

The Perils of Watching the Paint Dry Whilst Stranded Without a Wand With Rain. Rain and Rain and Rain. And More Rain

by TeaOli

Stuck without their wands, watching paint dry, during a seemingly endless rain, what
can a witch and wizard do?

Rainy Days And Mondays

Chapter 1 of 3

Stuck without their wands, watching paint dry, during a seemingly endless rain, what can a witch and wizard do?

Keeping her face bland despite the coil of excitement tightening in her belly, she looked up from the thin file her superior had handed over. "Have there been any... consequences?"

"Nothing Dark, if that's what you're asking." Blenda Bagnold waved a hand as if dismissing the very idea. "But if *you* discover anything of that nature, I'm to alert Robards straight away. Which means *you're* to report it to *me* and leave off your investigations the moment you know. I don't need to tell you how precarious our situation is, Granger: The Quiet Ones think we're superfluous to requirements, and the Auror Office consider us barely Patrol calibre."

"But..." A telling look was enough to remind her who she was dealing with.

Bagnold went on staring, almost daring her to resume her protest, only continuing after a long moment of silence and a sharp nod. "Still, we can't ignore the implications or rule out the possibility of one of these paintings being used for illegal activities," Bagnold acknowledged. "If our mysterious artist were to paint a goblin's portrait, for instance..."

It was not without good reason that Hermione Granger had been acknowledged as by one dead werewolf, at least the "brightest witch of the age"; she immediately grasped what her superior was getting at.

"But that would be impossible! And surely not even a painted goblin would agree to..." This time, she cut herself off. Obviously, they didn't *know* what the subjects in any of the oddly interactive paintings might decide to do. Or what they could do. That was why the Department of Mysteries had been asked to investigate. Why *she* was being ordered to investigate. "I'll begin by re-interviewing the known owners."

"You do that. Just remember you *are* a CDW with the MLEP so far as any of them need to know."

Granger nodded her understanding and was nearly out the door when Bagnold called after her. "And none of your 'derring-do' this time!"

~@~

Rediscovering Muggle shampoo and toothpaste had done wonders for his appearance, but at first, paying such meticulous attention to hygiene meant spending less time in his studio, so he'd given up cleaning his teeth after every meal, and he only washed his hair every other day. Or whenever he found gobs of oil colour weighing down the fine locks. Or whenever he was to meet with a client.

Today was a client day, a shampoo day, and his hair wasn't co-operating. Instead of flowing like a black brook down his back, it clung to his head in damp clumps.

Damned rain!

The "damned rain" had been his constant companion for more than a month. Well, the rain and a few portraits. More portraits than he usually had in his possession at one time rested on easels set at even intervals around the room. Most were chatting about cookery, their former lives, and their families and complaining about the *damned rain* that stopped them drying properly.

"I warned you of the perils of not sticking to linseed oil," called the only portrait who wasn't participating in the chatter. "Oh, no! The Great Artist had to be *different* to all those who came before him! Had to be better!"

"Your creations might have... *special qualities*, but that will do you no good if you can't deliver on time! Using poppy oil was mad enough, but to blend it with Chinese Chomping Cabbage oil was a recipe for a very long drying time."

The artist gave up on getting his locks to flow and glared at his oil-and-pigment likeness.

"It was *your* recipe," he growled. "*You* were certain it would work."

The artist's portrait sneered at the accusation. "First, you were given that recipe six self-portraits ago. Second, I am your 'best self' in more ways than one."

"And you would never have existed if one of my former 'best selves' hadn't been so generous. Stop whinging about things we can not change."

"All right."

The portrait's quick compliance left the artist suspicious. He stared himself in the eye for a long moment before giving up learning what the portrait was up to.

"All right," he echoed, fiddling fruitlessly with his lank hair one last time. (Not that it should matter; he wouldn't be putting on his usual show today, and the client wouldn't really remember much about him even if he did.)

He'd just begun to turn on his heel when the portrait called out, "Take me with you to explain, and perhaps your client won't mind you flimflamming him!"

Stopping his Apparation only to spill a bottle of white spirit on the canvas would likely have resulted in a splinch, so he simply disappeared with a louder than normal ~~at~~ *top*.

~@~

"It was meant to be a bloody present for our twelfth. He was a portrait artist decent enough recommendations from my colleagues," Geoff Rankin told her. "What more did I need to know?"

Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin, Third Class ("for loyalty *in extremis* and bravery in giving peripheral support to Harry Potter in his glorious defeat of He Who Must Not Be Named". Didn't *that* rankle? "Peripheral support", indeed. She'd spent months living in a tent with two adolescent boys who didn't know a bar of soap from a bar of chocolate at the best of times!) shook her head in disbelief. That men would buy tenth anniversary presents for their wives on the basis of nothing more than "decent enough recommendations" wasn't really surprising, but that anyone in wizarding Britain could have forgotten that just over a decade before they'd fought a war against *Dark Forces* and blithely go about commissioning a portrait of his not-so-dearly departed mother-in-law from an unknown artist whose features he could never quite recall was beyond stupid.

"Weren't you concerned about hanging the painting in your home?"

"Marty at work said his wife's mum's portrait was perfect down to everything save her sharp tongue. My only concern was that this bloke might forget to leave the last bit off mine."

"I see."

"Er, WC Granger..." CDW Granger grimaced at the unfortunate mis-appellation, but didn't correct the wizard "...the kids, you see, they really like having a granny who likes to bake and is never nasty. And my wife said she never enjoyed her mum this much when the old bat was actually alive!" Rankin didn't meet his interrogator's eyes. "There hasn't been any *real* trouble with these paintings, has there?"

Sighing, Granger conceded that there hadn't been. "But I suggest you keep an eye on any goings on between your family and the portrait. If anyone complains of feeling ill..." She wanted to warn not to let the children eat anything their painted grandparent offered, but knew from experience that the admonition wouldn't bear fruit.

"I'll Floo you straight away if that happens. After getting them to St Mungo's, that is. But before burning Granny."

She asked a few more questions, but she'd already heard enough. The story had been the same with each of the eight unhappy customers she'd visited before this meeting with Rankin: an acquaintance, a friend of a friend, or a colleague had whispered in a wizard's ear about an up-and-coming artist who had a knack for making mothers-in-law manageable in portrait form.

None were displeased with the portraits they'd received. No, they couldn't praise those enough, but they weren't happy to hear there might be something about the portraits that needed the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol sniffing round them. Nine useless interviews later, she wasn't any closer to finding the prankster painter if that was *all* he was than she had been before taking over the case.

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The artist cast two spells on himself upon arrival outside Sylvia Smith-Smythe's home: a drying charm that left his hair with enough body and shine to be featured in a shampoo advert and a modified Notice-Me-Not that ensured no one would remember much more than the hair.

He opened the interview with a brief explanation of his difficulties and his profuse apologies; it took fewer than ten minutes for her to have not only forgiven him (That was definitely down to his attractively flowing hair.) but to also have come up with a string of suggestions on how to speed things along. (He didn't doubt the latter was an attempt to delay his departure, and he was amused enough to play along.)

"I don't suppose a drying charm would help?" she wheedled flirtatiously, her eyes never leaving his hair.

"I'm afraid it won't, Mrs Smith-Smythe. Not if you wish the *special qualities*..." He cursed himself for using his portrait's phrase "...to be retained."

The adoring expression faltered just a bit, but then she shook her head and smiled again. "Well, I couldn't have her hanging on the wall as a regular portrait. I suppose this means you'll have to come again in another couple of weeks? Andrew's birthday is less than a month away, you know. I'm sure you also know how difficult a partner can be when disappointed."

"Alas, ma'am. I am unattached at the moment."

"Oh! What a pity." Her simpering smile suggested she didn't think it a bad thing in the least.

"But I doubt I'll need to return," he told her just to watch her face fall again before he added, "I'd much prefer it *if you* came to *me*." He didn't need to add the leer, but seeing her tremble all over made it worth the extra effort.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur Peintre. I'd be happy to come for... come *to* you."

"I'll have a Portkey delivered to you a week Thursday. Your mother-in-law's portrait will be dry by then."

"A week Thursday," she repeated a bit breathlessly.

He knew she would be thinking of him of his hair, anyway long after he'd Disappeared.

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Having an interest in just about everything worth being interested in wasn't exactly conducive to settling on a career. The humble among the number suffering from that affliction became writers, able to explore their interests vicariously either through the actions and adventures of other real people, or through the actions and adventures of characters that sprang from their own imaginations. Some managed to accomplish both, balancing careers as journalists with the dubious pleasures of being authors of fiction who found themselves being largely ignored.

Granger had considered those paths, but quickly dismissed each as unworthy of her intellect. Why shouldn't *she* be the one having the adventures *and* the one writing up her actions for the wizarding world to appreciate? To a less discerning eye, such ambitions might reek of a certain idiotic fraud sporting impeccably dressed gilded locks whose name was doomed to never again cross her lips with anything approaching approbation, but Hermione didn't concern herself over that. After all, she'd only write the *truth*, and that would set her apart from the lying bastard who'd cavorted dashing through her second-year dreams.

Unfortunately, in spite of her much touted mental acuity, Granger had failed to consider extenuating factors when considering her future.

Firstly, she needed an actual career in order to finance her adventures. Working as a junior clerk for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, while being morally satisfactory, didn't pay very much. Even the small (to the point of barely existing) *per annum* allowance she received for having been awarded her Order of Merlin didn't make enough of a difference to allow her to move from her parents' home.

Secondly, haring off on feats of derring-do against *Dark Forces* at the weekend left so little time for admiring the arguably more important work of her Auror-in-Training fiancé, she was very soon left without a partner, as well as without a backdoor line into any Dark Forces that were currently extant.

Thirdly, the few feats of derring-do she'd accomplished before she was dumped by the afore-mentioned fiancé had attracted the attention of not only the Department of Magical Law Enforcement but also the Department of Mysteries. Her new position under a joint venture between the two departments paid quite a bit more than her old one had, but the extra Galleons didn't make up for having lost her future husband.

Fourthly, she really, *really* hated being called WC Granger. But growling "That's 'Constable *Detective* Witch', thank you!" smacked of "derring-do", and that just wasn't on, according to Bagnold. And honestly, she would have accepted "CW" without the "D". No, *really*!

A/N: Written as a gift for jodel_from_aol, this story originally appeared in the 2012 LiveJournal SS/HG Fic Exchange.

The usual disclaimer applies.

Here Comes the Rain Again

Chapter 2 of 3

Stuck without their wands, watching paint dry, during a seemingly endless rain, what can a witch and wizard do?

Weak sunlight seeped into the room from floor-to-ceiling windows on five sides, dully illuminating a long-ish table covered in wooden canvas stretchers and other bits and bobs.

Two of the remaining three walls were painted white and housed rolls of canvas and racks of pigment arranged by colour. A large window small compared to the others, but still large enough to frame a pleasant view of an enclosed courtyard garden accessed via a small door made up nearly a third of the eighth wall.

"That won't work for ever." Much as he wanted to, he didn't glare at the portrait balanced on his easel. "I know you. Eventually, the urge to show off will get the better of you. I'll paint over her, just as I always have."

The lone figure in the painting peeped out from behind his own easel, which he'd angled away from the sight of his so-called creator. "And I know you," the figure in the portrait called out. "You will tire of wasting pigment and oils whilst I have an unlimited supply to repaint her. And then eventually, that much-vaunted intelligence of yours will reassert itself in the form of curiosity. I can wait you out."

"Or, my foot might slip as I carry a bottle of white spirit past your canvas."

The artist in the portrait smirked. "You wouldn't dare destroy me. I am your greatest creation if the number of self-portraits you've got hanging around are any indication. Besides, you'd have to do away with them all to truly get rid of me."

The artist in the room with eight walls said nothing. He simply stalked over to a wall covered in shelf upon shelf of many-hued powders and, pressing a hidden mechanism, slipped through a cleverly concealed door and out of the studio.

~@~

While the first nine of the artist's clients mightn't have been as forthcoming as she would have liked, Granger had better luck with the vendors who supplied the tools of the mystery wizard's trade and the witches and wizards who trained others in the art. *For a man who was supposedly working in the utmost secrecy*, Granger thought, *word about his work had certainly got round in certain rarefied circles*. Not that any of them knew anything concrete about him, of course, but more than a few had theories on how he'd accomplished his feats of magic.

The trail of evidence was easy to follow after speaking with pigment grinders and master portraitists and purveyors of fine canvas. Another CDW might have thought ~~too~~ easy, but Granger knew her worth and could say without the least bit of conceit that her aptitude for deductive reasoning was sufficient to have frequently led her down paths her spurious colleagues on the Patrol couldn't have located on a map. While she wouldn't call them idiots, they weren't the MLE's brightest lights, either. Otherwise they'd all be Aurors, wouldn't they?

But Granger wasn't especially focussed on the incompetence of her fellow constables; Granger was too gratified to stumble upon a deal-in-the-making only a week into her investigations to give them much thought at all. Tracking down a tenth client just before he was to meet with the artist had been nothing short of genius-level work.

"Do you really need to go *now*, CDW Granger? Using *my* 'key'?" Delvin Derwent seemed hesitant to hand over the battered 38ml tube of Daler-Rowney's Alizarin Green, but at least he hadn't got her rank wrong. "I support you coppers one hundred per cent but what shall I give the missus, then?"

"Tenth is tin," she told him, taking advantage of his momentary shock to prize the paint from his reluctant fingers. "Some say they don't recommend it if you want to make it to your eleventh, but Horace's Horologes in Diagon Alley sells a lovely punched tin clock in the shape of a heart."

Fortunately, the Portkey activating saved her having to say anything more, or even having to hear his response.

~@~

It was a performance he'd put on eleven times already. He'd long since stopped thinking about how ridiculous it was. If the idiots wanted to pay a bit extra for a bit of superfluous flair, who was he to complain? The moment he felt his wards react to the Portkey, he went into action.

"So glad you could make it, Mr Derwent." The artist spun around in a truly spectacularly dramatic display of billowing robes and flowing hair, already reaching towards the cloth-covered portrait resting on an easel in the centre of his studio. Outside the tall windows, darkness and rain provided a stirring backdrop to his presentation. He whipped the cloth from the canvas as he completed his turn...

And stopped short, his mouth agape.

But that was nothing compared to his guest's reaction.

Her eyes bulged, and her jaw went slack, and she had to suck down several breaths some shallow, others deep before she could sputter, "B-b-bugh..." Several more breaths preceded a nonsensical "I... Y-you..."

In the meantime, the artist regained enough composure to have

1. glared at this intruder who was decidedly *not* Delvin Derwent,
2. realised what had happened, and
3. begun to smile at her inability to form a coherent*word*, let alone a comprehensible sentence.

"Pr-Professor? You're, erm... You're supposed to be..." she finally managed to spit out.

How the hell is she seeing through the charm?

"Dead?" he supplied. "Hardly, though my survival is no thanks to you and your dunderheaded friends."

"But... *how?*"

"Not that it's any of your business," he snapped, "but ~~was~~ something of an expert at potions and countering hexes. Did you honestly think I wouldn't see my method of demise a mile away whilst pretending to serve a deranged megalomaniac who had an unhealthy affection for his cursed halfbreed snake? Honestly, Ms Granger. You disappoint me." A malicious gleam lit his black eyes. "Or is it Mrs Weasley now? I seem to remember... Oh, that's right! Left you at the altar, didn't he?"

He expected more of the gaping and sputtering. Or perhaps big, sad eyes and a trembling lower lip. He hoped for tears. What he got instead was righteous indignation.

"How *could* you?" She stormed across the room till she stood just under his prodigious nose. (She smelt quite nice, he noticed.) "How could you pretend to be dead all this time? Harry *grieved* for you! He's naming his next *son* after you!"

"And you stand here, alive as anything, mocking me because I couldn't hold on to my fiancé? How *dare* you not let us know you survived?"

Then she did burst into noisy sobs.

A full ten minutes passed before she had cried herself out. He spent the entire time standing in place, less than half a metre from the witch, staring. The tears weren't nearly as satisfactory as he'd expected. Odd, that. He hardly noticed that the portrait of Ailis Sweeting, who in life was said to have joyfully cast dire imprecations on her own daughter's wedding day, was also sobbing loudly enough to rattle the windows.

~@~

Granger swiped the last of the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand and used a handkerchief transfigured from the tube of Alizarin Green to blow her nose. The portrait of Ailis Sweeting was back under a cotton drape. A few flicks of Professor Snape's wand brought an easel holding an altogether different, far larger canvas to its side.

"I thought you might like to see what you're in for if you insist on keeping up your ridiculous hobby," he snapped.

She didn't realise he'd been speaking to the painting till after he glanced her way and beckoned her over to the easel.

"My adaptation of the portrait-animating spell is supposed to ensure that only the subject's 'best self' is captured," Snape explained. "Obviously, there is a flaw somewhere in its application. The higher degree of interaction is just a side effect. But even that is nothing that should truly interest the Ineffables."

"How did you..." Her wand was in her hand before she was conscious of drawing it.

He laughed *laughed* at her. "Oh please. Bagnold's lot is far worse at keeping secrets than the Unspeakables."

"Hermione, dear, there's no need for wands!" The voice was Snape's but it came from the painting.

Granger turned to look and saw a portrait of a smiling Severus Snape who held a palette in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. Over his shoulder, she saw a canvas propped on another easel. She could just make out the back view of a nude feminine figure standing near a bathtub.

The woman turned, reaching for a towel.

"Severus, who's with... Oh! *Expelliarmus!*"

To the surprise of everyone present, human and painted person alike, Hermione Granger's wand flew through the air, into Snape's self-portrait and on into the portrait the self-portrait had painted.

And it promptly fell through the other Granger's unfinished fingers, leaving smudges of oil-bound pigments as it landed at her feet.

Please Don't Stop the Rain

Chapter 3 of 3

Stuck without their wands, watching paint dry, during a seemingly endless rain, what can a witch and wizard do?

"*Accio* wand!" Granger didn't know whether to scream in frustration or to cry. "It's stuck," she said.

"Perhaps if I try...?" suggested Snape's best self. "*Accio* wand!"

An ebony wand flew from the living Snape's sleeve and into the painting. The startled portrait figure ducked, still clutching his brush and palette. The wand continued past him, past his easel, and embedded itself in one of the windows of the painted studio.

"Well, that was unexpected," the portrait observed.

"Damn you, you idiot!" Snape shouted. "I just painted that three days ago! It won't be dry for days."

The portrait shouted back, "Well, if you'd painted me with a wand of my own, the spell probably wouldn't have got confused when I Summoned one! And if you'd deigned to use linseed oil, they'd be dry already. But no, you have to use your special concoction as the binder *and* the medium even on the *windows!*"

~@~

It was a lot to take in. Under normal circumstances CDW Granger would have thought the detailed discussion about curing rates, iodine numbers, the properties of linolenic acid versus those of linoleic acid and spells to increase paint film durability fairly interesting. Ineffable Granger should have been taking notes. But no one was telling either one of her what she really wanted to know, and the little she'd had learnt about oil painting hadn't prepared her to fully understand what they *were* saying.

"...and everyone struggles with hands. I think I can claim without conceit that I do better than all but the great masters, but the fingers weren't perfect, so I decided do a quick touch-up," Severus something about the portrait's more open demeanour invited greater familiarity was explaining. "It doesn't hurt, of course, and it wouldn't have hindered her interaction with anything in her own painting, but your wand is *real*, and poppy oil takes so much longer to dry."

"Not that using poppy oil is 'mad' or anything," Snape put in. "It's not as if takes 'nearly forever' to dry and carries a greater risk of cracking!"

"It won't yellow over time the way linseed oil will. And thanks to spells *you* developed, I don't need to worry about cracking, do I?"

"Oh, of *course*, not cracking is more important than quick curing when *you're* the one doing the painting, that..."

"It's not the same thing!" Severus cried. "She's not meant for a client, is she? Why should it matter if a portrait painted for my own pleasure dries in..."

"Wait! Why would he paint *me*?" Granger addressed the portrait within a portrait as if the two wizards weren't still bickering with each other. "That doesn't make sense."

The oils-on-canvas Hermione took a breath to answer, but her creator was already painting a black gag over her mouth. She used her fingerless hand to wipe it away, glaring as she reminded him, "Wet on dry, Severus." Turning back to CDW Granger, she explained, "It gets lonely here with no one but himself to talk to. The other portraits are usually grandmotherly types without much to talk about besides kids and cookery."

"But that doesn't explain why he'd want *my* company." Granger chewed her lower lip. "There must be any number of people he'd rather be stuck with."

"No one intelligent enough to keep up decent conversation."

"Oh," said Granger. "I suppose I can see that."

Snape choked on some sarky remark or other, and Severus offered him a smug grin.

~@~

After another hour filled with more arguing and more failed attempts at retrieving both wands, everyone involved was exhausted.

Although Severus had managed to repaint Hermione's fingers to his satisfaction, their flesh and blood counterparts didn't seem inclined to doing anything more than glare at each other.

Severus stared in dismay at the windows still shivering under an onslaught of rain. It didn't look like the weather would be clearing any time soon, and he knew from experience and borrowed memories that forced inactivity left Severus Snape bad-tempered. "Why don't you show Ineffable Granger the kitchen? It's past suppertime, and

I'm sure you both could use the nourishment."

Snape scowled fiercely, but pushed away from the window he'd been leaning against.

"Granger?" he growled.

After only a moment's hesitation, she nodded, then followed him through the small door leading to one of the covered gardens.

Severus turned back to Hermione's canvas just in time to see the towel pool at her feet.

"I thought they'd *never* leave," she whispered mischievously.

~@~

Dinner, while surprisingly good, had *not* surprisingly started out a very subdued affair.

Granger had offered compliments on the delicious seafood "cawl" Snape served with a crusty bread he'd baked himself, and his acceptance had sounded grudging. (She realised only belatedly that telling him true cawl was made with lamb mightn't have been the best way to preface her appreciation.) But by the time she was eating the last of her third helping and he had already moved on to nibbling at what he would only call "a exceptionally fragrant local cheese" the first bottle of wine lay empty, and the conversation had expanded to include his work and hers.

"Perhaps you'd like to phone Bagnold before it gets too late," he suggested as he topped up her third glass of "a local vintage" he particularly recommended.

"Phone?"

"Yes." He grinned at her. (Surely that was the wine?) "A telephone. You'd be amazed at the wonders of modern technology your Ineffables have at hand."

Minutes later, she was lying to her boss. "He's invited me to remain so that I can observe his work, and I think it a good idea to study his methods, though I'm certain there is nothing for us to be concerned about."

It wasn't till she was installed in his guest bedroom and slipping into the nightshirt he'd wandlessly resized to fit her that she realised Bagnold hadn't asked why she had communicated via Muggle means.

~@~@~

"I don't know why you're sitting in here moping when you*could* be with her. And it's not as if you've painted anything in days."

Snape glared at his painted reflection before he remembered that he still wasn't paying him any attention.

"And I'll bet you still haven't told her you have a spare wand. I'm amazed she fell for 'wandless re-sizing!' Perhaps you aren't the only one fooling yourself."

Snape listened with half an ear to more unsolicited advice until the painted wizard's painted witch demanded a cease fire.

Her well reasoned argument with its heavy reliance on the existence of turpentine and white spirit made Snape hide a smile.

Three days of doing little beyond cooking for himself and his guest, eating and sleeping, and attempting to ignore all of his portraits made conversing with Hermione Granger a more attractive prospect.

All right. Conversing with Hermione Granger makes conversing with Hermione Granger a more attractive prospect.

The woman she was today was an improvement over the girl she had been at school. Although Hermione Granger had proved herself to still be intelligent and inquisitive and eager to learn, that she'd got over that annoying tendency to believe that whatever she'd learnt from *books* had more value than anything another *person* might share was... appealing. Snape didn't mind (much) admitting as much to himself. Admitting it to anyone else like to his busybody portrait, or to Granger was out of the question. But that needn't keep him from continuing to enjoy her company.

With that in mind, he set off to retrieve her from his library.

~@~

"Is it time for lunch already?" Granger looked up from a book on grinding one's own pigments. "Did you know some manufacturers of oil paints insist that the toxic substances give the best colours?" She turned back to the page she'd been poring over. "Of course you know; this is *your* book, after all. Have I told you your book is absolutely fascinating?"

It wasn't as fascinating as talking to Snape about his work was, but he was a busy man, and she couldn't expect him to devote ~~all~~ his time to an uninvited guest. Still...

"Lunch will not be ready to eat for some time," he told her. "I thought you might like to see the rest of the house."

That made her look up again. "Oh!" she said. "Oh, yes! I'd like that very much, actually. I've been trying to work out how it all fits together, but it hasn't been easy when I've seen so little." She forced herself to stop talking before Snape rescinded the offer. "Is now a good time?"

"That was the idea, yes."

His smile was tight, but it was a smile nonetheless, and she was willing to take what she could get.

Once again, he led her through to the kitchen and out into the covered garden that connected it to the art studio. Upon entering his work space, he turned to the wall directly adjacent and reached behind one of the racks. Half the wall swung forward on hidden and silent hinges.

He waved Granger ahead of him, and her breath caught as she stepped into a bathroom fantastic enough to rival the Prefects' bath at Hogwarts. The whole place had been tiled in huge squares of dark grey marble with accents the colour of new leaves.

"Not quite Slytherin colours," she observed and was pleased to see him smile at the inane comment when he could just as easily have brought the tour to an abrupt end.

"No," he agreed.

The bath itself took pride of place in the centre of the room. She recognised it from the portrait Snape's portrait had painted. It wasn't quite large enough to swim in, but it had seemingly been carved from a single block of translucent green stone.

"Quartz," he explained without her having to ask. "It was here when the house came into my possession. I'd never have been able to afford it. The previous owner hadn't really been able to, either. This room held the bath and nothing else. Even the floor hadn't been finished."

He pointed out a complicated shower system suspended from the ceiling, explaining that he'd designed it himself and had used the money he'd got selling the drawings to a

Muggle bath outfitter to finish the rest of the room

"I didn't ask for nearly enough," he told her. "Even with their 'gift' of the prototype and free installation, they took advantage of my ignorance."

Granger marvelled at how forthcoming he was being about what he had to see as a weakness, but he was already moving over to one of the eight walls.

The loo was hidden behind a cubicle constructed of thin slats of black wood, much like the one near the room he'd given her to use. A double sink more black wood and green quartz and grey marble stood at its side.

She wondered why a single man, living alone, would need a double sink, but decided against asking.

Snape hesitated at the black wood and grey marble wall standing directly across from the door to his atelier.

Granger stood a little away from him, afraid to ask the questions tumbling about her mind, lest the snarling professor return. She was really starting to like this more convivial Severus Snape and hated to do anything that might make him disappear.

"This is the door to my personal room," he said without turning around, and he spoke so quietly she could barely hear him. "This is the only way to reach it from inside the house. If you ever have need of me and cannot find me anywhere else, place your hand here..." he demonstrated by fitting his palm to a space between two tiles "...and the door will open."

They didn't go inside, though Snape had her practise opening the door three times before he led her back through his studio and into another garden.

~@~

The tour took far longer than it should have done because, once she'd got over the fit of reticence that had claimed her in his bathroom, Granger asked a lot of questions. She also wanted to stop and look at this or that as he guided her through the ten rooms and four gardens.

In each room, he noticed, her eyes found copies of a watercolour he'd painted soon after moving in. By the time they returned to the kitchen, he could see she was brimming with curiosity, and sure enough, she went directly to the copy hanging on the wall that separated the hub of his home from the laboratory.

"They're everywhere!" she exclaimed. When she turned to face him with a smug smile on her lips, he felt an urge to wipe it off using his own. "It's the house, isn't it."

Now don't you start! he admonished himself. *Bad enough she saw him painting her in the nude.*

"Very good, Ineffable Granger," he said for lack of anything better coming to mind. "Fifty points to Gryffindor."

He joined her at the wall and lifted the painting down. After passing his hand over the surface, he handed it to her.

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The morning of the sixth day, Granger sat at the kitchen table while Snape prepared their dinner and explained how Aberforth Dumbledore had saved his life after Nagini's attack. As soon as Snape had been well enough to travel, Aberforth had sent him into hiding at Honeycomb House. Building the house on tiny Ynys Ysbryd had been his one attempt at getting out from his famous brother's shadow.

Aberforth had suspected his older brother had misused the wizard who had supposedly murdered him, and after the whole truth had come out ("Thanks to Harry Bloody Potter!"), the older wizard had made Snape an offer he'd found he didn't *want* to refuse.

"No good for the goats," he'd claimed. "But no use letting it sit empty."

"It was a gift, really, though he saved my pride by accepting the deed to the house at Spinner's End in exchange. The only thing further he asked of me was that I learn to be my 'best self' during my isolation." He tossed a rueful smile over his shoulder. "The process is on-going, as you have no doubt noticed."

"That's why you do it, isn't it? That's why you paint the portraits?"

"In part," he acknowledged. "The Minister saw to the paperwork for the exchange himself, and he acts as Secret Keeper to the whole island. All in all, it's not been bad being 'dead', but I do need to eat, so I paint others for profit while my own portrait tries to teach me to live up to Aberforth's directive."

She rose from the table and walked across the room. Passing her hand over the watercolour, she traced a finger over Snape's map, admiring the clever ways in which he had made use of the rooms' unusual shapes.

"There is one thing I still don't understand: if it's meant to resemble a honeycomb, why didn't he build it in *hexagons*?"

"This is Aberforth we're talking about," Snape reminded her. "The man might have a good and generous heart, but few would mistake him for intelligent."

~@~@~

"How much longer is this going to take?" Granger knew she sounded peevish and regretted the loss of control, but *honestly*, how could this have happened? Not losing her wand. She knew how *that* had come about. But why on earth was she *enjoying* her old Potion professor's company?

"In a hurry to be somewhere else, Ineffable Granger?" Snape asked easily. As if she hadn't been horribly rude after he'd been so damn ~~ple~~*pleasant* all morning and had even cooked all of her favourite things for breakfast. *The bastard!* "Nothing is stopping you leaving any time you like. Now the rain's stopped, I can take you across to the village, then drive to town from there. The train stops at the station regularly."

Her jaw dropped. "You drive? You have a *car*? You have your own *boat*?"

"I do, I have, and *of course* I have. I wouldn't have offered otherwise. I would have offered sooner, only it's been years since I could get the top to go back up." His disarming smile made the butterflies in her tummy flutter disturbingly. "As soon as the paint has dried, I'll send your wand along directly. Shall it go to the Ministry, or would you prefer to have it sent to your home?"

Why should she have to choose either? The truth was... Well, she didn't want to think too much about the truth.

"Granger? The Ministry or your home?"

"I'd rather wait for my wand, if you don't mind." She bit her. "Only, her fingers will be *dry soon*, won't they?"

"So, you *are* in a hurry to leave." Odd. He sounded almost disappointed.

"Not really! But Rose Weasley's... That's Ron's new daughter, and her christening is next week." She gave him a weak smile. "I've got sort of the second most important role to play."

Snape gave her such a dark look, she thought he would toss her out right then.

Instead, he piled another helping of cheesy eggs on her plate and sat back to stare at her.

His voice was deliberate and low when he finally spoke. It made the butterflies flutter even more furiously.

"That *imbecilic toad* gave you up because he was too stupid to see your value beyond catering to his ego. Now he expects you to be his spawn's godmother? You'll have your wand back before the ceremony, but I'll drive you down to Devon myself if you'd rather not wait."

A slow smile spread across his thin lips as he spread butter on a piece of toast.

"In fact, I'd be *happy* to take you to there. I don't need a wand to hex him for you."

For the first time since waking, Granger felt unequivocally happy. But she suspected he might think her bright smile meant she was laughing at him, so she did the only thing she could think of to allay any such fears: she laid down her fork and reached across the table to take his hand, toast and all.

"As much as I appreciate the offer, I'd prefer to stay and learn more about your painting process," she told him, hoping fervently that he'd understand what she was really trying to say. "Bagnold would want me to give the fullest report possible."

He dropped the toast. Twisting his hand round to link his fingers with hers, he smiled back. "I'm sure she would."

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A/N: Huge thanks are due to my lovely alpha and beta readers [karelia](#), [bleddyn](#) (who also Welsh-picked) and [linlawless](#).