

Don't Get Me Wrong

by *bleddyn*

Written for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. When a determined Hufflepuff decides that Hermione Granger and Severus Snape are meant for each other, they really don't stand a chance.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Notes: This was written for sapphire_phoenix, a.k.a. phoenix_fancies, for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Thanks for the great prompt! Many thanks are also due to my wonderful-as-ever beta, peskipiksi. The title is, of course, from the fabulous Pretenders song. Listen to it at the end, over the imaginary closing credits. Disclaimer: any recognisable characters/locations are JKR's.

Original Prompt: Meddling Employer/Superior - Albus/Kingsley/Minerva/Harry/Someone sees a need in HG/SS and the other is the obvious fit. Who's in on it? Are HG/SS ahead of the game?

Chapter 1

Hermione looked around the crowded lecture theatre with curiosity. The Friday evening presentation of 'Back to Basics: Elementary Potions Reconsidered' had certainly attracted a varied audience, and she recognised a number of Ministry colleagues as well as some of her Hogwarts contemporaries. Percy Weasley raised a hand in greeting from the far side of the room, and she was fairly sure that was Padma Patil's shimmering black hair a couple of rows in front.

"Hermione, my dear!"

Hermione turned in her seat to see Pomona Sprout making her way along the row, muttering apologies as she squeezed past people and trod on toes. Hermione shuffled along the bench to make room for the stout witch, who sank into the space with a grateful smile. She grasped Hermione's hand in both of hers and shook it in delight.

"How lovely to see you here!"

Hermione smiled back. "It's good to see you, too, Professor. Are you well?"

"Fighting fit, my dear, fighting fit. And please, call me Pomona. I've not been your teacher for what? Five years?"

"Eight, actually. Time flies!" Hermione grimaced slightly.

"Good lord, has it really been that long? So, tell me, have you found a replacement for Mr Weasley yet?"

Hermione laughed at Sprout's abrupt curiosity. "I'm happily single for the moment. It's good to be able to give all my attention to my work."

Pomona studied Hermione's face closely then. "You're looking a little peaky, dear, if you don't mind my saying so. Not enough fresh air, I'd wager. Hmm?"

Hermione shook her head a little. "I'm fine. I'll admit I may occasionally go a week at a time without setting foot outside my office or the house, but that's one of the joys of the Floo network, especially at this time of year."

Sprout snorted. "Nonsense, girl. There's nothing like a good autumn breeze to keep the mind and spirits on top form. And I always say the only substitute for a man between your thighs is a spade in your hands. Come up and visit me at Hogwarts some time we'll have a healthy hour or two working in the gardens. That'll bring some colour back to your cheeks."

Hermione smiled. "I might take you up on that. Thank you."

Sprout nodded her head decisively, making her pointed hat wobble. Hermione noticed that it was one of her better, un-patched specimens. Must be a special occasion.

"So, is Potions one of your side interests, Pomona?" she asked.

"Well, obviously Herbology and Potions cross over in many areas. But I'm really here because of a personal interest in the lecturer." Sprout gave a conspiratorial grin.

"Really?" said Hermione, with some excitement. "Who is it? I've been trying to guess. But I don't think Horace Slughorn is likely to have given up his comfy retirement, and I'd be surprised if Blaise has been teaching long enough to have really developed any new ideas. And obviously no-one's seen or heard anything of Professor Snape for years. Nobody in the Novel Potions Unit has any idea who it might be, either."

Sprout shook her head. "Oh, no! I'm sworn to secrecy. And I'd hate to spoil the surprise." Her eyes twinkled with mischief, leaving Hermione even more intrigued.

At that moment there was a sudden stir from the front of the theatre, and silence gradually fell as all eyes turned to the podium, where a young woman with long curly hair had taken her place at the lectern. She smiled at them as the lights dimmed, leaving the podium spot-lit and the stage behind her in darkness.

"Ladies and gentlemen. My name is Penelope Clearwater, and on behalf of Pegasus Publishing I have great pleasure in welcoming you to this evening's lecture.

"As you are all no doubt aware, Arsenius Jigger's seminal work, *Magical Drafts and Potions*, has been the elementary Potions reference of choice for Hogwarts students and most households for the past sixty-three years. However, we at Pegasus felt that the time was ripe for the book to be revised to reflect recent developments and best practice in the field. We were incredibly lucky to secure the services of the most skilled Potioneer of our time to undertake the revision. As a result, *Magical Drafts and Potions: A New Synthesis* will be available exclusively to buy at Flourish and Blotts from Monday, and will be the curriculum text for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from September next year.

"To launch this landmark publication, we are honoured that the author has consented to give a practical demonstration of some of the more noteworthy improvements he has made to our best-loved and most-used basic potions recipes.

"With no further ado, I present the former Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Severus Snape."

The theatre was filled with a sudden buzz of whispered surprise at this announcement, but the sound stopped as instantly as it had started when the lights on the stage rose slightly to reveal an extremely distinctive shape silhouetted against the backdrop. Hermione glanced at Sprout, who was sitting very upright, hands clasped in her lap and an expression of pure delight on her face. Catching Hermione's eye, Sprout muttered, "I am *so* pleased he's done this. Just what he needs."

Wondering exactly what Sprout meant by that, Hermione returned her attention to the figure at the front of the room. The lights on the stage were now fully up, and she nearly laughed at the incongruous familiarity of the scene. Severus Snape stood behind a wooden laboratory bench, a cauldron gently steaming in front of him. He wore his usual black robes, and his shoulder length hair hung in curtains, framing his angular, unsmiling face. He fixed the audience with a chilly glare, and Hermione suspected that fully three-quarters of the gathered throng had suddenly regressed to feel like terrified eleven-year-olds.

"Good evening ... class." He spoke quietly, as ever, his voice still needing no great volume to hold his listeners.

"It was brought to my attention recently that, despite spending more years than I care to remember tenderly nurturing young minds at Hogwarts, I was always rather reluctant to share much of my knowledge of the subtle art of potion-making. It is true that I was content simply to allow my pupils to follow the instructions as laid out in the various prescribed textbooks and syllabi, and not encourage them to implement improvements that I may have developed for my own use. This was due to my assessment that the extreme majority of students were rarely capable of following the simplest directions from the book and that introducing any sort of improvisation or complication would have been likely to cause even more explosions and cauldron meltdowns than usual.

"However, I have been persuaded that rewriting and improving the textbook instructions would provide a new generation with an enhanced grounding in the basic recipes. As I am no longer teaching, it is not my problem if this venture causes the Hogwarts dungeons to disappear in a titanic explosion, and in that event will simply confine myself to saying 'I told you so.'"

At this point there were a couple of muffled laughs from the audience, and Snape gave a slight smile.

"On the other hand, I would hope that those of you present tonight have more than an average level of interest in and competence with potions, or you would not be here. So before I begin my demonstration I will simply say that what you are about to see are refinements and adaptations that work perfectly for me, but you choose to follow them in the privacy of your own laboratory entirely at your own risk.

"I shall begin with something you should all have learned to brew at the age of eleven a Forgetfulness Potion. The cauldron in front of me is at the half-way stage, where, as I am sure you will recall, the rosemary, beetle eyes and agave extract have been simmering together for an hour. Now, the standard recipe calls for the addition of ten drops of adder venom before simmering for a further hour, stirring intermittently, until the steam turns lilac. However, if at the same time as the venom we add a laurel leaf..."

At this point he paused as he dropped the ingredients into the cauldron and stirred twice with a glass rod. A soft gasp went up from the audience as the steam from the simmering liquid instantly shimmered into a lilac colour.

"As you can see, the laurel acts as a catalyst, halving the time taken for the brewing process. The potion is now ready for use. So, if any of you have anything you need to forget, please see me at the end of the lecture."

This time there were more chuckles from the audience, which Snape acknowledged with a slight incline of his head. "And now I will move on to a basic Swelling Solution."

By Hermione's estimation, over the next ninety minutes Snape demonstrated refinements to at least half of the processes from *Magical Drafts and Potions*. Some of the modifications were simple adjustments to component ratios, while others included extra ingredients or changes to temperatures or stirring techniques. The consequences ranged from removal of side effects and better efficacy to faster brewing. Throughout, Snape worked with his usual deftness and economy of movement. But he also gave a running commentary more humorous and informative than anything Hermione had heard from him in school. She could feel the whole audience responding to this lighter touch; the atmosphere became more relaxed, with both laughter and applause increasingly forthcoming.

The lecture ended with a standing ovation from the audience and an ironic bow from Snape. Penelope resumed her place at the lectern briefly to invite them all to stay for "drinks, nibbles and maybe a chat with our elusive author!".

Hermione turned to face Sprout, who clasped both of Hermione's hands in hers, grinning broadly.

"Well, my dear, what did you think? Wasn't he wonderful? I knew it was the right thing for him to do. Minerva said we'd never get him out in front of an audience, but I told her, 'He'll do it just to shut me up, and he'll be great,' and he did, and he was, wasn't he?" She looked at the younger witch expectantly and Hermione laughed helplessly,

totally bemused.

"Yes, Pomona, he was great. It's a shame he never taught us like that years ago, but it can't have been the easiest time for him, to say the least. Now please, will you explain what's been going on? Am I right in thinking this whole textbook thing was an idea of yours and Professor McGonagall's?"

Pomona nodded vigorously. "Well, of course it was. The silly man has just been hiding away all these years, which is no good for anyone. So I went and dug him out from under his rock and gave him a job to do, which incidentally is paying him very well and will make a nice profit for Pegasus, especially as Minerva's promised the book will be the new set text for the juniors. And hopefully this will be just the push he needs to get him back out into society again. Talking of which, we must go along and congratulate him."

She stood up then and started pushing her way through the crowd, which was slowly making its way towards the refreshments now set out at the front of the theatre. Hermione, one hand still clutched by Sprout, had no choice but to follow.

"I don't think Professor Snape will really want to talk to me," she protested weakly.

"Nonsense!" cried Sprout. "You were one of his best students."

"That never meant he liked me," responded Hermione.

"Oh, he didn't like anyone, then, my dear. You mustn't take it personally. I never did. And now we're the best of friends."

They paused in their squashed progress through the crowd as they bumped up against the drinks table. Sprout summoned two glasses of wine, passed one to Hermione, then knocked hers back in one gulp.

"Ugh!" she complained with a shudder. "Bloody publishers never buy decent wine."

Hermione sipped hers in a rather more ladylike manner, but had to agree as to the quality. Or lack of it. She shrugged and followed Sprout's example, swallowing the remainder in one go. If she was to be forced to confront Severus Snape for the first time since she'd left him for dead nine years ago she needed all the courage she could get.

"Severus!" boomed Sprout, and Hermione spun round to see the man in question standing just behind her. Sprout stepped forward and enveloped him in a hug, her head barely coming up to his chest. Hermione wasn't sure whether she was more surprised by the fact that Snape returned Sprout's embrace, or by the brief, wry smile he gave her over the little witch's hat. He glanced down.

"Pomona," he said drily. "Delightful as it is to see you, please would you remove your hands from my arse."

Sprout stepped back and looked up at him with a mock pout. "But, my darling boy, groping you is one of the few pleasures I have left in the twilight of my years." She turned and gave Hermione a wicked grin.

"You really should feel this man's buttocks, dear. Two plums in a hanky, that's all I'm saying."

Hermione felt herself flush scarlet. How the hell was she going to respond to that one? *Come on then, Professor Snape, let's have a feel?*

Fortunately, she was spared from answering by Snape himself, who held out a hand to shake hers briefly, saying, "Miss Granger. It's good to see you again. Kindly ignore any inappropriate comments from my erstwhile colleague here. I would put it down to incipient senility, but I have it on good authority she's always been, what were Minerva's words? Ah, yes. 'A shameless old baggage who wouldn't recognise decorum if it appeared in front of her waving a flag and dancing the rumba'."

Sprout smiled serenely. "You love me really, Severus. And if I hadn't been so happy to stand at your front door naked you wouldn't be here earning lots of nice Galleons, so fewer of your complaints. Anyway, pub? After you've satisfied your adoring public, of course."

"Pub," replied Severus. "And I think my public have adored me quite enough for one day. I promised Miss Clearwater I would stay for drinks afterwards, but I never agreed for how long. She's over on the other side of the room at the moment, so I think now would be a good time to beat a subtle retreat. Lead on."

"Well," began Hermione, utterly disconcerted now (*Pomona naked? With Snape?*), "I'll say goodnight, then."

"Oh no, you don't!" protested Sprout. "You're coming with us, isn't she, Severus?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "I think that's rather up to Miss Granger. Obviously she's very welcome to join us, but it would be a little unfair to insist on her company. She may have something more interesting to do on a Friday night than spend it in the company of two of her old teachers."

Hermione laughed. *Oh, why not?* "The fact I've chosen to spend tonight at a Potions lecture should allow you to reach your own conclusions about the current state of my social life. This evening's been full of surprises so far, so I may as well continue what I've started."

"Splendid!" Sprout clapped her hands briefly. "Now, where are we going? Leaky? Hog's Head?"

"Muggle," replied Severus. "I'll get stared at in the Leaky, and in the Hog's Head you'll just spend the entire evening chatting up Aberforth. I'm sure there's a nice quiet Muggle pub close by we can go to instead."

"Don't look at me," said Sprout. "No idea about Muggle pubs. Hermione?"

"Actually, the Duke of York's just round the corner," she said. "It's where Ministry staff go when they feel like a change. The beer's great. And the seats are comfy. And there's an excellent chip shop down the road if you're hungry later."

"Sounds perfect," said Severus, gifting her with a genuine smile.

"Fine by me," agreed Sprout. "You two are buying, though, because I've got no Muggle money on me at all."

"I warn you now, Miss Granger, it may be an expensive night," observed Severus as they began to make their way to the back of the theatre. "Sprout drinks like a Grindylow."

"I do, indeed," agreed Pomona cheerfully.

Their progress was interrupted repeatedly by people who wanted to greet Severus. Hermione watched him as he exchanged pleasantries. His manner was cordial enough, but his body language was stiff and unwelcoming. Pomona Sprout was evidently a special case.

Eventually they managed to exit the theatre into the small atrium beyond. They paused by the front door.

"Time to change if we're going Muggle," said Sprout, sweeping her wand down her body to Transfigure her robes into a long, red winter coat, with her pointed hat becoming the hood. Hermione performed a similar transformation on her outer robe, though she already had Muggle clothing on underneath.

Severus aimed his wand at his head first, and his hair pulled itself back to be secured by a leather tie at the nape of his neck. "That's better," he sighed. "I'd forgotten how

bloody difficult it is to see with my hair down. I lose all my peripheral vision."

He shook his arms briskly into what was now a long black overcoat, under which Hermione could glimpse a black shirt.

"And," he continued, "I'd forgotten how hard it is to brew in those ridiculous robes. They may look dramatic, but the sleeves do have a tendency to fall into the cauldron. I don't think anyone spotted me nearly igniting my cuffs earlier, did they?" He threw an enquiring glance at the two women.

"Didn't notice a thing, dear," Sprout reassured him. She grinned at Hermione. "He's gone quite native, you know, living in a Muggle village."

Snape scowled at her as he opened the front door and ushered them out into the chilly October night.

"Come along then!" cried Sprout gaily. "Lead on to the beer!" She linked arms with Hermione, bustling along to keep up with the younger woman's longer stride. Hermione glanced back to see Severus following just behind, hands thrust deep into his pockets and shoulders hunched. He put her in mind of a reluctant teenage trailing behind an embarrassing parent. She smiled slightly to herself.

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The Duke of York was quiet for a Friday night, and they easily found seats in a cosy corner near the bar. Sprout looked around eagerly as she sipped her gin and tonic. A large one, naturally. Hermione sank back into a soft armchair with a sigh of relief. Nine hours at her desk followed by an evening on a hard lecture theatre bench had left her sciatic nerves protesting. She glanced across the table to meet Severus's slightly sardonic smile.

"Long day, Miss Granger?"

"Long week, actually."

"So you thought attending a lecture would round it off nicely?"

She took a sip of her pint. "Do you know, I thought it would. There's been speculation for the last couple of weeks at work about who the mystery lecturer was going to be. And you know me I never pass up the opportunity to learn something." She paused then, head on one side as she considered whether to continue. "You always did say I was a know-it-all."

Snape gave a brief, humourless laugh but didn't look remotely apologetic. "Did I call you that? Every pupil irritated me in some way. The ideal class, to my mind, would just have sat down, shut up, got on with their work without asking questions or exploding anything, and left in silence. Unfortunately, that ideal class did not exist; consequently, I spent my entire teaching career in a state of at least low-level annoyance. My leaving Hogwarts was not a loss to the profession."

"But your lecture this evening was excellent," protested Hermione. "You explained everything so clearly which you've got a real gift for and you must have sensed how much everyone enjoyed it."

"I rest my case. This evening's audience approached my ideal in that they sat and listened quietly. Had I allowed them to take part in any sort of practical activity, I would no doubt have reverted to my usual cantankerous self."

He looked at her steadily, as if daring her to argue, then swiftly drank half of his pint.

"You're right about the beer, Miss Granger. Very well kept. So, tell me, what is it you do at the Ministry?"

"I use a combination of Arithmancy and Muggle computing power to pre-test new charms and potions, thus reducing the need for hazardous experiments." She grinned. "And that's the point at which people's eyes usually glaze over slightly and they say something like 'How interesting' and change the subject rapidly. Feel free to do the same."

Snape gave an impatient shake of his head. "Not at all. That genuinely does sound interesting. How does the combination with computers work? I always thought there were conflicts between Muggle technology and magic."

"Tell me about it. My computer is in what is basically a store cupboard at the Ministry, with Shielding Charms around the room to protect it from the magical field outside. But all it takes is for some idiot to wander in and *Accio* a pen or something, and I can lose an entire day's work."

"I'm guessing from your tone of voice that this is not an infrequent occurrence?"

"Oh, it happens at least once a week. I've banned Ron and Harry from coming within a twenty metre radius of my computer room, on pain of, well, pain. Even Kingsley came in last month and conjured himself a chair, which fried an extremely complex calculation I'd spent the last four hours working on. I threatened him with a Castration Charm, which in retrospect might not have been the most sensible approach to the Minister for Magic."

"You may have damaged your promotion prospects somewhat. Though it sounds like he had a narrow escape from more severe damage. I didn't even know such a charm existed."

"It's experimental," responded Hermione darkly. "That was part of the threat. But he was sweetly apologetic and sent me a bottle of very nice wine to say sorry."

"And that is why he is Minister for Magic. So, when this computer of yours is actually functional, what do you use it for?"

"Are you really interested, or are you just being polite?"

"Since when has the adjective 'polite' been used to describe me?"

"Fair point. Well, in the past the use of Arithmancy to predict the outcomes of new charms or potions has been limited by the fact that there are often just too many unknown variables. The preferred method has always been trial and error practical testing with diagnostic spells to analyse the outcomes. But by using a computer, I'm able to conduct hundreds of Arithmantic calculations simultaneously, which can cut out the more dangerous early practical testing stages. So, for a new potion I could calculate the combination of ingredients, temperature and methodology with the highest likelihood of success. Empirical tests will still be necessary at the final stages, but I can at least give the practitioner a probability of, say, ninety-five percent that he's not going to lose the floor of his lab in the process."

"Fascinating. Do you undertake private work as well, or is it purely for the Ministry?"

"I do a bit of ad hoc consultancy for Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. And St Mungo's approached me recently about advising on some medical applications. Why, is it something you're interested in?"

"It could well be. I've been carrying out some research of my own, and I'd certainly welcome the chance to cut out some of the more tedious and possibly hazardous early processes."

"I'd be happy to help."

"For a reasonable fee, of course."

"Of course." Hermione smiled warmly at Severus and took a long drink from her beer. He gave her a half-smile back, then a frown crossed his face. Hermione realised it was aimed at Sprout. She glanced at the beaming witch.

"And why are you smiling like the village idiot, Pomona?" asked Severus. "You have been sat there unnaturally silently for the past, what..."

"...Twenty minutes!" supplied Pomona, triumphantly. "You've been talking to a woman for twenty minutes without her slapping you in the face or telling you you're an unattractive bastard."

"Miss Granger's not a woman, she's an ex-pupil," protested Severus. Then he looked at Hermione with an expression of resignation. "Oh, bollocks. I didn't mean... Same again?" He downed the last of his pint and stalked off towards the bar.

Hermione didn't know whether to feel insulted by his dismissal of her femininity or amused by his discomfiture. She looked slightly sternly at Pomona.

"Would you care to tell me what that was about?" she asked.

Pomona sighed. "I've been trying to persuade the stubborn boy that he needs to get out of that house of his more, to make friends, even find a good woman. But he's been absolutely insistent that he's content with his own company. I nagged him and nagged him until he made a minimal effort to make the best of himself, but he keeps telling me that even if a woman manages to get past his looks, his personality will scare them off. Tonight being a case in point, I'm afraid. And he was doing so well talking to you I haven't seen him so animated in, well, *ever*." She sighed again, more heavily.

Hermione wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. Surely Pomona wasn't implying that Hermione was the sort of woman Snape would be trying to chat up?

There was silence for a few moments, then Severus returned, three glasses in his hands. He placed them carefully on the table and resumed his seat. He looked at Hermione, opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think the better of it and took a large swallow of his beer instead, his eyes still focused on her.

"I was just about to explain to Pomona that I wasn't remotely offended by what you said because I knew what you meant," began Hermione. "You were talking to me as an ex-pupil, maybe even as a potential friend, not as a woman you wanted to attract. Am I right?"

A look of relief passed across Severus' face. "Exactly. Thank you Miss Granger. Talking to an ex-pupil, and yes, indeed, possibly a friend," here he gave Hermione a slight smile, "is rather different from talking to a woman I want a relationship with."

Pomona shook her head. "I don't see why. Surely when you want a romantic relationship, the best basis for it is friendship?"

Hermione snorted. "With all due respect, Pomona, that's Hippogriff shit. I've done the whole 'falling in love with my best friend' thing, and it doesn't work."

"You're not the only one," muttered Severus gloomily into his glass.

"Friendship is fantastic," continued Hermione, warming to her theme, "But if you don't even have those 'Oh, my god, he's wonderful, I need to shag him on the table right now' sort of fireworks at the beginning of a relationship, there's absolutely no hope of any sort of sustained passion. And without that, well, quite frankly it would have been better to just remain friends from the beginning."

"Which is precisely the point I've been trying to make to you, Pomona," contributed Severus. "My looks are certainly never going to provoke the fireworks so eloquently described by Miss Granger, and neither is my personality. I may develop a select few friendships, but that is the extent of my ambition."

"What about love that grows over time?" asked Pomona, gesticulating with her gin glass.

"That concept is rather botanical, which I would expect from you. And, on that topic, what news of the Snargaluffs that you promised me?"

Pomona accepted the change of subject with good grace and a brief roll of her eyes. Hermione relaxed back into her chair as her companions began a lengthy discussion of activities in the Hogwarts greenhouses. She savoured her beer and watched the two of them. The Herbology Professor was certainly entertaining company. And Severus she shocked herself slightly, calling him that, even in her thoughts well, it was the first time anyone had shown such an interest in her work. Perhaps they might indeed end up as friends. Stranger things had happened.

She studied him closely, then. Sprout was right when she said he was making more of an effort with his appearance. His tied-back hair was no longer greasy, and although his teeth were still crooked, they were much whiter. His skin had lost its unhealthy pallor in fact, he looked like he spent a lot of time outside. But he was right his looks were never going to provoke any fireworks. That nose, for a start, was hardly appealing. With his hair tied back, his profile was even more forbidding. And in repose his face still took on a rather grim aspect.

Her eyes idly moved down his body. He was as thin as ever. She supposed wiry was the best that could be hoped for in terms of his physique, though if Sprout was to be believed his arse was well toned. Shame he was sitting on it. Perhaps she'd have a look for herself later. *Oh, yes, the alcohol's kicking in already. I can tell I haven't eaten since breakfast.* She shook herself mentally.

He was making some point about the soil in his garden now, and Hermione found herself watching his hands as he gestured. Over how many years had she seen him use those hands to chop ingredients and stir potions? She'd never really looked at them before, though. Long, elegant fingers, nails cut neatly short (*thank goodness I hate long nails on a man*). The skin bore a few stains, presumably from his brewing, and there were a couple of small scars. Burns maybe? Nice hands, though. Capable. She could imagine how they'd feel on her body. His touch would be deft and firm, but still sensitive and...*what in the name of all that is charmed am I thinking of? Two pints and I'm imagining Severus Snape's hands on my naked... I need to eat something. Now.*

She stood up abruptly. "I'm getting some crisps. Anyone else?"

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Two bags of salt and vinegar crisps and another pint later, Hermione was feeling much better. So much better, in fact, that she plucked up the courage to ask the question that had been bothering her for the past hour and a half.

"Pomona. Excuse me if this is none of my business, but I've got to ask. What the hell did you mean earlier when you said something about standing at his door naked?" She pointed towards Severus with her pint glass.

Pomona let out a peal of laughter, while Severus put his head in his hands, shaking it slowly.

"Please don't make me relive all that again," he groaned.

"Now I really *am* intrigued," said Hermione with a giggle.

"Well," began Pomona, clasping her hands together in front of her, "about two years ago Minerva and *finally* found out where Severus had been hiding himself away. She owled him several times, to no avail, so I decided to just turn up on his doorstep. To get to which I had to pass through the wards he's set around his garden. Wards that are designed to Vanish the clothing of any witch or wizard that passes through."

"Severus Snape!" said Hermione, in a tone of exaggerated shock.

Severus raised a protesting hand. "I would like to point out at this juncture that my strategy was not developed through any spirit of lasciviousness. I wanted to deter visitors, but didn't want to cause them any harm. Some sort of impenetrable wall would just be seen as a challenge. I assumed that the first thought of anyone who entered my garden and found themselves naked would just be to Apparate back as rapidly as possible to whence they came. Giving me my desired privacy. I hadn't, however,

bargained on Pomona Sprout and her combination of Hufflepuff determination and a total lack of propriety."

"Oh, you were pleased to see me, really," protested Sprout, waggling her eyebrows.

"So, let me get this straight," said Hermione, suppressing her giggles. "You appeared on his doorstep naked, so he surrendered and let you in?"

"Oh, no, dear," responded Pomona cheerfully with a shake of her head. "The first time he wouldn't even open the door."

"I have a spy hole in it. I was in shock," contributed Severus.

"The second time, a week later, he opened the door for as long as it took to tell me to go away. The third time he actually added a 'please'."

Hermione was giggling uncontrollably now at the visuals her brain was supplying. Severus' head was in his hands once more.

Sprout continued her tale. "The fourth time, he invited me in, gave me a spare cloak, and subjected me to a ten-minute lecture on the subject of why I should leave him alone. The fifth time, he repeated the cloak loan, and the lecture only on that occasion it was more of a diatribe lasted somewhat longer and involved a considerable amount of imaginatively ripe language. And on my sixth visit I arrived in his garden to find my clothing miraculously intact, and we've been friends ever since."

"I think 'friends' is a little generous," responded Snape, raising his head from his hands. "That's rather like describing a seagull as being friends with the sea when he's merely been swept away on the tide." But the expression in his eyes as he looked at Pomona was one of affection, noted Hermione, wiping away tears of laughter.

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"I'm sorry, you may be 'the most skilled Potioneer of our age' but I have to disagree. Anything that violent a shade of green can't be good for you, and there is no way drowning the whole lot in acetic acid is going to improve matters." Hermione waved a chip in Severus' general direction to emphasise her point.

Severus shook his head sorrowfully. "I thought you never passed up the opportunity to learn something. Mushy peas and vinegar is a classic combination and a far better complement to a bag of chips than that fluorescent orange insult you call curry sauce."

"Now, now, children," interjected Sprout from her seat next to them on a low wall. "The world would be a very boring place if we all liked the same things. Are you sure I can't tempt either of you to a pickled egg?"

"Just the sight of those things floating in a jar like eyeballs turns my stomach," replied Hermione with a shudder.

"I'm with you on that one, Miss Granger," agreed Severus, dipping another chip into his peas. "There is something inherently unpleasant about them."

"Any chance you could call me Hermione? Miss Granger makes me feel twelve again. Or like I'm in a job interview."

"I'll try. And you could try calling me Severus."

"That will feel weird. Though possibly no weirder than the fact I've spent the evening getting drunk with you."

"And me!" piped up Pomona cheerily.

Hermione laughed. "Actually, even when you were my teacher I imagined you as a pub regular, so that's less odd."

"What about me?" asked Severus. "Did you speculate as to my drinking habits at all?"

"Alone in your rooms with a bottle of Firewhisky," responded Hermione promptly, softening her words with a smile.

"Over-proof rum, generally, but otherwise accurate. Merlin, I was depressingly clichéd." Severus speared another chip with his wooden fork and considered it dolefully.

Hermione nudged her shoulder against his. "Cheer up. A lot of women consider you quite the brooding, romantic hero."

Severus looked down at her, eyes narrowed. "Yes, I've come across that strange conceit. It only takes a couple of minutes of my actual company to dispel their illusions."

"Oh, don't start that again, Eeyore," interrupted Pomona briskly. "There are plenty of us who find your company perfectly amenable. Anyway, are we all agreed about next Saturday? Two o'clock at yours, Severus, to get those Snargaluffs sorted out?"

"Fine by me," he agreed, "but I think you've steamrollered Hermione somewhat."

"No," Hermione protested, "It's OK. Pomona's right I could do with some fresh air and a bit of physical labour."

Sprout pushed herself off the wall and clapped her hands. "Excellent! Well, if that's all arranged, I really must be heading back to Hogwarts, before Minerva sends out a search party. She'll be very eager to know how tonight went."

Severus stood as well, holding his hand out to take Hermione's empty chip tray from her before dropping it with his own into a nearby bin. She smiled at him in thanks then jumped up from the wall herself. She could still feel the effects of the beer on her knees, which were slightly numb.

"There's an alley just around the corner we can Apparate from without being spotted," she said. "I need to go home as well I'm shattered."

Pomona looked slightly disappointed. "Oh, if you're sure, dear. I thought you and Severus might like to stay out a little longer."

Severus shook his head. "It's been a busy evening for me as well I'm ready for my bed. You know how exhausting I find your company, Pomona."

Sprout punched him, quite hard, in the arm, before linking it with hers. "Young people today no stamina. Lead on, Hermione!"

Hermione showed them to a narrow lane, backing onto a row of shops and lined with bins. A cat watched them suspiciously from the top of one of the bins, then ambled off with a flick of its tail.

Sprout released Severus' arm before wrapping him in an enthusiastic embrace. Hermione noticed that she managed another quick fondle in the region of his arse. Severus returned the hug, an expression of amused resignation on his face.

"Goodnight, you incorrigible woman. See you next week."

Sprout released him and turned to hug Hermione. "Lovely to see you again, my dear," she said.

"You, too, Pomona. Thanks for a surprisingly entertaining evening."

Pomona stepped away, waved gaily, and Disapparated.

Severus and Hermione looked at each other slightly awkwardly.

"You go next," he said, "I don't want to leave you here alone. Have you got far to go?"

"Just to Grimmauld Place. I've got an apartment in the attic, and I sort of caretake the place no-one else lives there permanently now, but quite a few people use it as an occasional base if they're in London."

"I see. Well, I've enjoyed talking to you this evening. Thank you."

"I've had a really good time too... Severus." She pulled a face. "That feels odd. I'm sure I'll get used to it, though."

Snape gave a half smile. "I'd like it if you did, Hermione. For what it's worth, using your given name feels strange to me as well."

Hermione grinned suddenly. "Do I get a hug?"

Snape looked at her quizzically. "That rather depends on whether you're going to use it as an excuse to test Pomona's judgement of my physique."

Hermione held up her hands with an expression of injured innocence. "I just wanted to be friendly."

"Well, in that case," murmured Snape as he stepped towards her, an amused expression on his face.

Hermione closed the gap between them and wrapped her arms around him, feeling him respond after a brief hesitation. They pulled each other close, and she found that her head fitted snugly against his shoulder. She relaxed into him and shut her eyes as she savoured the comforting contact.

"This is nice," she muttered. "You're a good hugger."

She felt rather than heard him laugh softly. "A hidden talent of mine. There's generally not much call for it."

They released each other and she smiled at him. "Goodnight then, Severus. See you next Saturday."

"Goodnight, Hermione."

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"And," concluded Pomona with a triumphant wave of her forefinger, "I think I've found him a woman!"

Minerva McGonagall looked sternly at her colleague over the top of her glasses, whisky tumbler stilled in its progress to her lips.

"Pomona," she began warningly, "please don't tell me you've been matchmaking again. I'd have thought your last disastrous effort would have taught you something."

Sprout waved a hand dismissively. "Pfft! I still maintain Draco holds his wand at both ends. I was sure locking him in the greenhouse with Justin would have brought him out of the closet, so to speak. Still, no harm done. They're both walking almost normally now, and Poppy says there should be no lasting damage."

Minerva sighed. "So who is the unfortunate victim of your meddling this time?"

"Hermione Granger."

"Hermione?" Minerva's eyebrows shot up. "But she was his student! And she's what? Twenty years younger than him?"

"Details, Minerva, details. Age is hardly relevant. I remember a wonderful summer with that under-gardener; what was his name? I don't recall *him* commenting on the fact that I was a quarter century his senior, though to be fair I may not have left him with enough energy to complain and..." She trailed off and gazed into the fire briefly, lost in memory. "Where was I? Oh, yes. As for the student thing well, most British witches between the ages of twenty and forty must have been taught by Severus, so it's hardly fair to make that an exclusion. And, Minerva, you didn't see him talking to her! He was just so relaxed and interested. And I don't imagine she meets many men that can match her intellectually. Don't worry I'm not going to lock *them* in a greenhouse. I'll just make sure they get plenty of chances to spend some time together, and we'll see what happens. No-one's going to get hurt."

Minerva looked at her sceptically. "Yes, well, I don't think you can guarantee that. But given the combined magical talent and temperaments of the characters involved, I'm fairly sure if anyone does get hurt, it'll be you."

Pomona just smiled serenely. "You'll see, Minerva. I'm definitely right this time."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 4

Shovels, socks and scars.

Chapter 2

Ron chewed and swallowed his last mouthful of Yorkshire pudding ruminatively.

"OK, let me get this straight. You spent your Friday evening at a Potions lecture. So far, so normal. For you."

Hermione smiled at him with artificial sweetness. Ron gestured with his fork as he continued.

"Then you went out and got drunk. Less normal."

"I hadn't eaten since breakfast *and* I was nervous."

"I'll let you off that, then. But getting drunk with Snape? That's just wrong. I know it turned out he was on our side and all that, and I know you were never as hard on him as me and Harry were. But drinking with him? Like you're friends or something?" He shook his head decisively. "Wrong. And weird."

"But that's the thing it didn't feel weird at all once I'd relaxed. He was really easy to talk to, and he was interested in my work, which made a pleasant change." She looked pointedly at Ron.

"I'm not *un*interested in your work; it just makes my head hurt to think about it. Snape's probably one of the few people who can understand what you're banging on about - I'll give him that. Anyway, what do you two think? Surely you don't think this whole thing is normal?"

He appealed to Harry and Ginny, who were sitting across the table from them. Autumn sunlight streamed in through the windows of the Grimmauld Place dining room. The basement kitchen may have been handy to eat in, but this room was much brighter and Hermione preferred to use it when she hosted one of their semi-regular Sunday lunches.

Ginny grinned. "You're doing enough talking for the two of us, brother dear. Look, Snape was never my favourite teacher, but you weren't there during that horrendous year. Without him, Merlin knows what damage the Carrows would have done, but he managed to fool us and them at the same time. I couldn't even try to guess what sort of person he really is. If Hermione reckons he's actually a pretty good bloke to have a pint with, it's no more surprising than finding out he held a candle for Harry's mum all those years, or, for that matter, finding out he wasn't dead when you were all convinced he was."

Ron frowned. "Harry? What about you, mate? Don't tell me you're OK with it."

Harry toyed with his wine glass, running a finger around the rim. "I'm not sure. I think I agree with Ginny I've lost the ability to be shocked where Snape's concerned. I can't imagine meeting him socially, to be honest, but that's mainly due to the fact my last conversation with him in St Mungo's wasn't a huge success. Something like, 'Um, well, really sorry we left you for dead, and oh, on that subject, while I thought you were dead I sort of told the world that you were in love with my mum.' A week later he discharged himself and that was that. Where has he been hiding, anyway, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged. "I didn't ask. Pomona said something about a Muggle village. I'm Apparating with her from Hogwarts next Saturday. I'll find out then."

Ron shook his head again. "I still think it's weird."

Hermione sighed. "I might get there on Saturday and find out he's regretting his drunken impulse and doesn't want me there after all. Which will be fine and, frankly, unsurprising. But I agree with Pomona he deserves better than being shut away on his own, whatever his misguided feelings on the matter are. And if I can be a friend to somebody who needs one, well, that would be a good thing to do."

Harry looked at her sternly. "This isn't another house-elf situation, is it? Hermione standing up for the helpless who actually aren't?"

Hermione threw her napkin at him. "No, you cheeky git, it's not! It's more Hermione deciding that she could do with a change of scenery and maybe a friend who can understand words of more than one syllable." She watched him flinch slightly under her glare before she relented and smiled at him gently. "I'm teasing. But my life at the moment is work and not a lot else, and Sprout was right about that at least it's not healthy. I love you all to bits, but you two have got your boys now," she nodded towards Harry and Ginny, then raised an eyebrow at Ron. "And I'm sure *you've* got a social calendar I don't even want to know about. If I'm not going to end up a lonely cat-ridden spinster, I need to get my arse into gear, start making some new friends and get a bit of a life outside work. I'll admit that spending a Saturday working in Severus Snape's garden is not going to lead to a happily-ever-after in any way, shape or form, but it's something *different*. That's all."

She took a deep breath. "OK, rant over. Who fancies pudding? Apple and blackberry crumble?"

Ron flung his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "If it wasn't for the fact we made a really crap couple, I'd marry you for your cooking. Is there custard as well?"

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Severus heaved himself up out of the hole he'd just dug and flung his spade to one side. He wiped his hands on his jeans, then surveyed the muddy marks he'd left slightly ruefully. No doubt Pomona would have something to say about his unkempt appearance. But surely she of all people would understand that a day in the garden was not conducive to, as she so bluntly put it, 'making the best of a bad job' where his looks were concerned.

He still wasn't entirely sure why he let her boss him around so much. It was all a bluff, of course. They both knew there wasn't a hope in hell of her actually forcing him to do anything he didn't really want to do. Which rather begged the question of why he was letting her cajole him out of his self-imposed exile. For a man given to introspection, he was surprisingly reluctant to examine his motives too closely. Maybe for fear of discovering that she was actually right.

He also couldn't quite believe he would shortly be welcoming Hermione Granger into his well-protected sanctuary. He really must be desperate for company. No, he chided himself, *that's unfair. You enjoyed talking to her last week* Strange but true. He'd accepted her presence after the lecture as being part of one of Pomona's interminable schemes to rehabilitate him into wizarding society without any expectation of gaining pleasure from the encounter. But Hermione had turned out to have something of the same quality as Sprout she chatted away to him quite fearlessly, with no sign of the awkwardness or awe that he sensed in so many when they were confronted with him. She also, by some miracle, was an intelligent and interesting conversationalist. And she had been remarkably good-humoured and sensible about his inadvertent dismissal of her gender. Unlikely as it might seem, if he was to start admitting more people into his life, he could do much worse than his formerly irritating pupil.

He looked up at the clouds. Rain never far away on this westernmost tip of Cornwall had threatened earlier, but the wind had whipped up in the last half-hour, and the sky out over the sea seemed to be brightening promisingly. He enjoyed nothing better than a raging storm when he was cosily ensconced in front of his fire with a good book, but he preferred to conduct his outdoor activities in more clement conditions. He strolled down to the edge of his garden to look out at the Atlantic. A footpath and a scrubby hedge were all that separated him from the edge of the cliff. The ebb-and-flow susurration of the waves in the cove below was such a constant accompaniment to his life now that he rarely noticed it. There was a definite band of pale blue sky out to the west, he noted approvingly, with the sea towards the horizon even showing a slight glimmer from the sun.

For some reason, he cared that Hermione's first impression of his home should be a good one. He turned back towards the house. It was the product of some 1960s architect's fevered imagination constructed from white-painted concrete, single-story, high-ceilinged and perfectly round, with windows banding its circumference so that the interior was bathed in light on even the gloomiest day. A more extreme contrast to the Slytherin dungeons or his depressing childhood home would be hard to find. Which was rather the point.

The house was surrounded by an extensive garden, partly lawned and partly dug over to accommodate the hardier of his plants. The more fragile specimens were located in the greenhouse, off to one side of his plot. The greenhouse had been his first addition after he moved in and was a salvaged Victorian affair, the swirling, elaborate ironwork providing a pleasing (to his eye, at least) contrast to the sleek minimalism of the house. There was also a whitewashed outbuilding. When he'd bought the property, this had been a garage with an ancient Land Rover quietly rusting away inside. Restoring the vehicle had provided an absorbing and therapeutic way to spend his first winter in Cornwall. It now ran like clockwork and lived happily outside, its previous living space having been converted to a small but serviceable laboratory.

So that was the Snape estate, as he called it ironically in his head. Apart from occasional visits to the pub in the village and his weekly shopping trip to the nearest town, this had become the extent of his world. And a very peaceful and undemanding world it had been until Pomona Sprout had erupted into it, bringing with her the irritations of his past but also a tantalising hope that maybe, just maybe, there could be benefits to interrupting his blissful isolation.

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Hermione clutched the hessian-wrapped Snargaluff stump tightly to her chest as she stumbled a little on landing, her left hand still tucked securely under Pomona's elbow for the Side-Along Apparition.

"There we go, my dear," said the older witch cheerily as she released her grip on Hermione. "Welcome to the arse-end of nowhere."

Hermione looked around with interest. They were standing on a narrow lane, surrounded by rocky moorland. The ruins of an old tin mine stood a few hundred yards away, the brick chimney like a jagged fingerpost pointing to the clouds. A strong wind gusted around them, bringing with it an unmistakably marine tang. Spurring off from the lane in front of them was a grassy track heading downhill. She inhaled deeply, the sea air reminding her of childhood holidays and bringing with it an immediate sense of relaxation.

Pomona pointed down the lane to their left. "There's a village of sorts about a mile in that direction. In front of you we have Severus' house, the Atlantic, then nothing until America. Come along!"

Hermione hoisted her Snargaluff stump to a more secure position with both hands, then followed Pomona, who was similarly encumbered, down the grassy track. They passed through a pair of gateposts, and as they did so Hermione felt a whisper of magic brushing against her face. She stopped abruptly.

"Pomona, are you absolutely sure he'll have remembered to adjust his wards to let me through?"

"Don't be silly! Of course he has. Now, come on before I drop this thing!" She hustled ahead again.

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped forwards. She could feel the soft touch of the magic against her body briefly; then it was gone. Without taking her clothes with it, she was relieved to note.

The track inclined more steeply and took a sharp right hand turn. Hermione glanced down as she rounded the bend, watching her footing in the deeply-rutted tyre-tracks. She looked back up again and stopped in astonishment to take in the sight in front of her. The track led into a shallow semi-circular depression, somewhat resembling a large, grassed amphitheatre. At the centre was a completely round house, looking rather like the top of a lighthouse, and she briefly registered the presence of a couple of outbuildings. But her main attention was seized by the view. The edge of the garden was evidently also the cliff-edge, and all she could see was ocean stretching away to the horizon. The sea undulated in countless shades of grey and blue. In the distance, shafts of sunlight had broken through the clouds and set the water below glittering. A distant boat gave perspective, looking like a child's toy.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "I can understand why he wouldn't want to leave this place very often."

"Glad you approve," responded a male voice, and the 'he' in question appeared from a nearby building, which Hermione belatedly recognised as a greenhouse. "Good to see you again. And you, Sprout."

Hermione made a swift mental adjustment in response to her erstwhile Potions master's current appearance. From his muddy wellingtons, through his ripped jeans, to his faded black T-shirt (*The Ramones? Seriously?*), he looked like he spent every day outdoors. It was almost impossible to reconcile the relaxed man in front of her with the angry, pale figure who had haunted the Hogwarts dungeons. It was like one of those optical illusions that kept snapping in and out of focus.

Pomona beamed at him, proffering the Snargaluff stump she was carrying. "I would hug you, my dear, but I don't want to set this thing off. Where can we put them down?"

"Use the bench in the greenhouse for the moment," replied Snape, leading the way back in. Hermione entered the humid, fragrant glasshouse and deposited her stump onto the indicated surface with a sigh of relief. It was heavier than it looked and had held the exciting prospect of shooting aggressive tendrils at her if she'd jostled it too much.

She looked round her again. The greenhouse was considerably smaller than the ones at Hogwarts, but was still a fair size. A multitude of plants, Muggle and magical, covered most of the surfaces and a good portion of the floor. Some sort of vine was trained through the internal ironwork overhead and trailed leafy shoots down to almost touch the tops of other plants growing up.

"A lot of these spend the summer outside, but I've brought them in ready for the winter," explained Severus. "The climate down here is relatively mild, but we get more than our fair share of storms."

"I'd imagine you get an impressive view of them it must be incredibly dramatic," observed Hermione, slightly enviously.

"Oh, it is. Which apparently suits my tendency towards the over-theatrical," responded Snape, raising an eyebrow at Sprout, who beamed back, then clapped her hands together.

"Right-o," she said heartily. "Time for some work. Severus, where are you planning on planting the stumps?"

"I'll show you. I've dug a couple of holes already, but wasn't quite sure how deep they needed to be."

The two witches followed Severus round towards the front of the house. A large area was dug over, although there was little sign of anything growing at this time of year. At the edge were two holes, each about three feet deep. Pomona surveyed them, head on one side.

"Not bad. They could do with going down a bit further, though we'll need to pack the bottoms with plenty of compost before the stumps go in. Chuck me that spade."

Severus obliged, saying, "I'll dig if you like."

Pomona waved a hand at him. "Don't be silly. It'll be quicker if I do it. More years of practice." She paused then, looking briefly at the implement in her hand before fixing Hermione with a wicked grin. "I always say men are like spades, you know, girl."

Severus groaned. "Please, Hermione, don't encourage her."

Hermione smiled sweetly at him before responding. "Go on then. I've think I've got to hear this."

Pomona stuck her tongue out at Snape, then continued. "Grasp 'em firmly by the shaft and they'll do whatever you want!" Hermione felt herself blush as Pomona lowered herself into the hole with a cackle of laughter.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," commented Severus, raising an eyebrow at her flushed face. "You'll need to develop an immunity to indecency if you're planning on spending time with Sprout."

Sprout snorted from the depths of the hole as soil flew from the blade of her shovel. "I'm not indecent, boy. I'm earthy."

"Literally and metaphorically," observed Hermione with a chuckle as Sprout half-rolled out of the completed hole and transferred her attentions to the other one.

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Three hours and what felt like several tons of soil later, Hermione stretched out in a chair with a sigh of relief. The sky had suddenly darkened, and the rain, light at first, had started to fall so heavily that they'd fled inside. Severus had pronounced himself delighted with the work they'd completed and insisted that they call it a day, which had come as something of a relief. Hermione was aching in places she'd forgotten existed, and she'd have to soak the blisters on her hands when she got home. But the Snargaluffs were safely planted, they'd dug over two of the smaller beds, and shrubs had been cut back and mulched. Something like that, anyway. She'd been very much the skivvy that afternoon, happy to just follow the instructions issued by Pomona and, to a lesser extent, Severus.

The latter had insisted that the two witches make themselves comfortable in the living room while he made tea. With no argument they'd settled down into armchairs by the fireplace, now filled with a crackling fire thanks to a swift flick of Pomona's wand. Despite the glowering clouds outside, the room was well-lit by the windows that stretched along one curved wall. The house was bisected by a central corridor that ran from front door to back, with all of the rooms opening off it. Hermione guessed that the others

would be formed like this one, with three straight walls and one curved. She was reminded somewhat of the Lovegoods' home, but the similarity in shape was where the resemblance ended. While that had been all vivid colours and chaotic clutter, this was calm and clean. The living room was sparsely furnished - just three armchairs and a low table near the fire. The walls were painted a soft cream and the floor was bare, bleached wood. It could have been austere, but Hermione found it restful. There were no pictures, but with the glorious view out to sea from the windows, who needed art?

The door from the hall opened with a slight creak, and Severus entered, three mugs levitated in front of him. He lowered them safely onto the table, then dropped himself down into the empty armchair between Hermione and Sprout.

"Dinner will be ready in about an hour. I hope you both like rabbit. One of the local farmers was selling them in the pub the other day, so there's a casserole in the oven."

"You cook?" blurted out Hermione in amazement.

Snape narrowed his eyes slightly. "Of course I can cook. I can brew a Draught of Living Death with my eyes closed and one hand tied behind my back - a rabbit casserole is hardly taxing."

"I'm not surprised that you're capable of cooking, just that you do. I didn't really have you down as the domesticated type."

"Oh, there's no end to his talents, Hermione," interrupted Pomona. "He's a dab hand with his household spells as well. And he's good with an engine. I do like a man who gets his hands dirty."

"Yes, we all know that," observed Severus drily. "You and Sebastian the under-gardener were the subject of some uncomfortably explicit gossip while I was at school."

Pomona snapped her fingers. "Sebastian! That was his name. I was thinking about him the other night, actually. And I thought we were so discreet - I didn't realise any of the students knew."

Snape snorted. "People in glass houses shouldn't shag at night with the lights on. Lucius Malfoy saw you and took a quite unpleasant delight in describing the scene in great detail."

"That boy always was an odious little shit. So glad he's finally been locked up."

There was a pause in the conversation as tea was drunk and tired limbs were stretched out. They'd all left their boots by the back door, and Hermione amused herself briefly by comparing socks. Pomona's were as darned as her hat was patched. It seemed a safe assumption that she'd never mastered the Transfiguration spell that could invisibly mend clothes. Hermione's own were sensibly dark blue and thermal - a property she had particularly appreciated that afternoon. Severus' pair was a defiantly non-sensible shade of red and looked distinctly hand-knitted. She looked up at his face then, to find he was studying her with an unreadable expression. She felt herself begin to flush slightly under his scrutiny.

"Great socks," she said hastily, breaking the moment. "Is knitting another of your hidden talents?"

Severus' face relaxed into a half-smile, and he gave a soft huff of amusement. "I must confess it's a skill I have never felt it worthwhile to acquire." He stretched his legs out straight and considered his feet.

"These were a gift from an elderly lady in the village: the pub landlord's mother, in fact. I gave her a salve to ease the arthritis in her fingers, and she knitted me half a dozen pairs of socks as a thank you. They're all equally garish but bloody warm, so I'm prepared to overlook the lack of sartorial elegance."

Sprout snorted inelegantly. "Yes, because you take such notice of your appearance generally. How old is that dish-rag of a T-shirt?"

"Pomona," responded Severus in a tone of exaggerated patience. "I've been gardening. In the company of two people who have known me for far too long to be care what I look like. If, Merlin help me, you ever set me up with a woman, then you can fuss about my appearance. Besides, you're hardly an example of immaculate tailoring yourself."

"Maybe not, but I have other assets," retorted Pomona, widening her eyes suggestively.

"So does Severus," protested Hermione. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. *Oh, bugger. I may as well finish what I started* "I think you're a bit hard on his looks, Pomona."

Severus looked at her evenly. "Don't feel obliged to take my side, Hermione. I have looked in a mirror, you know."

"You're as unobservant as she is, then."

"Well, don't let me stop you. I'm intrigued to hear this litany of my so-called assets. I suspect it may be short."

"Not at all. For a start, Pomona says your arse is great, though obviously I haven't looked. The rest of your figure's fine as well - plenty of women go for the long and lean type. Your eyes are quite strikingly unusual - very few people's are that dark - and you've got extremely good eye contact. Must be all that Legilimency. You've got lovely hands, and you're good with them, too. That can be a great turn-on - seeing a man using his hands to do something practical can get a woman thinking about what else he could use them for. You've got a smile that takes twenty years off you when you actually use it. Your voice is like liquid silk, even though sometimes what you're saying could do with a bit of work. Is that enough or shall I continue? Obviously, you need to bear in mind I'm not a woman, I'm an ex-pupil, so I'm a purely neutral commentator."

Severus' eyes had progressively narrowed in suspicion as her list had grown longer, but at that last remark he threw his head back with a bark of laughter.

"I have no idea if you really meant any of that, but I suppose you deserve a little revenge."

"I meant every word, actually. The revenge was in seeing you squirm as I said it all. Oh, I forgot; you've got your own hair and teeth as well, which is always a bonus in a man your age."

Severus turned to their other companion. "Pomona, will you remind me again why you think it's such a good idea for me to have friends? I'm not sure this is having the desired effect on my self esteem."

Pomona patted his hand with a smile. "She thinks you're getting forgetful as well, I'm afraid. She thought you might not have remembered to change your wards for her."

"Of course I remembered. One naked witch on my doorstep this century was quite enough." He looked at Hermione. "Not that I don't think you'd be a more welcome sight without your clothes than Pomona. Though obviously I haven't actually thought about you without your clothes. Not that I don't think it wouldn't be a pleasant thing to think about, and there's no reason why I shouldn't, but... I'm going to stop talking now before I make matters worse."

Hermione smiled at him kindly. "Well done. I may not know as much about spades as Pomona, but I do know one thing. When you're in a hole, stop digging."

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Severus closed the front door with a long sigh of relief and raked a hand through his hair. Peace at last. Until next Saturday, when they'd be back to, in Sprout's words, 'Make that excuse for a greenhouse look like less of a disgrace to Herbology'. The disruption had been worth it, though. The Snargaluff pods were vital for his research, and the garden was partly prepared for the winter.

Sprout's company was always entertaining, anyway, as long as it was in smallish doses. And Hermione seemed to take her cue from the older witch, her attitude towards him becoming more confident and playful as the afternoon had progressed. His mental image of her from her school days was a blurry one of bushy hair, an irritating desire to be right all the time, and an even more irritating tendency to fulfil that ambition. All three of those elements were still present, though the hair had been today mostly confined to a plait, and he could now recognise her intelligence and drive as qualities rather than faults. Her eager questions as she'd slaved away in the garden evidenced an undiminished desire for knowledge, and she was certainly not afraid of hard work. He'd noticed the blisters on her hands and made sure she left with some of his comfrey salve.

One thing remained a mystery. She'd grown up into a not-unattractive young lady. Although no great beauty, her figure was shapely, her features pleasant to look at, and her eyes shone with intelligent curiosity. So why on earth was she choosing to spend time with him? Sprout must be even more persuasive than he'd given her credit for.

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His Saturdays remained disturbed for the next month. They fell into a routine of afternoons in the greenhouse spent re-potting, trimming and carrying out what other maintenance jobs Pomona thought were necessary for his allegedly neglected plants, followed by supper around the kitchen table.

Hermione still showed every appearance of actually enjoying herself, and he noticed with approval that she had lost her desk-bound pallor. She'd confessed to him that she was rediscovering the pleasures of spending time outdoors and trying to make sure she made time for at least a short walk every day. He was beginning to suspect that he wasn't the only one for whom Pomona had a rehabilitative agenda.

*

On the third Saturday in November, Hermione arrived in the lane at the usual time. After that first week she'd been able to Apparate herself and meet Pomona there. Today, though, there was no sign of the other witch. She wound her scarf more tightly around her neck, then burrowed her hands back down into her pockets as she waited. The wind today was coming from the North, bringing with it a sharp chill.

"Hermione!"

She turned towards the sound of Severus' voice to see him striding up the track towards her, long black overcoat billowing in the wind. Pomona was right about his flair for the dramatic, however unconscious, she thought fondly.

"Hello," she replied with a smile as he approached. "No sign of the noisy one yet."

He reached her side. "That's why I came up to meet you. I had a message from Hogwarts earlier, saying she can't come today because she's ill."

"She's never ill!" exclaimed Hermione, surprised.

"My thoughts exactly. If I was a suspicious man, which naturally I'm not, I would say this was a less than subtle plan to get us to spend time alone. Our friendship is obviously not developing rapidly enough for her scheming mind."

Hermione chuckled. "I'm afraid I think you may be right. Look, would you prefer it if I went home? Without Pomona imposing our company, you could spend your afternoon how you want."

On another man, Hermione would have interpreted Severus' resultant expression as nervousness.

"I do have plans for the afternoon that don't involve gardening, but they do involve you. If you wouldn't mind staying, of course."

"I'm intrigued now. Of course I'll stay."

Severus' face broke into a surprisingly boyish grin. "Excellent. Come on then I've got work for you. No blisters today, I promise."

"That'll make a pleasant change!"

Side by side they walked back down the track. Instead of turning towards the house or greenhouse, as Hermione had expected, Severus led the way to the little white-painted outbuilding. She'd assumed from its appearance it was a garage or shed, but as he flung open one of the large front doors, she realised it was a laboratory. She laughed.

"Do you know, this was the one thing I always wondered about this house. I knew you must have a lab somewhere, but couldn't work out where it was."

"You could always have asked, you know. I'm not that scary."

Lights came on along the length of the interior as they entered, and Severus closed the door behind them.

"Welcome to my lair."

There was a long bench along each side of the room. The left-hand one had cupboards below and neatly ordered rows of glassware on the work-surface. The right-hand one had a couple of stools pulled up to it, and the surface was obscured by a seemingly chaotic spread of papers and parchment.

Approaching more closely, Hermione could see these were covered in writing, diagrams and equations.

She turned back to look at Severus. "Your research?"

He nodded. "Exactly. You did say when we first met that you might be able to help with some of the calculations. I trust I'm not imposing by..."

"Not at all!" Hermione interrupted. "I'd love to help. I've been hoping you'd ask, but thought maybe you were just being polite when we discussed it before."

"Polite?" repeated Severus.

"Well, yes, it does seem a little unlikely, doesn't it?" Hermione said with a wry laugh. "Anyway, fire away. What are you researching, and what can I do to help?"

Severus gestured towards the stools, and they both sat down.

"The main aim of my work is to find a way to heal curse scars."

"I didn't know that was possible."

"There's a difference between something being impossible and us simply not knowing how to do it yet."

"True. Why curse scars, if you don't mind me asking? I assume it's not for Harry's benefit."

"Ha, bloody ha. No, strangely enough, it's not. I started thinking about it when Pomona began berating me about my appearance."

He tugged down the collar of his black shirt to fully expose a patch of gnarled skin at the juncture of neck and shoulder, the uneven ridge a permanent token of Nagini's

attack. Hermione mentally slapped herself for being so dim.

"This was never going to be one of my better features," continued Severus, releasing the collar back to its normal position. "I was resigned to that, and to my sundry other mementoes of those delightful years. But I began wondering exactly what it was about scars caused by Dark magic that rendered them resistant to normal healing. After all, it can't be any intrinsic property of the particular spell used, can it?"

He looked at Hermione enquiringly, and she sensed this was a test. Trying not to sound like her thirteen-year-old, just-swallowed-a-textbook self, she replied. "No, because Dark magic is defined as much by the intent of the user as by the nature of the spell used."

Severus inclined his head approvingly. "Precisely. Do you know what spell was used to sever George Weasley's ear?"

"No. I know it was you that cast it, though. I assume you didn't actually intend to hit him."

Severus gave a humourless laugh.

"You're right. I was aiming for Yaxley, but he moved at the last moment, and I hit George instead. As my intent at the point of casting was distinctly Dark, the ear was irreparably lost. The spell I used was Sectumsempra."

"But when Harry used that on Malfoy, you healed the wounds."

"Which proves my point. When Potter cast the spell, he had no idea what he was using and no intent to cause real damage. Somewhat ironically, his usual witlessness worked to Malfoy's benefit. The lack of Dark intent made it possible for me to heal the wounds on that occasion. So in looking for a cure for curse scars, effectively what one is searching for is an antidote to physical damage caused by ill intent, rather than a specific counter-curse. I surmise that regardless of the curse used, there is a common type of damage shared by all wounds from Dark magic."

Hermione frowned slightly in concentration. "So presumably the first thing you need to do is determine the precise nature of that physical damage."

"Indeed. Now, most magical activity relies on the general mutability of matter. Transfiguration, Charms, Healing, Potions and, naturally, curses: all of these, at the most fundamental level, are just different ways of changing one thing into another, or changing the properties of an object. My hypothesis is that Dark magic can actually result in a loss of this mutability, leaving scars that cannot be Transfigured or Healed. A curse scar is resistant to any physical change."

"That makes sense. So any antidote needs to restore that ability to be changed, and the scar can then be healed by conventional means."

"My thoughts precisely. My research has been focused on potions that might have such an effect. I've started by looking at those that have an extreme transformative action on the body. Polyjuice, Ageing Potion and the like have the dual purpose of breaking down the natural physical order of the body and replacing it with a new one. What I need to do is isolate the elements of those potions that result in the initial breakdown and attempt to devise a method of recombining them to generate a more complete disruptive effect."

Hermione nodded. "You're aiming to break up the scar totally before the flesh can be healed. So how far have you got?"

Severus pulled the closest pile of papers towards him. "It's a significant task. The main problem is that the potions I'm looking at were all devised hundreds of years ago, and most of the research that went into them is long gone. So I'm having to start from scratch to identify which of the constituent elements have which effect, how they work in combination and so on. And these are not simple potions. I've got a list of around a hundred components to analyse, and then there will be vast numbers of possible new formulae. I've made a start, but it's going to be a long process."

"Which is where I come in."

"That's what I hoped. What do you think?"

"No problem."

Hermione felt a familiar thrill of excitement at being set a new challenge, but tried not to let too much of it show in her face. She pulled her stool in closer to the bench and looked at Severus with a business-like expression.

"Right, pass me a quill, some parchment and your list of components. Have you got a copy of *The Arithmantic Dictionary of Elements*?"

"Yes, I have. I'll get it for you. Would you like some tea as well?"

"That would be perfect."

*

Two and a half hours later, Hermione dropped her quill on to the work surface with a sigh. Severus looked up from his writing, concerned.

"Problem?"

She smiled at him. "No, it's OK. That was an expression of contentment rather than annoyance. I've done the preparatory work, but I need my computer for the rest. I've got to input all the data, write a couple of analysis algorithms, then leave the program to do the number crunching. By next weekend I should have some likely solutions for you."

He was slightly shocked. "And that's it?"

Hermione looked at him directly, eyebrow raised. "Hardly 'it'. This is the culmination of several years of bloody hard work on my part. I may make it look simple now..."

Severus held up a hand to stem her complaint. *Nice one, silver-tongue.* "I didn't mean it that way," he began in a conciliatory tone. "I'm just amazed at how quickly you're going to be able to complete work that would have taken me months. I'm impressed very impressed."

Hermione smiled, somewhat apologetically. "Sorry. I'm a little too used to people dismissing my work because they don't understand it. Even my colleagues at the Ministry are over the initial surprise at what I can do and just take it for granted now. They're used to how rapidly I can turn things around and only think to comment if I've not done something fast enough for them." She rolled her eyes and gave her head a brief shake of frustration.

"I thought you enjoyed your job?"

"Oh, the job's great. I love the challenge and the numbers and the sheer beauty of creating solutions from a mass of data. It's the numbskulls I work with that are the problem."

"I can sympathise with that."

Hermione's face broke into a broad grin. "Thought so. You've been my inspiration for years, you know."

"Dare I ask in what way? I can't imagine it's anything good."

"When someone's really annoyed me, I think 'What would Professor Snape have said?'. I've come up with all sorts of impressive insults thanks to you. I don't always use them, but even thinking them can be quite therapeutic."

Severus felt unreasonably flattered.

"It's good to know I inspired at least one student, albeit in a rather unintended manner. Can you remember any examples of the gems of abuse I've inspired?"

"Let me think.... 'Don't bother waiting for inspiration to strike your brain offers far too small a target.' That was for Meadows, in the Novel Potions Unit."

"Ouch. Did you actually say that to him?"

"I did indeed. He nearly cried. I think it was the shock as much as anything. Most people think I'm such a nice girl." She emphasised the adjective savagely, with a falsely sweet smile.

"I don't," Severus responded, without thinking.

Hermione looked at him, eyes slightly narrowed. "Bearing in mind your susceptibility to foot-in-mouth disease, might I suggest you choose your next words really carefully?" She pointed a warning finger at him.

Severus picked up Hermione's discarded quill and stroked the soft length of the feather while he mentally framed what he wanted to say.

"Nice' is a particularly insipid word," he began hesitantly. "And you're anything but. You're highly intelligent, a hard worker, funny, kind and strangely easy to talk to. Much as it pains me to admit it, Pomona was right to force us into each other's company. I've grown to very much value your friendship."

His eyes had remained fixed on the quill as he spoke, but now he dared to look up. Hermione was regarding him with a soft expression in her brown eyes. She stretched out her hand across the table and took his lightly.

"You've become important to me as well."

He moved his other hand to rest on top of hers, and they just looked at each other for a few moments. He felt an absurd urge to draw her closer, to *What? Kiss her? Don't be ridiculous.*

"I won't tell if you won't," she said softly.

"Tell what?" he responded, slightly alarmed at the possibility of her possessing a hitherto unrecognised gift for Legilimency.

"Tell Pomona she was right," she elaborated. "We'd never hear the last of it."

He gave a short laugh of relief. "No, that's very true. We'll keep it to ourselves. If you agree, though, shall I put her off for next Saturday as well? We can go through your results in peace then."

"Sounds like an excellent idea."

They exchanged another smile, then Severus realised he was still holding her hand and released it somewhat reluctantly.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Well, as you're being so helpful I suppose the least I can do is feed you. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. It's amazing how many calories thinking can burn off. Good job, really, or my arse would be the size of one of Hagrid's pumpkins."

"Your arse is fine," he said unthinkingly. *Again.*

She looked at him with what seemed to be affection. "See? You can be spontaneously charming. Sort of."

*

Severus served game pie for supper. Hermione was hugely impressed, but he felt honour-bound to confess that this time his culinary skills were not responsible.

"It's courtesy of Mary Trembath from the farm down the road. In exchange for some cough linctus for her twin boys."

Hermione looked at him somewhat quizzically over the rim of her wine glass. "You're not as isolated here as Pomona makes out, are you?"

He shrugged. "It's not possible to live somewhere like this and not get at least partly drawn in to the community. I may have turned my back on wizarding society, but even I can't shut out the whole world."

"So what do your neighbours think you do for a living? Or don't they ask?"

"You've never been in a Cornish pub, have you?" he replied with a snort of laughter. "They ask, believe me. I've told them I'm a writer who also dabbles in herbal medicine. They're used to artistic types round here, so now the initial curiosity's worn off, they leave me to my own devices. Company's there if I want it, but there's no pressure."

"How did you end up living here?"

Severus thought briefly, undecided as to how much to reveal. Hermione, appearing to interpret his hesitation as reticence, added hurriedly, "You don't have to reply if you don't want to. Sorry, I was just being nosy."

Severus shook his head, decision made. "No, it's fine. It's just not something I've talked about, even with Pomona. I was working out how to articulate my thought processes."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "Once the initial delight at being alive wore off, my weeks in St Mungo's were not a pleasant experience. The treatment was uncomfortable, but that was perfectly bearable, and I was very grateful to receive it. The problem, as so frequently happens, was with everyone around me. I was subjected to the whole gamut of human emotion, courtesy of my never-ending parade of visitors. This ranged from the barely concealed disdain of those who thought I was a cold-hearted killer, to the undeserved plaudits from the equally deluded individuals who felt I was some sort of romantic hero. Potter informing me that he'd enlightened the whole world to every aspect of my often regrettable past was the final straw. I refused entrance to anyone except hospital staff for the rest of my stay."

He paused and drank the last of his wine, acutely aware of Hermione's rapt attention. "In those days of blissful quiet, I realised something. For the first time in my life, I could actually do what I wanted. I didn't need to listen to any more infernal bleating about duty or honour or even Potions lessons. I'd nearly died to make sure Potter got his moment of glory, and I felt I'd damn well earned a peaceful retirement. So I took it. I discharged myself and found a quiet little cottage to rent as far away from Hogwarts as I could. Which was a couple of miles away from here, as it happens. I found this place when I was out walking one day, and that was that. Wizarding society successfully eschewed. Until Pomona bloody Sprout decided to make me her new project."

Hermione re-filled both of their wineglasses. "Pomona doesn't have any real power over you, though, does she? You could very easily bar her totally from your property."

"I took the path of least resistance. I'm still trying to work out why. Maybe I'm mellowing in my old age."

"Approaching senility, more like," Hermione responded with an impish smile. "No, I think all this time on your own has let you work out who you really are, as opposed to what others think you should be. And, now *you* know, you're confident enough to let the rest of us find out as well."

"Interesting theory. I didn't know you dabbled in psychology. Have you tried it on yourself? Do you know who you are?" he challenged.

"I've always known who I am." Hermione smiled somewhat wistfully. "The tricky bit for me has been to learn to accept it instead of trying to be what I'm expected to be."

"Weasley?" asked Severus with an unusual flash of insight. He was rewarded with a bright smile and a sharp laugh.

"To be fair, I don't think Ron had any idea what he wanted me to be. I certainly didn't really know what I wanted from him. We're still great friends, but that's not quite enough. I knew it was over when he went away for three weeks for work, and all I felt was relief at having the house to myself."

"Possibly not the stuff of romance novels."

"Quite. When he got back, he asked if I'd missed him, and I said, 'To be brutally honest, no.'. In response to which he laughed and said he hadn't missed me either. So we hugged and that was that. Definitely a damp squib."

"And you're holding out for someone who sets off fireworks?" Severus asked, picking up the reference to their conversation in the pub.

Hermione looked at him good-humouredly. "Something like that, yes."

Severus raised his wineglass towards her with an ironic smile. "I wish you every success in your search."

Hermione clinked her glass against his. "And don't you give up on finding happiness, either."

They drank, eyes never leaving each other.

*

Severus insisted on walking Hermione back up to the lane at the end of the evening.

"Goodnight, then," she said, with a warm smile. "I've had a lovely time thank you."

"It's been a pleasure. And thank you again for agreeing to help."

Since that first drunken farewell after the lecture, they had confined themselves to verbal goodbyes. But tonight, on impulse, she stepped towards him, and he opened his arms and enveloped her in a warm hug. She returned the embrace, savouring the feel of his hard, lean body against hers. Then her brain caught up with her senses. She moved away from him, slightly reluctantly, and they exchanged another smile.

"I'll see you next Saturday," Hermione said.

"I'll look forward to it. Take care. Don't work too hard."

*

With a soft 'crack' she was gone. He headed back down the track towards the house. He knew it well enough that the meagre light from the moon was sufficient for him to find his way.

He entered through the front door and closed it behind him softly, expecting to feel the usual relief at having his peace and privacy restored. But it didn't come. Instead, for the first time in many years, he felt alone.

*

Hermione slumped onto her bed with a sigh. Her head hurt from too much thinking. Not from the intellectual exertions of the afternoon. No, that had been fun. But from trying to work out just what was going on with Severus. Well, not with Severus, exactly. With her and Severus. She knew what he wanted from her. Friendship. He'd been surprisingly eloquent on the matter earlier, and she'd been touched by his self-conscious elucidation of her value to him. However, he'd also made it clear in the pub that he couldn't forget the fact that she was his ex-pupil.

Unfortunately, she was beginning to feel she could only too easily dismiss the fact that he was her ex-teacher. He was just so different from the man she had known at school. Because, of course, she barely had known him then. The broad brushstrokes had always been there to see the intelligence, the intolerance, the intensity. But so much had been hidden or just not allowed to develop. His loving loyalty, his sense of humour, his capacity for simple acts of thoughtfulness. And, however much he fought it, his need for companionship. It hurt her to think how much of himself he had denied for so long.

Every day she spent with him, he seemed to reveal a little more. And the more he revealed, the more she liked. She laughed inwardly at the suggestive imagery. She was fairly sure if he started revealing himself in *that way* she'd like it as well. It was surprising how much her opinion of a person's physical attractiveness could be coloured by her opinion of his personality.

Her ponderings were interrupted by a tapping at the window. She ran over to let in the barn owl that was knocking on the glass. The snowy little creature flew in gracefully and alighted on the headboard of her bed, holding its foot out for her to take the message. She unrolled the small piece of parchment and, with mingled surprise and excitement, recognised Severus' assured, angular hand. Her heart dropped, though, as she read the message.

Sprout gravely ill. Floo to Minerva's office at once. Severus.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

An all-nighter, a bit of frustration and a little cliff-hanging.

Author's Notes: Betaed by the ever-reliable peskipiksi. Disclaimer: any recognisable characters/locations are JKR's.

Chapter 3

Hermione stepped out of the fireplace in the Headmistress' office and carefully brushed a few stray cinders from her robes onto the hearthstone. Minerva McGonagall had been seated behind her desk but rose with a warm smile of greeting.

"Hermione, my dear, welcome back to Hogwarts." McGonagall seized her hand.

"It's good to see you, Professor, but not in such circumstances. How is Pomona?"

"Not well, I'm afraid, not well at all." The Scottish witch's soft brogue thickened briefly with emotion. "Let's get you down to the hospital wing."

Hermione followed closely behind as McGonagall left the office and began to swiftly descend the spiral staircase.

"Severus didn't give me any details in his note. What's the matter with her?"

"We think she's been poisoned," replied McGonagall grimly.

"Poisoned? How?"

"A plant specimen arrived for her this morning. There was a card, saying 'From an admirer' or some such thing. She took the plant down to the greenhouses to examine it. Shortly afterwards, she started complaining to Neville of feeling short of breath. Her condition worsened through the afternoon, and by early evening she'd lost consciousness. Poppy has tried everything she can think of, and has managed to stabilise her, but..." She trailed off with an expressive shrug of her angular shoulders.

"So it was the plant?"

"We can't be sure, but the timing seems rather coincidental. Neither Pomona nor Neville could identify the specimen, and that's the strange thing. Scatty as she seems sometimes, Pomona is no fool when it comes to unknown herbage. Neville assures me that she wore gloves and protective clothing the whole time. But Poppy insists that the cause is definitely poisoning, and the plant is the most likely culprit."

"I suppose she may have had a hole in her glove or something," replied Hermione thoughtfully, the image of a cursed Katie Bell coming to mind.

"Maybe. Of course, once we realised it was poison, and an unknown one at that, Severus was the obvious person to send for. He came at once, bless him: he swept in, interrogated everyone, nearly reduced poor Neville to tears, disappeared back home briefly, then returned saying he'd sent for you and could I meet you in my office."

Walking along the candlelit corridor, Hermione was assailed by the familiar Hogwarts smells food, smoke, a whiff of sulphur from the dungeons and the background aromas of cleaning fluid and sweaty socks. It was nearly eleven o'clock, so all the students were (theoretically at least) in their common rooms or beds, and the castle was uncannily quiet.

They arrived at the hospital wing to find the ward dimly lit, with only the bed by the furthest window occupied. They walked softly over to it.

Pomona's face was ashen, her usually buoyant hair sweat-slicked and limp. Her plump figure seemed somehow diminished by the white sheets tucked tightly around her. Her eyes were closed, but her fingers twitched fretfully.

Madam Pomfrey appeared from her office at the far side of the ward.

"No change, I'm afraid." She responded to McGonagall's enquiring eyebrow with a sad shake of her head as she approached. "I've put her under a Stasis Charm, but it's not holding. My most recent diagnostic spells indicated that the poison has permeated every cell of her body. It's having a gradual heating effect. I'm trying Cooling Charms, but they're just not strong enough."

"What about an ice bath?" suggested Hermione.

"A what?" asked McGonagall.

"It's a technique sometimes used in Muggle medicine to bring down body temperature in cases of extreme fever."

Pomfrey and McGonagall exchanged doubtful looks. "I can see how it could work," began Pomfrey. "But it might be too great a shock to her system. I'll keep it in mind as a last resort, though. Thank you for your input, Miss Granger."

"Where's Severus, Poppy?" asked McGonagall.

"He's gone to his old classroom. He asked me to tell you to take Miss Granger down to him."

"I can go down by myself, Professor," Hermione assured the headmistress. "If you'd prefer to stay with Pomona."

McGonagall shook her head. "No, I'll come with you. Not, I hasten to add, because I've been summoned, but because I'd like to know exactly what Severus is up to. I may have asked for his help, but this is still my school," she added with some asperity.

*

Hermione and McGonagall arrived outside the Potions laboratory, to be greeted by the unexpected sound of raised voices coming from within. They exchanged puzzled looks, then McGonagall flung the door open. They were confronted with the sight of Severus Snape and Ronald Weasley, toe to toe in the middle of the room, glaring at each other.

"Ron?" exclaimed Hermione incredulously.

"What on earth is going on, Severus?" demanded McGonagall, her sharp tones echoing around the stone walls. "Mr Weasley, what are you doing here?"

"My question precisely," drawled Severus with a sneer. "I requested assistance from the Auror Office, but they appear to have misunderstood my request and sent the tea boy instead."

Pointedly, Ron turned away from Severus and addressed the two witches. "Hi, Hermione. Professor. As I was explaining to Mr Snape here, I'm the Auror on call tonight. Which means that the Ministry has certified me qualified to deal with any Dark-magic-related emergencies that arise."

"And as I explained to Mr Weasley," interjected Severus, "this is not a matter of a cursed wastepaper basket. One of the finest witches of her generation has been near-fatally poisoned, so I would welcome the attentions of someone with considerably more in the way of intellect and talent. If such a creature any longer exists among the Aurors' ranks. The fact that they recruited Potter as well as the sidekick is somewhat indicative of the bottom of a barrel being scraped."

"Severus!" interjected McGonagall reprovingly. "I hear that Mr Weasley has proven himself perfectly competent in his chosen career."

"I think that qualifies as damning with faint praise," retorted Severus sourly.

At that Hermione moved to his side and put her hand on his arm hesitantly. He looked at her in slight surprise, as if noticing her for the first time. The barest smile of greeting pulled at his mouth.

"Hermione," he said softly. "Thank you for coming."

"Severus, I'm as worried about Pomona as you are," she began in what she hoped was a calming tone. "And do you know what? I'm glad Ron's here. He'll do everything he possibly can to help because he cares as well. I don't tell him this very often, but he is really, really good at his job. He's dogged and determined, and I'd trust him with my life any day. And, even though he's my best friend, you *know* I'd say he was hopeless if that's what I thought, don't you?"

Severus held her gaze steadily for a moment. Then he ran his fingers through his hair with a long sigh and turned back to face Ron. "Mr Weasley. You are at least fortunate in one of your friends. If Hermione says you are capable of this task, unlikely as it seems, then I believe her. But rest assured, if you fail in any element of your duty, I will feel honour-bound to remind you just how dangerous I can be, most likely by eliminating any hopes you ever had of furthering the Weasley line."

Ron grinned back, unabashed. "I don't doubt it for a moment, Severus. Is that what we're calling you nowadays?"

The other wizard raised an eyebrow but refrained from comment.

"So," began McGonagall, "now that's settled, what course of action do you propose?"

"The initial priority is to identify the poison," began Severus. "With Hermione's help, I shall analyse the plant itself. Mr Weasley's role is to find who the specimen came from, in the hope of gaining information on the poison that way."

Hermione nodded. "OK, then. Ron, there was a card with the plant, so you'll need to examine that for fingerprints or magical signatures; then you need to find out how the plant arrived at the school, then..."

"Hermione, love," interrupted Ron. "You know how you've just convinced everyone I'm good at my job? Could actually you let me do it?"

She had the grace to look slightly shamefaced. "Sorry. Force of habit."

Ron's freckled face split into a cheerful grin once more. "No problem. And don't worry; I will do what you said." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "First, though, can you fill me in on exactly what happened? Perhaps we could go up to your office and let these two get their brains working."

McGonagall nodded. "Very well, Mr Weasley." She looked sternly at Severus and Hermione. "I expect you to take the utmost care with that plant. I don't want anyone else joining Pomona."

"Don't worry; we will, Professor." Hermione gave her a reassuring smile. "We'll let you know as soon as there's any progress."

The door closed heavily behind them and Hermione turned to Severus once more. "Right, then," she asked. "What would you like me to do?"

He led her to a bench at the middle of the room, already half-covered with equipment and ingredients. In the centre was a large plant in a pot. The leaves were a deep, glossy green with jagged edges. Unusually for the time of year, it also bore a multitude of tiny, bright yellow flowers.

"Identifying plant poisons is notoriously complicated," explained Severus. "To begin with, the toxic element may be magical or non-magical. Cyanide kills wizards and Muggles with equal ease. In addition, the component parts of a plant may have different properties. Contact with the leaves of the Hibernian Swampwort, for example, causes a severe rash which can be healed using the sap of the same plant. This means that using Scarpin's Revelaspel on a plant may produce inconclusive results since the magical effects of the separate plant parts can undergo interference even cancel each other out."

"Have you tried *Specialis Revelio* on this one?"

"Naturally. And the results were indeed inconclusive magic is present, but I couldn't separate out the different elements. Our first task is to split the plant into its component parts roots, stems, leaves and flowers. Then we need to conduct two types of examination on each, to identify all of the magical and non-magical substances present. Are you familiar with Muggle techniques of chemical analysis?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Are you?"

Severus gave a slight smile. "Of course. In that case, I will carry out the identification of the non-magical compounds while you cover the magical aspects. I assume you can still remember your NEWT-level Potions?"

"Oh, it's all in my head somewhere. It'll come flooding back when I get started. Being in here is already bringing back memories." She glanced briefly around the familiar dungeon.

"It is indeed," responded Severus grimly.

They were soon clad in protective gloves and robes and wearing Bubblehead Charms in case of toxic smoke. The plant was dissected in short order, and they took samples from each part. They both worked quickly and quietly, the only sounds being Hermione's occasional muttered incantations.

After half an hour or so, there was a brief pause in activity as they both waited for cauldrons to boil.

Hermione broke the silence. "I'm sure Blaise would have done this for you, you know. Not that I mind helping, but he's better qualified."

"Mr Zabini did indeed offer his assistance, but I refused it. Until we know who is responsible for the attack on Pomona I prefer to rely on only those I am sure I can trust."

"You don't really think Blaise has anything to do with it, do you?"

Severus paused for a moment before replying. "For much of my life the maxim 'Trust no-one; suspect everyone' proved apposite. I have strayed from that slightly in recent years, but I find the current situation calls for its reassertion."

Hermione felt an acutely painful realisation of just how alone Severus had been for so long. "When this is over," she said quietly, "I think we need to find you a better philosophy to live by."

"Any suggestions?" asked Severus lightly, apparently examining the piece of parchment in his hand.

"I've always rather liked the realist's motto: 'Hope for the best; expect the worst.'"

Severus chuckled and looked up to meet her eyes. "I can manage the second half. It's the first that proves problematical."

"Perhaps I could help with that."

"You already do."

Hermione was sure from the way Severus hurriedly looked back down to his parchment that he hadn't intended to verbalise that thought. She regarded his bowed head for a moment, until a hissing noise from one of the cauldrons made them both start.

"Back to work, then," she said briskly and picked up her stirring rod, determined to attribute the sudden racing of her heart to the lateness of the hour and the vital importance of the task in hand.

*

The work was slow and frustrating, but by four in the morning they had a comprehensive list of all the magical and non-magical substances contained in the plant. The problem was that none of them appeared to be poisonous.

Severus sighed deeply and rubbed his hands over his face. "I was afraid of that." He picked up the parchment on which they'd detailed the results. "Any number of these could be combined to give a toxic effect. We'll just have to go through all the permutations." With difficulty, he refrained from expressing the litany of swear words currently coursing through his brain.

Hermione took the list from him and looked down it. "Right, I'll get my computer. Shall we work at your house or mine? The magical field here will fry the circuits totally."

He mentally berated himself for so quickly forgetting about her Muggle-inspired shortcut. He was getting too old for working through the night.

"My place," he said decisively, as if he'd had that in mind all along. "I've got the lab, so we'll be able to get to work on the antidote more quickly."

He picked up a spare piece of parchment and quickly wrote a note for McGonagall, detailing their plans. He enchanted it, and it took off, flying through a gap under the door and off to find the Headmistress.

"Come on, then," said Hermione. "We'll Floo to Grimmauld Place, then we can Apparate to yours, as you're not civilised enough to have a Floo connection."

"Civilisation is overrated," muttered Severus as he approached the fireplace.

*

He watched Hermione as she worked. He'd made tea, supplied her with the books and parchment she needed, and now there was nothing else he could usefully do. So he watched. She was oblivious to his observation, only looking up from her keyboard and screen long enough to check a figure in a book or scrawl something on to one of her ever-growing number of lists.

His inaction frustrated him. He felt the need to pace up and down the laboratory. Or start brewing something. Anything. But he didn't want to disturb Hermione's concentration.

Her hair was escaping from the rather haphazard plait into which she had tied it earlier, and a particularly unruly tendril kept falling into her eyes. She repeatedly pushed it away, only for it to return moments later. Severus raised his wand to charm it back in to place, then remembered, just in time, the effect such an action would have on the computer. What was it she'd called it? A laptop, that was right. He'd seen such machines in use occasionally, usually by sales reps, or the like, in the pub.

Hermione brushed her hair back out of her eyes once more. Severus eased himself up from his stool and went to stand close behind her. Gently, he swept the offending strands back from her forehead and tucked them back into the plait. She jumped slightly at the contact, then reached a hand back to touch his.

"Thanks," she said softly before returning her fingers to the keys. He watched for a little while, fascinated, as figures and equations rapidly appeared on the screen. She paused in her typing while the calculations continued, seemingly automatically, in front of her; then she copied some numbers down on to her parchment.

Severus returned to his seat.

*

Hermione groaned in annoyance. This did *not* make sense. Severus was instantly at her side.

"Problem?" he asked, anxiously.

She turned to face him, a scrap of parchment in her hand. "I'm not really sure. The six substances I've got here are highly toxic in combination, and they all occur in the flowers. As far as I can tell, their mode of action would be to raise body temperature, which is what's happening to Pomona." She saw a look of relief beginning to spread across Severus' face and held up a warning finger. "But," she continued, "that toxic effect only occurs if it's activated by water. And unless Pomona touched the flowers with a glove that not only had a hole in it but was also soaking wet, I can't see how the activation happened."

She put her head back and puffed a long breath out through her mouth. Tears of frustration were threatening. "I don't know what to suggest, Severus. If this isn't it, and we waste time making the wrong antidote..." She could hear the break in her voice and stopped speaking.

Severus held a hand out to her, which she took gratefully. He tugged gently until she stood up; then he released her hand.

"Have a break," he said softly. "Get some fresh air, try and relax for a few minutes, and then we'll decide what to do."

Feeling grateful to be abdicating responsibility for the moment, she followed him out of the laboratory and into the sharply cold garden outside. There had been a frost overnight, and the grass crunched under her feet as they walked towards the far side of the lawn. She noticed with surprise that the sky inland was already beginning to lighten.

"What time is it?" she asked in a low voice.

"Nearly seven," Severus replied equally quietly.

There was a low bench at the end of the garden, facing out to sea. They sat down on it, and Hermione leaned back gratefully, rolling her head slightly to ease out the stiff muscles of her neck. There was no wind, and she could hear little waves breaking on the shore below. Somewhere close by, birds were beginning to sing tentatively. Otherwise, all was silent.

She shivered slightly, belatedly realising that she'd forgotten to put her coat on.

"Cold?" Severus had obviously felt the movement.

"A bit," she admitted.

Wordlessly, he moved towards her slightly and put his arm around her. She relaxed against him and he drew her tighter.

"Thanks," she whispered.

"My pleasure."

She felt the reverberation of his voice where her head rested on his shoulder. She fitted into him perfectly. She tried to remind herself that this was Professor Snape she

was cuddling, but she couldn't bring herself to care. His other hand was resting on his knee, and she reached over and took it in hers. He intertwined their fingers and squeezed gently.

She inhaled deeply, the sea air invigorating her as it entered her body.

"Hermione..."

"I've got it!..."

They spoke simultaneously, Hermione's triumphant exclamation almost drowning out Severus' soft uttering of her name.

They both sat upright, out of their embrace.

"What do you mean?" asked Severus in confusion.

"I know how the toxin was activated!" explained Hermione excitedly. "She breathed it in! It must be the scent from the flowers. And when it reached her lungs, it dissolved in the moisture on the lung lining. That's the water that activated it! And, of course, from the lungs it entered the bloodstream, which carried it to every cell in her body. I can't believe I didn't think of it earlier." She shook her head ruefully.

"I bow to your superior knowledge of human physiology," said Severus, inclining his head. Then a genuine smile lightened his face. "Well done, Hermione." He stood up, taking her hand and pulling her up. "Come on, then. You've got an antidote to devise."

*

It didn't take long for the excitement to dissipate. Hermione jabbed her finger at the computer screen as she showed Severus the ingredients list for the antidote.

"Most of this stuff is pretty basic I recognised the formulae straight away. Rue, mandrake root and so on. But I've got no idea what this final one is. It's not in the sodding *Arithmantic Dictionary!*"

She put her head in her hands and let out a "grrrr!" of frustration.

Severus moved from where he had been looking over her shoulder to sit next to her.

"Let's look at this logically," he began. "Don't take this the wrong way, but are you sure the formula is correct?"

Hermione raised her face from her hands and glared at him. "I've checked it eight times. That enough?"

Severus continued hurriedly. "The next question, then, is why it's not in the *Dictionary*. You're more familiar with it than I am. Is there any class of substance that it doesn't cover?"

"Not that I can think of. It didn't used to be very reliable on Muggle plants, but that was corrected in the latest...hang on. This is the latest edition isn't it?"

"I doubt it I've had it for years," responded Severus as Hermione leafed back through the book to the frontispiece.

"Ha!" she said with a sudden grin. "Thank Merlin for that. This is ancient. Right, I'll just pop home and collect mine, which is the newest version." She made to stand up, but Severus put his hand on her shoulder to stay her movement.

"Why don't you let me get it?" he asked. "It'll save you the energy of Apparating, and you can make a start on working out the methodology."

"If you're sure," she began doubtfully.

"I'm sure," he replied firmly. "Where's the book?"

"In the library." She closed her eyes briefly and frowned in concentration. "First bookcase on the right, four shelves from the bottom, just left of the centre."

"Can you do that for all of your books?" he asked in a tone of amusement.

She grinned. "A quite tragic number of them, actually. Go on then, if you're going."

He bowed, mockingly. "Your wish is my command."

"You're in a very whimsical mood this morning."

"Merely light-headed from lack of sleep," he retorted over his shoulder as he left the laboratory.

*

He returned ten minutes later holding two books. He dropped Hermione's *Dictionary* onto the bench next to her and resumed his seat at her side.

"Wonderful!" she said as she picked the volume up and began rapidly leafing through it. "What else have you got?"

"It occurred to me that as it's likely to be a plant we're dealing with, a comprehensive Herbology text might be useful. I helped myself to your copy of *Botanical Inventory: Magical and Mundane*. Your library is a credit to you, by the way very well organised."

"Something of a testament to my lack of a social life," said Hermione with a huff of laughter. She ran her finger down the page in front of her. "A-ha! Here we go. The missing ingredient is the root of the perennial centaury, *Centaureum scilloides*. Ring any bells?"

"Not in the slightest, but that's why I brought the other book. Let's see... The perennial centaury is exceedingly rare, occurring only at one site in West Wales that is known to Muggles, and a site in Cornwall that is not. Well, that's one stroke of luck it's local." He scanned the rest of the entry and gave a snort of laughter. "According to an eighteenth century Muggle grimoire, adding the plant to lamp oil would make those on whom the lamp's light shone think they could fly. It's probably a hallucinogen. Pomona would approve of that."

His eyes travelled to the bottom of the page. "Bugger. Apparently the root of the plant has a magical action only when harvested at midnight." He slammed the book back down on the bench in frustration. "One of these days I'm going to come across a Potions ingredient that can only be collected in warm sunshine while holding a pint."

"Have we got until midnight?" asked Hermione in a small voice. "Can Pomona wait that long?"

Severus stood up, face set into a grim expression. "I don't know. Would you object to me returning to Grimmauld Place and using your Floo connection to speak to Minerva?"

"Not at all. Do you want me to come with you? There's nothing more I can do here for the moment."

Severus shook his head. "No, you stay." His face softened slightly. "Why don't you go into the house to wait? Sit down somewhere more comfortable. You must be exhausted."

"I think I've gone through exhaustion and out the other side, actually. How about I put the kettle on and maybe sort out some breakfast for us? I won't be able to relax until you're back, anyway."

She stood up and stretched her arms above her head. "I assume you've got some food in your kitchen? Or do I need to go and beg from one of your neighbours?"

She was rewarded with a slight smile. "You should be able to find something. I'm getting used to having visitors with large appetites."

She stuck her tongue out at him as they left the lab together.

"Very ladylike," Severus commented. He paused and touched her arm briefly. "I won't be long. Go on, get yourself inside. It's cold out here."

Hermione nodded wordlessly, then watched as he walked a short distance and Apparated away.

*

She was soon busying herself in the kitchen, opening cupboard doors at random, then examining the contents of the fridge. The windows faced inland, and the early morning sunlight was illuminating the room vividly, glinting gaily from polished surfaces and making the woodwork gleam. Hermione wished her mood was as bright. She also wished she'd insisted on going with Severus. It was agony, waiting for him to return and being unable to do anything except worry about what the news would be.

She realised she'd been gazing into the fridge for several minutes without taking the slightest note of what was inside. She closed the door with a sigh and rubbed her hands over her eyes. Put the kettle on. She could manage that, at least. She filled it from the tap, then placed it on top of the range to boil. It was only last week that she and Pomona had been teasing Severus about the proliferation of Muggle appliances in his kitchen. He'd refused to rise to the bait, laughingly protesting that sometimes Muggles got it right. He'd pointed to the said range, explaining that he'd yet to discover a magical technique (house-elves excluded) that would warm the house, heat water, cook a casserole and boil a kettle with basically no effort on his part. Even Pomona had conceded that point.

Hermione sighed again as she thought of Sprout; then she dragged her mind back to something more productive. Breakfast. She couldn't manage cooking. Toast? She retrieved a loaf from the bread bin and charmed a knife to slice it while she located butter and jam. She observed the handwritten label on the jam jar with a smile, briefly speculating as to what 'herbal' remedy this had been exchanged for.

"What's so funny?"

She jumped at the sound of Severus' voice from the doorway and nearly dropped the jar. She put it safely down on the table. "I was just admiring another one of your gifts from a grateful neighbour."

She looked searchingly into his face as he lounged against the doorframe, hand in pockets, and was relieved to find he looked relatively cheerful.

"Well?" she continued impatiently. "How is Pomona?"

"A little better, thanks to you."

"Me?" asked Hermione, confused. "What did I do?"

"The ice bath you suggested has proved remarkably effective. Poppy has managed to get Pomona's temperature to a more comfortable level. She's reasonably confident that she should be able to keep her stable until the antidote is ready."

Hermione gave a heartfelt sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for that. So, we wait until midnight."

Severus nodded. "I'll prepare the base of the antidote later; then we'll just be able to add the root after harvesting and take it straight back to Hogwarts. Incidentally, I've got a temporary Floo connection, so Minerva can contact us immediately if there's any change."

"I wondered why I didn't hear the front door when you got home. I'm impressed you managed to rouse anyone from the Floo Regulation Panel at this time on a Sunday morning."

"I didn't need to. Mr Weasley arranged it for me. Anonymously as well, so my location remains a secret. I have an unpleasant feeling I may have to revise my opinion of him upwards before this affair is concluded."

"I did tell you he knows what he's doing. Has he had any luck finding out who's responsible?"

"Apparently he has some 'promising leads'. Talking of promising, what's for breakfast?"

*

Hermione licked a stray smear of jam from her finger with obvious pleasure. She glanced up and realised Severus was watching her from his seat on the other side of the kitchen table.

"What?" she asked, a note of challenge in her voice. "This is delicious. I hadn't realised how hungry I was until I started eating."

"Evidently," he observed, looking meaningfully at the meagre remnants of the loaf of bread.

"Sod off," Hermione retorted cheerfully. "You've eaten more than me. Where does it all go, anyway? I assumed you were thin because you didn't eat, but I've seen no evidence of that."

"When I eat, I eat well, but I do have a habit of getting tied up in my work and forgetting about food."

Hermione nodded in recognition. "I'm like that as well. Merlin knows what size I'd be if I remembered to eat three meals a day." She put her hand to her mouth then to conceal a huge yawn.

Severus stood up. "Come on, young lady. Bed."

She opened her eyes wide in an expression of artful innocence. "What are you suggesting, Severus?"

"That you need some sleep. After being up all night I think any other bedroom activities are currently beyond me."

"What a shame." She gave him an impish grin.

Merlin's staff, am I actually flirting with her? More to the point, is she actually flirting with me? Strange what sleep deprivation can do.

He held her gaze for a moment, allowing a small smile to grace his lips. She met his eyes frankly; then he noticed her cheeks starting to colour slightly, and she hastily looked back down at the table. She picked up her mug and drained the last of her tea; then she stood up and stretched.

"You're right I'm shattered. The thought of my bed is suddenly very appealing. Is your Floo connection in the living room? I haven't got the energy to Apparate."

Severus nodded in confirmation and followed her as she left the kitchen.

When they reached the fireplace she turned to look at him. "Promise me you'll let me know straight away if there's any news. No rubbish about not wanting to disturb me." Her eyes looked into his anxiously.

"I promise. Now go. Sleep. And come back tonight suitably attired for plant hunting."

She laughed slightly at that. "You try to get some rest as well."

"I'll do my best."

Hermione moved closer to him and kissed him swiftly on the cheek. "Sweet dreams," she said softly before stepping back to the fireplace. She took a handful of powder from the pot on the mantelpiece and threw it into the fire, saying clearly "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place," as she stepped into the emerald flames.

Severus watched the fire for a long moment after she had disappeared. Something in their relationship had shifted in the last twenty-four hours. When he'd told her yesterday how much her friendship meant to him, he had been admitting it to himself as much as to her. But once he'd done that and received her graceful reciprocation, it was as if he had given himself permission to imagine more than friendship. With 'imagine' being the operative word, he told himself firmly. A brief hug on a bench and a bit of exhaustion-induced flirting do not a romance make. And they certainly didn't add up to the fireworks Hermione was searching for.

He looked away from the fire, the after-images of the flames still appearing in his vision as a faint imitation of the real thing. Which, he reflected regretfully, was the best he could ever hope to offer.

*

Greatly to her surprise, Hermione managed to sleep soundly for several hours. She awoke, slightly disorientated, in the middle of the afternoon. Her first instinct was to head straight back to Severus' house, but she restrained herself. After all, if he had heeded her advice, he would be asleep, and she didn't want to disturb him. Her next thought was to contact McGonagall for news, but the same restriction applied. The rational part of her brain knew that if there had been any change in Pomona's condition, someone would have been in touch. Unfortunately, the irrational part of her brain very much wanted some reassurance.

Ron! she thought with relief. *He won't be asleep. He'd better not be, anyway.* She wrapped her dressing gown more tightly around herself and ran lightly down the stairs to the basement kitchen. She knelt on a cushion on the floor in front of the fireplace and threw in a small handful of Floo Powder, calling out Ron's office location before plunging her head into the flames. She was met with the familiar sight of Ron's alcove in the Auror Office, albeit seen from an unfamiliar angle. Ron was sitting at his desk, scribbling furiously, but looked up with a jump when Hermione called his name.

"Bloody hell, love, you scared the crap out of me! Everything OK?" he added anxiously. "She's no worse, is she?"

Hermione shook her head, trying not to get a face full of ashes in the process. "Not as far as I know. I just wondered how you were getting on."

Ron smiled understandingly. "I'm amazed you've left it this long before checking up on me. I heard you've nearly got the antidote sorted well done."

Hermione shrugged modestly before realising the absurdity of such a gesture when Ron could only see her head. "It was a joint effort. Severus deserves as much of the credit. Anyway, how are you getting on?"

"Pretty well, actually. According to Filch, the plant was delivered yesterday morning by a boy from Hogsmeade. I managed to find him and have a chat. He didn't know the man who asked him to make the delivery, but he gave me a good description. And we got some wand signature traces from the card. It appears the sender wanted to disguise his handwriting, but he obviously didn't realise that nowadays we can detect which wand has been used. I'm waiting to see if we can get a match from Ollivander's files."

"So you've nearly got him?"

"With a bit of luck. Of course, he may have been cleverer than we thought and used someone else's wand, but let's be optimistic, eh?"

"That's great, Ron. Well done."

"Stop sounding surprised, you." Ron pointed a finger at her jokingly. "Now go on. Back to Severus. I'm sure he's waiting for you."

"What do you mean?" responded Hermione slightly defensively.

"What do you mean, 'What do I mean?'. You managed to persuade him I'm good at my job, which is nothing short of a miracle. The poor bloke is obviously besotted with you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron." Hermione hoped he would attribute her suddenly flushed cheeks to the heat from the fire. "I do need to go, though. See you later. And good luck."

"Cheers, love. Bye!"

Hermione rose from her kneeling position and put her hands, cool from the stone floor, to her still-heated cheeks. As she was fond of reminding him, Ron generally had the emotional sensitivity of Gillyweed. The fact that he thought that Severus liked her was neither here nor there. But she still couldn't suppress the sudden lightness in her heart as she ran back upstairs to get dressed.

*

"Move your hands up a bit. No, further. A little tighter. Nearly there... just to the left a fraction. Ah, perfect." Hermione sighed in satisfaction. If Severus had imagined how the night's plant hunting was going to turn out, he'd certainly never visualised this: lying on his stomach on the grassy cliff top with his hands gripping Hermione's denim-clad legs as she suspended herself precariously out over the edge.

He should have known that any population of plants not known to Muggles would be growing in an extremely inaccessible position. It was fortunate he was in the company of a small-handed witch who was unafraid of heights.

"Got it!" came her muffled voice from below. "You can pull me up now."

Obediently, Severus shifted his grip slightly on her legs and used his knees and elbows to heave himself backwards. With considerable effort and a complete absence of dignity, he managed to haul her back to safety. They both eased themselves up into a sitting position and caught their breath.

Hermione brandished a rather battered looking plant in her left hand. "Here we go, then. One missing ingredient, harvested at midnight. I really hope it's the right one."

"I still don't know why you wouldn't just let me Levitate you down," complained Severus.

"I told you this felt safer. Hanging slightly off the edge of a cliff with my feet held by someone I trust is one thing being suspended totally out in mid-air with no visible means of support is quite another. I'd have had flashbacks to Thestral rides. Anyway," she continued with a wicked grin. "I thought you'd appreciate the chance to

demonstrate your manly strength."

Severus looked at her face, dimly illuminated by the lantern he'd brought, but glowing from within with triumph. And possibly from the after-effects of being held upside down. She looked utterly lovely. He stood up briskly and held his hand out to help her up. She took it, and he pulled her to a standing position.

"There we go," he said. "Manly strength demonstrated again."

"I'm suitably impressed," she acknowledged with another smile. He vaguely noticed that she still held his hand. She took a step closer to him, close enough that she had to tilt her face up slightly to meet his eyes.

"So am I," he responded quietly. "Not by your manly strength, obviously, although..."

She silenced him by the simple expedient of kissing him softly on the lips. She moved away a little, looking at him uncertainly.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, "I didn't..."

This time he silenced her, touching a finger gently to her mouth. He held it there as he shook his head. "Don't apologise." He tentatively moved his hand to cup her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. Cat-like, she pressed her face slightly into the caress. He looked into her eyes, expecting her to move away at any moment, to make a joke, even to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. But she remained still, with a small smile on her face, accepting his presumption as if she welcomed it. *Pomona would be proud of me*, he thought irrelevantly, and with that thought came the recollection of the urgency of their night-time jaunt. With great reluctance he moved his fingers away from Hermione's face.

"We should get back."

"Yes, of course," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone, looking hurriedly away and releasing his hand almost as if embarrassed. "I'll see you back at the house."

There was a sudden, loud 'crack!' from behind them. They both spun around, wands instinctively in hand. Before them was the form of a slim young man, his wand held out threateningly low.

"I strongly recommend you drop those," he said warningly, nodding toward their wands. "And I'll have the plant as well. Now!"

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 4

A criminal is apprehended, Nifflers are imitated and a hat is worn.

Author's Notes: So, here we are at the final chapter. Many thanks to the wonderful PP admins for their patient attempts to drill punctuation rules into me, to my lovely beta peskipiksi, and to all you wonderful people who have left me such encouraging reviews. At this point I think I should also thank the incomparable Miriam Margolyes for inspiring my take on Sprout.

Disclaimer: any recognisable characters/locations are JKR's.

Chapter 4

"Now!" the unfamiliar wizard repeated, more loudly this time. Severus and Hermione exchanged a swift look then gradually stepped away from each other, moving until they offered two targets rather than one. Their opponent moved his wand from side to side erratically, trying to cover both of them.

"Do you know who I am?" he shouted, somewhat shrilly now.

"No," responded Severus in a bored voice. "*Petrificus totalus!*"

"*Incarcerous!*" contributed Hermione.

The young wizard dropped to the ground, paralysed and bound with thin ropes.

"Well, that was a little disappointing," observed Severus as they approached the prostrate form. "Am I getting older or is the opposition getting younger?"

"Both," replied Hermione. "*Do you know who he is?*"

"I don't think so. There is something vaguely familiar about him..."

Crack!

They both turned instantly in the direction of the new arrival, wands raised once more.

"Whoah!" Ron exclaimed, putting his hands up. "Friend!"

Hermione laughed in relief. "Ron, you twit."

"Ah, Mr Weasley," said Snape. "Better late than never. I believe we have something of yours." He waved a hand nonchalantly towards their captive, who was observing their conversation from his position on the lamp-lit grass with angrily bulging eyes.

"Sorry about that," said Ron with a grimace, walking over to them. "He Apparated away just as I arrived at his flat, and it took a moment for the locator spell on the Trace to kick in."

"How has he got a Trace on him? He's of age, surely?" asked Severus.

"We can put them on adults now, under special circumstances."

"That's rather reminiscent of a police state, isn't it?" Severus observed with a frown.

"It's been a useful tool for capturing Dark wizards," responded Ron defensively.

"Alright," interrupted Hermione, "can we have the discussion about civil liberties later? Who is this, Ron?"

"Meet Gideon Goyle Gregory's younger brother. He appears to have inherited the brains while big brother got the brawn. He was educated at home but went to Hogwarts for his NEWTS after McGonagall did that big push a couple of years back to try to reintegrate the Death Eaters' kids."

"Well, that seems to have been a resounding success in this case," commented Severus drily.

Ron shrugged. "By all accounts it was. At Hogwarts, he gave the impression of being quiet and hard working. He had a special flair for Herbology and Potions, which at least explains how he managed to develop the plant poison."

"It doesn't explain why, though. And why Pomona?" asked Hermione.

"Why don't we find out?" asked Ron cheerily. With a wave of his wand he removed the Body Bind curse, leaving the ropes in place, and moved their prisoner into a sitting position. "OK, then, mate. Answer the lady. Why *did* you try to kill Professor Sprout? Bad marks on a test?"

"She scarred my father for life!" spat out Goyle. "It's bad enough that he's in Azkaban, but she threw Bubotubers at him during the Battle of Hogwarts the sap nearly burned his face off. Everyone thinks she's so sweet and kind and *Hufflepuff*, but she's a two-faced, deceitful bitch!" He glared at them defiantly then began to cough and splutter as soapy bubbles started foaming from his mouth.

"Do not speak of Pomona Sprout in that way." Severus' voice was low and dangerous. "I suggest you remove this vermin from my sight, Mr Weasley."

"My pleasure." Ron hauled the gently foaming Goyle up from the ground by one arm. Ron was at least a foot taller than the younger wizard. "Come on. I've got a nice comfy cell in Azkaban waiting for you." He paused then, turning to Hermione and Severus. "How did you two find him, anyway?"

"He found us," explained Hermione. "This is one of only two sites where the main antidote ingredient grows, so he must have set some sort of alarm ward."

"You've got what you need, though?"

Hermione nodded and waved the plant at him.

"Excellent. Right, I'll probably see you later. Have fun!" And, gripping Goyle tightly, he Apparated away.

Hermione turned to Severus with a sigh. "Shall we try that again? I'll see you at the house."

"Not so fast." Severus stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her loosely. "We Apparate together. I'm not risking any more incidents."

Hermione leaned back into him, putting her free arm around his. "Is this just an excuse to get your hands on me?"

She felt his deep chuckle as he spun them away into darkness.

Disappointingly, he released her as soon as they arrived in his garden. *Well, what were you expecting, you silly girl?* she scolded herself as she walked rapidly with him towards the laboratory. *It's hardly the time or the place for anything else. And you're just friends, remember?*

*

Hermione stood anxiously at the end of Pomona's bed with McGonagall. Completing the antidote had, fortunately, proved straightforward, and she watched as Severus explained its administration to Madam Pomfrey.

"The poison entered through her lungs, so the antidote will prove most effective if delivered in the same way."

He had placed a bowl of boiling water on the bedside table, close to Pomona's head, and now he added several drops of the antidote. He moved his wand in a circular motion, muttering an incantation.

"There. I've erected a shield around the bowl and her face so the vapour will remain concentrated in the right area. You'll need to replace the water when it cools and add another three drops of the antidote."

"And how long do you think it will take to work?" asked Poppy, any sign of concern hidden behind her professional calm.

"It should begin to have a cooling effect almost immediately, although it is likely to be a few hours before she regains consciousness."

Poppy nodded with satisfaction. "Well, I'll take over now. Thank you, Severus. Go on, you three get some rest. Leave the patient in peace."

"If you're sure, Poppy," said McGonagall. "Let us know as soon as there's any change."

"Of course. Now, off you go. Out of my ward." She made a flapping motion with her hands. Her tone was stern, but her smile rather spoiled the effect.

"What do you plan to do now?" asked McGonagall as they left the hospital wing. "You must both be exhausted. I can arrange somewhere for you to sleep here if you'd like to wait around until Pomona wakes."

They paused in the corridor. Hermione glanced at her watch and was surprised to see it was only two o'clock.

"I know it's the middle of the night, but I don't think I could sleep. My body clock's all over the place, and I've had more excitement in the last couple of days than I've had all year."

Severus laughed softly. "I know what you mean. I think I might go for a walk in the grounds to clear my head. Fresh air's as good as sleep sometimes."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Hermione. "Do you mind if I join you? Or we can walk in opposite directions if you'd rather be alone," she added flippantly.

Severus inclined his head with a half smile. "Even if we walk in opposite directions we'll meet at some point, so we may as well go together."

"Was there a deep philosophical point in there somewhere?"

"Quite possibly."

Hermione realised that Minerva had been observing this exchange with a slightly quizzical expression.

"Well, I'm going to retire to my office," the headmistress said decisively. "Enjoy your wanderings, you two. If you do change your mind about sleeping, the governors'

quarters will be ready."

"Thank you, Minerva," replied Severus. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, both." She walked briskly away from them, the clicking of her sensibly heeled shoes echoing through the hushed corridors.

Severus and Hermione headed down the staircase towards the entrance hall in companionable silence.

"The castle's always at its best at night," observed Severus quietly as they crossed the expanse of the hall. "No students."

"Well, not many," qualified Hermione. "There are always one or two miscreants at large."

"True. Though I'm sure you were never among that number."

"Now, now. No need to be sarcastic."

"There's always need to be sarcastic."

"It's the lowest form of wit, you know."

"Therefore to be used on the lowest form of person. Bollocks, no, sorry, I didn't mean..."

Hermione silenced him by placing a finger on his lips. They'd reached the front door now and stood close together in front of it.

"Will you stop apologising for what you say? You should know by now that I'm not remotely easily to offend. I find it quite endearing when you just blurt out what you're thinking. Merlin knows you spent enough years having to act one role or another. I like the fact you feel relaxed enough around me to be honest." She started to move her hand away from his mouth, but he grasped it suddenly in his and pressed a soft kiss to her palm. He dropped his hand back to his side, keeping hold of hers, and tugged her slightly closer.

"You have no idea what it means to hear you say that," he began in a low voice, dark eyes focused on hers intently. "I've felt for a very long time that the only time I can be myself is when I'm alone. In Cornwall no-one has any expectations of me, but I have to hide the magical half of my nature. As far as most of the wizarding world is concerned I'm a caricature villain or hero, the effect is the same. Even Pomona sees me as a project, someone she needs to rehabilitate back into normal life.

"But you... You came over to me after that lecture and started chatting away like I was just one of your old teachers. No fear, little respect," ...he gave her a slight smile at that point... "and you acted like it was perfectly reasonable for us to be friends."

"Well, it is," she protested.

"Yes, I've come to believe that as well. The only problem is..." He stopped and took a deep breath then huffed it out. He looked at her uncertainly. "Do you really like it when I'm totally honest?"

She squeezed his hand. "I may regret this, but yes, I do."

"Very well, then. The only problem is, I've started to feel much more than friendship towards you. You're attractive, you're intelligent, but most importantly you make me feel as if you actually like who I really am."

"That's because I do. Oh, hell, if we're being honest... *I* love who you really are."

Hermione took his other hand in hers, but he frowned at her slightly as he responded. "I know when you say 'love' you mean as a friend. And that's all we can ever be, however much I'd like something more. You want fireworks, I know, and you're not going to get that from me."

"Have you finished telling me what I feel? When I say 'love' I most certainly don't just mean as a friend. And fireworks? Does imagining what your hands would feel like on my naked body count? Or admiring that really rather lovely arse of yours while you're digging? Or how about wishing that when you hug me you'd kiss me as well? Or the fact that when you smile at me, my heart genuinely beats faster, even though I'd always thought that was romantic drivel. But I haven't said or done anything because you'd got me convinced you still just thought of me as an ex-pupil who'd become a friend."

A slow smile had spread across Severus' face as she spoke. He leaned back against the oak door, pulling her hands so she came with him, then releasing them so he could wrap his arms loosely around her waist. She linked her hands behind his neck, grinning happily up at him.

"I know we've been a bit busy for the last couple of days," he said, "but I really wish we'd talked about this earlier."

"Yes, we've wasted so much time."

He drew her close and kissed her softly on the lips. "Better?"

"A bit."

Then she kissed him, and his arms tightened around her as his mouth opened to hers. Tentatively at first, their tongues danced around each other, then suddenly her hand was in his hair, and he pulled her body closely into his own, caressing her buttocks and back as they explored each other's mouths urgently. She ran her free hand down his side, finding the bottom of his t-shirt and pushing it up to rake her fingers down the bared skin underneath. He groaned into her mouth, and she gasped softly in response and pressed her lower body into the hardness she could feel between them. He dragged his mouth away from hers and began to kiss down her neck.

"How far away are those governors' quarters?" she asked breathlessly.

"Too far," he muttered between kisses; then he raised his head and grinned at her boyishly. "No, you're right we can't stay here. Knowing our luck, Peeves will be along any minute."

He took her hand again and led her swiftly back towards the staircase. She almost had to run to keep up and laughed delightedly.

"Are you in a hurry?"

He paused. "Are we still being honest? Then yes, I'm in a hurry. I've just discovered that, for some reason best known to herself, a gorgeous, young, bright witch has decided that she finds me attractive, and I want to take full advantage of that fact before she realises it's the sleep deprivation talking."

"What if I tell you I'm not going to change my mind and have in fact been fantasising about you taking advantage of me for quite some time?"

"Then I'm in even more of a hurry."

*

By the time they reached the entrance to the governors' quarters they were rather out of breath from the speed of their ascent up the stairs as well as the after-effects of a couple of pauses for passionate kisses. Severus flung open a large iron-studded door, revealing a short corridor. He led Hermione inside.

"There should be a couple of bedrooms and a bathroom," he explained, opening a door at random and peering round it. He opened the door wide then. "Will this do?"

Hermione took in the sight of the huge four-poster bed, luxuriantly draped in purple and silver, and totally failed to notice any other furnishings. "That will do very nicely. Though, as you may have noticed on the way up here, I would have quite happily shagged you against a wall."

"Maybe later, you shameless woman."

He led her inside and closed the door before pushing her back against it and kissing her deeply. She responded enthusiastically, enjoying the delicious press of his body against hers and the feel of the taut muscles of his back under her fingers.

She pulled her mouth away from his long enough to gasp, "Bed!", at which he swept her up in his arms, still kissing her, and carried her over to the other side of the room before depositing her none too gently in the middle of the soft quilt. He stood at the edge of the bed, looking down at her with an enigmatic expression in his dark eyes.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know."

She shook her head. "For an intelligent man you're surprisingly dense sometimes. I'll put this in words of one syllable. I love you. Get your kit off and your arse in this bed. Now."

"I've always loved your peerless grasp of the English language."

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Get yourself down here, and we'll see what else I can get a peerless grasp of." She shook her head ruefully and rolled her eyes. "I can't believe I just said that. I've spent way too much time with Pomona."

He threw his head back and laughed: the most genuine expression of happiness Hermione had ever heard from him. Then he flung himself down on the bed next to her.

"I give up. Go on then, woman. Have your wicked way with me."

So she did.

*

Severus lay with his arms wrapped around a naked, sleeping Hermione and wondered what exactly had happened that his life was suddenly so perfect. He had no idea what had prompted him to his uncharacteristic bout of frankness in the entrance hall earlier but, Merlin, he was glad he'd spoken.

Hermione shifted slightly in his embrace but didn't wake. *She must be exhausted*, he thought fondly. A couple of hours of vigorous and extremely satisfying love-making would have that effect on a person. *Smug? Me?* What he lacked in experience and finesse he hoped he had made up for in enthusiasm. She hadn't complained, anyway, and he knew she'd have been quite willing to issue instructions if she felt the need.

He shifted his position slightly to pull her even closer. As he did so, he heard a nearby creak, then a soft tapping on the door.

"Severus? Hermione?" came a whisper. *Shit!* He recognised McGonagall's voice.

"Be there in a moment," he called out softly, climbing rapidly out of bed and frantically looking for his jeans on the moonlit floor. He located them and pulled them on quickly, zipping them extremely carefully owing to his lack of underwear. He ran over to the door and opened it a fraction. McGonagall was standing there in her tartan dressing gown, lamp held aloft.

"Don't worry," she said quickly. "There's nothing wrong. I just thought you'd like to know Pomona's regained consciousness. Poppy insists she needs to sleep naturally now and won't let her have any visitors until later, but I thought you'd like to know straight away."

"That's wonderful news. Thank you, Minerva."

"No, Severus, thank you. I don't know what we'd have done without you. And Hermione, of course. Shall I tell her the good news or would you like to? Which room is she in?"

"I'm here," came Hermione's voice from behind Severus, and to his surprise and slight horror she appeared next to him in the doorway, with her hair sleep-tousled and wearing his t-shirt. Any hope he had that McGonagall might have thought they were innocently sharing a room was inexorably dashed when Hermione slipped her arm round his waist and nestled in to his side. With a mental shrug he put his arm round her shoulder.

"I heard. I'm so pleased she's going to be OK," Hermione continued.

McGonagall looked from one of them to the other, expression changing rapidly from shock to amusement. "Pomona was right then," she observed. "How long has this been going on for?"

Bemused, Severus replied, "About three hours. What do you mean 'Pomona was right'? What's the interfering old baggage been saying now?"

Minerva laughed softly. "Only that she thought you two were perfect for each other. You didn't really believe she'd have gone to all that trouble to encourage you to spend time together just for the sake of you being friends, did you?"

"Actually, yes." He looked down at Hermione. "What about you?"

She shook her head. "I had no idea. As far as I was concerned she just wanted to encourage you to be more sociable. She gave me the impression she'd given up on trying to find you a woman."

"Me too. She lulled me into a false sense of security."

"And look where that got you." Hermione smiled up at him cheerfully.

"Indeed." He kissed her lazily, eliciting a slight cough from McGonagall.

"Well, yes," the headmistress said archly. "I'll leave you to it. Sleep well." She gave them a meaningful look then turned to walk back down the corridor.

"Minerva!" She looked back in response to Severus' quiet call. "Don't tell Pomona about us just yet. I think we should break the news in person."

Minerva nodded. "She'll enjoy that. Good night, both."

Severus closed the door and leaned back against it.

"I thought she took that very well," observed Hermione brightly as she climbed back under the quilt.

"For a moment there, I wasn't sure if she was going to pass out or hex me," responded Severus, pushing himself away from the door and going over to sit on the edge of the bed. "Not very subtle of you, really standing there looking for all the world like you'd been shagged to within an inch of your life."

Hermione stretched and smiled with an air of self-satisfaction. "Which I have. And in our new spirit of being honest with the world and each other, I didn't see any particular reason to hide it."

"Well, I'm not going to argue. I've certainly got the better of the deal here, and I don't mind who knows it." A sudden thought occurred to him, and he chuckled. "I don't imagine your friends will accept the situation as easily as Minerva."

Hermione shrugged. "Don't be so sure. Ron guessed you fancied me before I did. He said it's the only reason you'd have let me change your mind about him."

"I think you must have been an extremely good influence on him, you know. It's the only possible explanation for his unexpected flashes of intelligence."

"Am I a good influence on you, too?"

"At the moment, my love, you look like an extremely bad influence. Incidentally, what are you doing wearing my favourite t-shirt?"

"It was the first thing that came to hand." She looked down at the Ramones print on the front. "I've wanted to ask you about this for ages. Is it a relic from your teenage punk phase?" She looked at him impishly.

"I bought it in a music shop in Truro five years ago, actually, but it's a reminder of my teenage punk phase. The original fell apart years ago."

From her slightly stunned expression, he was gratified to realise he'd actually managed to surprise her.

"You were really a punk? I thought I was joking! What spiked hair and a safety pin through your nose?"

"Don't be ridiculous. All that nonsense came later. No, I'm talking about the early days. The summer of 1976. The Sex Pistols played in Manchester, and the Buzzcocks were formed just up the road from where I lived. It was all leather jackets, ripped clothes and long hair, so not exactly a stretch for me sartorially. Rather conventionally, it started as an 'up-yours' to my late, unlamented father, who made some comment along the lines of 'Why don't you dress like a normal boy and not one of those shirt-lifting wizard bastards?'" He mimicked his father's Mancunian tones perfectly. "Happily, I discovered that the only thing that irritated him more than me dressing like a wizard was me dressing like a punk. The music was pretty good too."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "I learn something new about you every day." She shuffled closer to him and put her arms around his waist. He kissed her gently on the top of the head. She tilted her face up then, so he transferred his attentions to her mouth. She returned the kiss with enthusiasm, gently scraping her nails down his bare back. The sudden pressure of the zip of his jeans reminded him rather painfully about his lack of underwear.

He pulled away reluctantly and stood up to remove the offending garment. Hermione grinned up at him. "Excellent idea." She pulled the t-shirt up over her head. "Am I right in thinking we're not going to sleep?"

He looked frankly at the expanse of delectable flesh now revealed to him. "Honestly, my love, I'm not planning on wasting time sleeping for at least a week."

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Eventually, and with no little reluctance, they did have to leave their bedroom. Not least in order to visit the recuperating Sprout.

She was sitting up in bed when they reached the hospital wing, tucking into her breakfast with obvious enthusiasm. A vast bouquet of yellow roses was haphazardly arranged in a vase on her bedside table.

"Darlings!" she cried out effusively as soon as she saw them. She grasped their hands when they reached her side, breakfast forgotten for the moment. "I don't know how to thank you both; I really don't. Poppy and Minerva told me what you did. You were absolutely brilliant."

"It was our pleasure," responded Hermione.

"Thorn in my side as you are, I suppose I would miss you if you kicked the bucket," added Severus airily. "And Minerva would only have complained about having to find a new Head of House." The glint of humour in his eyes belied his harsh words.

He and Hermione pulled chairs up to the side of the bed and sat down.

"Beautiful flowers," commented Hermione, nodding towards the roses.

"They are, aren't they," agreed Sprout. "Aberforth brought them in first thing this morning. Would you believe he's gone all soppy? Kept going on about how nearly losing me made him realise how much I meant to him. I was still feeling a bit woozy, but I distinctly remember him mumbling something about making an honest woman of me."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Hermione.

"Aberforth's a good man," concurred Severus, "although goodness knows what he wants with you."

"Well, I don't know," said Pomona. "I suppose it is time I stopped sowing my wild oats and maybe thought about settling down. I told him I'd think about it. Anyway," she continued eagerly, "what about you two? Do you have anything to tell me?"

"I don't think so," replied Severus. "You have only been unconscious for a day and a half, after all."

"What about Saturday?" Pomona prompted. "How did you get on without me?"

"Oh, we were fine, thank you," answered Hermione blandly. "I helped Severus with some of his work, so it was very productive."

"Yes, in fact I was going to ask if you minded letting Hermione come alone again next week," added Severus.

"Really?" Sprout leaned forward eagerly. "Why? What are your plans?"

"We'll just be continuing with my curse scar research."

"Oh." Sprout sagged back against her pillows, a slightly crestfallen expression on her face. "I had hoped... Well, never mind."

"What had you hoped?" asked Severus, raising an eyebrow. "That Hermione and I would discover that we were actually madly in love while we were working on your cure and would end up rutting all night like a pair of sex-crazed Niffles?"

Pomona sighed. "Minerva's been talking, hasn't she? I'm sorry; I was just so sure you two were made for each other. I didn't mean to interfere." She braced her shoulders and looked at them brightly then. "It's good that you're friends, at least, though."

Hermione and Severus exchanged a glance. Hermione tried but failed to stop the giggles escaping as she looked back at Pomona.

Pomona looked from one to the other, taking in Hermione's laughter and Severus' uncharacteristically content expression. Hermione could see realisation gradually dawning on her face. Her eyes opened wide.

"What? No! Really?"

Hermione looked assessingly at Severus. "Madly in love, at least. I'm not sure I'm keen on the sex-crazed Niffler comparison."

Severus looked at her with laughter in his eyes and a half smile playing around his lips. "Sorry about that the image just sprang to mind for some reason."

"I'll forgive you." She rested her hand on his thigh and smiled back. *I really want to get him back in bed* she thought. *Sooner rather than later.* She realised Pomona was still watching them, beaming.

"Oh, I am so delighted for you both," she said, reaching for their hands once more. "I knew it. I absolutely knew it. And tell me, my dear," ...she looked into Hermione's face intently, eyes alight with mischief... "did you get your fireworks?"

Hermione leaned towards her conspiratorially. "Between you and me, he goes off like a rocket."

And with that, she achieved the impossible. Pomona Sprout blushed.

Epilogue

Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were married at midsummer, in a quiet ceremony on the beach below his their house. The ceremony was followed by a less than quiet reception in the village pub. Pomona Sprout wore a new, feathered hat of the brightest Hufflepuff yellow. And an exceedingly smug smile.

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By the end of the evening, the pub was crowded with a mix of wedding guests and local well-wishers. Pomona sat at the bar, gin and tonic in hand, watching the newly-married couple affectionately. They'd escaped the throng and sat at a corner table, heads close together, deep in conversation. Every now and again one of them would laugh.

"They look happy," observed Frank, the landlord, as he poured a pint.

"They do indeed," replied Pomona with some satisfaction.

Frank put the pint on the bar next to her, ready for Aberforth, who was currently doing the tango with Mrs Granger.

"It's nice to see," he continued. "Severus always seemed like a good man, but there was something a bit, I don't know *lost* about him. He deserves some happiness, and she's a lovely girl. Honest. No nonsense about her."

"Oh, she is," concurred Pomona. "I've known them both for years. They're perfectly suited. I've always said so. And everyone needs someone to keep them warm at night." She looked towards Aberforth's wildly dancing figure fondly.

"That they do," replied Frank. Pomona picked up a note of wistfulness in his voice and looked back at him with interest.

"What about you? Is there a Mrs Frank?"

"There was. She left me a few years back. Ran away with a brewery rep from Exeter. She always was one for the bright lights. I'm more of a good-chat-and-a-whisky man myself, but, well, I'm getting a bit long in the tooth for all that dating rubbish."

Pomona eyed him speculatively as she took a sip of her drink, a blissful idea having occurred to her.

"Tell me, Frank. Do you consider yourself to be broad-minded?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "Never met a pub landlord that wasn't. Comes with the job."

"Excellent!"

Pomona knelt up rather precariously on her stool and bellowed across the room, "Minerva! Over here! There's someone I'd like you to meet."

The End

Author's Notes: You can listen to the song that inspired the title here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_Bj8wrXsIk. Bonus points for those of you that spot the bizarrely coincidental HP reference in the video!