

Takeaway and Alchemy or: How Hermione Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Ministry

by juniperus

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Although Hermione Granger (née Weasley, née Granger) had always heard the Muggle adage *familiarity breeds contempt* bandied about when she was a child, it was not until she had left the Muggle world for good that she truly grasped the meaning.

Ron not only denied the importance of *The Tale of the Three Brothers*, during their search for Horcruxes, he sneered at her certainty. Because it was too *familiar*.

And, despite thirteen years of marriage and two children, he denied Hermione's importance. Because *she* was too familiar. That was, at least, the tripe Molly served her after Ron was caught *in flagrante delicto* with the Seeker of the Montrose Magpies.

Hermione had thought it rather more likely that he decided to punctuate his protracted Weasley Snit (over her unmitigated gall at not only insisting two children were *enough*, but then accepting a position in the Department of Mysteries less than a week after Hugo boarded the Hogwarts Express) with exclamation points consisting of two firm tits and broom-toned legs in the air.

And *said* so.

Thus, she thought to herself (as she did every time she replayed this particular set of bitter-edged life-recollections), that was the last time she had conversed with Molly Weasley.

Which wasn't a bad thing... although to be honest, she had to admit that her new flat was rather draughty and she really could use a new sweater.

It was, in other words, a lesson hard earned.

And, as she discovered time and time again (which perplexed her, since she would have thought her co-workers would have gotten used to her being right more often than not, by *this* time), a lesson hard defended.

"Tosser," she snarled as the lift doors began to open at the behest of the chirpy disembodied voice saying, "Level eight: The Atrium!"

"That's a rather personal observation, don't you think?"

She glared at the wizard joining her in the lift. "Get stuffed, Snape."

"Now, now...is that any way to speak to your new research partner?"

"I don't need a partner! How dare Sinclair suggest that I need some sort of nanny! My conclusions regarding the *Bidarte Lapidario* were spot-on, and," she added, her voice rising in pitch, "very well-documented!"

Severus Snape threw up his hands in mock surrender. "I didn't disagree with your conclusions, you recall, which is undoubtedly why I was punished by being assigned a harpy."

Hermione's glare darkened before she looked away. "As I said, Sinclair is a tosser."

"Indeed," Severus muttered as he strode away from the perennially perky lift announcing "Level nine: Department of Mysteries!" before the doors fully opened.

Hermione Granger (née Weasley, née Granger) sighed deeply before following him down the corridor to the now-familiar (and as of yesterday *contemptible*) black door.

It was her considered opinion that things were, as they say, *in the shit*.

~*~

"The man really *is* a tosser," Severus muttered as he followed Hermione into their office and slammed the door behind him.

She smirked. "I've been saying that for six months, Snape...have you finally worked that out *all on your own*?"

"Do recall that I hadn't offered evidence contradicting your assessment." He sighed.

"You could not have done...the man is a bloody imbecile," she said before unshrinking the massive pile of dossiers in her bottomless barrister bag and loudly dropping them on the floor next to her desk.

He lifted a brow. "Language, Granger."

Hermione blew him a raspberry and threw herself onto the lumpy old couch they'd transfigured from a waste bin. It made the office very tight quarters, but no number of cushioning charms improved the standard issue bum-numbing wooden chairs that looked to have been around since old 'Spout-Hole' Spavin's days as Minister.

"I *am* an adult," she countered, as she did every time he commented on her creative use of language. She had taken (rather shrill) offense the first time, but after realizing he dropped as many *fookin' hells* as would be expected from someone who grew up in a Northern mill town, it occurred to her that he *just might* be teasing.

Severus Snape... *joking*. She'd always intended to ask Minerva during their semi-regular teas whether he'd been like this at Hogwarts, but it just never came up. Well, that and she knew full well how little he had to joke about in those days.

"I'd noticed." He made a point of flipping through a file.

She looked at him curiously.

"Unlike your idiot partners-in-crime...", he continued, as if he hadn't changed the script mid-scene.

Initially she'd risen to Harry and Ron's defense every time Snape mentioned them (always in passing and never kindly, of course), but the longer she was no longer a Weasley, the more she realized that they *were* schoolboys as much now as ever, despite having different occupations that should have afforded them the opportunity to grow into their own. Molly was the glue...or was that fly paper?...that kept them together, of course.

She hasn't once missed those obligatory Sunday dinners at the Burrow. *Not once*.

"They're quite venerable, if you count them in dog-years, even if they both *do* still have a habit of piddling on the carpet."

Severus snorted, then grinned (which, she had discovered, was the combination that translated to 'laughed out loud' in Snapespeak. The notes she'd taken on his expressions and moods were considerable; why, his eyebrows alone...).

She grinned, herself.

"I think we should celebrate our impressive solving of the Almadén cinnabar case, despite Sinclair taking credit in the *Daily Prophet* today after having told us off for jumping to wild conclusions only yesterday, with a pie and a pint at the Leaky," she announced.

He grimaced. "Surely there's somewhere quieter... It's Friday," he began.

"... And the whole Aurory will be there." She thought a moment. "Right, then. I have bottles of Bishop's Finger that need attention... We can Apparate to your favorite chippy on the way to Northumberland House."

"Northumberland House?"

"The Ministry *ever-so-generously* provides glorified bedsits for its unmarried employees needing housing. We're charmed against Muggle discovery and have our own Apparation point, although I prefer to walk to the Ministry, weather allowing."

His eyebrows raised. "Glorified?"

"We *do* have our own loos, although only a standing shower." She shrugged. It was little more than the most minimal university accommodations, but it was free, and she didn't earn top scores in Transfiguration for nothing.

"Ah. Sounds delightful...lead on, MacDuff."

~*~

Hermione often appreciated her friendship with Percy Weasley. After the Final Battle he matured into someone thoughtful, level-headed...*especially for a Weasley*, Hermione had to note. *Shame about him and Audrey, although it's nice to see how happy he is with Greg.*

She also often digressed.

On this day she was *particularly* appreciative of Percy, who greeted her in the lift with, "Have you heard? Your file on the counterfeit case somehow found its way into a file destined for the Minister's office...really, Sinclair should keep a tidier desk."

She could have kissed him, really. Except... well, yes. "You're the bees, Perce!"

His self-satisfied smile told her he agreed with her assessment.

"What happened to the man who checks wands at the Ministry entrance?" she asked as they were joined in the lift by two people who looked as though they were heading for the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.

"Munch? He hasn't been in...well, *physically*... he hasn't been in *mentally* in my memory...in nigh a week, and no word from him."

Hermione frowned. "That seems very odd."

"It is...I don't think he's taken a day off for illness in a decade. He has no family to contact so I asked Harry to send 'round one of the rookies. The checkpoint looks off without him slouching there." He gave her a little nod as he shifted to the door as the lift slowed. "I'll... keep you informed."

"Ta, Percy."

She went up in the lift one more level before she had to exit and wait for another. She couldn't fathom how they'd managed to ~~d~~*that* to themselves, and had avoided outright *staring*, but the stench of burnt hair and...Nimue's knickers, is that *Stinking Bishop*?...fetid cheese resisted every one of her surreptitious freshening charms.

That she'd overslept and had taken her morning cuppa with just toast, instead of a fry-up, was suddenly a much more positive start to the day than it had been ten minutes before.

"Happy Friday, Snape!" she said, grinning as she slipped into the office.

"Is it?"

"Well, I don't know about *you*, but *I* always look forward to not seeing Sinclair for two whole days. Not to mention, I have very interesting news..."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I have from a reputable source..."

"Percy Weasley."

"I can neither confirm nor deny." She sat down on the tattered sofa before continuing. "Apparently our report on the counterfeit cinnabar shipments ~~somehow~~ found its way into Shacklebolt's hands."

Severus smiled evilly. "My, my, my... that *is* interesting news."

"Isn't it? I suspect that, despite Sinclair's do-nothing announcement, our information will actually be sent to Harry for Aurory action. It still galls me that we weren't able to pin down who had arranged for the adulterated Sindoor pigment to find its way into wizarding hands, but he has a lot of favors to call in from the Knockturn Alley merchants," Hermione commented, then frowned at the snort of derision that followed.

"I have grave doubts even his *contacts* could help him find his arse with a map," he began, "but perhaps he can manage to scare up a real lead, despite his intellectual deficiencies."

Hermione's frown didn't respond positively to the snide concession.

"We already investigated Malfoy, and although he was clean, he can't afford to allow anything to sully what portions of his name he's been able to scrub...he has, I am quite certain, already put a private investigator on the trail... and no doubt he'll jump at the chance to be recognized for selflessly helping Ministry officials solve the crime," he concluded.

She rolled her eyes. "Of *course* he will. Whatever...so long as we find out who's trying to import azoth. I don't want to see either the elixir vita~~or~~ a philosopher's stone in the wrong hands... The last thing we need is another Dark Lord."

He shuddered. "Quite."

"Not to change the subject, but to change the subject... another Ministry employee seems to have dropped off the face of the earth. Munch might not be much of a loss, but the pattern is getting a little..."

"Disturbing, yes. And no apparent pattern. Barrett, Hoskins, and now Munch? Not even *Sinclair* can keep claiming coincidence, although he won't allow anyone to investigate, so I'm wondering what he's up to."

She shrugged. "Nothing effective, of that I'm sure. Dinner tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it...it's your turn to pay."

~*~

A soft pop could have been heard as two figures Apparated into the Wizarding section of Northumberland House, but like trees falling in forests, the deserted floor noticed nothing.

"... I'm not keen on their pork, but the chicken is *always* a safe bet. I still can't believe you've never had *Pret*," Hermione nattered as she fumbled the food from one arm to the other and pulled out her wand.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Is there something about me that said 'frequents trendy eateries' to you?"

She harrumphed as she unlocked and opened the door. "Not a thing, Snape, but as often as you've surprised me since we were assigned together, *do* make more of an effort not to assume. No popular restaurants, *check*...perhaps you have a penchant for bodice-rippers or hide garishly-colored socks under your boots?"

She turned and saw the aghast look on his face and laughed.

When that look turned thunderous, she laughed harder.

"I'll just fetch glasses, then," she choked out as she set her paper bag on the table, still giggling.

He followed.

"You have your choice of mug or jam jar...I left most of my crockery and glassware behind," she said, proffering one in each hand for his inspection.

"I thought you said you'd transfigured everything in here."

She held the small glass up to the light as if she were inspecting a crystal goblet. "Nearly. I find these oddly comforting and haven't wanted to change them. They may be simple and mismatched ... but I chose them. The fact that they're an afterthought isn't important...I stared at cups and plates chosen by Ron and bought by his mother through all the years of my marriage... and I *despise* orange."

As he reached for the mug, he asked, "Fond of the British Museum?"

She nodded.

"*And Hartley's?*" He smirked.

"Blackcurrant, if you please. Do open and pour the wine while I fetch plates for the food," she smiled as she pushed him towards the small table that was both meal- and workspace.

"So," he began, with hands tucked under his chin mock-conspiratorially, "are we *finally* in a sufficiently secret location to divulge the name of the party responsible for circumventing our tosser of a department head?"

She grinned. "It is my understanding that the Minister's personal aide collects the files from the Department of Mysteries the morning of the weekly briefing, typically doing so before Sinclair bothers to arrive in his office."

"And that aide is a certain Percy Weasley, if memory serves..."

"It is."

"Well, well, well. How very *Slytherin* for a Weasley...I approve." Severus raised the last bite of his chicken wrap to Hermione and Percy before popping it into his mouth.

Her response...and smile...faltered in response to what sounded like a dozen enraged doxies beating their fists against her window.

A wand-flick later the sash opened and in flew the source of the disturbance, headed straight for Hermione.

She sighed as she broke the seal on the smoking red envelope. "...I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU THINK YOU'RE ACCOMPLISHING BY IGNORING MY OWLS, I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'D TREAT ME LIKE THIS AFTER I WORKED SO HARD TO LOVE YOU ALL THOSE YEARS, I ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE SELFISH BUT RONALD WAS SO IN LOVE...." Hermione cut off Molly's shrill tirade with a flick of her wand, then coughed on the acrid smoke that lingered after her Incendio.

Severus stared at the still-reddish ash pile in the center of the table. "Should I even ask?"

Hermione took a sip of her wine, then another. "I have refused all contact with my former mother-in-law for over a year and only speak to Ron by Owl about the children. I don't see Harry outside of the Ministry because Ginny is rather too like Molly, so he's able to play dumb where I'm concerned. Percy refuses to forward her messages to me, so *that*..." she said as she refilled her jar and raised it in a toast, "was my weekly Howler."

Severus blinked, then reached for the bottle and tipped the dregs into his mug. "I recall hearing that you had left Weasley, but never endeavored to learn more than that... It was hardly my...or anyone else's...business, not that professional discretion has ever been the forte of those chinwags in the Aurory."

She snorted. "It was front-page news!"

He tipped his mug back before replying. "Not on the *Quibbler*. I haven't bothered with the *Daily Prophet* since the last renegade Death Eater was rounded up. I have no interest in the nonsense they print, and the little newsworthy information they stumble across is covered with more skill by Mrs. Scamander."

"Luna *is* responsible in her reporting...unless, of course, it's about Rolf's ongoing search for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks." She shrugged and dropped her gaze. "I learned my husband was having an affair from a very clear...and very damning...risqué photo on the front page of the *Prophet*. I spent all that day in my office in shock, hiding from the pitying looks of the rest of the department. I spent the next day in tears, and then Molly came over the following morning to pat me on the hand and point out that I'd let myself go, and so, after all, what did I *expect* would happen? My subsequent rage carried me into Monday, when I filed for divorce."

She looked up from the pile of ash on the table to see something she hadn't witnessed in years: ~~avid~~ Severus Snape.

"That *baltic bitch*!" he spat. "The contemptible cow never *did* have a good word for anyone who tried to take her precious babies from her, except Saint-bloody-Potter. She was undoubtedly jealous that her daughter-in-law is more intelligent and more attractive than she could *ever* be!"

Hermione's jaw dropped. But before she could formulate a coherent response he stood, looked uncomfortably at the wall to the left of her and announced, "I apologize for the lateness of the evening, I really should let you get some rest," as he bolted for the door. "Thank you for a delicious dinner."

She stared at the door to her flat, at the now-empty chair across from her, and then looked back at the door, blinking in amazement. What in Gwydion's goolies just *happened*?

~*~

Three Fridays later Hermione was still asking herself that same question.

Three weeks of uncomfortable silence, two Fridays of muttered excuses from a Snape rushing to leave their office, and one rather embarrassing scene demanding to know how she'd offended him.

That was yesterday. She'd tried to apologize and blame it on skipping lunch, but before she could get the words out, he was already out the door.

It was hard not to dread another refused invitation and picking at a takeaway, alone. After all of these months, she found she ~~had~~ really looked forward to their weekly dinners... and she missed his friendship.

No, she missed *him*.

Well, wasn't *that* a revelation?

It was a revelation that caused her to straighten her sensible skirt before purposefully walking through the opening lift doors towards her. *their*...office.

An office which was, she discovered, utterly devoid of a certain Severus Snape.

He *always* arrived before she did.

She spent ten minutes trying to rein in her anger that he had chickened out instead of facing her this morning. Then she stopped trying, and spent the next half hour throwing his teacup against the door, casting *Reparo*, and throwing it again.

Until she remembered the disappearances.

And that's why, when Severus entered the office nearly an hour after she'd arrived, he found her sobbing into her desktop.

"What in Merlin's name is *wrong*, Granger?" he asked, visibly perplexed. "Are...are you injured? Should I call a mediwitch?"

Hermione leapt up so quickly she caught her foot in her chair caster. "Fuck! You're alive! Fuck, *that hurt!*" she exclaimed as she caught herself on the edge of her desk before losing her balance completely. "Don't do that to me again, you arse!"

He blinked. "Ask what's wrong?"

"No, you great pillock! I thought you'd disappeared!"

"No such luck," he muttered. "*Sinclair* has, however. As has that odd woman from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes."

Hermione pursed her lips in thought even as she continued to mop her face with a handkerchief. "Rey, I think... I've never talked to her, but I recall her name on some paperwork..."

"*No one* has...Finnegan has complained that she spends all day hiding in her office behind a stack of files since before *you* were hired, but she's been here so long he's just been waiting for her to retire. In fact, that's what he'd thought for the last month... that is, until Personnel denied his request to replace her.

"That makes ten."

"That we *know* of." He sat down heavily and tossed a file folder towards her. "I've been in the Minister's office for the past hour and a half...all of our cases have been reassigned; we're to devote all of our time to the disappearances, including the weekend. As could be expected, Sinclair has done nothing of note, save asking the Aurory to check their homes and send him reports that he then apparently ignored."

Hermione was too intrigued by the puzzle before them to remain angry that her cases had been taken from her. "Harry..."

"I've already requested that Potter meet with us as soon as he arrives...and I've arranged for lunch and dinner to be brought in, since we're effectively stuck here."

Her jaw dropped in shock. "You can't be serious."

"I am. Shacklebolt is spitting mad that Sinclair had kept the disappearances a secret and wants answers before word gets out and we're faced with a rogue Death Eater panic all over again." Severus sighed as he squeezed the bridge of his nose.

He'd been the target of a great deal of public animosity and accusations, that year after the battle...even after his trial and acquittal.

She considered the wall he'd inexplicably put between them, her outburst, and being trapped together in mutual discomfort. "Severus? Recently, er... yesterday, I..."

"Think nothing of it. We've both been... under stress, lately."

Was that an *apology* in Snapespeak? She'd have to note it down...*after* they solved the case.

Hermione nodded and settled down to work. She had files to requisition from Personnel and Darjeeling to order from the Ministry canteen.

~*~

"You're trying to square the bloody circle, Granger," Severus complained before allowing his head to fall back wearily onto the tattered sofa, "No more arithmantic equations doing complex dances across my desk, I *beg* you."

Hermione felt at least as tired as he appeared; given the growing mass of escaped frizz on the edges of her peripheral vision, she was fairly certain she looked even worse. She leaned forward in her chair and laid her forehead on her desk. It smelled like teak, which was utterly idiotic since the desk was solid oak.

Just as she made a firm decision to accost the cleaning staff about their egregious error, it came to her.

"Square the... squaring the... *Circles!* That's *it!*"

Hermione leapt up and swept the parchment and equations littering his desk onto the floor in one grandiose swish of her wand.

"*Dear Penthouse Letters, I never thought it would happen to me.*" Severus deadpanned. He had the good grace to look ever so slightly abashed when her usual look of exasperation changed to the menacing laser-focus of a military-grade sniper rifle.

Fortunately for him, she was as difficult to distract as a ferret down a rabbit hole, once she caught sight of her quarry.

"Do you recall the conversation we had after the unveiling of the new atrium floor?"

"Regarding the dunderheaded artist botching the Deathly Hallows symbol?"

"The very same. At the time you identified the symbol he'd actually used..."

"The squared circle, yes." Severus' brows knitted a moment before taking a sudden move towards his hairline. "You don't think... *Butow?*"

Hermione leaned forward to rifle through the morass of papers on her desk. Once she located last week's *Daily Prophet* special edition, she waved it over her head (whether in a pattern of triumph or to signal gale force winds was uncertain). "The dedication mentioned the precious metals and other rare components embedded in the mosaic...if he managed to get his hands on one of those counterfeit cinnabar shipments..."

"...he would have embedded azoth into those symbols!"

"Cue alchemical transmutation!" Hermione concluded as she sat back, grinning. *Rabbit caught!*

He shook his head. "Impossible."

"Not impossible. *Improbable*, maybe," she replied through gritted teeth. "But..."

He held up his hand. "There is a source," he said as he scribbled on a small piece of parchment, then tapped it once with his wand. No sooner had it disappeared with a pop than a large, leather-bound book appeared, hovering in front of his face.

"The *Book of Abramelin the Mage*," he said with a flourish.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "But that doesn't have the specifics we need; it's all theory..."

"This is the real *Book of Abramelin the Mage*, not one of the obfuscated versions leaked to Muggles," he interrupted.

"We *have* that? Why wasn't I informed? *It's not in the catalogue!*" With each word, Hermione's voice raised in tone.

"It's not for unauthorized use," Severus muttered as he looked through the tome.

She bristled. "How is it that *you're* authorized and I'm not? How dare they! Wha..."

"I'm a *Potions master*, or have you forgotten?" His clipped interruption invited no continuation of her snit.

She rolled her eyes exasperatedly, then checked to make sure he hadn't seen it. At least she hadn't stuck her tongue out, although she'd wanted to. Not that he didn't deserve it, but his comments about harpies had only recently stopped, and she didn't particularly miss them. *Tosser*.

He turned pages for several minutes while Hermione bounced her leg impatiently. She itched to get her hands on the book, in no small part because it was forbidden to her, but that would wait.

Not long, mind, but that was a fight for another day. Tomorrow perhaps...

She startled when he closed the tome with a loud *thunk*. "You are correct," he said as he tipped his head in her direction. "Although I question whether the Minister will simply take your...*our*...word for it."

"Why not? Everything needed is there."

"Sulphur?"

"Well, if that gold trim is actually *pyrite*...", she began.

"It would *have* to be...gold cannot be worked by magical means. The salt?"

Hermione thought. "The human body is perhaps 1% salts... Would you think that enough?"

He stared at her. "And how in Merlin's name would you know that?"

She examined her hands as she muttered, "My parents had me moved up a year because I was terribly bored in Primary...I had made it through several years of Secondary materials by the time I started at Hogwarts."

He raised an eyebrow. "You bloody well have an eidetic memory, haven't you? You weren't a know-it-all, you were *read*-it-all," he said as he crossed his arms.

She felt her face heat. "Well, yes... I suppose it could be called that, although it's hardly..."

He shook his head at her. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about; don't attempt to explain it away. It does make sense, more sense than the rumors by some in Hogwarts that even after the Time-Turner was returned, you had found a way to study instead of sleep."

She snorted. "Hardly. My Sunday lie-ins were legend."

"Hmmm." Severus looked at her in *that* way. Damn the man, surely he must know what that did to her!

There was heat in more than her cheeks at that point, but she'd be damned if she let him know he'd got to her.

"W-would you think the human body contains enough salt to complete the transmutation?" she asked as she pointedly looked away, willing her face to its usual coloring.

He grinned ever so slightly. Damn, she'd been caught!

"Possibly, if we also consider the magical selection that appears to be taking place...it's as if the mosaic operates like the Sorting Hat, only instead of seeing a child's potential within a House, it identifies a *lack* of potential...potential squandered, dissipated... dead-weight, if you will. Soft, malleable, poor quality...*lead*. I think we're fortunate it isn't any worse."

Hermione looked at him, perplexed.

"Thank Moelin we've not seen any golems." He shuddered.

She was inclined to agree with that assessment.

Suddenly, her eyes widened in realization. "Lead. Fuck me sideways...Sinclair *wastransmuted*, wasn't he?"

Severus' eyebrows nearly met his hairline before he reschooled his features. "Your wish is... er...*yes*, I think you're very likely right. There is no way I can think of to track the transmutation...there would be nothing left of Sinclair or the other missing wizards and witches... It seems to me that the Flamel subtheory of metallurgic corpuscularianism as applied to Geber's three treatises on *Takwin* would hold fast...we would have no magical means at our disposal to identify even an echo of their former signature."

Hermione pondered this and winced. "Even an *attempt* to find that echo could result in the accidental creation of a homunculus. So we have no way to reverse or replicate the process, and you said he's not likely to..."

"I did," he interrupted. "But now I rather think we have enough correlative information for Kingsley to act on...he had top scores in Potions at Hogwarts, his grounding in alchemical theory will be enough for him to follow our argument...the question will be whether he authorizes the use of the Department's sole remaining Time-Turner to destroy the mosaic before the fact, disregarding the policy for its use that he himself wrote, or just have it dismantled and replaced."

He scribbled a note and it disappeared with a pop.

Before she could raise a head of steam to begin an impassioned monologue *on that* particular (ridiculously reactionary, in her opinion) post-war policy, a silvery lynx slipped through the wall and intoned, in the Minister's voice, "I expect you both in my office tomorrow morning. Cordon it off discreetly until then. Good work."

Severus nodded. "There's our answer."

Hermione paused to find her suddenly-missing Gryffindor courage. "I'd, uh, like you to join me for dinner. Miraj makes a saag paneer *tadie* for..."

She held her breath as she watched him consider her invitation.

"King prawn tikka masala? Tikka nagaria?" She cringed inwardly at how desperate she must sound even as the words rushed out.

Oh well...in for a penny, in for a pound.

"I have Old Speckled Hen..." she added as she watched his expression change with each entrée mentioned.

"That would be... most satisfactory."

~*~

The Ministry Floo flashed green as two figures stepped out, hand-in-hand.

"Do you think Kingsley will be willing to authorize the galleons necessary to correct this problem?" Hermione asked as she gingerly dodged a short wizard wearing a chartreuse fez before pushing Severus out of the Monday morning arrival rush. "The 'Never Again' redecoration scheme was by Wizengamot decree, after all."

"I would find a replay of last night most agreeable, too, Granger, but your choice of location leaves a lot to be desired," he demurred as his back hit the wall.

She met his eyes and felt her face flush. She'd been *very* forward.

He'd been *very* receptive.

Especially in the kitchen. And in the shower. Not that he'd complained when they moved to the bed...

Ron had always refused her unless it was bedtime and the room was completely darkened...shagging in the light of day sounded delightfully wicked... and she was developing quite a *fondness* for wicked.

He cocked his brow questioningly, smirking as her deepening blush answered for her. "He'll have to," Severus said, replying to her earlier remark. "Quickly and quietly, lest that abominable Skeeter woman catch wind of it."

Her eyes scanned the sea of Ministry workers pouring from the Floos, separating into two neat masses edging the atrium before conjoining on the other side. Either the floating *Mind the Floor, Fresh Mortar* notices they'd put up were still in place on the perimeter of the tile or Moses had returned to direct traffic.

She nodded, and they joined the flow of employees teeming towards the main entrance.

"Oi! 'Mione! Is *he* why you aren't returning our Owls? Turned into a slapper, have you?"

They whirled around to see a red-faced Ronald Weasley barreling across the atrium, fists clenched, straight past the warning signs and onto the mosaic.

Severus' grip on Hermione's hand tightened.

"Not the tile, Ron! No!" she shouted as he charged towards her, his features set in equal amounts of stubbornness and anger.

Then he was gone.

Hermione Granger (née Weasley, née Granger) carefully picked her way across the design, avoiding the transmutation symbols, and picked up what remained of her ex-husband. It was interesting, the way the years-long weight on her spirit lifted as she felt the weight of the nugget in her hand. She was sure a Muggle psychiatrist would have a name for it, but she'd be buggered to care about that at the present moment.

She felt her face heat, again, and paused to take a breath. She supposed she should feel guilty for the strange sense of relief that the father of her children had just... *transmuted*... right in front of her eyes, but it had been so many years since she felt the stirrings of affection, of friendship, *ovanting*...and being wanted in return...that she considered any debt of mourning long since paid.

"He really should have listened..." she said quietly, turning around. Even though the atrium remained filled with oblivious employees streaming from the Floos, she noticed nothing except Severus' considerably weighted reply.

"He couldn't hear you."

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. No, Ron never *could* hear her...neither as his friend nor as his wife.

"You were always too good for him, you know," Severus continued as she joined him outside the edges of the mosaic.

"I know," she replied, suddenly very sure that she *did* know, despite Ron and Molly's attempts to shrink her down to size. She turned toward Severus as he stopped and noted the furrowing of his brow.

"I've exchanged lead for gold," she whispered as she opened the hand holding the ore and met his eyes.

He looked at her consideringly, then took the nugget. He tossed it into the air once before catching it and tucking it in his pocket. "Indeed."

As they made their way to Minister Shackbolt's office to make their final report, it occurred to Hermione that as long-lasting as she hoped their fledgling romance would become, she felt certain Severus' depths were too limitless to ever be *familiar*.

And she smiled.

~fin~