

A Hallowe'en Tail

by *Subversa*

Severus reflects on a Halloween past while Hermione encourages him to participate in the present Halloween. There is a costumed ball, and there are many meetings and a surfeit of romantic moments. This story is a sequel to Master of Enchantment, Bast: Operation Kitty, Meet the Parents, Meet the Boys, Meet the Beetles, and Nobody Told Me There'd Be Days Like These.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Blessings upon **LariLee**, who betaed this Halloween one-shot.

A Hallowe'en Tail

Another term was well underway at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Halloween was drawing nigh.

It was true enough that the first years would never know the demon the older children had stigmatized as the Great Bat of the Dungeons, and even those who had Known-Him-When were highly doubtful of the milder version of Professor Snape continuing for very long. He was still an exacting taskmaster, a harsh marker, a stern disciplinarian, but the maliciousness seemed to be gone from his snarky nature. To be sure, he was quick to punish misbehaviour in his classroom, and only a fool would act up in his presence outside of his classroom but his solitary prowls about the castle in search of miscreants had diminished to his actual assigned patrols, and if it could not be said that he no longer favoured his own House in distributing points, it was fair to say that he also no longer was apt to deduct points from hapless Gryffindors for offences such as "breathing too loudly." It was widely known amongst the upper years and whispered amongst the lower years, that the reason for this was that his new wife was a former Gryffindor prefect and Head Girl. That Madam Snape was fast friends with Gryffindor Head of House, Professor McGonagall, was a widely known fact. Even if Professor Snape's pretty bride was not present to witness the unfair deduction of points, she would find out from her friend and take it up with her husband.

Peace unparalleled in the last twenty years was reigning in the dungeons. Perhaps it was a bit much to ask that it last?

The battle had been raging for days. The Ministry was having a Halloween costume party on Wednesday night and Hermione was determined to attend. She worked for the Ministry now, and she was ambitious enough to want to see and be seen by those who might prove to be useful to her in her career. Besides, she thought it might be fun, and she wanted to have some fun with her husband whether he liked it or not.

"I am not attending a *costume* party."

Only Severus could say 'costume party' in such a way that he made it sound like a filthy swearword.

"Call it a masked ball, then," Hermione cajoled.

Severus sniffed scornfully without looking up from his newspaper.

"I would hate to have to go without you."

The withering glare she received for this comment was met by her sweetest smile.

Bast paced the floor from the study door to the bedroom door and back, moving ponderously on her elegant little feet. Her swollen, kitten-filled belly swayed just slightly as she walked. The room was completely dark, but she moved through it with the ease of long familiarity, back and forth, from the bedroom door to the study door and back again.

Crookshanks, who was curled up on the sofa, jumped to the floor and sat for a moment watching Bast as she made her trek from one door to the other and back. When next she lumbered past him, he leapt at her playfully, running across her path and nipping at her fur as he went by. With supreme disdain, Bast ignored him completely, undeterred in her mission.

On her next trip past him as he lay sprawled on the floor with his tail flicking back and forth in great annoyance, she simply made a detour, walking a broad swath around him before joining up with her established path in her restless quest.

Severus opened his eyes, slowly waking from a dream. Hazy, he wondered at the time. The candles usually illuminated in the mornings to let him know breakfast would soon be served in the Great Hall, and it was still dark. With an unspoken command, he lit the candles on his bedside table and ascertained that it was after seven which meant it was Wednesday.

Dear Merlin, how he loved his Wednesdays.

On Wednesday, his first class was after lunch, and the two hours before lunch were his so-called 'office hours.' His own loose interpretation of this silly idea of Dumbledore's was, 'only have to be available if a student has made a specific appointment to see me' which meant that he was free to spend his Wednesday mornings in bed with his bride because who would voluntarily descend to the dungeons and subject themselves to the singular misery of extra time with the Potions master?

Rolling to his side, Severus feasted his eyes upon Hermione. She still slept, one hand beneath her cheek, her lips softly parted. The sheet had drifted down to her waist, and one full breast was bared. His morning erection expressed satisfaction with this development. With another unspoken spell, the sheet shifted again, so that both breasts were bare to his eyes as she slumbered on, unaware. He could imagine the weight of her breasts in his palms, the nipples hardening against the contact, yet he waited, looked without touching her, considering the palette of her skin was it the porcelain of her face and breasts contrasting the rose of her lips and nipples? Or was it cream and coral?

His idle, lust-filled thoughts were interrupted when her eyes fluttered open, and she found him watching her with lascivious intent. Deliberately, she raised her arms above her head, stretching like a kitten as she arched her back and thrust her breasts in his general direction.

Dear Merlin, how she loved her Wednesdays.

Reacting predictably to her blatant provocation, Severus rolled over on top of her, grasping her outstretched arms just beneath her elbows and pinning them above her head before taking one inviting nipple into his mouth.

"Yessss, Severus," she sighed.

"It's Wednesday," he rumbled, releasing her nipple and happily rubbing the tip of his nose across the valley between her breasts.

"I know," she responded breathlessly.

He lifted his face to look into her eyes as he slid his hands up her forearms and twined his fingers with hers. As his palms pressed hers into the soft mattress, and his ebony eyes, burning with a dark passion that never failed to rouse her desire, bore into her eyes, the Enchantment worked its magic upon them, synchronizing their very heartbeats, each to the other.

Releasing her, Severus rolled away and picked up the wand on the bedside table. As he did so, raising himself to a sitting position, the bedclothes fell away from him, and Hermione was treated to the sight of his naked body. The black hair that brushed his shoulders fell forward into his face as he bent at the waist to retrieve his wand. Across his shoulders, the ripple of muscle that flowed with his movement was ineffably erotic to her; when he twisted back to face her, she raked her eyes down his lightly toned chest to the flat of his belly, then on to his proud erection, angling away from his body.

"Pet," he purred silkily, causing her to take her eyes from his endowments and return them to his face, "do you see something you want?"

Pushing herself up with her hands, Hermione nodded wordlessly and passed the tip of her tongue over her lower lip, never breaking eye contact as he sealed the bedroom door.

Hermione moved onto her knees and took his wand from his hand, reaching across him to place it back on the table. Then she pressed him back onto his pillow, moving to straddle his hips. With practiced ease, she settled herself; her own groan of satisfaction was echoed by the sharp intake of his breath. With a smirk, he watched her through half-lidded eyes.

Hermione proceeded in unhurried rhythm, rising and falling with a languorous, rocking motion gripping and releasing, gripping and releasing. Severus watched as she ran her hands across her breasts. Her dark hair tumbled in total disarray down her back; when she arched herself in that way, he could feel her hair caressing the tops of his thighs. The sensation, in combination with her sensual display, was almost unbearably titillating for him. Taking matters into his own hands, he grasped her hip with one hand, holding her as he plunged repeatedly into her heat, while using his other hand to apply stimulation of a more direct sort to that bundle of nerves at the juncture of her thighs.

Her cries as she reached her completion made him glad for the umpteenth time that the complex Silencing Charm he had permanently placed on their bedroom kept her passionate reactions for him alone. Deftly tumbling her to one side, he covered her with his body and slammed back into her, his inflamed sensibilities drinking in her parted lips, her closed eyes, the tossing of her head from side to side on the pillows, her luscious breasts bouncing with every thrust of his hips and he exploded, the compulsion to continue driving him until he could no longer move.

Slipping to one side of her, he pinned her to him with one arm, his gasping breaths stirring her hair. As his breathing returned to normal, Hermione curled into him, and he soothed her back to sleep with repeated caresses up and down her spine.

Halloween, 1997

Severus patrolled the perimeter of the Great Hall with a nastier than usual sneer upon his lips.

A Ball! A Halloween Ball! In the middle of a war, and what must the headmaster do but summon an orchestra and encourage the students in this mindless frivolity?

Abruptly he stormed through the entrance hall and outdoors, where Hagrid's enormous pumpkins had been set on the lawn, magically carved into jack-o-lantern faces on

the front side. There were doors carved into the backs so that couples could enter and look out through the eyes, nose, and mouth of the gourds while no doubt getting up to unseemly shenanigans from within. After pausing by the doorway of each pumpkin house to strike terror into the souls of the fleeing students, and to deduct points in a frenzy of self-satisfaction, Severus veered over into the rose garden, where he routed some of the more determined snogging partners with a few hearty blasts of his foliage-destroying wand.

The sight of a lone figure, sitting despondently on a stone bench near a fountain sporting an impromptu representation of a flock of swarming bats, brought him up short. The solitary person, who appeared to be female, was unaware of the havoc the Potions master had been creating as he chased the gropers and their accomplices back into the castle. As he crept closer, intrigued in spite of himself, Severus saw tears glittering upon the unblemished cheeks of the face lifted to the gibbous moon. A sliver of compassion, as unfamiliar as it was unwelcome, flashed through his neglected heart at the vision of innocence attended by desolation.

A swiftly cast Disillusionment Spell and another step closer enabled him to clearly catch sight of the female's face. Granger. It was Hermione Granger, crying by the fountain, all alone in the damned Garden of Lurve. Where in the devil were Potter and Weasley? What were they about to leave their Best Friend to wallow in some sort of self-pity induced fit in the middle of a ball? Why wasn't she inside, dancing?

Circling her soundlessly, reckless in his invisibility, Severus allowed himself the liberty of looking at her in a way he never permitted himself with his students. That mass of brown hair was ruthlessly tamed into an elegant chignon, twisted up onto the back of her head. Her skin, as he had noted, was smooth and the expanse of her throat, as she tilted her head back and gazed tearfully at the stars, was disturbingly inviting surely he did not wish to press kisses to that enticingly bare shoulder, displayed above the neckline of her formal dress robes of black velvet, and nibble his way up to lap the salty tears from her cheeks before devouring her mouth. He could not be experiencing so base a thought about a student!

...about a woman. His eyes drifted lower, to the cleavage, barely displayed but alluringly intimated by the proudly swelling breasts set above her small waist like twin temples of worship to the goddess of ...

...Teachers Eternally Damned For Desiring Their Students.

It was the hitching sob that broke from her, quickly suppressed as she pressed her hands to her face, which caused the marriage of his unfortunate physical desire and his unwilling compassion.

Inexorably crushing the nascent stirrings of attraction, he strode back to the castle entrance, removing the Disillusionment Spell as he went. Sweeping into the Great Hall, he spied Potter and Weasley sitting at one of the tables with other students gathered around them as Weasley told a Quidditch story.

"I would like a word, Potter," he snarled, stepping back to an unoccupied spot against the stone wall. Potter approached him warily.

"I suppose you know what you are about, Potter, but I hardly think that having the brains of the Dream Team sobbing in the rose garden is conducive to the success of the Order," he hissed.

Potter blanched, then turned on his heel and walked towards the doors.

Satisfied that his errand had been accomplished, Severus slipped out a side door and made his way to the dungeons, finding that he had no stomach for watching Potter bring Granger back into the Great Hall to be danced with by the male population of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. The Hufflepuffs were intimidated by her intelligence, and the Slytherins would never be seen with a Mudblood. But there were plenty enough of the bloody berks to have their hands on the skin he would never touch, holding the body his arms would never know, having the breasts he longed to feel pressed to his bare chest ogled by schoolboys without a clue. No, he would not be in the Great Hall again this night.

He spent the next three hours in front of the fire in his quarters, drinking too much brandy and not reading the book of Dickens opened in his lap. When the fire died down to embers and the brandy bottle was diminished to a dribble, he threaded his unsteady way through the dungeon corridors to his classroom with but one purpose in mind. Fumbling his way through the doorway, he staggered over to the row of cauldrons from the NEWT class and unerringly placed his hand on Miss Granger's. Curled at the bottom of the cauldron was a hair ribbon in crimson and gold, waiting for her next time in the classroom. She used the ribbon to hold the unruly curls away from her face when she toiled over her brewing under his watchful eye.

Nicking the ribbon from the cauldron and stowing it safely in his pocket, he wove his way back to his quarters, where he hid the ribbon behind the largest tome on the highest shelf of his bookcase before passing out on his bed.

They woke again after ten, and he allowed her to lure him into the shower with her. As was their custom, she washed him with the spicy smelling liquid bath soap he had grudgingly agreed to use, and he returned the favour, scratching her back with his fingernails as he washed her, smiling as she squirmed and murmured as if he were caressing her genitals rather than scratching her back.

She turned then and pressed her back against the tile as she offered her front for washing. Severus noted her come-hither look and chuckled. Stepping in close to her, he penetrated her folds with one finger, simultaneously pinching one nipple.

"What is it, Pet? Has it been forty-five minutes?"

She moaned and spread her thighs to allow him better access. Severus slipped a second finger in to join the first and lowered his mouth to her neck, biting gently and suckling her wet skin as the warm water cascaded over them.

Hermione luxuriated in her two deepest pleasures at once, insensate with bliss as the steamy water pelted her skin and the magic man worked his sorcery on her willing body with his masterful touches, pinches, strokes, licks, and bites. There was nothing more sublime than to be finger-fucked in the shower by the sexiest man alive. At that moment, he growled into her ear, "Come for me, Pet," then captured her lips, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as his fingers plundered her depths and his thumb made one last trip in its circle around her clitoris. Moaning her orgasm into his mouth, her muscles shuddered one last time on his fingers before he withdrew them and put them in his mouth, holding her gaze as he sucked his fingers. She sagged against him then, and he turned her so that her back was pressed to him as he finished bathing her.

They stepped out of the shower into the humid bathroom, and he took a forest green towel from a shelf, wrapping it tenderly about her body, this body that she entrusted to him along with her very soul, completely and without reservation. It struck him anew what a miracle she was, and he vowed to himself again that she would have everything she wanted, all that she deserved, whatever it was in his power to procure for her.

He preceded her back into the bedroom and began to pull clothes from the wardrobe. She followed him, meaning to go past him, but as she came up behind him, he turned and clasped her wrist.

"All right. But I am *not* wearing a costume."

With a gratified smile, Hermione rewarded him with a kiss and a brief hug before sitting down at her mirror to deal with her hair.

Severus and Hermione sat across from one another at their tiny kitchen table and watched Bast in her migration from the study door to the bedroom door and back again.

"I forgot about that," Hermione murmured.

Severus stalked into his study, carefully stepping over the furry ginger cushion that kept moving from place to place on the sitting room floor, but always placing itself squarely in Bast's pathway. "Why don't you *move*?" he muttered in irritation.

Crookshanks feigned deafness and tracked Bast's progress with his baleful yellow eyes.

Returning to the table, Severus smacked the calendar from his desk on the surface between them.

"What's the usual gestation period?" Hermione asked.

Severus consulted the notes he had jotted to himself in the calendar margin. "Fifty-seven to sixty-nine days."

"And how long "

Severus flipped the pages back to August. "Assuming she caught on the night of the dinner party, it's sixty-eight days today."

Hermione touched the back of his hand. "The animal Healer wasn't sure how the addition of the Kneazle blood would affect the length of the pregnancy," she reminded him.

"Why is she *padding* like that?" he blurted, inwardly dismayed at this show of concern for a housecat.

"Well," Hermione said, standing, "I think it might be because of her nest."

"Her what? She isn't a *bird*, Hermione."

Hermione took his hand and led him to the cupboard in the bedroom where the linens were stored. "The last weekend that we spent at Enchanté, when we left the cats here, this cupboard door was left ajar. While we were gone, Bast got up onto the top shelf and shredded the cardboard box full of my grandmother's hand embroidered tea towels."

Severus looked at the shredded mess that had previously been the top of a cardboard box.

"Why? She was never destructive before," he said in confusion.

"She was making a place to have the kittens the book says that it is quite common for the mother cat to make a nest in a safe place. Unfortunately, Bast has been too big and heavy to get back up here, so she has no nest."

With a muttered oath, Severus reached up and lifted the ruined box, full of soiled hand-embroidered tea cloths, now covered in tattered cardboard remnants. He removed the keepsakes from the box, then pointed his wand at the bed and said, "*Accio* my pillow." When the pillow zoomed into his hands, he stuffed it into the box, shrinking it to make it fit properly. Last, he put the slivers of cardboard back on top of the pillow, increasing the amount of cardboard to a fluffy pile.

He performed this task with grim concentration. As Hermione watched him, a wave of intense love for him washed over her with such force that it took all of her resolution not to cry.

Severus stood with the re-created "nest" in his hands and turned to scowl at his wife. "Where would she consider a safe place? One that she can still reach?"

Hermione led him into his study and moved his chair from its place behind the desk, indicating the space below. "This is enclosed on three sides, and she associates this room almost exclusively with you. Maybe this will do."

Severus knelt and pushed the box into place. Standing again, he went into the sitting room and scooped up his familiar, holding her with utmost gentleness as he carried her into the study and crouched to place her on top of her chosen nest.

"This is your place," he told her conversationally, one long fingered hand stroking her amazingly soft fur. "You will be safe here, and no harm will come to you."

Bast purred and butted his head with her head.

Severus stood and stalked back into the sitting room, where he glared down at the imitation furry cushion on the floor.

"This is all *your* fault," he said severely, before leaving to teach his afternoon class.

Crookshanks had the grace to look ashamed.

As they had agreed, Hermione checked back in on Bast hourly, expecting her to deliver the kittens at any time. As the afternoon went on, she became somewhat alarmed how could she get Severus to attend the party that night if he was concerned about Bast? She considered asking Minerva to come sit with the nesting mother, but tonight was the Hogwarts Halloween Feast, so all of the professors would be busy.

When the perfect solution dawned on her, she was surprised that it had taken her so long to think of it.

Severus entered his quarters after his last class, wondering why half a day of work made him as tired a full day of classroom time. Reflecting on how he had spent the first part of his day, he concluded it was no wonder he was tired.

He did not see Hermione in the sitting room, so he went into the study to check on Bast. As he rounded the corner of the desk and crouched to see the cat, he was startled to see the unmistakable form of a house-elf under the desk. The elf was speaking softly to Bast and holding a dish of water from which she lapped delicately.

"Quirk?" he said incredulously.

Quirk started and spilled some water, which he immediately mopped up with a handy housekeeping spell.

"Master surprised Quirk!" he gasped.

"How is she?" Severus asked.

"Kitty is fine, Master," Quirk reassured him. "Quirk is sitting with kitty and watching kitty all the time Master and Mistress is at the party."

Severus nodded and stood. "Good. I am very pleased."

Quirk's elf heart swelled almost to the bursting point at this mild praise and he promised himself he would earn the enormous trust placed in him by his master.

Severus strolled into his bedroom, where he found Hermione applying cosmetics before her vanity mirror. Hanging on the front of his wardrobe was a garish black satin cape lined in red silk.

"I am *not* wearing **that**," he said darkly.

Hermione smiled at him in the mirror, intent on her mascara. "I don't know why not, Severus. It's a perfectly decent cape, made of the finest materials I chose them myself. You can wear it over your usual clothes. It will hardly be like wearing a costume at all."

He took a step closer to her, glaring dangerously. "Do you think that I am unaware of what this garment signifies?" he demanded.

Hermione recapped her mascara and picked up her eyebrow pencil. "Of course I don't think that, Severus. Students were still taking bets on whether or not you were a vampire when I left school," she said calmly.

"I will not play into that preposterous rumour!"

Hermione recognized the danger signs and put down the cosmetic before walking up to him to place her hands on his chest.

"I would never ask you to do something that would expose you to the least ridicule," she said, gazing into his eyes, all but inviting him to probe her mind to ascertain her sincerity.

His ruffled feathers were quickly soothed. "Thank you," he said stiffly.

He looked down at the flimsy garment she was wearing. "What is that supposed to be?"

She stood back from him and turned about, allowing him to see her from all angles. "It's a Muggle ball gown from the Napoleonic era," she explained. "You know, Severus, if you don't wish to wear the vampire cape, you could dress to match me."

He raised a sardonic eyebrow. "How would I do that?"

"Well," she said, turning from him and going to open his wardrobe, "I thought it might be important for you to have a variety to choose from." She reached to the far side and extracted a British Naval uniform, circa 1805. Severus, with an interest in all things from the nineteenth century, was intrigued.

The coat was black! How strange. The epaulettes on the shoulders were gold, as were the polished buttons; Hermione had even provided the white linen shirt and black cravat of the naval officer of the time. He came to a decision.

"I will wear it."

She pulled out a tricorne hat in black with gold trim on the upper edges.

"*That* I will not wear; I will, however, carry it."

Hermione bestowed on him a radiant smile. "You will be the most distinguished man present," she assured him as she danced off to finish her own dressing.

Leaving Quirk with careful instructions on how to watch over Bast in their absence, Professor and Madam Snape Apparated to the Ministry Atrium, using the coordinates provided on their formal invitation. Waiting attendants took their cloaks in an anteroom and bowed them onto the landing above the Atrium proper, where more flunkies in the costumes of the nineteenth century were announcing each couple in the character of their chosen masquerade as they entered.

There were two other couples ahead of them as they entered the Atrium. Severus took the opportunity to look about the room in some surprise. It had been transformed for the night into a marble-floored ballroom, complete with crystal chandeliers. Tables covered in snowy napery dotted the room; an orchestra played on a raised dais. A champagne fountain flowed on one refreshment table, and an opulent selection of wines resided on another. The only concession to Halloween was the decor of the tables, with tastefully carved pumpkins glowing with candlelight set in the center of each table.

"The Ministry has outdone itself tonight," he commented.

He was completely oblivious to the stir Hermione and he created when they stepped to the top of the staircase; his striking figure, wearing the replica of Admiral Lord Nelson's full regalia in black and white with gold accents, complemented by Hermione in her gold silk ball gown, was stunning. Hermione was aware that all eyes were upon them, and she regarded her tall, dignified husband with undisguised pride. He had even permitted her to tie his hair back with a neat black riband, à la Nelson. He was magnificent.

Severus glanced at her and saw the unconditional admiration in her eyes. For an instant, he toyed with the idea of seeing himself through her eyes for just this one night and allowing himself to believe he was the man she thought him to be. Briefly, his mind flashed on the memory of that Halloween Ball so many years ago, when she had cried in the garden, unpartnered and unhappy. She had been his unattainable dream on that night, and now she was his.

As if no one else were in the room, he raised her hand to his lips. "Tonight, my Pet, you will dance every dance if you wish to do so. I will partner you, or you may dance with other men, providing they are properly respectful. Enjoy your ball."

Hermione gazed up into his eyes with complete adoration. "You are stupendous, Severus. It makes me want to shag you on the dance floor."

The corner of his mouth twitched into half a smile, as he pulled her hand through the crook of his elbow. "That also can be arranged," he told her, as the footman announced, "Admiral Lord Nelson and Lady Emma Hamilton."

Quirk looked longingly at the door through which Master and Mistress had disappeared, cheerfully instructing him to "look after things." He had tried to tell Mistress that he didn't know anything about birthing babies, but she had given him a pat on the shoulder and assured him that Kitty might not have babies while they were gone. Quirk sincerely hoped Mistress was correct, because whatever *did* happen would be Quirk's responsibility. It was true enough that other house-elves served Quirk's family when they were living at Hogwarts and why they would want to stay in the gloomy old castle when Quirk kept things so nice at Enchanté he would never understand but as long as Quirk was present in Master's *other* home, he was responsible for it, too.

With these serious thoughts in his mind, Quirk was quite surprised when Bast stepped onto his knee and then leapt heavily down to the floor. The black Siamese cat, hugely pregnant, walked out of the study and resumed her pacing walk across the sitting room floor. Quirk followed after her, determined to keep an eye on her.

Hermione was having a lovely time. After dancing the waltz with her husband, she permitted him to seek out liquid refreshment and quiet conversation while she plunged into the crowds standing about the refreshment tables and chatting. Penny Clearwater spotted her and waved her over to meet two other researchers from their department, young men called Simon Lewis and Peregrine Smith. Penny and Hermione inspected one another's costumes minutely and complimented each other on their cleverness. Penny's eyes strayed to where Severus was engaged in conversation with Kingsley Shacklebolt and she said, "How did you *ever* get him into costume? He looks smashing."

Hermione giggled. "Well, it's black, you see..."

A rash of Weasleys were announced, all at once, and Hermione saw the red-headed contingent, along with Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood, sweep down the staircase and into the crowd; soon afterward, she saw Arthur and Molly on the dance floor, dressed like a gangster and his moll.

"What in the world are they wearing?" Penny wondered out loud.

"Oh, it's Muggle stuff," Hermione said, smiling in appreciation as she watched the older couple dancing with such obvious enjoyment.

The person who was not watching Arthur and Molly with appreciation was their third son, Percy, who had come to the party stag and was now skulking about the punch bowl, annoying the secretarial pool. Between throwing looks of embarrassment at his mother and father, and casting glances of indignation and longing at Healer Penelope Clearwater, his one-time girlfriend and current boss, he puzzled over his current predicament. Why did she have to be so difficult? What had he ever done to earn her dislike? Surely she could not hold it against him that he broke off their relationship when he left school. Did she not realize that a man with aspirations to high office had to make sacrifices in his personal life if he wished to get ahead at the Ministry? Turning his back on the sight of Penny in conversation with Hermione, who had once been an agreeable and understanding ally in the battle to make sure that rules were obeyed and all things were done correctly, he stared out across the ballroom while trying not to make eye contact with any blood relatives.

Glaring at Percy from across the room was his youngest brother, Ron.

"What are you scowling at?" Harry demanded, thrusting a glass of champagne into Ron's hand.

"Percy. He's such a git."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, but why let it ruin your evening?" He surveyed his friend's Chudley Cannons Quidditch uniform. "You are aware that just about everyone else is wearing an historical costume?"

Ron took a swallow of champagne and made a face. "This is vile!" He glared at his half-empty glass and looked back over at the refreshments. "Don't they have firewhisky?"

Harry grinned. "Sure they do, but I picked up two glasses of champagne because I keep forgetting Ginny isn't drinking while she's pregnant. You got the spare."

There was a commotion at the staircase as another couple was introduced.

"The Musketeer Porthos and Lady Godiva!"

Ron choked. Harry poked him in the shoulder. "Okay, I get it; you hate the champagne. Go get something else to drink!"

"No, Harry, it's Viktor Krum!"

Harry looked up at the staircase with interest. "Yeah, that's Viktor."

Both of the young Aurors watched as Krum escorted his partner down the staircase. "Who's the woman?" Ron wondered.

"Dunno," Harry answered. "Is she really *naked*?"

"Who cares?" Ron responded, tracking Viktor's progress across the room, where the Minister for Magic was shaking his hand. "He is the greatest Seeker I have ever seen."

Harry spared his friend a glance. "Didn't you meet him at Hermione's wedding?" he asked curiously.

Luna loomed up behind them. "No, he was busy fainting," she said. "He doesn't really want to get married, but he won't say so." Then she turned around and walked away, into the crowd near the refreshment tables.

"Mate, you better go talk to her," Harry said, watching Luna disappear into the press of people.

"Nah, I've been talking to her for three months; she just won't believe me," Ron said, continuing to watch Viktor Krum and the nearly-naked lady.

"Well, come on, then, I'll introduce you to Viktor."

Dark clouds gathered over the sea to the west of the Scottish shore, and scuttled across the half-moon, darkening the sky. The wind whipped up, blowing the rain clouds inland, over the moors and into the mountains. The barometer began to drop.

Penny and Hermione watched Viktor introduce his date to the Minister for Magic.

"Is she *naked*?" Penny said in disgust.

Ginny Potter joined them, a glass of pumpkin juice in a champagne flute clutched in her hand. "No, it's a glittery body stocking and a really long wig but she might as well be naked look at the men."

The three young women watched in some fascination as the gorgeous, nearly-naked blonde woman began to work the room, starting at the top with the Minister for Magic and his department heads.

"What is Viktor even *doing* here?" Hermione said. "He doesn't work for the Ministry of Magic."

Ginny snorted. "Can you believe Bulgaria has appointed him a goodwill ambassador?"

Penny sighed soulfully, her eyes glued to the Quidditch player in the musketeer costume. "Why not?" she breathed. "I'm feeling loads of goodwill right about now."

Hermione and Ginny began to laugh.

"What?" Penny demanded, laughing with them, her cheeks charmingly flushed.

Quirk was roused from a slight doze when Bast suddenly emitted a blood curdling, low-pitched howl that went on forever. Leaping to his feet, he rushed up to her, but she continued her pacing, uninterrupted.

"Don't cry, Kitty!" Quirk said, wringing his hands. "What does Kitty want? Quirk will get it!"

Bast paid him no mind, but continued her pacing, letting out a steady stream of throaty calls as she went.

Severus looked out over the crowd and saw Hermione giggling with her friends. All was well with her, but he was feeling quite thirsty. He snagged a glass of firewhisky from

a tray and continued his exploration of the tables. Spotting a couple of familiar faces, he approached their location with a wicked smirk.

"Nice long bow," he commented, interrupting Lupin, whose nose was buried in Tonks' soft hair. Severus slipped into a seat across from them.

"We've been admiring your knee breeches from afar," Lupin shot back at him, his topaz eyes gleaming with laughter.

Severus glanced down at the skin-tight buff-coloured bottom portion of his costume. "I think they suit me," he agreed, "but I do hope that you mean Nymphadora was the one admiring my knee breeches, and not *you*, Lupin."

'Dora gave him a derisive look before standing. "I'm going to go chat with the girls," she said, and dropped a kiss on Lupin's cheek before moving away from them.

Severus sipped his firewhisky and surveyed Lupin from head to foot. "Who are you supposed to be? Robin Hood?"

Lupin snatched the tell-tale hat from his head and dropped it to the table top. "Better than the Sheriff of Nottingham," he retorted. "Where is your tricorne, Lord Nelson?"

Severus lounged back in the chair and tapped his temple with a finger. "I had the foresight to leave it with the helpful people who took my cloak when I arrived."

Lupin nodded appreciatively. "Good thinking."

Severus held up his empty glass. "I think, if we are going to sit about in these clothes, we are going to need additional alcohol."

Lupin stood with alacrity. "That is too damn true. Come on, I know where they're hiding the good stuff."

Harry stepped up to Viktor and slapped him on the shoulder. Viktor turned, the smile of the practiced diplomat on his face, but when he saw Harry, he broke into a grin.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, giving him a manly one-armed hug. "How is Ginny?"

Harry grinned back. "Ginny's great, Viktor, thank you for asking." He turned toward Ron. "I wanted you to meet Ginny's brother, my best mate, Ron Weasley."

Viktor good-naturedly shook hands with an awe-struck Ron Weasley. "I am pleased to meet you, Ron. You were indisposed at Hermy-own-ninny's wedding, yes?"

Ron flushed and the bonding began.

Tonks stomped over to where Hermione, Penny, and Ginny were talking to one another.

"She is all *over* Remus. I want to hex her," Tonks gritted between clenched teeth.

Penny and Hermione regarded the Auror with some alarm, both of them trying to ascertain where she was hiding her wand in her Maid Marian costume.

"Get in line," Ginny said, her voice as hard as diamonds.

The other girls followed Ginny's glance; on the far wall, looking a bit like a niffler trapped in wand-light, was Harry Potter, in conversation with Viktor's party date, who kept stepping closer and closer to the Boy Who Lived.

Hermione swore and the other girls looked at her in surprise. "Why didn't he just bring a bloody Veela?" she said. "Viktor will hear about this from me." She put her champagne glass down on a table and squeezed Ginny's arm. "Don't worry, Gin, I'll take care of it."

Penny watched Hermione storm away and saw Professor Snape standing between Lupin and Harry against the wall. "Why didn't she rub herself all over Severus?" she wondered out loud.

Tonks snorted. "When she offered her hand to him and said her name, he looked at her as if she were something nasty on the bottom of his shoe." Imitating Severus' precise tones with some accuracy, Tonks said, "Miss Howatch, I had little interest in shaking your hand when you were melting cauldrons and finishing each academic year at the very bottom of the least impressive Hufflepuff class to grace Hogwarts in this century. I have even less interest in doing so now."

Penny and Ginny were in whoops as Tonks finished her story. "Then he looked her up and down as if she were naked and *still* a crashing bore, before turning his shoulder to her and resuming his conversation with Remus."

Ginny literally laughed until she cried, a phenomenon which had been happening a trifle too often for her comfort. There were some things about pregnancy that she could *really* do without. Excusing herself hurriedly, she fled up the staircase in search of some privacy.

Hermione walked up to Harry and all but shoved her way between him and the man-eater. "Harry, you're hogging Miss Howatch; you really mustn't do that!"

Harry gave Hermione a look of unmitigated relief and followed the path he had seen a distressed Ginny take a few moments before.

Hermione got a good look at Viktor's date. Surprisingly, the woman was closer to thirty than to twenty; that would explain why Hermione didn't remember her from Hogwarts. Putting on a confidential air, Hermione said, "I hope you don't mind, but someone has asked to meet you."

Arminta Howatch, who knew very well who Hermione was, latched onto her words eagerly.

"Oh, who is it?"

Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly, Hermione thought gleefully. "Well, he didn't want to put himself forward, you know; he is a very well-known man, and it just wouldn't do for him to make a stir."

Miss Howatch nodded. "Yes, of course I understand!"

I doubt if you understood anything after about your second year at school she thought to herself, guiding the other woman in the direction of the punch bowl. "I told him I would ask if you would care to be presented to him. Would you like to?"

Miss Howatch nodded so hard she would have dislodged her long blonde wig if it had not been spelled to her head.

Percy sipped morosely at his tenth cup of punch, standing all alone in a huge crowd of people. It really took some kind of talent to manage that, didn't it? He must be the great prat his brothers kept telling him he was. He might as well just go home and hang it up for the night; Penny was never going to speak to him now that she couldn't take her eyes off that Neanderthal Quidditch player.

At that moment, Hermione swept up to him, leading the impressive-looking blonde who had come in with Krum. The blonde was wearing very little with nothing underneath what a little firecracker *she* must be! To his amazement, the two women stopped in front of him. He put down the punch cup and made an effort to look less inebriated.

"Percy, I told Miss Howatch that you wanted to meet her, and she agreed to come speak with you. I've told her what an important man you are in our department here at the Ministry, and she's just dying to hear more about what you do!"

Percy could not prevent his mouth from dropping open as he heard Hermione's unblinking recitation of his qualifications. There, she *did* admire him. And look at the big-breasted blonde! She admired him too! Percy's ego swelled back to its normal proportions as he undertook the task of entertaining the man-eating Miss Howatch.

Hermione walked away, quite satisfied that neither of them would bother anyone else for the rest of the evening.

Severus lounged against the wall with Lupin, sipping the good firewhisky and watching Hermione's handling of Miss Howatch with true appreciation. His delightful little wife was showing every indication of becoming as sinister as he was. He chuckled to himself.

His attention was distracted by a quick, "*Sonorus*" as Cornelius Fudge began to address the guests.

"Good evening, and welcome to the Ministry of Magic Halloween Masque!" He smiled through the tepid applause. "We have here tonight, as our special guest, Viktor Krum, Seeker for the Bulgarian National Quidditch team, and goodwill ambassador for the country of Bulgaria." He smiled through the enthusiastic applause. "The Ministry wishes to extend its thanks to the tireless efforts of our coordinator of this event, Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart!" He stepped aside as a smattering of applause from the witches in the crowd those who had never known Lockhart as a professor at Hogwarts greeted the smiling Lockhart as he stepped up to the front of the dais.

Lockhart had surely outdone himself tonight. After using terrific personal restraint in his selection of appropriate decorations for the party, he had let himself go in designing and creating his costume for the evening. With a total lack of tact and the gall of ten spiteful men, he had the temerity to dress himself as Merlin the Magician, right down to the crest of Uther Pendragon which he wore on his over-robe.

Severus and Lupin exchanged disgusted glances. Severus allowed his gaze to wander to the orchestra, then back to Lupin. He cocked an eyebrow. Lupin followed his gaze back to the orchestra and an impish smile crossed his face. He and Severus stood as one. Severus crossed toward the back of the dais, signalling to the orchestra leader to step over and speak with him, while Lupin moved quietly through the crowd in search of his lady.

Quirk paced with Bast from the bedroom door to the study door, begging her to stop her distressing, plaintive cries. He dared not to touch her; Mistress had been very strict that he was not to constrain Kitty to do what she did not wish to do, but Mistress never said that Kitty was going to begin howling like a banshee, either.

Just when he thought matters could get no worse, the sound of a heavy object colliding with the door into Master's bedroom reached his keen ears. Quirk stopped pacing to stare at the bedroom door in horror as yet another heavy object was hurled at it from within.

Quirk looked at Kitty, who was walking and crying, just as she had been doing for quite some time, then back at the offending door. Mistress had not said to go into her bedroom. But Mistress also had not said there would be crashy-banging noises in that room. What if someone were **Moving Master's Personal Things**?

Quirk took a deep breath to firm his courage and snapped his fingers to move into the other room.

Tonks was whispering with Hermione when Lupin came up and touched her on the arm. Gilderoy Lockhart was extolling the virtues of the Ministry for Magic from the front of the dais.

"What is it?" she hissed at her fiancé.

He simply gave her that smile that turned her knees to jelly and led her onto the dance floor.

"But Lockhart is speaking!" she whispered in protest.

Hermione watched Remus and Dora go onto the dance floor, then leaned a bit to her right. Yes, that was the top of Severus' head; he seemed to be in discussion with the orchestra leader. She watched as they appeared to come to an agreement; undoubtedly, gold had changed hands in the handshake that followed. Then he looked across the crowd, seeking her out, and walked straight to her, never taking his eyes from her face.

"...and my latest book, *Magical Whee! A Witch's Guide to Entertaining* is on sale in the ..."

Severus reached her and pulled her out onto the dance floor, a wicked gleam in his black eyes.

"What have you done?" Hermione whispered, as the orchestra began to play, and Lockhart's speech was drowned out. For a moment, the confused party planner tried to continue his sales pitch, but Lupin and Severus had pulled their women into tight embraces and begun to dance with them the moment the music began. Other couples, hearing the appealing tune and seeing the war heroes taking the floor, quickly turned their backs on the babbling boob with the bad dye job and joined the dance.

Severus held Hermione closely, his eyes riveted on her face, waiting for the realization to strike her. By the second bar of the song, she lifted her eyes to his, with such emotion in her face that he felt as if he had been given the greatest gift of all making her happy.

"It's *Open Arms*," she murmured, in a voice full of wonder. Would this man ever stop amazing her? This taciturn, unpleasant, snarky bastard, who handled her as if she were made of porcelain, and who remembered the first song to which they had ever danced, was a closet romantic to the greatest degree.

"It's our song, isn't it, my Pet?" he murmured, pressing her yet closer to him, willing her to allow them both to be taken by the Enchantment for the duration of the song.

"Just *look* at them," Rita Skeeter complained drunkenly to her companion. "I can feel the bloody Enchantment from here! You'd think they were in their own bedroom, at home. I'll bet he lifts her skirt and starts shagging her right there in the middle of the dance floor. Severus Sodding Snape can do no wrong; no, none at all," she finished with a sniff and another slug of gin.

"Who are you *talking* to?" a peevish voice demanded.

Rita looked around owlishly, blinking her eyes behind her jewelled spectacles and trying to focus. "To my friend," she slurred, gesturing in the direction of the potted palm.

Gilderoy Lockhart looked to his left and his right to make sure she really had been speaking to the indoor plants again. "You spent too much time as a *bug*!" he spat at her, jerking his head in the direction of the lifts. "Come on, we're leaving."

Rita shrugged and tossed off the rest of her gin before hefting her handbag and wishing her friend a pleasant evening. It wasn't as if *she* wanted to stay at the damn party. Not with the Snapes present. She'd rather sleep with Gilderoy Lockhart.

At that thought, she cast a longing look back over her shoulder to the indoor palm tree. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad being a bug after all not if she could live with her friend, the tree.

Rita sighed and joined her incensed employer in the lift.

Penny crept up to the slightly duck-footed figure of Viktor Krum as he stood politely pretending to listen to the Minister for Magic. Viktor was aware of the movement at his elbow and looked down to find an exotic-looking girl in the outfit of a gypsy staring up at him. The riot of dark curls framed a face made up a bit garishly, in concert with the costume she wore, but the heavy cosmetics could not hide her brilliant eyes, her perfect, pert little nose, or her delightfully formed lips. The glimpse he caught of her figure in the provocative skirt, slit almost to the hip on one side, and the peasant blouse, pushed down onto her arms to show off her lovely white shoulders and her fascinating cleavage, caused a stir in his mind as well as in other places.

"Hi," he said softly, gazing into her eyes.

"Hi," she answered, gazing back. "I like your feather," she said inconsequentially, indicating the plume in the musketeer's hat he wore.

"It came vif the hat," he responded stupidly, wanting to kick himself for such an asinine reply.

There was a bit of a stir as the speeches were interrupted by the orchestra beginning to play a slow love song. He saw Hermione and Severus dancing. He offered his hand to the alluring creature. "I'm Viktor. Vill you dance vif me?"

She took his hand. "I'm Penny. Yes, please; let's dance."

Viktor smiled as he pulled her into his arms and out onto the dance floor.

Luna stood on her own, sipping a glass of pumpkin juice and contemplating the jack-o-lantern on the table before her.

Ron put his hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. "Come dance with me, love," he invited her.

Luna looked at him passively. "You loathe dancing. You said you loved me, and you wanted to marry me, but that you loathed dancing. Now I'm beginning to think that is the only true thing you said to me that night!"

Ron pulled her into his arms and swayed with her gently on the edge of the dance floor. "I hated dancing with my Auntie Muriel, and with Padma Patil, but I love to hold you in my arms," he told her.

"Just thinking about marrying me makes you want to faint," she said sadly, holding herself rigidly in his arms.

Ron tightened his hold on her, gently running one hand up and down her spine. "Thinking about being in the middle of a Gilderoy Lockhart *circus* made me faint, love. It was pretty lame of me, and I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Luna looked up into his sincere blue eyes. Now that he had eye contact, he pressed his advantage. "You know I love you, Luna. You know I need you; I want you for my wife. Please stop saying I don't."

Luna continued to search his face, then relaxed into his embrace. "All right," she said simply, and just like that, it was over.

Ron sighed in relief, then took the presented opportunity to lure his fiancée upstairs to a quiet alcove for a bit of a snog.

Harry finally found Ginny, sitting on top of a coffee table in a waiting room on the floor above the Atrium. She had a fist full of paper tissues, and her make up had run down her cheeks with her tears.

"Ginny!" he cried, rushing forward and dropping to his knees before her, grasping her hands and looking into her tear-drenched eyes. "What is it, love? Are you ill? Should I get your mum?"

Ginny sobbed a bit harder and made another futile attempt to stop the waterfall down her face. "I'm not s-sick," she said, "I'm p-p-pregnant! And, there's a pretty woman here!"

Harry pictured in his mind the ancient maps Professor Lupin had posted in his Defence classroom when Harry had been in his third year, the maps with naught past the edges of the known lands but legends which read, "Here There Be Dragons."

He felt quite certain that if he took a misstep now, he would fall from the jagged edge of the known lands into the treacherous territory of the dragons.

He took the paper tissue from her hand and deftly dried her tears, his brilliant green eyes looking tenderly into her face. "There is a beautiful woman here, love, and she is pregnant, too. In fact, she is you. Don't you know I only have eyes for you?"

Ginny did burst into tears then, quite properly, and tumbled into her husband's arms. Ron and Luna came into the room then, drawn by the sound of the crying.

"I'm taking her home now," he said quietly to them. "We're both pretty tired. Tell your mum, okay, Ron?"

Ron nodded as Harry cradled his wife and Apparated to their home, where he could demonstrate his regard for her beauty as she grew with their child.

Quirk was standing in Master's bedroom, looking for the cause of the disturbance, when a frantic Crookshanks thudded into him from behind, claws first.

"Ouch!" he cried, hopping back from the hissing cat. "Bad kitty! Don't scratch Quirk! Quirk is not doing bad things to you!"

From the other room, Bast's full-throated cries continued. Crookshanks once again thudded against the wooden door before turning imploring eyes on Quirk.

"Mistress says you is supposed to stay in here," Quirk told the angry orange creature. Crookshanks hissed at Quirk again and ran at him. Quirk snapped his fingers and returned to the sitting room.

The thunderstorm raging over Hogwarts blew itself out just before midnight, at which time Kitty stopped crying and went back to her nest. Quirk thankfully followed her, hoping that she would go to sleep now. Curling up next to Kitty's nest, Quirk settled in to watch over her.

Hermione slowly circled the dance floor in her husband's arms, remembering the first time he had held her this way, on the dance floor of the fancy hotel by the seaside where they had dined, and danced, and fought, before giving in to the Enchantment and letting their shared destiny assert itself in their lives. The words of the song were burned into her memory, so representative of her mind set as she had begun to succumb to the love that had begun the first time they touched.

Somehow, she was not surprised when he led her from the dance floor before the final verse was complete, down a darkened corridor, then down another, and into a room where he said "*Lumos*" before closing the door and warding it behind him.

It was an unused office, bare of furniture save for a desk and a chair.

"Whatever are you up to now?" she asked, giving him a sly look from beneath her lashes.

"Did I not say it could be arranged?" he murmured against her hair, his lips finding and exploiting that sensitive spot just beneath her left ear.

She wrapped her arms about his waist, sliding her hands down to cup his arse, and she whimpered her approval for his plans.

He kissed her mouth, tugging her long skirt up, higher and higher. "Besides," he continued in that voice like chocolate caramel, "it's still Wednesday. If you don't get your Wednesday quota, you'll be off for the rest of the week." He dipped his head and roughly nuzzled a nipple though the silk of the gown, growling when he felt it harden, and biting at it through the cloth.

Hermione twined her hands in his hair, pulling it loose from the black riband, and gasped, "What's it to be? The desk? Or the wall?"

"Both," he snarled, lifting her the few steps to the desk before reaching down to release himself from the confines of his breeches.

"Hurry," she breathed, reaching for him with her arms.

Quirk woke up with a start, uncertain of what had woken him. There was Kitty, still in her nest ... but what were those little squeaky sounds?

Quirk snapped his fingers and produced more light under the desk; kitty meowed at him and blinked sleepy blue eyes against the brightness. Quirk paid no attention to kitty; he was staring into the nest in horror.

Rats! There was little rats in kitty's nest! Little black rats, little orange rats, little black and orange and white rats rats in MASTER'S KITTY'S NEST. Quirk moaned out loud in his misery. Oh, Master would be so angry, but truly it was not Quirk's fault he did not know where the rats has come from!

Quirk conscientiously offered kitty some water from her bowl, which she gratefully lapped up, as he tried to plan what he would say to Master about why kitty had rats in her nest.

It was a very happy, if quite tired, Professor and Madam Snape who came into their rooms at Hogwarts at nearly two in the morning. "Quirk?" Hermione called softly, as Severus illuminated the sitting room.

Quirk appeared in the doorway to the study, his eyes averted respectfully.

"What happened to you?" Hermione cried, kneeling down to inspect his scratches. "Did Bast..."

Quirk shook his head. "No, Mistress, it was the other kitty."

Severus slipped past them into the study, crouching down behind the desk. "Look, Hermione," he said in a gentle voice.

"I'll look after your scratches in a moment, Quirk," she said softly, before going to join Severus on the floor behind the desk.

"Hello, Bast," Hermione said, reaching out to stroke the soft black fur. "May I see your babies?"

"Five of them," Severus said. "Five."

"Quirk is being very, very sorry, Master."

Severus glanced at him, frowning. "Why, Quirk?"

"Quirk is not knowing how the rats got into the kitty's nest, Master," he explained tearfully. "Quirk fell asleep, and when he woke up, there was rats in the kitty's nest."

Severus bit his lip and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Hermione spoke before he could lose control of himself. "Quirk, this is what baby kitties look like when they are first born. They look, well, kind of like rats, and then very soon, they look like kitties. You did not do anything wrong."

Quirk was so relieved that he burst into tears. Hermione led him back into the sitting room where she healed his scratches, then sent him back to Enchanté with kind words.

She changed out of her ball gown and fixed two mugs of cocoa; when she joined Severus on the floor in the study, he had removed his coat and was stroking Bast, murmuring to her. Hermione provided them with cushions and a warm rug before curling up with her husband on the study floor.

"Five," he said, sipping meditatively on his cocoa.

"Think of it as life training," she suggested playfully, leaning her head on his arm.

"FIVE?" he said again, looking at her in horror.

"Well, hopefully we'll begin with one," she said, standing and holding out her hand. "Come to bed. Cats have been nursing litters of kittens for millennia without human intervention."

He stood and followed her willingly into the sitting room. "No bed yet, my Pet. First, I have something I want to show you."

She paused in the middle of the room as he opened a lower cupboard and brought out the Pensieve. From a high shelf, he moved a large tome and brought out a packet of letters, tied together with a faded ribbon in crimson and gold. He took his wand, and removing the silver strand of a memory, he placed it in the receptacle, then reached out his hand to her. When she joined him there, he said, "This is what happened four years ago, on Halloween night..."

A/N As a footnote, I must reference, **Bast: Operation Kitty** (shades of Gilderoy Lockhart, saying, "See my published works.") Anyway, this is a passage from *that* story:

Hermione walked up to him and took the stack of letters, bound with a faded scarlet ribbon, from his hand. She stared at them, her finger tracing the gold threads in the grosgrain, then looked up searchingly into his face as she pushed on toward him.

"These are the letters I sent you from Bulgaria... the ones you never answered."

Severus nodded mutely, seemingly embarrassed.

"And this ribbon I used it to tie my hair back in Advanced Potions... I thought I had lost it I always kept it with my cauldron, and then it went missing one day."

Severus's pale face was flushing; his eyes were darting to the side, as if seeking out an avenue of escape. Hermione continued to advance on him, and he continued to retreat, until he felt the wall at his back.

"You took my ribbon from my cauldron, didn't you? You took it in seventh year, before the night when we first touched " she slapped the stack of letters against his chest, "you took it, and you kept it because you were already interested in me."

The limpid brown eyes gazing up into his discomfited face were like a catalyst; Severus pulled her against him with a jerk, and buried one hand in the tangle of curls pouring down her back. "What exactly is your **point**?" he demanded, fastening his own intense scrutiny on her parted lips.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Hubby and I have been plotting this one out for weeks. He contributed so much to the story that I would like to give him co-writing credit, but he won't take it. He gives me goofy ideas, then goes to bed and I write all night and read it to him when he gets up in the mornings. Kudos to **MagicAlly**, who answered my questions about Halloween in England as well as giving me an exposition on the word "lurve." The Sheriff of Nottingham crack was for all of you Alan Rickman fans out there. Quirk's remark about not knowing anything about birthing babies was a mild tribute to *Gone With the Wind*.

Just because I want to, and I can, because these are my Author's Notes, I acknowledge my two chief encouragers and confidantes **KeladryLupin & hunnybunch**, who bear with my inane ramblings.

Last of all, to my beloved husband, my very own Slytherin I said yes 27 years ago, and soon we will exchange those "I Do's" again. I love you more -and I hope, better - than I did then, my cherished Poet-Philosopher.

Happy Halloween, y'all!

10/31/2005