

Caladrius

by Tarah_Fae

COMPLETE Started off as an answer to the Page 394 Challenge as set by Doomspark. Severus and Hermione are sent to an isolated community in search of a mythical creature.

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Chapter 1 of 3

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Disclaimer: JKR owns the rights to anything you recognize in this fic. I wish I did, but alas! Life is like a box of Bertie Bott's. Sometimes you get chocolate fudge, sometimes you get earwax.

PAGE 394 CHALLENGE

1. Take the nearest five thick books. If you don't have five thick books near you, go to the bookshelf. If you're too lazy to do that, use fewer than five.
 - 1a. None of the Harry Potter books are allowed, however. Anyone doing that will have a week's detention with Snape, and it won't be *that* sort of detention. It will involve scrubbing cauldrons and pickling pig foetuses.
2. Turn to page 394.
3. Take the second sentence on that page of each book.
4. Arrange the sentences to form as coherent a story as possible.
5. Post your wacky tale in your LJ with these instructions.

The Books:

1. George Beahn, *Muggles and Magic*
- "... for the evolving human spirit" (Hah... this book has exactly 394pages it was meant to be)
2. William Horwood, *The Wolves of Time: Journeys to the Heartland*
- "There was a hiss, a spatter of turf and rock dust, the phutt!, again, of a gun from the direction of the movement, and all was immediate danger once more."
3. Robert Jordan, *The Eye of the World*

- "Borderland fables!" the first man repeated.

4. Timothy Zahn, *Specter of the Past* (Actual quote from preview section by K.W. Jeter, *The Bounty Hunter Wars: The Mandalorian Armo*)

- "He could almost have laughed, if any twitch of his raw muscles hadn't hurt so much, pushing him toward unconscious oblivion."

5. Sylvia S. Mader, *Biology (6th Edition)*

- "When studies of population dynamics are done, investigators try to determine which are the key factors that determine mortality."

He had *told* the dotty old codger that he was no cryptozoologist. What the hell was he doing on another fool's errand for the Headmaster? He was supposed to be in retirement, enjoying the rewards of a job well done. Instead he was in this Cumbrian backwater, miles away from the tourist traps of the Lake District, arguing with the locals about something that most likely did not exist. He scowled at the two now openly hostile men in front of him. "What?"

"Borderland fables!" the first man repeated. "That be all they be!"

The man's companion nodded in agreement, his mouth set in a thin, stubborn line. Severus was sure they were lying. What he wouldn't give for the authorisation to put Veritaserum in their flagons, but the trouble he would get into would be more than the information was worth.

"Ye'd best be off, Outsider," the other man sneered, "if ye knew what be good fer ye... and the wee lass."

Scratch that poison in their flagons would be far more satisfying. Severus' scowl deepened; threatening him was one thing, threatening his wife was something entirely different. The village inhabitants had been almost painfully friendly and welcoming to both of them, until he started asking about the bird carvings that pervaded each nook and cranny of the ancient church that dominated the village green. "I do not want to cause trouble. I merely seek information. It is an importa-"

"The 'information' be not for ye, Outsider," the first man insisted, his hand clenched into a fist on the scrubbed table. "There be nothing to find out on those hills 'cept misfortune. Heed me when I tell ye this."

Severus gritted his teeth in frustration, sorely tempted to use Legilimency to just break into their minds and extract what he had come for. It would be so devilishly easy. They were unguarded, it would only take a moment to get to the facts he needed. He cursed under his breath and broke eye contact before the temptation became too much. He couldn't draw attention to himself and, judging from the prickle of many hostile glares on his back from the other patrons, now was not the time to make a scene.

Discretion was indeed the better part of valour. "Fair enough, gentlemen. I will consider your warning. Now, if you would excuse me." He left his drink untouched on the table and nodded a curt farewell to the two men.

He left *The White Crow*, stalking over the old-fashioned cobbles of the market square and through the ornate, but rusty, gates that lead to the churchyard. He could see Hermione's curls bobbing in between the lichen-covered headstones around the church.

His wife was busy making rubbings of some of the grave markers, a large smudge of charcoal across her pale cheek. "I think we have outlived our welcome."

She sat back on her heels and, as if she hadn't noticed him, murmured, "Fascinating." She quickly shuffled through some of the rubbings, seeming to compare the engravings on each.

"What is fascinating?" Severus peered over her shoulder, trying to read the text.

"Well, when studies of population dynamics are done, investigators try to determine which are the key factors that determine mortality."

He both loved and hated it when she sounded like a textbook. "We are not here for a study of the *human* population, my dear," he offered a bit archly.

"I know, I know!" She wafted her charcoal-blackened fingers at him impatiently. "But this is so unusual for a small village at the back of beyond."

"What is?"

"All of these people died of extreme old age. No disease, no injury. Impossible for a community this old and this far from modern medical aid." Her brown eyes sparkled in excitement when she finally looked up at him. "It *has* to be here!"

Movement at the edge of the churchyard caught Severus' eye several men were lurking there. Although they wore thick coats against the autumn chill, he knew by the way they carried themselves that they were concealing weapons under their outer garments. There was an unspoken menace in their stance.

"Hermione... gather your things, we need to leave *now*."

"But I... oh..." She had noticed them too. Hermione hastily began stuffing parchments with scrawled notes, rubbings, writing implements and her camera into her soft leather book bag. Despite the abuse she had put it through, it had somehow survived her schooldays.

Severus' fingers were tight around the polished wood of the wand in his coat pocket as they passed through a gauntlet of disgruntled villagers. Cold glares followed them to their small hired car. Severus grabbed Hermione's bag and threw it in the back while she started the engine. As soon as his door was closed, they beat a hasty retreat to their informal campsite in the woods surrounding the village, mud splattering the sides of the car as they bumped along the forest track.

Despite the less than fond farewell, Severus was determined to get the information they came here for. He had never been a man to give up at the first sign of resistance. If he were, he would be dead by now. Several hours later, he was pouring over a relief map of the area by the flickering light of the fire. Hermione pressed in tightly against his side, worming in under one arm before handing him his steaming mug of tea.

"Thank you," he murmured, wrapping an arm around her, but still studying the map floating obediently in front of him. "I think this is the most likely location," he said, indicating what looked like a steep valley just north of the village and taking a large appreciative sip of the warm drink. "Sufficient cover and no doubt an adequate supply of fresh water from that spring. Also easily accessible from the village... unfortunately we cannot go there. We will have to take the back way."

"The back way? Why don't I like the sound of that?" Hermione shivered against him and he vigorously rubbed his hand over her back in an attempt to generate some heat.

"It will certainly not be a pleasant hike," he replied grimly. "There seems to be dense woods and steep rocky slopes all around. We will need to get up early."

"Then I suggest," she said, flashing him a wicked smile before she gave him a languid kiss, "that we get to bed early."

"I could not agree more." Severus smirked, allowing himself to be lead to their small tent and the sleeping bag they shared, his forgotten tea slowly cooling in the night air.

Severus helped Hermione over the mossy log. They had been trudging through this godforsaken forest since just after dawn, but their progress had been annoyingly slow.

The forest itself seemed to be intent on impeding their forward motion trees, boulders and thorny bushes often encroaching on what was marked (rather optimistically in his opinion) as a hiking trail. Severus snorted at the map. Damn Muggles and their damn hiking trails.

If he had had his way they would be flying to the valley, but Hermione had refused to get on a broom despite all his reassurances. 'Let's take the hiking trail,' she had said. 'It will be invigorating!' she had assured him. 'Invigorating my arse!' he thought, pulling at the itchy shirt clinging to his sweaty body.

A twig snapping higher up the slope made him freeze. He grabbed Hermione, shoving her in behind him. "Hey! What do yo-"

"Shhhh," he hissed, peering up through the green murk. A silence had descended over the woods. It made the hair at the back of his neck stand on end. Their passing had only brought about a slight dampening in the noise level of the early morning chatter, but this... this was different. Ominous, almost.

He slowly reached for the wand in his pocket. As he was about to pull it out, a large stag bounded across the trail behind them, snapping twigs as it went. It stopped a short way down the slope and turned back to stare at them its large ears swivelling toward them in interest, its nose twitching at their scent before daintily picking its way further down the slope and out of sight.

"God... you gave me a fright there," she breathed against his shoulder.

He slowly allowed himself to come down from full alert, releasing the breath he didn't know he had been holding in a slow hiss. "My apologies. It did not feel ri-"

A flash of motion caught his eye. He forced Hermione down as a chunk of the tree they had been standing next to burst into splinters. Bloody hell! Was someone shooting at them? There was a hiss, a spatter of turf and rock dust, the *phutt!*, again, of a gun from the direction of the movement, and all was immediate danger once more.

"MOVE!"

Then they were running headlong along the trail, stumbling over natural obstacles, twigs tearing at their clothes and skin, rocks, trees and soil exploding at random all around them. He kept urging Hermione on, but her breath was starting to rasp in her throat and his muscles were screaming in agony.

As they slid down a small embankment, he spotted a hollow half-hidden by twining tree roots and twisting vines. There would only be room for one. "Hermione, get in there. I will lead them off."

"But-"

"Damn it, woman! For once, do as I say without questioning me! There is no time."

Hermione's jaw snapped shut and she nodded silently, her eyes glittering wetly. It only took her a few seconds to wriggle into the hiding place. "Now stay here until I return. If I do not return by nightfall... I want you to take the car and get out of here as quickly and quietly as you can."

She grabbed his hand. "I lo-"

"I know," he murmured as he cast the Disillusionment charm on her. Pushing himself to his feet, his legs somewhere between jelly and lead, he ran down the trail, making sure he was in plain sight. Sure enough, moments after his appearance, a bullet ricocheted off a boulder to his left, sharp stone slivers biting into his calf. He winced but kept going, his limp growing progressively worse as the shards worked themselves deeper into his flesh with each stride.

He swore as another volley cleanly severed a branch just by his head. Ducking down low, he dived in behind a tree and sat gasping for air, his lungs burning, the muscles in his legs twitching in protest at the abuse. He couldn't run anymore. His body would not let him. But now, with Hermione safe, he could turn and fight.

Severus grasped his wand tightly, the smooth wood comforting and warm in his hand, and waited. The rustle of feet through the fallen leaves wafted closer on the otherwise silent breeze. Severus pressed himself closer to the rough bark, fighting to control his breath, afraid that they would hear his heart pounding inside his chest. He knew he would probably only have one clear shot. The noise stopped.

Severus sat tensely, waiting for them to move again. The silence became deafening to his hypersensitive ears. Where were they? Why were they not moving? Had they turned back? He gritted his teeth and cautiously shifted his weight to peer around the tree.

The coldness of the steel that suddenly pressed against the back of his neck froze the blood in his veins. He slowly raised his hands, surreptitiously allowing his wand to slip into his sleeve.

"We told ye to leave, Outsider," a familiar voice hissed. The barrel pressed insistently on his neck, forcing him to his knees. A pair of boots appeared in his limited field of vision, their owner giving his jacket a quick pat down.

'Two of them, ' Severus thought, 'both no doubt expert shots.'

"We've had enough of yer kind. Always snooping, always prying. Ye will not just let it be." The metal pressed into his skin again. "If it be any consolation, ye got the closest of all."

Severus' face remained impassive at the man's words; he had no time to waste listening to mad ramblings, instead, he devoted his mind to finding a way out of this. He had certainly been in far worse situations while he was a spy, coming up against powerful opponents who knew a plethora of debilitating spells. He had survived those two bumpkins with firearms were surely not an insurmountable problem.

"Where be the lass?"

Severus' hands clenched. "She is not for you."

The men laughed nastily. "Whether ye tell us, or we take care of ye and then find her, matters not to us. It will not be taken from us, it belongs here."

"But we do not want to take it! We just want to-"

The butt of the rifle cracked into his skull - stars exploded in front of his eyes, but Severus somehow remained upright. "Liar! Ye want it for yerselves! No-one would go to this much trouble if they didn't want to steal it!" the villager shrieked. Severus felt cold steel against the back of his head now, pressed harshly against the lump that was no doubt forming. "Now," the man said more calmly, "to tie up loose ends. The crows and foxes will be glad of yer bounty."

Now or never. Severus shook his wand into his hand in one fluid motion.

"*Expelliarmus!*" came the roared incantation, sending the man behind him flying into a sturdy tree with a wet cracking sound that made Severus cringe. The other man whirled around, but before he could level his rifle a cry of "*Stupefy!*" made him buckle to the ground in a senseless heap.

Severus scowled in the general direction both spells had come from. "Gods damn it, Hermione! I told you to stay put!"

"Oh shut up, you insufferable man," came her disembodied voice from close by before she embraced him tightly. He could just perceive the outline where the Disillusionment charm bent around her curves. Severus was reluctantly grateful. Hermione's acting true to her Gryffindor stereotype had saved them - the element of surprise had definitely turned the fight in their favour.

"Could you tend to your... victim?" Severus drawled, indicating the man crumpled at the base of the tree. "We do not want to alienate these villagers any more than we already have."

"What? You mean shooting at Outsiders isn't a sign of welcome around these parts?" her voice quipped, but the crackling leaves indicated her progress to the man.

"I will see to..." The other wasn't there any more. If Severus were a man given to audible expression of emotion, he would have gasped. "Hermione - stop moving." There was a cold *snick* as the bolt of a firearm was pulled back. Severus' blood ran cold for the umpteenth time that day. The man knew where she was.

"*Ventusaevio!*" A violent blast of air ripped around the small clearing, snatching all the leaves from the forest floor and forcing them into a manic, whirling dance. "Hermione run!"

The spell had been a double-edged sword. Severus spun around, trying desperately to see his opponent. "*Protego!*" He wasn't sure if a shielding charm would stop a bullet, but he supposed that he would find out soon enough.

A surprised grunt escaped from Severus' lips as the man barrelled into him from behind. The momentum made them both stumble forward, pitching them head-first into some bushes.

Severus experienced a strange weightless sensation before his brain finally realized that he was tumbling head over heels down a steep slope. Time seemed to slow down, as if allowing him to inspect each rock he hit in minute detail, but not giving him the ability to do anything to avoid them. Severus was sure that he had heard several bones snap, but whether they were his or his attacker's seemed irrelevant.

He must have blacked out. When he came to, he could faintly hear Hermione screaming his name, but it seemed very distant. All he wanted to do was embrace the enveloping blackness it was undemanding and welcoming. He was sinking into its arms again, like an old lover after a long absence, when he felt the pressure on his chest.

He frowned. The weight was keeping him from bliss. His frown deepened to a scowl as he struggled to open his eyes. There, its beak close to his face, was a bird that looked remarkably like a large crow. It was looking at him, its head turned to one side to pin him with a one-eyed stare. Its eye was pale blue and its feathers, beak and legs the purest white. It reached out to preen at a couple of strands of hair that had fallen across Severus' face.

He could almost have laughed, if any twitch of his raw muscles hadn't hurt so much, pushing him toward unconscious oblivion. It had found *him*. All this trouble, and here it was sitting on his chest... looking at him. Severus gasped at the implication.

He half-expected the bird to wink knowingly, but instead it spread its wings, laying them gently over his chest. Severus cried out in agony as all the pain in his body rushed towards that point. Before the pooled pain became unbearable the bird launched itself, the hurt and injury trailing from its pristine white wings like red streamers. It beat strongly into the air, leaving Severus almost breathless at the drawing sensation in his chest.

The bird rose higher and higher. When it was an almost indiscernible speck in the sky, it arched back, exposing its chest to the sun in breathtaking somersault. The trailing redness burst into flame, engulfing the bird for a moment, before dissipating into nothingness.

"Severus!" There was a small avalanche of dirt and pebbles. "Oh Merlin!"

"Hermione," he croaked. "It is here."

She had finally removed the Disillusionment charm, her concerned face eclipsing his view of the sky.

"Are you okay?"

Her voice held a fearful edge; he must look a real mess. He winced, trying to struggle upright, finding he could manage it with much less effort than he had anticipated. He took stock of himself no broken bones, no scrapes, no bruises. That was impossible.

Another flare of light in the sky distracted them. They looked up just in time to see the last traces of the fire fading against the blue. "Damn fool birds. That be another two gone," muttered the man leaning heavily against a sapling. "I told ye to stay away!"

"I did not ask for its help," Severus countered hotly.

"Ye don' need to. The fools would cure a cold if it meant they could ride the fire. That be all they live for."

"They? Are you implying that there are more than one?" Hermione inquired.

"Not for long at the rate they be carrying on," the villager scowled darkly.

She frowned in that familiar way. "That is not what the texts suggest. They are supposed to be solitary and immortal, living at the hand of the king."

The man snorted rudely. "What will ye believe, lassie? Books or yer eyes?"

Severus could tell Hermione was working herself up into a hot retort. "Please," he interjected smoothly, placing a warning hand on her arm. "Give us the information we came for. Our sources are obviously lacking, but you have real experience of these creatures. Surely a master likes to share his knowledge?"

The man puffed up importantly. "Aye, I know all there be to know about them." Suddenly his expression was guarded again. "What makes ye think I will share knowledge with the likes of ye?"

"We come on behalf of many others who can no longer speak for themselves. Driven to madness by pain so excruciating that you could not begin to fathom it. We seek a cure, even the possibility of a cure. If you have any human compassion within you, you would give them a chance at a normal life."

The man considered this for a moment then grudgingly nodded. "Very well. I warn ye that it won't be to yer liking." He took out a pipe from his pocket, filling and lighting it with the mechanical grace that comes from countless repetitions of an action. His eyes took on a faraway look as he spoke.

"When my granda were a lad, the rookery was grand. They used to swarm these woods, riding the fire for any who came seeking aid. Too many came; there were almost none left." He took a deep draw on the stem of the pipe, the blue smoke surrounding his face like a halo when he spoke again. "Us had to protect them. A man came to our village, oh must've bin a hundred years ago if my granda's tellings were true, giving us them marker stones. The birds wouldn't pass 'em. Ye will see them all around." He indicated a nondescript moss-covered rock at the base of the slope with his pipe stem.

Severus was sure he had hit that particular one on his way down. On closer inspection, Severus could make out some fading runes carved into its mottled surface. Wizarding runes... interesting. No wonder the Headmaster had known exactly where the birds were. Damn him and his twinkling.

"When we asked him why, me granda said that he just answered - '... for the evolving human spirit.'" The man shrugged. "None of us common folk understood that back then, but he were a powerful man - that sort like their riddles."

When Severus shot a glance at his wife, he could see she had reached the same conclusion. That was why the Headmaster had been so anxious for them to come here. It was one of his long-running pet projects; the barmy old badger always had a few cards concealed up his sleeve. Was it foresight or his ingrained need to meddle that made him do these things decades before they would bear fruit?

"We kept 'em secret, letting everyone think they were just stories," the man continued oblivious to the silent communication between the two Outsiders. "Soon people stopped coming, but the temptation to use the birds for ourselves were too great at times. The numbers didn't wax as much as they ought to have. Now, only the right ill and the young are allowed in the valley. Old men like me waste their magic."

AN: The bird was the mythical [\[Caladrius\]](#). I've changed some of the attributes to suit my needs (and to give Hermione the heebie-jeebies because the old texts weren't 'accurate!').

The spell Severus uses ("*Ventusaevio*") means "violent (*saevio*) wind (*ventus*)".

Work on other archives (for now):

[\[Occlumency\]](#) :: [\[Illusions\]](#)

This fic was beta'd by the formidable Tevildo, who uploaded his first fic on [\[Lumos\]](#) - I found his take on the "Page 394 Challenge" utterly hilarious. Go check it out!

The Hurt in Your Heart

Chapter 2 of 3

Started off as an answer to the Page 394 Challenge as set by Doomspark. Severus and Hermione are sent to an isolated community in search of a mythical creature.

Disclaimer: JKR owns the rights to anything you recognize in this fic. I wish I did, but alas! Life is like a box of Bertie Bott's. Sometimes you get chocolate fudge, sometimes you get earwax.

AN: Well here's chapter two, I have no clue where this is going, but it probably won't take more than one more chapter to tie up the loose ends. Had to bump up the rating a bit more because, yes, you guessed it, there are lemons in this chapter (aren't you lucky?).

Some of you may wonder about my use of "cryptozoologist" in the first chapter and "magizoologist" in this chapter. To me, a cryptozoologist is someone who deals with creatures that might not exist (ie. they have not been confirmed by either magical or Muggle "science"), whereas a magizoologist is someone who deals with (existent) magical creatures in general.

Severus clung to slumber, but her hand was insistent. He had been so tired when they returned to the village, but the mood of the villagers had shifted considerably when Tobias had told them about Severus' encounter with the bird.

Some of the younger men had gone to break their camp and returned not only with their belongings but also Peter, the man Hermione had injured. He had sprained his shoulder, but was none the worse for wear and even invited them to stay in his home.

They had been set up in comfortable accommodation and fed a warm hearty meal. Severus' fingers had been numb from exhaustion when he had removed his clothes and climbed into the huge bed with its riotous quilt cover a bit later. He always snorted when people used the phrase 'went to sleep as soon as my head hit the pillow', but he couldn't even remember the soft sigh of expelled air from his feather pillow when he had settled down.

This hadn't been the dreamless, wrung-out sleep he had after Death Eater meetings for so many years. This was dark, yes, but as warm and secure as if he were an unborn child nestled beneath his mother's heart.

"Severus?" That insistent hand again.

His consciousness clawed its way upwards from the dregs of sleep.

"Mmph?" he grunted non-committally, tightening his arm around her and burrowing in closer to her warm back. 'Mmm... she smells so good,' he thought distractedly as the faint hint of magnolia wafted towards him when the quilt settled again after his movement. He flexed his crotch against her bum. Maybe waking up a bit more wouldn't be entirely bad.

Pressing a light kiss against her neck, his hand snaked down her body tickling her ribs, tracing her navel and then following her centre line down to her damp curls. She shivered and opened her legs slightly to give him access, her question seemingly forgotten. His fingers flitted over her clit for a few moments before dipping into her tunnel.

"Mmm... so wet," he rasped appreciatively against her ear, his fingers swirling around her opening before leaving and sliding up onto her inner thigh. Lifting her leg up and forward, he moulded himself to her back before easing his eager cock into her warmth.

What started off in the slow, luxurious rhythm of early morning love making, soon degenerated into a frenzied fucking. He couldn't get enough of her to slake his need; his hands were everywhere tugging at her nipples, pinching her sensitive clit, digging half-moon nail marks into the skin on her hips.

He bit into his own hand to dampen the strangled moan that bubbled from his throat when he came, thrusting erratically into Hermione a few more times as she cried out her own climax. They shuddered and twitched around and within each other for several long moments, their breath rasping in their throats and sweat glistening on their skin.

He buried his face against her shoulder, feeling the welcome tug of sleep at the corners of his mind again. Her inner muscles were still rippling gently over his softening cock and he wanted to savour the bliss with no distractions.

"Severus?"

"What?" he groaned against her skin.

She chuckled. "It's quarter to eleven. I don't think we can safely feign sleep any longer after *that*." She emphasized 'that' by wriggling against him. "Surely they heard."

Severus hissed as his cock responded to her teasing almost immediately. She gasped. "Goodness... you're feisty this morning. I should put you to bed early more often."

He moaned lustfully but delicately withdrew his swelling member from her, the friction making him shiver in pleasure. It had been quite a few years since his recuperation time had been this short. The temptation to make the best of this was very strong indeed, but she was right, they had to get dressed and get out there - they were here on business, not their honeymoon. "Sorry, it definitely has a mind of its own today."

She squirmed around in his grasp. "I'm sure they won't miss us for another fifteen minu-" Her lazy smile vanished from her lips, her hand flying to her mouth in shock when she looked at him.

"Severus? Do you feel all right?"

What a stupid question. He was in a warm bed on a blustery autumn morning, he had just had some of the most pleasurable sex of his life (and was apparently ready for round two) and he had had the best night's sleep he could remember. To be blunt, he felt bloody fantastic.

"Yes, I feel fine."

For some reason she didn't look convinced. Had some of the wounds from yesterday returned perhaps? After all, the magic of animals tended to be somewhat erratic because of its primal nature and the lack of conscious thought behind it.

Yes, her fingers were tracing over his brow, her expression changing from shock to wonder to speculation and back to wonder in quick succession.

"What is it, woman?" he asked, annoyed at her reaction.

Hermione shook her head. "You will need to go and look for yourself. There's a mirror on the dresser..."

Severus grumbled as he threw the warm covers away from him, his ardour flagging as the cold air hit his body. In a few strides he was at the dresser and reaching for the old fashioned hand-mirror. The silver was cool and heavy in his hand as he lifted it.

He nearly dropped the mirror in shock, juggling the ancient piece of craftsmanship as it threatened to slip from his grasp. He leaned heavily against the dresser, his chest heaving and his blood pounding in his ears as the surge of adrenaline rushed through his body.

It couldn't be! It just was not possible. 'Says the man who turned at death's door yesterday,' a small voice chided in the back of his head. Severus knew, of all men, he should believe in the impossible. He had witnessed acts of unthinkable cruelty, impossible kindness, inconceivable forgiveness. But this...

The mirror shook as he raised it again. He had to see that it was true, that it wasn't just a figment of his sleep-addled mind. The quivering image was the same as before. He hadn't dreamed it. Shaking with emotion, his eyes drifted down to the wrist of the hand holding the mirror.

He gasped raggedly.

The mirror clunked loudly onto the floor when he collapsed to his knees, burying his face in his hands. Hermione's arms were around him the next instant as he uttered a strangled sob. He didn't want her seeing him this weak. He tried desperately to push her away, but she held fast.

He hadn't cried like this since his father had beaten his mother to within an inch of her life when Severus was five years old. The man had taught him then that tears brought punishment and pain, so they had to be suppressed at all costs. There had been many times when they had threatened to break through his façade the excruciating pain of his Marking, the relief at Albus' acceptance, the grief at Lily's death, the final fall of the Dark Lord but in each instance he had controlled them. But now... the sorrow and joy alike were spilling from him in the only way his body knew.

His Mark was gone. The ugly black brand that he had carried for the better part of his life, the tangible evidence of his greatest mistake, was gone.

The face that stared back at him half an hour later as he shaved was his, but not entirely. The deep worry lines between his eyes and the etched lines around his mouth had gone, only faint creases still visible. The scar from where Lucius had managed to catch Severus across the cheek with a cutting hex in the final battle - gone. The scars across his chest and shoulders fewer in number as well, but those remaining much ameliorated.

He looked for lack of a better word younger. It was as if ten years' passing had been wiped from his face as he slept.

As he cupped water in his hands to rinse his face and neck, it puzzled him why seemingly 'simple' scars like the one on his index finger where he had once nicked himself preparing rat spleens had remained, while his Mark had been eradicated.

He checked his unmarred wrist for the thousandth time in the past forty-five minutes, sure that the Mark would creep slowly back onto his skin as soon as he looked away, like some cruel practical joke.

He sighed and roughly dried his face on the towel, the prickle of tears behind his eyelids again. 'Get a grip on yourself, man,' he mentally hissed at himself in disgust.

Hermione was dressed when he slipped back into their room, but her red-rimmed eyes and shaky smile nearly set him off again. He welcomed her hug, drawing support from her slender frame, able to lose himself in the magnolia haze that drifted from her clothes and hair.

Neither had said anything since he had broken down. They both knew words were not adequate to mark the event. Both just accepted without question, with the faith of children.

He pulled the navy jumper she had laid out for him over his head, allowing her to gently remove the hair that had been trapped under his collar.

Tobias, Peter and Peter's wife, Elly, were sitting around the kitchen table when Severus and Hermione came down the stairs.

Elly went into a flap that startled Severus. "Goodness! Ye must be starvin! Let me fix you a little something." She bustled around the kitchen, fetching a frying pan, eggs, cured meat of some kind and a loaf of home-made bread.

"Madam, you are most kind, but-"

"One omelette or two, m'dear?" the short, round woman inquired as if she hadn't heard him. If it weren't for her dark hair, he could've sworn she was Molly's long lost twin. His stomach gave a loud rumble as the smell of the melting tab of butter in the pan reached his nose. Elly laughed. "Two it be then. How 'bout you, lads?" she asked looking toward Tobias and Peter now. "Ready for a spot of luncheon?"

Both men gave a cheer, raising their cups of tea in mock salute. They grinned when she shot them a disapproving look. "Won't ye help me, dear? Cut that up in nice thick slices for the men," she asked Hermione, handing her a bread knife and well-worn cutting board. Soon the women were chatting amiably over the sizzle of the frying pan.

Severus slid into a seat across from the two men. He couldn't help staring at Tobias. The man looked slightly younger, but the difference wasn't as marked as Severus' own change. Severus poured himself a cup of tea.

"Ye look well, Outsider," Peter remarked. "Slept well?"

"Yes... thank you." Severus wasn't used to small talk, but it created a nice buffer. His grip on the cup tightened when the men shot each other knowing glances, but didn't say anything more, just looking at him with those faint smiles on their faces. It was clear that they wouldn't volunteer information he had to ask.

Drawing a deep breath, he said, "Why... how... am I...?" His words didn't come. Instead he vaguely indicated his face, hoping they would understand the question he didn't know how to articulate.

"Ye still be yer forty-odd years, Outsider," Tobias' eyes twinkled, "ye just dun' look it anymore."

Severus hated when people twinkled at him. "But why did it not have the same effect on you?"

"The birds know the hurt in yer heart," Tobias said mildly, sipping at his tea.

"But-"

"Enough jabber, lads. Eat up." Elly placed a heaped plate of food in front of him. He fell on it like a starving man, mumbling thanks when Hermione placed a thick slice of bread, plastered with fresh butter on the side of his plate.

Cutlery clinked on crockery as they ate. Somehow more food kept showing up on his plate. Elly was merciless, clucking "So thin" each time she refilled it.

Finally Severus sat back, groaning, "Madam, desist! I cannot eat another bite." Elly looked as if he had slapped her. "Oh very well..." he sighed in an uncharacteristic show of graciousness, "but just one more *small* helping." Her face lit up again as she shovelled more fried food onto his plate.

Peter and Tobias gave him sympathetic looks as he battled through his meal, but some sense of relief that Elly had found a new victim was evident in their shoulders. Hermione chuckled and patted his knee under the table, nibbling delicately at her own slice of bread slathered in marmalade.

Not long after, Elly was doing the washing up and humming cheerily to herself. Severus felt rather uncomfortable, not knowing whether to sit back or bear forward in order to ease his aching gut. He settled for sitting up very straight.

"Tobias... Peter... we need to discuss some things with you," Hermione said. The relaxed atmosphere around the table quavered like a soap bubble, but, thankfully, didn't burst. Encouraged, Hermione ploughed ahead. "We all know how valuable the Caladrii are." She squeezed Severus' hand, shooting him a look that melted his insides. "We have been sent here to work with you on conserving them, for the good of all involved. But we need to know all there is to know about them. Are you willing to help us?"

Tobias and Peter muttered to each other for a few brief moments, too low for either Severus or Hermione to make out the actual words. Peter looked unconvinced, shaking his head and frowning, but Tobias seemed to be winning him over to the idea.

"Fine, fine," Peter muttered. "What do ye need to know?"

That familiar academic hunger sparked deep in Hermione's eyes. She was so excited at the prospect of gathering information that she forgot herself and summoned her writing implements from their room. She was rummaging through her old book bag before she stopped and looked into the surprised faces of the three Muggles in the room.

"I... er..."

"Dearie be! I wish I coul' do that! Woul' save me trips upstairs!" Elly chortled, clunking a fresh pot of tea down on the table. Hermione smiled bashfully.

Severus sat back, quietly digesting his large meal as Hermione fired questions, writing extensively. She had never believed in using Quick-Quotes Quills, preferring to make all the notes in her own loopy handwriting.

Light was fading by the time she looked over the document with a satisfied air, annotating a few more points next to existing sections. Apparently, the Caladrii were fairly gregarious, nesting in a group of trees at the far end of the valley next to a sheltering cliff overhang. They always returned there by nightfall, roosting in groups of two to four birds, that might be related or not. They tended to be monogamous, only producing one egg per year and pining to death when their mate died (next to this Hermione had scribbled 'perfect candidate specimens'). At an estimated lifespan of a hundred-odd years (provided that they didn't ride the fire or get killed by foxes when they were chicks), it was clear why medieval writers thought the bird immortal. There didn't seem to be any difference in the magic of old versus young birds, but the magic did seem to affect each person differently (as Severus could attest to).

"Okay," Hermione mumbled around the pen she was chewing, a bright blue smear of ink across her nose and the ring finger on her right hand similarly marked. "I think we're dealing with a K-selected species here, I propose we... what?"

She was met with blank looks all around.

"Now, missy... I be no man of learning. We be but common folk," Peter offered with an apologetic spreading of his hands.

"Er... sorry... I meant that the Caladrii breed slowly but live long. We need a long-term plan in order to help them." There was an expectant pause; they were obviously waiting for her to say more. "We need to get a couple of magizoologists in here to-"

"Absolutely not!" Peter growled, transforming again into the angry villager from yesterday. Severus tensed in anticipation. "Outsiders be not welcome in the valley!"

"Peter, be reasonable!" Tobias said. "We can't hide 'em forever. I be tired of fighting and losing anyway." He looked resigned. "What harm be there in accepting help when we be floundering? We be under obligation of a blood oath. We have duties."

"Our duty is to keep them safe and keep Outsiders *out*. Interfering bunch of-"

"Peter Joseph Hempley!" Elly cut him off. "These nice people only want to help and there you go with those bullheaded notions of yours again. We have duties, and if this be a means to fulfill them, I be all for it."

"Peter," Hermione beseeched, "I *promise* you we won't interfere with your village. I will select the people myself and they will only be here for one, maybe two, weeks out of every year. You needn't even see them if you don't want to."

"Oh lordie, no! Tha' won't do! They'll stay in our house, won't they, Peter?" Elly said pointedly. Peter grumbled but nodded his head in defeat, earning him a hearty clap on the back from Tobias. "When will they be arriving, dearie?"

Tarah Fae on

[\[Ashwinder\]](#) :: [\[Illusions\]](#) :: [\[Occlumency\]](#)

What He's Always Wanted

Chapter 3 of 3

Started off as an answer to the Page 394 Challenge as set by Doomspark. Severus and Hermione are sent to an isolated community in search of a mythical creature.

Disclaimer: JKR owns the rights to anything you recognize in this fic. I wish I did, but alas! Life is like a box of Bertie Bott's. Sometimes you get chocolate fudge, sometimes you get earwax.

AN: The third and final chapter. I hope you folks enjoyed the ride. Not a lot of Severus or Hermione in this chapter, but I think it is dead good anyway since you get Owen and Trueblue.

My undying gratitude to **Tevildo** for beta-ing not only this chapter, but the other two as well. Someday I will remember to mention his greatness in every chapter... until then, I will flog myself for forgetting!

Owen Vogeldenk wiped the sweat from his face before it dripped onto the newly attached wooden shingles. Whoever had said that being a magizoologist would be a glamorous career choice had obviously never done any fieldwork. More often than not you ended up doing things totally unrelated to the animal you were studying... like building breeding-houses. At least that had *some* bearing on his study.

Three new breeding-houses in fact. They stood in a neat line, tucked in under the cliff overhang. Each was roughly fifteen by eight feet in size, each built from local timber and the sweat of his brow.

Speaking of which... He wiped at his face again, this time using his shirt. Gods, spring was muggy in this part of the world. This was his second time at the site. The first had just been a quick assessment and marking exercise; he had worked as quickly and efficiently as possible, as Madam Snape had requested, finishing his work - which normally would have required at least three weeks - in ten days.

The villagers were much more at ease with him this time around. Madam Snape had stressed the importance of maintaining good relations with these people, but luckily Owen was from a small village himself and his quiet charm had won them over.

A week into his second visit, he had been invited to another house for dinner, setting the trend for the rest of his stay. It wasn't lost on him that all the families whom invited him over had daughters of marrying age. He had laughed at the implications, reliving his childhood and understanding what it was like to have 'new blood' in the village.

Far from trying to get rid of him as soon as possible, the village seemed to be dragging its collective feet. 'Delays in timber shipments' meant that he was now a week behind schedule. He suspected that a few of the young ladies were vying for the extra dinner dates. Shaking his head in amusement, he slid expertly down the ladder.

There was still much to be done the hatching trays had to be installed in Breeding House One, along with incubation and turning charms, the special feed mixes for Breeding Houses Two and Three had not yet arrived, nor had a feeding schedule been set up.

Owen pulled irritably at the shirt clinging to his body, finally giving up and stripping it off. Wiping at himself with the discarded shirt he sought some shade to go over his planning.

Not being able to resist a good wriggle against the rough bark to relieve an itch in the small of his back, he settled against the tree. A flutter of wings announced her arrival, her claws digging uncomfortably, but not painfully, into his shoulder.

"What's up, Trueblue?" he mumbled, absentmindedly ruffling her white chestfeathers. The bird made a contented noise and preened Owen's short-cropped blonde hair. He smiled as she settled against his cheek, dozing. A wonderful sense of peace always rippled over him when she was perched on his shoulder, helping him concentrate. She had been one of the first birds he had captured and ringed a young female, marked with three blue rings, hence her pet name. She had taken a shine to him, following him around, keeping him company when he had to do paperwork. She already had a mate Red-red-white but she was an incurable flirt. Owen was hoping she would breed for the first time this year.

Owen checked over his census numbers. The anti-predator wards had worked wonders and quite a few of the very young birds he had marked in October were still alive and kicking. Tobias said they had tried to erect fences in the past, but the foxes had always found their weak spots, rendering them useless. They had started shooting any fox they came across, but this had just opened up space and resources for younger foxes from the surrounding areas.

Owen had also marked each breeding nest he found with the corresponding female's colour code. A simple *Demonisignio* charm would make the nest pulse with an amber light when it contained an egg. The young women in the village had all been very eager to tend to the scraped knees and elbows he got from clambering around in trees all day, much to the chagrin of the young men. Owen had just smiled helplessly and it soon became a running joke the young women turning out with first-aid kits and fussing over him while the young men groaned good-naturedly and 'rescued' him for a drink in *The White Crow*.

Now... a feeding schedule... He tapped his pencil against his notepad (these were so much more convenient than lugging parchment, ink and quill about!), rubbing at the day-old stubble on his chin.

"Mr Vogeldenk, we do not pay you to laze about half-naked under trees."

The unexpected voice made Owen start violently. Trueblue woke up at the jostling, cawing indignantly. A figure in black robes was striding across the grass towards them. Owen scrambled to his feet.

"Professor Snape," he gasped in greeting, extending a hand as the man drew near. This was the first time Owen had seen the effects of the Caladrius up close.

"Oh, do stop ogling me, Mr Vogeldenk. I grow quite weary of the scrutiny," the dark man drawled with a hint of exasperation in his voice as he shook the younger man's hand. "Getting attached to your charges?"

"What...? Oh, Trueblue just likes following me around, sir," Owen explained hastily. Damn, he wasn't in his class anymore, but the man's intimidation had run deep. It was clear that he had mellowed after the war, but 'old habits die hard' and all that.

"It is best," Snape quirked an eyebrow, but there was a certain sadness in his eyes, "that we do not think of them as individuals, Mr Vogeldenk."

"I know, sir. We're breeding them for a very important purpose," the magizoologist replied, as if reading the line from his research proposal. "We're ready for the breeding season, sir. Just a few more things to sort out." Owen felt Trueblue leaning forward on his shoulder to get a closer look at Snape.

Snape seemed as mesmerised by the bird as she was by him. "Good, good," he murmured, his eyes not leaving hers. The older man's eyes widened in panic when she hop-flitted over to his shoulder.

"No, you blasted bird! Get away!"

"Professor! Stay calm, she won't do anything. She's perched on my shoulder for hours with nothing happening to her or me. I think a patient needs to be prone before a Caladrius is able to work its magic. The worst that could happen is that she will make you feel happy."

Snape stayed perfectly still, his shoulders rigid. Trueblue regarded him, first with one eye and then the other. Owen nearly fainted in surprise when Snape laughed as Trueblue preened the ticklish area around his ear.

Trying to compose himself, Snape sputtered, "She is quite... friendly."

"That she is, sir. A right strumpet by all accounts." Owen smiled, the corners of his green eyes crinkling. "Let me show you around, sir."

The breeding program Owen put into motion was a roaring success, even more so in the past four years. Now he was able to monitor it all year round; he had married Beth, the inkeeper's daughter. He now had a cottage near the edge of town on the path to the valley, one small child, and another on the way. Owen knew he would never be able to publish any of his research (you never knew who read those journals, the Caladrii could just end up on the front page of *The Daily Prophet*) and that he would never become a big name in magizoology, but he wouldn't change what he had for the world.

He was being plastered with porridge by his daughter when the owl tapped at the window. It was Sangreal. "Thanks," he murmured, feeding the little grey owl a treat and ruffling its feathers affectionately. He knew the missive would be from Severus. Without even breaking the seal, he knew the time had come.

"Beth! I need to go to the valley. We will be receiving some guests soon," he called up the stairs. "Do you want me to bring Daisy up?"

"Gosh, no... I'll just be waddlin' downstairs like the hippo I be. Don't put yerself out," came the retort. Owen just smiled and lifted Daisy from her high chair. Beth had been this grumpy right before Daisy was born, but he knew she must be uncomfortable.

Beth was sitting up in bed, nibbling at the toast and marmalade he had brought up earlier. She shot him a cheeky smile, which he returned. "I can spot a hint when I hear it," he said as he deposited Daisy on their bed. "Some urgent business in the valley, sweets. Could you phone Elly and tell her to expect at least five or six guests? Maybe a few more?"

"Ye men... always invitin' the world over and expectin' us to make sure everyone has room and food!" she grouched, but grinned as she reached for the cordless telephone.

Owen pressed a kiss to both their foreheads before he raced down the stairs and toward the valley.

Neville was very nervous. He told himself it was because Snape was in such close proximity, but he had or so he thought outgrown his fear of the man. Besides, Snape wouldn't hex him with Hermione around... would he?

He didn't know why Hermione had insisted he come along to this village. This definitely did not look like the right kind of climate to find pyrorchids judging from the vegetation, it was much too wet. Pyrorchids liked dampness, true, but not abject wetness. But Hermione had seemed so sure...

Neville followed them uncertainly on a small path leading out of the village and into a secluded valley. He felt the slight tingle of stepping through a ward. Something was definitely going on.

"Hermione? Where are you taking me?"

"I can't tell you yet, Neville all I can say is that it is something you've always wanted."

Every tiny whim and desire that Neville had ever harboured in his chest flooded his thoughts. He mentally went through each, discarding them as he went along. What could they give him? Snape didn't seem the type to tie bows around pots of rare and interesting plants. He rather looked like the type who would efficiently dispose of bodies of students that used to drive him up the wall. "Hermione... What..."

"Neville... just trust me..."

"I don't un-" Neville gasped at what he saw. His parents were standing in the clearing, blinking dazedly into the sun. They looked confused... as always.

Snape called, "Owen! You may start." A young man that was standing close to the couple nodded and indicated that his two charges should lie down. He was speaking to them, and they nodded, but Neville knew they nodded at whatever you said.

Owen summoned a wicker basket to his side. Carefully opening the catch and reaching inside, he took out a large white bird and placed it on the ground between Neville's parents. Meticulously, he repeated the process, another of the birds joining its kin on the ground. The young man stepped away, taking the holding basket with him.

Human and bird looked at each other in interest. The birds hopped onto them and spread their wings across their chests. The screams of agony that erupted from his parents' mouths horrified Neville. They hadn't screamed like that since...

"What are you *doing* to them? You sick *bastard*!" Neville screamed. He wanted to rush to his parents, but Snape's grip around his upper arm had come out of nowhere, as strong as any Devil's Snare. He was terrified into silence when the man's other arm wrapped across his chest, holding him in place.

"Mr Longbottom... I must insist that you watch," the soft voice said in his ear. Neville hadn't realised that his eyes were closed and forced them open.

The birds lifted off in unison, dragging on their wings a multitude of bright red streamers that seemed to issue from the Longbottoms' very flesh. The birds spun and whirled around each other like a pair of ballroom dancers, the streamers fanning out in a haze of crimson, higher and higher into the air. At the zenith of their arc, they abruptly burst into flames.

Neville watched open-mouthed as his father sat up unsteadily, shaking his head as if waking up... and then reached to help his mother. This time, Snape let him run to them.

Tears were streaming down his round face. "Mum? Dad?"

His mother smiled at him, her eyes focused on him for the first time in his life she ~~had~~ saw him. Just as in his dreams when he was a small boy, she opened her arms and hugged him close to her. "Neville," she whispered, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I've missed you so much."

THE END.

Remember, my stories will always appear here first (if not exclusively).