

Unexpected Gifts

by peppermint

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Daily Prophet Social News

Wed, Miss Hermione Granger to Mr Neville Longbottom in a quiet family ceremony on 10th June 2005 at Longbottom Hall. Miss Granger was attended by Miss Ginevra Weasley and Miss Luna Lovegood. Mr Longbottom's groomsmen were Mr Harry Potter and Mr Ronald Weasley.

A champagne reception followed the ceremony. The new Mr and Mrs Longbottom are currently honeymooning in the British Virgin Islands and will reside at Hogwarts school upon their return to the United Kingdom. The groom is the associate professor of Herbology at Hogwarts, and the bride will finish her final year of Healer training in August.

Severus Snape could hardly read the rest of the social page beyond the announcement, he was laughing so hard. Granger and Longbottom! That had been a tidy secret! He saw Granger at the hospital all the time, and she had never said anything about it. Quiet family ceremony was almost universally taken to mean the bride was in a family way. God, he had never been happier to have left teaching behind for potions research. The thought of a brat with Longbottom's propensity for exploding cauldrons and Granger's know-it-all attitude was truly horrifying.

He set the paper aside and went to his desk to write to Minerva.

Minerva,

Spill the beans about the Longbottom wedding; I know you had to have been invited. Is Granger up the spout?

Severus

He went about his Sunday morning as he waited for a reply, hoping it wouldn't be a Howler. A few hours later, his Floo activated and spat an envelope onto the hearthrug.

Severus,

It was a lovely ceremony! And no, Hermione is not with child. Yet. I imagine she will be upon their return from the Caribbean, if the fertility symbolism woven into the old-fashioned ceremony Augusta insisted upon was any clue.

Honestly, if you're this desperate for gossip, you could just come for tea.

Minerva

Augusta, the Longbottom matriarch, was easily the scariest old bat Snape had ever met. She had married and had Neville's father, Frank, late in life. Now she was pushing a hundred and was still a harriidan. The Longbottom estate was trifling compared with, say, the Malfoy fortune in its heyday, but nothing to sneeze at. Augusta *would* want great-grand-heirs as soon as possible, or she'd risk the entire estate passing to another branch of the family.

He dashed off another note.

Minerva,

I accept. Four this afternoon? Tell Mippy to make those scones I like.

Severus

Part One

"Mistress Augusta? You is wanting breakfast?"

Augusta Longbottom did not answer; although she was breathing, Blinky was unable to rouse her. Minerva McGonagall had visited with news of Neville's untimely death the night before. For a woman who had survived two wars, another loss had been too much to bear and she had simply shut down.

Blinky gasped. "Blinky's poor Mistress! Blinky must... must... no, must not call Missy Hermione. Missy Hermione is sad herself." Blinky snapped her fingers and Apparated to St Mungo's to report her Mistress' condition.

Soon, a mediwitch arrived to assess the situation. "Augusta Longbottom, hmmm. Granger's gran-in-law. It may be time to repay a debt," she muttered darkly. "Listen, you elves. For your Mistress' health, you must not question anything that happens in the next few months. She may recover and then have a setback. But if you want to keep your home, don't say a word to Granger. She'll give you all clothes. She is a bad girl."

Blinky twisted the hem of her tea towel in her hands, distraught. "But Missy Hermione is family, even if she doesn't want to let elves get on with elves' work."

"Do you want to lose your home? Don't say anything to Granger!"

Blinky nodded. "We keeps Madam Augusta's secrets and silence."

Hair still dripping from the shower, Hermione stood in her towel looking at the sombre black dress robes laid across the bed. Six months ago she had been a bride now she was a widow.

Neville had jumped in front of an out-of-control Venomous Tentacula to keep it from biting a student. He sustained a deadly bite and died hours later, leaving behind not only Hermione but an unborn child as well.

Hermione was five months pregnant, and she wasn't sure she could bear the looks of pity she was bound to get at the funeral today. She dressed slowly, methodically, smoothing her widow's weeds over the small roundness of her belly. She sat on the edge of their bed for a moment, stroking a hand over Neville's pillow. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. They were supposed to have spent today choosing baby furniture and looking at prams. She wasn't supposed to be burying her husband after less than a year.

And then tomorrow she would need to look for another place to live. She knew Minerva wouldn't kick her out of Hogwarts, but she didn't want constant reminders of her loneliness at every turn. Longbottom Hall would be even worse. Augusta had built what amounted to a shrine for Frank and would likely do the same for Neville. She wanted their baby to be his or her own person, not expected to live up to some impossible ideal.

Her salary as a novice Healer was enough for a small flat or cottage plus expenses, and she was sure there would be some entailment from the estate for the baby. It wouldn't be all the comforts of Hogwarts, but it would be doable.

"Knock knock! Hermione?"

She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, sniffing. "In the bedroom, Ginny."

Ginny appeared around the door, dressed smartly in black. "It's time. Are you ready?"

Hermione stood slowly, cradling her belly with one arm. "No. I won't ever be ready to do this, but it doesn't matter, does it?"

Ginny shook her head and simply wrapped her arms around Hermione in a fortifying hug, gently swaying back and forth.

The funeral passed in a blur, and Ginny and Luna had the good sense to lead Hermione away from the crowd afterward to have a lie down in her rooms before she completely fell apart.

She heard them speaking in hushed tones out in the sitting room as she lay curled on her side, clutching Neville's pillow to her chest.

"... in shock, really ... Dreamless?"

"Not advised ... could ... tea?"

Hermione snorted despite her sorrow. If she drank any more of the standard British panacea, she would drown. She had almost drifted off into a fitful slumber when she heard knocking, and then another voice joined the conversation in a lower timbre than either of her friends.

"Hermione? Prof... er, Mr Snape is here. He has a potion for you, if you want it," Ginny said from the doorway.

Snape? Since when did he care? Still, he did know his potions. "Please," she said quietly, sitting up a bit.

Ginny retreated, and Snape knocked softly on the door frame. "Mrs Longbottom?"

"Come in, and it's Hermione, please. Mrs Longbottom makes me think of Augusta."

Snape almost smirked at that, but just nodded. "Hermione. I've brought you a potion of my own devising. It's a simple, safe, non-addictive sleep aid. It doesn't suppress dreaming, just helps calm the body and mind. Half a teaspoon before bed will be sufficient."

"Thank you, Mr Snape, but"

"Severus. No buts. You need decent rest to cope with everything on your plate, and this will help without hindering. I developed it for the midwives at St Mungo's, who have had excellent outcomes with pregnant women who had reported restless sleep. Don't be a martyr, Hermione," he said, his tone brooking no nonsense.

"This is something my midwife would give me anyway?"

"Yes. It's been thoroughly tested."

"All right, then. And thank you for thinking of me. I expect Minerva put you up to it, but I appreciate it all the same."

"Ah, you would be wrong. I've seen you at the end of a shift in Spell Damage, and I remember your atrocious sleep habits from your Hogwarts days. If anyone needs a good night's sleep, it's you," he replied in a sardonic tone, "even without the burden of grief and pregnancy. I'll leave you now, but I am very sorry for your loss."

He set the potion bottle on the bedside table and departed.

Luna came in and sat on the edge of the bed. "That was kind of him," she ventured. "I think research agrees with him."

Hermione nodded. "It was, although I had a feeling he might give me detention if I refused," she confided.

"He isn't a teacher anymore, Hermione," Luna said matter-of-factly. "Why don't you take a dose of the potion now, and that way when Neville's gran comes in ten minutes to try to talk you into moving into Longbottom Hall, Ginny and I can tell her truthfully that you're asleep. We overheard her complaining to Slughorn that you were being an ungrateful, stubborn child, refusing to accept her assistance."

"I know she's grieving too, but I can't face her right now," Hermione agreed.

Luna conjured a dosing spoon, and Hermione took the sleeping draught, which tasted pleasantly of chocolate-peppermint.

Her dreams were, if not pleasant, benign.

She dreamed of Neville working in a greenhouse, happy among the flowers, but she was unable to find a door into the greenhouse so she could get through and be with him. He kept waving her away with a smile, mouthing, "I'm fine, go on," through the glass. She woke when she turned to follow his suggestion.

Looking at the clock, she was pleased to see she had slept a full twelve hours. She felt well-rested and clear-minded, despite the ever-present sadness. Wrapping a dressing gown over her pyjamas, she wandered into the sitting room. A tray with a steaming pot of her favorite herbal tea and a basket of warm sausage rolls sat on the coffee table. Likely Winky's work, bless her little butterbeer-addled soul. There was also a letter from Neville's gran.

Hermione helped herself to a cup of tea and pastries, then unfolded the letter.

My dear Hermione,

I wish you would reconsider your refusal to move to Longbottom Hall. There is plenty of room, you would be more than welcome, and the house-elves are eager to help with the baby. I also wish you would reconsider your plan to continue your little job at St Mungo's. The long hours on your feet aren't healthy for a woman in your condition, nor is being around all that sickness. Besides, after the baby is born, you'll have to quit to stay home in any case. I simply couldn't allow you to put the child in a creche. Come home and let me take care of you and the baby properly.

I've already lost so much of my family. Please don't cause an old lady any more worry. At least stop by this morning at ten. There is the matter of the estate and the inheritance to go over.

Grandmother Longbottom

By the time Hermione finished reading the letter, she was shaking with anger. "Howdare she try to emotionally blackmail me?" she hissed, grabbing the nearest cushion and chucking it across the room. Oh, she would stop by, all right. Stop by and set her straight!

She finished her breakfast and went to dress. Augusta, of course, would be expecting her to still wear mourning robes, or black at the very least so Hermione chose a top in a delicate green that reminded her of Neville's plants, pairing it with jeans. Why not go all out to scandalize? She didn't bother with robes before stepping through the Floo to Longbottom Hall. On the other side, a house-elf appeared in the foyer to greet her.

"Oh! Young mistress, you is come for breakfast?"

"No thank you, Blinky. I'm here to see Grandmother, if she is up to receiving guests this morning," Hermione answered.

"But young mistress is not a guest! This is Miss Hermione's home! Miss Hermione should eat and not be starving Master Neville's baby!" Blinky insisted, before throwing herself on the ground and banging her head on the floor. "Oh bad Blinky! Blinky is a bad elf to be so forward and question miss!"

Sighing, Hermione pulled Blinky up by the back of her tea towel and gently set her back on her feet. Why did she ever think house-elves needed or wanted saving from anything but themselves?

"Enough. I already ate at Hogwarts, but if Pippy made scones this morning, you could tempt me with one and a cuppa."

"Miss will come to the conservatory and eat with Madam Augusta," Blinky stated, her tone brooking no argument.

"Yes, fine," Hermione replied, following Blinky to the conservatory that Neville had worked so hard to restore after he had discovered he had a knack for Herbology. She knew very well breakfast was usually eaten in the small dining room, but apparently Augusta wanted to either bask in memories or force Hermione to do so.

"Miss Hermione is come home, Madam Augusta," Blinky announced.

Augusta beckoned Hermione toward the small table near the windows. "Come and have a cup of tea, my dear. Have you thought any more about moving in?"

"Good morning, Grandmother," Hermione said as she took a seat. "That's what I came to talk to you about. You see, I don't think that would be a very good idea. I've never been the sort of person to let others take care of me while I sit around, and I'm afraid I cannot just sit idle for the next few months. I need to work, and I need my own space. You're very kind to offer, but Neville told me about his childhood I have no desire to have our son or daughter exposed to the same kind of overbearing influence and benign neglect on a daily basis. I'll be happy to visit as often as you like, but I will be living on my own."

Augusta just stared at her, her mouth moving but no sound coming out.

"Before I go, would you like to discuss the inheritance issues, or shall we meet at my solicitor's later in the week for that purpose?" Hermione inquired sweetly, watching the red rage on Augusta's face turn to black fury.

"You don't deserve a Knut of the Longbottom estate, you ungrateful brat! And you certainly don't deserve to raise that child. You have no respect for your elders and betters!"

"I don't want any of your money, Augusta but the baby does deserve it, and I'll raise him or her how I see fit. Neville would want his child provided for by the estate since he's not here anymore to do so himself! I don't regret conceiving this child by any means, but I'm done cowing to your demands that ridiculous fertility-symbolism-laden wedding ceremony is the last major influence you'll have on this child. It's no secret you were after Neville to marry and produce children for you to raise as soon as

possible, but you should have steered him toward someone placid and suggestible instead," Hermione spat. "I love loved him, Augusta. Don't you dare make me into some gold-digging harlot. I'm sure you remember having to bury your husband, and you had sixty years with him. I had six months as Neville's wife before I had to say goodbye, and it hurts! This nonsense could have waited, but you pulled your emotional blackmail and I am NOT having it!"

Wholly shocked by Hermione's emotional outburst, Augusta simply sat back in her chair.

"I know you're not a cruel woman, but you are distant and cool. Starving a child of affection and love is as bad as starving them of proper food. It's a miracle Neville turned out to be the amazing, loving, caring man he was if he spent his entire childhood under your thumb," Hermione said. "I'll owl you later in the week when we're both hopefully calmer."

She stood and walked out of the conservatory, head held high.

Her breakfast companion glanced down at her hands, which were beginning to bubble and flex. Time to get out of these clothes.

"Merlin, Granger is easy to manipulate," she told her reflection as she put her own clothing back on upstairs, leaving Augusta's mothball-scented togs for the elves to deal with.

Her plan was solidifying. It seemed the best way to get to Granger was the baby. She had no interest in the kid herself, but Augusta certainly must, perhaps enough to sue for custody. But first, she had to talk to the house-elves about some Howlers 'Augusta' wanted delivered. Dabbing magical concealer across the still-visible scarring on her forehead, she scowled. Granger would finally get what she deserved.

Snape stood in the Janus Thickey ward at St Mungo's where he was supervising a trial of a new memory-retrieval potion. He wasn't paying much attention to the effects on Gilderoy, though. He was too busy watching the scene at the other end of the ward.

Hermione sat on a chair near Alice Longbottom's bed, holding the insane woman's hand and talking. She looked exhausted ... positively wrung out, and he didn't approve. Why in the world wasn't she using the potion he had brought her?

"Send the results down to the lab," he told Healer Kranz before making his way down to the Longbottoms.

"... buried him last Saturday. I'm so sorry, Alice. I know you had to have loved him. I bet he was a darling baby."

"Mrs Hermione."

She glanced up, startled. "Oh, hello, Severus. More potion trials today?"

"Yes. Speaking of potions, why have you not been taking the one I brought you?"

Hermione grimaced, then indicated he should pull up a chair. "Have time?" she asked.

He swallowed, gauging the risk. "Some time, yes."

"I'll try to be brief. I have been taking your potion, but Neville's grandmother is none too pleased with me and keeps sending Howlers at all hours. She makes her house-elves deliver them into my bedroom at Hogwarts or to my cot here."

"Howlers? Merlin, what did you *do*?"

"Stood up to the old bat and told her I wouldn't move in or let her raise this baby the way she did Neville. And I might have shouted. A bit."

Snape chuckled darkly. "I would have paid to see that."

"She didn't send one last night maybe she's given up but I'm still sleep deprived, and I just came off a 24-hour shift. I'm mourning my husband, and I'm five months pregnant. It's amazing I'm still..." she yawned prodigiously "...coherent."

Severus frowned. "Isn't there anywhere under Fidelius you can go to get decent rest? You're all but asleep on your feet you're going to end up killing patients. And why in the world are you back to work already?"

Hermione didn't answer. She had nodded off sitting up in her chair.

Severus sighed. Someone needed to make sure she got some sleep. Where in hell were her friends? He drew his wand and sent his Patronus off with a message for Potter. That done, he transfigured a chair into a cot and moved Hermione onto it, then stalked off in search of her supervisor, telling himself he was concerned about patient safety and not the well-being of a bullheaded, know-it-all, recently widowed Gryffindor.

Hermione awoke to the sound of muffled arguing. She was surprised to find herself on a cot in the Janus Thickey ward and even more surprised to see Harry and Snape were the ones arguing a few feet away.

"...work herself to death; is that what you want?" Snape demanded to know.

"I had no idea she had gone back to work or about the Howlers! She's a big girl. She can take care of herself!" Harry snapped.

"Clearly not! Get the rest of your little gang together and see to her! How can you call yourself her friends, leaving her alone at a time like this?"

Bristling, Hermione sat up and swung her feet over the side of the cot. "Stop!" she hissed. "Stop this right now! I can take care of myself; I don't need anyone's help!" she insisted.

Harry turned to her, ashen-faced, then back to Snape. "You see? Neville was the only one of us who could ever get her to listen to reason!"

"I am reasonable!" shouted Hermione. "I'm trying to keep busy so I don't have to think about going home to empty rooms and to forget that my dead husband's hag of a grandmother is suing me for custody of this baby! I'm perfectly reasonable, Harry Potter, so don't you dare say otherwise!"

Harry rushed to the cot. "Hermione, love, why didn't you tell anyone about this?"

Snape scoffed. "Potter, she's grief-stricken, exhausted, and hormonal. Don't ask stupid questions. Just get her somewhere she can sleep without being bothered."

Hermione sobbed quietly in Harry's arms, embarrassment and shame fueling her tears.

"Come on, love. I'll take you to Godric's Hollow, and Kreacher can run interference with the Longbottom elves. Then we'll get you set up with a crackerjack solicitor, and you will bloody well take some time off work," Harry promised.

Severus caught Harry's eye and nodded in approval. "I'll send an owl with some useful potions in a little while. Get her to bed," he directed, watching them depart the ward, Harry's arm tucked protectively around Hermione.

"Didn't see that coming," Healer Kranz commented. "She seems so put together, but I'm surprised she's still upright with all she's got on her plate. Bloody good Healer, though."

"I've noticed. Patients speak highly of her. She was, admittedly, exceptional at Hogwarts as well."

"Ahh, part of that last batch of students you taught? The scores of newer trainees aren't as good in Potions as they were under you."

"Professor Malfoy is still finding his niche. They'll catch up soon. I recall your own NEWT potions scores were quite good, Healer Kranz," Snape replied.

"Third in my year. Could never get past Bill Weasley and Clementine Nott. Wait a mo', and I'll write a quick note to slip in the package you're sending to Hermione. I'm familiar with Augusta Longbottom, and I'll happily speak for Hermione if this custody nonsense goes to trial," she promised.

"I imagine she'll appreciate that, once she gets some sleep and sees reason," agreed Severus. "Just get me that note tomorrow when the Experimental Potions treatment team meets."

"Will do NO, GILDEROY! We *do not* practise our joined-up writing on the walls!" she cried, dashing off.

Severus shook his head and retreated down to the ground floor and his research. Dealing with Granger had put him behind.

Meanwhile, Hermione sat in the sunny kitchen at Harry's, drinking strong, sweet tea and watching him cook. "*You need tea. And food. And by Merlin, if you argue with me, I will tie you down!*" he had said.

"What d'you fancy in your omelet?"

"Cheese," she answered promptly. "And ham. Onion. Chive. Tomatoes. Peppers."

Harry laughed. "I think I have all that. When's the last time you ate?"

Hermione favored him with a withering glare. "I had lunch at noon, a proper lunch, lamb stew and a cheese sandwich."

Nodding as he deftly sliced vegetables, Harry noted, "It's well past teatime; no wonder you're hungry."

"Growing another human being is hungry work, Harry. Don't skimp on the cheese!"

As they were eating, a sleek Eagle owl tapped on the kitchen window.

"Is that Snape's?" Hermione asked.

"Must be," Harry answered, getting up to let the bird in. It flew over to Hermione, and she offered it a bit of her toast while untying the parcel and enlarging it. She smiled in recognition of the spiky handwriting.

"Yes, it looks like a few potions. Vitamins with iron, more of the sleep aid he brought last week, and an antacid," she said with a laugh. "Why is he being so nice?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe he's getting laid?"

"Harry!" Hermione gasped, laughing. "That's horrid of you!"

"I know. But he has been slightly less surly since he went into potions research at St Mungo's, plus no double-agent nonsense anymore. He's still exacting, demanding, and assured of his own superiority he's just less of a dick about it," Harry reasoned. "Now finish your omelet so you can take these potions and go to bed."

Nodding, Hermione made short work of her meal, took her potions, and let Harry tuck her into bed in his guest room, a very relaxing space with pale blue walls and an amazingly comfortable bed.

"I'm going out with Luna later, but Ron is going to come and sit with you in case you need anything," he told her.

"I'll be fine. Thanks again, Harry. I don't know why I'm being such a stubborn idiot. You're the best not-brother a girl ever had," Hermione said, slipping between the sheets. She was asleep in moments.

A few days later, Severus was working in the research lab when he heard his Floo-call detector sound. Minerva's head was sitting in the flames, looking harassed. Now, Minerva's usual expression wasn't too far off from that, but years of experience had led Severus to suspect someone or something had severely brassed her off.

"Headmistress, how lovely to see you," he intoned. "Pray, tell me what I can do for you."

"Are you free for lunch?"

"I could be. Why? Do you need my unparalleled leadership expertise?"

"Alas, no. Professor Malfoy just mentioned some trouble Hermione has been having."

"Ah. I surmise he's gleaned his information from his current paramour, Miss Weasley?"

"Apparently. Do you know what the issue is? Potter and Weasley cleared out Hermione's and Neville's rooms at the weekend and mentioned you came to her aid at St Mungo's last week but that's the last and only thing I've heard of it."

"Augusta Longbottom is suing her for custody," Severus drawled, offering the information as though it were a choice tidbit at a fancy dinner party.

"What!" Minerva shrieked. "How *dare* she?"

"She's a bitter old hag puffed up on her own importance," he said with a shrug. "Potter is footing the bill for a solicitor, last I heard, and he convinced her to take a bit of time off from work after she collapsed there following a 24-hour shift the week after Neville's memorial. She's staying with Potter you might give a call there and stop bothering those of us with real work to do."

Minerva favored him with a two-fingered salute and withdrew from the Floo without another word.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, attempting to ward off the impending tension headache. Would he be cursed to forever be mired in the petty dramas of Potter and his ilk?

Just then, the Floo ignited again, and a pair of hands pushed a sturdy box through, then retreated, the connexion closed. He crouched down and picked it up, then plucked the note from atop the lid.

Severus,

I know this is small thanks for your kindness, but I wasn't sure what else I'd be able to get you to accept. These are from Harry's garden, but Neville gifted him the plants.

Gratefully,

Hermione

Inside the box were a dozen white lotus blossoms, perfect specimens and the key ingredient in his new memory-regeneration potion. He carefully put the box into the cold storage in the lab, then returned to his office to reply to Hermione.

Hermione,

Thank you. I'll put these to use in the potion meant for Frank and Alice. As for my reputed kindness, you're obviously suffering from hormone-induced delusions. Do try to keep it to yourself.

Regards,

Severus

He folded the note and chucked it into the Floo, barking Potter's designation, refusing to think any longer on a certain widow and her problems.

That same afternoon, Hermione met with Paul Byers, the solicitor Harry had retained.

"Historically, custody cases in the Wizarding world favor the pure-blood petitioner. There has been some reform since the war, but not enough as far as I'm concerned," he explained as they began to go over the case. "However, there is considerable doubt on Madam Longbottom's side. She is elderly, and Hogwarts staff filed a report with child services regarding your late husband and an incident where he was pushed by a relative from a window while under her supervision. Moreover, you are young and healthy, a war heroine, and a prominent rising star in the world of memory-impairment care. The main problem is that being a widow, you'll plan on being a single parent. The Wizarding world is still quite in favor of traditional two-parent families."

Hermione scowled. "I certainly did not plan on single parenthood, but it's a bit of a necessity now. I'm going to be penalized because I'm a widow? Augusta would also be a single caretaker!"

"But she is, other than your baby, the last remaining member of an ancient pure-blood line. It's despicable, but there is precedent."

"Well, the courts will have to cope. I'm not marrying anyone else my husband has barely been dead a fortnight. These precedents are ridiculous. There shouldn't even be any basis for Augusta's suit at all," replied Hermione in disgust. "I could just walk away, go to the Muggle world. Batshit crazy grandmothers do not often win custody suits there."

"Right. That will be a powerful advantage wanting to keep a powerful, talented witch and her likely talented offspring within the Wizarding community," he replied. "Now is there anyone who you think might speak on your behalf?"

Hermione pulled a list from her purse. "These, for starters. I only had a few days to talk to people."

Paul took the list, whistling as he looked it over. "This will absolutely help. I think we'll be able to pull this in your favor, Ms Granger-Longbottom. I suggest you return to work half-time if you can manage it. The courts will want to see that you intend to support yourself. We'll also tie the inheritance issues up with the custody case. Since you only want Neville's fair share of the Longbottom estate in trust for Junior, I don't see that being denied. Who did you plan to name as trustee for the child?"

"A family friend, Bill Weasley. He works in acquisitions for Gringotts and is competent and trustworthy when it comes to finances."

"Weasley also a pureblood. I know you hate hearing it as much as I hate saying it, but it will help."

Hermione left the meeting feeling a bit dazed and thought a nice meander down Diagon Alley in the weak winter sunshine might help her regroup. She was considering ice cream flavours outside of Fortescue's when a shadow blocked out her sunlight.

"Ah, Severus," she said in greeting. "Did you get the lotus blooms?"

He inclined his head in a nod. "They will be very useful, thank you. However, I believe it is customary for a gentleman to send a lady flowers, not the other way around."

She smiled. "What is customary is no concern of mine, although you may feel free to send me flowers if you like I imagine very thorny roses."

Severus laughed, a sharp bark, startling passersby. "Careful, Madam people will think we're up to something with this talk of gifts of flowers."

"People will think little else. I'm going to have an obscenely large ice cream and spoil my dinner. Would you like to join me?"

"Regretfully, I cannot but thank you for the invitation," he replied, sketching a bow before striding away. 'Idiot!' he lambasted himself. 'Flirting with a former student whose husband isn't even cold in his grave! She's only being kind, same as she would to anyone!'

Hermione watched Severus walk away, frowning. Just when she thought it was safe to attempt to treat him as an equal and not her superior, it backfired. She reviewed the conversation and was horrified to realize it had bordered on flirtation! Oh God! No wonder he had run off! What must he think of her, flirting with him, and Neville dead less than a fortnight? She decided to skip the ice cream and just go home.

Harry was still at work when she arrived, but she busied herself prepping ingredients for dinner. Chopping vegetables wasn't unlike work in Potions classes, though, and soon her mind wandered back to the topic of Tall, Dark, and Sarky. He was much more approachable than he had been before, although if that was because of a new job and a new lease on life or just her not being a student any longer, she wasn't sure. He had been very kind to her as of late, but he was only concerned about patient safety. His regard was nothing more than he'd show any colleague.

When Harry arrived home and found her staring into space, he sent her off to the sofa for a kip while he made dinner. She drifted off easily under a cozy throw, falling into a dream.

She walked with Neville in a summer garden, and he stopped every so often to pick a bloom, which he would add to the basket she had over her arm. When the basket was full, he kissed her softly and strolled away, whistling cheerfully, his hands in his trouser pockets. She stood as if rooted to the spot and unable to follow.

Then Harry was shaking her awake.

"Dinner's ready."

"Thanks. That dream was... strange. I've had similar ones lately."

"Hmmm," Harry said thoughtfully. "Strange dreams? What would Trelawney say about that?"

"They aren't nightmares, although nightmares might be easier. Neville's always happy, in a garden or a greenhouse. Then he walks away w-where I can't f-follow," she explained, her breath hitching on the last few syllables.

"Oh, love," Harry murmured, putting his arms around her.

"It's not fair," she sniffled into his shoulder. "None of this is."

"It certainly isn't, but you'll get through it. Come on, you'll feel better for some food in your belly."

"I swear, Harry. You sound like Molly. Stop. It's creepy."

Laughing, he stood and helped her to her feet. "If only my cooking were that good," he lamented.

In spite of herself, Hermione laughed too.

The following week saw Hermione back on the roster in Spell Damage.

"Part time!" her supervisor had tutted at her. "Three eights, and if you ask nicely, I'll put you in for a four-hour shift one other day to cover lunch breaks. You're a talented Healer with a bright future, Hermione. We can't have you burning out."

Truth be told, the lighter schedule was much easier on Hermione now that she'd moved into the third trimester. She was tired and swollen, and her back ached even after the shorter shifts.

When she went to the midwife for her six-month checkup, there was a questionnaire about birthing preferences. It occurred to her that she would need to find a birthing partner since Neville was gone. Her midwife suggested a close friend, perhaps one who had given birth before. Molly was her only option there, and she didn't much think Molly would help her to relax much. Ginny would be a good option, but her career with the Harpies made her attendance unpredictable. Luna was right out, and Ron still fainted at the sight of blood. She was unsure if Harry's bonds of friendship extended as far as helping her through labour and childbirth. Still, she trusted him, and he was calm and steady. Maybe as Ginny's backup?

The rest of the visit was taken up by the usual measurements, poking, and prodding. Finally, the midwife performed the charm to amplify the baby's heartbeat. The lub-dub filled the exam room, and Hermione sighed happily to hear it.

"Still about 155. I'm thinking girl."

"That would be nice," Hermione replied, "but I still want to be surprised!"

Anna, the midwife, laughed. "I know. How are you coping? It's only been a few weeks since you lost Neville."

"His grandmother is making my life unpleasant. I have to go to a hearing next week. She wants to take the baby from me."

Anna gasped. "That's horrid!"

"My solicitor thinks we have the better case, but I worry."

"Try not to worry too much. Easy to say, I know. But you're clever, and I'm sure you'll be a great mum. Give me a shout if you need anything even a friendly ear and a cuppa you're only just downstairs."

"Thanks, Anna. I'll see you next month."

Hermione may have had a lot on her mind, but so did Blinky the house-elf. There were several times every day she wanted to go to the Floo and call Missy Hermione, and only the promise made to Madam Augusta's mediwitch kept her from doing so. Blinky had taken to shutting her fingers in the oven door as punishment every time she got anywhere near the Floo with the intention of breaking her promise, but she felt her promise was wrong. The mediwitch with the strange face did many odd things, and Madam Augusta sometimes seemed all better for an hour or so, but then would get worse and have to go back to bed for a week, unresponsive and not even knowing when Blinky or the other elves came to clean her rooms.

The mediwitch was there again today, going through Madam Augusta's old papers for "a clue to the poor dear's condition." Blinky had wanted to stay and keep an eye on her, but she had been sent away to "clean something and stop snooping".

"Crazy old bat saved every letter she ever got, I think," muttered said mediwitch, lifting the lid from a dusty box. "Let's see what influential sorts Augusta knows."

Most of the letters were gossip, newsy sorts, perfect for ferreting out information. A sheaf of correspondence from Honoria Prince caught her eye. From the copy of *Nature's Nobility* she had at hand, Honoria Prince had been Severus Snape's grandmother. Perhaps there was an angle there. Snape, after all, had harboured no love for Granger or Longbottom. His testimony might come in very handy.

From the letters, Honoria was rather upset at her only child marrying an abusive, close-minded Muggle. A letter from a few years later expressed sorrow at so rarely seeing her grandson, but finding him a queer, quiet thing when they finally did meet. The letters chronicled Honoria's continuing disappointment with her heirs.

17th June 1971 "... the boy should be raised in a proper Wizarding home. He has talent and aptitude, but his father seems to think that stifling any and all mention of magic will keep it out of his household. I'm afraid he's in for rather a nasty shock when Severus receives his Hogwarts letter later this year..."

3rd September 1971 "... sorted into Slytherin, so the letter he sent says. At least Horace Slughorn is still the Head of House and encouraging his half-blood students to connect with their Wizarding family..."

6th March 1976 "... not sure how to connect with the boy. He seems to have inherited all of his mother's withdrawn sullenness and his father's quick, hot temper. He perceives every assistance I attempt to offer as a threat..."

9th June 1978 "... visited by Severus today. A good talk with the lad although he's almost a man grown now. I regret there is little left of the Prince estate to pass on to him..."

11th October 1979 "... has been seen around with Lucius Malfoy and his circle of friends. Back to his withdrawn state, could hardly get a word out of him. He seemed overjoyed to tell me to stay out of his affairs. I told him I was royally disappointed in him. He stormed out. I regret it now..."

The final item in the stack was a *Daily Prophet* clipping of Honoria's obituary from early 1980, her death seemingly from natural causes.

Oh, Snape would do rather nicely. She could insinuate his grandmother would want him to assist Augusta surely he felt guilt over the way they parted before Honoria's death. She added him to her list of people to contact. The rest of the stacks of correspondence garnered her a few other influential families to which 'Augusta' could appeal for assistance.

The morning of the custody hearing was cold and rainy, a perfect match to Hermione's black mood. She was still settling into her new cottage, located in a quiet Wizarding grove, and she hated living out of boxes she hadn't had a chance to unpack. She couldn't find the shoes she needed, and her transfigurations had gone wrong lately with the surfeit of hormones playing havoc in her body. Finally, she found the blasted shoes in a box marked "sitting room" in Ron's untidy scrawl. He must have packed them when he and Harry cleaned out her rooms at Hogwarts. Now she was almost late thank Merlin for the Floo. The ministry atrium was only moderately busy at quarter-to-ten in the morning, and she made her way down to Courtroom Four in good time.

Augusta was already waiting, wearing her horrid vulture-topped hat and fox stole, red handbag clutched in one bony, claw-like hand. Several witches and wizards Hermione did not know stood nearby. On the other side of the corridor, Arthur and Molly were waiting, along with Bill, Ginny, Ron, Harry, Luna, Professor McGonagall, and a couple of her coworkers. Paul stood off to the side with his assistant, looking confident. Augusta's solicitor, an ancient wizard, mostly looked constipated.

As the courtroom door opened, Snape came striding down the corridor.

"Ah, Severus. You got my owl, then," Augusta croaked.

Hermione's jaw dropped. Snape was going to speak for *Augusta*?

"Apologies, Madam, but I never did. I'm here to speak on Ms Granger-Longbottom's behalf," Snape replied, his glance darting to Hermione. She offered a tight smile in return, tamping down her panic.

"Your grandmother Prince would be very disappointed in you, Severus."

"My grandmother Prince is dead, and she was a bitter hag who loved other people's misery. She never was anything *but* disappointed in me, Madam."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Thank you for taking the time away from your research to come today, Mr Snape. I appreciate it."

Severus inclined his head politely. "It is never any trouble to speak the truth," he replied.

"So, is he the father? Is this some scheme to get the fortune?" Augusta sneered at Hermione.

"Excuse me?" hissed Hermione.

Paul stepped in-between the two witches, his hands in the air. "Save the petty accusations against my client for the magistrate, Madam Longbottom."

Hermione stood in the corridor, shaking with anger, as Augusta and her supporters filed into the courtroom. "How dare she? How *dare* she!" she spat, her hands curled into fists.

"Relax, she's a horrid woman and it will work against her," Harry offered, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "Anybody who knows you knows how faithful you are. You'd never do anything remotely like Augusta said. She's grasping at straws."

"She can't be in her right mind," Minerva muttered. "Augusta has always been aloof and distant, but not downright cruel."

Hermione frowned. "Perhaps. Losing Neville would have been a shock. Hopefully the magistrate will see things my way."

They filed into the courtroom, taking seats far away from Augusta's contingent. Harry sat next to Hermione with Paul on the other side.

"All rise for Magistrate Patil," the bailiff announced.

Paul leaned over to nudge Hermione. "Padma will hear the case fairly. I was afraid we were going to get one of the crotchety old relics from Fudge's time."

"Quiet in the courtroom, please! We are here today to hear opening statements in the custody case of Longbottom vs Granger-Longbottom. I understand Mrs Augusta Longbottom seeks custody of Ms Hermione Granger-Longbottom's unborn child. The child in question was fathered by Ms Granger-Longbottom's late husband, Neville Longbottom, the plaintiff's grandson. We will now hear from Mrs Longbottom's counsel on the grounds for this case," announced Padma.

Augusta's solicitor hauled himself to his feet, joints creaking. "Ms Granger-Longbottom may seem like an upstanding citizen on the surface, but we have evidence that she is petty, volatile, and far too self-invested to mother a child properly. In addition, she cannot provide for the child in the way my client is able to, evidenced by her requesting a trust to be established for the child's expenses. Also, as a Muggle-born, she is ill-equipped to impart the traditions and customs of pure-blood society to the child."

"We will address the establishment of a trust later in the proceedings, Mr Wiltshire. Please keep your comments restricted to the custody case. If that is all you have to say, we will hear from the defendant's counsel now."

"Thank you, your honor," said Paul, rising from his chair. "Ms Granger-Longbottom is an upstanding member of Wizarding society, a war heroine, and a promising young Healer in the specialty of Spell Damage. As such, she makes a living wage and will have no trouble providing for the needs of her child. I have encountered no proof of Mrs Longbottom's spurious claims against my client."

"I see the custody portion of this case will need to go to a full hearing to have these claims presented and defended against," magistrate Patil replied. "However, I have reviewed the documents and claims for the establishment of a managed trust for the child. The child will receive Neville Longbottom's intended portion of the Longbottom estate in trust, with a monthly stipend equal to half the late Mr Longbottom's monthly salary as a tenured Hogwarts professor paid to the legal guardian of the child for expenses. The trust will revert to the child upon his or her seventeenth birthday. Mr William Weasley will be the executor and manager of this trust, the court has been advised by a Gringotts goblin on these matters."

"Two months from now is the soonest available time for the full hearing to take place. The court apologises for the delay. The clerk will contact all parties and their counsel with the date and time. Dismissed."

"Two months!" Hermione groaned. "I'll be the size of a house by then!"

"Use it to your advantage," Ginny suggested. "Snag some sympathy!"

"Something is off with Augusta. I just know it," Minerva said to Severus. "She's holding herself differently, and her facial expression is, well, strange."

Severus scowled. "I did get her letter, and her handwriting was slightly different, as was her phrasing. Something is fishy, and I mean to find out what it is," he said to Minerva as they left the courtroom.

"You're certainly being helpful. Why?" asked Minerva.

"Hermione doesn't deserve the old bat's ire. She visits Frank and Alice more in a month than Augusta does in a year. She's an excellent Healer. Plus, she's funny, and I can hold a conversation with her without having to explain anything," Severus said defensively.

"You daft idiot." Minerva chuckled. "You're in love with her."

"She's recently widowed and up the spout. I am not in love with her. I find her pleasant and competent!" hissed Severus.

"You keep telling yourself that, lad," Minerva murmured.

Hermione watched Severus and Minerva walk away, talking quietly. What was compelling Severus to be so kind and helpful to her? She didn't mind; she enjoyed his company and his acerbic wit, but she did wonder at his intentions, as silly as that seemed. Maybe he just wanted a friend.

"Hey strategy meeting at Godric's Hollow?" Harry asked, jolting her out of her thoughts. "I'm going to stop and get Chinese takeaway; can you go open the house?"

"Sure. I'm still on the Floo list?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, you will never not be on the Floo list at my home," he scolded. "Get going, you daft bint."

She smiled fondly. "Going, going. Get me some spicy pork bao, will you?"

Bill had to head back to work, but the rest of the group ended up in Harry's den, eating kung pao shrimp and vegetable lo mein out of the containers as they went over possible strategies for the formal hearing.

"Where is she getting the nonsense about Hermione being volatile and self-centered?" Ginny asked, nabbing a wonton out of the container Luna was holding.

"Maybe Neville had written to her about Hermione casting that Petrificus on him in first year?" Ron replied from his perch on the arm of the loveseat.

"That's kid stuff, though and if Neville had forgiven her, Augusta shouldn't care," Ginny insisted.

"Augusta was pleased as punch with Neville for standing up to them in that instance, but she admired Hermione's tenacity. I know. We talked about it. And she was delighted when Neville proposed. There is something seriously wrong with her," said Minerva.

"Maybe she's been talking to Umbridge," Harry suggested. "Umbridge would say all those things and more about Hermione," he scowled, viciously stabbing a stray shrimp with his chopstick.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I've heard all kinds of things about that. Did you really give her to the centaurs?" he asked Hermione, who sat next to him on the sofa, nibbling on her bao. "If it were anyone but that hag, I'd say it was a horrible thing to do, but I'm still convinced she deserved whatever she got."

Luna calmly slapped Ginny's chopsticks away from her wontons as she answered Snape. "She did. And I'd say that was more ruthless than vicious. A kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, sort of scenario."

"Yes, I did, and yes, I still feel horrible about it. I didn't think they'd carry her off and... well, *use* her in that fashion," Hermione said, blushing. "But I'd do it again if I had to. Which I wouldn't; now we know better. Harry should have used his two-way mirror. But we all do stupid things as children; they ought not to be held against us as adults. If we kept going on and reliving everything foolish we did at school, then we'd be here forever."

Paul shook his head. "And we're getting off the subject. Hermione, you have so many trusted pillars of Wizarding society willing to speak out for you. All Augusta has is hearsay, at least as far as we know. I'll look into the possibility that she may not be in possession of all her faculties. We might have to question her elves. I hate having to do so; getting a straight answer is almost impossible because of the way their magic ties them to their families."

"Right, the 'secrets and silence'," said Harry.

They were all quiet for a few minutes as they thought and ate.

"Personally," Severus said slyly, out of the blue, "I'm *delighted* to be considered a trusted pillar of Wizarding society."

Eight pairs of chopsticks were thrown at him from around the room.

The next few weeks passed quickly for Hermione, filled with appointments, meetings, and work.

She glanced up at the clock on her office wall and groaned. Two more hours left of her day and all of it full of paperwork to get through. Severus had been having some successes with his new memory regeneration potion, and so there were families to contact for consent for further testing, among other things. She had just put quill to parchment when there was a knock on her office door.

"Yes, come in," she called, putting the quill down.

Severus pushed the door open and walked in, setting a lidded paper cup on her desk. He held an identical cup in his other hand. "Mind if I sit?"

"You brought me tea?" she asked, sniffing at the steam escaping from the vent in the cup's lid. "No, you brought me raspberry leaf tisane. Someone's been doing his research," she teased. "Please, sit."

He favored her with a withering glance. "I am a Potions Master, Hermione. Any NEWT student worth their salt could tell you about basic tonics for the woman of childbearing age. Still," he said pointedly, "*you're welcome*".

"Thank you very much for the uterine tonic, Severus. Did you just stop by for tea and a chat?" she asked sweetly.

"As nice as that would be, no, that isn't the only reason I came up from the lab. I've hit a snag with the new memory-regeneration potion. It's as effective as it's going to get on its own, and I'd like to try Charming it. My Charms scores were, of course, excellent but not as good as yours. I looked them up. Besides, Charmed potions tend to be more efficacious with a brewer and a caster working together."

Hermione took a sip of her tea and regarded Severus over the lid of the cup. He was asking her for help and had gone to the trouble of bringing her tea. Still, they had been working together a good deal of late, and it was help she would be willing to give since it could benefit her patients. He would have known that, which meant the tea was likely a friendly gesture on his part. "Will wonders never cease," she murmured to herself, setting the cup down. "Yes, of course I'd be willing to work with you on the potion. It will have to wait until the baby comes as my charm work has been unpredictable lately. My midwife tells me it's a good sign the baby will be magical."

Severus nodded. "Of course. If you don't mind my asking, how long will you take on maternity leave?"

"Six months, most likely," she replied. "That's what my contract here allows standard. I'm sure we could work on the potion before I officially come back to work, though. A few days here and there would be a good trial run for leaving the baby with Molly, too."

"Is she running a creche these days?" he asked.

"No, but she and Arthur look after Bill and Fleur's six year old, Victoire, while they work. She offered, and I can't think of anyone else I'd rather trust with my child. Hopefully I can wear her down about payment she doesn't want anything. I was thinking I'd threaten to bring Arthur a Muggle electronic device every two weeks if she doesn't agree to at least a nominal fee," Hermione giggled, eyes sparkling with mischief.

"You'll bring him Muggle gadgets anyway," Severus replied.

"Just don't tell Molly my secret," she whispered conspiratorially.

He merely shook his head with a smile, drinking his tea.

Her stomach rumbled, and she pulled open her desk drawer and took out a packet of chocolate digestives. "Biscuit?" she offered, holding the packet out to him. He took two, and so did she. They sat in companionable silence for a few more minutes.

"Thank you for agreeing to help with the potion," he said. "And for the biscuits."

"You're welcome, Severus. Just let me know if there's anything else I can do."

He took another drink of his tea, leaning back in the chair. "Have you met with Paul again since he went out to Longbottom Manor to question the elves?"

"I'm meeting him and Minerva for dinner at Hogwarts after work. He sent me a message earlier in the week saying some interesting things had happened while he was there, and he wanted to know what I made of them. Minerva knows Augusta best out of anyone I'm acquainted with, so she should be able to give us a better barometer of what's normal and what's not," Hermione explained. "You're welcome to tag along if you're available. It's Friday, and that means roast beef and Yorkshire pudding."

Severus narrowed his eyes at Hermione over his cup. "That's outright bribery, Madam," he intoned.

"Six years of Fridays at Hogwarts and I could have counted the times you missed dinner in the Great Hall on one hand. It was rare to find you there any other day of the week," retorted Hermione. "Besides, Paul is wondering about any potions Augusta might be using and what sort of effects they can have. Why bother finding another expert if you're available?"

"You make a man feel so loved and wanted for himself, darling," he deadpanned.

"You've caught me out. I'm only interested in your big brain," she shot back.

"I'll come back at five and Floo over with you," Severus replied, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Suits. Now run along and play with your volatile chemicals, I need to finish this paperwork."

"Headmistress, tell Hermione and Severus what happened when you went over to the Longbottom estate earlier in the week. I want to see if they think it as odd as I did," Paul requested.

The four of them sat at dinner in Minerva's private dining room off the Great Hall. Hermione raised an eyebrow at Minerva. "Did something strange happen?"

Minerva nodded, taking a sip of her wine. "Augusta and I were at Hogwarts together, and while we weren't best friends, we were close. All these years since, we've been to visit each other countless times, and I never would have turned her away, nor she me. She's visited when I've been swamped with work, and I put things away so we could have tea. I've visited her when she's been ill, and she just insisted I pull up a chair. When I went over there on Tuesday, her head house-elf wouldn't let me out of the receiving room. Blinky was endlessly apologetic, but also seemed nervous. Her excuse was that Augusta had already gone to bed and wasn't receiving any visitors. It had barely gone four in the afternoon."

Hermione frowned. "That is odd. I stayed with Augusta for a fortnight before the wedding, and she was a night owl, up until all hours busy with something. I really think there might be something wrong with her. That's strange behaviour for Blinky, as well. Blinky is the sort who will bully you into a comfortable chair and have an ottoman at your feet and tea at your elbow in seconds, all the while making you think it was your idea in the first place and she's just overjoyed to serve."

The look on Paul's face was pensive. "Let me tell you how my visit went. I made an appointment ahead of time, of course. I did not see Augusta, but was able to interview Blinky. When I asked her about Hermione, she would say nothing except 'Missy Hermione is a bad girl who is wanting to give elves clothes and is not letting elves take care of her.' Any questions about Augusta were brushed off as 'Madam Augusta is being fine, but very tired. Always tired.' It really seemed like Blinky wanted to say something else, but something was preventing her from doing so."

Severus frowned, pushing his roasted potatoes around on his plate. "You're going to want to have the elf brought for questioning at the trial, probably under Veritaserum. It wouldn't be out of the question to have Augusta questioned under Veritaserum as well. Something is seriously not right with the woman. Even if she were taking a daily potion for say, depression a reasonable guess, considering the circumstances it wouldn't cause that sort of fatigue."

"The last time I actually spoke to Augusta was when I called on her to inform her of Neville's death. She took the news as well as one can with that sort of thing but perhaps it was shock," Minerva mused. "But then she came for the memorial and seemed fine. Sad, but fine."

"She didn't stay for the reception," Severus noted.

"She didn't?" Hermione asked. "I didn't either, though."

"Nobody expected *you* to. I specifically told Miss Lovegood to dose you with that sleeping potion right away so she and Miss Weasley could brush the old bat off if need be," Severus replied. "I overheard her talking to Slughorn about how she hoped you would come and live at Longbottom Hall and how she was going to speak to you about it before she went home."

Minerva cast a sideways glance at Severus. "Right little knight in shining armour, you are."

"The unexpected death of a loved one is enough to be getting on with ... without other people's expectations mucking up the job," replied Severus coolly, rising from the table and stalking out to the corridor.

"That was uncalled for, Minerva," Hermione snapped, throwing her napkin down on her plate and going after him. Severus leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed over his chest, scowling. She didn't say anything, just stood next to him and nudged him with her shoulder. They stood in silence for a few moments, and when Hermione looked over at him next, she found him gazing back at her.

"Defending my honour?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"I just cheeked my former Head of house on your behalf," Hermione groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"She does so love to needle if she thinks she has something to irritate me with. Twenty years as her colleague and more as a friend probably gives her the right but I do know how it is to mourn a loved one and have to cope with a hundred other expectations and obligations at once. It was long ago, but I still know."

"I appreciated you coming to my rescue, although I don't think shining armour is quite your style. Too flashy. I'm not really sure how I would have got through all this so far without your friendship and support. Thank you."

"Nonsense. You have many friends to turn to," he demurred.

"I never would have said anything to them without your intervention. I would have kept pushing on and telling myself I could go it alone. Harry was right without Neville to make me see reason, I was blundering around like an idiot. You're a good man, Severus, even if you don't believe it," Hermione said with a smile, going back into the room.

He stood there for a moment longer, eyes closed and leaning against the cool stone of the wall. Damned if he wasn't falling for her, hard and fast. He hadn't intended to, but she'd wormed her way into his heart without even trying.

Sleep was elusive the night before the custody trial, and Hermione tossed and turned for over an hour before drifting off into a fitful sleep, curled around a pile of extra pillows for support.

The dreamscape was shadowy, a mist obscuring most of her vision, but it slowly faded, revealing Greenhouse Three at Hogwarts. She was dressed in her school robes and definitely not pregnant. Neville stood at the front of the greenhouse near the Venomous Tentacula, chatting with Severus. She could see the plant extending its tendrils, and without a thought, she leapt away from her workstation to warn Neville with a shout. Unfortunately, she drew the plant's attention, and it lunged for her, but instead of Neville coming between her and the Tentacula, Severus protected her and was bitten. Hermione stared at Neville in shock, but he was fading away into the mist, which was once again gathering around.

Severus lay on the ground, the plant bite on his neck a violent red. She dropped to her knees and pressed a kiss to the bite, and it began to fade.

"You keep healing me," Severus murmured, brushing her curls back from her face.

Hermione awoke suddenly, the phantom tingle of fingers ghosting across her brow. It was still dark, and she cuddled back down into her pillow nest for a few more hours of sleep, the disturbing nature of the dream fading away. When her alarm went off later that morning, she only remembered Severus coming to her rescue and his cryptic words as she had woken from the dream.

She showered and dressed for court, wearing the conservative maternity robes Paul had suggested. She'd had a difficult time finding anything in the shop that wasn't some horrifying shade of Umbridge pink, but she had finally found a navy blue set that she could live with. Forgoing pumps for sensible flats, she tied her hair back from her face and applied a small amount of make-up. Hopefully, things would go in her favor today.

As she made her way through the Atrium at the Ministry, she was waylaid by a gathering of the press, calling for her thoughts on the case. Thankfully, Paul was immediately at her side, pushing through and saying she had no comment. She breathed a sigh of relief as they stepped into the lift and the doors slid shut.

"I had no idea that would happen," she said wearily, leaning against the wall of the lift car.

"It's a high-profile case you're a war heroine and a widow, and the custody trial is over a baby that isn't even born yet. It's the kind of thing these vultures eat up," Paul replied, straightening his tie. "I've filed a petition with Magistrate Patil to have Augusta's questioning done under Veritaserum. I agree with Headmistress McGonagall and Mr Snape that something is off with her. The elves will also be questioned with Veritaserum."

"Will it help if I offer to take it as well?" asked Hermione.

"It may. It's an option we can use if need be," Paul replied as the lift doors slid open and they stepped out into the corridor.

As they made their way toward Courtroom Four, the other lift pinged behind them. Hermione turned to see Augusta and her solicitor. Augusta was tucking a potion vial into her handbag and grimacing so she was taking something, Hermione realized with a stab of satisfaction. The only question remaining was just what was it? She only offered a polite nod as Augusta swept past into the courtroom.

"She just took a potion of some kind," Hermione muttered to Paul. "Maybe for anxiety?"

"She'll try to claim interaction with Veritaserum and stall the trial," Paul replied with a groan.

Hermione merely nodded, taking a seat on one of the benches along the corridor. Her back was killing her. The lifts continued to drop various supporters of both parties, and soon they made their way into the courtroom. It was arranged differently than it had been for the hearing. The gallery now faced the doors and seven chairs were behind a long table on a dais.

"If you recall from our earlier meetings, Magistrate Patil will be joined by some justices pulled at random from the Wizengamot as a whole. They may offer advice and ask questions, but the final decision is made by her," Paul explained. "I've never seen the full six at a custody trial before; it's usually two. I'm not sure what Patil is playing at here."

"She's afraid of being accused of favoritism she and Hermione were in the same year at school," came a voice from behind them.

"Good morning, Severus and good call, that makes a lot of sense," Hermione replied.

Paul nodded. "I hadn't thought of that. Severus Hermione saw Augusta take a potion as she stepped off the lift. What is contraindicated with Veritaserum?"

"Only one potion interacts negatively with Veritaserum despite popular rumor and belief. Hermione is rather familiar with it, being the only Second-Year in history ever to have attempted brewing it," Severus replied.

"Polyjuice? Really? And it wasn't an attempt. It was successful. Harry's and Ron's transformations into Crabbe and Goyle were flawless. The only reason my dose didn't work is because I had a cat hair instead of a human hair," Hermione retorted.

Severus raised an eyebrow, laughing softly. "I stand corrected. You were even more of a know-it-all than I originally suspected. But yes, Veritaserum causes instantaneous and painful re-transformation to the original state. No lasting damage, but it's a truth potion. It also cancels out glamours applied directly to a person."

"Let me guess it wouldn't have worked on me in my half-cat state?"

"Animal transformations are tricky. We just had to let you shed," Severus teased gently. "Do you think it's possible Augusta could be an imposter? Using *Imperius* would be so much easier than Polyjuice, though. None of the main apothecaries brew it, and the shady Knockturn Alley types that do charge an insane amount for it."

"Right. Like it'd be that easy," snorted Hermione.

Only Paul and Hermione were allowed to sit at the defendant's table, and Severus went to join Minerva and the others in the gallery as the bailiff came in a side door.

"All rise, Magistrate Padma Patil to ascend the bench in case L-64225, Longbottom vs Granger-Longbottom. Wizengamot members Tyrell Swindon, David Gudgeon, Artemis Ames, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Anthony Jarvis, and Annabelle Edgecombe to offer advice," the bailiff intoned.

Padma was joined on the bench by three men and three women of varied ages Swindon was the oldest by far, his hair merely several tufts around his wrinkled ears; Ames, a bright-eyed witch in her early thirties, the youngest. The inclusion of Kingsley surprised Hermione, but then again, they were only acquaintances.

Augusta's case was presented first, and from the testimony given by the witnesses, it was looking pretty good for Hermione. The nastiest thing they had managed to dig up was a couple of *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly* articles from her fourth year about her supposed romantic exploits and the alleged love triangle between her, Harry, and Viktor.

Augusta herself was called to the stand about three-quarters of an hour into the proceedings.

"Let the record show," Padma stated, "the defense has petitioned for the principal witnesses to be questioned under Veritaserum. The court has granted this request."

"I cannot take it!" Augusta protested, getting to her feet. "It will interfere with medicinal potions I'm on!"

Hermione turned to Paul, shocked. "There is no way..." she whispered.

Kingsley leaned in and spoke quietly with Padma, who then addressed the gallery. "The court wishes to call upon the expertise of Severus Snape, Potions Master. Mr Snape, would you outline for the court any potions that interact with Veritaserum?"

Severus stood and made his way down to the Magistrate's bench. "Certainly. Does the court require I also give testimony under Veritaserum?"

"Swearing you in should be sufficient, but Veritaserum is available," Padma replied.

"I'll agree to a dose," Severus consented, looking over at Augusta and holding her gaze as the bailiff brought the potion over and administered three drops under Severus' tongue.

"Very well, then," Padma muttered. "Severus Snape, is there any potion which interacts negatively with Veritaserum?"

"Yes, there is one potion."

"What potion is that?"

"Polyjuice Potion is the only potion known to react with Veritaserum. Unless Madam Longbottom is currently under the effects of Polyjuice, Veritaserum is safe for her to take. Certainly, should she prefer to wait the approximate five to ten minutes left before the efficacy of Polyjuice wanes, I imagine the court may be lenient the forced transformation is rather painful."

"Preposterous! I am not Polyjuiced!" spat Augusta. "Wiltshire! Object to this!"

"I cannot, Madam," Wiltshire, Augusta's solicitor, replied. "You must submit or be held in contempt."

"Could she really be Polyjuiced?" Hermione hissed at Paul.

"Looks that way. Snape is bloody uncanny."

"I never would have thought of this angle but if she's an imposter, where's the real Augusta? I'm more than a bit worried now."

The hum of discussion in the gallery soon erupted into noise and shouts. "I will have order in this court!" Magistrate Patil demanded.

On the witness stand, the false Augusta was panicking. Her skin had begun to change, the wrinkles and spots of old age fading to the smoothness of youth, her hair darkening, and her face changing. The panel members were first to notice the transformation, and a sudden shout rang out.

"Marietta Elaine! What is the meaning of this?"

Hermione's attention snapped back to the witness stand in shock. Sitting there, wearing Augusta Longbottom's vulture hat and fox stole, was Marietta Edgecombe, with 'SNEAK' still outlined in purple pustules across her nose and cheeks.

"Oh my God," Hermione breathed. "Oh my God, Marietta."

The courtroom erupted into shouts for explanation and information, and it took a good five minutes for Magistrate Patil to bring the courtroom back to order. "You will explain yourself," she commanded Marietta. "And you will do so under Veritaserum. Bailiff dose her."

"Granger ruined my life! I was just returning the favor! Little miss high-and-mighty deserves it!" Marietta said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Explain how you came to impersonate Augusta Longbottom and the current whereabouts and condition of said witch!" Padma demanded.

"I was the home-care mediwitch on call when her house-elf came to report that Augusta was unresponsive. I recognized her as Granger's grandmother-in-law. I decided to try to use her influence to make Granger's life hell like she made mine and thought taking her child away would be the best way to do it. Madam Longbottom is at her home, alive and well, but I've been keeping her in the coma so she doesn't wake up and go out of the house. I told the house-elves not to tell Granger anything because she would give them clothes.

"I've been buying Polyjuice potion and using it to impersonate Augusta Longbottom in public and private to further my plan. And I only regret that I got caught!" Marietta explained sullenly.

Padma looked positively thunderous. "How did Ms Granger-Longbottom 'ruin your life', Miss Edgecombe?"

"Magistrate Patil?" Hermione interjected. "If I may?" At Padma's nod, Hermione continued, "I'm sure you recall the D.A. from our fifth year at Hogwarts, seeing as you were a member. The sign-up sheet was jinxed to identify anyone who revealed confidential information about the meetings or members to the Inquisitorial Squad, Argus Filch, or Dolores Umbridge. The jinx was meant to fade as the person felt remorse, but apparently Miss Edgecombe has been carrying this grudge for almost ten years. All she ever had to do was be the least bit sorry for ratting us all out to Umbridge and the marks would have faded away within a week.

"Barring that, it's a jinx, easily reversed by the original caster as anyone who has passed their OWLs should know. At any time, she could have come to me and asked me to do so."

"Umbridge said she'd have my mum sacked! What was I meant to do?" Marietta cried.

"Pardon, but that Umbridge woman never had the authority to replace or sack any ministry employees until her promotion under Thicknesse during the War," interjected Annabelle Edgecombe. "Marietta, you ought to have come to me first. Why didn't you tell me this happened?"

"I just covered it up with make-up," Marietta muttered.

"And in turn hardened your heart against someone who was trying to defend and protect her fellow students against corrupt leadership. You'll be lucky if you don't end up in Azkaban over this," said Padma grimly. "The custody suit of Longbottom vs Longbottom-Granger is dismissed. Get someone over to Augusta Longbottom's residence to make sure she's all right. Miss Edgecombe is to be remanded into Ministry custody. Court is adjourned."

As the announcement of dismissal was made, the gallery dissolved into cacophony, shouting and cheering. Paul turned to Hermione to congratulate her, only to find her with her head buried in her hands, crying.

"Hermione?" he said gently, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she hiccuped. "Just... hormones, and the surprise of everything with Marietta it's a lot to take in."

He nodded. "Look, here comes Snape. Shall I have him find you a cuppa?"

The thought of that made her laugh a bit through her tears. "Paul, if you can convince Severus Snape to fetch me a cup of tea like an errand boy, I will be incredibly impressed," she replied.

Severus came up to the table, shaking his head. "I am not a glorified errand boy, Mr Byers. I do not fetch anything for anyone but I will certainly take Hermione for a cuppa. Maybe even a biscuit, we are celebrating, after all." He held his hand out to Hermione to help her from the chair.

Paul just shook his head in amusement. "Sounds promising. Good luck with the baby and everything, Hermione. You were a pleasure to have as a client; I so rarely get anyone so prepared."

Hermione offered Paul a watery smile as she took Severus' hand, rising from her seat. Severus tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and guided her from the courtroom, past the crowds, and to the lifts. Hermione was a bit confused as they skipped the floor with the canteen, but Severus just patted her hand and quirked a half-smile as he guided her through the Atrium to the Floos.

"Fortescue's!" he shouted, dashing the powder into the grate and stepping in with her.

Once they arrived in the ice cream parlour, Hermione glanced up at him. "Ice cream?" she asked.

"Several weeks ago, you stood outside this shop and asked if I wanted to join you in, what was it? Oh yes, 'an obscenely large ice cream'. At the time, I'm afraid I allowed my own notions of propriety to prevent me from joining you."

She smiled, brushing a stray bit of soot from his robes. "I recall. I was horrified with myself after you walked away I feared I had been overly flirtatious."

"And I feared the same of myself. Now that some time has passed, I hope you'll allow me to take you up on that offer."

"I'd love an ice cream but only if you'll come to my new place for dinner to celebrate. Tomorrow night?"

Severus nodded. "It's a date."

"Temporary insanity, that had to have been it," Hermione muttered to herself as she gave the sitting room a final once-over. At least dinner was taking care of itself in the oven, a simple quiche Lorraine. A salad waited in the fridge, along with a container of Fortescue's chocolate-peanut-butter ice cream for dessert in the freezer. She looked at her armchair with desperate longing, but didn't dare sit down lest she doze off.

A glance into the spacious kitchen put her at ease. The table looked welcoming and homey, set with everyday dinnerware and a re-purposed glass pitcher filled with wildflowers. She removed her apron and fussed with the drape of her dress over her monstrous belly. Only another week or so to go.

The clock chimed six as a knock sounded on the cottage's front door. Hermione took a deep breath, increasingly more difficult these days, and opened the door. "Hello, Severus. I'm glad you could make it," she greeted her guest with a smile. "Please, come in."

"I appreciate your going to all this trouble in your state," Severus replied, stepping over the threshold.

"It's no trouble, really. I'll sleep very well tonight from being so busy," she said with a laugh. "Dinner's ready, if you'd like to come and sit down."

"It smells delicious," he commented, holding out a bottle. "I brought lemonade, since wine would not be appropriate."

Hermione took the ice-cold bottle. "This will be delicious. I've been craving something sour and fizzy," she confessed, leading him into the kitchen. "Would you pour this while I get dinner on the table? Just need to get the quiche from the oven and the salad from the frid..." she gasped, grasping the back of a chair with her free hand.

"What's wrong?" Severus asked, taking the bottle of lemonade back from her.

"Just, ah, practise contractions. They'll stop once I sit down," she explained.

"Sit," he commanded, his tone brooking no nonsense.

Hermione sat. "But the dinner!"

"Hermione, I am more than capable of removing a dish from the oven and a salad from the refrigerator," he said gently. "Why don't you pour the lemonade?"

She popped the top from the bottle and filled the tumblers she had set out for water with the fizzy lemonade, and soon Severus had the quiche and salad on the table. He sat down across from her and took his glass, raising it. "To victory over grudge-holding, grandmother-imitating twits."

Laughing, Hermione raised her glass to his. "Cheers."

Dinner passed in a flurry of chat and laughter, Severus' sardonic wit keeping her in stitches. As they ate dessert, another powerful contraction washed over her. She realized she might need to call Ginny when Severus left.

He insisted on helping her wash the dishes, and they stood together at the sink, looking through the window above it at her back garden in the gathering twilight.

"It'll be pretty next spring when I've had time to get plantings in and organized," she said, making conversation as he washed and she dried.

"Plenty of space for a proper garden and some grass for little feet to run on," he agreed, his eyes dropping to her abdomen, then back up to her face.

"Yes, it was one of the reasons I chose this property," Hermione answered, their fingers brushing as she took a plate from him. A shiver ran down her spine at the inadvertent contact, and she glanced over to find him gazing at her intently. He reached out and brushed his knuckles against her cheek, leaning in almost imperceptibly, waiting, it seemed, for some signal from her without which he would not allow himself to continue. She didn't move by much, just a tiny step into his space, but it was enough for him to lean down a bit and kiss her gently, tentatively, as if unsure of his welcome.

"Severus," she whispered after a moment of soft kisses, her lips curled in a smile. "I think my water just broke."

Time seemed to stop for a moment as Severus glanced at their feet, looking up with a puzzled expression when he didn't find a large puddle.

"It's not damn, this is a strong one like in Muggle movies. I thought these were the same sort of thing, practise contractions, that I've been having the last few weeks. I guess I was wrong," she panted, clutching the counter.

"What do I do?" Severus asked, tamping down his panic.

"My bag's by the sofa and there's a dummy on the mantle. It's a Portkey to St Mungo's. Activation word is 'lullaby'."

"Do you want me to call anybody?" he asked, going to retrieve the bag and the Portkey.

"You can Floo Ginny or send your Patronus for her when we get there," Hermione answered, breathing through to the end of the contraction. "Let's go."

Severus was unsure why he had just been invited to the impending birth of Neville Longbottom's posthumous offspring, but he wasn't about to argue it with Hermione. If she wanted him there, he would be there. They grasped the Portkey, and he tapped it with his wand. "Lullaby," he intoned, and they spun off into the ether.

The Portkey dropped them in a small room at the hospital clearly intended for arrivals there was also a large Floo along the wall. Hermione pushed the door open and approached the reception desk. "Hi. Granger-Longbottom, Hermione. Checking in."

The mediwizard at reception barely glanced up, but produced the proper paperwork and handed it over. "Sign here and here," he said in a bored tone. "Room 394, down the hall to your left. Family lounge is over to your right. An orderly will be along shortly to assist you."

Severus peered over at the family lounge. "Shall I go and try to get hold of Miss Weasley for you?" he asked.

"Yes, Severus. Thank you. If you can't find her, try Harry. She might have had an away game today," Hermione replied, handing her bag over to the orderly who had just appeared. "Let me know who you get hold of," she requested, following the orderly down the hallway.

He went over to the family lounge and used the Floo. Ginny was indeed at an away game, an automated message giving him the news. Harry was simply nowhere to be found. He tried the Burrow in a last attempt.

"Severus! What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Arthur. Hermione's gone into labour and I've brought her to St Mungo's. Ginny was supposed to be her birthing partner, but she's away with the Harpies, and I can't find Potter, who was supposed to be Ginny's backup," he explained. "Is Molly there?"

"No, she's not she's at Bill and Fleur's, watching Victoire while they're out for the evening. Hermione in labour, though! Wonderful news!"

"Wonderful, if you don't count that she hasn't a birthing partner to help her." Severus scowled.

"You're there. You'll have to fill in. Just be encouraging. You've a cool head in crisis; I've seen it. And it's plain to see that you care for Hermione, and she for you," Arthur said with a smile.

"I do care for her, Arthur, but I can't imagine she'd want the reminder that Neville can't be here for her."

"Nonsense, Severus. Hermione's not stupid. If she didn't want you there, you wouldn't be there. She would have just shoved you out the front door and gone on her own. Now stop dallying and get back to her!"

Severus gave Arthur a sheepish smile and ended the call, heading down the hall to Hermione's room.

"Bad news. Miss Weasley has an away game, and I couldn't find Potter. I even tried Molly, but she's not home. However, I'm here and willing to stay, if you'll have my help," he explained to her, sitting in the chair at the edge of the bed.

"You're constantly coming to my rescue, you know," Hermione said fondly, reaching for his hand. "I'm just waiting for Anna, my midwife. After she comes to check on me, I want to walk. Just sitting here isn't going to make this go any quicker or easier."

"I defer to your superior knowledge on the subject," Severus said softly, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles as a mediwitch bustled into the room.

"Ah, now that's what I like to see. Births go so much smoother when mum and dad are a cohesive unit," she said with a smile.

"He's not..."

"Oh, I'm not..."

Hermione groaned, shaking her head as both she and Severus tried to speak at once. "He's my birthing partner. My husband was killed in a workplace accident four months ago."

"Ah. My apologies, then. In that case, a good friend is still very helpful. Your midwife will be along shortly she just had another delivery and she's washing up. I'm Mel; I'll be assisting Anna. How long ago did your contractions start?"

"I've been having them off and on all day, but I didn't realize they were productive. My water broke about half an hour ago as I was washing dishes, and the contractions have been far stronger since then. They were about five minutes apart then, but are closer to three now," explained Hermione.

"Sounds like you'll be making good progress, then. Let me cast a couple of diagnostic spells so we can monitor you and the baby remotely, then you might want to move around a bit take a walk, rock in the chair. You can get in the tub once Anna's looked you over, too," chattered Mel, drawing her wand and casting the aforementioned spells. They settled around Hermione's belly in a multicoloured fog. "The darker purple line is the baby's heart-rate, the white line is the strength of the contractions, and the red line is your heart-rate."

After making sure there was nothing else they needed at the moment, Mel went off to check on another patient and left Hermione to wait for Anna. Unable to sit still any longer, Hermione clambered out of bed and asked Severus to get her slippers from her bag so they could go for a walk in the corridors. She felt much better being upright and moving, even if she did have to stop and lean on Severus every few minutes as contractions happened.

Anna met them as they were coming back around the corner near the reception desk for the second time. "There you are!" she greeted Hermione with a smile. "I thought your friend Ginny was going to be your birth buddy! Did you just snag Snape on your way up? Entice him out of the lab with promises of crushing his fingers?"

"Miss Weasley is playing an away game with the Harpies this evening I happened to be having dinner with Hermione when her water broke," Severus explained. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"He's doing really well; don't let him fool you. He knows exactly where my back hurts and has been applying the most delicious counter-pressure during the contractions," said Hermione. "They're about three minutes apart."

Anna nodded. "Far be it from me to stand in the way of a born natural," she said with a wink. "Let's go back to your room, and I'll check how much you've dilated." She led them back to Hermione's room and had Severus help her back up on the bed. "All the monitoring spells look great so far," Anna mused, giving a swish of her wand, which had the monitoring spells fading and a shadowy image of the baby floating above Hermione's abdomen. "Take a look. Perfect positioning, head down and rotated properly. Good job, mum you've had good posture." She swished her wand again. "And you're dilated to seven already. I'd say keep walking if you're still comfortable, or hop in the tub if you like the jets are great for back labour. How's your pain level during the contractions?"

"About a seven or eight," Hermione replied.

"You might want to think about getting in the tub sooner than later if you want to deliver in there. I looked over the notes that Mel took, and I'd say you've probably been in labour all day. You'll be coming into transition soon, and then things will likely go very quickly. I'll send Mel in to fill the tub and be back to check on you two in a little while." She smiled, then made her way out of the room.

"Are you sure... are you sure you want my help?" Severus asked after Anna had left.

"Well, I can't have Neville, as much as I wish I could. I won't lie: I miss him. But this... relationship that has grown between us is important to me as well. I'm sad and sorry

that I lost my husband, but I refuse to be sorry that those events brought you and I together," she said quietly. "I don't expect anything more than you're willing to give."

Severus nodded. "Then I'll do my best to be a top-notch birthing partner. Just don't break my hands. I need them to work."

She chuckled, then gasped, another contraction starting.

Soon, Mel came to fill the tub and Hermione got in, wearing her bathing suit top for modesty. Severus did as Anna suggested, transfiguring himself a pair of bathers and getting in behind her so he could continue rubbing her back as the contractions got lengthier and more frequent. Hermione did not speak much except to tell him where to move his hands, and he followed her lead. She found his solid, calm presence soothing and helpful between contractions. Before long, Anna returned for another check and declared Hermione ready to push.

"Hermione, are you comfortable against Severus there? Would you like to change position?" asked Anna, pulling on gloves and a water-resistant apron. "Severus, are you doing alright?"

"M'fine," she muttered between contractions.

"I'm fine if she is," he replied, reaching for a cool washcloth and draping it across Hermione's forehead. "It's her party, after all."

"Great! Next contraction, Hermione, I want you to push. Push as long as feels natural to you, then take a break. Your body knows what to do, and all you have to do is trust it," Anna explained, kneeling by the tub.

Hermione barely heard Anna's instructions; she just knew she had to bear down, so she did. She coasted on the waves of the contractions and pushed, leaning against Severus for support, although she hardly realized he was there in her concentration.

"One more push, Hermione we've got a head! Just take a deep breath, and on the next contraction, give me a big push so you can meet your baby!" Anna encouraged her.

One more push. She could do that. Hermione pushed for all she was worth.

"Excellent job! It's a girl! You have a beautiful daughter, Hermione!" Anna exclaimed, bringing the baby to the surface of the water and resting her on Hermione's chest. The baby began to wail almost immediately, her skin pinkening as she cried.

"A girl," Hermione murmured, wrapping her arms around her daughter and leaning down to brush a kiss against her wrinkly forehead.

"I've never seen anything more amazing in my life," Severus murmured, resting his hands on her shoulders. "You were phenomenal."

Later, after all the mess was cleared away, Hermione was curled up in bed with the baby in her arms, feeling very much at peace with the world. Severus was dozing in the rocking chair she had tried getting him to go home and rest after he had gone to Floo Arthur again to let them know everything had gone well, but he wouldn't hear of it.

"I think I'm going to call you Violet. Your father would have liked that. He can't be here, but I know he would have loved you. It's all right, though, you won't lack for suitable male role models."

"Damn right she won't," a voice piped up from the doorway. Harry stood there with a bouquet of pinks, smiling to beat the band.

"Harry! Severus tried reaching you earlier, but you were gone."

"I know, I'm sorry. I should have let you know I was going to be away tonight but it looks like Severus did a fine job as your support."

"It was an honor, Potter," Severus declared from the rocking chair with a smirk.

"Come and meet Violet, Harry. I can't decide who she takes after more, but she's got my hair, poor darling."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and peered at Violet with a wide smile. "She's gorgeous, even with your hair," he teased. "I won't stay long I, uh, proposed to Luna earlier. She's accepted."

"That's wonderful! This is just the best night ever!" Hermione exclaimed, beaming.

"The Harpies won their game, too," Severus said, stretching. "Mel told me a little while ago while you were in the shower."

"Ginny caught the Snitch, Harry's getting married, I had a baby, and Severus didn't faint. All is right with my world."

Epilogue

It had been an eventful year. Augusta had woken from her coma and was doing very well. The Charmed memory-regeneration potion was showing great promise in preliminary trials. Frank and Alice now recognised Violet every time Hermione brought her to see them, and many other patients were improving as well.

Marietta Edgecombe was currently engaged in community service as punishment for her crimes, clear-faced and much changed for the better.

"Stop fussing. You've got everything done for the party, and even if it's not perfect, Violet will never know. All she's going to care about is the cake," Severus grumbled, wrapping his arms around Hermione's waist as he stood behind her at the kitchen window, looking out at the gaily decorated garden, early spring bulbs and green grass providing a pretty picture.

"I know, I know. I just want it to go well. This is the first time Augusta's been here, and you know how she is."

"I do know how she is. Why don't you let me take your mind off your to-do list," suggested Severus, nuzzling into her neck.

Hermione squealed, tilting her head back to look at him. "People will be here in twenty minutes, and I need to get Vi up from her nap and get her dressed," she scolded.

"Your mind is constantly in the gutter, little know-it-all," Severus murmured, turning her around in his arms. "While I appreciate it most of the time, that wasn't what I meant this time."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, her eyebrow raised.

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. "Hermione, I never imagined that bringing you a sleeping potion would lead to you becoming so important to me that I can't stand being without you. You know that I love you, and I couldn't love Violet more if she were my own flesh and blood," he said, opening the box to reveal a golden band with a bezel-set sapphire. "Will you marry me?"

She looked at the ring, then up into his face, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Yes, a thousand times yes, Severus."

A smile spread across Severus' face at her answer.