specially tender in the area round Nagini's scar to his palms before finding their way up again.

It didn't take long for Severus to realise he'd been wrong. Her scent wasn't heaven; *this* her firm touch, the way her hips cradled his (even through four layers of clothing) was heaven!

Why the fuck haven't I experienced this before?

She worked over his shoulders again before returning to his chest, this time giving it far more substantial attention.

"You have lovely pectorals," she murmured, giving them one last caress before moving lower. "Mmm. And abdominals, too. You're very fit, aren't you?"

He didn't think she expected an answer, but he gave an appreciative groan, anyway.

Somehow, they shifted again without him really perceiving the action until it was over until he was pressed to the back of the sofa, half on his side.

She slipped off the sofa to kneel at his side.

"Lift your hips for me," she commanded gently. The fine black silk of his boxers could have been air for all the buffer it provided between his skin and hers. The effect elicited by the backs of her fingers brushing against his most intimate anatomy was not unexpected. "Oh! Sorry about that."

The chit hasn't nearly learnt to lie! Thank god.

Severus opened his eyes in time to catch her predatory smile. Funny, but he didn't mind playing the part of prey. Not in the least. Not if she meant to keep putting those hands to good use. Too befuddled to respond coherently, he hoped his lethargy and his sex-addled smile would serve to convey his capitulation.

Perhaps she'll even respect me in the morning.

The thought startled a chuckle from deep in his chest, and Hermione used movement to divest him of his shirt.

But he knew part of him truly did want her respect. He'd even meant much of what he'd thought earlier.

At school, Hermione Granger had been a decidedly eager, though not always thorough, researcher. Trying to teach the girl (as much as *hetried* to teach any of his students, which wasn't very; he'd never wanted to be a teacher) had been a trial. Married to her books and the words which lay therein, her incessant questioning of his methods and constant hand-waving might have driven him to drink if he hadn't more important issues on his plate than an annoying, overeager swot with bushy hair and buck teeth.

Though, I suppose I would have hexed her, given the chance, rather than risk my own liver.

This woman was another thing altogether.

Her hands were too busy conducting their *research* to wave about. With his tired body now the object of her study, he was pleased to note she strived to prove she'd overcome that deficit.

At some point in time he wasn't sure exactly when she'd slid off him to kneel on the floor. Starting at his feet, she kneaded her way up his legs, easing and creating tension in equal measure.

He didn't mind the questions she whispered in that soft, husky voice so long as they were variations on "This will work better if we take that off, too, don't you think?" (never more so than when "this" was the clinging jumper she claimed restricted her range of motion) and "Harder or softer?"

Harder, you soul-sucking succubus! You... siren! You... oh, Qandisa's Kāma!

"Mmm, you *must* like it," she murmured. "You're blurring your belief systems."

Fuck! She heard that? Had he spoken aloud? *And, still a know-it-all, even in the midst of a seduction!*

"Oh, yes; I heard." She tittered as she increased the pressure on his left ankle.

Apparently he was still voicing his thoughts. *Splendid. Bloody splendid.* He was just thankful she hadn't seemed to hear the bit about her being a know-it-all. Or in the process of seducing him.

"Mmm, not really," she murmured, giving his left calf an extra hard squeeze. "Not unless you want me to be. I can, you know. It wouldn't do for a know-it-all not to know

how to seduce you, would it?"

She nuzzled his thigh, making him momentarily forget how to breathe. Good job she was still talking so he needn't respond straight away.

"Actually, my mum used to do this for me when I was a little girl. You'd probably never have guessed from the way I was when I got to Hogwarts, but when I was Violet's age, Mum and Dad used to chase me out of the house, and I'd run around like a wild little thing and climb trees. I wasn't very good at it, so I'd always come in with scrapes and sore muscles and such."

A shudder shook him from shoulders to toes the moment he heard Violet's name trip off her tongue.

"I love that you're so responsive," she murmured, seemingly misreading his revulsion as rapture. "It's so unexpected... but so very sexy."

Severus's eyes flew open, his gaze landing on the photo-strewn mantelpiece. Violet and her brother were leaning forward in their frame, watching intently.

Hermione Fifty-five's fingers climbed up his thighs, past his hips, to rest at the waistband of his boxers.

Apparently oblivious to his distress, she said, "Let's get rid of these, shall we?"

Snape stared into the eyes of the blatantly curious children who weren't his own, but who may as well have been.

"No!"

Exhaustion all but forgotten, he shot up, clasping his hands over his groin, though any evidence of his arousal had faded the moment he heard his undaughter's name.

Once he regained enough composure to glance at his hostess, he found Hermione sitting back on her heels, hands held up in the universal gesture for "I mean no harm." But the expression on her face showed her confusion and, if he wasn't mistaken, hurt.

"That is to say," he said, glancing away again, "not in front of the children." He canted the side of his head towards the photographs he was also avoiding looking at.

"Wha...?"

From the corner of his eye, he caught her looking over her shoulder at the mantel, before he felt the weight of her gaze fall on him again.

"Severus," she said. He just *knew* from the way her voice slid up then down then up once more that she was smiling at him in a manner that suggested he was being silly and she thought it was adorable. He wasn't sure *how* he knew; certainly, no one had ever thought him adorable before. But he could tell that was what she was thinking.

"I know they are only photographs and don't *really* know what we are doing," he said. "*I know* how Wizarding photography works. All the same, I'd prefer not to continue."

That's right, you coward. Blame it on the children.

Don't call me a coward!

"That's no reason to stop. We can move to the bedroom if that will make you more comfortable," she told him. "And getting in a little practice might lead to good things in your future. Two seventy-three hasn't got a wizard of her own, you know."

No, he *didn't* know! Much like he hadn't known some crazed Molly Weasley had created a curse capable of casting him out of his own world and into the perilous unknown. Just as he hadn't known his Hermione Granger was known to a whole cadre of Hermiones Grangers as Hermione Two seventy-bloody-three! No one had seen fit to let him know she was supposed to be *his* fucking Hermione Granger!

Suddenly, the excitement and upheaval of the past few days and nights weighed more heavily on him than her gaze had done moments ago. His anger faded as fast as it had flamed. He was *still* exhausted, after all, albeit more relaxed than he had been; he certainly wasn't in the mood any longer.

Mustering more bravery than a house full of Gryffindors, he let his eyes meet hers.

"Please, Hermione," he found himself pleading (to his disgust!), "I need to rest, not... stimulation. Tell me more about what's in your mysterious Notebook or about your family or what the hell else 'Abbas' means."

Her smile, he noted, wasn't smug at all.

"All right," she murmured and, picking up The Notebook from the floor near her knees, she climbed back onto the sofa. "One thing you won't realise if you've only read The Account," she told him as she settled down at his side, "is how much Violet adores her Daddy and all her Undaddies. She'd do anything for them."

Hermione opened The Notebook and began to read.

He tried valiantly to stay awake, but it was no use. By the time the odd combination of her delighted cry of "Oh, finally!" and the disagreeable yank behind his navel roused him, he had no idea what secrets she might have revealed.

SS~HG

Severus opened eyes he'd squeezed shut against the whirling sensation and churning stomach that came with travelling. He felt perfectly at ease, now.

Fastest I've recovered yet. Must be getting used to flitting about from world to world.

It was unclear from the diffuse light just where he might be, but his head was pillowed against something smooth and warm that smelled of almonds and honeysuckle. His hands, he found, were resting against things equally warm and smooth, so he gave each an experimental squeeze. He thought the familiar aroma and soft skin might have something to do with the curious state of his welfare.

Hermione, he thought (and might have murmured), contentedly. *MyMione*.

He might even have giggled at that last bit.

Too tired and too taken with his delightful location, he didn't immediately register the folds of fabric surrounding his face as anything unusual.

It was perfectly understandable, he would reason later, that he didn't immediately respond to the completely unexpected (and nearly unintelligible) ranting his latest Hermione Granger subjected him to.

He managed to catch bits which sounded like, "... 'no', you horny bastard!" and "... your *own* Hermione soon enough, I expect!" a hex he didn't hear left him in a heap of wobbly legs attached to a battered backside.

Only when he discovered himself flat on his back next to his bed he was sure, after a few laboured attempts (and a single success) at turning his head that it ~~was~~ his bed

looming over him did he understand he'd arrived with his head burrowed up and under Hermione Granger's nightdress.

SS~HG

"Oh god! God! Sir oh god! I'm terribly sorry!" Her voice was rather louder than he expected and almost shrill in her unmistakeable panic. He flinched as she scrambled off his bed in a flurry of flannel and slender legs and... *a suspender?*

What kind of daft woman wears suspenders to bed? Without stockings. And is it better or worse if she wears only one?

He really didn't have any more time to devote to the mystery because Miss Granger was leaning over him, worry etched over her pale face, saying, "Oh please, sir! Please believe me when I say I *am* sorry. I didn't realise it was you. I'd already told him half a dozen times I wasn't interested and that he'd just have to wait till he got home, and he backed off each time, but then he'd just start over again, taking a different tack each time, and I really didn't want to do any permanent damage, but this last time he didn't... Well, I suppose it was *you*, actually. So, he didn't stop this time because now he was you, and of course you couldn't know what was happening and so you probably weren't able to stop before I hexed you, but I promise I never would have done it if I'd known you were you!"

Severus was a bit disturbed to realise her verbal diarrhoea had actually made sense to him.

I really must get some sleep, he decided. But, in the mean time....

"Shut up, Granger," he said, punctuating his words with as charming a smile as he could manage whilst half asleep.

At least he hoped it was charming. It was hard to judge from Miss Granger's shocked expression. Then, she likely hadn't known he was capable of charm; prior to meeting Violet, he hadn't known of his prowess, either. And although Hermione Fifty-five had confirmed its existence, *his* Miss Granger would probably need to time to become accustomed to it.

"I don't need your apologies or explanations," he assured her. "Now I'm finally home again, I just want several hours of uninterrupted sleep in my own bed."

Shaking his head, Severus tried to sit up, only to discover wobbly legs left him at a distinct disadvantage.

"Perseus' petrified prick, woman! What did you hit me with? Never mind, just help me on to the bed. No, I don't want you to attempt a counter-curse right now, just... cast a fucking Mobilicorpus and put me on the bloody bed!"

He glared at her as she hurried to do as she was told *Not too early for her to know I mean to be the bossy one here*. and would have left it at that if his old nightshirt hadn't flown up, exposing his equally worn y-fronts when she settled him into bedclothes that still carried her delectable scent.

"That voluminous sack you're drowning in can hardly be called anything so suggestive of brevity as nightie," he added to make sure she understood he couldn't be caught through such devious tricks. "It's no wonder you're single; I wonder that my predecessor was tempted!"

The shock on her face was worth all the Galleons in Gringotts, Snape decided. He was almost tempted to toss out another scathing remark, but recalled her propensity for lightning-quick mood changes and thought better of it.

"Not all men are aroused by black lace and green satin," she spat. "Not even, apparently, all Severus Snapes. Some of them have taste!" Spinning around, she started stomping around his bedroom, snatching up various items from various surfaces.

Too late, said the voice he immediately recognised as the more annoying one. *Dunderhead. Misjudged that one, didn't you? Care to give insulting her another go? Something that will leave her cooing and batty her lashes at you, this time?*

He really hated that voice.

"Give over, Hermione," he said, trying not to sound nasty, but not hiding his irritation, either. "I'm tired and cranky crankier than usual, that is and you've just jinxed me with the worst case of Jelly Legs I've ever felt for something that isn't my fault. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, all right? Can you forgive me and come over here?"

When she turned towards him, her expression slightly less mutinous than it'd been moments before, he patted the mattress next to his wobbly right thigh.

"Please?" He strained to appear contrite. "I really am sorry," he added, hoping that hearing her own words tossed back at her would further soften the witch. He let one corner of his mouth tick up. "You know what my temper is, Granger."

Oh, right. Remind her what an arse you've been the whole time you've known her. That's going to work.

"Will you shut up?" he snapped.

Granger's face flushed and her expression darkened with a return to something like its previous show of anger. He hurried to explain himself.

"No! I didn't mean *you*, Gra... er, Hermione. I was talking to one of the infernal *voices* I've been hearing since this fiasco started."

Suddenly, she looked conflicted. Her mind, he suspected, was warring between concern and...

"You've been hearing voices?" She sounded almost eager.

Ah, yes. Academic intrigue. It figures the idea of having a new symptom to study would do the trick.

"Not like you're thinking," he assured her. "I suppose it would be more accurate to say my thoughts on what's been happening have taken on the form of an internal commentary, of sorts. Since I've been of two or three minds about my situation, I've heard two or three somewhat divergent" (understating the level of opposition wasn't the same as *lying*) "opinions at times over the past few days."

A reluctant smile tugged at both corners of her mouth at that. She probably knew he was lying, he figured.

"And which one were you talking to just now?" she asked.

"The one that's been telling me always about ten seconds too late, mind everything I've done wrong."

Severus watched in triumph as her smile grew and she walked over to him.

SS~HG

Snape lay against the pillows she'd fluffed to heights they'd never before known, listening to the witch beside him on the bed. She'd started off sitting, but upon returning from retrieving her copy of The Notebook from his chest of drawers, she'd gradually relaxed until she was lounging comfortably at his side.

Her bossy voice had an oddly soothing quality to it, and Snape decided he wouldn't be averse to hearing it on a regular basis. Though it was a near thing, he didn't fall

asleep in the midst of trading the story of the past three days from each of their perspectives. Of course, she knew much of what had happened to him from reading The Notebook, so the retelling of the events on her end took up the bulk of the conversation. Merlin, but the witch could talk! Tired as he was, he comprehended (foggy brain and all) her reasons for being in his home. He even sleepily agreed that it was a good idea to have someone on hand who was both was familiar this particular version of their world and knew what was going on, and he went so far as to suggest she might remain until the mystery of the spontaneous travelling was solved.

"Well, I do have quite a bit of leave saved up," she'd told him after agreeing that that was probably another good idea. "It's not like at the French Ministry where they make you take breaks and practically pack your bags *for* you."

Her tale of Severus Two Seventy-four brought him back to full awareness. It was, at turns, too amusing and too disconcerting for him to give it only half his attention.

"I probably shouldn't have said that bit about how he couldn't turn me on even if he stuck his head up my nightie and yodelled 'God Save The Queen'," she admitted sheepishly, "because I just knew he'd see proving me wrong as a challenge. Part of me *did* wonder if he would try. Not that I would have let him; he wasn't the right Sev..."

Hermione she was definitely "Hermione" now she was curled up next to him, however platonically they both pretended it to be blushed and looked away.

"I mean, I wasn't the right Hermione." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. It was a look that gave lie to her words.

Fifty-five obviously didn't know it all! Snape decided, delighted. So the witch does want me. No reason to make this easy for her.

Putting his much-vaunted Occlumency skills to good use, he reined in the desire to chuckle at her discomfort.

"Hecate's hexad of halluces and thumbs, woman!" he snapped, instead. "If you expect me to believe you don't want me to continue what that idiot Two Seventy-four started, don't *look* at me like that?"

"Sorry." A deep flush she didn't quite hide by looking away complemented the breathy whisper.

He fought back another smile.

"Never mind," he said. "Why were you wearing a nightgown, anyway?" It occurred to him he should have asked that when he'd asked why she was in his house.

"Well, I've been up all hours for the past few days," she said, all at once looking nearly as tired as he felt. "*was* dressed earlier, but then I wanted a quick nap and he pointed out I'd been more comfortable in nightclothes." She smiled a little ruefully. "As hideous as this thing is," she tugged at the saggy bodice, "it never occurred to me he'd think my taking his suggestion was an invitation."

The idea of a different Severus thinking to get his hands on *this* Hermione, the one who should have been reserved for the wizard to lying next to her to have a go at first, vexed him beyond anything else that had happened since he'd gone to bed Thursday night. He threw himself off the bed, too consumed with anger over his counterpart's audacity to recall his legs hadn't been working half an hour earlier and that he'd ordered her not to cast the counter-curse.

Pacing about the room, he slipped into his old lecture manner without realising it.

"And nor should it have occurred to you," he said. "The only thing a man should take as an invitation for intimacy with a woman is an invitation for intimacy!"

Her wry grin told him that not only was he preaching to the converted, but that what he was saying now didn't exactly reflect what he'd said moments ago. Severus didn't especially care.

"Where the hell was the man raised, a cave in a desert?"

Hermione laughed softly. "Cokesworth, I think. In a terraced house at Spinner's End."

He pretended to scowl at her. "Where's my wand, woman? I need to hex that smile right off your pretty little face!"

She started, then grinned even harder. "Oh!" she said, scooting down the bed and onto her back.

He watched, completely fixated, as she raised her knees... and the hem of her nightdress.

Severus gave up pacing in favour of watching the revelation of a pair of well-turned legs.

"I didn't want there to be any confusion so I've been wearing it since I got here," she said cheerfully. Apparently, she was unaware of the effect her actions were having on him. Her hand tugged at the suspender circling her left thigh just above the knee as she explained, "It's wand sheath. I used an..."

"Undetectable Extension Charm," he finished for her, and was at her side before she could close her mouth. "Allow me," he murmured, sinking onto the tiny scrap of mattress next to her.

Not waiting for permission or even looking at her face he tried to ignore the temptation to stroke the smooth skin beneath the odd black material as he eased the suspender down her leg until he could pull it from her finely formed foot.

What on Earth is this made of? Nothing I've known.

"Rather than hexing me..."

The sound of her voice, breathy and hesitant, pulled him from his examination of the suspender-cum-sheath. She was smiling shyly when he met her gaze.

"I'm sure you can think of other ways to occupy my mouth."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Several."

Her tongue darted out to moisten her soft-looking lips. Was that nerves or could it be...

"Most of them would be far more pleasant than hexing," she went on. "For both of us." The last bit was almost a whisper.

That's an invitation if I've ever heard one!

Steady on, Snape. Mustn't be too hasty.

Stay out of this, you fool!

"Such as?"

Her next blush tinted her cheeks a delicate pink. Severus smirked at the sight.

When he said, "Like that, is it?" they darkened to the deepest shade of rose.

Then he took her hand in his, suggesting, "A kiss, perhaps?" and her whole face went scarlet.

A/N: "Laying the Odds" is a side bet similar to the "Don't Pass" and the "Don't Come": one wagers that the point won't be rolled before a seven. This sort of bet might be attractive to the wrong bettor, as he is still betting the player rolling the dice will lose.

Please also note, this chapter was written purely for the UST and LOLs, and it was never meant to contain any redeeming bits of plot. If you found any here, I sincerely apologise for not fully excising them.

Chapter Seven: Fools, Wearing Their Hearts on Their Sleeves

Chapter 8 of 10

When circumstances demand or allow, the wise would-be wrong bettor will fade.

Severus lifted her hand to his lips, pausing for effect just a whisper away from her soft skin. Hermione looked up at him in wide-eyed wonder. His heart tapped a curious cadence in his chest; the pulse point at her neck fluttered wildly.

Her pupils dilated till her eyes seemed nearly as black and fathomless as he knew his own to be.

The air surrounding them seemed to thicken then diminish.

She compensated with a rapid series of deep, stuttering breaths.

His jaw snapped down, and he sucked in more than his share of the available oxygen in a gaping yawn.

She snatched her hand back, saying, "Oh!" for what had to be close to the hundredth time that afternoon. "You poor thing! You must be extremely exhausted."

Severus turned away, muttering an irritated, "Or distinctly disinterested," before his brain had time to stop him.

There you go again with the insults and alliteration! And your breath likely caused as much offense as your words.

Fuck off. He was too tired to even put much venom into mentally scolding himself. Besides, he knew the hated voice was right. This time.

Except...

He glanced back at the witch lounging next to him.

Except, rather than glaring at him as he deserved, Hermione Granger was smiling gently.

"Here. I'll go so you can lie down," she said, patting his bed.

"No," he said. Obviously his mouth was still operating without input from his brain.

"Erm, that is to say... What?" Her wide eyes grew wider with worry and confusion. "You *don't* want to lie down?"

I must seem a right idiot, Severus thought. *Or insane, more like. Barely able to...* another huge yawn interrupted the thought. *Barely able to keep my eyes open or even stand on my own feet.*

He considered sending her to rifle through his library in search of milder invigorating spells (which he knew she wouldn't find) or to defile his kitchen with her wretched cocoa.

I might at least get a coffee out of that. Surely one of the other know-it-alls taught her how. Or, maybe that pervert who stuck his... my.our head up her skirt? Good god, I need to sleep!

Dealing with embarrassment had never been one of his stronger suits, and exhaustion didn't improve his facility in the least. In the end, however, both the sad concern painting her face and his own keen desire for a cuddle won out. Not that he intended to alert her to that last bit.

"No," he told her, carefully modulating his tone. "I meant, I would like to have a rest, but I would prefer you to remain and, er, continue filling me on what has been happening."

She parted her perfect little lips to protest that *hereally* needed to sleep, no doubt but he cut her off before she could begin.

"There's no need to start at the beginning," he warned. "Your fifty-fifth incarnation was kind enough to explain much of what the others held back. Unfortunately, I was wrenched away before she could..." *Before she could bewitch me out of the rest of my clothes?* Something told him saying that wouldn't end well for him. Good job he was used to thinking quickly. "Before she could tell me about the days immediately leading up to my recent adventures."

For a moment, he thought she would refuse.

"All right." She was giving him another of those soft smiles.

And patting his bed again.

Merlin, I hope I stay awake!

SS~HG

"You nearly slept with her!" Granger sat, knees drawn up to her chest, on the bed next to him and waved her copy of the blasted Notebook as if it were a criminal indictment.

Still groggy and grouchy, Severus wondered how often his sleep would be interrupted. Despite her protests that it was nearly all about the Violets, he'd convinced her to share the most recent updates from the book. And he'd drifted off to the sound of a voice he found increasingly... necessary, as well as to thoughts of a little girl who wasn't his daughter but could have been. He certainly hadn't expected to be awakened so soon, or in such an unpleasant way.

He scrubbed the edge of his hand across his eyes, wincing at his own harsh treatment of his person. But it did the trick; he was fully awake.

Sitting up, he leant over to peer more closely at his companion. Her eyes were red, her skin blotchy. The book she still held aloft, however, seemed different to what he recalled. It was narrower and not quite as long. No, he decided, it wasn't The Notebook, after all.

"Ahh, poring over the secrets your little faction of Hermiones keep from the rest, are you?" He let his lips slip into a derisive smirk. "How Slytherin of you. I have to admit I'm impressed."

Granger glared at him. "Well?"

Severus sighed and ran his hand over his face again, but far more gently this time.

"Well, *what*, Granger?" As amusing as he found her, his patience was already growing thin. *And left to her own devices, she'll probably take hours to answer!*

He stretched over to twitch the book from her hands, but she snatched it out of his reach before shoving it between her breasts and her knees.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" Her brow furrowed, and her lips twisted in distaste. "How to you intend to excuse what you did?"

For just a moment, Severus was confused. Then understanding came so quickly he almost laughed aloud.

The witch means to play "wife" before the wedding, does she? This will be fun!

It had been a long time since he'd had anything like "fun" in his life. Come to think of it, had he ever?

"I don't intend to excuse myself," he told her, "because I don't need excuses.

"If by 'sleep with' you mean I achieved a state of unconsciousness at her side," he went on, his voice oozing the kind of disdain he hadn't got to use since his Hogwarts days, "then I *did*, in fact, sleep with her. There's no 'nearly' to it. Just as I 'slept with *you*."

Granger's face turned the colour of beetroot and her luscious lips nearly disappeared in a magnificent display of ire.

"You know what I mean! You didn't only 'achieve a state of unconsciousness' with her. If you hadn't travelled exactly when you did, you would have had sex with her!"

She's making it far too easy for me, really.

"What? When I travelled, I was barely awake again!" he roared back, making certain she couldn't perceive just how much he was enjoying the exchange. "But even *if* ~~had~~ had sex with Ms Fifty-five, why should that matter to *you*, Miss Granger?"

"It doesn't!" She folded her arms round her knees but, tellingly, looked away. Severus smirked at the faint flush colouring the cheek turned towards him. "But it should matter to *you*," she muttered. "She's a married woman."

"Whose husband not only condones and encourages her activities, but also engages in similar behaviour."

"That's no excuse!"

Severus took perverse pleasure in watching her reaction to his disinterested-sounding, "Isn't it? Not that it matters as I've already said I haven't got an excuse."

Because he knew she knew and he could tell she knew he knew she knew she had no leg to stand on because she still refused to look at him, instead settling for a disgruntled "Hmpf!" and a surly frown.

His cheeks hurt from committing unfamiliar contortions. Plainly, he was as close to grinning like a dunderhead as he'd ever been in his life. But he could hardly be bothered to stop.

Hermione Granger Two Seventy-three was as drawn to him as he was to her.

And yet, he also knew the witch could be as stubborn as he was wont to be. As distasteful as he might find it, Severus realised it was time to bring out the heavily artillery. Mustering the full complement of cunning in his arsenal, he rearranged his expression into something he hoped looked solemn, at least, if not woefully forlorn.

"Please, Hermione," he pretended to plead. He waited until she looked at him, her gaze hesitant but hopeful, before continuing. "Put yourself in my place. Imagine what it must be like to be torn without warning from the only world you've known. For days I lived in constant anxiety, never knowing where I would next open my eyes."

He watched her expression soften, compassion and chagrin painting her features. Then he moved in for the kill.

"And I have been so very... *lonely* these past years."

When she didn't speak, only stared at him, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, he wondered if he'd over-played his hand. But then she closed her mouth with an audible ~~snap~~ and abruptly stood, and he knew he'd won this round, at least.

"Hermione, wait!" he called as she stormed towards the door. He didn't really expect her to stop, but wasn't surprised when she did. She didn't turn towards him, either, he noted. "Please," he said, forcing even more sorrow into his tone.

You'll go to Hell for this, the annoying voice taunted. *Or at least piss her off rather than get what you want from her.*

"Don't go," he pleaded anyway. "I have been lonely for most of my life, but each time I travelled, I got a glimpse of what might have been if I'd... I saw what I might have had if I'd had..."

He let his words trail off, suddenly aware that he wasn't feigning the longing any longer. That last bit had revealed more than he liked to admit even to himself.

"What was she like, Severus?" she whispered. "Violet?"

His chest constricted. *Why is she asking me that?*

"Like me, to look at," he said, almost against his will. "At least at first glance. But looking closer, there is a warmth, a sense of affection... There is a... loveliness she could only have got from her mother."

Fuck! I must sound a right sop!

But it also worked.

Granger spun on her heel and very nearly flew towards him, that smaller version of The Notebook still clutched in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Severus!" she cried. Falling onto the bed, the little Notebook gripped in one small fist, she awkwardly clambered over to within six inches of where he lay. Without looking up from the small strip of space between them, she spoke again. "I've thought about it too."

Her eyes shined with unshed tears when they finally met his.

"I wanted to tell you. Everything. I... I thought... You had a right to know." She looked away, tears and a guilty flush staining her face. "It's only... The rules, and... other things."

Rules you were perfectly willing to break when it suited you he thought. And yet, he suspected he knew exactly what those "other things" were. Because he couldn't promise she wasn't or more accurately, the other living Severuses weren't right about what he would have chosen had he known about the curse before experiencing everything he'd experienced in the past couple of days, he didn't reply.

Not being able to lash out left him at a loss. Severus stared at her profile for several moments before reaching out and running his thumb across her wet cheek. She sucked in a shuddering breath. Emboldened by her response, he snatched the bedclothes from beneath her and snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, her quiet voice further muffled because her face was pressed up against his chest. Severus grimaced at the snot and tears seeping through his nightshirt, but didn't push her away or let go.

"So am I," he said, surprising himself by meaning it.

She felt good, curled against him as she was and, giving in to a sudden impulse, he tipped up her chin and used a fistful of her nightgown to clean her face. Before he could talk himself out of it, he was leaning forward and brushing his lips over hers.

There wasn't any passion in the kiss for one thing, it was over as quickly as it had begun, and he was tired enough still that his prickly prick didn't try to join in but he felt better for having done it. She *looked* better after.

"Go to sleep, Hermione," he murmured, tucking her back against his damp chest. "You must be nearly as exhausted as I am."

And to his great relief, she only nodded her head and clung to him, the little Notebook gripped in one small fist.

Severus rearranged the blankets and sheet so that they were both well covered, then closed his eyes again.

She tastes like heaven, too, was his last thought before sleep reclaimed him.

SS~HG

Severus wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but it was dark outside by the time he opened his eyes again. He felt more refreshed and more alert than he had in days. If not for needing the loo, he would have been content to remain wrapped around and wrapped in the arms of Hermione Granger.

Just thinking about the witch he was holding alerted something other than his mind. Even with sleep-creases on her cheeks and a hideous shroud masquerading as sleepwear, she managed to move him. Knowing that his growing problem would only interfere with gaining relief for the older, more pressing problem, he deemed it best to leave the bed before things got out of hand.

"Now you want to work," he scolded his troublesome tadger. "Well, you'll just have to wait! At least till she wakes. More likely, for ever."

Hermione murmured grumpily when he extricated himself from her embrace, but didn't wake.

It made sense to shower (and take care of that other need while he was at it) once he was up, and then to dress in clothes of his own. He emerged from the bathroom to meet the strongest test he'd faced since Tom Riddle's defeat.

The temptation to wriggle the little Notebook from her fingers, or even to take up the larger one she'd discarded on his bedside table proved almost stronger than his will.

Almost.

Rather than give in and risk losing whatever it was that was happening between them, he crept in stocking feet downstairs. Once there, he made his way to the alcove off his sitting room which housed his desk.

The search for an alternate meaning for "Abbas" took longer than he liked most sites only confirmed the "severe" definition Fifty-five had admitted. But upon learning that the name might almost mean "the lion," he snorted aloud *Sneaky little witch!* and moved on with the rest of his business on the internet.

Finding the page he'd long ago bookmarked didn't take long, and he was three chapters into the old favourite when he heard Hermione approach the alcove where he kept his computer. He suspected she'd been in a bit of a panic when she'd awakened to find him gone, and the thought of her gasping for breath while frantically scanning the room made him smirk.

"You haven't gone. Thank god!"

Having decided allowing her to suffer a bit longer wouldn't go amiss (*The lion, indeed!*), he spared her only the briefest of glances before returning his attention to the words on the screen.

"Yes, I'm still here," he replied without looking her way again.

"Well, erm..." She faltered for a moment.

I wonder, Granger, are you chewing your lovely lower lip?

"Well, then maybe we can assume this means it's really over," she offered. "Whatever it was, I mean," she continued. "Erm, maybe..."

He *did* turn again then, pinning her with what he knew was a look intent and intense enough to make her squirm where she stood.

And she squirms sonically, doesn't she? Pity she's not absolutely sure she's annoyed me again.

"Miss Granger," he began, stifling a grin; a wrong-footed Granger was too delicious not to enjoy, but letting her know he took pleasure in her discomfiture would likely scuttle his plans... "Have you ever actually *read* any of Wildcat's fan fiction?"

She stopped squirming to step closer (*Thank all that is good and holy!*), saying, "Of course I have. I've read her entire oeuvre!"

Mustn't give myself away. Not when I have her where I want her: on the defensive!

"In that case, did it never occur to you that Spock never 'travelled' spontaneously?"

He gestured her even closer so she could see the part he'd highlighted. Absently, he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her into his lap. She settled there as if she'd been doing so for years, bracing her elbows on the old wooden desk and leaning forward to read.

The Etrian touched the small device, and Spock saw that she was communicating telepathically just as the captain had done in the first universe.

Suddenly, the dizziness returned. Spock closed his eyes briefly, and when he looked up again, he saw that the Etrian team had changed. He also saw that in Kirk's place sat Uhura. Exceedingly relieved to see her alive and well, he nevertheless raised an eyebrow when he looked closer at her uniform and found a captain's insignia. And when he glanced at his own insignia, he found the bars of a commander.

Fascinating. Could the jump from one universe to the next be tied to the Etrians' communication devices?

SS~HG

His revelation observation, whatever had the desired effect. Eventually.

"I don't know." Hermione was slumped in one of the shabby armchairs in the sitting room proper. Seated too far away in a matching chair, Severus missed the weight of her on his legs. He hoped she was also missing the closer contact. "I wish I could say it was over, but we haven't figured out what started you travelling in the first place," she said. "I mean, even if, as you say, it's not spontaneous... We don't even know who's doing this or why. Who knows how long this will last? It might be for ever, or you could be snatched away in the next instance."

The sadness he saw in her face made his stomach twist in a whole new way.

"I know."

She sat forward, face brightening at his words. "You do?" Then, *How?*

Snape sneered. *Infernal Gryffindor optimism!*

"I don't know whether this is the end," he explained, hoping to stave off any further displays undue enthusiasm, "but I think I know how it began. I'm sure of it."

Hermione leant back again, this time frowning and tense.

"Well, of course you know how it began. We've explained all that, even if it took a..."

"No," he interrupted. "I mean I believe I've worked out why Two Seventy-four and I were included in this round of travelling."

A/N: I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Star Trek fanfic writer, Wildcat, for not only writing *A Roll of the Dice*, the inspiration for this story, but also for encouraging me to write this one and allowing me to quote her exquisite story. Thanks so much, Wildcat!

In private games of craps, to "fade" or to "fade [someone]" is to bet against the shooter.

Chapter Eight: Playing His Part Well

Chapter 9 of 10

A bettor who's had a change of heart, might expect his luck has also changed. This might be a good time for a leap of faith... and for betting The Hard Way.

Severus hadn't felt like going to the large supermarket outside Cokeworth, but Hermione had declared the contents of his cupboards as not worth mention, and for more than a decade the grocer down the street had been closing on Sundays in protest of "that bad business in '94."

"If I hadn't been detained against my will these past two days, I would have gone yesterday," he pointed out whilst dejectedly (if affected dejection counted) pushing the trolley Hermione was rapidly filling with items she swore they would need for the next week.

"We could have gone yesterday," she said, sounding far too cheerful, "if you hadn't insisted we discuss *everything* as soon as I woke up. Or, you could have woken me earlier instead of reading fan fiction and whinging about what to name your non-existent offspring."

"You needed the sleep as much as I did," he snapped. (A display of anger was more palatable than the idea of showing she'd hurt his feelings.) "Probably more."

"Well, I suppose I *could* go home..."

Severus decided he'd come to a good place for shutting up.

SS~HG

"But it still doesn't make sense!" She paced his small, shabby kitchen, crossing her arms over her chest as she spun away from him.

Must look into building into the house next door Snape thought, watching her spin on her toes after taking only seven steps.

"Anyway, I don't see why or *how*, for that matter she would..."

He cut her off rather neatly with, "You've not had the pleasure of meeting her."

"I have! I've known all of them for years longer..."

"Exchanging pleasantries and research in between fomenting rebellion is not the same thing," he insisted.

"But I..."

"You've never been in her presence." *Nimue's nipples! Will the witch die for giving up an argument?*

"Fine! I've never met her, and you have. Happy?" Hermione stopped pacing to glare at him. "Even if you're right, I see no reason *for you* to be the one to deal with this."

She thought it was stupid and risky. And it was, but Severus didn't really see an alternative. Well, not one that gave him some semblance of power over his own destiny, anyway.

"Hand me that boning knife," he said, pointing his chin at a slightly curved strip of metal bolted to the wall. A half-array of knives were fanned out across its magnetised surface. "I am the *only* one fit to deal with this particular problem as I think best," he added as she complied.

Knows her knives, however quarrelsome she gets he thought approvingly. *Useful in the kitchen or the lab. It's no wonder so many of me married so many of her.* He noted the high colour still staining her cheeks. *And the stropiness has its own merit.*

She clenched and unclenched her fists several times, opening and closing her mouth nearly as often whilst she stared at him. Fighting a smirk, Severus set about filleting the fish that would be their dinner if she didn't hex him in the meantime.

"Now you're just being ridiculous! Or a control freak! Or both!" The condemnations were bellowed in her bossiest tones. "Probably both." The last bit was uttered in a barely audible mutter.

He agreed that his need to be in charge probably all right, definitely had a lot to do with his decision, but did that really matter?

"When I need something done, and I know that I can do it the right way, I prefer to do it myself," he told her without looking up from his task. "There's nothing ridiculous about that. I've learnt the hard way depending on others can lead to disaster."

By the time the silence had lasted long enough for him to de-bone both portions of salmon, curiosity forced him to risk a glance.

Hermione was scowling at him. She was almost as good at it as he was.

"You're the one who likes to think there's not much difference between Hermiones," she said as if no time had passed at all. But she was repeating herself now, so he barely paid attention. "Why not apply the same to yourselves and ask a Severus? It makes more sense than you..."

"Because against your better judgement, I might add you decided to deny me the means of asking a Severus for a bacon sarnie," he gritted out, his jaw muscles twitching rapidly, "let alone a delicate favour such as this!"

The witch was so infuriating at times he couldn't even enjoy seeing her in a pique! He could have sworn her ghastly hair swam with magic when she was angry. Usually, it was a sight to behold. At the moment, he was too furious to notice.

But as moments passed during which she failed to respond, he felt his rage begin to dissipate. He'd already known Hermione was filled with conflicting feelings about rules. It stood to reason she'd be conflicted about *him*, as well.

"You don't look the bacon sarnie sort," she said finally.

Nonplussed at her nonsensical retort, Severus was silent for several seconds. Then, seeing that the fight had gone out of her, he let a smile spread slowly across his face and suggested, "You might give dinner a chance before passing judgement on my flair for breakfast."

"What if she tries to keep you?" she asked after another silence.

"With a host of Hermiones wielding wands in protest? I doubt she'd succeed." He shifted the salmon from the worktop to the oven. "And ~~the~~ Severus will certainly have something to say about it." *Especially if you keep insisting on sleeping in the guest room, if for no other reason!* And he won't be wandless. How does that work, by the way? The wand sheath."

"I'll tell you *after* dinner. Trust me, it's better that way."

SS~HG

"There's still time to change your mind, you know."

Severus continued stomping up the walkway, wishing he was wearing his dragonhide boots rather than the expensive-looking Muggle pair she'd procured for him. True, they looked rather well with the dark grey trousers and merino wool jumper in forest green she'd made him purchase "We aren't fussy, really, but everyone is expected to be presentable for dinner with company" but they left a lot to be desired in sheer stomping power.

"No, thank you," he murmured after a moment. He was listening with barely half an ear, but managed to give off the appearance of actually considering what she had to say. He'd got quite a bit of practise in that over the past week. It wasn't as if she ever amended her methods.

She'd moaned all through her abbreviated explanation of how she'd made his wand sheath, though she still steadfastly refused to tell him how she'd obtained the required hair and skin samples from him.

"You don't want to know. Trust me."

She moaned about having to inform Potter of their *his* plan.

"But we've kept it secret so long for a *reason*! Telling more people might lead to disaster."

"Keeping silent has *already* led to disaster! And if my theory proves wrong, we're likely dealing with a Dark wizard or witch," he pointed out. "You'll need to contact the Auror Office anyway. Why not have your dear, *trusted* friend who happens to be in line to head said office already on hand?"

She moaned when he revealed what he thought to be the best place for them to perform the spell.

"Don't be ridiculous! They aren't involved in this at all. *Why*, for heaven's sake?"

"I am never ridiculous," he said, feigning an affront he didn't really feel. In fact, he was enjoying winding her up. Obviously, fear and nervousness was making her particularly short-sighted. "They are as involved as the rest of us; more importantly, it's best that all actors are in analogous locations when we do this."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, but she'd petulantly agreed, adding, "But they'll hate it."

Of course, she moaned when it turned out she was wrong about *that* too.

"Why'd I even have to mention Violet and Abbis? Now they'll be watching me, thinking I want to have your babies!"

"Don't you?"

That comment uttered on Thursday had not only ensured he'd spent the rest of the week continuing to sleep alone, but also deprived him of receiving any more of the tentative cuddles and hesitant kisses she'd only begun to bestow on Tuesday. Two days later, he was still regretting his runaway tongue.

She moaned when he decided they needed help, after all, from "a reliable Severus and Hermione."

She moaned at having to test the spell that would cause only him and their chosen Severus to travel, though she preened a bit when he said, "If that twit Fifty-five can manage it on a regular basis, surely *you* can do it twice now and twice more when it counts!"

But then she'd moaned some more when he returned from that short trip with a Notebook of his own tucked into his sheath.

Medea's murderous mien, is there nothing that won't make her moan? Not that I'd mind if some of that moaning was from making.

"Hello! You must be Severus!" A small woman with familiar brown eyes and unfamiliar sleek brown hair was beaming a familiar smile at him. "Come inside and *welcome!* Harry's already here."

Severus attempted something approaching an amiable smile as she relieved him of his new dark grey (perfect match to the trousers, naturally) cashmere coat. He must have been successful because she stepped aside and waved him past her, saying, "He's in the sitting room with Nikos. Down the hall to your right."

Snape heard Hermione's muffled return to her mother's enthusiastic greeting as he strode into the house. He looked back in time to see the witch extricating herself from Dr Granger Two seventy-three *pater's* embrace. Smirking to himself, he turned before she caught him looking and followed the sound of voices to a comfortable-looking lounge.

A comfortable-looking man sat in a comfortable-looking chair, talking easily with a comfortable-looking Harry bloody Potter. The man presumably Dr Granger Two seventy-three *pater*, if the mass of bushy brown curls was anything to judge by leapt to his feet as Severus entered the room. Potter took his own time standing.

"Mr Snape! Or shall I call you Severus? I suppose it should be Severus, shouldn't it?" Granger was nearly as tall and thin as Severus himself, and his long-legged stride carried him to the threshold almost before Severus had fully crossed it.

"Welcome, Severus. Welcome," Two seventy-three *pater* went on without waiting for an answer to his either of his questions. His right hand closed around Severus's in a surprisingly strong grip, and he covered both hands with his left. His blue eyes twinkled in a manner reminiscent of a certain dead deranged wizard.

"Helen and I are pleased to finally meet you," he continued, pumping Severus's arm up and down as enthusiastically as his wife had hugged Hermione. He punctuated each word with firm slapping of their clasped hands with the one he had free. "We're very excited about all this, Severus. Helen especially. You could probably tell she was very happy to hear about what's happened. Or what *could* happen, hey?" Dr Two seventy-three *pater* gave a little laugh and a wink, but didn't move to release Severus or to end the vigorous handshake. "That's not to say that I'm *not* excited. Oh, I am! Haven't been this excited since that owl came and we finally learnt what was what with our little girl! Oh! Just imagine, Severus. But you won't even have to wonder, will you? You probably won't bat an eye when you see your kids' toys go flying... Er, that is to say, *you* wouldn't need to wonder *if* you had kids doing magical things."

Two seventy-three *pater* winked again and stopped the hand-pumping, but he didn't let go or stop patting.

"But we..." Pat. Pat. "...really *are* happy..." Pat. Pat. Pat. "...to have you here..." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. "...and so *excited!*" Pat. Pat. Pat. "Hermione hasn't done much magic around us." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. "Not after Australia, as you might well know." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. "But now you're here..." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. "...Hermione told us this was all your idea..." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. "...so we have *you* to thank, and we're ever so grateful for the opportunity." Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat.

Turms's tongue, now I know who gave her that mouth! And why she likes touching so much.

But, not wanting to make a poor impression so soon into their acquaintance, Severus managed not to pull away or even roll his eyes. However, spotting Potter off to the side, smirking at his predicament, tested his mettle.

"You're welcome, er, Dr Granger."

"Dr Granger!" Dr Granger (finally) let go. "Oh no, young man!" *Young man?* "I'll stand for none of that. You had better call me..."

"Daddy, let Severus go so he can sit down, and we can come in," Hermione ordered from hall behind him. But her tone was full of barely restrained laughter and indulgent affection, and Severus felt his heart squeeze the tiniest bit at the sound of it.

Harry Potter doubled over, shaking with silent laughter.

SS~HG~HP~NG... and HG

"Are you sure, Sev?" Nick Granger leant forward in his chair, and a brief image of the man eagerly waving his hand flashed across Severus's mind. "Helen and I are perfectly willing to help out."

"I'm afraid there really isn't anything for you to do," Severus told the visibly disappointed dentist.

"But surely we can..."

"Nikos! He said there's nothing for us to do. *We are* Muggles, in case you've forgotten." Helen glared at her husband before flashing another beaming smile at Severus.

Severus smiled back and made a mental note to ask her for tips on containing loquacious tendencies.

"Right," said Hermione. "I'm the only one who'll be doing anything." She exchanged glances with Harry bloody Potter, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

Since when has the boy learnt subtlety?

"Whenever you and... Sev are ready, Hermione." Potter chuckled at his own idiocy.

SS~HG

He tried not to wince while the churning sensation faded from his middle, but the look of concern on Helen Granger's face told him he'd failed.

"I guess you're not ours, then," she said with a soft smile. "Hermione is upstairs 'doing research', or as I like to call it 'hiding'. Best get it over with before she comes down, I suppose."

She wiped floury hands on a kitchen towel and indicated that Severus should do the same. For the first time since he'd arrived, he noticed he was nearly elbow deep in fragrant dough.

"She'll just have to wait for her Mummy cakes," Helen told him. "Follow me."

They found Violet regaling Nick, as the man's counterpart had insisted everyone but his wife and close relatives called him (in a long and rambling explanation finally curtailed by his daughter's "Severus doesn't care, Daddy!"), with plans for the weeks ahead.

Severus watched from the doorway, a small but joy-filled smile curving his lips. The unfamiliar facial contortion gave his cheeks cramp, but that wasn't reason enough to stop him relishing the feeling inspiring it. He didn't even flinch when Helen Granger squeezed his shoulder before slipping back to the kitchen.

The little girl stopped mid-chatter to peer at him closely. After a moment, a brief flicker of delight crossed her face, only to be replaced almost immediately by a cautious neutrality.

She'll be a Slytherin, he thought, not for the first time.

"What are you doing here, Undaddy?" Violet asked. The faux-casual tone made Severus's lips twitch.

Definitely Slytherin.

He didn't notice Nick slipping from the room in his wife's wake.

SS~VS

She might be destined for Slytherin, Severus decided half an hour later, but Violet Snape could be as obstinate as the witch who'd given her life.

"But it's what he wanted, Undaddy!" she moaned for what must have been the fiftieth time. "~~He said~~ it on his birthday! *I heard* him."

He groaned. Audibly. He considered calling the Grangers for assistance, but reflected not without warrant that doing so would only bring his insistence on doing this himself back to haunt him.

"No doubt you were listening at your parents' door again," he muttered, and to his surprise (and secret relief) the little girl finally showed some sign of guilt. "Darling, I know you only wanted to make your daddy happy, but you must see this wasn't the way to do it. To be honest, I don't even see how it *cou...*"

Violet moved close to where he still knelt in spite of the ache creeping into his knees. Her dark eyes were wide and sad beneath the weight of her unfortunate eyebrows.

"He said he'd be happy if *you* were happy, Undaddy," she whispered morosely. "He said that's the only other thing he wanted, but Mummy and me didn't get him anything like *that*."

Tears welled in her huge eyes, and Severus did the only thing he could: spreading his arms, he swept the daughter who wasn't his (but who could have been, had things been different) into a secure embrace.

"Oh, *Violet*," he whispered against her tangle of dark curls.

SS~HG

"Wish magic?" Helen Granger stared at him, both brows raised, from across the dining table.

"Wish magic," he confirmed. "I gather you experienced the results of it many times before you knew Hermione was a witch."

"Oh, yes!" Nick Granger smiled and rubbed his hands together. "It wasn't just the toys, you see; she got also got quieter and more and more secretive. Why, there were times when we didn't hear a peep out of her for hours! You can't imagine what she was like before, having met her after the magic, but Hermione used to talk and talk."

Severus avoided looking at Potter, who he knew would be having just as difficult a time holding back laughter.

"He doesn't want to hear about me as a kid, Daddy," Hermione said. "And anyway, I want to know more about what happened with Violet."

"Yes, Severus," Helen chimed in. "Tell us more about that. What was the poor child wishing for?"

"Nothing for herself, as it happens," he said, addressing the entire group and taking care to make eye contact with everyone. "She overheard a private conversation between her parents."

"The only thing I might wish for now," Severus Fifty-three told his wife, "is that every Severus who hasn't yet experienced the sort of happiness I've found could one day at least know what it's like to be me."

"Oh, shut up!" Hermione Fifty-three said. "You won't get lucky tonight by pretending to be soppy."

"You wound me, witch! I meant every word. Besides, it's my birthday."

"Well, since it's your birthday..."

"So Violet decided it was up to her to get her daddy what he'd *really* wanted for his birthday. A few sneak peeks into her mum's Notebook, and wish magic took care of the rest."

Now, avoiding the gazes he'd just taken pains to meet, Severus tucked into the excellent dinner he and Nick had prepared. And if he didn't show any outward sign of pleasure when Hermione's left hand slipped under the table to rest on his right thigh, well, that was a *good* thing, wasn't it?

A/N: A "hard way bet" is a wager that a shooter will throw a 4, 6, 8 or 10 by tossing pairs, that is throwing two 2s, two 3s... you get the picture.

The "bad business of '94" was the failure of the Sunday Trading Act 1994, which heralded the failure of the Keep Sunday Special campaign.

Finally, my deepest thanks to linlawless for the quick and flawless beta read.

Epilogue: Right Bettor

Chapter 10 of 10

The odds might not be as favourable, but the Wrong Bettor will find becoming Right makes the game less lonely.

Waking was a sensation not unlike being ripped from the liquid comfort of his mother's womb, Severus supposed. Without even opening his eyes, he knew he was alone in his bed. Again. Still. Just as he had done every morning for the past three months, he took a moment to remind himself that *this* was his real life. Dreams and fantasies were nothing more than the offspring of whimsy.

You brought this on yourself, imbecile! It's your fault she isn't here with us!

Make up your mind! Either we are one or we are two!

But of course, it was his fault they... *he* was alone because he'd made all the wrong choices, said all the wrong things.

Then...

Hermione's hand had crept, slow and warm, up his thigh beneath her parents' table. Helen and Nick made pleasant conversation about the nature of magic and asked for explanations of things their daughter had apparently never explained. Harry bloody Potter grinned inanely between forkfuls of food.

"That's so interesting!" Helen exclaimed, having quickly grasped the concept of Arithmancy and its implications. "I'd imagine Hermione would really like that subject."

Severus glanced at the woman whose hand was currently climbing towards dangerous territory. The look in her eyes had him quickly returning his gaze to Helen lest he embarrass himself and everyone else.

"Your daughter was said to be an excellent student of Arithmancy," he managed to say. He fervently hoped no one noticed the strain in his voice.

"The best in our year!" added Potter. The boy had the audacity to wink at Severus.

"She never said a word about it," Nick put in. "She never told us much of anything about her studies at that school of yours. I guess we Muggles didn't rate. Our own daughter, Severus! Can you imagine, never telling us her own parents that she was among the greatest Arithmanceress! Or is that Arithmancitian?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, Helen grimaced, saying, "Oh, Nikos" while Potter choked on a forkful of roast chicken. Severus was surprised to find himself defending Nick with, "Has your father-in-law finally learnt the difference between felly tone and a telephone, Potter?"

The comment was met with laughter from everyone but the bewildered Nick, and an unfamiliar sensation nothing unpleasant coiled in Severus's belly.

Dinner had continued in that manner, and by the time Potter rose from the table, claiming, "Ginny and the kids will be back from the Burrow soon", Severus knew this was a life he wouldn't mind getting used to.

Potter's winks and grins and genuinely welcoming smiles ceased to grate. So did one Granger's incessant chatter. And he truly enjoyed the other Granger's intelligent conversation. But nothing was so nice as *his* Granger, who might not have been ready to share his bed over the past week, but still did naughty things to him under the table.

And later...

Alone together in her tiny, tidy flat, she didn't seem so reluctant, after all. The kisses, perfectly designed to leave them both a bit dunderheaded for minutes at a time, had started on the steps leading up to her building. They'd made the walk up to her second-storey flat three times as long as it needed to be.

Those kisses got her out of her blouse, and when he looked up from the silky scrap of nothing posing as her brassiere, she gave him a cheeky grin.

"Front clasp," she said. "I was hoping..." Then she took his hands in hers to show him why front-clasping bras would ever after be his favourite foundation garment.

But, as had always been true for Severus Snape, all good things eventually came to an end.

He'd just edged his thumb across a tightly beaded nipple, eliciting the most delicious moan from his delectable Miss Granger, when green light flared from her fireplace.

"Hermione? Oh!" A pale green face with darker green freckles stared at them, wide-eyed, before turning away just enough to shout into whatever room it was in, "Oh, Harry! You were *right*! He's there with her right now, and it looks like I'm interrupting." Severus heard a soft chuckle. "Hermione hasn't got a shirt on, and Snape looked just like James the time Teddy hid his teddy!"

The head withdrew completely *finally!* but it was no use. The name "James" was like a bucket of icy water to his libido, and Severus deflated faster than a balloon mistaken for a pincushion.

Undaunted, Hermione had wrapped her arms round his neck and murmured, "Next time one of us needs to block the Floo."

Now

Not that there'd been a next time. Not quite like that, anyway. The interruption had brought him close to his senses.

He'd suggested a bit of caution, moving a bit more slowly.

"You're right," she'd agreed. "I guess we both got caught up in... everything. Of course we should slow down." Only, she'd taken "caution" and "slow down" to levels he

hadn't actually been striving for.

At first, he'd been beyond happy to put the series of escapades behind him.

Or so you conveniently told yourself.

He knew better than to chalk any of it up to the nightmare he'd originally imagined it to be; the three days his calendar claimed he'd missed made sure of that. And he was pragmatic enough not to hope he was safe from it happening again, no matter the combined intentions of two hundred ninety-four Hermione Grangers/Granger-Snapes/Granger-Weasleys/Granger-Weasley-Snapes. Even they, he suspected, would find thwarting the whims and wishes of several headstrong little girls formidable. Children, after all, were known to frequently lack impulse control.

Since Granger and her two annoying friends had spent six years making a habit of showing up whenever he least wanted them in his vicinity, he'd expected her to come back straight away.

You mean you wanted her to come back next day!

Instead, he'd spent a blissful five days alone in his home. He had almost an entire nearly delightful week of solitude in which he could pretend he wasn't thinking about her intellectual growth and that thoughts of her physical maturation (and her hands and her lips and her soft skin) didn't distract him during dull moments of Potions research.

But by the end of the week he'd started to miss her.

Might as well tell the truth when it's just us!

Merlin's saggy sack! Can't I even wallow in my grief without you providing opposing commentary?

Not if you're going to lie to ourselves, no.

Severus harrumphed, still not risking opening his eyes.

But by the end of the week *To the hottest hell with "slow!"* he'd been burning to see her again, to kiss her again, to hold her again.

Then...

"I missed you, too," she'd whispered against his chest.

He pried himself out of her ironclad embrace and led her into his house. The first changes were so tiny, he thought he might need to point them out, but she noticed everything. And she was eager to help him make bigger ones.

Neither one of them saw much of anyone else over the next month. There was hardly time when they spent every evening and all five weekends preparing the shabby house at Spinner's End for its eventual close-up.

"For all the work I'm doing, I'll have to ask for an ownership share when we're through," Hermione told him. She was teasing.

"I'll have to keep your demands in mind," Severus replied. He was dead serious.

It shouldn't have been a problem, and in spite of all sorts of hints even one of her dunderheaded friends could have recognised Severus hadn't been prepared for any opposition to his proposition, er, strategy.

He already owned the house next door. Renovation plans were surprisingly easy to procure. There was nothing stopping them from getting on with it.

Nothing except one Hermione Jean Granger, the two hundred and seventy-third known witch of that name.

"What do you mean, 'no'? How can you say 'no'?"

Hermione placed a hand on his forearm and gently squeezed. "I'm not saying 'no', Severus." She smiled, but he saw that her lips trembled just a bit. "I'm saying 'maybe, but not yet'. We... I need time to... to explore what this is between us, to learn what's best for both of us."

"What is there to learn and explore?" he snapped. "We've known each other nearly fifteen years! Either you want this or you don't!"

"But that's just it we *don't* know each other. Not really." Her voice and expression were so earnest and resolute, he'd known better than to argue. "Last week we couldn't even get through a decent snog without both of us going a little mental."

About *that* at least.

"So why can't you get to know me whilst living here? You didn't seem to mind spending a week sleeping in my childhood bed. What's changed?"

Her face turned red with what he instinctively knew wasn't embarrassment.

"Didn't mind? Of course I minded!" she fumed. "But you didn't give me much choice in the matter, did you? Not if I wanted to know if your little solution would work."

"I gave you a choice," he countered. "In fact, if you'll remember, the sleeping arrangements were *your* preference."

He hadn't thought her lovely face could turn any darker than it already had. He was wrong.

Now

Severus grimaced at the remembered conversation.

Just as embarrassing was his reaction when she'd flounced towards his front door: he'd practically *begged* her not to leave.

"Running away, Granger? Aren't you getting a bit overwrought over a little teasing?"

"It's either leave or hex you again, Snape!"

And then she'd done both.

He lay on the floor, his jelly-like legs unable to support his weight, thinking he'd never wanted her more than in the moment she'd slammed the door behind her.

Mornings like this one told another story.

Then...

Two days later, she was back before he'd even dragged himself from bed. And the next day, and the next and the one after that. Each morning, she watched him closely as he made his coffee before joining him at the kitchen table for a quick cup of chocolate before she left again for work.

Evenings and weekends went back to what he'd come to consider normal, only now he had her mornings, too. She was nearly living with him as it was, but he was careful not to point that out. Severus was clever enough to pretend patience.

"I'm not so much of an imbecile not to recognise when I need to change tactics," he told her. "If you need more time to learn what I'm already certain of, I'll give you time."

Hermione wanted so badly to believe in him, she fell for it without much scepticism.

"Oh, thank god, Severus!" She beamed at him, making his insides quiver like he was Travelling. "I don't want you thinking I don't want you... I just need to ~~be~~ sure."

Relieved she hadn't asked him how much time he was willing to give, Severus tried an indulgent smile. Because, being absolutely sure, himself, he had a plan. And he needed her trust if it were to succeed.

"Of course you do, darling," he said, pulling her in for a kiss designed to leave them as imbecilic as that sort of kiss always did.

Their interactions had already proved her to be as brave as the Gryffindor she'd once been while doing a good job of being as cunning and ambitious as Merlin, that greatest Slytherin of all. Thorough readings of The Notebook, The Account and even The Little Notebook (which he knew she'd only *pretended* to accidentally leave at his home one evening) had painted a picture of a witch who was as brilliant as a Ravenclaw and as loyal as a Hufflepuff. That last side of her personality was going to get him what he wanted.

By the end of the second week since her (second) return, he'd finished brewing fertility and anti-contraception potions.

Those second and third aspects of her personality prevented him from slipping her either brew.

"This is just like when Ron left, you know! He had this pretty picture of what our lives would be without even asking me if I wanted to paint it that way. And when he found out I didn't, first he tried to trick me into it, then he walked away rather than compromise when I caught him at it!"

Now

But he knew that last skirmish had been beyond the pale, and after four days had gone by without word from the bushy-haired harridan, he had given up on her making an appearance and was feeling more than a bit irritated over what he considered to be her poor manners.

She could at least come here and finish the argument, damn her ridiculously beautiful brown eyes!

Right, because a witch owes the wizard who would have impregnated her without her consent or even her knowledge a chance to explain himself.

I wouldn't have actually done it. I knew she would find me out.

Wouldn't you have?

I don't know.

So, it was a surlier than usual Severus Snape who eventually opened his eyes in the shabby-looking room in the run-down house at Spinner's End later that morning.

That is, he was a surlier than usual Severus Snape until he realised exactly *what* had wakened him.

He didn't bother with throwing a dressing gown over his tattered nightshirt or with slipping his wand from the skin-and-hair sheath he still wore on his left forearm. No thief or enemy could get past his wards. And what sort of thief stopped to make coffee?

SS~HG

"Fifty-three informs me that any idiot even one of our dunderheaded friends can learn to brew a halfway decent cup using a cafetiere. Doing the same with a percolator takes a master. I don't know that I'm a master, but Mum who is very definitely a master said I can make a decent pot."

She faced the worktop below his cupboards, her back to the kitchen doorway. Even after she'd poured him a steaming cup, she didn't turn.

"Your mother is a wise woman with exquisite taste," said Severus. "I'm prepared to accept her word on the matter."

"She also said a couple can't survive if only one of them is making all the decisions."

He didn't move beyond the threshold.

"As I said, your mother is wise. Wiser by far than a wizard who never learnt till recently what it is to be a man. First, because he was too angry and stubborn to grow up. Then because his life was not his own. But finally, because he became too accustomed to behaving like a sullen boy to even consider growing up."

"Idiot man," she muttered.

But he heard. And he heard the longing and the affection, and that was enough to give him... No, he wouldn't ever *think* the word. Severus stepped into the room, and she turned as he reached her.

"I *am* sorry, Hermione. What I almost did was unforgiveable, but I hope you will forgive me, anyway."

"We can't make a Violet." Eyes wide with trepidation, she chewed her lower lip. "It's too late for that."

He smirked, and then he decided to take a risk. If she planned to stay, she'd really have to get used to it.

"If you apply your supposedly prodigious intellect to the matter, you will find 'Ellen' is a suitable tribute to both our dams. Don't get any ridiculous ideas about having 'Abuses', either," he said before finally giving in to the desire to pull her to him. "Besides, flower names are overrated."

The arms about his waist tightened as if she were acknowledging his blatant lie.

"I wouldn't have tried to tweak the curse and find her, you know," he said because he both loved and hated that she so easily saw through him and because he couldn't resist getting in one last dig; he was certain the rest of his life wouldn't offer many such opportunities.

"I never believed you would." Her voice was muffled against his chest. Not that it stopped him hearing and understanding every word. "That was the other Severuses' concern."

"Because she wouldn't have been *my* Lily, and I wouldn't have been *her* Sev," he went on as if she hadn't spoken. "And don't get any ideas about calling me 'Sev' just because you're *my* Hermione."

His Hermione pushed back just enough so she could tilt her head to look up at him.

"All right," she said. "As long as you remember *you're* mine, as well."

A/N: That's all, folks. The last gasp.

I must offer huge thanks to Wildcat for her generous support and approval in writing a story based (and referencing!) her story *A Roll of the Dice*. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that linlawless made this story better than it was when she came in and started beta reading halfway through.

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