

Cuckoo in the Nest: The Baby Dialogues

by melusin

Already experiencing a miserable second pregnancy, Hermione receives an unexpected surprise...

****Winner: Best Short, HG/SS Awards, Third Round, 2008.****

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is my first post DH fic, in which I try to excise the horror of 'The Epilogue' from my brain by twisting it to fit my own nefarious purposes. Hope you like it.

Many thanks go to Septentrion for her fast efficient beta work.



Cuckoo in the Nest: The Baby Dialogues.

'Tell me,' Hermione asked wearily, 'why do we have to redecorate the nursery when it looks okay as it is?'

Ron smiled and patted his wife's protruding belly. 'Because it's a boy,' he explained patiently, making allowances for the fact that she was having an off day. 'Pink would be just... wrong.'

Hermione was too tired to argue. Personally, she thought this whole colour thing was ridiculous. As if the baby would care what colour they painted the walls. No, so long as he was well fed, had his nappy changed regularly and could sleep somewhere warm and comfy any time he felt like it, he would be happy. She looked around the room,

empty now apart from the rocking chair Molly had given them when she was expecting Rose. 'Whatever,' she replied.

Ron chose to ignore his wife's lack of interest in the decor. *Hormones.* 'We'll discuss it tonight when I get back from work,' he said cheerfully. 'Take care, you two.' He kissed Hermione on the cheek and patted her bump again. 'See you later.'

Hermione watched Ron leave the room before slowly lowering herself into the rocking chair. She was worn out, debilitated by morning sickness. It had been a rotten pregnancy so far. Rose had been a breeze in comparison; a few weeks of morning sickness at the beginning, and that had been it. But with this one... the very sight of food made her queasy even chocolate, which was making her feel especially miserable. Hermione considered Flooding Molly for some tea and sympathy even though she was unlikely to keep the tea down.

'That's the thing with boys, dear,' her mother-in-law's voice came back to haunt her as she sat staring at the teddy bear wallpaper. 'They fight you all the way. Male magic is different from ours, you see. Ours is alien to them.'

Hermione had smiled politely at the time before dismissing it as another old wives' tale, but lately, she was beginning to suspect that there might be something in it. After all, Molly had had six boys, and so it was fair to assume that she could be trusted to know what she was talking about. Hermione couldn't for the life of her understand, though, why her mother-in-law, if she had been this bad with Bill, had gone on to repeat the experience another four times. *Must be a masochist,* she thought spitefully. *If this one had been my first, he would have grown up an only child.*

Closing her eyes in despair, Hermione rested her head on the back of the chair. How much longer could this possibly go on for? She was barely half way there yet. *I don't think I can take much more of this...*

'Have you forgotten everything I ever taught you?' said a voice. 'There is a potion... '

'Go away. You're dead.'

He laughed. 'I have unfinished business, Miss Granger.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means,' the voice replied, *'that I did not accomplish what I set out to do in my last life. In fact, I made many more mistakes, so I have to come back to rectify them. I do, however, get to choose the best people to help me get it right this time that is, my new parents. In short, Miss Granger, I have chosen you. Oh, and by the way, I am rather partial to green...'*

'Nooo...' Hermione woke up in a cold sweat.

~ * ~

In the kitchen, Hermione poured herself a large glass of water and gulped it down, trying to shake the dream she'd just had *It was quite amusing, really,* she said to herself. *Ron will laugh when I tell him.* Mercifully, the nausea seemed to have passed for the moment, so she cut a couple of rounds of bread, smeared on a generous helping of peanut butter and mashed a banana on top. She took a hungry bite out of the sandwich...

'Ye gods, woman. What in the seven circles of hell are you eating?'

... and promptly spat it out again.

'What? Who-who's there? Show yourself!' Spinning around, Hermione drew her wand and glanced nervously around the kitchen, half expecting to see a ghost.

'And I thought you were supposed to be bright.'

No, Hermione thought, *this isn't real. It can't be. I'm hallucinating. Yes, that's it. I know I shouldn't have eaten that rye bread it must have had some ergot in it.*

'You are not hallucinating.'

'Please don't tell me I'm possessed.'

'Not... exactly...'

'Then... Wh-what are you doing in my head?'

'Think... lower, Miss Granger.'

Hermione's hand moved protectively over her belly. 'No. No, it's not possible.'

'Oh, but I'm afraid it is.'

Hermione pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table, feeling dizzy and nauseous again.

'Now that I have your undivided attention,' the voice said firmly, 'I will ask you once more. What is that you are eating?'

'A p-peanut butter and banana sandwich,' Hermione replied weakly, then took a sharp breath, clutching her abdomen as the baby kicked.

'You expect my brain to develop properly on that rubbish?' he cried. 'What sort of food is that to be giving a growing foetus? Now, you listen to me, madam. I want you to be very clear on this. During the period of my gestation, you will pay particular attention to your diet. You will eat lots of green vegetables, fresh fruit and oily fish. What you do with your body afterwards is your own business, but while I am "in utero" you will...'

Hermione ran for the sink and heaved.

Still panting, she turned the tap on and splashed some water on her face. 'No...' she gasped, 'you listen to me. I don't know what your game is, but you can just... leave.' She tore off a strip of paper towel and dabbed her face dry. 'Can't you see what this pregnancy is doing to me? It's because of you, isn't it, that I haven't been able to keep a meal down in months? *Isn't it?*' She stopped to take a calming breath before continuing. 'In which case, who the hell are you to tell me what I can and can't eat, hmm? It's none of your damned business. So, why don't you just piss off and leave me and my baby alone.'

There was a low chuckle that felt like a rumble in her stomach. 'But I am your baby, Miss Granger, and what you eat concerns me greatly. Moreover, it is abundantly clear to me that you have been paying scant regard to our basic nutritional requirements. However, I also appreciate that you are ill and that, no doubt, you have had an unpleasant shock, so before we go any further, you are going to brew an anti-vomiting potion, drink it, make yourself comfortable somewhere, and then you and I are going to have a little chat. We have much to discuss. Now, do you have any peppermint?'

~ * ~

Feeling much better than she had in a long time, Hermione reclined on the sofa and put her feet up.

'Um... hello?' she said, feeling rather foolish and not knowing how to begin. 'So... er... how come my mid-witch didn't know about that potion?'

'I expect because she's some incompetent old hag!'

Even though she had been expecting an answer, Hermione still jumped. 'That's unfair...!' She faltered as a frightening thought occurred to her. 'It isn't something that might harm...'

'Of course not! Why would I want to harm myself?'

'I'm sorry,' said Hermione. 'That was stupid of me. But then, I haven't been thinking very clearly lately.' She readjusted the cushion behind her aching back. 'Look, perhaps you'd better start at the beginning... Erm, you said you chose me. Why?'

'There were several reasons,' he replied. 'But perhaps I should tell you a little bit about myself before we get to that.'

And so Hermione listened quietly while her baby gave her a brief outline of his mistakes in his past lives, what he had to do to put things right in his new life and explained why he had chosen her to be his mother.

'So you see, Miss Granger,' he concluded, 'I'm telling you all this now to make you aware of the guidance I will need. Consider it a sort of insurance policy, if you will. For once I am born, I will have no memory of my previous existence, and you will have the mewling infant you so desperately desire.'

'I see,' Hermione said, although she didn't fully understand. In fact, his explanation had given rise to more questions than it had provided any satisfactory answers. Rather rashly, she asked the first thing that came into her head. 'Did you... did you really think that I was highly intelligent, brave and-and good looking?'

'Yes, I most certainly did,' he replied. 'But more importantly, you possess a highly developed sense of morality, which will be essential in keeping me on the straight and narrow and, hopefully, prevent me from getting into too much trouble this time around.'

Hermione fell silent, her thoughts in turmoil while she tried to come to terms with the situation. For one thing, how was she going to break the news to Ron that she was expecting... Severus Snape?

'You will say nothing,' said Severus. 'He'll think you've gone mad. And, as I said, I will be a blank slate. How I turn out will be largely down to you, so he need never know.'

Hermione sighed in resignation. 'You're probably right. He will think I've finally lost it...Hey, wait a minute. Can you read my mind?'

'Not... always,' he replied cautiously. 'I can sense your mood, of course, as that has a direct impact on me, but I can only read the thoughts that are floating close to the surface.'

'Well,' Hermione said firmly, 'I'd very much appreciate it, if you didn't go nosing around in my head.'

'Force of habit, I'm afraid.'

Hermione could almost see the smirk in her mind's eye. She covered her forehead with her hand. 'I can't believe this,' she wailed. 'This can't be happening to me.'

'Well,' said Severus, 'I'm not exactly thrilled about the turn of events, either. Given the choice, I'd rather be in Barbados with a couple of expensive whores drinking Margaritas, but thanks to a certain megalomaniac and his pet snake, here I am.'

Hermione felt the baby's agitation and rubbed her tummy absentmindedly.

'He is... dead, I take it?'

'Voldemort?' Hermione felt the baby shudder. 'Oh, yes,' she replied. 'Didn't you know? But of course, I don't suppose you would, would you? Would you like me to fill you in on the details?'

'That would be most kind of you,' Severus replied. 'I've no idea what's been happening while I've been... er, gone. One minute I was hurtling down a tunnel towards a bright light, and the next I was being told I had to come back. How did Potter manage to finish him off?'

'Let me see... After we... After we left the Shrieking Shack...' With a shaky voice, Hermione began to recount the tale of the Battle of Hogwarts to her unborn son. He listened quietly until she got to the part where Neville had decapitated Nagini...

'Merlin's balls!' he exclaimed. 'I never would have thought that Longbottom had it in him. Seemed I misjudged the boy.'

'Yes,' Hermione agreed. 'You always were rather harsh on him, as I remember.' She grinned. 'Actually, er... we were thinking of making him your godfather.'

'You have got to be joking!'

'No, I'm not. And from what you've been telling me, he would be a good role model for you he's rather looking forward to you calling him Uncle Neville, actually.' She sniggered, taking the ensuing silence as a small victory.

Her triumph was short lived. 'So...', Severus said frostily. *'From what I've gathered so far, you married the youngest Weasley. I take it he is my father...'*

'Yes, I married Ron,' Hermione confirmed. 'What do you mean...? Of course he's your father!'

There was that rumbling again. *'I was just checking. You never know...'*

'What do you take me for?'

'I suppose it could be worse,' Severus continued, ignoring her outburst. 'At least it's not Potter. So how come you ended up with the sidekick?'

'Ended up?' Hermione was outraged. 'Sidekick? We were in love, and-and he has some very good qualities.'

'Name three.'

'He-he's brave, intelligent...'

There was a muffled sound very much like a snort.

'Your father is a good man,' Hermione chided, 'and you would do well to remember that.'

'Well, there is one good thing about the Weasleys, I suppose,' Severus conceded. 'They're a strong family unit and take care of their own. I was sadly lacking that in my last incarnation. Hmm... Yes, that could very well work to my advantage...' He fell silent while he considered the possibilities. An extended family could be a good thing provided he remained part of it. But Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley? Not exactly a match made in heaven. He decided to enquire further. *'Tell me, what kind of compatibility score did you get?'*

Hermione yawned. 'What are you talking about?'

'You know oh, don't tell me you didn't do the Arithmancy calculations before you agreed to marry the twerp!'

'Calculations? We were in love...'

'You keep saying that as if it were in the past, Miss Granger. Is there something I should know?'

'No, there isn't! And you can stop calling me, "Miss Granger"!'

'What would you like me to call you, then? "Mrs Weasley"?'

'God forbid! How about "Mummy"?'

'Not while I still have a mind to call my own.'

'Hermione, then.'

'Very well, Hermione and you may call me, "Severus".' He detected a slight flutter of emotion, which aroused his curiosity somewhat, but he decided not to pursue it. *'So, Hermione, if you 'were' in love with 'Daddy', what are you now?'* he asked. *'You see, I would like to know, before I make my decision and commit myself to this body, if I'm likely to be brought up by a single parent.'*

'I'll have you know, we have a very stable relationship, um... Severus.' Hermione was becoming irritated by such personal questions. 'And what do you mean, "commit yourself"?'

'Just that.' he replied. *'The body, as I'm sure you're aware, Miss...Hermione, is merely a vessel for the soul. Until this body becomes independently viable, I can choose to leave it and seek out different... quarters, if I so choose.'*

'Why don't you then,' Hermione spat, 'and leave me alone!'

Severus hesitated before replying. *'A body is no good without a soul, Hermione. And, I'm afraid it is too late for someone else to move in, as it were. If I leave now, you will abort.'*

'Oh? Oh.'

'You will have to go through all this again,' he added softly, *'in the hope that the next soul you give a home to will be of a more pleasing disposition than I.'*

'No. Oh, no,' Hermione protested. 'I don't think you are unpleasant. Please don't think that; I never thought that! I-I-...'

'You don't dislike me?' Severus was unable to restrain his curiosity this time. He delicately probed... *'What's this...? You don't... You didn't... You fancied me?'*

'I thought you couldn't read my mind!'

'That was too easy. I had no idea.'

'Well, of course you didn't!' Hermione exclaimed. 'I didn't go around broadcasting it, did I?' She put her hands over her stomach as her eyes filled with tears. 'I cried for you, you know.' Her voice cracked. 'If I could have got my hands on a Time-Turner, I would have used it to save you. I wished and wished that things could have been different that we could have... I would have done anything to get you back... And now... Oh, God, now I have to get used to the idea that I'm going to give birth to you. Have you any idea how creeped out I am about that?'

Severus felt like saying that she should be more careful about what she wished for, but decided against upsetting her any further. *'I can... appreciate that...'* he said gently. *'Yes. Well... Perhaps we should change the subject. Um... Tell me about my sibling.'*

'Rose?' Hermione sniffed, Summoning a tissue to wipe her eyes. 'Oh, she's a lovely child. She's very serious, loves animals a lot like me at her age only more sporty. She idolizes her auntie Ginny and wants to play Quidditch when she grows up.'

'I can see we're going to have a lot in common,' Severus said drily. *'She hasn't inherited your brains, I take it?'*

Hermione had to smile at that. 'Well, she is bright but...' She sighed. 'No, you're right, she hasn't. She's a Weasley through and through.'

'Just as well you're going to have a son who'll be a kindred spirit, then.'

'Maybe, although you'll also inherit the Weasley genes.' Hermione giggled. 'I can't imagine you with red hair and freckles, though, somehow.'

'There's not a snowball's chance in hell of that happening,' Severus declared. *'I have absolutely no intention of ending up looking like a carrot and being bald by the time I'm thirty!'*

'Ron is not bald,' Hermione said defensively. 'Just a bit... thin. On top. Anyway, you won't have any choice in the matter.'

'Oh, won't I?' he scoffed. *'I think you're forgetting I'm a magical being, Hermione. A very powerful, magical being. Genetics can only go so far...'*

'Just what are you planning?'

'You'll find out,' he replied. *'Now, if you don't mind, I'm feeling a little tired. All this growing is exhausting.'*

'You and me both, Hu er Severus.' Hermione turned onto her side and stuffed a cushion between her knees. 'Ron will be home in about an hour, so I suggest we both have a little nap now, all right?'

'Agreed.' Severus tuned into the sound of Hermione's heartbeat and felt himself drifting off to sleep. *'We shall continue this conversation later, Hermione.'*

~ * ~

Hermione decided to take Severus' advice and not tell her husband about the day's revelations. By the time Ron came home from work, she was busy in the kitchen preparing their dinner, much to Ron's delight, since he'd had to see to his own needs for the past few months and not just in the kitchen. Hermione actually smiled at him, which he took as a very good sign that he might be on a promise later that evening. But despite such selfish thoughts, Ron was genuinely relieved to see Hermione tucking into her dinner, chatting like her old self and generally looking a lot healthier. He was also quite pleased to hear she'd made a decision about the nursery, even though he had reservations about the colour.

A couple of hours later, after a nice hot bath, Hermione climbed gratefully into bed, looking forward to getting a good night's sleep and hoping that the next morning she wouldn't have to make her usual dash for the loo. She rearranged her pillows into her customary nest and sighed contentedly as she snuggled down.

She was just dozing off when she felt Ron's arm come over her.

'Hermione...?'

'Ron, I'm really tired.'

'Just a quickie. Please, love...' he whined. 'It's been ages... I'll be gentle. You don't even have to move. Please.'

'Oh, all right.' It was easier not to argue. She was so sleepy, she did not resist as Ron fumbled about with her nightie and moved in closer... He wouldn't be long; she was grateful for that, and then she could go back to sleep... And the baby was peaceful...

Her eyes flew open in horror. *Oh, God. Please, please, don't wake up now.* Hopefully, if she was very still and kept calm, this would be over before...

'Is he doing what I think he's doing?'

Hermione groaned.

'Oh, yes, baby... Do you like that?'

'No. Tell him to stop it at once!'

'I can't...'

'Yes, you can, love, just... Oh gods, you feel so good... '

'Oh, pu-lease. You can't expect me to have to put up with this.'

'I'm sorry...'

'Don't be, baby. Can't... last... Love you...'

Spent from his exertion, Ron flopped onto his back and reached for Hermione, expecting her to join him for a cuddle.

'That was the most embarrassing... I'd like a word. In private.' Severus shifted so that he was pressing down hard on Hermione's bladder.

She shot out of bed... 'Sorry, darling... Need a pee.' ...and ran for the loo.

In the bathroom, Severus allowed Hermione a moment's privacy before starting.

'That cannot happen again,' he growled.

'Your parents have sex. Get over it.'

'Sex?' he said incredulously. *'Sex? Was that what it was? A few grunts and a couple of thrusts... Does he have the faintest idea how to please a woman? I doubt he could find your clitoris with a compass.'*

'And I suppose you could?'

'I'll pretend I didn't hear that.'

'I'm sorry.' Hermione put her head in her hands and sighed. 'I can't believe I said it. But then, I can't believe I'm sitting on the toilet talking to my ex-professor-soon-to-be-son about my clitoris, either.'

There was a soft rap on the door.

'Hermione? Who are you talking to? Are you all right in there?'

'Yes, love,' Hermione replied. 'The baby's a bit restless, that's all. I won't be long.'

'Restless? What the fuck do you expect after that...?'

'Can I get you something, Hermione? A cup of cocoa?'

'Feeling guilty about that pathetic performance, are we?'

'Shut up!'

'What?'

Hermione suppressed the urge to scream. 'Nothing, love. I'm fine, honestly. Go back to bed.'

'Okay if you're sure you're all right.'

'Yes. Really, I'm okay.' Hermione flushed the loo and went to wash her hands.

'Has he gone?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' said Severus. *'Now, as I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, he's not much cop in bed, is he? How long are you going to put up with that, hmm?'*

Women have sought their pleasures elsewhere for a lot less.'

'That's enough,' said Hermione, slamming her hand on the washbasin. 'We had a perfectly good sex life, thank you, before... before...'

'You conceived me.'

'In a word, yes.'

'I see.'

'I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean'

'Oh, but you did, Hermione,' he said bitterly. 'Look, I was an unwanted child in my last life, so if you don't want me around, say so now. I can't afford to screw this up. If I do, the next time they might send me back as a Muggle.'

Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around her middle. 'You *are* wanted,' she said, *and*, incidentally, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being a Muggle. You were planned for, Hugo; you are not an accident...' She screwed her eyes closed. *Shit.*

'What did you just call me?'

'Er... Hugo.'

'Please tell me you are not serious.'

'I am,' Hermione said firmly. 'Very. It's a perfectly good name. It was my grandfather's name, actually and we both like it.'

'How... touching,' he scoffed. 'And I bet the poor bastard had seven shades of shit kicked out of him in the playground for his trouble. What kind of name is that to give a child?'

'And Severus is any better?' Hermione retorted sweetly.

'That was uncalled for,' he grumbled. 'But if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer a name that isn't going to attract every bully within a ten mile radius, thank you very much. Think of something else.'

She smirked. 'How about Remus Sirius?'

'I'll take Hugo.'

'Good,' said Hermione. 'I'm glad that's settled. Now, unless you have any further objections, I'd really like to get some beauty sleep.'

'Fine by me,' Severus replied. 'God knows you need it. Just tell that oaf to keep his hands to himself.'

~ * ~

Hermione awoke the next morning to find Ron sitting on her side of the bed smiling at her.

'I've brought you some tea,' he said, indicating the mug on the bed-side table.

'Thanks.' Hermione pushed her hair out of her eyes. 'What time is it?'

'Half-nine,' Ron replied. 'You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to wake you. So, any nausea?'

Hermione sat up gingerly. 'No. Actually, I feel pretty good,' she said, reaching for the mug. 'Why aren't you in work, and where's Rose?'

Ron gave her hand a squeeze. 'I just wanted to be sure you were okay first. I Floo-called the office to tell them I'd be late, and I've packed Rose off to Mum's until Sunday.'

Hermione took a sip of her tea. 'There was no need to do that.'

'Well, I thought there was, so I did,' Ron said. 'You need a rest. Would you like me to make you some breakfast?'

Hermione shook her head. 'I'll have something later but thanks for the offer.'

'I'll leave you in peace, then. Make sure you get plenty of rest and don't overdo it today.'

'I won't,' Hermione assured him. 'Now, go. You know what that boss of yours is like.'

'Don't I just.' He got up off the bed. 'See you later.' Ron blew Hermione a kiss and Disapparated.

'I thought he'd never leave.'

Hermione choked on her tea. 'Do you have to keep scaring me like that?'

Severus chuckled. *'You should be used to it by now.'*

'I don't think there's much chance of that happening,' she replied, leaning back on the pillows.

'So...' Severus began. *'About young Mister Weasley...'*

'Oh, please,' Hermione interrupted. 'Don't start on that again.'

'I was about to say...' he said tersely. *'Hard as it is for me to admit it, I was evidently wrong about him. He obviously cares for you a great deal.'*

'Yes. Yes, he does and the feeling's mutual.' Hermione took another sip of tea. 'I'm glad you can see that. Finally.'

'Maybe he will make an adequate father, after all.'

'Will you stop being so negative!' Hermione put her mug down and plumped up the pillows. 'Ron is already a good father to Rose, and he will be to you, too.'

'I wasn't being negative,' Severus replied. 'I just can't see us having anything in common; that's all I was trying to say.'

Hermione thought for a moment. 'Chess. He can teach you chess.'

'I am already an expert... Oh, I...'

'I'll rephrase that,' said Hermione gently. 'He can help you re-learn it he's really very good.'

'Yes... yes, perhaps that is something you should encourage. Very well, that is a mark in his favour...' It seemed the paternal influence in his life wouldn't be as bad as he'd first thought providing Hermione stayed put. But would she? Severus had the feeling she wasn't as happy as she made out. *'I still don't understand why you didn't do the calculations, though.'*

Hermione sighed in exasperation. 'Because there was no point!'

'But everyone...' He stopped. *'Don't tell me the Gryffindor walking encyclopaedia didn't know about...'*

'Of course I knew,' she snapped. 'I shared a room with Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, for God's sake! They were fortune telling about boys as soon as they hit puberty casting the Runes, reading tea-leaves, crystal ball-gazing you name it; they did it.'

'So why...?' Suddenly, it was perfectly obvious. *'You did it for me, didn't you?'*

'Perhaps.'

'Yes, you did. I can tell,' he crowed. *'What did we get?'*

Hermione considered lying, but there didn't seem to be any point; he could read her like a book. 'Ninety-seven percent,' she said.

'Ninety... That's impossible,' Severus declared. *'No one gets that kind of score. I only got a fifty-three with...'*

'Well, we did,' Hermione said firmly, 'and it didn't seem to matter what variables I put in; it never wavered.' She reached for the mug again and stopped. 'Um... Who did you...?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It was Harry's mum, wasn't it?'

'Perhaps. Though it's none of your...'

'I saw the Pensieve memories you gave Harry, so there's no point in denying it.'

Severus groaned. *'I had forgotten. I thought there were blanks in my memory, but I put it down to this underdeveloped brain.'*

Hermione wrapped her arms over her stomach protectively, wishing she could hold him for real. 'You loved her very much didn't you?'

'Yes,' he hissed, *'for all the good it did me. And that's one thing, Hermione, I would like not to repeat to be made a fool for love. I can do without it. You will make sure that I do not make any unsuitable romantic attachments...'*

Hermione threw back her head and laughed. 'Oh, Severus.'

'What's so funny?'

'Severus, how do you think I could stop you from falling in love?' She giggled helplessly. 'And even if I thought a girl wasn't good enough for you, would you take any notice of your mother?'

It was a fair point.

'But I vow to you, hand on heart, you will not be loner,' she declared, suddenly serious. 'You will have the love of your family, and you will make friends with children your own age. You will be secure...'

'Will I?' He snorted. *'How can I be sure you won't leave Weasley for some-some drunken alcoholic wife-beater? You didn't do the calculations for him because you knew they would never come close to ninety-seven percent, didn't you? Admit it!'*

'You don't know me very well,' Hermione replied stonily. 'In fact, you don't know me at all, if you think I would put up with any kind of abuse in a relationship. I married Ron because I love him and because we get along really well. That's all you need to know.'

'And what about passion, Hermione?' he persisted. *'What about longing? Do you crave your husband's presence when he's not there? Does the very sight of him blank out every other person in the room? Do you come alive when you are close enough to feel his breath on your face; forget to breathe when he smiles at you? Or,'* he added nastily, *'do you close your eyes and pretend he's someone else?'*

Hermione swallowed hard, trying to block the unwelcome thoughts his words were evoking. 'Yes... I understand about passion and longing, Severus.' She closed her eyes. 'And then... And then, the person or the feelings go, and what's left? I know what I have with Ron, and it's not going anywhere. You may have chosen to wallow in self-pity all those years, but I chose to make a life for myself.'

'How dare you?' His voice was barely above a whisper. *'You know nothing of me, you stupid girl. I was in Vol-Voldemort's service for most of my adult life. How could I have had a relationship with anyone, never mind a family? He would have seen it as a weakness and exploited it for all it was worth. It would have been as good as a death sentence for anyone to get too close to me.'*

'I'm sorry. That was petty of me...' Hermione snuffled. 'You were so incredibly brave all those years... Oh, it's all so bloody unfair!'

'Very few things in life are fair, Hermione, but you will find that things usually happen for a reason.' He paused, astonished by the emotions he was sensing all around him. *'Do not weep for me, child. No one forced me onto the path I took. No one forced me to betray the only woman I ever loved. The world is undoubtedly a better place without me.'*

'Don't say that; don't you dare say that,' Hermione cried. 'Anyway, it's not true. Our world owes you a debt of gratitude...'

'That's the most preposterous...'

'It is not.' She sniffed, brushing the tears away. 'You said you could do without love but where would we all be now if you hadn't loved Lily Evans under Voldemort's thumb, that's where.'

'However did you come to that ridiculous conclusion?'

'It's not at all ridiculous,' Hermione replied. 'Don't you see? If you hadn't begged for her life, Voldemort would just have killed her. He would never have given her the option to stand aside, and Harry would have died, too.'

That was the most ludicrous thing he'd ever heard. *'But if I hadn't told him about the prophecy, she would still be alive.'*

'You can't know that,' Hermione replied. 'He could have learned about the prophecy from someone else in due course. No, your love for Lily Evans saved Harry saved all of us, and like it or not, you are going down in history as a hero.'

'A dead hero.'

'Tragically, yes.' She sighed. 'But for whatever reason, you have been given another chance, and I am going to do everything in my power to ensure you have a happy and fulfilling life, or die trying.'

The flood of passion that accompanied Hermione's statement was overwhelming. Severus could have made some snide comment, but her sincerity made him think twice about it. There was only one question. *'Why?'*

'Because I love you.'

... ..

'Severus?'

'Severus?'

'Oh, be like that then,' she said, throwing the covers off. 'I've got better things to do than lie here arguing with you, anyway.'

~ * ~

Later that morning, after a hearty breakfast and some nifty wand-work, Hermione's home was gleaming like a new pin.

'There,' she said, looking around with satisfaction. 'Much better.'

'It is edifying to know that you didn't let the best education the wizarding world has to offer go to waste.'

Hermione refused to rise to the bait. 'Stopped sulking, have you?'

'I was not sulking,' Severus replied haughtily. *'I was merely taken aback by your... confession.'*

'Why?' she asked. 'You're my baby. Why would I not love you?'

'Yes, well, uh... I am not accustomed... That is to say, I... a-hem... So, what household potions have you perfected in your spare time?'

'You know,' said Hermione, gathering up the last of Ron's Quidditch magazines. 'You're not nearly so intimidating anymore, so you can cut the sarcasm. Besides, it's called, "nesting".'

He snorted. *'What are you? A stork?'*

Hermione sat down and put her feet up, ignoring him. 'Five minutes, and we'll start on the nursery,' she said brightly. 'You said you liked green, what else would you like?'

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'Well...' Hermione replied. 'For example, where was your favourite place?'

Severus couldn't really think of anywhere special. *'I suppose I liked the Forbidden Forest,'* he said eventually. *'Particularly at night when the sky was clear or early morning when the grass was still damp underfoot... Why do you ask?'*

But Hermione had stopped listening. 'Hmm... interesting. All right, I could do that, but I'll need to dig out my seventh-year Charms textbook... And you are not to go poking around in my head,' she added, 'or you'll spoil the surprise.'

Two hours later, Hermione sat in the rocking chair admiring the transformation of the nursery. Starting with a dark green at the skirting, she had gradually lightened the colour as it progressed up the walls, finally changing to blue at the top. In the four corners of the room, she had painted trees, whose branches grew and intertwined, and finally, twinkling above them in a scaled down version of the ceiling of the Great Hall, she had created the sky at night.

Severus had no idea what she'd been up to, only that she had expended an enormous amount of magical energy, which had left him feeling quite exhausted. Whatever it was, he was extremely glad she'd finished.

'Would you like to see?' she asked. 'I'll visualise it for you.'

And so he looked... and looked. *'You did all this... for me?'*

'Do you like it?'

Severus could not believe his eyes. *'For... me?'*

'Yes, for you.' She smiled at his bewilderment. 'And when you're older, I'll buy a telescope, and we'll look at the real thing together, and I'll teach you the names of the constellations.'

'Oh,' he said. *'Oh, that sounds wonderful that is, I mean to say... Yes, that is an excellent suggestion, Hermione. As a matter of fact, I've been meaning to bring up the subject of my education. Perhaps, now would be a good time as any to discuss it.'*

Looking up at the stars above her, Hermione put her arms around her middle. It was an action that was becoming habitual. 'What do you want to know?'

'Well, let's see...' Severus thought about it for a moment. *'Tell me what sort of pre-Hogwarts curriculum you have in mind. I would expect, by approximately age seven, for example, to be fairly proficient at Potions and to be able to cast some rudimentary hexes.'*

Smiling, Hermione shook her head. 'Aren't you forgetting the "Underage magic directive"?'

'Ah, yes,' he said slyly, *'but you'll be around. They'll think it's you.'*

'What makes you think that?' she asked. 'I'm only on a year's maternity break. I have my career to think of, too, you know.'

The idea that Hermione might not be around all the time had never occurred to him. *'Career?'*

'Yes,' Hermione replied. 'I'm a lawyer. My ambition is to become the youngest serving witch on the Wizengamot.'

Severus was impressed. *'A noble ambition indeed, Hermione. But what about me? Your son?'*

'You'll be in nursery.'

'You would leave me with strangers?' he cried.

'Not strangers, no. Your grandmother.'

Severus was horrified. *'Molly Weasley?'*

'Yes,' Hermione confirmed. 'Molly ended up babysitting for so many grandchildren she decided to go into business. She now runs the "Mollywobbles Daycare Nursery"...'

'Molly Weasley?' He shuddered. *'Nursery? How am I supposed to learn anything of any use there with her?'*

'You'll learn to play and...'

'Play?' he said incredulously. *'Play? What a complete and utter waste of time when I could be reading...'*

'Play will be very important for your social development.' Hermione's tone was firm. 'Like it or not, you are going to learn to ride a toy broom and throw a Quaffle like normal children. And then, once you're old enough, you'll go to Muggle Junior School like your sister before you.'

'Muggle school?' Things were going from bad to worse. *'Have you any idea?'*

'Yes, I went to one myself, remember, and I want my children to have some experience of their Muggle Heritage.' Hermione was fast losing patience with his attitude. 'You're going, and that's final...Oww, that hurts!'

'No, I won't.'

Hermione gritted her teeth against the pain. 'Oh, yes, you will even if I have to do it at wand point.'

'I want you to promise me some extra tuition, then,' he said silkily.

'All right, all right, it's a deal. Just stop kicking me, will you!'

~ * ~

Ron found Hermione asleep in the rocking chair when he returned home, and he, too, could not believe his eyes.

'So this is what you mean by taking it easy, is it?' he said, looking around the room in wonder.

'What do you think?' Hermione asked.

'I think it's bloody amazing,' Ron said, walking towards her and sniffing the air. 'But... um... What's that pong?'

'Oh, that,' Hermione replied airily. 'I Charmed the carpet to smell like the forest after the rain when you tread on it. It's very important that all the baby's senses are stimulated, you know.'

'I see.' Ron glanced about and noticed a unicorn peeking around a tree. 'You don't think this is all likely to scare him half to death, do you?'

Hermione laughed. 'No, there's nothing scary here no Acromantulas, or anything.'

'Thank God for that!' Ron said in relief. 'So, um, what's for dinner?'

'I'll find something,' Hermione replied getting out of the chair. 'You go and pour yourself a drink.'

'Okay.' But Ron stood transfixed, watching as a centaur galloped off into the distance. 'Hermione,' he said, taking her arm to prevent her leaving the room, 'you are one bloody amazing witch. I hope you realise that.'

Hermione blushed at the rare compliment and hugged him. 'Thank you, Ron.'

There was a loud snort, which fortunately only Hermione was able to hear. *'And it's taken him how long to work that out? I take it all back; the boy's an idiot.'*

~ * ~

In the months that followed, Hermione spent a lot of her time in the nursery she had created for baby Hugo. Severus, however, was becoming increasingly bored and restless, and so, to keep him entertained, Hermione started reading to him. She read out works of Muggle literature, arcane magical texts, articles from the latest Potions journals anything she could lay her hands on, and they argued and debated over it all. For relaxation, she played him selections of classical and modern music (he particularly liked jazz) and sang or hummed along out of tune just to feel that rumbling chuckle. Hermione could not recall a time since the war when she had been so happy, and yet, her happiness was tinged with sadness because she was all too aware that it could not last forever.

And Severus felt it too as, week by week, he found himself growing to love the woman who, if the Fates had been kinder, might have played a very different part in his destiny. He worried for her, though, wondering how she would cope with losing him again when the time came for 'Hugo' to take his place.

Hermione's behaviour did not go unnoticed by Ron. Even allowing for her being pregnant, she was acting most peculiarly, and he was beginning to worry about her sanity. Often, he would walk into a room to find her standing or sitting as if she were listening intently to something he couldn't hear. Then, at odd times he would catch her saying things like, 'Oh I see... Moonstone? Really? Are you sure? Wouldn't that react with the tincture of Bladderwort?' And for no reason at all that he could understand, she would suddenly have a fit of giggles as if she were laughing at some joke he was unable to share.

One Sunday, when they were at the Burrow for lunch, Ron decided to tell his mother about his fears and managed to corner Molly in the kitchen. But she just smiled, hugged him and said, 'Don't worry. Once the baby's born, she'll be fine.' Then she turned back to the cooker, muttering something under her breath which sounded suspiciously like, 'Wonder who she's got,' and left him feeling more confused than ever.

But, eventually, the inevitable happened. Severus and Hermione were having a heated debate over the necessity of changes in the education system when Severus' voice turned to a high-pitched squeak.

'What on earth was that?' Hermione asked.

He tried again with the same result. *'It is the point of no return, Hermione. Time to choose.'*

'And-and what have you decided?'

'I-I would very much like to stay,' he replied hesitantly, *'but only if it is what you want. If you do not want me for your son, I will understand.'*

Hermione had no such doubts. 'Of course, I want you to stay. I want to look after you. If you go, who knows where you'd end up?' She didn't wait for Severus to reply to that. 'No, you have been entrusted to me, and I won't let you risk your soul with anyone else. Stay. Please.'

'Then, stay I shall.' As Severus made his commitment, he felt a shift in his consciousness. It was time for him to say goodbye to his old life. *'Well, there's no point in putting it off,'* he said, trying to sound cheerful. *'Let's get this over with. Would you like to get to St Mungo's before we start?'*

'Don't be daft. You can't come out now there's weeks to go yet.'

'I know,' he said sadly, *'during which time, my memories will gradually fade. I can't bear the thought of it. I want out now.'*

'No, no way, you can't,' Hermione protested. 'You might die! Give it another couple of weeks, at least, please. Give yourself a chance.'

'Oh, all right,' Severus reluctantly agreed. *'But don't expect me to hang around in here any longer than that.'*

~ * ~

It was only two weeks later when Hermione felt the first contractions.

'Ron?' she called out. 'Ron? It's the baby... he's coming.'

Ron pelted into the kitchen, his face ashen. 'But he can't yet. It's too early.'

'I'm ready now. Let's get on with it.'

'Try telling him that,' said Hermione, doubling up in pain.

Ron panicked. 'Does it hurt, Hermione?'

'Imbecile! Of course it bloody hurts. You should be in here.'

'Calm down!'

'Sorry, love,' said Ron, 'I'm just worried about you about you both.'

'Not you... the baby,' she panted. 'He's anxious.'

'Too bloody right, I am. How is my head supposed to fit in there?'

'It'll be all right,' Hermione tried to reassure him. 'We're in this together.'

'Of course we are, love,' said Ron. 'Now, just keep panting like we practiced while I call the hospital.' He ran for the fire-place.

'Panting, my arse!' said Severus. *'Tell him to go stick his head in a vice and see how he likes it. I think I've changed my mind. I'm staying put.'*

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Hermione grabbing the back of a chair. 'You've broken my waters. You've got to come out one way or the other!'

Ron came back into the kitchen five minutes later, closely followed by Hermione's mid-witch.

'I need to examine you, dear,' said the nurse. 'Best get you on the bed.'

Hermione nodded and allowed herself to be helped to the bedroom.

'Ooh, he's in a hurry to join us, isn't he?' said the mid-witch. 'You're almost at full dilation.'

But Hermione wasn't listening. Severus was terrified and she could feel his distress.

'I-I'm scared, Hermione... I'm going to lose myself...'

'I promise... I'll tell you about you... when the time is right,' she panted. 'Now, let's get on with this.'

'You promise?'

'Yes. Trust me, I'm your mother.'

'I suppose there is no other option.' He sighed. *'Oh, very well. What are you waiting for, woman? Start pushing!'*

'Stop...telling me... what to... do.'

The mid-witch smiled at the young woman on the bed talking to herself ... and at the perplexed look on the father's face. She had seen it all before. 'You're doing fine, Hermione. I can see the head.'

Hermione gritted her teeth and pushed.

'Here... he ... comes... It's a boy,' said the mid-witch. 'He looks a little bit on the small side to me, but I'm sure he'll soon catch up.'

Ron stared at his son in shock. 'But-but, all us Weasleys are red-headed...'

The baby snorted.

'Give him to me,' said Hermione.

Hermione took her son in her arms. *So tiny.* She touched his face gently, stroked his downy black hair and was totally smitten.

Nuzzling his face, she whispered, 'It will be all right this time, you'll see. I'll make sure of it.' She kissed his cheek and smiled. Black eyes bored into hers, and she could have sworn he smirked or was it wind before latching onto a nipple.

~ * * ~

Epilogue:

Hogwarts. Eleven years later...

'WEASLEY, HUGO!'

The Hat fitted snugly over the boy's head, blotting out the sight and sounds of the Great Hall.

'O-ho what have we here? A snake in lion's clothing, eh? Only one place for you, my lad.'

'SLYTHERIN!'

There were loud gasps and equally loud applause as the first Weasley in... well, ever, took his place at the Slytherin table.

The Bloody Baron chose that moment to swoop down from the ceiling and take a closer look at the youngest additions to his house. Hugo paled when the blood-stained phantom hovered overhead and stared menacingly at him, but his mother had told him what to do. He bowed respectfully.

The Baron peered at Hugo for a moment before returning the bow and giving a rare smile.

'Welcome back,' he said.

~ *Mischief * Managed*~