

# The Christmas Rose

*by Subversa*

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## Chapter 1: Slamming

*Chapter 1 of 6*

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Christmas blessings upon my beta, **LariLee**, and my Brit-Picker, **MagicAlly**

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. She makes no objection, however, if I play with her toys, providing I put them back where I found them before she notices I've been messing again. Happy Christmas, Jo!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 1: Slamming

*Seven Weeks Before Christmas*

Severus Snape sat at the tiny table in the kitchen of his personal quarters at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, pertinaciously marking papers. Stubbornly, he refused to consult the watch in his pocket, reminding himself that it had not been so very long since the clock on the mantel in the sitting room had chimed nine o'clock.

He did not know why it was of such importance to him to see Hermione when he lifted his eyes from his task. He had spent more than forty-one years of his life without her constant presence, and he had been content to be alone. Now, after a mere few months of marriage, he found his evenings to be curiously empty if he could not glance across the table, or across the room, or across the pillows, and see his curly-haired bride.

His hand was in the unconscious act of reaching for his watch when he heard the door open, then close, and the unmistakable sounds of Hermione's return. Snatching his hand away from his watch pocket, he continued with his marking. It was not until he saw her heading for the study rather than the kitchen that he cleared his throat to alert her to his presence, but he still did not look up until she spoke his name.

"Severus!" Hermione said, rounding the table and bending to wrap her arms about his shoulders from behind as she nuzzled his ear.

Severus turned his face then, his large, hooked nose gliding across her cheek before he tilted his head and spoke, his lips moving against hers with his words.

"Where have you been, young lady?"

Hermione ignored the question and took the kiss, twining the fingers of one hand in his end-of-the-day oily hair and cupping his evening-roughened cheek with the other. With a tender smile into his eyes, she released him and seated herself diagonally from him.

"Why are you doing your marking in here?" she asked.

"Because I find that I do not concentrate very well when attempting to mark papers in the midst of a bloody cattery," he replied dryly.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Are they that noisy?"

"No, but they are damnably constant. And there is also a house-elf living in my study."

Hermione nodded. "I thought it would be easier to have Quirk sleep in the study with the kittens than in another room," she commented.

There was a soft "mrow" and Bast's elegant little head suddenly protruded between the edge of the table and Severus' stomach.

Hermione laughed. "Bast isn't even in there with them?" she said, reaching out a hand to stroke the purring black cat.

"Well, can you blame her? They never stop that constant peeping noise and they nurse perpetually. I'm amazed that she hasn't just smothered them in their sleep."

As if realizing the topic of discussion, Bast leapt lightly down from her master's lap and sauntered across the sitting room and into the study. The sound of Quirk's squeaky voice speaking to the mother cat could be heard in the kitchen.

Hermione rubbed her face. "I am so tired," she said.

"You worked late tonight," Severus commented, picking up his quill and appearing to focus his attention on the handwriting of some unfortunate Potions student. Actually, he was watching her face covertly from behind the curtain of his long hair.

She arched in her chair, pressing the knuckles of her fists into her lower back to massage her sore muscles. "Simon and I have been discussing the Christmas Rose Potion," she explained.

Severus bristled behind the screen of his ebony mane, but kept his voice devoid of emotion. "Someone was here, working with you?"

"No, we spoke by Floo. He has been trying to make the hellebore infusion but he keeps melting cauldrons."

"Is his last name Longbottom?" There was a definite dark pleasure in relieving some of the building spleen with a nastily placed shaft.

Hermione snorted in spite of herself. "No, his last name is Lewis leave poor Neville alone, Severus!" When he wisely did not reply to this, she continued, "I think that it may be possible to charm the cauldron to hold the infusion of hellebore long enough to finish preparing it so that we can add it to the potion base." She sighed and stood from her chair, beginning to move toward the bedroom. "I'm going to meet with him and his partner, Perry Smith, in their lab tomorrow so we can try my idea."

Severus abandoned all pretence of marking schoolwork. "Perri Smith is a woman?"

Hermione glanced back at him. "No, *Peregrine* Smith is the other researcher from my office to whom I introduced you at the Halloween Ball last week. Don't you remember?"

Severus busied himself re-capping the bottle of red ink and gathering his parchment into a neat pile. "You cannot expect me to recall the name of every tedious person you force me to greet at inane parties," he snapped. "Of what possible interest would such persons be to me?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment, a look of confused hurt marring her features. "My workmates would only be of interest to you if you cared what I do with myself all day long, Severus. I apologize for subjecting you to such tedious and inane company. I will endeavour not to do so in the future. I will just go to parties *without* you!"

On this tearfully hurled threat, Madam Snape turned her back on her husband and hurried into their bedroom, allowing the heavy door to close behind her with a resounding slam.

Merlin's beard! Why could he not curb his disagreeable tongue? Now he had hurt her feelings, and she would expect him to apologize but he was damned if he would! He spent too much of his time begging pardon for things he said to her. She was his wife, and he did not see why he should have to mind his words around her. This was his home, by the gods, and it was about time for his wife to begin to know who was the master here!

Storming into the sitting room, Severus snatched the brandy decanter from the shelf and poured some into a goblet, then settled onto the sofa before the fire and glared dangerously into its flames.

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Two hours later, when he climbed into their bed beside her, she woke and moved pointedly away from him toward the edge of the bed. It was necessary for him to wait for her fall asleep again before he could pull her to him and go to sleep, as well.

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Hermione seemed to float above him, just out of reach. She was at her most wicked and alluring, her dark eyes languorous in her desire, her full lips parted, with the tip of her little pink tongue barely visible to him. Her siren's call seemed to lure him on, inviting him to claim her, to take her but every time he stretched for her she was just beyond the extent of his arms. She reached out then and stroked up the length of his erection; moving with mercurial speed, his fingers closed about her wrist...

...and he woke.

He was reclining on his side, his morning erection at odds with the headache just behind his eyes. He groped for his wand and muttered, "*Lumos*." Fumbling with his watch on the bedside table, he saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. His spirits immediately brightened; if his candles had not woken him for breakfast in the Great Hall, it could only mean today was Wednesday.

Dear Merlin, how he loved his Wednesdays.

A shameless smile graced his thin lips as he rolled toward Hermione; she deserved to be paid out for that bit of taunting in his dream.

It was not until he saw her empty pillow that he recalled the contretemps of the night before. A feeling of pique flashed through him, followed by an icy stab of fear. Throwing the covers from him, he surged to his feet, crossing to the bathroom in quick strides. A savage flick of his wand fully illuminated the rooms, but the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach had already informed him she would not be there, lounging in the bubble-filled bath, waiting for him to wake up and join her for Wednesday-type activities.

He burst through the bedroom door into the sitting room, barely pausing to glance into the kitchen before he bellowed, "Hermione!"

The door to the study rattled open and Quirk erupted into the room. When the sight of his fully enraged and entirely naked master met his eyes, Quirk quickly averted his face and squeaked, "Mistress is not being home, Master!"

"And where exactly *is* Mistress?" Severus inquired in an alarmingly quiet tone.

Staring helplessly at his feet, Quirk replied, "Mistress says she is going to work at the other researcher's lab today, Master. Mistress is being gone to breakfast in the Great Hall."

Severus turned on his heel and strode back into his room.

"Then I, too, shall go to breakfast in the Great Hall."

"Yes, Master," Quirk said, though his words were drowned out by the slamming of the bedroom door.

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Minerva McGonagall watched the silent young woman near the end of the table as she frowned at her bowl of porridge. Following Minerva's line of sight, Albus Dumbledore spoke to her quietly.

"I don't believe I've ever seen either of them at breakfast on a Wednesday morning."

"She isn't speaking to anyone, either," Minerva said. "Perhaps I should go sit with her?"

Albus placed a restraining hand on her arm. "I think we had best leave her to her own thoughts this morning."

Under their watchful eyes, Hermione stood and donned her cloak before pulling her briefcase from beneath her chair and heading for the front doors.

"She must be working away from home today," Minerva murmured, before returning to the perusal of her morning mail.

Moments later, Albus gained her attention again with another gentle touch to her arm. She looked at him and he directed her attention to a fiercely glowering Potions master, who was standing over his wife's barely-touched breakfast as if its existence were a personal affront to him.

"Why do I get the impression that she is avoiding him?" Albus muttered, as if to himself.

"Go speak to the boy, Albus," Minerva urged him.

The Headmaster shook his head. "We must not interfere in their squabbles, Minerva. They must learn the lessons intended for them from each of their disagreements, or the relationship will not grow as it is intended to do."

Minerva sighed audibly as she watched Severus Snape stalk back out of the Great Hall without eating a bite of food.

"Severus has never been at his best when learning emotional lessons, Albus."

Dumbledore's sigh echoed her own. "I remember. That is what worries me, my dear."

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Quirk jumped when the door slammed again. Scrambling out into the sitting room, he bowed to his master.

"Welcome home, Master. How may Quirk be of service?"

Snape stared at him, a nasty sneer on his face. "I was gone for all of fifteen minutes, you dolt. I do not *require* your services."

Quirk averted his eyes deferentially. "As Master wishes," he said, backing again into the study. He went around the desk and crawled beneath it to the nest where the week-old kitty-rats lived. Bast lay back, allowing the hungry babies to nurse. Crookshanks lay several feet away on the desk chair, which had been pushed up against the wall and to one side to allow Quirk easy access to his charges. The large, fluffy ginger cat flicked his tail and watched the other felines with his flat yellow eyes.

Quirk studied the baby kitties, which, in his unstated opinion, still looked mostly like rats. There were five of them, two fluffy ones and three smooth ones, and no two of them were alike. Two kitties were as black as Bast, and two kitties were as orange as Crookshanks; one kitty was blotched with black and orange and white. Quirk had spent much time considering the kitty-rats while cooped up in the study. If it were in his nature to question the instructions given him by his master and mistress, he might have wondered why he was being asked to spend his time watching over these kittens. As it was, Quirk was trying very hard to be a good house-elf; he would do what was asked of him with all his heart.

He flinched involuntarily when he heard his master slam out the door again.

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Professor Snape burst into the Potions classroom, causing the door to rebound off the wall before thudding shut behind him. Striding to the front of the room in a swirl of his black cloak, he turned on his heel and glared at his NEWT students. Meredith Greengrass caught the eye of her lab partner, David Urquhart, and rolled her eyes toward their Head of House. David nodded minutely, immediately straightening in his seat and staring straight ahead. The table with the three Gryffindors continued to buzz quietly with conversation; obviously the idiots had become so used to the toned-down Snape that they had forgotten the malevolence of the full-force Snape. The two Slytherins experienced a moment of inner joy. Gryffindor blood was about to flow well, Gryffindor rubies were about to fly out of the hour glass, and that was just as good.

Euan Abercrombie chuckled softly at something said to him by Ray Jordan while Emma Frobisher quickly finished up the homework she had been assigned in Arithmancy. Professor Snape, who had been quite lax, comparatively speaking, in his class thus far this term, was staring at the Gryffindor students, waiting for them to realize that class had already begun. When they failed to do so, he strolled to their table and stopped right in front of them.

Emma Frobisher was the first one to see a very cold and undoubtedly angry Potions master staring at the Gryffindor students. Her reflexive squeak alerted her tablemates to their danger, too late.

"What has so captured your attention, Mr. Abercrombie?" he inquired in his soft, deadly voice.

"N-nothing, Sir," Euan replied shakily. "I apologize; I didn't realize class had begun."

"Oh, that is abundantly obvious, Mr. Abercrombie."

The Slytherins snickered behind their hands, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Let me think," he said in his silkiest voice. "That will be twenty points each from Gryffindor for inattention in class."

Ray Jordan was so unfortunate as to gasp out loud, which drew the black, tunnel-like eyes to his face. "Another ten points from Mr. Jordan and a detention."

He waited a moment, spreading his hands expansively. "Come, come, I am perfectly willing to take more points from your House."

The three Gryffindors sat stonily, keeping their eyes straight ahead, digging into deeply ingrained memories to discover again how to behave in Professor Snape's class. Professor Snape stood over them for another moment, then curled his lip and returned to the front of the classroom.

"Who can tell me the uses of hellebore?" he demanded.

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Professor Snape entered the ground floor room set aside for the staff meeting late that afternoon, seating himself at the uninhabited end of the table without looking either left or right. Ignoring his apparent wish to be left alone, Madam Pomfrey smiled and said, "How is Hermione, Severus?"

Snape drilled the matron with unfriendly eyes. "You should ask her, Poppy."

Professor Ferguson was a recent addition to the staff, who had joined the faculty at Hogwarts as flying instructor only when Professor Hooch had left to care for an ailing relative. This was his first staff meeting, and he was very interested in everything, particularly the teachers whom he had not yet met. He sat with Professor Flitwick, who perched perilously beside him on a stack of cushions. Professor Ferguson leaned down and whispered in his broad Scottish accent, "Is that fellow as unpleasant as he looks?"

Professor Flitwick muffled a chuckle behind a raised hand. "Oh, no, he's *much* more unpleasant than he looks."

Ferguson's brow furrowed. "You sound rather proud about that?"

Professor McGonagall snorted from the other side of Professor Ferguson and said quietly, "We are immeasurably proud of Professor Snape's singularity, Craig. You will come to appreciate it."

Albus Dumbledore cleared his throat and called the meeting to order. The agenda was typical of such meetings at schools around the world; within thirty minutes, most eyes in the room were glazed with the dullness of it all. Things livened up considerably when, during the discussion of the Yule Ball, the Headmaster said, "Severus, may we count upon you and Hermione to chaperone at the dance?"

Snape shot to his feet with such violence his chair toppled to the floor. "If you have nothing of import to discuss, Headmaster, I bloody well have more important things to do!"

The slam of the staffroom door was still echoing in the room when Professor McGonagall's eager voice was heard.

"Who had 7 November in the pool, Professor Vector?"

The Arithmancy professor pulled out a chart as Professor Ferguson looked about at the highly amused teachers with confusion. "What pool?"

It was the Headmaster who answered him. "The office pool to determine upon which day the honeymoon would be over and Professor Snape would be back to his snarky best," he imparted with a chuckle. "I think this calls for a drink, don't you?"

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Severus charged through the castle corridors, rage warring with fear, warring with hurt, warring with pride, warring with longing within his unaccustomed breast. Hearing Hermione's name was like having an open wound touched. Between any other couple, this breach would have been a normal, newlywed spat. For Severus and Hermione, bound by the Enchantment, it transmuted into an agony of separation. She was not simply his wife, his lover, his "pet" she was his comfort, his security, his stability a rift between them cut him to the very soul.

She had laughingly asked him, in those first heady days of their acceptance of the Enchantment, if it would always be so strong between them that they would constantly be driven to touch one another. He had told her, as he had learned from his research, that the Enchantment would not change, but that they would learn to adapt to it so that they would be able to function in their every day lives without feeling driven every moment to be in physical contact with one another. He had been correct; after a lengthy and concentrated honeymoon during which they "concentrated" on adapting to the Enchantment the urge had become a dull roar in the background of his consciousness.

But *this* torment was something new. They had not, in their short time together, had an argument that had not been settled on the spot, even if it took a great deal of shouting, swearing, and pacing to accomplish a peaceful resolution. He reminded himself that the Enchantment was not only about the physical passion; it was also about the peace and solace they each found within the other.

Now, atop the Astronomy Tower at sunset, he looked out over the grounds of Hogwarts and felt more alone than he had ever felt in the deepest despair of his Death Eater days. Then, in his youth, he had never known the rest and repose of complete acceptance; he had never experienced the peace of the safe harbour that was his Hermione.

Severus pulled his cloak more closely about him and stared, unseeing, into the Dark Forest.

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A scream of indignation pierced the merriment in the staff room. The professors lowered their glasses and turned as one to stare at Sibyll Trelawney, who was standing in a welter of scarves and shawls, pointing in accusation at Professor Firenze.

Minerva McGonagall's voice cut across the room with asperity. "Really, Sibyll! What in the world are you on about?"

The affronted Divination teacher drew a shaky breath. "Him! He said he knew it all along! He constantly taunts me!"

Professor Vector looked up from her chart. "Firenze it is! Well, we don't need to ask how *you* knew what date to choose!" She rummaged in her pocket and brought out a bag that clinked with gold. "Here's the pot, Firenze. Good show."

The majestic centaur accepted the bag with a simple nod of his head, then turned and held it out to Professor Trelawney. "I have no use for an excess of Human gold. Allow me to make you a gift of it."

Dead silence greeted these words, as every person in the room was stricken speechless.

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Severus was standing in the middle of the sitting room, his lips pressed together in a thin, tight line, when she came in the door after ten o'clock that night.

"I see you decided to come home tonight," he sneered.

Hermione removed her cloak and hung it on the peg by the door. "Please don't start with me tonight, Severus."

"Have you eaten?" he demanded.

"Yes, we ate a Chinese take away," she responded, moving past him toward the bedroom.

"We?"

"Simon and Perry and I. I told you I was working with them today."

He curled his lip at her retreating back. "I trust it will not be necessary for you to do so again?"

She turned to face him from the doorway of their bedroom. Her face was drawn with exhaustion, fatigue etched into her weary eyes. When she spoke, her voice held none of the pugnacity which she had displayed in other altercations with him; even her tone showed an alarming quality of enervation.

"Yes, it *will* be necessary. It will take the efforts of all of us to complete the next stage in this process. This is important work, Severus if we are correct about the efficacy of this potion, it will make nerve regeneration possible. Do you *know* how many patients St. Mungo's is still seeing every day veterans of the war who are suffering from the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse?" She sagged for a moment against the doorframe, rubbing at her eyes. "We are so close I won't stop trying."

"To what strength are you brewing the infusion of hellebore?" Severus said, standing with his arms crossed and his feet braced as if for battle.

"We need the strength at no less than ninety percent, or it will not have the necessary narcotic effect."

He snorted his disdain. "It is not possible. You will just melt cauldron after cauldron. I believe I advised you so when you first discussed this project with me."

Hermione rallied her strength and stood straight again. "I *will* do it! It is only a matter of finding the necessary combination of Strengthening and Containment Charms."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Foolish wand waving! It has no place in a Potions laboratory."

Hermione advanced a step back into the sitting room; Severus congratulated himself on drawing her back towards him, even if it was only to express her anger.

"Just because *you* are stuck in the seventies as far as your Potions training goes does not mean that the science has not advanced in the last twenty years," she spat. "Did you ever bother to *read* my course thesis from University? I conducted some very promising research into the fusion of charm work and potion brewing!"

"Of course I read your thesis, stupid girl! Who do you think forwarded the damn thing to the Ministry for Magic? *You* certainly never bothered to do so and how on earth you thought you would ever find a situation without bothering to put yourself forward I have no way of knowing!"

They had advanced upon one another until they were standing toe-to-toe, both of them angry enough to be saying things for which they would presently be very sorry.

"*You* did it? You're the reason why Penny Clearwater asked me to come in for an interview? So you could have me work from home? So you could keep an eye on me? How dare you!" Hermione's fists were clenched by her sides as she shouted at him, fury in every line of her body.

"Why would I feel the need to keep an eye on you, Hermione? I am, after all, *stuck in the seventies* and in the seventies we believed in *free love*."

He spoke the last two words with such mocking scorn that it took all of Hermione's resolution not to slap his contemptuous face.

Instead, she pushed past him, grabbing her cloak from the peg and her bag from the table.

"Where are you going?" he thundered, striding after her.

Hermione whirled on him, her wand in her hand. "Don't make me hex you, Severus." She wrenched the door open. "It takes all of my energy to work on this project. I don't have time for your ridiculous tantrums. I'll find someplace else to stay."

"Do not walk out that door, madam. I forbid it." She was a strong and clever witch, but she would stand no chance against him in a duel although he could never force himself to employ his wand against his wife. There was no need, after all it was her duty to obey him

which was a belief Hermione apparently did not share. She turned her back on him and walked out, quietly closing the door to their home behind her.

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It was Quirk who removed the empty brandy bottle from his master's slackened hand and covered Master's recumbent body, much of which protruded from the end of the too-short sofa, in the wee hours of the morning.

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A/N: Please don't hurt me. Next chapter is on the way!

From <http://www.botanical.com>, comes this definition of black hellebore: The Black Hellebore - once known as Melampode - is a perennial, low-growing plant, with dark, shining, smooth leaves and flower-stalks rising directly from the root, its pure white blossoms appearing in the depth of winter and thereby earning for it the favourite name of **Christmas Rose**.

For the significance of Wednesday mornings in the Snape home, see *A Hallowe'en Tail*, found on this archive.

Severus' complicity in sending Hermione's course thesis to the Ministry for Magic was strongly implied in the first chapter of *Nobody Told Me There'd Be Days Like These* also found on this archive.

Whether her interpretation of his reasons is correct is another matter entirely.

Professor Ferguson left Hogwarts the year before Severus began. He played professional Quidditch for an American team, then coached for the same team before coming to Hogwarts as the flying instructor. All of this back story you are burdened with because **hunnybunch** cleverly pointed out that Ferguson should have known who Severus was and been familiar with his personality the man is a war hero, for heaven's sake!

Have you finished your shopping yet? I still haven't begun mine! But some stories simply need to be told...

## Chapter 2: Melting and Exploding

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione and Severus are heartsick and miserable, separated by stubbornness and pride. McGonagall and Dumbledore intercede, and Severus is drawn into the task of helping Hermione and her fellow researchers to complete the brewing of the hellebore infusion for the Christmas Rose potion. They attempt the infusion again with exhilarating results.

Christmas wishes for my beta, **LariLee**, and my Brit-Picker, **MagicAlly**

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. She makes no objection if I play with her toys, providing I tidy their clothes and put them back where I found them when I'm done. Happy Christmas, Jo!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 2: Melting and Exploding

*Six Weeks Before Christmas*

Hermione entered the spare bedroom in Penny Clearwater's flat and sagged into a reclining position on the bed, too tired to bother shrugging out of her robes. It had been five nights since she had walked out on Severus, and she was completely beyond thought or feeling any longer. Her only tolerance now was for the Christmas Rose Potion project. She swallowed food for fuel, slept without moving for eight hours every night, then rose with the sun to shower, dress, and go out to do it again. Penny now was spending the long, fruitless, frustrating days in Simon Lewis' laboratory with the rest of the team working on the project. An extra hand was always useful, an extra wand even more so, for the attempts they made to brew the critically needed hellebore infusion.

If anyone dared to speak to her about anything unrelated to the Christmas Rose Potion, Hermione responded in a querulous tone that bordered on hysteria.

And she could not, she would not, think about Severus.

That familiar plunging feeling, so visceral as to be physically discernable, blindsided her as her defences crumbled. No, no, please! Circe, not this not now. She clenched her fists in the bedclothes, gripping them tightly, until her white knuckles could grasp no tighter. The sudden nausea which rose without warning sent her scrambling for the bathroom; she knelt on the cold linoleum of the floor, losing what little nutrition she had managed to ingest hours ago from a cardboard container.

Her forehead pressed against the toilet cistern as one hand reached for the handle to flush. She felt a kindly hand gathering her hair back from her face and securing it in a queue; the same hand then bathed her face from behind with a wet face flannel.

When she was sure her retching was over for this go, Hermione looked up at Penny with a pitiful smile.

Penny held out a hand. "Let's get you to bed."

Hermione allowed Penny to help her up without argument and went into the bedroom, where she wordlessly changed from her creased robes into a borrowed flannel nightdress. Penny sat on the end of the bed, watching her.

"Let me Floo him."

"No."

"You're making yourself really ill, Hermione. This has got to stop."

Hermione's head dropped; unbidden, the tears came again.

Penny sighed. This was a cycle that had been repeated several times in the days Hermione had been with her. Merlin deliver her from stubborn people! If she had ever once been through *one* of the episodes which Hermione had suffered almost daily for the last five nights, she would have done anything in her power to make it stop.

Penny stood and pulled back the bedclothes, plumping the pillow before taking Hermione by the arm and leading her to the bed. Experience of the last several days had taught her that comforting words, arm pats, and hugs were of no use once Hermione reached this stage; the best she could hope for was to dose her with Dreamless Sleep and pray for the best.

Penny pulled the bedclothes up and sat down next to Hermione on the edge of the bed, watching her carefully.

"Oh, God, Penny, it *hurts*," Hermione whispered, turning her tear-streaked face away, toward the wall.

"Where?" the Healer asked, grasping her wrist. "Let me help you."

Hermione did not respond. The longing raced through her veins as if her blood were afire. She had thought the desire was strong in the beginning, when they were so new but the need for his presence, his comfort, his staunch and unchanging *self*, was bringing her swiftly to her knees.

The charm work she was attempting took all of her considerable power, every single day. By the end of each of their sessions she was drained so completely that Penny often had to Apparate them back to her flat when they gave it up, late at night, walking away from the disaster of yet another molten cauldron. She had no energy to deal with Severus and his jealousies and his unprovoked attacks.

Yet another wracking surge of misery coursed through her, wringing a moan of anguish from her throat.

Penny stood and went to fetch the phial of Dreamless Sleep. She could not bring Hermione to her senses, nor repair her sundered marital relationship, but she could provide surcease for the night.

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Remus Lupin looked up anxiously at his fiancée as she joined him at a table in the Hogs Head Inn. Seeing her adorable face brought a softening and a tender smile to his face. He stood and gently kissed her lips before seating himself again, close enough to her that he could reach out and touch her as he spoke.

Tonks found herself forgetting the cares which had burdened her when she walked in the door of the pub. When she saw *that* look in his topaz eyes, all she wanted to do was crawl into his lap and kiss every inch of his precious face and that was just for starters.

Remus captured the hand which bore the small diamond she wore so proudly and turned it so that he could press a kiss to her soft inner wrist. "I love you, 'Dora," he said in a voice suddenly choked with emotion.

'Dora reached up and stroked her finger down the old scar which bisected both lips at an angle. "I thought you said we won't have time tonight," she reminded him softly, suddenly ready to drag him up the rickety steps to brave the questionable sheets on the beds above.

He chuckled and gave his head a shake, causing his greying sandy hair to fall into his face. "We don't. I have an appointment to meet with Minerva in an hour."

"I could sneak in a side door and up to your rooms..."

"Albus threatened me if we did that again. No love-making in the castle, not until we're married not during term time."

'Dora, who had known what he would say before she made the suggestion, dragged her hungry gaze away from his face and answered the question he had come to the pub to ask her.

"I couldn't see her she's spending fifteen hours a day working in this Lewis bloke's laboratory. I did talk to Penny, though. Hermione cries herself to sleep every night;

Penny usually ends up dosing her with a sleeping potion."

Remus shook his head. "Severus is a mess. I had to get between him and Craig Ferguson this afternoon. Severus is so ... difficult. Filius Flitwick said he *warned* the new bloke about Severus at the staff meeting on Wednesday you would think Ferguson would have had better sense than to accost him after that."

'Dora opened her eyes wide. "What did Ferguson *do* to Severus?"

Remus shook his head. "Severus refused to say, just left the room. Ferguson said he just made a friendly comment about Severus' work for the Order during the war."

'Dora pondered a moment. "I'll lay you odds he was stupid enough to mention Hermione in some way."

Remus glanced at her with respect. "I would not bet against you, my love." He stood and held out a hand to her. "I'll walk you to the Apparition point."

'Dora preceded him out onto the darkened Hogsmeade street. When the door closed behind them, she tilted her head and gazed up into his face. "Promise you'll come spend the night, soon."

Remus ducked into an alley, pulling her after him, where he gently but firmly pressed her up against the wall. "Wait up for me tonight," he commanded hoarsely, before bending his head to hungrily devour her mouth.

---

Severus entered Professor McGonagall's office and seated himself in the hard wooden chair indicated for his use.

"Thank you for coming, Severus," the Deputy Headmistress said.

"I was under the impression it was a *summons* Minerva," Severus returned.

"Would you have come if I had worded the request differently?"

Severus merely quirked an eyebrow in reply.

"Then you understand why I phrased my invitation as I did." She appraised him frankly, noting the lank, greasy hair, the less-than pristine condition of his shirt, and the shadow of stubble on his cheeks. "You look a mess, Severus. You're tormenting the students and terrorizing the staff. How much longer do you intend to let this quarrel with Hermione continue?"

Severus rose precipitately to his feet. "I do not intend to discuss my marriage with you or anyone else, Minerva," he spat out savagely, turning for the door.

In her most imperious, commanding voice, Professor McGonagall said, "Take your seat, Severus Snape. You have *not* been dismissed!"

Somehow transported back twenty-five years, when she was his Transfiguration professor, the boy in Severus compelled him to obey McGonagall's order. Seating himself again before her desk, he looked at her bleakly.

"Now. What did you quarrel about?" she inquired reasonably.

Severus looked away from her uncomfortably. "She is working too much."

Minerva regarded him with a small show of astonishment. "Surely you do not seriously expect me to believe you quarrelled about something so ridiculous?"

His shoulders sagged and his head lowered. "I'm too old for her, Minerva," he said, his voice barely audible.

"The age difference is no greater now than it was when you rushed into marrying her, Severus. Pray tell, what is the difference between now and then?"

As she watched him, she saw how he struggled with himself. It was so hard for this boy to open himself to other people; trying to help him when he was in trouble was like trying to tend to a wounded tiger. He circled and snarled and let fly with his heavily clawed paws even as he limped and bled.

Finally, he looked into her face with anguished eyes. "She said..." His voice failed and he had to clear his throat before he tried again. "She said I am 'stuck in the seventies.'"

The look on McGonagall's face was patently incredulous.

"What?" he demanded with a show of his usual ill-temper.

"Severus, were you quarrelling when she said it?"

"Yes, did I not say so?"

McGonagall leaned toward him impatiently. "Did you mean everything you said to *her* in that altercation?"

Severus opened his mouth to retort, but McGonagall forestalled him. "Did you exaggerate? Engage in name-calling? Speak to her as if she did not have the sense of a flobberworm?"

Severus' mouth snapped closed again and a sulky look descended upon his face. "It's not as if I had not done all of those things before when we have argued," he whinged.

"Was she, or was she not, completely *exhausted* from her work when this argument took place?" Minerva asked him.

"She was, and I was only trying to talk some sense into her! She's driving herself too hard on this project."

Minerva's gusty sigh goaded him. "Why do you greet every piece of information I impart to you with such signs of disgust?" he demanded.

Speaking slowly and carefully, as if he were not quite bright, Professor McGonagall said, "Severus, I want you to think back. This is going to be difficult, because my understanding is that the Enchantment is an overwhelming force. Nevertheless, I want you to make a signal effort to remember: what is it that you liked about Hermione before the Enchantment?"

He thought for a moment, before saying, "Her intelligence, her drive " he stopped and sputtered. "Who says I liked her before the Enchantment?" The sudden diminution of the quality of his word choice and the maturity of his attitude placed him firmly in the company of his fifth year students.

Minerva gave him a triumphant smirk. "No one told me, Severus. It was a guess. Now, please continue. Her intelligence, her drive..."

Severus glowered at her. "What is your point?" he demanded peevishly.

McGonagall stood and walked around the desk. "My point is this: the very qualities that placed her in Gryffindor House, joined with the qualities which you admired in her, are the reason *why* she is driving herself. Did you think she would cease to be herself because she became your wife? Was it your wish for her to do so?"

Severus rose and walked jerkily across the room to the window, then paced back to her desk, distress on his face. "Never. I want her to have the career she wants I want her to have *everything* she wants but I need for her to want *me*, as well." The last bit was barely audible.

Minerva reached out a compassionate hand and placed it upon his arm. "Now we reach the crux of the matter. Who are her work companions?"

Severus' lips grew tight and he wrenched his chin up, flinging the oily hair back from his face. "Two young men from the Ministry."

"Severus," Minerva said, waiting patiently until he turned his face back to hers. "She only has eyes for you. She does not care about the age difference. Young men of her age have *never* interested her. Even without the Enchantment, there is not another man who could supplant you in Hermione's heart."

She saw with some satisfaction the tiny flare of hope in his eyes. "Do you truly believe that?" he asked her quietly.

Minerva answered without hesitation. "With every fibre of my being, Severus. You have no rival for Hermione's affections. But if you are going to allow your own insecurity to cause you to doubt her, I don't know what is going to become of you. Have you so little confidence in her?"

Astonishment washed across Severus' harsh features. "I have *every* confidence in her," he answered firmly.

Minerva allowed a small smile to grace her lips as she squeezed his arm. "Let some of that confidence in her abilities bleed over into your feelings about her integrity and the quality of her fidelity," she advised him.

With a rare show of caring, Severus' mouth softened as one of his large hands covered McGonagall's hand on his sleeve.

She patted his angular cheek before she turned to seat herself behind her desk again. "Good luck," she said.

He stopped at the door and looked back at her. "I am going to need it."

Minerva watched him square his shoulders before he walked out of the room; the closing of the door found her indulging in a fond smile.

---

Penny was crossing the hallway with a phial in her hand when she heard the knock upon her door. With a sudden hope that it was an unexpected visit from Viktor Krum, who had popped in to see her twice since the Halloween Ball, she patted her hair before opening to her visitor.

"Professor Dumbledore!" she said, astonished.

"Good evening, Healer Clearwater," he said politely, peering at her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. "I know it is late to pay a call but may I come in?"

Penny stepped back from the door and invited him to enter, suddenly conscious of the disorder of her sitting room. "Please excuse the mess ... we've been quite busy at work."

Dumbledore seated himself upon her couch, between a stack of Healing periodicals and pile of towels which she had yet to fold. "The Christmas Rose Potion, I believe?" he inquired.

Penny seated herself in an armchair and nodded. "Do you know about it?"

"I have read a bit about it," he admitted. "May I ask about your progress?"

Penny sighed. "I'm just an extra chopper in the laboratory; Simon Lewis and Peregrine Smith have been leading the research. When Hermione joined us, things really began to move along. But we've hit an impasse."

Dumbledore had a look of polite interest on his face, waiting for additional information, when Hermione wandered into the sitting room wearing the dressing gown she had also borrowed from Penny.

"I thought I heard your voice, sir," she said.

Dumbledore stood and crossed to her. "Please sit down, Hermione. You do not look well." He indicated the place he had vacated on the couch. When she had seated herself, he flicked his wand at the pile of towels, which folded themselves and flew into Penny's arms.

Penny understood Dumbledore's unspoken request; standing, she said, "I'm going to put these things away," and left the room.

Dumbledore seated himself where the towels had been and handed Hermione a clean handkerchief from his pocket. "Please don't feel you must stop crying on my account," he told her kindly.

Hermione choked out a sound which was a cross between a laugh and a sob. "I have been crying a bit, lately," she admitted.

Dumbledore did not speak, but watched her in a helpful way, his manner inviting her to speak her mind.

"Did Severus ask you to come?" she said.

Dumbledore thought he detected a tiny note of hope in her tone. "No, Severus does not know I am here."

Hermione looked down at her hands and pulled at the borrowed handkerchief. "I see," she said in a small voice.

"Do you?" he inquired curiously.

Hermione looked up into his piercing blue eyes.

Dumbledore then said, "Hermione, what makes you certain that your marriage will still be there for you to return to it?"

He watched the thoughts process sluggishly through her exhausted mind; when he perceived the expression of horror on her face, he spoke again.

"In the wizarding world, a wife is generally submissive to her husband's wishes."

Hermione seemed to swell with indignation at this pronouncement. "That is old-fashioned rhetoric from a time when women were regarded as chattel!" she protested.

Dumbledore held up a calming hand. "It is indeed an old-fashioned belief, Hermione, but it is still a tradition. You must remember that your husband was raised in this custom, however, and has lived immersed in the wizarding world for all of his forty-one years. As hard as he may try to understand and appreciate your point of view, you must make allowances for some beliefs being harder to dislodge than others."

She gazed into the fireplace, mulling over his words. Dumbledore once again allowed her some time to digest his words before speaking again.

"He forbade you to do something, Hermione. Had he ever done so before?"



Hermione looked over at the old wizard. "No, sir; Severus has never forbidden me to do anything."

"You are perhaps unfamiliar with the wizarding precept which states that when the husband invokes his power of Prohibition, it is the wife's duty to obey?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "What?"

Dumbledore nodded, and was pleased to see Penelope Clearwater poke her head into the room again. With a slight movement of his head, he invited her to join them again.

"Perhaps you could bear me out, Healer Clearwater?"

Penny knelt down by Hermione's feet. "Did he use those words, Hermione?"

In a fair imitation of her husband's tone and diction, she said, "'Do not walk out that door, madam. I forbid it.'"

When Penny winced, Hermione looked mutinous. "That's *ridiculous*! Why on earth should he be able to command my obedience like some feudal lord wielding power over a serf?"

Dumbledore spoke to her with some sharpness. "You say that he has never Prohibited you before, Hermione. You cannot say that he is using this responsibility frivolously."

Penny spoke again, then. "I can only remember my father using the power of Prohibition with my mum twice in my lifetime, Hermione. It is not something which is used lightly. I'm not saying that there are not idiots who would misuse it, but a good man does not. It is a solemn charge, after all."

"Could he *compel* me to obey?" she asked indignantly.

Penny looked shocked. "That is *never* done. A wizard would not pull his wand on his own wife! It's *indecent*, Hermione." After a moment, she continued, "A wizard only Prohibits his wife to safeguard her, the marriage, or the family. For her to disregard it is a great sign of disrespect."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Why was *none* of this ever discussed at Hogwarts? Or at University? How can I have lived in this world for half my life and *still* not know things that are so fundamental that they are never even spoken of?"

Penny grasped her wrists and pulled her hands from her face. "Severus knows you're Muggle-born, Hermione. I'm sure, if you explain to him that you did not know about the power of Prohibition, that he'll understand. He *loves* you!"

"He didn't Prohibit me until the end of the quarrel, Penny! He was being beastly about my work on the project! And jealous of Simon and Perry! He was being demanding and nasty and insensitive!"

Dumbledore snorted and turned the sound into a cough. Hermione turned affronted eyes to him.

"I beg your pardon, Hermione, but you have just described your husband's basic personality to a nicety. Surely you're not going to hold these things against him at this late date?"

Hermione opened her mouth to argue and Dumbledore spoke again. "Step back from the argument, my dear, and tell me the facets of Severus' personality of which you were aware before you knew about the Enchantment."

Hermione closed her mouth again and pondered. Penny stood, saying that she would brew up a nice pot of tea, and disappeared into her small kitchen. At last, Hermione began.

"He's the most intelligent man I've ever met well, barring you, sir, but you must admit that you're in a different category than most men are."

Dumbledore inclined his head at the compliment and indicated with a hand movement that she should continue.

"He is sarcastic, snide, and cynical, and viciously witty. He is antisocial, unpleasant and a bit emotionally backward."

Here Dumbledore held up a hand again. "Let us discuss this arrested development. You are aware of the causes of it?"

Hermione looked frankly into the Headmaster's eyes. "He has allowed me into his mind, sir, with permission to Legilimize him without reserve. In fact, he guided me, to see everything about him, before he would accept my love. I am aware of the causes."

"What do you imagine are some of the unfortunate side-effects of his emotional retardation, as it were?"

Hermione applied her mind to the puzzle. "He is overly sensitive, virtually incapable of accepting kindness, unable to form or maintain friendships, and insecure in the highest degree."

Professor Dumbledore nodded, as if to praise a student who has returned a particularly complete answer to a question posed in the classroom. "Now, tell me, my dear, did you by any chance say anything unfortunate to him in your quarrel anything, perhaps, in the heat of anger, which you would later have begged pardon for saying?"

Hermione covered her face with her hands again. "I told him he is stuck in the seventies."

Penny, who was entering the room with the tea tray, said, "Ouch!"

"I too, have been accused of that of course, my accuser meant the *eighteen-seventies*." He twinkled at the young women over his spectacles. "Let us have this lovely tea; I believe we have discussed this matter sufficiently."

Hermione gave him a grateful, if tremulous smile, and sat forward to pour a cup of tea for him. Penny walked into her bedroom and came out again with a bulging briefcase.

"You are familiar with alchemy, are you not, Professor?" Penny said, approaching him with the mass of parchment. "Would you look over our research and see if there is anything we are missing?"

---

Severus was standing at the Apparition point outside the gates of Hogwarts the next morning when Hermione appeared.

For a moment they stared at one another, both startled. Then Hermione spoke, awkwardly.

"I was on my way to find you," she said.

"I was on my way to find you," he replied.

"I need to ask for your help," she continued.

He looked at her, her hair a bushy, messy mass, confined to a disorderly queue, her face devoid of cosmetics, showing signs of exhaustion, her eyes tired and bloodshot,

and all he knew was that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms for all time.

He spoke stiffly. "How may I be of service to you?"

She looked at him, seeing the signs of sleeplessness in the pronounced lines on his careworn face, the eyes as bloodshot as her own, the disorder of his clothing, and wanted nothing so much as to climb into him and hide herself there forever.

"Can we go somewhere for coffee?" she asked.

---

Severus sat across the table from her in the Leaky Cauldron and forced himself to listen to what she was saying. He wanted to touch her, needed to touch her, but she had made no move to apologize to him for walking out. She had also given no sign that she wished to be touched. It dawned on him that he was going to have to find a way to solve this problem with her work project if he wanted to regain her attention for himself. It was part of her Gryffindor determination, he reminded himself. She could no more walk away from a task which needed to be completed than he could deny himself the opportunity to taunt a Gryffindor.

With renewed attention, he began to attend to her explanation.

---

Hermione stepped out of the fireplace and Severus Flooed in behind her. As he brushed the ash from his black cloak, he could see the anxious looks upon the faces of the project partners. Both of them had been students of his; he had made it his business to find out about them when Hermione had walked out on him.

Peregrine Smith and Simon Lewis had both obtained Outstanding marks in Potions on both their OWLs and their NEWTs. He had no clear memory of either of them, other than a vague recollection of their faces in the sea of students whom he had taught in his years as the Potions master at Hogwarts.

Nodding haughtily to each of the men, he said, "Mr. Smith, Mr. Lewis." He then turned to the other woman in the room and said, "Good afternoon, Healer Clearwater."

The wizards murmured cautious greetings to their old Potions master, wondering for the umpteenth time how a girl as brilliant as *Hermione* could have tied herself to the Greasy Bat of the Dungeons. Penny was considerably braver, stepping forward with a smile and offering her hand.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape. Thank you for agreeing to help us."

Severus cast a coldly appraising look around the laboratory before briefly shaking the proffered hand, then answered, "I said I would investigate the ~~possibility~~ of helping you."

Simon, in whose laboratory they were working, made a mental comparison of the cleanliness and orderliness of his own work space as compared to the Potions classroom at Hogwarts and immediately busied himself tidying up.

Hermione led Severus to the large parchment-littered table at the side of the room, which had a number of mismatched chairs pulled up around it. "Give over, Si, and come sit down. We need to explain our procedure to Severus if he's going to help us."

Simon gave up on cleaning the work surface and joined the others at the table. Presently, the three researchers were posing their work to their old Potions master, answering his curt and perspicacious questions and feeling very much as if it were their NEWT oral examinations, all over again. Healer Clearwater looked on in amusement, occasionally making notes to herself as they went.

The clock above stairs was chiming four o'clock when the researchers and the professor had completed their consultation and had outlined their plan for the next attempt at brewing the hellebore infusion.

Perry stood, leaning back a bit to work the kinks out of his back. "So, are we ready to begin, then?"

Severus stood, very much in his classroom persona, and spoke.

"Certainly not, Mr. Smith; please take your seat."

Perry sat down quickly, trading a quizzical look with Simon. Hermione and Penny, however, were utterly attentive to Professor Snape.

"When did you last eat?" he demanded of Simon Lewis.

"Uh, I had toast and tea this morning," he replied.

Severus turned his hard stare on Perry Smith. "I had coffee and a bun on the way over here, sir."

Next Penny and Hermione received his attention. "We had tea and toast this morning, too," Hermione told him.

Simon was getting a bit tired of the old autocrat coming into *his* laboratory and acting as if they were all schoolchildren again.

"See here, Professor, what has that got to do with this?" he demanded.

Severus turned on him. "What has the general good sense of eating properly and sleeping properly and fully replenishing your magical strength every single night got to do with your ability to perfect an untried magical experiment which is dependent upon your single and combined abilities to reach its completion?"

As he spoke, his voice had grown quieter and his enunciation more precise, until his last words were a whisper, and each of the four young persons were leaning forward to hear him.

"Perhaps you could explain in what way your health and strength *does not* affect the outcome of this project, Mr. Lewis?"

After a moment of abashed silence, Hermione spoke.

"What must we do, Severus?"

Severus reached into his watch pocket and consulted the timepiece.

"I will meet each of you in one hour at the Leaky Cauldron. Ask for the private room. You will dine properly, on a nutritious meal, and then you will return to your homes and your beds and you will take the phial of sleeping potion with which I will provide you. You will remain in your beds for no less than nine full hours. After a night of complete rest, we will meet here in the morning and make another attempt."

Without waiting for any sign of agreement from the others, Severus strode to the fireplace and held his hand out to Hermione.

"Come with me, please, Hermione. I wish to speak with you."

Hermione was strongly tempted to repudiate this domineering command, feeling that she would rather stay and discuss matters further with her co-workers. However, Penny nudged her with a certain violence under the table, and it occurred to her that she did not need to further insult a husband whose power of Prohibition had already

been flouted not if she wished to remain married, at any rate.

With a smile at Simon and Perry, she obediently stepped into the fireplace with Severus and held his hand as he released the powder and said clearly, "The Leaky Cauldron."

---

Severus stepped out of the fireplace and immediately turned to offer his hand once again to Hermione. The touch of her hand alone had been enough to both assuage and arouse the demands of the Enchantment. She took his hand and he led her to the bar, where he arranged the details of their dinner with Tom, the innkeeper.

Tom then escorted them into the private parlour, stoking up the fire and closing the door behind him before he left them alone.

Severus stepped over to the tray upon which several bottles resided. Picking up a bottle of deep red burgundy, he poured a goblet half-full of the wine and carried it to Hermione, who had chosen to seat herself in a leather wingback chair by the fire.

"Please oblige me by drinking this wine, Hermione. It will stimulate your appetite and enable you to partake of a full meal. It's the burgundy that we have at Enchanté."

Hermione accepted the goblet of wine and took a mouthful. He stood over her, watching her, much as he had done on a long ago night at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, when he had poured brandy into a teacup and made sure that she drank it.

When he was convinced that she was making an effort to ingest the burgundy, he said, "There is something which I must obtain from my office at Hogwarts. I will be back quickly." Without further comment, he exited the private parlour.

Hermione's eyes flicked to the clock on the mantelpiece; thankfully, she noted that the others would be joining them soon. Severus would not have much time to work himself into a full tantrum in such a short period of time.

Very soon, Severus returned to his wife. She jumped nervously when he entered the room, and he knew a moment of sour satisfaction. At least she had some respect for his *temper*.

"You will feel better when you have eaten a proper dinner and had a full night's sleep," he told her, seating himself in the armchair facing her.

Hermione was surprised at his choice of topic, though she responded readily enough. "But you don't think we will succeed, even if we're rested," she said disconsolately.

"Nonsense. I never said that."

Her eyes flew to his face. "You never said you thought it might work, either!"

He raised an eyebrow at her and crossed one long leg negligently over the other. "When have you ever known me to be effusive?"

Hermione found herself entirely distracted by the movement of his legs. She paused, with the glass only part way to her mouth, and remembered the sight of his unclothed legs, with particular attention to the lean muscle of his thighs.

Severus saw her pause and clearly read the bit of lust that crossed her face. He breathed an internal sigh of relief and deliberately shifted his position, uncrossing his legs and watching her eyes go to his fly.

Severus reached across the small distance between them and took her goblet from her. "You've had enough wine, I think," he said, his amusement evident in his tone.

Hermione watched him longingly as he crossed the room to return the goblet to the tray.

"I knew nothing about the power of Prohibition, Severus," she blurted suddenly.

He paused for a moment, his hands reaching out to grasp the edge of the table before him.

His back still to her, he spoke. "How can that be, Hermione?"

She stood and began to pace before the fireplace. "Muggles don't have it," she explained.

He turned then, a frown upon his face. "Muggle wives do not obey their husbands?" he asked incredulously.

"Of course they do! That is, some of them do, but it is a custom which has fallen into obscurity in the last thirty years or so."

Softly he said, "You mean, since the *seventies*?"

She looked at him from across the room, her contrition evident on her pinched face.

"I didn't mean it! I was angry with you!"

He advanced upon her, holding her gaze with his glittering black eyes. "I am too old for you, Hermione."

"You are perfect for me, Severus," she responded, trying and failing to look away from his compelling gaze.

He stopped before her, just beyond her reach. "I have acted foolishly, Hermione. I never meant for you to think that I am not very proud of the work you did in University. And I am very proud also of your position at the Ministry and the work you are doing there. I *can* learn to control my feelings of jealousy, Hermione. I know that I must."

She looked up hopefully at these words and advanced to meet him, placing the palms of her hands flat on his chest as she gazed into his eyes. He was reaching for her when the door to the room opened and the rest of their party entered, talking amongst themselves.

With a rueful smile at her husband, Hermione turned to greet her workmates.

---

Severus looked about at the young people when they had finished their pudding. He had resolutely refused to allow any of them to have coffee with their pie. "No stimulants," he had said firmly. Standing, he pulled four phials from his pocket; these were the reason why he had returned to Hogwarts.

"We are agreed that we will meet here at eight o'clock in the morning for breakfast?" he said.

The four heads nodded.

He held up one of the phials and showed it to them. "This potion will become effective thirty minutes after you ingest it. You will do well to go straight home and to bed; tomorrow may be a long day."

"Bed at eight o'clock at night?" Penny said doubtfully.

Severus raised an eyebrow at her. "You are not required to participate, Healer Clearwater. If you have other plans that will occupy you, please do not feel compelled."

Penny rose and held out her hand for the phial. "What is it, exactly?"

Realising that the Healer was as familiar with such potions as he was himself, he responded. "It is a variation of Dreamless Sleep, including a large dose of nutritional supplement and a slight sedative. I mixed it specifically for this purpose." He held the remaining phials out to the others, each of whom took one. "Drink up," he advised.

"Now?" Perry said. "Take it now?"

"If you wish to have my assistance, you will swallow it here, where I may see you do so, and go directly home and to bed," Severus replied in an uncompromising tone.

The four uncorked their phials and toasted one another. "To the Christmas Rose potion!" Simon said.

"And to Professor Snape," Penny added.

And they drained their phials.

---

When the young wizards had Flooed away, Penny stepped into the fireplace in the main room of the Leaky Cauldron and gave her direction. Hermione stepped up next and Severus made as if to follow her.

"Where are you going?" she asked him.

"I'm coming with you," he replied.

"Severus, I don't think..."

"...that you will be awake in another twenty minutes. I will sleep on the Healer's couch."

Hermione shrugged and held out her hand to him.

---

Severus removed his coat and his waistcoat while remaining in Penny's parlour and waiting for the sleeping draught to have its inevitable effect on the two witches. When he cracked the door into the spare room and found Hermione sleeping soundly, he slipped into the room and stretched out beside her, gathering her into his arms.

He was asleep in less than three minutes and slept more soundly and restfully than he had done since their quarrel began.

His internal clock woke him at dawn and he rose, fully refreshed. He was able to leave his wife sleeping in her bed, none the wiser concerning who had shared her bed in the night.

---

At ten o'clock that morning, the five of them were gathered in Simon Lewis' laboratory with the implements of their work arranged in a tidy and orderly manner. The fresh stalks of the black hellebore, also known as the Christmas Rose, were laid out upon the chopping surface. Perry and Simon stepped up to the table, then each turned with their silver knives held blade-first in their hands, extended to Severus.

"Sir?" Perry said. "Will you do the honours?"

Severus inclined his head in acknowledgement. "That will not be necessary, gentlemen. I am here to participate in a bit of foolish wand waving."

The young wizards looked at one another a bit uncertainly, but when they saw the old Bat take Hermione's hand in his and press it to his lips, they turned their backs and began to chop the stalk of the plant with concentration and precision.

---

It had been Professor Dumbledore who had spotted the weakness in their plan as he looked over the notes Healer Clearwater had shown him two nights before. He had agreed with each step they had outlined, even approving the sequence of Strengthening and Containing Charms Hermione had devised to implement the brewing of the hellebore infusion. It had not been until he reached the casting of the charms that he found a problem with the programme.

"How many assistants do you have to help in casting the series of spells?" he had inquired.

"There are three of us, Professor. Simon carries on with the brewing whilst Penny, Perry and I cast and hold the spell."

Dumbledore had paused for a moment, then had tapped a gnarled finger upon the parchment before him.

"I do not mean to throw aspersions upon your spell-casting abilities, my dear, but you do not have enough power present to maintain the integrity of the cauldron. That is the reason why the cauldrons continue to melt."

Hermione had cocked her head and considered him. "But, sir, you know that old saw, how too many cooks spoil the broth..."

Dumbledore had laughed aloud at that. "We wizards say that 'too many brewers spoil the potion,' but I follow your point, my dear. I am familiar with your strength, as well as that of Healer Clearwater and Mr. Smith. Each of you is powerful, and I'm sure that you blend your power together well." His eyes had met Hermione's then and he had held her gaze, as he had said, "What you are in need of is a fourth spell-caster, a very powerful one, whose magic blends well with yours that is, of course, if you can think of anyone."

He had left soon after dropping that little titbit.

Hermione had Apparated to Hogwarts at first light the next morning, in search of the most powerful wizard of her acquaintance, whose magic blended with her own in a seamless whole.

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It came as almost no surprise at all when the entire procedure progressed without a hitch and to a successful conclusion. The four young people, feeling themselves under the eye and the direction of their Potions master, were accustomed to projects which he directed being properly completed.

It was only in extremis, at that point in the charm progression when each previous cauldron had melted into a useless lump, that Hermione held her breath, then felt that exhilaration which comes from an idea becoming reality before one's eyes. Feeling her own magic blazing in the safe cushion provided by the low, dark note of Severus' powerful contribution, she dared to glance over at him, and found herself stricken to the core by the sight of him in all his glory. The power poured from him in waves so intense that it stirred the air around him, causing the long ebony hair to be lifted from his face. His teeth were clenched, his lips drawn back from them in an expression at once terrifying and electrifying. The look in his eyes was one of almost supernatural exhilaration.

When he turned his head and his eyes met Hermione's, she felt a jolt of passion jar through her with such force that she gasped out loud. Her focus was not impaired by this phenomenon; in some way, she found it sharpened and amplified her contribution to the stream of magic which was holding the cauldron whole as Simon brewed the infusion of hellebore. She became aware that her nipples had grown taut with the wave of passion; almost instantly, the rising heat in her loins began to build higher. Instinct compelled her to accept rather than fight the physical sensations. As the arousal moved through her body, her magic flared ever stronger. Severus, too, appeared to be in the throes of an incandescent eruption, rising to meet hers, radiating out to envelope Penny and Perry in the towering conflagration. At the moment that Simon shouted the successful completion of the brewing, Hermione was convulsed with an orgasm with the magnitude of a solar implosion. Simon, as had been agreed in the

planning stage, used his own wand to knock the four wands of his companions up, breaking the connection and severing the bond. Hermione, Penny, and Perry were knocked to the ground by the impact of the sundering; only Severus kept his feet, though he staggered.

Simon looked around at the charm casters. "What was *that*?"

Penny struggled up, blinking her eyes. "It was better than sex," she muttered.

Perry sat a few feet away from her, surreptitiously checking his trousers for embarrassing stains. "It was sex, Penny. What are you talking about?"

Severus squatted down beside his bride. "Are you all right?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm fine. Did it work?"

Severus helped her to stand and steadied her wobbly legs with an arm around her shoulders. "It worked. See?"

Perry was up now, and he and Simon were swiftly bottling the infusion they had created, excitedly chattering about the next step in the process, when they would add it to the potion base.

Penny was sitting on a stool near the two young men, tugging at her robes and glancing about as if to determine what had just happened to her and who had witnessed it.

"Gentlemen, Healer, with your leave, I will take my wife home now."

He was wrapping her securely in his arms as he spoke; his words were mere courtesy. He was going home with his prize whether they liked it or not.

"Thank you, Professor," Penny said, prompting the young wizards to echo her sentiments.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, Hermione," Penny said, as the Snapes Apparated away.

*Not if I have anything to say about it* Severus thought to himself.

After all, tomorrow was Wednesday.

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A/N: I must make note here of a rather silly error I made in the writing of this chapter, which was pointed out to me by the alert Keladry Lupin. Penelope Clearwater is Muggle-born we know this because she was one of the victims of the Basilisk when the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Therefore, she would have been no more familiar than Hermione was with the Power of Prohibition, and she could not possibly have been able to relate her father's use of the Prohibition with her mother, because they were both Muggles. I decided to leave the chapter as it is, but I did want those of you who spotted the mistake to know that I am aware of the inaccuracy.

## Chapter 3: Growing

### Chapter 3 of 6

Hermione and Severus heal from their separation, indulging in one another. Their house-elf comes to them at an inopportune time with concerns regarding the kittens.

Christmas joys for my beta, **LariLee**, and my Brit-Picker, **MagicAlly**.

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. For reasons I do not understand but heartily appreciate, she lets me play with her toys, providing I clean up behind myself. Happy Christmas, Jo!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 3: Growing

*Five Weeks Before Christmas*

The blazing logs burned in the fireplace, and the Snapes basked before it in silence. Severus sat in the ingenious contraption known as a "recliner," which Hermione had Transfigured for them from one of his old wingback chairs. The seat of the recliner was certainly large enough for them to easily sit side by side. For some reason, however, Hermione preferred to sit in his lap, her cheek pressed to his chest, just above his heart. Severus held her securely to him, one arm firmly about her waist, whilst the other stroked slowly and sensually up and down her back. One of her hands clutched a fold of his white linen shirt; the other grasped and released the fine strands of his black hair, letting the strands run through her fingers, then grasping and releasing again. Her eyes were closed, an expression of bliss upon her face, lit golden by the firelight. His eyes were open, watching the fiery light as it moved over her features, accenting her cheeks, with her mouth in shadows, then shifting, so that one shell-like ear was glowing and the rest of her face indistinct.

In the week since the successful brewing of the infusion of hellebore, they had been virtually inseparable. The breach in their relationship had frightened them both into rethinking some of their personal positions on different topics. Hermione came to see that Severus needed her in a manner she had never permitted herself to know. In some ways, it made him seem less omnipotent to her, for it demonstrated a neediness he had never been able to communicate to her verbally. In other ways, it made her surer of him, to know that he required her presence in his life every bit as much as she required him in hers. Severus came to see that Hermione did not view her work as an escape from him or from their home; rather that it engaged her intellectually and stimulated her voracious mind sufficiently, which was as much a necessity to her as breathing. Finding that their separation had rendered her as unhappy and physically unwell as it had him made him feel more secure in her, to know that she could no more walk away from him without tearing herself asunder than he could contemplate a life without her in it.

Arriving in their home directly after the infusion was brewed, they had tumbled into their bed, both exhausted to the very marrow of their bones. Fully dressed, they had lain face to face, indulging themselves in touches and kisses that owed more to relief than to passion. They had fallen asleep in one another's arms, each clinging to the other as to flotsam in a flood. When at last they woke, Severus had insisted upon ordering food from the Hogwarts kitchens and feeding her with his own hands as he also fed himself, before he would permit an in-depth discussion of their separation. He had received her apology for walking out on him with a wordless kiss to her forehead, almost like a benediction. She had received his apology for his jealousy and his unkind words with amazement and a heart full of gratitude. Had she been asked what she thought was fair versus what she expected, she would have willingly admitted that she did not believe him capable of the kind of admission of fault which he delivered to her, though

she certainly felt she was owed it. That he followed his words by carrying her to their bed and making earth-shattering love to her was much easier to believe. She wondered if he were aware how much more intimately they were bound now, by their joint confessions of wrong, or of how the amends they made to one another, in bed and out, over the next several days, smacked very much of atonement.

On a more fundamental level beyond thought or reason, they were simply enthralled in much the way they had been in the very beginning of their love. They parted to do their work each day but came back together in the late afternoons as if they had been apart for a matter of days rather than a matter of hours. If they made love less often than they had in the first frantic weeks of the Enchantment, they certainly spent more time wrapped in the solitude of one another's eyes, thoughts, and arms.

Hermione opened her eyes and tilted her head back to gaze at her husband's face in the glow of the hearth's illumination. His lips, in repose, were fuller, more kissable than she had ever seen them. The scowl was gone from his face, smoothing out lines of care, though the crease directly between his eyebrows remained. The inky depths of his black eyes when she met them seemed to capture her and hold her there, safe and imperilled in the same moment. Willingly, Hermione arched her neck, giving herself over once again to the jeopardy of surrender to Severus Snape.

Severus drank in the sight of his wife's half-lidded eyes as she moved them slowly over his face in the glimmering firelight. The scrutiny which he had never been able to abide in his life as the ugly, greasy git, he relished in his new incarnation, as the wizard in possession of the most alluring witch alive. When she met his eyes, he gently pushed into her mind, willing her to allow herself to give over completely to the passion slowly and inexorably building between them. He felt the moment when she yielded herself to his will. When she offered her throat to him, he dipped his head to lave, then suckle that spot where her artery pulsed the blood from her fierce heart, to her fervid mind, and to points beyond, encompassing the legs which would wrap themselves about his hips, and the cradle of her womanhood, which would rise up to meet him, and meet him again.

Thus engaged, it was not until Quirk cleared his throat the second time that his master or mistress paid the least heed to him.

Severus did not raise his head, but rather spoke to the house-elf with his lips yet against Hermione's soft skin.

"Is the castle on fire?" he asked.

"No, Master, but..."

"Are you bleeding, Quirk?"

"No, Quirk is not bleeding, but ..."

"Then *go away*," Severus said, now applying teeth to the spot which had been licked and sucked.

Hermione struggled in his arms and he released her so that she could sit up.

Twining her fingers in Severus' hair, to let him know she had not lost their place, she spoke kindly to Quirk.

Quirk wrung his hands. "Quirk is sorry to be bothering Master and Mistress," he began, "but there is something being wrong with the kitty babies."

Severus actually looked over at the elf, at this pronouncement. "Are they ill?" he demanded.

"Well, one of the kitties may be having a fever," he allowed conscientiously.

"Then, what?" Severus growled.

"One of the kitties is too high for Quirk or the mommy-kitty to reach it. One of the kitties is being good. And two of the kitties Quirk cannot find."

Hermione surged to her feet. "You've lost two of the kittens?" she said.

"Quirk has not lost the kitties Quirk cannot SEE the kitties."

Severus, now with an empty lap, pinched the bridge of his nose, as Quirk said, "But the kitties is always back when it is time to eat. Only, mommy-kitty isn't happy with the way the babies is being and Quirk does not know what to do!"

Hermione started towards the study. "So only three of the kittens are in the study now?"

Quirk followed behind her. "Quirk is only seeing three of the kitty-babies, Mistress."

Hermione said calmly, "You know, Quirk, baby kittens are so little they can get themselves into very small hiding places."

"Quirk can hear the kitty babies talking he just can't see where they are," he lamented, following Mistress into the study.

Hermione looked about the study carefully; other than seeing Crookshanks, ensconced in the desk chair, flicking his tail with some annoyance, nothing appeared to be out of place. She knelt on the floor and peered into the nest.

"All five of the kittens are here, Quirk," she said gently.

Quirk looked over her shoulder. "See, Mistress? The kitties is eating now, they always come to eat."

"Which one has the fever?" she asked, her hand hovering over the nest.

Quirk squeezed under the desk and scooped out the protesting kitten which was a fair match to its father with its long orange fur. "This kitty is being hotter, Mistress."

Hermione took the tiny tomcat into her hands. He seemed to be no more or less warm than he ought to be. "The kitty seems fine to me, Quirk. I don't think he has a fever."

Hermione moved Crookshanks and sat in the chair near Quirk.

"Quirk, the kitties are getting bigger now, and it is natural for them to move around more and get into more mischief they are just kitties, being kitties. Now, if something is truly wrong, I want you to come tell me straight away. But it is not a good idea for you to be disturbing Master unnecessarily. Master is a little grumpy right now and it is best not to bother him unless you really need to."

Quirk hung his head. "Yes, Mistress. Quirk will remember that the baby kitties are getting bigger, and Quirk will not worry."

With a gentle pat on his little elf head, Hermione left the study, closing the door behind her.

Severus was standing before the fire when she came back to him and wrapped her arms about his waist, resting her head where she could listen to his heartbeat.

"Well?" he asked, the rumble of his basso profundo vibrating against her listening ear.

"The kittens are fine but I'm a little worried about Quirk. Do you think he's over-stressed?"

Severus moved out of the circle of her arms, taking her hand and leading her to the bedroom. "How the hell would I know? But if he is, we'll take them *all* to the animal Healer next week."

"Severus!" she protested. "That's not funny."

"Funny be damned," he responded, closing the bedroom door with finality.

## Chapter 4: Terrorising

*Chapter 4 of 6*

Percy Weasley snoops around for information to make trouble for the Snapes and encounters the kittens, who take an unaccountable dislike to him.

Christmas love for my beta, **LariLee**, and my Brit-Picker, **MagicAlly**.

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. Sometimes, she lets me mess around with her toys. Happy Christmas, Jo!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 4: Terrorizing

*Four Weeks Before Christmas*

Percy Weasley looked nervously about as he descended into the dungeons at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It was not that he was afraid of meeting anyone Professor Snape, for instance it was only that he preferred to carry out his self-appointed task without any unpleasantness. Say what you will about Severus Snape, war hero, recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class he was an unpleasant git and always had been.

Percy reached the corridor leading to the private rooms of the Potions master and began to make his cautious way in that direction. He had every right to check in with the researchers employed by the Office of Experimental Magical Solutions; he was, after all, the Assistant Head of the office. But he had been cut out of the loop, and he did not like it one bit! It was just wrong for Penny to hole herself up for days with Peregrine Smith and Hermione Snape at Simon Lewis' laboratory and refuse to tell him anything about what they had done. He had accidentally overheard a conversation between Penny and that jumped-up Goodwill Ambassador from Bulgaria, Viktor Krum who did he think he was anyway? Krum showed up and Penny acted as if Percy were a self-watering houseplant; she paid him no mind at all, just fell all over the belligerent-looking Quidditch player in a disgusting display of unladylike behaviour.

At any rate, he had unintentionally heard a conversation between Penny and Viktor in her office, about a supposed incident which occurred when brewing the Christmas Rose Potion. The telling of the story had been interrupted with revolting sounds of snogging and Merlin-knows-what going on behind Penny's closed office door; unfortunately, the Extendable Ears transmitted all of the noises in the room, little though he wanted to hear *that*. Of course, he had never *purchased* Extendable Ears, but he had found a pair of them when he was searching the pockets of George's dragon skin jacket only for a handkerchief, he would never have put his hands in anyone's pockets, otherwise! and the Extendable Ears had come in quite handy when Penny was unwilling to include him in all of her planning sessions. She left the administrative tasks involved in running the office completely to his discretion, but that was not what he wanted he wanted to be in the middle of the excitement of the experiments with the Christmas Rose Potion.

From what he had been able to hear between the snogging, the giggles, and the heavy breathing going on in Penny's office and how very hard Percy had tried to keep from thinking of when the delectable Penny had been his girlfriend, and had been happy to receive his kisses in quiet corners all around Hogwarts! from what he had been able to tell, some dodgy goings-on had taken place when the infusion of hellebore was brewed at Simon's lab a couple of weeks before. Penny had spoken of a group charm-casting, from which she claimed to have had a sexual experience! *Some* people might think Percy was a prosy bore, but he certainly knew what kind of magic brought about random sexual orgasms.

Dark Magic.

And if Severus Snape had been involved in the incident, there might very well have *been* Dark Magic involved. Snape was, after all, just some reformed Death Eater. And who said he was completely reformed? The higher-ups in the Ministry of Magic might not be too happy to know that Penny had involved a Death Eater in the plans and experiments in their office.

So Percy found himself creeping along the ill-lit, damp dungeon corridor, hoping to find Hermione Snape, so that he could attempt to gather more details about the episode. Percy had been around the Ministry long enough to learn that Knowledge Is Power.

Stealing along the passageway, he glanced at each door, surmising that Hermione's laboratory was probably around here *somewhere*, but unsure of where, and as befitting a typical man, quite unwilling to ask anyone. Reminding himself that he was a Gryffindor, and therefore brave, he finally chose a door and reached out to grasp the handle.

With startling speed, the door was pulled open, and Percy literally stumbled part-way into what appeared to be a sitting room. The obstacle which halted his head-long acceleration was not a piece of furniture, however it was a house-elf.

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Quirk's week had gone from bad to worse. After trying to tell Mistress about what the kitty-babies had been doing, he resigned himself to simply accepting whatever they did as a normal part of kitty-growing. That these incidences of kitty behaviour included feats of magic which were quite unusual for house cats, in Quirk's experience, was just another one of the facts of life as Master's house-elf that Quirk did not understand.

...because the kitties *were* strange. Even their *parents* thought so. At all times, the daddy-kitty sat on the desk chair and watched the kitty-babies with his knowing yellow eyes, save when they were sleeping; then, the daddy-kitty slept, too. The mommy-kitty did all the normal mommy-kitty things, nursing them, grooming them, teaching them to use their litter box but she did not like it when they did the things which upset Quirk, and he wondered if perhaps the mommy-kitty was unaware that growing kitties get up to mischief, as his Mistress had explained to him.

Somehow, Quirk doubted it.

First of all, there was the smooth black kitty-baby, who looked so much like the mommy-kitty. Sometimes, she was right there in front of Quirk but sometimes she grew so

faint that Quirk could see almost right through her and sometimes she completely blended into the background. If she was standing in front of the red pillow in the corner, the kitty-baby would become red. If the kitty-baby was standing in front of Master's study bookcase, she would begin to resemble the books before which she stood, which sometimes made it hard for Quirk to find her. Quirk called her Fader, because sometimes he could see her, and sometimes he could not.

Then there was the fluffy black kitty-baby. Sometimes, she would be playing on the floor with the other kitty-babies, and then she would suddenly be on top of the tallest bookshelf. Quirk knew that kitties could climb but no kitty could climb that high, or leap up there with nothing higher than the floor to leap *from*. It really bothered the mommy-kitty when the fluffy black kitty would be up on the tallest bookshelf, because the mommy-kitty could not *reach* the bad kitty-baby. Quirk called her Jumper, because she could go so high.

Next, there was the smooth orange kitty-baby. Sometimes, he would be playing with the other kitty-babies, and then he would simply be gone. Quirk did not know where the bad kitty-baby was when he went away. One time, Quirk had been in the tiny kitchen of Master's quarters, preparing a small meal for himself, sure that the kitties would be fine if left to their own devices for just a few moments. As Quirk was spreading butter on his toast, the smooth orange kitty appeared on the kitchen counter where Quirk was working. Quirk was so startled that he hopped back and squeaked. By the time Quirk had sorted himself out, the smooth orange kitty was gone from the kitchen counter. When he hurried into the study, to make sure he was not imagining things, the smooth orange kitty baby was sprawled on the rug with his siblings piled on top of him. Quirk called the bad, disappearing kitty-baby Blinky, because sometimes Quirk would blink and the kitty-baby would be gone.

The fluffy orange kitty-baby was the one Mistress had checked for a fever on the night Quirk had dared to voice his concerns. There was no other way to say it: sometimes the fluffy orange kitty-baby was on fire. It scared Quirk very badly the first time it happened. One moment, the kitty-baby was tussling with his orange brother on the rug; the next moment, the kitty-baby was an orange ball of flame. Quirk had grabbed a cushion and run over to put the kitty-baby out, like an accidental fire in a rubbish bin, but the kitty-baby had, just as suddenly, stopped burning. Quirk had approached him, and bravely felt the kitty-baby's fluffy orange fur. The kitty-baby was very warm, but he did not appear to be burned, even though he had been on fire. Sometimes, the kitty-baby caught fire when Quirk was right next to him, and Quirk would be singed in places. Quirk called the fluffy orange kitty-baby Flamer.

Last of all, there was the kitty-baby who was splotched with orange and black and white patches; Mistress said the splotched kitty-baby was a "calico." Her little face was neatly bisected, one side black, and one side orange, and her fur was smooth. She nursed with the other kitty babies and frolicked with them on the study rug, but she never faded, or jumped, or blinked, or flamed. The only peculiar thing about the splotched kitty-baby was that she often curled up on the chair with the daddy-kitty and cuddled and groomed and slept. The daddy-kitty never had anything to do with any of the other kitty-babies; he would hiss at them if they tried to climb up into his chair. The splotched kitty baby sometimes got a smoky smell about her, if she was too close to Flamer when he burst into fire, or she would be left on her own if Blinky and Jumper disappeared, as they often seemed to do, though Quirk could still hear them, even when he could not see them. It seemed sad to Quirk that the splotched kitty looked so different, and was left on her own so often. Quirk called the splotched kitty-baby Lonely.

Watching over and keeping up with the kitty-babies was becoming increasingly difficult for Quirk. Lately, he had found Blinky in the bathtub, lapping water from the drain; in the clothes hamper in Master's bedroom, sleeping; and once, curled up on the shelf in the larder, as if waiting for a mouse to dare poke its nose into the kitchen.

Fader had actually disappeared for an entire day earlier in the week; since Quirk could not *swear* there was anything truly wrong with the fading kitty-baby, he had not dared take his worry to Mistress.

Flamer had taken to bursting into a ball of fire much more frequently. Quirk had actually earned himself a burn on his cheek when the kitty had caught fire just as Quirk was bending over the nest to count heads. Oddly enough, Flamer's siblings and parents were never harmed by the fire he produced; only poor Quirk and the rug and curtains of Master's study had suffered, thus far.

Just this morning, when Quirk had returned to the study from a much-needed trip to the loo, he had found Jumper actually *hovering* over Master's desk, as if wishing to scope-out the unknown territory of the desk-top and report back to his partners-in-mischief.

Only Lonely was a good kitty-baby. She never hurt or frightened or worried Quirk. She was quite willing to let Quirk hold her, and she would purr and rub her bi-coloured face against Quirk's cheek. But then one of Lonely's siblings would do another Bad Thing and Quirk would be running about, trying to set things right.

The good thing about living in the study with the kitties was that Quirk only had to safeguard one room from them.

The bad thing about living in the study with the kitties was that this was *Master's* study and the kitties were beginning to Move Master's Things.

Quirk was willing to grant the kitty-babies and their parents a great deal of leeway but he was *not* prepared to abandon the basic precept of his training as Master Professor Severus Snape's house-elf: under no circumstances, at any time, was Quirk to Move Master's Things, nor was he to permit anyone else to do so.

One day, Mistress had noticed when Quirk was a bit more frazzled than usual, and sporting a blister from Flamer's latest burning binge, that Quirk seemed out-of-sorts. She had asked him then, "Quirk? Are you okay? Are the kittens okay?"

Quirk had mustered a smile for his mistress. "Quirk is fine, Mistress. And the kitties is just being kitties." Mistress had explained to Quirk that he must expect the kitties to get into mischief as a natural part of growing up, and he was willing to be brave about it.

As for Master, he never seemed to notice Quirk or the kitties, these days; he seemed to have eyes for no one but Mistress.

So Quirk was going about a usual day of kitty-baby-watching when the wards set on the door into Master's quarters let him know that Someone Was Trying to Get In.

Barrelling into the sitting room, leaving his charges untended, Quirk grabbed the door handle and tugged it open and a tall red-haired man fell into the room.

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It was Lonely who wandered out of the study with her tail held high to investigate the next room and the Stranger she smelled. Quirk sat the Stranger down in a chair and went into the kitchen to fetch a cup of tea. The very small kitten crossed the room behind the chair in which the Stranger was sitting, her little kitten nose a-twitch with Wrongness. Lonely crept beneath the chair in which the Stranger sat and sniffed experimentally at his socks, which only confirmed the kitten's suspicions.

The Stranger was a Bad Man.

Lonely summoned her siblings.

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Hermione smiled at Professor McGonagall and offered her a tin of biscuits to go with the tea.

McGonagall looked around the room with approval. "You keep a very neat office, Hermione. It is a sign of a well-ordered mind."

Hermione chuckled. "I share this work space with Severus, Minerva. You would not care to hear what he has to say about messiness in his Potions laboratory."

McGonagall regarded her with some amusement. "I imagine it would be nothing I have not heard from his lips before." She took a sip of her strong, unsweetened tea and tilted her head. "I see he was able to mend his fences with you."

Hermione smiled ruefully. "We had some joint fence-mending to do, actually. He told me what you said to him thank you, Minerva."

"I have never had a daughter," the regal woman said, "but I would have hoped to have had a daughter much as you are, my dear."

Hermione reached across the desk and lightly touched Minerva's hand. "What a sweet thing to say. Were you never tempted to marry?"



Minerva's eyebrows rose steeply. "What would make you think that? I was rather sought after, in my youth." Her eyes took on a far-away cast. "There was a time, before the beginning of the war with Grindelwald, when I quite thought I *would* be married."

Hermione sat forward, quite interested. "You could not have been very old then," she commented.

"No, I had just left school, and was at University, reading Transfiguration. My " she paused for a moment, as if determining upon a term "special friend was a bit older than I, and doubtful that a marriage between us would work."

"Just like Severus and me!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Well, not dissimilar, certainly," Minerva allowed, sipping again at her tea.

"What happened? Could you not convince him?"

Minerva looked thoughtful. "I really did not feel it was my job to convince him. I felt quite strongly that he must convince himself."

Hermione shook her head. "If I had left it up to Severus, I'm afraid he would still be waffling about it." She cocked her head to one side. "Did he? Convince himself, I mean?"

"I do not know, my dear."

Hermione had opened her lips to inquire further when a loud commotion quite close by brought her to her feet. "That sounds like Quirk!" she said and rushed out of the laboratory with Minerva following closely behind her.

---

Percy was not at all sure what was happening to him when it first began. It felt as if there were tiny needles piercing the skin of his legs through the fabric of his trousers. He reached down to brush at his legs and bumped into a solid mass then his *hand* was being pierced by the needles. He shook the hand, to rid himself of the sensation, only to feel a dense object fly away from him. He jerked his head to look at his hand and was horrified to see long, thin scratches appear on his skin, where droplets of blood began immediately to well up.

"What the hell?" he shouted, quite forgetting his officious dignity.

The house-elf hurried back into the sitting room, splashing hot tea everywhere. "No, no!" the elf cried. "Bad kitty babies! Bad!"

Percy then perceived that his scalp was under attack. He craned his head back and saw a tiny black kitten with long black fur floating over his head. As he looked up, the little devil darted out one front paw and delivered a scratch down his rather long nose.

"Ouch!" the incensed wizard shouted. "Bloody hell!"

Quirk was trying to control his charges, to no avail. He could not see Fader or Blinky, and he could not reach Jumper. Lonely was being a *good* kitty-baby, sitting over on the sofa beside the daddy-kitty.

Crookshanks was watching the display of supernatural kitten-hood with tail-swishing satisfaction, while his mate sat a safe distance away from the Stranger's feet, voicing her displeasure and distress at the top of her Siamese voice.

Percy thought for a moment that he was having some sort of preternatural nightmare. The needle-jabbing had travelled right up his trouser leg and he was having to use his hands to defend his manhood, while the *flying* cat continued to scratch his scalp. Then another one of the damn felines, this one a bigger, black cat, sat down in the middle of the floor and began to yowl. The house-elf was trying to climb the chair in which Percy sat, to fetch the flying cat. Percy discovered that there was an orange kitten clinging to the sleeve of his robe and sinking its razor teeth into his arm. He was able to take a swing at the orange kitten but it was gone! He looked around the room for the damn cat, and saw it sitting on the hearth. How had the little bugger gotten all the way over there? And wait was this *another* orange kitten? It was running straight at him, as if to leap into his lap. Well, it would bloody well learn what a bad idea *that* was when he knocked it silly.

Or so he thought until the running kitten burst into flames just before landing in his lap.

---

Hermione erupted into the sitting room with Minerva McGonagall hot on her heels. A scene of utter chaos met their eyes. Quirk was standing on top of Percy Weasley, apparently beating him with a coal shovel. One of the black kittens was levitating over Percy's head, while the other appeared to be clinging to the fabric of Percy's trousers and gnawing on his knee though it was a bit hard to tell, because the kitten was almost transparent. One of the orange kittens seemed to be Apparating close enough to deliver a scratch or a bite to the embattled Percy, then Apparating away before Percy could retaliate, whilst the other orange kitten sat on the floor by Bast, watching the excitement. The calico kitten was sitting on the couch with Crookshanks, who appeared quite pleased with the proceedings. Percy was covered with scratches and bites and his robes appeared to be smouldering.

Moving quickly, Hermione snatched Quirk from Percy's lap and removed the coal shovel from his hand. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded.

"Quirk is putting out the fire, Mistress!" the elf wailed. "Oh, Quirk is so *sorry* the kitties is being kitties *all over the red-haired wizard*"

In the next moment, Minerva had cast a Shielding Charm to keep the kittens off of Percy. Muttering darkly to herself, she stalked to the fireplace, snatched a handful of Floo powder from the box on the mantel, and threw it into the fire. "Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's office," she snapped.

The Headmaster's head appeared in the fire. "Yes, Minerva?"

"We need you immediately in the Snapes' quarters," Professor McGonagall informed him shortly.

"Step back, my dear; I'll come now."

Minerva stepped back from the hearth and the Headmaster whirled into place.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, stepping down from the fireplace.

Percy was examining the hurts on his hands and arms with a horrified expression. His attackers, not understanding that the magical barrier Professor McGonagall had erected prevented them from further harrying their prey, continued to hurl themselves against the invisible obstruction.

Thrusting an indignant finger in the direction of the kittens, Minerva said, in a voice pregnant with foreboding, "*Albus, what have you done?*"

Hermione had now plucked the hovering kitten from the air over Percy's head. The other three, realizing that their assaults were no longer succeeding, abandoned their task and scampered off the join their mother on the rug. Within moments, Bast was sprawled upon the floor, surveying the world through half-closed eyes, while the hungry kittens nursed, for all the world as if nothing untoward had occurred.

Hermione released the struggling Jumper onto the floor, so that the small black kitten could trot off to have her share of the meal being offered. With a murmured, "*Finite Incantatem*," she removed the shield from about Percy's chair and went to exclaim over his hurts.

Professor Dumbledore stood near the fireplace in dark blue robes spangled with stars and moons, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I really could hardly say what I have done, Minerva." He circled the nursing kittens, then cast a curious glance at Crookshanks, who promptly came up and butted his flat face against the Headmaster's fancifully embroidered robes. "I cannot say I had considered the possibility of this beauty breeding with a Kneazle." As he spoke, he bent to stroke Bast's luxuriant black fur.

Professor McGonagall stood rigidly before the hearth, bristling with righteous anger. "Well you had best find a way to *fix* it," she told him, in no uncertain terms. Then she turned her back upon the bemused Headmaster and crossed over to Percy. "Come along, Mr. Weasley; you will want to visit with Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing."

"No, I won't!" he answered peevishly.

Professor McGonagall stood quietly, waiting for the former Head Boy to comply with her wishes. Finally, he stood with ill-grace. "Oh, all right," he muttered and obediently began to follow Professor McGonagall from the room.

Hermione heard Minerva say, "Good afternoon, Severus," as she and Percy passed out of the room.

Severus stepped through the doorway into the home he shared with Hermione. His robes were a bit less tidy than usual, and there appeared to be a bit of green goo in his hair. His eyes took in the humiliated house-elf, pacing before the hearth and periodically letting loose a loud sob; the Headmaster, glancing speculatively between the house-elf and the cats on the rug; and his harassed-looking wife.

"You didn't tell me we were entertaining this afternoon," he murmured to her with a sardonic lift of his brow.

Hermione chuckled. "It was a rather spontaneous party, I'm afraid," she said, going over to him. "Did you know you have aloe vera gel in your hair?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Mr. Babcock saw fit to share the contents of his cauldron with twenty-five of his closest friends." His eyes softened as they rested on Hermione's face; he made a motion as if to hold out a hand to her and she immediately took the proffered hand. "Is there a particular reason why Quirk is entertaining us with this conduct?"

Quirk, hearing his name on Master's lips, froze in place and looked miserably at his feet.

Dumbledore turned then from his contemplation of the kittens and spoke. "Your house-elf has had a bit of a bad experience, Severus, and I am very much afraid it is my fault."

"In what way could it possibly be your fault, Headmaster?" Severus asked, his tone reflecting a certain flavour of insolence.

"You have a litter of magical kittens here, Severus, which have undoubtedly been giving the elf a difficult time as they have begun to grow into their powers."

Severus turned to Quirk. "Is this correct, Quirk? The kittens have magical powers?"

Quirk looked up with anguished eyes.

"Why did you not *tell* us?" Severus demanded, much aggrieved.

"M-mistress said the kitties is just being kitties, Master," Quirk said, his voice barely audible.

Hermione sighed. "He's right, Severus. He told me they were levitating and Apparating and disappearing and bursting into flames and I didn't really believe him."

Severus started at the last power. "Bursting into *flames*? You must be joking."

"No, I'm quite serious."

"No wonder that Weasley smelled of smoke," he muttered. He turned his fulminating gaze to the Headmaster. "Well? In what way do we have *you* to thank for this delightful situation, sir?"

Dumbledore looked rather longingly at the sofa, but Severus did not invite him to sit. Instead, he released Hermione's hand and crossed his arms over his chest with an air of belligerence.

"Severus, did you ever wonder where Bast came from?"

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Many times," he answered shortly.

"I found her for you," Dumbledore told him.

"Indeed?" Severus responded icily.

"Yes. To insure that she would be able to stay with you, I ... assisted her with a tendency toward Apparation."

"You mean, to make it impossible for me to rid myself of an unwanted cat, you gave her the ability to plague the life out of me!" Severus snarled.

Bast disengaged herself from her offspring and leapt up onto the high back of the recliner, touching her cold nose to Severus' fingertips, as Dumbledore replied, "At the time, I must confess that it did not occur to me what the consequences might be if she were to breed with another magical creature."

Severus automatically stroked the infinitely soft fur on the head of his familiar, while looking over at Crookshanks in some amazement.

"What so-called magical powers does that imitation throw rug have?"

Dumbledore smiled. "He is part-Kneazle, Severus. And, if I am not mistaken, his ability to detect wrongness in another living being has been inherited by the little calico kitten."

Severus frowned. "All of them ALL of them are magical?" His head was beginning to ache.

"Yes, they are. For some reason they took a dislike to Mr. Weasley. But we cannot allow them to remain in the castle, with the students it is too dangerous." Severus opened his mouth to retort, but Dumbledore forestalled him with a raised hand. "If I may suggest it, Severus, your house-elf should take the cats to your home in Wiltshire to look after them there. It would be best, I think, if he were given permission to use magic to control them."

At this, Quirk nodded his head vigorously.

"Will this be acceptable?" Dumbledore asked the Snapes.

Severus was glowering. "Certainly, send the fiends to Enchanté to burn it down then I will have to live in this blasted castle until my dying day!"

Dumbledore had crossed over to Quirk and was smiling down at him. "Your name is Quirk, is it not?"

Quirk bowed deeply. "I is Quirk, Sir."

"Quirk, in a day or so, I will bring someone to help you with the kittens someone who has had some experience with unusual magical animals."

Severus snorted. "I will NOT have Hagrid living at my house."

Dumbledore gave Severus a piercing glance from his blue eyes. "Hogwarts could not possibly spare Hagrid. No, this will be someone else. I will bring an assistant for you, Quirk how will that be?"

Quirk bowed again. "It will be as Master decides, Sir," he said in his squeaky voice.

Dumbledore and Hermione turned questioning eyes on Severus.

Severus sighed dramatically. "Certainly; send any number of people to live in my house and eat my food. It can be of no possible matter to me."

Dumbledore smiled and clapped his hands together. "Excellent! Then Quirk and I will move the cats to Enchanté now, if you have no objection."

The old wizard waited as Quirk organized the adult cats into their baskets, dividing the kittens between them. When all was ready, Dumbledore pulled a sweets tin from his pocket; with a tap of his wand and a murmur of, "*Portus*," the Portkey was made. At last, Severus and Hermione were alone.

"Why was Percy Weasley in our quarters?" Severus demanded, apropos of nothing.

"I have no clue," Hermione replied, kicking off her shoes and stretching her back. She looked him over with a small smile on her lips. "I sort of like your hair with Slytherin green streaks," she teased, reaching up to gather a bit of green goo and hold it up for him to see.

Severus grasped her wrist. "Come along, Madam Snape; I need your assistance."

Hermione giggled and followed him willingly. "How can I assist you, Professor Snape?" she asked.

"You can wash my back, and I will wash your front," he informed her.

"You're on."

---

A/N: Kudos to my husband and my daughter, Lauren -- he pointed out that Dumbledore could not Apparate the kittens to Enchanté; she suggested the Portkey and reminded me Dumbledore had used one from his office in OoTP. Good little canon Nazis, my family!

## Chapter 5: Ruminaton and Reminiscing

*Chapter 5 of 6*

Quirk's helper comes to stay at Enchant, and the Snapes attend the Order Christmas party.

Christmas truths for my beta, **LariLee**, and my Brit-Picker, **MagicAlly** -- "...because at Christmas, you tell the truth..." (Snicker, cough!)

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. If I am very good, I can take her playthings out, providing I put them back with all their dignity intact. Happy Christmas, Jo!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 5: Ruminaton and Reminiscing

*Three Weeks Before Christmas*

The bell chimed at Enchanté and Quirk hurried to answer the door. Standing on the doorstep, looking about her in a curious way, was a female house-elf. She wore a very neat lime-green pillowcase and carried a small bag. Quirk stood in the doorway, gaping at her.

"Hello," the female said in soft voice. "My name is Holly."

Quirk closed his mouth with a snap. "I is not asking you what your name is," he responded. "What is you doing here?"

Holly reached into her bag and withdrew an envelope. "You is not needing to be rude," she reproved. When Quirk did not respond, she said, "Is your family being home?"

"Where my family is being is none of your business," he replied, snatching the envelope from her hand.

"That is a letter for your master or mistress. Is you knowing how to read?"

"What I is knowing is none of your need to knowing," he said. Turning his shoulder to her, he spotted his own name written on a scrap of parchment attached to the envelope. He clutched the scrap and laboured over the writing.

*Dear Quirk,*

*Please welcome Holly to Enchanté. She lives and works with a family of animal Healers and she knows about magical animals of all kinds. She is a nice elf and will help you with the kittens.*

*Your Friend,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

*P.S. Please deliver this envelope to your mistress.*

Quirk looked up from the note and glared at Holly. "I is not needing *your* help."

Holly gave up on being polite and reached past Quirk to open the door further, then stepped past him into the foyer.

"I is not here to help you with your family. I is here to take care of the kitties. Where are they?"

Quirk shoved the door closed. "I is the head elf in this house," he declared.

Holly looked around. "You is the *only* elf in this house," she laughed.

"You stay here!" Quirk commanded, then walked away from her to the fireplace in the sitting room. Quirk threw the Floo powder into the fire and said, "Professor Severus Snape's quarters."

Moments later, his mistress's head was floating in the fire. "Good morning, Quirk," she said. "Are the kittens well?"

"Yes, Mistress," Quirk replied. "There is a letter for you from Professor Dumbledore."

"Very well, Quirk; step back, and I'll come through."

Hermione came through into the sitting room at Enchanté and took the proffered envelope. "Thank you, Quirk." She seated herself in one of the armchairs and began to read.

Dear Severus and Hermione,

I have sent help for Quirk to Enchanté. Her name is Holly. Her master is animal Healer James Herriott. She has been trained in the care of magical creatures. Healer Herriott highly commends her abilities. I have made arrangements for her to stay until the kittens are of an age to go to proper homes.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Hermione looked around the room expectantly. "Where is she, Quirk? Where is Holly?"

Quirk pointed toward the foyer and Holly took one hesitant step into the sitting room. "Holly is here, Madam Snape, ma'am."

Hermione stood and walked forward to where Holly curtsied. "Welcome to Enchanté, Holly."

Hermione glanced over at Quirk, who was glaring at the up-start. "Quirk, have you prepared a place for Holly to stay?"

"Quirk was not expecting a house-elf, Mistress. Quirk had prepared the guest room upstairs."

"The guest room will be fine, Quirk," Hermione assured him, leading the way upstairs. "Come with me, Holly; I'll show you where to put your things, and then Quirk can introduce you to the kittens, all right?"

Quirk stood in the foyer, watching with horrified eyes as his Mistress led the quietly protesting Holly up the stairs.

"Oh, no, ma'am, please," Holly whispered in distress. "Please don't make Holly stay in the guest room. House-elves isn't sleeping in the family's rooms it isn't fitting, ma'am."

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at the agitated house-elf. "It will be all right, Holly. Come along, please."

With an obedient sigh, Holly allowed herself to be shown up to the guest room.

---

Hermione seated herself at the desk in the laboratory, mild guilt pulling at her mind. Quirk seemed upset, Holly seemed uncomfortable, and the kittens seemed to be growing more impossible with every passing day. To top it all, Hermione and her workmates were growing ever closer to completing a viable test-version of the Christmas Rose Potion.

With a determined shake of her head, Hermione sent up a plea to Whomever might be listening to make all well at Enchanté, then threw herself into the pile of parchment before her.

---

Quirk stomped into the kitchen. Not only was that Other Elf sleeping in the Family Quarters, but she was telling Quirk how to take care of the kitty-babies! Quirk had been taking care of the kitty-babies without her help for a month! Well, aside from the rug in Master's study and the robes of that red-haired wizard, the kittens had done no harm under Quirk's supervision! He certainly did not take into account his many burns and hurts, suffered due to unusual abilities of Bast's and Crookshanks' babies.

A wicked thought came to him. That Other Elf might be sleeping in a wizard's bedroom, but he could fix it so that it was not such a nice place to be. With a grim smile upon his lips, Quirk went down into cellar to fetch the kitty-babies from their make-shift quarters below.

He was not Professor Severus Snape's house-elf for nothing Quirk had learned some things about how to be nasty at the knee of a true master.

---

Holly sniffled to herself and unpacked her things. Why did Master send her away to this awful place? Holly was a good elf! She always did just as her master told her to do. She helped him with the magical pets that people brought to Master's clinic when the poor animals were sick. Was Master thinking about giving Holly clothes? Pushing that horrible thought from her mind, she was moving towards the bedroom door when it popped open without a knock and seven cats were thrust in, followed by Quirk, carrying a litter box.

Holly turned on the mean house-elf indignantly. "You is not to be coming into my room without knocking on the door!" she said in a loud voice.

Quirk kicked the door shut behind him and placed the litter box on the floor.

"This is not *your* room this is *Master's guest* room, and you is having no business staying here!"

Holly's eyes dropped in shame. "I know I isn't," she agreed softly.

Quirk stopped in mid-tirade. Somehow, it was difficult to continue being nasty when the other person admitted their wrong behaviour.

"Well, if you is going to be sleeping in this big room all by yourself, you can just keep the kitties in here with you!"

"All right," Holly responded, turning to lift her bag from the bed. "Perhaps you can do as your mistress said and be telling me all about the kitties and their magical powers."

Quirk crossed his arms across his thin chest and glared at the Healer's elf. How, when he was bringing the kitties to stay in her room and telling her what a shameless elf she was to be sleeping in a wizard's bedroom could she *still* be ordering him around as if she were Human?

Holly stood, showing no impatience, and waited for the stupid boy-elf to do as he was told.

---

The elvish warfare continued throughout the day. Quirk managed to do much of his communicating by speaking *of* Holly *to* the kitties. He would not prepare food for her, nor would he sit down to eat with her; he showed her where the kitchen was and adjured her to clean up behind herself because he would not do it.

Holly, on the other hand, simply delighted in speaking *to* Quirk she was telling him what to do and how to do it.

"You be holding Jumper while I tie her with this string," she said, pulling out a length of red yarn.

"You is going to tie her to the floor to keep her from flying?" he snorted. "Flamer will burn that string right up!"

Holly waited for him to do it, just looking at him out of her great big brown eyes. Quirk had to admit the she wove the string in, out, and about on the kitty in such a way that it did not trail about her on the floor, attracting the notice of her siblings and inciting them to attack it. When next Jumper flew, Holly snapped her fingers, and the red yarn obediently unfurled right into her hand, so that she could tow the kitten back down to the floor with a spoken command.

"If you pulls kitty down and gives her the command every time she flies, she will learn not to do it," she explained to Quirk, who pretended not to listen.

Next she pulled a tiny jar of paint from her bag. "You be holding Fader while I put a little bit of paint on her," she instructed.

"What good is a little bit of pink paint going to do when kitty is *invisible*? And Mistress is not going to be happy when kitty eats the paint and gets sick!"

Once again, Holly just waited patiently for Quirk to scoop up the wriggling fluffy black Fader. When he had done so, she carefully applied the paint to the tip of the kitty's tail. "This is being special paint," she said by way of explanation. "Master is making it himself. The paint shines in the dark and shows up even when kitty is invisible, so that you can find kitty. It's safe, even if kitty eats it Master would not be hurting animals." This last bit was said in a tone of reproof, as if Quirk had spoken badly of Holly's family.

After seeing how clearly the pink paint showed, even when Fader completely disappeared, Quirk stopped objecting. Of course, Holly had not asked his assistance when she belled Blinky, placing a pretty green collar made of the softest suede about his smooth orange fur. The Anti-Disapparition Jinx which Quirk had applied to the room with Master's permission kept Blinky from Apparating out of the room, and the bell made it easy to find him if he Apparated into the cupboard or under the bed.

...which left them with Flamer. Quirk did not ask, but waited to see what Holly would do for the ball-of-fire kitten. The only thing she pulled from her bag, however, was a large bottle of what appeared to be bubbly water, with an odd metal attachment on top of it.

He did not have to wait long to find out what she meant to do with it. In a confrontation with Fader over which of them was going to sit in one particular spot on the floor, Flamer burst into fire. Holly calmly lifted the bottle and sprayed Flamer until he was a dripping mass of soggy orange fur, equally affronted and down-hearted. Kitty looked so funny Quirk could not help but chuckle.

Holly made a "shush" noise as she knelt beside Flamer and dried him with a snap of her fingers, murmuring a command to him. "You is not to be laughing at kitty; it is hard enough for kitty to be wet without you making fun of him," she said to Quirk.

Incensed at this final insult, Quirk stomped out of the room and let the door slam behind him.

---

Late that night, when Quirk paused outside the closed door of the guest room, wondering what might be the reason for the light to still be burning within, he heard the sounds of weeping. He reached for the door handle, then turned and went back down to his room off the kitchen. If the Other Elf was being unhappy, maybe she would just *go home*.

---

### *Two Weeks Before Christmas*

Severus glanced up when the clock on the mantelshelf chimed five o'clock. Putting aside the book he was reading, he left the sitting room and moved a short distance down the dungeon corridor, pausing to enter an unmarked door.

Across the work counter, he spied Hermione sitting at her desk, one hand twirling an unruly curl as the other made notes on the parchment scattered before her. He closed the door and crossed the room soundlessly, stopping behind her with his hands on her shoulders.

Hermione started when two hands grasped her shoulders; almost instantly she registered her husband's presence, and she tilted her head back to look up into his fathomless black eyes.

"Hello," she said, pressing her shoulders and her head back against him.

"It is time for you to come home," he told her, stroking her cheek with one long finger.

"Time got away from me," she said, rising and taking his hand, allowing him to lead her to the door. "Is it time for dinner?"

Severus allowed her to precede him through the laboratory door, then paused to ward it. "No, it is time for you to bathe and dress for the Order Christmas party."

Hermione's hands flew to her hair. "The Order party! I had forgotten all about it!"

Severus smirked at her, motioning for her to continue back to their rooms. "I had surmised that much, actually," he told her as he followed her into the sitting room and closed the door behind him.

Hermione stopped in the middle of the floor, surveying him with rank suspicion. "Wait a minute. You do not *like* parties. You whinge and wheedle every time I try to make you go anywhere. Why is it that *you* are reminding *me* of a party when I had forgotten all about it?"

Severus strode to the middle of the floor and took her into his arms, twining his fingers in the heavy curls at the nape of her neck with one hand and pulling her fully against him with the other. He captured her lips in a kiss that robbed her first of mutinous inclinations, then of thought, and finally of will. When both of her arms were wrapped around his neck as she greedily returned his kiss, he removed his lips from her mouth to trail kisses to her ear.

"They will expect us to be there you would not wish to cause any offence by failing to go. I cannot have them believe that *you* have become anti-social." He stepped away from her, looking down into her eyes with an enigmatic expression on his harsh features. "If obligation mandates my appearance at this gathering, I intend to walk in with the most desirable witch in the world on my arm. Do you have any further objections?"

Hermione went off to her bath in a glow, with her appreciative husband's eyes following her as she went.

---

Molly Weasley looked about the parlour at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, feeling a bit of vicarious pride for Ginny's triumph at such a successful first party in her newly

renovated home. Harry and Ginny had chosen to knock through a wall into a seldom-used room, thus enlarging the sitting room to a nice size. The glass cases and moth-eaten tapestries which had graced the room when the Black family had lived here were gone, replaced with freshly painted walls and comfortable chairs and sofas, arranged in such a way as to invite relaxation and conversation. The enormous Christmas tree in the corner of the room was a-glitter with decorations and crowded with gaily wrapped gifts, many of which were the result of the name-drawing gift exchange the Order engaged in each year.

Dobby, the Potters' paid house servant, carried in a new tray of canapés from which Remus Lupin snagged a stuffed olive as Dobby went by.

"Hermione is looking well this evening," Remus commented to Severus, who sat at his side, sipping Ogden's Old Firewhisky.

Severus' eyes took in the radiant countenance of his bride as she sat with the other young women, admiring pictures of Hannah's and Fleur's babies. "She is luminous," he agreed, his own eyes shining as they rested upon her. "Will you assist me with something a bit later?"

Remus' face registered astonishment. "Of course I will, Severus; you have only to ask."

Severus leaned forward. "This is what I want you to do..."

---

Quirk looked at the bare evergreen tree set up on a table in his room. Mistress had said he could have a Christmas tree, and she had given him permission to use the Christmas decorations he had found in boxes in the cellar, but he was feeling a bit sad. Christmas in Master's Great Aunt Seraphina's house, where Quirk had been bred and trained to his position, was a busy time for the house-elves. The entire house was decorated, there was much baking done, and endless entertaining. Since Quirk's master and mistress did not live at Enchanté most of the time, there was little need to decorate and no need to bake or entertain. It was just a little lonesome for him.

As he sat on the edge of the elf-sized bed in his room, he noticed movement outside his window. With a snap of his fingers, he doused the light. Beyond the window pane, he could see that the snow which had begun falling that afternoon was now drifting in pretty mounds upon the front garden. Walking through the snow was Holly.

Quirk pressed his nose to the window and watched her. She was really not such a bad elf, after all. She could be bossy about the kitties, but she never tried to interfere with Quirk's management of the house. In fact, she was sort of stupid about how to take care of the house, which made Quirk feel better. He supposed that if he had been set to work in an animal clinic when he was just a tyke, he would know more about taking care of magical kitties than he did about keeping house but it was really hard for him to admit that *she* might be better at something than *he* was.

He watched as Holly stopped in the middle of the lawn and turned her face up to the sky. He had heard her crying in her room every night when he went up and pressed his ear to the door. He did not know why she was crying, but it became more and more difficult for him to be mean to her. She was just an elf away from home; perhaps, if Master had sent him to spend a long time in the home of another family, he might be sad, too.

With sudden decision, Quirk stood and walked to the front door. He would say something kind to her.

---

Harry and Ron gathered up the discarded wrapping paper that had covered the drawing room floor in the midst of the gift exchange. Ginny, ponderously pregnant, smiled her thanks at her husband and her brother; the last thing she wanted to do was bend over repeatedly to stuff papers in the waste bin.

Dumbledore was showing off his seven pairs of thick socks, in the most lurid colours of the rainbow, to Minerva McGonagall, who was holding a large book which detailed the history of England during the time of Grindelwald. Arthur Weasley was excitedly removing his Muggle magic tricks from their odd packaging, while Fred and George donned their matching hats, which proclaimed them to be "Gred" and "Forge." Slipping away from their mother, who was trying to show her children the wristwatch she had been given, which was a miniature of her excellent kitchen clock, the twins converged upon the punchbowl with matching conspiratorial grins.

Severus had been sitting for some minutes staring at the leather-bound works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which had been his gift from an unknown giver. He noted the passing of the Weasley twins and their progress to the refreshment table. The finely-honed instincts garnered from years of teaching adolescents served him in good stead once again as he advanced upon them from the rear.

George started and very nearly dropped the phial he held when the most loathed voice from his childhood inquired, "Brewing something, gentlemen?"

Fred gave his twin a look of disgust as George permitted Severus to remove the phial from his hand and sniff it.

Severus stood for a moment, his eyes closed as his nose communicated its information to the encyclopaedia in his mind. "It's a diluted form of the Euphoria Elixir," he said at last, handing the phial back to George.

George darted a quick look to Fred, who said, "Sir?"

"Carry on," Severus said indifferently, wandering away.

Remus was sitting on a sofa, sipping at his drink and watching Tonks, who was huddled with Luna Lovegood, deep in wedding discussions.

"Are you drinking punch?" Severus inquired of him as he took a seat.

"No, why?" Remus asked.

Severus smirked and sipped at his glass of Ogden's Old Firewhisky. "Never mind."

Remus made a mental note not to touch the punch. "Have you begun to shop for Hermione's Christmas gift?"

Severus curled his lip. "I believe I have that taken care of, Lupin. What are you getting Tonks for Christmas?"

Remus looked thoughtful. "I thought I'd get her drunk and let her have her way with me," he said.

When Severus inhaled liquor, Remus laughed out loud.

Severus mopped his face with his handkerchief and nailed Remus with a menacing glare. "Have you *been* in the punch?"

Remus chuckled. "No, it's 'Dora loving them changes you.'"

Appreciation glimmered in Severus' eyes. "Yes, they are a sneaky, conniving and underhanded lot."

Remus snorted. "You'd think they'd all be Slytherin, according to you."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"You make that sound as if it were a compliment!"

The other eyebrow went up to join the first. "I *meant* it as a compliment."

Remus observed him for a moment, then raised his glass. "To the ladies may they always befuddle us."

Severus put his glass to his lips, murmuring, "Indeed."

---

Holly stood in the snow with tears falling down her face and tried very hard not to feel so lonely. She had been gone from home for a week now, without a word or a sign from her master that he missed her or needed her assistance. What if he was training some other elf to do her work? Why did Master have to send her away at all?

"Holly?"

Holly turned in surprise, seeing the mean boy-elf standing there in the snow, watching her. Her hand came up to her face, wiping her tears away.

"I am sorry you is being sad," Quirk said gently.

Holly's lip trembled. "It is scary here," she whispered.

"Oh, no," Quirk said, taking another step toward her. "Master is not here, so it is not *really* scary!"

Holly sniffled and looked interested. "Is your master being scary?"

Quirk nodded vigorously. "*My* master is even *famous* for being scary," he imparted with some pride.

Holly looked down at her feet in the snow. "Is that why you is so mean to me?" she asked softly.

Quirk felt really badly, then. "I is a bad, bad elf to be mean to you, Holly. You is not being mean to me."

Holly felt her face blush and kept her eyes on her feet, not knowing what to say. Quirk waited for a moment, wishing she would say something, because he did not know what to do next. When she did not look up again, he finally sighed and turned back to the house. She probably would never like him because he had been so mean to her before.

He actually heard the giggle before he felt the soft, wet plop of the snow thudding into the back of his neck. Turning with a suddenly much lighter heart, Quirk gathered a handful of snow and created a missile to hurl at his laughing tormentor.

---

Harry sat down next to Neville and Ron with a big sigh. "They all seem to be having a good time," he said.

Ron looked over to Luna, who was now recounting wedding details to all of the females in the room. "Can you believe I'll be married next week?"

Harry and Neville exchanged droll looks. "*I* can, mate," Harry said, "the question is, can *you* believe it?"

Ron nodded, never taking his eyes from his fiancée. "But she talks and talks about the wedding ... is she going to like me when the wedding is over?"

Neville clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly way. "Sure she will, Ron. Then she'll get all excited about furnishing your house or something like that. Girls love being married."

Harry snorted. "Just wait until she's pregnant ..."

Ron turned horrified eyes to his two friends. Neville nodded vehement agreement. "Yeah, they talk about that loads more than they do about weddings."

Harry, who had just been through the joys of a wedding, being a newlywed husband, and who was now an expectant father, enjoyed taking the piss out of his best mate.

Ron gulped audibly. "I can't pass out like I did at Hermione's wedding, Harry; Luna would never forgive me. Do you think there's some potion or something I could take to make me really strong on my wedding day?"

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was sitting a bit apart from the other women, talking quietly with Ginny. "I think you should ask Hermione, Ron. Potions are her field now, you know and if she doesn't know of anything, she can always ask Snape."

Neville blanched at this suggestion, but Ron looked thoughtful. "Great idea, Harry. I think I'll do that."

Harry chuckled and made a mental note to have a chat with Hermione sooner rather than later.

---

Ginny looked up excitedly. "You have five kittens at your house and I didn't know about it? I want a kitten!"

Hermione shook her head. "Not one of these kittens, Gin they all have unusual magical powers and Dumbledore is going to have to place them in special homes. It's been a right nightmare. Besides, you're going to have a baby you don't want a kitten."

Ginny looked obstinate. "Fine. But I want to see them I'll bet they're adorable!"

Hermione cast a pleading look at Harry, wishing he would come and manage his difficult pregnant wife. Harry, however, seemed to be having a fine old time working Ron up into a lather. Hermione sighed. "Perhaps you could come for tea next weekend," she began.

"No," Ginny said, becoming more contumacious by the moment. "Let's go now no one will miss us; we don't have to be gone for very long."

"Ginny, you're not supposed to Apparate after your seventh month!" Hermione protested.

"We can go Side-Along," Ginny wheedled, sensing that she was about to get her way.

Hermione stood then. "All right, but if you get nauseous, it's not my fault. I'll get our coats."

Ginny stood and began to follow her into the hallway. Harry saw her moving and joined her there. "What's going on, love?" he asked, slipping one arm about her shoulders and kissing her cheek.

"Hermione is going to take me to see her kittens," she told him.

"Erm, Gin? We have a house full of guests..." Harry began.

Ginny turned a stormy face to him. "I want to see the kittens, Harry, and I *will*. You take care of the guests, and I won't be gone fifteen minutes."

Hermione came down the stairs from the bedroom where the coats had been placed; she and Harry exchanged a meaningful look over Ginny's head.

"I'll look after her," Hermione assured her best friend as she helped Ginny put on her cloak.

Harry mouthed his "thank you" as Ginny and Hermione went down to the ground floor.

---

Hermione Apparated them to the box hedge at the edge of the drive and paused to make sure that Ginny was all right.

"I'm fine!" Ginny said, beginning to walk up towards the house. "Look how pretty the snow is in the moonlight!"

It had stopped snowing and the moon and the stars could clearly be seen in the velvety black sky. Hermione had to admit that the snow did look very nice on the grounds of Enchanté. "It's a shame we haven't decorated the house for Christmas," she said, opening the front door and leading Ginny into the foyer. "We'll go on into the kitchen, Gin; Quirk wasn't expecting us, so there's no fire in the parlour."

They entered the kitchen, where Hermione spoke a spell and lit the candles. From beneath the closed door to the left, there was a glimmer of light. "Quirk?" she said, going to the doorway.

The door to Quirk's room opened and Quirk was there, with the partially decorated Christmas tree behind him and Holly on the floor with tinsel in her hand.

"We is just decorating the Christmas tree, Mistress," Quirk said, averting his eyes deferentially.

Holly leapt to her feet, flinging the bit of tinsel back into its box and dropping a curtsy. "Good evening, Madam Snape, ma'am," Holly said in a frightened voice.

Hermione bit her lip and looked at Ginny, who was clearly struggling not to laugh. "I am glad you are decorating the tree, Quirk; that certainly needs to be done. Where are the kittens?"

"We is making sure the kitties is sleeping before we is decorating the Christmas tree," Quirk said desperately.

"Do you think you could bring the kittens to the kitchen for a visit?" Hermione said in a voice trembling with laughter. "Madam Potter would like to see them."

"Yes, Mistress," Quirk said. He grabbed Holly's hand, and they all but ran from the room.

"Did we just interrupt house-elf love?" Ginny whispered in fractured accents.

"Ginny, *stop!*" Hermione whispered back, her eyes alight with amusement.

---

Severus made another circuit of the sitting room, the hallway, the kitchen, and the loo, before stopping in the doorway with a frown on his face. Where had she gone?

"Are you looking for Hermione, sir?"

Severus looked down, and Harry Potter shoved his glasses back up his nose in a gesture unconsciously copied directly from the James Potter Book of Moves. Sternly reminding himself to behave, he responded, "Yes, I am. Do you know where she is?"

"She was taking Ginny to see your kittens; they said they'd be back in fifteen minutes."

"And how long have they been gone?"

"About twenty. I'm sure they'll be here any moment."

Severus stood for another moment, wracking his brain for small talk. "Thank you for inviting us to your home, Po Harry; it is a very nice party."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but Severus felt he had done his duty; he walked off without another word.

---

The young women who had been eagerly discussing Luna's upcoming wedding erupted in a burst of laughter, as they sat around with their cups of punch. Angelina pulled Fred down beside her and tweaked his nose. "Aren't you the sweetheart, bringing us all a glass of punch?"

Fred grinned at his twin, who was fending off a nose-tweaking attack from Alicia. "Score," George mouthed at him, before succumbing to a thorough nose-tweaking.

There was a clatter from below, then Hermione and Ginny came up the stairs, a bit breathless from the cold, and giggling. They put off their snow-dusted cloaks as they watched the rampant nose-tweaking going on amongst the young women and their men. Dobby, who took their cloaks, jerked his head in the direction of the punchbowl.

"Mister George and Mister Fred," he said to Ginny, by way of explanation.

"Oh, really?" Ginny said, marching off to confront her brothers, a martial light in her eye.

Hermione strolled away from them towards her husband, who had just spoken to Remus Lupin. Severus sat down and picked up his book; Hermione sat down next to him and placed her outdoors-cold nose against his cheek.

"I've been meaning to ask you," he said, without looking up from the book, "what you want for Christmas."

Hermione settled back on the sofa, cocking her head to watch his face. "I only want one thing for Christmas."

Before he could respond, an odd noise came from below could it possibly be the kettle whistling? Severus put the book away from him, speaking quietly to Hermione. "Excuse me, please," he said and headed into the hallway; she could hear him walking down the stairs.

---

Dobby came bounding down from the bedroom where he had replaced Hermione's and Ginny's cloaks. The kettle was singing in the kitchen, and Dobby had not put the kettle on to boil! He would have to hurry, or the kettle would melt!

Remus Lupin, stationed in the hallway, caught Dobby as he rushed by.

"Sir?" Dobby said in confusion.

"I can't let you go down there, Dobby," he said softly, as Hermione quietly followed her husband down the stairs to investigate his odd behaviour.

Smiling to himself, Remus leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs. "In fact, no one is going down there, until I say so."

---

Hermione entered the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, to find her husband standing with his back to her as he poured the steaming water from the kettle into the china teapot set before him.

"Severus?" she said cautiously from the doorway.

"I'll be with you in a moment," he said and motioned her into a chair, which had been set at right angles to the table.



Confused, Hermione sat down, never taking her eyes from him. Moving with some impatience, he opened a cupboard over the stove and pulled out a bottle of brandy. Seeing him there, in his customary black robes with the bottle of brandy in his hand, a sensation of déjà vu flooded through her mind, just as time became elastic and up-ended her into the past.

He poured a measure of brandy into the waiting teacup and pressed the cup into her hand.

"Drink this, Miss Granger. Slowly." His voice was quiet but commanding.

Hermione turned her face up to look at him; after nearly five months as his wife, she was used to obeying his will. Severus' face was impassive, but his eyes were fierce.

This was the first time they had been back together in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, since the night she had first held him in her arms, and they had felt the Enchantment flow through their veins like molten magma.

Putting the teacup to her lips, she drank, then stood and stepped up to him, placing one hand fearlessly over his heart.

"Please don't send me away, sir," she whispered, gazing up into his eyes imploringly. Then she reached around with her free hand, gathering a great handful of the back of his robes, and pressed herself to him, tucking her curly head beneath his chin.

In a move quite unlike the rigid acquiescence he had displayed on that night so long ago, he crushed her to him in a savage embrace. "Not this time, Pet not ever," he said thickly, his voice heavy with import.

"You," she said as she clung to him, deeply moved by this romantic re-enactment of the beginning of the tortuous course of their love. "All I want forever is you. Only you."

Severus brought his hands up to frame her face. "I *am* yours beyond question, beyond doubt only always," he vowed, then claimed the kiss he had foregone those years ago, before he knew that he was permitted to have a dream come true.

---

A/N: Deepest thanks and most enduring love to my beloved Slytherin, who collaborated with me so closely on this chapter. The idea of the reunion in the kitchen was his, ladies. Am I, or am I not, One Lucky Wench?

To read the original kitchen scene, see the Prologue to Master of Enchantment, located on this archive.

The Euphoria Elixir induces euphoria in the drinker, with occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking, according to The Half-Blood Prince.

## Chapter 6: Marrying and Merrying

*Chapter 6 of 6*

Ron and Luna are married, the kittens find new homes, the Christmas Rose potion continues to puzzle its creators, and Severus comes to a realisation about his wife.

Merry Christmas to my beta, **LariLee**, who made time to beta this story at the most hectic time of the year.

Happy Birthday to my dear friend, my kind encourager, and my partner in Woo-Ha, **KeladryLupin**, the Christmas baby! This one's for you, Kel.

I own nothing. Jo owns everything. God bless you, Jo, and Happy Christmas!

The Christmas Rose

Chapter 6: Marrying and Merrying

*One Week Before Christmas*

Hermione woke and murmured "*Lumos*" to light the candles. She picked up her wristwatch and verified that it was indeed nearly 8 a.m. It was Ron and Luna's wedding day, and she had some errands to complete as early in the day as she could manage it. She stretched to loosen the muscles in her neck and back and sat up on the side of the bed. Before her feet touched the floor, an arm snaked around her waist and pulled her back.

She landed on her pillow with a giggle; then Severus was looming over her.

"Where do you think *you* are going?" he said.

"I have to go to the Burrow and to Enchanté this morning," she said, reaching up to smooth the inky black hair, threaded with silver, from his face.

"No," he said, bending his head to plant first his lips, then his teeth on the pulse beneath her right ear.

Hermione rolled her head to the left, exposing more of her throat to him. "It's not Wednesday," she protested weakly.

Severus shifted so that he pinned her to the bed, holding his weight from her chest with his hands so he would not impede her breathing. "It is Saturday," he informed her, nudging her legs apart with one knee and insinuating the knee snugly against the juncture of her thighs, "and that is nearly as good as Sunday, which is second only to Wednesday."

"But what about Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday?" she inquired idly, running one hand down the lightly toned muscle of his back.

"I have not decided yet," he told her, applying slight pressure with the knee between her thighs. "We will have to try them out and see how they rank."

"Have we never tried them out before?" His activities were swiftly robbing her of the desire for lucid conversation.

"Never," he affirmed. "There is always only ever now, my Pet."

The Burrow would still be there in an hour or two, she decided, tracing her hands in parallel lines from his shoulders to his hip bones. It was time to take Saturday for a spin.

---

Hermione called out a greeting as she entered the Burrow through the door into the kitchen.

"Hermione!"

Ron barrelled down the stairs, his hair standing on end, wearing his pyjama bottoms and what appeared to be a Weird Sister's tee-shirt in approximately Ginny's size; his broad chest stretched the fabric so tightly that the words were distorted.

She smiled at him, going up to place her arms about him and hold him for a moment. "Today's the day how do you feel?" she asked.

"I feel great now it's later that I'm worried about!"

She stepped back from him and reached into her pocket, bringing out a tiny phial filled with a golden liquid. Making a production of checking to make sure that no one was in the sitting room or lurking on the landing, she pressed the container into his hand.

"Take it straight from the phial, no more than one hour before the ceremony is set to begin," she said in a lowered tone. "Don't let anyone see you do it, mind!"

Ron stared at the minute glass bottle with a look of wonder.

"Is it Fel "

"Hush!" she hissed at him. "Don't ask!"

Ginny's cumbersome belly preceded her down the stairs with a sleepy-eyed Harry following. Molly had wanted them all together at the Burrow for the pre-wedding festivities, and the house was packed to the rafters.

"What are you doing wearing my old tee-shirt?" Ginny asked her brother in passing.

Ron looked down at himself. "No wonder it doesn't fit," he said.

Harry stood between Ron and Hermione. "All taken care of?" he asked softly.

Ron gave him a one-armed hug. "Brilliant, mate! Best idea you've had all year, asking Hermione for help!" Ron turned to head back up to his room. "I guess I'll see you at the hall, Hermione."

Hermione patted him on the back. "I'll be there, never fear. It will be a lovely wedding you'll see."

The youngest Weasley boy grinned at his friends before bounding back up the stairs, two at a time. Harry and Hermione watched him until he was out of sight, then exchanged a wordless look of fond amusement as they heard him thundering the rest of the way up to the top of the house.

Harry gave Hermione a quick hug and walked with her to the door. "I'll see you there, I guess," he said.

Ginny looked up from her cup of juice and toast. "Can't you stay for a cuppa?" she asked.

"Thanks, Gin, but I have to pop in at Enchanté this morning, and I'm meeting with Penny this afternoon."

Ginny gave her a wicked look. "I hope you've given Quirk advance notice of your visit."

Hermione met Ginny's eye and they both lost it, laughing until tears ran down their faces.

Harry looked slightly ill. "I hope that Dobby doesn't get a girlfriend," he said.

Hermione bristled at that. "He has as much right as anyone else to be happy, Harry."

Harry held both hands up. "Okay, okay, just don't talk to me about it, all right? I don't want to think about house-elf love anymore than I want to think about *old* people love. Urgh." He poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the table. "And especially not before coffee."

"Fair enough," Hermione said cheerfully, and with a happy wave, she let herself back out into the crisp wintry morning. Turning on the spot, she Apparated to Enchanté.

---

Hermione entered the front door at Enchanté and looked about her in amazement. The house looked lovely! Tinsel wound up the banister to the landing, red velvet bows adorned the door handles, pine boughs and sprigs of holly decorated the mantle it was amazing how well Quirk had made the house look with the decorations he had found in the cellar.

Crookshanks came down the steps, meowing at her, with Bast and the kittens following behind him. Hermione surveyed the kittens doubtfully, but they seemed to be acting like normal cats. Bast butted Hermione's ankle and uttered a plaintive cry; Hermione bent to stroke her luxuriant black fur and said, "He misses you, too."

Holly appeared at the top of the stairs. "Good morning, Quirk's Mistress," she said, walking down the steps. "Can Holly bring you something warm to drink?"

Hermione smiled at the female house-elf. "Thank you for asking, Holly. Why don't we have some hot chocolate? I need to speak with you and Quirk about the kittens."

Holly's eyes clouded, and her mouth quivered the slightest bit. "Yes, ma'am," she said and led the way into the kitchen.

---

Quirk finished his weekly dusting in the cellar, making sure the wine shelves were free of spider webs and that the floor was swept. He was feeling both happy and sad. Happy, because Holly was with him, and Holly was the best friend Quirk had ever known. She liked to play in the snow, just like Quirk did. She liked to sing songs while she worked, just like Quirk did. She liked to say silly things and laugh, just like Quirk did. And she liked to catch him under the mistletoe and well, there were some things that Holly liked to do *more* than Quirk did.

He blushed as he remembered the first time Holly had kissed him. Mistress had given permission for them to dress the whole house for Christmas, and Quirk had begun to hang tinsel while Holly went outdoors. She was gone for a long time, but when she came back she had the pine boughs and sprigs of holly, as well as the mistletoe. Quirk had ignored the mistletoe as long as he could, engaging Holly's assistance with the red velvet bow distribution and the arrangement of the pine boughs on the mantelshelf and over the front doorway. They had giggled and sung, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly," until their voices were tired, while they found places to put the sprigs of holly with the pretty red berries on it.

Finally, Holly had cornered him.

"Where is we hanging the mistletoe?" she asked him.

Quirk looked at his feet and muttered an answer.

"What is you saying?"

"In the cellar," he said more loudly.

Holly cocked her head to one side with a little frown on her face and Quirk noticed again how pretty her big brown eyes were and the cute way she scrunched up her mouth when she was thinking hard about something.

"Who is being in the cellar to kiss under the mistletoe?" she asked.

"*Nobody*," Quirk answered emphatically.

Holly opened her big brown eyes even bigger. "Then we isn't hanging it there that is just silly talk, Quirk!"

"Mistletoe is being silly!" he snapped back at her, stomping into the kitchen.

Holly had stood in the hallway and watched him for a moment before shrugging her shoulders and resuming her activities with the red velvet bows and the sprigs of her namesake.

Quirk had skulked and sulked in the kitchen for a while, until Holly's serene singing to herself of "The Holly and the Ivy," had drawn him curiously into the hallway. When he peeked around the banister, Holly had pounced upon him. He had just glimpsed the mistletoe, charmed to float above their heads, before she had rocked his world by pressing her girl-lips to his astonished mouth.

Quirk's toes had curled in elven delight.

So had Holly's.

It startled them enough that they didn't do *that* again for a while.

There had been other ways to play. One day after a fresh fall of snow, they had gone outdoors to build a snowman. Elves are handy craftspeople, and their snowmen actually bear some likeness to real persons. Quirk had shaped their snowman's nose into a large hook, given him black coals for eyes, and a large black handkerchief charmed to frame his face like long black hair.

"This is being my master," he told Holly.

She gasped. "Quirk, you is making fun of your master!"

"No I is not," he objected, gently pushing her down to sit on a nearby log. "I would *never* make fun of my master he is being the most powerful wizard in the world!"

Holly looked doubtful.

"Well, next to the headmaster," Quirk amended. Then, stepping behind the snow-master, he bellowed in a scary voice, "Quirk!"

Moving from behind the snow, he said in a tiny-Quirk voice, "Yes, Master?"

Darting behind the snow again, he yelled, "What are you doing in here?"

Back out again. "I is coming because you is calling, Master."

Behind the snow. "If I wanted you I would tell you!"

Back out again. "Yes, Master, I is going now."

Holly was overcome with giggles at this demonstration of Quirk and his master.

Quirk then sobered. "Master is getting rid of the Bad Man who came to Enchanté and Moved Master's Things."

And the entire history of Quirk's epic battle with Gilderoy Lockhart was poured into Holly's willing ears.

"And then Master threw the Bad Man on the floor and said " here Quirk assumed his gruff voice again, "What is you doing in my house?"

Holly gulped. "And then what was your master doing?"

Quirk mimed thrusting a wand at an enemy on the ground.

"Master was putting his wand in the Bad Man's face!"

Holly looked at Quirk with utter admiration. "And what was you doing, Quirk?"

Quirk swelled under her adoring gaze. "Quirk was standing next to Master to help him scare the Bad Man," he bragged, rather inaccurately. Quirk had actually been in the kitchen, spreading icing on the cake for their dinner, but he had *heard* what was happening, and that was *almost* like helping, wasn't it?

Holly had hopped up, overcome with appreciation of his derring-do, and thrown her arms about Quirk. Her warm breath was in Quirk's ear as she said, "Oh, Quirk, you is being so strong and so brave! I is always being safe with you!"

And that was the first time that it was *Quirk's* idea to kiss.

Realizing that he had been standing leaning on his broom for quite a while, Quirk shook himself and began to trudge upstairs. Mistress was coming today, and Quirk knew it could not be good news. The kitties no longer nursed; they were very well-behaved after their time with Holly, and soon they would be going to their new homes and Holly would be going back to her master.

Quirk's tummy lurched in a most unpleasant way.

How was he going to get along without Holly?

---

Hermione entered their quarters in the dungeons at Hogwarts and looked around the sitting room.

"Severus?"

"In the study."

Hermione went into the study, which Severus had thankfully reclaimed when the cats were moved to Enchanté, and found him perusing an alchemy journal.

"Have you had lunch?" she asked him.

"No, I waited for you," he responded.

"Good, I'm starving!"

They settled at the table in their tiny kitchen with bowls of thick stew and crusty bread.

Severus watched as Hermione picked up her spoon, put it in the stew, then picked up her bread and nibbled at the crust. She gazed off into space over his shoulder, then put the bread down and grasped the handle of the spoon. When another minute passed without her eating a bite, he spoke to her.

"Shall I feed you?"

Hermione started and laughed. "I'm sorry, I was wool-gathering," she apologized. Then she took a bite of the stew, followed by a bite of the bread.

"See, I can feed myself!"

"We'll see," he replied sceptically, taking another bite himself. "What is troubling you?"

"Hmm?" she said, putting her bread down and playing with her spoon again.

"What are you thinking about?" he tried again, patiently.

"Oh the Christmas Rose potion," she admitted, looking fully into his face. "We're so close now, Severus, but we can't get the base to hold it keeps separating."

He nodded. "Have you tried taking it from the heat before stirring in the infusion of hellebore?"

"Yes."

"Have you tried adding the infusion of hellebore at high heat and keeping it just under boiling until the fusion occurs?"

"Yes."

Severus now had a marked crease between his brows as he mulled the problem in his mind. Hermione watched him, eating more steadily now as Severus abandoned chewing for thinking.

"Have you tried using the flat side of your knife to crush the sopophorous bean, rather than slicing it up?"

Hermione stood suddenly, startling Severus.

"I've got to speak to Penny," she said, a tiny seed of excitement in her voice.

"Well, I have no objection, Pet," he drawled, "but wouldn't you do better to finish your lunch first?"

"No!" she said, leaning over to kiss his mouth. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

She hurried into the sitting room, grabbing her cloak up from the sofa.

"Think of crushing the sopophorous bean?" he asked, following her.

"No, I've known to do that ever since I watched you prepare the Draught of Living Death in my sixth year," she answered him, fastening her cloak about her. "I'll be back by four, to get dressed for the wedding this might be the answer, Severus!"

"What?" he demanded peevishly, but he was speaking to empty space as she hurried out the door.

---

Penny looked up, startled, when Hermione burst into her office. "Hi," she said, putting down the file she was reading.

"I've got an idea!" Hermione blurted.

"About the potion?" Penny asked hopefully.

"Yes! Can we Floo Simon?"

Penny led Hermione to the fireplace, where they sat on the low stools provided and Penny threw the powder into the flames.

Simon's untidy head appeared. "I hope this is about the fusion," he grumped.

Perry poked his head up next to Simon's. "What do you have, Hermione?" he asked expectantly.

"We haven't tried varying the stirring," she said excitedly.

Perry frowned. "Varying the stirring?" he said, unconvinced. "Hermione how much difference can that actually make?"

"I've seen it make the difference between success and failure in a potion, Peregrine," she answered him firmly. "I say we should experiment with it."

"Let's try it now," Simon said, excited.

"We can't," the girls answered simultaneously.

"We're attending a wedding this evening," Penny explained.

"We can do it Monday," Hermione promised them.

"We can do it *tomorrow*," Simon said firmly. "My lab, two o'clock."

Neither of the other researchers demurred, and Penny said she would be there too.

"I *so* want to make this work," Penny said as they ended their conversation with the young wizards.

"I think we all do," Hermione said.

Penny snorted. "I'm not so sure about Percy."

Hermione cast her a shrewd glance. "Yes, I have been wondering about Percy."

"He was at Hogwarts that day to try and get information from you about the brewing of the infusion of hellebore "

"But we kept that from him on purpose," Hermione reminded her. "How did he find out?"

Penny squirmed. "He overheard me speaking with Viktor about it."

Hermione gaped at her. "Percy came to your *flat*?"

"No..."

"Viktor came to see you at the office?"

Penny nodded mutely.

"Were you talking with your office door open? How else would Percy hear you?"

"With his sneaking little ear to the door!" Penny said grimly.

"Penny!"

The Healer flushed.

"Were you and Viktor..."

"No! Well, not exactly," Penny corrected herself.

"You know how jealous Percy is of you! No wonder he's trying to make trouble!"

Penny giggled. "Wait until he sees Viktor escort me into his brother's wedding that will put the cat amongst the pixies!"

Hermione pulled her cloak on. "Well, Viktor can handle Percy, Pen, but I would hate to see Percy make mischief for you at the Ministry."

Penny snorted. "I'd like to see him try!"

---

Later that afternoon, Severus leaned against the wall in their bedroom and watched with hooded eyes as Hermione finished with her hair and make-up. She was stunning. In the few months since they had stood before Dumbledore and taken their vows, she had bloomed into her womanhood. In the sunlight of her husband's desire and support, the uncertainty of her girlhood was falling away from her, leaving behind a woman of such luminescence that he was, at times, awed by the light of her presence.

She stood and went to the wardrobe; hanging on the door was the velvet robe she would wear as Luna Lovegood's matron of honour. The robe was the colour of cranberries, a bitter fruit of which he was inordinately fond. With her dark hair, dark eyes, and fair skin, she wore the colour as no fair woman could.

She twirled around and stopped facing him, smiling and holding her arms out. "How do I look?"

He crossed the room to her, took one of her small hands, and raised it to his lips. "An unfair question, my Pet," he murmured.

"Unfair?" she queried.

"I am a mere mortal man," he excused himself, stepping aside to allow her to exit the room. "Words fail me."

"We don't have time for that now, Severus," she said as she walked away from him.

He smiled to himself. Sometimes, his wife took him far too literally.

---

The Snapes entered the wedding hall and crossed the foyer into the main room, where Hermione stopped short to look about her in admiration. The room had been transformed into a winter wonderland, with white silk coverings hanging from the ceilings and the walls, as if one were surrounded by snow. Tall evergreens decorated the edges of the room; each one was dusted with magical snow and drizzled with silvery ice as if hung with crystal ornaments. On the dais where Ron and Luna would stand with their Bonder stood a truly majestic Christmas tree, elaborately decorated in jewel tones of sapphire, for Ravenclaw and in ruby, for Gryffindor, in honour of the bride and her groom. After a moment, Hermione perceived that some of the trees were camouflaging the refreshment tables, which would be uncovered and revealed when the wedding was over and the reception began.

Hermione turned to Severus. "I'll go to help Luna dress now," she said.

Severus nodded, glancing about the large room. "I'll just search for a place to sit," he said, looking at the myriad empty chairs.

Smiling her approval, Hermione moved across the main hall to the doorway through which the bride's changing room could be accessed. As she made her way down the corridor, she wondered what had happened to the wedding horrors Harry had described to Ron at the Three Broomsticks the night she had broken the news of her own engagement to them. It occurred to her that the Halloween Ball, which the Ministry had sponsored, had been arranged and catered by Gilderoy Lockhart, and it had been quite elegant, too. Perhaps being Obliviated had been beneficial to her old Defence professor. He had certainly done a lovely job of decorating Enchanté when Severus' Great Aunt Seraphina had insisted upon "giving" them Lockhart's services as a wedding gift.

Hermione reached the dressing room door and turned the handle to let herself in. She found Luna sitting before a large mirror in her undergarments with Molly and Fleur fussing over her hair. Ginny sat on a nearby chair, passing pins and combs to the other women as needed. The intricate dressing of the bride's hair was serious business, so Hermione sat down quietly beside Ginny and watched.

In truth, Ginny was a closer friend to Luna than Hermione had ever been. Ginny had been adamant, though, that she would be far too pregnant by Christmas time to look well in a bridesmaid's robe. Luna had then asked Hermione to stand with her, and Hermione had happily agreed. It seemed fitting, somehow, that she and Harry would be standing up with Ron on his wedding day.

After several minutes of combing, twisting, and pinning, Molly stepped back with a satisfied glint in her eye. Fleur clapped her hands together in Gallic glee. "Luna, you are beautiful!" she rhapsodized.

Luna, who had been sitting with her eyes closed, opened them and looked at her own reflection.

"Oh," she breathed, reaching out her fingers as if to touch her reflection. "I *am* beautiful."

"Of course you are, dear," the mirror replied cheerfully.

Ignoring the mirror's comment, Luna caught Molly's eye in the glass. "Thank you Mum," she whispered, a bit uncertainly.

Molly burst into tears and embraced the motherless girl from behind. "You are very welcome, Luna. I am *proud* to call you my daughter."

There were several minutes of nose-blowing and eye-drying after that, until Tonks breezed into the room.

"What are you lot *doing*?" she demanded, pointing to the clock on the wall. "We still have to do her make-up and get her into her robes!"

Angelina and Alicia followed Tonks in, each with their arms full of gaily wrapped gifts.

The twins' wives each gave Molly a kiss on the cheek.

"Look at these! They just keep on arriving at the Burrow!" Alicia exclaimed.

"Thank you for bringing them, girls. Could you make sure that Gilderoy sets up a table for the gifts to be displayed, please?"

"Sure, Mum, we'll take care of it," Angelina assured her.

Ginny moved her chair closer to Luna's and Luna shifted so that they were sitting knee-to-knee. Ginny had her wand in her hand, and she deftly charmed the bride's make-up onto her face. Fleur stood just behind Ginny, watching critically and making occasional suggestions. It amazed Hermione to see how well Fleur and Ginny got on now that they were both mothers well, Ginny's baby wasn't born yet, but she was most assuredly a mother!

When the make-up was approved by the sisters-in-law, Angelina and Alicia sallied forth to make sure the reception arrangements were well under way while Hermione and Fleur lifted the elegant white velvet robes over Luna's head and settled them on her shoulders. Molly then stepped in and began to fasten the robes up the back with the small silver clasps.

Hermione retrieved her bag and stood before Luna.

"Luna, the Muggles have a lovely custom that I would like to share with you," she said, smiling into the bride's eyes.

Luna smiled back. "I'd like that."

"A Muggle bride goes to be married with something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue," Hermione explained. When Molly nodded, Hermione lifted the heavy Goblin-wrought tiara from a box on Ginny's knees and passed it to Molly.

"This is our Great-Auntie Muriel's tiara, Luna, and all of the Weasley brides for untold generations have worn it," Molly explained, tenderly placing it upon Luna's blond head, and cleverly adjusting the sophisticated wedding coiffure to anchor and best display the tiara.

"That will be your something old," Hermione added. She then withdrew a black leather case and opened it. "This is your wedding gift from Ron and it will be your something new."

She turned the case so that Luna could see the gossamer silver earrings within, each a swirl of delicate precious metal spangled at irregular intervals with minuscule moonstones and glittering diamond chips.

Luna's mouth dropped open and her eyes filled with tears. "No, no, no!" Fleur exclaimed, rushing forward to charm the slightly protuberant blue eyes dry. "I began to cry just like that when Mum gave me Bill's wedding gift," she said in a comforting way, holding a sheaf of the golden hair away from Luna's ear so Hermione could fasten one of the earrings. When the jewellery was correctly situated, they turned Luna so she could see herself in the mirror in all of her wedding regalia.

The bride was a study in silver and white, like a winter queen. She was gazing uncomprehendingly at her own reflection when her father slipped into the room.

"Is everyone decent?" he asked in his slightly bemused way.

Molly moved forward to welcome him. "Come see your baby girl, Everard," Molly encouraged him. "She is enchanting."

Luna's father walked right up to her, taking both of her hands in his. "You are just beautiful," he told her, not trying to hide the tears which ran down his face. "I wish your mother could see you today."

Luna hugged her father, unconcerned about crushing her velvet gown. "She can, Da' I know she can," she whispered before she released him.

Molly bustled over and handed Mr. Lovegood a handkerchief. "We'll just let the girls finish getting her ready," she said soothingly to the widower as she led him from the room.

Fleur performed another quick charm to dry Luna's tears as Hermione came back up to her.

"This is the handkerchief that Ginny carried when she married Harry, and I carried it when I married Severus." She reached for Luna's gown with one hand, murmuring an incantation and tapping the seam of the skirt with her wand. "It can be your something borrowed. There is no pocket to ruin the line of your robes, but when you *need* the handkerchief, just reach for it and it will be in your hand."

Luna hiccupped a watery laugh. "I'll need that," she said.

Hermione knelt before the bride; she passed a lacy blue scrap to Fleur and lifted the hem of the robes. "This is an old-fashioned garter, Luna. Ginny and I both wore it, too. It can be your something blue." As Hermione held the skirt up, Fleur slipped the garter up Luna's slender leg, where it came to rest just above her knee.

Fleur and Hermione rose and stepped back to survey the bride.

"You're perfect, Luna," Tonks said. "How do you feel?"

Luna seemed to think for a minute, then a happy smile spread across her face. "Happier than I've ever been," she reported.

"Then let's go get you married," Hermione said and went to open the door.

---

Rita Skeeter spoke sharply to the house-elf in charge of the punch bowl and stopped to twitch the corner of a tablecloth into place. Gilderoy Lockhart was in his element tonight, directing the festivities at what would undoubtedly be one of the finest weddings of the year. He was giving orders to the "help" as a king might summon, encourage and direct his minions on the eve of a battle. Rita observed him with grudging admiration, keeping her distance so that he would not give *her* any further busy-work to do. She skirted the edges of the madness, occasionally addressing remarks and instructions to the helpers in the acid tones so particularly her own.

Rita had been busily conducting quality assurance inspections on the adult party beverages for hours now, and she was near the point of beginning to engage the evergreens in conversation. From a safe vantage point across the hall, she spied two young women, their arms laden with gifts, speaking to Gilderoy. She slipped closer until she could hear the conversation.

"I am sorry, ladies, but it cannot be done! I have all of the tables arranged to perfection. We cannot change things now!"

Angelina gave Lockhart the smile that made Fred's blood run cold. "You do know who Molly Weasley is, don't you?"

Lockhart blanched. "Of course I know the dear lady; she has engaged my services and agreed to all of my arrangements!"

Alicia stepped into Lockhart's personal space and pressed forward with their advantage. "Well, perhaps you would care to speak with her about it? She is the one who wishes for a table to be prepared for the gifts, you know."

Lockhart had seen Molly Weasley in a full blown harangue and had no desire to be the focus of such a force of nature. With a graceful smile and a sweeping gesture, he bowed himself out of the picture.

"By all means, ladies, make whatever adjustments you feel are necessary." He glanced around and detected Rita, lurking just out of his reach. "Miss Skeeter will render you all assistance won't you, Rita?"

Rita gave her employer a sour look and nodded her agreement. She watched him beat a hasty retreat, then turned to the two young witches.

"I have just the place for those," she said with an evil smile.

---

Harry sat quietly in the groom's changing room, watching Ron pace. Bill, who was sitting next to Harry on the sofa, leaned just slightly toward him, and said, "You're sure you've got a plan? So he won't pass out?"

Harry nodded, never taking his eyes from the nervous groom. "Yeah, Hermione and I worked it out. Don't worry."

Arthur Weasley approached his youngest son. "All right there, Ron?" he asked quietly.

Ron looked over at his father. "Great, Dad. It's kind of like just before a Quidditch match, you know?"

Arthur nodded gravely.

Fred spoke up, helpfully. "Nervous, but hoping you'll perform well?"

George guffawed, but Arthur frowned them down. "You'll be fine, son."

Harry stood and approached his best mate. "Now is a good time," he said softly. Ron nodded and turned his back to his brothers, popping the cork and upending the phial into his mouth. In the distraction of Arthur's reprimand, the action went unnoticed.

---

Rita walked past the refreshment tables until she reached the one laden with stacks of Lockhart's most recently published books. Wasn't it just like the gilded peacock to hawk his wares at someone's *wedding*?

"We can have these books cleared away and set up the gifts here," she said with false affability and nasty intent.

House-elves were summoned and they began to move the books with speed and efficiency. Rita watched them with idle pleasure; Gilderoy would be *livid* when he saw how she had dismantled his portable "Gilderoy Lockhart's Book Emporium."

As she rounded the corner of the cloth-covered table, she saw a large paper shopping bag tucked beneath it. Curious, she pulled the bag toward her, then bent and lifted the book reposing in its depths. The tome was covered, oddly enough, in a plain brown paper wrapper. Rita opened the cover and flipped through the pages. Brilliantly coloured, glossy photographs of elegant wedding components met her eye, as well as text. Rita ripped the plain cover off, revealing the actual cover of the book.

---

Gilderoy turned and saw Rita just as she opened the book he thought he had carefully hidden beneath his sales table. With an exclamation that was a cross between a moan and whimper, he began to run across the hall.

---

Rita looked up in confusion, and in a penetrating voice, said to no one in particular, "Who the ~~hell~~ is Martha Stewart?"

---

Severus sat to one side, watching the drama unfold as if he were immersed in a play. Skeeter had a book in her hands now, and Lockhart obviously did not want her to have it. He was running across the hall, dodging early-arriving guests and harassed house-elves with a look of desperation on his face. Severus leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms in derisive amusement.

Who was Martha Stewart, indeed?

---

Gilderoy skidded to a stop in front of his so-called helper and snatched the book from her hands, shoving it back into its bag and kicking the bag beneath the table.

"Never mind!" he hissed at her, looking around to see who might have heard her outburst. Fortunately, the Weasley witches were off speaking to their identical husbands as the table was being prepared to receive the wedding gifts. The only person who appeared to paying any mind was ...

"Claiming responsibility for someone else's work again, Lockhart?" the dreaded silky voice inquired from behind him.

"This is terrible," Rita continued, oblivious to the arrival of her nemesis. "Gilderoy, this person has plagiarized entire *chapters* of your new book on wedding planning!"

Gilderoy stepped forward and placed his arm about Rita's shoulders, smiling down into her upturned face with the full force of his charm. "I have already spoken to my solicitor about it, my dear," he told her. "You do not need to worry your pretty head about it."

Rita gazed up at the handsome face, into the forget-me-not blue eyes which seemed to be smiling just for her, and forgot all about the Martha-Whatsis-thingie. All she had heard of his speech was the word "pretty," which had floated into her alcohol-saturated brain and taken up permanent residence.

"You've been working much too hard today, Rita. Why don't you go and sit down, relax for a while. I don't know what I would do without you."

To Severus' everlasting disgust, Skeeter blushed, simpered, and wandered off no doubt in search of a friendly potted plant to chat with. Severus sneered at Lockhart, making no effort to conceal his complete disdain.

Gilderoy glared at him belligerently. "What do you mean to do about it?" he demanded.

"I?" Severus purred. "Why would I take action?"

"Because you are an interfering, disagreeable person!" Gilderoy blustered.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "I am an unpleasant person to cross, Lockhart, and you would do well to remember that."

Gilderoy felt that the collar of his robes was suddenly too tight. He pulled at it nervously, keeping a worried eye on the scowling devil before him.

When Severus felt that the imbecile had squirmed for long enough, he gave him a nasty smile, which appeared to frighten Lockhart more than the scowl had done. "I will take no action, Lockhart," he said. "I would not deprive my Great-Aunt Seraphina of her pet party planner."

Gilderoy sagged in relief as the dark, vicious fellow walked away from him. Then he grabbed the incriminating bag from beneath the table and scurried out of the hall.

---

Severus sat quietly near the back of the room, noting that the groom's side of the hall looked like a sea of red with all the Weasley hair. Next to him sat Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin, their hands clasped as if they were the ones being bound in matrimony. Just in front of him, Penelope Clearwater appeared to be glued to the side of her escort, Viktor Krum, and Percy Weasley was behaving as if his head were on a swivel, so frequently did he crane his neck to keep an eye on the Healer and the Seeker.

There, on the dais, was Hermione, her fire an excellent foil to the bride's ice; on the other side, beside Ronald Weasley, stood Potter, supporting his friend on his wedding day. The last of the golden trio was venturing upon matrimony; the triumvirate was severed and their alliance of old cast down. Now they were grown, embarking upon their individual paths, seeking their unique destinies which damn well meant he could now mark Weasley off the list of people who might one day show up on his doorstep to monopolize Hermione. The dunderheaded duo would both have their own wives, be busy with their own lives, and have much less time to be a part of his.

Excellent.

Because Hermione was just exactly the kind of friend who could be counted upon in a pinch. It was one of the chief things Severus admired about her, though he decried it, too. She was entirely too willing to offer her ready sympathy to needy people.

Take, for example, the night of Yule Ball, at Hogwarts...

*As the headmaster had requested, he and Hermione were there as chaperones. She insisted it would be a good example for them to set if they were to dance a proper waltz. He grumbled, but he did not really mean it; he loved to hold her in his arms, and he was proud of the graceful picture she made as they danced. After their waltz, they made a circuit of the Great Hall, keeping an eye out for miscreants. When the students began to slip out of the room, two by two, Severus set out for the entrance hall.*

*"Where are you going?" Hermione asked him.*

*He raised an eyebrow at her. "Shrubbery stalking," he replied.*

*She looked amused. "Must you?"*

*"Other than the pleasure of dancing with you, my Pet, it is my only bright spot in this whole chaperoning ordeal," he answered. His lips twitched. "Would you care to accompany me?"*

*She beamed at him, tucking her hand in his elbow. As he led her into the entrance hall, she said in an uncommonly loud voice, "What an excellent idea! Let us go out and walk about the rose garden."*

*From the shadows in the entrance hall, there was the sound of scrambling and whispering. Severus looked down his nose at his beautiful betrayer. "Killjoy," he grumped.*

*Hermione gave him a brilliant smile and continued out into the crisp night air. They strolled toward the fountain, which sported an ice sculpture of Father Christmas and his reindeer. On the bench there sat a lone figure; a girl, crying in the garden.*

*Hermione put a finger to her lips and approached the solitary child. Severus could not hear their words, but he could observe Hermione's actions. She conjured a handkerchief and passed it to the student; their heads bent together, and he knew the girl was confiding, and his wife was listening, encouraging, and counselling. Why was she so good? And, being so good, why did she want him? How could she bear him? Was she simply a prisoner to the Enchantment that united them, while he reaped all the benefits? Well, she seemed happy with her lot and with him.*

*And he would bloody well do his best to keep her that way.*

*A few moments passed, and the girl stood and began to pass with Hermione back toward the castle. Hermione allowed the student to go ahead of her, and turned to meet her husband's eye.*

*"Finished?" he inquired.*

*"Yes, I'm finished. Carry on."*

*She proceeded to the entrance, as he shook back his sleeves and drew his wand, advancing on the nearest rose bush.*

*"Twenty points from Hufflepuff, Mr. Babcock!"*

---

Ron's voice was strong and firm as he spoke his vows to Luna; her voice was small, but her shining eyes left no one in doubt of her sincerity. There was a tremendous, thunderous applause as the ceremony came to an end. Ron and Luna made their ceremonial trip through the hall, arm in arm, now husband and wife. Harry and Hermione followed them, their own eyes shining as they gleamed at one another.

"I can't believe he fell for it again!" Harry chortled, as Hermione hushed him.

"You don't want him to find out!"

"I wouldn't mind. He would probably laugh, too. He did last time."

---

The doorbell at Enchanté chimed. Quirk and Holly were cuddled on the loveseat by the fire in the sitting room. Holly whimpered when they heard the dread sound.

"They is come to get the kitties," she whispered unhappily.

Quirk rose, and with dragging steps, went to answer the door. The sight which met his eyes confused him.

"You must be Quirk," the red-haired wizard said.

Quirk stared at the young man. This was not the bad wizard that the kitties had attacked, nor was it the red-haired wizard who was Mistress's best friend, along with Harry Potter. No, this was a *different* red-haired wizard and there were TWO of him.



"I is being Quirk," he admitted, bowing.

"Quirk, my name is George Weasley, and this is my brother, Fred. Professor Dumbledore sent us here to pick up the kittens."

Quirk stood aside and let the wizards in. Holly curtsied politely and then went up the steps. "Holly is getting the kitties ready to go," she said in a choked voice.

Quirk trailed up the steps behind her. "Quirk is helping get the kitties ready to go."

George waited until the house-elves were out of sight.

"You were right!" he chortled.

"I thought I heard Dumbledore telling McGonagall he had found homes for the kittens they have to be the ones that gave Percy hell." Fred looked quite satisfied with developments.

---

The girls crowded around Luna in the bride's room as she changed her clothes and put on her travelling cloak.

Angelina caught Alicia's eye.

"Where did they get off to?"

Alicia shook her head. "I don't think we want to know," she said.

---

The guests spilled out into the moonlit night. When the bride and groom ran out, hand-in-hand, they were showered with confetti.

"Is that a flying car?" Remus asked Severus, staring at the Gryffindor-red vehicle.

Molly tutted through her tears. "Arthur just keeps on tinkering with them," she said.

Ron tugged open the driver's side door, and Luna scooted across the seat. Then the door was slammed shut, the motor roared to life, and Luna was waving goodbye to the swiftly receding crowd as the car rose into the sky.

"It goes a treat, that car," Arthur said, wiping tears from his face and admiring his handiwork, all at the same time. "They'll have a nice, smooth trip."

George snorted behind them. Severus glanced over his shoulder and saw one of the more dreaded sights of his teaching career: the Weasley twins, looking immensely pleased with themselves.

"Been brewing again, gentleman?" he inquired sardonically.

Fred laughed out loud.

---

Luna snuggled up to her new husband and kissed his cheek. "How long will it take us to get there?"

Ron said, "Not too long, love. Then we'll be all alone."

There was a "mrow" from the back seat. Turning his head, Ron saw what looked like an entire litter of kittens there.

His roar was heard almost all the way back to the wedding hall.

"FRED AND GEORGE!"

---

The next morning, Professor Dumbledore arrived at the small cottage the newlyweds had rented for their honeymoon and ruefully retrieved the kittens.

"I should have realized your brothers were eavesdropping on my conversation," he said by way of apology.

"It's very difficult to take into consideration every possibility of what Fred and George might do," Luna observed as Dumbledore took the basket of kittens and disappeared.

"How about taking every possibility of what I might do into consideration?" Ron asked, pulling her back into his arms.

Luna gazed up into his bright blue eyes with happy contentment.

---

Hermione and Severus each packed a small bag for their holiday stay at Enchanté.

"It will be a lovely break to get away from the castle for a while," Hermione said as they walked through the snow to the Apparition point.

"It will be a lovelier break to get away from the students for a while," Severus replied.

---

That afternoon, Hermione met Penny and Perry at Simon's laboratory.

"There are times when adding a stir in the opposite direction can change the likelihood of success with a potion," she instructed. "We'll use small cauldrons and keep a record of each attempt so that we won't duplicate ourselves."

Penny held up her quill and parchment. "I'll take notes."

The three researchers nodded grimly, each concentrating carefully on their purpose. Two hours later, they were sweaty and grimy from standing over the cauldrons but no closer to a solution. Suddenly, Severus Snape erupted from the Floo connection like the proverbial bat out of hell.

Simon, who was closest to the fireplace, literally jumped.

"Sir!" he said, somewhere between indignation and outrage.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lewis. I should like to speak with Hermione." He stood by the hearth, waiting for her to pass the stirring rod to Penny and follow him into Simon's small office, where he closed the door.

"What is it, Severus?" she asked anxiously.

He looked at her gravely. "I apologize for interrupting, Hermione, but a situation has arisen at Enchanté which I believe requires your attention."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously and he could almost read the thoughts as they passed through her mind. Was he manufacturing some excuse to lure her away because he was jealous, as he had been the last time she became this involved in her work?

Without waiting for her response, he continued to present his case. "It's Quirk. I think there is something wrong with him."

Now her eyebrows rose, in fair imitation of his most sceptical look. "Wrong in what way, Severus?"

"It is not easy to describe..."

"Why can't you just handle it?" she demanded a bit impatiently.

He glared. "For one thing, I have never had to know about the care and feeding of *house-elves*."

She glared back. "And I have?"

"Certainly. You speak with him voluntarily." She looked incredulous. He tried a small wheedle. "Besides, *you* are the *nice* one."

Hermione chuckled, in spite of herself. "Go on," she invited.

"He seems to be apathetic. He does what I ask of him, but otherwise he is either moping or wailing in a most annoying fashion."

Hermione looked at him from the corner of her eyes. "He must be really bad for *you* to notice."

Severus nodded, much struck. "Indeed," he agreed, as if they were speaking of someone else.

Hermione laughed at him outright, then. "You are absurd, you know," she said, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "Poor Quirk. I did not expect him to take it so hard. Have you tried to reason with him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I told him that I understood he had grown fond of the kittens, but that he had known from the beginning that they would have to go when they had grown big enough to do so. I told him the headmaster had found them all good homes. I explained to him that he should be happy for them in their new homes, and he should be happy that he would have more time to himself now that they were gone."

Astonishment crossed her face. "You can't be serious!"

He assumed a haughty look. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione sighed loudly. "Holly went back to her master today, did she not?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Severus," she interrupted him, "Quirk is not upset about the kittens leaving. It's *Holly* leaving that has him so distressed."

He stared at her with an utter lack of comprehension.

"Why?"

"Because he is *in love* with her," she explained, speaking to him as if he were not quite bright.

"Are you sure?"

"Completely."

Severus extended a hand and stroked his thumb across her lower lip. "So could you have a chat with him, Pet?"

"I can't, Severus. Not now. We are a cat's whisker away from success. Later, perhaps." She caught his hand and pressed her lips into his palm. "For now, I must get back to work." With a final smile, she opened the door to the office.

"But what should I do about Quirk?" he asked somewhat plaintively.

Over her shoulder, she said, "You've had *loads* of students there is always one whose heart is broken while they moan and die a thousand deaths. Do what you do for them."

"Detention?" he said to the space she had recently vacated.

---

It must have been a Weasley idea, most likely conceived by the one that was about to pop from *aprevious* conception. He snorted. Apparently, at the Order's Christmas party, it had been decided that as there were no further evil sorcerers to battle, they would make war on some of the suffering left in the wake of the fall of Voldemort. To this end, baked goods and small gift items would be procured for distribution to the ill and infirm at St. Mungo's on Christmas Day. This was not at *all* how Severus had envisioned spending his first Christmas with his new bride. It would quickly become obvious to all who might be so unfortunate as to stray into his presence on that hateful day that Severus Snape was *not* in a holiday spirit. The more he brooded upon the ridiculous plan, the more it festered his festive mood.

Even the method by which he discovered this do-gooder's scheme affronted him.

He had been delighted when Hermione had returned to Enchanté that Sunday evening from her labours in Mr. Lewis's lab. He thought he had been generous, giving her up on *his* day off particularly when he had been deprived of her for the whole of the previous day on Ronald Weasley's account and he had felt justified in requiring some fair compensation. He was also looking forward to telling her how he had resolved the Quirk "issue" all by himself. In his estimation, his excellent management of the Quirk situation made him deserving of more of a reward than simply having his house-elf behave sanely again.

Then she came home, in high spirits, vivaciously exploding with joy, and his plans were turned on end.

"I gather you had some success," he said dryly.

She flew into his arms.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! It was all in the wrist," she joked, demonstrating. "It was the stirring pattern. It was just a matter of experimenting to get the right combination. Now we are ready to begin the trials. Do you know what this means?"

"We can try to test *my* stirring?" he growled, possessively pulling her against his chest.

"Severus, I'm serious!" she protested, pushing away from him.

He had the grace to look somewhat contrite. "I'm sorry, Pet. Yes, I do know what you have accomplished and I am very proud of you."

"Sometimes I wonder."

It seemed that a change of subject would be beneficial.

"Hungry?" he inquired.

"Famished!"

"Quirk reports that our meal will be ready within the hour. That leaves time for you to have a glass of wine in your bath."

"Quirk!" she exclaimed, diverted. "How is he?"

He took her by the arm and guided her toward the stairs. "I will tell you about it as I watch you bathe."

"Watch me?"

He could perceive that his earlier faux pas was forgiven.

He leaned towards her, his nose grazing her cheek on the way to her ear. "How can you expect me to eat my vegetables unless I am anticipating afters?"

She curled herself against him invitingly. "You could join me have a bit of afters *before* dinner."

Gently, he prodded her to begin climbing the stairs.

"Tempting, Pet but I will wait. That's why we call it *afters*."

---

While she lazed in the strawberry scented bubbles, Severus hid his pride by using a matter-of-fact tone as he described how he had contacted Holly's master. Each of them had shared similar stories of the distress of their house-elves. Severus pointed out that neither elf was of much use in their present condition and suggested an accommodation, to which the animal Healer quickly agreed. Holly could visit Quirk at Enchanté every Monday, and Quirk could visit Holly at her home every Wednesday.

"Wednesday?" Hermione inquired archly.

"Wednesday," he confirmed blandly.

She splashed him in a hopeful manner, but he ignored her gambit, merely casting a Drying Charm upon his trousers.

"How does Quirk feel about it?" she asked.

Severus shrugged. "I have no idea. He appears to be himself again, except for bouts of unprovoked singing even though he sings outside of my presence, it is *not* outside of my hearing."

Hermione laughed at his pained expression. "But, Severus 'tis the season, after all!"

"I suppose so," he allowed.

---

Severus was happy to see Hermione's appetite back to normal and then some. Much credit for the excellent meal she devoured could be laid at Quirk's door. In his gratitude and giddiness, he had provided a veritable feast for them. Amidst the assaults on the various dishes before her, as she wavered uncertainly between two equally tempting offerings, she said, "Don't let me forget to Floo Neville tonight."

"Longbottom?"

"Um-hmm." Her mouth was full.

"Whatever for?"

She swallowed. "He's organizing the Order's visit to St. Mungo's."

Severus became still. "What visit?"

"The one on Christmas, Severus. It was planned at the party while we were in the kitchen. Don't you remember?"

"As I recall I was *in the kitchen* how could I possibly recall something to which I was not a witness?" he said acerbically.

"Ginny told me about it later, and then I told you," she explained.

"No," he answered, "you did not."

She blinked at him. "Of course I did I wouldn't have forgotten!"

His lips thinned. "I am quite sure I would remember something as ridiculous as that, Hermione."

She looked truly penitent. "I'm sorry, Severus. It must have slipped my mind with all that's been going on."

He waved a negligent hand. "It is quite all right. Simply inform your friends that we had other plans about which you had forgotten and that you cannot come out to play with them on Christmas Day."

Her determined chin came up. "I was *not* aware that we had other plans, Severus. And it is not playing it is doing something good for people less fortunate than we are. Besides, I've already committed us. I won't back out now."

The fresh scars of recent history revealed to Severus a wisdom which declared this battle already lost. He knew, even if he somehow persuaded her to stay home with him all Christmas Day, that she would be resentful and he would be disappointed. So he grudgingly surrendered with a sigh and said, "I will honour your commitment. Now, will you please enlighten me as to what this is all about, especially as to what I am expected to do."

Hermione obliged, her mood not appearing to be much dampened by his lack of enthusiasm. He listened quietly, assuming the role of the much put-upon and thus justly-grumpy martyr a role he planned to maintain until Christmas.

Hermione was simply too happy to be fazed by Severus being Severus. After all, her hard work had paid off. The Christmas Rose potion was in test form and it was her first Christmas with her new husband who loved her so much he succumbed to her wishes with barely a fight.

Thus, the shagging continued unabated, and a lovely Christmas was had by all.

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### *Christmas Day*

Quirk woke when it was still dark outside, suddenly aware that there was a presence by his side.

*Don't move, Quirk*, he thought.

Reaching carefully up by the juncture of his shoulder and his neck, his hand encountered a familiar softness. Feeling suddenly both excited and worried at once, he snapped his fingers and lit the candles.

Curled up, in a purring ball by his face, was Lonely-the-splotched kitty.

"Kitty," he whispered, "you is not supposed to *being* here!"

Lonely blinked her big green eyes at him and said, "Mrow?"

Quirk then noticed the shiny red ribbon tied about her neck, with a note attached. With shaking fingers, he untied the ribbon and read the note.

Dear Quirk,

Happy Christmas! Because you have been such a good house-elf, Lonely is coming to live with you and be your kitty.

Father Christmas

P.S. Your mistress says it is okay.

---

Severus followed Hermione through the corridors of St. Mungo's, as she visited ward after ward of those who were too ill to be in their own homes for Christmas. It was too much to have hoped that they would go unrecognized; time after time he was forced to acknowledge the murmurs of, "Happy Christmas, Professor Snape," with at least the appearance of good grace. He curbed his instinct to snap and snarl at the poor buggers; he recognized many of them as former students and some of them as former classmates. Seeing them infirm was not an easy task.

Hermione amazed him. She was never at a loss, shaking hands and exchanging a kind word with each person who spoke her name or reached a hand to her. Severus was careful to keep his hands out of sight, so that he was not required to touch anyone.

At last, Hermione paused before the door into the Curse Damage ward. Turning to him, she said quietly, "These people are the ones who will test the Christmas Rose potion, on a volunteer basis." Her voice quavered. "If it is successful, some of them will be able to leave here one day."

He nodded his understanding as she pushed the door open.

A Healer in lime green robes turned when they entered and smiled as she came towards them. "Hermione! Happy Christmas!"

Hermione shook hands with the woman, then presented her to Severus. "Miriam, this is my husband, Professor Snape. Severus, this is Healer Watson."

Severus inclined his head respectfully, and from the bed nearest him, the excited murmur ran down the ward.

"Snape Hermione research war hero "

Healer Watson led them to a bed where a young man sat, his legs dangling over the edge. Sitting in a chair by his side was a young woman and standing next to her was a serious-eyed boy of five or six.

"This is Aubrey Brownlow, Mrs. Brownlow, and young William," the Healer said by way of introduction. "Aubrey was an Auror, and he was injured with the Cruciatus Curse in the first Battle of Godric's Hollow."

Hermione greeted the family, then took the man's hand and began to speak to him. Severus was stirred to painful memory, and the room faded away.

How many people had he personally hurt, as this man had been hurt? Why had he done it? Because of anger? Hatred? Then, when he had turned spy, why had he done *that*? Because he was afraid for himself? So he could earn his salvation? When had his choices ever been about anyone but himself? And when had his actions ever benefited anyone but himself?

Yet here was Hermione, whose driving force was to do right, regardless of her own benefit or her own loss. This was how she chose to spend her energies and where she chose to exercise that incredible intelligence in the service of a good beyond herself.

He started as Hermione found his hand and held it tightly, her eyes fixed on the face of the young man who was speaking to her.

"They gave me my first dose last night, before I went to sleep," Aubrey Brownlow said, his voice filled with wonder.

Severus was uncomfortable as the man continued to speak; the tears in the Auror's eyes had begun to fall, and Severus had no clue how to react to this show of emotion.

"Last night when I fell asleep I couldn't move my legs, ma'am. I haven't been able to move my legs in three years. It was one of those Death Eaters who got me, you know, got me from the rear and kept on and on until I thought I would lose my mind."

Severus groped with his free hand for the handkerchief in his pocket and silently offered it to the stranger, who gratefully accepted it and wiped the tears from his face.

"When I woke up this morning, I could move my toes see?"

The Snapes looked down obediently and watched the toes in question they were definitely wriggling. Mrs. Brownlow and Hermione were crying now, too.

"It's working, ma'am. I'm going to get better get well I'm going to walk out of this place..."

---

The snow had begun to fall again as the Snapes made their way from the box hedge at the edge of the drive, up to the door of Enchanté.

Severus stopped, and reached out to pull Hermione into his arms. "Happy Christmas, wife," he murmured into her hair.

"Thank you for going with me," she said. "I know you didn't want to be part of that."

Severus could not trust his voice to tell her she was wrong; he simply held her more tightly in the dusk of their first Christmas as husband and wife.

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A/N: I must give credit to my only-ever love, my Slytherin husband, without whom this final chapter may never have been completed. He laboured over it one day for five hours while I slept, and many of the passages in this story were virtually written by him. In his usual way, he refuses to take a writing credit.

Bless you, O Faithful Reader. Merry Christmas!