

Lessons in Metempsychosis and Saṅsāra

by TeaOli

After dying in the Shrieking Shack, Severus Snape is sent back so that he can learn to be a functional human being. In spite of the strides he appears to make, he and his very own "Clarence" know that it's mostly window-dressing.

Hermione Granger doesn't regret the choices she made during the war, but that doesn't stop her seeking some sort of absolution for some of the consequences. If she could let go of her guilt, she might learn to believe she's got abilities beyond being a swot.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 8

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Prologue: *D'abord le doux sommeil, puis réveil acerbe.*

Transmigration of the soul; passage of the soul from one body to another; chiefly, the transmigration of the soul of a human being or animal at or after death into a new body (whether of the same or a different species), a tenet of the Pythagoreans and certain Eastern religions, esp. Buddhism. "Metempsychosis." The Oxford English Dictionary. Second ed. Vol. IX, p. 684. 1884-1991.

The endless cycle of death and rebirth to which life in the material world is bound. "Samsara." The Oxford English Dictionary. Second ed. Vol. XIV, p.435. 1884-1991.

The constraints of the dead are different to the ties which bind the living.

While each state had its benefits, without a doubt, finding two beings who agreed on what the advantages of both or either might be was surprisingly difficult, considering the sheer number of souls who were cognizant of the distinction. Still, that there were assets and detriments inherent to each was universally accepted.

But for those fortunate or *un*fortunate enough to exist between life and death, the argument was by and large moot, as they usually lacked the knowledge to weigh the two.

Severus Snape was mostly dead, and although he was as yet unaware of this fact, he was aware of the faint sound of raised voices. The muted Babel did nothing to ease

the excruciating pulsation that seemed to emanate from his neck before working its way to his head.

~RP~

"Keep it down!" It was possibly the twentieth time she'd issued the order, and what Lily Potter's voice lacked in volume was more than made up for in vehemence. Her glare met each of the shabbily Spartan room's other occupants in turn. She offered an extra fierce glower to one of the two white-haired men and placed her hands on her hips. "Well, Albus?"

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian of the madly twinkling eyes twinkled them for all their worth (not that he was fooling anyone with the display) and asked mildly, "Yes, Lily?"

"This *is* your mess," she told him. Shrugging her husband's would-be calming hand from her shoulder, she gave the old man an especially potent glare. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"My mess?" Albus persisted, even though it was clear none of his companions were buying the innocent act.

~SS~

A long while passed (in which the commotion going on just within his hearing didn't abate in the least) before his dulled wits were able to apprehend a correlation between the throbbing pain and his heartbeat. No sooner than he'd made the connection did the pain dissipate.

But then he remembered the snake.

~RP~

"You'll wake him if you lot keep shouting like that," Lily reminded them. "I'm sure none of *you* wants to be the one to explain. And we all know he won't like any of you to be the first thing he sees!"

"No need to worry about that," came a voice from the doorway. Grinning with a noticeable lack of mirth, Fred Weasley ambled into the room before continuing. "The shouting *did* wake him, but then his eyes sort of bulged, and he made a kind of strangled noise, and then he fainted. He'll be out for a while yet, I think."

"Well, thank Merlin for that!" Nymphadora Tonks managed to trip over nothing at all on her way to flopping onto the room's sole sofa.

"Don't bring my name into it!" an ancient-looking man with a long silvery beard the one who'd remained silent since Lily had admonished them all again for their noisy disagreement ordered firmly. "I've nothing to do with this mess."

Ignoring the old man and grimacing ruefully, she said, "Still got Tonks feet, yeah? Hope it doesn't last too long this time."

Her husband, traversing the short stretch of worn floorboards much more smoothly than she had done, took a seat beside her. Covering her hand with his, he said, "You always pick such clumsy bodies, darling." He smiled at her as if that were something to be proud of.

Lily wasn't the only one to eye the two with something approaching disdain.

"I was not the one who was supposed to mind him." Dumbledore had adopted his kindly-but-firm teacher's voice, and even Tobias and Merlin recognised it. Everyone else had at least once or twice been shamed into altering their behaviour after hearing that voice. "I made do with what I got after *you lot* failed to do your duty and keep an eye on him. By the time he was in *my* hands, the damage had already been done!"

"Bollocks!" The force behind the exclamation belied the fragile appearance of the rail-thin woman who made it. Her voice got louder and louder as she went on. "He was only a little *boy*, not yet past saving! If you'd spared a moment to see exactly what your handsome little Gryffindo..."

Seeing the Potter lad take a step forward, Tobias Snape placed a hand on his wife's shoulder, a silent reminder that their son was sleeping. If either of the two of their boy's nemeses currently present spoke, he doubted she'd be able to rein in her temper.

Dumbledore took advantage of her sudden silence. "I *never* looked at student..."

"Too right, you didn't," Eileen whispered murderously. "So long as they weren't one of yours, they mightn't even have existed!"

"I admit I might have favoured my lions; it's only natural to..." His eyes twinkled again as he trailed off, smiling abashedly. But even Dumbledore didn't appear to believe the excuse.

Aware another noisy argument might awake his son faint or no faint Tobias cut in before the women could get started again. For all her directives for quiet, Lily Potter's temper was something to be reckoned with, and when it got control of her, she tended to forget her own rules.

"Honestly, Albus, you could have done better, and you know it!" Tobias pitched his voice to match Lily's prior tones of hushed intensity. *None* of us were at our best when we were wearing flesh, but you had the most experience and the most memories of being Real, and *still* you managed let him down."

He half-turned and indicated the others in the room with a sweeping gesture.

"Don't go blaming these children" both Lily and James Potter bristled at the word, not caring that he was speaking in their defence "for not being able to manage him whilst they were still *here*! Even as an infant he was a precocious handful; with Eileen and me gone, they did the best they could. Once he was in the Inner and at that school of yours, it was down to *you* to continue his education."

The change in the wizard's demeanour would have been startling if Tobias hadn't been expecting it. All signs of twinkle gone, Dumbledore stormed over until his nose was inches from the younger soul's. "I refuse to shoulder all the blame for this! You were terrible both of you as Inner parents. If you'd never bred, he wouldn't have been able to follow you! If you'd never gone, he wouldn't have had anyone to follow."

He flung up a hand when Eileen started to protest.

"Be quiet! I'll have my say," he said, his voice now as dangerously low as Tobias's had been. "You could have refused the placement! You could have ensured your son was raised properly. You and your wife could have said 'no', and much of this mightn't have happened!"

Tobias shook with barely controlled rage. It had been long enough since he'd returned to the Outer World that just as Eileen had shed her timidity much of the temper he'd developed during his most recent stint in a flesh suit had already sloughed off. But Albus had been a thorn in his side for nearly a year at this point, all the while needing him about his failure as father in this world as well as the one Inside.

"Enough," Merlin broke in from a darkened corner of the room. "They could not have." His subdued authority impelled everyone to turn to him. "You know that, Albus. Even if you weren't a Real Person when they got their orders, you've learned enough and *recalled* enough since your return to realise they couldn't have declined orders."

He stepped out of the shadows, his gaze seeking out first Albus, then Tobias, Eileen and each of the Potters in turn.

Without seeming to consult or even look at the other, Lily and James moved closer to the Snapes.

"I have endured your ridiculous squabbling almost since the day Albus returned to us," Merlin told them. "Before that, even, since you four have been grumbling ever since Black came back to us. I have had enough! What we do about the boy *now* is the only thing that matters."

~HG~

There was little time for grief, but it wasn't truly possible to join in the celebrating.

Hermione leaned into Ron, somehow aware letting him hold her allowing him to stroke her hair as they sat in silence brought him more comfort than any words of condolence could. Her hand shook as she slid it up his chest to his shoulder; her trembling lips fought to hold in a sob.

Fred lay with Tonks and Remus and Colin and... so many others. Just over fifty of their number lost. Not so many as she had first feared.

There was no consolation in that. Only Ron's body, warm and solid and pressed against hers, made much sense at all.

She spied Harry through the crowd. He slumped, exhausted but not diminished, on a bench. Ron continued his gentle stroking.

She watched Luna Lovegood, of all people, join Harry. The two spoke briefly, then Luna was shouting something loon...

No, whatever Luna was shouting wasn't so loony, after all, Hermione realised as Harry disappeared into the folds of his Invisibility Cloak. And on a day where very little had made sense, it was only fitting that Luna should come to their saviour's rescue.

~RP~

If he were still wearing flesh, their bickering would have seemed petty and useless, but amusing all the same. Now it was just irritating.

If they were going to send the kid back to try again, someone was going to have to keep an eye on him. Lily was right out that would be a disaster. And his parents would just confuse him more.

Knowing there really wasn't any other alternative, Fred sighed and slowly got to his feet. "I suppose I'll have to be the one," he said.

He didn't miss the glimmer of satisfaction in Merlin's dark eyes.

~SS~

"I don't care what Merlin or any of them says: he's our boy, and we're telling him!"

Tobias Snape would have responded to his wife's edict if his son hadn't beat him to it.

"But I'm *not* a boy!" Severus didn't let the pre-adolescent squeak that passed for his voice discourage him. Magic had power over many things, after all. He glared at the couple occupying the sofa opposite his. Why did dead people need furniture? "This is ridiculous. I was thirty-eight when I 'died'. Why should that change now I'm dead?"

He sneered when Tobias and Eileen only exchanged a lingering glance, hands drifting together, before turning to him with fond smiles. Irritatingly *identical* fond smiles. His parents didn't *smile*. Fondly or otherwise.

"Oh, Rus," murmured his father. "You missed so much, running off after us before you were ready." Tobias chuckled, a sound Severus was sure he'd never heard before a sound he was equally certain he recognised as if he'd been hearing it his whole life.

"They say it's young Fred's job to enlighten you," Eileen began whilst her husband's shoulders continued to shake *fondly*, Severus didn't doubt), "but they also say you wouldn't have left before you were ready if we'd been here." She glanced away at that.

Severus waited for her to say more, but even his father stopped laughing and stopped looking so damned pleased with life. Death. Whatever. The silence wore on until Severus felt an unaccountable desire to go to the man and woman (*spirits?*) sitting across from him. He wanted to squeeze between them, bury himself in their warmth, let their soothing hands ease the aching confusion from his brow.

He shook his head. It should be easy to say these two... whatever they were... weren't the man and woman who had given him life. That they were too kind, too patient, too oozing with... love... to be Tobias Snape and Eileen Prince. Only he knew on a level so deeply embedded in his core, it was nearly impossible to even consider an alternative they were his. Worse, he recognised their connection ran even deeper than that of the fleshly parents they'd been to him once.

"It's supposed to be like school," Eileen said, startling Severus from his reverie. "Fred explained about Real People, I think?" Severus nodded, and she continued. "Well, he mustn't have got to the part about being human. What he calls 'putting on flesh suits' is more regularly called being born. And it's supposed to be like going away for school.

"Everybody does it eventually, darling boy. Only you went too early. Imagine a seven-year-old wizard starting Hogwarts. That's pretty much what you did when you decided to follow your dad and me."

~FW~

In the tales of great battles, where both those the victors call heroes and those they call villains fall, often little effort is put forth to show how survivors on either side mourn. Yes, tearful or spirited (or sometimes, both) funerals and memorials are described, but how many historians have catalogued the difficulties of planning a proper leave-taking for the lost when nearly everyone they loved or who loved them is needed to finish the war? How many books captured the inner turmoil of individuals living through a war's ugly aftermath?

Fred grimaced at the very idea. He'd lived through many wars over the courses of his many lives. Some things never got any better. Some things always remained beyond the reach of others.

He remained out of sight and just out of reach while watching his family huddle together over an open grave that cradled the shell he'd so recently worn. Their sorrow was a palpable thing to one such as he was now. The weight of it would have been crushing to a newer person.

Perhaps this wasn't, he reflected, the best time to do what needed to be done. But the better moment had already passed, and delaying much longer wasn't likely to make his task easier.

Still, he waited until only a lone man knelt at the edge of the place where his body would decay and disintegrate. Fred knew he was luckier than most people: not everyone had a true twin.

Manifesting so a person dressed in flesh could see him, he knelt beside the man.

"George," he said, ignoring the look of mingled wonder, fear and joy on his twin's face. But he soaked in the shift in his brother's emotions and revelled in the lessened strain it brought. "There's something you need to know. And I'll need your help to make sure it goes right."

~HG~

"I think you should do, love." Ron was stroking her hair again, holding her close just as he had done so many times over the past few weeks. He leaned against an ancient towering oak in his parents' back garden, and she rested her head on his broad shoulder. "It's perfect for you. You'll be able to do so much... good, I guess. And maybe it'll stop anything like... like what happened happening again."

Hermione's first instinct had been to decline Kingsley's offer. As May had stretched towards June, the atmosphere at the Burrow started to become less heavy with sorrow. Arthur had returned to work almost immediately; in spite of the lingering grief which touched every part of her life, it hadn't taken much longer than that for Molly to refocus on taking care of her family. It was as if she could bear to carry on, but only if she knew she was keeping what remained of the people she loved in her sight and safe from harm.

And now, in everything but name, Harry and Hermione were Weasleys. The younger witch felt nothing short of retrieving her old family could be worth leaving her new family just now.

"You're partly right," she began, choosing her next words with infinite care. "Only, I don't think it has to be now. You know what Kingsley said, once I start, I won't be able to change my mind for ages. And we won't be able to talk about it! I'm not even sure how much you'll be able to remember! Before I can even think about choosing that life, there's my parents and your mum and..."

"Don't worry about all that," Ron said, and he pressed a kiss into the hair he was still stroking. "Kingsley said we wouldn't forget. We just won't be able to talk about it with anyone but *you*. You'll still have me and Harry and Mum and Dad to moan to, and you won't have to worry that any of us will be off telling your secret soon as your back is turned!"

She knew he was grinning, could hear it in his voice. But she also knew he was trying to make the best of things.

"But Molly..."

Ron interrupted her again. "Look, you'll need to go fetch your parents anyway, right? That shouldn't take long, and I'll go with you so Mum won't worry about you doing it alone. And Kingsley will send someone along to help if she doesn't think that's good enough." He squeezed her once, then gripped her shoulders and pushed her back so that he could meet her eyes. "You have to do this, Hermione. And you *want* to do it. Most of you does, at least. Even if it's hard for us as a family, it's the right thing to do. You know that."

One problem with existing in an isolated society and fighting a largely hidden war is that the horror of what has happened could quickly fade from the memory of anyone not directly touched by the fighting. With the physical damage mainly centred at Hogwarts, and the worst of the emotional damage confined to those who'd lost loved ones, Wizarding Britain had become many islands of pain instead of a world where friends and strangers came together in a crisis in the weeks since Tom Riddle's defeat and demise.

Being at once one of the bereaved and one of the champions made the dichotomy between duty and love all the more difficult to balance, Hermione mused. It was a feeling every Weasley true or honorary understood.

But a miracle of sorts, anyway; surely she couldn't call it anything less? made that concern redundant for her.

"Is that ickle Ronniekins, all growned up?"

Ron spun quickly, snarling, "Shut up, Fred! I'm..."

Then what he'd said and to whom he'd said it seemed to register, and the blood drained from his face.

But Fred was looking at Hermione. "Ron's right, you know," he told her. "Mum and Dad especially Dad agree. S.A.M.E. needs you. And I expect I won't be going anywhere for a while. My project looks to be a long one. That'll give Mum a chance to... say good-bye properly."

Hermione's gaze shifted rapidly from one brother to the other, living man to dead. As Ron's face gained back some of its healthy colour, she opened her mouth to ask how a ghost could bring *anyone* comfort, let alone Molly Weasley.

Almost as if he were reading her thoughts, Fred rushed on, neatly cutting off her attempted protest. "I'm not a ghost, by the way. Not the sort you lot remember from Hogwarts. I didn't choose not to move on. Mum knows that, too."

Ron and Hermione exchanged equally bemused glances as Fred started floating back towards the house. After a moment, the spirit who wasn't a ghost looked back and rolled his ghostly eyes.

"Well, come on, slowpokes!" he bellowed. "We've a family meeting, or did I forget to say?"

~SS~

"Are you sure this is going to work?" His high-pitched voice annoyed him in a way that hadn't bothered him in weeks. He went on, in spite of his irritation. "Because it doesn't exactly make sense. If you're taking me there just for me to end up coming right back..."

Severus was confused, but reluctant to admit it. In the months (at least, it had *felt* like months!) he'd spent in what these Real People (as if living people weren't real!) insisted on calling the Outer World (why couldn't they just call it Heaven?), he felt increasingly like the child they told him was. At first, it had rankled to realise he had to look up to see almost everyone he met even Nymphadora Tonks, or whatever was her "True Name", was supposedly centuries older than him. He hadn't accepted his mother's word that he had gone to the Inner World when he was far too young, or that the more than thirty-eight years he'd spent there had equalled only about three years of equivalent human development. But he hadn't been able to disbelieve her, either.

Then he'd started *acting* like a ten-year-old boy, and it hadn't seemed to matter as much.

Now, though... Now that Weasley was escorting him back to whatever was left of his "flesh suit", his pride came rushing back.

"Time here and time there doesn't exactly match, Sevvie." As he explained again, using the same words he'd already used a dozen times, Weasley's smile was both smug and patronising. Snape wanted to tear it from his freckled face. "Every moment here consists of several moments there. Of course it's limited, but we have some choice of when we arrive in the Inner world."

"No, I mean, if time is counted so differently, how do you know I'm supposedly still a kid when you're all grown up? Mam said..."

"You ask too many questions," said Weasley.

Severus was about to ask another question, but just then they materialised outside a tiny cottage in a pretty little clearing surrounded by an unfamiliar wood.

"We're here," Weasley told him unnecessarily.

A shiver ran down Severus's spine. "Is he... Am I... Where is 'here', exactly?" He wished, not for the first time, that it was his parents, rather than Fred Weasley, who were with him.

Weasley grinned wickedly. "Here," he said, "is where your body has been lying in a coma for the past three months. In you go!"

Next thing Severus remembered, he opened his eyes to find a woman who was very like an emaciated vulture staring down at him. Her sunken cheeks and ugly hooked nose were regrettably familiar.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he croaked and was happy to hear that, although it was hoarse from disuse, his voice had regained its adult baritone.

She gave a short, sharp series of wand movements, and her features seemed to melt, rearranging themselves in a manner which left her looking both familiar and not.

"Not all Princes shrink from taking care of their own," she said once it was done.

Severus stared, not believing what he was seeing.

"Mother?" It couldn't be. Eileen Prince had been in... wherever he'd just left, alongside Tobias Snape. He felt another rush of longing for them.

"Hardly." A second flick of her wand restored her usual appearance. "I could do nothing for my sister," she began by way of explanation. "A librarian's salary is a pittance; a school librarian's is less than a pittance. But I hoped being here, at least I might be able to save Eileen's son. Until moments ago, when the Headmaster's phoenix and that nasty Weasley boy's spirit fetched me to your room, I believed I had failed you as I failed her."

Book One: Inimici

Chapter 2 of 8

What are enemies, really?

Book One: *Inimici*

As learned persons are often aware, opinions about enemies (and what to do with them) have long been on offer and have never been in short supply.

"Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot / That it do singe yourself." — Duke of Norfolk, *Henry VIII*, William Shakespeare, ca. 1613

"I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their intellects. A man can not be too careful in the choice of his enemies." — Lord Henry, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, 1890

But that alone is no guarantee that such advice can conquer such sheer dogged persistence as is possessed by many such persons.

Without wisdom, knowledge can be as dangerous as ignorance.

Chapter One: Renaissance

Chapter 3 of 8

Hermione Granger sees a new side of Snape. But the curmudgeonly Potions professor still simmers not far from the surface.

Chapter One: *Renaissance*

Hermione paused a moment to let the disagreeable sensation of Apparating pass. But the trip from her parents' home in Cornwall to Ottery St. Catchpole was relatively short, so she was fit to head up the hidden drive soon enough.

The early-June afternoon sunshine was pleasant on her bare arms, and she smiled as the sounds of youthful laughter and joyful shouting penetrated the hedgerow. The Burrow was controlled chaos at its best, and now she was a grandmother, Molly Weasley ensured her home was always a happy place. Realising how much she'd missed being a regular part of that happiness over the past two years, Hermione quickened her pace.

"Hermione! It's about time you got here!" Harry greeted her almost before she'd cleared the privet. Clearly, he'd been watching out for her. "You could have Apparated to the top of the drive, you know," he scolded. "The wards aren't so picky these days."

She noticed Ron was standing just off to Harry's side, and she ran the last few yards to reach them.

"I'm right on time," she said, falling into Harry's exuberant embrace. "And I needed the walk to prepare myself."

Ron's hug was gentler, but no less heartfelt. "Missed you," he murmured in her ear as she squeezed him in return.

"Me too. Thanks for inviting me."

Then he pulled away just enough to smile down at her as he ruffled her hair, and she knew they were all right, despite everything.

She linked arms with both men as they walked towards the rambling, ramshackle house.

Her relationship with Ron hadn't always been so easy. Distance hadn't been a problem once she'd done her seventh year and trained for her new career at Doveweed School for Squib Integration's makeshift Hogwarts unit. She'd chosen Exeter because it was the only university offering her course that was also somewhat near her parents. That the city was practically next door to the Weasleys' village was an added bonus. It should have been perfect.

But the demands of their individual studies and career training and Hermione's complete inability to speak about most of her new life under most circumstances, combined with her desire to spend as much time as she could with her parents would probably have taken a toll even if...

"Hermione!"

Angelina Weasley waved happily at them from the side garden, and Hermione found her smile growing. It was hard to remain pensive amid a glut of Weasleys!

Breaking free of the boys, Hermione went to hug Angelina.

"Where's the baby?"

Angelina sighed dramatically and pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead.

"Our resident babysitter has only just rescued me from his clutches," she said. "For the next half hour, at least, I'm as footloose and fancy free as you lot! Or nearly." She tapped her right ear, and for the first time, Hermione noticed a bit of brown string dangling from it. "One of George's latest inventions. Portable Extendable Ear. I wanted one of those Muggle baby monitors, but this is even better! It goes wherever Freddy is without me having to follow too closely."

Hermione laughed and allowed Angelina to lead her to the back of the house. It was a long way round, and the two women chatted about anything and everything (but nothing very important) as they walked. Harry and Ron trailed behind them, engrossed in a conversation consisting of Auror Office gossip from what Hermione caught of it.

"It's like he never died, he's with us so much," Angelina was saying. "I can't think how he manages to do any real work when it seems like he's always at the shop with George!"

Shaking her head and smiling, Hermione wondered about that, too. Then a thought made her stop walking. Angelina stopped beside her.

"What is Fred's real work? He didn't say when he told Ron it was okay to go to Australia with me, and I never thought to ask later."

"Funny you should ask." Angelina giggled and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Come on. I'll show you."

It wasn't long before they'd reached the back garden and the source of all the happy screaming.

A cluster of small children were draped all over a tall, rail-thin man reclining on a battered chaise longue. Two tiny girls with red-gold pigtails and a little boy whose sleek hair fluctuated between teal blue and midnight black surrounded the chaise in an ever-fluctuating dance along the man's prone body. A baby, probably still too small to toddle, clung to the man's shoulders and shook a head full of brown curls that glinted red in the sunlight.

Hermione watched as the children changed position as often as the bigger boy's hair changed colour, the lot of them giggling at whatever game they were playing with their minder. A laughing Fred Weasley more opaque than she'd seen him since his death hovered above the fracas while encouraging the kids.

The other man didn't smile or laugh, but as she and Angelina moved closer, she noted that he occasionally stuck out a hand to tickle one of his tormentors with long, pale fingers. Shock compelled Hermione to stop in her tracks for the second time.

The baby started to slide down the man's torso and grabbed two inky-looking hanks of hair to steady himself. Fred laughed, and the man frowned heavily before placing a large hand under the child's bottom. As the other kids continued to dart in and out and around him, he settled the baby against his shoulder again.

Hermione turned to a grinning Angelina to ask, "*Severus Snape* is Fred's work?"

"See, or rather, *hear* for yourself."

Angelina pulled an Extendable Ear with Snitch-like wings from the pocket of her jeans and released it into the air. As it winged its way over towards the huge old oak, she dipped into her pocket again and fished out a second brown string.

Almost giddy with curiosity, Hermione let her friend slip the cord into her ear.

"Oh, *wow*," she murmured as she listened.

~SS~

"Go' you, Unglewus!"

At least that was how Snape heard it.

Tiny fingers dug into his side, less-than-adroit little fingers (painfully) attempting to tickle. Severus managed to suppress a grimace of distaste lest his audience mistake it for a smile. Snaking an arm about two-year-old Dominique's waist, he lifted the young witch onto his lap. Her happy shrieks made her cousin giggle and coo and flap his arms. Two fat fists, small but powerful (as Severus knew from experience), only just missed his nose.

No wonder the, er... nipper's mother keeps dropping him into my lap. Feisty little thing. I should count my blessings he's too young to participate in this ridiculous game.

Make Uncle Rus Smile was the Lupin brat's invention, and as the oldest and bravest of the pack of wild... children besieging Molly Weasley's garden, he was also usually the victor.

At least "story-time" is over, Severus reminded himself.

Unfortunately, the narrow escape from the Fists of Fred wasn't the end of Snape's torture. As "Uncle Rus" snapped his head out of Freddy Weasley's reach, Teddy took advantage of the momentary distraction to launch a full-scale assault.

He watched the boy's short blue hair darken to midnight black and pool over skinny shoulders. Sun-browned skin faded to a waxen pallor. But the best part was when, eyes on either side of it squeezed shut in concentration, Teddy's nose began to lengthen and take on a discernible curve.

Severus had to bite his tongue to keep from smirking. The werewolf's boy showed improvement every time they met!

"Oi, Sev! Teddy's the one that's got you!" Fred Weasley the First, Irritating Spirit Guide Extraordinaire, pointed a translucent finger and cackled.

"He has not."

Severus thinned his lips to prove his point. But even as he did, Bill Weasley's older girl turned her attention to young Lupin, pawing at the boy as if he really were her

fearsome "Uncle Rus" and giggling. The comical sight caught him unawares and he was forced to duck his head, hiding a smile behind a curtain of his own hair and the baby's curls.

"You're smiling, aren't you?" Fred teased.

"No."

"Liar!"

Snape lifted his head to find four pairs of eyes aimed at him. Two each of blue and brown.

Brown?

He watched as Teddy Lupin's face morphed from a reasonable facsimile of his own to... a truly atrocious version of his guide's.

"Merlin, Fred!" he snapped, shifting the spirit's namesake to his side. "Now see what you've done? Ted was looking splendid only moments ago."

"Ded!" said Freddy.

Five pairs of eyes turned to the baby.

"Good boy, Freddy! Ted *does* look as handsome as Uncle Fred, doesn't he?" Fred asked (fortuitously killing any desire Severus had to smile).

Freddy pointed an accusing finger at his "handsome" uncle. "Ded!" he insisted. Slapping his own chest, he added, "Fed!"

For a moment, a profound silence reigned. The children all stared in wonder at the exaggerated expression of hurt distorting the dead man's face.

Snape threw his head back and howled.

~HG~

Hermione arranged the last plate-setting to her satisfaction, then stepped aside, giving George space to position two jugs of pumpkin juice and a pitcher of water at the centre of the far end of the table.

"Kid zone," he told her, as if the smaller proliferation of smaller plates interspersed among three larger ones didn't say as much. "We usually take turns. Helping Sev. This week it's Percy and Andromeda. If we're lucky, she'll be too busy seeing to the kiddies to stop him getting hexed!"

Hermione decided not to ask which "him" George meant.

Their assigned tasks complete, they chose to linger outside near the table rather than risk getting chased out of Molly Weasley's kitchen. George filled a few blanks Harry and Ron and Angelina hadn't.

How... bizarre, Hermione couldn't stop thinking. Many things had changed since the end of the war; some changes were stranger than others.

"Harry told you about the cat, yeah? He didn't reckon on this being the result." He gestured towards the little group beneath the tree. "None of us did."

A burst of laughter only just audible across the garden, but clear as anything via the Extendable Ear left her wide-eyed and slack-jawed. The sound was deep and full of joy... and like nothing she'd ever before. Like nothing she'd ever expected to hear.

Her companion chuckled at her reaction.

"I can hardly believe what I'm seeing," Hermione murmured, turning back to George. "*Orhearing*. It was strange enough when he was telling stories, but..."

He grinned, shaking his head. "Happens nearly every Sunday, but it's usually not this good. Though, one time, Fred..."

"Dinner!"

Molly Weasley's call startled the two and started the kids tumbling back towards the house, shouting to all and sundry as they came.

"Gran, Freddy did it!"

"Freddy made Uncle Rus *laugh*, Papa!"

"Unglewus silly!"

Hermione and Angelina made their way around the long table as Snape followed at a more leisurely pace, Angelina's son nestled in his arms. Just as Hermione started to take her seat, she noticed a brown blur of fur hurtle itself onto his free shoulder.

~*~

Like everything about the Burrow, mealtime was controlled chaos. Laughter, chatter and good-natured teasing were traded more often than serving dishes filled with Molly's excellent food.

Snape the blur with long mousy-brown fur (a cat, Harry claimed) draped round his shoulders was seated too far away for her to speak with him easily. And besides, he seemed rather occupied. When he wasn't answering one of the children's questions or exhorting another to at least try her broccoli, he was trading jibes and smiles with the rest of the Weasleys.

Hermione noticed Victoire wasn't the only one who hesitated to try the vegetable Snape had called *broccolo Romanesco* when Molly asked him to repeat its name. The spiralling fractal flowers were clearly not a Weasley staple.

"*Everyone* is going to try this nice broccoli Severus was kind enough to grow for me," Molly had ordered at the start of the meal. But she, the wizard himself and Hermione had so far been the only ones to actually eat what was on their plates.

It was weird to see how at ease Snape was surrounded by loads of Weasleys, a brace of Potters, a Lupin and a Tonks. But he clearly wasn't uncomfortable, and Hermione thought again of how much she'd missed over the past two years.

~*~

Even though Molly had chased most of her children and all of her grandchildren (and her son-in-law's godchild, whom she considered an honorary grandchild, anyway) into the sitting room, the Weasley kitchen was nearly as noisy as the back garden had been.

Percy, Fleur and Harry, wearing aprons and wielding large spoons, dipped into a dozen pots of ice cream while chattering loudly over the clattering of mismatched bowls.

At first Hermione wasn't sure why she'd been asked to stay behind: there didn't seem to be anything for her *to do*. But then Molly pulled out two small containers from behind some jars in the charmed cold storage, holding up an expensive espresso-flavoured ice cream for Hermione's inspection.

"I've been saving this for you, dear. Ron tells me you prefer this one," the older witch said. "Without any extras?" she added sceptically.

Touched at such thoughtfulness, Hermione smiled and assured her hostess that Ron had been correct.

"I always do Severus's myself, as well," Molly confided. She tapped the lid with her wand and deftly transferred three scoops into a bright orange bowl with her other hand. "I'm the only one who can make it just as he likes it."

Another tap of her wand removed the Chilling Charm from the second pot. In a matter of seconds, Molly filled three scoops of the triple-chocolate dessert in a brown bowl with yellow flowers. She drizzled a generous helping of chocolate syrup over that before crumbling a handful of Chocolate Digestives on top.

"He'll be hiding down under the tree," Molly murmured, jabbing a whole biscuit onto the dark brown mound. "Take this out to him, love, will you?"

Hermione eyed the over-sweet concoction, half-amused, half-doubtful. Who'd have guessed the formerly acerbic former Potions master had a sweet tooth?

Picking up on the doubt, Molly assured her, "Trust me, love it really is his favourite." She turned back to supervise the others, wiping her spotless hands on her equally spotless apron.

Hermione had almost made it out the door when she called out, "Wait, dear! I forgot the Chocolate Tadpoles!"

~HG~SS~

She found him sitting where she'd first spotted him. This time, instead of four kids poking and prodding at him, there was only a small lump of wildly curling brown fur purring in his lap.

"Harry told me you own a cat." She placed both bowls on the arm the chaise longue, sank down onto the grass and drew her knees up to her chest. "Is it a Selkirk Rex? I read in *Felid Fancy* there's plans to import them this year."

"She is not."

Hermione flushed at her gaffe. She should have known Snape would be overly fussy about his pet. The cat in question opened black eyes just long enough to give her a slow blink.

Great. Even his cat is offended.

"Sorry," she said aloud. "She's lovely, though."

"You *would* think so," Snape muttered, loud enough for her to hear.

Not wanting quarrel about his manners, she reached over and picked up her bowl. He glanced at her as she brought a spoonful of fragrant espresso ice cream to her mouth, but didn't leave off stroking his cat to try his own chocolate monstrosity.

"If she's not..." she started ask just as he said silkily, "I was surprised you could take time out of your busy schedule to join us today, Ms Granger."

Instinct urged her to snap back, but he smiled almost pleasantly as he lifted his spoon. That was disconcerting enough to still her tongue until a cooler mindset won out.

"Term's over," she said when nothing better came to mind. "Graduation is next month. I expect I did well on my exams."

"Of course."

She looked at him sharply, but couldn't detect any sign of nastiness in his expression. If anything, he looked almost congenial. But the silence that followed his observation was uncomfortable, all the same.

"Is she a part-Kneazle, then?" Hermione nodded at the mass of bushy fur still purring contentedly. Feigning interest in his cat wasn't likely to lead her astray, was it? As long as she used the correct pronoun. "I've never seen a cat with black eyes before."

"Kneazles aren't the only magical felines." Looking as if there was more he wanted to say, but didn't dare, Snape sighed.

"I don't know as much about magical pets as I'd like," Hermione said with a rueful smile. She desperately hoped her admission was a good enough excuse. "I was so focussed on finishing up at Hogwarts, catching up at Dovewede and getting through uni, I didn't really have time for pleasure reading until now. But, what's her name?"

"Why are you wasting your time asking questions you don't really want answered?" he snapped.

The purring stopped as if a switch had been flipped. The cat's back snapped into a high arch, her fur on end and her claws firmly planted into Snape's thighs. Hermione winced at the sight.

The cat turned to face her master and hissed.

"Yes, Mum," Snape said through clenched teeth. "My apologies, Ms Granger: I should not have lost my temper."

The cat settled down as if nothing had happened.

"She's called 'Mum'?" It seemed a silly thing to name a cat especially a cat owned by Severus Snape. But then, today she'd witnessed Severus Snape playing with children, so... "I mean, it's an... interesting name. I once knew a woman who had sixteen cats. The oldest two were called 'Mother' and 'Daughter' because one was pregnant with the other when she my neighbour, I mean rescued them. Even though she was only a kitten, practically. Mother, I mean." Hermione knew she was babbling and had presence of mind enough to stop herself. "So, was there any reason you named her...?"

"No."

"No?"

"As her name is not 'Mum', that is not the reason behind her name."

"But you just..."

"She is a nagging, interfering bossyboots. A role common to mums the world over, don't you agree?" Snape said, not unkindly. Perhaps even fondly. A faint smile crossed his face as he glanced up. It was scary. "Ms Hermione Granger," he said formally, "I should like to introduce you to Miss Knowi Tall."

"Knowi, dear," he added in a saccharine voice that was even more disturbing than the smile had been, "I'm sure you'll be pleased to meet your eponym, Ms Granger."

"My eyes are brown."

"Yes, well, you never were as perfect as you thought you should be, hmm, Miss Granger?" Knowi turned to look at him again, and he muttered a hasty apology. "In order to stop me getting more holes in my skin, perhaps we should talk about something else. *Someone* else," he suggested. "Try to tell me about your work."

The abrupt change caught Hermione unprepared. "I ca..."

"Try," he repeated firmly.

Completely convinced the words would constrict her throat or devolve into complete gibberish as she spoke, she said, "A few weeks after the end of the war, Kingsley came to me with an offer." She took a deep breath, preparing herself for the discomfort she knew from experience accompanied attempts to explain her position. "It was an opportunity to work for a secret division within the Department of Mysteries S.A.M.E. It stands for..."

He smiled as she broke off, and Hermione stared at him in wonder.

"How...?" She swallowed again and licked her lips. "I've never been able to do *that* before!"

Snape chuckled. The sound was surprisingly pleasant, nothing like the derisive laughter she remembered from her student days.

"SAME don't only target Muggle-borns," he told her. "Half-bloods with a Muggle parent are nearly as useful to them."

"You were... But I thought S.A.M.E. was only established *after* the war!"

He rolled his eyes, but no disdainful sneer followed that action.

"Think, Ms Granger," he said. "Could the Ministry really have established a new division so quickly? Even with Kingsley at the reins, they can't move that fast with something that... far-reaching."

Hermione bit her lip, nodding, but not looking at him.

Of course S.A.M.E. must have been around for ages! She'd known that at least part of the programme must have existed for some time, but the Division of Squib Adjustment and Muggle-born Equality as a whole? Existing even back when the Ministry hadn't believed Voldemort was much of a threat?

"Of course, it must have been conceived when he was at his worst the first time round," she murmured aloud.

"Before that," Snape put in. "As much as it pains me to say it, not *everyone* in the Ministry was totally incompetent, even then."

She looked at him sharply.

"But they offered *you* a position?" Realising how that must have sounded, she flushed.

He only laughed bringing a healthy-looking bit of colour to his pallid face and said, "Of course they did. You weren't the first brilliant witch or wizard to go through Hogwarts, and I actually remained all seven years."

"You refused?" She didn't know what to make of this teasing Severus Snape, and her tone remained serious. "Why?"

He looked away, and she noticed his cheek lost some of its recently gained colour.

"I had what I thought was a better offer."

Not wanting to stir up troubled waters any more than she already had, she spoke quietly. "And you... never told?"

The left side of his mouth ticked up a bit, but she didn't see any crinkles form at the corner of his eye the way they had done when he'd smiled with the children.

"Need I remind you I am one of the strongest Occlumens known to have ever existed?" He turned to her then, and she could see that the smile *didn't* reach his eyes. "Besides, the offer was made with a modified Fidelius Charm, just as it is now. *That* is why you can talk about it with me without choking on your tongue or spewing nonsense."

"Oh." She felt stupid saying it, but what else was there to say that wouldn't invite his ire and another painful admonition from Knowi?

"My companion," Snape said, apparently apropos nothing, "is rightly called a member of *Felis vilicus venencifia*, more commonly known as 'Liverpudlian Rex'."

~RW~HP~

The dark patch just to the right of the back door made a perfect place for spying. The house itself blocked the glow of the moon, and the yellow light spilling from the ancient fixture above the stairs didn't reach very far.

"As much as I hate to admit it," Harry whispered, "I think you might be right."

He waited for Ron to crow in victory. When no such reaction was forthcoming, he let his gaze drift back over to the tableau his friend had never stopped watching. "I didn't see her eyeing him over dinner, but this... this is real, mate. What should we do?"

Ron's smile was slow and sort of scary, Harry thought. His friend's words were even worse.

"We do whatever we can to make sure Hermione gets what she needs," Ron said. "I think we might even find a solution to that other problem in the process."

A/N: Hugest thanks to linlawless for the beta and to karelia for the hand holding (and the "go ahead and post what you're ready to post!").

Chapter Two: la Révélation

Chapter 4 of 8

Something... new... this way comes. Severus doesn't know if it's good or bad, but he suspects it has something to do with Granger's return.

Chapter Two: *la Révélation*

The library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place wouldn't have been Ronald Weasley's first choice of venue for a Wednesday evening. Especially not with two of his living brothers, one sister-in-law, his old Head of house, his mum and the head of the Ministry for company. But since his regular Wednesday *night* plans were scotched had been for *weeks!* he saw no reason to waste breath complaining. Still, the seven of them had been staring at each other for fifteen minutes. What was the point of calling an "emergency" meeting (the third in two months) if no one was going to talk about their reason for being there?

A flash of green in the fireplace caught his attention, and his relieved sigh was lost in the general hubbub as his father stumbled into the room, brushing ash and Floo powder from his clothes.

Dad walked round the table, pausing to whisper something into Kingsley's ear on his way to the last empty seat.

"We all know why we're here things have been heating up, haven't they?" Mum's voice was tired, but it was clear enough she didn't mean for anyone to answer the question. "Might as well get on with it."

Looking nearly as bad as she sounded, Dad dropped heavily into his seat next to her. "Right," he said. "Sorry to have kept everyone waiting."

George went first not that there was much to tell. "Still working out where to go with Plan B," he said, winking stupidly. But there was no missing the edge in his voice when he said, "Only, I can't narrow anything down till we've come up with a Plan A."

Least stupid thing the berk has said about it in months.

Fleur's pretty face twisted into a grimace as she nodded in agreement. Bill rubbed her shoulder but he looked just as grim.

"Yes, er, well..." Dad faltered. It was obvious he hadn't anything actually *useful* to add. Or, at least not anything he could share with anyone who wasn't the Minister for Magic.

Ron stared at his old man, but didn't say anything. His mentor would have been proud of him, he rather thought.

The rest of the Order debated George's Plan B for another ten minutes or so, but it was true: they really *couldn't* move forward with a backup strategy when they hadn't decided what to do in the first place.

"Do you think he'd even agree?" Charlie wanted to know. "If it came to Plan B, I mean?"

"I should think *not*," McGonagall said. She shook her head. "That poor boy..."

George snorted. "Course he won't!"

He would know, having the inside track, and all.

"I think he suspects something," Harry told everyone. It was the first thing he'd said about their subject all night. "Apart from lessons, he's been avoiding Ron and me for *weeks*. Claims he's tired, but that was never a problem before, was it?"

His friend looked so crestfallen at the idea, Ron couldn't hold back a snort to match his brother's. He noticed he wasn't the only one who found Harry's disappointment amusing. He felt a bit bad about that, but at least the laugh had relieved some of the tension.

Now, come on. The greasy git has become something of a mate over the past few years, hasn't he?

"I don't think it's that," Ron informed the group. "Well, he *has* seemed a bit... distracted, lately. And those bags under his eyes have got baggier. What with our extra lessons and all, it kind of makes sense for him to be tired of me, at least. Even if he did say I'm doing shockingly well, dunderhead that I am.

"But I don't think he has a clue what's really going on." Patting Harry's shoulder awkwardly, he continued. "He's probably too grateful for an excuse not having us dragging him out every week to even think that anyone's been plotting against him!"

Harry shrugged off Ron's hand and rolled his eyes. "Of course he knows, Ron! The man was a spy!"

"Yeah, but..."

"Ron's right." George's interruption had everyone staring at him. "Fred says Knowi's up to something. Has him getting up extra early every morning for weeks now." Everyone knew "him" didn't mean Fred.

Do dead people even sleep?

"Are you sure he hasn't seen anything during your lessons?" This was from Dad. "The last thing we need is for him to find out before we have a plan in place."

"I *told* you he says I'm doing shockingly well. Said I'm easily distracted and this time it's actually a good thing!" Ron smiled smugly at the faces ringing the table.

He ignored George's mock puking, but Mum's fierce look had them both sobering straightaway.

"You know about 'Pudlians, Dad," George said, still serious. "They 'know what is soon to come' and all that. So, if he suspects something, it's only because she's been

preparing him for whatever is going to happen. It's nothing to do with Ron."

I guess he's not always a berk.

Another heavy silence filled the room, making everyone uncomfortable. So Ron was really glad when Bill broke it with a question that had been asked and answered a dozen times already:

"How much time do you think we have?"

Kingsley sighed and shook his head. "I don't know. Less than we had last time someone asked. And getting less every day." He frowned so hard a vein started throbbing at his temple. Ron eyed the big fist the Minister for Magic had unconsciously made, wondering if Kingsley would finally lose his cool enough to pound Harry's table.

"What are we going to *do*?" Mum asked before that could happen.

Everyone made a point of not looking at Kingsley, but he was the one who ended up speaking first, anyway. He leant back in his chair, suddenly The Minister For Magic in capitals instead of everyone's friend. His gaze pinned Dad's.

"A month, you said, Arthur?"

Ah. So that's what the whispering was about. But wait... What is it?

"Only about six weeks, I'd say. If I had a little help..." Dad said, glancing Ron and Harry.

Should have known they'd find a way to take up more of our...

Kingsley also looked at them. "I think you boys were right," he said. "I think it's time to bring in Hermione Granger."

~SS~

Severus liked routines.

The Monday morning after that first Sunday, he had awakened to Knowi's plaintive yowl a full hour earlier usual. He dragged himself out of bed, complaining and loudly contemplating possible uses for *Felis vilicus veneficia* parts in various potions, but he got up. Ages ago, he'd learnt to ignore the little cat's cries only at his own peril.

"Beware, Miss Tall," he muttered as he made his way out of the small bedroom and stalked across the living-room-cum-dining-area, "if you are only looking for an extra meal, I *will* make you into potions ingredients, even if I have to invent the potion first!"

Food and water bowls were both filled, just as the charms on them were supposed to ensure. Severus looked over to where Knowi sat next to his rolled-up yoga mat, staring back at him imperiously.

"Fine, then," he said. "You *aren't* risking your life for an extra helping. Unless you're hoping for the tinned stuff?" When she ignored his raised eyebrow and continued to stare, Severus went to join her. "Right. I suppose this means trouble is brewing, so to speak."

Knowi mewed an assent.

Severus bent to unroll the mat, then settled himself on it. "And I don't suppose you're going to find a way to tell me what it is."

Knowi stepped over him to burrow into the space the yoga mat had occupied. A second later, she emerged, holding a soft toy in the shape of a blue-shirted man with pointed ears. She slinked over to her human and climbed onto his crossed legs.

Severus took the proffered Mr Spock plushie. Mr Spock meant meditation before yoga. Meditation before yoga meant something big.

He wracked his memories for any recent occurrences that might change his life, but there was nothing.

Except... Why had Ms Granger come for Sunday dinner after a two-year absence?

He filed the thought away. It hardly made sense, the girl's presence affecting him in a negative way, but he'd learnt not question everything, every time. Instead, he treated the symptoms. If that meant an extra sixty minutes of meditation and asanas, so be it. His well-being was worth more than sleeping in could ever be.

~*~

The next weeks had brought no definitive answer to the question of *what* (although Ms Granger's repeated presence on Sundays underscored his suspicion), but they also brought no respite from Knowi's early-morning appointments. Soon enough, Severus was rising without her assistance.

He meditated. He went through the daily series of poses which helped keep the tenuous grip on his humanity from slipping away completely. He got round the bad temper the loss of sleep might have brought by going to bed early. That it gave him an excuse to put off his weekly outing with Potter and Weasley had been an added bonus.

Tonight, claiming exhaustion from extra Occlumency sessions with the latter was not an option.

Not that he hadn't tried when his two (formerly imbecilic) groupies had bearded him in his den the day before.

"But you can't stay in *all* the time!" The adult Potter's whinging had been considerably more annoying than the boy's defiant bluster had ever been.

"Yeah," a grinning Weasley *Sextus* had agreed, "it's not healthy, you avoiding us outside of work. Can't have you reverting to form!"

"You should go," Fred added, appearing out of nowhere, as he so often did.

Knowi showed her agreement by twining herself about the young Aurors' legs.

Four against one. What choice did he have, really?

Life might have been better when I was alone and reviled by all Severus thought as he towelled off and added a quick a quick drying spell for good measure.

He stepped up to the mirror hanging over the sink, running an appraising hand over his jaw. It didn't really matter if he shaved, but in some areas at least, he had always been fastidious. There was no need to deviate from habit simply because he would be using Polyjuice tonight. But sticking to routines helped keep him sane.

He certainly didn't *need* to spend an evening down the pub with Potter and Weasley; their impertinent and often interfering company was likely to undo whatever good had been done by Knowi's inexplicable insistence that he spend more time at the rituals which had helped him survive his survival.

"I 'need to get out more' like I need a daily Cruciatus," he told the face in the mirror. And yet he did not stop shaving.

Face smooth, hair hanging loose about his shoulders, he walked the short distance from bathroom to bedroom naked. He possessed only a handful of shirts and trousers that fit the body he would use later, and he was loath to create any of these things. Besides, there was no one to see his own nude form. No one but Knowi, that was.

She lay sprawled, as only a feline can manage, at the centre of his single bed. Her head lifted and her eyes opened lazily as he entered the room. Just as slowly, she stood and stretched before lowering herself to the bed again. Her muzzle, Snape saw, now rested on the Mr Spock toy.

It's to be meditation again, he mused. That didn't bode well for the night.

But forty minutes later just before any further hesitation would undoubtedly result in concerned knocks at his door he left the Ministry barracks that had been his home for the last four years.

~HG~

She only answered the telephone because she happened to be closest. Just over a month into her career with ObiyeChem, she'd hardly made any new Muggle friends. Everyone from uni was busy with jobs of their own, or looking for jobs. (Hermione had been lucky enough to start straight after graduation.) The call wasn't likely to be for her, but it would save Mum or Dad having to stop whatever they were doing, so...

It was her boss. Not the one from the lab, but her real boss.

"I'm outside," he told her.

Hermione peeked out the window; sure enough, a neatly dressed man stood across the road, a mobile at his ear.

"Ring the bell in five minutes." A long day in the lab made her tone impatient. She raced upstairs to retrieve her notes from her room.

Two minutes later, she heard Mum welcoming Arthur Weasley to their home.

Drat that man! Probably has ten time-telling devices on him, but he can't count five minutes?

Snatching up a file filled with useless (she thought) observations, she rushed back down the stairs.

Another fifteen minutes of interminable chitchat passed, during which Hermione marvelled anew at the apparent change in Arthur. Not that it was really a change, she reminded herself. He'd just never showed her his true colours before recruiting her to S.A.M.E.

As her impatience grew, she tried to remember she was grateful to him for helping ease her parents' transition back to Betty and Graham from Monica and Wendell. He'd even had his accountant cousin sort out their finances. But still... For better or for worse, Hermione's manners were still far too ingrained for her to tell him to shut up about technology shares, the sorcernet and every other thing that wasn't S.A.M.E. business.

Arthur admired the new gadgets her parents had purchased since his last visit. "I knew you'd like that telly, Graham. Top of the line!" and Dad and Mum promised to get up to Devon "soon, really." By the time Arthur finally noticed the file clutched in Hermione's hands, she was rigid with anticipation.

"We won't bother with that," he said, waving a dismissive hand at the folder. "You'll be leaving O-Chem in three weeks time."

Mum and Dad discreetly excused themselves.

"But I haven't been there two months! It won't look good on my CV, leaving so soon."

"This isn't a demotion, Hermione." His expression told her she was in the presence of the Director of S.A.M.E. The family friend was gone, and she didn't think it wise to protest again. "If anything, it's a promotion. We need you closer to the Ministry for a... side project. But officially, you'll still be working for the Obiye family."

"All right. What will I be doing?"

"To start with, you'll be living and working with your friend Lara Obiye," Arthur told her. Hermione didn't see how working at her friend's shop, The Witch's Daughter, could be a promotion, but still didn't argue. "As for the side project... The boys are setting that up as we speak."

~RP~

"It might just work, you know."

"Only if they don't bugger it up! No chance of that if we were doing it."

"Now, Dora, you don't really want to go back so soon, do you?" The spirit who had been Remus Lupin slipped an arm round his wife's shoulders.

"Not really. Only, he does a good job with Ted, yeah? I don't want that to end."

"I don't think we need to worry just yet, dear."

~SS~HP~RW~

"It's awful, really. You know Hermione. Always asking questions, always trying to get answers straight away." Potter shook his head and sighed. "This job is probably killing her."

"Only probably?" Blond eyebrow raised, Severus smirked at his companion's dramatics.

"Well, she hasn't said anything," Weasley put in, aiming a speaking glare at his friend. "But we know she can't be all that happy. Or at least not very interested in what she's doing. For Hermione, that's as bad as hating it."

Steadily regarding the two young men, Severus swallowed the last of his pint. It wasn't that he thought they were lying, but neither one was being entirely honest.

Potter jumped to his feet the moment Severus set down his glass. "My round!" he declared and, having gathered the empties littering their small table, was lost almost instantly in the busy pub.

"You are Occluding, Mr Weasley. I wonder why?"

"What? How do you know? I'm your best pupil!"

So as not to encourage his "best pupil" into further squawking, Severus chose to be honest rather than insulting.

"I don't need to use Legilimency to know when you're hiding your thoughts. You have a tell. Fortunately for you, that vacant look is barely perceptible and doesn't hinder your Occlumency abilities."

Weasley's eyes focussed immediately; then he gave a lopsided grin. "Still," he said, "I should work on that. Can't have anyone thinking your best pupil is a dunderhead,

can we?

"Here's the thing about Hermione, Sev. She trusts you and admires your work. If you could maybe just give her a little help, a lesson here or there, perhaps she'll be able to move up the ladder to something a little more to her liking."

"Yeah." A grinning Potter placed three more pints on the table. "If you were the one helping her, she'd definitely be halfway to bottling glory."

~OotP~

The next gathering of the Order of the Phoenix underscored just how much Hermione had missed during her necessary absence. She hadn't supposed there had been many meetings while she was occupied with university and helping her parents get settled in Cornwall. Clearly, she was wrong. The last one she'd attended had been more a celebration of their success. This one was obviously the latest of many serious sessions aimed at righting a wrong which had the other members deeply concerned.

"Hang on a minute." Hermione chewed her lip, not sure how to go on. Not sure she *wanted* to go on. But, needs must. "All this..." She gestured at the table and its occupants. "All this plotting behind his back... Doesn't it seem to anyone that it's just like..." She bit her lip again. "Professor Dumbledore? Like you're his puppet masters. Don't you think he's had enough of that? Why can't you *tell* him the Ministry are planning to sack him."

"You don't know what you're talking about! You weren't there at the beginning, were you? You don't know how bad things were!"

Harry's sudden anger, seemingly directed entirely at her, ignited her own.

"I was there! I saw how bad off he was when Madam..."

"You weren't there *after*, when he was recovering, and no one could get through to him, and we thought he might not make it, after all. You were too busy with school, and then it was university. You can't just come back now and tell us we're wrong when you weren't there."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment. Harry's last words hung in the tense air. Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat, even though no one was looking at her. Never mind that she hadn't been given a choice once she'd accepted Kingsley offer, and never mind no one had told her about... whatever it was that she supposedly had missed during the years that followed.

Arthur Weasley cleared his throat. "It was my choice to keep Hermione focussed on her work," he said. His voice was quiet, yet firm. "Everyone agreed at the time."

Hermione felt Molly's hand cover hers, and when she glanced up, the older witch smiled gently, squeezing the hand she held.

"It was hard for him, at first," she said. "Physically, he was well on the mend. But for that first year until he started seeing your Muggle mind-Healer..."

"Dr Listener?" That was another shock. Dr Listener was a Squib and a psychiatrist she'd met at Dovewede. "Since when has he been her patient? I thought she might help Harry..."

And she had, it turned out. And Harry had suggested she might help Snape. And... and the whole story all the dark ugliness no one had shared with her before came out.

"Everything began to change once Doctor L started helping him," Harry said, calmer now. He gave her an apologetic smile. "But if he's tossed out now, no money or job, all that work could be for nothing."

"But isn't he receiving some sort of compensation already?" she asked, completely confused by the meeting's agenda. "I know being on probation might reduce his salary potential, but surely the Ministry pays him something for the work he's doing."

Hermione watched everyone shift uncomfortably in their seats. No one met her questioning gaze.

Finally, Molly told her wringing fingers, "He gets room and board. If he were really on probation, they might do more."

"Isn't he?" If Severus Snape wasn't on probation, Hermione wondered, why was he living in Ministry barracks and teaching an Advanced Potions and Occlumency programme for the D.M.L.E.?

"No, he is not! That's just the vile rumour the Wizengamot spread to stop the natives getting restless about him avoiding Azkaban." George's usually cheerful face was dark with anger.

"It also helped that he offered to give up everything he owned in reparations," Kingsley added. His sneer would have done Snape proud. "The whole business was still a nasty piece of work." He looked angry as well as uncomfortable. "Even the Minister is only one voice, Hermione. Unless you want us to up-end everything we've worked so hard to change."

"No! No, of course not." Her face was hot with embarrassment. The past week had been like her first year all over again: she'd spoken without thinking, caused offence where none was intended. "I'm sorry. It's just... I don't understand. He was absolved of all wrong-doing... Why was he punished at all? Even if it was supposedly voluntary?"

"It's as Kingsley told you; he's only one voice and I make two. The rest of the Wizengamot don't know Severus like we do. And neither do the public." Arthur's face was as grave as his voice. "I'm sure Sunday dinners have demonstrated why we can't just let him go a couple years from now. He's like family, but he'll never accept anything he thinks is charity not even from us."

"We've come up with a few ideas, but... We could use a fresh pair of eyes, Hermione."

Hermione turned to Ron. "Is *that* why you invited me? To see him in action? All that stuff about the family missing me was just a ruse to get me to observe Severus Snape dandling children on his knee and trading barbs with Gred and Forge?"

Ron coloured, but didn't look away. "Everyone *did* miss you, Hermione. That wasn't a lie," he said. "But, yeah, you needed to see for yourself what it's like now. I wasn't sure you'd come if you knew about... the other thing. Because of what happened... in Australia..."

He trailed off, and Hermione realised that he hadn't shared the other reason for their break-up with rest of the Order.

Thank god!

"Dad's right," Fred said, pulling her from her embarrassed thoughts. "We do have a few plans. As my closest relative, and his last known living 'victim', George got Sev's assets when he offered reparations. But he's too stubborn to ever take a Knut from any of us. Even what's rightfully his."

"My Plan B was to find a way *tomake* him. But since you're back on board, I've got another idea." Everyone turned to stare at George, who was looking at Ron. "And I expect Hermione has one, as well. Or she will soon enough."

"If he'll accept my original terms... Which he won't do. Not without putting up a fight. The financial side shouldn't be so bad. And I suspect whatever our resident genius has rolling around in that big brain of hers should take care of the rest."

A/N: Thanks as always to linlawess for the beta-read and for sticking with me as I fought to rework this chapter. Extra thanks to bleddyn for lending her parents' names to me.

Chapter Three: Entêtement

Chapter 5 of 8

Despite his stubborn streak, Severus is forced to re-think his association with Hermione. The Order discusses plans. Ron and Hermione have a talk. Victoire has plans of her own.

Chapter Three: *Entêtement*

Nothing much changed. A good thing because routine meant sanity. Severus still spent an hour a week in Katharine Listener's tidily cheerful office. Four days a week, he taught a handful of Auror recruits and three handfuls of Wizard Squad trainees how to detect, identify and neutralise dangerous potions and tried to instruct them in the art of shielding their minds. Thursdays, he brewed cures for St Mungo's. Saturdays, as always, were his own. Except for the one Saturday each month which belonged to the aunt who had watched over his comatose body before presiding over his physical recovery in her woodland cottage. His every Sunday still belonged to the Weasley family.

~*.*~

Nothing changed, except that Granger had added moans disguised as clever anecdotes about her work to her repertoire of annoying conversation.

"Why do you encourage her?" For the most part, Dr Listener was true to her name (her true name, unlikely as that was; the Listeners were an old, if severely depleted, wizarding family), but she had a habit, from time to time, of surprising him with such ridiculous questions.

"I do not." Severus sneered at the very thought. *Encourage Granger? The witch has never needed encouragement to open her mouth and keep opening it.*

"I should have said 'entertain' her, perhaps?" Listener smiled her benign, non-committal smile. "Why do you entertain her advances?"

Advances!

"If you're so unhappy in her company," his therapist continued, "why do you listen to her complaints and answer her questions? I know Hermione can be a bit enthusiastic when she's really keen on something, but she's easily cowed by even the slightest hint of disapproval from anyone she wants to approve of her. Why haven't you used that against her?"

"She is still becoming reacquainted with wizarding society."

"And despite the fact that she has numerous wizarding friends and acquaintances, you feel you must be the one to help facilitate her transition?"

"Of course not," he sneered. "But Miss Tall..."

"Do you feel obligated to take orders from your familiar?"

"Me having a cat was your recommendation." His dry reply was accompanied by a falsely dispassionate study of his fingernails.

When Listener didn't rise to the bait after a long moment had passed, he raised his head with another show of feigned indifference. "Why don't you practise proper medicine?" Lashing out when discomfited was a thing he reserved for these sessions.

"Is Hermione's former work the reason, then? Is that what you would like to be doing? Practising 'proper medicine'?" Her voice and expression were drenched in genuine curiosity. *Annoying!* "There's nothing stopping you..."

"From returning to a degree I abandoned nearly two and a half decades ago?" Severus snorted and then, putting on overly posh accents, said, "And ~~what~~ were you doing the past twenty-three years, Mr Snape?" He altered his voice again to answer, "Oh, a bit of this and that... trying and mostly failing to teach magical children at a magical school how to brew magical potions, spying for *two* lunatics in hopes of defeating the crazier of the two in a war that only finished about five years ago.'

"Oh, yes, that would go over splendidly!"

"It could be done if that was what you wanted. If it isn't, fair enough," conceded Listener. "But that doesn't mean you should force yourself to do something you loathe. Not after the life you've lived. Why don't you tell Hermione you'd rather not spend time with her?"

"Because I *can't*." He looked away from Listener's maddeningly patient gaze. "Obviously, something needs doing for the girl. And the Weasleys haven't a clue what that might be."

"You can do whatever you like, Severus." Her voice was still calm. Still patient. Still bloody annoying. "You don't owe Hermione anything."

"I owe the *Weasleys*."

"How so?"

"Once a week, I inflict my presence on them and their table."

"Molly and Arthur appreciate what you have done for them and consider you one of their own."

"Of course they still treat me as if I were one of their bloody brood." His lips twisted. "They ~~are~~ *grateful* for the illusion I bring with me. The lot of them *are thankful* that my coming to them allows them to perpetuate the illusion that they have not lost a son and brother."

"Why 'an illusion'?"

Unsurprisingly, the words he wanted to speak wouldn't come; there were limits to who he could tell about Fred's true nature and how much more he could reveal to those who already knew. Listener was privy to more than most, but this...

"If I am 'cured', he will be gone before they can reasonably expect to join him," he said instead.

"That still doesn't explain why you need to endure Hermione's overtures."

Severus took in the mild but curious expression and knew he had little choice but to offer the unvarnished truth if he wanted to change the subject before the session ended.

"She needs *me*, I think," he said as if those five words which he barely understood himself explained everything. And to his relief, Dr Listener behaved as if they did.

~*.~

Nothing much changed except that he exchanged his old routine for one that accommodated an irritating witch in need of watching over. Keeping an eye on Granger was the most he was prepared to offer; he decided to do nothing to help her advance her career.

The last didn't seem to matter in the end. Once Shackbolt had got into his head that a select and fortunate few should be honoured with the task of devoting a few hours each week to furthering Granger's education, he hadn't let go of the idea. Severus's protests that the girl wouldn't need an advanced understanding of Potions on her particular career path and "isn't she overburdened already, having two Ministry jobs, even if one was supposed be secret?" fell on deaf ears. He was stuck assisting the witch in her rise to glory.

It helped that Granger was quieter during the lessons, limiting her questions to the subject at hand. At first anyway.

Soon enough (too soon, he sometimes thought), however, their conversations in the lab began to mirror those spent under "his" tree at the Burrow, ranging across all sorts of interesting and intriguing topics such as the flatmate who was suspiciously adept at developing Muggle "natural" hair and beauty products for someone who had been declared a Squib, or what had been Granger's favourite classes at university that had nothing to do with brewing procedure or ingredient analysis. In spite of her having reduced her Sundays at the Burrow to one for every three of his, he was spending even more time with her than he had when she was at school.

That he didn't mind nearly as much as he might have done was something he chose not to examine too closely. It was easier to ignore the curious looks Molly Weasley sent his way every third Sunday and the smug grins Ronald Weasley wore every time he saw the younger man if Severus told himself that having Granger practically glued to his side left him feeling put upon.

~OotP~

"We all agree we need to reform and redeem him in the eyes of wizarding society."

"Yes, but just how to you propose we do that?" Kingsley wanted to know.

"It's simple," Hermione said, offering first him, then the rest of the Order, a confident smile. "Rumour, innuendo and gossip are practically currency in our community. First thing we need to do is have him stop using Polyjuice when he goes out with Ron and Harry.

"Next, we make sure the right ears overhear someone talking about what he's been brewing. Maybe even hint at some sort of award in the offing.

"Once the world knows what he's been doing for St Mungo's, they'll already be halfway to accepting. When they hear respectable witches are vying to marry him, they will have to accept him for the good man he is."

Her declaration was met with expressions ranging from amusement to outright astonishment.

"What?" She looked from face to face, hoping in vain that her own calm appearance would make the plan seem less shocking than it was.

Kingsley ran a hand over his tired-looking face. He always looked exhausted at these meetings, Hermione realised. "Er, where do you expect to find 'respectable witches' who are so eager to become 'Madam Snape'?" he asked.

Hermione's gaze swung back and forth round the table again. "Well, for one thing, we won't actually put *it* that way. He only needs to be seen in the company of a respectable witch or three. The busybodies will do the rest. As for which witches, to start there's Andromeda Tonks they get on well at Sunday dinners, and I'm sure..."

Ron choked on a stifled chuckle, cutting her off. He and Harry exchanged glances, then burst into full-on laughter.

"What these two idiots are trying to say is, Sev doesn't really do 'respectable' when it comes to dating," George said above the din. "Actually, he doesn't do dating, so much as he... Er... In any case, Meda sees him more as a younger brother, I'd say."

"*Oui*, 'Ermine," Fleur said, looking concerned. "Severus will 'ave to look far from the Burrow to find a wife. We are all family."

~HP~RW~HG~

"Don't let them get to you, Hermione." Harry looped an arm round her shoulder as they walked away from Grimmauld Place. "I thought your plan was pretty good. Ron and I both did."

Giving them both a mock glare, she jabbed her thumb back towards the hidden house. "You might have said something in there."

Ron laughed. "Would have looked weird if we were ready to marry off our drinking partner, wouldn't it?"

"No, it wouldn't! Not when Harry's married and you will be soon enough."

"I haven't actually asked her, you know," Ron said.

But Harry and Hermione knew it was only a matter of time before Demelza Robins became a Weasley, and they told him so. The three friends spent the rest of the ten-minute walk to their favourite wine bar talking and teasing and seeing who could come up with the most outrageous marriage proposal.

~*.~

Ron watched Harry wind his way through the crowded bar. Soon as he was certain their friend was far enough away not to overhear, he leant closer to Hermione.

"Should I be worried, I wonder? I've been doing a lot of keeping things from Harry, lately." He glanced at her in time to catch her face flame either with anger or embarrassment, he wasn't sure which. Yet. "I won't share your secrets, but it's scary sometimes, seeing how clueless he is."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest. "I don't have any secrets other than Australia. And you know all of that was rubbish."

"If it's rubbish, then how come you haven't told anyone?"

"Lara knows."

He rolled his eyes.

"Ronald! I *can't* tell anyone else." She slapped her hands down on the table and stared at him. "They wouldn't understand the way you do. They'd start getting *ideas*. Specially after tonight."

Ron gazed back at her, unwilling to point out that if he'd "understood" they'd probably be married by now. "What I don't understand," he said calmly, "is *why* you haven't got any ideas now you've seen what he's like these days."

~RP~

"Have you looked at any of his moments recently?" asked the last person either of them wanted to hear. "He's doing quite well lately, I think."

"Stay out of this," warned Eileen. Her voice was cold and dangerous and powerful. A flow of pride washed over Tobias at the sound of it.

"Oh! I wouldn't dream of interfering." The only one of them wearing a human-like form, Albus fussed with the sleeves of his purple and orange robe.

Tobias would have doused the twinkle in the old liar's eyes if he could have. The ancient soul was too wily to be called a fool, but that never seemed to stop him acting one.

~SS~HG~

Two Sundays later, Severus sat beneath the oak's branches, baby Fred squirming on his knee and batting at his nose. More intent on listening as young Victoire squabbled with Ted Lupin, the other children dragged their feet instead of engaging in their usual rush to see who would reach him first. Shriill voices carried right across the wide expanse of garden, giving Severus an unwelcome clue as to the nature of the dispute.

"Uncle Rus is going to marry *me*, not 'Ermione!" she insisted with a toss of her red-gold curls. "*You* can marry 'Ermione."

Ted's face screwed up in helpless anger. "I'm not going to marry her," he shouted. "She's old. I'm going to marry *you*!"

"Hmpf!" Victoire marched over to Severus and sat at his feet. "Uncle Rus, tell Teddy I can't marry him because I am going to marry you."

To his credit, Severus didn't blanch or give any other outward sign of his inner horror.

"I think, Miss Weasley, when you are old enough to marry, you will think *me* too old."

Ted's face melted into a good copy of Severus's own at its smuggest, and the little boy shot his friend a triumphant look.

"Maybe I *will* marry Teddy," she conceded.

The argument settled before it had become a brawl, the other children gathered around him, and Severus set about entertaining them as usual which is to say that he pretended he wasn't trying to entertain them at all.

But the relief of having been deemed unsuitable to one day marry Victoire Weasley brought no relief from the matter weighing most heavily on his mind: Granger was still invading his personal space to ask impertinent questions. He still wasn't quite sure why he answered, but an idea too ridiculous to be the real reason, he assured himself had been forming in the back of his mind ever since he'd made that odd admission to Listener.

Ronald had been far less forthcoming than Severus would have preferred; his ever increasing skill at Occlumency was good for the boy's duties, but it was a blow to Severus's information-gathering scheme.

Still, there was and always had been more than one way to skin a garden gnome, and Molly Weasley was a most *effective* research assistant even when she didn't realise she'd taken on the role.

What do you need, Granger? he wondered as he went to have a word with his hostess.

~*.*~

He shocked her by asking for her help in the kid zone.

She'd thought she'd already learned everything this new and (mostly) improved Severus Snape was willing to let her learn about him. Halfway through the meal when he lifted a fretful little Fred from her arms, leaving her feeling inexplicably bereft she was forced to accept that the complicated man now playing such an unexpected role in her life (and in the lives of her friends) was an endlessly fascinating enigma who would most likely continue to keep her off balance for however long she knew him.

Oddly, the idea was not an unappealing one, she realised.

As usual, Severus had deftly managed to keep the kids both entertained and fed with only a modicum of mess. Once everyone else was settled into their own conversations and plates, she started plying him with questions about his work, peppered with an occasional anecdote about her own. Whether it was due to the small ears in their vicinity or because he was just nicer, full stop, he answered the questions and commented on her stories about work.

When it was time for afters, somehow she was a bit fuzzy on the details of *exactly how* she ended up in the kitchen with him, cutting cakes and pies for the entire Weasley clan. The conversation had turned to a Muggle friend of hers who'd read Ecological Sciences at university before becoming an environmental preservationist.

"It's odd when you think about it. Different perceptions." Smiling as if to herself, she continued slicing a large chocolate cake whilst covertly observing him. He seemed inordinately patient, so she went on. "When I first got to Hogwarts, I would have said well, thought anyway... I would have been too embarrassed to actually admit it in the beginning. Not that it would have been hard to guess. Anyway, I thought I *hadn't* any friends before Hogwarts, but Geoff thought we were. It really made me start to think about how what we think we see isn't necessarily the whole picture."

She'd only mentioned the young man and his course of study in passing, intending the anecdote as a handy segue into the speech about perception. But Severus, an interested light in his black eyes, asked question after question about the programme, very few of which she could answer.

"I had no idea you were so interested in saving the environment," she said, cutting off his complex observation about the many deleterious effects of certain methods of fossil fuel extraction.

He added a dollop of crème fraîche to Molly's slice of rhubarb pie.

"You think it perfectly natural that you have interests outside of Charms and Arithmancy, but given evidence that I have any outside Potions and Defence, you are surprised?" Eyes on his task, he smiled nastily as he spooned a thick raspberry coulis over Fleur's chocolate cake. "Perhaps you are not as open-minded as you like to believe yourself to be."

She smiled artlessly to show she had no intention of interrupting again.

"Think, girl! Tom Riddle was an insane megalomaniac, but he was also a genius of the first order." Severus plated three more slices of chocolate cake, one of apple pie and two more of rhubarb pie. When Hermione still hadn't spoken, he continued. "Is it so hard to imagine that once he had established a society which was dominated entirely by a people he considered to be superior he would wish for the world they ruled to be unadulterated by the effluence created by those he had always considered inferior?" Clearly, he'd intended the question to be rhetorical because he didn't even give her a chance to answer. "No. He wanted a pristine world for his pristine people."

Chewing her bottom lip, Hermione contemplated his surprising revelation. Although, considering the terms into which Severus had put it, the notion wasn't so surprising, after all. At least it shouldn't have been. Not really.

"And he meant to achieve this... immaculate Earth by using Dark magic?"

Severus wiped his hands on a damp tea towel, his dark eyes still on hers as he did so, a sneer or was that his version of a smile? twisting his thin lips.

"Well, he would need to do something with the leftover Muggles and Muggle-borns, wouldn't he?"

~SS~

There were flashes of memory, sometimes. Moments where Severus remembered. There weren't supposed to be, according to his own personal Clarence. But "supposed to be" didn't stop them coming.

He could almost see his mother and father as they truly were: nearly intangible beings of light and energy. Their warmth and love came to him in dreams and when he meditated. Or when one of those imbeciles the Auror Office were choosing now that everyone believed in peace left him so ticked off, it was either seek out a glimpse of the Outer World or try to send one of them *to it*.

He poured a draught past the lips of his unconscious student.

"Did you learn nothing that I have taught?" he barked when the young man awoke. "You ingested an elephant's dose of Jiang Shi Potion. If I hadn't been standing by with the antidote, you would have been one of the walking dead before you reached St Mungo's!" He waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming, he sighed heavily. "Go home, Mr Barrkopf."

Barrkopf's home was in the same wing of Ministry barracks as Severus's own apartments. All the first-year recruits lived there, and a couple were in the habit of occasionally knocking on their instructor's door for a bit of extracurricular tutoring. Barrkopf, fortunately, was not in that number.

Severus decided to retire to his rooms, his familiar and his memories, confident he wouldn't be disturbed.

~RP~

Two radiant, amorphous entities watched the moment play out. The more brightly glowing of two focussed energy in a way that suggested something... forbidden was about to happen.

"Merlin!" exclaimed the smaller and dimmer mass of energy. "You're always reminding us we can't go round 'nudging' the fleshsuitsers!"

"So I do," said the other before coalescing into the distinct form of an ancient-looking greybeard. "Because you probably shouldn't, Fred Weasley. But I think you'll find things are somewhat different when you've progressed to the levels I have reached. That could happen sooner than you expect."

Then, with a smile that was either sly or smug or both, *henudged*.

~HG~

"Are you sure you won't come? I really hate to think of you being alone tonight."

Lara Obiye, who had been watching her flatmate dart around their living room for the past fifteen minutes, waved away the invitation (the seventh, by her count) with a patient "It's already tomorrow in Kokopo, H" before taking a deep breath and changing the subject.

"Maybe you're so conflicted because you think it might come true."

"What? Oh, you're back to talking about *that*, are you?" She laughed, but Lara could hear the nervousness belying the humour. "No! Mum's *aMuggle*, L. She... She can't have been right. It's minor brain damage, you know? Near death experiences and all that. I'm sure you've read about it. See the light; come back with psychic powers?" Her shoulders slumped, but at least she stopped pacing. "None of it's real, though."

Standing, Lara grabbed Hermione's shoulders. "You should know better after living for months with a Muggle-witch. Not all magic is what you Brits make of it."

Hermione laughed again, confidently this time. "You're as English as I am!"

"By birth, yes, but I learnt a lot living outside Kokopo, and then Rabaul, surrounded by Mum's relatives. Magic isn't the same there, and six years is a long time. We have a name for what you dismiss as 'minor brain damage'. It means 'bringing it out', or close to that, anyway. It's not done except in extreme cases, or they would have brought out mine. But it sometimes happens accidentally, too."

She could see that she'd scared her friend, but Lara knew that fear could bring out magic that might have otherwise gone untapped.

"Give over, H," she went on. "I know it must be hard to accept. Dad*still* has trouble with our kind of magic, but it's real, and I think it has to do with what's been eating you all this time."

"Why did you even come up with this dating scheme? You wouldn't have suggested it if you weren't at least half thinking your mum might have had it right. You must have known it wouldn't be easy to find witches willing to participate, especially when you can't tell them *why* they're to be angling after your Severus."

"Well, maybe..." Hermione admitted. "But he's not 'my Severus'."

"No, but you'll never learn the truth about your mum if you don't spend more time with him outside his laboratory."

"It just seems so... wrong, using him like that."

"Only because you'll have to eat your words if everything works out." Lara made quick work of tidying Hermione's hair into an attractive braid and nudged her friend towards their fireplace. "Go, or your dad will start to worry, and your mum will have to paint the truth out just to reassure him and dinner will be ruined."

The smile Hermione tossed over her shoulder was small but genuine.

"And make sure you don't come back without a piece of birthday cake!"

~RP~

"We could have been nicer to him." Mournful brown eyes gaze remained directed at the floor. Emotions were easier to hide when they affected the forms (if not the

substance) of fleshsuits, but not meeting anyone's eyes helped even more. "I feel like this is our fault."

"It's not!" Lily protested. "If anyone is to blame, it's me. Here and there, I let him slip through my fingers."

"Really?" Fred shook his head at the Potters and Lupin. "This isn't about any of you, and no one could have stopped Severus getting into trouble. Not here, anyway. Remus and James barely had anything to do with him when he was still real, and watching him was *everyone's* job."

"But when we were flesh... I could have been a better friend. Even if he was turning into a nasty piece of work. Maybe if I'd accepted his apology, he wouldn't have gone so very dark."

Fred smirked at the very idea, and soon Lily was laughing along with him. James and Remus didn't even smile.

"All right," she said when she stopped laughing. "There's nothing I could have done. But what makes you think *that* lot will do any better?"

~OotP~

"This is the right thing to do!" Exasperated, Hermione shoved back her chair and shot to her feet. "None of you have any qualms at all about asking him to watch over your kids; now, when there's something we can do for him, when there's something *I'm* more than willing eager, actually! to do for him, why are you so resistant?"

She scanned the startled and concerned faces of the people ringing the table. They were all his friends, she believed with her whole heart; none wished Severus Snape any malice. So why was everyone but Ron and George telling her what a horrible idea it was? Unless... She glanced around the room again.

"We agreed weeks ago this is the best chance we can give him. I don't see why that's no longer true simply because now I'm the only one who's likely to do it, and we're running out of time."

"Hermione..." Arthur's voice was hesitant and uncertain. "It's not that we think Severus isn't wor..." He seemed to realise what he was saying quite possibly via a below-the-table kick from his wife, if his strangled yelp was any indication and wisely shut up.

"We don't want him hurt!" Molly put in before he could stick his foot in it again. "It would be different if a more mature witch was showing genuine interest. That's only to be expected. A young witch such as yourself? Oh, Hermione, his head might get turned. You can't imagine how *isolated* he's been! It's worse even than when he was at Hogwarts."

"Right," Hermione said, her voice calmer as she resumed her seat. "*I know* that I wasn't here for the worst of it, and I haven't been back very long, all things considered. But he's my friend, too." Part of her desperately wanted to tell them her interest *was* genuine, even if it wasn't the sort of interest Molly meant. But that would mean telling the Australian secret. "I'm not going to... We'll tell him the truth, of course. I know you didn't want to do that, but I don't think we have a choice there. That way there won't be any chance of him mistaking my intentions, and maybe he won't be as annoyed that we've been Dumbledoring him.

"And when things don't work out, he'll come out ahead in this. I've already got a reputation among witches and wizards who remember back to the Tri-Wizard. They'll just think I'm up to my old tricks again." She frowned, more to herself than to the rest of the company. "Besides, it's not as if you lot came up with your own candidates."

If she'd held out any hope that her little speech would garner anything more than an extended and uncomfortable silence (*sh#ad*, of course) before everyone else saw reason, she was in for disappointment (which she got in spades) until seemingly for no reason at all George started grinning and applauding.

The concerned looks even the ones that had been trained on the tabletop all transferred to their cheerfully clapping companion. And all looked far more worried than they had at the end of Hermione's outburst.

"What?" George asked, feigning innocent confusion. At least he stopped slapping his hands together. "She's right, you know. She's the only one available right now, and we need to get this part done before people start to forget everything else we've put in place. Frankly, she's been my first choice from the start."

A few jaws went slack after he let that slip, but Arthur was stroking his chin and nodding thoughtfully, and Kingsley was smiling, and even Harry was looking at Hermione with interest.

Ron better not have...

"George is right," his youngest brother said. "We should have been pushing her at him all along. Right, Harry?" Ron looked at his friend for confirmation. "He hardly ever wants either of us in the lab since Hermione's been back, and if you ever saw them working together, you'd know why straight away. It's like watching a... thing with one brain and four arms!"

It became immediately clear that Harry, who'd at first returned Ron's regard uncertainly, was warming to the idea. Or had he only been pretending to protest in the first place?

"Yeah," he said, not sounding quite as enthusiastic as either Weasley, but definitely not unconvinced. "They are rather good together. In the lab." He emphasised the last bit. "Snape doesn't even get tetchy when she starts talking about things other than flobberworms and stirring rods while they're brewing."

Hermione smiled. With Harry's support behind it, the battle should be on its way to being half won. Not that she wouldn't have tried anyway, but getting Severus to agree would be a whole lot easier if she had the rest of his friends pestering him to accept the future she had planned. And if Ron had him told her secret, well, she'd deal with *that* later.

"You never *were* on board for Meda," George accused for Hermione's ears only. "I never believed for a second you'd let some other witch have him."

She coloured to the roots of her bushy hair, but smiled and didn't deny it.

~FW~

Maybe it was that he had more interaction with the fleshies, or maybe it was because he had a true twin, or maybe it was just because he had something more personal to gain from ensuring a not-disastrous outcome, but Fred was convinced no one was more frustrated than him at being forced to watch the denizens of the Inner World bungle this latest project.

Merlin's little nudge might have had some small effect on the goings on, but Fred was close enough to the situation to realise his family's plan would be dead in the water if they left everything to Hermione and Ron. It wasn't that those two weren't extremely capable; it was that Severus was too formidable an opponent for them to conquer on their own. Especially if they insisted on keeping mum about their real goals.

Why else had nearly a two weeks gone without anyone taking further action? He didn't count Hermione's timid invitations for Severus to join her for lunch in the canteen as anything like progress.

Fred was sighing as he manifested into the form he most often used in the Inner World and appeared in a tiny Ministry cubicle.

"Look, I know all about Australia, so I get why that might be a problem for you," he said. "But as my twin pointed out, the longer we wait, the less effective our weapons. It's time and past you stopped all this planning rubbish and got started, don't you think?"

Despite the surprise and nervousness and alarm Fred could see pulsing even through her fleshsuit, Hermione Granger rose from her desk as if the souls of her friends popped by for a chat every day she spent at the office.

He smiled approvingly and held out a hand to lead the way.

~HG~

It was as unlike the rest of the barracks as her flat was to the Burrow. Well, perhaps *not that* different. Maybe more like her parents' house compared to her flat. Anyway, it was more than she expected. Six or seven trainees could have been housed here. At least.

Two doorways led off the large and neatly ordered main room. She guessed there would be a bedroom and a bathroom behind those doors, but it was the space she stood in that held her interest.

An entire quarter of the room had been converted into a modern-looking kitchen, and a couch and two small armchairs formed a cosy sitting area. Most surprising was the little alcove to the right of the entrance. It held a spelled window, a small desk and a quietly humming computer, as well as Severus's familiar.

~SS~

Toeing off the slippers he'd worn through the corridors, Severus dropped his boots just inside his quarters.

Not even having already performed all the necessary cleansing and sterilising spells on them made him like keeping them where he lived. Yet, living in the barracks meant he was a potential victim to the pranks that were all too common among the Auror- and Wizard Squad-trainees. So every brewing day, he brought them home with him after showering at the lab.

The relative freedom of his Thursdays meant adding the extra steps of treating the boots to ensure they didn't suffer from the harsh ingredients and the equally harsh spells and soaking his feet to ensure they didn't suffer from being confined in the boots. Only he'd run out of both solutions, hadn't he? He could easily make more, but since the ingredients he needed were part of his private store, he'd been forced to return home with untreated boots and feet.

Of course, I wouldn't have forgotten if I wasn't expected to babysit...

The thought ended abruptly as he caught sight of the object of his grumblings standing in his kitchen.

He ignored the slow gaze travelling from his bare feet to his damp hair and stalked over to her.

"What are you doing here, and how did you get in?"

Impertinent little burglar that she was, Granger *smiled* at him!

"What's got you in a snit tonight?" She didn't give him a chance to pick up the jaw he'd dropped and answer her question. "It's Barrkopf again, isn't it? What did he do this time?"

She finished shredding the mint leaves already in her hands. Oregano, he noticed, waited to be pulverised.

Moving over to the sink, he quickly washed his hands before returning to her side. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her watching him as he scooped two handfuls of oregano into a mortar and began pounding with a pestle.

"What are you doing here?" he asked again.

Then she did something else he most certainly *did not* expect. Hermione Granger impetuous, impertinent and now the impenetrable bane of his intellect physically interrupted his preparations. Grabbing one of his hands in both of hers, she gazed up at him, her face open and beseeching.

"Fred let me in," she said. "Because I need you, Severus. Perhaps as much as you need me."

A/N: Thanks to karelia for the on-going beta reading through many, many revisions!

Chapter Four: *le Rejet*

Chapter 6 of 8

Although Hermione didn't mean to make that particular request, Severus is adamant in his refusal. And while the people who love her are lending sympathetic ears, the People he loves (and the people he loves) are meddling.

Chapter Four: *le Rejet*

Hermione's stomach clenched painfully, and she felt fortunate that her breathing seemed normal enough. Severus was gaping at her. She hurriedly dropped his hands and, ignoring both the mint and the oregano, started chopping sprigs of thyme.

"Granger, I long ago realised you, Harry and Ronald only had one brain among you," he said, "but up until now I had thought you were the one in possession of it. Have your friends' gains resulted in your own loss?"

"You've been friends with Ron and Harry for years now," she said, somehow managing to keep her voice matter-of-fact. "I had thought we were becoming friends, too."

He rejoined her at the workbench. "I would hesitate to call my relationship with Harry a friendship, and Weasley is..."

"He's almost family," Hermione supplied. "And Harry, too, by now." When he didn't contradict her assessment, she felt brave enough to go on. "Well, your *family* and your friends have had some things to worry about lately."

It took longer than she had expected to get everything out, to explain about the Ministry and how he had effectively been training his own replacements, to tell him how his friends had been searching for a solution because they'd all been so worried "especially the Weasleys because they think of you as one of their own" and to promise that they hadn't *meant* to behave like Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. By the time she was finished explaining, he had already prepared the oregano and had a pot set to boil on the hob.

"We have it all worked out, and *that's* one of the things I wanted to talk to you about tonight. I want to help you, and I need your help to do that."

"And you're not in love with me?" The look he gave her was pointed, the raised eyebrow irritating.

"W-what?" she sputtered. "Of course I'm not!" *Is that why he's been so reluctant to give me extra lessons?*

He nodded and weighed a portion of pulverised oregano, but after almost a full minute had passed, he said, "And yet your behaviour tells quite a different story."

"My behaviour has been perfectly in line with the sort of relationship I thought we were starting to have," she said primly. She laid down her knife so her trembling hands wouldn't reveal her disquiet. "I'm still getting to know you. Of course I don't love you."

"Then tell me," Snape sneered, "why is it your two dearest friends have each independently come to the conclusion that you do? That you might even wish to marry me?"

I'm going to murder Ron. Or maybe just torture him. It wouldn't be fair to make Demelza an almost-widow before she gets to be a wife. At least Ginny won't mind me hexing Harry.

"If you believe everything Harry and Ron have to say, you've changed more than I realised," she snapped, finally at the end of her tether. "I only said I wasn't in love with you, didn't I? I've already said I've considered marrying you!"

For a few breathless moments for both of them, she was certain Snape gaped at her again.

"That is... I mean, I did tell the others I would be willing to be the one who *appears* to be considering marrying you."

She didn't like the way he was studying her so intently now.

"Good *god*, woman! And to think I believed you lacked cunning." He snorted appreciatively. "You've got them all fooled, haven't you? Most of them believe you've been secretly pining for your old Potions master, and those who can't quite wrap their minds around that disturbing prospect believe you offered out of the kindness of your noble little heart! None of them have guessed your motives are purely selfish, have they? Either the generous war heroine, returned to do another good turn at great personal sacrifice or the lovesick young witch out to get what she wants by any means?"

She knew she shouldn't indulge in the curious niggles of pride his words inspired really, why should she be proud that he thought her capable of such convoluted machinations? but she was powerless to stop the grin that insisted on plastering itself across her face.

But grinning like a fool won't convince him you're not a 'lovesick young witch', will it?

Forcing herself to sober, Hermione countered with, "Not *all* of my motives are selfish. I really do want to... improve your public image. For *your* sake, not for any dubious praise helping you might grant me. But, yes, there *is* something you can do for me. Possibly. Eventually."

"Oh?" Snape raised an eyebrow, his mouth ticked up just a bit at the corner.

Hermione frowned in earnest, then. Why had she said anything? Now he expected her to actually *tefl* him!

"You might find it a bit... er, a bit... shocking."

"I assure you, miss, after the life I've led, I am decidedly unshockable." He stooped to pull a foot bath from beneath the workbench.

"Er... You see, I hadn't really intended to approach you about it tonight. Actually, the other thing I mentioned was supposed to be a question about countering side effects while still harnessing the benefits of nettle when using it in a hair tonic." She gathered up the herbs they had prepared and dumped them into the simmering pot. "Although, I suppose it *is* related, in a way, to what you might be able to do for me. Eventually. If I decide to ask, that is."

"The answer to your question will depend on which side effects you wish to counter and which properties you wish to retain," he told her, removing the pot from the hob. "We can go over that subject in depth *after* you tell me what, exactly, I might possibly be able to do for you if you eventually decide to ask it of me."

She twisted her fingers into painful knots and gnawed at her lip.

"Just spit it out, Granger."

Might as well get it over with.

She sucked in a deep breath and shouldered on the vestiges of her Gryffindor courage. "Well, you see," she said, "I know nettle has been known to cause difficulties with pregnancies on occasion, and I *may* need to know how to prevent that because I *may* need your sperm. One day, that is."

"What did you say? You need my *what*?"

"I said that I *might* need your..."

"Shut up!"

"It's not..." Hermione's protest was cut off when Knowi let loose an admonishing hiss.

Severus looked from witch to Liverpudlian Rex, then visibly calmed himself. A bit, anyway. He tipped the fragrant brew into the foot bath, added an extra measure of dried peppermint and began stirring in a precise, measured pattern.

"Will you, for just one moment," he began, his gaze focussed somewhere between the cat and the bath, "consider shutting up?"

Hermione glanced at Knowi, but the fastidious feline, apparently satisfied with her charge's feeble attempt at civility, was washing a paw and not paying either of them the least bit of attention.

~*.*~

Hermione pressed a hand against the brick wall facing her and waited for her stomach to stop swirling. Now that she was using it at least weekly again, Apparation didn't usually affect her very much. But she'd been upset when she'd left Snape's Ministry quarters, and she hadn't been much better by the time she'd found a safe place to turn on her heel. She counted herself lucky she hadn't splinched or ended up somewhere miles away from the back of Lara's shop in a smart street of fashionable boutiques.

Feeling perfectly fine after a few deep breaths, Hermione pushed away from the wall and approached the shop's back door.

It swung open before she touched the handle. Light poured out from the room beyond.

"Bearded the lion in his den and survived to tell the tale, did you?"

An urge to sob welled up in Hermione at the sound of Lara's teasing voice. The sight of her flatmate's smiling face nearly pushed her over the edge. Instead, she pasted a fierce frown on her face.

"I told you I'd be late tonight," she said as she stepped past Lara and into The Witch's Daughter.

"So you did," Lara said, closing the door behind her. She crossed the room and started shifting shining laboratory equipment from workbenches to shelves and cupboards lining the walls. "But I've already done your batches for tonight, so all you need to do is tell me."

After a moment, Hermione joined her. "How'd you know where I was? Did you have a visitor of a spectral nature?" Living and working with Lara was scary at times. The woman was far too perceptive for someone who claimed to be a Squib.

Lara laughed. "No. Though, I wouldn't have minded if *he* had come." She gave an exaggerated shiver. "Dead sexy, Fred Weasley is."

Hermione was powerless against the grin that fought its way to her lips. Even as she marvelled at Lara's uncanny ability to *just know* things, amusement at her friend's perfectly timed bout of silliness soothed Hermione's agitated nerves.

"How *did* you know, then?" she asked, determined not to be distracted by levity.

Shrugging, Lara put away the last set of scales and said, "Where else would you have gone? And speaking of, did you manage to ask about the nettles?"

The question brought a rush of fire back to Hermione's cheeks, but she ignored it as best she could. "I did, but before he could give me answer we... Oh, god! I think I might have ruined everything, and now we'll never know the answer, and I don't see how I can possibly face him on Sunday!"

She refused to cry over this. She wasn't the crying sort and hadn't been since she'd left school. Something about fighting a war against ultimate evil had burned the tendency right out of her, she told herself.

"Right," Lara said, and she started pulling pots and bottles and bunches of herbs from the cupboards and shelves. "I've been dying to try out the recipes for 'Me Cry?' and maybe some 'Woe, Begone!' tea. No sense having a makeshift lab in the shop if I can't use it to experiment on friends."

The gleaming laboratory hidden at the back of the shop was by no means makeshift. The Obiye sterling had seen to that. But Hermione found herself smiling again as Lara started ordering her round the room.

~EP~SS~

"You're quiet today." Ermengarde Prince set her cup on a side table and stared at her nephew until he deigned to answer.

"You *like* quiet," Severus muttered into his teacup.

"At my place of work, I demand it. My home is another thing." As if to underline that point, she leant back in the deceptively delicate-looking wing-back chair half-facing the fireplace. It was really quite comfortable and sturdy enough that its mate held Severus's weight without complaint. "I see no need for such discipline away from the library."

He didn't quite scowl, but she could see it was a near thing.

"Then perhaps you ought to get rid of the librarian's face," he said.

She cancelled the glamour she so often forgot she was wearing. It didn't change much, she knew her eyebrows thickened, her hair darkened to a glossy black, the large, hooked nose got smaller and less a bit less crooked, the sunken cheeks filled in, and her vulture-like neck became something approaching swan-like but it was enough to make her look like a new woman to anyone who didn't know of the spell.

"Better?" She didn't wait for answer before adding, "Even if you haven't got anything to say, I have."

He raised enquiring brows and Ermengarde took a deep breath. The news would affect him, whether or not he realised it.

"I've been considering making an honest man out of the old git."

"Which old git might that be?"

"My Argie, of course! Who else?"

"*Who*?" She didn't think he really cared because he took a sip of the tea soon as the question was asked.

"Argus Filch, you dunderhead! We've been friends since we were children and lovers since you were a second-year."

He spat out the tea.

"You and Argus Filch?" He shuddered unpleasantly, rocking the slender chair that barely contained his tall form. "I might vomit."

Ermengarde brandished her wand faster than many would have thought possible.

"You had better mean that picturing Argus naked turns your stomach."

He still looked a touch green, but he composed his features and said, "Yes, of course, Aunt. What else could I have possibly meant?"

She cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx anyway.

~*.~*

"I've been waiting nearly twenty years to see him like this again!" Severus winced at the harsh scrape of Filch's gleeful voice. "I always said you'd be the one to do it, my sweet."

Isn't that the same endearment he uses for the cat? Another shudder made his wobbly legs wobble more.

"What did the bastard say this time?"

He didn't hear his aunt's answer, but he opened his eyes in time to see the unpleasant caretaker lock her in a kiss that was far too enthusiastic and that went on far too

long. If the appreciative noises she was making were any indication, his aunt was quite enjoying herself. When her hands slid down to grasp Filch's boney arse, Severus had to look away before he really did lose his tea.

Still, he wasn't able to stop the gagging sound from escaping his rapidly constricting throat.

Filch prised his lips from Ermengarde to aim a glare in Severus's direction. "What's wrong, Snape? Can't stand the idea of your auntie loving a mere Squib?" He grinned nastily and swung her around to his side, clamping one arm round her waist. "Too bad. You don't get to choose for her."

A burning wave of rage rising from deep inside him threatened to overwhelm Severus's senses. He fought to clear his mind, unwilling to look more closely at the years of pain and shame behind his anger.

"I don't care that you're a Squib." He didn't at least, not in the way Filch was probably thinking. "And you're right. Aunt Ermengarde is free to make her own choices. I'd just rather not see her suffer any permanent consequences."

"Oh, so it's just marriage, then, is it?" Filch spat, gripping Ermengarde even tighter. "A Muggle was good enough for your mum, but a Squib should be beneath your auntie's notice?"

"I told you it's nothing to do with you being a Squib," Severus spat back. "It's everything to do with you being a fool who, instead of accepting his lot, surrounded himself with everything that he wanted but couldn't have," he said, knowing even as he spoke that the words were vicious beyond reason. But he wanted this man, this interloper to feel as horrible as he was feeling. "It's about you being stupid enough to give Galleons to swindlers, year after year, despite all the proof their promises were rubbish. *Dunderheads* should be beneath Aunt's notice."

Severus watched with satisfaction as the man's face turned nearly purple.

"You dirty..."

"Enough!" Ermengarde's voice was fierce, but her eyes eyes that seemed to be trying to bore into her nephew's very soul were full of concern... and possibly understanding. "I won't have the only two people I love left in this world fighting like animals."

Chagrined, Severus looked away. He was disgusted by his behaviour, but the idea he'd tried so hard to suppress that had his Prince grandfather been alive, he would have looked upon Ermengarde's union with a *Squib* far more favourably than he had upon Eileen's with a *Muggle* brought out all sorts of confused feelings: shame and pain, coupled with an irrational desire to protect his parents nearly fifty years too late. The end result had been the rage he hadn't been able to tamp down.

"Forgive me," he murmured, hoping she would sense his sincerity, but not truly believing she could.

"You idiot boy!" The words may have been harsh, but they were spoken with affection. And suddenly, Severus felt a pair of thin arms wrapping around his middle and a sharp chin pressing into his chest. "It wasn't like you think at all, you know." Her voice was muffled, but he understood her well enough. "There's so much Eileen never told you, and I... And I guess I wasn't ready to tell, either. But it's time you knew."

~HG~

Hermione was half convinced she was paying for the sins of a previous life. Not that she really believed in reincarnation, but certainly she hadn't done anything *this* life to warrant everything that had happened over the past two days.

She'd crept into her cubicle at the Ministry hours before she was due, only to have Ron poke his head in ten minutes later. He'd taken one look at the dark circles under her eyes and demanded to know what was wrong. Of course, she hadn't been able to hold anything back from him.

"Shit, Hermione. Everything?"

"Almost everything, anyway," she told him with a nonchalance she didn't actually feel. "I'd only started telling him about Australia when his cat kicked me out."

"Knowi kicked you out?" He looked sceptical. "Are you feeling all right? Did you get any sleep last night?"

"If you can say I'm feeling fine the morning after I've made a fool of myself and possibly ruined a hero's only chance at redemption, then yes, I'm feeling fine. But no, I didn't get any sleep last night." She pressed the heels of her hands to her tired eyes. "Knowi didn't exactly kick me out, but she made it rather clear that she needed to talk to Severus. Alone."

"She said so, did she?"

Hermione uncovered her eyes to find him looking like she'd grown another head.

"He said he's got some sort of translating program for his compu... Yes, Ron, she said so."

Ron shook his head. "Well, maybe it's not as bad as you think, then. She probably put in a good word for you. Liverpoolians *know* things."

"Just like Lara, apparently," Hermione muttered.

The conversation had ended soon after with his admonition that she should take the day off. She hadn't even learned why he'd stopped by or how he'd known she'd be there. And when her boss had ordered her home a couple of hours later, she'd done as she was told.

Lara hadn't wanted her at the shop, and had advised her to Apparate down to her parents' place "if you think you can manage not to splinch. I'll put you on a train if that's beyond you. And I don't want to see your face again before Sunday night."

Apparating hadn't been a problem, and Mum and Dad had been suitably sympathetic before dashing off to their dental surgery. But by dinner time, Mum was already telling her that "at least you've broken the ice", and Dad wasn't much better.

Now she was alone in their modern flat without even the prospect of arguing with them again to distract her from worrying.

"Sorry, darling," Mum had said this morning, not sounding the least bit sorry. "It's not every Saturday I can tear your dad away from his surfboard, so I'd rather not change our plans."

Deciding that Lara would just have to get over her presence, Hermione turned on her heel, thoughts firmly directed on the alley behind The Witch's Daughter.

~SS~

It came out in fits and starts, first round Aunt Ermengarde's kitchen table: his grandfather's aspirations, his parents' marriage, her romance with Filch, and her secret identity everything was connected, in a way.

Ermengarde had understandably not wanted to return to the bosom of her family once she'd left Beauxbatons, and the position at Hogwarts had seemed perfect at the time. That it had opened up so soon after her sister's impassioned plea for help "looking after my poor boy" had seemed fortuitous. That Albus Dumbledore had been not only able but actively willing to help her disguise her true identity had seemed miraculous. Even after she'd learnt his ulterior motives, she couldn't fault the fact that the man had

tried to keep her safe from harm.

Even better, he also had taken on the suitor her father had deemed unacceptable.

"Did you think I *wanted* to be stuck at that damned castle with your poncy wizard pulling everyone's strings behind the curtain?" Filch pursed his lips. "He was the one who had me give Kwikspell a go, knowing it wouldn't work for the likes of me. Wanted to keep me in my place, I expect."

Ermengarde patted his hand consolingly.

"I wouldn't put something like that beyond Albus," Severus murmured. "He was, at his core, a good man, but he enjoyed playing what he thought were harmless pranks."

Severus was feeling a lot more understanding towards the cantankerous caretaker at this point. Filch, it seemed, hadn't really ever been the obsequious sycophant he'd pretended to be. Aunt Ermengarde had begged him to keep an eye on her nephew after his return to Hogwarts as the Potions master. Filch had tossed aside his dignity and complied out of love.

"Still, I would have probably gone after the Potter brat showed up if it weren't for your grandfather's books."

And up until now, that had been the most astonishing thing Filch and Aunt Ermengarde had shared with him. Although Reuel Prince's journals spanned more than seventy years and addressed twice as many topics, one subject dominated. Severus hadn't had a chance to truly delve into his grandfather's writings on the differences between Muggles, Squibs and wizards and what to do about those differences before Ermengarde had announced that they were leaving the cottage, but he had read enough to know that the journals would have been dangerous in the wrong hands.

Voldemort would have killed to get his hands on them had he known where to find them.

Argus Filch had carried those journals, transfigured to look like a giant ring of keys, for nearly three decades.

Severus turned away from the large crumbling house and glanced around him, quickly taking in his surroundings. The garden looked terribly neglected, but it was enormous. A stand of trees stood at the bottom, off to the left.

"Where *are* we?" he asked in spite of already having made what he thought was a pretty likely guess.

"After I revealed myself and told her of my plans, Minerva shared some confidential information that pertains to your situation, and..."

"You mean that I'm to be sacked and left homeless as soon as I've finished training my replacements?"

She looked at Filch instead of meeting Severus's eye. Clearly, she was up to something.

Princes do breed true, he thought, not for the first time, *and not even Beauxbatons could instruct the Slytherin out of her*.

"Yes, that," Ermengarde confirmed. "I knew you'd need somewhere to live, and although the headmistress said the Order are making plans, she didn't seem to think they were likely to work out. Not that she would tell what they were.

"But, anyway," she went on, sweeping a hand out to gesture to the house and surrounding grounds, "this is yours, if you want it. It was the family's main residence the cottage was the other, but I'm keeping that and it should go to a Prince, and Argus and I certainly won't be passing it on to our children."

The chances of most Muggle women becoming pregnant lessened once they reached their mid- to late-thirties or early forties, if he correctly recalled the module in Obstetrics he'd done before he had to leave university. While he was sure something similar must be true of witches, he hadn't a clue what the age of decline would be.

But down that road of thought lay Granger and her ridiculous request. He shook his head, once again forcing his musings away from the rocky path they'd been taking.

"It needs work," Ermengarde said. "And a lot of it at that. But Argie's cousin Jack..."

"Jack Filch. Best builder in Cornwall," Filch supplied.

"Jack and his sons are willing to help if you want the place."

~TT~

"I wouldn't say she's ruined everything," said Fred, "but he might be a bit more difficult to convince now."

"Plan B, then?"

"I doubt he'll want to go back to Spinner's End, but perhaps Plan C?"

George grinned at his dearly un-departed twin. "Lee's already on it, brother. He can have an updated list of appropriate places, wizarding or Muggle, straight away if it comes to that."

Fred nodded in approval. "Clever you! Almost as clever as your more handsome brother."

"Bill, you mean?"

"Right."

The True Twins shared a laugh, but then Fred got that look in his eyes that George knew meant he was seeing something beyond what a normal person could see.

"What is it?"

"Ickle Ronniekins is going to make Mum *very* happy tonight."

~RW~

Mum looked happy enough, but Ron could see the worry behind her smile. Demelza was huddled in a corner with his sisters-in-law and Ginny, and he'd finally stolen a moment away from the all the hearty congratulations. He sidled up to Mum and whispered in her ear.

"All right?"

"Everything is wonderful, dear!" Molly beamed at him, but the underlying concern was still evident, and for a moment, Ron wished he could go back to the days where he was completely oblivious to everyone else's feelings. "Now, if only Charlie would find someone, my work would be done."

"Come on, Mum. I know that's not what's bothering you."

At first it seemed she was going to pretend not to know what he meant, but Ron kept watching her the way they'd taught him at the Academy, and soon enough, she was

spilling everything.

"It's just... Oh, Ronald, tell me this isn't why Hermione didn't come!"

He breathed a relieved sigh, and as much as he wanted to follow that up with rolling his eyes, he settled for smiling, instead.

"Course it isn't." He slung an arm round Mum's shoulders. "In fact, I didn't get a chance to tell her I was going to do it today. She's a bit broken up over Sev, you know."

Molly's interest caught instantly. "Is she?"

"Oh, Mum, you didn't believe that nonsense about her only pretending to like him, did you?" He gave her a conspiratorial look. "It took a long time for her to accept it, but when we were in Australia, we had it on good authority that he was the one."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You see..."

~HG~

Skipping Sunday dinner at the Burrow immediately after that most interesting Thursday night probably wasn't the best way to convince the man she wasn't in love with him and didn't have any ulterior motives beyond the ones she'd already shared with him. The way the infernal man's mind worked, he would decide that, so far as spending time with him, she'd traded quantity for quality, Hermione suspected. After all, she'd still have to show up in his lab at the end of the day four days a week, wouldn't she? And he couldn't exactly turn her away since it had been unofficially *suggested* that it might behoove him to teach Potions to a junior worker in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, could he?

"If you aren't going to actually speak or even listen," her mother said suddenly, "you might as well be at the Burrow instead of hiding out here."

She forced her mind away from her reluctant future (possible) partner in parenthood, and tried to listen to what her mother was saying about colour and light. And living energies, whatever sort of nonsense *that* might be. Because, she told herself, that was the real reason she was in Cornwall instead of Devon. She wasn't "hiding out".

"Sorry, Mum," she said, hoping her smile looked cheerful enough. "Woolgathering."

Living and working in London meant she couldn't keep an eye on her parents. On Mum especially. And how was she supposed to decide if Lara was right about everything if she couldn't tell if her mother was still sane? Dad wasn't much help; he actually seemed to like the changes in his wife, and though the new hobbies he'd brought back from Australia weren't nearly as disturbing as Mum's, Hermione couldn't depend on him to play watchdog when he seemed to be spending more and more of his free time at the beach.

No, neither of her parents were the stodgy dentists whose memories she had modified years ago. They'd even shortened their names because, as her father had said, "Gray and Bette" sound cooler than "Betty and Graham", don't you think?"

"Gray and I wouldn't mind going there, for that matter," Bette said. "It's not too far to drive if you can't manage to Side-Along us both. Molly's invited us, you know."

Hermione hadn't known, and the last thing she needed was for her mother to spend more time with magical people. Especially not these magical people. Or the one in particular. It was bad enough that Bette was sitting next to her, casually talking about magical transportation as if it were an everyday part of Muggle life.

"Maybe in a couple of weeks," Hermione said, faking a yawn. "I guess I'm a bit tired from having two jobs. Old age must be catching up with me. And it can be exhausting there with all the children needing attention."

Knowing she'd said exactly the wrong thing, and ducking her head to avoid her mother's keen look, Hermione nevertheless heard Mum mutter, "Old age! I suppose that makes me ancient."

Fortunately, Dad chose that moment to come in, still sandy from his walk on the beach.

~RW~HG~

Tuesday morning, Ron poked his head in again.

"You're looking better," he said as soon as he saw her. "And if you hadn't been hiding this weekend, you'd already know my news. I did it!"

"Did what? And I wasn't hiding."

"Right," he said, snorting at the blatant lie. "And you haven't been avoiding Potions lessons, either." But then he was grinning and telling her, "I asked Dem to marry me!"

"You did? When? Oh my god, Ron! Congratulations!"

"Sunday. Right before dinner."

"You've been engaged for two days and you're only telling me *now*?"

"It's only been a day and a half, and I would have told you before I proposed. I could have used your help with that but you didn't come." He grinned again. "Had to ask Ginny to keep Dem busy while I hid the ring in her napkin."

"You hid it in her napkin? And *Ginny* helped? She didn't tell you that was a crap idea?"

"Hey! It was going to be Sev, but then Mum needed his help in the kitchen. Folding it up in the serviette was his idea. I wanted to put it in the bread basket."

Hermione found it hard to imagine Ron approaching Snape for help in surprising his fiancée, but then she would have had a hard time imagining many of the things that had occurred around that man recently.

"In that case, I'm glad you asked his advice. Someone might have eaten the ring otherwise."

"That's exactly what he said!" Ron's grin was so big now, Hermione thought he might injure himself. "You two are obviously a match made in heaven, or wherever you go after you die. King's Cross, maybe, like Harry said?"

Screwing up her face into a frown that was only half-faked, Hermione grabbed a paper aeroplane that was zipping into her cubicle and said, "Severus Snape and I aren't a match made anywhere, Ronald."

"Then I guess you'd better get to work on that. Because without giving away too many details; don't shout at me. I told Mum that you were."

~RP~

"Merlin will have our heads if he catches us at it again," Tobias cautioned.

Flashing an impatient red, Eileen reminded him that they didn't have heads at the moment. "Besides," she added, "young Fred has been poking his nose in it every chance he gets."

"Fred is *supposed* to do a bit a of nudging now and then. It's his job, isn't it?"

"No. It's *not* his job. And if Merlin can look the other way when that one breaks the rules, then he can look the other way for us, too." She pulsed a soothing pale yellow, tinged with solemn blue-grey. "Our boy needs us, Toby."

Their boy did need them, Tobias acknowledged, and without any more argument, he dove behind Eileen into Sev's dreams.

~SS~TS~ES~

He always slept better when Mam and Da visited. Tonight they'd been full of some strange sort of excitement from the moment they'd arrived, and Severus found that his memories of *before* were clearer than they had ever been.

Surely there was a reason for that.

"Have you finally come to take me home, then?"

It was hard to tell when they were just blobs of glowing energy, but Severus thought he saw his mam and da exchange glances. Or whatever the equivalent was for glowing blobs of energy. More likely, they were talking to each other without including him.

"Not yet, darling," Mam told him. "You've plenty to do here and learn, still."

In this form, he had discovered many dreams ago, talking to his parents was easy. Soon as he thought of what he wished to say to them, the words the concepts or images or *something* that had no real equivalent in the Inner World reached them automatically. It made lying impossible, and at his level of skill, hiding the truth was equally out of reach. There was literally nothing he couldn't tell them. There was little he didn't *want* to share with them. But they could keep secrets from him, it seemed. And they did.

"I've been trying to be good," he said. He turned imploring eyes on Da; unlike the fleshly man had been, the spirit was the softer touch of his parents. "It's hard because I miss you both so much. Please. Ask Merlin if I can come home."

"Not till the time is right, son," Da said. "Not a moment before that."

"But when will that *be*? How can I learn anything, how can I *do* anything when I don't know what I'm supposed to be learning!"

"I'm sure you'll work out what you need to do," Mam crooned.

Then she and Da enveloped him in their living energy, pouring their love and confidence and pride into this melding that was what passed for an embrace in the Real World.

"We have faith in you, son," Da told him as they both began to pull away.

"But I've been *trying*!"

~SS~

The beacons of light and warmth that were parents faded away, but waking didn't wrench him from the Real World. Not this time. Instead, Severus slept on, and the faintly glowing entity that now haunted his dream had a presence hardly bigger than his own. Neither he nor his companion was dressed in flesh or even the facsimiles of flesh his parents and the others had worn when he'd first gone back after the snake's bite.

"I'll be going In before you," she was boasting. "Mum and Dad said I'm nearly ready."

His dreaming self sensed a *wrongness* to her claim that was confirmed when his dream self snapped back with, "Shut up! You're only little still. I'll be In ages and ages before you."

He knew she was looking at him haughtily then, though he couldn't say how he could tell she was looking at him at all, considering their lack of bodies.

"Don't be silly! My parents have already got their assignments, and they're almost guaranteed to meet in the Inner because it'll be my first time. They do that, you know. Or you would know if you'd been paying attention."

He had no idea what she was going on about.

"And I'm hardly little," she continued. "I might've come to be after you, but I haven't been skiving off, so I've got far more All than you have."

Dream Severus couldn't argue. The evidence was there in plain sight. Dreaming Severus urged his dream self to ask what "All" was, but somehow he knew this was nothing more than memory it lacked the clarity and... trueness and *presence* of time spent with his parents. Besides, he was waking up, anyway.

A/N: Thanks to karelia (for the beta read) and to noodle (for the alpha read and the cheerleading and for making me laugh and cry).

Chapter Five: Il Vaut Mieux Suer que Trembler

Chapter 7 of 8

Forced by circumstances to let go of denial, Severus and Hermione each find the strength to face difficult truths.

The instants that made up the Inner World spun away from the last of their corresponding numbers in the Outer, and the moment ended.

"I don't suppose Merlin would fault us for helping him remember," Tobias said doubtfully.

Eileen glowed with enough delight for them both. "Probably not," she agreed. "And once he's seen our success and ~~w~~*will* succeed in this he might recommend us for an increase in All."

Not at all assured of their success with Severus (he already knew rule-breaking wouldn't get them more All), Tobias was nonetheless happy for his wife. He delved inside himself to find knowledge of when they could discover the results of their efforts. Time ran differently here in the Outer World than it did in the Inner neither faster nor more slowly and while they didn't divide it into days and nights, there were close approximations.

"We've a week before we can touch his next moment," he mused. "Perhaps we could..."

"Explain exactly why and how you managed to nudge that girl whilst you were 'helping' your son? Without permission, I might add."

~*.*~

After repeated denials and a lengthy discussion of the girl's most recently lived moments, they were no closer to solving the mystery, but Merlin was certain that Tobias and Eileen were telling the truth. Not that he was ready to let them know that. Not yet, anyway.

"I don't understand what went wrong," Eileen insisted for the seventh time. "We knew nothing about the girl!"

In a resolute show of solidarity, Tobias half flowed into her. The display would have made a lesser being than Merlin pulse with approval and happiness.

Instead, the ancient materialised a manifestation of his most familiar fleshsuit and pointedly stroked the long white beard hanging from his chin to his navel.

"Mmm, no. You're right," he murmured after several of their moments during which Eileen and Tobias both also took refuge in the difficult to read fleshsuits had passed. Untwining his fingers from his beard, he looked up at them. "This can't have been your doing."

Eileen merely nodded, her peripheral vision showing that Tobias was doing the same. But Merlin didn't seem to be paying attention. He stared at his palm in apparent fascination, appearing to be even further lost in his thoughts.

"Someone with more All than the three of us combined have accumulated might be, erm, experimenting," the old man murmured, almost as if he were speaking to himself. He wasn't of course; they wouldn't have heard the words otherwise, fleshsuits or no fleshsuits. No, he had *wanted* them to hear his words.

"Not...You don't think it's the Timeless...?" Eileen felt herself tremble, and she wondered if she wouldn't feel more comfortable in her natural form. Probably not.

In any case, Merlin scoffed at that idea. "None of us here are so important as to have caught their attention." He turned wise, ancient eyes on them. "At least, you should hope we are not."

Eileen was wise enough herself to hope exactly that.

~HG~

Hermione chased after the last tendrils of the dream, but opened her eyes to find it all too faded and hazy to make sense of. She was left only with an impression of having been very young and very determined. And of a companion who had tried to cover a deep sorrow with a bravado she'd seen through but had treated like hubris.

"I'll do it, then," she whispered in her darkened bedroom. "It's the least I can do to make up for it."

She wasn't sure what she was swearing to do or if the promise had really been her own decision rather than that of someone whose youth had left her too resolute and impetuous for her own good.

~SS~

For the third time in five days, Severus woke to find a cloud of bushy brown fur perched on his chest. A cloud that *crackled* when he ordered it off him. He reached up to touch the spot Knowi Tall had just vacated, and his fingers closed on a sheet of A4-sized parchment.

It was a menu of the day's nicer luncheon choices at the Ministry canteen.

"What do you expect me to do with this?" he asked the cat (also for the third time in five days). "You know I make my own meals."

She didn't answer this time, either. And this time, at least, she didn't hiss in protest when he tossed the offending page aside. Instead, she dropped her Mr Spock soft toy at the foot of his bed and stared at him till he gave up and agreed it was time for his meditation.

~*.*~

"You'll need that, of course, but it's not going to do what she hopes it would."

Severus brought first his right arm, and then the left, up and over his head in unhurried, deep stretches.

Unfolding his legs, he rose into a squat feet set shoulder-width apart, inhaling and exhaling as he held the position. He flowed out of malasana, moving from pose to pose, opening various parts of his body as he gently eased himself from the world of only mind and body to one that included the reality of the main room of his quarters.

At last, with his hands flat in front of his feet, he pushed against the floor until his arse pointed in the air and pressed his face against his knees. Folding in on himself, he sent several breaths in balasana, relaxed and content.

Moments later, he was standing straight, his eyes still closed. The familiar sense of calm and... near-peace gave him the patience to ask, "What the hell are you on about, Weasley?" in genuinely mild tones.

"Meditation and saluting the sun...Don't say it! You don't *do* Surya Namaskara." Fred corrected himself before Severus had the chance. "But while whatever it is you just did and all the meditation in the universe might be good for you, but it's never going to solve your Granger problem."

Severus frowned but only because he was feeling perturbed. "Granger? A problem how? I haven't seen the girl in nearly a week."

A slow smile spread across Fred's translucent face. "Lie to anyone else, but don't lie *to me* and don't lie yourself: you saw her last night when she dreamed the same memory you as you."

~SS~HG~

"How nice of you to grace this laboratory with your presence again, Granger." Severus watched with no small measure of satisfaction as the girl ~~the~~*woman* flushed guiltily and hurried into the teaching lab. "Couldn't come up with more excuses to avoid me, hmm? Theatre blues today."

"I haven't been avoiding you!" But she dutifully went over to the large wardrobe that held the hospital-inspired gear he required all of his students to wear when working on more sensitive potions.

"Liar." He liked how his accusation turned her pink cheeks ruddy.

"I sent an aeroplane." Her voice was muffled, her head deep in the wardrobe.

"Full of excuses."

"I've been... very busy," she said as she emerged with a pile of blue clothing and a lightweight folding screen. Without meeting his eyes, she hastily set up the screen, appearing moments later having donned scrubs and the theatre gown that did for her brewing robe. "As I told you in the aeroplane, things at the shop have been... busy, and there's Mum and Dad and... and Crooks. My cat. He scarcely sees me these days, what with me having two jobs and... things. And I can hardly expect Lara to..."

"Well, there are plenty of *things* that need doing *here* if you mean to catch up your training." To prove his point, he flicked his wand, and several recipes appeared on the blackboard. "As you so helpfully pointed out, the Ministry are eager to be rid of me. Our time is limited."

"But those aren't MLE potions." Her nose wrinkled in confusion. She wound a long strip of blue fabric round her head. While it was far from the frizzed mess of her youth, her awful hair was too voluminous for any normal scrub cap to contain. "Why do I need to learn them?"

Severus didn't have an answer. Not one he was willing to give, anyway.

"No more excuses, Granger. Today, you will begin to learn the improved Wound-binding Solution I developed last year, and you will return every evening until you have mastered every potion I have taught or created these past four years. Do I make myself clear?"

"I..."

He filled a cauldron with distilled water and lit a fire beneath it.

"But what about my...?"

"I don't include weekends, of course. And you may bring the cat," he told her rather than admit he hadn't the least clue what he was supposed to do with her.

"I meant my job. My other job, I mean. I am supposed be at the Ministry only part time, but I've already been putting in loads of extra hours here for your lessons. Hours I'm meant to be at the shop. Lara *needs* me."

"Right. She couldn't possibly find anyone else to run the till with as much skill as the great Hermione Granger does." He pointed at a tank of Lolabugs swimming among murky green seaweeds. "Express the venom sacs of three of those. Medium. Try to do it without killing them. Return any survivors to the tank."

"What?" But she was already back at the wardrobe, pulling out dragon-hide gloves small enough to fit her hands.

"Don't kill the Lolabugs. They are difficult enough for a fully trained potioneer to acquire. You will find it nearly impossible once I am gone."

"Oh, er, right." She stuffed the gloves in a pocket and grabbed a small net and a glass bowl on her way to the tank. "I'm not a shop assistant, you know. Well, that's not my main job, anyway. I help Lara develop new products. At night, after the shop's closed. But anyway, I know better than to bring my cat into the lab; Crooks sheds."

As if on cue, Knowi Tall appeared, twining herself about Granger's ankles. Snape smiled thinly at the witch's look of consternation. He smiled wider as she netted three mid-sized Lolabugs in quick succession.

"It's a good thing, then, that I've also developed a no-mess exfoliation charm. Good for felines and for the lab. Hairs and dander disappear as they are released."

"But..."

"And if you are as overworked as you claim, I am sure Ms Obiye will see the sense in having you brew or whatever it is that you call whatever it is that you do for her only at the weekend. You can hardly be an effective employee if you're too tired to follow proper procedure."

Granger stalked across the lab, Knowi trotting behind her. She banged the bowl down on the worktop and threw her gloves next to it before whirling to face him.

"You're not being fair! Just because you are content to spend every moment you aren't working with nothing but a colourful ghost" ...Severus only just stopped himself laughing as Fred's head suddenly materialised behind Granger and poked a tongue at her before disappearing just as quickly... "and a cat..."

Knowi's affronted yowl cut her off, and Granger stooped to pat the cat, saying, "Not that you aren't a lovely specimen of your species."

"You *would* think so," he muttered. Not that she seemed to hear.

Knowi squirmed away and blinked out of sight, and the infuriating girl wasted a moment looking dismayed; then she stood, giving slight shake which undoubtedly echoed the mental one. "Just because you're content with having only a dead person and Knowi for company," she repeated, "doesn't mean the rest of us don't need more. Other people and... and cats get lonely! They like to be with their families, their friends."

Severus snorted. "Funny, I could have sworn you said that Ms Obiye needs you at *heshop*."

"Lara is my friend and my flatmate." She pulled her gloves on with more force than the task needed. "I don't just work for her."

"Friends, yes. You did mention how important it is to spend time with them. You're right, of course. I know because I see your *two best mates* far more often than they see you, and I have to listen to them complain that you never make time for *them* lately." He scowled as the colour leached from her cheeks. Guilt was a dagger he knew well, and he had no sympathy for any who left themselves open to it. "Too busy helping your other *friend* at her shop, I suppose. Or perhaps you're too broken up over your erstwhile lover's recent betrothal to face him. Much like you were too embarrassed to do your job after practically propositioning me. Yet another of your *friends*, I believe you called me." She started to protest, but he interrupted her again. "Fine! Mornings, then. Show up at the canteen soon as it opens that's ninety minutes before Magical Creatures expect to their prize employee's arse in a chair and I'll give you an hour's instruction every morning."

She stared, struck dumb and probably as dunderheaded as her two friends has once been.

"I expect you to show some gratitude. I like my life and my routine as it is, Granger. But as distasteful a prospect as it might be, if it means getting rid of you, I'm willing to briefly change my life to suit your current disposition."

She laughed. The reaction was startling enough to break the tension and sense of... shame he'd so carefully been building in her, and he stared at her, no doubt looking as foolish as he was feeling.

"What?" He snapped at her to more to relieve his own discomfort than because of any animosity he felt towards her.

"Sorry," she said through gasping giggles. "It's just... There's a song, and... Oh, god. Never mind. I'm sorry."

He gave her a hard look, but went on. "Don't imagine for a moment that this means I'm open to your advances. The sooner I am done with you, the better. Now, as I am generously giving up pub night with your mates for your benefit, I expect diligence on your part in exchange. You're still stuck seeing me, of course, but you seem to have got over your temporary insanity there."

"Whether you think I'm any good or not, Lara really does need me."

Silence hovered between them for a moment he knew she must find long and painful. Severus watched her spirit wither under his stare. He ignored the voice at the back of his mind suggesting this mightn't be the best way to help the girl. Honesty. It was the best he could give her.

"Does she?" he said at last. "Or do you need her?"

She didn't answer, instead turning her attention to quickly and expertly expressing venom from the three Lolabugs.

He drove the last nail into her coffin of mortification. "Sundays shouldn't be a problem for you, as you've already abandoned Molly Weasley again."

There wasn't much she could say against his arguments after that, though he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd tried. But she didn't, and they got on with it. That night. And the next. And the next. Until, by the end of the week, they had settled back into some semblance of their previous... if not exactly camaraderie, then at least not enmity.

"I'll be at the Burrow this Sunday, actually," she told him Friday, pausing at the doorway to the lab, her hideously ugly cat tucked under one arm. "I suppose I'll see you there."

"I don't suppose you will," he told her, feeling unexpectedly pleased to see a flash of disappointment cross her face. "I've other plans that may carry over till Sunday." He wasn't sure why he was telling her so much of his business, but the increasing guilt blooming on her face made him add, "Molly doesn't mind because, unlike some people, I thought to inform her well in advance."

~BG~GG~

Lying, as a rule, went against Gray's nature. Not because he had any moral aversion to telling an occasional untruth. Rather, he tended not to lie because wasn't very good at it, and he reckoned it was usually pointless to try.

He didn't lie to his patients even a five-year-old knew that a "this won't hurt" coming from a man about to stick a needle in her mouth was a liar and over the years had (without much success, mind) exhorted his colleagues to do the same.

Before he'd met the woman he would one day marry, his penchant for telling the truth hadn't always stood him in good stead. Teachers learned very quickly that they could get the real story of what happened when their backs were turned if they asked Graham Granger. He wasn't very far into his adolescence before girls knew better than to seek out his opinion about how they looked in this skirt or with that hair style.

He was in his third year of university before Betty Bellamy befriended him and taught him how not to get told off by women who were initially attracted by his thick dark hair and brilliant smile. He'd known of her in a vague sort of way, but they had never actually spoken until the day she'd witnessed his honesty at its worst.

"Next time, you might not want to compare her make-up to a clown's."

Graham spun around, cheek still smarting from the ringing slap he'd just got from Charlotte Perkins, a girl he knew only a little better than the one criticising him from her perch on a low stone wall. She was two years below him, he recalled, but also doing a degree in dentistry. Mouse brown curls framed a face rendered no less sweet by its sardonic expression.

"She asked if it made her lips look sexy because she wanted you to ask her out," the girl on the wall Betty something told him. "She probably bought it with you in mind. It's new, you know. Most of the girls on our course are trying it because Roydon recommended it. Claims it's guaranteed to make men salivate after a single glance."

"It doesn't." Graham shook his head in wonder that *any* of the dentistry students he knew were willing to take advice make-up advice from fifty-year-old tutor who'd only returned because she'd divorced her American husband. "She looked like she'd escaped from a circus!"

"True, but you didn't have to say that. And you'd best think about what you *should* say instead, because Charlotte's not the only one who hasn't yet given up on you." Betty slung her bag over one shoulder and jumped off the wall. When she started walking down the path, opposite the direction he needed to go, Graham nevertheless fell in step with her. "I happen to like it when a bloke says, 'You're too pretty to need cosmetic enhancement' or some other nonsense."

"How can you say you like it if you think it's nonsense?" He didn't know why he was walking with this girl he didn't even know why he was talking to her but he was eager to hear her answer.

"Because the right sort of nonsense can leave you feeling good." She grinned at him in a way that showed just how little cosmetic enhancement she required. "And sometimes it's even true."

Not long after that they'd become best mates despite the age disparity. Under her tutelage, his brusque frankness had mellowed into a sort of genial honesty that the women of Birmingham had found intriguing and even endearing. But in the end, he hadn't cared about what other women saw in him; a year and a half later, he admitted he wasn't immune to his friend's ability to charm almost anyone.

Since Australia, that quality had only got stronger, and the same trait that had often left him dateless in his youth now made him that most oxymoronic of medical practitioners: a popular dentist.

So when Bette had suggested he call their daughter and tell her they were having a romantic break, so she needn't bother coming home, he'd done it. Not without a sense of remorse this being the second weekend they'd tried to be rid of her, and all but he'd accepted it as necessary. Even if it also meant giving up his Saturday morning surfing to search northern Cornwall for an abandoned estate which, for all that he could tell, didn't exist outside his wife's dreams. He believed in Bette more than he believed in the blue or the sky or the ocean's slate grey.

He glanced at his wife one last time before turning back to the unbroken wall of green.

"If you're sure," he muttered, more to himself than to Bette, and gripped the steering wheel more firmly.

"Of course we're sure. You trust me, and I know I'm right," his wife assured him. "Go on. I'm dying to know if I was dreaming of *Lactarius delisiosus* or *Lactarius deterrimus*."

~SS~

Reuel Prince hadn't hated Muggles, it turned out. Not exactly. They were faulty, deficient, flawed, defective. But they couldn't help themselves, and he felt they were deserving of a wizard's pity. That consideration hadn't been extended to Squibs.

Reading the man's journals had showed Severus just how much his mother's father had chafed under the restrictions imposed by International Statute of Secrecy. The Prince patriarch didn't think the answer lay in genocide or enslavement. No, he had devised a solution that was nearly as horrifying because of his simplistic understanding of its complications.

"Assimilation." Severus spat the word, then shook his head. Knowi kneaded his knee with her paws.

"So he thought." Filch's voice lacked venom, but that didn't fool Severus into believing the older man approved, either. "But only with new stock, or far away enough to be like new. Like your father."

His grandfather had sought to rid the world of Muggles thereby rendering the Statute unnecessary by breeding out the lack of magic. The notion would have seemed almost noble if it hadn't been the cause of his parents' misery.

Still, it was better than what he'd always assumed to be Reuel Prince's ideology. He'd been wrong to think his grandfather had valued Squibs over Muggles, yes, but Aunt Ermengarde could have ignored the old man's wishes once she no longer lived under his roof. It was a justification a rationalisation and Severus knew it. But it was the only way he could contemplate the future Ermengarde wanted for him without being drowned in guilt. Knowing that the man had been an idealistic, though plainly stubborn and somewhat unethical, idiotic genius made accepting his inheritance somehow less repugnant. Not that he intended to keep it.

"Of course you can sell it," she had assured him soon after his arrival the night before. "But you'll have to fix it up first, else who would want it? All that work..."

Just how much work it would take was the question Severus was bent on answering as soon as he could extricate himself from his aunt and her wedding plans. By the time she and Filch got round to asking his opinion of possible ceremonies for the fifth time, Severus decided he'd had enough.

"You didn't need my permission before, and you don't need my advice now," he told them. "Just tell me what I need to do, if I need to do anything, and I'll do it. Or not. Now, I'd like to take another look at the estate if you don't mind."

Concern spread across Aunt Ermengarde's stern face, but surprisingly, before she could protest, Filch came to Severus's rescue.

"You'll want an expert opinion and an expert to do the work," the grizzled old keeper said. "Like I told you, Jack Filch is the best in those parts. You'd never know he was a Squib, the way he sings the stone. Most claim he isn't, but he's got no more magic than me. Did a run in the family, our generation, the curse did. But his boys are wizards, even if they're only half the stonemasons their father is."

"I see." And Severus did see. The Filch "curse" was likely part of the reason this wedding hadn't taken place when he was still a boy. Confirmation of his suspicions was written in the regret on Ermengarde's thin lips. "I would like to meet your..."

"Cousin," Filch reminded him.

Severus gave a sharp nod and stood, dumping Knowi from his lap. "But not today."

"He don't come cheap, but he won't bleed you dry, either." Filch gave a nod of his own. "And the work'll be worth every Knut."

"I trust it will." Severus moved towards his aunt as if he might embrace her, but thought better of it. Like the Snapes, the Princes weren't much for physical affection. He settled for giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Brow raised, he looked at Knowi, but she leapt into Ermengarde's arm instead of his.

"She'll come after you if you need her, I suppose. 'Pudlians always do, don't they?"

He gave both his aunt and the cat a small smile and said, "I'll return before evening," then turned on his heel, leaving the woodland cottage in a swirl of time and space.

~*.*~

It was both worse and better than Severus remembered. The house was small by, say, Malfoy standards, but it would have done nicely for the Weasleys when all of the children were in residence and had a bit of room to spare for a grandchild or four. *Or five*, he amended, recalling that Ginevra had recently announced she meant to quit the Harpies.

A walk around the entire structure, taking closer looks than he'd bothered with before, revealed that he wasn't about to inherit an actual pile of rubble. The oatmeal-coloured stone was weathered and working itself loose in places, but he was inexplicably confident that Jack Filch could do everything his cousin claimed.

On his third circuit, he let his eyes find the foundation-stone. He scowled at the claw-like handprint at the bottom left corner and at the words etched dead centre.

This stone was laid by Reuel Prince on the 9th Day of May, 1927.

The man hadn't yet had a wife, but he'd meant to start filling the house with his get as soon as he found a suitable witch. And when said "suitable witch" had failed to produce more than two daughters, Reuel Prince had been left with a great empty museum of a house and a fortune diminished by a world-wide crisis.

Swallowing a lump of unease, he stared at the handprint. Once he did this once he accepted this *gift* from the monster who had destroyed his parents its weight would wear on him until he rid himself of it. It was a burden Ermengarde Prince had spent her life avoiding, yet he feared she would take it on if only to spare him.

The man he was still trying to become couldn't allow that to happen.

He pricked the tip of his thumb and each finger, in turn, before drawing the needle across his palm just below his knuckles and again just above his wrist. As he spoke the words Aunt Ermengarde had made him repeat over and over again until she was satisfied he knew what he was about, he pressed the seven crimson points into the stone handprint.

The house... changed. It was still neglected and in need of repair, but as it accepted him as its new... family, it seemed to square its shoulders and brush off the dust. It wasn't beautiful, but it was less *unwanted inheritance* and more disturbingly, considering his plans something akin to *home*.

Its power and its... *presence* washed over him. Immediately, he knew something wasn't as it should be.

~*.*~

"How did you get here? Access to the drive should have been... limited."

"I suppose you mean your Muggle-repelling whatsits," the bearded man said cheerfully. Severus's wand hand twitched, but he forced himself not to hex the grinning reprobate. "They can't stop my Bette, here," the man explained, slinging an arm around the familiar-looking woman. He winked, grinned even more foolishly and gave the woman a decidedly inappropriate squeeze. "And since, erm, *things* happened to us, I've learnt to trust my wife's instincts. Unreservedly. Even when that means driving straight at a hedgerow."

The woman was barely paying attention. "We came to see your mushrooms, actually." She waved her arm in a lazy half circle. "I can't work out what they are. I know what *this*" ...she raised a book filled with page after page of colourful photographs... "says they should be, but they shouldn't be growing all together."

Severus let his lips creep into a nasty little smile. "Your daughter didn't happen to inherit her irritating capacity to assume she's always right from you, did she?"

He wasn't quite surprised when the woman had a less than dramatic reaction to his implication.

"Hermione wouldn't thank you for that." Her grin was remarkably unlike anything he'd ever seen on Granger's face. She used her chin to point over his shoulder as she said, "And we're willing to admit when we don't know something. Sometimes. For instance, I still haven't a clue what those are. I was hoping to find *Lactarius delisiosus* here."

"The blue ones are *Lactarius indigo* usually confined to Central America. But stranger things are possible given enough magic and know-how. Edible, but... I suppose you might call it an acquired taste that some won't ever acquire. The disgusting-looking monstrosities are *Lactarius sanguifluus*." Pulling a folding knife from his jeans pocket, Severus plucked one and sliced into it, releasing the blood-red discharge for Granger's mother to see. "They *aren't* exactly rare here, and frankly, most mushroom lovers think them superior to your beloved saffron milkcaps."

"The latex is certainly gorgeous," she allowed, peering more closely. "It looks like wine. But I'm visually partial to the bright orange milk, actually."

"If there's any truth to his journals, my grandfather never attempted to eradicate the *delisiosus* already growing here."

Wrinkling her nose in a way that reminded Severus far too much of Granger, she swung her head from side to side and took several steps back. "Where?"

He pointed behind her. "You're nearly standing in it. Take a step back and about six of them will lactate all over your boot."

"All this talk of lactating and latex sounds a bit like confessing sexual fetishes." Granger's father winked at his wife. "I'm not sure that's appropriate conversation for the future father of our grandchildren."

She swatted her husband, grinning at him madly even as Severus glared at both of them.

"Gray! You know we're doing no such thing."

"And I don't intend to father your daughter's brats."

"Try not to sound so sure about that, mate," said Gray Granger. "Could leave you looking like an arse when you do. Bette's rarely wrong about the future."

~HG~

Returning to the Burrow was easier than she'd imagined it would be. There were no recriminations over her absence at least not from the any of the adults present. Teddy repeatedly asked had she and "Uncle Rus" had a row, and what was she going to do to make it up to him so they could play with him next week?

"You're not as fun as Uncle Rus, but there's no one else to play with us."

Having delivered his lecture and conscripted her to act as Severus's replacement, Teddy spent the next two hours demanding she entertain him and baby Fred and little Molly while everyone else relaxed or helped the original Molly in the kitchen.

The lecture was the worst of it. The playing was the best of it: not only because she hadn't done nearly enough of that when she'd been a child herself, but also because she was fairly certain being with the kids shielded her from adult curiosity for the duration.

All too soon, it was time to send the littles off for a wash and to set the table. While Andromeda took over, she was left to face the music, so to speak.

Luckily, Fleur and Bill had taken their children to France, and Harry and Ginny were mercifully silent on the matter as they laid out linens and cutlery. Between Fred and Ron, Hermione surmised, George and Angelina had at some point had more or less the whole story, and George pulled faces at her whenever one of his parents tried to reassure her that everything would work itself out in the end.

Ron and Demelza were too busy considering and rejecting possible wedding dates to pay her much attention, although at one point, the latter had whispered conspiratorially, "Maybe we can have a double ceremony if you could get the git to come round soon, but I won't hold my breath, as I know what you're dealing with. It took Ron long enough. Wizards!"

The idea was so ridiculous, both women laughed long and loud and refused to tell anyone why. Hermione felt herself relaxing again.

But a seat at far end of the table and three little ones to watch wasn't enough to stop her catching the knowing glances Molly continued to throw at her. And since Arthur was sitting next to her at the foot of the long table, she had to endure his occasional (but discreet) consoling pats of her hand, never mind that Freddie was sitting on her knee and Percy's Molly was perched on his.

Still, dinner was as delicious as always, even without Severus Snape's interesting contributions, and the three children provided just enough distraction so that, after a bit, Hermione forgot to worry.

The littles' plates hadn't been cleared and most of the grown-ups were still eating, but Little Fred was ready for a parent's arms. That's when it happened.

"Give him to George or Ange, Hermione," Molly told her, "then you can help get pudding for the babies."

~*.*~

As ordered, Hermione followed Molly into the kitchen. Without thinking, she walked straight to the Welsh dresser catty-corner to the ancient range and picked up an ice cream bowl. Only when she joined Molly at the table did she realise her mistake.

There wasn't any triple-chocolate ice cream waiting for her to dish out. No Chocolate Digestives to crumble over it and no chocolate syrup to pour on with too heavy a hand. No chocolate tadpoles to drown in the syrup.

Because this Sunday, at least, Severus was absent.

"Gets to be a habit," Molly observed, nodding at the dish in Hermione's hand, "taking care of the ones we care for."

"I guess I *did* get used to his awful taste in desserts." She smiled ruefully until she wasn't smiling at all. And she didn't carry the bowl back to the dresser.

"It hard, I know, loving someone when they don't even know you're breathing the same air as they are." Molly giggled and cut into second pie. Dark berry juice bubbled out. "What has he had to say about it?"

"He doesn't know anything about it," she admitted, feeling her cheeks heat without understanding why she should be embarrassed or why she didn't want to correct Molly's interpretation. "I haven't told him."

Molly set the knife down and turned to Hermione. Her motherly face was so full of wisdom and understanding, Hermione was hard put not to stare at the bowl in her hands. But just when she thought she might dissolve under that compassionate gaze, Hermione was swept into Molly's arms and held close.

"Tell him, love," the older woman whispered into her ear. "Tell him, or neither one of you will find the happiness I know is waiting for you."

Still clutching the small dish, Hermione wrapped her arms round Molly's plump shoulders and clung as if letting go was an Unforgiveable. Even as she took comfort in the embrace, she wondered why she still didn't feel the least bit guilty about going along with Ron's version of the story.

~SS~HG~

"I haven't been completely honest with you." She spoke out of the blue Monday evening, and when she looked up at him, he was too surprised at how grave her expression had become to let loose the sharp retort clinging to the tip of his tongue.

"Haven't you?"

~*.~*

At first it was funny to see people scurrying by and catching snatches of conversation. After the fifth time they overheard someone complaining about the cold, Hermione and Ron exchanged glances and burst into laughter. Winter had never been so warm in Scotland, and the July temperatures they'd left behind in Devon hadn't been so different to this.

"It's fine for you two," Allen Gracie teased. "We're not used to freezing our arses off here."

But Hermione took the man seriously and sobered straight away. "Auror Gracie..."

"Lighter."

"Lighter?"

Their escort winked. "Our answer to your Aurors. 'Cause we're more enlightened down here," he explained. "And lucky for you, that means I know where to find Wendell and Monica Wilkins."

The Australian Ministry hadn't let any grass grow under their feet whilst war was being waged amongst the magical denizens of the UK. They'd been watching recent immigrants magic or Muggle for at least two years by the time Monica and Wendell Wilkins arrived in Adelaide. And when the couple settled on Kangaroo Island only two months after their arrival, they kept watching.

Ron was as impressed as Hermione, and he asked Gracie dozens of questions as they travelled to Kangaroo Island by means both magic and Muggle. The differences between Australian and British procedure were fascinating, and Hermione wanted to ask dozens more.

But she found her parents waiting for her her mum proudly wearing a tee shirt with Hermione's face, painted in garish colours, on the front at a pretty little shop in Kingscote, Hermione forgot about it for nearly a year.

~*.~*

Seemingly still lost in her memories, Granger traced circles on the workbench with an index finger.

"She always used to say she could see the colours of music or hear the music of colours," she mused, almost as if she were talking to herself. Perhaps she was. "Something like that, anyway."

"Dad and I used to smile about it. Even after we learned that it was a real thing and there's even a name for it, we teased her, and she didn't mind at all. But this the paintings... The colours might match, but it's not the same. I think even Dad's frightened of it sometimes. Or at least he was when I first found them again. Now..."

Her self-absorption was irritating. Fearing they'd never get on with the lesson if he allowed her to indulge herself, Severus resorted to sarcasm to drag her out of it.

"Did I understand you correctly? You are considering me as a potential sperm donor because your mother is a synaesthete, but that has absolutely nothing to do with your reasons for wanting to pretend to be my girlfriend. Have I got that right?"

"No you haven't," she snapped. "Mum's... synaesthesia" ...she said the word as if she were testing its flavour or perhaps its weight on her tongue... "hasn't got anything to do with what's wrong with her now. The colours are a coincidence." Her voice rose and her words came more quickly as she became visibly and audibly agitated. It was nearly as annoying as the soft, dreamy cadence had been.

"Or perhaps your Auror..."

"Lighter."

"...friend had tipped her off."

"He hadn't it wasn't allowed. Maybe she remembered about it from before or it didn't go away when I..."

"But you don't believe your mother sees the future and paints it, then?"

"I don't believe anyone who says they see the future."

"And the prophecy?" He almost hated her for reminding him of it. "The one that foretold the triumph of a boy with more power than sense over an insane but brilliant Dark wizard? I suppose you don't believe in that, either?"

She glared at him for a moment before looking away, her cheeks reddening.

"That was different," she muttered. "That was magic."

"I see. And what is magic, Ms Granger?"

"I don't know what you want me to say," she said.

"Come, I'm sure someone as... inquisitive as you has given it some thought."

"Magic is... It just *is*. Like breathing."

Unable to help himself, he laughed.

"Yes," he agreed when he could speak again, which wasn't very long after. "Magic *is* like breathing. For you and for me. But that says nothing about what it's. Why we have it. Why your parents or your flatmate supposedly can't.

"Tell me, why *can't* they have magic?"

That the know-it-all didn't know at all was written clearly across her face.

"And if they can't have magic, however small it might be, why would you need me at all?"

Chapter Six: Ce n'est pas L'amour

Chapter 8 of 8

Love may be all you need, but who needs love?

"I never imagined it would be this... personal. I didn't think I'd still have her on my hands."

"Why do you?"

"Because she... Because I do. Because she still hasn't found her way. Because before, I didn't know how to help her, and now I suspect... Because I thought I had more time."

As usual, he avoided Dr Listener's frustratingly patient gaze. He wanted to see the woman turn angry. He wanted to make her lose her temper. He wanted her to vent those frustrations for him, but they only grew as the silence lengthened.

In the end, she spoke first. "What's changed?" She asked it patiently, of course.

"We're running out of time." He handed over a copy of that morning's *Daily Prophet*.

~*.*~

"It's the only way, Severus," Kingsley had said, his voice surprisingly grave. No doubt he was concerned for the girl. "Luckily, they believed it. You've been seen with her in the canteen, and she's been seen entering your quarters at night. No other witch would ha... There's no one else appropriate. I *did* try."

Keeping his face coldly expressionless, Snape forced himself not to snap at the insult Shackbolt hadn't quite cut off. It wasn't as if his words were a surprise.

After all, Severus Snape was not a handsome man, and he never would be. Without the evidence Kingsley had pointed out, even Hermione Granger would have seemed an unlikely romantic prospect for someone so unattractive.

It wasn't just the sickly, pallid tone of skin or the yellowed snarl of teeth hidden behind his thin, cruel lips. Not even the great hooked nose protruding between and beneath one really could not emphasise enough just how *much* of his face it covered his cold, black eyes was what made him so unsightly. No, Severus Snape brilliant Potions master, war hero and one of the bravest men wizarding society had never known was horrifically unattractive because his *nature* was even more profoundly ugly than his countenance. He did not try to tell himself otherwise.

"Thank you, Kingsley, for delivering the news personally," he told the Minister for Magic. "And I appreciate your efforts on my behalf. If you will inform me of when and where the rite is to take place, I give you my word that I'll not shirk my duty."

Unfortunately, most magical folk took in his face, added that to his sour, dour and coldly superior personality and concluded that the man must be as evil as his looks. He was nothing of the sort, of course. But that didn't stop witches and wizards the world over hating him. It hadn't stopped the Ministry punishing him in a manner painful enough to make even Hogwarts' legendary dungeon denizen tremble in something like fear.

"I *am* sorry, Severus," the Minister said sadly, and this time Snape realised the pity was aimed at himself. "They aren't so far gone as to think they can plan *ifor* you. You get to choose the time, at least, so long as you *do* choose. But it will have to be soon."

"And what does Granger have to say about this new turn of events?"

"Hermione? I haven't told her yet. That's next." Abruptly, his eyes widened in comical concern. "She still means to...? She hasn't changed her mind, has she?"

"No, I don't believe she has." Severus didn't tell him that the girl probably had reasons of her own for wanting the connection.

Kingsley's exhalation was too obviously full of relief for Severus to miss the very real fear that had inspired it, but he didn't acknowledge that. Instead, he listened attentively as Kingsley went on, reiterating details already delivered, expounding on expectations.

"How long?" he asked when the minister seemed to run out of things to repeat.

"I don't know. Not before the New Year, I expect. It'll take them that long to plan and prepare the award ceremony, and they won't want to... do anything rash before that. You can expect an owl tomorrow, first thing. But whether or not you accept the 'honour' they're planning, the first story is likely to be in the morning's *Prophet*, and there'll be *hints* in it."

It only made sense that the Ministry would do everything in their power to keep him from running once they were through with him. They mightn't wish to keep him, but they wouldn't wish to be blamed for St Mungo's completely losing access to his genius.

Severus doubted they knew about the estate in Cornwall. Even the Weasleys weren't aware yet. But somewhere, he knew, in the deepest bowels of the Ministry, a very junior clerk would have been notified soon after the spell of acceptance was completed. Still, only a few officials at the Ministry's highest levels were privy to the true nature of The Snape Situation, so he didn't fear that they would have been informed of his inheritance.

His secret weapon. His escape route.

"You can take care of the other... ceremony anytime after that, any reasonable time, that is. I expect Hermione will have something to say about that. But you can discuss it with her tomorrow. I'll see you then, Severus. It's probably best that I be the one to break the news to her."

Kingsley was nearly through the lab's door before Severus thought to stop him.

"Arthur Weasley," he said. "Take Arthur with you."

~*.*~

"How is any of this going to help Hermione? And, again, why do you feel it's your responsibility to help her at all? You don't still believe the Weasley family want you to sacrifice your own happiness for her."

"Of course, she thinks I mean to give in. I've already seen more of her than I did in six years at Hogwarts." It was only a small exaggeration, and it gave him an excuse to ignore her second question. "She went from avoiding me to scarcely leaving me alone, turning up at all hours with packets of information from special doctors who expect their male to have a wank in tiny rooms stocked with filthy videos. And now there's nothing I can do to be rid of her."

The first visit, he told Listener, came about when Granger had rapped at his door on the pretext of seeking an answer about her previous question on a nettle substitute.

"I'd say she was shocked when I actually answered her." Lips twisting cruelly, he smiled at the memory of Granger's slack jaw. "But she kept coming back."

By the second Thursday night, she was insistent that they really had become friends of a sort somewhere along the way, but that his native surliness made him try to hide it. Three Thursdays later, he still hadn't found a way out of advising her on developing new products for The Witch's Daughter.

"Why not? *Do* you mean to go through with it, after all?"

For only the second time since they'd been meeting, Severus considered being completely honest with his therapist. He didn't know exactly how much he *could* explain, and in the past, he'd used that uncertainty as a reason to avoiding explaining much that he didn't *want* to share. But now... now such evasiveness seemed almost pointless.

"I don't know," he told her. "I have at least four months to prepare my own alternative ending, but I don't think she'll be allowed to continue as she's been doing for much longer."

Before she could ask him again why Granger's future mattered *to him*, Severus told her what he'd learnt about Bette Granger.

~HG~

Hermione grabbed her jacket and sprang towards the door just as it swung open.

"Late again, Madam Snape?"

"Will you *never* stop calling me that?"

"Not as long as you blush every time I do." Lara grinned wickedly and pressed a finger against Hermione's hot cheek. "Course, by then it will probably be your name, so I won't have to stop."

Pulling away, Hermione leant back against the wall to the right of the door. "That's the problem," she said. "I'm not sure it ever will be my name."

"Oh, H." Looking contrite, Lara moved to take Hermione into her arms.

"No. It's all right. I'm not giving up. Yet. But you're right. I'm late. To see my parents."

And then she pushed away from the wall and hurried through the open door.

~*.*~

It hadn't been a lie. Not really. This took time, and if she'd waited, she might not have had enough before Mum and Dad returned from wherever they went when they were avoiding spending Saturdays with her.

Hermione looked again at the scores of images before her. Severus Snape stared back from them all. In most, he was accompanied by two small children with dark curls, laughing faces and eyes as dark as his. In a few, he held a single hairless baby. In others he had a toddler or two wrapped round a leg or two. Or clinging to his back. Or holding his hand. Or sitting on his lap. Or... Not one of the drawings or paintings showed a woman at his side. But it was clear that the children a boy and a girl were the always the same children.

And they were undoubtedly *his*.

"He *has* to agree," she decided aloud. "I have to convince him."

Dragging her eyes away, she checked her watch again. Time to put Mum's works of art back where she'd found them.

~HG~SS~

Finally telling Severus the whole truth and then facing his challenge to her logic well, hearing his challenge, anyway was the thing that firmed Hermione's inexplicable longing to make her mother's 'vision' a reality. She admitted to herself that there was no "might" or "may" about it: she wanted to be the mother of Severus Snape's children just as dozens of her mum's paintings had suggested she would be.

A belief that her mother saw the future in her dreams wasn't what drove her. But perhaps if she could make one of Bette Granger's grander visions appear to come true, Hermione could stop feeling so guilty.

You aren't even sure the spell did her brain permanent damage When the guilt settled in anyway, she resorted to lying to herself. *You're doing this because it's a good idea and because having a family of his own will be good for him, too.*

But before that could happen, she'd realised, she would have to spend more time in his company outside the lab and away from the Burrow. Showing up at the door to his quarters after Thursday night brewing, Crookshanks at her feet, became a habit.

Now, she was curled on the little sofa in his quarters, taking notes from a treatise on medicinal plants since he wouldn't let her borrow it. Knowi and Crooks shared a chair at the desk. Hermione was long used to their yowling and mewing at the computer.

As close as she was beginning to feel they'd grown, she was well aware that progress toward her ultimate goal had been sorely lacking; she'd been campaigning in earnest for nearly a month, but he had remained resolutely resistant to all inducements. And yet, he never denied her entry, either.

What's taking so long? His rooms scarcely take up more space than Mum and Dad's living room.

Suddenly uncomfortable waiting, Hermione stood, leaving the notebook where she'd been sitting. A dozen steps took her to a narrow bookcase standing next to the television. Her eyes roamed over DVDs stored there. None of the titles were what she would have guessed at a year ago if she had even been likely to guess at Severus Snape's DVD collection at all. The boxed set of Star Trek episodes intrigued her most of all.

They were another gift from Harry; she'd learnt that much a few weeks ago, but Snape hadn't provided more information, and she hadn't asked.

"What's this about, then?" she asked Knowi.

The cat kept mewling at the computer with Crooks. Hermione hadn't expected an answer, anyway.

I'll ask him when he gets back.

Fear clutched her stomach, and her hand dropped away from the collection. Hermione didn't recall reaching for it.

"As a boy," Snape said, "I had a... thing for Mr Spock."

She swung around. *Did he hear me? Why doesn't he wear shoes? Wait, he's gay?*

"Not that sort of 'thing'," he told her, making her flush. His lips twitched once before he continued. "I had a deep admiration for the character. He was something to model myself after."

"Really? Why?"

Snape handed the book over. "He didn't have anything so messy as emotions. Logic and truth were enough for him. He was satisfied with his lot."

Hermione felt her heart break for the boy Severus Snape had once been. "He wasn't, you know." A whisper was the best she could manage. "He was half human."

His eyebrow rose, but his expression was otherwise unreadable.

"I know that *now*, but at the time, I rarely had a chance to see much beyond the first series."

"Oh."

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

"Because I want to know you better." She smiled, more to herself than to him. Severus Snape loved to argue, but these days, she quite enjoyed the verbal sparring. "And you always answer. Eventually."

"Why the grand desire to invade my privacy?"

Ignoring his sneer, she stepped around him and stalked away from the shelves to the sofa. "I'm not invading. I wait to be invited in. And you *know* why!"

"Why are you so irritatingly persistent?" He dropped heavily onto the couch, stretching his long, thin legs and flexing his bare feet.

"Why haven't you stopped me coming round?"

"You *know* why. Why do are you so obsessed with your mother's 'injury' instead of focussing on your own stalled career?"

"I..."

"Tell me" ...his eyes seemed to bore into hers, stripping any hope she had of dissembling... "why *were* you sacked from your position with the Equality Division's little medical research subsidiary practically before you'd even started? Got to be too much for you, did it? No. I can't imagine the 'greatest witch of her age' would allow herself to be anything but the best. Was it deliberate, then? Was hiding amongst Muggles too far removed from the fame and glory you'd enjoyed amongst us?"

Hermione knew he was baiting her most likely in an effort to get her to leave, or at least leave off her pursuit of him but she refused to rise to it, and she was determined to remain in his company until he saw reason at last. And she didn't dare tell him the truth. At least not all of it. Admitting more of her weaknesses could only damage her cause.

"No," she said, though it took real effort to unclench her jaw. "I left because I..." A deep breath made going on a bit easier. "I *accepted a new assignment* when it was offered because I didn't seem to be doing any good there. I wasn't really contributing to Wizarding knowledge stores, and nothing I was doing in the lab could contribute to Muggleborn-pureblood relations."

His scepticism was almost palpable, and it made her stomach ache to watch his frown grow deeper. "Granger, lying to me isn't..."

"I didn't have a choice, all right? I wasn't given one. Arthur *ordered* me to change jobs." She looked at her hands, unable or unwilling to meet his gaze whilst admitting her last, most humiliating, secret. "I was less than *useless* working for ObiyeChem. I knew when they took me on it was only because of what I'd done in the war, and because I was because I was Lara's friend and Harry's friend. But they didn't seem to expect me to *do* anything. Or even expect me to *be able* to do anything."

She glanced up at him then, prepared for the sneering disdain she was sure would be painted across his face. There wasn't any. There was nothing, in fact, save the smooth, expressionless mask which he'd worn through most of their acquaintance.

"They *said* our group were doing pharmaceutical trials and peer-reviewing research other firms had done, but the truth is, I... What I was doing was little better than *spying* on developments in Muggle medicine," she said rather desperately, "but I didn't learn anything we don't already know. And wouldn't have done any time soon, either." Her hands curled into fists, and she searched his face for some sign of understanding, of reproof, of *anything*. Finding none, she turned away from him.

"Nor was I the only one from S.A.M.E working there," she added after the silence had gone on longer than she liked, "or even the most experienced. I hated it *hated* knowing I wasn't being any use to anyone. I don't need to bottle fame or brew glory or any of that nonsense you promised us first year! But I *do* need to make things better for people like me, and despite everything they told me, I wasn't doing that."

Surely now he'll tell me I'm being a silly little girl and make me leave.

"Oh, I see. Verifying the claims of others' so-called 'medical miracles' must have frustrated your... creative genius," he said. She could tell from the sound of his voice that he was once again implying she lacked originality. He was smirking when she spun around to glare at him. "However much you feel it was a waste of your talents, the work is hardly pointless," he pointed out. "Someone had to do it. And sometimes... Sometimes we are all forced to do things that seem meaningless or even futile at the time, in order to serve a larger purpose which has not yet been revealed to us."

He was talking about his years serving Dumbledore, she realised. *Why is he telling me about it? Why, after all the insults and disdain...*

As if he knew exactly where her thoughts were taking her, Snape spoke again. "My last service to Albus was far more intolerable than anything you might have endured. But I did it. Only my vows and... another thing... kept me going after..."

Lily. Can't he say her name? After all this time?

"I would imagine it must have been terribly... difficult for you, doing what he asked," she said gently, hesitantly.

"You'd be wrong, Ms Granger," he said, his voice formal and stiff. "In that moment, I found it easy to kill him."

Hermione felt herself grow cold at that, and she opened her mouth to answer to stave off the disquiet threatening to overwhelm her senses but again couldn't find the right words.

"I thought of what he had done to me when I was student," he continued after it became obvious to both of them that she wouldn't speak. "Or rather, I thought about what he had not done for me. I thought of how I'd find it easier to do... what I *must do* if my true master were gone and could no longer order me about." His gaze became as cold as she felt, and she knew real fear for the first time in four years. "I thought of how he had bound me to send Lily's son off to die, and I hated that it made my promise to protect him a wretched, *wasted* thing. In an instant, I thought all of that, and it became easy to want it badly enough to say the words and mean them.

"But that wasn't all there was. Albus was not the only one to place his life in my hands. Did you know that? Of course you did. It wasn't in the papers, never mentioned at my trial, but Harry found out, so you must know as well. I swore an Unbreakable Vow to Narcissa Malfoy that I would do it if her son could not. Also easy, since Albus had already made me promise that Draco wouldn't have the opportunity."

"I didn't know that, actually," she whispered. "But it doesn't matter. It doesn't really change anything, does it? Not since it served the same purpose. I still don't understand how you can be so..." She searched for the right word and, not immediately finding what she was looking for, carried on with, "...complacent about what was done to you."

Snape stopped what he was doing and regarded her in that inscrutable way she had so come to despise. It left her feeling juvenile and inept; since the end of the war, she'd hated that feeling above all else.

"Albus was never a *bad* man," he told her at last. "He was arrogant, manipulative and secretive to the point of being almost deceitful." His lips twisted bitterly. "But then those are also traits which are accurately attributable to me, and you still insist on my inherent *goodness*. I'd be a hypocrite to condemn them in him, wouldn't I?"

She stared at him, dumbfounded at his self-awareness. Or, more truthfully, she was shocked that he would be privy to the less defensible flaws to his personality, much less admit them aloud. Maybe she shouldn't be, she reflected. There was his association with Dr Listener and Knowi to consider, and he certainly wasn't the man she'd...

"Surprised?" The look on his face was full of mocking disdain. Perhaps even disappointment? "I am a man of many faults, Miss Granger, both small and large. I willingly acknowledge those which I have had cause to recognise."

She wanted to ask if he counted being spiteful, sullen and nasty among his shortcomings, but held her tongue. At least at first she did.

You plan to live with this man long enough to get two children by him? she chastised herself. *You don't intend to let him cow you all the time, do you?*

"You were prepared to *marry* and bear the children of a man you believed incapable of seeing his own deficiencies?" He sounded just as if he'd been reading her mind, and Hermione was hard-pressed to remember he couldn't use Legilimency without her knowing.

He can't have, can he?

"I must say, that doesn't bode well for the future happiness of those hypothetical children."

"Despite what you believe about their mother's desires," she told him. "our children don't need to be perfect. They just need to exist."

"There's nothing connecting *you* to your mother's portraits of me and those children. If you want to be a mother so badly, find someone else to help you make them."

"But that's just it. No one else will do for this. It has to *be us*."

~*.~

She wasn't listening. Or, perhaps she *was*, but she clearly hadn't truly heard anything he had said.

"I know what it is to be an unhappy child of unhappy parents." He kept his voice even, hoping that calm would have an effect his anger had failed to have. "Despite the best intentions of the beings who created me, the man and woman they became could not live up to their own expectations."

He saw that she didn't understand what he was trying to say, but still she responded.

"Perhaps, but... But our children will be happy because we're neither one of us the sort to let them be anything else!" Her annoying great gasps didn't stop her going on after he raised a questioning brow. "Well, not anymore, anyway. Look, they'll be happy because they'll live in homes filled with love. And I will love our children. And... And if what I see Sundays at the Burrow is any indication, you will too."

Her own folly her light treatment of the very paternal instincts she claimed to see in him could work against her, he realised.

"I would never want to live apart from any children I sired." As soon as they were out, he saw the words were truer than he had intended. The surprise on her face told him she hadn't expected it any more than he had.

But it wasn't enough to sway her from her goal. "So they'll live in *ahome* filled with love. *Our* home."

Now he did allow a cruel smile to curl his lips. "I seem to remember your vehement denial of loving me."

There! Surely she would see how ridiculous she sounded. Fred Weasley's sudden appearance, a restive Knowi in his arms and ready to pounce, was a warning that Severus was treading on thin ice.

"We don't need to love *each other!* It's fine if we don't, as long as we love the children. Is... Is the romantic sort of love truly necessary to make a decent marriage?"

"I think," Severus said slowly and not unkindly, "had you ever truly been in love you would not ask that question."

"Not fair," Fred warned for Severus's ears only, and Knowi added a hiss of agreement.

Granger's eyes flashed in anger briefly, then surprised comprehension took over only to be quickly replaced with glimpse of sadness. That's all he saw all she allowed him to see before she rearranged her features into determined resignation.

"I *have* been in love," she told him quietly. "It didn't work out for me. And, yes, that's because I stupidly allowed my chance to fade away with everything that was going on."

Even now she refused to acknowledge the full truth of what had happened with her mother. Although he couldn't begin to understand why, the knowledge made his stomach twist painfully.

"I think a part of me expected it would be there, waiting," she continued, "when I was ready to fight for it. Only it wasn't. That's my fault. I know that. But that doesn't mean mutual respect and companionship aren't also worthy foundations for marriage."

She placed a hand on his arm; he could feel the trembling in her fingers.

"I *do* respect you, Severus," she said quietly. "More than that, really. I consider you a friend."

"You have no idea what my life is like now," he told her, still inexplicably smarting from her earlier failure to understand how significant fatherhood would be for someone like him. "You never have."

He watched as she chewed her lip, but this time didn't sense any uncertainty in the habitual gesture. She seemed... thoughtful.

"No," she said eventually. "I don't really know. But I'd like to. I've been trying so hard to find out."

~ES~TS~

"She's going about it all wrong."

"And her timing couldn't be more wrong," agreed Tobias.

At first, Eileen pulsed pale confusion. But then a rush of fear and compassion mixed with lost hope suffused her being in a maelstrom of violet and the palest yellow-white and a deep blue-grey.

"He only has a week until..."

"Yes."

"Merlin didn't seem very angry... Not in the end. He seemed rather *towish* we'd..."

"He did, didn't he?"

"Still..."

"Yes, still."

Neither noticed the Person watching them watch their son.

~SS~

Amorphous globs of glowing energy streamed away from the large being, their bright colours a stark contrast to the one that *onlyoozed* from the meeting space. It was the same as before as it was every day. When he first *finally* noticed, he was somewhat shocked he hadn't seen it before. But soon enough it seemed to be a thing he had always known: the others their age avoided her just as much as they avoided him.

It was no wonder that she had so often sought him out. And didn't it only make sense that he should do the same? He'd already learnt loads from watching her as she practised the things he should have been learning from the lessons they shared. Accepting her friendship, however weirdly it was offered, could only make it easier.

He flowed over to where she hovered, seemingly lost in thought.

"Today's lessons were hard, yeah?"

She registered his presence, but was quick to hide it in a show of obliviousness. If he hadn't been watching her so intently, he would have missed how she'd done it. She started oozing away.

"Guess they were worse than I thought. If even *you* don't know what you're doing!" He tried to manifest a purplish-pink wonder, and he felt he mostly succeeded. It was another thing he'd learned from watching her.

"Of course I don't know what I'm doing yet. We've only just been taught." Her crimson pulse was quickly subdued by a blue calm.

"Really? I thought you knew everything," he teased, the pale fire of his sarcasm mitigated by the faintest tinge of lavender-hued friendliness.

Only, he didn't think she noticed anything but his words because she glowed crimson again, this time marred by ugly patches of grey-blue in response. She shrunk into herself until she was nearly a solid mass of rage and sorrow.

"I don't! And I never said I did!" Her voice was painful to hear, and as she spoke, her All condensed in a way he knew was somehow terrifyingly wrong. "I know more than you, but anyone who goes to school knows more than you, but I *don't* know what's happening or what's going to happen because they won't tell me, and... And, I... Now I know they're all wrong about you! No one likes you because they think you're stupid. But you aren't, are you? You're clever, but you're cruel. You are the cruelest boy I know!"

For a moment, he flashed as crimson as she was, but then his irritation was gone, and he couldn't call it back. Her anguish was overpowering the anger; he could see that now.

Suddenly, he was glowing a soothing yellow. His mam was always turning that colour in him, but he'd never managed it himself before. Crooked lines of blue-grey fear ran through him, but he was *trying*. The faintest hint of a warm brown began to spread through him.

~HG~

"What happened?" His voice had lost the mocking tone she hated so much.

"I told you, I don't *know*." Despite her best efforts, she felt the fury and sadness she didn't understand begin to fade. She didn't even have the control to conceal her growing comfort from him. She didn't understand why she was hurting less, either. "Something's gone wrong. Something to do with why your parents left, and now they're telling more People they have to go to the Inner. Mum and Dad might have to go early. They might not get magic."

"I don't understand." He was nearly all yellow and brown now, but tendrils of his confusion stretched all over.

"Nor I."

"But, I mean, you're almost ready to go..."

"They *always* give you magic your first time. If my parents don't have it..." Sorrow rushed back in, and she fought against it without success.

Focussing all of her All, she forced herself to coalesce and change, solidify. After what felt like an eternity, she flexed fingers and toes. She squeezed her eyes shut. "If my parents don't have magic," she told him, "they might make me take others."

"How did you *do* that?"

Even with her eyes closed, she could hear the wonder in his voice.

"You'll learn how. When you have enough All, they'll tell you how. Everyone learns to make a sort of false fleshsuit before they go."

"Why are you wearing it now?"

"Because fleshsuits can cry." Her voice shook on the last word.

"Why would you want to do that?"

She wondered if he knew what crying was, but she didn't answer.

"You aren't crying right now." Curiously, his voice was still kind. The sound of it made her feel more awful.

"Not yet," she croaked. "I don't think I know how yet. I thought it would just happen."

"Maybe you don't have enough All." It was obvious he was trying to be his old nasty self, but she could hear his worry.

"I have too much All. That's why they're making me go, even if it means I can't have Mum and Dad."

"If I had enough All, I wouldn't let them make me do anything!" He meant it, she could tell. "I'd learn to make my own fleshsuit, and I'd go, and I'd find Mam and Da even if I got other parents."

Though she hadn't ever tried it herself though she knew it was more than she should try an idea filled her mind. She opened her eyes and dissolved back into her natural form.

"Take some of mine."

She didn't wait for his shock to fade before she pushed out a tendril of herself and reached for him.

~SS~HG~

Every year, Harry told them not to bother. It didn't help. Tiny black bats fluttered near the atrium ceiling. Large pumpkins faces, comical or cruel, carved into their flesh stood guard next to each busy Floo. The fountain was festooned with giant spiders, all spinning webs that flowed like water.

Hermione hurried to the nearest lift and rode down to the canteen.

Snape had got there first, of course. He took one look at her face and clasped her elbow in a large hand. "My quarters. Now," he bit out in a harsh whisper.

~*.*~

"It wasn't your fault."

The door had scarcely closed behind them. The pity that softened her face and brought the glint of tears to her eyes it couldn't be empathy; the girl knew nothing of the kind of guilt he carried was fuel to his ire. Nevertheless, he attempted to hide it. She deserved that much if for no other reason than because a girl from his memories of the Real World, of Real Life, had once given him a gift he wasn't sure he could ever repay. And if he was truly meant to help her in some small way...

"Of course." Severus looked away from her, not sure letting her see the force of his rage would be at all helpful. "Of course," he repeated, knowing the bitterness in his voice wouldn't be lost even on a complete fool. Every nuance of his anger and anguish would be apparent to someone like Granger.

"You couldn't have known what he would do," she asserted.

It was too much. She went too far. "I *knew!* Do you think me an idiot?" He swung around to face her, no longer hiding what he was feeling, what she was making him face. "Do you think I was stupid back then?"

"I was ambitious and full of my own supposed brilliance, and I knew there was only one sure way to stop the prophecy. I told him anyway. I told myself I didn't care about anything beyond gaining that monster's favour because I never imagined that it might be her. And because I let myself become just as much a monster, an innocent woman and her husband died."

"Warriors. They were both warriors. Don't diminish her by remembering her as less than who and what she was. Lily Potter chose to die to save her son." Granger was implacable in her drive to make him listen and live through his pain all over again. "You can wallow in your guilt for the rest of your second chance at life, but you don't get to forget what she did. And you don't get to take credit for it."

He hated her in that moment. Even if he was right and she was doing only what was needed, he hated her for being the one who forced him to look back.

She went on speaking as if she hadn't heard a word he'd said. "And even if you did have an idea of what he might do... even if you imagined how far he would go, it wasn't your choice. *He* was the one, Severus. And then Professor Dumbledore *promised* you."

"He never should have needed to make me promises."

"He shouldn't have, but he did. At least you *tried* to correct your mistake. But he lied to you. He used you. He used the guilt he knew you were feeling to try to win, all the while knowing it could destroy you. *That* never should have happened. Are you going to let him finish the job from beyond the grave?"

Severus wanted to shout. He wanted to tell her that he'd been doing fine before she'd come back into his life. He wanted her to know that ~~hadn't been~~ allowing Albus fucking Wulfric Percival Brian fucking Dumbledore to *win!*

But he knew he'd be lying if he did.

And then Knowi was on his shoulder, purring away his anger. He walked stiffly over to his sofa and sank down onto it. Granger followed.

"What would you have me do?" He stared up into her wide, sad eyes, not caring if she could see that he was begging.

Her face fell. Of course it did. The know-it-all didn't know. How could she?

"I don't know," she said. "But I'd like to help you work that out."

~ES~TS~

"Maybe there's hope for the girl, after all." Tobias glowed bright with approval.

"Maybe." Eileen shone less brilliantly.

~HP~HG~

Hermione was one of the few people outside his Weasley family who never tried to fuss over Harry on 31 October. He was grateful to finally have her near enough to take lunch with him, especially since this year Ron was busy with Severus and Arthur had claimed an emergency meeting.

But the rumour mill had already done its work, and now Harry wondered if his friend might need a bit of coddling of her own.

"How is he?" He watched her face. He was far more concerned about her than he was about Snape, but he didn't think she needed to hear that just now. It would probably make her cry or something.

"He didn't tell me I was ridiculous." Her eyes were dry, but her smile was tight and grim. "Not in the end, anyway."

Harry sighed, ready to hold her after what he was about to say. "Oh, Hermione, that's still not a yes."

"Then I'll just have to keep trying, won't I?" Her voice didn't even shake.

A/N: Thanks to Mazzy for enhancing the description of the spiders' webs.