

# Operation One-Eighty

*by Jadamil*

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## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 2*

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### Chapter One

Severus Snape regretted leaving his billowing robes at home. He might have promised Hermione to wear the fitted green robes she liked so much, but he always felt ill at ease in the maelstrom of red-haired exuberance that was the Burrow, and the reassuring flutter of his robes never failed to make him feel better. That, and scowling. Unfortunately Hermione had ruled that out, too. She had mentioned that it would diminish his chances of getting laid later, and only the thought of a willing and enthusiastic Hermione naked in their bed as a reward could get him through the day without either going insane or murdering anyone.

The day had started out sunny but soon turned cool and cloudy. Severus wrapped his summer robes tighter around his scrawny form.

Some of the women in flimsy summer dresses had fled from the Weasley garden into the house as soon as the first cloud showed up in the sky and dragged Hermione with them. She had given him an apologetic look over her shoulder and was gone. Severus would have liked to follow her, but the other women had jokingly threatened the men with 'girl talk', as one of her companions had called it, and so successfully kept him from joining her. He cast a non-verbal heating charm and slunk down the garden path to keep warm.

He took care not to come too close to the mob of noisy children running around the pond and the adults playing Quidditch above the orchard. The whole extended Weasley family, which unfortunately through his relationship with Hermione included Severus against his will, had turned up to celebrate Arthur's long-awaited, finally official promotion from head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects to head of the whole Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The host and a number of his disgustingly cheerful guests stood around two big tables sagging under the weight of enough sandwiches, chicken and ham pie, salad, rock cakes and homemade strawberry ice cream to feed the whole Ministry of Magic.

The lamentable lack of shadowy corners in which he could lurk left Severus hovering around the rose bushes instead. How he wanted to blast them. Just one, or maybe two...he could always pretend it had been an accident.

Someone bumped into Severus from behind, nearly sending him sprawling, and then waltzed off without apologising. Severus cursed under his breath and straightened, ready to give the miscreant a piece of his mind. If Arthur had not noticed Severus that same instant and waved at him, he might even have forgotten himself and let Potter's precious firstborn grow a fetching pair of antlers. As it was, Severus just nodded back at Arthur and gripped his wand tight enough to make his knuckles crack, wishing he could at least take house points off the snotty brat.

James Potter. Of course. Who else but a Potter could make him regret his resolution to be a better man? The boy was a combination of Weasley and Potter genes, oh joy. When Severus had woken up from his long coma after the battle and found himself alive and pardoned, he had sworn to take his chance, turn over a new leaf and keep his nose clean in the future. For some reason he had decided that meant he couldn't insult the feeble minded do-gooders around him any longer. He had also stopped following raving, noseless madmen and killing barmy old headmasters, but giving up the insults had been the hardest. When he came down from his potion-induced high, he amended his resolution to appearing like he had turned over a new leaf. He could still insult every last one of them in his head without anyone being the wiser. Well, nobody but a very skilled Legilimens, but it hadn't exactly been a good year for those thanks to yours truly.

But James Sirius Potter...James *Sirius*...made Severus's wand hand twitch. He followed the laughing and screeching seven-year-old with his eyes. If looks could kill...

There was a loud bang, a flash of green smoke and young Potter dropped to the ground. Before Severus could do anything, like yelling 'It wasn't me!' at the top of his lungs before hexes would come flying from all sides, the boy jumped up again and giggled.

"James Sirius Potter, you'll hand over those Bombtastic Bombs right now."

"Mu-um!"

While Ginevra Potter flew over to her son and gave him a talking-to, Severus closed his eyes and counted to ten *One sneaky Slytherin, two sneaky Slytherins, three sneaky Slytherins*... Severus's heart rate slowly returned to normal. The dark clouds gathering in the sky matched his mood perfectly. When the first few rain drops landed on his scalp, he turned his back on Ginevra, who had just dismounted to solve the minor familial problem once and for all, and strode back to the house.

Surely Hermione was finished with her girl talk.

He didn't mind her spending time with her friends, especially if the spending happened far, far away from him; he did mind being shoved to the side and being forced to face them alone, however. He owed Arthur for recommending him to St. Mungo's as a brewer when nobody in Britain wanted to buy from him and he had to ship all his potions to the continent to make a living, but that gratitude didn't extend to the plentiful fruit of Arthur's loins.

As he approached the back door, he could hear voices and clatter from the kitchen. Severus grimaced. Those Weasleys could not survive one hour without stuffing their faces. It probably had to do with growing up under Molly's influence, he mused. No wonder the lot were Quidditch mad; they would have the body shape of a well-fed Puffskein without the exercise. It was probably Molly in the kitchen right now.

He was proven right when he heard Molly say, "He's such a little cutie, I could nibble his tiny little feet all day!"

That explained the food fixation, Severus thought, get'em when they're young and all that rot.

"I really envy you, Molly. Such a big family, and now Ron has got one on the way."

Severus did not recognise the second woman's voice, although he could hear her clearly with the door ajar; he guessed she was one of Molly's cousins.

"It is nice, isn't it? But I guess it's not for everyone, I mean, I don't want to speak ill of her. She's not our daughter but I like to think of her as family."

"You mean Ginny's friend, what's her name?"

"Hermione."

Severus didn't miss a beat, but he slowed down and pretended he was admiring Arthur's garden shed. Breaking the habits of a lifetime was hard, and he had been a good spy. Most of the living ex-spies were.

"Ah, yes, Hermione. Ginny mentioned that her thirtieth birthday is coming up, perhaps she'll change her mind? Tick tock goes the clock."

Severus crossed the last few yards with the speed of a glacier and the same frosty demeanour.

"No, no, I'm afraid not."

"Is it because of him? How long has that been going on, anyway?"

Severus had a good idea who the him in question was. He was now near enough to peer inside the kitchen while looking to the rest of the world like a man with a peculiar interest in the moss growing on the stone steps (*Funaria hygrometrica*, he could think of four possible uses off the top of his head; alas, none of them deadly). Molly stood at the cooker with her back to him. To her left sat a short stick-figure of a woman leaning forward and clutching an enormous handbag.

"Oh, three years, give or take. Surprised us all that they lasted longer than three months, to be honest. Mind you, it's probably for the best that Severus is not a father. The stories the children tell about his teaching days! But no. Hermione doesn't want children. That's why she and Ron split up, in fact."

"Oh, I see."

"Yes. Mind giving me a hand?" Molly asked, and Severus saw the two women disappear through the door to the scullery. "Now, where have I put the tablecloth?"

Severus slipped inside. On the wall the magical clock's single hand first pointed to 'Cooking', then jumped to 'Time to get everyone inside' while Severus was looking. A pot stood on the cooker and the aroma of beef stew wafted through the air. Severus had to squeeze by the centrepiece of the now deserted Weasley kitchen, a big wooden table. Although the worn-down hardwood floor creaked under Severus's heavy boots the women didn't notice him. He quietly closed the door behind him and hurried down a narrow passageway.

"Oh, 'ello Severus."

In front of him Fleur Weasley came down the staircase with a baby in her arms wrapped in a knitted blue blanket. As always, in the presence of the tall fair-haired quarter-Veela, he had to suppress a smile. He inclined his head in greeting instead.

"Little Louis needed a new nappy."

That was more information about little Louis than Severus ever wanted to know, but he nodded anyway. He couldn't think of a single reply that wasn't sarcastic.

"Ave you seen Bill? No? Ronald, what 'appened to your 'ands?"

Behind them Ronald Weasley strolled up, grinning from ear to ear like a loon. "Me and the kiddos were just testing our experimental stuff."

The imbecile held up his arms and showed his enlarged hands. They were each the size of a Bludger and flopped grotesquely from one side to the other like a pair of oversized gloves. "Wicked, huh? It's a new version of the Ton Tongue Toffee."

He wiggled his fingers and missed the photograph of an old wizard by a hair's breadth. "Sorry, mate." The little figure jumped back in its frame, shook its fist and then stomped off into the background.

Fleur Weasley wrinkled her nose and cupped the back of her baby's head with one hand as if to shield it from his uncle's bad influence. "That is disgusting."

Severus silently agreed. He had been exposed to the maximum dose of Weasley charm he could endure, and Hermione's former beau was a sore point with him even on a good day. He needed to find her, soon, before he started decimating her friends. How curious, he had always thought he would start by offing Potter. Junior, that is. Or was it senior, now? The middle one, damn it, he wouldn't call him Harry in his head.

"Do you know where Bill and the girls are, Ron?"

Weasley shrugged his shoulders and waved with his left monstrosity in the direction of the kitchen. "Dunno. Mum wants everybody to come in 'cos it's started raining. Maybe Bill's helping to bring in the food?"

"Raining? My purse, eet's still outside. 'Ere, will you hold Louis? Ah no, not you," she said and, evading Weasley's outstretched arms, pressed the baby against Severus's chest, forcing him to put his arms around the boy to prevent him from falling down.

He was too stunned to protest, so the strange strangled sound he heard had to come from Weasley next to him. No Hogwarts educated woman would ever hand her baby to him, not even the Slytherins. He remembered too late that Fleur Weasley née Delacour was a Beauxbatons alumna.

His first instinct was to shove the bundle right back into its mother's arms, but she had already stepped back. "Only one minute," she said and disappeared down the passageway.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Weasley twitch. What did that moron think, that he would drop the child? Or maybe scarp and use it as a potion ingredient? Once again he wondered how a woman as intelligent as Hermione could have lowered herself to fall for that simpleton. Severus only didn't sneer because that endangered his deal with Hermione if she heard of it. When she heard of it, he corrected, because he knew with dead certainty that every second from now on until Fleur returned would be re-enacted ad nauseam to the amusement of the whole Weasley clan. He raised his Occlumency shields to give nothing away and only then did he allow himself to look down at the child in his arms.

It was sleeping. Well, thank Merlin for small favours. It was also surprisingly heavy and had a mop of red hair over its scrunched-up face. Apparently the Weasley side had wrestled the Veela charm to the ground in this one, poor sod.

Severus congratulated himself on his foresight when the boy turned his head and yawned into Severus's robe in his sleep. Severus's eyebrow wanted to crawl up to his hairline but was held back by the steely grip of his Occluded mind. A clear case of damned if you do, damned if you don't. Weasley was prone to misinterpret any reaction on Severus's part to his disadvantage.

It became harder to maintain his stoic appearance with Louis shifting in his arms. Interesting. Apparently sleeping like a baby wasn't a synonym for sleeping like a log as he had thought. And now the boy smiled. While asleep. The corner of Severus's mouth broke rank and had to be dragged down again ruthlessly. If he was lucky Weasley hadn't noticed or if he did, mistaken it for a nervous tic.

Severus hadn't known babies could smile in their sleep. Was that part of the Veela allure manifesting or normal child behaviour, maybe a sign of indigestion? Severus felt beads of sweat form on his forehead from the mental strain he was under. Deep, deep down, unnamed emotions boiled and threatened to bubble to the surface. Any longer and he would suffer irreparable damage to his reputation, he was sure. What was keeping that woman?

"Ah, I'm back, but you didn't even notice, no?" Fleur cooed at her child and lifted him back into her arms.

Behind her came the whole family stomping down the corridor. Severus saw how Ronald Weasley bounced on his toes and practically burst with the wish to share the tale of the bat of the dungeon with a child shoved in his arms and felt his ire rise like it always did when he felt cornered and ridiculed. If he wasn't very careful he would lose control and make a mockery of himself. At best he would cut Weasley down to size but at worst he would start ranting and raving like a lunatic. He decided there and then to disappear and wait out the rush in the loo.

He locked the door behind him with more force than was strictly necessary, settled down on the closed lid and took a deep breath. Some kind soul had left an old Quidditch Monthly magazine on the window sill, and Severus flipped through the pages, skimming over the articles while he listened to the hubbub outside. When that couldn't hold his interest any longer, he wrote his shopping list in his head. In alphabetical order to make it more challenging. The muffled sound of the horde stampeding through the house ebbed down around the time Severus got stuck after T for toilet paper and gave up.

There wasn't much to see in the tiny room; it was only big enough for the loo, a sink and a tiny milk glass window with a flower pot on the sill. Every surface was scrubbed spotless apart from a dirty smudge over the towel rail. Severus leaned forward. His guess was one of the children had played with the flower soil. He checked the window. Yes, there were trails covered by the leaves. Severus dipped his index finger in the soil and pressed it next to the original smudge.

Definitely flower soil.

Another mystery solved through experience, expertise and experimentation. One Evanesco later his hand was clean, the wall wasn't and Severus's mood had brightened. He idly wondered if Hermione had put him under Imperio to come with her today and dismissed it as unnecessary. She could dangle the vaguest prospect of sex in front of his big noggin and he was putty in her hands. If he was lucky, Hermione had already had an overdose of Molly by now and was ready to leave. That cheered him up immensely and he left his sanitary haven.

He found Hermione in the packed living room, standing in the corner in a gaggle of women. Ginevra Weasley gesticulated wildly to the obvious amusement of that former Bell woman while Hermione smiled politely and looked about the room. In exchange for him wearing the robes of her choice she had let him pick her dress, and Severus used the opportunity to admire his handiwork. He definitely got the best of the bargain. She wore one of her few *are-you-sure-it's-not-too-short* dresses, a floral summer dress that was his favourite because of its plunging *I-cannot-possibly-wear-this* neckline. The *really-I'll-break-my-neck* heels were the icing on Severus's cake.

When Hermione's gaze met his, her smile widened and turned into a real one. She stole a peep at Ginevra, who was still the centre of attention, and then tugged at her left earring. Severus smirked. That was his cue, the secret signal that she used only in the most dire of situations.

He wove his way through the crowd and let Hermione take his arm.

"There you are, Severus! Ginny was just telling us about the Quidditch game."

She squeezed his upper arm and bumped against him. His skin tingled where a lock of her curls brushed over his cheek and the familiar scent of her discreet perfume wafted up his nose, inviting him to have his wicked way with her. Like always he marvelled at how he had managed to win her and, even more miraculously, keep her. He suspected the secret of their success was her stubbornness and not his irresistible charms, but he could live with that. If they had been alone he would have embraced her and buried his face in her hair as a prelude to more salacious activities, but that had to wait until he had stolen her away.

"I'm afraid it's time for me to leave. I have a potion simmering at a critical stage," he lied in a bored voice.

"I should come with you, after all it's my patient and if it works I want to have detailed records."

The excuse sounded ham-fisted to Severus's ears, but none of her friends knew enough of St. Mungo's inner workings in general and Hermione's role as acting department head and co-founder of the new research ward in particular to catch her in a lie. None of the new spells and potions developed by Hermione's small team had made it out of the testing stages yet, although it was only a matter of time, and Hermione only worked directly with patients when she was filling in while one of the regular Healers was on holiday.

They took their leave and fought their way through the crowd. Hermione smiled and waved and hugged Weasleys left and right, no matter if born, née or related by law while Severus simply nodded and steered her towards the door. Only Potter dared to give him a slap on the back, grinning like a madman and even adding a cheeky 'see

you, Severus'. The whelp's bothersome hero worship had turned into worrying chumminess since Hermione had started seeing Severus.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered on their way out.

"You're welcome."

They had made it to the front door when Arthur intercepted them. "Leaving so soon?"

"We're sorry, Arthur," Hermione said and gave him a quick hug.

"It's alright, some other time." Arthur freed his glasses from Hermione's mane and pushed them back up his nose. "I had no chance to ask you earlier, is it true you'll be St. Mungo's new Muggle liaison now that Esme retired?"

"I haven't decided yet; there's still so much to do that I don't know if I have enough time."

"You would be perfect. And think about all the wonderful things you could incorporate into your research, like those stitches I had!" For a moment Arthur's smile dimmed and he turned to Severus with a pained expression. "What a horrible evil thing that snake was, and you had it worse than me. I'm so glad you pulled through."

He clasped Severus shoulder and gave it a fatherly squeeze. "Now take your lady home." He let go of Severus and opened the door for them. "Don't let us wait that long for your next visit!"

Arthur smiled at them a last time and closed the door.

"Let's go home, Severus."

Severus had to clear his dry throat before he could speak. "Yes, let's go."

Severus wrapped his arms around her on the threshold and Apparated them straight into their bedroom.

"Another minute of Quidditch talk and I would have strangled Ginny," Hermione said. She leaned against Severus and slipped off her shoes. "The whole time she was going on about England's chances at the world cup. It's still a year away!"

"England's last qualification match is next week against Bulgaria."

"Then that's why she wanted to know if I'm still in contact with Viktor Krum. As if going to a ball with him fifteen years ago makes me an expert on the Bulgarian team."

"He's their new coach."

"He is? That's nice, I hope for his sake that they'll win."

"And I hope for your sake that you won't repeat that statement in Ginevra's earshot. I confess I find your aversion to Quidditch a tad unusual in a witch with wide interests."

"As long as it's up in the air and played on brooms, I'm not interested." She took off her earrings and put them in the jewellery box on her dressing table. Their bedroom had been just big enough to hold Severus's small bed and wardrobe to begin with, but with Hermione's furniture squeezed in and the bigger bed it was downright claustrophobic.

"I see. As I am the former teacher in this relationship please allow me to enlighten you." He leaned down and swept Hermione up in his arms.

"Severus! What are you doing?"

"Consider it a lesson in Quidditch theory."

Hermione put her arm around his shoulder and peered down at the floor. "You're not going to use your flying spell, are you? Any higher and I'll get sick."

"Let us begin," Severus said and threw Hermione on the bed without further notice. Her eardrum-piercing shriek would have put to shame a banshee and, in fact, sent poor old Crookshanks hurtling off the pile of dirty clothes stuffed under the dressing table in which he had dozed through their Apparition.

Severus pretended his ears were not ringing. "Blatching: flying with the intent to collide." He dove and landed next to Hermione, who scowled at him but pulled him closer when he crawled on top of her and let his forehead rest against hers.

"The Transylvanian Tackle, a fake punch to the nose to distract a player."

"Not so fake any more if you don't get to the point soon."

He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. "Patience, my dear, patience." With a swish of his wand all of their clothes vanished from their bodies with a small pop and reappeared folded in a tidy pile on the floor. Severus dropped his wand on top of it.

"You are such a neatness freak. Is that a legal move?"

"If you believe the rumours, yes. Obviously you don't pay close enough attention to the gossip column in the *Daily Prophet's* sports section."

"Ugh. I really didn't need to know that."

"Please concentrate on the lesson at hand." He pushed himself up to his elbows and planted a kiss on Hermione's shoulder. "Quidditch is much more than a hobby for the fan."

"Yes, I kind of noticed."

"Quiet." His nip of her upper arm resulted in a low moan. "They support their team," Severus slid a bit lower so he could better pay attention to his favourite parts of Hermione's anatomy, "through the ups and downs," a couple of kisses and licks to illustrate, "and practically worship the ground they fly over." His index finger stroked from Hermione's faded curse scar down to her belly.

"Go on. Please."

Her skin was smooth and warm to his touch. "They defend their team. They are devastated if they lose and ecstatic if they win. A real fan does not waver in his loyalty and sticks with his team no matter what."

Severus felt her running her fingers through his hair.

"They, ah... they cannot imagine their life without it. Not for one single day, hour, or minute. Not even a second."

"Severus."

He looked up.

There was a strange glitter in Hermione's eyes, but she smiled at him. "I know one or two things about Quidditch, too, even if I don't know the correct terms." Her hand sneaked down between them. "What's it called again when someone seizes the opponent's broom tail?"

Severus swallowed and tried to keep his eyes from crossing. "Blagging. That is considered a foul, actually."

"Really? Too bad." The sheets rustled as she spread her legs. "Don't you get a penalty shot when you got fouled?"

"Your sense for fair play is commendable. I should try to score then."

"Yes, you should."

He tried, and he did, much to the joy of everyone involved. Hermione demonstrated her understanding of the Starfish and Stick move, while Severus managed a Sloth Grip Roll shortly before the proceedings ended not so surprisingly in a draw. Hermione even suggested they schedule a rematch in the morning.

Life was good.

oOo

Severus woke up with a gasp, his pulse racing and his heart close to breaking.

"Nightmare again?" Hermione mumbled half-asleep and snuggled up to him.

Yes, a horrible nightmare that didn't have the decency to fade away. Oh the storyline ran together and bled away until only single snapshots stayed, but even now that he was awake the horribly sweet and sickeningly syrupy feelings from his dream stuck to his brain like candy floss. His subconscious had crossed a line with that dream. Was it possible to unthink a thought? Wise to cast Obliviate on himself?

"Ssh, I'm here," Hermione murmured, more asleep than awake. She nuzzled his chest and yawned. "It will be okay in a sec."

No, it wouldn't be. Not this time.

He had felt utter joy in his dream and it sucked the happiness out of reality. Normally he had boring run-of-the-mill dreams or nightmares either filled with longing for the things he could not have or loathing for the deeds he had done trying to obtain those things; it had always been that way and that part hadn't changed in the last few years. Only lately he then woke up to find Hermione holding him, the embodiment of his wishes come true, and it took the sting out of the recurring nightly horrors. This time she had been in his dream, though, and not only her. That was the problem.

The dream had torn a gaping hole into his life. Where before two had been the answer for the prayers of one, there it was now missing a third.

Severus Snape wanted a baby.

oOo

This couldn't wait. Severus and his subconscious needed to have a little chat. That required preparation, because the downside of being one of the most accomplished Occlumens in the wizarding world was the risk of Occluding one's own thoughts.

Severus crawled out of bed, careful not to wake Hermione, and crept down the stairs in his nightshirt.

The only things that could compromise his shields were large amounts of alcohol or extended contact with Harry bloody Potter. Irrespective of the fact that these days the Chosen One would probably be only too happy to assist Severus should he ever be so desperate to actually consider asking The Boy Who Couldn't Just Die And Stay Dead and thus take out all the potential fun of waking him up at three a.m., extended contact with Potter also resulted in elevated blood pressure, the impulse to grind his teeth to dust and was generally bad for Snape's health. Hence the bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey he had stashed away under the kitchen sink for exactly such a purpose. Severus seldom drank: a consequence of growing up with an alcoholic father who beat his wife when sober and turned on his son when drunk. He mainly used it as a tool to loosen tongues, including his own.

It was a good thing the Dark Lord hadn't allowed alcoholic beverages at Death Eater meetings or Snape might have ended up as a corpse flambé on Nagini's menu.

Severus fetched the Firewhiskey and took a swig. Half a bottle later he had established contact with his subconscious. It wasn't happy with him, but what else was new?

*You should find another way to explore your feelings. You know that.*

"Yes, yes, get on with it." Severus paced around the kitchen with his hands clasped behind him.

*That necklace you picked for Hermione's birthday is wonderful, but you should take her out for a romantic dinner...*

"Babies! Get back to the topic, what's that about a baby in my dream? Why do I suddenly want to become a father?"

*Not suddenly. You've been thinking about it for some time now.*

He stopped short. "I haven't! That's ridiculous!"

*Then why are you always watching the children when you think no one is looking?*

"Someone has to keep an eye on Potter. Any Potter, no matter which generation."

*You wondered what it would feel like touching pregnant Ginevra's baby bump.*

"Purely scientific interest."

*If you say so. And being angry when Ronald Weasley and his wife announced their pregnancy?*

Severus wanted to glare at his pesky subconscious. "I wasn't angry, I was annoyed. Sometimes I forget that I'm no longer a teacher and won't have to teach the next generation of Weasley pranksters."

*Bollocks. You were the odd man out again, watching others leading the life you think you will never have. Like you felt before I pointed out that you should give Hermione a chance. 'When you love someone, all your saved-up wishes start coming out.'*

"What the...stop that schmaltzy nonsense! I've gone mad, that's it, isn't it? Next I'll spout Beatles lyrics."

*She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh come on, Severus, your glower doesn't work on me.*

"If you don't start making sense I'll go back to bed."

*Then I'll send you another dream. And another. Until you listen.*

"I don't believe you. Why would I want children? I hate them. Babies are worse because they smell."

*Oh, please, you want to make me believe you are afraid of changing nappies? You work with smelly obnoxious ingredients every day. And no, you hate other people's children. Your and Hermione's child? That's a different kettle of fish. Being a parent doesn't obligate you to fawn over other people's spawn. Think of yourself as an old plush toy that sat on the shelf for its whole life. Now that Hermione cuddles you, the old stiff stitching comes loose and your soft filling spills out.*

"That mental picture is disgusting in so many ways I can't count them all. I think I'm going to be sick." He pulled back a chair from the table and slumped down. "I don't know how to be a father."

*You'll learn. Just as you learned to be happy with Hermione. You are not your father and she is not your mother.*

Severus rubbed over an old stain on the table top with his fingertip. "That's all well and good, but according to Molly Hermione doesn't want children."

*Just because she doesn't want a flock of red-haired children doesn't mean she won't have one with you.*

"It's not something that has come up so far. What can I do? If that's the reason she broke up with Weasley..."

*Now that's the question, innit? I told you Weasley is not an issue here. Just ask her.*

"I'm a Slytherin. I was a spy. I fooled the Dark Lord on a regular basis; I'll come up with a cunning plan."

*Or you could, you know, just ask her.*

His fingers halted. "If I could convince her that it was her idea all along..."

*Yes, splendid idea. Or you just... you know what? Never mind. Try it your way first. Now that's sorted how about you loosen up a bit so we can have a chat without you royally pissed? If I didn't send you a dream from time to time you would never listen to me.*

"Get stuffed."

*And nice talking to you, too. Ta-ra!*

So that was settled, then. He only had to shattegise...no, stratte..., *strategi*... bloody hell was he pissed. He only needed *aplan*.

It took him three tries to pick up the vial from the table before him and pull the cork.

*I really think you should just ask...*

Snape swiftly downed the Sober-Up potion and winced when his temples turned into a painful throbbing mess. The instantaneous return to soberness was as pleasant as a blow to the head and had the same after effects, but he had much thinking to do.

Anyone who had ever witnessed Severus fight Dumbledore's orders tooth and nail before giving in to the inevitable would have been surprised how easily he came to terms with his epiphany, but it was simple, really. Unlike the old codger, Severus's subconscious truly had his best interest at heart. It didn't inflict lemon drops on him, either.

So how to make Hermione want a child? Severus scratched his chin. By presenting a child that embodied all the good reasons to have children. So far Hermione did not want children, ergo the child could not be a Potter or Weasley. Merlin knew that minus the last day all that brood had ever inspired in Severus over the years was a deep gratitude that he would never, ever need to set foot in a classroom again.

It had to be one child then, singular, not children, plural horribilis. Severus found a quill and a sheet of paper in one of the drawers and jotted down a list of desirous attributes.

Well-behaved, quiet, intelligent, old enough to display said intelligence but not old enough to talk back.

Severus hesitated, then added good-looking to the list. He didn't harbour any illusions about the chances of them producing a Gilderoy Lockhart look-alike between them, but in his experience only loving parents overlooked unattractiveness in their offspring. Probably because their own ugly features were staring back at them.

Now, how to find such a child?

For some unfathomable reason Britain's wizarding parents did not go out of their way to invite him to their spawn's birthday parties. That is, all save one family. Although Severus had already declined he had to admit the child in question met his requirements to a 'T'.

Now he only had to inform Hermione and hope that she let him live.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 2*

Severus is very happy with Hermione. When his sudden wish for offspring could interfere with their bliss, he comes up with a true Slytherin masterpiece of a plan to convince her.

Chapter Two

They marched down the gravelled drive to a mansion at least five times the size of the old two-up, two-down at Spinner's End he had sold as soon as he could. If it had been human, it would have been a refined and unpretentious old witch who would just raise one gracefully arched eyebrow and calmly call for a house-elf if something as

tacky as a white peacock dared to show up on her front lawn.

"Tell me again why we're on our way to Scorpius Malfoy's birthday party?"

Severus slowed down to give Hermione the chance to keep up in her high heels. "Because I want to be seen with the newly appointed Muggle liaison of St Mungo's?"

"There's not much prestige involved if nobody else wants the job."

"Then it's because Draco gave me the loan to start my own business after the war."

Hermione expressed her opinion of his explanation with an unladylike snort. "We both know you didn't really need that loan because you, being you, changed the lion's share of your teacher salary into pounds and deposited it in a savings account."

"A teacher's salary doesn't amount to much."

"Two decades' worth of it do."

"The Bank of Scotland has a much better interest rate than the goblins. Are you accusing me of philanthropy?"

She patted his arm, a gesture that would have smacked of condescension if done by anyone but her. "Sorry, won't happen again. But you never went to one of his social things before."

"It is never only a social thing with families like the Malfoys; it is imperative to weigh the pros and cons carefully before accepting an invitation."

"Severus-speak for 'it's complicated'."

That was an understatement; the first time they had met again face to face after the war, Draco had just returned to England for Lucius's trial. It had been an awkward and painful affair. There were tears and a stuttered apology involved on Draco's part and a mixture of delayed gratification and unease on his, and although Severus was glad to see Draco finally grown up, it also rattled him to see the younger Malfoy humbled and missing his usual arrogance. So much so that he accepted his offer of an interest-free loan. Hermione was right that he hadn't strictly needed it, but it had meant that he could afford to buy his new house before he found a buyer for the one on Spinner's End and fit his lab with the newest equipment.

After the cathartic experience of their first meeting, he and Draco stuck to infrequent dinners and sometimes Floo calls, and the rest of the time, they corresponded by owl. However, Draco had started sending invitations to their social events after his wedding to Astoria Greengrass.

Draco had been raised to be a self-serving political beast. The war had changed him into the Malfoy equivalent of a philanthropist: still a political beast, still thinking of his family first, but using his brains for a change, and as he had climbed up the social ladder again with marrying a Greengrass, he had wanted to improve Severus's standing in society the only way he knew how. It was to his everlasting vexation that Severus didn't want to suck up to the high and mighty to influence public opinion of him.

Hermione pointed at the gift-wrapped shrunken box in Severus's hand. "I don't know if a measly Muggle scooter will satisfy a Malfoy. I mean, Scorpius is three. He probably owns more expensive toys than all Weasley grandchildren put together and a fleet of toy brooms to boot."

"That may be, but I'm positive he does not own a three-wheeled aluminium kick-scooter yet. I have a hard time picturing Draco shopping at Harrods."

Hermione didn't reply. Severus stopped and looked down into her drawn face. "Draco is not the boy you remember," he tried to reassure her. He watched how her hands smoothed down her skirt, fluttered up to her hair, then dropped again and played with her bracelet. "But we can turn back now and Floo-call him that an emergency at St Mungo's came up."

They stood there for a few seconds in which Hermione fiddled with her necklace and mussed up her hairdo before she finally straightened and continued walking. "I promised Molly gossip. Don't sneer." She slipped her hand into his. "I'm counting on you to help me unearth all their dirty little secrets."

They walked the last few yards to the door in amiable silence. Only then did Severus let go of her hand to ring the bell.

They were greeted by a beady-eyed house-elf wearing a spotless blue uniform. "Welcome to the Malfoy residence, sir and madam. I am Blodder. Should I take the present for young master Scorpius? Please follow me."

Hermione's eyes had widened during the elf's accurate little speech. Blodder accepted the parcel from Severus with his spindly fingers and led them through the grand entrance hall to a porch at the rear side of the house. Their steps echoed on the stone tiles.

Severus smirked. Hermione was radiating curiosity; he estimated Blodder had another minute at most before her restraint broke and he would have to face a barrage of questions. Maybe the dignified house-elf recognised the inquisitive gleam in Hermione's eyes, because at the door leading outside he bowed, and after a squeaky "Enjoy your stay" directed at the ground, he quickly Disappeared with a soft pop.

Hermione swivelled round to face Severus. "He was wearing clothes. And how he spoke... What does that mean?"

"There's a new fad among the pure-bloods who did not openly oppose the Dark Lord but did not agree with him, either. They don't want to get lumped together with his followers who got away, and they use house-elf rights as their agenda."

"And Draco agrees?"

"From what I can gather, he agrees with everything his wife proposes."

"That doesn't sound like the Draco Malfoy I knew."

"Which I have been telling you all along."

The former Greengrass elves had been horrified to have to accept a salary and only agreed to wear uniforms tailored out of towels, but Severus saw no reason to share that knowledge all at once.

What he hadn't told Hermione and was not going to, on the other hand, was that Draco had complained to Severus that his house-elves had a day off whenever he needed them; whatever for, he had not said, but having shared a common room with Lucius, Severus guessed it involved a hair brush and a nail file.

Hermione bent forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Gossip has it that it's only a marriage of convenience?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You can tell Molly she's wrong. If Draco was only after money and influence, he could have married Miss Parkinson. No, he is head over heels in love with Astoria, and I'd say she feels the same about him."

Draco had found his perfect match in her: she was a smart lady of society, good-looking in the cool and detached way the Malfoy men were suckers for, but most importantly, she kept him on his toes. Draco's life would have taken a different turn without her, and not for the better.

Severus's gaze was fixed on the carving on the wall panels without actually seeing it. "You could say Astoria is for Draco what you are for me."

He was startled out of his reverie when Hermione pecked him on the lips out of the blue. "What was that for?"

Hermione just smiled. He glanced around and, assured that they had no audience, put his hands on her waist and kissed her back. "What did I say?"

"Nothing," she said and shook her head, still that serene smile on her delicious lips. A few strands of her rebellious hair escaped her pinned updo and framed her face, making her look like a fairy queen. "I already like Astoria," Hermione said and started grinning. She skipped down the stairs into the garden. Maybe the queen of pixies, then. Severus trailed behind, puzzled but confident in his victory.

The Malfoy garden party and the Weasley equivalent didn't differ much in idea, only in scale. Instead of two rickety tables, there were half a dozen with a cold buffet served on silver plates, decorative ice sculptures under stasis charms in the shape of fish and flowers and more house-elves in uniforms that served drinks to the eighty or so adults Severus could see standing around. A throng of children milled around the lawn a safe distance from the refreshments. A couple of wizards in bright yellow robes stood by the hedge and piled up large boxes sporting the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes logo while a bit further down the lawn, two witches in red opened bulky crates and bent down, apparently checking the contents.

Severus spotted Astoria and Draco talking to a member of the Wizengamot whose name eluded him at the moment. Scorpius was perched on his mother's arm with his face buried in her shoulder, leaving only platinum blonde hair and expensive tailored robes visible. He might have been asleep for all the reaction their arrival got out of him. Severus felt the first tendrils of doubt reach for his plan, trying to choke it like Devil's Snare. Astoria, on the other hand, was a dark-haired, graceful witch, charming and equally polite to Severus and Hermione when she noticed them and came over.

"We are grateful that you could make it, Severus. Don't mind Scorpius; he is a bit shy. I'll go inside with him for a bit. We will have opportunity to catch up later, I hope. Miss Granger," she said, and the two women exchanged a friendly nod.

She then kissed Draco, who had torn himself away from his other guests and joined them, on the cheek and left them alone. Scorpius's feet bobbed up and down with every one of her steps. Not once had he looked up, and Severus started to feel a bit queasy. It didn't make him feel better that the second Astoria's back was turned, both Draco and Hermione assumed the polite society version of the duelling stance with stiff backs, arms close to the body and fake smiles that showed more teeth than Hagrid's accursed three-headed dog Fluffy.

"Thank you for coming, Severus, Gran...Miss Granger," Draco said through his smile.

"I'm always happy to meet a friend of Severus'," Hermione answered in the same polite tone of voice.

At the mention of his first name, Draco winced and darted a glance at him. Severus suppressed a sigh. Children. Draco wouldn't be happy to know that Potter had winced in a similar fashion the first time he had met Severus and Hermione as a couple. It had been quite amusing, back then, until Severus had realised that the reason was jealousy and not disgust as he had initially thought.

Severus watched Hermione and Draco smiling some more while each of them was looking at him to put them out of their misery.

"Yes, yes, we're happy to be here, Draco." He awkwardly put his arm around Draco's shoulder in what he hoped was a fatherly fashion; it wasn't like he had a well of positive memories of his father to draw on. He had to have done something right because Draco's face lit up like the Christmas tree in the Great Hall. Severus hastily crossed his arms before his chest. "Tell me, how is your mother faring in France?"

"Oh, she's doing fine. She sends her love."

"She's not here?" Hermione asked and craned her neck like she waited for Narcissa to jump out of the hedge. Severus could not blame her after her war experiences with the Malfoys. He knew she had only accompanied him because she knew how much it meant to him, even if she didn't know why it did.

"Mother feels that her presence here would make some of the guests uncomfortable, and she doesn't want to spoil Scorpius's big day," Draco said in matter-of-fact manner without a hint of resentment.

Severus nodded. Lucius had been the driving force behind following the Dark Lord, and Narcissa didn't hold a grudge against Severus because of his role as spy since he had saved her son. For the majority of the magical population, on the other hand, Narcissa was persona non grata for different reasons, depending on which side they had been on during Voldemort's reign.

"You have organised a lovely party for him," Hermione said with more warmth in her voice. "I see you bought from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?"

Draco nodded. "They have the best fireworks. We also hired the Magical Menagerie for the day. They are new in the business, but Astoria's sister recommended them."

"Really? I read about them in an article in the *Prophet*. It sounds fascinating! George, um, George Weasley, told me they were looking into making a deal with them. About selling miniature figurines, of course, not the big puppets."

Severus only listened with half an ear while he scanned the crowd. The novelty of seeing him and Hermione together hadn't worn off, apparently, judging by the curious and in some cases downright hostile looks they got.

"Let's take a look, Severus, shall we? I want to know if they're as life-like as everybody says they are."

Hermione waved at Draco, who waved back...Severus had no idea how that could have happened in the thirty seconds he hadn't paid attention...and dragged Severus through the throng of guests. Nobody met Severus's eye, but in their wake he could hear them whisper "much too young", "her teacher" and, of course, "Death Eater" and "murderer". Severus ground his teeth and pushed on; if Hermione heard them, too, she didn't show it, and he didn't want to draw her attention to those cretins. He was forced to let go of her arm and fell behind when a stocky young wizard stood in his way and jostled him.

"Over here," Hermione called.

Severus looked up and saw a gigantic snake fly straight at him.

oOo

Severus slunk into the bedroom where Crookshanks snored loudly in the laundry basket and Hermione was already in bed and, as a heroic sacrifice to her sense of duty, read the revised edition of *Charm Your Own Cheese* that Molly had given her for Christmas. The prospect of Molly finally going one cookbook too far and finding herself looking down the business end of Hermione's wand, as amusing as it was, failed to cheer him up this time. A shower had not been enough to wash away the horrors of the day. He dove under the covers and closed his eyes.

"Draco Flooed. There will be no problem with the puppeteers from the Magical Menagerie."

The less said about it the better. It was testament to the trials he had endured that he did not feel even the tiniest spark of lust when he snuggled up to Hermione. The day had gone downhill the minute they had entered the Malfoy garden. Only a few people invited, Draco had said. A small affair. Severus should have known that the Malfoy version of a few people meant at least a hundred, most of them parents with children under five. Thanks to the Malfoys the plan had gone tits up, and he now needed a new one.

"Apparently, the company wanted compensation at first because you blasted their snake to smithereens, but when Astoria pointed out that it was their employee who had lost control over it, and that children could have been hurt if you hadn't acted, they were quick to apologise."



Scorpius had been a disappointment. Oh, it was possible that he actually was the well-mannered child Severus had pictured and hoped for, but as far as Malfoy egos and their need to be the constant centre of attention were concerned, the boy was seriously lacking. A Malfoy with performance anxiety? Lucius would not be amused.

That is not to say that Lucius had much to be amused about nowadays, even with the Dementors gone from Azkaban. Draco hadn't mentioned him, and Severus had seen no point in asking.

"I've been thinking," Hermione began, still frowning at the picture of a glowing Shropshire Blue, and Severus perked up at her tone. Maybe not all was lost yet.

"I didn't want to say anything earlier..."

"Yes?"

"...did you also have that feeling that, well..." Severus scrambled on his elbows, and Hermione finally looked at him with her warm brown eyes "...is Draco going bald?"

Fuck fuckity fuck fuck.

Severus slumped back into his pillow. This year Draco would find no Bleaching Potion under the Christmas tree.

oOo

After a good night's sleep, Severus had calmed down. Hermione kissed him goodbye and Flooed to work at St Mungo's, and Severus climbed down the cellar stairs to his potions lab. Here in his private lair, he chopped ingredients, the potions bubbled in their cauldrons, and when the air was filled with the familiar fumes of a lifetime, he could concede that the debacle was his fault. It had been a long shot to begin with and had hinged on a factor Severus had no control over. Well, he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. The potions were all simmering at uncritical stages, so Severus wiped his hands, made a pot of tea upstairs and had a cuppa in his makeshift office in the second cellar room he had moved into so that Hermione could have his upstairs office. Theoretically, the upstairs room was big enough for the two of them, but he had fled from Hermione's clutter. Her creativity thrived on chaos, on heaps of haphazardly stacked books stuffed with colour-coded bookmarks until they looked like rainbow-coloured hedgehogs, while his mind needed order to unfold its potential.

He sipped the hot tea while he thought some more. So, phase two of his plan. Backup plans were for Gryffindors who rushed in without thinking; Slytherins crafted plans that covered every possible outcome. His gaze fell on the rickety bookshelf crammed with obscure potions texts, and it occurred to him that he had better check something else first.

On the bottom jammed between two unwieldy tomes stood the plain, slim hand-written book that Severus needed. He plucked it from the shelf and opened it. The journal had been written with a dreadful scrawl by a mediaeval witch gathering the potions she needed for her daily work as midwife. Only his years of marking homework enabled Severus to decipher the chicken scratches.

After his coma he had had to deal with the fallout of Nagini's venom. For the first weeks he had suffered from dizziness, numb fingers and toes and, most annoying, temporary loss of his voice. Strangely enough, the venom had also solved his oily hair problem, at least temporarily. These after-effects had only lasted a month, but Healer Smethwyck had warned him that he might face more permanent long-term effects, most notably sterility and impotence. What a glorious morning it had been when, about two months after that, Severus had woken up to find his toddler proudly greeting the day. He hadn't wasted a thought on sterility; as far as he had been concerned, his equipment had done everything Severus needed it for. Maybe it still did, but he had to make sure of that.

He was looking for the Sterility Solution, a simple but reliable way to test if a man could sire children. Of course there were newer and more sophisticated fertility potions; Severus regularly brewed them for St Mungo's. Their colour could tell a healer if Mr Bollywoggle's chances to spawn little Bollywoggles would improve if he stopped smoking and swore off the Ogdens', but they also took at least two days to brew. Severus didn't want to risk Hermione walking into his lab and asking which one of the hospital's patients the potion was for.

Severus thumbed through the book, stopped and turned back two pages. Well, if push came to shove, he could volunteer to take that Seahorse Elixir here and carry their child himself. He read the instructions until he came to the next page that had a crude illustration drawn next to the recipe. Severus did a double take, carefully crossed his legs and decided he would rather endure hour after hour of Cruciatius before doing something that foolish.

Enough time wasted; on the next page he finally found what he had been looking for. He skimmed through the page and nodded to himself; he had just enough of the needed ingredients left for one dose. Excellent.

With all the necessary ingredients arranged in orderly rows on one side of the cauldron and the journal put on the other, Severus started brewing in his lab. It wasn't challenging work. The crucial factors were to add the sperm sample directly into the potion and not collect it first in a cup, or it might get contaminated, and to do so not later than...here Severus craned his neck and squinted...not later than fifty minutes after adding the Belladonna seeds.

Severus set the Matty, the magical timer used by potioners all around the globe, which was named after its inventor, Hatty McLeod, a genius tinkerer with no sense of time but a solid business acumen to make up for it, stirred the rod one last time and dropped the purple seeds into the cauldron.

There was enough time to let the potion cool down, decant a tumblerful and go up into the bedroom, fetch the old edition of Playwizard hidden under his side of the mattress, settle down to some pleasurable business and collect the spoils.

"Miaow."

"Get out, you flea-ridden, oversized mouser! Shoo!"

Crookshanks obviously was in no mood to listen. He jumped on the table and landed on the battered journal.

"You know you aren't allowed in here!"

"Miaow!"

Severus grabbed the protesting half-Kneazle, threw him out of the lab and closed the door behind him. The potion was undisturbed, but the book had fallen off the table. A tiny flake of dirt crumbled off the page when he picked it up and dusted off the paper with his hand. Where there had been written a comfortable fifty only seconds ago was now a challenging five.

Five minutes.

For ten precious seconds out of that five minutes, Severus's mind went blank; then the adrenaline rush set in and he bustled about the lab with hectic activity. First he tapped his wand on the Matty and changed it to five minutes; it changed its colour from a friendly blue to a nice orange and hummed at a low frequency. If this batch was ruined, Severus had to wait and order new ingredients before he could try again, but with the potions he had to start today because Potter's new Auror recruits had walked into a training trap and set a new record on acting stupid, his tight working schedule in the next days to catch up on his regular orders and the weekend looming, he would lose a whole week. But only five minutes...

The Matty hummed louder and the dial emitted a yellow glow.

...but only four minutes and thirty seconds left. Apparition with the potion at this stage was out of the question; hurrying up to the bedroom would take too much time. He couldn't just drop his pants in his lab. It was unsanitary, and how would he be able to work here in the future? That left the office. A flick of his magic wand...the wooden one...and the door to his office flew open with a loud bang; the cauldron and the Matty floated over to his desk with Severus close behind.

Four minutes.

Severus ripped off his robe and pulled his trousers and pants down in one go. It was awfully chilly in his office; he hadn't really noticed before.

The Matty grew louder.

"Alright, alright!"

How hard could it be? Severus looked down. Not hard at all, unfortunately. He took matters into his hand. A fantasy, but which one? The one of them under a Disillusionment Charm and Hermione giving him a blowjob at Flourish and Blotts and they had to be careful not to be caught? Sex in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts after hours? Hermione as the librarian punishing him for stealing a book? And what the hell was wrong with him that all his fantasies contained books?

The Matty chimed once. Severus took a deep breath, closed his eyes and got to work. The time they came back from Arthur's party. Oh, that was nice. The curve of Hermione's hips under his hands. Yes, that was working. The Matty chimed again, at a higher frequency, and reminded Severus that while it was nice that he had fun, he'd better hurry up and finish sooner rather than later, how about in the next two minutes, 'kay?', and Severus dug out one of his most prized memories, so precious to him he seldom thought of it lest he taint and distort it somehow.

Their first time together, how Hermione had shoved him against the door, all pushy and gloriously determined and how they had ripped their robes in their haste and how his knees had gone weak when she had moaned in his ears, like they did now, and he put down his free hand on the desk for support, ignoring that the chime in the background turned into an aggressive buzzing, the signal that only one minute was left, and that the edge of the desk top cut into his thighs, because that only reminded him how they had ended up on the stairs and he had ripped her stockings off and she had dug her heels into his backside to have him closer, closer and she had been so hot and he had lost it and oh Hermione she was and he was and they were and oh fuck yes now yes...

Severus bucked once, twice, in sync with the magical timer that skipped and skidded over the desk, then quickly opened his eyes and witnessed through the curtain of stringy hair that clung to his sweaty face that he was bang on target and right on time, too, because the Matty wailed one last time and tipped over. The potion in the cauldron was the same dull brown colour as before, rather anticlimactic really, but the whole process took one to two minutes before there was a reliable result. Severus hobbled over to the chair on shaky knees, made a half-hearted attempt to pull his pants up where they belonged and then just gave up and slumped down with his briefs dangling around his ankles. Short fuse, loud bang, just like their first time, only less embarrassing. He had been mortified, Hermione disappointed, but she had let him make it up to her, twice, before they went at it again and it was perfect.

A tiny bubble broke the potion's surface and burst with a soft pop, then another, and another. A golden oily sheen formed before at last a sparkling mist rose in triumph from the cauldron and spread over the ceiling, a swirling and pulsing testament to Severus's fertility.

Severus leaned back his head to enjoy the view. He was feeling rather chuffed with himself. The answer to his other question suddenly seemed pretty obvious to his mellowed mind; it was swimming in that cauldron right now. Not literally, of course, but he realised he had put the cart before the horse. Instead of dangling children in front of her nose, he had to circumvent her impressive higher brain functions and appeal to her animalistic side, the part of her that acted on instinct and checked men against the evolutionary blueprint that said 'father material'. It was also obvious to him that he needn't bother trying to fit into the 'protector' or 'provider' blueprint; Hermione was a powerful witch more than capable to protect herself, and she knew only too well how much money Severus made. No, he would go the carnal route.

Severus was a thin man, had been downright skinny, even, for as long as he could remember, but after Nagini's attack he had lost so much weight he couldn't spare to begin with that he had resembled a gaunt Inferius. His muscles had atrophied, and while he had gained a stone again with time, he hadn't regained his old strength. At Hogwarts he used to walk miles during the day, from down in the dungeons up to the Great Hall during meals and to the Astronomy Tower during his rounds and through the Forbidden Forest to collect ingredients and didn't break sweat, but lately, he had become complacent and sluggish. Nevertheless, Severus was top-notch father material, and before long, Hermione would come to realise that, too, yes indeed. In phase two of his plan, he would put an end to the deplorable state of his body and get back into shape. Although it was high time to buff himself up, he could do so step by step in addition to his other undertakings.

Reproduction was essentially a matter of biology, and from now on he would remember to treat it as such. He was potent, and Hermione was young. They had plenty of time.

oOo

Severus was running out of time. Time, stamina and pain killers; why on earth had he been too chintzy to brew one last batch again? He slowly heaved his aching body into their bed without his usual grace. Luckily for him, Hermione was engrossed in perusing *The Official Highway Code*...this was the latest requirement in order to fulfil the ridiculous new tightened Ministry regulations for Muggle liaisons...or he would have been forced to put on the graceful potions master persona for her and risk grievous injury.

In the beginning he had started out slowly with taking the stairs in the house at a run at least ten times a day and Apparating to a location a mile off his destination when going out and walking the rest of the distance. He now dropped off his potions for St Mungo's in person instead of sending the sturdy owl all their potion suppliers were provided with. This had the advantage that he could pry Hermione out of her lab and treat her to lunch in the cafeteria.

After the first week had passed with no apparent progress, he became impatient and upped the ante. He started to clean his cauldrons by hand, scrubbing their encrusted and stained bottoms until their shiny surfaces reflected his face. While it was an oddly meditative experience and improved the dexterity of his fingers, it wasn't the full-body workout the rumblings of his pupils about their detentions had led him to believe.

Really, had he known sooner he would have found something worse for the spoiled brats to do.

After the second week with neither any muscle gain nor any leisure time to speak of due to all the extra hours he spent scrubbing and walking, Severus was ready to explore new avenues. Instead of just scrubbing his cauldrons, he used them as dumb-bells. He started with the standard size two copper cauldron, just the right weight and felt good in his hand, and that went so well that he soon worked his way forward to the big knee-high kettle lovingly called the Macbeth by connoisseurs. That resulted in a pulled muscle and a dent both in his ego and the cauldron respectively and was the reason he resumed taking the pain reliever slash muscle formation potion he had to take after his coma. Luckily, he had one vial left and was thus spared the humiliation of being seen buying the potion. He couldn't lift his injured arm to open the bottle, let alone brew with it. He used his teeth to uncork the vial.

Thereafter, he changed back to the middle-sized weights, just in case, and brewed a month's supply of his potion.

With his arms and chest nicely taken care of in his training workload, he was looking for a way besides the stairs to improve the muscles in the rest of his body. In Hermione's bookcase stood a book on yoga, but the Macbeth debacle was fresh in Severus's mind. He didn't want to sigh out his soul on the bedroom rug knotted up like a pretzel, so yoga was out.

He needed to go on a mushroom foray anyway, so he Apparated deep into the forest and just started to run. His lungs soon burned and his thighs protested, but he ploughed on, only stopping long enough to transfigure his boots to trainers and his dress trousers into black tracksuit bottoms after an oncoming jogger eyed him suspiciously and then gave him a wide berth. His shirt he left as it was; the collar concealed the snake-bite scar on his neck and the long sleeve covered the fine silvery scar where his Dark Mark had been.

He frightened an old lady with her dog when he crashed through the underbrush back onto the path only a few yards from her. The malicious part of him gleefully registered that he still had it in him to spread terror, only to have the woman ask if he was all right...her poor husband had looked that red in the face before he had his heart attack...just a minor one, don't worry, but wouldn't it be better to slow down and make an appointment for a check-up just in case? She droned on and on until Severus was out of earshot, but her unleashed terrier followed him.

Severus tried to outrun the nasty bugger, but the dog, tongue lolling and stubby tail wagging, chased him happily around the lake until Severus slipped on a wet stone, lost

his balance and landed in the smelly water with a loud splash. The resident swans were a bit aggressive...nothing a well-aimed hex didn't solve...and the cool water was invigorating, so no harm done. He should have felt mortified and threatened the swans to stay away or he would pluck their feathers one by one and manufacture them into quills to then Disapparate in disgust and order his mushrooms at Slug & Jiggers, but he didn't. Instead, he felt gorgeously alive with the blood rushing through his veins and a rivulet of cool water running down his back. Somewhere between running for his life and swallowing a pound of duckweed, his physical awareness had come out of hibernation.

He waded back to the shore and splashed the yapping dog with the water he wrung from his hair. Too bad Hermione couldn't see him rise from the waves like a demigod, his white shirt clinging to his wet, flushed body warmed by the summer sun; the whole scene could have been lifted straight out of one of her Regency romances. Severus sniffed at his shirt. Apart from the smell, of course. Oh, well, he had started to take three showers a day anyway to keep his activities secret from Hermione.

That secrecy was now about to end. Severus lifted his stiff legs one by one, and accomplishing that was no small feat, then rolled on his side and arranged his limbs in a suggestive pose. For weeks now he hadn't disrobed in front of Hermione, slept in his old nightshirt and made love to Hermione in the dark to maximise the surprise effect. He had sacrificed his leisure time to run, lift weights and cook a whole meal at noon because his appetite had gone through the roof. Every muscle in his body screamed in agony, but it had been worth it.

His naked skin glistened in the candlelight because of the oil he had carefully applied, in agony in some difficult-to-reach places. He didn't have a stitch on; he had thought about investing in new underwear and in the end decided against it. He'd seen a nice pair of briefs in Slytherin green when they'd been shopping for Scorpius's birthday present, though, that he only hadn't gone back for because he wasn't sure if the string in the back wouldn't chafe.

Severus knew the time for the grand reveal had come when the bathroom mirror whistled at him when he came out of the shower.

Hermione had yet to look up from her book. Severus coughed.

"Just this paragraph."

Severus coughed again, and finally, she put down her book and looked up.

"I'm all ears...oh." She poked at his pectoral muscles, pinched his upper arm and then withdrew her hand as if burnt. "So I wasn't wrong. You did feel different," she said at last.

Severus thought she appeared rather pensive than surprised; had to be the light playing tricks on his eyes. Maybe he should have waited until after her test, but there was no turning back now. "Like what you see?"

She rubbed her thumb and index finger together and sniffed at her hand. "Did you use my body oil?"

"Come closer and find out," he purred and slipped his hand under her nightgown.

She frowned. "Again?"

"I didn't know it was such a great hardship for you."

"It's just we did it yesterday."

"So?"

"Twice. And the day before."

"I fail to see your point."

"And the day before that." She bit her lip and looked up at him. "Is this about me being so busy lately? It's not much longer, I promise." She shoved her book under the pillow as if to emphasise her point. "I know driving lessons three times a week is a bit much, but I want to get it over with. Look, now that I've passed the theoretical part it's only the practical test left."

"It's not about your driving license. I don't need a special reason to desire you. In fact, if you're that worried about your test, why don't you take lessons on the remaining weekdays, too?"

"Um. Really?"

"Yes, I don't mind."

"Oh. You don't. Huh."

Severus leered at her. "Now, where were we?"

Hermione picked up his hand and planted a quick kiss on his knuckles. "Sorry, I'm just tired with work and the driving lessons. Another time, okay?"

Without waiting for his response, she blew out the candle on her bedside cabinet, lay down and turned her back to him. Severus blinked against the sudden darkness as he went through their conversation again. Not subtle enough or just plain bad timing? Not yet ready to admit defeat, he decided to try one last time with his best move: the back rub. He felt his way across the bed under the cover until his fingertips reached Hermione and then ran his hand up her back in one long stroke. Her shoulder was tensed and hard under his fingers. He gently dug in and kneaded the stiff muscles, but unfortunately, it wasn't working that night. He waited for a reaction, a sigh, a purr, but nothing. When he peeked over her shoulder at last, he could see in the dim moonlight shining through a gap in the curtains that Hermione's eyes were closed. Apparently, she was fast asleep.

In a way he was relieved. Disappointed as well, yes, but the physical exertion of the last few weeks had left him exhausted. A night off wouldn't hurt. On the contrary, he could use a good night's sleep, just this once, to renew the strength for when Hermione was in the mood to rip his clothes off and test his newly found agility. He yawned and pulled the blanket up to his chin. At least she hadn't been able to take her eyes off him, he thought and smirked in the darkness. Everything was still going according to plan.

He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, blissfully unaware of his surroundings, and although he might have subconsciously registered if Hermione got up soon after, he wouldn't have been able to remember it in the morning.