

Bat Out of Hell

by *bleddyn*

Ten years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Snape agrees to help the Muggle Law Enforcement Liaison Unit. What has he let himself in for?

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Chapter 1 of 7

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A/N: So, I was reading SS/HG fanfiction while listening to Meatloaf, and this happened. It'll be seven chapters, with titles taken from the tracks on the *Bat Out of Hell* album (cheers, Jim Steinman!). Many thanks to my wonderfully encouraging and efficient beta, peskipiksi. Disclaimer: Any characters you recognise belong to JKR, and I'm not making a penny from them.

Chapter 1: Bat Out of Hell

The cauldron's contents exploded in a shower of red sparks, and a cloud of pink fumes rose to envelop its unfortunate owner. "McBride!" roared a voice, and from the other side of the dungeon a dark figure loomed, trailing his black robes behind him. Professor Snape closed in on the hapless McBride, who was now coughing uncontrollably as he emerged from the smoke.

"How much pomegranate juice did you add, McBride?"

"Two spoonfuls, Professor."

"And what do the instructions on the blackboard say?"

McBride tried to focus his now streaming eyes through the pink vapour.

"Oh... two drops, Professor."

"So while you have undoubtedly improved the flavour of your Throat-Ease Potion, it will have been rendered utterly ineffective. Rather like you." *Evanescor!* Snape vanished the offending mixture with a contemptuous flick of his wand. "And ten points from Gryffindor for being an irredeemable idiot."

Snape stalked away from the desk, shoulders hunched over and trailing his robes like the bat of his nickname.

"Merlin, that bloke never bloody changes!" muttered McBride.

If, however, McBride had been looking at the Professor's eyes as he strode away he would have noticed a mischievous twinkle that was rarely there during Snape's first tenure as Hogwarts' Potions master.

Oh, he was still as irascible as ever with the younger and stupider pupils, but there was a persistent rumour that with his more talented NEWT students he could be a patient and encouraging teacher with (whisper it) a dry sense of humour. Truth was that in the ten years since his near-death at Voldemort's hands, Snape had mellowed. He'd had a lot of time to think during his long period of recovery at St Mungo's and his even longer convalescence at Hogwarts.

It had turned out that while the anti-venom he had formulated had been totally successful at saving his life, the side effects of taking it for two years had been rather severe. He emerged from St Mungo's after six months with a weakened heart and scarred lungs, and an admonishment to "Get plenty of fresh air and gentle exercise!" echoing in his ears. While he was nowhere near fit enough to teach again, his erstwhile colleagues had welcomed him back to Hogwarts to complete his recovery. Well, Minerva had welcomed him back, anyway. The others had tiptoed around him (physically and metaphorically) until they had established that he was probably no longer dangerous and that even his tongue was used rather less as a deadly weapon than it had been previously.

The gentle exercise element of the prescription had been achieved through walking, firstly through the Hogwarts grounds, then further afield. Within six months, he was often out of the castle all day, walking for miles through the wild hills. On one hot day during the summer holidays, he arrived back at the castle desperate to cool down, and on a sudden impulse stripped off and jumped into the lake. The instantly invigorating cold water was a revelation, and from that day on he added a morning swim to his slowly increasing exercise routine. At the end of his first year back at Hogwarts, the healers at St Mungo's pronounced themselves delighted at the improvement to his health. He felt fitter than he had done in years, and the outdoor air had even brought some colour to his sallow cheeks.

But more important to him than the physical recovery were the changes to his mental state wrought by his lonely wanderings. It took him a little while to adjust to the fact that he was free to leave the castle, not to tell anyone where he was going, not to be responsible to any master. And that freedom brought with it a peace of mind he couldn't remember ever feeling before.

When Minerva asked him to resume his position as Potions master and Head of Slytherin House when Horace Slughorn retired (again), he'd agreed with only slight reluctance. Teaching idiots was a minor irritant compared with what he'd suffered in the previous decades, and he felt ready to live a quiet life. And for seven years he managed just that.

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"P-p-p... Professor Snape!"

Snape spun round as he left the Great Hall after breakfast to see a terrified-looking first year brandishing a piece of parchment as if it was on fire.

The boy continued in a rapid, high pitched squeak. "Excuse me, Professor, but the Headmistress asked you to give me this!" He showed no sign of actually handing the parchment over, so Snape snatched it from his shaking hand.

"Thank you, Davison. Is a reply needed?"

The small boy looked at him in abject horror. "She... she didn't say, sir."

"Then probably not. That will be all. Run along, now." He flapped his hand at the boy, who didn't need telling twice and dashed away down the corridor as if pursued by the Headless Hunt.

Snape sighed as he opened the message. What thankless task was Minerva about to saddle him with? At least there were only ten days left until the end of the summer term. He read the immaculate copperplate: *"Please come to my office at 3 p.m. today to meet with Anton Fletcher."*

What did the Head of the Auror Office want with him? Snape wondered as he headed back to his rooms. He had not met Fletcher since his promotion to Head of the Office a couple of years ago, but as a rank and file Auror he'd had a reputation for dogged determination rather than brilliance. Determination had its place, though, and Snape knew Fletcher had been instrumental in apprehending many of the numerous Death Eaters who had gone underground after Voldemort's defeat. Even after ten years the Aurors were kept very busy.

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At 3 p.m. prompt, Snape entered McGonagall's office. It had changed considerably since Dumbledore's or indeed his own day. There were rather fewer exotic magical instruments and rather more comfortable chairs, and the decor inclined towards the Caledonian. To Snape's surprise, the Headmistress was not in the room, but a tall, stooped man in his late fifties was standing looking out of the window. He turned as Snape entered and held out a hand, smiling.

"Good to see you looking so well, Severus," Fletcher said as they shook hands. "And thank you for sparing the time to speak with me."

"My pleasure," replied Snape, "although I will admit to a certain curiosity as to what the Auror Office wants with a humble Potions teacher."

"Enough of the false modesty, now. Take a seat and I'll explain." The two men sat down next to the Headmistress's desk, and Fletcher continued.

"Minerva will be with us shortly. She's showing my colleague some of the recent changes to the school and receiving her own briefing on the reasons for our visit. Now, of course you are aware that we are still tracking down the last of Voldemort's supporters. The information you have given us in the past has proved invaluable in identifying and convicting many of them."

Snape inclined his head briefly in acknowledgement.

"Unfortunately, some have proved rather elusive. We have become aware in the last few years that a number have sought refuge in the Muggle world."

"The same thing happened after Voldemort's first defeat," interjected Snape.

"It did, indeed, but this time around we find ourselves in a rather more complicated situation. Twenty or so years ago it was relatively easy to swoop in and seize a Dark wizard from his Muggle hideout, Obliviate a couple of Muggle neighbours or police officers or whoever, and no one was any the wiser. Unfortunately, since then the Muggles have undergone something of a communications revolution. I don't know if you know anything of their computers or something called the Internet?" He looked at Snape enquiringly.

"A little," admitted Snape.

"Well, without going into details although I don't really understand it myself they can pass on messages instantaneously, send photographs and moving pictures, and get access to all sorts of information very quickly on these computer machines. The upshot is that it is now extremely difficult to control who knows what.

"We seized an ex-Death Eater called Filmore about three years ago. He was living a very quiet life in a Muggle town, but fortunately was spotted by a passing wizard. Anyway, we did the usual took him in the early hours of the morning, no witnesses, Obliviated his neighbours and the owner of the local corner shop, and thought that was that. Next thing we knew, his disappearance was all over the Muggle press a Muggle boy had been passing, delivering newspapers, and had used his mobile telephone to take moving pictures of Filmore being bundled out of his house. He went to the Muggle police, put the pictures on this internet thing so everyone could see them, and the Muggles began investigating a kidnap! It took us months to get it all sorted out, and apparently Muggles are still coming up with all sorts of far-fetched conspiracy theories about the whole affair."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Although I suspect none of their theories are nearly as far-fetched as the truth," he observed drily.

"Quite," Fletcher agreed. "In the wake of that debacle, a Muggle-born member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement suggested it might be a good idea to set up some sort of small unit to work with the Muggle police. As far as the police are concerned, they are a special anti-terrorist unit, which gives them all sorts of rights to act

rather outside ordinary Muggle law. It means that we have perfect cover to seize Dark wizards openly in front of Muggles, and they don't ask awkward questions."

"Except if they see magic performed in front of them, I imagine," said Snape.

"We try to avoid that wherever possible," replied Fletcher, smoothly. "We have certain alternative methods available to us. The personnel recruited to the unit have all been trained in Muggle laws and law enforcement techniques, as well as obviously being some of our most gifted wizards and witches."

"This is all very interesting, Anton, but I fail to see where I fit in."

"The head of the unit has accompanied me here today and should be returning any minute with Minerva. She's in charge of the operation we need your help with, so I'll let her explain."

Just then they heard footsteps and laughter coming from the staircase behind them. Fletcher and Snape got to their feet and turned to greet the two witches as they entered the room.

"Perfect timing," said Fletcher. "Severus, I believe you know Miss Granger - the Head of the Muggle Law Enforcement Liaison Unit."

Snape looked at Hermione in shock. He hardly recognised her. Her long, bushy hair was now cropped short, her robes were elegantly cut and draped on her slender figure, and she was still smiling broadly at whatever joke she and Minerva had been sharing. She looked nothing like the intense, gawky student he remembered. She held out her hand for him to shake, directing her smile towards him now.

"Professor Snape. It's so good to see you again. It's been too long."

He could detect nothing but sincerity in her voice. He took her hand briefly and inclined his head.

"Miss Granger. I always thought you would go far."

She fixed him with an impish grin.

"On the contrary, Professor, as I recall you always thought I was an insufferable know-it-all."

"The two thoughts are not necessarily mutually exclusive," he responded acerbically. "I understand you are going to enlighten me as to the reason for my presence here."

Minerva gestured them all to seats, and she took her place behind the desk. A tea tray had appeared, and she gestured for the teapot to pour. Cups floated to land in front of each of them.

"Yes, Miss Granger," the Headmistress said, "I'm interested to know why you need to borrow my Potions master."

Hermione took a deep breath and began to speak.

"Part of our job in the unit is to monitor Muggle news, crime reports and so on for any sign of suspicious, Dark Magic-type activity. It came to our attention late last year that an arms dealer called Yuri Markov was rumoured to be offering a rather unusual new chemical weapon. When applied to the skin this chemical causes agonising burning pain which, apparently, is resistant to any Muggle attempts to alleviate it. It causes a red discolouration to the skin at the application site, but the burning pain rapidly spreads right though the body."

While she had been speaking, Fletcher had removed a folder from his briefcase, from which he now extracted some Muggle photographs which he passed to McGonagall and Snape.

"We were able to obtain some Muggle moving pictures of this chemical in action," he explained, "and here are some still shots."

Hermione spoke again. "The first picture shows the application site, with the distinctive colouration. Any thoughts, Professor?"

Snape examined the picture closely. "It looks somewhat like a Scorpion Sting potion. The effects of that are similarly systemic to what you describe, although the pain is less intense and the application site stains pink rather than red."

Hermione nodded. "That's the conclusion we came to as well - we think it's some sort of enhanced Scorpion Sting." She gestured to the other photos. "These show the application of a second chemical, presumably the antidote, which removes the red stain and halts the pain. We think that Markov plans to sell both. You could effectively hold your enemies to ransom by spraying the potion around and then withholding the antidote until your demands had been met."

"So if you don't need me to identify the potion...?" Snape left the question hanging.

Hermione looked at him seriously. "We need you to identify Markov. We can't be sure if he's a wizard himself, or if he is acquiring the potion from one, but we suspect the former. He apparently arrived in the UK from Russia five years ago, but we've been able to find out nothing about his life before then. Russian police and security services say they have no files on him, although they don't exactly have a spotless record when it comes to sharing information.

"He's something of a recluse, with just a very close knit circle of friends, family and business associates, and it's notoriously difficult to actually get to meet him. And it's proved impossible to get a photo of him."

Snape leaned forward in his chair, curiosity well and truly piqued. "Impossible to get hold of one, or impossible to take one?"

"Both. I've managed to meet him on three occasions. I've been working undercover as a freelance international trade negotiator, and got an introduction to Markov through one of his associates. My cover has links with some of the more unsavoury regimes in Africa, so Markov thinks I may be useful to help him peddle his wares. On the second and third occasions we met I had a hidden camera, which totally failed to capture any images of him. Pictures of everyone else came out fine, but his face was blurred."

"Some sort of Concealment Charm, I assume?" Snape asked. He was slightly surprised to find himself addressing Granger as an equal rather than an irritating, if talented, pupil.

"We think so," Hermione replied, "and a sophisticated one at that. I find it very hard to recall any details of his appearance either."

Snape opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione beat him to it.

"And if you're about to suggest Legilimency, we've already tried that. It seems my memory of him is genuinely blurred. No, the only way for you to see if you can identify Markov is to actually meet him."

Snape didn't bother to ask why they had come to him. He knew his knowledge of Voldemort's circle was unrivalled among those on the "right" side. He had spent weeks at a time during the first few years of his recovery providing the Aurors with names, descriptions, locations - anything that they or he could think of that might help with the huge task of bringing the Death Eater army and their collaborators to justice. He had rather hoped that his role was at an end and he would be allowed to let his memories of that part of his life fade. But it seemed not.

He picked up his replenished tea cup and asked calmly, "And how exactly do you propose I engineer a meeting with this notorious recluse?"

Hermione smiled brightly at him. "Oh, that part's easy. You'll be posing as my husband."

Snape nearly choked as he inhaled a mouthful of tea. He took a moment to regain both breath and composure, then fixed the young witch with his best glare.

"Quite apart from the utter implausibility of that scenario, I work alone. I do not need the distraction of babysitting such an inexperienced dabbler in the art of espionage."

Hermione's eyes flashed with barely suppressed anger. "I wasn't aware I was asking to be babysat, Professor."

Fletcher held up a placatory hand. "Severus, I'm afraid we must insist. It has taken a considerable amount of time and effort for Miss Granger to earn her place among Markov's circle. It would be a waste of our resources to repeat the exercise for you when we already have your cover prepared. Miss Granger has told Markov all about her husband, an eminent research chemist. I understand he is very keen to meet you." Fletcher then played his trump card. "If you refuse to participate, our only other option is for Miss Granger to apprehend Markov alone, without knowing if she is dealing with a Muggle or a dangerous wizard."

Oh, great, Snape thought. Now they were appealing to his better nature. He tried to hide the fact he had one, but it was sometimes unconcealable. It looked like he would have to tolerate working with the young witch briefly.

"Very well." He nodded once, unsmilingly. "Do we have a business meeting set up, or dinner?"

Hermione looked at him with a slightly smug smile. "Oh, it's rather better that. We're spending the weekend at his country house."

Bugger.

Fletcher reached into his briefcase again and pulled out a small packet of papers, which he handed to Snape. "Here is all the information we have on Markov, along with details of your and Miss Granger's cover stories, and the plans we have made for the weekend. Before we commit you totally to this mission, though, I'd like some sort of assessment of your capabilities."

Snape fixed him with a chilly stare. "*An assessment?*" He said the word with distaste.

Fletcher returned the stare, unintimidated. "We are well aware of your outstanding performance and ability during the war against Voldemort, but you cannot deny that you were gravely ill and have been out of the field of combat for a decade. I am sure you can appreciate that it would be remiss of me to send Miss Granger into a dangerous situation with you without first of all establishing that you are capable of defending yourself adequately."

Snape tried to ignore the rage and humiliation which were fighting for dominance in his head, and spoke calmly. "And what form do you suggest this ... assessment ... take?"

"Oh, I think a quick duel with Miss Granger should suffice."

Snape was gratified to see a shocked look flit across Hermione's face. This was obviously as unexpected to her as it was to him.

"Perhaps you could take yourselves off to an empty classroom now?" Fletcher continued, looking at McGonagall enquiringly.

"Of course," she replied. "The fourth floor Transfiguration room is free."

Snape stood up. "Come along then, Miss Granger. I'm sure you can't wait to put me through my paces." And with that he swept out of the room, leaving her to follow swiftly after him.

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Hermione stole a glance at Snape's face as they walked quickly along the fourth floor corridor. She had been pleasantly surprised by the change in his appearance. She had hardly seen him in ten years. He returned to the castle during her seventh year, but had been an infrequently glimpsed presence then, and she'd had little call to return to Hogwarts recently.

While his customary black garb and long black hair were still very much in evidence, his skin colour was much healthier, and he had lost the general air of self-neglect he used to carry. Any doubts about his physical fitness were being dispelled by the speed at which he was walking, though she suspected that was driven by fury. She could well imagine the humiliation and ire Snape felt at being subjected to a test of his abilities by a former student. She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry about this, Professor; I had no idea...." Words failed her.

Snape slowed his pace and turned his head to look at her grimly. "Much as it pains me to admit it, Miss Granger, Fletcher would indeed have been negligent to not confirm my skills are still intact. He is correct in his assumption that I have not fired a spell in anger for ten years."

Reassured by his words, Hermione smiled as she responded, "Not even at know-it-all Gryffindors?"

She was rewarded with a slight quirk of his mouth.

"I have fired many spells in frustration, irritation and total exasperation, but even your house-mates have not merited the heady heights of anger."

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They entered the empty Transfiguration classroom, and Snape moved the desks and chairs to one side of the room with a quick flick of his wand. Hermione strolled to the centre of the room with a forced nonchalance. She breathed slowly, trying to still the repeated "Oh my God, I'm going to duel Professor Snape!" reverberating around her brain. Was she going to end up utterly humiliated by the Potions master, as had so often happened during her school career? Or (worse!) was she going to discover that his injuries and long illness had left him a shadow of his former self?

Snape took up a position opposite her. He pushed his long black hair back from his face and gently shook his robe sleeves up his arms to leave his hands totally free. He gave her a slight bow, which she returned.

"Ready, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Professor."

"I suggest we begin with verbal spells only."

"Very well," she replied with a calmness she did not feel.

Snape nodded curtly. "After three, then. One, two ... *Expelliarmus!*"

"Protego!"

They shouted simultaneously on what should have been the count of three.

Snape's curse bounced harmlessly from Hermione's shield. "Cheat!" she exclaimed.

"And your point is, Miss Granger?" Snape drawled as he began to move around her in a slow circle. Hermione mirrored his movements, watching his wand arm closely.

"*Petrificus totalus!*"

"*Tarantallegra!*"

Their simultaneous spells crashed in a shower of sparks between them. Hermione began to relax and enjoy herself. So far they seemed fairly well matched. Again and again their spells clashed as they circled and probed each other for weakness.

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!*"

Hermione flung up a shield just in time to protect herself from Snape's Stunner. *Oh, getting serious now, are we?* she thought. *Let's see what you can do with this.*

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Protego!*"

Snape's shield was up the instant she cast the Stunning Spell, but in her mind she said, "*Finite Incantatem!*", and his spell dissipated to leave the remnants of the Stunner through. Snape was thrown backwards onto the hard wooden floor.

He was back on his feet and circling again almost instantly, a slight smile on his face.

"Non-verbal *Finite* Miss Granger? Clever."

"Thank you, Professor. Of course it dilutes the power of the Stunner somewhat but it can still be enough to give one the upper hand."

"Briefly, maybe." He gave a slight flick of his wand.

Hermione jumped a little as the lights extinguished and the curtains snapped shut to leave them in total darkness. Blind now, she concentrated on her other senses, straining her ears to pick up any movement. She felt a sudden shift in the air behind her, then there was a red flash and a Stunner shot at her from the opposite corner of the room. She was hit in the chest and stumbled backwards, only to be caught in a tight grip.

"You were saying, Miss Granger?" Snape spoke softly in her ear as he held her against his chest.

Hermione tried to steady her breathing, not sure whether she was more shocked by the Stunner or the sudden close proximity of her ex-teacher.

"How did you manage to Stun me from over there when you're... here?" she asked.

"*Relumos!*" Snape relit the lamps without relinquishing his hold on her.

"There's a mirror in that corner, Miss Granger," he replied, his breath warm against the sensitive skin of her neck. "I simply reflected my spell off it."

Hermione looked at the mirror on the opposite side of the room.

"I hadn't noticed that."

"Well, there wouldn't be much use in my dropping the lights if I hadn't already planned my move, would there?"

His voice, as soft and melodic as ever, sent shivers down her spine. She moved her arms up to cover his where they wrapped round her body.

"The reflection dilutes the power of the Stunner somewhat but it can still be enough to give one the upper hand," he continued.

Hermione smiled as she recognised her own words and moved her hands down to hold his gently. She turned herself slightly towards him, then gripped his hands more tightly as she bent her knees, braced her shoulder upwards and flung him over to land on his back with a thump.

She looked down at his shocked face. "Briefly, maybe," she said, and walked sedately out of the classroom, trying desperately to stop the bubbles of gleeful laughter that were threatening to rise from her chest.

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Snape pushed himself up into a sitting position, wincing slightly as he straightened his back. He'd be in need of some Bruise Paste later. But Merlin, that had been... fun, he admitted, slightly surprised. He'd initially thought defeating his ex-student would be easy, but she'd quickly disabused him of that notion, repelling his early curses with a speed and aplomb that had impressed him. She'd certainly been well trained, and she was young and fit enough to use the training effectively. Unlike himself, he thought, ruefully. OK, he was still fit, but his reflexes weren't quite what they were. And that bit of trickery in the dark hadn't worked out as planned either.

He climbed painfully to his feet, trying to decide which hurt more, his pride or his arse. Arse, definitely. This was just the opening skirmish, and if the cocky little Gryffindor thought she'd beaten the bat of the dungeons into submission, she was very much mistaken. He was rather looking forward to their next duel. Though as he hobbled towards the door he thought verbal sparring might be preferable for round two.

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Snape arrived back in the Head's office to find the others waiting for him. Minerva noticed his slight limp and asked sweetly, "Would you like another cushion for your chair, Severus?"

"That won't be necessary, thank you Minerva," he replied smoothly as he sat down and tried to find a comfortable position.

Hermione glanced over at him. "I was just reporting to Mr Fletcher that you seem fully fit and your magical skills are as effective as ever." She looked back at Fletcher. "Although a little training in Muggle unarmed combat might be useful."

"I am familiar with that primitive fighting style, thank you. Your use of it during a wizarding duel was just ... unexpected," Snape replied, lightly.

"Well you had just cast a *Stupefy* at me," retorted Hermione.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "Professor! Please tell me you didn't Stun Miss Granger!"

"Merely a reflected one, Headmistress. And not even full strength. At the risk of sounding like a whining first year, she Stunned me first. At least I had the manners to catch

her when she fell."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Who says chivalry is dead?"

Snape glared at her.

McGonagall's second eyebrow rose as well. "I think we should count our blessings that you two are fighting on the same side!"

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Later that afternoon, the four walked down to the entrance hall for Hermione and Fletcher to depart.

Snape and Hermione paused by the front door, discussing final details. They were to meet for a few days' preparation before their weekend away.

"I'll arrange Muggle clothing for you, Professor," said Hermione. "I assume Madame Malkin has your measurements on file?"

Snape bristled slightly. "I can assure you, Miss Granger, that I am perfectly capable of procuring suitable attire." And he dreaded to think of the type of costume she might deem appropriate.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "I don't doubt it, Professor, but you may as well utilise the Ministry's resources. Don't you trust me not to dress you in purple tartan and a fuchsia cravat?"

"Not really, no," he responded bluntly.

Hermione huffed. "Honestly! This is part of my job let me do it. I promise everything will be dark-coloured and tasteful, and you'll be free to Transfigure anything you don't like, anyway."

"Very well, then," he conceded, reluctantly. He had to admit Muggle fashion was not exactly his area of expertise. He raised a warning finger at her. "But the slightest hint of Gryffindor colours and the deal's off."

"Marvellous! We'll need to do something with your hair, though. That's hardly a Muggle style, even in academic circles."

"You are not cutting my hair, Miss Granger. It's an essential part of my image as the malevolent Potions master. Just because you've decided to cut off your crowning glory I see no reason to do the same."

Hermione's hand went to her cropped curls. "Don't you like my hair, Professor? It's a lot easier to manage this way, and I thought it rather suited me."

Snape snorted. "Your hair is absolutely fine, but it is not a style I am in a hurry to imitate."

In fact, he thought her short hair emphasised her eyes and bone structure and made her look like a fallen angel, but there was no way in hell he was going to tell her that.

Hermione put her head on one side. "Hmm, I wonder, is it long enough to be tied back?" And before he realised what she was doing, she'd moved to stand beside him and was running her fingers gently through his hair. She swept it back from his face and gathered it in one hand at the base of his neck, leaning round to look at him from the front. "Oh, that's fine. You'll look every inch the trendy professor."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Marvellous. Now would you be kind enough as to unhand me?"

Hermione released his hair and stepped away from him rapidly, looking slightly flustered. "Sorry. Your hair feels gorgeous really soft. What do you wash it in?"

"The lake. Now if you don't mind, some of us have work to do. I look forward to receiving your owl with the time and date of our meeting."

And he abruptly swept off in a flurry of black robes, back to his dungeon to contemplate what the hell he had just let himself in for.

Hot Summer Night

Chapter 2 of 7

Books, a bottomless wine bottle, and some startling revelations.

A/N: Many thanks to the wonderful peskipiksi for her sterling beta work.

Disclaimer: if you recognise them, they're not mine!

Chapter 2: You Took the Words Right Out of My Mouth (Hot Summer Night)

With a loud 'Crack', Snape Apparated into the quiet country lane. The warm sun of the July afternoon was tempered by a stiff breeze skittering around the hill on which he stood. He looked curiously at the cottage in front of him. It was small but well cared for, with whitewashed walls and a red tiled roof. He let himself in through the wooden gate and walked up the path through the lawned garden. The front door opened before he reached it. Hermione stood in the doorway, smiling slightly nervously.

"You found it OK, then, Professor? Well, of course you did; you're here... um... Would you like to come in?" Her fingers fiddled with the hem of the light cotton shirt she wore over Muggle jeans.

Snape gave a ghost of a smile as he walked past her into the house. He found himself in a cosy living room. Comfortable-looking chairs were arranged around a large fireplace, and a round dining table stood to one side, strewn with papers. To the left were French windows, standing open to show the garden, while to the right was a doorway into what looked like the kitchen. Every inch of the walls not taken up by windows or doors was lined with books.

Hermione gestured to the room. "Welcome to my home."

Snape inclined his head. "Thank you, Miss Granger. I wasn't expecting to be granted such a liberty." He couldn't prevent his gaze from drifting around the bookcases.

Hermione's face relaxed into a less nervous smile. "Please, feel free."

Snape dropped his bag where he stood and approached the nearest shelf, running his long fingers over the leather book-bindings.

"It's always the first thing I want to do when I go into someone's house," Hermione continued, "look at their books, I mean. I've been told it's rude, but I don't mean it that way."

Snape looked up from the volume of Celtic spells he'd been leafing through.

"Personally, I feel that looking through someone's books gives you an excellent insight into their personality, so it's paying them a compliment to be interested."

"That's a very Slytherin spin on the fact that books are often more interesting than people. Although I wouldn't pay attention to any insights you get about me from these shelves they'll tell you I'm a 110 year old Healer whose eyesight is failing and who has moved in with her great-niece."

Snape raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"The books came with the house," Hermione explained. "Although a condition of sale was that Healer Mayweather can still ask me for any she wants to borrow back."

"I see," said Snape. "Although I suspect that in your eyes the books came with a free house rather than the other way around. This is a fascinating collection."

Hermione moved to stand next to him. "It is rather wonderful," she agreed. "I don't know if you've noticed, but the books are arranged totally randomly. It offended my organisational sensibilities when I first moved in, but I didn't really like to rearrange everything immediately. And now I've grown to love the fact that I can come across a book on Bulgarian wizarding folklore when I'm actually looking for a rune dictionary. I can get sidetracked for hours!"

Snape was relieved to see she seemed to have overcome her earlier bout of nerves. Adjusting to spending time alone with her as a colleague rather than a student was going to be challenging enough, without her juddering with fright every time they spoke. He replaced the book on the shelf with some reluctance and turned to face her.

"Do I get a guided tour to the rest of your domain?"

Hermione beamed at him. "Of course! You'll love the basement this way."

She led him though into the kitchen, where bright sunshine reflected from the highly polished copper pans that hung from one wall. A huge ginger cat was curled up on a rocking chair in front of a range cooker.

"They came with the house, too," Hermione said, gesturing to the pans. "Although I confess they don't get used quite as much as the books."

She opened a door at the back of the kitchen to reveal stairs going up and down. Snape followed her as she began to descend.

"Watch your head!" she exclaimed, just in time, as Snape ducked under a low wooden lintel at the bottom of the stairs.

"Sorry!" Hermione said with a grimace. "I'm short enough to get under that and tend to forget about it. Ron nearly knocked himself out when he came down here. Anyway, what do you think?" She moved to one side to reveal the room behind her. It was a small but well-equipped potions laboratory. "Healer Mayweather hadn't been down here for years so it took me ages to get it all cleaned up, but I love it down here now."

Snape moved around slowly, murmuring approval at the immaculately clean cauldrons and glassware, and the well-ordered shelves. He opened a large cupboard at one side of the room and lit his wand to examine the bottled ingredients inside. He heard a soft chuckle from the other side of the room and looked up to meet Hermione's amused gaze.

"Am I missing the joke, Miss Granger?" he asked, frowning slightly. It was one thing for her to lose her nerves, but quite another for her to laugh at him.

She shook her head, still smiling. "No, no joke. But I was just thinking that usually my house tours are along the lines of 'Oh what a lovely kitchen, and can we see the garden?', whereas with you the highlights are the books and the lab."

Seeing his still-present frown, she continued hastily, "I mean to say that it's lovely having a visitor who appreciates my favourite bits of the house for a change."

Snape closed the cupboard door gently, face neutral again. "In that case you obviously need to cultivate a better class of visitor. Do you get to work down here very often?"

Unfazed by the *non sequitur*, Hermione shook her head with an expression of regret. "Not as often as I'd like. I knock up everything I need for work and everyday purposes, but don't have time for any research or experimentation. Unlike you. I read your paper in the *Journal of Experimental Potions* on Veritaserum modification. I thought the adjustment to remove emotional recollection was quite brilliant."

Snape felt unreasonably pleased with the girl's compliment, although he was careful not to let his expression show it. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Excluding the emotional part of memory from the effects of the potion was a necessary correction. You have no idea how much easier suspect interrogation is when they are not confessing their undying and unrequited love for some paragon of witch-hood in their dim and distant past." *No prizes for guessing the inspiration behind that idea* he thought, ruefully, silently daring Hermione to even *think* the words 'Lily Potter'.

But she just laughed, saying, "Yes, I can imagine. And if you ever did have the need to use the potion on a pupil, you'd be spared the fevered adolescent fantasies."

Snape shuddered. "Perish the thought. Although obviously, using Veritaserum on a pupil would be wrong, and I would never countenance such an action."

Hermione looked him sceptically. "Obviously. Anyway, much as we both love my lab, I don't suppose you want to sleep in it, so I'd better show you to your room. Come on."

Snape followed her up the stairs, past the kitchen door, and then up the next flight of stairs to the first floor landing. He was definitely not watching her arse, he told himself.

Hermione walked along the landing, indicating doors in turn. "My room, the bathroom, and this is yours." She opened the last door and stepped aside, allowing him to enter first. The room was simply furnished, with a large bed covered in a deep blue woollen counterpane, a chest of drawers, a bedside table, and a small desk and chair. The ceiling sloped slightly, and Snape had to stoop a little as he walked over to look out of the window. Hermione joined him as he looked at the view of the sun-hazed hills.

"So where exactly are we?" he asked.

"Ottery St Catchpole is about a mile in that direction," she replied, pointing straight ahead. "And the Burrow, the Weasleys' home, is around two miles that way," she continued, pointing to the right. "So I'm afraid I haven't moved far from my friends Harry and Ginny live in the village, and Ron and Luna are at the Burrow, of course." She looked up at him with a look of defiance, as if daring him to criticise.

He ignored the flash of irritation that always rose at the mention of Potter's name, and instead replied mildly, "Isolation is not necessarily a virtue."

He was rewarded by the quickly suppressed look of surprise that flickered across Hermione's face. She stepped back from the window. "Well, now you've had the tour, how about I leave you to settle in and I'll put the kettle on? We can have tea in the garden while we get to work. Come down when you're ready."

Snape inclined his head with a slight smile. "That sounds satisfactory, Miss Granger. Would you be so kind as to send my bag up? I could Summon it, but I would hate to damage any of your books in passing."

Hermione dropped a small curtsy with a mischievous grin. "Certainly, sir. See you in a minute." And she left the room, with Snape watching her and wondering whether the nervousness might not have been a bad thing after all.

*

Hermione carried the tea tray out through the French windows into the garden and placed it carefully on a wrought iron table in the shade of a large oak tree. She had been surprised at how discomfited she had felt welcoming Snape into her home. He seemed somehow larger than life in her little house, and briefly, she'd been a small, scared, eleven year old schoolgirl again. But, as always, discussion of books had restored her equilibrium. She was sure she'd now be able to treat him just as she would any other male colleague. Albeit a frighteningly intelligent, sardonic and, she had to admit, striking-looking one.

She sat at the table, then Summoned her pile of papers from the living room. She leafed through them quickly, pulled out the document she wanted, and settled down to read.

Some minutes later she looked up with a start at the sound of a soft cough. Snape stood framed in the doorway. It took her a moment to register what was odd about his appearance; then she realised that he had shed his customary black robe and was clad in just a white linen shirt and black trousers.

"Sorry," she said. "I was miles away."

"I noticed," he replied drily as he approached the table and sat down opposite her. He put down the small pile of papers he had been carrying and tapped it with his wand so it expanded into a stack nearly as high as Hermione's.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Please," he replied.

Hermione waved her wand, and the teapot poured into the waiting mugs.

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Just milk, thank you."

"So," began Snape, after taking the first sip of his tea, "what is your plan?"

Hermione had been slightly concerned that her former teacher would be reluctant to cede leadership to her and felt a certain relief at his words.

"Well," she began, "we'll spend the rest of today and tomorrow morning here, going over all the information we've got about Markov and making sure that our cover stories are straight. Then, tomorrow afternoon, we'll Apparate to my London flat, in character, from which point magic is banned except in case of catastrophe. We'll travel to Markov's house on Saturday morning, arriving there by car, of course."

"I hardly thought we'd Floo into his living room," replied Snape acidly.

"Quite. So, did you find the papers I left you informative?"

"Very much so. You seem to have done your homework with as much thoroughness as ever. I expect it's rather easier now you're only doing your own work rather than having to cover for your dunderhead friends."

Hermione laughed, not in the least surprised that Snape knew how much Harry and Ron had depended on her assistance.

"Oh, they still ask for help with their work sometimes. How do you think I got to hear about the whole 'Death Eater in the Muggle world' problem in the first place?"

"The unit was your idea, then? I surmised as much."

"I made a couple of suggestions to Harry and Ron, which they then took to Fletcher, and, well, here I am."

"I imagine it took rather more work than you're admitting to. I assume you had to undergo extra training?"

Hermione was rather flattered to see an expression of genuine interest on Snape's often impassive face.

"Well, first of all I did a year's accelerated Auror training; then I spent a year in the States training with the FBI they're the American Muggles' law enforcement body and really gave me the best grounding in Muggle techniques I could ask for profiling, crime scene investigation, and so on. Then I did a few months back in this country getting a thorough grounding in UK law. After that I was ready to set up the unit. As far as the Muggles are concerned we're a branch of their security services, and any weirdness I display is explained away by my American training. We've been operating for nearly a year now, and so far they don't suspect a thing."

"And what level of success have you had?"

"At last count we've apprehended five confirmed Death Eaters, half a dozen collaborators whose precise status has yet to be determined, and four Muggles who fortunately aren't our problem."

"Impressive. And now I hope to be able to help add to that total."

"All being well. OK, then, how about you tell me our cover story?"

Snape leaned back in his chair, long legs stretched in front of him, and fixed Hermione with the same intent expression he used to lecture a class.

"My name is Steven Singer. I am a freelance research chemist, who has previously held positions at Oxford and Harvard Universities as well as Imperial College London. I now undertake various lucrative contracts in the private sector, rumoured to be concentrating on the field of biochemical non-lethal weaponry."

"You are Jane Eastwood, who I assume declined to take my name on marriage on some feminist principle."

"A purely professional decision, I assure you," interrupted Hermione. "In private, I am very proud to be Mrs Singer, but my professional reputation was made using my maiden name, and I am reluctant to jeopardise that."

"Fair enough, then, I'll let you off." Snape's eyes glinted with humour. "You are an international trade negotiator. You used to work for the government, but for the last five years have put the contacts you made to good use brokering some decidedly unsavoury deals between various warlords and semi-legal arms traders. And you look like such a lovely girl as well."

Hermione gave him a sarcastically sweet smile.

"We met at a conference three years ago, where I was lecturing and you were touting for business. You fell for my obvious charms, and we were married six months later."

We now live in blissful harmony in London, although we both travel a lot for work, which may actually account for the blissful bit as we obviously spend very little time together."

Hermione laughed at that. Snape with a sense of humour? Wonders never cease.

"Seriously, though," Snape continued, "what exactly is the beautiful, young Jane Eastwood doing with an unattractive, ill-tempered chemistry professor twice her age?"

Hermione inwardly glowed at the compliment.

"Well, for a start you're neither unattractive nor twice my age. You're ... striking, I think I would say. And Steven Singer is not ill-tempered he is witty and has a subtle but wicked sense of humour."

Snape snorted. "I think you may be overestimating my acting skills."

"He just doesn't suffer fools gladly, which in a man of his superior intellect is totally understandable. And Jane is no fool, so only ever sees his good side anyway." She smiled winsomely at him. "She has tremendous respect for his knowledge and experience."

"Oh, Lord, please don't tell me this is a father-complex thing."

"Not at all. She has a reputation of being something of a ball-breaker in her professional life and tends to scare men off, so she found it refreshing to find someone who wasn't intimidated."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Are we still talking about Jane, here?"

Hermione laughed, slightly embarrassed. "Of course, although there may be certain similarities."

She paused then, trying to decide just how far she dared push this newly discovered sense of humour. What the hell ...

"Between you and me, the main reason she's with him is the sex is fantastic, and he's hung like a centaur."

Snape looked briefly shocked; then he chuckled, a genuine smile transforming his face. Hermione was stunned who'd have guessed Severus Snape had such a deliciously filthy laugh? The deep, throaty sound went directly from her ears to her libido without as much as a by-your-leave from her cerebral cortex.

"Is this imagination on your part, young lady, or has someone been talking?" Snape asked, still smiling.

"Professor McGonagall may have mentioned something in passing."

"What gossip has the old witch been spreading now?"

"I think her precise words were 'You must get Severus drunk and ask him about Madame Francine and her enchanted handcuffs'."

Snape shook his head ruefully. "Well, she's right you'll have to ply me with something much stronger than tea to get that story out of me."

"Maybe later," Hermione replied with a grin. "Anyway, back to work. I've got some new information to update you with."

*

They spent the next two hours working: going through all the information Hermione had gathered on Markov. Snape also shared the results of his own investigations into the Scorpion Sting potion.

"So if my assumptions about the reformulation of the potion are correct, the antidote modifications should render it effective. I hope we don't need to use it, but I felt it best to be prepared," he concluded.

"That's fantastic. All being well, it will be a matter of identifying him, calling back-up, and apprehending him, but the best laid plans and all that "

Hermione stretched her arms above her head and rolled the stiffness out of her neck. She was surprised to see how low the sun was in the sky. The oak tree cast a long shadow across the lawn.

"I hadn't realised it was so late!" she exclaimed. She was suddenly aware of how long it had been since lunch. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Snape leaned back in his chair. "Now you mention it, I wouldn't say no to dinner."

Hermione stood up. "Right, then, how does chilli con carne sound?"

"That sounds delightful, but I don't want to put you to any trouble."

Hermione smiled broadly. "No trouble at all. Can you clear the table? I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

*

Snape watched her as she walked into the house, still stretching the kinks out of her neck. He would admit to having had slight *all right, huge* misgivings about following his ex-pupil's leadership on this mission, but he was pleasantly surprised at her competence and obvious experience. He shouldn't really have been surprised, he reflected. However irritating he had found her general demeanour and holier-than-thou know-it-all-ness as a pupil, he could never have faulted her work ethic.

She had grown into an assured, able young woman with a nice line in self-deprecating humour. And she was as sharply intelligent as ever. With a fantastic book collection. *And really rather easy on the eye*, he added, before quickly suppressing the thought.

With a flick of his wand, he tidied the papers on the table into two piles, which he reduced and put to one side. His stomach growled hungrily. He supposed, regretfully, that it was far too much to ask that she should be a good cook too.

He was surprised to see her coming back out of the house; plates, cutlery, and glasses floating in front of her.

"Told you I wouldn't be long!" she said gaily as she arranged the table.

"This looks wonderful," said Snape, trying to keep the note of surprise out of his voice as he looked at the steaming plate of chilli in front of him and inhaled the delicious aromas of meat and spice.

"Well, I can't take any credit," smiled Hermione. "Thank Molly Weasley."

Snape looked at her in puzzlement.

"You must have heard of *Molly's Millisecond Meals*?" she asked.

"I seem to recall seeing advertisements in the *Prophet*, but I hadn't realised who the Molly in question was."

"She's had the business going for about a year, now. Please, eat. Wine?"

"Trying to get me drunk, Miss Granger?"

"Would I?" She opened her eyes wide in an expression of mock innocence.

"Probably," Snape replied drily. "But I think I'll risk a glass."

They ate in silence for a minute or two.

"This is really quite delicious," said Snape. "Tell me about Molly, then."

Hermione took a sip of wine.

"It all started around eighteen months ago. I went to the Burrow for dinner one weekend and made some off-hand comment to Molly about it being the first proper meal I'd had for a fortnight. I should have known better, really, but she was horrified, and insisted that when I went home I took the leftover stew with me, plus some pies she'd made that morning.

"The following evening I was working late, and ended up sharing the food with a couple of colleagues, who both said they wished they had someone like Molly to cook for them. I passed the compliment on next time I was at the Burrow, and George was there as well, and he said there really must be some way for Molly to make some money from her cooking talent. And we came up with the basic idea that evening – Molly prepares batches of food, puts them into individual portion boxes, then puts stasis, reducing, and stabilising spells on them, and sells them. They keep for a week, and when you want to eat you just need to say a quick '*Finite*' over them and the food's ready.

"She started off small, using my and Ron's contacts at the Ministry to get the first customers – you'd be amazed how many Ministry employees have neither the time nor inclination to cook! Then George took over the advertising, and business has sort of exploded since. They run a mail-order service and do local deliveries. They've had to expand the kitchen at the Burrow, George has put a full-time manager in his shop, and Molly employs a couple of staff now as well."

Snape had cleared his plate while she had been speaking. "Well, she certainly is an excellent cook, and the Weasley family deserve their good fortune. They suffered too much during the War. And I don't forget that I owe them my life."

Which was no exaggeration. He'd used Arthur Weasley's blood to formulate an anti-venom after Nagini's attack at the Ministry. Then, after the Final Battle, if Ron hadn't told Arthur how Snape had "died", and if Arthur hadn't, even in the midst of his grief, remembered that the snake shouldn't have been able to kill him, then Snape probably would have bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack despite all of his precautions.

He became aware that Hermione was watching him guardedly, obviously trying to decide what, if anything, she should say. He decided to relieve her of the responsibility.

"So what went wrong between you and the Weasley boy? You always seemed joined at the hip from the little I saw of you during your last year at Hogwarts. Then all of a sudden there were screaming headlines in the *Prophet* saying you'd broken his heart, or he'd broken yours – I forget which."

Hermione looked at Snape sharply, as if expecting to see sarcasm, but seemed satisfied with what she saw, for she shook her head, a small smile on her lips.

"No hearts were harmed in the ending of our relationship, I assure you. It was just ... you won't have seen the film 'When Harry Met Sally' will you?"

Snape quirked one side of his mouth. "No, but I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

"Well, Harry and Sally meet at college and spend years convincing everyone that men and women can just be friends, and sex doesn't have to get in the way; then of course they end up in bed together and realise that was what they wanted all along. It's most famous for a great scene in a restaurant where she fakes an orgasm. Anyway," she continued hastily, "Ron and I were just like that but in reverse – as soon as we'd slept together, I realised I'd made a huge mistake and really just wanted him as a friend."

"That bad, eh?" Snape smirked.

"No, not bad, just ... odd. God, no, I don't mean that either. I just knew that as much as I loved him and wanted to protect him and enjoyed spending time with him, physically there was just no... spark. And then I thought that maybe I was expecting too much, and that a relationship founded on being great friends was enough, and I persevered for about a year, but in the end I had to admit it was going nowhere and really wasn't enough. I think it came as a relief to him when I ended it, actually. I was getting the impression that when we were friends he was fine with me being brainy and tough and not needing looking after, but it's a slightly different proposition when it's your girlfriend."

"He needed someone more willing to flatter his enormous male ego?"

"I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but yes, sort of. And then a couple of years later, he and Luna got together, and they're just perfectly matched. They make each other laugh, and her other-worldliness gives her a sort of vulnerability that means he can indulge his knight errand tendencies. I'm really happy for them."

And she was, thought Snape – her open face showed no hint of jealousy or resentment.

"And what about you, Miss Granger; have you found that spark you were looking for?" he asked lightly.

"I've had a few sparks, thank you very much," she replied with an impish grin, "but nothing that's lit a long-lasting conflagration. In any case, my work doesn't really allow for a relationship at the moment. And how about you? Apart from Madame Francine, of course?"

"Oh, I've had my fair share of sparks, young lady. I'm far too old and set in my ways to accommodate someone in my life on a permanent basis, though."

Not that he was inundated with offers from women who wanted to immure themselves in a Scottish castle with an ugly curmudgeon, he reflected, but he'd rather think of it as his choice. Although why he was discussing his sex life with an ex-pupil was quite beyond him. The wine must be stronger than he had thought, though it had not escaped his notice that the bottle was replenishing his glass on a regular basis and seemed to be bottomless. He held the glass up to the fading light and examined the liquid's ruby depths.

"Lovely wine," he said. *Oh, yes, subtle change of subject there!* "Elf-made?"

"Naturally," replied Hermione. "I've got a barrel of the stuff in the basement, and the bottle is charmed to keep replenishing itself."

"That must have cost a few Galleons."

"Probably, but we confiscated half a dozen of them from the home of a Death Eater a few months ago. Obviously, we couldn't have left them behind for Muggles to find."

"How... circumspect of you."

"It was rather, wasn't it? Anyway, once we'd checked that the contents were safe, I shared them out amongst the team. And we sent one to Kingsley, and one to Fletcher,

so they wouldn't complain about misappropriation of evidence."

Snape laughed and raised his glass to his lips once more.

*

They continued talking for the next hour or so, sharing anecdotes of idiot pupils, daring Death Eater arrests, and obscure potions research. The sun set and the garden filled with inky shadows as the sky darkened to deep blue. Bats emerged from their roosts under the eaves and began flying around the garden in erratic patterns as they chased their supper.

Hermione had removed the dinner things to the kitchen with a flick of her wand, and the table was now lit by one of her trademark portable fires. Azure and green flames flickered gently, and when the conversation paused, she studied Snape's face covertly as he watched them. His expression was relaxed and unguarded. His stories of Hogwarts life had revealed his customary lack of tolerance and disdain for ignorance, but she sensed a deep-rooted sense of contentment as well.

"So," she said raising her glass and inclining her head interrogatively, "are you drunk enough yet?"

Snape looked at her steadily. "Madame Francine?"

Hermione nodded.

"Miss Granger, if I were ever drunk enough to reveal to you the full details, I imagine I would also be drunk enough to be incapable of speech. However, if it will mean the end of the subject, you can have some edited... highlights."

Hermione beamed. "Oh, yes please!"

"Very well. Madame Francine came to us from Beauxbatons for a term to add to our History of Magic curriculum. For some reason she took an interest in me."

Can't imagine why, thought Hermione, looking assessingly at his long, lean frame, elegant hands, and enigmatic eyes.

"And Madame Francine is part Veela, so when she takes an interest the object has very little choice in the matter."

"I'm sure you put up a spirited fight," Hermione said, laughing.

"Naturally," Snape continued drily. "To cut a long story short, one thing led rather rapidly to another, and we ended up in my quarters with a bottle of Firewhisky and the aforementioned handcuffs. The evening passed in a very enjoyable manner until around three a.m., when the enchantment on the handcuffs wore off. Madame Francine was totally unable to release me, and I was in no position to use my wand."

Hermione giggled and Snape glared at her.

"That was not a euphemism, Miss Granger. In the end it took the combined efforts of Professors Flitwick and McGonagall to free me, and believe me when I say I ~~was~~^{wasn't} dressed for company."

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth as she desperately tried to suppress her laughter.

"It was four days before the three of us could look at each other without blushing, although Francine was quite unashamed."

At that Hermione couldn't stop the peals of laughter from escaping. Snape tried to scowl, but couldn't hold the expression and just shook his head with a wry smile as Hermione tried to bring herself under control.

"I hope I don't need to emphasize, Miss Granger, that not a word of this conversation is to reach Messrs Potter or Weasley?"

"My lips are sealed."

*

She could just picture McGonagall's and Flitwick's faces. She was also trying desperately not to conjure up the tantalising image of a handcuffed Snape. Not while he was sat in front of her, anyway. She spoke quickly to drive away the thought.

"If it makes you feel any better, I was utterly humiliated by Ron's Great Aunt Matilda."

"Caught the two of you, did she?"

"Ah, actually it was Charlie, not Ron," admitted Hermione, flushing slightly.

Snape raised an amused eyebrow. "Miss Granger, exactly how many of the Weasley men have you bedded?"

"Only the two! Lavender Brown's done a hat trick. Well, she claims four, but Percy adamantly denies it, and I'm inclined to believe him. Which is all beside the point. Anyway, two Christmases ago, the Burrow was stuffed to bursting with the Weasley clan, so I said Charlie and his girlfriend could stay here. Only they'd split up so it was just him, and we both had a few drinks, and one thing led to another and..."

"Spare me the sordid details, *please*. Although I always thought of Charlie as more brawn than brains your type?"

"For a life partner no. For a couple of days' shagging over Christmas? Too bloody right. Have you any idea what riding dragons does for a man's thighs?"

"Surprisingly, no, but I'll be sure to mention it next time I'm giving the Slytherins careers advice."

"So, the day after Boxing Day he was supposed to be Flooing back to the Burrow to escort Mildred home before heading back to South America. He was all ready to go; then I decided to give him one for the road, so to speak. Next thing I knew, I could hear Great Aunt Mildred's dulcet tones saying, 'Well, Charles Weasley, I hope you're going to return the favour.' She'd got tired of waiting and had Flooed to us. She then went straight back to the Burrow and informed everyone present that Charlie would be along as soon as he'd finished pleasuring the Muggle-born."

Hermione was gratified to hear Snape's wonderfully dirty laugh again.

"I imagine that went down well with them all."

"Luna told me afterwards that George was delighted because it meant Bill owed him ten Galleons. Molly was the problem she was briefly convinced that she was going to get me as a daughter-in-law after all. I found it rather tricky explaining afterwards why her son was fine as a holiday shag but really not marriage material."

Hermione winced inwardly as she recalled the conversation. Molly had really thought her wandering son was about to put down some roots, and it had felt horrible to disillusion her. But shortly afterwards, Charlie and his ex had reunited, and Hermione had been let off the hook.

She realised darkness had now completely fallen. Her flames made intermittent fizzing noises as kamikaze moths got too close. She met Snape's eyes and smiled.

"I'm going to call it a night. We've got another busy day tomorrow."

Snape rose politely as she stood up.

"I think I'll enjoy your garden for a little longer, Miss Granger."

Hermione laughed. "I think after this evening's revelations you can drop the 'Miss Granger'. Call me 'Hermione', please."

"Very well, Hermione. As long as you'll return the favour."

Hermione smiled softly. "OK, then. Good night, Severus. See you in the morning."

"Good night. Sleep well."

Hermione turned and strolled into the house, looking forward to her bed and dreams of a naked, handcuffed professor.

Heaven Can Wait

Chapter 3 of 7

Hangovers, a taxi ride, more handcuffs and a bedroom scene.

A/N: Many thanks again to the wonderful peskipiksi for her patient beta work, and to the ever-helpful PP admins, especially for comma-wrangling! And thank you to those of you who have given me such lovely reviews.

Disclaimer: if you recognise them, they're not mine!

Chapter 3 Heaven Can Wait

Snape groaned as sunlight filtered in through his closed eyelids. Merlin, what time was it? He reached out to where his watch lay on the bedside table and opened his eyes a fraction to squint at its face. *Half past bloody five!* One advantage to sleeping in the dungeons was that the sun never woke him, but that meant he now found it impossible to sleep anywhere light.

He sat up and groaned again. How much wine had he drunk last night? A little too much, if his memories of the conversation served him correctly. Hermione had proved extremely easy to talk to. And she seemed to find the same quality in him, which was a novelty. The revelations about her love life had certainly dispelled any residual impressions that she was still his student.

He heaved his legs out of bed and contemplated his plan of action for the morning. Hangover potion first, then a shower (*must use a Silencing spell so as not to disturb Hermione*), then coffee. Definitely coffee.

*

Fifteen minutes later found Snape rifling quietly through the contents of the kitchen cupboards. He located ground coffee, mugs and a coffee pot in mercifully quick succession, and soon the room was filling with the delicious aroma of brewing caffeine. While he waited he wandered through to the living room and opened the French windows, inhaling the fresh garden air. The dawn chorus was tailing off now, although a song thrush and a blackbird were still competing enthusiastically for dominance from the top of the oak tree.

Hermione's huge ginger cat came sauntering across the dew-soaked grass towards him, then sat at his feet with a look of expectation on his squashed face.

"Oh, no," said Snape, with a stern expression. "If you're looking for food you can wait for your mistress. You hardly look like you're starving; in fact I suspect you've spent the whole night terrorising the local wildlife."

Crookshanks gave the feline equivalent of an indifferent shrug and pushed past Snape's legs into the house, where he jumped lightly into an armchair and started his morning ablutions. Snape followed him in and began the enjoyable task of selecting a book to accompany his morning coffee.

*

Hermione came downstairs at seven to the welcome sight of hot coffee on the stove. She filled her mug, then went in search of her erstwhile professor. She found him seated on a bench in the sunny part of the garden, totally engrossed in a book.

"Morning!" she called softly as she approached. Snape raised his hand in acknowledgement, but did not look up from his book, so she walked quietly over to take a seat next to him. She curled her legs up under herself and closed her eyes as she sipped the bitterly refreshing liquid. The last twinges of a headache were still making themselves known at the base of her skull. She heard Snape close his book and opened her eyes to look enquiringly at him.

"*Semantics and Sorcery*," he said, tilting the volume's spine towards her. "One of yours have you read it?"

"I didn't even know I had it!" she replied, laughing.

"It's quite fascinating," he continued. "The author discusses the effect of the language we speak on how we can use magic: as language shapes thought, it also shapes the precise form the action of a spell can take. Despite the fact that the words used to cast a spell are internationally harmonised, the way we use thought to focus the magical energy can be influenced by our mother tongue. Just as English has no equivalent word for the German *Schadenfreude* or the Welsh *hiraeth*, slight subtle differences in magical effect can be seen between different nationalities."

Hermione had let Snape's melodious voice wash over her, but became aware that he appeared to expect a response.

"That does sound interesting, but I think I'll appreciate it more once I'm properly awake."

"Good Lord, you mean the much vaunted Granger brain doesn't operate at full capacity twenty four hours a day?" Snape replied, the quirk of his lips showing he intended to tease rather than taunt.

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she looked steadily back at him. "Apparently not, because I can't even think of a scathing response. I'll opt for a dignified silence instead. Go back to your book while I wake up." She flapped her hand at him dismissively.

Snape snorted softly and did as he was told.

*

By mid-morning they were back at work at the garden table.

"Here's a picture of Penbryn Hall," said Hermione, pushing the print across the table to Snape. "Markov's country house, near Builth Wells in Mid Wales. Markov's wife, Helen, inherited it on her father's death. He died of a heart attack not long after she met Markov."

"How convenient," replied Snape drily.

"Quite. The sad thing is, I've spoken to her on the phone about this weekend, and she sounds absolutely lovely. Goodness knows how she ended up with Markov."

"Could be any number of reasons. Loneliness, a fancy for an exotic foreigner, or perhaps she's fooled you and she's actually a nasty piece of work herself. Quite likely she has no idea about Markov's true personality. Alternatively she does know and is one of those deluded women who thinks she can reform her man."

"What a fascinating insight you have into the female psyche. We'll find out soon enough, anyway. Oh, that reminds me. Can you ride a horse?"

Snape looked at her with a suspicious frown. "I have ridden a horse, but not for many years. I assume there's a reason for the enquiry?"

"I told Helen we'd be arriving quite early on the Saturday, ostensibly to avoid the traffic out of London, though actually to give us as much time as possible to have a nose around. She suggested we could go for a ride if we've got time, as she's got a stable full of horses. I said that sounded like a nice idea, though I haven't been on a horse since I was a child, and I quite truthfully said I had no idea what your riding skills were like. We'll see how the day pans out, anyway. The other couples are arriving for lunch, then we've got dinner with them and some local guests."

"And Markov is due to arrive on the Sunday morning?" confirmed Snape.

"That's right. Helen was very apologetic, saying he was too busy to be home for the whole weekend, but to be honest this is far better for our purposes. The more evidence we can gather against him the better. We haven't managed to identify a site for his research laboratory, so I have a strong suspicion it's at Penbryn."

"I have read your briefing, Hermione," said Snape acidly.

"Sorry, Severus." Hermione grimaced slightly. "I'm not used to working with anyone with quite such a retentive memory. Go on then, show off. Tell me all about the other guests this weekend."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "A test? Very well. We will be joined as staying guests by two other couples. Giles Pemberton and his wife Verity are old friends of Mrs Markov. Verity and Helen were at school together. Giles has a financial stake in several successful companies in the telecommunications and IT fields. His business dealings all seem to be legitimate, and there is nothing suspicious in his bank records, but it would seem strange for Markov not to have utilised him in some way.

"The other gentleman, and I use the word ironically, is almost certainly working with Markov. Archie Price started his criminal career with small-scale smuggling of alcohol and cigarettes, for which he served a short prison sentence fifteen years ago. Since then he has stayed out of trouble with the authorities, although his business activities seem to be no more law-abiding. He is strongly suspected of being behind several large smuggling rings, associated with deals in both drugs and arms, but the Muggle police have been unable to acquire enough evidence against him to act. Which I imagine they're rather upset about.

"He will be accompanied by the current Mrs Price. Stacey is wife number three, substantially younger than her husband, and lists beautician as her occupation, though there appears to be no evidence of her actually working.

"The identities of the dinner guests are not known, but they will probably be local worthies known to Mrs Markov."

"Outstanding!" exclaimed Hermione, smiling sweetly. "It's so good to know your advanced years haven't dimmed your memory."

"Sarcastic little trollop," growled Snape. "It's such a relief I only have to pretend to be married to you. I pity the poor sod who gets the job for real."

"I can be lovely when I want to be," protested Hermione. "Anyway, on the subject of our pretend marriage, we're probably going to have to keep it up all the time while we're at Penbryn."

"Keep it up?" repeated Snape, with a slight smirk.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Why is it that however impressive a man's IQ is, at least part of his sense of humour never matures beyond adolescence? You're as bad as Ron. We'll have to keep up the pretence, I mean, nothing else. Don't worry; I shan't make any physical demands of you. What was I talking about, anyway? You have now totally derailed my train of thought"

Snape smirked again.

"Oh, yes, I remember," continued Hermione, glaring at him. "We'll have to keep up *the act* because I have a very strong suspicion our bedroom will be bugged. By which I mean Markov will be using some sort of electronic surveillance. It would be in character for him to use the opportunity to spy on us and check we are who we say we are. I'll be able to check the room when we arrive, but obviously won't be able to remove any bugs I find..."

"...because then he'd know we know," finished Snape.

"Exactly. So we may have to take some long walks in the grounds if we're to speak freely."

"You mean to say that on top of everything else, I need to pretend an interest in gardening? The prospect of this weekend just gets better and better."

*

After lunch, Snape retired to his room to prepare for the journey to London. Hermione had told him that his Muggle clothes were waiting for him at her flat, but she'd brought something for him to wear for the trip. She had also warned him that apart from his wand, he was allowed to take nothing that could be identified as from the wizarding world. Which meant his packing wouldn't take long, he reflected.

There was a knock at the bedroom door, accompanied by Hermione calling "Are you decent?"

He opened the door, saying, "I don't think I've ever been called that, but I am dressed."

Hermione held out a suit bag to him, marked with Madame Malkin's crest.

"I thought these were Muggle clothes?" he asked, noticing the crest as he took the bag.

"Muggle design, yes, but it's easier and cheaper to get Madame Malkin to make them. Her versions tend to fit better, too. And include wand pockets, though obviously you're not supposed to be using magic at all once we're in London. Right, I'll see you downstairs when you're ready. I'm off to change into Jane Eastwood."

And with that she walked purposefully back down the corridor. Snape remained leaning against the doorjamb, watching her retreating arse, before he realised what he was doing and backed rapidly into his room.

*

Much as Snape hated to admit it, on the available evidence Hermione had excellent taste in Muggle clothing. He examined himself critically in the full length mirror he had slightly shamefacedly Transfigured from the small looking glass on the wall. The linen suit was a dark navy, and even he had to concede it hung elegantly from his lean frame. The light blue shirt he wore underneath was soft and comfortable, and although the collar was open it fitted well enough around his neck that the scar from Nagini's bite was hidden. His hair was tied back as directed. He was, he thought, almost unrecognisable as the Hogwarts Potions master. Almost, but not quite that nose was, alas, all too distinctive.

He returned the mirror to its previous state with a flick of his wand, then picked up his bag and headed downstairs. There was no sign of Hermione, so he walked back to the base of the stairs and called up, "Come along, wife! We haven't got all day!"

He was rewarded with the sound of Hermione's laugh and a shouted "I'm on my way, darling!"

Moments later Hermione appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "I hope you're not planning on addressing me as 'wife' for the whole weekend," she said, an expression of mock disapproval on her face.

"Does it not strike the right note? And you can't possibly expect me to answer to 'darling'."

"What would you prefer? Angel? Sweetheart? Love of my life?"

"I would prefer we avoided endearments totally if at all possible."

"Fair enough then, grumpy sod. Come outside into the sunlight so I can have a proper look at you."

Snape followed her out of the front door and stood there while she walked around him, lips pursed. He distracted himself from feeling like a prize bull at a cattle market by covertly examining her changed appearance. Her casual jeans and shirt of the last couple of days had been replaced by tailored trousers and a floaty, silky top that, yes, gave a nice glimpse of cleavage. Although opportunities to look down said cleavage were slightly limited by the fact that she was wearing high-heeled shoes so was now three inches taller than she had been.

She completed her circular tour of his anatomy and stood in front of him, a slightly smug smile on her face.

"Well?" Snape asked. "Do I pass muster?"

"You most certainly do! I knew you'd look great in that outfit. You would not believe how long it took me to come up with a wardrobe for you. I've spent far more time than is healthy recently imagining you out of your robes."

"Time well spent, then," he replied, choosing to ignore the subtext in her comment. "So, woman, where are you taking me now?"

"'Woman' is no better than 'wife', you Neanderthal. Bloody Northern men, you're all the same!" She shook her head ruefully. "We are heading for London and civilisation. To be precise, St Pancras Station, where Jane Eastman is meeting Steven Singer off the Eurostar train on his return from a European conference. We'll then get a taxi to my...sorry, *our* flat. Which I am fairly sure is being watched, hence the need for an unimpeachably Muggle arrival.

"Are you happy for me to Apparate us both to St Pancras? There's a hidden Apparition point there, but it's a bit tricky to explain exactly where it is."

"Take me where you will," replied Snape, inclining his head courteously and holding out his hand.

To his surprise, instead of simply grasping his arm, Hermione ducked under it and put both of her arms around his waist, whirling him off in a tight confusion of perfume, soft curves and suffocating darkness.

*

They stumbled slightly on landing, and Hermione stepped regretfully out of Snape's embrace. *When did that happen?* she thought. She'd grabbed him, not the other way round. They were in a deserted, white-tiled corridor. Wordlessly, she took Snape's hand and led him out through the door at the end and out onto the crowded station concourse. No-one paid any attention to yet another newly reunited couple.

She entwined her fingers more tightly with his, and at his enquiring look muttered, "I don't want to lose you amongst this lot."

They followed the flow of the crowd out of the station and towards the taxi rank. Hermione led the way to the first available black cab, but Snape reached around her to open the door.

"Thank you, darling," she said as she climbed in, ignoring the nearly imperceptible narrowing of his eyes at the endearment.

"Fifty-seven Holland Park, please," she said to the driver.

"OK, love," he replied, and she settled herself down next to Snape.

She noticed that he had stretched his arm out along the seat back behind her, and as she sat down he brought his hand down to her shoulder, his long fingers caressing the sheer fabric of her shirt. He lowered his head to speak softly into her ear.

"Should we be putting on a display of affection for the driver's benefit?"

The deep timbre of his voice sent an unexpected shiver of desire down her spine. She lifted her hand to his face and daringly kissed his cheek gently, briefly, before whispering back.

"Some small display might be a good idea, but nothing so inappropriate he would remember us."

Snape lowered his head and kissed the bare skin at the junction of her neck and shoulder.

"Would this be appropriate?"

Hermione managed a quiet "Oh, yes" before he moved his head up slightly to place an open-mouthed kiss just beneath her ear.

"What about this?"

"Definitely." She ran her fingers through the short hairs at the nape of his neck, resisting the urge to pull his mouth to hers.

He moved his mouth right over her ear and whispered, "But I suspect that ripping your top off would not be?"

Hermione felt herself flush at the image and retaliated by running her free hand gently along the inside of his thigh, looking straight into his eyes and saying, "You are a wicked man. Just wait until I get you home."

His dark eyes filled with a combination of desire and mischief as he replied, "What exactly are you planning on doing with me, wife?"

She continued to run her fingers slowly up and down his thigh and placed a feather-soft kiss on his lips before replying in a low voice, "As soon as we get through the front door, I'll pin you against it and kiss you until you can barely breathe."

Another kiss.

"Then I'll lead you to the bedroom and ask you to remove all of your clothes, slowly, so I can watch."

Another kiss.

"Then I'll remove mine, slowly, so you can watch."

She paused, observing the effects of her words on her companion. The mischief in his eyes had fled, leaving only the desire. Snape grasped her hand as it moved along his thigh and stilled it. He moved to whisper in her ear again.

"You are going to provoke an old man into a heart attack if you're not careful."

"You did ask!" she protested softly.

He dropped another kiss below her ear, swirling his tongue briefly on her flesh. She tried and failed to prevent a small moan of longing escaping her.

"I should have known I would get more information than I required when I asked you a question," he murmured.

Hermione raised their joined hands from his thigh and brought his knuckles to her mouth, kissing them lightly one by one.

"At least these answers come from practical experience rather than a text-book."

They held each other's gaze for long seconds, breath gradually slowing. Hermione watched as Snape's eyes flicked down to look at her lips, and she opened them slightly in anticipation as he moved forwards to capture her mouth with his. She closed her eyes as their lips met, his mouth covering hers possessively, tongues gliding against each other...

"Fuckin' hell, mate!"

They sprang apart guiltily as the taxi came to a sudden halt. The driver looked back over his shoulder at them.

"Sorry about that! Bloody cyclist pulled right out in front of me. Didn't mean to interrupt you!" He wagged his eyebrows suggestively and turned back to the road.

Hermione caught Snape's eye and tried to suppress a giggle at his expression of affronted dignity.

"How much longer do we have to travel in this infernal contraption?" he growled as she tucked herself under his arm again.

"Only another five minutes or so," Hermione replied after a glance out of the window. "Perhaps we should just sit quietly for the rest of the journey we've convinced him, anyway." She indicated towards the driver with a quick movement of her head. Snape snorted derisively, but tightened his arm around Hermione's shoulders and dropped a quick kiss onto the top of her head. She relaxed into his embrace.

She gazed out of the taxi window, but didn't notice the busy streets they were passing through. Instead she was reflecting on the fact that she'd just had one of the most erotic experiences of her life. In the back of a taxi. Fully clothed. With Severus Snape. That was ... unexpected. Obviously he'd been acting, but still *Wow*.

*

Snape looked down at the top of Hermione's head, nestled against his shoulder. *What the hell had just happened?* He knew what had nearly happened. He had been within seconds of conducting an act of gross public indecency. In the back of a taxi. In broad daylight. He was slightly shocked by how willing he had been to push their encounter to its logical conclusion. He *never* lost control like that.

He knew she had just been acting with her little seduction routine, but, damn, she was good. *Correction, she was evil*. He had totally underestimated her appetite for deceit. He had assumed she would have rejected his subterfuge, rather than going along with it with quite such enthusiasm. And his reactions to her had been alarmingly genuine. He was beginning to feel that challenging Miss Granger to any sort of duel was a spectacularly bad idea.

*

The taxi pulled over in front of a stately, white-painted Victorian townhouse. Similar buildings were ranged along both sides of the quiet, tree-lined street. Hermione paid the taxi driver with a cheery "Thanks!" then led the way out of the vehicle and up the shallow steps to the front door. Snape followed closely behind, resting one hand gently at the small of her back as she searched through her handbag for her keys.

"Ah ha!" she exclaimed, holding the errant bunch up in triumph and flashing him a brilliant smile. She opened the front door, then took his hand and led him into a high-ceilinged entrance hall. The floor was tiled in an ornate geometric pattern. Still holding his hand, she continued on up the elegant staircase in front of them until they reached a black painted door with the number 57B on it.

"This is us." She smiled, unlocking the door and gesturing for him to enter. She followed him in and closed the door behind her, then put her finger to his lips. For a heart-stopping moment the words ... *pin you against it and kiss you until you can barely breathe* flashed through his head, then she was gone, walking rapidly around the apartment holding up what looked like a Muggle mobile telephone. He realised with some relief (*disappointment?*) that she had merely been gesturing him to be silent.

He strolled into the living room, examining his surroundings curiously. The contrast with Hermione's cottage could hardly be more pronounced. The well-proportioned room had bay windows and a high ceiling. The furnishings were stylish and minimalist rather than comfortable, and the neutral walls displayed some large modern art canvases with no recognisable subject matter. There was a flat screen television and various unidentifiable pieces of Muggle technology, but no books.

Hermione entered the room still brandishing her phone and grinned at him. "All clear. I can declare the flat a bug-free zone. So we can drop the act for the time being."

"Pity," replied Snape drily. "I was rather looking forward to being dragged to the bedroom and forced to strip."

He was amused to see Hermione flush slightly.

"Sorry about that. I got a bit carried away."

"No need to apologise. You were extremely... convincing. I commend your acting skills." He inclined his head graciously.

"You were pretty good yourself. Your acting, I mean, not the kissing, though that was good too, and... shall we change the subject now?" She held her hands up in an expression of submission, shaking her head firmly as if to clear it.

Snape took pity on her. "So, how does this bug detector of yours work?"

Hermione sat down on the black leather sofa.

"Have a seat, and I'll explain."

Snape obediently settled himself next to her, long legs stretched out in front of him and an expression of interest on his face. Hermione passed him her phone, and he examined it closely.

"It looks like an ordinary Muggle mobile phone," Hermione began, "and, in fact, it can be used as one. But it's got an inbuilt sensor to detect the sort of signals emitted by electronic surveillance equipment. It can also distinguish between different types of bug, so can tell me if there are just auditory signals or if there are cameras as well. Anything detected shows up on the screen."

"I assume this works just using Muggle technology?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. Magic and Muggle electronics most definitely do not mix. Try using a spell to detect bugs, and you just fry them, which isn't exactly subtle. We have been using that incompatibility to our advantage, though."

She reached down to the floor to retrieve her bag. After a brief rummage she pulled out a set of handcuffs. She swung them from one finger, a smile playing around the corners of her mouth.

Snape looked at her steadily.

"Hermione," he said warningly, "I'm sure you won't take it the wrong way when I tell you that if you even attempt to put another pair of handcuffs on me I will hex you into the middle of next week."

She smiled winsomely at him. "Don't you trust me? I'm hurt."

"You will be."

"Fair enough. How about if I just ask you to hold them? They'll still work."

Snape reluctantly held his hand out and took the handcuffs from her. Hermione turned the small key in the catch to lock them, then removed it.

"OK," she said. "Keep hold of them and cast a spell. Something simple."

Snape held the cuffs in his left hand, then looked at an unlit candle on a side table.

"*Incendio!*" he said.

Nothing happened. He felt a slight moment of panic. He could always light a fire wandlessly. Wordlessly too, for that matter. He reached into his pocket with his right hand and removed his wand. Pointing it at the candle he repeated, more loudly this time, "*Incendio!*" Again, nothing.

He turned to Hermione, scowling. She had a slightly smug expression on her face.

"All right, witch, what have you done to me?" he growled.

She took hold of the handcuffs and replaced the key in the catch to unlock them, then released them again into Snape's grasp.

"Try now," she instructed.

He pointed his wand at the candle again. "*Incendio!*" Light flared instantly as the wick ignited.

He gave the handcuffs back to Hermione.

"Very impressive," he conceded. "I wasn't aware such equipment existed."

Hermione grimaced. "You know what the Unspeakables are like they hardly go for publishing their research in peer-reviewed journals. They developed this technology originally for use in Azkaban. After the defection of the Dementors, new methods were needed to prevent escape. Wand confiscation was never enough to prevent the more skilled prisoners from using magic.

"It's been known for years that magic interferes with Muggle electronics, and some bright spark in the Department of Mysteries decided to investigate exactly what the cause was and whether the reverse effect existed as well. They managed to isolate the precise electromagnetic frequency where the interference occurs. The transmitter in these handcuffs emits that frequency and, well, you've seen the effect for yourself."

"Indeed. Has the technique been used over larger areas as well?"

"They've tried, but they haven't yet managed to control the field size. It gets a bit hit and miss in terms of the area affected. Even with the handcuffs, I have to be careful not to stand too close to whoever I've put them on or my magic disappears too."

"So this is one of the methods you can use to apprehend a wizard in front of a Muggle audience?"

"Exactly."

"Any other little toys you'd like to show me?"

Hermione dug in her bag again and brought out a small handgun. Snape fought the instinct to leap out of his seat.

"Bloody hell, woman, don't wave that thing at me. Do you know how to use it?"

Hermione eyed him calmly.

"Severus Snape, seriously? This is me you're talking to. Brightest witch et cetera? It's not loaded. The safety is on. And of course I know how to use it. Firearms training was part of the syllabus during my year in the States. To be honest it was a piece of cake if you can aim a wand you can aim a gun."

"You can't just cast a Jellylegs hex with a gun, though, can you? They're rather all-or-nothing weapons."

"I agree, though aiming to incapacitate rather than kill should generally be the goal with a gun as well. Believe me, this is very much a weapon of last resort, but it's always useful to have that extra back-up."

Once again, Hermione Granger had managed to surprise him, Snape realised.

"Is that the lot or have you got a small crossbow secreted in there as well?"

*

That evening they walked to a nearby Italian restaurant for dinner. Hermione had confessed that she managed to run the apartment very well without magic as long as she had a cleaner and always ate out. Snape had laughed at that.

They sat at the bar with a beer each while they examined the menu and ordered their food, then a young waitress led them to a table in a secluded corner of the dining room.

Snape held out a chair for Hermione. "Come along then, wife."

Hermione looked up at him as she took her seat.

"Are you really going to call me that all weekend, *Steven*?"

Snape sat down opposite her.

"I rather like the proprietary ring it has. And I'm sorry, but you just don't look like a Jane. I suppose I should be thankful you didn't choose to christen me Rochester."

Hermione shook her head. "No, that would have been a bit obvious. Though you do have the dark forbidding countenance."

"You forget, I'm missing the mad wife in the attic. Unless you count Sybill Trelawney in her tower."

Hermione chuckled. "I must admit I'm surprised to find you have such a familiarity with Muggle literature."

Snape grimaced. "I don't. I read *Jane Eyre* at a time when I was foolish enough to want an insight into what a Muggle-born girl might find romantic."

"Ah, I see. Did it work?"

"Not so as you'd notice, no. And of course, *Jane Eyre* isn't Muggle literature. Charlotte Brontë was a witch."

Hermione looked at him, steadily. "A witch? Really?"

"Of course, isn't it obvious? That hopeless cover story about three sisters brought up in isolation in the wilds of Yorkshire? Total naifs who manage to write about passions they've supposedly never experienced? Honestly, I'd have thought a girl of your intelligence would have worked that out. And failing that the use of *Vocant Amoris* as a narrative device to return Jane to Rochester..."

"*Vocant Amoris*?" Hermione interrupted. "What's that?"

"Of course, I forgot. One of the advantages of being Muggle-born is that your head wasn't stuffed with all the usual superstitions when you were an impressionable child. *Vocant Amoris* the Lover's Call where two people whose hearts are as one can cry out to each other across any distance at a time of great need. Supposedly." Snape's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Rochester calling to Jane to bring her home. Of course. But you said supposedly? I see how such a thing could theoretically be possible; I mean we normally use a Patronus to send messages over a distance, but I'm sure some other mechanism could work, and it would be easy enough to test, and it could be terribly useful if the whole love aspect could be removed..." Hermione faded into silence as her mind raced over the possibilities. Snape snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"Stop that. It's just superstition of the sort beloved by weak-minded romantics, and there is not one single well-documented case of its occurrence. Oh, many a love-struck teenager has insisted it has happened to them, but no-one has been willing to subject themselves to testing. Although to be fair the failure to demonstrate *Vocant Amoris* during a test wouldn't necessarily prove it doesn't exist..."

"...it could just be the case that the two involved weren't truly in love. Yes, I could see how that could be a problem. But still ..."

She paused as the waitress put their starters on the table then left.

Snape looked at Hermione enquiringly.

"Are we going to be debating mythical love spells all evening, or are we actually going to eat?"

Hermione smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. But while we're eating you can tell me if there are any other Muggle writers who weren't what they seem."

Snape picked up his knife and fork. "Let me see. You never believed any of that Bard of Avon crap about Shakespeare, did you?"

*

They emerged from the restaurant two hours later. Hermione paused to take a lungful of the warm, summer air, tainted as it was with exhaust fumes.

"God, I hate London. Great shops, great food, but bloody awful apart from that. I can't wait to be back in the country tomorrow."

She'd surprised herself with that small realisation, several years ago. She always thought she would love living in the city. When she was imagining her future, it always included a jolly little video montage of her striding through London streets in heels, laden with shopping, hailing taxis and eating in nice restaurants. The reality was that the years of Hogwarts air, not to mention the extended camping trip in their seventh year, had left her feeling polluted and claustrophobic after a day or so spent in the capital. She thanked Providence and Apparition for the fact that distance was no object when it came to the daily commute.

Snape crooked his elbow towards her. "Shouldn't we be walking arm in arm, as a blissfully married couple?"

Hermione smiled at him as she slipped her arm through his. "An excellent idea. Walking in these heels gets a little tricky when I'm tired."

"I don't know why women feel the need for such ridiculous footwear. I would have expected rather more sense from you."

They began to walk slowly back towards the flat.

"Well, for a start I'm in character, and this is how Jane Eastwood dresses. I tend to wear heels for work anyway. I'm generally the youngest person in the room and the only woman, so the last thing I need is to be the shortest as well. At least this way I don't need to be physically looking up to anybody."

She turned her head to face Snape, tilting her chin up a little to meet his eyes. He returned her gaze steadily. She smiled slightly. "Though there are still those I look up to metaphorically."

He stopped walking and looked down to where her hand was curled round his arm. He moved his other hand to cover it, and she felt the warmth and strength of those long fingers on hers.

"You've shown me over the last two days that you don't need to be looking up to anyone any more, least of all me."

The unusually gentle tone of his voice moved Hermione more than his words.

She moved her fingers until they were entwined with his and shook his hand slightly. "Listen to me," she said. "I was always in awe of your talent, your intelligence, your bravery. But it's only since I've been doing this job working undercover, having to keep straight two separate lives, live in two different worlds that I've fully appreciated all you had to go through for so long. And what I'm doing is safe. If my Muggle cover gets blown I can just Obliviate a few people and run back to the Ministry. You were putting your life at risk every day."

She looked at his bowed head, afraid she'd said too much, brought back memories he'd rather were left buried.

He raised his head to meet her gaze, and she was relieved to see a calm expression in those black eyes. "That was who I was," he said softly. "Now I'm just a Potions master whose only subterfuge is pretending to the students that I'm far more frightening than I am."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest but Snape silenced her with an impatient shake of his head.

"No, let me finish. My fighting days are over. The wizarding world owes me nothing, and, for the first time, I feel I owe nothing to the world, to anyone. I'm content to live a quiet life, but that doesn't mean I don't have every respect and admiration for those who are carrying on the fight, and that includes you."

Hermione blinked back sudden tears and replied unsteadily, "Can we agree to admire each other, then?"

Snape gave a warm smile and inclined his head. "I think that would be acceptable."

Hermione looked deep into his eyes and felt she'd won a victory of sorts.

They resumed their walk in silence. As they neared the house, Hermione said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm?"

"If your fighting days are over, and you don't owe anyone anything, why on earth did you agree to this mission?"

"Well, initially I thought I was agreeing to provide protection to an ex-student, which rather came within my remit as a teacher. And then after you'd deposited me flat on my back on the Transfiguration classroom floor, I was too scared to tell you I'd changed my mind."

Hermione's peal of delighted laughter echoed down the street as they walked up the steps to the front door.

*

Half an hour later Hermione was gazing into the depths of her glass of whisky, trying to decide exactly how to phrase her next question. They had decided to have a nightcap on returning to the flat, but she could now feel her eyelids starting to grow heavy. She leaned forwards in her armchair and looked at Snape sitting opposite her, reclining comfortably with his legs up on the sofa. She took a deep breath. *OK, you can do this* she thought. *You kissed him earlier, for Merlin's sake*

"Come on, wife, spit it out."

Hermione jumped slightly at Snape's words. He was observing her with amusement in his eyes.

"I can hear you thinking from here," he continued.

"Um, I was just trying to think of the right way to put this, but ... do you want to sleep with me tonight?"

Oh no, that didn't come out at all awkwardly. She watched his face carefully for a response, and was relieved to see that his amusement wasn't replaced with horror.

"I assume you're not propositioning me, and when you say sleep together, you mean just that?" he asked.

"Oh, God, yes, totally," she responded rapidly. "I just thought that as tomorrow night we're likely to have eavesdroppers, it might be best to have a trial run. To make tomorrow a bit less awkward?"

"Well, as long as it's not just a flimsy excuse for you to have your wicked way with me, I think that the idea has merit. I would appreciate some forewarning if you snore like a flobberworm or sprawl across the entire mattress."

Hermione chuckled. "You are such a gentleman."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "As you're proposing to share a bed with me you'd better hope I am."

I'd really rather you weren't, actually, thought Hermione wistfully.

She downed the last of her whisky and heaved herself out of the armchair. "I'll go and get ready, then. You should find everything you need in the bathroom, and your clothes are in the wardrobe in the spare bedroom."

Snape raised his glass to her. "Off you go then, wife. I'll just finish this then I'll join you."

*

In fact, Snape helped himself to another couple of fingers of whisky, which he knocked back in one swallow. He could do this, he thought. Hermione's idea had been sensible. Far better that any *issues* were sorted out in advance. Who slept on which side of the bed that sort of thing.

Severus Snape was perfectly capable of spending the night in a bed with a woman without doing anything inappropriate. Even if that woman was twenty years younger than him, was his intellectual equal, and was quite unreasonably attractive. And had nearly caused him to pounce on her in a taxi like a hormonal adolescent. *Oh, bugger.* He steered his shoulders and headed off to find some suitable bed-attire. Preferably something very loose-fitting.

*

Snape gently pushed open the door to the master bedroom. He had taken his time getting ready for bed in the vain hope that Hermione would already be asleep. The room was softly lit by a bedside lamp, and she was curled up under a white sheet on the side of the bed furthest from the door. To his slight dismay, as soon as he entered the room she sat up with a welcoming smile. He tried not to notice the brief vest top she was wearing and utterly refused to speculate on what else she was wearing under the

sheet.

She put her head on one side and studied him quizzically. "I couldn't decide if you'd wear that T-shirt or not."

Snape looked down at his grey top, emblazoned with the slogan 'Chemists experiment in bed'.

"I'm planning on keeping it. I'll Transfigure it to read 'Potions masters' instead of 'Chemists' when I get back to Hogwarts."

Hermione grinned broadly. "I can just imagine the expressions at breakfast if you turned up in the Great Hall wearing that!"

He closed the door behind him and walked over to the bed, bare feet silent on the wooden floor. The room was warm, and he was glad he'd put on a pair of sleep shorts rather than pyjama bottoms. As if reading his mind, Hermione said, "I've opened the window, but it's still warm in here. No air-conditioning, I'm afraid, and no Cooling Charms allowed either."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," he replied as he sat on the edge of the bed. "Was it deliberate, leaving me the side of the bed closest to the door?"

"Yes. I guessed you would prefer that. Was I right?"

"Indeed you were. I understand we are not using magic, but I hope you appreciate I need to sleep with my wand close at hand?"

Hermione reached under her pillow and pulled out her wand. "I agree. Emergency use only, obviously, but better safe than sorry."

Snape nodded briefly, then put his wand on the bedside table and swung his legs into bed. Hermione flipped the sheet to one side to accommodate him, and smiled at him as he lay down and made himself comfortable, facing her. She switched off the lamp then shuffled down to lie next to him, close but not touching.

"Good night, then," she said into the darkness.

"Good night. Sleep well. No snoring," he replied, and heard her soft giggle as she rolled over on to her side, facing away from him.

He lay on his back and stretched his long limbs out under the cool sheet. *There, that wasn't so bad*, he thought. *Close your eyes and it will be morning before you know it*

The long day and the whisky soon combined to make him feel pleasantly drowsy. He moved to lie on his side, facing Hermione, and his fingers accidentally brushed against her back. They both flinched a little at the contact and she moved, very slightly, out of his reach. Her breathing was even, and he couldn't decide if she was asleep or not. He stretched his arm out, bringing his hand into contact with her back again. Once more, she moved fractionally away from him.

Deliberately, he reached out to her back again. This time she inched away further, then *crash!* With a thud and a muffled squeak, she fell out of bed.

She clambered back up, and, even in the dim glow from the streetlights outside, he could see she was glaring at him.

"You did that on purpose!" she accused, lying back down next to him with a huff. He propped himself up on one elbow.

"I didn't expect you to dive out of the bed, but, yes, touching you was no accident. Why did you keep moving away?"

"I was trying to give you more room! I thought you were just stretching out. Touching seemed a bit, well, intimate."

Severus laughed softly. "We will get no sleep at all if we jump every time we make contact. The bed isn't that big. Now come here, wife."

He reached his arm out and pulled Hermione back firmly until she was lying on her side, her back to his chest. He curled slightly around her, and she pulled his arm in close around her stomach. She gave a quiet sigh.

"Better?" he murmured.

"Much. You're right: I can relax now. 'Night."

"Good night. Try to stay in the bed this time."

Snape inhaled the faint fragrance of perfume from the back of Hermione's neck and relaxed his hand against her belly. Sleep beckoned again. He smiled softly. He was rather proud of that little bit of persuasion. He'd almost believed it himself.

Author's note:

Schadenfreude is a German word meaning to derive pleasure from another's pain or misfortune. *Hiraeth* is a Welsh word for a feeling of longing for a place, person or time past. Like homesickness, but not necessarily for home. Neither has an equivalent word in English, though we can experience both emotions!

Vocant Amoris is Latin for "Call of love".

All Revved Up with no Place to Go

Chapter 4 of 7

In which Penbryn Hall hides secrets and Snape reveals a talent.

A/N: Thanks to the lovely peskipiksi for betaing in the face of germs. Disclaimer: Any characters you recognise are JKR's, not mine. And I'm making no money from this. Hermione may have borrowed a couple of CDs from me. But not the car, more's the pity.

Hermione woke with the dawn light, feeling deliciously refreshed. Her alarm had yet to go off, so she remained where she was, relishing some extra minutes in bed. At some point during the night, she and Snape had both turned over, and she was now nestled against his back, her arm wrapped round him. She gently caressed the soft fabric of his T-shirt. She'd been unable to resist it when she spotted it online. She honestly hadn't expected to see him wear it, though.

She had been surprised by his actions last night, but had to admit he had been right. After his unexpected embrace, she'd relaxed and slept as comfortably with him as if they'd been together for years. Who'd have guessed that Severus Snape was a snuggler in bed? She giggled quietly, muffling the sound against his back.

"That's rather disconcerting, you know," rumbled Snape's soft voice. "Waking to find a woman laughing at me."

"Not half as disconcerting as discovering the dreaded bat of the dungeons wears T-shirts with inappropriate slogans and enjoys a cuddle," she retorted.

"I'm undercover," he responded with aplomb. He rolled onto his back, and Hermione moved over slightly, propping herself up onto her elbow to look down at him. He looked as relaxed as she'd ever seen him, a slight smile playing at the corner of his lips. She felt a sudden rush of affection for this complex man with whom she'd been acquainted for years, but whom she felt she was only now getting to know.

Beep, beep. Her alarm. She reluctantly moved away from Snape and reached over to her bedside table to silence it. She sat up then, stretching her arms above her head and yawning. She noticed Snape's eyes flickering to the inch of bare stomach revealed by her movement.

"Time to get up, I'm afraid," she said.

"Off you go then, wife. I'm not moving from this bed until I can smell coffee," Snape replied imperiously.

Hermione stood up and pointed a warning finger at him. "Just to be clear, I am getting up and making coffee because I want some, not because I'm being obedient."

"Oh, don't worry; I would never accuse you of that."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him and flounced out of the room, well aware that her shorts had ridden up and were giving him a fantastic view of her arse.

Snape banged his head down on the pillow and groaned. He hoped she took her time with the coffee. It was going to be at least ten minutes before he was in any fit state to move.

*

"What the hell is that?"

Snape scowled at Hermione as she held open the car door for him. The early morning air was cold, and the city around them was starting to wake.

"It's a car. A Jaguar XK to be precise. Don't tell me you haven't noticed it parked out here."

"Yes, I know it's a car, and yes, I had noticed it. I just didn't realise it was yours. It hadn't occurred to me that a long car journey was one of the tortures I would have to endure this weekend."

Hermione abandoned her position by the passenger door and threw their bags into the boot instead.

"Just get into the car, now!" she hissed.

Snape glowered again as he lowered his long frame into the sports car. Hermione slid into the driver's seat and turned to face him.

"Had you forgotten we're probably being watched?"

"Yes, I had," he admitted, surprising her. "I was just rather taken aback. How long will it take us to drive all the way to Mid Wales?"

"About four hours, depending on traffic," Hermione replied.

"So, why can't we Apparate most of the way there and just drive the last few miles? And by the way, I assume you can drive and this isn't some ill-advised magical-Muggle hybrid."

"Totally Muggle, and I am an excellent driver. And I enjoy driving. This is a fantastic and very expensive car, and it has to be returned after this weekend. There's not a Bowtruckle in a bonfire's chance I would ever be able to afford one in real life, so I'm going to take advantage of having it and drive every possible mile I can. You're not scared are you?" Hermione's eyes widened teasingly.

"I have travelled in cars rarely, and I have never enjoyed the sensation," Snape conceded reluctantly.

"You were fine in the taxi yesterday," protested Hermione.

Snape looked at her directly. "I was... distracted yesterday."

Hermione smiled mischievously. "Well, I strongly recommend you don't attempt any distraction today, or I am highly likely to crash the car. Honestly," she continued, more seriously, "I am a good and safe driver, and I promise I will get you there in one piece."

She put her seatbelt on, raising her eyebrows at him until he did the same.

"Excellent. Now hold on."

She turned the key in the ignition and grinned at the apprehensive expression on his face as the car roared into life. She revved the engine slightly.

"Ready?"

"I place my life in your apparently capable hands."

"That's what I like to hear. Wales, here we come!"

She released the handbrake and, with a cursory check in her mirror, accelerated noisily down the narrow street.

*

An hour into the journey, Snape was somewhat surprised to find that he was relaxed and almost enjoying himself. The seat was comfortable, there was more legroom than he'd expected, and the vehicle smelt delightfully of leather and Hermione's perfume. He was fairly sure that her initial hurtle through the deserted early morning streets of the city had just been mischievously calculated to scare him, and once they were on the motorway, her driving style settled to one of easy competence. Now no longer in fear of his life, he settled back to admire the relaxed strength of her hands on the steering wheel and gear stick. Not to mention the way her short skirt rode up slightly as her feet moved on the pedals. He moved his eyes away swiftly when he realised where they were directed, only to meet Hermione's amused glance.

"Enjoying the scenery, Steven?"

"Very much. I hadn't realised Berkshire was so appealing."

"Hmm. There's music in the glove box if you need distracting."

Snape followed her gesture towards the cubby hole under the dashboard. He opened it and pulled out a wallet full of CDs. He looked at the silvery discs, tilting them to the light to read the titles.

"Black Sabbath? Is that Muggle or ours?"

Hermione chuckled. "Muggle, though I think the lead singer would wish otherwise. Surely you've heard of them? They've been around since the seventies."

"Strangely enough, Muggle music wasn't the listening material of choice in the Slytherin common room during that period."

"Fair point."

"Aha! This I recognise!"

He pulled a CD from the wallet. Hermione held out her hand for it and inserted it into the player without looking. Within seconds, the car was filled with the sound of a solo cello.

Hermione let out a long sigh and put her head back on the headrest. "Bach! Oh, I love this. Cello Suite No 1, I believe?"

"Five points for Gryffindor. One of ours, of course."

"Bach was a wizard?"

"Naturally. There's no way a Muggle could produce that amount of music in one lifetime."

*

It was late morning by the time Hermione drove through the elaborate gates of Penbryn Hall. The house was not immediately visible as they passed along the beech-lined avenue. Manicured grass extended in all directions, and deer could be glimpsed grazing in the distance.

"So good to know crime doesn't pay," observed Snape, taking in the surroundings.

"It won't for much longer if I've got anything to do with it," replied Hermione grimly. Then she flashed a bright smile at Snape. "Told you I'd get you here in one piece, didn't I?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "There's still time for one of those deer to leap out in front of us."

"In which case we'll be having venison tonight," Hermione retorted cheerfully.

She was pleased Snape had got over his fit of apparently genuine nervousness at the beginning of the journey. Given the scale of abdication of control required, she shouldn't really have been surprised. Merlin knew she could sympathise with *that* feeling. One of the reasons she loved driving so much was the fact that she could experience total mastery of woman over machine in marked contrast to the extreme lack of mastery she still felt every time she mounted a broom. She had considered telling Snape the story about her near-death experience with an unwary hang-glider, but decided to maintain her illusion of competence for a little longer.

The next bend brought Penbryn Hall into sight. Hermione had seen photos, but still wasn't prepared for the sheer beauty of the Georgian mansion set against the backdrop of the Cambrian Mountains. The soft grey stone was bathed in July sunshine, and water sparkled in a fountain at the centre of the gravelled forecourt.

"Wow," she said. "I'm in the wrong job."

"I think you'll find it's more a case of having the wrong parents," replied Snape acidly.

She parked to one side, between a battered Land Rover and a new BMW saloon. She patted Snape swiftly on the knee.

"There. All safe."

"Never doubted you for a moment," replied Snape as he opened his door.

"Wait a moment!" said Hermione sharply, putting her hand on his arm to stop him. "There's a security camera above the front door can you see it?" She pointed to the front of the house.

Snape looked in the direction she was indicating and nodded briefly.

"I see it. What do you suggest?"

Hermione frowned slightly. "We should be fine as long as you keep your face angled away from it."

"Are you implying I have a distinctive profile?"

"Certain elements of your physiognomy are fairly recognisable, yes. It would scupper our plans a bit if you were recognised remotely before we've even stepped through the front door."

"Very well, then, I shall keep my head bowed as if in deference to my esteemed wife." And Snape was out of the car before Hermione could think of a suitably cutting riposte.

She chuckled to herself as she joined him at the back of the car and retrieved her bag from the boot. They stood together briefly, Hermione looking at the house's elegant façade while Snape looked at Hermione.

"Ready, wife?"

Hermione met the challenge in his eyes and nodded. "As I'll ever be, Steven."

They climbed the shallow stone steps to the porticoed front door, Snape carefully averting his face from the camera's gaze. He rested his hand briefly on the small of Hermione's back as if to guide her. Her stomach was churning with nerves, but she derived some slight comfort from the contact. She pressed the enamelled bell-push and heard a loud jangling from inside the house.

Only seconds later, the door was opened by a black-and-white-uniformed maid. She was plump and in her early twenties and greeted them with a welcoming smile.

"Hiya!" she said with a strong Welsh accent. "Welcome to Penbryn Hall."

Hermione returned the smile. "Jane Eastwood and Steven Singer. I believe Mrs Markov is expecting us."

"She certainly is," replied the girl, opening the door fully and beckoning them in. "It's lovely for her to have company. It's so quiet here most of the time, and I'm just that excited about this weekend! We've been dead busy getting everything ready, and of course there's the big dinner tonight and..."

"I think our guests have got the picture; thank you, Ceri," interrupted a soft, cultured voice from behind her.

Ceri spun round, hand flying to her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs Markov. I'm talking too much again, aren't I?"

Hermione looked with interest at Helen Markov. She was in her late forties, slightly built, with mousy brown hair cut in a short bob. She wore a sensible tweed skirt and a short-sleeved cream blouse. Her eyes were gentle, and she smiled kindly at the flustered maid.

"That's fine, Ceri. Would you go down to the kitchen please and arrange for tea to be served in the morning room?"

"Yes, Mrs Markov." Ceri gave Hermione and Snape a brief grin as she hurried off.

She could be a good source of information, thought Hermione.

"I'm sorry about that," continued Helen, joining them by the door. "As you'll have gathered, I'm Helen. You must be Jane." She held her hand out to Hermione.

"I'm so pleased to meet you at last, Helen," responded Hermione, shaking hands. She indicated Snape. "This is my husband, Steven."

Snape took Helen's proffered hand and raised it to his lips briefly. "Delighted to meet you, Mrs Markov."

Hermione watched this display of old-world manners with amusement. *Snape the charmer? Who'd have thought it?* Helen seemed quietly delighted, though, as she led them further into the lofty entrance hall. The floor was marble, and their footsteps echoed through the huge space.

"You have a very impressive home, Helen," remarked Hermione.

"I'll give you the full guided tour later, if you'd like," responded Helen. "I'll show you up to your room first, though; then we'll have some tea."

"That sounds lovely, thank you," replied Hermione warmly.

They walked through the entrance hall, exchanging small talk about their journey and the weather. A pillared opening on the right led to the base of a stately stone staircase, which rose towards a large stained glass window before dividing into two. They climbed the stairs, turning left at the second flight, then followed Helen along a luxuriously carpeted hallway.

After passing several doors, Helen paused and opened one.

"Here we are," she said. "I've put you in the Blue Room. I hope you like it."

Hermione stood in the doorway and gazed around the ornately decorated room, taking in the delicately figured Chinese wallpaper, dark wooden furniture, and canopied bed. The fabrics and wall-coverings were all, unsurprisingly, in varying shades of blue.

"Wow," she said. "I'm going to feel like I'm in a Jane Austen novel, sleeping in here. It's beautiful."

Helen smiled in pleasure. "Thank you. It's one of my favourite rooms. You've got an en-suite bathroom as well, which was a luxury Elizabeth Bennet could never have dreamed of. Now, get yourselves settled in; then you can join me for tea in the morning room. It's the door immediately to your right at the bottom of the stairs." Hermione and Snape both thanked her, and she hurried away back down the corridor.

The two entered the room and dropped their bags by the door. Hermione took her phone out of her bag and began to scan the room while Snape walked over to the window.

"I'll just check my messages," she said, watching the screen carefully as she walked slowly around. The alert for a radio bug showed up as she approached the bed, and she isolated the source of the signal to the base of an incredibly ugly table lamp. She continued around the room, but found nothing else. She went into the en-suite bathroom, which was at least double the size of the bathroom in her cottage. No bugs there either.

She changed the phone setting and rapidly typed a note on the screen as she returned to the bedroom. 'One audio bug by bed. No cameras. Bathroom clear.'

She walked over to Snape and held the phone out to him. He glanced briefly at the screen and nodded once.

"Right then," she said decisively. "Let's get unpacked."

"Is that really necessary?" asked Snape. "We're only here for the weekend."

"You can't leave your clothes in your bag. They'll crease. Come on it'll only take a few minutes."

Hermione suppressed a smile as Snape put his bag in the bed and unzipped it with a scowl. The whole nagging wife persona might prove to be rather enjoyable.

*

Snape tried to remember the last time he had unpacked a bag manually instead of magically. He supposed it must have been his last trip home from Hogwarts before he came of age. The inefficiency of it had chafed even then.

Suit over his arm, he opened the door of a huge mahogany wardrobe. He hoped Hermione was just being polite when she expressed admiration for the room's decor. It was far too ornate and stylised for his taste. As he was arranging his suit on a hanger, Hermione came to stand next to him, a swathe of deep green silk over her shoulder. She smiled at him as she hung the dress (*ah, that's what it was*) next to his suit.

"Like the colour?" she asked.

"Very appropriate. Are we finished here?"

"Yes, darling. Let's go and find that tea, shall we?"

It wasn't me that caused the delay. And stop calling me darling. With some difficulty Snape kept his thoughts to himself and took Hermione's proffered hand as they left the bedroom.

Following Helen's directions, they found the morning room. It was decorated in a more relaxed and comfortable manner than the few parts of the house they had seen so far, and it looked like a room that was lived in rather than displayed, Snape thought. As they entered the room, Helen was just putting a pill bottle down on a side table next to the tea tray.

"Migraine medication before you ask," she said with a smile. "I used to suffer terribly, but Yuri brought these for me the second weekend he came to stay with us. That was the weekend my father..." She paused briefly. "That was when I realised what a kind and thoughtful man Yuri was, and I haven't suffered from migraine since."

"That's very impressive," responded Hermione. "Migraine is notoriously difficult to treat."

"I know," answered Helen. "My doctor had tried everything, but Yuri said these came from a Russian herbalist, and I was to take them twice a day, and *voila* no more headaches."

Snape held out his hand. "Would you mind if I had a look at them? Herbal medicine is a research interest of mine, and professional curiosity is a terrible thing." He gave a slight self-deprecating laugh.

Helen handed the bottle over. "Of course. Though they're just little green pills I doubt you'll be able to tell anything by looking at them."

"Ah, but my husband has an extremely talented nose." Hermione said.

Snape opened the bottle and closed his eyes as he inhaled deeply.

Feverfew, of course, for the headaches. And butterbur for the same. Ginger for nausea. Moonstone for emotional balance. And a hint of Ashwinder egg. That explained a lot, he thought. Markov was dosing his wife with a love potion. Despicable but rather clever the low dose would have brought on the effect subtly and no doubt felt totally natural to Helen, and as the tablets were actually effective against her headaches, she would just keep taking them regularly without suspecting a thing.

Snape opened his eyes to see Helen and Hermione watching him with amused curiosity. He put the lid back on the bottle and returned it to Helen.

"I can understand why they work," he said. "I could detect feverfew and butterbur, which are well-known herbal remedies for headaches, and ginger to prevent nausea. I suspect it is the precise way in which the three are combined that gives the pills their efficacy."

"I'm intrigued you could tell all that from the scent alone," said Helen.

"Merely a matter of more years of practice than I care to remember," responded Snape. "And always a useful party trick."*Not to mention a literal life-saver on more than one occasion.*

*

Helen was as good as her word and gave them an extensive tour of the Hall following their tea. Hermione lost track of the bedrooms after number seven. Their hostess was an informative and amusing guide, explaining how an ancestor had built the house in the early nineteenth century, using his fortune earned from the wool trade during the Napoleonic Wars.

"I must admit the house had been getting somewhat down-at-heel over the last few decades, but when we got married, Yuri vowed to return it to its former glory, and he has invested a lot of time and money in the place. He loves it as much as I do," she explained as they descended the stairs to the entrance hall. She led them to the left of the front door. "Here's the dining room."

The room was dominated by a vast table, the gleaming mahogany surface polished to a mirror-like shine.

"Needless to say we don't eat in here very often!" said Helen, laughing. "It's a little large for the two of us. But it does look wonderful when it's set out for a formal dinner, as it will be this evening."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Hermione warmly. "I just hope my dress is smart enough."

"I'm sure you'll look utterly enchanting," murmured Snape, but loudly enough for Helen to hear, and she smiled at them both indulgently.

"Your husband is quite the charmer, isn't he? He reminds me of my darling Yuri."

Hermione wondered briefly whether Snape would be taking more offence at being called charming, or being likened to an arms dealer who was also a suspected Dark wizard. Probably the former.

Helen indicated a door at the far end of the dining room.

"That leads to the store rooms, laundry, and kitchen, but I daren't take you down there at the moment. If past performance is any measure, my housekeeper, Mrs Bowen, will be supervising a scene of controlled chaos preparing for tonight, and interruptions will not be welcome."

"She sounds rather scary," observed Hermione.

Helen grimaced. "She can be utterly terrifying when she wants to be. She's run the house for forty years, mostly single handed, and has rather *definite* views on the way things should be done. She was horrendously offended when Yuri insisted we take on more staff, but I think now she is secretly loving the new opportunities for intimidation that are offered her. Poor Ceri gets the brunt of it, but fortunately she's as thick skinned as she is talkative. The gardener, on the other hand, is a more sensitive soul I've caught him hiding in the hydrangeas on more than one occasion. And we've gone through four cleaning ladies at last count. But she's actually a very kind soul underneath it all my mother died when I was ten, and Mrs Bowen rather took me under her wing."

Hermione was starting to develop a somewhat sad picture of Helen's life. An only child, left alone in this huge house with just her father and the housekeeper from a young age, resigned to spinsterhood. Until she was swept off her feet by an exotic foreigner with whom she was besotted. (Although, from the expression on Snape's face while he examined Helen's migraine pills, she had some suspicions about the reasons for that.)

And within twenty-four hours Hermione was probably going to deprive her of her husband. Merlin, this job was hard sometimes.

She glanced at Snape, who was observing Helen with something like compassion in his dark eyes. As they followed their host back out into the entrance hall, his hand rested briefly on Hermione's shoulder, and he squeezed it slightly. With that gesture, she realised that he knew exactly how she felt.

*

From the dining room, Helen led them straight across to the opposite side of the front door.

"This is Yuri's office," she said, opening the door and gesturing for them to enter. It was furnished just as an old-fashioned country squire's study should be, with hunting prints on the wall, a couple of comfortable leather armchairs in front of the fireplace, and a large antique desk. The only incongruities were the flat-screen computer monitor and keyboard to one side of the desk.

"Where does that door lead to?" asked Hermione, pointing to the other side of the room.

"What door?" asked Helen, looking straight at it.

Ah, Muggle-Repelling Charm, thought Hermione. She quickly continued speaking. "Sorry, I just assumed there would be a door like the one from the dining room. Papered

over, maybe?"

Helen looked confused briefly. "Um, you're right, there was a door there." Her expression cleared. "I remember now. Yuri had it bricked up when he renovated this room. It does lead to the mirror image of the kitchen wing, but we'd only used it for storage for years, and it's structurally unsound now. We may renovate it in the future, but for now it's safer blocked off."

Seeing that Helen still looked slightly disconcerted, Hermione linked her arm though that of the older woman.

"Now, I'm sure in a house like this there must be a *wonderful* library."

Snape moved to Helen's other side. "I feel I need to warn you that if you let my wife enter your library, you will have severe difficulty extricating her."

Suitably distracted, Helen laughed as she left her husband's lair.

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The house did indeed have a magnificent library, which Hermione was prised from with only modest protests. Following cursory looks round the drawing room and saloon, they had left the house via the rear terrace to view the immaculately laid out garden. Hermione and Helen chatted animatedly about horticulture as they strolled between the colourful flowerbeds while Snape trailed slightly behind them. He wondered idly when Hermione had gained her apparent expertise in Muggle gardening.

There was no doubt in his mind now that Markov was a Dark wizard. The love potion pills could possibly have been sourced from elsewhere, but the Muggle-Repelling Charm on the study door settled the question. The only mysteries now were Markov's actual identity and what exactly lay behind that concealed door. The fact that Markov apparently hadn't felt the need to use anything other than anti-Muggle magic indicated a certain arrogance, mused Snape. He was obviously supremely confident that no-one from the wizarding world was going to penetrate his disguise. Which was going to make apprehending him all the more satisfying.

Hermione and Helen had paused ahead of him and turned, waiting for him to catch up.

"Helen says she needs to go back up to the house to organise lunch, but we can go and have a look at the stables. Shall we?" asked Hermione.

"That would be pleasant," responded Snape. *And would give us an opportunity to compare notes.*

Helen smiled at them.

"Perfect. Well, in that case, I'll see you in the saloon for lunch at one o'clock. The others should be here by then. And we can ride this afternoon if you're interested as you'll see, we've got a good choice of mounts."

"We're very grateful for your hospitality, Helen," said Snape, inclining his head politely.

"Thank you, Helen," agreed Hermione. Their hostess murmured her appreciation and hurried back to the house, no doubt to face the formidable Mrs Bowen.

Snape held out his arm to Hermione. "Come along then, wife. Let's see what fine specimens of horseflesh await us."

Hermione took his arm with a grin as they began to walk slowly in the direction of the stables. "You sound the very epitome of a country gentleman."

"Antithesis, more like, but I'm glad the act is convincing. So, what have we learnt this morning?"

"You first. I'm guessing Helen's migraine pills are nothing of the sort?"

Snape shook his head. "They are, I'm sure, extremely effective against her headaches. But they also contain a weak love potion."

Hermione let out her breath in a long sigh. "I thought so. Poor woman. There's nothing in them that is actually harming her health, is there?"

"Not that I could detect, no."

"That's one mercy, anyway. I was slightly concerned that if Markov bumped off her father he'd do the same to her. I take it we think he did kill the father?"

"Well, the timing is rather suggestive. If I interpreted what she said correctly, Markov stayed with them for a weekend, and that was when he saw the house and met Helen. Then he returned for a second weekend, at which point he started dosing Helen with love potion, and her father conveniently died. Heart attack, wasn't it?"

Hermione nodded.

"There are any number of methods a skilled potioneer could use to bring on a heart attack in a way undetectable by Muggle medicine," Snape continued. "Foxglove, oleander, corn lily, broom, *Cerbera* and those are just the plants. Unfortunately, I think you'll struggle to prove his guilt on that count."

"So, we'll just have to find more evidence against him," said Hermione in a determined voice. "On which point, I'm assuming the concealed door from his study leads somewhere interesting. Was it just me, or was it a little odd that the door only had Muggle-Repelling Charms on it?"

Snape quirked his lips slightly. "Well, that does depend what's behind it. There may just be an impressive display of pornography he wants to hide from his wife."

Hermione looked at him steadily.

"But," Snape continued, "if we are correct in our assumption that it is his laboratory, then the lack of precautions is rather telling. We are dealing with someone arrogant enough to feel he is at no risk of discovery by anyone from the wizarding world. Such a lack of fear is rather unusual for a former Death Eater. Any of them with half a brain cell and Markov's potions skills indicate an above-average level of intelligence will have spent a couple of decades either terrified of Voldemort, or terrified of the Aurors, or terrified of betrayal by one of their own. Paranoia rather came with the territory. The only exceptions were those of high enough rank to be totally confident of their position in Voldemort's circle, or the general wizarding hierarchy, or indeed both."

"But I thought all of Voldemort's nearest and dearest were already accounted for?" asked Hermione.

"That was my understanding as well. Have you considered the possibility that Markov is genuinely Russian? There were a number of Dark wizards on the continent who were loosely allied with Voldemort, but who never totally committed to his cause."

Hermione frowned. "In that case, how likely is it that you will be able to identify him?"

"It's still perfectly possible. With his potions expertise, I may even have encountered him in a professional capacity. But, to be honest, I think who he is matters less than what he is a Dark wizard who has developed a dangerous weaponised potion which he is selling to Muggles, who has murdered at least one man, and who is deceiving a delightful woman who really doesn't deserve it."

"Should I be jealous?" asked Hermione, eyebrow raised.

"No, I think you're safe. You're much better endowed." He paused for a beat, watching Hermione's eyes narrow dangerously. "Your library's more interesting for a start."

Hermione laughed and squeezed his arm. "I do love a man with a one-track mind."

*

Their stroll eventually brought them to the stable yard, with its arched entrance topped by a clock tower. Walking through the archway, they found themselves in a large courtyard, three sides of which were taken up by looseboxes. At least half were occupied, and a number of equine eyes followed their progress across the yard. An elderly man in a flat cap approached them, and Hermione observed with some amusement that he was the absolute caricature of an old stable hand – small, wiry and bow legged. She tried to decide whether the picture would be completed by an Irish brogue or West Country burr, so she was slightly disappointed when he hailed them in an unmistakeably local accent.

"My granddaughter told me you'd arrived," he said. "Ceri. Up at the house."

"Oh, yes," said Hermione, "she seems like a lovely girl."

"Lovely but could talk the arse off an antelope. I'm Huw. Are you two riding later?"

Hermione turned to Snape, who returned her look with a challenge in his eyes. "I'm happy to if you are," he said.

Hermione turned back to Huw. With some trepidation, she said, "OK. But I warn you I haven't ridden since I was a child, and I wasn't very good then. I need the equine equivalent of a Morris Minor."

Huw chuckled. "Is that what you drive, then?"

Snape interrupted. "No, she's got a Jaguar which she drives like a demon, so I've no idea why the thought of a horse worries her."

"I trust the brakes in my Jag animals are rather less predictable," retorted Hermione. "I'm just more comfortable with horsepower than horse power, if you know what I mean."

"Don't worry, *bach*," said Huw reassuringly. "I've got just the thing." He led them over to a nearby box. "Meet Violet. She's nearly twenty and hasn't been faster than a trot for at least five years. She was a good hunter in her time, but Helen only really keeps her as a pet nowadays."

Hermione and Violet eyed each other doubtfully. Hermione held out her hand and rubbed the horse's nose gently, at which the grey mare closed her eyes and exhaled softly, looking for all the world as if she was dozing off. Hermione grinned. "She'll do."

Huw rubbed his hands and turned his attention to Snape. "And how about you?"

"To remain with the mechanical analogies, good brakes are essential, but I wouldn't object to a bit of acceleration as well."

"Ah, in that case I think you'll like Samson." They followed Huw to a stable on the opposite side of the yard, where a huge black horse with a crooked white blaze was looking down his nose at them. "Gentle as a lamb but will run all day if you want him to."

Snape patted Samson's neck briefly, but they both gave a start at the sound of a loud crash from the adjacent box.

"Behave yourself, Turpin," growled Huw, moving to look over the door. Hermione peered over his shoulder from a safe distance to see a large chestnut horse stamping his feet at the back of the box.

"He doesn't seem happy," she observed.

Huw shook his head. "Too many nerves and too little training. Mr Markov bought him for Mr Price to ride. We're doing our best with him but...." He shrugged his shoulders.

Snape walked over to stand next to Huw. "He's a beauty, though, isn't he?" He held out his hand over the door towards Turpin, who eyed it distrustfully.

"Watch yourself," warned the stable hand. "He's bitten chunks out of two of the grooms."

Snape kept his hand still, and gradually the horse approached, ears flat against his head and tail swishing angrily. Hermione took a nervous step back. Once the horse was close enough, Snape placed his hand very gently on his neck, carefully making eye contact. Hermione was reminded of Harry greeting Buckbeak for the first time. Turpin snorted, and Snape murmured something softly to him. The tension left the horse's body, his ears pricked forwards again, and he nudged Snape's shoulder hesitantly.

Huw gave a low whistle. "Never seen him do that before. You've got a way with horses, mate."

Snape turned his head towards them, hand still resting on Turpin's neck. He smiled slightly. "I used to. It's good to know my touch hasn't deserted me."

Hermione was intrigued. Was Snape just adapting the Hippogriff technique, or did he have some hidden past as a horse-whisperer? She'd ask him later, she decided. She glanced at her watch.

"Come on, Robert Redford," she said. "We need to get back to the house for lunch."

A look of slight puzzlement crossed Snape's face at her form of address, but he gave Turpin a last pat on the neck and moved over to join her.

"We'll see you later, then," she said to Huw.

"Enjoy your lunch, both," he said, walking away across the yard with a brief wave.

Snape draped his arm round her shoulder casually as they headed back to the house.

"Robert who?" he muttered into her ear.

"Redford. Actor. Good with horses." Hermione replied, succinctly. "Where did that little trick come from?"

"Product of a misspent youth."

"As long as you didn't Imperius him."

"That would be a fairly despicable thing to do. And unnecessary. Horses are simple creatures. Project an image of sweet, green grass into their minds, and they calm instantly."

Hermione slipped her arm round his waist.

"Impressive. Tell me more about this misspent youth of yours."

Snape looked down at her, amusement in his eyes. "This is very cosy. In case of an audience, I suppose?"

"Of course," Hermione replied, electing not to point out that he'd put his arm around her first. "And don't change the subject. I want to hear about your early career as a horse-wrangler."

Snape chuckled softly. "That's overstating it somewhat. There was wasteland near my childhood home that gypsies often used for grazing their horses. One summer I think I'd have been ten there was a group of unbroken colts on there. Some of the local boys were taking bets on who could stay on one longest. I spent a week creeping down there at night to practise, and I picked up the trick you saw earlier.

"The second week, I took that group of boys for every penny they'd got. I'm sure you wouldn't think it to look at me now, but I was a particularly unprepossessing child, as scrawny as I was ugly." He gave a wry twist of his lips.

"I can't believe that," interjected Hermione.

Snape looked at her sceptically. "Liar," he said. "The other boys were convinced I would be incapable of staying on even one of the colts for more than a second, but I took great pleasure in relieving them of both that illusion and their money. They were pleasantly stupid, and it took them four horses before they caught on that there was something not quite... normal about what I was doing. At which point, I ran before they could beat seven kinds of shit out of me. I seem to recall that was the day I performed my first wandless Disillusionment Charm, as well."

Hermione laughed. "Precocious brat, weren't you?"

Snape eyed her sternly. "The words 'pot' and 'kettle' spring to mind."

"You may have a point," conceded Hermione. "Was that the extent of your riding adventures?"

Snape shook his head. "No, I'd quite often sneak off at night and borrow a horse for a couple of hours. The wasteland was developed when I was in my mid-teens, though, so that was the end of that."

"Well, I look forward to admiring your skills later." A sudden thought occurred to Hermione, and she struggled to suppress the grin tugging at the corners of her lips.

"What now?" asked Snape, warningly.

Hermione grinned fully as she replied, "I've just remembered what else I'll be admiring. The jeans I've brought for you to wear may be a little on the snug side."

She shrugged at his faintly shocked expression. "It's only fair I get a good look at your arse don't think I haven't noticed you ogling mine."

Humour sparked into his eyes. "I haven't been *ogling*, as you so inelegantly put it. I've been studying in a spirit of scientific enquiry."

"Really?"

"Naturally," he responded loftily. "I was merely curious as to whether the cumulative years you've spent sitting on your arse in the library have deformed it in any way."

"Have you reached any conclusions, yet?" *Merlin's balls, he is joking isn't he?* With difficulty, she resisted the absurd impulse to peer round at her own rear end.

"It's a little early to say. I think I need rather more observation before I can decide."

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Observe away. I fear I may be in for a disappointment though muscle tone's one of the first things to deteriorate with age, and I'm slightly concerned your backside may have got as flabby as your wits."

Snape studied her face closely. "In that case, I think I'll choose not to mention the streak of horse shit you've had on your cheek for the last fifteen minutes."

Hermione's hand flew to her face, and simultaneously, triumph flared in Snape's eyes and realisation dawned in her *brainBuzzer, he got me with that one.*

"Onenil to me, I think," he continued airily. "Flabby wits indeed."

They'd reached the steps up to the terrace at the rear of the house now. The French windows from the saloon were open, and a sudden burst of high-pitched, raucous laughter reached their ears.

"Either Mrs Bowen has finally provoked Ceri into a fit of hysterics or the other guests have arrived," observed Hermione as they paused at the bottom of the steps.

"Amusing as the former would be, I suspect the latter," said Snape. "Come along then, wife; on with the show."

Hermione tightened her arm briefly around Snape's waist and was reassured to feel an answering squeeze round her shoulders. Wordlessly fortified, they headed up the steps to continue their masquerade as a loving couple.

A/N: *Bach* is a Welsh term of endearment, literally meaning 'little one'. Much used by the older generation round these parts!

For the benefit of non-Brits (and, come to think of it, anyone under the age of 30!) a Morris Minor is a type of car that was beloved of elderly ladies and the clergy until at least the 1980s.

In Georgian house design, the saloon was a large drawing room or room used for entertaining.

Credit must go to the late, great Douglas Adams for pointing out that Bach's musical output was suspiciously high for a mere mortal.

Two Out of Three Ain't Bad

Chapter 5 of 7

Adventures on – and off – horseback. And a novel use for a Cushioning Charm.

Author's note: Thanks to peskipiksi for providing first-class beta and education services. Disclaimer: Any characters you recognise are JKR's, not mine. And I'm still making no money from this.

Chapter 5 Two Out of Three Ain't Bad

Snape gripped his glass tightly and absently wondered just how angry Hermione would be if he hit Mrs Stacey Price with a Silencing Charm. He could do it wordlessly. It wouldn't be *that* obvious. He regretfully concluded that incurring Hermione's displeasure would probably result in an experience even worse than his current predicament. Which was saying something.

Since he'd been introduced to Mrs Price at the buffet lunch table, she had managed to monopolise his attention by the simple expedient of backing him into a corner and talking at him. He had been subjected to lengthy monologues on the subject of her education (an NVQ in Nail Technology, whatever that was, although he was fairly sure it had nothing to do with woodwork) and her business plans (her husband Archie was setting her up in her own beauty salon, apparently). At which point he had started fantasising about hexing her.

He suddenly became aware that she had interrupted her stream of inane babble to ask him a question. Fortunately, he was possessed of that uniquely male attribute whereby he could repeat the last line of a woman's conversation, even though he hadn't actually been listening, and was able to answer smoothly, "No, I haven't been married before. Jane's the first Mrs Singer. I hope she'll be the only one."

Stacey flicked her long blonde hair back over her shoulder. "Aww, that's sweet. Well, I'm the third Mrs Price, and I'm bloody sure I won't be the last. I reckon I've got about four years 'til he trades me in for a younger model. But until then, I'm going to get every penny I can from him." She shrugged. "It's a fair swap he likes showing me off and bragging to his mates about what a firecracker I am in bed. You know what they say about men and carpets."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No, but doubtless you'll enlighten me, Mrs Price."

"They're the same lay 'em well, and you can walk all over 'em for years!" She let out a cackle of the same raucous laughter he and Hermione had heard from the terrace earlier.

She slapped Snape lightly on the arm. "Anyway, you've been very naughty, Dr Singer, keeping me all to yourself like this. I'd better go and talk to Archie or he'll be wondering where I am!" And, with a final swish of her hair, she was off, her pneumatic figure tottering slightly on her too-high heels.

Snape rather doubted Price was missing his lady wife, as he was currently deep in conversation with Hermione. A rather *tactile* conversation, he thought sourly, as he looked over at them. The oleaginous Archie seemed to find it necessary to emphasise every point he made with a touch to Hermione's arm or hand. Hermione had an expression of polite interest on her face, but her body language was screaming *Touch me one more time, and I'll turn your testicles into tadpoles* Snape wondered how Price would react if he realised quite how much suppressed magical power he was toying with.

He considered going to Hermione's rescue, but then reasoned that she was perfectly capable of defending her own honour and would probably prefer him to continue to circulate. He took a sip of his mineral water and observed the rest of the company. Stacey had been diverted by Giles Pemberton on her way back to her husband and seemed to be giving the chinless wonder the same treatment Snape had received. That could be an unfair assessment of Pemberton, Snape admitted. He hadn't actually spoken to the man he just looked the 'nice but dim' type.

So, that left Verity Pemberton, who was currently chatting to Helen on the far side of the saloon. Snape helped himself to some more sandwiches from the lunch table and approached the two women. Helen beamed at him.

"Steven, how lovely. Verity, this is Dr Steven Singer. Steven, this is Verity Pemberton, my oldest friend."

Snape and Verity shook hands. Verity was taller than Helen, with a trim figure and elegantly coiffed ash-blond hair. She was immaculately dressed, but her smile was welcoming.

"I always wish there was a way of expressing the sentiment 'oldest friend' that makes it clear you're talking about the longevity of the relationship rather than the venerability of the friend," she said, laughing.

Helen chuckled and Snape inclined his head graciously, "In this case, Mrs Pemberton, there can be no question."

Verity laughed again. "Oh, I like this one, Helen. Something of an improvement on most of Yuri's associates, don't you think?"

Helen frowned slightly. "I wouldn't like to say. Um, I must go and see what's happened to the desserts...." She scurried off across the room.

Verity watched her retreating back with a sigh. "Oh, dear. I always forget she won't listen to a word that might be construed as criticism of the sainted Yuri." She looked at Snape uncertainly. "Have I offended another member of the fan club as well?"

Snape shook his head. "I've never even met the man. My wife has had some business dealings with him. As it happens, he and I are in overlapping fields of work, so he suggested we should meet."

"And what exactly is his field of work, Dr Singer? Helen's only told me it's something to do with importing and exporting. Yuri did ask Giles to invest in the business, but I've managed to persuade him that's probably not the best idea until he knows what his money's actually being used for."

"I don't know the full extent of the business either, I'm afraid. I'm a research chemist, and I think Markov deals in some of the types of herbal medicines I develop. Am I correct in thinking you don't approve of your friend's choice of husband?"

Verity grimaced slightly. "It's difficult. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something not quite...*right* about Yuri. Obviously, Helen fell head over heels in love with him, and although it all happened very quickly, the marriage still seems happy. So, I should be... *I am*... very pleased for her. I've never seen him be anything other than loving and attentive towards her. And he's unfailingly polite and charming when we meet."

She paused then, frowning. "But I think you can judge a man by the company he keeps, and some of his business associates seem downright unpleasant. Archie Price included. And then there are his eyes."

"His eyes?" Snape asked, puzzled.

"When he smiles, or laughs, it never reaches his eyes. They look dead. Cold. Like a salmon on a slab." She shuddered slightly. Then she shook her head.

"I'm probably just being silly. You've got lovely eyes, Steven. They invite confidence."

Really? That was a first. Strange woman.

Verity's eyes left their contemplation of Snape's and scanned the room briefly. She made a slight *move* of distaste.

"Damn. The Price woman has cornered Giles again. I'd better go and rescue him. Last time, he compared the experience to having his ears cleaned with a metal file."

Giles Pemberton rose slightly in Snape's estimation. He gave Verity a brief smile.

"I think I should probably release Jane from Mr Price's clutches as well."

"Literally, if she's not been careful. That man gropes like a tetanic octopus."

Snape lowered his voice conspiratorially. "To paraphrase Butler, it was very good of God to let Price and Mrs Price marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four."

Verity laughed and, with a nod of acknowledgement to Snape, set out to liberate her spouse.

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Snape felt Hermione's already rigid body tense even further when he slipped his hand round her waist, then relax as she realised it was his arm embracing her rather than Archie Price's. She turned slightly to greet him, a welcoming smile on her lips and a *Where have you been, you bastard?* expression in her eyes. He didn't need his famed Legilimency skills to read that thought.

She briefly introduced the two men, who shook hands. Snape noted that Price had the slightly too-firm, slightly too-long handshake of a man who seeks to establish dominance from the outset. He was of a height with Snape, but rather more solidly built, with the appearance of a once-fit man who was starting to run to fat. He looked to be in his early fifties, with close-cropped iron-grey hair. His too-loud shirt and chunky gold bracelet indicated the lack of taste to be expected from a man who had married a woman like Stacey.

"Well, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need another drink." Hermione indicated with her empty glass.

"Would you like me to..." began Snape, only to be silenced by Hermione's vehemently shaken head.

"No, that's fine, darling," she said, smiling, reaching up to kiss his cheek. "Nice try," she murmured into his ear before walking as speedily as decorum allowed over to the opposite side of the room.

Snape turned back to Price to see him watching Hermione's retreating figure appreciatively. Price met his eye, unabashed, and gave a lascivious grin. "You've done well for yourself there. Bit posh for my taste but one hell of a looker."

Snape entertained himself briefly with the image of exactly what he was going to turn Price into once this weekend was over, then replied calmly, "Delighted you approve. I had the singular experience of your wife's company earlier."

"Yeah, she's a good girl, Stace. You're as young as the woman you feel, eh?"

Fortunately, Snape was spared the necessity of responding by Helen announcing the arrival of dessert and coffee.

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Hermione checked her appearance one last time in the bathroom mirror. Her tight jeans had enough stretch that they'd be comfortable to ride in while the long t-shirt stopped her looking like a tart.

Lunch had gone smoothly, she thought. She'd been briefly concerned that Snape was going to jinx Stacey Price at one point, judging by the dangerous look in his eyes, but he had controlled himself admirably. He seemed to have been a huge hit with Mrs Pemberton as well.

Archie Price had been rather less than a hit with her. She had, however, gleaned a pleasing amount of information from him. His incessant bragging had left her with a list of countries he and Markov did business in and even his approximate annual income from their deals. Stupid man. But she'd smiled and been polite and not even slapped his hands away. Picturing casting an Incendio on his bollocks had helped.

She had managed a brief chat with the Pembertons too, but, unfortunately, hadn't been able to direct the conversation towards anything of relevance to her investigation. They both seemed pleasant enough, and she'd seen enough to establish that Verity definitely wore the trousers in that marriage.

It was odd, Hermione mused, how many people seemed happy in relationships where there was a huge power imbalance. She never ceased to be amazed by friends, both male and female, who gloated over how they had their other halves catering to their every whim. Just as strange were the men who seemed happy to be mothered and organised by their wives and the women who happily cooed about how manly their partners were and how they were treated like precious dolls. For her, a relationship had to be a partnership of equals or nothing. Given the choice between being showered with roses or having a bloody good intellectual discussion, she'd take the latter any time. Though, both would be nice. Which probably explained why she was single, she thought wryly.

Talking of husbands... She opened the bathroom door and returned to the bedroom, where she'd left Snape to change in private *Merciful Merlin! I'm glad I bought him those jeans*. Snape was standing at the window with his back to her, hands in his pockets *And he has to know how that pulls the black denim taut against that perfectly shaped arse*, she thought, admiring both the anatomy and the audacity. She'd been right to equate his backside with his wits earlier. Both were perfectly honed.

"Enjoying the view?" asked Snape, still with his back to her.

"Spectacular," responded Hermione, joining him at the window and leaning her elbows on the sill. She looked up at him slyly. "I love the way you can see the shadows of the clouds on the hills."

She took in his complete costume then, from the faded blue Imperial College T-shirt to the belt with the elaborate silver buckle ~~not something I bought~~ *must be his own* to the aforementioned black jeans, artfully designed by Madame Malkin to look well worn. With his hair still tied back with a strip of leather, he looked, she thought, like the type of bad-boy university lecturer that would have his female students hanging on his every word and dreaming of hanging off parts of his body. Goodness knows the effect he'd have if he returned to Hogwarts looking like that. NEWT-level Potions would be oversubscribed, for a start.

"If you've quite finished admiring the scenery, I believe Helen and Verity will be waiting for us downstairs." Snape's voice was as sardonically smooth as ever, but his dark eyes burned with suppressed amusement. Hermione gave him a slightly embarrassed grin and took his proffered hand, entwining her fingers with his.

"Lead on, my love."

Snape bent down and murmured into her ear as they left the room. "That's a marginal improvement on 'darling'. Thank you, wife."

*

Snape and Hermione followed Verity and Helen down the path through the gardens towards the stable block. Archie had gone on ahead while Stacey and Giles had declined the invitation to ride. Stacey, apparently, wouldn't go near a horse, and Giles had some work to catch up on.

Hermione had her arm round Snape's waist, and his arm rested across her shoulders.

"Hang on a second," she said, pulling him to a halt. "I've just remembered something."

He looked down at her quizzically, although she was amused to see his expression give way to faint shock as she slid her hand down from his waist to caress the firm curve of his arse.

Oh, yes, she thought. *That feels just as good as it looks. Now what was I doing? Got distracted a moment. Ah..* She muttered an incantation and suddenly felt a slight barrier against her hand.

Snape's expression cleared. "Cushioning Charm?" he asked. Hermione nodded with a slight smile.

"What happened to 'only use magic in case of catastrophe'?" he asked.

"Believe me," responded Hermione darkly, "not being able to catch Markov tomorrow because we can't walk qualifies as catastrophe. I remember the effects of a few hours in the saddle."

"I see your point. Was the hands-on approach really necessary, though?"

Hermione adopted a look of wide-eyed innocence. "Of course. Aiming a charm without a wand can be a little tricky."

"Well, in that case," responded Snape, "shall I do you?" He paused for a moment. "Which, in retrospect, I could have phrased somewhat more elegantly."

Hermione laughed as their eyes met. "Be my guest."

Not breaking eye contact, Snape moved his hand slowly and deliberately from its position on her shoulder. She felt the warm pressure of his fingers as they slowly descended her spine over the waistband of her jeans and down the seam. She desperately resisted the urge to shift her position as he spread his hand and gently stroked the round swell of her buttocks before whispering the incantation. The close contact was lost as the spell took effect, and she felt suddenly bereft. She was sure her eyes must have betrayed the impact his actions had on her, but his expression remained lightly amused. *Bastard!*

Cushioning Charms as foreplay? Flitwick hadn't thought to mention *that* one.

"Keep up, lovebirds!" Verity called from up ahead, and Hermione realised how far behind they had fallen. She and Snape restored their hands to more decorous positions and resumed their walk.

"You've got a couple of fans there," she said mischievously, nodding towards the older women.

"I don't know what you mean," Snape replied airily. "Although, Verity did tell me I've got lovely eyes. Deluded woman."

"You have got lovely eyes," protested Hermione. "As windows to your soul, they could do with a bit of polishing, but they're incredibly expressive when you allow them to be."

The eyes in question expressed scepticism, so Hermione just wound her arm more tightly around her colleague's waist and smiled to herself.

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As Snape approached where Samson was tethered, he remembered one minor element that had been missing from his previous riding experience. A saddle. No, tell a lie, make that two elements. He'd never used a bridle either, just a rope halter. *Bollocks*. So much for impressing Hermione with his skill. *Get a grip, man. Literally*. He seized Samson's reins, hoping he looked like he knew what he was doing.

"Here, I'll hold him for you while you mount." Huw came across the yard, and Snape handed the reins to him with a grateful nod. He sneaked a look over to where Helen was mounting her bay hunter and copied her actions, heaving himself up into the saddle surprisingly easily. He copied her foot position in the stirrups as well and was pleased to find he felt even more secure than he had in all his bare-back riding as a child.

"OK there?" asked Huw. "Stirrups all right?"

Snape nodded. "Yes, I think I'll cope. Thank you."

Huw handed the reins up to him, and he took them, again covertly examining Helen to check he was holding them correctly. He rested one hand gently on Samson's neck and made feather-light contact with the horse's mind. Samson's ears flicked back in interest, but Snape could detect nothing but calm contentment emanating from the big black horse. That was a good start, at least.

With a loud clattering of hooves, Archie Price rode Turpin across the stable yard. Price had the horse on a short rein, pulling his nose right into his chest, and the handsome chestnut jogged crab-wise over the cobbles. He was under control, but not contentedly so. Even without reading his mind, Snape could feel the fear and distrust radiating off him in waves.

Helen and Verity followed Price out of the yard, leaving Snape and Hermione to bring up the rear. Helen turned in her saddle to talk to them.

"We'll head up the bridle path through the woods. It'll be nice and cool for the horses, and it's a really pretty ride along the river bank. Then we'll come back across the fields so anyone who wants a good gallop can have one. Does that sound OK?"

Hermione laughed. "Sounds perfect, though I think I'll give the galloping a miss."

Helen smiled and turned back round. Snape glanced over at Hermione and caught her eye. "Comfortable?" he asked.

"In terms of being cushioned, yes, thank you. In terms of feeling at home in the saddle, rather less so." She grimaced slightly and returned her attention to the path ahead.

Snape was also feeling the benefit of the Cushioning Charm. And was relieved to discover that *had* feel at home in the saddle. He held the reins in one hand and rested the other on the horse's shoulder while observing Hermione with interest. Her seat and hold on the reins were absolutely correct, as he would expect, but she looked tense. It was as if her brain had learned how to ride, but her body hadn't. He wondered what other activities that applied to. Riding a broom certainly that lack in her abilities had been noted at Hogwarts by virtue of it being pretty much the only one.

He allowed himself to speculate briefly on whether her performance as a lover would be guided by body or brain. He rather suspected the former. He thought back to their encounter in the taxi and all their hugs, embraces, and hand-holding since. She seemed extremely comfortable with physical contact. He wondered how specific that was to him was she a customarily tactile person? He seemed to recall from her student days that she hadn't been one of those girls who were constantly walking around arm in arm with friends. But obviously, she had changed a lot since then. And, of course, this weekend she was supposed to be married to him so would want to show their affection physically.

But a small, hopeful voice in his head whispered, *Plenty of married couples don't spend their whole time wrapped around each other. And there was definitely no need for her to fondle my arse like she did. Perhaps there is something there.*

At that moment, Hermione interrupted her examination of the path to flash him a brilliant smile. "You look much more at ease than I feel. You and Samson suit each other strong, dark and impressive."

Yes, crowed the little voice, *perhaps there is something there*

*

Oh, arse, thought Hermione. *That was subtle*. Her nerves were definitely getting the better of her. First she blatantly checked him out in the bedroom; then she quite obviously groped him on the pretext of casting a spell; then she came bloody close to grinding herself on his hand when he returned the favour. And now she was telling him he was strong, dark and impressive. There's nothing like playing hard to get, and that was *nothing* like playing hard to get. And she'd been doing so well. OK, so she'd been rather more touchy-feely with him than she usually was with anyone, but he didn't know that, and it was perfectly acceptable under the guise of their cover. Maybe he hadn't noticed.

She sneaked a quick look at him. He sat on the black horse with easy grace, reins in one hand while the other rested on his knee. The expression on his face was unusually relaxed. He met her eyes and smiled slightly, and she smiled back with a fleeting feeling of absolute happiness.

*

They continued riding at a walk through the wood. The light was a soft green where it filtered through the beech and oak leaves above their heads. To their right, the river chattered and sang as the clear mountain water rushed over rounded stones. There was little birdsong in the heat of the afternoon, but Snape spotted a couple of dippers darting about in the water and heard the distant cries of a buzzard.

There was a sudden flash of grey to their right and a loud *croak* as a heron, which had been standing unseen in a river pool, took off clumsily and flew upstream on heavy wings. All of the horses started, but the effect on Turpin was electric. He reared slightly and whinnied in fear, plunged forwards briefly; then he stood stock-still, trembling.

The others halted their mounts a safe distance from the terrified horse. Price had managed to keep his seat, but had now tightened his reins even further and was trying to kick the horse on. Turpin refused to move, so Price pulled a crop out of his boot and used it once, hard, against the horse's flank.

"Archie," protested Helen, "why don't you get off and lead him for a moment? He's just been spooked."

"He's just being stubborn," replied Price through gritted teeth. "He needs to know who's boss." He struck the horse again to no effect. Turpin remained stationary, ears back, trembling still.

"Archie," repeated Helen. "Please get off him. You're not doing any good."

Price turned to look at her, a disdainful expression in his eyes. "He's not the only one who needs to know who's boss. Yuri bought this horse for me to ride. And I will. The way I want."

Snape sighed inwardly. Twice now, he'd refrained from hexing the man. He really shouldn't make a scene. But...

He dismounted and led Samson forwards slightly, handing his reins to a surprised Helen. He glanced back at Hermione, who was watching him with what he was fairly sure was approval.

He walked towards Turpin. "Mr Price," he said softly, "I strongly suggest you do as Mrs Markov has asked and dismount from that horse."

*

Hermione heard the timbre of Snape's voice with a chill of recognition. Three decades' worth of Hogwarts students knew and feared that tone – a softly-spoken Snape was far more threatening than a shouting one. Unfortunately, Archie didn't recognise the steel of intent under the velvet voice and looked down at Snape with a sneer.

"Now listen to me, *Doctor*," Price spat out the honorific as if it were an insult, "I am not the sort of man you want to make an enemy of."

"On the contrary," drawled Snape, "you are *exactly* the sort of man I want to make an enemy of. Now, I repeat, dismount from this horse *now*." The final word was snapped out like a whip.

Price appeared to be speechless with fury, but didn't move. Snape moved to stand right next to Turpin and laid his hand gently on the horse's neck. As he had done earlier, he murmured softly to the scared animal. Gradually, the horse's trembling stopped, and his nose brushed briefly on Snape's shoulder. Snape muttered something else into the horse's ear.

Price looked down at Snape with suspicion. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Snape stepped back from Turpin's shoulder. "Me? Nothing."

And Turpin gave a sudden, violent buck of his hindquarters. Archie Price sailed inelegantly over his head and landed with a loud *plash* in the shallow water of the river.

There was a concerted gasp from the women, followed by a quickly suppressed giggle from Hermione.

Turpin strolled innocently over to Snape and nuzzled his shoulder. Snape patted him absently while observing Price with narrowed eyes. The older man had heaved himself to his feet and stood in the centre of the stream, literally dripping and metaphorically fuming.

"Are you hurt?" asked Helen.

Price just glared at her.

"Now," said Snape, still in a dangerously soft voice, "I think you should borrow Samson and go back to the house to get yourself dried off before you upset our hostess further. I'll look after Turpin for you – he and I have come to something of an understanding."

In silence, Price squelched out of the river. As he passed Snape, he snarled, "You'll regret this." Snape merely eyed him with contempt.

Price snatched Samson's reins from Helen and pulled himself up into the saddle. He hauled the horse's head round and with a swift kick to his flanks cantered him back in the direction of the house.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't known she had been holding. It was all she could do not to leap off her horse and envelop Snape in a hug of gratitude and admiration. She was, however, rather concerned that her hostess might not have taken the insult to her husband's business partner lightly. She looked slightly anxiously in Helen's direction. The last thing they needed was to be thrown out of the house. But she needn't have worried. Helen was looking at Snape with a look of slightly dazed happiness.

"I have no idea how you just managed that, but Turpin and I owe you a huge thank you. I don't like thinking ill of Yuri's friends, but Archie, well... Thank you."

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgment, his hand still idly stroking the chestnut's neck. "My pleasure."

"No such reservation from me," interjected Verity. "It's about time that odious creep was put in his place. What on earth have you done to that horse, though? Have you hypnotised him?"

Snape shook his head with a slight quirk of his lips. "Turpin and I met earlier and rather liked each other, that's all."

He turned to address the horse. "Now, if you don't mind, we'll finish the ride together." Turpin whickered softly, and Snape swung himself lightly up into the saddle. Turpin stood like a statue while Snape settled himself and took the reins in a loose hold.

"Shall we, ladies?" Snape asked and nudged Turpin into a walk. Helen drew her horse alongside, leaving Verity and Hermione to follow.

Verity turned to Hermione, her face lit up with a huge grin. "To quote my sixteen-year-old daughter: Oh. My. God. That was amazing. You've got a very impressive man there."

Hermione briefly let herself bask in the reflected glory and tried to keep the smugness out of her smile as she replied, "He has his moments."

Half a mile further on, the path led them through a gate and into a large meadow. Helen pulled up her horse and said, "If anyone wants a good run, we can skirt round the edge of the field. Or you can just walk up this side."

Snape stroked Turpin's neck. "I think this one needs to let off some steam."

Hermione laughed. "And this one definitely doesn't. I don't mind walking up on my own, though."

Verity shook her head. "No, I'm just in the mood for an amble. Go on, Helen; you go with Steven and we'll meet you at the top."

Helen gave the easiest smile Hermione had seen from her and looked over at Snape. "OK? Fancy a race?"

Snape gave a predatory grin. "Competitive? Me?"

And the two horses, chestnut and bay, were off, matching each other stride for stride as they sped across the bottom of the meadow.

*

When they arrived back at the stable yard, Snape could still feel the tingling after-effects of adrenaline in his veins. The confrontation with Price had been an indulgence, but the man really had deserved it. And he had forgotten quite how liberating a headlong gallop could be. Perhaps he should investigate the possibility of keeping a horse at Hogwarts. He dismounted from Turpin regretfully, giving the horse a farewell pat as he handed the reins to the waiting stable boy.

Judging by the laughter emanating from the other side of the yard, Verity was telling Huw about Price's watery exit. Snape strolled over to where Hermione was preparing to dismount from Violet. She smiled down at him at he took the reins.

"Have you had fun?" she asked.

"The afternoon has been... satisfactory, thank you." He could feel the grin he was suppressing tugging at his lips.

Hermione swung her leg over the saddle and slid down the horse's flank, stumbling slightly backwards as she landed on the cobbles. Snape's free arm shot out to catch her, and he drew her in firmly against his side.

She looked up at him with a grimace. "The charm worked, but my legs are a bit stiff." Her arm slipped to its now customary position around his waist.

"There's no rush to go anywhere," he said quietly.

His adrenaline-primed brain was suddenly acutely aware of all the points at which their bodies touched. He allowed his fingers to gently caress her side. She turned slightly towards him and looked at him with an expression of such open affection that even his jaded heart recognised it as genuine. He couldn't help himself. He bent his head slightly and kissed her softly on the lips, allowing himself to savour the brief contact before pulling away. But then he felt Hermione's hand snake into his hair, arresting his movement before encouraging his lips back down to hers. He felt, rather than heard, her soft sigh as they kissed again. This wasn't the heated passion of their encounter in the taxi. This felt more like... recognition.

With an impatient snort, Violet shoved her nose into Snape's side, and the moment was broken. He and Hermione pulled apart as she looked at the horse with a look of mock irritation. "Honestly," she huffed, "I'm surrounded by jealous members of your fan club!"

Snape rubbed the horse's nose. "It makes a pleasant change to be in the company of females with such good taste."

Hermione punched him gently in the arm. "Smug git. Come on. I think I need a quick soak in the bath if my legs are going to be fully operational later."

Now there's an image, thought Snape as he offloaded Violet's reins onto a smirking Huw.

*

Hand in hand this time, they walked back through the gardens to the house. Hermione felt slightly unsettled by what had just happened. At some point, their light-hearted, almost competitive, flirtation seemed to have tipped over into... what? She wasn't sure. And now really wasn't the time to be analysing it, she told herself sternly. She had work to do. On the subject of which...

"I'm going to have a look through that door in the study later," she said quietly to Snape.

He looked at her sharply. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

She shrugged. "Possibly not. But I need to be sure what's there before we confront Markov tomorrow. I'm going to feign a headache after dinner and sneak off to explore while everyone's otherwise occupied."

Snape frowned slightly, "Might it be wiser for both of us to go?"

She was grateful for the fact that he hadn't dismissed the idea outright or insisted that he should go instead. She shook her head.

"No. It'll be better if you can cover for me and make sure no-one gets too curious about my whereabouts."

Snape nodded briefly, although his expression remained slightly grim. "Very well. You're the professional. I shan't insult you by telling you to be careful, but..."

She squeezed his hand briefly. "I know. I will."

For Crying Out Loud

Night-time wanderings (of several kinds) and a scientific discussion.

A/N: Those of you familiar with the *Bat Out of Hell* album may have noticed that I have taken a liberty with the track order. For some reason I'd got the last two tracks transposed in my head when I was plotting this out. And so it's staying this way, for reasons that will become clear. Apologies to any affronted Meatloaf fans!

Thanks again to peskipiksi for betaing and encouraging, and thank you to those of you who have left such great reviews. Disclaimer: anything you recognise belongs to JKR, and no-one is paying me a penny for this.

Chapter 6 For Crying Out Loud

In other circumstances, reflected Snape, he would have thoroughly enjoyed that evening's dinner party. The food had been exceptional, the wine exquisite and free-flowing, and the company congenial. He had been flanked at the table on one side by an elderly spinster who looked to have not eaten for several days and wanted nothing more than to make up for lost time, relieving him of the necessity of making polite conversation, and on the other side by Verity. She had entertained him with an amusing *sotto voce* commentary on the rest of the guests, so that by the end of the meal he knew who was having an affair, whose business was in trouble, and which of the assembled worthies had a criminal past.

On another occasion he would probably have been flattered by the attentions of such an attractive woman as Verity and might even now be speculating on whether those attentions might be continued in a more physical manner. But tonight, his interest lay in a different direction. Across the table and slightly to the right, to be precise, where Hermione was dividing her not inconsiderable charms between an elderly Colonel and his nephew. The nephew was in his early twenties and clearly rather tongue-tied in Hermione's presence. Snape had seen a lot in the way of nervous laughter from him but little conversation. His uncle had no such reservations and, judging from the snippets that had reached Snape's ears, seemed to have spent most of the evening regaling Hermione with rather risqué (and possibly totally imaginary) tales of his military adventures.

Hermione looked for all the world like she was thoroughly enjoying herself, although the slight roll of the eyes she had given Snape when he had met her glance earlier indicated otherwise. She really was a good actress. Which thought obviously started him wondering just how genuine her actions towards him had been that weekend. He dismissed such ponderings savagely. Now was really not the time.

She did look lovely, though. Her green silk dress clung in all the right places, hanging from thin straps and swooping down almost indecently low at the back. Her eyes were made up to look smokily seductive, and tiny diamond studs glittered at her ears. On a purely aesthetic level, she was special. When her intelligence, independent spirit, and sense of humour were factored in, she was perfect. *Oh, hell*, he thought. *I think she's perfect? Not only does she make me act like a hormonal adolescent now I'm even thinking like one.*

*

Hermione was relieved when Helen rose to her feet to suggest they should all adjourn to the saloon for port and coffee. Colonel Algernon Davenport was entertaining in his own way, but that way was better enjoyed in rather smaller doses than the length of a five course meal. She had kept trying to bring his mouse-like nephew into the conversation, but Nigel (*was it Nigel? Neil maybe?*) had just smiled bashfully and answered monosyllabically as if he'd never even spoken to a woman before. Although that hadn't stopped him gazing adoringly down her cleavage at every opportunity.

She excused herself gracefully from the two men with a murmured, "It's been a pleasure, but *really* must pay my husband some attention now," and eased her way past the chattering guests until she reached Snape's side. He was talking to Verity, but quirked his lips in greeting and slipped his arm round her waist while he finished what he had been saying.

"Well," said Verity with a smile, "I see I'm surplus to requirements. I've tried to entertain him for you, Jane, but I swear he's been not even been half listening. He's got only eyes for one woman, and unfortunately, it's not me."

Snape opened his mouth to protest, but Hermione interrupted him. "No, it's no good denying it. I know you've been ogling old Mrs Fortescue all evening."

Snape shrugged. "I can't help it. I always find a moustache on a woman irresistible."

The three of them laughed; then Verity took her leave to rescue Giles, who had once again been cornered by Stacey Price. Snape and Hermione followed the other guests out into the entrance hall and towards the saloon.

"I think I feel a headache coming on," said Hermione softly. "I'll make my excuses to Helen in a moment, then slip off for half an hour or so."

Snape nodded and kissed her briefly on the cheek, his expression unreadable. "I'll be waiting, wife."

Hermione entered the saloon and found Helen checking the coffee pots. She smiled at Hermione's approach.

"Jane, dear, are you enjoying the evening?"

Hermione grimaced slightly. "It's been absolutely lovely, but I've got a bit of a headache. I'm just going to go and take some painkillers and lie down for half an hour, if you don't mind."

Helen's face took on an expression of sympathy. "Oh, no! I'd offer you some of my tablets, but Yuri was quite specific that they were formulated precisely for me, so I don't know if they'd work."

"Don't worry, I've got something very effective. Steven is useful like that." Hermione gave a weak smile. "I'm sure I'll be fine in a little while, so I'll probably see you later."

Helen still looked concerned. "Shall I send Ceri up in case you need anything?"

Hermione shook her head firmly. "No, honestly, I'll be absolutely fine. Thank you, though."

"Well, if you're sure. Have a good rest."

"Thanks, Helen."

Hermione left the room quickly. She caught Snape's eye as she left, giving a brief nod in reply to his interrogative eyebrow. She walked rapidly up the stairs and to their bedroom, then went through to the en-suite bathroom, closing the door behind her.

She took a deep, calming breath and removed her wand from where it had been concealed in her thigh holster. She tapped herself on the head with it and felt the cold chill as the Disillusionment Charm took effect. She knew she wasn't quite invisible, but it would be enough to avoid all but the most determinedly curious eyes. Taking off and discarding her shoes, she padded on now silent feet back out into the bedroom and then to the corridor. She checked in both directions before closing the bedroom door softly behind her.

She paused at the top of the stairs, waiting for the last of the guests to make their leisurely way into the saloon. When she was sure the coast was clear, she walked swiftly down the staircase and ran lightly across the vast entrance hall, only pausing when she reached the door of the study. With a final check around her, she opened the door and slipped inside, silently closing the door behind her. She leaned back against it briefly and caught her breath.

She proceeded then to the door on the opposite side of the room. She moved her wand in a diagnostic spell, but it revealed only the characteristic strokes of a Muggle-Repelling Charm. She tried the handle, only to find the door was locked. Pointing her wand at the keyhole, she murmured "*Alohomora!*" and felt the handle yield to her touch. She shook her head. Snape was right. Markov really was demonstrating a breathtaking certainty that the wizarding world wouldn't find him.

Going through the doorway, she found herself in a long corridor. It was dimly lit by moonlight filtering through windows to her left. Three doors opened off the right-hand side of the corridor, and there was another at the end.

She tried the first door to her right. It opened easily, and in the low light she could make out audio equipment and a couple of video monitors. Red and green LEDs flickered gaily, their cheerful twinkle belying the undoubtedly nefarious purpose of the surveillance centre. Hermione couldn't tell if there was recording equipment as well if there was, it could prove a rich source of evidence. Making a mental note to check that point tomorrow, she closed the door and moved on to the next.

The second room was fitted out as an office, complete with computer. Hermione muttered "*Finite*" to cancel the Disillusionment Charm, then entered, allowing the door to close behind her. She lit her wand briefly, seated herself at the desk, and switched the computer on. Wand extinguished, she waited for the computer to boot up, using the light from the screen to check the desk drawers. She was disappointed, but not really surprised, to find nothing more interesting than printer paper, pens, and paperclips. The computer chimed softly, boot-up complete. *Password required. Bugger. Now he shows some caution*

She tried a couple of passwords, more in hope than expectation of any success. 'Helen' didn't work, or 'Penbryn'. With a wry smile she tried 'Voldemort', then 'DarkMark'. No luck. She shrugged mentally. Never mind. One of her unit was a wizard with computers, so to speak. He'd crack it in an instant. She shut the computer down and returned to the dim corridor, only to nearly jump out of her skin as she heard a voice close by.

"Nigel, m'boy, I am *perfectly* sober and capable of driving home!" boomed Colonel Davenport's distinctive and decidedly un-sober tones.

With a sigh of relief, Hermione realised that the voice was coming from outside the windows. The Davenports must have parked right next to this wing. It was a timely reminder to keep her noise and light to a minimum, though.

Heart still beating rather faster than usual, she moved to the last door on the right. Opening the door revealed a bedroom. That was a surprise. Although, on second thoughts, it made some sense that Markov might need to stay down here, especially if he was brewing something that needed many hours of attention. The room appeared devoid of any non-essentials, with just a single bed, a bedside table, and an empty bookcase. It reminded her rather of a private hospital room. There was a further door at the back left of the room, which a quick investigation showed to contain a shower and toilet.

Back in the corridor again, Hermione paused before opening the final door. Once more, the handle moved easily under her hands, but the door itself was heavy. Heavy enough, in fact, that it took all her weight to push it open. *Interesting*, she thought. *Reinforced, or lead-lined?* The latter could serve to protect all the electrical equipment from any magic performed behind the door. She felt a flutter of anticipation as she peered around the door.

Thank Merlin and all his little pixies! The moonlight flooding through the windows into the large room reflected from the glassware, cauldrons, and bottles arrayed across four laboratory benches. Hermione shut the door behind her, careful not to let it slam. She explored the room methodically, left to right, checking cupboards and bottle labels and building up a mental inventory of equipment and ingredients. All of the components of the Scorpion Sting Potion were certainly present, and much more besides. Heaven knew what else he was brewing in here, though Severus could probably make some educated guesses. Talking of whom.... She checked her watch by the light of her wand. Her self-imposed time-limit was nearly up.

Reaching the back right hand corner of the lab, she came across a filing cabinet. She opened it, and very nearly let out a triumphant "Yes!" She contented herself with a happy smile as she flicked through the paperwork inside. She couldn't make out much in the moonlight or the faint light from her wand, but could see enough to determine that there were order forms and invoices with customer and supplier details. Hopefully, this would be enough for them to track down and destroy any potions that had already made their way into the Muggle world.

A second drawer was filled with handwritten notes in what looked like Cyrillic. He was Russian, then. Which answered one question, but led to several more, chief of which was: *What the hell does this lot say?* A Translation Spell would work and was simple enough to do, but she daredn't take any more time. She wouldn't be surprised if Helen sent Ceri up with some warm cocoa or something if she was away for too long.

Reluctantly, she replaced the notes in the drawer and closed it. She'd come back first thing in the morning, she decided, before Markov arrived. It would be easier to work by daylight, anyway. She cast a quick look round the lab to make sure everything was as she'd found it, then sped off to return to the party.

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Five minutes later she was back in the saloon, trying her best to look like she was recovering from a headache rather than getting her breath back. Most of the thirty or so dinner guests were still there, and the alcohol and conversation were still flowing easily. Snape must have been watching out for her, as he was by her side almost instantly.

"How are you feeling?" he asked solicitously, reaching one hand out to caress her head gently.

"Much better, thank you," she replied, trying to think of some way they could talk in private.

Snape looked at her assessingly. "You still look a little pale. I think some fresh air would do you good."

"That's an excellent idea."

She took Snape's hand and he led her towards the open French windows at the far side of the saloon. As they passed an empty chair he picked up a cushion from it. Hermione looked at him quizzically. "Wait and see," he murmured.

A couple whose names Hermione could not for the life of her remember were talking just outside, but otherwise the terrace was empty. Snape led her straight ahead, to the waist-high stone balustrade. In one smooth movement he dropped the cushion onto the top, took Hermione in his arms and lifted her round until she was sitting on the cushion, her back to the house, facing out to the moonlit garden, fifteen feet below.

She turned her head and smiled at him admiringly. "Very smooth. Did you plan that?"

"Not at all. I'm just good at spontaneous romantic gestures. Now turn around and I'll massage your shoulders." He lowered his voice. "And we can talk."

Obediently, Hermione moved so her back was to Snape once more. She felt his warm hands on her bare skin. He began to massage her neck gently, his long fingers carefully easing out the tension she hadn't even realised was there.

"Well?" he asked, his voice thrumming softly in her ear.

"Mmm. That feels lovely."

"I meant, well, what did you find?" His voice was heavy with amusement.

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that."

Hermione refused to feel embarrassed. The bloody man must know what a distraction he was proving. She dragged her mind back to the matter in hand and away from the skin under his hands.

Softly and succinctly she related her discoveries in Markov's rooms to Snape.

"So in the morning I think I'll plead another headache and go back to translate some of those papers while the rest of you are at breakfast," she concluded.

She felt Snape's hands tense a little on her shoulders, but he merely said, "If you're sure that's necessary and advisable."

"I am."

"Very well, then."

They remained in silence for a little while, Snape's fingers still moving idly on her skin. She leaned back into his hands, swinging her legs gently as she totally relaxed.

There was a sudden movement from one foot.

"Shit! My shoe's fallen into the shrubbery!"

"That's very alliterative of you." Snape moved to lean over the balustrade next to her. "Though actually I think it's a rockery."

Hermione put her head to one side, considering. "Yes, I think you're probably right. Off you go, then."

Snape turned to look at her, eyebrow raised. "To where should I be going, exactly?"

"Down there. To retrieve my shoe. It's your fault it fell off. You relaxed me too much."

Snape's eyes glinted with amusement.

"I do apologise. I shan't do it again."

"Oh yes, you will. But get my shoe back first. *Please?*" She smiled with saccharine sweetness and fluttered her eyelashes.

Snape snorted, but sauntered off down the steps to the garden, hands in his pockets. When he was directly below Hermione he looked up at her.

"Where exactly is your absurd item of footwear?"

Hermione peered down and pointed. "Round about there, I think."

Snape stepped unsteadily into the rockery, and Hermione could hear muffled swearing as he tried to keep his balance on the rocks without crushing any plants.

"Oh! I can see it!" she exclaimed. "It's behind the *Pyracantha*."

Snape looked back up at her, a slightly exasperated expression on his face. "Not helpful."

"The big plant with the white flowers," Hermione explained.

Snape ducked down under the plant in question, then began to swear loudly.

"Ouch! Bloody fucking buggeration!"

"And the sharp thorns," Hermione continued, helpfully.

Snape straightened up, brandishing her silver stiletto like he was about to hex her with it. A faintly evil smile crossed his face as he looked up at her. "I can see right up your skirt from down here, you know."

Hermione hurriedly crossed her legs and, with as much dignity as she could muster, swivelled herself around so she was sitting facing the house.

*

Snape smiled slightly as he returned to Hermione. *A oneall draw, that one*, he thought. He hadn't really been able to see up her skirt there wasn't enough light. And obviously he was far too much of a gentleman to have looked.

Hermione was waiting for him, seated demurely on the balustrade, legs crossed at the ankle. Snape knelt on one knee in front of her.

"May I, Cinderella?" he asked, holding out the shoe.

Hermione observed him with amusement.

"Certainly, my *Prince*," she replied.

Snape held her gaze as he grasped her bare foot gently and deliberately ran the tip of his finger along the sole. He was rather disappointed when she didn't flinch.

"Not ticklish?"

"Not there, no," she replied, an impish smile on her lips. "I am in plenty of other places, though."

"Now *that's* an invitation," he drawled, placing her shoe carefully on her foot. "I feel I ought to make some observations in the spirit of scientific enquiry."

Hermione looked down at him. "Under laboratory conditions, of course," she responded archly; then he saw the corners of her mouth twitching. He was beginning to recognise that look.

"Come on, then," he said, getting to his feet and brushing the dust off his trousers. "What horribly inappropriate thought has occurred to you now? You may as well say it."

She let her smile blossom. "OK, though you may regret this one. Have you ever shagged anyone on a laboratory bench?"

He laughed, then, and sat down next to her on the balustrade.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but no, I haven't. Why, have you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I've just often looked at a lab bench and thought that as long as the height of the man concerned and the bench matched, it would be a really good position."

"I can honestly say I've never considered the erotic potential of my laboratory. Though you do realise now you've put the thought into my mind..." He paused. *Bugger.* She really had put that thought into his mind now, and it wasn't just in the abstract. His lab at Hogwarts would be no good, of course, but she had that lovely basement in her cottage, and if he remembered correctly the bench there was around hip height and.... He realised she was watching him speculatively.

"I don't know if you noticed," she said, "but the bench in my lab at the cottage would be just about hip height on you."

"Really?" he responded, as if the thought hadn't been further from his mind. "And, just hypothetically, obviously, would that be the sort of height you were thinking of?"

"Hypothetically, yes, I think the correct hip-height-to-bench-height ratio for the man involved would be around one to one."

There was a sudden burst of conversation from the direction of the French windows as a small huddle of people stepped out onto the terrace. The group stayed near to the house, several of them lighting cigarettes. Giles Pemberton was with them, and Snape nodded to him in acknowledgment.

Still apparently watching the new arrivals, he said softly, "So, in this hypothetical situation of yours, what exactly would be the position of the participants?"

"Well," began Hermione, quietly, "to take a random example, I would be sitting on the bench while you stood in front of me, so I could wrap my legs around you."

"Hence the importance of the relative height of the bench," continued Snape, rather proud of how steady his voice was remaining.

"Exactly. Clearly, as a scientific exercise, the experiment would have to be repeated several times to ensure a reliable result."

Merlin's manhood, she's good at this. He allowed a slight smile to quirk his lips as he added, still not looking at her, "And might I also suggest that some other comparable work surfaces be tested as well, to serve as controls?"

He could hear the answering smile in her voice as she almost purred, "Now, *that's* an excellent idea. Hmm... I think the kitchen counter and the dining table might suffice for that purpose. I venture a hypothesis that the former might be a little too high and the latter a little low, but that could be tested easily enough."

"What about the table in your garden, under the oak tree?"

"Outdoors? Very adventurous. Wouldn't you worry about our... experiment being observed?"

Snape turned slightly to face Hermione then. They were sat close together, but still not touching. He knew she must be able to see the desire in his eyes as he responded honestly, "The way I feel at the moment, I would take you right now on this wall with no qualms whatsoever about the audience."

She regarded him frankly, with heat and affection in her eyes. "And I would probably let you if you tried." She paused, and reached out her hand to cover his where it lay on the stonework between them. "But it wouldn't be a terribly good idea."

Snape felt the warmth of her hand on his as if it burned. "A little too indiscreet?" he asked, with a lightness he could not quite feel.

"No, it's not that." She grinned as she looked up at him mischievously through her eyelashes. "I'm more concerned about that drop behind us. We'd both break our necks."

He felt an answering grin tugging at his mouth as the tension evaporated into humour. "It'd be one hell of a way to go, though."

She chuckled then, and he let his own throaty laugh escape as he turned his hand to entwine his fingers with hers.

"You do realise I am not going to get a wink of sleep tonight, woman."

She smiled sweetly up at him and opened her eyes innocently wide. "Oh, I am. And I'm planning on having the most ~~st~~ wonderful dreams."

*

In the event, it was Hermione who dozed fitfully while Snape slept the sleep of the righteous beside her. She rehearsed scenarios for the next day over and over again in her head. When they finally met Markov, they would have the element of surprise on their side, and he would be outnumbered, magically at least. Ideally, their first meeting would be engineered to occur with as few Muggles present as possible. With luck, Markov would not recognise Snape, and they would be able to isolate and apprehend him at their leisure, but it was reasonably likely that the two men did know each other, in which case it would be a matter of capture first and tidy up the mess later. Her team were just a phone call or Patronus-cast away, and the local Muggle police had been apprised of the situation (or a heavily-edited version, at least) and were on stand-by.

She rather hoped that the evidence to be collected from the lab would also implicate Archie Price. The Muggle police tended to get a little disgruntled if they weren't left with a suspect to play with after helping with one of the Unit's investigations, and it would certainly be incredibly satisfying to hand the odious Mr Price to them in handcuffs. She smiled then at the memory of Archie standing dripping in the river earlier. Severus had been utterly magnificent.

It was no use. She finally had to admit that, at the very least, she had a huge crush on him. And at the most? Well, she wasn't going to think about that now. She had an important job to do tomorrow. *Today, actually it was past midnight before we came to bed*

She propped herself up on her elbow and studied Snape's face in the dim light, its angular planes thrown into sharp relief by the moon's rays. He was lying on his back, one arm flung above his head and the other stretched out towards her. She lay back down, snuggling in until she was lying on her side next to him, head on his shoulder and one hand resting on his chest. After a second's thought, she bent her knee and brought her leg up until it rested on his thigh. *Oops, a bit high. That's not his leg I can feel. What is he dreaming about?* She felt a sudden delicious curl of lust in her abdomen. *I wonder how he'd react if I just climbed on top of him? Such a shame to let that go to waste.* Her body shook with a suppressed giggle at the thought, then she jumped slightly as Snape said softly, "You seem to be making a habit of waking me up by laughing at me. Would you care to share the joke?"

Hermione smiled to herself as she moved her leg slightly against his erection. "Only if you'll tell me what you were dreaming about."

Snape drew his arm around her and slid his fingers up under the hem of her vest top to trace gentle circles on her skin. "I've got no intention of telling you, but I might be persuaded to show you."

Hermione stretched herself like a cat, pushing into his hand as she straightened her leg and rubbed it down his thigh.

"Tempting as that offer is, I still have a headache, I'm afraid." *And there's a bloody microphone next to the bed* "Maybe tonight."

"I'll hold you to that." Snape rolled onto his side to face her and wrapped both arms around her loosely.

Oh, yes, please hold me to that. "I could probably manage a goodnight kiss, though," Hermione said, smiling as she held his gaze, watching his dark eyes glitter in the moonlight.

He moved towards her slightly and kissed her very softly on the lips, then drew back, observing her almost uncertainly. Hermione felt that he was waiting for her to make the next move.

So she did. She put her hand to the nape of his neck and pulled him close again to kiss him firmly. His lips opened beneath hers, and she swept her tongue against his, tasting sleep and toothpaste and whisky, and suddenly he was kissing her back deeply, taking the initiative as he rolled them slightly, pushing her onto her back and half covering her with his body. He ran his hand in a firm caress down her side. She moaned into his mouth as their tongues licked and tasted each other, tangling one hand in his hair and slipping the other beneath his T-shirt to stroke the warm skin of his back. *Sweet Merlin, I want this man now. Sod any eavesdroppers. Just this once I'll let my libido outvote my brain. Fuck, he's stopping. Don't tell me his brain's won the argument. He's a man. His brain isn't supposed to get a vote*

*

With a Herculean effort Snape pulled back slightly from Hermione, kissing her once more, chastely, on the lips before resting his forehead gently on hers. He closed his eyes. They were both breathing heavily. *Well, that was bloody close*, he thought. *Nearly forgot about that fucking microphone. Four more seconds and I'd have been ripping her clothes off and ... Think about something else. Quickly.*

He raised his head and opened his eyes. Hermione was looking up at him with a wry smile that somehow managed to convey a mixture of lust, disappointment, and understanding.

"I've got a strong feeling this headache will be gone in a few hours," she said conversationally.

"I do hope so. It must be frustrating for you."

"I can tell it's hard for you, too." She grinned impishly, equilibrium and humour apparently restored.

He kissed her again then swiftly this time, before they could get carried away. "Come on, then, wife. Let's try and get a couple of hours' sleep at least."

He settled them both on their sides, drawing her back tightly against his chest. She interlaced the fingers of one hand with his where it lay against her stomach.

"Sleep well, my love," she murmured.

"I'll try," he replied, fully aware that he was not, in fact, going to sleep for an instant until he'd given himself a mental cold shower and cleared the fog of lust from his brain. With a sigh, he began to silently recite the Chief Warlocks of the Wizengamot since 1023: *Edrelbert the Unreliable, Cymric Wulfstan, Godric ap Hywel ap Rhys ap Myrddin....*

*

He finally drifted off somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century and woke a few hours later feeling decidedly unrested. His unsated libido was vying for attention with the gnawing anxiety in the pit of his stomach. He was finding it incredibly difficult to allow Hermione to wander off and explore Markov's laboratory alone. At the very least, he wanted to accompany her. And a small but significant part of him was desperate to tell her to go home and leave him to tackle Markov.

Rationally, he knew that Hermione was at least his match when it came to magical ability, and that she would quite happily confirm the fact by inflicting something inordinately painful on him if he even attempted any display of chivalry that could be read as doubt about her competence. And he had no such doubts. Not really. It was just that she was so young (*not that young*, a still lust-infested corner of his brain protested) and relatively inexperienced. *And despite all of my protests about wanting a quiet life, I am still a control freak with a hard-to-suppress urge to protect people. Especially the ones I love. Love? Merlin's right buttock, where did that come from?*

*

Hermione noticed that Snape seemed quiet and distracted as they were getting dressed that morning. *Probably didn't get much sleep after I pounced on him*, she thought somewhat guiltily. They had staged a conversation about her missing breakfast because her headache was not quite gone, and Snape was nearly ready to go downstairs.

She went into the bathroom to comb her hair and was slightly surprised when Snape followed her in and closed the door. He stood close behind her as she looked in the mirror, and his eyes met hers in the reflection.

"I assume we're safe from being overheard in here," he said quietly.

Hermione nodded. "As long as we keep our voices down. Are you OK?"

Snape gave a rueful smile. "I'll just be relieved when we have Markov safely in custody. Do you want me to Disillusion you? It's one of those charms it's always easier to do on someone else than on oneself."

Hermione smiled gratefully at him in the mirror. "That would be perfect. Thanks."

She watched her reflection in interest as he raised his wand then tapped her firmly on the head with it. She could see the spell as it travelled in a chilly wave down her body. The effect was eerie. She was nearly invisible, but if she concentrated hard she could see herself more clearly, her ghostly image becoming almost tangible.

She turned to face Snape. "I don't know if you can tell, but I'm smiling at you. I may come in to breakfast after I've finished in the lab, but if not I'll meet you back up here."

He nodded once. "Very well. Have fun. If you do decide to come in to breakfast please remember to cancel the charm or you'll scare the life out of everyone. And yes, I can see you well enough to know you're sticking your tongue out at me now. Immature wench."

"Grumpy old git," retorted Hermione. "Go and get your coffee. I'm sure you'll be back to your usual charming self once you've got some caffeine in your system."

"I think I'll stick to tea, thank you. You've shredded my nerves enough in the last twenty-four hours that more stimulation is the last thing I need."

Hermione rather liked the way his melodious voice lingered over the word 'stimulation'. She reached up to kiss him gently on the cheek, then waited for him to leave the bathroom and bedroom before following him soundlessly and almost invisibly.

*

Five minutes later found her in the now sunlit laboratory, rifling through the second drawer of the filing cabinet. She pulled out the first folder and took it over to the nearest bench, spreading the pages out in order in front of her. With a flick of her wand and a muttered incantation, she cast a Translation Spell. Instantly, golden letters rose above each page and hung floating in the air above the original text. A variation of the spell would transfer the translation to paper, but that could wait. For the moment she just wanted to satisfy her curiosity.

Scorpion Bite Potion, she read. *For subjugation of enemies and...*

She felt a sudden warmth spread through her body. In the fraction of a second it took her to realise her Disillusionment Charm had been cancelled, she began to turn, casting a Shield Charm. "*Prot...*"

But it was too late. Her wand skittered out of her hand as she was Disarmed, and before she had even turned to face her assailant, she heard the word *hcarcerous* and ropes appeared from thin air to tether her limbs tightly to her body. She felt her legs buckle as something hit her from behind and realised it was a chair as the ropes extended further to tie her down to it.

"So, Ms Eastwood," said a strongly accented voice. "Who are you really, and why have you brought Severus Snape to my home?"

*

Hermione watched Yuri Markov grimly as he moved to stand in front of her. *Why was I so bloody stupid as to work with my back to the door?* Now she could see his face, she recognised instantly the charm he had used to prevent her remembering what he looked like obviously cancelled itself in his presence. In other circumstances she might have appreciated the finesse.

His eyes were a very pale, icy blue. His face had a Slavic cast, with high cheekbones and a long, narrow nose. His black hair was cut short and contrasted sharply with his chalky skin. His thin lips were twisted into a slight sneer as he looked down at her.

"I am waiting for an answer, Ms Eastwood. Or whatever your name really is."

He tapped her wand against the bench. "This would seem to indicate that you are a witch. That fact alone proves you are not who you say you are."

Hermione met his gaze defiantly. "I have no idea what you are talking about, Mr Markov."

Markov grunted. "Liar. Well, let us start with me telling you what I know already. I asked Mr Price to give me a preliminary report on you and your alleged husband, and I had a very interesting telephone conversation with him last night. You will no doubt be delighted to know that he likes you, though he would rather fuck you on the negotiating table than have you sat at it. He was less complimentary about Dr Singer. I paid little attention to his complaints until he recounted a very interesting story about what your husband did to Turpin. In his words 'it was just like magic'.

"Now, to him that was just an expression, but as you can imagine, I thought it merited some further investigation. I resolved to return here a little early to check out some of the camera and microphone outputs. My decision was vindicated when, as I was preparing to leave, the silent alarm for this wing of the house was triggered. Clever things, Muggle burglar alarms."

Bugger, thought Hermione. *I missed that one. He's not quite as complacent as we thought.*

Markov continued speaking, pacing now in front of her. "So I returned in the early hours of this morning without alerting anyone to my presence. First of all, I checked the security camera, but you cleverly made sure your spouse kept his face turned away from it. As it happens, I have only seen Professor Snape's face once, and I may not even have recognised him straight away. But then I listened to some of the audio recordings from your bedroom. I assume you knew it was bugged? I would hope you usually have more interesting conversations. Although events at 2 a.m. were rather more exciting. Tell me, did you find out what Severus had been dreaming about?"

Hermione shuddered at the thought of Markov eavesdropping on them and was heartily glad that things hadn't got any further out of hand. She continued to glower at Markov in silence as he carried on speaking.

"But I digress. You kept your husband's face hidden but you didn't think to hide his voice. You forgot one thing about the Death Eaters. They did insist on wearing those ridiculous masks. So, almost always, when I met with the Dark Lord to apprise him of events in my country, the face of his most trusted lieutenant was hidden. But not his extremely distinctive voice, which I got to know very well. Imagine my surprise when I heard it in my house.

"So, for the last time, who are you, and why have you brought Severus Snape here?"

Hermione's mind raced as she tried to think of a way out. Her wandless magic was good, but unlikely to be effective against an armed Dark wizard. Her bag contained her gun, among other things, but had fallen on the floor when she was captured; it was currently out of reach. She needed to remedy that. She tried stalling for time. Perhaps she could sow enough doubt in Markov's mind that he would release the ropes, at least.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Steven's just a Muggle who's good with horses. We've been married for three years. I can't help it if he sounds like Snape. Listen, obviously I am a witch, but I'm still here because I want to do business with you. You apparently prefer to work with Muggles nowadays, so that seemed like the best way to approach you. I had every intention of telling you the truth this weekend."

Markov looked at her steadily. He seemed to be considering what she was saying. Then he shook his head.

"You are still lying. But never mind. I will have the truth from you. Eventually."

He flicked his wand, and a bottle flew to his hand. With a chill of dread, Hermione recognised the vermilion hue of the Scorpion Bite Potion.

Markov tapped a finger to his lips, considering. "I think half an hour should suffice to begin with. Then we shall see if you are minded to be a little more forthcoming."

He moved over to stand right next to Hermione. She instinctively tried to flinch away but he gripped her arm tightly. He unstopped the bottle and let one drop of the liquid fall onto her wrist.

Hermione was surprised at her detachment as she watched the red colour spread slightly across her skin. She knew how the potion worked. In a few seconds, a burning pain would start to radiate across her body. It would happen in waves, each peaking higher than the last before waning slightly. That was one of the reasons for the potion's efficacy. Instead of causing prolonged unconsciousness, it tricked the body into waking repeatedly as the pain apparently subsided, denying the relief of blissful oblivion. Clever, really.

She felt the first white heat shoot out from her wrist. She looked defiantly up at Markov, who was watching her with every appearance of enjoyment.

"Now," he said. "I think we will release the ropes. That will give you the freedom to writhe in agony. I don't think we want any broken bones. Yet."

Bastard. Hermione felt the ropes release, but was able to do nothing but slide to the floor as the potion took hold. She was aware of Markov speaking again. "But I think I will Silence you. I need to make a telephone call, and the screams might be a little distracting."

She faintly felt the charm act, but was more concerned with the wave of pain that had now reached the very tips of her toes. Just as she felt she could stand no more, the pain level dropped slightly. *Now, if I could just reach my bag...* But no sooner had the thought entered her mind than the torture began again. This time the wave of pain rose higher and higher. She knew she was going to lose consciousness. As she felt the world go black around her she silently screamed one word into the vault of her mind. *Severus!*

*

On the terrace there was a sudden report as Snape dropped his tea-cup. It shattered into a hundred pieces, scattering its liquid contents like a necklace of amber carelessly strewn across the stone.

Paradise by the Dashboard Light

Chapter 7 of 7

Rescues, paperwork, and the testing of a hypothesis.

A/N: So, here we are then. The final chapter. Thank you so much to everyone who has encouraged me and shown their love for this little tale. Special mention goes to my lovely beta peskipiksi and to the PP admins who have patiently shepherded wayward commas and been generally enthusiastic and helpful. Disclaimer: anything you recognise belongs to JKR, and no-one is paying me a penny for this.

Chapter 7 Paradise by the Dashboard Light

Ceri appeared at the French windows. "Is everything OK, love? Sorry... Dr Singer. I heard a smash."

The question that Snape was about to ask died on his lips. That unearthly, agonised scream hadn't entered his mind via his ears. Had it been generally audible, the chirpy maid wouldn't have been enquiring after crockery. He forced a smile to his lips as he moved with studied nonchalance towards the saloon entrance. "Sorry, Ceri. The cup just slipped out of my hand. Would you mind coming with me for a moment?"

Ceri looked at him quizzically. "'Course not. What's the matter?"

They passed through the saloon. Verity, Helen, Giles, and Stacey all glanced up from the table as they passed. Snape paused briefly. "I hope you don't object, but I've asked Ceri to take a tray up to Jane."

Helen smiled kindly. "Not at all. I was about to suggest that myself. Please, carry on."

Snape led Ceri out into the entrance hall, closing the saloon door behind them. He paused then, despite every nerve in his body screaming at him to run.

"Do you trust me, Ceri?"

The girl grinned at him. "Yeah, I do, actually. You've got lovely eyes, and Uncle Huw told me what you did with Mr Price's horse. I wish I could have seen..."

"Thank you, Ceri," Snape interrupted. "Come with me." He walked swiftly over to the door of Markov's study with the chatty maid following close behind. He stopped by the door.

"I need you to make sure no-one comes in here. I don't care what excuse you make, but I'm sure you'll think of something."

Ceri looked at him with a puzzled expression, but then nodded. "OK, love. Promise you'll explain after, though?"

Snape forced a smile. "I promise. Thank you."

With a deep, nerve-calming breath, he entered the study and walked rapidly over to the far door. He extracted his wand from an inner pocket then, quickly establishing that the Muggle-Repelling Charms had been disabled. He spared a brief thought for the implications before passing through the door and into the corridor beyond. Unerringly, he ignored the side rooms, heading for the lab entrance at the far end. That was where Hermione was. He could still feel the tug of her silent scream summoning him to her side.

He paused briefly before the door, wand in hand. He planned to rush through, surprising whoever awaited him on the far side. He raised his wand and magically flung open the door. *Shit, that didn't work. What the bloody hell is this door made of? Lead?* Considerably less dramatically than planned, he entered the laboratory. In a split second he took in the scene in front of him. Four lab benches extended from the doorway towards the back of the large room. Midway down the far right bench stood a man, his back to Snape, and at his feet lay an unmoving, heartbreakingly familiar figure. *Oh, God, please let her be alive.* Snape hurled a desperate prayer to any deity that might be listening, then felt a flood of relief as he saw the body move. Relief that was tempered with pain as he witnessed what appeared to be a spasm of agony.

He aimed his wand at the man, then froze when a strong arm gripped him from behind and a cold metal object was pressed to his neck.

The figure standing over Hermione now turned to face him and Snape felt a sickening chill of recognition. *Of course. Why the hell didn't I guess earlier? Russian. Potions expert.*

The wizard smiled at him smugly. *Verity was right. The smile doesn't reach his eyes.* "Dear me, Severus. You appear to have brought a wand to a gunfight."

Belatedly, Snape realised the import of the chill of metal at his neck. He registered Archie Price's voice as it muttered into his ear, "Told you not to make an enemy of me, didn't I?"

Snape chose to ignore Price's rather pressing call for his attention and instead focused on the other wizard. "So, Boris Ivanovitch. I never wondered what happened to you."

Ivanovitch walked towards him, still smiling smugly. "Circumstances at home were no longer conducive to my business dealings, so I decided to try my luck in a new sphere. Muggles have been pleasingly keen to grasp the potential of my work."

Snape shrugged. "Stupidity has never been the sole preserve of the wizarding world. Muggles are equally tragic in their attempts to subjugate others through bullying and intimidation." He risked a glance at Hermione. She was still writhing restlessly on the floor. He suspected he was witnessing the effects of the enhanced Scorpion Sting Potion.

Ivanovitch stopped moving ten paces in front of him and leaned against the lab bench, lips twisted into a sneer of contempt.

"Don't worry, Severus. I haven't killed her yet. Though she might be wishing I had. She really has been outstandingly loyal to you. Tell me, have you used a love potion on her, or are you just paying her exceptionally well? Or am I to believe you've fucked her into submission?"

Snape tensed, drawing in his anger to Crucio Ivanovitch into unconsciousness, but Price reminded him of his presence by tightening his grip and pressing the gun more firmly into his neck. *Is it my imagination, or is Hermione moving more purposefully?*

Snape deliberately pulled his gaze away from Hermione, focusing instead on Ivanovitch. "Some of us don't need to rely on love potions," he responded. "Tell me, has this

house been worth the effort of murdering its owner and drugging your wife?"

Ivanovitch shrugged. "It was no effort. And I wanted a dwelling that reflected my status. Our family home in Russia was destroyed by enemies of the natural order of the wizarding world. Bleeding heart liberals who bled muddy blood. Daring to say that Muggle-borns could be a match for we pure-bloods."

"Perish the thought," said a new voice from behind Ivanovitch.

"Watch out, boss," cried Price, but too late, as Hermione pressed her gun to Ivanovitch's head.

"Now," she continued conversationally, "what was that you were saying about wands and gunfights?"

*

Hermione held her gun firmly against Markov's temple. Her legs still shook slightly with the after-effects of the Scorpion Bite, but all things considered, she felt pretty good. OK, so they were in something of a Mexican stand-off position. But that was manageable. Some distant part of her brain was shouting, *Hello? Shock?*, but she chose to ignore it.

She looked over at Snape, who was standing impressively nonchalantly bearing in mind the fact Price had a gun to his neck. "Am I right in thinking you two know each other?" she asked, waving her free hand vaguely between the two wizards.

Snape looked at her directly, concern in his eyes. She glared at him, hoping it conveyed *I'm fine, answer the bloody question*, rather than *Do something suicidally brave*. She was relieved when he answered mildly, "I do apologise. Where are my manners? Please allow me to present Boris Ivanovitch, former Potions Master at Durmstrang."

A memory sparked in Hermione's brain. "Merlin's pants! You're the one that looks like Dracula's younger brother! Viktor was amazingly accurate when he described you! I hadn't made the connection, but it's obvious now. Did teaching not agree with you?"

Ivanovitch made an attempt to face Hermione, but she rapped him sharply on the head with her gun and he remained where he was.

"After the Dark Lord fell, I thought it politic to take my talents elsewhere. Speaking of which, the Potion should still have another fifteen minutes to run on you."

Hermione smiled broadly. "Ah, but I have a very clever colleague who gave me a sample of antidote to keep in my bag, just in case."

Ivanovitch scowled. "Even with the antidote your muscles should suffer from spasms for several hours."

Hermione shook her head happily. "Nope, no spasms. My colleague is *extremely* clever." She caught Snape's eye, beaming.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I used a strong dose of hemp oil as an anti-spasmodic."

Ah, thought Hermione. *That would explain why I feel as high as a kite*

Markov grunted. "Foolish. That will interfere with the ground hedgehog quills and cause a relapse within the hour."

"Only if I was stupid enough not to..."

"Excuse me, boys," interrupted Hermione. "Can we save the Potions pissing contest until later? Mr Price and I were wondering if we're going to have to shoot anyone today."

In fact, Archie Price was wearing an expression of slight bewilderment as he held his gun to Snape's neck, the other arm gripping him firmly around the shoulders. Hermione couldn't decide if he was Imperiused, Confunded, or just terminally stupid. Whatever, he was definitely the softest target in the room. She met Snape's steady gaze with her own, silently willing him to read her mind as she formed an image in the forefront of her brain. She saw intensity flare in his eyes as she felt a soft tugging on her thoughts; then he nodded almost imperceptibly.

Silently, by her side, she extended the fingers of her free hand one by one. *One, two, three...*

Quick as a flash she took her gun from Ivanovitch's head and shot Price in the shoulder as Snape raised his wand at Ivanovitch, shouting *Stupefy!*

She grabbed her wand from the work surface behind her, then ran over to Price, vaguely aware that Ivanovitch had dodged Snape's curse and ducked behind a bench. The sounds of smashing glass filled the room.

Price had collapsed onto the floor, gripping his shoulder. Blood was seeping out from beneath his fingers. He glared at her as she crouched beside him.

"Bitch. What the fucking hell is going on here?"

"You're learning a lesson in choosing your business partners more carefully. Let me see your shoulder."

Price scowled, but moved his hand. His shirt was soaked in blood, although it looked like the bullet had passed through cleanly. Hermione moved her wand over his arm. Her muttered "*Tergeo!*" cleaned the blood away; then she conjured a tight bandage to wrap the wound. Content now that he wasn't going to die on her, she got to her feet, gagged and bound him with a quick "*Incarcerous!*" and kicked his gun safely out of reach. Then she turned her attention to the two wizards duelling in the centre of the lab.

Ivanovitch had retreated behind a bench, but a "*Reducto!*" from Snape exploded it into splinters. Glassware flew across the room and bottles smashed on the floor. *I'll have no evidence left at this rate*, thought Hermione ruefully.

Ivanovitch countered with a "*Stupefy!*" which Snape deflected with a contemptuous flick of his wand as he strode implacably towards the other wizard. Ivanovitch backed away until his progress was halted by the bench behind him. He vaulted lightly up onto it, aiming a curse down towards Snape, but again his hex rebounded harmlessly from a Shield Charm. Snape aimed a blasting spell at a large glass bottle on the bench, then said "*Incendio!*" and ignited the liquid contents as they sprayed though the air. Ivanovitch leaped backwards, away from the resulting fireball, and again put the width of a bench between himself and Snape.

"You're running out of places to hide," drawled Snape. With a circular motion of his wand, he drew the remaining flames in a ring around Ivanovitch, who spun quickly, shooting water out of his wand to extinguish the flames as he went. As he completed his spin, he was smacked sharply on the side of the head by a cauldron that Snape had Summoned at high speed from the opposite end of the lab. He fell sideways, disappearing behind the bench.

Hermione picked up her bag and ran over to join Snape as he moved carefully around to check on the Russian. He was out cold on the floor, wand still in his hand. Snape put his foot firmly on Ivanovitch's arm before bending down and taking the wand from him. Hermione crouched down to lock her handcuffs firmly onto the captured wizard's wrists.

She grinned at Snape as they both stood again.

"Nice shot," she complimented him. "I've never seen a cauldron used as a weapon before."

"You have no idea how many times I've fantasised about doing that to some of my more irritating pupils. I admit I was rather pleased with how well it turned out. Good shot from you earlier, too."

They looked at each other for a moment; then Snape pulled Hermione into a tight hug. She wrapped her arms around him, relaxing into a wonderful feeling of security. She felt him kiss the top of her head.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked quietly.

She pulled away slightly and looked into his dark eyes with a smile. "I am absolutely fine. Great, even. That antidote's wonderful. I may ask you for some more later."

Snape shook his head with a quirk of his lips. "Much as it grieves me to admit it, I think I may have been somewhat heavy-handed with the hemp oil."

Hermione put her head to one side. "You? Get a potion wrong? I think we'll give you the benefit of the doubt and say it's the effects of adrenaline and low blood sugar. Some of us haven't had breakfast yet. I'm starting to sober up a bit now, anyway. Fortunately, as I've still got work to do." She reluctantly stepped back out of Snape's embrace. "Would you mind securing Ivanovitch while I sort out Price?"

Snape inclined his head. "My pleasure. Bound and silenced?"

Hermione shook her head slightly. "Just bound. The Muggle police will be seeing him, and it'll be hard to explain if he wakes and can't talk. I'd suggest gagging him, but they get a bit funny about that as well."

Snape turned to deal with his captive while Hermione walked over to where Price was still lying on his side, struggling against his bindings. She met his glare with a sweet smile. "Now, Archie. You don't mind if I call you that, do you? You're going to have a little sleep, and when you wake up you're going to feel much better, and you're not going to remember any of this." Price's eyes widened in fear, but Hermione murmured, "*Morpheus obliuato!*" and he instantly relaxed and slept.

"What was that?" asked Snape as he left the now-bound Ivanovitch to join her. "I don't think I've heard it before."

Hermione tried to keep the satisfaction out of her smile as she replied. "No, you wouldn't have done. I invented it, actually, for our work in the unit. It's a modified Obliviate it sends the recipient to sleep for around fifteen minutes, wiping their memory of the previous hour. It leaves rather less disorientation when they wake than the standard charm."

Snape nodded, and Hermione was quietly thrilled to see he actually looked slightly impressed. "Good idea. You're moderately talented, you know."

Hermione raised her wand at him warningly. "Can I try that trick with the cauldron?"

"Haven't you got minions to summon?" he responded drily, pushing himself up to sit on the edge of the bench behind him.

"I'll have you know the unit is very much a partnership of mutually-respecting colleagues..."

"As long as they remember who's boss," interrupted Snape.

Hermione grinned. "Exactly. You're right, though I do need to call them." She rummaged briefly in her bag before pulling out her phone. She pressed the first number on the speed dial and wandered over to stand by the still-unconscious Ivanovitch while she waited for an answer. It only took a couple of rings before the call was picked up.

"Dennis Creevey," responded the voice on the other end.

"Hi, Dennis. It's me. I've got one for you to pick up and one for the Muggles, too."

She listened to his brief congratulations, then continued. "Tell the police it's a firearms charge for the moment, but we should have more on him later. They'll need an ambulance. He's been shot in the shoulder, but he'll be fine. Full Muggle cover when you come up, please."

"OK, no problem. See you in five," came the reply.

"Cheers, Dennis." She ended the call and turned back to Snape, who was watching her with a slight smile.

"What?" she asked.

He jumped down from his perch on the bench. "Just seeing you in professional mode."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," she quipped. "Let's get these two out into the study. I don't want the Muggle police trampling through the lab."

They proceeded out through the connecting corridor and into the study, Hermione floating Price in front of her while Snape transported Ivanovitch. They dropped them none-too-elegantly into armchairs. Ivanovitch stirred slightly, then drifted back into unconsciousness.

Hermione turned to look at the previously Muggle-Concealed door, an idea occurring to her. She pushed it closed, then Transfigured the surface of it so it matched the surrounding wall-covering. "There," she said. "It just looks like it was papered over now. That should save us a couple of questions later."

She became aware of voices in the entrance hall outside. *Damn. I really didn't want any witnesses.* Snape went to open the door, holding up his hand before she could object. "It's all right. I'll deal with this. I take it you want the hall cleared?"

Hermione nodded gratefully.

She sank down into a chair as he left the room. The combined effects of hemp oil and adrenaline were wearing off now, and last night's dinner seemed a very long time ago. *Note to self: don't go investigating until after breakfast next time.*

Snape returned within moments, shaking his head with a wry smile as he closed the door behind him. "That girl Ceri will go far. I asked her to make sure no-one followed me in, so she's told Helen that part of the roof of this wing has collapsed, and I was helping some of the ground-staff with it. I've been able to send Helen off to make an appointment with her architect for tomorrow, which should take her a while as it's Sunday. The others have gone up to their rooms, and Ceri will be back in a few minutes with tea and toast for you."

Hermione let out a long sigh. "You are an angel. I was just thinking I needed food."

Snape looked slightly pained. "Calling me 'darling' all weekend has been bad enough. I can't find the words to express how inappropriate 'angel' is. I do have a reputation to maintain, you know."

Hermione jumped up out of the chair and flung her arms round his neck. He wrapped his arms loosely round her waist as she smiled up at him. "It's OK," she said. "I won't tell anyone what a wonderful man is hiding under that disguise of yours. Not unless you want me to."

He snorted. "Hardly wonderful."

"How about 'not as much of a bastard as you pretend to be'?"

He put his head on one side, considering. "Maybe. I'd appreciate you not spreading that malicious rumour too widely, though."

"Fair enough. You can bribe me with a kiss if you want."

"Is that all it will take?"

"It's all you're getting in front of two unconscious suspects with Ceri about to burst in. Call it a down-payment."

Snape's arms tightened around her waist, and he pulled her firmly towards him, lowering his head to kiss her on the lips, gently at first, then more forcefully as she responded. She caressed the nape of his neck as she returned the kiss enthusiastically. *Oh, yes, I could get used to this.*

There was a sudden crash from the other side of the room. They sprang out of their embrace and spun round to see Ivanovitch trying to pull himself up from where he had fallen from his chair to the floor. He was still bound, but there was murderous rage in his eyes as he screamed, "*Crucio!*"

Simultaneously, Snape and Hermione raised their wands. "*Stupefy!*" they said in unison, and the Dark wizard fell back to the floor, senseless.

"That wasn't strictly necessary," said Snape drily as they hauled him back into the chair. "He couldn't have done anything with those handcuffs on."

Hermione shrugged. "I owed him one. What's your excuse?"

"He hurt you."

Hermione heard the sudden, flat anger in his voice, and when she looked into his eyes she could see the fury reflected there as well. She raised her hand to his face and caressed his cheek briefly. "I'm fine now," she said reassuringly. "Thanks to you."

There was a knock at the door. Hermione went over to open it, to be met by a beaming Ceri bearing a tray. Hermione gestured for her to enter and was impressed that she put the tray safely down onto a table before looking round the room. The girl's eyes opened wide at the sight of Ivanovitch and Price; then they narrowed as she looked from Hermione to Snape.

"I'm guessing you two aren't quite who you say you are? What are you? Police? MI5?"

"Something like that," replied Snape smoothly. "These two gentlemen will be taken away shortly, and Jane will explain the situation then. I need you to keep quiet for a little longer though."

"OK, no problem. Can't say I'm surprised that pair were up to no good." She jerked her head towards the unconscious men dismissively. "I'm not sorry, either, except for the fact Mrs Markov is going to be really upset."

"Well," said Snape. "I may be able to help a little with that. Would you do me one last favour?"

Ceri nodded her assent and Snape continued. "In the bottom of the wardrobe in our bedroom, you'll find a black bag. There's a small pill bottle in there marked 'Valerian'. Would you bring it down for me?"

"Okey dokey," said Ceri, grinning. "Back in a sec." And she bustled off, positively brimming with self-importance.

Hermione looked at Snape quizzically. "Valerian?"

"Calming Draught in tablet form, actually. It occurred to me it might be a useful thing to have with us."

"I'm impressed."

Snape shrugged. "In my experience wives don't always take their husbands' arrests very well. On one memorable occasion Narcissa Malfoy actually turned an arresting Auror into a frog. A horrible cliché, but she did it with such style."

"Really?"

"Have you never wondered where 'Hopper' Hargreaves got his nickname from?"

Hermione laughed and helped herself to toast and jam.

*

Snape watched with amused respect as Hermione took command of the combined body of Muggle and wizarding law-enforcement personnel when they arrived a short time later. Orders were swiftly issued, and within minutes Price, who was starting to stir groggily, had been transferred to an ambulance, accompanied by two Muggle police officers.

The still-unconscious Ivanovitch was bundled unceremoniously into the rear of a waiting van by two burly members of Hermione's unit. Hermione informed Snape in a low voice that the van was just for show, and that the wizard would in fact be Apparated directly to Azkaban from the back of it.

The two remaining police officers were briefed speedily by Hermione, who assured them that she would join them later with more details. Once they had departed, she turned to the three members of her team who were left.

"OK, I think we've probably only got a couple of minutes before the other members of the household work out there's something going on, so I need you to head straight down to the lab and start collecting evidence. There's a load of paperwork, a computer, and audio equipment, and I need an inventory of the potions paraphernalia and ingredients. What hasn't been smashed, anyway." She directed a mock glare at Snape at that point, but he just looked back steadily, unashamed. Hermione continued. "Anything we're not transferring back to the office needs to be Vanished, and that wing of the house needs to be totally Muggle-safe before you leave. Any questions?"

With a mild feeling of revenge, Snape raised his hand. Hermione looked slightly shocked, then laughed. "I'm getting reversed*déjà-vu*. Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Would you object to me using the lab for a short time? There's something I'd like to work on."

Hermione's expression became one of curiosity, but she just replied, "No, that's fine. I'd be grateful if you would let Dennis here know what ingredients and so on you're using, though, so he can keep a record of it."

Snape looked properly now at the young wizard in front of him. He was slightly built, with sandy hair and an open, friendly face. Something in his eyes indicated a hidden hardness, though. Snape had only a very vague recollection of him at school, but of course remembered his older brother rather better. After all, he saw his name every day when he passed the memorial plaque in the Great Hall.

Creevey held out his hand to Snape with a smile. "Professor. It's good to see you again. Though you probably don't remember me from school you only taught me for my first few years. I'd left by the time you returned to teaching."

Snape shook his hand and considered the young man's face again. "No, I'm afraid I don't remember you very well, but that probably indicates you were quietly competent

in my classes. After all these years of teaching, the only pupils who stick in my memory are the very few who were exceedingly gifted or the regrettably larger number who were spectacularly irritating."

Creevey grinned at that. "You remember Hermione, then."

Snape glanced over at her to check she was listening. "Ye-es," he replied, lengthening the syllable significantly. "She was definitely one of the second group."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him, while Creevey looked between the two of them uncertainly, obviously not quite sure what to make of the exchange.

"Go on, then," said Hermione. "Off to the lab with you all. I've got some explaining to do to Helen and Mrs Price."

Snape brushed Hermione's hand gently with his as he followed Creevey through the study. He didn't envy her the conversations to come. "Would you prefer me to stay with you?" he asked softly.

She shook her head with a reassuring smile. "No, I think it'll probably be easier for Helen with as few witnesses as possible. And I'm not sure Mrs Price is even going to regret the loss of her husband. Once that's done I need to head down to the police station to sort out some paperwork, so I'll meet you back here later."

Taken by a sudden, mischievous impulse, Snape raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Take care, wife."

Hermione smiled sweetly. "I will, *darling*."

*

Hermione had sent Ceri to get Helen and Verity and now sat waiting apprehensively in the library. She felt a twinge of regret that she'd never get the chance to explore the extensive shelves of leather-bound books; then she mentally shook herself as the door opened. Helen and Verity came in, both wearing puzzled but friendly smiles that made Hermione feel even more guilty about the relationships she was about to destroy.

"This is all very mysterious," said Helen, approaching Hermione where she stood by the fireplace. "Shall we sit?"

Hermione noted with admiration the way that Helen subtly re-asserted her position as hostess. Perhaps there was a little more steel in her character than she'd been given credit for.

Once they were seated, Hermione cleared her throat nervously. "I'm very sorry to tell you this, Helen, especially as you've been so kind this weekend, but your husband has just been arrested on charges of illegal arms trading."

Verity's hand flew to her mouth as she suppressed a gasp. Helen remained motionless, the colour draining from her now unsmiling face. She drew her eyebrows together in an expression of mild confusion as she studied Hermione's face.

"I can tell you're not joking, but I can assure you there has been some mistake. Who told you this? Who made the arrest? Where is my husband?" Helen's voice started off calm, but by the last question a tremor had entered it. Verity took her hand.

"I'm afraid there has been no mistake," responded Hermione. "I made the arrest myself, and your husband has been taken to a secure location. I work with the police and have been investigating your husband's business activities for some time. I came to your house this weekend in the hope of collecting enough evidence to arrest him, and I have been able to do so."

Helen raised her chin slightly, an expression of defiance on her face. "So am I to understand that you have lied to us this whole weekend, abusing my hospitality in order to fabricate some trumped up charges against my husband?"

Hermione winced inwardly. "My name is not Jane Eastwood, and I was never planning on entering a business partnership with Mr Markov, but I can assure you that the charges levelled against your husband are utterly genuine. Mr Price has also been arrested." She held out a small card to Helen. "If you have any questions, you can call this number."

Helen snatched the proffered card, then got to her feet, shaking off Verity's restraining hand impatiently. "I have many questions, and I shall phone my lawyer immediately. I would be grateful if you and your *husband* could leave my house as soon as possible. Good day."

She walked out swiftly, head held high. Hermione and Verity exchanged glances.

"Do you think she'll be all right?" asked Hermione.

Verity gave a brief smile. "She'll be fine until the anger wears off; then she'll be devastated, of course. She adores Yuri. I suppose there is no chance there has been a mistake?"

Hermione shook her head. "None at all."

"Well," said Verity, "I can't say I'm surprised he turned out to be a wrong 'un, as they say. And Archie Price's arrest is the best news I've had all month." She narrowed her eyes at Hermione. "I am surprised about you, though. And Steven. Does he work with you, or did you genuinely bring your husband along for the weekend?"

"He works with me, that's all," responded Hermione.

Verity smiled then. "That's most definitely not all. I've seen the way you two look at each other, never mind the fact you can't keep your hands to yourselves. You may have been lying about your identities, but there are some things you can't fake. Or disguise."

Hermione smiled back a little awkwardly. "I don't know about that, but... well, we're only just getting to know each other properly. It's too early to say *what's* going on between us."

"You'll work it out. You strike me as an intelligent pair, though that doesn't necessarily make for the easiest of relationships." Verity stood then, smoothing her skirt. "I should go to Helen."

Hermione remembered something and stood as well, pulling the bottle marked 'Valerian' out of her pocket. She held it out to Verity. "These might help to soothe her nerves later."

Verity took the bottle and studied it. "Valerian?"

"Amongst other things. Steven may not be quite what he says he is, but he hasn't been lying about being an expert in herbal medicine. He thought these might come in useful. I hope you trust us enough to use them."

Verity nodded with a satisfied smile. "You two have done a good thing here this weekend, so yes, I trust you. Helen will thank you eventually, too." She held out a hand. "I expect this is goodbye."

Hermione took her hand to shake it. "Probably. It has been a genuine pleasure to meet you."

"You, too, whatever your name really is. Don't worry I don't expect you to tell me," Verity continued with a slight laugh. "And give Steven whoever a kiss from me."

"With pleasure," responded Hermione. "Take care of yourself, and of Helen."

"I will," agreed Verity. "Goodbye." And she left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Hermione rolled the tension out of her neck. *One down; one to go.*

*

"*What!*" shrieked Stacey Price at the top of her not inconsiderable voice. "What the fuck has the stupid sod done to get himself arrested?" Then she held up a hand. "No. You know what? I don't actually care. I've never asked where all his money comes from, and I'm not about to start now. And if he thinks I'm going to wait for him to get out of prison, he's got another think coming."

She frowned as she looked at Hermione assessingly. "What happens to the money, anyway?"

Hermione thought briefly. She really wasn't fond of Stacey, the avaricious little cow, but on the other hand... "Your husband's assets will be frozen as soon as the banks open tomorrow, but we can't touch anything in your name. So, I can't suggest you do this, but if, for example, you happened to transfer the cash from your joint accounts into your own account today" She saw realisation dawn in the other woman's eyes. Stacey may not have been the most academically gifted girl in the house, but she was certainly quick on the uptake where money was concerned.

Stacey gave a sly grin. "I can do better than that. I know where he hides all his online banking stuff. It'll piss him off no end if I clear him out*My thoughts exactly,* agreed Hermione silently. *It couldn't happen to a nicer man.*

*

By the time Hermione returned to Penbryn early that afternoon, she had come to the conclusion that the worst part of her job wasn't dealing with distraught wives. It wasn't even being cursed and poisoned by Dark wizards. It was the bloody Muggle police paperwork. It wasn't enough to promise them a report later. Oh, no. At least half a dozen separate forms had to be filled in; then there were the details to be entered onto the computer. And there were even more forms today because she'd had the temerity to shoot someone. *That was worth it, though* She grinned savagely as she closed the door of the Jaguar behind her.

As she approached the house, Ceri hurried down the steps to greet her. "Dr Singer asked me to keep an eye out for you. He's waiting in your bedroom."

Hermione smiled at her gratefully. "Thanks, Ceri. You've been an absolute star this weekend, you know."

Ceri beamed proudly. "Just glad to help. And don't worry about Mrs Markov you've done her a huge favour, and she'll realise that soon."

Hermione walked across the entrance hall, looking around her one last time. Gorgeous as this house was, she couldn't wait to leave. She ran lightly up the stairs, suddenly energised again. She went into the bedroom, finding Snape looking out of the window once more. She was delighted to notice he was back in his black jeans. He turned to greet her with a quirk of his lips. "All done, wife?"

She sat heavily on the edge of the bed. "Yes,*finally.* Helen's devastated, Stacey's delighted to be independently wealthy, and the Muggle police are satisfied because all of their pieces of paper are correctly filled in. Did you finish your mysterious project?"

Snape came to sit next to her on the bed. "Hardly mysterious, but I wasn't sure all the ingredients would be in the lab, so I didn't want to promise anything I couldn't deliver. In the event, they were, so yes, I'm finished. Your colleagues are all done downstairs as well. They left about fifteen minutes ago."

"And? Your project was?" prompted Hermione.

"I've formulated Helen's migraine medication without the love potion ingredients. The new pills look and taste virtually identical to the originals, so the only difference she'll notice is a gradual lessening of her passion for Ivanovitch. I've entrusted Ceri with the task of switching the bottles."

Hermione leaned back on her hands and grinned at him. "You know, you're in danger of being called 'less of a bastard than you pretend to be' again."

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Hermione continued. "Seriously, though, thank you. That will really help her. I'm sure there'll be some residual affection after all, they've been married for a few years, and at the very least she's used to having him around. But hopefully that will wane quite quickly."

"Yes," drawled Snape. "It's surprising how you get used to having the most unlikely people around." He looked at her meaningfully. Hermione smacked him lightly on the arm.

Talking of getting used to having people around....

"So," she began casually. "What are your plans for the rest of the day? Do you need to get straight back to Hogwarts?"

Snape shook his head equally casually. "Not at all. I assume you need to go back to the office with your colleagues, though."

"Oh, no. They can manage perfectly well without me for the moment. They know what needs to be done and can give me a shout at home if anything urgent comes up. No, I need to get the car back to London, then I'm planning on going to my cottage. You're welcome to join me if you can bear another car journey. You've still got some of your things at the cottage, so you can come and get them. Or I can just owl them to you if you prefer. Or you could just Apparate yourself straight to there you don't have to wait for me..." *Stop babbling, woman.*

Snape looked at her, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I'm not sure the hemp oil has totally worked its way out of your system yet. I think it would be a good idea if I kept you company for a little while longer, even if that does mean suffering your driving again."

Hermione felt sudden butterflies in her stomach as Snape looked at her. There was amusement in his eyes, but desire as well*Sweet Merlin, is he actually going to come home with me? Are we really going to do this?* The anticipation was going to kill her. She stood up and smiled down at him.

"That's settled, then. Give me five minutes to change and pack my bag, then we'll be off."

*

In the car half an hour later, Snape was beginning to get nervous. Surprisingly, it wasn't due to the fact she kept taking her eyes off the sharply winding road to glance in his direction. No, it was because of the way her glance would skitter away again as soon as he tried to meet it. He'd pushed her too far he knew it. He should have just Apparated straight back to Hogwarts and left her to think about what, if anything, she wanted from him. Yes, they had got very close that weekend, but it had been an intense situation, and perhaps she was having second thoughts.

He knew he wanted her absolutely, body and mind, but that didn't mean she felt the same way. Yet. If ever. Although if that desire wasn't really there, he mused, how had she silently called him that morning? He was as far from being a romantic teenage girl as it was possible to get, but he would stake his wand on it being the Vocant Amoris

spell she'd used. She hadn't just silently screamed his name she'd summoned his soul. He couldn't have resisted, even if he'd wanted to. But did she know she'd done it? He suspected not. She'd been barely conscious when he'd arrived, and surely she'd have made some reference to the spell since if she'd been aware of what she'd done.

As he studied her face, she looked over in his direction once more. This time, though, their eyes met.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" she muttered savagely, and she swung the car abruptly off the road and into a layby. She switched off the engine and flung her head back briefly against the headrest before sitting back upright, twisting slightly in her seat to face Snape.

"I can't do this," she began. Snape felt a chill in the pit of his stomach. Despite his efforts, something must have showed in his expression, for Hermione's eyes opened wide and she shook her head vigorously. "No, I don't mean that! I mean, we've been really close to something happening this weekend, and now I think something is going to happen, but I'm not totally sure, and I can't wait until we get to London to find out, and I'm usually much more articulate than this but.... Can I just kiss you?"

With a leap of relief from his heart, Snape allowed a deep chuckle to escape as he leaned towards her, murmuring, "You didn't actually have to ask, you know." Then their lips met, and any doubts about what she wanted fled in that instant. She deepened the kiss with a sigh of contentment. He wrapped his arms around her to pull her closer, only to be met with an "Ouch!" of protest. He pulled back, searching her face anxiously.

"I've still got my seatbelt on! You nearly garrotted me." She grinned at him as she fumbled with the fastenings, and he felt his loosen as well. "There," she continued. "That's better. Now, where were we?"

He reached for her again, firmly pulling her until, with a little manoeuvring past gear stick and handbrake, she was ~~was~~*(nally!)* seated astride his lap. "You were about to be here," he said softly, before kissing her again, exploring her mouth, then dropping a trail of kisses down her neck, swirling his tongue on the sensitive spot beneath her ear. He remembered *that* one from the taxi. He heard her moan of pleasure with a feeling of satisfaction; then coherent thought fled briefly as he felt her teeth nipping at his neck and her fingers scratching lightly down the bare skin of his back under his shirt. He groaned and slid his hands from her waist and down until he found the hem of her short dress, then up under the skirt until he could caress her lace-clad arse. *Am I being unreasonable to think she wore this get-up for my benefit?*

Their mouths returned to explore each other urgently while their hands did the same. Hermione shifted a little, rotating her hips and pushing herself against his groin before moving back as her hands stroked down his body and began to fumble with his belt.

He moved his hands up to her shoulders then, and firmly pushed her slightly away from him, removing his mouth from hers.

"What?" she asked, rather breathlessly.

He kissed her briefly on the lips. "Much as I want you, and as you can no doubt feel, *really* want you, our first time is definitely not going to be in the front of your car."

She grinned at him. "Well, the back seat is more traditional, but this one really doesn't offer much space. Minor design flaw."

He shook his head. "I have a much better idea. Go on; out you get."

He leaned to open the car door, and she scrambled out with him following close behind. He shut the door and muttered an incantation, then put his arms tightly around Hermione again. She looked dubiously at the wooded embankment as it plunged steeply towards the river. "I'm not sure this is a *huge* improvement."

He bent to kiss her, murmuring softly, "Have you forgotten you're a witch?" as he spun them into darkness.

*

I've never kissed while Apparating before, thought Hermione absently. They landed, and she continued to enjoy the kiss and the sensation of Snape's body pressed firmly against hers for a long moment before it occurred to her to wonder where they were. The light was dim, and it took a second for her to realise they were in the basement of her cottage.

She looked up into Snape's eyes with amusement. "And what exactly are we doing in my laboratory?"

A lascivious grin curled his lips as he replied, "We have an experiment to conduct. Remember?"

"Oh, yes, I remember," she responded, kissing him again enthusiastically then...

"Shit!" she exclaimed, pulling away. "Where the hell is the car? I paid no attention at all to the road and I haven't got the faintest idea where I parked!"

"About a mile outside Erwood, and the vehicle is protected by Muggle-Repelling and Concealment Charms," replied Snape airily. "Fortunately, not all of us have lost our higher brain functions."

"Not yet, maybe." She held his gaze steadily as she dropped her hands to his belt, unfastening it swiftly, then unzipping his jeans. She saw his eyes narrow slightly as she slipped her hand inside.

Well, hello. Not quite hung like a centaur, but that will do nicely.

She continued to hold his gaze as she dropped his jeans to the floor, then lowered herself in front of him.

Let's see what this does to your higher brain functions.

She heard a sharp intake of breath from him, released raggedly, then "Fuck! Have you cast a Cooling Charm on your mouth?"

"Yes why? Don't you like it?"

"Merlin... yes... no... stop talking... put your mouth back where it was. Ah..."

Me one: higher brain functions nil thought Hermione smugly.

She felt Snape's hands on her shoulders. "You'd better stop that now," he said in a slightly strangled voice, "Or I won't make it as far as the bench."

She got to her feet a little unsteadily, trailing her hands back up his body as she went. He was clad only in his shirt now.

"When did you take your boots and socks off?" she asked.

"Vanished them," he muttered, reaching for her and kissing her deeply again. He pulled her close, running his hands firmly down her back and over her buttocks as she pressed herself against him.

"You're overdressed," he said, releasing her to kiss her shoulder, then beginning to unbutton her dress. She returned the favour with his shirt. He dropped soft kisses to her breasts as he uncovered her white lace bra, pushing her dress back over her shoulders so it fell to the floor. "Much better," he murmured, before unclasping the undergarment. She slipped out of it, then pushed her knickers down and kicked them away with her shoes as he removed his shirt. Snape ran his eyes up and down her naked body unashamedly. "Beautiful!" he said, with a slow smile.

"You're not so bad yourself," responded Hermione with a grin, eyeing him equally blatantly. His body was lean, but toned from exercise, and he held himself confidently under her gaze. She was briefly surprised at her own lack of embarrassment, but somehow it felt like they'd known each other intimately for a lot longer than they had.

He put one hand to the back of her neck, then paused as he leaned in to kiss her. "Contraception's taken care of," she reassured him, guessing his concern. She closed the short distance between them, pushing the full length of her body against his and raking her fingers down his back. Skin met skin everywhere, and tongues and hands caressed desperately as they both finally let their passion have full rein. He pushed her back until she felt the bench behind her, the wood pleasantly cool against her heated skin. Then he put his hands around her waist and lifted her up until she was sat on the work surface. She looked into his black eyes, slowing her breath as he gazed back. She'd never seen such adoration, or felt such heart-tugging desire.

Still with his hands round her waist, he pulled her close into him. "Now," he drawled softly. "I believe we have a hypothesis to test."

"Oh, yes," she responded as he drew her even closer. *Oh, yes!*

*

Afterwards, Hermione Apparated them up to her bedroom. Their experiment had, they both agreed, been a resounding success. Although further verification of the results would definitely be necessary.

*

In bed, Hermione lay with her head on Snape's chest, gently tracing circles on his abdomen in a pleasant post-coital haze. *Actually, she thought, make that pre-coital. A second round would be good. Inter-coital, then. Is there such a word?*

Long fingers ran idly through her hair.

"What are you thinking about now, wife?"

She was glad he was still calling her that. Generations of good feminist ancestors were spinning in their graves, but she didn't care.

"How do you know I'm thinking?"

"Well, for a start, you're conscious. And you've stopped stroking my stomach. You always go very still when you're deep in thought."

"That's extremely observant of you."

She felt him shrug slightly. "I've watched you a lot over the last couple of days. And you haven't answered my question."

She moved up so her head was next to his on the pillow and trailed her fingers softly through the sparse black hairs on his chest. "I was being silly. Semantics. I've just thought of one thing I wanted to know, though."

"Mmm?"

"This morning. Why did you come to the lab? How did you know I was in trouble?"

*

Bugger. I was really hoping she wouldn't ask that.

Snape's mind raced, rehearsing the explanation. *Well, you remember that mythical love spell we were talking about the other day? Vocant Amoris? Apparently it's not so mythical after all. And guess what? You used it to call me earlier. So it seems that we're soul mates. Not that I'm trying to rush you into anything....*

He rolled over to face her and reached out his hand to gently cup her cheek, rubbing his thumb against the soft skin. "I didn't know. I was just concerned because you'd been gone for a long time."

Hermione smiled brilliantly and mirrored his movements, caressing his face. "Well, your timing was perfect. Thank you."

And, as their lips met once more, he thought, *I will tell her. One day....*

*

The End

(For now, at least.)