

Return of the Fairy God-Jarvey

by dracontia

Sequel to 'Courtesy of Your Fairy God-Jarvey.' Hermione mistakes Severus' intimations that he would like to deepen their relationship for just the opposite, and unintentionally pushes him away. With their relationship needlessly on the rocks, it's Regina Fletcher, to the rescue! More wacky fluff, with a dash of fluffy angst!

1: You Really Should Be Committed

Chapter 1 of 7

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Disclaimer: I solemnly swear, the Jarvey made me do it. Since she's more broke than I am, I make not one red cent.

Author's Note: You don't *need* to read the first story to enjoy this one. But it would help.

WARNING: If you have allergies to mobile phones, you might want to keep your favorite medication handy. They will be mocked both subtly and overtly, employed as plot devices, and mercilessly used in running gags throughout this story. You have been warned!

Chapter 1: You Really Should Be Committed

Promises. Commitments. Love.

Not exactly words evoking the most cheerful thoughts for Severus Snape. Worse, those particular words had begun to pop into his head at annoyingly inconvenient moments...such as when he was keeping count of how many times he'd stirred counterclockwise.

Every promise he'd ever made had gotten him into trouble, frequently of the legal variety. Committing had also proved hazardous to his health and well-being. There had been days when the agony of the long-term teaching contract easily rivaled that involved in the nasty little tattoo whose pinkish ghost of a scar still marred his left forearm. The few brave souls who had attempted to love him had suffered for it. As to whether he had ever loved anyone else... considering the fates of the (admittedly) few candidates, he truly did not want to analyze that closely.

Unfortunately, it was getting to the point where it required nothing of thought, much less analysis, to be quite certain he loved Hermione. When they were apart, her image was always teasing the edges of his thoughts, insinuating its way into the center of his attention. He couldn't make any sort of plan for the immediate or more distant future without placing her in it, somehow.

When they were together, he felt suffused with vitality, his senses heightened and his mind exhilarated. Nothing could faze him. Even the largest irritants in his life were more amusing than annoying in her presence. (Of course, the two largest irritants in his life...whose names he preferred not to even think...were regrettably connected to her; however, she proved sufficient antidote that they ceased to be excessively noxious.) That must be love...mustn't it?

Either that or the sneaky little witch was coating herself with some sort of drug, and now he was addicted.

That was admittedly unlikely. He felt fairly confident in his ability to identify a variety of dependency-causing substances. It was even easier to detect adulterants to her personal fragrance and flavor now that he was brewing her perfumes and other toiletries. Of course, that didn't discount the possibility that there was something inherent to Hermione that was addicting him.

The thought was rather depressing. Was that all there was to it? Alchemy?

No, that couldn't be it. After all, they were able to spend time together without winding up in the horizontal plane. Hmm, better rephrase that...without having sex. It wasn't always horizontal.

Besides, Hermione was actually good for him. He had to be more or less honest with himself to admit that, still no easy task. She had been quite inspirational...perhaps 'pushy' would also have been an apt term...in getting him to finally start submitting his research to scholarly publications. (Although she couldn't understand, and he never intended to enlighten her, as to why he was so hesitant to owl Minerva's friend, Sophronia, at *Eire Elixir*.) With nearly two decades of working for Albus and with Minerva on his resume, he knew *real* Gryffindor nagging, and Hermione hadn't crossed that line.

Better still, she knew how to properly congratulate him on his good fortune once the article actually was published. Of course, he couldn't think of anyone else from whom he would consider that particular form of appreciation proper. That was probably another tally in the 'in love with Hermione' column.

And then there was that bizarre interlude with the Jarvey. Severus still couldn't bring himself to use the creature's title, partly because he still didn't quite believe there could be such a thing. Were it not for his now luxuriously silky head of hair that was such a pleasure to brush (better yet, to be brushed by his lovely lady witch), he would have managed to convince himself that his encounter with the creature had been a very strange dream. Since it plainly wasn't a dream, it strongly suggested his heart's desire was being with Hermione. Considering the other evidence, that didn't seem too implausible.

But if he really loved her, what was he to do about it?

They could continue as they had for the better part of a year. It wasn't a bad arrangement. His schedule was quite flexible (almost nonexistent), so whenever Hermione had plenty of time, they made a day of it. Apparating was free, so they had very nearly the world to choose from when it came to just strolling about together, taking in the sights and talking. Muggle art galleries were his favorite; Severus had enough of chatty art to last a lifetime, so it was quite nice to look at paintings that didn't talk back. (He was particularly glad not to hear from the legion of Marilyn Monroes in the Tate Modern.) Even burying themselves in the 'vault' at Flourish and Blotts to lust after rare first editions was a more than agreeable use of a spare day. Spending the night together afterwards was just the icing on the cake. When Hermione was short of time, she wasn't above stopping by his place or owling him to visit hers for a quick romp. They had each other and still had their space.

He was beginning to find space overrated, however. His own gloomy thoughts were rotten company, especially compared to Hermione. Bad enough Snape was talking to himself. But now that he was reduced to arguing with himself, there was a good chance he'd wind up altogether barmy.

Neither one of them was getting any younger. If he failed to make it permanent, some young wizard would doubtless come along and sweep her off her feet. In specific, a wizard with real prospects. Someone with hopes for the future that didn't rely upon society at large deigning to revoke his pariah status. Someone for whom the term 'sensitive' meant 'incredibly perceptive with regards to her needs' rather than 'quick to take offense.' Someone good-looking.

Well, that last wasn't fair... not to Hermione, anyhow. She wasn't a shallow witch whose head could be turned by mere appearances. Obviously. But should she encounter someone with brains and personality to back up those looks, he might find himself stuck on the wrong side of her door for good. No, best get a ring on her finger and be sure whose bed she would be coming home to each night.

Affording the ring would be a bit of a trick. He wasn't going to settle for a transfiguration job. This would have to be the real thing, preferably magical. Recalling the half a term of gossip surrounding Sinistra's Amazing Vanishing Engagement Ring, there was no way he'd deal with the vengeful bitch that was Magical Layaway. Borrowing money was out; he was too disreputable for a bank loan, and he strongly suspected that Draco was barely keeping afloat without Lucius' iron fist on the purse strings. Snape had no idea of the exact situation, but gathered that a great deal of Malfoy money and a few employees of the family had gone permanently missing in the absence of Lucius' sharp eye. Draco didn't discuss the matter in any detail; but he had gone so far as to seek Severus' assistance in acquiring a mobile phone.

Talk about a painful experience. He couldn't see why Draco was so bloody intrigued by the nasty little devices, business tools or not. There was no way he would have one...even getting too near the bloody one Potter had given to Hermione caused his left arm to twitch. That, in his opinion, was another reason the little prat was bad news. Wizards who felt the need to be in communication with their...associates...in any place or any time of the day or night, ought to be viewed with utmost suspicion, in his experience. He'd spent too long being at the beck and call of a maniac wherever he went to submit to being called by any dunderhead who could work those infernal buttons. The very fact that they worked at all around magic made them highly suspicious items.

That was quite a frightening line of thought, actually. Mobile phones in the Wizarding world... A Malfoy willing to do business with Muggles... The former top Slytherin preparing to engage a Gryffindor (and not in the sense of an invitation to duel)... If Snape heard anything about Longbottom brewing a potion correctly, he would forget about the whole marriage thing and simply brace himself for the Apocalypse.

When a week passed without any new to that effect, he concluded there was no getting around it. He'd be buying a ring, and he'd just have to stretch his resources somehow.

A nagging little voice (sounding suspiciously like Molly Weasley's) suggested that he propose first, then take Hermione shopping for her own ring. With a slight guilty twinge, he shoved said voice into the nearest metaphorical broom shed. He knew that Hermione would take his financial situation into account, and his ego just wasn't up to watching her swallow her disappointment at having to turn away from 'the ring' so she could choose from among 'the rings he could afford.' A damned shame he couldn't do it that way... Asking Hermione if she'd care to pick out her engagement ring would be much easier than summoning the intestinal fortitude to make a real, unequivocal proposal.

Even more horrific, she might offer to pay for her own ring. It struck him that this was exactly the sort of thing a Gryffindor (especially such a practical one as Hermione) would do and would therefore go down in history as one more massive blow to his dignity from a member of said house. That the offer would be utterly free of malice, and issued from the sole living Gryffindor whose respect and esteem he likely couldn't live without, would simply make it a thousand times worse.

After almost six months, the pittance he was able to set aside only amounted to a larger pittance. He'd like to wait a bit longer and afford something better, but not long after the rather torrid little interlude in the lav at the last Ministry function, Hermione had begun to seem restless. It was beginning to look like now or never, and he was increasingly disinclined to accept 'never' as an answer.

Of course, shopping for the ring meant... actually shopping. Not for books, potions ingredients, groceries, or other such necessities of life, but for *jewelry*. He sighed at the book he was holding, which had been serving no purpose other than to keep his hands from wringing each other for the past half hour. Were Snape flush with Galleons, he would still be reluctant to shop for magical jewelry, simply because it was something about which he knew very little. He couldn't be certain if the properties of cauldron and stirring rod metals and stones used as ingredients translated at all into magical jewelry-making, and consulting books on the subject in any library or bookstore was out...not unless he wanted the rumor mill to propose to Hermione on his behalf before he ever found a ring. So cowardly, yet so tempting...

There was nothing for it but to put himself at the mercy of some bloody clerk...anonymously, of course. He dropped the book like an insensitive boor snubbing his date for a more desirable dance partner and disguised his appearance with a few basic glamours before Apparating. He would start by shopping for a magical jeweler.

After browsing Diagon Alley for over an hour and a half, Snape was frustrated as all hell. The jewelers were either insufferably pretentious-looking vaults or sported at least one window display of gaudy little baubles beneath charmed cupids shooting at floating hearts. The former would wreck his budget. The latter set his teeth on edge.

He'd have to consider Hogsmeade, even though he was reluctant to reacquaint himself with the region. There were magical neighborhoods in Wales and Ireland known for

decent jewelers, but the wizards there were notorious for wanting to conduct business in their native tongue. It would be a nuisance to look up every odd magical shop in the Isles. Before committing himself to a frustrating day of Apparitions and translation spells, a quick look down Knockturn Alley was in order.

Not too far from the respectable storefronts of Diagon Alley, he encountered the most likely shop he'd seen yet. Moore and Mraz's may have been located in Knockturn Alley, but it had a look about it that desperately screamed, 'We're respectable craftsmages...only here because of the rents!' Granted, it had an inconspicuous three balls clustered on the signpost in front of the door, but in Knockturn Alley, those probably came with the building. Even the warehouses here offered pawn services...so he'd heard.

After an extended consultation with the artisan/proprietress, he exited the shop feeling absolutely confident that he had the perfect ring to give his Hermione. (He also had the nagging feeling that the canny artist had seen right through his pockets and tailored the price of the ring to take up every last Knut on his person, but he was sufficiently satisfied with the ring and relieved to have done with the process that he decided to overlook it.)

Now, if only he could figure out what to say when he gave it to her...

The already threadbare rugs at Spinner's End were suffering substantially from all the pacing the master of the house was doing lately. It was a good thing they weren't sentient. They would have suffered even more if they could have heard his mutterings.

"Hermione, would you do me the honor..."

Go ahead and sound like the stuffy old fossil you are.

"I'm crazy about you."

You're right about the 'crazy' part...daft as a brush, in fact, if you're going to take a page out of 'Mating and Dating for Hopeless Sixth Years.'

"I've been thinking about our relationship lately..."

That's the sort of thing you'd say if you were going to dump her, you dolt.

"I'm not getting any younger, love..."

Are you MAD? By all means, keep reminding her of the difference in your ages. And sound desperate in the bargain. Brilliant.

"I *am* desperate," he admitted to the empty room. Failure was not an option here. If the best he could come up with was a simple 'marry me' and her reply was a simple 'no,' he didn't think he could take it.

Perhaps he could just slip her the ring during the course of a romantic dinner and let her draw the appropriate conclusion as to what it was for. This, too, he reluctantly dismissed. Even with as little as Severus knew about such things, he strongly suspected that worked best with a significantly more impressive ring, during the course of a significantly more impressive dinner than he could afford.

To hell with it all. He wouldn't worry about what to say. He would sweep her off her feet, drag her to her bedroom, ravish her, the Accio' the ring and say, "Marry me, you gorgeous enchantress..." Yes, somehow it sounded much less absurd in bed and would be easier to say whilst high on a post-orgasmic rush. Proposal accomplished! No awkward discussion necessary.

Part of him argued that it seemed rather a Gryffindor thing to do. He argued back that he was, in fact, proposing to a Gryffindor, so that was actually diabolically logical and therefore, slightly Slytherin. A third voice in his head said that, seeing as how he was having arguments with himself, he had plainly gone 'round the bend. Therefore, he could have been doing something quite Hufflepuff, and it wouldn't matter because he and all the inhabitants of his cranium were going to be booking a suite in St. Mungo's any minute now. At which point Severus dove into his emergency stash of Dreamless Sleep Potion and put himself (and the lot of them) to bed.

He awakened with no better ideas, but at least the traitorous dissenters within his mind were keeping their metaphorical mouths shut. He I-loved Hermione and he could do this. He had his plan, and he was holding to it. Now all he had to do was put it into practice.

Unfortunately, it wasn't looking as if he would get the opportunity. Every time he owed Hermione for a date, she replied (with increasingly terse notes) that she was revising and would talk when all of her exams were over. Snape ruthlessly wrestled the 'morbid self-doubting fantasy switch' into the 'off' position. She wasn't rejecting him... She was just busy.

Right, the snide voice in his mind scoffed. Remind me again why you're so certain she would be willing to marry your sorry arse?

That was a good bit of the problem. He wasn't certain. Snape hated uncertainty. Dislike of uncertainty was the driving force behind his abrasive personality. After all, it was quite a bit easier to cause people to dislike you rather than to like you, and their reactions were so much more predictable. When people liked you, they did inexplicably generous things to you, like repeatedly saving your life... and asked unpredictably grave things of you. When people disliked you, they either avoided you or tried to screw you over. With that, he knew how to deal.

Hermione certainly liked him. From there, unpredictability kicked in... Did she love him? And if she did, enough so to want to spend the rest of her life with him? She'd said words to the effect of 'I love you,' but nothing absolutely unequivocal.

After all, if the Jarvey episode was anything to go by, it was *his* desire to be with Hermione. The stupid beast hadn't had much to say on whether or not Hermione wanted to be with *him*. Of course, if he was starting to give that much weight to the opinions of a voluble dust mop, she would probably be better off without him... which line of thought led to further agonies of self-doubt.

Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. He was going to see her, whether it was convenient or not. The witch was bloody brilliant; she needed more time to study like a Giant Squid needed wellies. And if one of her irritating friends were there, he'd throw them out. Hell, he'd be quite happy to transfigure Potter into an end table, if that's what it took to clear the way to Hermione.

Not for the first time, he rather wished her flat were in Diagon Alley or another Wizarding neighborhood. He'd even settle for some quirky Muggle locale where he could wear his favorite garments without attracting notice. He felt like a hermit crab experiencing catastrophic loss of shell without his carefully crafted cocoon of billowing fabric protecting his personal space. Going out dressed only in a shirt and trousers was verging on nudity, psychologically speaking. But it was either that or suffer odd looks and odder comments. Speculation on the location of the fancy dress party and snide remarks about the vicar going calling were the perennial favorites.

Thank Merlin he wasn't some silly old pureblood who couldn't bear the thought of wearing trousers. How did they survive, living only in the narrow sliver of the world that belonged solely to wizards? They were like pandas, retreating into the ever-diminishing bamboo forests.

Hmph. Pandas. Damned annoying creatures always made him feel like yelling, '*For the love of Ukemochi, you're omnivores! You made it out of the ice age. Can't you at least make the transition to other types of greenery?*' Furry dunderheads. Cute only gets you so far in life. Not that he would know.

At least he could bloody well wear a shirt with a button down collar. A legion of buttons and a well-practiced scowl: the world's two most elegant deterrents to undesired personal contact.

As he waited at the door after knocking, his thoughts returned to hopes that Hermione would accept his proposal. The old saws about sexual frustration resulting in crankiness were entirely too accurate. And without points to deduct or detentions to assign, he was lacking his two favorite opportunities to vent.

Hermione Granger was driven. Anyone who had known her from the age of two could have told you that. Talking early, walking early, reading early... Her parents always tactfully avoided any mention of the whole potty training debacle. After all, nobody's perfect.

Being the best brain was her claim to fame. It was the balm that soothed her pain at changing from a precocious, curly-haired little toddler on whom all the grownups doted, into a bright, forceful child with the capacity to annoy most of her peers...and not a few adults...just by being smart. (Amazing how adding a few years to one's life caused unmanageably curly hair to mutate abruptly from 'cute' to 'bushy'.)

She deeply missed not having anything resembling a 'normal' seventh year at Hogwarts; though admittedly 'normal' was a word of limited application with regards to her education there. The specially arranged series of N.E.W.T.s examinations, which had proved her mastery of all and sundry magical topics via independent study, had been one of the comforts that had helped her regain a feeling of normalcy...indeed, of feeling human again...after the war.

Having had her fill of chasing after Things Nastier Than Thou, she resolved to devote her mental muscles to the noble art of Healing. Her parents were happy that she would be practicing some strain of medicine, and she felt content that she was making the right decision for her future in the magical world. She had tackled her course of academic study with her usual fervor and had dutifully performed every task demanded of her apprenticeship. Hermione had been confident that she would succeed in record time. She was counting on it, actually, having just submitted her request to take her qualifying exams one year early. Then, just shy of her goal, she had hit a most substantial brick wall.

Actually, it was a Healer resembling a wall (or perhaps a half-giant). His name was Andrej Kornokovich, and he had simply shook his massive, lion-maned head at her and said, "I do not think you are ready, Miss Granger."

The worst of it was, it wasn't as if he were being arbitrary or unfair. Kornokovich was never known to play favorites and devoted so much time to the nurturing of the prospective Healers under his supervision that the staff had a running joke to the effect that he was technically two hundred years old from Time-Turner use. (The other popular refrain named him 'the best thing to ever come out of Durmstrang'.) Everyone insisted that St. Mungo's had been exceedingly lucky to lure him out of retirement and into a position of running the Apprenticeship program. Hermione had agreed, feeling the utmost admiration for the huge, gentle Healer with the mane of permanently tawny hair and a kindly, ragged, purr of a voice, when he took over during her final year. That was, until, with his most amiable growl, he had dropped the bottom out of her hopes of becoming one of the youngest Healers ever to be accredited.

"I think it is safe to say you are the brightest apprentice here," he continued, softening the blow as best he could. "Your ability to perform on your exams is not in doubt. And it is good that your confidence in your abilities shows in your professional demeanor. But your bedside manner has not yet matured. You must learn to project calm, and empathy, to your patients as well."

It would be easier if he were being nasty, or even cold. Nor did it help that he still had traces of his Slavic accent, thus causing her to keep flashing back to her amicable, yet still painful, parting from Viktor.

"You excel at answering their questions. Now I ask you to become good at gaining their trust and eliciting the questions they might be embarrassed to ask. I have high hopes you may yet meet your goals, for you would certainly be an asset to this hospital and to the world of Magical Medicine. I must insist that you either spend perhaps another year developing your skills with patients, or perhaps redirect your energies to research."

"Healer Kornokovich, I can improve my bedside manner! Please, it means so much to me...tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it," Hermione said earnestly, trying not to sound frantic. The thought crossed her mind, *Couldn't a man who looked so much like a lion favor a Gryffindor...just a bit?*

"I still believe you will become an excellent Healer...but not quite as soon as you had hoped. I will grant you this, Miss Granger: Take your exams, provisionally. If I can see between now and the time you receive the results (which I do not think are in doubt), that you can truly Heal from your heart as well as from your formidable mind... I shall be happy to revisit my opinion on extending your apprenticeship."

After thanking Healer Kornokovich professionally yet profusely, Hermione left his office under more pressure than she had ever felt in her life. She really was a compassionate person. The trouble was, she was not inherently a patient person. And patience was not to be learned by conventional study.

Had she been facing qualification just a few years earlier, the issue never would have come up. Any number of Healers she had met possessed questionable bedside manner. But Kornokovich wouldn't stand for it, and no one could argue with the quality of Healers qualified under his supervision. He was even lobbying for retraining for some of the more caustic or patronizing individuals on St. Mungo's staff. There was no way around it. In the midst of final preparations for those all-important exams, she would have to swallow her impatience. She would need to imbue her manner with all the caring she possessed to convince him that she was truly ready for the title she had worked so hard to achieve.

As if this weren't enough, she was feeling another type of pressure. And it, too, was as disagreeably familiar as the stress resulting from learning that-which-cannot-be-imparted-by-a-book. The 'time is passing... when do I find out where this relationship is going?' type of pressure. Because frankly, Hermione was inclined to hope it was going down an aisle of some description, followed by a permanent combining of their libraries. The problem was, she had no idea if he were hoping for the same.

Even after more than a year of intimate acquaintance, Hermione knew better than to assume she knew what Severus was thinking. If the man had been a book, he'd have been written in Lemurian. Probably only Albus Dumbledore had ever had a thorough grasp of 'what makes Snape tick.' And at the moment, she was in no position to start the delicate process of taking him apart to look at his works.

She also knew better than to assume what they had together was anything more than two adults enjoying each other's company... at any given hour... in a wide variety of agreeable positions... After all, she'd been there, done that, too. Three times, with relative seriousness. The first serious relationship had ended with Viktor traveling a considerable distance to do the gentlemanly thing and break it off in person, rather than sending an owl. Quite a gallant gesture, really, considering they'd never gone farther than...well, not all the way, anyhow. The second had ended with Ron and all his earthly possessions being forcibly ejected from their flat at three in the morning in a manner that would put projectile vomit to shame, accompanied by volleys of curses. The third had ended, abruptly, when fellow Apprentice Geoff St. James simply left St. Mungo's for a mediwizard training program in New York without so much as saying goodbye. (The cowardly son of a bitch.)

Simply asking Severus outright what he felt and what he intended to do about it was likely a bad idea. Even after her success with the Publication Project (as she had tacitly named it), she knew better than to think he was an easy barge to steer. In fact, that effort had simply proved the point that the only people from whom her man was capable of taking direct orders were either those who might take his life or to whom he owed his life...and even the former might not get very far on one of his more obdurate days. Subtle nudging would move him to do something he (deep down) wanted to do already, but badgering him into doing something he plainly did not wish to do would go over very poorly indeed.

It would help if the inscrutable bastard had at least said 'I love you' at some point in the last year.

Well, he had said the words... but not all at the same time, in that order.*Oh, wonderful*, Hermione thought as that sarcastic aside wandered through her brain.*Perhaps if we spend enough time together, I'll start thinking like him... Maybe that will clear up the matter.*

Unfortunately, thinking like her lover was not conducive to maintaining the gentle patience she needed to accomplish her goal of impressing Healer Kornokovich. Just responding at length to Severus' letters would cause his beloved sarcastic voice to pop up in her thoughts at the most inopportune moments (dunderheaded patients). It would be exponentially worse if she actually saw him, so she found herself responding rather briefly, when he owled, that she simply couldn't see him just yet.

Even the psychology texts she was poring over in her efforts to improve her approach to patients seemed to be steering her thoughts toward Severus. One particularly nagging passage mentioned 'bridge relationships,' transitional attachments formed by someone getting over the loss of a previous romantic partner. What if she was

serving as a sort of a bridge relationship...not from an old romantic attachment back into the world of dating, but from an entire former way of life to something completely different? In that case, even seeming too eager might, well, toss him off the bridge, so to speak. Several related articles and a few internet searches later, she became convinced she must remain steady, interesting, and available so that he would come to the inevitable conclusion that this bridge was leading to them getting married.

She started giving herself internal relationship pep talks periodically. This did not qualify as talking to oneself as long as she never said anything out loud, so she felt fairly safe and sane about it. *Okay, Hermione, you can do this. Just as soon as you've qualified, and everything is settled in your professional life, you can start the delicate process of convincing your very own confirmed curmudgeon and life-long bachelor that you love his very curmudgeonliness and will make an excellent wife for him.*

For now, maintain the status quo, she told herself sternly as she jotted another brief reply for Piglet to carry *Don't spook him by going all misty-eyed and flowery.* Once she was a full-fledged Healer, she could relax and play with her darling Snape-puzzle until the picture began to emerge more clearly.

Whatever you do, don't push him! He's just contrary enough that you'll end up pushing him away Hermione in her right mind would have recognized this thought as the unfortunate product of spending too much time with periodicals devoted to pop psychology. Anxious, bet-hedging, terrified-of-failure Hermione thought it sounded absolutely profound. Optimism dared to whisper briefly in her ear that if she could hang on to him long enough, he'd be bound to want to settle down. After all, it wasn't as if he was getting any younger.

Not that Hermione was complaining on *that* account...

Three weeks passed in this manner, and Hermione was about to explode. She had been on double shifts six times in those weeks; studying for her exams...the first of which (that past Wednesday) had been an intractably evil bitch...the second of which was on Monday and promising to be even worse; straining muscles in her jaw trying to maintain a gentle smile and not express exasperation (particularly at an idiotic Quidditch player who was in for the third time for the same careless injury); and worst of all, not being able to fit Severus into her schedule (at this point, she was almost willing to risk a little abrasiveness rubbing off on her, just to get another form of rubbing) and still get enough sleep to function. As if things couldn't get any uglier, her period was due to start any day...or any hour, now.

It was thus that Hermione was poring over psychology books rather than relaxing and getting a good night's sleep, as Healer Kornokovich had firmly recommended when she left the hospital that Friday afternoon, when she was interrupted by the sound of knocking.

Stress. Interrupted study. Relationship anxiety. Sexual deprivation. PMS. Ingredients for a nasty little concoction called Hermione's Perfect Storm.

"What?" Hermione snarled angrily, flinging open the door.

Author's Notes:

Ukemochi: A goddess who was the personification of divine food in Japanese mythology.

Lemurian: the language of the mythical continent of Lemuria, the Pacific Ocean equivalent of Atlantis. Definitely qualifies as an obscure tongue in which to be literate.

Oh, and for the kind souls who helped me to decide which version of this chapter to run with... I believe in recycling. Stay tuned to this website for the fate of the scenes/characters you reported on so favorably.

Duh-duh DUN! Major misunderstandings and loopy Jarvey action, coming right up!

(Bowing to LariLee) LariLee was kind enough to beta read this while under extreme physical discomfort. I'm not sure if this story exacerbated her condition or not, but any errors are still my own silly fault.

2: She Read Him Wrong

Chapter 2 of 7

Sequel to 'Courtesy of Your Fairy God-Jarvey.' Seeing as how both Severus and Hermione want to get married (to each other no less) what could POSSIBLY go wrong? Uh... as Reggie the Fairy God-Jarvey would tell you, only a bloody fool asks that question.

Author's Note: You don't *have* to read the first story to understand this one. But it sure would help. And I apologize in advance for the absence of appropriate accents and ~ over the Spanish words. Word doesn't add them automatically, and I don't know how to make it do so. Lo siento!

Warning: There are spoilers for the original story in this chapter! Reggie the Fairy God-Jarvey makes her appearance here; brace yourself for some exceedingly salty language, and the appearance of several not-quite-gratuitous mobile phones.

"Oh. It's you, luv," she said rather stiltedly. *For Merlin's sake, I know the man can read,* she thought crankily. *Didn't my last note say I'd see him when all my exams were finished?*

Severus' plan to simply sweep Hermione into his arms ground to a halt as he registered her rude salutation and the appearance of herself and the room beyond. It looked like the contents of a bookstore and a stationery shop had met in pitched battle in the tiny flat. There was no clear evidence of the winner; but her hair was plainly a casualty, judging by the number of inky quills impaled in it.

"Thoth's beak. Dare I ask if there's anything left in Flourish and Blotts, witch?" he asked, amazed *How in the Nine Hells am I going to drag her to the bedroom? What with the stacks of books, notebooks, writing implements, and periodicals on the floor, the couch, and every remotely horizontal surface, the only safe way to reach it is on the handle of a broom.*

Hermione grunted something about exams at him, turning distractedly so that his attempted kiss glanced off her smudged cheek.

"Good to see you too, pet," he retorted. *Right. No carrying her across No Wizard's Land.* Perhaps a 'Plan B' was in order, something along the lines of getting her in the mood so she'd follow him to the bedroom, or better yet, lead him there.

If Severus had been the sort who paid much attention to his students aside from preventing them from blowing up the classroom or seeking opportunities to take house points, he might have had an inkling of Hermione's capacity to needlessly obsess over her achievements. Had he ever engaged in any sort of conversation with Ron and Harry about Hermione in her school days, he would have realized that approaching her near the date of an important exam was tantamount to poking the business end of a Blast-Ended Skrewt with one's wand to see what happened.

But since he was going to have a nice, chummy chat with Potter and Weasley sometime between his figure skating lesson in Hell and singing a live duet of 'A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love' with Celestina Warbeck, he was not privy to this little bit of information. Consequently, he was left standing in the middle of the devastation that was his witch's flat with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Who in Hades was this half-feathered harpy, and what had she done with his Hermione? And would nibbling on her ear do anything to get her back?

Picking his way among piles of reading material, he slipped an arm around her waist with intent to nuzzle. Before he could even get in one good nibble, Hermione shrugged him off brusquely.

"Sorry, darling, but now really isn't a good time," she said in a harassed voice. *Damn! Why does he have to come over in an amorous mood when I feel like an over-filled water balloon and smell like back-to-back shifts at the hospital?*

Concern was giving way to annoyance. "You can't seriously expect me to believe that you actually need more time for revising? Miss 'I-Memorize-Every-Text-Before-The-Course-Starts'?" he asked tartly.

'Taken aback' did not begin to describe Hermione's reaction. For the past two years, she had been amused by displays of Snapely sarcasm, since none of them was directed at her. To be on the receiving end of it again, after so long, was as shocking as a slap in the face. "How do you know that's what I mean by 'not a good time'? What do you know about it?" she finally gasped, almost tearing. "The last time **you** had exams of any description, I wasn't even a zygote!"

'Annoyance' was being elbowed aside by 'anger.' "Bloody hell, witch! If it's your time of month, SAY so! I could use Legilimency, but I'm afraid it might tax my poor, antiquated brain cells," he snapped. Evidently wells of causticity that had largely lain dormant for the past year were welling up with a vengeance.

"Don't you DARE think of doing that! And don't you swear at me, either!" she spat like an angry cat. Why did the men in her ~~life~~^{life} always bring that up? Was there a Wizard's Relationship Handbook somewhere that included a chapter entitled 'How to Fight Dirty Without Striking a Woman?' Or were all wizards sexist pigs? And worst of all, why did those accusations always have to come up when she was due to start her period?

"That's rich, coming from the witch whose vocabulary at the point of climax consists of a pronoun, a proper noun, and one exceedingly vulgar verb," he retorted.

Hermione was aghast. "I can't *believe* you're bringing up what I say in a moment of passion during an argument!"

Snape stared at her incredulously. "It's not as if there's anyone else in the room listening! And I refuse to consider that walking flea circus you call a familiar 'someone.'"

"Leave my cat out of this! At your volume level, they don't have to be in the room to listen...anyone nearer to here than Durmstrang can hear you without half trying!" she grit out from between clenched teeth. At least she didn't have to worry about crying. Her face was so hot at this point, there was a good chance any overflowing moisture would simply turn to steam.

"I suppose we should pass notes, then?" he asked coldly, sarcasm condensing on the words and dripping off. He snatched up a bit of parchment from the table as a prop, then realized it already had writing on it. Unfortunately, he glanced at the writing. It was a reflexive action. He could resist written words within his field of vision about as well as a bear could resist an unguarded box of doughnuts. As luck would have it, his eyes fell on the worst possible portion to read.

'No, Mum, I'm not 'involved' right now. You know I don't have time for any sort of romantic entanglement. My apprenticeship at St. Mungo's takes up far too much time.'

He found he couldn't read any farther. Perhaps the odd, chilling numbness that suddenly swept his body had something to do with it. Had he imagined for even a moment that he would be able to go back to his solitary hell? Never mind pulling the broom out from under him...she had just ripped out his heart and taken no few other vital organs along with it, judging from the exceedingly hollow sensation dominating his body from approximately head to toes.

"I see. Just when did you decide you don't have time for romantic entanglements? Or should it matter to me, since we evidently aren't 'involved'?" he hissed, flinging the letter at her backhand.

Objectively, Hermione knew that it was physiologically impossible for her heart to drop into her stomach and splash her abdominal cavity with hydrochloric acid. Subjectively, that's exactly what it felt like when she recognized the letter she had meant to discard...but obviously had not.

"That was a private letter! And for your information, I wasn't going to send *that* draft!" she said, voice rising steadily as she forgot about caring whether or not the rest of the neighborhood could hear them. "Stop changing the subject!"

"There doesn't seem to be any subject, according to you," he seethed. "Certainly no romance."

"It's...it's just...for Nimue's sake, please, can't we discuss this after my exams?" she raged back, fingers clenching in the air, eyes wild. Somewhere in the kitchen, there was a sharp, shrill click like the sound of glass cracking.

As Hermione had once observed, Severus' instincts for self-preservation seemed to be diminishing in his post-teaching, post-double agent existence. Otherwise, he might have reconsidered his subsequent comment, in light of the fact that it was becoming apparent that Harry Potter was not alone in his ability to perform wandless magic when incensed.

"Interesting you should bring up Nimue," he snarled. "At least it reminds me I'm hardly the first wizard idiot enough to fall for a younger witch."

There were more sounds of shivering glass, as the air around Hermione seemed to crackle. "You're comparing me to that slag?" she shrieked. "How DARE you? You're no Merlin, honey!" She stormed to the door and flung it open, clearly implying that if he was going to talk to her that way, he could get the hell out. Evidently her subconscious mind was in agreement, judging by the series of 'cracks' and 'snaps' in her wake, many of which connected stingingly with his skin.

The temperature of the room dropped about twenty degrees, and not because of the open door. One might fancy seeing ice crystals form on Snape's abruptly closed features. "Fine. I'm too damned old to be your interim plan while you wait for someone more presentable to come along," he said in a flat tone of anger as he brushed past her. The stinging would have been bothersome if he could feel anything below his skin.

Hermione, awash in the bleak aura of numbness that followed Snape, suddenly had the inkling that she had catastrophically misinterpreted the purpose of her lover's visit. "What? Severus, what are you...?"

"Goodbye," he said dully and stormed out the door with the intention of medicating himself until the stings went away. Or until he did. At this point, it didn't matter which.

She saw a squarish shape fly through the air, striking the doorsill violently and exploding open with a sparkling burst and a slight tinkling sound. Hermione stared, willing her mouth, legs, anything, to work. She finally ran for the swinging door, crying loudly, "Severus!"

The street was quiet and almost empty at this time of night. Evidently he hadn't bothered to wait until he reached the alley, but simply Disapparated in full view. She stumbled on something, and found the angrily discarded box at her feet. She picked it up. It was a jewelry box... with a space for a... ring.

Several people young and old were awakened by a piercing, almost deafening, extended shriek of despair. One of them...a pleasant young lad with Muggle parents who

was destined to get a very surprising letter the next year...would be swearing to his future schoolmates at Hogwarts that he had heard a banshee that night.

At the headquarters of the International Society of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooding Beings, Regina Fletcher...Master Fairy God-Jarvey (provisionally)...was finishing up a report on her latest assignment. She had to settle for grumbling inwardly about the length of her probationary period, though she would have dearly loved to complain aloud. Since being even the brightest Jarveys lack opposable thumbs, she had to stick to uttering only the words of her report (with a minimum of profanity, no less) so that the enchanted quill would dutifully record just the facts...thank you very much, Madam fucking Mab.

Mab hadn't been able to get away with blocking Reggie's attainment of Master level (even the most hostile members of the review board had been impressed with how she had managed to maneuver Snape to her godchild Hermione). However, the crabby little overgrown damselfly didn't seem to have any problem keeping the Jarvey on probation bloody well forever. Every 'damn' in writing would most likely prolong the agony.

Honestly, was it so unforgivable to blow up the odd loo, or make a public fountain run with vodka martinis for a few hours? Nobody had gotten hurt, and an awful lot of people had been happy about the second one. Maybe it had something to do with the huge amount of money Mab and several other supervisors had lost in the office pool. Served the stupid fuckheads right for betting against her.

Suddenly, she stopped the quill with a yelp. The emergency board lit up in tandem with a jolt of misery not her own. One of her godchildren was in severe distress...Hermione, by the feel of it.

Shite! What the hell have you done this time, girly? Or maybe the better question, what has Snarkyarse done? Fletcher thought feverishly, as she Summoned her tutu.

"I'm off, Boss! Emergency call!" she yelled through Mab's office door, shimmying awkwardly into the pouf of pink tulle that was the mark of her profession. Not waiting for her supervisor to acknowledge her, Reg set her little fuzzy face in a scowl of determination and focused on her godchild's emotions of distress so as to know where to go.

Regina Fletcher: Fairy God-Jarvey, ready for action.

"What's happened, sweetie? Old Pain-in-the-Arse giving you grief?" Reggie asked sympathetically as she popped into sight on Hermione's couch. The Jarvey was brought up short by her goddaughter's appearance. "Caramba, babe! You look like you're molting. What the fuck is going on here?"

"I failed...again!" Hermione wailed, causing several perfectly innocent textbooks to explode into their component particles from bursts of uncontrolled magical energy. Judging by the debris field, they weren't the first.

Reggie shimmied up her godchild's arm and nudged her reassuringly with her forehead. "Come on now, mija, if anything needs to be blown up around here, I'll take care of it. You need to pull yourself together and tell Godmum Reggie what happened while I pluck your excess plumage. Here, have a hanky, honey." Reggie climbed on the back of the couch and conjured a handkerchief, a really large, soft one. It was too bad the recipients of her handkerchiefs were usually too distracted to notice the flair with which she summoned them. It was one of the first skills a Fairy Godmother had to learn, and Reggie did it with such style.

"S-Severus showed up unexpectedly, and we got into a fight. I told him that now was a bad time for him to be here, but the stubborn prat wouldn't listen to me. He started tossing out insults! He hasn't said anything that mean to me since I was a student!" she whined and blew her nose loudly. "I thought he just wanted a tumble, and I sort of threw him out, but it turns out he had...a ring...and he was probably here to propose, and I've bollixed it up completely!" she wailed.

"I've got to admit, that's getting the wrong end of the stick with a vengeance. Actually, knowing you two it was probably mutual. Everyone has bad days, hinny. I'm surprised the wanker has behaved as well as he has for this long. Usually the reversal of hormones only lasts through the first couple of months of a relationship," Reggie said, spitting another quill over her shoulder.

"Reversal of hormones?" Hermione asked, refolding the handkerchief and dabbing her eyes.

"Yeah. At the beginning of an affair, men get all mushy-gushy with female hormones and act more soft and nurturing than usual, whereas women get sort of aggressive and horny on male hormones. It makes for really hot sex and not a lot of arguments at first...you know, the classic 'honeymoon period,'" she explained, freeing a few bits of broken quill from the tangle of her godchild's hair and cleaning up the ink smear.

"So what are we in now, the divorce period?" Hermione asked darkly.

"Nah, just reality," Reggie replied. "Let me go retrieve your big ol' cranky love bunny so the two of you can communicate. Apologies would be a nice place to start, and an 'I love you' or two wouldn't be amiss, either. You can always start planning the wedding after the exams from Hell."

"I doubt it," Hermione sniffed morosely. "He threw away the ring."

Reggie spared a glance for the empty box and shrugged. "I seriously doubt your Snape has reconsidered wanting to get hitched, especially since you've got him at least half-tamed. He's just off having a big sulk. Finding the ring will be easy. It's the Count of Cranky that's going to be a little tougher to track down. Would it help to talk to your Mum while I go in search of Snarky?"

Hermione fidgeted. "Um, well, that's er, part of the problem. He found out I haven't told my parents about us yet. They don't know I'm seeing anyone right now."

The Jarvey's jaw didn't just drop...it plummeted. "You've been shagging Snarkyarse within an inch of his life for over a year and you haven't told your parents you're 'seeing' anyone right now?" she asked in a hushed tone that implied she was in utter awe of the magnitude of the gaffe.

"I didn't know if he was as serious as I was! I've been through this twice before...telling Mum and Dad I've found 'the one'; then it all goes pear-shaped and I'm left looking foolish. They really liked Ron. And they heard so much about Geoff that when the rotten commitment-phobic pillock left me without so much as a good-bye note, they half believed I'd made him up so they wouldn't worry. I didn't want to get their hopes up again, in case it didn't work out," she explained. *Not to mention my own*, she thought sadly.

Reg shook her head. "That, my dear little brainy-bint, is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not to mention probably thinking too much. Whatever happened to 'I love you'? Unequivocal, simple, to the point..."

"Well, thinking is what I do best. I thought I had come up with a good strategy for keeping the relationship stable until I could investigate his intentions in a more subtle fashion. More than anything, I didn't want to lose what we had by trying to get more," she said, trying to justify what was really beginning to look like a very foolish series of decisions after all.

"Damn. And I thought **he** had issues. The hat put you in the 'no guts, no glory' house for a reason, babe. Don't play it so safe; it fucks up your karma," Reggie advised.

"Do you go to some sort of Fairy Godmother school where they teach psychology and philosophy?" Hermione couldn't help asking a little acerbically.

"Nah. I turn myself invisible and attend university lectures when I have time off. Plus Argenta figured out a way to get a Muggle TeeVee and Sat-A-Light to work in the break room, so we've started watching Open University," the Jarvey explained. "A couple of times we even got some Yank named Fill, but he's as nutters as some of the people he talks to, so I don't know how much that's worth."

Hermione wondered fleetingly if the reason she liked Regina Fletcher despite her off-color vocabulary was that she missed the daily dose of surreality that had been part and parcel of attending Hogwarts.

"Reggie?" Hermione asked, her voice still pained.

"What, hinny?" Reggie asked gently.

"I-I always thought fairies weren't particularly powerful," Hermione said, honestly puzzled. "Why is it that you have, well... 'Fairytale Fairy' Powers?"

"You're right," Reggie admitted. "Your run of the mill Christmas ornament fairy is weak as pumpkin-juice piss. However, Fairy Godmothers and Godfathers aren't the chickenshite, souped-up pygmy puffs that decorate Christmas trees. As long as a fairy or fairy-type being only uses its magic for its own self-protection, the magic stays puny. But if any such creature really, truly cares about the well-being of creatures other than itself, the magic sort of...mushrooms.

"I can't quite explain it 'cause I don't understand it. Nobody does. All I know is, if you care enough to want to help that badly, you get the juice to do it." She sighed. "It's one of the reasons there aren't a hell of a whole lot of Fairy Godmothers. The magic bloody well has a mind of its own, and it evidently wasn't finding enough female fairies to carry it on. The International Society of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Goooding beings was formed from the original Fairy Godmother's Club when the power started showing up in other magical creatures."

Excellent move, Reggie thought. Hermione knew a lecture when she heard it, and it was drawing her brain back into more familiar, methodical, logical patterns.

"I don't need you going psycho witch while I'm gone looking for Crankytrousers. Who can you go to?"

Hermione looked at her Fairy God-Jarvey, momentarily dumbfounded into a semblance of calm. "You want me to Apparate while I'm so upset that my subconscious uses my magic to start attacking **books**?" she asked.

"Okay, we need to get someone over *here* to fix you drinks or let you cry on their shoulder, or whatever contains the misery until I can retrieve Señor Snarky. Focus, doll. Who fits the bill?" she asked, banishing the first soaked hanky and producing another.

Hermione tried to think. Flora Randolph was one of the few Apprentice Healers whom she was close to, the only one who never so much as joked that the much younger apprentice was an upstart. Unlike Hermione, she had exemplary bedside manner. Also unlike Hermione, Flora was only bright as opposed to brilliant, so she needed to spend every nanosecond of time she could eek out with her textbooks. Neville was always a nice shoulder to cry on; never judgmental, always a great listener. But she was loath to wake him up and ask him to catch the last late night Portkey from Spain, especially since he and Lola had just recently gotten baby Alicia to start sleeping through the night.

It required no thought whatsoever to conclude that neither Harry nor Ron would be the least help in this particular situation. In fact, it would be best for the mental and physical health of all concerned parties if they never, ever, found out what had happened.

"Ginny," she finally said, with a residual sniff. "I'll go mad if I have to listen to anyone who might start clucking and tutting."

Reggie approved of that assessment. The last thing Hermione needed was someone to help her feel sorry for herself. "Okay, yeah, the Weasley brujita. Get her over here, de pronto. Where's your owl, babe?"

"Piglet's out hunting," Hermione said, her voice starting to quaver again. Her owl was a tiny little thing reminiscent of Pigwidgeon, a creature both agile enough to evade Crookshanks while awake and small enough to happily sleep in a cat- and Kneazle-proof cage suspended from the ceiling. It had been one of Ron's more thoughtful gifts while they had been together. Which of course, reminded her of previous failed relationships, of failure in general, and resumed the rapid downward spiral of her thoughts and feelings...

Reggie began to swear under her breath at the absent Snape while conjuring a third hanky. "Chingate, hombron! Why the fuck did you decide to make a ruddy arse of yourself with the lady while she's not only stressing, but PMS-ing?" At volume, she asked, "What else you got, mija?"

"I'm not connected to the Floo network. Could you go get her?" Hermione asked hopefully.

Regina sighed. "Sorry sweetie, no can do. La jefa is just looking for an excuse to have my arse for an ink blotter. I've already revealed my presence to your nasty old novio, but I can't go around introducing myself to all and sundry of your friends and relatives. Not unless you invite me to your wedding. Weddings and births, those are the only places where a Fairy Godmother can go out in public and be widely seen. I can't say what line of business I'm in, of course, but at least I don't have to concentrate on staying invisible," Reggie explained, launching back into a lecture.

Seeing her godchild's face start to crumple again, Reggie realized that mentioning weddings was possibly not the smartest move. She hastened to ask, "Has your amiga got one of those tellyphone-thingsies?"

Hermione all but slapped herself in the forehead. "Right! The mobiles Harry got for us... Did I put Ginny's number in my address book?" Realizing that both her landline and accompanying paperwork were buried somewhere in the debris field, she shook her head. "Never mind, it's programmed... where *is* that thing?" she asked, scrabbling through the pockets of each of her coats and for once inwardly blessing Harry's obsessive need to keep tabs on all his friends at any inconvenient hour of the day or night. *Please don't let Harry find out about this until it's all blown over*, she thought frantically. *I hate to have to incapacitate a friend, and frankly, I'm not sure I can take Harry down anymore...especially when he's in 'Snape hunting' mode...*

"I'll stay 'till I know she's coming, then go track down your Large-Nosed Wanker for you," Reggie said. She picked up the empty ring box in her teeth and waited to bolt out the door as soon as Hermione was done phoning.

Ginny Weasley was dead tired. Gringotts' Goblins were demanding taskmasters, especially when training a witch who dared to think she could master their particular brand of financial magic. So far, she was showing them...it turned out that if there was one thing Ginny did better than Quidditch and creative hexing, it was finances. But that didn't mean they'd let her off work early as a reward.

Mum had evidently Floo'd while she was at work and left her dinner. The implied lack of faith in her culinary skills would have been annoying had she not been so bloody hungry and altogether too tired to fix so much as a sandwich. She ate, brushed her teeth, and was contemplating whether she had enough energy to shower before going to bed, or wait until morning, when her mobile warbled merrily in the pocket of her business robes.

Ginny counted to three, hoping it would keep her from answering with profanity. It wouldn't be fair, really, since the only people who ever called her were Harry, Ron, Hermione, and occasionally Fred or George, when they nicked Ron's phone. (Neville alone had managed to stay clear of Harry's slightly barmy need to keep tabs on all his best friends. Whether through sheer absentmindedness or maritally-inspired canniness, he had managed to lose every phone Harry had given him and remained cheerfully and routinely in touch only by owl post.) Although mobile phones were slowly creeping into the Wizarding world through chat-addicted Muggle-borns, they were still only about as common as Yeti wool mittens. Not much chance of unwanted calls except for the odd wrong number.

Interestingly enough, they were the only Muggle technology that worked about as well in Wizarding environments as in Muggle ones.

"Hello," she answered, not bothering to hide her exhaustion.

"Ginny, I... Severus went storming out of here a bit ago and he's in a state, and I'm in a state, and...well, could you come over right away?" Hermione babbled.

This opening salvo left Ginny slightly alarmed. Hermione was, generally speaking, 'The Level-Headed One.' If *she* went off her broom, what hope was there for the rest of them? Then again, whenever her heart got involved, it always seemed a bit more than her head could handle...

"Slow down. What happened?" she asked, grimacing as she looked at the clock. No shower tonight.

"I was studying, and he came over unexpectedly, and I half threw him out, but it turns out he was here to...at least, I think he was...but now I don't know where he's gone so I can't clear up the misunderstanding!"

"Can't you...Oh, right. You *would* have a flat with no fireplace," she sighed.

"I've never really liked Floo-calling or being Floo-called. A girl wants to have the option of lying about on the sofa in nothing but her nightie without the chance of anyone who happens to know how to use the Floo-directory sticking his head into her living room."

Having not a few issues about that herself, Ginny was disinclined to argue. Maybe this would all make more sense in person. Or maybe she could just find Snape and relay a message so she could get to that shower after all. "Would you like me to Floo-call and see if he's home?" Ginny asked, stifling a yawn.

"Would you?" Hermione almost sobbed with relief.

A head full of ashes later, Ginny was fairly certain that Snape was not in that doxy trap masquerading as a house, and had resigned herself to hitting her body with a quick 'Scourgify' rather than having a more satisfying wash. "No luck, Hermione. I'll be over in a few, okay?" She cut off Hermione's thanks with the appropriate button and shoved the phone back in her pocket.

Tired or not, she'd help. Despite their own sometimes tumultuous relationship, Hermione had been there for her when she broke up with Harry. Granted, Ginny had done the dumping, but it hadn't been easy, and she hadn't been in the mood to have Mum alternately fussing over her and berating her. Hermione had listened to three hours of ranting, even though that act could easily have been misconstrued by Harry as taking sides.

Of course, Ginny had a sneaking suspicion that Hermione had also been there for Harry in the aftermath of the breakup... at least once... and not just in sense of offering a friendly ear. Since confirming that suspicion would result in significant psychological trauma (Ginny had never seen any two unrelated people more like a brother and sister than Harry and Hermione, and she would really rather not think of them together in *that* way), she was content to remain in blissful ignorance.

Speaking of the Floo...

Ginny set the outgoing message on her answering dummy. It was a lovely bit of spellwork, really, based on the idea of a Muggle answering machine. The charmed statuette was set up on the hearth and would immediately begin relaying the apologies of the absent witch or wizard. It could also record up to 20 messages (if they weren't too wordy) to be repeated when its owner returned. She was working on increasing its capacity as well as enabling it to recognize specific people and tailor the message accordingly.

However, the going was slow. Fred and George were willing to help, but only if she sold them through Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Ginny didn't want her invention to be seen as just another novelty item, and the twins were too invested in their business to let it take a back burner to her mission to revolutionize communication in the Wizarding world. What she really needed was a partner with some capital to invest and sufficient brain cells to serve as a useful sounding board.

Well, this wasn't the time to dwell on it. Hermione needed her, and probably also needed a stiff drink. Bugger. All she had was an indifferent bottle of Merlot, and no time to stop and buy anything. Better bring a bar of Ocumare chocolate, and her stash of 75% pure Dominican as well. Too bitter for most tastes, but it was the most effective legal mood enhancer in either the Wizarding or Muggle worlds, as far as she knew.

Ginny Weasley: Friend in need, ready for action.

Notes on Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary:

Caramba: Good grief (amazingly restrained for Reggie, I know)

Mija: contraction of 'mi hija'=my daughter. A term of affection and endearment.

De Pronto: quickly

Chingate: Fuck you (no surprises there)

Hombron: It literally means 'big man.' Sometimes it is translated as 'stud' or 'big bruiser,' but I was always taught that it has a negative connotation, and that in practice it is used in the sense of 'big bully.'

La jefa: the boss (feminine)

Novio: boyfriend, fiancé

Amiga: Friend (feminine)

Author's Notes:

I was going to include the citations on that research into the 'reversal' of hormones thing, but I can't find my notes. Since this is not a research paper and I am not being graded, I hope you will be satisfied with an apology and my assurances that I did read such research, and Reggie is not just talking through her tutu. This may be a goofy parody, but it's an educated goofy parody. I've never read a story where an 'answering dummy' was used; but if anyone out there has come up with something similar, I apologize...I couldn't steal that whose existence was unknown to me!

If you have access to Trader Joe's, they've got this little thing called the Chocolate Sampler. It's a flat, rectangular box full of deceptively innocuous-looking thin squares of 75%, 73%, and 70% pure cocoa, from the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Madagascar, respectively. They are sweetened...just. For those interested, both species and terroir matter with chocolate. Compare Chocovic's Varietal chocolates...Ocumare from Venezuela with Guaranda from Ecuador, both 72% cocoa...and taste the difference.

For anyone less a connoisseur of dark chocolate than I am, the Dominican will likely knock the roof of your mouth off. If you think that milk chocolate (or worse, that waxy white travesty) is chocolate, even the Madagascar (which I find to be almost cloyingly flowery) will probably taste like raw baking chocolate. As far as mood enhancement goes, I haven't had a doctor recommend Prozac since I started on this stuff. Yippee!

Dark chocolate and LariLee... My heroes!

3: I Dream of Genie With the... Light Gray Fur?

Chapter 3 of 7

Reggie has seen Severus in the aftermath of a bender. But she's never had the pleasure of bending an elbow with him. It's quite possible that even Trelawney could successfully predict a wee problem there. And why is Ginny suddenly sounding a bit like Reggie?

Disclaimer: No one who makes any significant amount of money has anything to do with this story, which rules out J.K. Rowling, et al, for sure. But you were clever enough to work that out for yourself.

Warning: More Fairy God-Jarvey not-so-bon mots ahead. Gratuitous intoxication. And Phones! Phones! Oh, the humanity!

Chapter 3: I Dream of Genie With the... Light Gray Fur?

Regina Fletcher was on a mission; time was of the essence. But turning Hermione over to Ginny had eaten precious minutes, and the trail was cooling.

The Jarvey began by retrieving the missing ring. Her breath left her in a hiss when she got a good look at it. This was one nice little bauble...red, yellow, white, and green gold, in four graceful, thread-thin intertwined strands, set with a tiny, pale blue stone. Startled, the Jarvey recognized that it was a real star sapphire, though a tiny one, and the color was the exact shade of the dress robes Hermione had worn to that ball almost two years ago. It was an unusual color for a sapphire, most likely a custom transfiguration job. She carefully replaced it in its classy leather box, feeling oddly choked up at the obvious thought and expense to which he had gone.

Her whiskers quivered over ring and box as she sniffed them for psychometric vibrations. Hmmm. Powerful emotions, indeed. Snape was snarky arse over teakettle in love with his witch, no doubt about that. She concentrated on detecting emotions beyond the powerful combination of affection and trepidation. Her little gray lips curled in a worried snarl. Rage and despair were the last emotions to touch the box, and a strong desire to disappear, never to be seen again.

Replacing the ring carefully in its velvet nest, Reggie squeezed it into the magical pocket in her tutu. One of these days, she would get the union to lobby for cargo vests instead of tutus as the standard on-duty uniform. Pockets were a damn sight more useful than pleats, and there was only so much she could cram into that little extra-dimensional space before things started going missing.

Reg sighed. She feared that her quarry would not have simply retreated to his lair. But she suspected he would have at least made a stop at the bar before burying himself in a secluded spot to drown his misery. "Snape Manor, it is," she muttered to herself, 'poofing' into solidity in the middle of the decidedly worse for wear parlor of the decidedly worse for wear house at Spinner's End.

"Oi! Snape! You home, you cranky old bastard?" she hollered, without much hope. Crapcakes... The bugger had been here quite recently, by the feel of it. And he hadn't bothered to reset his wards before leaving again. Not a good sign. Reggie hurried to the bathroom and found Pain and Hangover Relief Potions where they'd been on her last visit, noting with sad approval that the second vial was quite dusty. At least until tonight, the crazy mofo hadn't been imbibing to excess. Let's see, which one was the Sobering Potion? A flick of her tail, and another dusty vial lit up.

She wasn't carrying three slippery glass tubes in her jaws, and it would be better not to risk losing or breaking the vials in her magic pocket. The Jarvey Transfigured her tutu into a bandolier and filled it with the potions. Okay, so it wasn't a tutu anymore, but it still sort of encircled her body. And it was still pink. Hopefully this wouldn't count against her in the review of her probationary period. Bloody Mab.

Putting the sensitive Psychometric tools that were her whiskers to work once again, Reggie discovered where Snape had stood last before disappearing to wherever he'd gone. *Okay, old girl; focus on Mr. Miserable's thoughts and follow that wizard!* She thought fervently, and once again, 'poofed' out of sight.

Ginny sighed. Comforting people was not her specialty. She could handle Girl's Night Out, Quidditch With the Boys, Swimming with the Sharks in the cold, cruel waters of Business, Dodging Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes Gags Gone Horribly Awry (or worse, gone right), and Fights to the Death with Very Nasty Wizards. But growing up with six brothers made 'I'll go hex the bastard for you' her favorite reassuring phrase, and she knew that broom just wouldn't fly in this situation.

It didn't help that she couldn't for the life of her figure out what Hermione saw in the skinny old buzzard. She was left without a whole lot to work with in terms of reassurances. *Okay, start listening, Ginny,* she told herself. *Think business... let the other bloke go first, see if he gives away anything you can use.*

"I was just trying to play it safe... I didn't want to make any big decisions during examinations. And he somehow concluded I wanted to be quit of him!" Hermione wailed.

Ginny thought this would be fairly easy to do, considering some of the verbal gymnastics she had overheard during the painful two years Hermione and Ron had tried to make a go of it. For two people so prone to talking, they could be piss-poor at communicating. "I don't know how to break this to you, Hermione, but he isn't exactly Mr. Optimism. It never occurred to you that he would tend to interpret anything short of a declaration of undying love, well, negatively?"

"I know he has issues..." Hermione began.

"Issues? The *Daily Prophet* has 'issues.' Severus Snape has complexes that make Gringotts' vault system look like a one-room shack," she replied, unable to mask her incredulity.

"I suppose you think I should have tried to stick it out with Ron?" Hermione asked, starting to sound shrill again.

Ginny's face collapsed in exasperation. "Hermione, do I look like my Mum? I accept that you and Ron were doomed as an item. Maybe ol' Phlegm can stand being just one more Mrs. Weasley, but I can't imagine *you* wanting to let yourself get swallowed up by the out of control Devil's Snare that's the Weasley Family Tree." She gave a short laugh, hoping she sounded lighthearted. "I guess that's sort of the reason Harry and I couldn't make a go of it, either. I couldn't quite bring myself to go down in history as 'the-girl-who-snagged-the-Boy-Who-Lived,' any more than I'm interested in being 'just one more Weasley.'"

That assessment left out the key element in Ron and Hermione's breakup; to wit, she wanted to be a Quidditch Widow nearly as much as she wanted her cranium aerated. However, Hermione didn't bother to argue with Ginny, seeing as how the entire vermilion-coiffed Weasley tribe was absolutely Quidditch-obsessed and their range of reactions to pooh-poohing said sport ranged from polite disbelief to outright hostility.

Friends she and Ron would always be; but if they were stranded on a desert island together, they'd have to divide it in half straight off and agree just to meet for tea each day so as to avoid driving each other barking mad.

"Hullo, Hermione," Ginny called, making a megaphone of her hands. "Anything you want to share, or am I being helpful enough just warming this end of the couch?"

"He brought a ring," Hermione said quietly.

"WHAT?" Ginny yelled, hopping up on the couch before she came to her senses and sat back down. "Sorry, I must have heard you wrong."

"No, you heard right. He never gave it to me though, since we had our blow up before he could do whatever it was he was planning," she said, her voice flat and mournful.

"Then how do you know he brought it?" Gin asked.

"He threw it at the door as he was storming out, and I got a glimpse of it as it flew through the air," she answered with a sigh.

Hard-nosed business tendencies aside, Ginny was still very much female and wanted very much to ogle and judge her friend's engagement ring. "Where is it now?" she asked, trying not to sound too eager. Or drool.

"A friend of mine is using it to help track him," Hermione said carefully, remembering not to give away anything about Reggie. Not that Ginny would have believed it.

Ginny slumped back into the couch cushions, disappointed. "Bugger. So I guess we're just waiting here until your friend finds him and figures out whether or not he still wants to marry you after all that drama?"

"Basically," Hermione replied. "I guess I should try to study."

"Oh, absolutely," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "I saw what happened to the last pile of books that got in your way." One of the first things she had had to do upon entering the flat was help Hermione repair exploded textbooks. Somehow, Gin didn't think that Hermione's unintentional burst of magic had chosen that target at random.

Reminding Hermione of the book incident caused a surge of guilt, quickly replaced by anger at the man who'd made her so upset in the first place. "I hate wizards," she mumbled into her hands.

"There are always Muggles," Ginny retorted.

"I hate MEN," Hermione groaned, staring up at the ceiling.

"Well, that would certainly account for all your relationship problems," Ginny said, pulling out the Ocumare. "That leaves women and chocolate. I'm afraid I happen to like men most of the time, so all I can offer you is chocolate."

This managed to squeeze a snort of laughter out of Hermione. "I think that's the most complex entity I want a relationship with, just this minute." She took a bite of the proffered square, and shuddered. "Ooh, that's bitter."

"Yeah, but it's good," Ginny sighed, working on her own share. Comforting people was hard work, after all. She needed to keep up her strength.

"Wow. I think I see what you mean," Hermione said, feeling an odd sense of both rejuvenation and comfort extending from her mouth to her brain and trickling down through the rest of her body. "Have you told Remus about this stuff?"

"Of course. I send him a little care package whenever I get the chance, though I have to be careful about it."

"Careful?"

Ginny hesitated before replying. "It's...it's this weird thing with Tonks. At first I thought she just didn't like dark chocolate. She wouldn't be the first person who's more the chocolate frog type. But lately I'm getting the idea it's me she doesn't like. Almost as if she's... jealous, or something."

Hermione stared, slack-jawed. Ginny reflected that a chocolate-striped tongue is just not a flattering look for anybody.

"That's... completely bizarre. Do you have any idea why?"

Ginny's face began to glow with embarrassment. "Well, um... There was the matter of a Floo-call incident a while back... involving, um, a lack of clothing on my part."

"But that was accidental...wasn't it?" Hermione asked, deeply puzzled.

"Of course it was!" Ginny piped up quickly. "But I guess...I guess he explained it to her poorly. Oh, and waited a few months before mentioning it."

"Wizards," Hermione snorted.

"Men," Ginny scoffed.

"At least there's still chocolate," Hermione sighed, finishing off her square. It wasn't so bad, once you got the hang of it.

"For which we can be grateful," Ginny grumbled. What with work being so consuming, chocolate was all the satisfaction she'd been getting lately. She wasn't desperate enough to consider dating a goblin...yet.

The Jarvey appeared at the mouth of a particularly small and disagreeably smelling cave. She wasn't fooled, though the illusion was most accomplished. Ducking past the screen of fake tiny gnawed bones, she proceeded to the real cave opening, and the dank room beyond.

One look at Snape had Reggie shaking her silvery noggin in exasperation and dismay. Except for the lack of drooping feathers in his hair, the figure hunched over an upended barrel (which served as a display table for his empty liquor bottle collection) was a tall, dark, mirror image of Hermione's misery. A thin sigh escaped her. *Why couldn't the two whacked-out wand jockeys just say how they felt straight away, and save me having to play Dr. Reggie, Relationship Counselor?* she fretted inwardly.

Reggie decided to wait until Severus had a few more glasses before approaching him. Drunkenness notched his hazard level down from lethal to bloody damned dangerous. The Jarvey would really prefer him to be securely restrained. However, considering she needed to secure a measure of good will from him and that tying him up was not conducive toward that end, she'd take what she could get.

The last of the Ogden's was disappearing, and he had not yet begun to contemplate which bottle he would attack next when Regina Fletcher made her presence known.

"Didn't I tell you booze is no beauty treatment, arsehole?" she scolded him, bounding up to the surface of the makeshift table. "Quit trying to drown your sorrows, amigo. You've done it so many times those motherfuckers have learned to swim."

Just what he needed. The beast he didn't quite believe in to have another go at matching him with a witch who didn't quite need him. "Not again," he groaned. "What the hell are you, anyway...the Ogden's Firewhisky Genie? I rub the bottle and you magically appear."

"So don't rub the damn bottle," she said. "Part of my job as Fairy God-Jarvey is to save you from yourself."

"Remind me again how that works," he muttered indistinctly.

"You desire something of which you are reasonably deserving. You fuck up trying to get it. I come and extricate you from the pile of shite you've amassed for yourself. It's really quite simple," she explained.

Snape grunted and reached for another bottle. Hmm, very dusty label on this one. Oh, wait. That was his eyes unfocusing. No, the label was so old it had faded to illegibility. *What the hell is in this bottle, anyway? Damned label, stop moving! Not the right shape for Firewhisky. Perhaps a sniff... whoa. Strong stuff, whatever it is. Definitely not some poncey brandy from Lucius. Maybe a bottle of Karkaroff's favorite Glaciervodka? Ah, well, here goes nothing...*

Oberon's Speedo, what is the loco bugger trying to drink now? Regina thought frantically, as she watched him struggle with the top on the mystery bottle. She had to get the man's attention while he still possessed a few functioning brain cells. Perhaps a change in tactics was in order.

The Jarvey whipped her tail at an empty bottle and transfigured a small glass for herself. "Pour me some of that rotgut, you greedy buzzard! If you insist on washing your sodding liver out to sea, the least I can do is keep it company on the trip," she quipped.

Who is this rodent, and why does it want a drink? Draco? Wait... No, it's that bloody Jarvey. "Haven't you got any rules against drinking whilst on duty?" he asked. *See, I'm not that drunk,* he thought with relief. *I can be suspicious, if necessary*

"If there is such a rule, the pillock what made it never had to help your sorry arse," Regina sniped. *Let's see, Sobering Potion in the top vial, hangover in the second, pain relief in the third,* she rehearsed silently. *I hope to hell I don't puke and drop the lot before I have a chance to force them down Sir Snark-a-Lot's gullet*

He unsteadily poured a splash for the Jarvey, who lapped up a drop and promptly choked. "Chingate!" she finally gasped, clinging to the rim of the glass. "How can you drink this dragon piss? If you have any taste, hombron, it's sure as hell not in your mouth." Holy crap, the cave was spinning. Had it been doing that when she first showed up?

"Lightweight," he snorted, and with a smirk, downed his glass.

Snape had never heard of a liquid Portkey, but there was a first time for everything, he supposed. It would certainly explain the sudden sensation of being sucked clockwise through a sausage-casing, navel first, in the dark. *Where am I?* Snape thought dizzily. *More to the point, who am I?*

"Who am... oh, right. I'm that bastard killed dear old Albus," he moaned, his head listing precariously on his shoulders, dropping his impressive nose down to where it hovered close to the rim of the glass.

"Uh-uh. You were cleared of that... you did what you had to do, Crankytrousers. Dear ol' Albus Dumblydore said in his very own posu- poshtu- possumus...after he was dead...words that you were following his orders," Regina said, shaking her paw at him admonishingly and almost tipping herself over in the process. "Y'know, with your nose hanging over the tumbler like that, you look like the world's ugliest hummingbird," she added, apropos of nothing.

Spinning slowing down... wherever he was going, he must have arrived. What a depressing thought. "Who the hell was I kidding?" he whimpered. "I'm no catch. I can't live without her, and I'm not good enough to live with her. What woman wants to marry the...what did you call me?"

"Don't remember," the Jarvey replied, honestly puzzled. She normally had better recall than that. What was going on here? "I dunno 'bout *women*. But 'at cute lil' witsch, *Hermione*, likesh you, sorry bugger that you are. I even like you, right now." *Whoa, crap. Drunk Fairy God-Jarvey on duty. This is going nowhere good, on a fast broom.*

"How do you know she likes me?" he asked, miserably. "When you go around handing out 'heart's desires,' how d'you figure out if they desire each other? *Did any of that make sense?*" he wondered fuzzily.

"Its...itsh one of those things," she replied, trying to remember not to give away whose God-Jarvey she actually was. Wait a moment... whose was she, again? "I was jusht at her flat. She's heartbroken. You gotta go back to her. She's gonna dry up like a hydrangea in the Sahara if she keeps crying like that. Don' be a shtupid wanker...again. How did you manage as a shpy, being shucha lush?" Hmmm. Why couldn't she feel her tongue, all of a sudden?

Snape straightened up partially and managed a passable imitation of his trademarked contemptuous expression. "Are you mad? I din' drink when I was spying. I'm not su-i-ci-dal," he pronounced very carefully. He realized he had to say things slowly and carefully; otherwise all he could hear from his mouth was a sound like bees buzzing. "Uh-oh... I can't... feel... my cheeks. My whole face is numb. Am I talking funny?" he asked very earnestly, putting all his effort into staying upright and not cutting the ends off any of his words.

Reggie wobbled up to him and unsteadily rose to her hind legs, patting his face clumsily with her paw. "Nah, your ugly ol' mug doeshn't feel numb to me, honey. And I haven't heard you shay one funny shing."

He squinted at the Jarvey from the corner of his eye. He didn't recall giving this thing permission to enter his personal space. Actually, he didn't recall which direction was 'up' just this moment, but he didn't see that as a reasonable excuse for the insufferable beast to be fondling his face. "Don't touch me... you foul... ferret," he protested.

"Admit it. You shink I'm cute," Reggie cooed, turning her sparkly little crossed eyes on him at full diabolical twinkle. *Gee, he has a lovely snout for a human.* she thought mistily.

Hell, no, he wasn't going to admit how cute the furry little irritant was. "I hate, I-loathe, and des-shpise every hair on your narshty lil' body," he slurred, paradoxically chucking her under the chin as he said it. Speaking clearly wasn't as important as he once thought. It was quite liberating to let the words wobble out his lips any way they pleased.

While on the subject of tactile pleasures... what a nice, soft thing this annoying beast was. Maybe there was something to be said for having a fuzzy little creature as a familiar. But having one that talked was more trouble than it was worth.

"That's jusht the drinkies talking, Sevvie honey," she simpered, snuggling up to his hand. Somewhere, the three or four professional neurons not yet awash in potent potables shrieked at her to remember she was on a mission, and she struggled to focus on them.

Severus frowned and shook his head, making the room whirl cheerfully again. His stomach was not cheerful about this, possibly because it was inclined to whirl in the opposite direction. "No, no, I'm quite certain it's-ah... me. See, my lipsh are moving and everything. Even sounds-a lil' like me, jus' shorta slurred," he argued solemnly.

"Lish-listen to me, sweetie. You are serushy- sher- real drunk. So'm I. We gotta get bright and get back to your cute lil' cha-cha. She's in luuuuurve with you, an' you're breaking her pretty lil' heart, you big bully," she scolded him.

Wonderful. Now the Amazing Talking Dust Rag gives lectures and guilt trips. It was only cute when its mouth was shut she decided. *Someone make the thing go away.* "Pleash, jus' bugger off like a good lil' polecat," he begged.

He said 'please', Regina realized, something that scared her half sober.

This was an impressive feat, considering that Voldemort popping out from under the table and shouting 'Surprise' wouldn't be enough to scare either of them completely sober, at this point. Though it might have helped them down that path, without any particular danger to either of their persons. They could have handily knocked him unconscious with their collective breath until reinforcements arrived.

"No. Fucking. Way. I just called you 'Sevvie' and you didn't even threaten me. Once you've sobered up, you'll *Avada* my fuzzy little arse, assuming you remember anything. I hate to think how much you imbibed to make you actually say 'please.' No, this party is so fucking over. Have another drink for the road, babe," Reggie hiccupped, slipping the Sobering Potion from her bandolier and tipping most of it into his empty glass. She quickly took a healthy lick of what was left, and instantly regretted it. Apparently the stuff they had been drinking did not take kindly to any attempts to usurp its sovereignty over one's synapses.

"Not going to *Avada* anyone. Never again," Snape muttered, morosely. He chugged the contents of the glass and gasped. "You're trying to poison me, you bloody stoat! What the hell was... ohhh... shouldn't have drunk from that bottle with the wandering label..." he began to grip his head, grimacing. His stomach wasn't exactly a happy bunny, either. The thought flickered briefly through his mind, *'Have I ever actually felt green before?'*

"Hangover relief, your own brand," she said, pulling the second vial from her bandolier and taking a quick sip before passing it on. "Gack! Now I know why that liquid lightning didn't faze you, Snarkarse. It can't possibly taste worse than the shite you brew to counteract it."

Snape was actually feeling quite fazed, thank you. He really had to give up on drinking-as-therapy. He'd heard the female of the species often dealt with misery via chocolate. As long as no one found out he had gone soft enough to take the option favored by witches and werewolves...

Blast. That rotten rodent was talking to him again.

"Come on now...be a nice pervy old bastard and go home to your little hoochy. I know she's not underage any more, but she's still cute enough that you can pretend," Reg said coaxingly.

"She doesn't want me back. She threw me out!" he said angrily, ignoring the deviant implications of the Jarvey's comments.

"Yeah, I've got a ten-foot Wizarding photo of that, Big-Time Duelist. Right next to the one of you in ruffled lavender robes, flamenco dancing. Did she Petrify and then Levitate you while your back was turned, or did the teensy little brujita just strong arm you out the door?" Reggie scoffed.

"She made it quite clear I wasn't wanted," he said, glowering.

"It was a misunderstanding! Why didn't you just propose, instead of trying to shag the snot out of her first?"

"I was setting the mood," he grumbled. It sounded bloody lame just now.

Reggie's silvery body sagged dejectedly in several places. "Fucking hell! The woman was on the verge of the screaming haddabs between exams from Hell and PMS from a similar address, *told you* that she couldn't see you until the situation calmed down...and you figure that this would be a time she'd be amenable to any 'mood' other than 'homicidally irritable'?"

Snape decided he would simply disregard all of this, since it implied some of the blame for this mess might lie with him. "She never told her parents about me. She was never serious about this in the first place," he sulked, changing the subject.

"She was covering her arse! She's got two serious relationships, one engagement, gone down the crapper on her curriculum vitae! For shite's sake, as if YOU, Mr. Double Agent, never hedged a bet in your life!" she squeaked at him in exasperation.

"She attacked me! Look at this," he whinged, rolling up his sleeve to reveal all the sizzling little red zap marks from Hermione's display of wandless magic.

"Oh, pobrecito. She didn't do it intentionally, you know. Girlfriend was blowing things up left and right...so the fact that even on a subconscious level she was able to refrain from popping your bollocks like water balloons says heaps about the fact that she doesn't intend to do you any lasting harm. How's about you take a potion and get over it? Or do you need me to kiss them and make them better?" Reggie asked saucily, tossing the vial of Pain Relief Potion on the table.

Snape decided that focusing on the pink bandolier would at least start the process of mentally shutting out the graphic image of 'how it could have been worse.' "Look, it's obviously over. There's nothing you can do to pull this one out of the U-bend, you Walking Bolster Pillow with a Pancho Villa Complex. I survived the first forty-five... odd... years of my life without anyone in particular sharing it. I imagine I shall manage whatever is left of it just fine, thanks," he groused tiredly. "And it's not as if she couldn't do better."

Reggie looked down at her bandolier and hastily changed it back into a tutu. No use racking up more negative points for her next probation hearing. "Right. You're just bloody fine-as-Acromantula-silk. You're not a wizard, you're actually a genie. That's why you keep trying to crawl back into a bottle of some description whenever things go badly," she spit sarcastically. "And you've got a piss-poor idea of what I can and can't do, as has been demonstrated on prior occasions."

"Oh, really? Well, tell me, O Fuzzy-Genie-of-the-Firewhisky-Bottle, what the hell can you do, exactly?" he snapped.

Reggie couldn't resist a challenge. In fact, they rather inspired her. "Consider yourself kidnapped, arsewipe. We're going to see the Candy Man," she said, hopped on his shoulder, and caused them both to disappear...hoping that she wouldn't leave any part of him behind at the cave. She'd never 'poofed' anything larger than herself before.

Things were quieting down. A whole bunch of *'Reparo'* had tended to the shattered glasses and damaged books, and most of a bar of Ocumare had attended to Hermione. Ginny reflected that Snape was lucky, indeed, that he hadn't been hit with whatever Hermione had done to the rest of the flat. All the Healers at St. Mungo's wouldn't have been able to put him back together again.

So when Ginny's phone rang, breaking the relative calm, she quite understandably grimaced. "It had better not be Fred and George asking for me to come back to work for them," she threatened. She looked at the display and swore.

"Twins?" Hermione asked.

"Worse. Harry," Ginny replied.

She sighed. There was no way she could ignore him. There were times when Ginny would gladly have given him back the mobile if she'd thought he could stand it. Once Harry started burning anytime minutes, he was serious about getting in touch with someone. You ignored a call from Harry at the risk of winding up with a face full of frantic Auror, wand drawn and demanding to know if you were still in one piece.

Sometimes, if you closed your eyes and mentally modulated the voice, it was almost as if Mad-Eye Moody had come back to life.

"Hi, Harry," Ginny said, trying to sound relaxed.

"Hi, Ginny. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important. Ron's at The Burrow for the week and really wanted to get in touch with you, but he got your answering dummy," Harry said by way of explanation.

The sole Weasley sister couldn't work out just why it was that Professor McGonagall had always thought all Gryffindor-based disasters had their source in Neville Longbottom. From Ginny's perspective, Ron accounted for a fair number. "Why couldn't Ron ring me himself?"

Harry snorted. "Your Dad nicked his phone again," he explained.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Why am I not surprised? It had to be either him or the twins. I love Dad dearly, but I swear his Animagus form would be a Niffler with an inordinate

attraction to shiny little bits of Muggle technology. All right, put Ron on."

Harry's voice took on the character of a muffled yell. "Ron, get your arse back in here!"

"He's the one who wants to talk to me and he runs off?" Ginny asked, by now thoroughly exasperated. She hoped to Hecate that Ron would get on the phone and get whatever it was off his chest before Harry had time to start getting curious.

"Don't ask me to explain Ron...he's *your* brother. So, where are you?" he asked

So much for getting Harry, the semi-paranoid Auror, off the phone before he could start snooping. Ginny thought. "He's *your* best friend," she retorted. "I'm at Hermione's."

The phone went silent a moment as Harry struggled with a pang of conscience. Trying to sound nonchalant, he asked, "I, ah, haven't talked to her in a bit...why don't you put her on?"

Funny how well guilt carries over even mediocre cell transmission. Ginny knew that ever since Hermione started seeing Snape, Harry and Ron had been hesitant to call, much less visit. And it would be best for all and sundry if that hesitancy lasted at least through tonight.

"Um, she can't talk just now," Ginny equivocated, checking Hermione's expression from the corner of her eye for confirmation and detecting a flicker of relief. At least her assessment that Hermione would not find Harry all that comforting at the moment was correct. Now, if only she could head off the Wizarding world's were-bloodhound/pit bull, they would manage. Why hadn't wizards invented something like mobile phones? They were incredibly useful things when you were lying through your teeth long distance.

The voice on the other end lost the guilt edge and acquired one of suspicion. "Are you really with Hermione, or is there something...or someone...you haven't told me about?"

"I swear, you're sounding as paranoid as Moody. Hermione's in the loo, you prat. I *am* not hiding some new boyfriend. Does Luna know you're asking me this?" Ginny asked, scandalized.

"I'm only asking as a friend," Harry responded in a hurt tone of voice. "Oh, wait...it's near time for Hermione's exams, isn't it?"

If Ginny thought hard, she might be able to recall a moment at which she felt her anxiety whip away more rapidly. "Yes! She's well, a little *intense* right now."

Harry laughed, sounding much more relaxed. Ginny was so relaxed she almost tipped over. No, wait, that was fainting from relief. "She's obsessing as usual? Why am I not surprised? Hang on till she's out, let me have a word or two with our favorite genius," Harry coaxed.

Damn! This was not going well. She couldn't wait all night, and Harry wouldn't. "Ah, she's just come out...I'll put her on." Ginny mentally crossed her fingers and covered the receiver. "He wants to tell you to relax about your exams," she hissed at Hermione as she quickly passed the phone over.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione said, thinking her voice sounded rather well, considering. "I can't talk long...I've got a few last minute things to review."

"Hi, Hermione. Don't tell me you actually think there's something you still don't know!" he teased.

"You can never be too prepared," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "Let's say I call you Monday when it's over, and maybe we'll have dinner? It's been a while."

"Sounds good to me. Well, I won't keep you from your beloved notes any longer," Harry said. "Hand me back to Ginny, and I'll see if I can figure out where Ron has got to. 'Bye, luv.'"

"Bye," Hermione said quickly, choking back a fresh wave of grief. She had been hoping to celebrate with Severus after her exams.

Ginny took back the phone with a smile, confident that disaster had been averted. Harry's next words wiped the smile off her face.

"Why has Hermione been crying?" Harry asked sternly.

Crap, Ginny thought fiercely. *He's using his interrogator voice. This is **not** good.* "No, that's not...why would she..."

"Ginny," Harry asked, warningly. "Do I have to Apparate over there and find out for myself?"

"Well, yes, maybe just a bit," Ginny tried to pass it off. "She's under a lot of stress."

Too late. All Harry's instincts were in full bloodhound mode. He reviewed his brief conversation with Hermione and bristled. "She hasn't invited me to eat with her since she and Snape became an item! There's some trouble there, isn't there? What has he done?"

"Harry, it's not what you..." Ginny stopped, almost hearing him glower on the other end. "Okay, so she and Snape had a bit of a row, but *we're* managing it," she continued through clenched teeth. This was bad. Very bad. Very, VERY bad...

With a jerk of his wand, Harry cast a Silencing Spell. He may have been as mad as hell, but he wasn't rude enough to disturb Arthur and Molly. Especially since they might deem it prudent to Stupefy him lest he run off and do something detrimental to his position of trust, once they had an inkling of what was bothering him.

"WHAT DID HE DO? By God, when I'm done there won't be Pygmy Puff pellets left of him!" he thundered.

"*He isn't here!* Keep your voice down, or you won't need the phone!" Ginny all but shouted back. Amazing how easy it was to slip back into argument mode with Harry.

"Fine! When I hunt the bastard *down*...again...he'll have to be interred in a matchbox!" he fumed, a little more quietly.

"No, no, NO! You are NOT going to 'hunt the'...never mind! Hermione says someone is looking for him now," she hissed, casting worried glances at the distress on her friend's face.

"Will you tell me what happened already? Or do I have to come over there and question you in person?" he demanded.

"It was a misunderstanding, and it's being sorted! Leave it, Mr. Heir-to-Moody," Ginny warned.

"Fine. I'll find out for myself just what sort of 'misunderstanding' has Hermione, the most reasonable person I know, crying," Harry said flatly. It was amazing, and rather scary, how he could seethe almost audibly without any of it actually showing in his voice.

"No, Harry," Ginny said frantically, and when she heard nothing from the other end, nearly shrieked, "Are you listening to me? NO, HARRY!"

"I'm going over there shortly," he replied as placidly as if he were talking about meeting for tea.

"Is the connection faulty? Or do you just need help with the word 'no'?" she asked.

"Oh, Ron's here," Harry continued in that calm tone, oblivious to Ginny's growing distress and vehement insistence that he butt the hell out. Faintly, she heard him say,

"Forget whatever it was, we have bigger fish to fry. Snape's finally done it."

When Ginny heard 'Ron's here,' her brain briefly shut down and she wildly hoped that her brother would take the initiative, wrestle the phone from Harry, and give him a few minutes to cool off. This was primarily because Ginny was quite tired and not quite in her right mind at the moment. She missed the last part of his statement. "Good. What?" she asked, confused at her brain suddenly registering the mention of fish.

"We'll be there in no time, Hermione!" she could hear Ron calling loudly in the background.

"Not a good idea..." Gin warned.

"We'll Apparate right over," Harry said, and rang off.

"We?" Ginny mouthed, glancing at Hermione's apprehensive expression.

Shite. Shite. Shite. Hermione was finally calm, and now Harry was coming over. Bringing Ron.

This was going to get ugly.

Author's Note:

Pobrecito: You poor thing (masculine form) Obviously, Reggie is employing it sarcastically.

Psychometry is the technical term for the ability to handle an object and detect the emotions of the last person to touch it (among other things) by sensing the psychic signature left behind. It works best for intense emotions or objects that have been held or worn by the target for an extended period of time.

Fairy God-Thingies don't use Wizarding magic, which accounts for the lack of appropriate spell-words when Reggie does her little tail-wiggling thing. This includes Apparition...hence the 'poofing.' It may be a parody, but I DO try to maintain internal logic. Believe it or not, as long as the original Fairy God-Jarvey story was, it could have been longer. As you can see, there were plenty of details about the abilities and motivations of Fairy Godmothers, which simply had to be ignored in my futile attempt to make the story a one-shot. It was a terrible detriment to that otherwise serious tale, I know.

There was no suggestion of bestiality in this chapter. Just two characters having their snark temporarily disabled (by a hazardous substance which probably should not have been consumed recreationally...more on this later) and who were, as a result, a little chummier than normal.

Thanks to Keladry Lupin and Broomclosetravelnclaw for writing a little drabble o' risqué-ness on Potter Place a while back, which suggested a scenario in which Ginny isn't a big fan of the Floo, Tonks isn't a big fan of Ginny, and Remus is still really, really, embarrassed!

(Bowling to LariLee) Beta reading this comedy shtick takes patience, understanding, amazing intellect, and the constitution of a giant. All I possess that qualifies me to write it is a moderate proficiency in written English and nerves of Flubber. You tell me who deserves the lion's share of the praise.

4: The Gryffindors Must Be Crazy

Chapter 4 of 7

Does Reggie really think kidnapping Severus will do anything towards making him a happy bunny? And do any of you seriously think Harry and Ron are going to be any help comforting Hermione? Me neither. Let's read.

Disclaimer: By golly, if they were mine, I'd feel right sorry for them just this minute. Since they aren't... eh. Oh, and I apologize in advance for the title of this chapter, since I imagine SOMEONE in fandom must have used it before me. It's too tempting to pass up.

Warning: Everyone uses bad language in this chapter. And I do mean EVERYONE. Oh, and there are more phones. But they don't say anything. Ring tones don't count.

Neither Harry nor Ron could remember the original reason for calling Ginny. That reason was unimportant now. The only important thing now was...

The Plan.

Ever since they had discovered Hermione's relationship with Snape, they had agreed it was doomed. Although even Harry finally conceded that Hermione was simply going through one of her more 'mental' phases, rather than being under the Imperius Curse or some other form of duress. Regardless, they had both remained as certain that he would eventually hurt her as if they had access to a nice little bubble in the Department of Mysteries prophesying to that effect.

Thus, they had devised **The Plan**.

Would that the lads had been so methodical in their efforts to search for Horcruxes.

Harry ended the Silencing Charm. If he forgot and left it in place, Molly would be asking pointed questions in the morning...of Ron, who would break like a wand in a Hippogriff's beak. It wasn't just the 'Mother Effect,' either. That witch could give Aurors lessons in interrogation.

They regarded each other gravely across the Weasley kitchen table, speaking in low voices to avoid waking Molly and Arthur. "All right, Ron, it's finally happened. You remember what to do, right?"

"We don't offer to track him down and hex him. We don't call him names. We don't offer to introduce her to anyone else just yet. We definitely, under no circumstances, say, 'We told you so,'" Ron recited dutifully.

"Okay, that's what we *don't* do. I'm asking if you're clear on what *wedo*," Harry reiterated.

"I'm taking them in order. It's easier to remember that way," Ron answered patiently. He had made an important discovery about both Harry and Hermione during the course of their mutual friendship. Arguing with either of them was like trying to argue with Mum...if you were fool enough, you could yell yourself hoarse and still end up where you started, if not behind. Quiet inertia worked much better. Eventually they either gave up, or gave in and met you halfway.

Harry glowered at him and began to review the pertinent portion of the plan. "We are going to remind her that we have always been her friends and always will be. We will remind her that she is intelligent, beautiful, and one of the most eligible witches alive. We are going to let her cry on our shoulders if necessary, either separately or collectively, until she gets it all out of her system. The key word is *supportive*."

"Right," Ron replied, swallowing hard. He had a bad feeling this would end in hexes and other modes of disturbing the peace, but he was nothing if not a loyal friend. Plus he hadn't any better ideas, aside from leaving Ginny to clear it up; and the only way to successfully suggest that to Harry would be to hit him with a full Body-Bind first.

"Let's go," Harry said, with all the seriousness of someone preparing to lead a raid on a nest of fugitive Death Eaters.

Which, if they did this badly, might not be such an inept comparison.

Harry and Ron walked briskly from the Apparition point. The lateness of the hour made for sparsely populated streets. Still, there was no use taking the risk of being seen popping into sight right on Hermione's doorstep, nor in being rude and doing so in her living room.

When they got to the door, Harry took point and knocked softly. "Hermione?" he called gently, in the sort of tone one uses on distraught children and injured animals. "It's Harry and Ron. Please let us in."

Hermione put her head in her hands, feeling the tears try to leak out of her eyes again. Harry's 'sweet' voice reminded her of being comforted by her Mum, which reminded her of approximately sixty-five percent of the bad things that had happened in her life thus far. Not a good recipe for holding back the floodgates.

Ginny, whose vocabulary for the last ten minutes had been reduced to sotto voce iterations of 'crap,' almost dragged her feet as she went to answer the door.

"Hi, Ginny," Harry said perfunctorily as he hurried over to the couch, where Hermione was trying to rein in her trepidation. Ron glanced at his sister and shrugged apologetically as he moved to take his place on the other side of Hermione. Ginny rolled her eyes at him and nodded. It was universal Friend-of-Harry-Speak for 'He's probably going to be checking up on us at least once daily for the rest of our natural lives, and we'd best just learn to avoid cringing every time he upgrades the mobiles.'

Ginny retreated behind the tiled counter separating the sitting/dining area from the kitchenette. Not only was there insufficient space on the laughable excuse for a sofa for all four of them, but she also thought it might be prudent to place the bar between herself and any hexes Harry and Ron might elicit from a distraught Hermione.

Being Gryffindor did not equal being suicidally foolish. At least, not for this Weasley. Ginny had spent a lifetime watching her dear but interfering mother and her dear but interfering friend Hermione collect stray Kneazles and causes the way some people collected Chocolate Frog Cards. Based upon their experiences she had decided that sometimes, the best way to help someone was to simply let them make their own mistakes, learn from them, and have sufficient tact to refrain from saying, 'I told you so,' as you handed over your last clean handkerchief.

Really, behind the counter was the most strategic position. Handkerchief: check. Chocolate: check. Wine: check. Wand in hand, ready to cast Shield Charms repeatedly in the event Ron or Harry 'comforted' Hermione to the point where she lost it completely: double check.

Harry clasped Hermione's hand, looking at her with his sorrowful green eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked solemnly, still using the 'addressing an injured bird voice.'

Ron decided echoing Harry was a pretty safe strategy for the moment. "Yes, what...what happened?" He had almost asked, 'What did that miserable git do to you?' but stopped himself just in time. *Okay, Ron... keep your gob shut. Pat her shoulder, there's a lad... Harry can handle the verbal bit. He's the sensitive one.*

Oh, God... Harry's being so... sweet. I'm going to cry so hard I'll asphyxiate on my own tears. Hermione thought desperately. *How do I counteract it?*

"Oh, Ron," she sobbed, turning away from Harry slightly and leaning on the tall redhead.

Harry was feeling just a bit put out. *Aren't I the sensitive one?* he thought plaintively as he was relegated to patting her knee.

For Ron's part, his desire to cling to Hermione like a human Devil's Snare had diminished rapidly once he realized an engagement ring did nothing to stem the flow of roughly eight years of nagging. Not that he didn't appreciate her invaluable assistance editing...okay, rewriting...most of his school essays... Or that she had saved him from academic disaster on numerous occasions by forcing him to study (at wand-point, if necessary)... Or the nice, if a little plump, figure that accompanied her extraordinary brain. But he'd already endured six years of bossing, ordering, and occasional bullying from her by the time they officially became an item. Which basically made him feel as if they'd already been married, thanks very much, and the honeymoon was definitely over. Being 'just friends' suited him.

"It's okay, Hermione," he said awkwardly. "I mean, whatever happened... was it really so bad?"

"I'd really rather not talk about it," she sniffed.

Ron sighed. "You know that no matter what, Harry and I are here for you," he whispered.

"I know," Hermione said between sniffs.

"It's terribly unfair, isn't it?" he asked tentatively, rubbing her back. One didn't need an 'Outstanding' in Arithmancy to figure out that, under the circumstances, one could work back from 'crying Hermione' and discover 'Snape-plus-unfair.'

"Why does it always end so badly?" she asked mournfully.

Wow, Harry and Ginny both thought, from their respective sides of the counter. Ron was... managing.

"You poor thing," he soothed, thinking of Mum. That seemed to be one of her favorite expressions. "You deserve so much better."

Wait a minute... Was he... feeling sorry for her? "I DON'T WANT OR NEED YOUR PITY!" Hermione shrieked, pulling back suddenly.

If I could change directions that fast on a broom, they'd name a Quidditch Play after me. Ron thought, dazed. "What? No! I..."

Hermione, in no mood for explanations, whipped out her wand and directed some very irate birds Ron's way.

"Shite! What is it with you and canaries?" he yelped, jerking back and scrambling away from the chirping onslaught as he fumbled for his wand. *This is why I'm not an Auror*, he thought grimly. *Bloody nuisance, always having to be ready to duel at a moment's notice.* "Merlin's hairy arse, HELP!"

Harry deftly banished the canaries, noting their ominous black color. He would have to proceed very, very cautiously... Which was difficult, considering the distracting squeaking sound from behind the kitchen counter. Either Hermione had a malfunctioning charmed teakettle, or Ginny was having an unhelpful attack of the giggles back there. *You're being supportive, Harry. No yelling...at anyone*, he reminded himself.

"Ron," Harry said wearily, "you are the best friend a fellow could ask for. There is no doubt in my mind or anyone else's that you're trying to help. But there's absolutely nothing for it. You get within ten feet of Hermione when she's feeling overwrought, and you instantly develop a terminal case of foot-in-mouth."

"I think I've noticed," said Ron. "How 'bout I keep my mouth shut and make tea?" Without waiting for an answer, he dashed behind the counter and started summoning the

necessary utensils from Hermione's cupboards.

Amazing, Ginny thought, as she watched him bustle about in a manner that would have done Mum proud *He's learning. It only took half a lifetime and...five? six?...different occasions of being attacked by irate little birdies before he worked out that his best shot at being a comfort is getting the tea.*

Ron sat down beside Ginny, taking advantage of cover while the kettle simmered and Harry, with his most soothing voice, tried to convince Hermione to do otherwise.

"Glad to see someone's having fun here," he grumbled as a residual giggle escaped her.

Gin spared him a disgruntled look. "Oh, loads," she snorted. "After a long day at Gringotts, I thought to myself, 'Eh, that shower can wait until tomorrow. What I really need right now is a rousing evening of watching Hermione pitch the bitch all over most of the wizards she's...'" Ginny broke off, deciding that 'Hermione,' 'Ron,' 'Harry,' 'Snape,' and 'shag,' were NOT concepts she was emotionally ready to link in a single sentence. Besides, she really wasn't sure about what might have happened with Harry. "Give over, you prat. I'm here for the same reason you are...Hufflepuffs don't have the market cornered on loyalty."

"We could use a few good Hufflepuffs right now," Ron said. "They always seem to be better at this sort of thing."

"Yes, well, Hermione's friend Flora isn't available," Ginny sighed.

Ron smiled a little dreamily. "I like Flora... She's pretty, sweet, quiet..."

"Five years older than you, and a thousand times more mature," Ginny interjected.

"Nobody's perfect," Ron said philosophically.

On the other side of the counter, Harry was trying his best to take up where Ron had left off...when he'd been doing well, that is. To be honest, he was beginning to wish there were a few good Hufflepuffs at hand. Neville would do. Offhand, Harry couldn't think of a single Gryffindor who exceeded Neville Longbottom at being understanding, loyal, and kind. Although no one would ever think of him as soft anymore; not with the peg leg, pretty wife (who'd been his adoring nurse) and Order of Merlin, First Class to remind everyone just who had been the hero during that surprise raid on St. Mungo's.

He would have rung Luna for help. She was at least distracting, if not specifically comforting; but she refused to use telephones of any description, which drove him to distraction, considering she held the top spot in his affections. Specifically, she insisted that mobile phones were part of a conspiracy involving the Ministry of Magic, foreign Muggle businessmen, and inculcating people everywhere with mindless devotion to the Pygmy Puff Lord. Harry was beginning to suspect she didn't believe every one of her own wild stories, but with Luna's perpetually pleasant, placid, earnest expression, it was quite impossible to tell.

"Hermione, please try to calm down. It was a row, all c-couples have them now and again," Harry said softly, for what felt like the hundredth time. He thought he was doing admirably, not stumbling more over the word 'couples.' What the hell had Ron and Ginny been doing in the kitchen all this time? It didn't take that bloody long to make tea.

At this point, he would have settled for being able to convince her to re-sheath her wand.

"Are you trying to tell me this is nothing? Leave it, and it will all blow over?"

"I'm telling you that we're here for you no matter what. Are you sure you wouldn't rather discuss this in more..."

"He yelled at me and brought up embarrassing things that should have stayed in the bedroom, completely misunderstood what I was thinking and feeling, and stormed out of here in a massive temper tantrum! Is that enough detail for you?" Hermione hissed.

"Hermione, honey... this is Snape we're talking about," Harry said, as if explaining something to a very small child. "Forgive me, but...is that really terribly unusual for him?"

Hermione's eyes clouded dangerously. "Harry James Potter, do you HONESTLY think I'd stay with him if he were a nasty, insulting bastard to me?" she asked, voice low and cold.

Harry wasn't quite at the end of his rope, but he could definitely feel himself sliding. Hearing one's full name, in that tone of voice, enhances gravity more than grip. "Hermione, listen to me for half a second, will you? I'm not impugning your judgment, but did you really expect that the grea..."

Harry stopped cold. He swallowed hard. His every muscle tensed for action, and he renewed his grip on his wand because he wasn't certain if stopping himself before letting all of that hateful epithet out of his mouth (after he and Ron had sworn between them not to even *think* it) would cut the mustard with a Hermione on the verge of catastrophic meltdown.

There was some excuse for him, really. They were having an emotionally charged discussion. It was late, and they were both tired and stressed. Harry had been using that unfortunate appellation for Snape for over a decade. He had been doing well to catch himself before letting it slip out entirely.

Unfortunately, that was worth about as much as being the guest at a Malfoy dinner party who managed to right their glass of red wine after having spilled 'only' half of it on Narcissa's best Acromantula silk heirloom tablecloth. The effects were eerily similar. All talking in the room stopped with a collective hiss of indrawn breath, leaving the offender facing a very angry witch into whose good graces he would not be restored any time soon.

Hermione gave no warning. She simply whipped her wand around and flung a Stinging Hex at him.

Fortunately, between recreational Quidditch and Auror training, Harry had the reflexes of a serval. He popped over the arm of the couch and took cover, the burst of energy winging his left arm. This success was countered, however, when he dropped his wand and it rolled inconveniently away.

Ginny scrambled to grab her wand, cursing her carelessness at chatting with her brother to the detriment of monitoring the Harry/Hermione situation for danger signs.

"Why the hell aren't you two doing something?" Harry yelled, rolling again as he reached for his backup wand. Hexes and jinxes were flying south for the winter in flocks, and Harry felt as if he were right in the middle of their migration route.

"Look, mate, I tried...but you're the one who forgot the 'don'ts' list," Ron replied, feeling a little exasperated as he cast Protego from the safety of the other side of the counter.

Ginny popped up and hit Hermione with Expelliarmus...not very hard, but from behind, which bothered the hell out of her conscience...and deftly caught the flying wand.

"Ron, Harry, OUT NOW!" Ginny yelled, knowing she couldn't prevent Hermione from Summoning her wand for more than a few seconds once she regained her balance.

"We love you, 'Mione," Harry called as he spotted his primary wand and dived for it.

"No matter what," Ron added, and they both Apparated the hell out of there, as any good friends would who wished to live to offer sympathy another day.

Ginny hurried around the counter and shoved another glass of wine and another square of chocolate into Hermione's hands before she could object. "Bite," she ordered.

Hermione would have argued (*Calories! Calories!* some anal-retentive region of her cerebral cortex screamed), but the pull of dark chocolate was becoming hard to resist. Ooh. High octane Dominican stuff, this time. The goblins must be paying Ginny a fair salary.

"Drink," she continued and set Hermione's wand on the table. "This is getting ridiculous. That friend of yours who is supposed to be able to find Snape plainly isn't having any luck. I think I'm just going to have to fight back my disgust and do what I should have done to begin with." The kettle wanted attention, so she dug for her mobile as she filled the pot, which Ron had set out during his burst of usefulness.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, trying to swallow her agitation along with the Merlot.

Gin frowned over the display, fiddling with infinitesimal blips as she tried to access directory assistance. Bless Harry for getting top-of-the-line mobile service. At least he got that much right. Ah, there it was. "Calling the only other wizard I know of who both knows Snape and has a mobile," Ginny replied grimly.

The Jarvey was unpleasantly surprised when she found herself and her victim standing outside the grounds of Hogwarts *Fuck hag's tits*, Reggie thought furiously. *I always heard the oil-based version of Dumbledore spent Friday nights in that painting of Animagi playing poker at the Ministry of Magic, second floor break room. This is going to be even more bloody difficult.* Drinking in the line of duty, kidnapping, inaccurately estimating where to 'poof'... she'd be taken off probation, all right...by being busted back down to Journeywoman.

Snape blanched. The last time he had seen those gates was one of the numerous incidents in his life he would dearly love to forget. "What good will it do to come here? It's not as if it's really A-Albus," he said, shaking his hair over his haggard features.

"Close enough for government work," Reggie retorted, deciding to pretend she'd meant to come here all along. "Now shift your arse!" Before he could decide to Apparate away, she gave a flick of her tail and warned him, "I've just turned your hair shocking pink, hombron...and I'm not fixing it until we're in the Headmistress' office, so unless you want to go home looking like your Animagus form is a flamingo..."

"Oh, let's get this fucking well over with already," he huffed, stomping through the gate.

"Now you're talking my language, amigo," Reggie said, approvingly. She ran ahead, deciding it would be sensible to make sure that the headmistress was away from her chambers and office during this little mission. The Jarvey had listened to her interactions with Snape before. Well meaning, yes; Fairy Godmother material, no way in hell. Time for a modest little diversion...

She made herself invisible and scampered silently into the hall. Security was lax again, with peace firmly in place. Now all she needed was one pesky poltergeist. Ah, perfect... Peeves, near the stairs, tormenting a rusty suit of armor. Almost too easy...

Reggie sent a little of her trademark magic their way, and suddenly, the suit of armor became highly energetic, crashing off down the hall and yelling for reinforcements. Peeves, delighted as a cat whose half-dead mouse suddenly finds a final burst of adrenaline, cackled gleefully and began chasing it avidly down the hall, flinging ink, leftover porridge, and other less savory materials at the retreating knight. As the sound receded, Reg noted to her delight that other suits of armor were, indeed, heeding the battle cry and clanking out of their alcoves.

"Five... Four... Three... Two... One," Reggie whispered, and right on cue, Argus Filch came lumbering down the hallway at an amazingly fast clip, Mrs. Norris streaking ahead of him as he yelled, "Headmistress!" The Jarvey held her hostage back until Minerva was racing and grumbling after Filch, a vision in a flowing tartan dressing gown with matching nightcap and slippers.

With immeasurable trepidation, Severus followed Reggie down familiar corridors and up the steps to the headmistress' office.

"You're lucky she didn't ward it behind her," he grumbled.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Reggie retorted, sparing him a flick of her tail to put his hair to rights. "I've told you, you don't know shite about what I can do."

She barged into the office and clambered up to the top of the desk, clearing her throat meaningfully at the assembled portraits. "Look, I'm sort of sorry for the interruption, but not enough to start blubbing about it. There, that was the apology, and a damned nice one for me. Now, listen up, all you old educational-types. This is an emergency, as constituted under the Emotional Crises section of the Code of Conduct for the International Society of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooding Beings. As such, we need a private confab with the Candy Man," Reggie announced.

Never had the office been filled with so many wide, incredulous eyes. In fact, it was beginning to look a bit like Eeylops Owl Emporium in there. In the newest of the portraits, Albus Dumbledore's beard twitched with a hidden smile. "I see you have a passing familiarity with me...or at least with my history and reputation. Might I presume to ask your name?"

"Regina Fletcher, Master Fairy God-Jarvey... provisionally," she muttered the last bit. She scampered up the wainscoting and precariously planted her paws on the gilded frame. "But call me Reggie. Listen Abuelito, unlike you, I'm not some sugar-fueled oracle. Why you ever had to hire a Divination professor is beyond me, when you have the well-deserved reputation for knowing every fucking thing."

The painted Dumbledore chuckled. "I'm afraid that reputation is completely undeserved, but I will do my best, Miss Fletcher...ah, Reggie," he promised. "Could we have a moment alone, ladies and gentlemen?" he asked the occupants of the other portraits. He glanced meaningfully over his shoulder at the background of his portrait.

Apparently this signified something to the other painted headmasters. They exchanged glances of varying degrees of amusement, consternation, and resignation as they began moving as if inclined to leave their frames.

"This is highly irregular," Phineas Nigellus grumbled.

"Judging by your attitude, so are you," Reggie snapped. "Go find a picture of prunes and give us a half hour or so here!"

Phineas reached for his wand, cursed vehemently when he realized it wouldn't do a damned bit of good, then went purple and cleared out of his frame in one of the worst moods he'd had in about a century.

Dilys Derwent giggled hysterically. "Oh, Loki's socks! I wish I'd thought of that one myself. Go ahead and have your half hour, you droll little thing." She wandered off into the portrait system, still chuckling.

With the rest of the former headmasters and headmistresses absented from their frames (with varying degrees of good grace at the temporary eviction), the Jarvey wasted no time in getting down to business. "Sugar Daddy, I need some help...and seeing as you know this stubborn arse best, you're the man to go to. I can't convince The Grouch What Ate Hogwarts to go back to his witch and make nice. I could kidnap him to her place, but he'd probably either sit there sulking or start hexing people. I think part of the bee in his bonnet has something to do with the manner in which you parted company, seeing as how he's been periodically attempting to replace his hemoglobin with hooch ever since."

Addressing Severus very gently, Albus said, "Come here, my boy."

Slowly, Snape approached the portrait, in a room now empty of every living thing but himself and the Jarvey, and even of other painted entities. Still, he could not raise his head to look at the man who had been like a father to him. To whom he had proved his loyalty... by killing him.

Albus' portrait nodded to Reggie, who assumed her perch on Snape's shoulder, discreetly flicking a tear from his cheek with her tail. A handkerchief would be more efficacious, but she knew better than to press her luck by offering one. Never mind that the audience for his grief consisted of an animate painting and an overly-clever animal. She snuggled into his shoulder, realizing that she was standing in for Albus' comforting hand and awaiting her next cue from the man in the portrait.

"How is Draco these days? Minerva chats a good bit about her Gryffindors, but I haven't heard much news of him."

Severus cleared his throat. "Well enough," he muttered softly. "He has been trying to rebuild the Malfoy fortune to the point where he can support Narcissa in the style to which she had become accustomed."

"I wish him luck," Albus said, laughing. "I would say that goal is unattainable with anything short of Slytherin ambition." In a soft, coaxing, voice, he asked, "It was not what you expected, was it?"

Severus dashed the back of his sleeve resentfully across his eyes. "When I made those promises, I...I don't know what I was thinking," he growled hoarsely.

"Perhaps you were thinking that you might prevent a child from having to suffer what you did, and make the mistakes you made," he stated simply, as if discussing a particularly nice stretch of weather. "Severus, look at me," he urged, sighing when he got no response. "You know that I had to die. You had agreed to provide your assistance, if needed."

Snape refused to reply. Albus' voice was gentle, the sort of tone one uses on wounded animals and unhappy children. "You pictured me confined to a bed in the infirmary, or perhaps in my own quarters, too weak and in too much pain to even help myself, when I would call on you to keep your promise," he stated softly. "Perhaps you imagined a quiet scene with Minerva holding my hand as you helped me tip a vial of something painlessly lethal down my throat, to end my suffering."

"Stupid of me, wasn't it?" he snarled, his voice verging on hysterics. "Why should it have been that painless... that simple?"

"Do you think it would have been painless to help me pass from life that way?" Albus asked, nothing evident in his voice but honest curiosity.

"For you, at least," Severus answered, still plainly on edge.

"No. It would have been less painful for you, and that is the sole reason I so deeply regret it. I feared you would suffer greatly before this latest war was over. I had hoped that I would not contribute excessively to that suffering, but I unfortunately I did."

Albus looked at the Jarvey, smiling in approval at her sympathetic snuggling, and was seized with a brain-wave. "Your karma is crap when it comes to Gryffindors, isn't it dear boy?" he queried innocently.

The eleven-year-old deeply buried in Severus' psyche squealed *Headmaster Dumbledore said, 'Crap!'*, startling a choked giggle from him. He was so caught off-guard that he actually looked up to meet his mentor's eyes. They were very true to life, and gazed at him with particular gentleness. It was agonizing. He tried to tell himself it was only a painting, but that only made it worse. Self-loathing was grinding his head downward, but hunger for the sight of those eyes was stronger. He couldn't bring himself to look away now. "The negative influence of this animate dust rag aside, I would say that qualifies as the understatement of the year, Albus," he managed, hoarsely.

Reggie's tail was soaked. She preferred not to call attention to the fact that she had been serving as a handkerchief for the last five minutes, but she needed to dry her tail and the silence was driving her nuts.

"Good move, Sugar Daddy," she said approvingly. She cocked her head at the man in the portrait and surreptitiously banished the salt water soaking her skinny tail. "You know, I see why Madam Mab would have given her right wing to recruit you."

"I had heard rumors to that effect," he replied, his voice tinged with amusement. "I must say, if the whole teaching thing hadn't worked out, being a Fairy Godfather would have been rather entertaining."

"Well, you have the perfect opportunity to amuse yourself here tonight. I'm officially deputizing you as a Fairy Godfather 'cause I need all the help I can get with Mr. 'Nobody-Likes-Me-And-If-They-Do-I-Don't-Deserve-It-Guess-I'll-Go-Eat-Flobberworms,'" Reggie said in disgust. "Do you know Hermione was crying her eyes out when I found her, all because of this stubborn wanker?"

"She hasn't even told her parents she's seeing me," Severus protested, realizing that he sounded sulky, even to himself. "Maybe I shouldn't blame her. After all, it's a bit hard to explain you're seeing a barely exonerated murderer who's nearly two decades your senior and used to be your teacher." He sighed morosely. "It's like asking someone to believe in a Fairy God-Jarvey."

"See what I mean?" Reggie huffed.

Albus shook his head. "Do try to lighten up a bit, Severus. Suspension of disbelief now and again would do you a world of good. You really should go and have a good talk with Hermione and sort all this out. Bear in mind that the dear girl hasn't had much better luck with love than you have. I quite imagine that she's been worried about many of the same things you have been, and no doubt behaved as she did in large part out of fear of being hurt."

"You know, you're really good at this," Reggie commented.

"Thank you, Reggie dear," Albus said. "I do try."

"If by that you mean you're good at interfering in people's lives as a hobby..." Snape muttered.

"*Benevolently* interfering, you tosser," Reggie corrected.

"Quite," said Albus, beaming.

"What am I supposed to say to her if I go back, Albus? I was... rather caustic when we parted," Severus said hesitantly.

Reggie started laughing.

"Sweet Merlin...now who's the master of understatement?" Albus said, tsk-ing. "I can only imagine..."

"Well, she got in a few good hits as well," he grumbled.

"I certainly hope so; she'd hardly be a match for you if she couldn't," Dumbledore retorted, blowing on his glasses and giving them a bit of a polish with the tail of his beard. "Quit trying to make everything so complicated. I know a hammer tends to see all problems as nails, but a Slytherin needn't to see everything as an elaborate plot or a way to get around someone. With witches, I think you'll find that a simple, sincere 'I love you' covers a multitude of sins. When was the last time you told her that?"

The silence stretched... and stretched... and Albus sighed. "Now I see the problem."

Snape was feeling intractable again. "Love doesn't fix everything, Albus."

"Enough that the exceptions hardly bear mentioning," he replied firmly. "Tell me, how many wizards do you know of with a phoenix as a familiar?"

The apparent change of topic caught him off guard. "I have never heard of another, save you. Perhaps in the past, but certainly not now," he finally managed.

"A wizard cannot choose a phoenix as his familiar; it is the phoenix who chooses the wizard. It is a grave responsibility, for implicit in the gift of its company is access to truly ancient and wonderful magic. It also carries the burden of knowing when to lay that gift aside...through death...that it might continue through others. My death made it available to everyone who would fight against darkness. And now, it is the responsibility of everyone who shared in that power to begin building it up and nurturing it again,

through love, compassion, and courage, until a phoenix finds another worthy companion," Dumbledore's portrait-self finished.

Severus made no reply. "You were part of the struggle," Albus said. "You have a share in this responsibility. Many died selflessly and released their share; others nurture it by teaching the next generation of wizards and witches. You were given...I gave you...many of the most thankless and difficult tasks of the war. You were the only one with the courage and skill to do them; by their nature, you can never be rewarded as others were for their roles, though without your deeds, the rest might well have been impossible. I see in the very fact that you are still here that you have one more role to play... just as important, and for a change, rewarding in itself. It appears to me that you and Hermione will be joining the ranks of those producing that next generation."

"I haven't even gotten around to proposing yet," Severus protested.

The painted headmaster chuckled again. "Perhaps I'd best warn you, the majority of married witches do develop the strong inclination to have a child at some point...something you must be open to if you are going to get married."

Severus would have argued, but Narcissa suddenly came to mind. If ever there had been a witch unlikely to succumb to the instinct for motherhood... The way he'd heard it, Draco was an only child only because Lucius wanted it that way. And Hermione was much warmer than Narcissa. The possibilities rather boggled the mind.

"Come now...it's always different when the children are your own, so I've heard. I imagine you'll much prefer it to teaching them," Dumbledore said encouragingly.

Snape's expression twisted with a different sort of pain. "Do you honestly believe engendering dunderheads to be an improvement on attempting to train them?" he asked.

Albus laughed fit to burst. "Severus, if you and Hermione produce anything less than geniuses together, I shall fall out of my frame," he said, wiping mirth-moisture from his glasses. "Hmm, perhaps I was a little too loud," he said, absently. The sound of running footsteps approaching prompted him to resume his pose of snoozing against the gilt edge, a smile tugging at the corners of his beard.

Reggie's Spanish Vocabulary

Amigo: friend (masculine)

Abuelito: Granddaddy (affectionate diminutive of Abuelo: Grandfather)

Author's Note:

Just so this is quite clear, I rather like Ron. I don't think he's an idiot. He reminds me of the boys I grew up with, who just took a lot longer to grow up than I did. (*At longer.*) I think he is a fundamentally uncomplicated soul, and one of those entirely decent people possessed of an incredible talent for saying the wrong thing, particularly when his intentions are entirely right. Admit it. You **know** someone like that. We all do. And they're wonderful folks. But as a shoulder to cry on, they can be about as helpful as a remote control without the batteries.

I have nothing against Harry, either. He's just...overprotective...of his loved ones. Painfully so. Perhaps pathologically so. Shocking, no?

Let's see... who would presumably be able to find Severus, and might just possibly bring himself to use a phone? Yeah, too easy, I know... See you in the next chapter!

I have no way to repay you for your amazing efforts, LariLee. But Reggie has offered to turn your hair pink, if you like.

5: Calling Draco Malfoy

Chapter 5 of 7

Congratulations! Having read this far, you are now entitled to wear a shirt that reads 'I survived Thernonuclear!Hermione.' Reggie has been practicing psychiatry without a license. And if Draco doesn't become an unlicensed private detective in about five minutes, I don't like Narcissa's odds of ever becoming a grandma.

Disclaimer: No seriously...I don't own them. Just borrowing them. Okay, fine, I'm a kleptomaniac! Are you happy now?

Warning: The phones have their final hurrah with a camera-phone finale. They will be available for autographs after the epilogue. Tartan follies, portrait madness, and very mild abuse of a Malfoy and a Snape are also included with the sincere hope this doesn't squick anyone too badly. But the TMI is intentional. Read on at your own risk.

Chapter 5: Calling Draco Malfoy

Draco was sitting at his desk, pulling at his impossibly platinum blond locks. At the moment, it would have been nice if they were actually made of platinum. It would have gone some way towards solving his financial problems. Quite the nasty shock it had been... the day he discovered Galleons didn't grow on trees, but that Mother could spend them as cheerfully as if they owned an orchard.

Narcissa had poured a great deal in the way of their resources down the pit that was defending Lucius from criminal charges, all without letting up on her personal spending in the slightest. To make matters worse, her grief (at Lucius' death in the Azkaban Jailbreak Riot) and uncertainty (at Draco's fate whilst he and Snape were making themselves scarce following the nightmare in the Astronomy Tower) seemed to drive her to take solace in what Draco considered the most heinous of all Muggle inventions: retail therapy.

As if all that wasn't bad enough, their financial manager had adopted the position that when the rat's away the cheese is fair game. Rumor had it that immediately upon hearing of Lucius' demise, the sneaky bastard had neatly embezzled several vaults' worth of Galleons, converted them to pounds, and thence to several different other types of currency, before adopting a Muggle identity. He and the cash had disappeared as thoroughly as if *Evanescio*'d. The trail had gone cold in Monte Carlo. Their only hope for justice at this point was that, wherever the thieving cretin had ultimately disappeared to, he had died most unpleasantly by choking on some expensive delicacy

The most annoying bit...aside from being robbed...was that the rotten wanker had been an excellent financial manager. As it turned out, the extent of Lucius' talent in that vein had been a personal inclination to be tighter than a duck's arse and the knack for hiring someone with the optimal financial skill for minimal salary. Would that he had passed even that modest ability on to his son. Or at the very minimum, whatever strategy, trick, or piece of blackmail that had kept Mother's hands out of the cookie jar.

Arithmancy be damned. Draco would have dearly loved to be adept at plain arithmetic. It would have helped considerably in making sense of the ever-shrinking balance in the Gringotts' accounts (and a few others strategically located in nations with liberal ideas about banking). Not that they were destitute, not by most wizards' standards. But as his parents had been reminding him on an almost hourly basis since the moment of his birth, they were not most wizards.

Without the threat of Lucius' wrath hanging over them, persons whom Draco had believed to be invaluablely loyal turned out to be, at best, fair weather friends, and at worst, ready and willing to take advantage of the inexperienced young man. Only Severus was really trustworthy; but he wasn't the least help in rebuilding a fortune, never having had much more than the proverbial two Galleons to rub together. It was beginning to look like there was nothing for it. Draco was going to have to figure out how to make an honest...and lucrative enough for Narcissa...living.

His inclination was to invest in some sort of business, but lacking much acumen in that realm, he was proceeding with great caution. In a quest to avoid anyone put off by his reputation, he had gone so far as to begin making contacts with businessmen in the Muggle world. Draco had gone so far as to acquire a mobile phone with assistance from Severus and actually figure out how it operated.

That was an embarrassing incident he would almost be willing to have Obliviated. Neither of them entirely knew what they were about, and neither was willing to appear so. It was rather like a pair of fifth years in a brothel, trying to look as if they were entirely at ease and in control of the situation when in reality they only had the vaguest notion of what everything was, where everything went, and what to do with it if they miraculously got it there.

Draco had accepted the necessity (he was pretty certain being poor would be much, much worse), but one thing still bothered him.

How in the Nine Hells was he going to break the news to Mother?

He had nightmares about it. The most common one involved forgetting to put his mobile on silent mode and having it go off at the breakfast table. As if on cue, the familiar ring tone broke into his thoughts and made him jump.

He frowned at the display. The number wasn't familiar, but he had put out a few feelers recently. He decided to answer it. Blast these tiny buttons! Did Muggles have incredibly small fingers? "Draco Malfoy speaking," he said, trying to emulate his father's casual confidence.

Ginny grimaced, glad she wasn't using the Floo and therefore could make all the faces she felt inclined to. "Draco, this is Ginny Weasley."

Bloody hell. Not only was she unlikely to do anything for his financial health and well-being, but the Weasley chit was beyond doubt the 'single witch least likely to get him laid'...after Granger. "What do *you* want?" he asked. Why hadn't she used the Floo? Now he'd have to try to make his sneer audible.

"I need you to track down Severus. He and Hermione had a huge row, and we think he's gone off somewhere with intent to do something drastic," Ginny replied tersely.

Draco winced. He should have known it was inviting bad luck to even *think* of Granger. To say he had mixed feelings about Severus' attachment to the most lethal Muggle-born witch alive (**not** smart to permit the pejorative term to cross one's mind, not while Severus was still somewhere on the planet and capable of Legilimency) was an understatement. However, considering the daft sod's level of besottedness, there was a good chance he'd do something rather rash in the event they parted on bad terms.

"When did all this happen?" he asked, immediately all business.

"Almost two hours ago," Ginny said.

"You waited that long to call me? What the hell were you thinking?" he asked more shrilly than he had intended as a feeling of panic clutched his innards. In two hours, Severus could have arranged a reunion with Lucius in a (hopefully) better place. Losing his sole remaining male role model was not something he cared to contemplate.

"We had someone else looking for him," Ginny growled. Great. Draco plainly thought this was worth panicking over. Granted, if there was a contest for Slytherin Drama Queen, he would have beat all comers for the past century, but still...

"Please tell me it wasn't Potter," he begged. Amazing how one could feel one's face actually growing paler at times.

"You really do think I'm stupid, don't you? No, he and Ron were here trying to comfort Hermione. It worked so well they're lucky they aren't being checked into St. Mungo's right now. If Snape running off like this is as bad as you're implying, then you'd better get on the broomstick and track him down before it's too bloody late!"

"All right, all right! Give me a second to think!" Draco nervously smoothed his hair back a few more times, succeeding in making it look even more a fright. "Right, then. I'll save your number on my mobile, and I'll go to his place to see if I can figure out where he might be off to."

"I Flooed his place before coming over here...Hermione isn't on the Floo network. He wasn't home," Ginny objected.

Of course this couldn't be easy. "Do you have a camera phone?" he asked, not very hopeful. After all, he wouldn't expect a Weasley to have anything top-of-the-line or cutting edge.

"Yes," Ginny bit off.

"Send me a photo of Granger's flat, so I can Apparate there if necessary. I'm going to try a few places first," he said, tugging at his hair and nervously rehearsing the locations of the various hideouts he and Severus had used during their flight. Amazing; the Weasel chit had a camera phone. They must not be as special as he had thought. Stupid sneaky Muggle saleswoman.

Of course the pretentious bastard would have a camera phone. Probably had all sorts of expensive little optional whingdings that he didn't know how to use, if he even needed them. Ginny took a quick picture and sent it. "Have you got the photo?" she asked.

Draco wracked his brains to remember how the whole photo thing worked, barely suppressing a shout of elation when he finally achieved victory over the legion of arcane little buttons. He looked at the room shown in the tiny display and grimaced at the shabby surroundings. *Just like Severus to pick a witch as bloody broke as he is,* he reflected. "Got it. I'm off."

Ginny stuffed her phone viciously back into her pocket, vexed more out of habit than anything else. Draco had been surprisingly civil and cooperative. Perhaps that was what annoyed her. He hadn't given her any real reason to be annoyed.

That's just silly, she told herself, as she wearily flopped back into the chair opposite Hermione and poured another cup of tea. Alternating hard and soft drinks was the current strategy. She didn't need a *drunk* and distraught Hermione on her hands.

"Draco's worried, isn't he?" she asked, sounding quite listless.

"Draco is an overgrown crybaby who would probably be absolutely panicked over spoiling his manicure," Ginny huffed.

"He cares about Severus. He knows him well enough to know the sort of self-destructive things he can do in one of his moods," Hermione replied forlornly.

"Hermione," Ginny said, having gone from confused to furious to utterly drained, and was now at a sort of eerie stage of calm, "Draco will find him. Draco will bring him back, or I will present Draco's bollocks to him on a Beater's bat. And he knows it."

"But will he find him in time?"

"Stop worrying about Snape. He's almost as melodramatic by nature as Draco, and he's had longer to work at the fine points of delivery. He's lived this long without intentionally inflicting anything worse than a well-deserved hangover on himself; he'll survive one more night. And as much as I hate to admit it, Harry was right...couples have rows and then make up all the time. It isn't always the *'Finite Incantatem'* on the relationship," Ginny said, stopping for breath.

She noticed Hermione was beginning to look quietly attentive rather than defeated. Bloody hell. Was that what it took to calm her, all along? A bloody damnetecture? "Stop worrying about your exams. You've known everything that's going to be on them, backwards and forwards, for at least a year now. You always have done so, and you always will. I know this because I know you. You are going to do fine. You are Hermione, super Gryffindor uber-brain, tamer of the Snape. Why don't you go have a lie-down until they get here?"

Hermione knew how to deal with lectures. Assimilate information. Apply it. Ace the test. She put her skills to work and was soon dozing fitfully on the sofa.

Ginny put her head in her hands and sighed. "I wonder if I could wrestle any worthwhile favors from Snape in exchange for a manual on the Care and Handling of Distraught Hermione?" she murmured softly as she took advantage of the lull to doze off.

Draco began Apparating to all the hiding places he and Snape had used in their horrible flight. It was gut-wrenching work, not at all suited to making a safe Apparition. Fortunately, eyebrows grow back.

However, it was a little painful trying to get around without any toenails. Bugger it... should he wait for the next available Healer at St. Mungo's? That would take too long. Better go avail himself of Granger's talents. He'd heard she was almost done with her apprenticeship. No doubt the Wonder Witch could patch up the results of a minor Splinching quite handily, much as he hated to admit it.

He popped into the flat depicted in the photo, cursing shrilly as he stubbed his nail-less toes on a chair.

Ginny and Hermione were immediately alert. "Where's Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Haven't found him. Listen, I..."

Draco did not get a chance to say what it was had interrupted his search. He found himself bent backwards over the cold tile of Hermione's kitchenette counter, with Hermione's foot painfully crushing his injured toes and her dangerously sharp wand digging into his throat.

"Fucking hell...HELP!" he gasped at Ginny, feeling his eyes tear up from the pain in his foot.

"Hermione, give over!" Ginny huffed tiredly, shoving her friend's wand clear. "He's no use to you dead or dismembered. Besides, you're supposed to be a Healer...do no harm, and all that?"

"Not yet I'm not," she snarled threateningly, but backed off. *Thanks a load for reminding me about the whole not-quite-a-Healer-thing, Gin,* she thought sourly.

Looking unbecomingly splotchy, Draco sank to the floor and pulled his shoe off his offended foot. "You're the one who bloody well asked me for help, just you remember that," he hissed, experiencing a fresh wave of agony as his sock peeled free of his bare nail bed. "I had some trouble Apparating to some of the places I thought Severus might be," he explained, still eyeing Hermione's wand nervously.

"You splinched," she said matter-of-factly.

"Only a few toenails," he protested.

"Oh, I suppose eyebrows just aren't the thing this season," she retorted, causing a little voice with a suspiciously Slavic accent to warn Hermione to treat her patients with compassion and respect. *All right, all right,* she sighed inwardly.

Draco couldn't for the life of him figure out what Severus saw in this b-er, witch. *I'm doing her a favor, as much as I'm looking after a friend,* he thought sourly. *Does she have to talk to me like I'm an idiot who couldn't Apparate correctly if his life depended on it?*

He deserved better than this. He was a reformed arsehole, damn it.

"All right, Draco," she said in the 'kind and patient' voice she had been practicing with a vengeance for the past three weeks. "Let me see the damage. I should be able to have you patched up in no time." She went through her checklist internally: eye contact, check; smile, check; compassion even though this is the Lesser Malfoy Prat; check, damn it.

'Nice' Granger was more unnerving than 'I'm-going-to-hex-your-balls-off' Granger, mainly because the latter was the only version with whom he was familiar. He flinched as she waved her wand over his offended digits, intoning the charm to re-grow the missing nails.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, managing to sound concerned. Finding herself surprised she actually was, at least a little.

"Not much," he confessed. He wasn't about to admit that just seeing her with a wand in hand was now, and probably would be for the rest of his life, enough to make him flinch. "Thank you," he managed to add, awkwardly.

"It's nothing, really," she said, equally uncomfortable with pleasantries. "Here, let me fix your eyebrows before you go."

This time, he managed not to shy away, though having that wand near his face was more nerve wracking than seeing it near his foot. Draco quickly resumed his shoes and stood up. "I've got a few more places to check...he'll be in one of them for certain. I, um, it'll be all right, Granger," he stammered. Then he Disapparated out of there before he could say something more awkward, or the Confundus Curse the Weasley bint was probably using wore off and Granger remembered how much she hated him.

"Wow... he... wasn't a jerk," Hermione managed. The only other time Draco had been that civil to her was when he arranged the whole potion-delivery system that started this mess. "Bloody hell," she whispered.

"What now?" Ginny asked.

"If Draco finds Severus, I'll owe him... again," she said, shaking her head in disgust.

"Bad luck," Ginny said sympathetically. "If this keeps up, he may even figure it out one day."

Having resumed his search (in a highly motivated mood), Draco found himself examining a regrettably familiar cave. He felt puzzled. Clearly, Severus had been here. Freshly emptied bottles cluttered the table, and a candle guttered on the rocky shelf above it. But where had he gone?

All right... if he could remember how to use the camera phone, he could remember that spell. Severus was a great one for inventing spells and had taught Draco a variation on a tracking spell, which would allow Draco to determine where Severus had last Apparated if he could find something with which he'd been in physical contact. Considering how small the cave was, eventually he'd touch something that would yield an image. One of those cups was a likely suspect... Nothing from the large one, perhaps try the small one? No. Okay, try sitting on the stool...

Hm. He must have gotten something a little wrong when casting the spell, since the only impression he could pick up was...the thought of Dumbledore's portrait?

"He went to Hogwarts?" Draco whispered aloud. That probably meant he was talking to Prof- Headmistress McGonagall. Great Merlin. Talk about hitting the Hostile Gryffindor Witch trifecta. He felt fairly certain that Minerva McGonagall was only slightly better disposed towards him than towards a wad of fresh Drooble's stuck to her shoe.

Apparating to the front gates alone was like a punch in the stomach. Feeling like a thief, the sole surviving male Malfoy stole up the path to the castle, trying to remember the route to the Headmaster's...no, the Headmistress'...office.

Minerva tracked down Peeves and the rampaging suits of armor. That was the easy part; they left a trail of devastation that would have been detectable by a blindfolded Niffler with parsnips up its nostrils. The army of armor was dealt with fairly easily, though it took some time, a few Full Body binds, a lecture on duty and discipline from Sir Nicholas, some Levitation, and a lot of shoving from Filch to get everything returned to its proper alcove. Peeves was, as usual, more of a handful. The Poltergeist was so worked up that it took the Bloody Baron and threat of exorcism to get him back in line.

The Headmistress was trudging back to her quarters, yawning openly and reflecting that it was just as well tomorrow was Saturday, when she overheard some familiar voices.

"Well, aren't you a lovely young thing? Tell me my dear, do you..."

"Phineas! Stop harassing that child, you old leech."

"Did you hear her complaining, Dilys? Find someone else to annoy, you old busybody. If I'm going to be exiled from my place of honor, at least I'm going to enjoy myself."

"What are you two doing here?" Minerva asked in astonishment.

"Ask that sucrose-powered scofflaw holding a conference in **your** office," Phineas grumbled. "One would have thought he'd assume a little more dignity, once properly ensconced in a frame."

"If ever someone needed to get out more, it's you, Phineas," Dilys scolded.

"That's rather what I was trying to do when you so rudely interrupted," he retorted, glaring across the hall. He turned back to the blushing shepherdess with a much more charming tone of voice. "Now, where were we, my dear?"

"On your way back to my office," Minerva snapped, beginning to puff as she picked up her pace. Bloody Mary's Ghost! What madness had hit the school tonight?

Back in the office, Severus, Reggie, and Albus heard light footsteps rapidly ascending the stairs. It definitely wasn't Minerva...maybe the head Boy or Girl with a late-night emergency?

"Incoming!" Reggie squeaked and turned invisible.

An uncharacteristically harried-looking Draco Malfoy burst into the room through the open door before Severus could Disillusion himself, and began haranguing him without preamble.

"Look, Severus, I just got back from your witch's flat, and let me tell you, it wasn't pretty in there. The next man who darkens her doorstep without you in tow is going wind up with one very powerful, very angry, witch going Bella LeStrange all over his arse. She's already hexed Potty and the Weasel, and she's just itching for an excuse to make certain Mother never has any grandchildren to spoil."

"How did you get involved, anyway?" Snape asked, stalling for time. He wanted to reconcile with Hermione, but he would much rather it were not posthumously.

"The female Weasley...you know, the little chit that possesses suspicious traces of intellect...thought I might be able to find you. She's there now, trying to prevent total Granger meltdown. I give it fifteen more minutes before she has to cut her losses and get the hell out, in the interest of self-preservation."

They were interrupted by a chuckle from Albus' portrait. "Don't keep the lady waiting, my boy! It quite sounds as if the Obliviators will have quite the job on their hands unless you reassure her promptly."

Just then, Minerva swept in like the Spirit of Vengeful Tartan.

"So this is the 'conference' Phineas was complaining about! I found him sulking in that painting of the shepherdess with Dilys taunting him from behind a still life across the hallway. Would any of you lads mind telling me what the hell is going on here?" It was remarkable how little humor all that plaid evoked when framing a face that so plainly meant business.

Albus smiled apologetically from the wall as the visible three-dimensional miscreants suddenly became fascinated with empty portrait frames in the vicinity. "Sorry to borrow your office without notice, Minerva dear," he said. "But I assure you, it was all for a good cause. It seems Severus and Hermione had a little misunderstanding this evening. However, I do believe I have managed to talk some sense into him, and Draco has just arrived as an emissary of good will from Miss Granger. In light of her response to his abrupt departure, I have advised him to return to her and resubmit his marriage proposal in less equivocal terms. But perhaps you have a different perspective on the matter?"

"I most certainly do," she said solemnly, pulling herself up to her full height and glaring daggers up at both Severus and Draco, as though they were a pair of particularly ill-trained Slytherin puppies that had just done something unpleasant on her office rug. They flinched slightly as she swept past them, opened the Floo, and grabbed a jar of Floo powder from the mantle. "Mr. Malfoy!" she called in her most commanding voice so that he practically hopped to her side. "To the Leaky Cauldron with you, and I am making it YOUR responsibility to see that Mr. Snape Apparates to the nearest designated point in the vicinity of Miss Granger's flat as soon as he comes through. Do I make myself perfectly clear, lad?"

"Yes, ma'am!" he exclaimed, all but clicking his heels and saluting. He dove into the fire with alacrity, glad he had gotten off so easily. Since it was clearly his fate to be ordered around by disgruntled and powerful Gryffindor witches this unfortunate night, he was not about to argue. He had seen fate at work enough in his life so far to be absolutely positive that it would only return to bite him in the arse later, were he fool enough to resist.

"And YOU!" she shouted at Snape with sufficient force behind her words that he, too, was startled forward. "Don't you dare think of detouring or delaying! That poor lass has cooled her heels for nearly two bloody years while you hemmed and hawed! Get your arse over to her and propose...it'll be much easier on your crotch than straddling the fence!" With that, she tossed Floo powder on his shirt, yelled out the destination, and shoved him through the Floo, giving him a quick sideways kick to the bum with her tartan-slipped foot for good measure to make sure he went all the way through.

"You've been wanting to do that for at least the last two decades," Albus accused in reference to the gratuitous kick, his beard quivering with chuckles.

"Longer," Minerva said, sinking into her Headmistress' chair with a wide grin on her face. "There were no few times I'd like to have done it when he was a student! I swear, there are times when nothing less than a baffle to the backside will make him take notice."

Everard, first of the Headmasters to return from his wanderings in other paintings, shook his head at Albus. "The things we put up with because you're the man with Hogsmeade's High Street, including a fully stocked Honeydukes, in the background of your portrait," he remarked.

"So that's how you convinced them," Minerva said. "I did wonder."

The occupants of the other frames were straggling back from their various jaunts through the castle's portrait system.

"You know, I'd quite forgotten about the painting of monks in their wine cellar," Armando Dippet said jovially, giving a little hiccup. "We really should, ah, inspect the other paintings in the castle more often."

"Speak for yourself, you barmy old tippler," grumbled Headmaster Pontius Hooper, distinguished Hufflepuff. "I got taken for three Sickles, five Knuts by those bloody card sharks near Gryffindor Tower."

"Yes, that was quite a lot in your day, wasn't it, Pontius?" Phineas asked with a smirk. He was recovering. The shepherdess had been rather nice, even if there wasn't much he could do to reap the benefits of her good will what with that pesky Derwent witch spying on him.

"I see you didn't find any prunes," Dilys sniffed, causing his scowl to snap back into place.

Minerva shook her head. "You can spend the rest of the night sniping at each other and working on a 'Portrait's Night Out' rotation, if you like. I'm going to bed. If Hermione doesn't send me an update soon, would you be so kind as to take a peep at her engagement ring while she's at work and report back to me, Dilys dear?" she asked with a yawn.

"Consider it done," Dilys beamed.

Draco was already dusting himself off when Snape tumbled through the Floo. The younger man picked up his mentor, slapped a few cinders to the floor, and started hustling him towards the door.

"Where are we going?" Snape asked, feeling the weight of his invisible tormentor still clinging to his shoulder...mercifully silent, for once...as Draco pulled him along.

"You heard the lady," Draco replied. "We're Apparating to your witch's flat...do not pass 'Go,' do not collect 200 Galleons." He was tired of being indirect. At the moment, the sooner he got clear of this mess and into bed, the happier he would be. In fact, he was at the point where he didn't care that he would be alone in said bed, completely surrounded by no beautiful witch whatsoever.

"Since when do you listen to Gryffindors?" Snape asked in amazement.

"Since when do you shag one?" Draco retorted. "Look, you're too old to be fanning about like this. Witches aren't exactly falling off broomsticks into your lap at this point in time..."

He makes it sound as if they once did, Severus thought, half-sourly, half-wistfully.

"...and I'm too young to die. So you're going to go to Granger and either kiss and make up, as recommended by the Hogwarts Brain Trust, or at least break it off more gracefully. You have until we Apparate there to figure out which. I'm tired, unaccustomedly dirty, and still have one scheme of questionable usefulness to try to implement before the night is over. But I owe you, and always will, and I'm not letting you go until you go there and get this sorted! Oh, and I'm not about to land in her living room again. You'll have to take me Side-Along to the Apparition point in her neighborhood."

Severus, equal parts shocked, annoyed, and touched, managed to do as he was told. "I don't recall you being this... decisive," he remarked as arrived in the alley behind the Chinese takeaway.

"Indecision doesn't take you very far when looking after Mother," he said tiredly.

After several more minutes of briskly hustling along, they were at Hermione's door. Snape turned to Draco and asked solemnly, "You do realize, I wouldn't have had this relationship had you not convinced her to make my deliveries to St. Mungo's?"

Draco grimaced. "If that was some sort of thank you, keep it. I'm going on the record in this mess as having only been repaying a portion of a significant debt, and following orders." With that, he knocked on the door and yelled unceremoniously, "I've got him!"

Ginny was closest...both to the door and to being awake...so she wasted no time in getting it open. Even with that head start, Hermione managed to nearly bowl her over trying to reach the door.

"Severus, I love you," she babbled frantically. "Please, let me explain about..."

Severus was in no mood to hear explanations. He simply cut off her words by rushing at her and crushing her to him, regardless of trampled books, papers, and Ginny, who was nearly shoved into the table. "I love you, too...for Hera's sake, if I'm ever fool enough to try storming out on you again, Petrify me or something," he mumbled fervently into her mess of hair.

Ginny opened her mouth, shut it again, and ducked past the tightly clinched couple out the still open door. At this point, she was pretty well convinced that her friend and said friend's amour were both, as Ron would put it, 'absolutely mental,' and she was in no way qualified to deal with them. Draco slammed the door on a scene he'd really prefer not to see, thanks very much, and followed her.

On her way to the corner, she called Harry to confirm that all was well. She wasn't absolutely certain of that, of course...but to salve her conscience, she would stay within earshot fifteen minutes or so, just in case someone needed to contact St. Mungo's to deal with a few Magical Injuries.

Draco had other ideas. He calculated that if Severus was going to make up with his off-the-broom Muggle-born, they'd be shagging like Kneazles shortly, and he frankly didn't want to be within a mile of that. If they weren't going to make up, he'd prefer not to be a witness at the trial. Not to mention he had an inkling of a plan...

As soon as Ginny put away her phone, she found herself face to face with Draco. Before she could say 'Hi,' 'Good-bye,' or 'Go to Hell,' he grabbed her around the waist and she found herself being dragged off in a Side-Along Apparation.

Ron and Harry both showed up at the Burrow.

"Did she get you?" Ron asked, looking Harry over with concern.

"Just my 'new' arm," Harry replied, rolling up his left sleeve and checking the spot below his elbow where the magical prosthetic fitted in. "It really only conveys sensation from my fingers and palm, so hitting me that high is no bother." He rubbed the slight scorch mark off the realistic looking flesh and flexed his fingers. "They've sure come a long way since Moody's stump. Sometimes I forget which parts are original," he joked.

Ron understood why Harry had come along with him instead of going home right away. Any time Harry had a trying experience, he hated to go home to Luna until he had calmed down slightly. Which made Ron feel slightly guilty for what he was about to do, but...

"Harry," he said, employing his best reasonable tone (and hoping he wasn't achieving that vocal effect through his toes), "if Hermione manages to reel that bat of hers back in, it's probably for the best."

"WHAT?" Harry yelped, leaping away from Ron as if his other best friend in the world had just hit him with a Stinging Hex...in his good arm, this time. "Mind if I borrow a page from your book and ask if you're mental?"

"Think about it," Ron reasoned. "This is a guy who spent the better part of his life answering to two different terminally bossy people without losing...well, all of his mind, anyway. He knows how to deal with someone who's clearly off their broom without killing them or getting killed himself."

"You seem to be forgetting your Snape history," Harry grumbled darkly. He had seen Dumbledore's Pensieve memories like everyone else at Snape's trial had. But only he

had actually witnessed the act that precipitated the trial, and it wasn't the sort of thing you got over readily. "And surely you don't think Hermione compares to Voldemort?"

"I dunno, mate... There were times...about once a month...everything but the scales," Ron said grimly, grimacing slightly at hearing the deplorable name. It didn't evoke fear anymore, but the facial twitch was a hard habit to break. "You only dated her...briefly. Living with her was a whole other game of Quidditch. Two Bludgers, no Beaters."

Harry sighed. He really wasn't qualified to comment on that statement, since what he and Hermione had...briefly...almost couldn't be construed as even dating. When Ron was right, he was right. It was downright unnerving. Sort of like a real prophecy from Trelawney.

"I just want her to be happy," Harry finally said. "You and Hermione are my first real friends. I think of you as my family. I don't know a hell of a whole lot about family, but I do know I care about both of you being happy. It was simpler when I thought you'd be happy together."

"Simpler maybe for you. It was bloody difficult for us," Ron grumbled. "But I know what you mean. I thought it would be simple, too. You and Ginny, me and Hermione... It was all quite tidy on parchment. I know Mum thought so. It's too bad we all get along best when we can each retreat to our separate corners if necessary."

Harry's phone rang. He listened, made a few terse remarks, and rang off.

"Ginny? Hermione?" Ron asked, anxiously.

"She says Snape got there, and everything is quiet now. Seems they've made up, after all. And Ginny says..." Harry swallowed heavily before continuing... "that he's got a ring to give her."

Ron looked blankly at Harry for a moment. "A what? You mean don't mean..."

"Bloody git's probably already proposed. And considering how Hermione behaved tonight, I'll wager she'll accept. If she does, I guess we'll...we'll have to figure out how to be civil to the bastard, for her sake," Harry said glumly.

"Well, that's a relief! It'll be much easier once they're back to shagging regularly and in a decent mood," Ron piped up cheerfully. His newfound resolve to remain wisely silent was thoroughly effaced by relief at the drastic decrease in his chances of future close encounters of the canary kind.

"Ron," Harry said, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and turning decidedly greenish, "I said I was ready to live with Hermione's decision and attempt to be civil to Snape. I didn't say anything about wanting to make a habit of speculating on their personal life."

"Sorry," Ron replied with a heartfelt groan. "Wish I hadn't said it, myself. Now that I think of it, that thought is only a little less disgusting than belching slugs."

Harry sniggered. Enough years had gone by that that was finally somewhat amusing...to him, at least.

Ron punched him in the arm. "Drop it, or I'll find something to say about Hagrid and Madame Maxime together."

Harry clutched at his throat, making gagging noises. "Puh-LEASE," he groaned, only partially pretending agony. "Do that and I'll tell you about the time at Grimmauld place when I walked in on your parents."

Ron gave an agonized yell. "No, no, I can't hear you, LA, LA, LA, LA!" he sang at the top of his voice, a most high and lonely place (lonely because it could empty a room in two notes) as he clamped his hands over his ears.

They both dissolved into laughter. Ron quickly sobered up and looked askance at Harry. "Tell me you were joking about that last bit."

Harry sat up, looked Ron straight in the eye, and lied, "Of course I was!"

He wasn't about to relive that exceedingly brief but traumatic event, especially since the other two parties involved hadn't noticed him as he popped the door carelessly open, then immediately dove back behind its comforting opacity. He still considered himself lucky he hadn't gone blind. If he pretended otherwise long enough, it had never happened...right?

All he knew was, whoever still swore by Merlin's hairy arse plainly hadn't seen Arthur's.

Ron shot him one more peculiar look, but decided he'd not tempt his feet to leave the safety of the floor. "Ready to go home and unload tonight's adventures on Luna?" he asked neutrally. Not that he wouldn't make an effort if Harry still needed to vent more before leaving, but he had practice next morning. At least a few hours' sleep were in order.

At the mention of Luna, Harry's face took on a dreamy, faraway expression, not terribly unlike that of Miss Lovegood's signature mien.

Ron reflected that he was glad he'd managed to steer clear of Luna. As much as he liked her, he'd hate to go about with such a goofy expression ~~on~~his face. "You know, when Hermione talks about Snape, she looks a little bit like you do now," he remarked.

Harry pulled himself out of his Luna-reverie. "Really?" he asked in honest surprise. He considered what thoughts had coincided with his smile. With shock, he realized that the thrust of his musings was that, when he was with Luna...he was home. Was that how Hermione felt about Snape? Bizarre. Yet, if it were somehow true...

"I think I'll owl Hermione tomorrow," he finally said. "I might owe her an apology, of some sort. Luna usually has some interesting insights...once I get them translated."

"I'll bet," Ron chuckled. "I'll check in on Hermione sometime tomorrow afternoon, after practice. Hopefully he'll have cleared out by then. I'm not ready to practice being civil just yet."

Harry snorted. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready," he confessed. "But what the hell? I killed Voldemort. I imagine if I keep telling myself it's for Hermione, I can keep from trying to kill Snape." And with that, he bid Ron goodnight and Apparated home to Luna.

Ron's last fuzzy thought as he tumbled into bed was *Harry really needs to get his arse off the fence and marry his nutters little witch.*

Author's Note:

Baffie: slipper. For best results, apply to backside with foot in residence.

No insult to Arthur Weasley was intended in this story. Some of the best people on earth have hairy arses. And if you're waiting for me to elaborate on that, get comfy. It ain't happening this lifetime.

Duh-DUH-DUN! Did Severus actually propose? Did Hermione accept? Will Harry, in fact, get his arse off the fence and ask Luna to marry him? Will Ron wake up in time for Quidditch practice? What in blue blazes is Draco doing with Ginny? And for the love of soap in dirty mouths everywhere, will Reggie FINALLY get to turn visible again? These and other equally inane questions may or may not be answered in the next chapter!!!

6: Whose Jarvey Is It, Anyway?

Chapter 6 of 7

What are Draco and Ginny up to? What, exactly, was in that mystery bottle? I don't know about you, but I can't possibly feel sexy without a good shower. To find out if that has anything to do with this chapter, read on. (Do I smell citrus, or is that just your soap?)

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money off this. I've decided that I possess far too much integrity to accept any bribes to stop.

Warning: Mobile phones are scarcely mentioned in this chapter. Reggie is fairly restrained, for her. Sorry to disappoint. Would a spritz of lemon help make up for it?

Chapter 6: Whose Jarvey Is It, Anyway?

Hermione simply flung herself at him, and they crushed each other in a mutual embrace.

This is why we need to be together, they thought simultaneously. This is what it feels like to be home. Neither of them noticed Ginny and Draco making their swift exit, slamming the door on the way.

Home did, however, need a good Spring Cleaning. Trying to be tactful, they pulled away from each other.

"Don't take this amiss, my love... but have your studies left you a bit distracted from, ahem, bathing?" Severus asked hesitantly. "You're a trifle inky, and have a... clinical... fragrance."

Hermione's shoulders caved in chagrin. "Ah... I, um, may have neglected to shower after doing double shifts at St. Mungo's...I really was busy." Her nose crinkled and she cleared her throat. "Speaking of which, love... Were you in a clinic of some sort? Or an older hospital?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that...that smell. It's awfully reminiscent of an older-type, ethyl alcohol-based anesthetic potion. They discontinued it some years ago because it works poorly on persons with high alcohol tolerance and varies in effect based on the patient's magical ability. It also has side effects that tended to last until the body rids itself of all residual traces of the potion."

Uh-oh... mystery bottle puzzle: solved, Snape thought worriedly. Aloud, he asked, "Side effects?"

"Difficulty Apparating..."

Well, the Jarvey had taken care of their first trip, and he'd made it to Hermione's flat from The Leaky Cauldron just fine...

"...uncontrollable nausea and vomiting..."

Stomach contents still in place? Check.

"...excessive emotionality..."

No, those tears had been completely justified.

"...and impotence."

*Ummm... Oh, **shite**.*

"I don't think I could have come into contact with anything of that nature," he remarked, his neutral tone covering a frantic internal scramble after stimulating images to convince his less than responsive manhood to show initiative in the presence of his lady. Maybe a more active approach was in order. "Perhaps we could repair to the bath together and discuss our situation?"

Hermione smiled. "Just let me take a shower first, my love," she said softly, her eyes beginning to catch the light of passion.

He frowned at her in puzzlement. "We're going into the bath. Whatever do you need a shower for?"

Hermione stated (as if this were logic that anyone could grasp without half-trying), "I can't go into the bath all sweaty and mucky...just give me ten minutes, and I'll make myself presentable enough that we don't end up floating in swamp water." She planted a quick kiss on his cheek and ducked into the bathroom.

He might have tried to argue the point if he hadn't desperately wanted time to remedy his sexual plight. "Stupid drinking binge! How the hell am I going to get this out of my system before she's done with her shower? Damned if I can remember whether I have any purgatives at home," he growled to himself, pacing and urgently directing his attention southward every few thoughts, in hopes of some sign of erotic life from his trousers.

An odd tingle coincided with a familiar voice sounding from the back of the sofa. "Try now, you pervy old bastard," Regina said, her patient tone contrasting with the insults.

Severus spared the Jarvey on the couch a brief glare before testing whether he was, in fact, put to rights. He pictured Hermione in the shower, beads of water rolling off her lush curves, trails of white foam tracing the dip of her lower back and the valley between her breasts...

Ahhh. Much better. But there was still one small problem...

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, leveling a hard stare at the little silver irritant.

"What the hell do you mean, why am I doing this?" she asked defensively. "If you want me to put you back as you were..."

He quickly interrupted, "Why are you helping me when you aren't my Fairy God-Jarvey?"

Reggie was a little surprised, but she took it in stride. Male though he was, she had been pretty sure he was bright enough to figure things out...eventually. "How did you work that out?" she asked.

"Lots of little things. The fact that you had been to see Hermione first was suggestive. Then, you made the mistake of mentioning that you had been ~~looking~~ for me. I

imagine you would always know precisely where to find me, if you were, indeed, charged with my happiness."

Fuck, she thought. *There really was a good reason for rules against drinking on duty.*

"And, there is of course, the fact that no one could ever possibly consider me worthy of that sort of favor," he finished bitterly, sinking onto the cushion beside the Jarvey.

"Well, as it so happens, you stubborn git, you are right...and you are dead wrong," Reggie said, in a huff of injured dignity. "You're right that I was assigned to Hermione. Did it then occur to you that the absolute best proof that you are...for reasons that still more or less escape me...the only wizard for her, is that I, who am entrusted with helping her obtain her heart's desire, keep dragging your pathetic arse over to her?"

Snape was having trouble finding a retort to that. It was his own argument thrown back in his face, after all.

"I'm going to be on probation for-fucking-EVER now that I've spilled all this to you, but I'm past caring. I'm doing it for Hermione, whose happiness is more important to me than a stupid, wanking promotion, and I'm doing it for you, too, damned stuffy old bastard that you are! Maybe I've taken one too many knocks to the bonce, but I've become attached to you for some reason, and I don't give a pygmy puff's arse what anyone else thinks. I bloody well think you've paid double for your sins, and I bloody well think you deserve to be happy, and I'm bloody, fucking, damned well going to do whatever I can to ensure you are!"

"You *have* taken too many knocks to that sorry excuse for a cranium if you're attached to the likes of me," he retorted.

"Better not say that around your novia, seeing as how she's stuck on you like a barnacle on a dinghy. And yeah, I like you, Sir Snarky. Hey, what's not to like? My average case I have to deal with shite as serious as a heart attack. So far in the two times I've been with you, I've gone to a party, gotten blitzed, played dress-up, met and insulted famous portraits, and blown up a public lav. Not to mention you've got a mouth like Tio Pancho, except in English. Helping you is a fucking barrel of monkeys, amigo. Reminds me of a family reunion."

He still had a few ounces of sulk-and-snark that needed to run their course, although it was rather heartening to be so flatteringly assessed...even if it was by the raunchy rodent. "If you aren't my Fairy God-Jarvey, then how do you know what will make me happy?" he challenged.

"Oh, gee, that's a bloody tough one to work out...but let me apply my little pea-brain to it. Before you hooked up with my Frizzy Godchild, you were a lonely, miserable, cranky, downtrodden, alcoholic old sod who saw the light of day about as often as a vampire, with no social life and no sex life except for the tender ministrations of Madam Palmer and her five daughters," she commenced tartly.

"Don't try to sugarcoat it on my account," he replied sourly.

"After becoming One With Know-it-All, you ceased to be lonely, showed no measurable evidence of misery, and no trace of over-consumption of potent potables. People in Diagon Alley and elsewhere have actually been periodically blinded by the sunlight reflecting off your cave-fish pale face. You began not only to have a moderate exposure to social situations, but to recover the inklings of a professional life, as well...yeah, try to hide that grin, Sir Snark-a-Lot...I heard about your article making its way into '*Eire Elixir*'. And you were so high on happy hormones from the shag-a-rama that was part and parcel of your relationship with Hermione that you actually had ~~work~~ at being cranky some of the time," the Jarvey continued.

"As always, I am in awe of your eloquence," he intoned, pinching the bridge of his nose and cringing.

Reggie launched into the wrap up. "When you thought she dumped you, you went crawling off alone into the booze-bottle forest to try to lose yourself there. I finally drag your arse through catharsis and get you back here with her, at which you flung yourselves against each other like a couple of battling elephant seals, except not with intent to beat the crap out of each other. It's obvious to everyone but you, evidently, that having Hermione as Swotting Beauty to your Prince Snarking makes you one happy bunny...at least as happy as you are willing to let yourself get. Imagine the possibilities if you'd unbend a little more!" she exclaimed, standing on her hind legs and waving her forepaws vehemently for emphasis.

Snape reflected a moment. "Double for all my sins?"

"Well, that's a bit of an approximation," Reggie admitted, summoning a scroll. She let it fall, unrolling across the length of the couch and along the floor.

"Those aren't..." he started to ask.

"Yep. Single spaced, no less. With some on the back."

"Are you sure those are all mine?"

"Well, pretty sure. Maybe I was a little optimistic about that 'paying double' bit... some of these don't get wiped 'til you marry Hermione," Reggie admitted, then tactfully decided to Banish the scroll.

"I seem to be making a habit of being indebted to you for my happiness," he finally remarked in a tone of profound resignation.

"I won't tell anyone if you don't," Reg replied, draping her pointy snout over his shoulder confidently.

"I won't tell anyone either," Hermione said, softly. Severus turned toward the bathroom door where Hermione stood wrapped in a towel and a little wreath of steam, smiling at him. He rose to meet her. "Is it true? Do I really make you happy?" she asked.

There was only so long he could argue in the face of overwhelming logic. "Yes. You do... and," he continued, not caring how reckless it might be, "if you wish to make me happier, you could answer a small question for me." He dug into his pocket, cursing as his hand met an absence of jewelry box. Sod it! Why had he thrown the thing away?

"Looking for something, Oh Count of Cranky?" Regina asked with a giggle, floating the ring box towards them.*Happy ending, happy ending!* Her little brain sang gleefully.

Hermione started giggling as well. "Do you realize this is the very first time you've ever expressed a desire for me to answer one of your questions?"

Severus mock-glared at her and snatched the box out of the air. "Stop laughing and say whether or not you'll marry me, your infuriating little know-it-all," he snapped (completely without venom). He rather awkwardly opened the ring box and thrust it at her.

Still smiling, she took the ring from the box. "The answer would be 'yes,'" she said, admiring the colorful twists of gold and the brilliant blue sapphire they cradled. "I believe it's customary for the wizard to actually put the ring on the witch's finger," she added, helpfully.

"Can't resist adding a little extra to a perfectly simple answer, can you?" he asked as he slid the ring into place, an almost disbelieving smile quivering at the edge of his lips.

"Would you have me any other way?" she asked, beaming back. By way of an answer, Severus swept his witch off her feet and carried her back into the bathroom.

Reggie rightfully figured that not only was her work here done, but that there was as of this moment indisputably a crowd. "See ya, crazy hinnies," she called cheerfully. "And don't forget to invite me to the wedding!" She poofed away in her trademark cloud of silver smoke.

Ginny would have worried more about being kidnapped if she hadn't felt quite certain she could jinx the living shite out of Draco just as handily now as she had been able to

in school. Mainly, she was curious. What was the bastard after?

"Have a seat," he said, gesturing almost gallantly at the only other chair in what appeared to be an office.

"I'll stand, thanks," Ginny replied. "Sorry if I'm being gauche, but I admit to being unfamiliar with the etiquette of being kidnapped." Her eyes drifted over the open ledger on the desk. *Pluto's piles*, she thought incredulously. *Can't the stupid wanker hire a better accountant?* Her very next thought was, *He still bloody well has more than enough Galleons to set in motion the Floo of the Future. How do I get my hands on them?*

"You wound me, Miss Weasley. You are free to go at any time... once we've discussed your invention, and efforts to go into business," Draco said casually.

"Ah... You mean, my ideas that you've tried to steal," Ginny countered, equally coolly. She had wondered who was behind all those inquiries from an unnamed 'potential buyer' about the Answering Dummy and the prototype Floo-er ID box. "But finding it already patented, you began nosing into my business affairs in an attempt to see what you could get out of it," *Perhaps the answer to that question of how to get my hands on some Malfoy money is, 'more easily than I thought,'* she mused.

Draco gave a thin smile and waved his hand in a gracefully dismissive gesture, looking disturbingly like a much younger and handsomer version of Lucius. "Mere semantics, my dear Weasel. I am rather curious as to why you haven't availed yourself of your twin brothers' marketing machine."

Ginny decided to lay it on the line. She was tired as hell, and she hadn't any more desire to dance all night with Draco in the figurative sense than in the literal sense. "Look, Malfoy, Gred and Forge's attention can't be held for more than half an hour by anything lacking the power to explode, make someone ill, generate instant piles of cash, or get them off. It's not just a question of selling one little novelty. My plan will take years to fully implement. It is extensive, time-consuming, requires patience to execute, and will eventually prove insanely lucrative. The key word is, 'eventually.' I've got what amounts to a master plan for revolutionizing communications in the Wizarding world, but no capital and no connections."

"Actually, I think the key words are 'insanely lucrative,'" Draco replied. *She's interested, Draco... don't spoil it by, say, drooling.* "However, we are arguing quite pointlessly. I take it that you know well that I still possess a fair amount of capital."

"Not for much longer, unless you fire your accountant," she retorted.

Draco wasn't quite able to suppress his wince.

"You're doing this yourself, aren't you?" she asked slowly, realization dawning. It had never occurred to her to imagine that the Malfoys could ever be anything but absolutely swimming in both Galleons and devoted sycophants to polish and care for them. "Is that why...the mobile? This?" she asked, gesturing at the office.

He was determined to keep some semblance of cool. "Pounds spend just fine once you change them for Galleons," he said, challenging her to comment. He decided one last throw of the dice was in order. "What you see in that ledger is what I have left, besides a mother who thinks shopping is a way of life, a mansion that suffers from the indifferent ministrations of one mardarsed house-elf, and a name of questionable repute in the Wizarding world. Oh, I also have a few connections...a Muggle with a disused factory that wants a tenant, and a few people in the Ministry who are strategically placed and could be persuaded to help out with permits and regulations...*if I had the inventions, and if there were a wizard with a respectable name...*"

"...or witch..."

"...Or witch, fronting for the business. There. The mighty have officially fallen," Draco finished.

Ginny studied the wood grain on the desk. She was partially cogitating, partially hiding her excitement at the revelation that all three of the components her plan was lacking...capital, connections, and a larger manufacturing space than any Wizarding neighborhood had to offer...were hers for the negotiating. All she had to do was overcome her distaste for dealing with a Malfoy.

She had to hand it to him... Draco sure wasn't Lucius. Amazing how quickly the threat of being forced to live like someone in a normal tax bracket had overcome a lifetime of prejudice, or at least allowed him to suppress it. As poor as his bookkeeping skills were, he plainly had a useful measure of cunning, charm and resourcefulness. Even with a lifetime of goodwill towards Muggles in her upbringing, she hadn't managed to win over anyone with space to let. "I wouldn't settle for merely fronting, you know," she said. "I have experience in taking WWW international, and I'm studying law and accounting with Gringotts' best. I'm not wasting my talent on anything short of a full partnership."

Draco gave Ginny a long, appraising look, finding himself not too discomfited that it was being returned in kind. "I could just attempt to buy the rights to your invention, you know," he suggested smugly. It was more out of habit than anything else. There was no way in hell he could manage the books himself, nor ever trust anyone not fully invested in the company to do so.

"Assuming you could acquire it against my wishes, you would only have a single component of the system. What's it going to be, Ferret-Boy? Waste a substantial portion of your time and money chasing after a single invention? Or partner with me and make several absolute bloody fortunes taking the Floo system into the twenty-first century?" she challenged.

"You were mis-Sorted, my dear Weasel," he said casually, retrieving a bottle of champagne and two glasses from a charmed compartment in his desk.

"Maybe the hat saw my hair and heard the name 'Weasley' being read and simply tossed me into Gryffindor on reflex," she said, matter-of-factly drawing her wand and testing the bottle for tampering. She summoned her own glass as well, an amused glint in her eyes.

Draco raised an eyebrow as he released the lid with a seemly pop and poured for her, but otherwise did not acknowledge her actions. In a social situation it would have been hideous etiquette to bring your own glass, to say nothing of checking your host's bottle for substances more intoxicating than the alcohol. In business negotiations, it was a basic survival skill...one he had learned the hard way.

"I won't permit such casual informality at the office, of course. I must insist on being referred to as 'Mr. Ferret-Boy' during business hours," he said, looking rather mischievous himself and startling a brief laugh from Ginny. *She can be caught off-guard by humor*, Draco thought. *The intelligence gathering begins.*

Okay, if the ferret can manage to have a sense of humor, I certainly can she thought. "And I, for my part, will not settle for anything less than Miss Weasel," she replied playfully. *And if he thinks I'll bind myself to any sort of 'Gryffindor fair play' beyond accepting or giving the occasional jibe with good grace, he's got another think coming.*

As they toasted their pending partnership, both tried to refrain from grinning too fiendishly. It wouldn't do to look like the Kneazle that got the cream before the cream was securely gotten. Between her legal training and his native sneakiness, writing this contract was going to be more exciting than test flying a new Nimbus.

As Severus set Hermione back on to her feet and leaned in for a kiss, she drew back with almost comical haste. At least, it would have been comical to anyone except the two of them.

"What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed at the horrified expression on her face.

Finally, through her fingers covering her nose and mouth, she gasped, "Good Lord, Severus! You could vanquish a dragon with that breath!"

His entire posture slumped into a pose of profound exasperation. "And you accuse *me* of being overly dramatic?" he quipped.

By way of answer, Hermione grabbed her wand from the edge of the sink and shot a well-timed 'Scourgify' right into his open mouth.

He gagged at the sudden dryness, and she quickly followed it up with *Aguamenti*, thrusting the glass into his hands, which he drank eagerly. Taking the empty glass, she quickly stopped any further complaints by pressing her lips to his, kissing out all the fear, love, and frustrated passion that had been warring within her through the last few weeks.

"I'm sorry for being so abrupt, my love," she whispered, when they finally separated for breath, "but that kiss has been building up tension inside me for almost a month, and it just wouldn't wait for a tooth brushing."

It is quite difficult to sneer and pretend to suppress a self-satisfied smirk at the same time, but Severus had an extremely talented face in that regard. "And you couldn't bring yourself to kiss me 'as is'?"

"Not the way I wanted to kiss you," she said, punctuating her reply with a demure glance through her eyelashes.

Oh, listen to the Jarvey...just in this one thing, mind!...and unbend a little. He managed a slightly sulky look. "I don't really think I should... but I suppose I could excuse your impertinence, just this once..."

"Perhaps I could make it up to you by washing your hair?" she asked coyly.

Severus gave a sort of half-moan, half-whimper as his trembling fingers struggled with the buttons of his shirt. It was like saying to the average man, 'I read a book on exotic blow-jobs today, may I practice some on you?'

Not that he would respond to that unenthusiastically, either.

Hermione dropped her towel with studied nonchalance, glancing at him over her shoulder as she stepped into the tub. Unfortunately, he was tangled in his shoes and failed to notice her seductive gesture. Sighing, she sank into the bubbles and waited patiently for him to get free. For the hundredth or so time, she wondered why a man who otherwise dressed with distinctive flair elected to wear those silly y-front underpants beneath it all. Even Ron wore boxers, for goodness' sake. Although the pictures of Snitches enchanted to fly across them reduced the sexy factor down to nil.

As Severus finally settled into the tub in front of her, Hermione reflected it was a good job she was a witch. Without Transfiguration, this absurd birdbath was barely large enough to accommodate her. He would have fit into it like a giraffe with its backside in a bucket.

"I'm so sorry about tonight," she cooed softly at him, trickling water over his head and gently scraping her nails across his scalp. "I did a poor job of explaining that cowardly letter..."

"No worse than I did of proposing," he sighed. Mmmm... hair-washing and breast-pillowing bliss... Lovely young witch wearing his ring... Why was he supposed to be upset, again?

"I'll write Mum and Dad this Monday, after my second exam," she said, slowly working up lather on the right side of his head as he turned to nuzzle her left breast, then attended to the other side as he turned. "Although perhaps I should give them a week or two to assimilate the idea that we have a relationship before I spring this ring on them!" she giggled.

That suited Severus. He suddenly found himself less than enthused about the whole business of bringing her parents into the picture as he realized it would inevitably lead to meeting them.

"It's a beautiful ring, by the way," she added, massaging just above his normally furrowed brow. Hermione couldn't help but be amused by how worked up her lover became with the application of a little shampoo, but she hoped he didn't expect her to keep this up too long. He was getting a tad heavy.

"Well, it should be... After all, it reminded me of you," he purred. It really was easy to say pretty things when he was delirious with warm, silky, utterly disarming arousal. Decisions, decisions... Continue to luxuriate in the hair washing, or turn over and start shagging her silly? Would that all of his dilemmas were so grave.

Hermione proved more decisive, or maybe just less lazy. He would also accept 'more randy' as an answer. The result was the same...she squirmed slickly out from behind him and re-situated herself in his lap, reaching for the flannel.

As nice it was having the rest of his body soaped (by the teasing little minx who seemed intent on warming his cock without actually giving it anywhere to go) he was a bit put out at the fact that she'd not finished the job when it came to his hair. "You didn't rinse me," he protested, indicating the foam on his head.

She responded with an apologetic look. Then, she ducked him.

He came up, spluttering "You do realize, witch, that killing me to get your greedy little hands on my paltry assets will not work until *after* we're married?" he asked, narrowing his eyes dangerously at her as he pulled her close. Teasing time was over.

Hermione giggled and let him pull her into a kiss. "Well, you are rinsed now," she whispered. "And you still feel pretty lively to me."

It was hard to argue with that assertion, particularly as she fitted herself smoothly onto his rampantly erect shaft. Slowly, as if to savor the fact that neither of them was going anywhere, they rocked their hips in rhythm that sent the bath water slapping against the sides of the tub and slopping over onto the floor unheeded. Even their kisses were incredibly languid.

"I'm afraid all I really have in the world is you, love... and a house that even pests, both magical and Muggle, scorn," he confessed between slippery kisses. "Having you quite makes up for the house, though."

"The only assets of yours I can't live without are this," she said breathily, pointing to his temple, "this," she continued, caressing the spot where his heart thumped in his chest, "and this," she finished, running her hands lovingly over the rest of his body that she could reach.

"I do believe you missed a few parts," he purred smugly at her, giving a few emphatic thrusts to illustrate exactly which parts he meant. He had to hang on to the sides of the tub to keep from ducking himself in the process, but that only made it more interesting. A bit like bondage, without the chafing.

"Definitely... for about three weeks," she moaned, drawing herself up along his hot length before plunging back down forcefully against his thrusts. Ooh, that was creating turbulence in some very interesting places. Wherever they ended up living, a tub big enough for two was in order. Love among the bubbles... absolutely brilliant.

"Three weeks, two days, and approximately eight hours... not that I was keeping track," he hissed, rocking faster and capturing one enticingly bobbling nipple in his mouth. Soap had never tasted so sexy. God, it was hard to talk... or think... or breathe... so good...

This time, when she climaxed, she bit his hair.

As he let go, he realized he'd missed that, too. He wouldn't have minded even if she'd assaulted his nose again.

It was quite a heady experience, being told so pointedly that you are wanted for the exact sum of your component parts, and Severus was feeling quite relaxed...to the verge of unconsciousness. But since falling asleep in the tub was an act of exceedingly poor judgment, even with someone trustworthy on hand to fish you out in the event of the worst, he settled for talking. Brain and mouth seemed vaguely connected again. "Ah, I almost forgot...my library. Are you sure you have absolutely no interest in it, my dear? There are a few rare and first editions in there," he whispered silkily.

"Ummm... The library is just icing. Although I figure it will be a bit of a comfort to me when I outlive you," she replied mischievously, appreciative of his record good mood. Mildly humorous, teasing Severus was a rare and wonderful beast, whose infrequent appearances were to be encouraged and savored.

"*When?*" So you **are** plotting against me," he mock scolded her, playing idly with her wet mess of curls.

Hermione gazed at him with serious eyes. "If I had my way, we'd grow quite old together..."

"To two hundred, at least," he interrupted, kissing her nose.

"...then turn into two trees, like Baucis and Philemon in the Greek myth...so that neither of us need ever mourn the other's death," she finished softly, her voice catching.

They held each other close a long while after that. Finally he said, "I agree with the sentiment, love... I just don't think I'd take to life as a tree."

She giggled. "What about me? I'm so short compared to you, I'd look like a glorified shrub."

"Oh, out of the tub with you, already," he said, giving her a light slap on the backside that sent water splashing everywhere. She splashed back at him as she climbed out. "We may be planning to grow old together, but we don't need to get all wrinkled beforetime," he grumbled unconvincingly as he clambered out in turn.

Just in case he was actually annoyed (which Hermione doubted) she took extra care toweling him off. She did such a good job, in fact, that they almost didn't make it out of the bathroom, especially as he insisted on reciprocating.

However, cold tile can only hold so much appeal for tired bodies. They whisked enough textual debris aside to make a clear path to the bedroom. Hermione tried to put on her nightgown, but it was rather difficult with Severus firmly affixed to her back and gently countering her every attempt to don said garment by further entwining his arms with hers. Her protestations gradually weakened, and he pulled her down into his lap on the edge of the bed, from which position he eased them both to the horizontal. Hermione finally relaxed, staring up at the boring, familiar ceiling and luxuriating in the never boring, familiar warmth of her fiancé at her back. He was amazingly comfortable to lie upon. Mmmm. The virtues of a firm mattress...

"When are the rest of your examinations?" he asked, murmuring into her hair as he fiddled with the unruly mass. The trick was to make it seem as if he were caressing those outrageous locks while he was trying to get them tucked securely away from nose-tickling range. She was feeling too entirely light atop him. Definitely not eating properly.

"Monday, eleven hundred hours, part one of..." she began rattling off her schedule.

He sighed heavily, fluffing her curls in all directions. The hair was as out of his way as it was going to get. Time to proceed with the calming. Yes, stroking her eyebrows... a nice, unconventional place to start.

"I know I'm obsessing again. But it's truly important to me," she said, shivering a fraction as his fingers drifted lightly down her cheeks, detoured over her ears, then slid down to circle the tip of her chin.

"And you are truly important to me, which I why I don't want you succumbing to a nervous breakdown between now and then. You aren't taking care of yourself. You're wasting away, my love," he said in a soft, solicitous purr, tracing a line down either side of her neck.

"I've been trying to lose weight for years. It's the only good thing to come out of all this stress," she countered, her voice growing soft and breathy as his slender fingers trailed across her sharp collarbones and lightly brushed the perimeter of her breasts.

"Not to me, it isn't. I'll not have my witch looking like a starved waif," he growled into her hair. He winced slightly as he ran his fingers down her torso, finding hints of her ribs and the points of her hipbones.

"I'm not underweight," she sighed, carefully rolling over (without rolling off) to nuzzle his chest. "I promise, I won't waste away."

He made no reply, but his resolve to restore her to warm, soft plumpness at the first opportunity was unshaken. In fact it was reinforced as he ran his hands over her pert little peach of a bum, inwardly tsking at its diminished fullness. There was no way he was going to let Hermione end up looking like his mother. The thought alone was quite depressing. His mother had been so thin, so neglected... so very, very, sad. Hermione would never look thin and neglected, not as long as he was alive to say anything about it. There were ways of making her eat.

And as for sadness, he had it on very good authority that, for some unfathomable reason, he made her happy.

"Severus?" she asked, wondering if his silence meant he was brooding again, or just falling asleep.

"Yes, my pet?" he murmured.

"I... I'm so sorry about what happened earlier tonight. I thought that I was failing...failing you I mean, not making you happy...I wanted to protect myself. I was so insecure, I almost ruined everything for us."

"No more so than I," he replied.

She hummed inquisitively into his sternum, and he clarified, "I've... been known to fight an insecurity or two myself." Severus stared at the ceiling, willing his heart rate to slow down from the anxious pitch aroused by that confession. Damned uninspiring ceiling. If the room were larger, he'd suggest a canopy for the bed. How does one brood in a supine position without a fabric pattern to gaze at?

Hermione nuzzled a few wiry hairs within reach of her pert nose. "It seems strange to think of you as ever being insecure. You always seem so... pulled together."

He snorted. "You were going to say 'buttoned down,'" he scolded, but his voice was plainly amused.

"Yes, well, about that...why all the buttons?" she asked.

"You've been dying to ask that question for years," Severus accused, unable to keep a smirk from taking possession of his face.

Odd how intimate association with a person makes it possible to sense their facial expressions, even when not in line of sight. Hermione persisted, egged on by the smirk as much as her own curiosity. "Absolutely. Are you going to answer it, or are you saving that profound revelation for a wedding present?"

"Intimidation, of course," he yawned.

"Buttons are intimidating?" she asked, resolving to stay awake until she got a satisfactory reply.

Bother. He knew she wouldn't be satisfied with a simple answer. "The right buttons certainly are. Nice, uninterrupted, identical, neatly queued... they project professionalism, rigidity, uniformity, everything that is unyielding, official, and, generally, intimidating. Compare a pullover to a button-down shirt, or one of those silly things with novelty buttons to a similar garment with the standard conservative two-hole mother-of-pearl models," he explained, too tired to bait her any further.

"I can understand the last bit. But really, I find it a little hard to believe that it has a large effect," she said wonderingly.

Teaching must be a habit that becomes ingrained after a while. Severus found he needed to stay awake until she understood what the hell he meant. "It's true. Arthur

Weasley would have gotten farther in the Ministry if he made a better showing of buttons."

"Now I know you're having me on," she scoffed.

"I am absolutely earnest. How can anyone consider him a wizard to contend with when he goes about bundled in soft fluff? Even a Hungarian Horntail would have to work at being intimidating if it were muffled in a Weasley jumper," he said with greater seriousness than he could have allotted the topic if more alert.

Hermione gave up, succumbing to giggles. "I love every secure and insecure inch of you, Severus Snape...down to the last button," she sighed. She meant to finger his navel by way of a punch line to her little joke, but was just too tired to move sufficiently

His answer was somewhat muffled by her hair, which he was contentedly sniffing. "Ah, but now that I have you firmly in my clutches, I doubt I shall be experiencing much insecurity, my lovely little witch. Had I known that 'I love you' was the incantation to bind you to me, I would have said it long ago." *Must add more Neroli to the next batch of conditioner, as soon as I can afford it*, he thought, analyzing her fragrance approvingly. *That orange blossom essence is incredibly sexy on her. Though it seems to be making me say some rather absurd things.*

"Just don't forget to renew the spell every so often, my love," she mumbled, her lips pursing slightly against his skin as she drifted off.

Severus sighed. Of course, she had to fall asleep on him, literally. Now what? He simply wasn't a cuddler, regardless of her consistent efforts to encourage him in that direction. However, he wasn't just going to roll her off to the side, not after all he'd gone through to get her.

Oh, what the hell. "Accio' blanket," he said quietly. Hermione barely stirred as he spread the blue flannelly softness over her back, fluffing it so that it neatly covered both their feet. "Don't think I'm going to make a habit of this," he muttered, resting one hand protectively on her lower back and caressing the riotous mess of her curly hair, currently nestled under his chin, with the other.

A feline sneeze issued from the chair in the corner. Severus narrowed his eyes at Crookshanks. "I care about your opinion only slightly less than I wish to know what it might be," he said with a sneer. The cat (whose feelings toward him could have been similarly summarized) yawned disdainfully and went back to sleep.

His last thought before falling under the sway of Hypnos was that they'd be stuck in his flea-trap of a house. As things stood, they couldn't afford to rent, much less buy, a place big enough for his lab...or their books. But it scarcely mattered. As long as they were together, they were home, and he wasn't about to trade that for anything.

Even if it meant occasionally waking up to Hermione shamefacedly cleaning a reddish smear from his leg, and apologizing that his planned weekend of incredible celebratory sex would have to be postponed in favor of a weekend of conversation, tea, and... sigh... cuddling.

almost FIN

Author's Note:

Tio Pancho: Uncle Frank (Pancho being short for 'Francisco'...I don't know why, either)

Anyone want an epilogue? No? What about an epilogue with lemonade? Well, I'm going to write one anyway. Stick around or not, as you prefer. Thanks to all those who have reviewed! Do you realize Reggie's head is now almost too big for her little body? We luvves you all!

Hee hee... just to show I never forget a remark... Severus doesn't care what Crookshanks thinks either, Sun. ;-)

Hang in there, Larilee...we're almost done! Wow... you mean, you like this? Oh, great. You realize the Jarvey's going to want her own room, now. With a star on the door, no less.

Epilogue

Chapter 7 of 7

I've become slightly addicted to Epilogues, it seems. But hey, isn't it worth a couple hundred more words to find out how Hermione's exams turned out? Oh, don't look at me like that. Okay, how about a sip of lemonade?

Disclaimer: I never said they were mine, except for the little beast with the big mouth.

Healer Kornokovich smiled broadly when he saw who was entering his office. "Miss Granger! How lovely to see you. Vere you coming to discuss my recommendation?"

"Yes, sir," she said with only a faint trace of nervousness...which evaporated into a smile as she brushed her thumb over her ring. She discovered that a year, more or less, didn't matter much anymore. She knew she would be qualified eventually. The big uncertainty in her life was happily cleared up, and that, amazingly, seemed to make everything else manageable.

The big man pulled a sealed envelope from somewhere in his voluminous desk. "I would tell you your results, but I am not a seer. Then again, I do not think it takes a seer to predict that you have passed all exams most handily," he said, still smiling indulgently as he handed over the packet. He sat back with an expectant look on his face, like an indulgent uncle confident that he has given the perfect Christmas present.

Hermione colored faintly pink at the compliment and tried not to seem too eager as she broke the seal. She pulled out a parchment with some very impressive test scores... then felt something at the tips of her finger in the apparently empty envelope. Something fabric-like. Curious, she reached in and pulled out...

"These...are these mine?" she asked, staring at the mint-green robes.

"Vell, the laundry room did not put them there accidentally," he said, breaking into a wide smile. "Of course, there vill still be a ceremony to present your degree, vhitch your family may attend...but I see no reason to let you vaste your time as a trainee while the proper security arrangements are made to comply vith Secrecy laws."

"You said you didn't know my results!" she exclaimed, still astonished.

"I did take a few liberties with how I expressed it, Healer Granger...but I never said that I did not know the contents of that envelope," he replied.

Healer Granger. It was all she could do to keep from squealing most unprofessionally.

"Come now...I believe you have rounds, do you not?" he asked, interrupting her reverie.

"Oh! I mean, yes, sir! I'll get to the, um..."

"The Lobelia Sprout Plant Poisoning and Injuries Ward," he supplied helpfully. "Report to Healer Molyneux for your schedule."

"Right away!" she finished, shrugging out of her trainee robes and into her Healer's robes, still crisply creased from being magically folded into the envelope.

"Oh, and... Healer Granger?" he asked, still smiling gently.

"Yes, Healer Kornokovich?" she responded, beaming back.

"The contract for our more complex healing potions comes up for renewal this week. Would you be so kind as to take your Mr. Snape his paperwork to sign personally, this time? It would be much more lucrative for him to supply us directly, rather than to sit at the bottom of a long trail of subcontracts," he said, presenting her with a parchment.

Hermione was speechless. "Sir?" she finally asked, wide-eyed. "How...How did you know?"

"It was not so hard to figure out, once you started going out with him. I cannot imagine even such a responsible young woman as yourself taking time at the end of a romantic evening to make a delivery. Although remarkably, I seem to have been the first to notice that delivery of every batch of potions coincided with one of your dates," he said, his accent thickening as his amusement blossomed into a friendly laugh.

Hermione blushed, even as she couldn't help giggling at herself. So much for secrecy!

"No one will ever forget, Healer Granger," he continued in his best kindly voice. "But it is in everyone's best interests to forgive, especially based upon what I see here. You are happy, and I do not see you being happy with a wicked man. You are his best recommendation."

"I...we...appreciate this very much, Healer Kornokovich," she said, her eyes shining.

He tilted his head, gently deflecting her thanks. The big wizard had always felt that kindness should be as automatic as breathing, and no one thanked you for breathing. "Compassion, Healer Granger. Remember, it is the cornerstone of Healing."

Hermione made sure her robes, with the contracts in the pocket, were conveniently near the bed. She wanted to wait until she and Severus were done celebrating her new status to reveal the other piece of good news.

"You didn't," he said aghast, pulling himself up on one elbow instead of relaxing into the pillow.

"You're welcome,luv. You do realize that increasing your income, soon to be part of our combined incomes, is a good thing?" she asked, refusing to let go of that lovely post-climactic laziness.

"I can't believe that you just waltzed into the hospital after we were together to make those deliveries," he groaned, rolling away from her and staring at the moth holes in the canopy. Gryffindors!

"Well, it was important! They had to be delivered promptly, you know that," she said defensively. Apparently, there would be no basking in the afterglow tonight.

"There was nothing that couldn't have waited one more day. I built that into the brewing schedule," he explained huffily.

"Nice time for you to tell me!" she retorted. "And I rather imagine it would have been discovered eventually. Why don't you just sign the contract and be glad it's sorted in your favor?"

Severus tired of trying to explain the finer points of evasion and reached for the parchments she had placed on the bedside table during the course of her explanation. After all, the contracts were there, and it was quite a better bargain for him this time around.

"I'm afraid I've misjudged you, my dear," he said, shaking his head as he read everything carefully before signing.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" she asked, slightly anxious and entirely confused.

"Well, now that you're no longer in the constant company of the-two-I-refuse-for-the-sake-of-my-blood-pressure-to-name, you are remarkably lacking in stealth, evasiveness, and general sneakiness," he answered with a small sigh of disappointment. "Accio quill," he muttered, finding nothing untoward on the parchments...other than the fact that it was probably still slightly less than his expertise was worth, but more than enough to ensure they could afford decent wedding bands. In a few more months... as long as they didn't want anything too fancy. He wasn't letting her pay for those, either.

Well... maybe for his. After all, they did want to get married sometime this century.

"Since when have I been sneaky?" she queried defensively.

"Your memory is fading in your old age, pet."

"Speak for yourself."

"All right, does mention of Umbridge and the Centaurs ring any bells?"

"That was more like... inspiration."

"Hmm. Two words, then: Boomslang skin."

"Ah...um..."

"I see your memory is returning."

"I thought you accused..."

"Do you *like* seeing that vein on my forehead?"

"Of course not, darling. I know you'd rather not name the name, but I had hoped that you would be inured to casual mention of him by now."

"Give me another year...or three. And even then, not in our bed," he growled. "Come now, I doubt that now he could correctly identify Boomslang skin in a hurry, even if it were still attached to the Boomslang. And there is no way in hell he'd have managed to brew Polyjuice Potion correctly. That left either one of my N.E.W.T. level students or the young lady who ended up making an extended visit to the infirmary with a bad case of hairballs."

Since Hermione enjoyed being reminded of that incident almost as well as she took to being teased about Lockhart, she responded with a sharp slap to his exposed bum.

Severus glared over his shoulder at her. "Is that how you treat your half of my assets?"

"So that's my half," she said with a smirk, soothing the light pink mark she'd made on that particular cheek. She could never examine his body for long without beginning to inventory his sprinkling of scars, some of which had obvious origins (Slicing Hexes left very distinct marks) and others, which were harder to identify. A bit below the spot she'd just spanked, Hermione noticed a tiny, whitish scar for the first time. "What happened here?" she asked, tracing her finger along the slightly differently textured spot near the juncture of his thigh and buttocks.

"I'm still not certain," he confessed. "I was trying to keep Quirrell from tossing your irritating little friend to his death your first year, and all of a sudden I found myself engulfed in flames. It's a good thing I..."

A glance over his shoulder revealed that Hermione was turning some rather alarming colors. "What's wrong pet? Are you...what are you..." he trailed off. Suspicion replaced concern. "What do you know about this?"

Silence. Blushing.

"You **didn't**."

"Well... darling, you must understand, we were..."

"...thinking with approximately your I.Q. divided by both of theirs? You do realize that had those flames gotten a few inches higher, we might not be enjoying these agreeable carnal interludes," he admonished, glaring at her.

"I'm sorry, my love," she said, quite subdued. "It was meant to be a distraction, not an assault."

"Hmph. I suppose that incident in the Shrieking Shack wasn't meant to be an assault, either?"

Now it was her turn to glare. "What is this, 'bring up youthful misdeeds night'? I'm no seer. It's not as if I was thinking, 'Ooh, best not damage this big scary chap too badly, I might want to shag him someday.'"

He pulled a disgusted face at her. "That's an incredibly deviant line of thought."

She giggled. "Well, much more so if you'd thought of it. I might have been more careful with that flame if I'd known I was putting my claiming mark on my future mate."

He snorted and muttered something about pervy little girls.

She stroked the scar apologetically. "So, why is it that the only mark is all the way up here? I wasn't exactly trying to goose you with that bottle of flame, as I recall."

"Poppy took care of the rest. I wasn't about to show her that particular spot, not for the sake of an inch-long blemish that I need multiple mirrors and a bit of modified yoga to see."

Severus was beginning to feel a bit silly for raking her over the coals regarding her childish mistakes. Besides, if he weren't careful, she might begin making inquiries into the brilliant exploits of *his* student career...and in the highly unlikely event Minerva had forgotten any, he felt quite sure she knew of a portrait that could refresh her memory. "They weren't severe burns...more like a little scalding. The only reason that mark is there at all is the fact that I treated it myself, with a view towards alleviating the discomfort rather than worrying about appearances. It's not as if it's my best side."

"Oh, I don't know..." she said suggestively, rolling back onto her elbows and letting her head fall back, the better to display two of her distinctly aesthetic assets for his enjoyment. "It certainly has its aesthetic qualities."

Judging by that unsubtle gesture, she was plainly amenable to making it up to him. "So, who finally broke through your brilliant attempts at subterfuge?" he asked, teasing the delicate flesh around her collarbone and between her breasts with the quill as he reached over to put the contracts out of the way.

"Evidently, Healer Kornokovich worked it out. I get the impression he will sort anyone who objects," Hermione said, relaxing. She considered it highly promising that despite Severus' sarcasm being firmly in place (which was probably a good sign that any beginning of relationship hormonal effects were well and truly done with), he still tempered it a bit with humor...for her, anyhow. With regards to the rest of the world, 'The-Snark-Who-Takes-No-Prisoners' reigned.

She could live with that.

"Well, since you spoiled my opportunity to luxuriate in the afterglow of the incredibly skillful and thorough job I did of pleasuring you, I think it only fair that you recompense me for all my efforts on your behalf," he said, dropping the quill and laying back on the pillow with an expression that was a unique cross between petulant and smug. "Not to mention you owe me for various pains in the arse, not all of which are figurative."

She almost launched into a pointed counterargument that she had done her share of 'pleasuring,' thank you very much, and it was he who had ruined the mood; then abruptly realized this statement, as nearly everything Severus said, needed filtering to be properly understood. Without the constant grind of academics for the first time in her life, she was able to devote considerable attention to becoming more fluent in Snape.

"Hmmm. Let me see... translating from 'Snape-speak,' I would say that means you've got all applicable bees out of your bonnet and would like to make love again. However, you are feeling exceptionally lazy, and want me to be on top and do most of the work this time. Am I correct?" she asked, smiling indulgently as she swung one leg over his hips.

"One of the compensations to bedding a know-it-all," he replied, licking his lips expectantly. "Remind me, pet... what were some of the others?"

She reminded him.

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning while Hermione slept, Severus came padding back to bed from the loo. He did so in total darkness, reasoning that it was his house and he ought to be able to make it there and back without disturbing the repose of his fiancée with a '*Lumos*' spell.

It would be almost as much a shame to disturb the repose of his wand...which always looked complacently comfortable in its sleek, dark elegance next to her lighter, more petite and demure model...as they shared the nightstand.

He was a little less convincing as he reasoned internally that the early morning trip was a direct result of the lithesome witch bouncing enthusiastically on the vicinity of his bladder several hours earlier and nothing to do with all of his body parts approaching the half-century mark. After all, by Wizarding standards, he estimated he had a good two more decades to go before he need start giving serious consideration to the concept of middle age. If he was feeling particularly delusional, he could even get away with imagining he was still in some vestige of the prime of life.

Regardless, the not unreasonably lumpy mattress and the warm and smooth beyond all reason body of his beloved were very comforting after an au naturel stroll through the drafty room.

"Love you, pet," he murmured sleepily, twisting one of her stray curls possessively around his finger.

She hummed interrogatively at him, waking slightly as she snuggled against his body and felt the chill of night air and hand washing that clung to his skin.

"Just renewing the spell," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"Love you, too," she yawned. Their body temperatures melded into uniformly soothing warmth, and they drifted off to sleep again.

In the offices of the International Fellowship of Fairy Godmothers and Related Do-Gooding Beings, Madam Mab was breaking in a new intern. Pip had managed to finagle his way into a supervisory position, and she missed all thirty-two officious, overeager, highly organized inches of him. Gizzywiggle was hyperactive and solicitous and couldn't organize a sock drawer if every pair was color-coded beforehand.

"It's *her*," he said, placing a slipping and sliding pile of paperwork, documents askew in their folders, on the desk. "Fletcher."

That earned a grimace from his boss. "If she wants to get off probation, she's got to straighten her tutu and start flying right...or whatever it is that Jarveys do to get around," Mab grumbled.

"Remind me again, Ma'am--why do we employ non-fairies?" Gizzywiggle asked.

"There just aren't enough of us, Gizzy my dear," she said sadly. "Loss of habitat... Lack of inclination towards the vocation amongst the younger set... Recruiting of all the taller pixy kin for Eastern European and Asian gymnastic teams..."

Before Mab could wobble off into the misty land of reminiscence, Gizzywiggle quickly interrupted. "I'll fetch Fletcher for you."

Within moments, the young fairy returned with the rather un-fairylike being in question. Reggie hastily tugged her pink tutu into place as she gracefully slunk into the room.

"Regina Fletcher, *Master* Fairy God-Jarvey... provisionally...ready and reporting for duty, Your Royal Chuffing Crankyship!" She lifted her silvery eighteen inches or so of body into the air, balancing on her pewter-tipped tail and hind legs as she saluted. It would have looked like a respectful gesture had she not worked two digits of her paw apart, back of said paw facing her supervisor, as she made it.

"Save it, Fletcher," Mab growled. "Look, as much as I disagree with your methods, I'm NOT maliciously blocking your advancement. I can't do that.*No matter how much I might like to*, she thought.

"Damn right you can't. Union Regs say I can't be passed over for promotion more than three times without a formal reprimand for wrongdoing, and the formal hearing necessary for such a reprimand," Reggie said. "And you know what that means...witnesses, proper representation..."

"I know Union Regulations!" Mab almost shouted.

"Sorry to interrupt...but Madame Mab, we've got a problem," Pip, now supervisor of the Office for the Administration of Unusual Situations, squeaked apologetically as he stuck his head in the door.

Mab sighed. Everything was a problem as far as Pip was concerned, especially now that he had his own department to run. "What is it now?"

"Longleaf in the Training Division asked me to bring this to your attention, since she's swamped with new recruits. There's a trainee who has passed all the exams, but she's...she's having trouble placing him in an apprenticeship." Pip brought yet another file (neatly tabbed, perfectly sorted, and meticulously aligned with the center of the folder, evoking a nostalgic sigh from the bespectacled fairy) and placed it on the desk for her perusal.

Mab turned the pages with a flick of her wand. Her eyes, magnified to bug-like proportions by her glasses, flickered rapidly as she read.

"Fletcher, you're probationary period is over. Go with Pip to meet Motoyoshi, your new apprentice," she said abruptly, looking up from the file and slamming it shut.

Reggie shouldn't have been whooping in celebration. If she had been a little more restrained, she might have noticed Mab chuckling evilly behind a mountain of files...

FIN

Author's Note:

If you were planning on being offended by the gymnast reference, please bear in mind that my Grandmother was an Eastern European rhythmic gymnast in her youth, and my husband is Asian. No insult was intended!

Don't despair, oh fans of Reggie! After all... she did say that Fairy Godmothers get to attend weddings, right? Not to mention, I suppose one or two people might be interested in finding out why Mab was so despicably gleeful about assigning Reggie to train this Motoyoshi fellow. There might be a story in that, if I've not been locked away by then. Do they let you use the internet in a loony bin?