

Spinster

by ladyofthemasque

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

Chapter 01

Chapter 1 of 11

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Author's Notes: *Plot-kitten. Nibbling on my toes. So furry...and cute...losing...consciousness... *thump**

This story is NOT Deathly Hallows compliant. I tried...but it felt like I was bugging my characters and trying to giggle about it. Not cool. Not the story I wanted to tell. (Of course, I kinda feel like that's what DH turned out to be, but that's just my opinion, don't flame me for it 'cause I'll freely admit I haven't actually read DH, just heard the spoilers...and I am not going to read it until all those editing mistakes I heard about have been cleaned up, at the very least.) So this is just my little twist on reality. Without bugging my characters, and with definitely no insane giggling. Just some normal giggling, because there are a few funny moments ahead. (At least, I think they're funny.)

...'Nuff said. I hope you enjoy my parody!

~Lotm

I.

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Oh god... Ermmm...Krum. Victor Krum!

It was the only name Hermione could think of to get herself out of her predicament. She stared at Ron as he sat there in his hospital bed, giving her a confident grin, and tried to not let her dismay show. Unfortunately, from the way his smile slipped, she didn't think she succeeded. His brow dipped, then furrowed into a scowl.

"Oi! Why are you looking at me like that? Don't you *want* to get married?" Ron demanded, studying her as if she'd grown two heads. "Hermione, you know I was going to ask you as soon as we won...and we won! Now we can get married and raise a big family!"

Married? To Ronald *I Love Quidditch To The Point of Insanity* Weasley? Mr. *I Think Books Are Stupid*? This was the first she'd heard about it, actually! Not that it was a *surprise*...but the prat did have a tendency to assume an awful lot, make plans, and then spring final ideas on people without first asking if any of the preliminaries were permissible.

Of course, Hermione had already done her best to put him off, once she'd realized after a particularly spurious daydream last summer that said daydream would never come true: he would *never* sit with her on a sofa, quietly reading wizarding journals about advances in Transfigurations or Arithmancy, and discussing the articles in an

intellectual version of domestic bliss. No, marrying him, she'd end up with conversations revolving around Quidditch teams, a dozen kids and a garden patch. And while Molly Weasley was a wonderful woman who loved that kind of life, Hermione was *not* Ron's mum. Nor was she some sort of Muggle cheerleader, to hang onto every sports-related conversation like it was the most fascinating thing she'd ever heard.

Krum. He was her only hope of surviving this without crushing Ron's spirit. As much as she didn't love him like, well, a lover, she *did* love him like a sister, and she didn't want him to think it was because of the magical hand the Healers had been forced to give him. She'd already had to reassure him that his hand didn't bother her in the least. It didn't; it was the rest of him that bothered her.

"...I...I can't, Ron," she forced herself to confess. "When he died...I realized how much I still love him. I can't marry anyone." She turned away, dredging up acting skills that had thankfully improved since she had lured Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest. "Viktor's d...death left a gaping hole in my heart. I need to recover. I need time. I can't even think about another man right now, let alone marriage or kids."

"But...but I thought you loved me!" he protested. "Hermione, I thought you loved *me*. What happened?"

Turning to face him, she gave him the truth. "Ron, I realized over this last year that you're my dearest friend. I grew up as an only child, but when I met you and Harry, I realized over time that you were like the brothers I always wanted, but never got to have. Not until I came to Hogwarts. I thought for a little while that there might be something else, but when I met Viktor..."

She turned away again. Ron cursed, then threw one of his pillows onto the floor. "...Just what I need! Now who's going to want me? A bloody cripple with a..."

Hermione whirled on him with a scowl fit to rival one of his mother's. "You just shut your gob, Ronald Bilius Weasley! I happen to know for a *fact* that Lavender Brown was calling your name and asking the nurses how you'd fared, when she came to, in the women's ward. She was in the bed right next to me," she added bluntly. "If you want to start thinking about marrying someone who loves you, then start thinking about *her*. You at least have a chance to marry someone who loves you in that way who is *still alive*."

He scowled at her, his nose wrinkling in a mulish pout, but he didn't argue her logic; at least, not aloud.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione huffed and headed for the door. "I need to go home and let my parents know I'm alright. I'll see you in a couple more days."

"What about Harry?" her friend asked her, his tone stubborn with reluctance to talk to her, but laced with concern for the third member of their friendship.

"They said, if Fawkes hadn't come back and cried on him, he'd have been permanently blinded. As it is, he's still in worse shape than either of us," Hermione confessed, pausing at the doorway to look back at him. "He looks like a stained-glass window, so thin, you could practically see right through him. We both got off lucky, compared to him."

Ron shrugged, flexing the gilded fingers of his artificial hand. "Not so lucky as you did. You were only stuck here for, what, five days?"

Hermione absently rubbed her abdomen, wincing a little at the memory. Bellatrix LeStrange had eviscerated her with a nasty spell, before being taken down by Neville Longbottom. She'd nearly died on the battlefield. "It could've been worse, yeah."

"...Do you *really* still love him?" Ron pressed her one more time.

Somehow, she refrained from rolling her eyes. "Words cannot begin to express what I'm feeling right now, Ron. I just...need to get away for a while. See you."

Ducking out of his room, she headed up the corridor. With the help of Aurors stationed in the halls in this wing of St. Mungo's, the staff had managed to keep the wizarding world press away from the recovering heroes. Unfortunately, she would have to run the gauntlet to get out of here, since Apparating wasn't possible. Unless she was lucky enough to find a Floo connection, of course.

Slipping out to the nurse's station, she caught and asked one of the passing orderlies a question. The fellow knew who she and her friends were, of course...who didn't, after the defeat of the Dark Lord...but he kindly showed her how to get out of the hospital through the back entrance. Thankfully, there weren't any reporters waiting in the back alley behind the old building that looked like a closed shopping centre.

Hermione didn't immediately Apparate home, however. Instead, she shifted to one side as the door closed, and slumped back against the brick wall. Her parents weren't actually at home, right now, though she did intend to contact them, once she got home. They'd been secretly sent on a cruise to the Caribbean, just days before the final confrontation. It had been Harry's idea, actually, and his Galleons, converted to pounds, that had afforded the trip. She'd conjured a 'prize packet' of tickets for them, to surprise them, then had convinced them it was real when they'd told her about the strange letter they'd received in the mail.

Not just her family, either. The Order had learnt that several families of Muggle-borns were going to be targeted by the Death Eaters. Too many for the Order to watch over and protect, and the Aurors were already spread too thin. In the end, they'd packed them off on a cruise ship with a trio of Order members who would ward the ship from stem to stern to keep them safe. It had worked. They were all safe.

With another five days to go before her parents were due home, Hermione wasn't in a hurry to go back to an empty home. Well, almost empty. After being released this morning, she had swung by Headquarters and picked up Crookshanks.

Something brushed against her ankle, making her snap her eyes open and grope for her wand. Hermione hadn't realized she'd closed her eyes until then. The thing, brushing her a second time, resolved itself into the sorriest looking cat Hermione had ever seen. It was black, with matted fur that looked like it hadn't cleaned itself in a while, and it definitely looked starved, it was that thin. Certainly it wasn't a happy puss; the tail was dragging low, the ears down, the whiskers drooping as it all but huddled against her.

The poster-child for misery, the cat looked up at her with the darkest eyes she had ever seen on a feline, so dark, the slitted pupils looked navy-blue in comparison. Its gaze flicked between her face and her wand, aimed warily at it, but the cat just stood there, shivering. Unable to withstand such a piteous sight, Hermione tucked her wand back into her shirtsleeve and stooped, slowly and cautiously, extending the backs of her fingers for His Bedraggled Majesty to sniff. Cats had always been her favorite animal. As had underdogs and pathetic waifs of all sorts who needed compassion and love to make them better creatures.

Whiskers flicked back, then cautiously forward as the cat visibly steeled its courage. It sniffed at her digits...and flinched as the door opened next to them. A wizard in green scrubs stepped outside, an unlit cigarette in his fingers. He blinked at the sight of her crouching by the door, then dropped his gaze to the cat.

"Hey! Go on, scat!"

"What?" Hermione asked, startled.

The man waved his arm at the cat, who flinched back. "Damned cat has been hanging around for the last few days, trying to get in here...go on, get! I should call Animal Control to come get rid of it, filthy little creature."

"What? No!...This is my cat!" Hermione found herself lying, for the second time that day. She scooped up the puss, who thankfully didn't claw her, or struggle in protest against suddenly being held. "He's just been trying to get to me! He's...he's half-Kneazle. They're really smart, you know."

"Animals aren't allowed in hospital, girl," the wizard scoffed. "I already had to ward the doors so it couldn't get in...so get it out of here!"

The cat hissed at the wizard, who retorted with a rude gesture before lighting his fag. Disgusted by the man's cavalier, heartless attitude...not to mention the tobacco

smoke...Hermione concentrated. With a crack, she Disapparated from the alley, taking the cat with her. Crooks and Puss would just have to learn to get along, it seemed. She certainly wasn't going to leave the poor thing to starve and suffer abuse, or worse, be carted away for euthanasia, if it was left in the alley behind St. Mungo's.

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Ears pressed flat against his head Severus huddled in the witch's arms. He'd picked up enough gossip from the hospital workers taking their breaks in the alley behind St. Mungo's to know that the Dark Lord was dead, thoroughly defeated. Unfortunately, enough members of the wizarding community had been injured that there hadn't been any Healers to spare to question the persistent presence of a black cat with black eyes. When he'd seen the Granger git slipping into the alley, he'd hesitated a long moment before approaching her. The only thing that had made him do it in the end was his memory of her silly compassion for house-elves, and that squash-faced, marmalade cat of hers.

"Crooks? ...Crookshanks!" The girl...woman, given the curves under her shirt...carried him from an entryway lined with a coat-rack and still, Muggle-style photographs, to a sitting room lined with comfortable furniture in a tasteful blue calico. "Crooks, come here; I've someone I want you to meet!"

It wasn't until the *larger* cat came into view that Severus realized he would be at a distinct advantage in a fight, if the girl set him down and her Familiar took exception to another male cat in the house. Severus hadn't been able to keep down more than a fraction of the mice he had caught and attempted to eat. Mousing was just too difficult for a wizard who had never done it before, and too revolting in taste to stomach for long.

Just because he *looked* like a cat, didn't mean he *was* a cat...he thought. At least, it seemed that way. Unfortunately, he couldn't remember...

Orange-gold eyes peered up at him, as the smush-nosed cat sniffed. Hermione lowered Severus to the floor at her feet. He tensed, prepared to flee if necessary. The bigger tom padded forward, still snuffling, though how it could breathe with such a pug nose, Severus didn't know. He backed up, his haunches running into Miss Granger's trainer-clad ankle, until the marmalade cat's whiskers tickled his own, filling his own nostrils with the scent of felinity.

"Is he a good cat, Crooks?" he heard Granger enquiring, surprising him. "Or she; I supposed it could be a girl-cat. I haven't looked, yet. Is she a good kitty? Not like that rat, Pettigrew, I trust?"

Another sniff, and Crookshanks pronounced judgment on Severus Snape. "*Mrraow*."

Severus stiffened as the cat lunged forward...and rubbed against his flank? Stunned, he found himself attacked from above as his former pupil stooped and stroked him from scalp to tail. It was a strange sensation...but undeniably soothing. He found himself leaning into her leg as she petted him twice more. Then she scooped him up, one palm cupping his ribs just behind his forelegs, the other scooping up his hind paws, supporting his weight.

It was a comfortable way to be picked up. And it was equally comfortable, the way she cradled him against her bosom as she headed into another room, a very Muggle kitchen. Drawing her wand, she flicked it at the refrigerator, then at a cupboard. Severus watched as a tin with a plastic lid sailed out of the one, and a saucer out of the other. A fork came out of a drawer with another swish of the vine-wood shaft. It scooped out something brownish and moist, chopped it up on the saucer, then winged its way to the sink while the can went back into the icebox and the plate settled onto the kitchen table.

He found himself deposited next to the teaspoon of food. "...There you go. You look like you need a good meal in you. I'll get you some water, too."

The smell of the stuff repulsed him, even worse than the taste of raw mouse. Chicken-and-liver, if he'd read that glimpse of the tin's label correctly. Liver repulsed him as a food item even in his original form...which he couldn't return to, thanks to that *rat*.

She came back with a custard cup filled with water. Severus found himself lapping at it before she finished putting it on the table, thirsty. Filling himself with the clean tap-water, he found her nudging the plate towards him again.

"Come on; eat up, Puss...."

One hind leg missed the edge of the table, forcing him to scrabble for balance. The other cat leapt up onto the table as he edged to one side. Miss Granger huffed a breath at her Familiar.

"Crooks, that was for Puss-in-Boots, not you! Puss, don't you want any?" she asked, picking up the plate so that she could hold it under his nose.

He squirmed free, backing up across the table. He couldn't help it, though he *was* starving; it just smelled revolting! Looking up at her as she set the saucer back down, he licked his muzzle, wishing he could tell her that what he *wanted* was real food. Like bangers and mash, or a roasted chicken. Not that disgusting slop her marmalade tom was now gobbling with relish. *Think it through, Granger!* he thought at her, wishing he could project thoughts, not just read them through Legilimency. *If I won't eat cat-food, what will I eat? Aren't I starved and pathetic-looking enough for your overblown sense of compassion?*

She sighed after a moment and went to the cupboard, opening it the Muggle way. Rummaging through the shelves, she pulled out a tin and a bowl, then tapped the tin with her wand, cutting it open. Scooping the contents into the bowl, she picked up a tiny bit on the pad of her finger, and brought it back to the table. Severus sniffed deeply, and closed his eyes briefly in satisfaction.

Tuna. He could eat tuna. He could eat tuna all day, practically! As carefully as he could, he nibbled the scrap of fish-flesh from her fingertip. She smiled down at him, and stroked the back of his head, adding to the bliss of the fish on his tongue. "I guess you're as finicky about the smell of that stuff as I am. I'll get you some tuna, Puss."

Relieved, Severus licked his teeth, waiting for her to transfer some of the tuna to a second saucer. When she brought it back, he snapped it up gratefully. He even licked the plate clean, chasing down the last few scraps. Wisely, she hadn't given him a lot, since his cat-sized stomach had shrunk a bit, but it was good, and tasty. And found himself leaning into her palm as she petted him again.

Having been forced into this shape, unable to communicate, unable to *eat* for the last week, Severus found himself enjoying the two simplest pleasures of all: a full belly, and the gentle, comforting touch of...well, an ally, if not a friend. A rumbling sound made his ears flick, until he identified the source with a touch of surprise. It was *him*; he was *purring*, of all things.

"That's a good Puss," she praised him. Then lifted her hand and stared at it. "Though I think the next priority is to give you a bath."

His tail twitched, at that. Not that he wanted to be filthy; he didn't know how to clean himself in this form, other than an awkward lick or two. The thought of water wasn't very appealing. He had suffered through two cold spring downpours and numerous mud-puddles already.

She drew her wand. He stiffened, but it was too late to run. A swoop, and the young woman intoned, "*Felidae mundicarum!*"

His fur snapped out, bristling with static electricity. A grumbling made him glance to the side. The other tom looked like an orange ball of sugar-spun fluff. Crookshanks gave his mistress a dirty look, then sat back on his haunches to start licking his chest-fur, matting it down so that it no longer stood out like an advert for the before-picture for a hair-conditioner. Unfortunately, Severus just couldn't bring himself to lick his own fur. Not yet, though at least he now had an example of the proper technique at hand. The thought of getting hair stuck on his tongue made him shudder, and the thought of a hairball...!

A squawk escaped him as he found himself scooped up and rolled over, belly-up in the witch's arms. She caught his hind legs, pushing them up out of the way with her hand. If he could have blushed, he would have, the moment Severus realized she was peering intently at his hindquarters. A smile stretched her mouth, revealing the teeth she'd had fixed a few years back, after that Beavertooth Hex Malfoy had cast on her.

"Aha, a boy-cat! I see that I picked the right name for you, Puss-in-Boots," she added, turning him around so that he was lifted by the ribs until their noses were level. His hind feet scrabbled for purchase, finding it on her bosom. Which was embarrassing, but he didn't have much choice; the drag of his hindquarters was too uncomfortable to go without support for long. She scooped him into a comfortable hold against her blue-clad breasts once more. "Well, we'll just have to get a nice gentleman like you acquainted with your new home. Including a stop at the litter-box. I sincerely hope you're litter-trained..."

Wrinkling his nose, Severus let himself be carried upstairs. He did have to relieve himself, but didn't know how much his dignity could take, if she expected him to do it in front of her. He also didn't know if he would be allowed outside, or not. Hiding in a flower bed to do the deed was slightly more civilized than doing said deed in public, if barbarically primitive.

The litter-box was in the bathroom. The cloying scent of its perfumed clay overwhelmed him when she dumped him directly onto the granules. Right next to a clumped bit left by the other cat, no less. Disgusted, he leapt out and shook his paws, scraping them over the bath-mat to get the stuff off of him.

"No getting finicky over where you piddle, Puss," Miss Granger warned him, her fingers moving to her waistline. To his shock, she unfastened her jeans, pulled them and her knickers down, and sat on the toilet, relieving herself right in front of him without any discernible problem about doing so. "If you pee on the carpets or the bedding, I'll be rubbing your nose in it, just to warn you!"

I think not! I'd far rather be a man again, and use a toilet like a proper gentleman. Of course, a proper gentleman wouldn't look at a young lady as she urinated. Nor would he admire her smooth, firm thighs, nor study the curve of her buttock, nor the crinkly thicket of hair between her legs. *Stop perving over her; she might eventually learn you're a wizard, and get back at you for it...*

An idea struck him. He really did need to go. As soon as she finished using the toilet, he leapt up the moment she vacated. By the time she finished pulling up her trousers and turned around to depress the lever, he had managed to straddle the opening and relax enough to relieve himself. It helped that he had carefully refrained from looking at her young, firm backside.

"What... Oh, that's a clever cat! Who trained you to do that?" she asked, wonder in her voice.

Severus leapt up onto the nearby sink counter as soon as he was done. A check behind him showed the seat was still pristine; everything had gone where it was supposed to go. He lifted his gaze to hers with a touch of smugness. *See what a gentleman can do, when he wishes to be civilized?* Of course, it was a peculiar sort of pride, over a normally non-socially-acceptable activity, but he didn't have much choice, stuck as he was in this form.

"I wish Crookshanks knew how to do that," she stated as she flushed the toilet. "Well, wherever you grew up, your last owner taught you a clever thing, Puss." Washing her hands, she dried them, then scooped him up again. "Okay, food is given in the kitchen; there's always a bowl of water down there for you to drink, plus dried kibble that you can share with Crooks. There's also a mat in my room with a water-dish and a kibble dish on it, though I'll have to refill them, since Crooks has been at Harry's house up until today, and I only filled the dishes downstairs.

"You're not allowed to go outside, just yet," she added, carrying him into what had to be her bedroom. It had a bed just wide enough for one person, and plenty of shelves crammed with books of all shapes and sizes. "Not until I've had a chance to check you over for fleas and such, and given you a few protective spells. At least your fur is short, compared to Crooks'. I won't have to spend an hour brushing you out, every day."

Severus had seen cats enjoying being brushed; they seemed to relish it as much or more than a petting. Knowing now just how pleasant a petting could feel, a part of him longed for a brushing. Longed for a pampering, really. He quickly put that down to the delirium of having lived as a cat for a week, as soon as he realized what he was thinking.

Except that she did lower him onto the coverlet on her bed, and then pick something up from her nightstand. Sitting beside him, she corralled him onto her lap, and started stroking him with what looked like a hairbrush. A hundred small, pearl-tipped bristles stroked over his skin, rasping softly through his fur.

Severus nearly staggered from the sensation. It was like the soothing niceness of being petted, with the added satisfaction of a really good scratching session. *Bliss!*

"...Watch the claws!" The bliss of the hairbrush stopped, traded for her fingers catching and squeezing his forepaws. She scolded him, holding his blinking gaze for a moment. "You can knead all you want, but *no claws*, got that?"

After a moment of holding his gaze, she resumed stroking him again. This time, Severus minded his actions. He couldn't help the urge to push alternately with his feet, but he did carefully refrain from extending and digging in with his claws. They might have been dreaded professor and annoying student once upon a time, but he was well aware after the last seven, harrowing days that Miss Granger was his best chance at survival, now. And really, she *was* being quite hospitable.

However, when she attempted to brush his belly, his instinctual sense of vulnerability overcame the bliss. Lunging free, he turned around when he was a couple body-lengths away. She gave him a sheepish look, resting the brush on her lap.

"Okay, so we've established a few boundaries. I'm just glad you're...oh! Hello, Crooks!"

Whatever she had been about to say was set aside in favor of brushing the marmalade tom. He, too, purred and kneaded her thighs as she stroked the brush through his fur. She brushed him for a little while, then let him walk off of her lap onto the bedding. He sat on his haunches, curling his tail around his feet, and gave Severus a look as if to say, *See? This is how a cat properly acts...*

"Well, I need to get back to that tuna, and make myself a sandwich for lunch. Now, the two of you should play nice," she admonished both felines, unaware that one was actually a wizard trapped in a furry coat. Stooping, she bussed the orange tom on the top of his head; Severus washed the furball tolerate it. Before he knew what was happening, her hand cupped the back of his neck, and her lips were planting a kiss on his own feline-shaped cranium. Astonished, he blinked at her form as she retreated from the room.

A huff of breath from the other cat on the bed made Severus glance that way warily. Now that his mistress wasn't in the room, would the other cat tear into him? Thankfully, no. Instead, the furry beast decided to start grooming himself. He did so by glancing up at Severus every few seconds.

Severus settled into a crouch, trying to figure out how to communicate with his hostess, and how much. If he could talk...and if he were captured by the Ministry...he could demand Veritaserum from the Wizengamot, to be tried with a mouthful of Truth Serum in his system. Assuming they didn't just throw him in Azkaban without the due process of a trial...like the last time the Dark Lord had been fought.

But if he could speak the Truth...now that *all* of his Oaths were fulfilled...he had hope that he could exonerate himself. Supposedly there was some sort of evidence in Albus' office that would support his claims, though whether or not anyone had found it yet, let alone believed it, was something he just did not know. Of course, it was typical of the shitty end of the stick, that he couldn't even defend himself by that smidgen of a chance he had to clear his name.

Pettigrew had discovered his duplicity just before what had turned out to be the final battle. He had cast a spell at Severus, who had leapt for his only chance at escape...but the former professor couldn't remember what that spell was, nor how he had come to be stuck in the body of a cat. He still had *some* of his wizardly powers left; he could Apparate, and open and close doors, and a few other things. Basically, anything he could do wandlessly, he could still do while trapped in this form. He didn't know how to undo the spell holding him a puss-in-boots prisoner, however.

Stuck as a cat, he had no way to communicate with anyone. He couldn't speak, and he couldn't write. Frustrated, he tried to figure out what to do...and almost gagged as a liver-scented puff of breath crossed his nose. Worse...the other cat *licked* him. He backed up, ears flattening, but Crookshanks didn't press the matter. Instead, he licked his paw, looked at Severus, licked it again and scrubbed his face, then looked at the black cat again. Lick, look. Scrub, look.

It took him a few more moments to realize the cat was trying to tell him something. No, not tell, *show*. He was...showing Severus how to groom himself?

As much as he wanted to rebel, Severus knew he had to give in and learn how to be a cat. There was no telling how long it would take to find a way to communicate with Miss Granger. There was also a part of himself that said it might be wiser to just remain a cat. No one would be after him, and no one would be trying to kill him for doing the war-winning job of spying on the Dark Lord, a job that no one else could have done, if he stayed in this shape. But if he stayed in this shape, voluntarily or not...he had to learn how to act like a cat.

Crooks blinked those golden eyes at him, looking remarkably wise for a squash-nosed, marmalade puffball.

Distaste flattening his ears, Severus lifted a paw, licked it, and scraped at his muzzle. Crooks purred in approval, and showed him how to wash himself from head to tail. Severus was grateful Miss Granger stayed downstairs when he got to the point where he had to clean his own genitalia. The suppleness of his body was amazing, but the embarrassment would have been too much for him to handle, had she seen him with his leg in the air and his nose buried in his crotch. It almost would have been better to have died at the ratty man's silvery hand, but he had learned to live with far worse things in his life. At least this time around, he was kissing his *own* arse.

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Puss, Hermione discovered, was a bibliophile. Thankfully, not the sort of feline who slept on books, or nibbled on them, or marked them as his territory in some sort of way. Instead, whenever she curled up with a book, he would inevitably find his way to her, climbing into her lap and settling himself down so that he, too, could look at the pages. He made an excellent lap-cat, though it was a little awkward to host both book and cap on her lap, if the tome was heavy or large.

At least Puss gained back some of the weight he had lost, though he insisted on eating human food, not the gooshy tinned stuff that Crooks adored. Nor did she ever catch him eating the dried kibble that Crooks liked to munch. In fact, he was odd enough in his finicky preferences that she actually caught him lapping at a cup of tea she had left on the table, when she suddenly remembered on her third day home that she had to cycle the laundry in the washing machine and dryer, down in the basement.

Of course, it was tea with milk in it. Since he had already nibbled at a lump of cheese without any ill effects, she gave him a saucer of milk. He lapped at it after a bit of sniffing, but when she giggled at the white droplets clinging to his whiskers afterwards, he had given her an affronted look, and gone off to lick himself clean in private.

But he was a good companion, and she considered it a blessing that he and Crooks got along remarkably well. They didn't ever fight; at least, not in her presence. The closest they came to a scuffle, in fact, was when Crooks was already in her lap and she decided to read a Potions Journal that had arrived that morning. After Summoning it and unfolding the pages, she had been startled to hear Puss growling slightly, standing next to her hip. Crooks had lifted his head, Puss had growled again, looking between the elder cat and the magazine in her hands.

Slowly standing up on her lap, Crooks took his sweet time stretching his limbs and arching his back...including a flick of his tail in the other cat's face. Puss didn't retaliate, just gave the other cat a disgruntled look. As soon as her limbs were clear, he climbed into place, curled around, settled down, and stared at the pages. It was quite peculiar, but also kind of cute, in a way.

Her parents came home from the Caribbean, tanned and happy, and as giddy as a middle-aged couple could be after a weeks-long second honeymoon. They accepted Puss into the family readily enough, were relieved...if a bit puzzled...to hear that the war was now over, and just plain happy to be home again. Within two days, they were back into the swing of their dentistry practice, effusively grateful to their other two partners for covering for them during their impromptu vacation. Hermione was glad to have them home, but felt like the house wasn't quite so peaceful anymore, now that she didn't have it to herself.

When Harry was declared fit enough to return to 12 Grimmauld Place, Hermione dithered for a little while on whether to just visit briefly, or stay for a few days while he settled into post-Voldemort life outside of the Healer's care. She herself had warded her own home against paparazzi-stalking, so she had been able to unwind and recover from the last battle in relative peace and quiet. It was the thought of being able to do this for Harry that made up her mind. Mad-Eye Moody had fallen in the final battle, taking with him the Fidelius Charm that had been hastily re-cast on the place following Professor Dumbledore's own demise. That meant reporters could find the place, if they tried. If she could protect him from bloodsuckers like Rita Skeeter, she was obliged to do so.

Packing up her cats, she took herself off to the former Black residence. The hallway was blissfully silent; Fleur Weasley had found a spell to silence all the vociferous portraits, thanks to the knowledge of a witch who was a portrait-painter friend of hers. Bill was still working on getting the Permanently Stuck elf-heads off the walls, since the one spell they had found took time and effort to apply. Half of them were down, though. The house would soon look a lot more cheerful, if the Order members had anything to say.

Harry was grateful for all the assistance in making the house into a home. He was still a little fragile-looking, and sometimes looked utterly lost, but he had recovered his ability to smile and joke a little. Once in a while, he'd rub at his forehead, which no longer bore the lightning-shaped mark of his curse-scar, but otherwise seemed little worse for the wear.

His first night home, there was a celebration of the Order. It was half-somber, as they remembered who had died in the conflict, but half-joyous as well. It wasn't until fairly late, around eleven o'clock, that Harry managed to pull Hermione into the library for a quick word. Puss was in there, curled up on the settee. Harry guided Hermione over to the sofa, settling down with her on the cushions next to the wary, watchful black cat.

"...I didn't get the chance to thank you, earlier," he began somewhat diffidently. "For saving my life after...after I died." He gave her a shy smile, rubbing his sternum. "I could have done without the aching ribs, of course."

"You're welcome, Harry," Hermione returned, grinning wryly at him. "Unfortunately, aching ribs are par for the course, with CPR. I'm just glad it worked, to kill the last tainted fragment of Lord Voldemort."

"So am I. So...what are your plans?" he asked her.

"I don't know," Hermione shrugged, sitting back on the couch. She petted Puss for a moment, then scooped him into her lap. "I'll stay here for a little while, make sure you're settled in and all. I've also warded the house against an invasion by reporters, so you'll have a little sanctuary from all the post-war madness," she added, kneading her fingers through the cat's nape. He didn't quite purr, but he did get sleepy-eyed with pleasure as she did so. "I liked being on my own, while my folks were still down on that cruise...I'm glad you paid for them to leave the area."

"Well, it did save their lives. And it allowed us to nab a bunch of Death Eaters," Harry admitted. "I just wish I knew who our informant was. I'd like to thank him, or her. It was their word about the impending attack on the Muggle-born families that gave us the chance to take him out for good."

Puss purred. Harry eyed the cat, then extended his hand to see if he would be accepted. Twisting his head away, Puss disdained the youth's touch. A wry smile twisted Hermione's lips. "Well, here's one fellow who won't let you grow a big head, just because you saved the wizarding world..."

"Thank goodness," Harry agreed. "If Kingsley hadn't arranged for that Portkey to bring me here, I think I might've been crushed by all those people wanting to thank me, when I was released from St. Mungo's. I even had offers for people to pay me to bottle some of my fame. I never wanted to be famous. I never wanted to go through *any* of this...and now Ron's lost his hand...and he said something about you turning him down. That you're still in love with Krum, of all people."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I just said that bit so he wouldn't think I was turning him down because of his hand."

Harry eyed her. "Why did you turn him down? He was quite upset when he revealed he'd asked you to marry him, and you said no."

Sighing heavily, Hermione petted Puss to soothe her own feelings. "Harry...I'm not in love with Ron. I won't *ever* be in love with Ron. I love him as a friend and a brother, but frankly, he and I have so very little in common that, were I ever to *be* in love with him...it would die out within a couple months at most. We just don't have enough in

common to make a go of a relationship, let alone a lifelong marriage." A soft laugh escaped her. "...I have more in common with Puss, here, than I do with Ron!"

"With Puss?"

"He loves sitting in my lap when I read. He'll even oust Crooks," she confessed.

"Where did you find him?"

"In the alley behind St. Mungo's, the day I was released. Poor thing was starving to death. Crookshanks likes him, though," she admitted. "He's a good judge of character, and I haven't anything to complain about. He's even toilet-trained!"

Puss' ears flicked down and back, but scrubbing her fingers around them made him relax again. Harry petted him, earning a narrow-eyed look of bare tolerance. "He's lovely. And I'm happy that both of your cats are getting along. But...Hermione, if you're not going to date Ron, and you're not still in love with Krum, and you want to live on your own...isn't that like...well...turning yourself into a spinster?"

Hermione gave him a look as dark as the glare of the cat resting in her lap. "Harry James Potter, I'm not even nineteen, yet! Wait until I'm an unmarried twenty-nine, before you start calling me that!"

"Considering all that Time-Turner use you did in your third year, I'm surprised you haven't turned twenty by now," he quipped.

"I only added the equivalent of about half a year's worth of age, Harry...well, I suppose that ~~does~~ mean I'm nineteen by now...but I'm going to count my years by my regular birthday, regardless," she asserted. "Anyway, just because I want to live on my own doesn't make me a spinster. It merely makes me independent-minded."

"No, wanting to live on your own with two cats and no love-interest makes you a spinster," Harry teased, earning a shove from her. He laughed, but rather than taking further umbrage, she giggled as well, reaching over to hug him. The jostling made Puss lay his ears back and edge away from the dark-haired wizard, but he didn't protest otherwise.

...

Severus' ear twitched. Cracking open one eye, he searched for the sound that had awoken him. With the night-vision of a cat, it was easy to see the door slowly, silently opening and a tall, lanky body entering. He couldn't discern colour in the dark, but he knew the idiot-boy. Weasley. Severus peered with both eyes, narrowing them slightly as the boy finished closing the door by casting an Imperturbable Charm. Sixteen years of teaching overly hormonal students had his whiskers bristling and his fur fluffing. The boy was up to no good.

Digging in his pocket, Ronald Weasley extracted a small perfume bottle. There wasn't much light coming in through the half-curtained window on the far side of the room from the door, but it was enough for him to read part of the twins' distinctive logo, and the words '...ove Philt...'. *Love Philtre*. The boy *definitely* wasn't up to any good.

"One whiff of this, a look at the first male's face you see...which will be my face...and you'll realize you ~~do~~ love me, Hermione," he whispered, bringing the bottle up into position.

Oh, no, you don't! Severus leapt to his feet and hissed as loudly and furiously as he could, lashing out with a paw. It connected, catching the bastard on the flesh below his thumb.

"...FUCK!" Startled, the young wizard stumbled back. Crookshanks darted out from under the bed, hissing as well. That tripped the idiot on his own heels. Both he and the bottle dropped to the floor with a thud, the latter thankfully not breaking, and the woman underneath Severus' paws jerked awake and scrambled for her wand.

"*Lumos! ...Ron?* Ron, what you *doing* in here?" Granger demanded, staring at the young man sprawled on her bedroom floor. Her eyes caught sight of the bottle with its label, and her face paled, then flushed red with anger. "*Accio bottle!*"

It smacked into her hand, allowing her to double-check it in the light of her wand. Her abrupt glare made Severus proud, in its fearsomeness.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley," she enunciated clearly, coldly, all but shaking with fury, "I am going to *tell your mother about this!* GET OUT!"

He scrambled to his feet, bounced off the door when it wouldn't open, remembered to draw his wand and cancel the charm sealing it shut, and scrambled through. Hermione slammed the door shut with a flick of her wand, then lit the oil lamp by her bed. Sitting up against the headboard, she shuddered, staring at the perfume bottle. Crooks leapt onto the bed, head-butting his mistress until she petted him. He gave Severus one of his Looks. Rolling his eyes...as much as a cat could...Severus did the same, giving the young woman comfort as well.

"...Thanks, boys," she finally murmured. "I couldn't have asked for two better defenders."

Pulling each of them close, she kissed the top of their furry heads. Severus flattened his ears as usual...but not quite as much as before. She had a bad habit of kissing him on the head whenever she was pleased with him, but this time around, it felt...nice. Well, he *had* earned a reward, he justified silently. And he found himself purring when she did it again.

Damned feline body, enjoying stuff like that...

...

In the morning, Hermione had a better plan than just telling his mother. She sent an owl to the twins, asking them to drop by for supper. Ron flinched around her and his mother, but when neither of them came down on him like a derelict house, he seemed to get it into his head that she had decided to forgive him. Catching her alone in the parlour, where she and Puss were reading the *Daily Prophet* together, he started to drop onto the sofa next to her, an ingratiating smile curving his freckled face.

Puss *hissed*. Ron jerked himself right off of the cushions again, his eyes wide and wild. Hermione gave her friend a cold, hard stare, backing him up even further, but said nothing.

The idiot took it as encouragement. "Look, Hermione...I just wanted you to get your head back on straight. You haven't seen Krum in years! And you've been wanting *me* in the interim. I was just going to help that along."

Puss growled, giving him a narrow-eyed glare of his own. Hermione stroked his spine, calming the black feline. Since her plan hinged on not having this conversation right now, she merely stated, "Ronald, I am reading right now. You do remember what that is, don't you? It's only been a year since you quit school. And when I am *reading*, I like to be *alone*. Uninterrupted. So, if you don't mind..."

Her hand stopped petting Puss long enough to make a dismissive flutter towards the door.

Ron studied her for a moment, then backed up to the doorway. "Um...thanks for not telling my mum, after all..."

Her hand fluttered again, shooing him out of the room. Sighing roughly as he vanished, Hermione stroked her new cat. "At least *you're* a male I can stand to have around. *You* like reading and sitting quietly."

Puss nuzzled the edge of the paper drooping in her other hand. She obligingly lifted it back into position. The black cat purred.

...

"Fred? George?" Granger asked once the platters and bowls of food had been passed around the kitchen table. Some of the din of conversation at the crowded table died down a little. Severus, seated in her lap so that she could pass him tidbits of delicious real food, listened as she continued. "I want to thank you for coming out here. I thought a free meal would soften the blow of having to ask you this..."

"Ask us what?" Fred returned, fork halfway to his mouth.

"I need you to give your brother Ronald a refund." Pulling the bottle out of her pocket, she set the Love Philtre on the table. "It seems he won't be able to use this on me *without* my permission, after all."

Bedlam. Since most of the Weasleys were gathered at the table, including Molly and Arthur, plus Tonks and Lupin, Severus found himself purring as he watched everyone lay into the youth. Even better, she fed him a bit of tasty chicken. *Dinner and a show*, he thought smugly.

The best part was Potter's reaction. He let the others shout and harangue his best friend for several minutes, then finally shouted, "...*Enough!*"

Weasley...the youngest male, that was...relaxed a little. Until Potter continued.

"Ron, that is the *stupidest* thing you have ever done. And after seven years of friendship with you, I can honestly claim that! You owe everyone here an apology, *especially* Hermione," he told his friend. "Get it through your head: she *doesn't* love you that way. And after this, she'll *never* love you in that way."

Face mottled from paling and flushing under the attacks of his family and friends, Ron stared at his plate. "...I'm sorry."

"You'd better be!" George emphasized, pointing a finger at his youngest brother as Ron stood and started to leave the room.

"As had *you*," Granger retorted, glaring at the twins. "If it weren't for you and your brother, he wouldn't have thought to try and use it on me!"

"It only lasts five minutes!" Fred protested. "That's only long enough to get a girl...or a bloke...to agree to have a drink with you!"

"Not if they're using it on you while you're already in *yourbed*."

Severus snagged another bit of chicken from her plate, amused. And a bit of zucchini, too; he might be a cat, but he liked the vegetable. Molly gasped at the news, glared at her retreating offspring, then shifted her gimlet eye to her other sons.

"Enough!" Granger cut her off before she could begin another round of haranguing her children. "Ron has learned his lesson. As, I hope, have the two of you. Honestly, you need to *think* about the consequences of what you're producing. First, that blackout powder that was used at Hogwarts last year, and now this! You're supposed to be adults by now, and that means being responsible. Now, I am going to tell Ron that I forgive him, now that he knows just how wrong his actions were. I'll *think* about forgiving the two of you for your own culpability in this mess."

Scooping up Severus, she rose and enchanted her plate and glass to follow her.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go eat in private. When everyone has calmed down, I brought a Muggle word-game from home, if anyone is interested in playing. I'll be in the parlour."

"Er...which game?" Arthur enquired, seizing on the subject-change gratefully.

"Scrabble."

Severus remembered that game. It was played with tiles of letters that were placed in a crossword-like way on a grid, with each letter having a different value...*tiles of letters!* He craned his head to look up at Granger's face. He could manipulate tiles of letters! He didn't dare do it in a roomful of Weasleys, because that would be too many people to escape from if they insisted on knowing who he was, as soon as they knew he could communicate, but he could do it with her, once they left this place!

Controlling the flow of information was the meat and bread of survival, for a spy. If it was just the two of them, he could reveal himself to her a little bit at a time, and engage her brilliant mind in helping him figure out what Pettigrew had done to him. It was his best chance of somehow regaining his original form...and there was a chance, with her history of rooting for the underdog, that she might actually listen to him when he pled his case for, well, not *innocence*, but the fact that he was still on the Order's side. And had been, despite all the things he had done to fulfill those damned Oaths laid upon him. Leniency and forgiveness. Or at least allowing him to continue as her pet cat, if nothing else.

It wasn't easy, curbing his impatience as she finished her supper and was joined by Harry, Lupin, Tonks, and the twins for the game. His tail-tip twitched, and his paws ached to bat at the tiles, but he controlled himself. Seventeen years of spying had taught him how to be patient when he didn't want to be patient. And she did have nice hands, petting him while waiting for her turn.

The freckled idiot came to the doorway near the end of the game. Severus noticed him, perking up his ears. That caught his mistress' attention. Their eyes met and held, then she heaved a sigh.

"...You're forgiven, Ron. Seven years of friendship shouldn't be spoilt by one moment of stupidity, however colossal. But don't you ever do that again, you understand?" she chided him. "Not just to me, but to any other girl."

Idiot-Boy nodded, rumpling his hair. He came further into the room and lifted his chin at the game. "Looks like fun. Can I play?"

"Next round," Lupin assured him. "Dora and I have to get going, after this. You can take our place."

Severus didn't particularly care for Lupin, but he wasn't sure if replacing him with Idiot-Boy...he liked that mental sobriquet...was the better option. When the other two left, he tolerated the presence of yet another Weasley at the table. The second game progressed much like the first had, with Miss Granger winning. The vast gap in the point-spread between her and Idiot-Boy satisfied him that he had made the right choice in defending her virtue, last night.

She deserved someone with an actual brain in her life.

...

Aside from the Ronald Incident, Hermione enjoyed the three days of her stay. She returned home with her cats and her board game with a lighter heart, glad that Harry was recovering his good spirits. And happy for him, since he'd received an offer to apprentice with the Aurors. Ron had received an owl offering the same thing, too. He was torn between accepting and seeking a position with a Quidditch team, but Hermione had told him to accept the Ministry job; he could always audition for a team in his spare time, but in the meantime, it would be an income.

Her own owl offering to take her on as an Auror apprentice had arrived, but she didn't think she would accept. The excitement of the war had been more than enough, for her. In fact, even more so than Harry, Hermione felt like she was at a loose end. She really wanted to go back to school and finish studying for her N.E.W.T.s, but it was too

late to rejoin the other students for this year, and going back with the younger set next year would just be too weird. She didn't know if anyone would apprentice her, or even take her on as a teacher's aide, if she hadn't passed her N.E.W.T.s...and without them, she didn't know what other jobs she could get.

Which meant she was at a loose end. Dropping her things onto her bed, she set Crooks and Puss free, then sagged onto the mattress next to her suitcase. Puss-in-Boots jumped up next to her. She patted him for a moment, but he squirmed free and sniffed at her luggage. Then pawed at the latch. Sighing, Hermione stood. "I suppose you're right, Puss; I should unpack and get my dirty things into the laundry..."

Unlatching the case, she pulled out her clothes, tossing them into the hamper in the corner. When she came back, Puss was pawing at the cover of the Scrabble box. She reached to lift it out of the box, but he planted his forepaws on the box and looked at her.

"Maow!"

Puzzled, Hermione released the box. He dropped down and started pawing at the lid again. That confused her.

"What do you want, Puss? Do you want into the box?" Hesitantly, she lifted the lid out of the way, then the board. He darted in and snagged the bag containing the tiles, tugging it out of the box. "Puss? What are you doing?"

He tugged it to the edge of the bed, then dropped down onto the short-piled rug laid over the wooden floor. A bit of tugging and pawing got the drawstring mouth open, then a tug at the other end of the bag spilled out several of the tiles. This was such unusual behavior for a cat, Hermione stared at him as he finished dumping out the rest with little jerks of his black furry head. Dropping the bag to one side, he nosed around the tiles, batted at them, and separated out a few of them.

She reached for her wand when she realized he was lining them up...forming a word. As soon as it was ready, he faced her, sitting on his haunches and curling his tail around his feet like an Egyptian cat-statue. Dark eyes blinked sleepily while she read the result of his work.

HELLO

"...Puss?" Hermione whispered, sinking to her knees in surprise. "You can *talk*? What kind of a cat are you? Not even a Kneazle should be that smart!"

His tail lashed and he moved, nosing through the tiles. She had to wait patiently while he arranged them. W I A R D. Which didn't make sense, until she caught him growling as he tried to flip over the tiles that were face-down.

"...Wizard? Is that what you wanted to say?" Hermione asked. He looked up at her and nodded his head sharply. Unmistakably agreeing.

She sank back on her heels, her hand covering her mouth. In the next moment, her wand whipped out, pointing at him. "If you're anything like Pettigrew..."

He flinched back, but didn't move, aside from the flicking of his tail-tip. Crookshanks, who had leapt up onto the windowsill to enjoy the sunshine, jumped down and hurried over. He head-butted her hip for attention, startling her, then moved around in front of her. Between her wand and the other cat.

Hermione blinked. "Don't tell me *you're* a wizard, too?"

Crooks blinked. Puss moved, sorting out letters. NO, and CAT. Then hunted up the letters for SMART, and nudged CAT after them.

"...Just a smart cat, eh?" Hermione found herself asking, and again received a sharp, regal nod. Shaken inside, she lowered her wand. Crookshanks was a good judge of character, and the two had been getting along famously ever since his arrival. Grumbings about being ousted for reading privileges aside. That thought made her gasp.

"You really *were* reading my books and journals with me, weren't you?"

Puss nodded.

"Why haven't you changed back?" she asked him, curious. "If you're a wizard..."

He shook his head, then pawed at the tiles, rearranging them. C A N T.

She guessed the space was for the missing apostrophe. "Are you trapped?"

He nodded.

"Oh! No wonder you were trying to get into St. Mungo's! We've got to get you there!" She moved to pick him up, but he scuttled back out of range, shaking his head quickly. Hermione paused. "...You *don't* want to go to St. Mungo's? Why ever not?"

He nosed at the letters again, pawing at a few in an attempt to turn them over. She realized he was looking for letters that weren't visible, and tucked her wand up her sleeve. Turning over all of the tiles, she scattered them out across the carpet.

"Here, you paw the letters, and I'll place them," she compromised. "It'll be faster than you nosing them about."

He nodded and picked them out, tail flicking. It didn't take long that way to assemble what he wanted to say, if in a shorthand sort of way. DANGER, he spelled with her help. C A N T T R U S T A N Y O N E A M H E L P L E S S L I K E T H I S

The part about not trusting anyone made her suspicious as to why he wouldn't want to be helped at a hospital, but his second comment...and Crooks' recommendation of his character...made her lean on her instincts. She wanted to trust that *he* wasn't dangerous, at least a little, but she needed information. "Don't you want to be restored to your human form?"

He studied her for a moment, then blinked slowly and spelled, MAYBE. And COMPLICATED.

"Complicated? What's complicated about it?" Hermione asked, confused. Nosing around the tiles, he spelled the next two words. Surprising her.

W A N T V E R I T A S E R U M

"You want the Truth Serum? Whatever for?"

A M G O O D B U T N O O N E B E L I E V E S

Snippets whirled through her mind. No one believed in him; he had black fur and dark eyes; his situation was complicated; he claimed to be good; he thought he would in danger, if he asked for help from everyone else; he ate real food and liked tea; he had dark fur and dark eyes...

Her wand whipped out again, making him flinch, as did her hiss of his name. "*Snape!*"

Chapter 02

Chapter 2 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

II.

...

A puff of orange interceded. Crookshanks leapt between them again, his fur at its fluffiest, hiding the sleeker-furred wizard-in-disguise. His golden eyes stared at her, his bulk shifting as she tried to angle her wand for a better shot.

"Move, Crooks! *Move!*"

A black paw came through the fur under Crookshanks' belly. It pushed at the two tiles in the center of that last sentence. NO. Then batted at the two preceding words in emphasis, if awkwardly since he couldn't see what he was doing. AM GOOD

"Good? You killed Professor Dumbledore!" she protested, voice rising in her agitation. "Why *shouldn't* I hex you?"

A knock on her door interrupted her. "Hermione?" her mother's voice called through the panel. "Are you alright?"

Torn between the two situations, Hermione forced herself to reply, "Um...yes, Mother; I'm fine! Just talking to myself..."

"Alright, then. Supper will be in half an hour. Don't forget to set the table!"

Hermione returned her attention to the black menace in her bedroom. He had slunk out from behind Crooks, and was rearranging the letters. He flinched under her angry regard, but hurried to pat the tiles into place.

HELP ME

"Why *should* I?" she demanded, keeping her voice low and her wand trained on the furry traitor in front of her.

CAN EXPLAIN

With his whiskers low and his ears back, he looked about as unhappy as a cat could get. He knew very well that she could hex him quite easily, helpless as he indeed was, stuck in the body of a cat. Hermione hesitated. Her gut was conflicting with her brain. She *knew* he had killed the Headmaster last year...and yet he was still in front of her, not trying to flee. He could've stayed silent, like Pettigrew had done all those years, hidden under the guise of Scabbers, the Weasley pet rat. But no, as soon as he had realized he could use the tiles to communicate with her, he had chosen to do so. Risked exposing himself to her, knowing that she was suspicious and he was helpless.

Sighing roughly, she prodded him with the tip of her wand. "Well? Go on! Explain, if you can."

Giving her a sardonic look...which cats were good at doing, she had to admit...he pawed several tiles into place.

NOT ENOUGH TILES

"...Not enough tiles? That's a cheap cop-out!" Hermione protested.

BUY MORE

Oh. Well. She hadn't considered that option. Staring at him, Hermione realized abruptly that she didn't *have* to buy more tiles. She was a witch and could just transfigure what they needed. She merely needed a lot of small objects in order to do so. Not quite trusting him to stay put, now that he was revealed, she flicked her wand. "*Stupefy!*"

He keeled over, unconscious. The limpness of his body made him look almost as pitiful as he'd been back in that alley. It reminded her that he had nuzzled her for attention, that he had been a good-kitty all this time in her company. That he had hissed at Ron, for being stupid enough to try to douse her with the twin's equally stupid love-potion. It also reminded her that he'd seen her taking a pee, and undressing in her room, and...

Scooping him up, Hermione resolutely stuffed him into the cat-carrier, locking the grille in place. Hopefully that would hold him until she returned. There was a hobby store just a few blocks away; if she hurried, she could get there, buy several bags of marbles...far cheaper than several Scrabble sets...and return with plenty of time to wash up, set the table, and eat supper. As for her prisoner, the traitor could starve for a little while, the way she was currently feeling about him.

...

Severus woke needing to use the bathroom. He also woke with the fear of having been transported to Azkaban after her attack, since the first thing he saw was a grid of metal wires. It took him a moment to realize the purple ruffly thing in the distance was the valance at the bottom of Miss Granger's bed. A familiar sight, over the last week or so. He was in the cat-carrier.

As if that could hold him. He still had some wandless, wordless magical tricks. Rolling his eyes, he concentrated, Apparating out of the cage with a soft *crack!* Appearing in the bathroom, he leapt up onto the toilet, used the facilities, then Apparated back. But not into the cage. As much as it might be smarter to stick himself back in there, to hide his ability to escape, Severus shuddered at the thought of being trapped like that. His whole life had been a trap. Poverty, hatred, discrimination, being swayed by the rhetoric and false logic of a madman, serving two masters in the hopes of destroying the evil one of them...and being trapped into destroying both of them for the greater good.

No, he had to convince the chit to help him, somehow, without getting himself locked up.

A delicious smell wafted into the room. Severus realized he was hungry, and that the bedroom door was open. Supper-time. Trotting downstairs, he headed for the dining room. With her parents home, he was reasonably certain she wouldn't put up a fuss at his appearance. That, and he was hungry. It smelled like shrimp, one of his favorite seafoods.

Hermione caught sight of a black object entering the dining room. She looked over at 'Puss' sharply. "How did *you* get out?"

He stopped and looked at her for a few moments, then disappeared, displacing air with *æcrack*. Apparating onto her lap. Her mother startled.

"Goodness! Is that a wizarding cat?" Rachel Granger enquired, blinking at him. "I didn't know they could do that. Crooks certainly hasn't! At least, not in the last four years..."

"No, just this one," Hermione muttered. "And he's in trouble for it." She lifted her hand, intending to push him to the floor. He head-butted her palm, twisting himself so that she was forced to caress him, not shove him off her lap. "Don't think you can butter me up, mister!"

"Is your cat in trouble?" Jeffrey asked his daughter.

The cat in question purred loudly, nuzzling up against her stomach. "Yes...and if he doesn't stop it, I'm going to Petrify him."

He stopped, giving her a hard look. Her mother reached over and scratched behind his ears. "Oh, don't be so hard on the fellow, dear. He's been quite nice, so far. Now, you were telling us about your visit to Harry's?"

Trapped into social politeness with her parents, she buried her agitation at having the bastard traitor on her lap and resumed the conversation. And gave in and fed him scraps from her plate, when he nuzzled her fingers. The worst of it was, he was cute as a cat. Sleek and handsome. Affectionate, and even *cuddly*. She'd always had a soft spot for cats, but the concept of Severus Snape, Bastard Extraordinaire, being *cuddly* churned her stomach.

The telephone rang just as the meal ended. Her father went to answer it as Hermione pushed Snape off of her lap in order to help collect the plates. If he took offense at being dumped like that, she didn't see it. Instead, the annoying feline followed her from room to room, almost like a faithful dog. Apparently, he didn't trust her further than he could see her. Well, that was fine; she didn't trust him, either. *Of course, he could just be trying to ingratiate himself, somehow...*

She was coming out of the kitchen for another handful of dishes when her father called to her.

"Hermione, it's for you. It's Aunt Eumenia." Jeffrey held out the receiver to his daughter. 'Aunt' Eumenia was actually more of a second cousin, but she insisted everyone call her 'Aunt', one of her many eccentricities. The woman was a paleo-archaeologist. Hermione had always liked her because the woman had encouraged her to read all sorts of things, usually gifting her with some odd Muggle research text on an obscure but fascinating subject for birthdays and holidays, many of them on ancient ruins.

Curious, Hermione picked it up. "Hello, Auntie! How are you?"

"Hello, Hermione dear, and just splendid, thank you! I have a *really* big favour to ask you. You're about to leave the last year of that private school of yours, right?" the woman on the other end of the phone asked. "You must be home for a school holiday or something, yes?"

"Er...yes. That's right," Hermione hedged. "This would be my final year, yes."

"Excellent! It turns out that I'm about to leave, too! As in, leave the country," her aunt continued briskly. "I've managed to snag a position on an expedition to Burma, only it's for at least three months, and that's just too short a time to lease out the house, yet too long a time to let it stand empty. So! I was thinking, there's you, a young lady just getting out of school, fairly responsible, good head on her shoulders, and I thought it would be a perfect match if you came and stayed in my cottage while I'm gone! What do you think?"

"Er...well..." She realized within moments that it suited her plans. If she had a house of her own, she'd have time to interrogate Snape-in-Boots, who was seated at her feet at the moment. Time, and privacy to deal with him and his situation. And she would be able to enjoy living on her own. "I'm thinking that's a *great* idea, Auntie. I'd need to arrange with my folks for some way to pay for food, and the utility bills..."

"Nonsense!" Eumenia interjected. "I leave at the end of the month. I can have a neighbor watch over the house for the first half of June, until you're ready to come home, but I'll need you to pop up here as soon as you can; we'll visit the bank so I can open a joint account with you, and you'll just withdraw whatever's needed from that account to pay the bills and buy the food while I'm gone, plus a little splurge money for yourself. Not much, mind you, but I know you're not a wastrel when it comes to money, and I *know* you'll pay the bills and such on time. You can even bring your cat, since Pookie is going off to stay with my sister's kids."

"Yes, I'll *definitely* bring the cat," Hermione agreed, studying the black-eyed feline at her feet. He narrowed his eyes, but couldn't say anything. "I'm actually free on Monday, if you like, and school lets out at the start of June, so I can move in as soon as that."

"Excellent! Oh, and, erm...if you want to bring over any *men* friends," Aunt Eumenia murmured in her ear, "I've a supply of prophylactics in the master bath you can use. Just restock them, that's all I ask; no questions!"

Hermione blushed. "Er, thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"Well, a girl can never be too careful! I'll see you on Monday, then! My place, no later than ten o'clock, no earlier than nine!"

Hermione said her goodbyes, hung up, and faced her parents. "Erm...Aunt Eumenia wants me to watch over her place while she's gone for three months, on an expedition in Burma. She said she'll arrange for me to cover the bills and such...and I've said I'll do it."

"Well," her father murmured, eyeing her from head to toe. "You're growing up rather fast, making plans to move out on your own, already."

"Dad, it's just house-sitting!" Hermione protested against his teasing. Scooping up the cat at her feet, she headed for the stairs. "I'll need to arrange a train ticket up to Nottingham, money for a cab... Come along, Puss," she told the cat in her arms, "we have *so* much to plan."

...

Severus found himself dumped unceremoniously on the floor in her bedroom. She cast an Imperturbable on the bedroom door, essentially locking him inside. He decided it was a good thing he'd already visited the lavatory, though a bit of water would have been nice. Somehow, he didn't think she would get him a saucer of milk anytime soon.

There were half a dozen netted bags on her desk that hadn't been there before, largish bags filled with scores of marbles; she must have fetched them from somewhere while he was unconscious. Ripping them open, she dumped them on the floor, settled on the carpet, scooped them into several different piles, and started Transfiguring them into Scrabble-like tiles. Severus carefully stayed back and to the side, not wanting to call her attention to him while she was wielding her wand. To his relief, she not only duplicated all of the letters in sufficient quantity, she also added punctuation marks and numbers. A flick of her wand separated out the original tiles, sending them back into the bag, and from there to the box still in her suitcase, up on the bed.

A last swish, and the Transfigured tiles arranged themselves into neat groups and stacks. Settling herself more comfortably, she looked around, spotted him, and arched one of her brown brows. "...Well? Come and explain yourself! *If* you can."

Disliking her attitude, Severus picked his way over to the piles. He hunted through the letters, tapping here and there with his paw, leaving her to the menial task of assembling them into words. She had even included a largish stack of blank tiles for space-markers, he noted. Then again, she had always been a thorough pupil, if a bit pedantic. As his words turned into sentences, she started murmuring suggestions when he was three and four letters along, making him nod or shake his head. It sped up the assembly process a little, eventually allowing him to write a short paragraph.

TOOK 2 UNBREAKABLE OATHS ALBUS AT 19, NARCISSA 1 YEAR AGO. COULD NOT BREAK OATHS. 1 TO DO WHATEVER IT TOOK TO DEFEAT DARK LORD. 1 TO PROTECT AND HELP DRACO IN TASK. HAD NO CHOICE. WILLING TO TAKE VERITASERUM TO PROVE TRUTH WHEN HUMAN AGAIN, BUT NOT IF NO ONE WILL LISTEN. DIDN'T DO ALL THIS ONLY TO BE EXECUTED WITHOUT TRIAL!

Hermione sat and absorbed his short-hand paragraph. Finally, she swished her wand, clearing the carpet and reordering the stacks.

"How do I know you're telling me the truth? I can't exactly administer Truth Serum to a cat, since you'd be too useless from its effects to pick out the letters, and I can't trust turning you into a human again unless I know you're not going to draw your wand and hex me. And I have to assume you still have your wand, since if you told me you don't, I couldn't trust you to be telling the truth about that."

He tapped several tiles. I THINK I STILL DO.

"You think you still have your wand? ...How can you not be completely sure?" she asked him, wanting to clarify his comment.

I CANNOT REMEMBER.

"What do you mean, you cannot remember?" Hermione countered, frowning at him. He tapped the tiles one after another, slowly getting his explanation across.

CONFRONTED THE RAT, BEFORE THE END. RAT REALIZED I WAS STILL LOYAL TO ORDER AFTER ALL. I CAN'T REMEMBER HOW I ENDED UP AS A CAT, NOR HOW I ESCAPED. AM MISSING SOME MEMORY. LAST THOUGHT, COULDN'T GET TO HIM, SO HAD TO ESCAPE. DID, SOMEHOW. HID. LEARNED WAR ENDED TWO DAYS LATER, WENT LOOKING FOR ST. MUNGO'S TO BE NORMAL. COULDN'T GET HELP UNTIL FOUND YOU. KNEW YOU WERE SENSIBLE.

It was shorthand speech, but it got the message across.

"If I were *sensible*, I'd bind you up and hand you over to the Aurors," Hermione muttered, flicking her wand to restore order to the tiles. He shook his head, earning a dark look from her. "It *would* be. But...you've gone to a lot of trouble to confide in me, and if you can Apparate, that means you could run away at any point in time. Which means...you're staying with me because you probably do think I could help you, somehow."

Severus nodded, and tapped another set of tiles. YOU ARE SMART, CAN FIGURE OUT HOW TO UNENCHANT ME. ALSO COMPASIONATE, BE MY ADVOCATE TO OTHERS. ALWAYS BEEN ON ORDER'S SIDE. DAY 1.

"...You've been working for the Order since Day One?" Hermione repeated skeptically. He nodded sharply. "You mean...since *before* you joined the Death Eaters?"

WAS ASKED TO JOIN BY LUCIUS. SAID WOULD THINK ABOUT IT. ALBUS FOUND ME THINKING. MADE ME SWEAR VOW TO JOIN, DO WHATEVER IT TOOK TO SPY, AND NOT SAY OTHERWISE WITHOUT HIS PERMISSION UNTIL WAR WAS FULLY OVER. WHICH IT NOW IS. BUT WITHOUT HIM, AM STUCK WITHOUT ADVOCATE. NEED VERITASERUM, NEED PENSIEVE FOR MEMORIES AM NOW FREE TO SHARE. NEED TO BE HUMAN...BUT NOT SO IDIOTIC AS TO RISK SELF. SURVIVED WAR. WANT TO SURVIVE AFTER-WAR.

"So, Albus made you spy for him from the very start?" Hermione asked, clearing the carpet once more. Snape-the-cat tapped several tiles, until she blushed at the result.

OPPORTUNISTIC BASTARD.

"Er, yes, well... So, you wouldn't have agreed to do so without the Unbreakable Vow?"

SWORE 1ST VOW OF OWN FREE WILL! TO KEEP 1ST VOW, HAD TO SWEAR 2ND STUPID VOW.

"Oh." She thought about that for a few moments. "Well...if this *is* true..." At his narrow-eyed look, she gave him a glare of her own. "Look, this is hard for me to accept! And if it's hard for me to accept, it'll be hard for the others to accept. In fact, I'm not even sure if I should be the one making up her mind on what to do with you."

I DID WHAT NO ONE ELSE COULD DO, WHAT WAS NEEDED. SMALL THANKS I GET FOR HELPING SAVE WIZARDING WORLD. WOULD RATHER STAY A CAT THAN GO TO AZKABAN. HAIRBALLS HEAVEN COMPARED TO SOUL BEING SUCKED OUT.

Hermione couldn't help the soft snort of laughter that escaped. She was sure he was trying to be snarky and sour, expressing his bitterness at what they both knew would happen if he revealed himself to anyone else without the evidence to clear his name, but his sniping comment was actually rather funny. "Well, it would serve you right, suffering a massive hairball. You were quite unpalatable as a teacher, you know."

He pawed out the tiles from the previous paragraph, spelling, ANNOYING KNOW IT ALL.

"Well, at least I'm not your student anymore...and you'd better be nice to me, because I'm the only hope you've got to clear you name*if* it can be cleared."

She didn't quite know what had made up her mind, but Hermione felt like she had to help him. *If* his words were true...well, Veritaserum would confirm them. She had acquired a small bottle of the stuff in the last year, and there was still enough left to dose him for her own purposes. The first problem, of course, was transforming him back into his human self. Which she didn't dare do if this were some sort of horrible trick, unless she had a way to confine him and protect herself from his wand. He hadn't actually *said* he wouldn't harm her...and she couldn't exactly cast an Unbreakable Vow with him, without him being able to speak his own half of the Oath, nor without a third party to cast the spell.

But she could lay down the law, as it were, about a few other things. Ways for him to prove he would at least cooperate for now with her. "Alright. You want my help? You've going to have to agree to certain rules, from here on out. First off, you don't lie to me. I'll hex you six ways to Sunday, if I ever catch you in a lie. What happened to Filch's cat back in my second year will be a piece of cake, compared to what I'll do to you."

Severus expected that. He did not, however, intend to give himself away to anyone else...and he wanted a few caveats of his own listed. Rooting through the tiles, he assembled a short retort. WON'T LIE IN PRIVATE. BUT NO REVEALING SELF TO OTHERS.

Hermione read that, and planted her free hand on her hip, the other still holding her wand. "You think you can make demands of your own, do you?"

He managed to arch one whiskered brow at her in eloquent silent rebuttal, for a feline.

She had to admit, at least to herself, that he did have the right to protect himself. Considering how everyone else still vilified his name... "Fine; we'll both agree on when it is time to reveal your identity...*Puss*. But you're not allowed to watch me anymore when I'm changing, or using the lavatory!"

Batting at the tiles, Severus painstakingly assembled a response to that piece of idiocy. HAVE ALREADY SEEN EVERYTHING. WHO CARES?

"Who cares? /care!" she retorted.

YOU'VE SEEN ME LICK MYSELF. SAME THING. SUFFER. She started to protest, so he assembled more words. MUST SEEM LIKE CAT! CATS DON'T CARE.

She wanted to protest that it wasn't the same thing...but she had seen him licking himself, and had seen him using the toilet...which explained how he had learnt to straddle and use it in a civilized fashion. It wasn't that far off from her own bathing and peeing, some of which he had seen. A memory returned to her, of her tipping him up in her arms, pushing back his tail, and staring at his fuzzy genitals in order to determine what she thought was a normal sort of cat's gender. Heat suffused her face from chin to forehead. Clearing her throat, she conceded his point.

"Alright. We'll just...carry on as normal, then. You'll keep pretending to be my cat, and I'll keep pretending you're just my cat. A very precocious cat, considering you can Apparate," she added under her breath. "Once we get to Aunt Eumenia's and get settled in, then we'll see if I can come up with a way to fix your condition. But not until then," she asserted. Mainly because she knew it would take time to figure out how to contain him long enough to dose him with Truth Serum. She backed up in her thoughts a moment later, frowning. "Hang on...how is it that you can Apparate?"

The body of a cat wasn't built for shrugging. Severus nosed the tiles around again, bored with the tedium of it, but at least grateful he *could* communicate. His former colleagues had once accused him of wanting to eschew all social contact. After too many days of not being able to communicate beyond the simplest of body-language offerings, even tedium was better than nothing.

DON'T KNOW.

"...Right, because you can't remember what that rat did to you," she muttered. "Most cases of wizards being transformed into animals by other wizards, they don't retain any of their own powers. It's what makes being Transfigured nearly an Unforgivable. But on the other hand, most such Transfigurations don't last long, with the wizard flexing his will against the magical bonds imprisoning him. Have you tried to become human again?"

Severus nodded his head; of course, he had tried!

"And it didn't work?" she queried. When he shook his head, she nibbled on her lower lip. "If you were an Animagus, you'd still have the ability to Apparate, and such, but if you were, surely you could've freed yourself by now..."

Severus blinked at her for a moment, then hunted through the piles of scattered tiles. WHAT IS AN ANIMAGUS?

Hermione's brows rose with disbelief as he finished patting together the final tiles with his paws. "What is an Animagus? You *know* what an Animagus is!"

He stared back at her, and shook his head.

Dismay wrinkled her brow. "What do you mean, 'no'? Professor, *everyone* knows what an Animagus is! There's not that many of them, but we all know!"

I DON'T. He nudged those letters above the others, then patted the first line of his previous question, emphasizing it. WHAT IS AN ANIMAGUS?

"An Animagus is a wizard or witch who can turn themselves into an animal and back; it's a very hard piece of magic, and outside of the Marauders, the only other one I personally know of is Professor McGonagall. You certainly knew Sirius Black was an Animagus, after he escaped and went back to Order Headquarters to live! How can you not rememb...*oh!*" Eyes widening, she stared at him in comprehension. "Of course! Pettigrew didn't change you into a cat! You changed *yourself* into a cat, when you were trying to escape him...he must have struck you with a Memory Charm!"

Severus listened to her, absorbing her words. He supposed it made sense, since if the girl took these Animaguses...Animagi...for granted, yet *he* didn't know about them...well, she wasn't the only know-it-all in the room. He patted three letters together, and a punctuation mark. HOW?

"Professor Flitwick mentioned this once, when we were discussing Memory Charms in class, in my sixth year. He said that if the wizard or witch being struck with the hex was casting magic at the same time, a more powerful magic, the hex had a small chance of erasing *that* from their memory, instead of whatever the caster originally intended! And changing yourself into an animal is one of the most powerful and difficult forms of Transfiguration out there! You *can* use your magic, but the reason why you cannot change back is because you cannot *remember* how to do it!"

This made things so much easier. Except, Hermione had no idea what spell Lupin and Black had used on Pettigrew to turn him back into a man. She chewed on her lower lip again. "...I'll have to find some way of asking Remus what spell they used on that rat, all those years ago. But it shouldn't take long to practice, and as soon as we reach my Aunt's place, we can just change you back into your human form. No more living like a cat."

Something about that made Severus' ears dip flat. The thought of being permanently his human self wasn't a bad idea, but the thought of not knowing how to re-disguise himself as a cat was. As vulnerable as this form was, it was a near-perfect disguise. Certainly it was far easier to hide as a smallish housecat than as a tallish, adult wizard.

Batting at the tiles, he reassembled them into a new string of words. NO. MUST RELEARN ANIMAGUS THING FIRST. GOOD DISGUISE.

Hermione considered his words. It was a good sort of disguise. It had kept Pettigrew hidden all those years in the bosom of the Weasley clan, after all. The only problem was, she was going to have to teach him something she herself didn't know how to do.

Wait, why can't I learn how to do it myself? Am I, or am I not, the best student of my year in Professor McGonagall's class? Well, I was the best, she amended, thinking about having to give up her seventh year with the same twinge of regret he had suffered all through the last year. It had ended up being worth it, in terms of ending the Dark Lord's reign of fear and hatred. *In fact...if I ask Professor McGonagall to teach me over the summer, she just might agree!*

"I'll do it!"

Her sudden exclamation had Severus puzzled. He patted her denim-clad knee with a paw. When she looked down at him, he quirked one furry brow at her.

"Oh...I'm going to learn how to be an Animagus myself, and I'm going to try to get my lessons from Professor McGonagall herself, this summer. If I can. And when I do, *you* can sit in on the lessons and pay attention! ...Unless she already knows you're an Animagus, and will recognize your markings?" Hermione asked, worried. "Does she already know?"

CAN'T REMEMBER, he batted together, giving her what he hoped came across as a sardonic look. He was a furry black cat at the moment, not a sarcastic, brooding human.

...

Even though she'd agreed that him seeing her naked now was no different than earlier, Hermione still changed for bed in the bathroom. She wanted to don her longest, thickest, most opaque flannel nightgown, but it was a warm spring night. She settled for a satiny set consisting of a short-sleeved pyjama top and knee-length shorts, instead. Padding back into her room, she doused the lights so that only the lamp by her bed still glowed, then slipped into the covers. Adjusting the pillows at her back, she picked up the book she had fished out of her shelves, hesitated, then settled it against her upraised, bedding-draped thighs with a sigh.

A glance around showed she was alone. "...Puss? Puss-in-Boots! Come here! Come here, Puss!"

Under the bed, Severus narrowed his eyes. He had just finished grooming her ginger-marmalade cat, lapping at the back of Crookshanks' head, and was now being groomed. It was an awkward but equitable exchange; he couldn't groom the nape of his own neck very well, nor could the other tom. When Crooks had first done it to him, it had startled him, but the half-Kneazle had been showing him how to be a convincing, effective cat. And it didn't feel bad. It could smell a bit ripe, if the furry beast had just eaten tinned-whatever, but it felt kind of nice.

Being a cat was a lot more sensual than he was used to experiencing. After three weeks, Severus was beginning to enjoy all the sensations this form of body could hold. Stretching was a blissful ritual, when one was a cat. Curling up into a warm ball, tail over nose, was remarkably cozy. And being petted...heaven, or damned near close to it.

"Fine. Be that way," he heard her state. "It's just that I've found the textbook that talks about Animagi, and I thought you'd want to read it with me..."

Crookshanks had already taught him that there were times when a feline ignored a human...and times when they paid close attention. He *had* intended to ignore her...but curing his ignorance was too important to curing his current condition. Pulling free of the ginger cat, he padded out from under the bed, pausing to stretch his hind legs as he emerged from under the valance. Cleared of the bed-frame, he arched his back, stretching that as well. Then shook himself, twisted, and leapt up onto the covers.

"Oh! There you are. Erm...you can come up here beside me, while we read. You don't need me to read aloud to you, do you?" she asked him hesitantly.

Padding towards her, Severus stopped long enough to give her a look and a shake of his head. However, after sitting beside her for a minute, his position was just too awkward; her arm kept getting in the way. Giving up, Severus stepped onto her belly, making her inhale sharply in surprise.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "I didn't say you could sit on me!"

Deliberately, he whapped her in the face with his tail-tip, before settling down in a crouch. The pages were awfully close at this distance, but he had grown used to that from their earlier reading sessions. She stared at him for a long moment, then sighed and resumed reading the book on her own. The moment she tried to turn the page, however, he stretched out a paw, trapping the sheet in place. Telling her without words that *he* wasn't done, yet.

Hermione regarded the back of her former professor. "Twitch an ear, or something, when you're ready to have the page turned."

He obliged a few seconds later, removing his paw and flicking his right ear. He only had to catch up with what was listed on those two pages, since he hadn't been able to read much with her arm in the way, to start. Together, they silently read the next section. Flicking his ear just as she started to slide her fingers between the next few pages, separating out the next leaf, he waited patiently for her to finish before turning the page. She only took a few seconds longer than he did, matching their reading speeds quite nicely.

There were only about ten or so pages in the text pertaining to what they needed to know, but it was a fairly in-depth history of Animagi, and it discussed the troubles and difficulties of the transformation process. Not the necessary spells...which had to be mastered both wordlessly *and* wandlessly, which was why so few people ever mastered the necessary skills...but the whys and wherefores. Around the eighth page or so, her free hand absently shifted to his spine once she finished turning the current page. Just as absently, she started stroking his fur.

Bliss... Who cared if she was an annoying ex-student, and best friends with some of the most annoying twits it had ever been his misfortune to teach? He was currently enjoying two of his favorite activities: the ages-old pleasure of reading and learning something interesting...and the newfound joy of being caressed by sensitive, talented fingers. Yes, there were things he missed about being human, but there were certain things he loved about being a cat. As they finished the chapter together, Severus found himself purring with a level of happiness as a cat that he simply hadn't known very often as a man. If at all. His had not been a life filled with pleasant human contact, let alone contentment.

Hermione, closing the textbook, realized her fingers were running through his fur. Not only that, but the normally sarcastic, cruel man, a man who had insulted and belittled her for years, as his student, was *purring*. For a brief moment, she wanted to rub it into his face...but only for a moment. *He hasn't had much in the way of comfort in his life. Not being a spy, not having to watch his every word, his every move, never being able to trust anyone but a bare handful...and being reviled for all the things he had to do, as a convincing Death Eater and spy...*

She couldn't push him away. Nor torment him. If she could bring him a little pleasure, with both of them *knowing* who and what he was...well, it was a valid technique to praise and reward someone, to encourage them to be good. *That, and his fur is so much softer and nicer than his hair ever looked.* The thought almost made her giggle. Gently, she scrubbed his jaw-line with her fingernails, enjoying the way *he* enjoyed it, leaning into her hand and twisting his head so that she hit all the best, itchiest spots.

Yes, it definitely looked like Severus Snape made a far nicer feline than he did a man.

...

They settled into something of a routine. She had to leave him behind for her daytrip up to Nottingham...explaining that her aunt's dog was hyper-excitable and loved chasing cats, something he agreed he did not care to experience...but when she came back, they eventually settled into a round of reading various magazines and texts while lounging together on her bed, and then discussing the contents of their efforts. It was Hermione who coaxed him into talking with her, albeit in his limited fashion. She pointedly reminded him that the more time a wizard or witch spent in their Animagus form, the more they needed to keep their higher thought processes stimulated, to keep from sinking too far into animal-thoughts.

Since the more he learned about Animagi, the more Severus remembered Pettigrew being a twitchy little idiot with several distinctly ratty habits and characteristics, he grudgingly allowed her to prod him into halting, tile-batted conversation. It was exercise for his body as well as his brain, but it was inevitably tedious. Even when she tried to help him by guessing what words he was trying to spell, and completing the ones he confirmed with a nod, arranging the tiles with her opposable thumbs. At first, he wasn't sure just how good a conversationalist a pedantic know-it-all like her could be, but she turned out to be very quick-witted and widely read for her young age.

She not only soaked up knowledge like a sponge, but retained it remarkably well. Four days before they were due to pack up and move to Nottingham, she pulled out a back issue of *Ars Medica*, the journal for wizarding world medical practices, and argued the point she was trying to make, regarding the use of Muggle ginkgo bilboa in Memory-Restorative Draughts. Admittedly, the trial described in the article she referenced did say there was a slight percentage increase in the success rate of restoring lost memories...something useful for their own position, since he had argued with her about brewing him the Draught once they were at her aunt's place...but it wasn't just her argument that held his attention.

It was the advertisement in the margin next to that column that caught his attention. When she started to close it, Severus lunged at the paper, pouncing on it. He did his best to ignore her started giggle, nosing back the sheets of paper until the ad was revealed. Reading it quickly, he pawed at it, looking between it and her to draw her attention.

"What did you find?" Hermione asked, tugging the journal out from under him. She scanned the side-column, finding the spot his paw had batted. "Lucigna's Diaries: For Trauma Patients Who Cannot Speak," she recited. Blinking, she frowned at the small-print. "Useful for spell-muted patients who can neither speak nor write, due to hex or curse; simply bind the diary to the patient with the enclosed spell, place their hand upon the page, and ask them whatever you like. These finely crafted and enchanted, blank-bound books will write their owner's answers upon the pages in their own handwriting, as quick and easy as can be! Cannot be used to revive memories of Obliviated victims; Creator not responsible for scrawled gibberish caused by cases of insanity. Cost: 2 galleons, 5 Sickles."

"*Mao!*" Severus asserted. He did *not* want to suffer through any more tedium of hunting and patting at tile after tile. It forced him to abbreviate his words, and that grated on his nerves, like reading one too many first-year essays.

"Yes, I quite agree...if this Lucigna is still enspelling these books, then they're perfect for your condition," Hermione confirmed. "The cost is a bit pricey, but it'll be worth it to not have to sit there and wait for you to hunt up the necessary letters. I hope she's still creating them.."

The sniffy look of the black cat curled up on her stomach told her that he hoped so, too.

...

The place reeked of dog. Severus scrunched up his nose, deeply offended. Bad enough she'd stuffed him into the cat-carrier with Crookshanks for the train-trip and cab-ride. He could understand that; they had to maintain the appearance that he was just a normal cat. But to make him suffer the stench of canine dander was too much. As soon as he could breathe...sort of...he batted at the nearest of her suitcases with an impatient meow. In specific, the one holding the book that had arrived via owl-post the night before they had left.

"Just a moment, Puss!" Hermione chided him, finishing paying the cabbie who had brought her bags and trunk into the house for her, including several sacks of groceries. She'd paid extra to be able to have the cab sit and wait at the grocer's so she could buy what she needed for the week, though she'd been forced to hurry to keep the cost down. "There you go, sir."

"He's an impatient one, isn't he?" the cabbie observed as the black cat meowed and whapped the suitcase again. "Wants his kitty-treat, does he?"

"Something like that," she agreed. "Thanks for the ride, and for waiting for me."

"Anytime, miss...thanks for the tip!" Touching the brim of his hat, the cabbie left. Hermione closed and locked the door behind him, then warded it with a spell. Not so much to keep Snape from getting out, as to keep curious Muggles from getting in. Her aunt lived in a neighborhood where each 'cottage' sat on roughly an acre of land, but the neighbors were very friendly with the outgoing, middle-aged archaeologist.

Fishing out her wand, she slashed it at the suitcase. It unlatched itself, and the paper-wrapped book inside sailed out, landing on the floor at his feet. It had arrived too late in the evening for them to use, literally arriving with a tap of an owl-beak on her window when she was snuggling under her covers. She had tossed it into the suitcase and promised to enspell it to him when they arrived. Dropping to her knees, Hermione unwrapped the package, read through the introductory card included with the book, then lifted one of her ex-teacher's paws, placing it on the cover. He permitted the indignity, giving her a narrow-eyed look, but held himself patiently still while she cast the enchantment inscribed on the card.

Magic swept up out of the book, over his furry hide, and back into the cover again. For a moment, cat and book glowed, then both subsided, appearing normal once more. Nudging him aside, Hermione opened the tome, and gestured for him to place his paw upon the first page. Ink immediately spilled out from under his fuzzy black toes.

About bloody time! This place REEKS of dog, and I demand you do something about it, immediately! The Mundic class of Cleaning Charms, at absolute full-strength, if you please!

Hermione choked on a laugh. "My, you're rather demanding, aren't you? No 'thank you' for my buying you this book? I thought you were a civilized cat, not a barbaric crab."

He looked at her for a long moment, then more ink followed below the first set of words. **Fine. Thank you for the book; it is a lovely and most useful gift. I deeply appreciate your expenditure on my behalf. NOW will you clean the bloody house, before I have to claw my deeply assaulted and offended sinuses to shreds?**

Shaking her head ruefully, Hermione rose to her feet, squared her shoulders, and began Cleansing the cottage. "*Domu Mundicarum! Penetrodu Mundicarum!*"

Grime and dander swirled up out of every crack and crevice, pulling out of the carpeting and the upholstery, shaking free of the draperies and the leaves of the potted plants. Within moments, she had a compact ball of ick centered in the air, ready to be discarded. Even to her human...and thus less-sensitive...nose, Hermione could tell the difference in the air.

"Well. We'll just do that for all the remaining rooms," she told her two fellow houseguests, though Crookshanks was busy sniffing at a potted plant, "and then this place will be livable!"

Good. Don't forget to put away the groceries. I don't want the milk to spoil.

Hermione dipped a mock-curtsey. "Yes, Your Majesty...go hunt for mice, or something. I'll be back when I'm done doing all the *real* work."

Cheeky girl, Severus thought, but removed his paw from the book before doing so, not wanting it recorded. He eyed the pages. They looked like they would gradually fill with a permanent record of everything he shared. If the two of them talked too much before he learned how to transform himself, they might have to buy another book, though at least this one was fairly fat, with large pages. *Thankfully, my handwriting is fairly small. I can be almost as verbose as she is, without too much risk of running out of blank pages too soon...*

That thought made him sit back on his haunches, considering the youngish woman he could hear enchanting in the next room. *She has grown up, hasn't she? Quite smart, and rather mature for her age. And a good conversationalist. Somewhere in there, she learned how to listen to another person, and not just talk the ears off her listeners...* He shifted a little, uncomfortable with another realization. *She's grown into a rather attractive young woman. She's matured, mentally and intellectually. And her overblown compassion has been tempered somewhat with experience and realism. She's not trying to save the whole world, anymore, whether or not it wants to be saved.*

Of course, she has helped to save-the-world, he admitted to himself. *Now that that's over, she can help to save me.*

Crookshanks pounced suddenly, then snapped at something beneath his paws. Severus realized that it was a spider and shuddered internally. He heard Hermione enchanting another room clean and trotted in her direction, wondering what she planned for luncheon.

...

...Well, of course Bode's work on the Psyscandum Charm revolutionized psychic Healing, Hermione! There are far too many Hexes and Curses that affect the soul to *not* have a reliable means of scanning one's psyche!

Hermione opened her mouth to retort that there was more to her point than that. She did a double-take before she could speak, re-reading what he had written. "You said my name!"

I...what? Severus withdrew his paw from the page, blinking at her.

"You said 'Hermione', right there in your own handwriting," she pointed out, tapping the scrawled pronoun with the tip of her finger. Flashing a smug smile at the indignant black cat on her aunt's dining table, she asked, "Finally seeing me as an adult and an equal, are you?"

That was beyond the pale. Narrowing his eyes, Severus planted his paw back on the pages, all but standing on the book. **You may be an adult, but you're still a slip of a girl who is half of my age, and half of my experience! There'll be no cheek out of you, *Miss Granger*.**

She blinked at his affronted scribble, and squared her shoulders. "Well, if there'll be no *cheek* out of me...I suppose scratching *your* cheeks is out of the question! Or would you rather not be deprived of the feel of my impertinent fingers dallying with one of your favourite pleasure-spots, hmm, *Severus?*"

He lifted his paw from the page, but not before the word, **Impertinent...** had scrawled itself on the paper.

Hermione balanced a curl of shredded cheese on her fingertip. He stretched out his head and neck, stepping back onto the page in order to get close enough to eat it.

"Stop sulking, Severus, and have a bit of cheese, before I eat it all. Considering our situation, I don't see why we cannot address each other by our first names. We *are* adults, and we're stuck together in an unusual and therefore somewhat intimate situation. So suck it up, don't have a hairball over it, and let's get back to my point. Which isn't just that Bode's work revolutionized psychic Healing; it's the reason why Harry, Ron and I were able to find so many of Voldemort's Horcruxes...oh, stop flinching! It's just a name!"

A scary name, scrawled his handwriting on the page. He ducked back, stared at his admission with downward-pulled whiskers, then flicked his ears and stepped on the page again. **I hate the way this thing reveals my thoughts...**

"Well, it's better than the previous system we had," Hermione pointed out. She noticed a final scrap of vegetable on her plate and scooped it up with her fingertip. "Last bit of zucchini?"

Yes, please! Leaning closer, he nibbled it from her finger. **Even as a cat, this still tastes good...**

Cunningly, Hermione brought her other hand up while he was occupied, and started stroking him from head to shoulder-blades. As she did so, she glanced at the pages under his forefeet. Sure enough, his thoughts spilled onto the sheets.

Oh, yes...yes, I like that...I could let her do that for ages...wish she'd massage me all over; that would be heavenly...god, I'm such a hedonist...yes, ye...oh, fuck! How dare you invade my thoughts like that? Can't a man have his privacy whilst he's being petted so heavenly...FUCK!

Scuttling back from the book, he glared at her. Unrepentant, Hermione laughed. "Suffer, *Severus*. You may have had to present a bastardish face to the rest of the world for longer than I've been alive, but you can't fool me any longer. You actually *like* certain aspects of life. *This* life, as a cat. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you *are* turning into a hedonist. As much as it may dismay you." She offered him a last scrap of cheese. "I'll remind you that you've survived two decades of highly dangerous espionage and outright warfare. You helped us win the war. You *deserve* to be happy, now. Stop wasting such a miracle and start enjoying life!"

He gave her a hard look. Hermione waited for him to take the cheese, but to do that, he would have to step on the page again. Sighing, she waggled her finger.

"Don't make me dangle a piece of string in front of you!"

That narrowed his eyes even further, but he accepted the cheese. Namely by moving *around* the book, in order to get to her finger-tip. Nipping it delicately from her skin, he snapped it into his mouth, then licked his jaws and planted a paw on the open book. **You try being a cat, and never having any privacy when you want a bath!**

Drawing her wand, Hermione tapped him lightly on the nose. "*Felidamundic!*" His fur crackled and fluffed slightly, cleaned by the spell. Not quite as fluffy as the first time, but clean enough. "All you had to do was ask."

It's not the same, he grumbled. **There are things I do like about being a cat, like cheek-scratchings and how much better cheese tastes, but there are plenty of other things I heartily miss...**

"Poor Puss," Hermione sympathized, scooping him up and cradling him on her chest. "We just have to wait two more weeks, then Professor McGonagall said she would visit and I could learn how to be an Animagus from her. Once we learn how to do that, you can be a man *or* a cat, and have the best of both worlds. Mind you, I think I'd fancy being a cat myself, though it's not always possible to control the end-result of the transformation. I'd certainly hate to end up a bug, like that horrid Miss Skeeter. Of course, being a bird would be nice," she mused, sitting back in her chair as she stroked and scritched him absently. "I hate broom-flying, and riding on a thestral wasn't fun when I couldn't see it...but maybe if I were in control of flight..."

"Who am I kidding?" she snorted. "I hate heights. I always have, and I always will. Going up to the midlevel observation deck on the Eiffel Tower was the scariest thing I've ever done, outside of maybe fighting Death Eaters... No, I think I'd rather be a cat. I certainly won't want to be a snake or a lizard." She looked down at the cat in her arms, purring quietly as she stroked and cuddled him. "A pity you cannot remember anything about deciding to become an Animagus. I'd love to know if a cat was what you were aiming at. Certainly no one would expect *you* to turn out to be a closet hedonist."

He cracked an eye open, stared at her, then squirmed free, landing next to her plate. Padding over to the book he faced her and touched it. **Clean up the dishes, then come back and pamper me. If I am to be a hedonist, then I shall wallow in it whilst I can.**

The bold, blunt admission, edged with an autocratic flair, made her laugh. Pulling him close, she kissed his forehead. He leaned into it, then skittered back. It was too late, though; the words had already formed on the page.

Ohhh, I like that...

If a cat could blush, he was definitely blushing. So was she. Clearing her throat, Hermione picked up the luncheon dishes. "Well. I'll just go and see if I can remember that cleaning charm Mrs. Weasley likes to use on her dishes."

Chapter 03

Chapter 3 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

Author's Note: This chapter contains one of the two mentions that garnered the "bestiality / animagus "relations" rating, but both scenes are uber-uber-mild. Still, there are those who might object, so...y'all been warned.

III.

...

Chin on his paws, Severus contemplated his life. It was changing, and he couldn't figure out what to do about it. *He* was changing, in fact. Relaxing...and softening. He blamed it on being a cat. There weren't any other influences in his life right now that could explain the way he melted.

Except for maybe the influence of a certain frizzy-haired know-it-all. It was *her* fingers that stroked the tension out of his body. *Her* fault for pampering him. Her lap he curled up in, her magazines and books they read together, her cooking that was making him full and sleek, and as contented as the cat he was forced to be. Except he didn't feel all that forced.

Minerva was due to arrive tomorrow and begin Hermione's private Animagi lessons. Had he still been a teacher, today would have been the day after all the children left the school, taking the Hogwarts Express back to London before dispersing across the countryside to their various homes. Had he not been forced to seemingly betray his employer, he would've been working alongside the other teachers, settling the last bits of post-term business, such as restoring the classrooms to rights, or perhaps ensuring that the various Potions ingredients were safely secured and stored to await the end of the summer holidays.

He had been a Potions Master for fifteen years, and the Defence Arts instructor for not quite a year. And then a heavily wanted man. He was still a heavily wanted man, as far as he knew. Having his former colleague come for a visit made him think about the upcoming lessons, and the end result of those lessons. There were, of course, concerns over whether or not he could clear his name. He had committed murder, by the letter of the law. By the spirit of it...he had merely assisted one of his very few friends to commit suicide.

Severus had plenty of concerns about whether he'd be thrown into Azkaban without a chance for a trial, or given a Dementor's Kiss without being allowed to testify to all, as Barty Crouch, Junior, had been treated. Once upon a time, he had hissed at Sirius Black in his rage about how excruciating something like that was rumored to be, and how *he* would still try to be there to watch it happen to the cur, if he could...while at the same time secretly fearing that was how he himself would wind up, at the end of the war.

He did deserve it, on several levels. He had done what was necessary, what was needed to stay in the Dark Lord's circle long enough to get every last scrap of information out of the serpentine bastard's service...but that didn't scrub all of the blood of his ill deeds from his skin.

But there was another concern he had to contemplate. A stranger and thus more disturbing one. It was bad enough that living as a cat for over a month now had taught him how to indulge in his unsuspected, heretofore unknown, yet remarkably sensual side. He reveled in the indolence of napping in a sunny patch, of indulging in full-body stretches, of curling up with his cheek pillowed on his own thigh. The bliss of being petted, the satisfaction of a really good scratch in just the right spot, the marrow-deep smugness being pampered with tidbits fed to him upon the delicate fingers of a lovely, brilliant young witch...

And there's the fly in my ointment, Severus thought, twisting onto his side. He was currently indulging in a sunny spot in the conservatory attached to the southern side of the sprawling 'cottage' of her aunt. A hedonistic sort of place, with three bedrooms, two baths, an indoor jacuzzi with a little sauna room off to one side, a conservatory-like solar positively blooming with plants that tantalized his feline senses... Distract himself as he might, it all came back to *her*.

Hermione Granger. She was lounging in a hammock strung between two posts in the conservatory. The rope-like structure was impossible for him to climb upon or walk across, since the ropes were too uncertain a surface for him to trust. She was also curled up with, "...A silly girl's book, all romantic nonsense and happily-ever-afters; you wouldn't like it," according to her. She was clad in a thin-strapped top and cutoff shorts that were even more abbreviated than her nightwear. They showed off her thighs and her shoulders, and the curve of her cleavage as she kicked one foot against the floor every now and again, keeping the hammock in gentle motion.

She was a nubile adult witch; emphasis on the adult part, even if she was roughly half his age. An attractive witch. Oh, her face was only modestly pretty, but her personality shone through her skin. Part of it was her sense of humor, a hefty portion was her compassion, and the rest of it was her intelligence. Her mind entranced him as much as any of her curves did, whenever they conversed, and they had conversed a lot. Already, she'd been forced to order a second copy of the Lucigna's Diary. They still had several pages to go in the first one, but there was no telling how long it would take them to figure out how to turn him back into a real man.

A part of him longed to turn back into a man for a specific reason; to rub himself up against those sweet, feminine, fully adult curves and have those sensually talented hands of hers stroking the body of a fully human, fully adult male. Part of him was disgusted that he was perving over a student, and yet another part of him kept pointing out that she *wasn't* his student, and hadn't been his student for a full year, now. A fourth part reminded him that she still didn't quite trust that he was honestly on her side of the war, and had always been. Albus' death still stood in their way.

Minerva knew who was still feeding the Order information, after Albus' death and his flight with young Mr. Malfoy to join the Dark Lord's forces. At least, he had a vague impression that the two of them had talked over the last year...but he couldn't really remember. He suspected that Pettigrew had tried to erase his knowledge of anything useful to relay to the Order about the Dark Lord's movements and such, and whatever hadn't been soaked up by his Animagus transformation had spilled over into other areas of his memory. He was glad that the ratty little man was firmly dead. Hermione had confirmed that much, at least.

The light of the sun had shifted in the last few minutes, coming through the vines climbing up the wrought ironwork supporting the panes of glass that formed the greenhouse-like conservatory wall. It gilded her curls on one side, making her look half mortal, half angelic... Severus nearly sneezed in a feline snort of disgust at his fancifulness. While it might be successfully argued that *he* was a devil, only the most ardent admirer would call such an argumentative, opinionated woman 'angelic'.

Sighing, he stretched out a little more on the flagstones. His personal patch of sunlight was fading, leaving him with the option of staying on the cooling pavement, or shifting to find a sunnier, warmer spot. Deciding he would move, he inhaled in preparation to stretching and rising...and caught a whiff of something delicious. It wasn't food, but it did make him strangely hungry.

It took him a few more sniffs to pinpoint a direction for the draft. Standing, he stretched, enjoying the pull and shudder of his muscles, then padded closer to the hammock. Then closer still. Passing beneath it as she kept it swinging with an occasional nudge of her toes, he sniffed at the air over his head. The hammock rocked back and forth, gradually slowing...there! Rising up onto his hind legs, Severus gingerly touched the stilled net with a paw, and sniffed deeply at her backside. *That* was where the ambrosia-like scent was originating.

Her foot kicked the hammock into motion again, forcing him to drop back to all fours. It also forced him to remember that he *was* a cat...and that sniffing the crotch of his hostess was *not* a wise thing to do. Not if she caught him at it. He would rather have her catching him licking his own genitals in public than admit he had a sudden desire to lick *hers*.

His feline instincts supplied the reason for why she should suddenly smell so good: the witch was in heat. A month ago, the war had ended and he hadn't known her then. He'd known her when her menses had come and gone...an embarrassing thing to realize, but that had been just before he'd found a way to communicate with her, before she knew he was a wizard trapped in a furry guise...but not when she was at her ripest stage, when she was ovulating.

Masculine fascination merged with feline instinct. He found himself balancing on his hind legs again, wobbling a little as his nose quested after that rump swinging overhead. The distant chiming of the doorbell startled both of them. As Hermione squirmed awkwardly out of the hammock, Severus chided himself silently but firmly to *not* do that again, before trotting after her as she headed for the front door.

Both were curious to know who was at the door. For her part, Hermione was also rather put-out; the romance novel she had been reading had *just* gotten to the best...i.e., smuttiest...part. Being interrupted while the heroine's loins were throbbing with an about-to-be-fulfilled desire left her own throbbing with utterly unfulfilled desire. Not that she had any experience with fulfilling said desires, beyond what she'd snuck on her own with a good book in one hand and the other caressing her flesh...something which she hadn't been able to do since realizing her new cat was anything *but* a cat...but it was the principle of the matter.

One just did not go around interrupting a good romance book at the hot-and-heaviest part! It was with that annoyance on her mind that she jerked open the front door, ready to snap at whoever her interrupter might be. Probably one of her nosy-parker neighbors, come to have a chat with Aunt Eumenia's pretty but reclusive niece.

The last person she expected to see was Minerva McGonagall.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger," the Headmistress of Hogwarts stated, offering her a remarkably warm smile. "I hope you don't mind too much that I came a day early..."

Ready to tell her neighbors to stuff it, fighting back the urge to growl in frustration, and faced with the greatest living authority-figure from her time at Hogwarts, Hermione finally gave in and whinged, "...You interrupted a *really* good book!"

Minerva eyed her for a moment, then gave in and chuckled, shaking her head. "I'm glad to see some things will never change. Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Come in, Professor; you *are* welcome in my home. Even if I *was* just getting to the really smutty bit..." Turning as she closed the door again, Hermione caught sight of a black-furred body staring up at her, whiskers perked forward and blushed. "Er..."

"I'm actually glad to hear that. I always thought it was a waste to read only textbooks and trade journals for the whole of one's life. Mind you, *Ars Morpha* is a good trade journal," Minerva stated, allowing Hermione to take her cloak and hang it on the coat-tree, "but I also have a monthly subscription to that Muggle company, Harlequin Books."

"*You* read Harlequin novels?" Hermione asked, smiling as she moved around to face her teacher. She bumped into Severus with one bare leg, and absently stooped to scoop him up into her arms, cuddling him close.

Minerva drew in a breath to reply, then blinked and stared at the cat in her arms. Her hand slipped up to the base of her throat as she gave the cat a shocked look.

"...*Severus!*"

Hermione stiffened, preparing to grab for the wand stuck through her curls, currently holding them up off her nape like an overgrown hairpin. In her arms, Severus tensed as well, ready to Apparate to a safe spot out in the garden, one he had already investigated for just such a purpose. But his former colleague didn't attack him. Physically, at least.

"Is *this* where you've been hiding, all this time? I thought you were *dead!*" Minerva harangued him, glaring at him through the lenses of her spectacles. "Why didn't you ever report back to me, you horrid man? The Dark Lord's been dead for a month, and I could only think you'd fallen right along with him!"

"Er...you know he's still on *our* side?" Hermione asked her mentor hesitantly.

"Of course, I do! I saw a Pensieve of Albus' memories shortly after his death, regarding the truth of Severus' allegiances," Minerva dismissed. "But I didn't dare discuss it with anyone until after the war ended, since things had progressed to the drastic point of him having to...to do what he did, in order to remain seemingly a part of the Dark Lord's forces. I couldn't hardly let such an extreme sacrifice go to waste, now could I?"

Hermione cuddled Severus closer. "But what about now? Are you going to help clear his name?"

"Of course, child! The current head of the Wizengamot, Priscilla Philliston, has already seen the Pensieve, and has quietly absolved Severus of all of his crimes."

Both Hermione and the cat in her arms blinked at that news. "But...why wasn't I told?" she demanded. "I didn't hear a word of this!"

"That's because, for one, it wasn't widely bruited about; that idiot, Scrimgeour, thought it would be 'bad for publicity'. If you ask *me*," she added darkly, "he just wants a convenient scapegoat to beat, since everyone thinks Severus is dead. For another, if you haven't noticed, my dear, you have been rustifying in this...well, this charming sprawl of a home you have, here."

"Thanks," Hermione returned distractedly. "It's actually my aunt's home; I'm house-sitting at the moment."

"A young lady living on her own with only two cats for company risked being called a spinster, back in my day," Minerva stated. She eyed the cat in the younger witch's arms, and sighed. "Stop huddling in her arms, Severus, and come back to your original form. Have you no proper greeting for me?"

"...He can't," Hermione confessed as Severus' tail twitched in irritation.

"What do you mean, he can't?" McGonagall repeated, glancing between the two of them.

"I mean...he cannot remember how to do it. We think he was hit by a Memory Charm at the moment of transformation. He literally could not remember anything about Animagi, or how to become one. We've done a little bit of studying since then, but...well, I thought I'd ask *you* how to be one, then teach him all over again on the sly so that he could transform back, you see."

Her former teacher rolled her eyes, drew her wand, and jabbed it at him. A flash of blue-white light startled both of them, making Hermione cry out and Severus flinch. A second flash of light forced him to tumble to the floor even as his limbs lengthened and straightened. Black fur flowed into black robes and black hair, receding into pallid skin. His feline muzzle parted in a hiss and ended in a human groan. Hermione quickly caught his reshaping arms, steadying him as he staggered on just two feet, after having lived for a month on four. Panting, he blinked, shook himself gingerly, adjusted the grip of his fingers on the wand in his hand, then straightened.

"...Thank you, Minerva," he panted, regaining his breath. Everything felt wrong, oddly squished, oversized, and dulled in nearly all of his senses. Colours were brighter, but that was the only recompense that he could sense. Straightening his shoulders a little more, he flicked his hair out of his face, and tucked his wand up his sleeve. "But I had *hoped* to wait to transform myself until I had re-learned the ability to attain that shape. You may have had my sins absolved *quietly*, but the rest of the wizarding world still sees me for what I am, a murdering bastard. Until the world knows the truth, I will have no choice but to hide!"

"Oh. Right...sorry, I didn't think about it, in that light. Look, I can always Transfigure you back, Severus," the Headmistress pointed out. "But as a cat, you weren't exactly capable of coherent communication with human beings. Believe me, I *know*."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, since they felt rather empty without her Puss-in-Boots to hold, anymore. "Whereas *I* was looking forward to practicing to become an Animagus, myself."

"Oh, I'll still teach you," Minerva reassured her ex-pupil. "*Both* of you," she conceded at a look from her ex-colleague, his own arms folding across his chest. "But in the meantime, we need to formulate a way to get the public to hear the truth about your long years of sacrifice, Severus. It won't be easy, of course."

"Tell me about it," he grouched.

"Oh, hush. If you haven't learned anything about optimism and enjoying life while stuck as a cat for the last month, then you obviously weren't paying attention! There's far too much to enjoy about being a cat to give it up *that* easily. Except for the taste of mice," she muttered, making a face and shuddering delicately. "And crickets. I never could stomach crickets. Never could *swallow* them, either. They always stuck, going down. There were days when I thoroughly wish I'd been a bird."

Wondering which would taste worse, mice as a cat or worms as some sort of bird, Hermione cleared her throat. "...Why don't we all go into the conservatory, and have a cup of tea or something, while we chat?"

"I'd rather not go near any windows at the moment," Severus countered. "Not while I'm in human form. The parlour will do; the drapes can be closed." Stepping from the front hall into the parlour a few feet away, he drew his wand and flicked it, wordlessly shutting the drapes. "Fetch us some iced tea, Miss Granger."

"'*Miss Granger?*'" she repeated, her brows rising. "If I have to fetch, then *you* have to wash up, *Mister Snape*. Actually, you owe me a *lot* of washing up, considering you've never once set or cleared a plate in all the time you've been here!" Turning on her heel, she flounced toward the kitchen.

Severus flushed, the moment he realized Minerva was watching their interaction with distinct amusement. Her mouth twitched. "I see the two of you have been getting along famously. But then, she clearly has a love for cats, doesn't she?"

"A cat, Minerva, is a distinctly separate entity from a man," Severus muttered. Not realizing until her smile widened that he'd inadvertently made an innuendo. One he suspected his former colleague would milk.

"So you *have* been indulging in your feline side. I'm very proud of you, Severus. I trust you have been letting her pet you?"

He gave her an affronted stare. "That's a rather indelicate thing to say!"

"Nonsense; you clearly haven't been touched enough, in your life. At least, not pleasantly. And there's nothing more pleasant than being petted and properly scratched, as a cat. Oh, don't make a face like that," she chided him. "Or it'll freeze like that. Which it nearly has done, already, given how many years you had to wear it like that."

"Now, we'll have a nice chat, a preliminary lesson in Animagi Transfiguration, and then I'll turn you back into a cat until our next lesson. So you can stay *hidden* all you like," she lightly mocked. "At least until tomorrow, when I'll be back. I'll be coming every day for the first two weeks, then three times a week thereafter. I don't think it should take

you more than a week or two to regain what you've forgotten, and not much more than three or four weeks for her to get the hang of it.

"She's really quite brilliant, you know," Minerva added with studied casualness, moving over to an armchair to seat herself. Severus followed, not fooled in the least when she continued conversationally, "Very few witches of any age are as smart as young Miss Granger is. I'll bet she talked your ear off, starved for decent conversation in the midst of all this rustification. A pity you weren't able to communicate with her."

"Actually, we figured out two different ways to communicate. One was a bit cumbersome, and the other has a tendency to communicate *too* much, at times," he confessed, settling himself on the settee. "Otherwise...we have been getting along remarkably well, considering our history. As you said...she has a love for cats."

"I trust you'll treat her equally well, whenever you're in your human form?"

Severus was saved from answering by Hermione's return. Or so he thought. She smiled at the two of them as she set the tray down on the coffee table, handed out glasses of iced tea, and curled up on the sofa next to him. Within touching distance. Of course, it was a smallish settee, but not that small, surely.

"...So," Hermione stated as Severus sipped at his glass, grateful to be able to take a real, human-sized swallow. "Are you going to treat me well, now that you're in your human form?"

He froze for a moment, then finished swallowing. Lowering his glass, Severus considered her question carefully. "...I might. Are *you* going to treat me well?"

Afterward, Hermione would marvel at her daring. Afterward, she would wonder what imp of the perverse made her do it. But that was afterward. Considering his own words for a brief moment, she leaned in close, scritchd her fingers under her chin, where she encountered the faintest scratchiness of his beard-stubble, and made him glance sharply at her.

"Haven't I always?"

It was a rather flirtatious thing to say, never mind to do. Both of them froze for a long moment. Minerva cleared her throat, sipping at her own iced tea. Her words gave them something else to focus on, allowing them to separate and focus on her instead of each other. "...The first thing an Animagus needs to be able to do is cast wordless magic. If I remember correctly, Miss Granger, you managed to master this difficult task before the rather abrupt end to your sixth year. So that part should not be a problem for you.

"The second thing is to master wandless magic. One cannot transform into an animal and back again and expect to retain their grasp on said wand, after all. It must be made as much a part of the Transfiguration as taking a wand with you during an Apparation...which is in and of itself a manifestation of wandless, wordless magic. If I remember correctly, you also passed your Apparition test quite readily, over a year ago. That gives us a good basis to begin with," she praised. "Now, there are some minor magics that are both wandless and wordless that I'd like both of you to practice until you get right, between today and tomorrow.

"We'll build up your abilities in both forms of magic, until you're ready to tackle the big one, then I'll guide you through the process when I feel that you're ready for your first attempt...so to speak, in Severus' case..."

...

Minerva concluded their first lesson with a pleased look for both of her former pupils, and Transfigured Severus back into the body of a cat. After Apparating outside and back to make sure it was the right spell, leaving him with what little magic he could wield in that shape, he had watched Hermione offering Minerva one of the spare guest rooms. To his deep relief...and frustration, since the book and tiles were elsewhere, leaving him mutely unable to express his own opinion...she had turned down the offer, citing that she preferred her own bed whenever possible, and had already shifted it from Hogwarts to her home somewhere on the outskirts of Inverness. Promising to be back tomorrow afternoon at the same time for the next lesson, she ordered them to continue practicing wandless, wordless magic, and Disapparated.

Severus expected Hermione to immediately begin that practice. Instead, she gave him an inscrutable look, scooped him up...she had a terrible habit of doing that, regardless of his dignity or current intentions...and took him with her back to the hammock. Adjusting herself in the rope net, she draped him along her torso and started stroking him, making him purr.

"You know, you really are nicer, as a cat," she observed, once he had stretched out a bit, his forepaws almost pressing against her chin. He opened his slitted eyes, giving her an irritated look. She smiled and rubbed behind one ear. "Don't look at me like that. You know you are. You've *been* nicer, since becoming a cat. I think, whatever happens, if you want to stay a cat, I'd be happy to keep you company."

A quirk of his brow was all the enquiry he needed to make; Hermione guessed his thought.

"And, um...if you want to have some company in your life...a friend, or whatever...when you're a man...I think I could do that, too. I'd, erm, be honored to be counted your friend."

He blinked at her, slowly and thoughtfully. Then closed his eyes and snuggled his head back onto his outstretched limbs. Only the tip of his tail moved, flicking in a slow, easy rhythm. Hermione fished her book out of the netting at her side, opened it to a spot back at the beginning of the smut-scene, and absently stroked him again as she read. So long as he didn't turn around and attempt to read the pages, with their graphic love-making sequence, she didn't mind reading a smutty romance novel in front of him. It wasn't as if he was interested in such things.

When he squirmed around on her chest, shifting onto his side and curling his neck a bit, she froze for a moment. He settled down again, resuming his purring. Figuring he was going back to sleep, and not trying to get a good look, she continued reading.

Hermione had forgotten she was dealing with a Slytherin. Having lulled her back into considering him as a cat rather than a man, he found himself wanting to know what her book was all about. Eyes slitted just enough to read, Severus absorbed the 'girly stuff' in the paperback. It was all aching breasts and gliding hands, making him think the heroine had forgotten the existence of such things as analgesics, and that the hero had coated his fingers in a Greasing Salve.

Its hero was also far too idiotic-sounding, spouting third-rate compliments only a Hufflepuff or a Gryffindor could have devised, as he groped his companion in what sounded like an amateur attempt at best of lovemaking...but the effect on Severus' living divan was undeniable. Once again, he could smell the perfume of rising desire rising from her skin. Reminding himself it would be crude to shove his muzzle into her crotch, he contented himself with reading the lurid scene and inhaling her perfume, and trying to decide if he could do better than that, as a lover...

Not that he'd had many opportunities to be a lover. Sarcastic, bitter, greasy-haired teachers who pretty much terrorized all potential future love-interests while they were still underage didn't have much in the way of dating opportunities. Of course, he could have gone for someone a little older than himself, but many of those remembered him from his student days, which meant there were no breaks to be found there, either. But he was fairly certain that, having indulged in his senses as a cat, learning to enjoy his hidden, hedonistic side, he could invoke it again in the presence of a woman. Preferably one who had her own knack for sensuality.

If scritchings and strokings were anything to go by, he was fairly certain Hermione would make a good partner for such things. That, and she was definitely reacting to the tripe in the book. Not that it was badly written, of course, just a little unrealistic. Not once did the author mention what happened to their shoes in the midst of all that disrobing...and as it was a Muggle book, no one could point to a wordlessly delivered Disrobing Charm as a possible 'save' for the continuity mistake. But as she turned the page, breathing a little deeper as the action in the novel grew more intense, Severus smelled how her arousal deepened with each successive paragraph.

It was a delicious scent, too. Between the gentle stroking of her fingers and the perfume of her body, he slipped into a half-dozing state of fantasy and imagining...

Those same fingers stroked down the muscles of his back; the scent of her desire perfumed the skin of his face...she tasted as delicious as she smelled, he was sure of it.

He caressed her own body, licking her lips, nibbling on her throat, stroking the curves of her breasts, making her gasp softly, shudder delicately... He turned her over, rubbed his cheek against her spine, nipped at her nape as he thrust into her...

Severus jolted upright as soon as he realized he was physically aroused from that thought. Embarrassment had him scrambling off of her, leaping to the floor and racing out of the conservatory, seeking a place to hide. He collected his wits when he was halfway to the kitchen, forced himself to slow down, and trotted into the downstairs bath. A bit of pawing at the lever on the toilet tank got the contraption to flush. *There, let her think I suddenly had to piddle. It's far more dignified than the truth...*

Which was that she would be dismayed by the thought of her ex-professor perving over her.

...

Finally, he was gone! Hermione didn't know what had made him leave, nor did she care. She just quickly shoved her hand up into the ragged hem of her cutoff shorts, hooked aside the crotch of her knickers, and started stroking her aching flesh. On the second read-through, the lovemaking scene was simply too hot to ignore its side-effects on her body. Closing her eyes, she pictured the blond-haired, green-eyed, hunky hero of the book touching her instead. Or rather, tried to. What she got instead was the dark-eyed, dark-haired, brooding countenance of her 'cat' in her imagination...and a remarkably fast, hard-shuddering orgasm at the very thought. A silent one, punctuated only by a sharply indrawn breath, but an intense one all the same.

As soon as she got her senses back, Hermione quickly readjusted her clothing, then sucked on her fingers, hoping to get the scent off of them before he came back. He didn't, however; in the manner of the feline he resembled, he apparently had decided to go off and do something else. Casting a simple warning-spell on the doorway at about cat-height, she settled in to read more of her book. The warning would let her know if he came near the conservatory again, in case she ran across another smutty scene and needed another 'personal moment'.

...

The ringing of the doorbell startled the three in the parlour as they practiced wandless and wordless magic. Severus looked sharply at Hermione, who shrugged and looked at Minerva. Drawing her wand, Minerva flicked it at Severus, enchanting him back into his feline form. The doorbell rang again as his frame twisted and shrunk, followed by impatient pounding. And a familiar voice.

"Hermione! Open up; it's Harry, and Ron! We've come to see you!"

"Come on, Hermione!" Ron's voice joined the noise, as Harry knocked again. "Open up! You can't hole up like a spinster-maid forever!"

Crossing to the door, Hermione unlocked it, jerked it open, and scowled up at the tall redhead. "Ronald Weasley, you are a foot-in-mouth jerk!"

Severus snickered. Then *maowed* in surprise as Minerva picked him up. She joined Hermione by the front door, greeting the young wizards with a smile. "Hello, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley."

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry eyed her, startled. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting with Hermione, of course. And having a nice cuddle with her cat," the Headmistress added. The cat in her arms flattened his ears, but endured the tease.

Ron curled his lip at the black tom in passing as Hermione admitted them into her aunt's home. He glanced around more appreciatively at their surroundings. "Posh place. Muggle, is it?"

"Entirely. So no leaving behind any chocolate frog wrappers," Hermione quipped. "What brings you out to Nottinghamshire?"

"Well, we hadn't heard from you in a while," Harry told her. "You've practically become even more of a recluse than I am. I wanted to make sure you were alright."

She smiled at him, gesturing for them to take seats in the parlour. "I'm *fine*, Harry. I've just been relaxing and catching up on a lot of my reading."

"Why are the curtains drawn?" Ron asked, staring at the closed drapes.

"Er...it protects the furniture from fading," Hermione cobbled together, smiling. "And keeps the nosy-parker neighbors from looking in, while I'm practicing a bit of wand-waving."

Ron looked between her and Professor McGonagall. Comprehension dawned on his freckled face. "Oy...you're learning how to be an Animagus, aren't you?"

Hermione flushed, wishing he hadn't figured it out. Especially when Harry grinned and said, "I want to learn that, too!"

"Me, too!" Ron asserted, nudging Harry in the arm with his elbow.

"Gentleman, if you wish to learn to do so, you will have to schedule your own lessons," Minerva stated reprovingly. Her hand stroked the back of the black cat resting in her lap. "In fact, you are intruding upon Miss Granger's time. And you will have to bring your wordless *and* wandless magic up to standard before I would even let you attempt it...no arguments, Mr. Weasley! I still remember quite clearly your last grade in Transfiguration. You would have to work very hard to reach the level of performance that your friend has achieved."

Reaching over, Hermione plucked Severus from the older witch's lap, settling him on her own. "...I think we'll postpone the rest of today's lesson, Professor."

"Then I'll be by at the usual hour, next time. No slacking in your practices, between now and then," Minerva admonished her. She rose, and Harry and Ron rose perfunctorily with her, but she murmured that she could show herself out. The boys sat back down again after their ex-teacher *cracked* out of view, Disapparating.

Ron eyed Hermione, and the way she stroked the feline on her lap. "You still have that cat?"

"Yes, I still have this cat. And Crookshanks," she added. "He's somewhere in the conservatory, I think. Or maybe napping upstairs; he's getting on, in cat-years."

"So...are you going to show us around?" Harry asked.

She sighed in mock-exasperation, but smiled and shifted Severus to one side. "I *suppose*." Rising, she gestured at the room, which was lined with statuettes, bits of pottery, wall-hangings, and other primitive-looking odds and ends. "This is the parlour. Don't touch any of the artworks; they're worth a fortune. Aunt Eumenia is an archaeologist, and often ends up trading various collector's pieces with her colleagues around the world."

"Didn't you say she was in Burma, in that letter you sent?" Harry asked her, rising following her into the hall. "The *one* letter you sent?"

As Hermione blushed and apologized for her lack of communication, Ron leaned halfway out of his chair, whispering to the cat on the settee. "...You tore my hand open, that night, didn't you? I ought to neuter you!"

Severus *hissed*, scrambling to his feet. The freckled wizard jerked back in startlement. Hearing the noise, Hermione came back into the room.

"Ron, what are you doing to my cat?" she demanded.

He rose and backed away from the black tom, pointing at it. "That thing is insane! It just started hissing at me for no reason!"

"Puss isn't insane!" she shot back. "He's half-Kneazle, just like Crooks...who, I'll remind you, has already proven to be a very good judge of character! If he's hissing at you, it's because you've done, or were about to do, something *untrustworthy*."

At her pointed reminder of his past attempted action, he subsided, but the moment she turned back towards the hallway, he flipped his hand in a rude gesture at the cat.

Severus growled softly, watching the youngest male Weasley leave. Deciding to follow them, he leapt down from the couch, unwilling to trust the overgrown boy out of his personal sight. Not with a threat like that, and not when it also ran the risk of the idiot-boy ending up alone with *his* Hermione, at some point. At that thought, his trotting stride checked for a moment. Shaking it off, Severus hurried to catch up with them. Just because he wished for it, didn't make it true. On the other paw, nothing she had said or done had told him flat-out to *not* watch over her. Which meant he would do as he damned well pleased, unless and until she stated otherwise.

"So, did you read yesterday's paper?" Hermione asked Harry, aware of Severus trailing after them as she took her friends on a tour of the downstairs portions. "That lengthy article in the *Daily Prophet*, about how Professor Snape has been absolved by the Wizengamot of all crimes?"

"Absolved, my arse!" Ron snorted. "He probably stole some of the Malfoy funds to bribe his way out of trouble."

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was scowling. She huffed and added, "Did you *also* read the part where it was Professor Snape who was secretly feeding us all that information on where to find the Horcruxes, and the defenses Lord Voldemort had put in place around them?"

"So?" Harry asked belligerently.

"So, if he *hadn't*, we very probably wouldn't have won the war," she tartly reminded her friends.

"A month and a half away from civilization, and she's already lost her wits," Ron scoffed.

Turning to face them, Hermione glared at both of her friends. "You know, if the two of you are going to continue to cling to old grudges...if *anyone* in this house is going to cling to stupid old grudges in my presence...I'm going to throw you out! *Grow up*, Harry! The only reason why we won is because *everyone* played their part in getting us all to the final victory. You might've had a Prophecy insisting that only you could end the Dork Lord's reign of terror, but you certainly couldn't have done it on your own!...I wonder," she added abruptly, facing down Harry as he stared at her, flushing and paling alternately. "Are you so full of your own victory that you've even forgotten that *Ronald and I helped you* to win? You seem determined to forget all of the *little people* who helped make you the Boy Who Lived Twice!"

He flushed, dropping his gaze out of shame.

Hermione pressed her point. "Give credit where credit *is due*, Harry. Even if you don't like the person, give them credit for all the things they did right...and all the things that were done to *make* things right. Don't just point at any mistakes, no matter how glaring *or* piddling. You've made your own colossal mistakes along the way, so if you're going to point any fingers of blame, start by pointing them at yourself!"

"What blame?" Ron interjected, frowning at her.

"We *all* forgot that Professor Snape was an Order member. We could have asked *him* to go to Headquarters to check on Sirius' whereabouts. Or to get a message to the rest of the Order to help us look for him, rather than risk using Umbridge's Floo, and the disaster that followed. *I'm* as much to blame for that as anyone, since I forgot that possibility as well," she reminded her two friends. "But you don't see *me* laying all that blame at someone else's feet. *I* grew up, and learned how to take responsibility for my own share of the world's problems!"

Neither of them looked at her. Severus, however, found himself purring quietly. Partially for her spirited, if indirect, defence of him. Mostly for the way she seemed to be getting through the thick skulls of her two friends.

"Now, if you're going to disparage a man who had *more* courage and bollocks to carry through the most nightmarish tasks necessary to help win this war than the two of you possessed, combined and multiplied, then you can just leave, because I don't want to hear about it. If you're capable of keeping a civil tongue in your head, of reading that article and admitting how we *all* had a hand in winning the war, 'greasy gits' included, then you can stay and see the rest of the house," she told them. "It's your choice. Civility, and stay? Or rudeness, and leave?"

They didn't answer her, didn't even look at her...but they didn't leave, either. Severus sat on his haunches, his tail curling around his feet. Admiration for witch warmed him more than any patch of sunlight, at that moment. Nodding her head, somewhat satisfied for the moment, Hermione gestured at the next archway.

"...The kitchen is this way."

...

Minerva and Hermione both watched with awe as Severus finished unfurling his frame. As soon as he was upright, he touched his chest, his arms, his face...and grinned. Wrestling it down into a smirk, he faced both ladies and bowed. They immediately applauded him.

"Well done, Severus! Well done! I knew it would come back to you!" Minerva praised her colleague. "And with only a week's worth of practice!"

"Technically, it didn't," Severus stated, adjusting his coat cuffs. "It was you, pushing me back and forth through the transformation process on each visit, that helped."

Hermione glanced between them. "Perhaps...if we used that spell on *me*...?"

"It wouldn't do anything to you, Hermione; you haven't got an Animagus form, yet!" Minerva reminded her.

"But, if I'm concentrating on trying to *become* an Animagus at that moment," the younger witch countered. "Wouldn't it sort of be like priming the water-pump?"

Severus rubbed his chin, his arms folded across his chest. "...She may have a point, Minerva."

"I will remind you that your knowledge of Animagi has been Obliviated, Severus," the Headmistress retorted.

"My former knowledge, yes, but not my wits. What would happen if you cast the spell on an average witch, one who wasn't trying to transform?" Severus enquired.

"Why, nothing, of course!"

"Then where would be the harm in trying the spell on a witch who's trying to transform?" he offered logically.

Minerva looked doubtful for a moment, but drew her wand and glanced at her former student. "Is this something you're willing to risk, Hermione?"

"I think he's on to something. Besides," she added with a smile, "you can always cart me off to St. Mungo's if something goes wrong. It's not like I'm trying this on my own, after all."

"Yes, well, you've always had a level head on your young shoulders," Minerva praised. "Are you ready?"

Hermione composed herself for a moment, then nodded.

"On the count of three... One...two...three!"

She closed her eyes and concentrated on the spell as Minerva's wand swished through the air. Light impacted on her eyes...and then suddenly the world wobbled. Snapping her eyes open, she clung to her concentration on the Animagus spell as the world enlarged. The floor shot up to meet her, making her land on all fours with a startled *thump*. A giant in black stepped close, peering down at her. Hermione wondered what the heck she was, and if she had all the necessary bits with nothing freakily extraneous. Smiling, Severus stooped and scooped her up in his arms, startling her.

"Well, aren't *you* a pretty little puss?"

His touch was surprisingly gentle. Hermione was relieved to know she was a cat, since that was what she'd been aiming at, but she also very much wanted to know what she looked like. However, those long-fingered hands were cradling her to his chest, making her very aware of his masculine scent...and...and the bastard was petting her, turning her muscles to melted mush. He scratched gently behind and below one of her ears. The back of her throat, somewhere between her sinuses and her mouth, rumbled in a purrrrrrr of pure happiness. He had unbelievably sensual hands, so talented, so soothing, so...

"Put her down, Severus, before she starts to drool. Hermione, wake up and re-gather your dignity! You're a cat, for heaven's sake!" Minerva ordered her tartly, if not unkindly. "There will be plenty of time for pettings later. Gather your wits, and try to Apparate onto the sofa, there's a dear."

Disgruntled at being lowered to the floor, Hermione sighed...it was more a flicking of her ears and her tail, which felt really good, if unnerving to remember having had something similar back in her second year...and concentrated, willing herself to the settee cushions. A *bang* and she bounced lightly onto the cushions, having judged her entry-point a little high to be on the safe side.

"Excellent! Come back here, young lady, and we'll concentrate on restoring you to your natural shape. Remember," Minerva stated as Hermione jumped down and padded over, "it is just a reverse of the mental incantation, and a reverse of the mind-imagery, as I reverse the spell in order to help revert you to your natural form... Ready? Three...two...one!"

The world shook and shrunk around her as her body unfolded back onto bipedal feet. Hermione staggered a little, dizzy from the sudden shift in blood pressure. Hands caught her shoulders and steadied her, holding her until she could straighten on her own.

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded, mouth curved up in an almost-smile, but didn't say anything as he released her and stepped back.

"Goodness. That was quite easy, wasn't it?" the former Transfigurations Professor observed, hand to her chest. "How exciting...Severus, I do believe you've hit on a genuine way to speed the process of learning how to be an Animagus!"

"I would caution you to remember that Miss Granger has always been precocious, when it comes to spellcasting," Severus returned. "I suggest instead that you take up Misters Potter and Weasley on their request to learn how to be Animagi and at the appropriate point in time, when they are ready, use the spell upon them to assist in the transformation process. Their powers are closer to average than hers, making them better test-subjects."

"I'll give that a try. Come...we'll try it again, but this time, I want you, Severus, to cast the two spells upon her," Minerva said. "And then we'll have it tried with Hermione casting the spells upon *you*, during the transformation process."

"I'd like to try it near a mirror, if you don't mind," Hermione stated. "I'd like to see what I look like, as a cat."

Tapping her wand on the back of the nearest armchair, Minerva Transfigured it into a cheval mirror. A tip of the mirror pointed it slightly towards the floor, ensuring that anyone cat-sized would have a good view of themselves. "On the count of three, Severus..."

Five seconds later, Hermione found herself staring at a pretty kitty with fluffy, mottle-striped fur. Most of her coat was a soft sort of beige and brown, with a little splotch of white to either side of her nose, more white on the tips of her paws and the feathers of her belly, and soft 'grease marks' in brown along her cheekbones. She flicked her duster-like tail, settled onto her haunches, and turned her head this way and that, admiring her reflection. Her eyes were a lovely shade of gold, many times lighter than their normal tawny brown. They looked rather pretty, she decided.

She wracked her brain to remember where she had seen such a broad-cheeked head, before. It came to her, after a moment: siberian longhair, that was it. She looked like a russian or a siberian longhair.

Happy...purring, in fact...she looked up at the two giants who had once been her teachers. Once again, Severus stooped and lifted her into his arms. This time, however, she could see the tan-and-brown blotch she made against the black of his overcoat. Squirming a little for comfort, she lounged indolently across one of his forearms, pleased with the way his other hand started stroking and petting her from scalp to rump. He even stroked onto her tail, tugging lightly on its tip. It felt remarkably good, like a brief stretch of her muscles...

"Now, now; you'll have plenty of time for that later. Severus, transform her back again. Hermione, I'll want you to cast the spell on him after you're human again. Once I'm satisfied the two of you can change each other back and forth successfully half a dozen times, and I know you can rescue each other if it becomes necessary, then I'll take my leave. I have some business I'll need to handle regarding the school, but after that, I'll come back, test the two of you on transforming yourselves without the spell, then march the two of you down to the Animagus Registry at the Ministry of Magic."

"Minerva, they use a Truth Stone on the applicants," Severus reminded her. "They'll ask me how long I've been an Animagus."

"Yes, but they won't be asking *me*, and *you* cannot remember anymore...remember?" she prompted him. "Just state for the record, 'To the absolute best of my recollection, this week was the very first week that I have been able to successfully transform myself into an Animagus cat and back into a man again,' and you'll pass the Truth Stoning test. Adding the bit about 'back again' makes it perfectly truthful, since you did turn yourself into a cat weeks ago, but haven't been able to change back again on your own until just now."

"Professor McGonagall," Hermione teased her former teacher. "You just bent the rules like a Slytherin! I'm proud of you."

Minerva blushed, while Severus surprised them both with a chuckle.

...

Confident they could transform each other, Minerva McGonagall took her leave an hour later. Hermione eyed her housemate. "Well. I think *you* should cook dinner, tonight."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Me? You are the hostess, madam."

"Yes, and you've mooched off me long enough. Besides, a Potions *Master* should be able to rustle up something tastefully edible in a kitchen, shouldn't he?" she challenged him, flapping her hands at him to shoo him towards the kitchen.

He didn't shoo very well. Folding his arms across his chest, he didn't move from her aunt's living room. "It will not be so easy to trick me as that."

Looking him up and down, Hermione planted her hands on her hips and gave him a dismissive look. "Perhaps. And perhaps you're just afraid of doing real work around this house."

His dark eyes gleamed, but he didn't rise to the challenge.

Hermione tried a different tactic. "Besides, you've been getting all the pettings and the pamperings. It's *my* turn to be lavished with attention. You're going to help me turn into a cat, feed me tuna from your finger-tip, and scratch and pet me all I want, tonight."

Her bold declaration appealed to him more than it should have. Severus reminded himself that it was his responsibility to keep things platonic between them. He was not the sort of man to force his attentions onto any female...two-legged or four...if he could help it. Not when what he longed for was a woman to desire his attentions of her own free will. "...And if I don't agree?"

"Then I won't pet you!"

Severus regarded her for a long moment, before unfolding his arms. *Such cruelty, in one so young?* he thought with a touch of amusement. *Perhaps you need to learn a lesson in just what you're threatening me with, Miss Granger...starting with a demonstration of just how much I can make you purr.*

A slight bow, and he conceded, "As you wish; I shall cook our supper, feed you dainty tidbits, and stroke you from nose to tail-tip, all evening long. In three...two...one..."

Hermione shrunk for the tenth time, that afternoon. And for the sixth time, found herself scooped up into his arms. *Ohhh, yes*, she thought with a purr as he kneaded her nape with his fingers, heading for the kitchen. *Let the lovings begin...*

Chapter 04

Chapter 4 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

IV.

...

Reclining on her bed, where they had retired after finishing their supper, Severus massaged the fluffy cat sprawled along the flat plane of his torso. It was a position they had been in several times previously on this bed, albeit reversed. This time, he was the human and she was the feline. Before, it had been her fingers that stroked and scratched, ruffled and soothed. Now, it was his turn to make her melt and purr.

Since her bedroom was warm despite the windows being open to the evening air, he had removed his frock coat and waistcoat, leaving him in white shirtsleeves. And he had removed his shoes out of respect for her coverlet. He fully expected her to leave plenty of sheddings on his garments, but that was only fair; she had tolerated his own black hairs being scattered over her own things since the day she had picked him up in that alley, cradling him with the same gentleness he could now give back in return.

There was nothing sexual about the attentions he gave her; instead, it was purely sensual, or rather, sensuous, of the kind meaning an indulgence of one's senses. There couldn't *be* anything sexual about it, in two such disparate forms. But a part of Severus' mind refused to stop wondering what it would be like to stroke her human flesh, instead. There was nothing that a human male and a housecat female could do, but plenty of possibilities for a human male and a human female. So, as he rubbed her nape, rumbled her mane and tugged gently along the length of her tail, he found himself wishing she would accept these sorts of attentions in her regular form, and much, much more than just this.

A futile wish, of course. Severus had no illusions about how disliked he was by the vast majority of the wizarding world. How disagreeable he had been toward others, for most of his adult life. Including her. Some of that had been the need to push people away, to limit how many people would be around him long enough to realize he was leading a dual life, and to limit how many people would become potential targets themselves, should he ever be caught in a crossfire. Some of it had been stress, which was no wonder, given his career as a professor and a double-agent in a very nasty war. Some of it had just been a distaste for having to put up with those who weren't swift-witted enough in their thoughts to keep apace with him.

The fluffy brown-and-beige cat purring from abdomen to sternum was smart enough to keep up with him, he silently acknowledged. And he wasn't embroiled in a deadly war anymore. True, there were plenty of people who still hated his guts, and who would want to see said guts being used as his own lynching-rope...but that would be an attack coming from only one side. The war had left him hated and mistrusted on both sides for far too long.

Her didn't have to seek out another person's company; Severus had learned over the years how to live on his own, alone. Except he had discovered he *liked* Miss Granger. Enjoyed her company greatly. Enough that the thought of her good name being brought low, simply from being placed in conjunction with his own, was a thought he didn't care to contemplate.

If he tried to court her... The first and biggest obstacle to overcome, of course, would be her not laughing in his face. Or slapping him in the face. The next biggest obstacle after that would be everyone else reviling her for her taste in companionship. Even though that article had come out in the paper regarding his true allegiance, the one outlining the Wizengamot investigation and his subsequent pardoning *in absentia*, along with other articles slipped into *The Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler* to further spread the word, he was still going to be *persona non grata* in the wizarding world.

If Hermione paired herself with him willingly, openly, the rest of their world would no doubt accuse her of being mad. Or drugged. He could very well be accused of 'slipping her something', given his history as a Potions Professor. Not that he *could*; he didn't have current access to a cauldron, let alone powdered mandrake root, oyster liqueur, the tears of a veela...

Actually, it was more like she had drugged *him*. Being *kind* to him; holding him; cuddling him. *Petting* him, while he had been in such a sensually vulnerable form as *afelis domesticus*. But almost no one would think of things from that direction.

She stretched, then shifted, standing up. Tolerating the weight of her paws on his stomach, he shifted his hands to follow her as she padded onto his upper chest, continuing to stroke and soothe and rub her flanks through her silky-soft fur. He was kneading her haunches when she shifted forward that last step...and licked him on the tip of his nose.

Startled, nearly cross-eyed from her proximity, Severus stared at her in shock. Hermione didn't know quite why she had done it, just that the urge had been there, and her feline nature had prompted her to indulge in the impulse. The way it clearly startled him was too appealing to ignore. Maybe it was because he had just spent nearly a full hour making her feel sooo *good*, but she did it a second time, feline eyes half-closing as she did so. He blinked at her.

Really, for such a beaky thing, his nose wasn't without a certain quirky appeal. Her tongue-tip rasped over his nose-tip a third time, making him cross his eyes again. *How amusing!*

Severus struggled to find his voice. "Hermione...what are you...?"

With all that practice from earlier and all of her current desire to back her now, Hermione screwed up her willpower and successfully Transfigured herself back into her human form. Thankfully, she shifted her limbs to either side of his torso; if she hadn't, she would have most likely cracked his ribs, if not outright crushed them. Within a span of no more than three startled heartbeats, he was straddled by a young witch clad in light blue shorts and a pale blue, short-sleeved blouse. Brown eyes stared down into black for a long moment, her arms and legs caging him in place.

Then she did it again. Licked his nose with the tip of her tongue. And giggled as he scrunched up his face. Oh, yes, it was even more fun when she did it in her human form!

"Hermione...!" Lips met lips, silencing his protest before it could emerge as more than a brief whinge. It was unexpected, it was soft and sweet, and not very demanding...and it was far better than merely *nice*.

It was so much better than *nice*, Severus found himself digging his fingers into her curls, sweeping his palms down her back...grinding his hips up into hers as her tongue flicked along the seam of his lips. She moaned against his mouth in reaction, writhing down onto his hardened flesh. The sound curled along his nerves, making him want her even more.

Grimacing, Severus shifted his hands to her ribs, pushing her up and back. Confusion creased her brow, for the move forced her to end the kiss. "...Why are you stopping us?"

Why, indeed... For a moment, Severus couldn't remember why. Not when the act of sitting up caused her loins to settled even more intimately over his pelvis. Yes, he still wore his trousers and she had on her shorts, but it was a *very* intimate position, conjuring primitive, primal images of her riding him, of him thrusting up into her, which reminded him that he had just admitted to himself that he *liked* her...very, very much.

Wincing again, Severus muttered tightly, "Because I am trying to respect you."

She blinked at him. Absorbed his words, visibly pondering his meaning. And smiled slowly, sinking back onto his chest with a faint but undeniable blush. That took the pressure off his loins, but it did bring the soft curves of her breasts into contact with the muscles of his chest. "I think that is the sweetest thing you have ever said to me, Severus Snape."

That earned her a scowl. "I am *not* sweet!"

"I didn't say *you* were sweet; I said that what you*said* was sweet," she corrected him with a frown of her own. It smoothed into a shy smile. "...I think I like this version of you."

"What version?" he asked her warily. Some of his suspicion dissolved when she stroked a lock of his black hair back from his face, tucking it behind his ear.

"A softer, kinder Severus Snape." That earned her a dirty look. Hermione didn't take offense. Instead, she gave in to the same instinct that had made her lick his nose as a cat, and brushed her lips across his. "I didn't say *soft*, I said *softer*. You're not quite so high-strung, anymore, and I really like that. But 'snap' is still a part of your name, Mr. Snape...but then again, so is 'nape'."

Her fingers slid to the back of his neck, where they slipped under his shirt collar and massaged the tense muscles under his skin. Severus resisted for all of two seconds, but it was just too much like her fingers had rubbed and soothed his nape as a cat. Only this time, he was a fully human male. Combined with the tiny kisses she dusted across his mouth, it made him want to melt into her. He had been a hard man for most of his life, thanks to the circumstances of that life...but he was alive in a world without a Dark Lord, lying on a broad bed in a quiet cottage, draped with a warm and willing female.

He was only a man. But he was an honorable man. When she shifted to press little kisses up along his cheek, he managed a warning. "If you keep doing this...I will take you, Hermione. Man..." he shivered when her warm breath tickled the lobe of his ear, closing his eyes to control...or perhaps revel in...the sensation, "...to woman."

She'd never really been tempted, before now. Not in the ways of women and men, though she had kissed and groped a little in the past. Now, Hermione considered his words carefully, then nodded. "It's all right. I'm ready to go all the way."

Virgin.

In flaming ten-foot letters.

Severus' eyes snapped open, the concept burning in his mind. Given the Weasley family predilection for procreating all over the place, or at least attempting to do so, he had assumed that she had 'gone all the way' with the Idiot-Boy. On the one hand, he was relieved that she hadn't been treated to fumbling freckled fingers, ruining her expectations of what a good time in bed should be like. On the other, it was *his* fumbling digits that would have to introduce her to that concept.

Not to mention that, As A Virgin, flaming letters and all, she most likely wasn't taking a contraceptive potion. They hadn't even discussed the future, beyond getting him to shift his shape on his own...which admittedly they'd done...and getting him registered as an Animagus to keep him out of Azkaban, and continuing to get his work for the war-effort known by all, so that no one killed him. But beyond that...nothing.

He couldn't think, with her chewing delicately on his ear. With the same strength of will that had kept him alive for longer than she had been born, Severus pushed her to one side. Ignoring her soft protest, he rose from the bed, stepped carefully out of reach, and breathed deeply to regain control over his body. Which was voting for screwing the future in favor of screwing *her*.

He hadn't survived decades of war by giving in to impulses without at least some careful consideration, however.

Arms tightly crossed, he turned to face her. She looked like a cross between a cat and a siren, despite her all-human form, for she was half sprawled on her side, half on her stomach, one knee drawn up just enough to emphasize the satiny skin of her thigh. *Virgin*, he reminded his libido, and cleared his throat.

"Where do you, ah...see yourself, five years from now?"

Hermione stared at him, one brow quirked as high as it could go. *That* was a non-sequitur. "Where do I *see* myself, five years from now?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "What do you want your life to be like, in the future? How do you see yourself? Career, home...relationship?"

Hermione didn't quite believe her ears, for a moment. *Severus Snape, saying the 'R' word?* She blinked and considered his words. "I don't know. I really haven't considered it, yet. I mean, the war took up a fair chunk of our attention span, and there was always that Damocles' Sword hanging over our heads, of whether or not any of us would

even survive..."

Since she was taking the question seriously, Severus made himself relax his arms and sit on the edge of her bed, angled so he could look at her comfortably. "What would you *like* to be doing?" At her curious look, he found himself adding, "I am the sort of man to meticulously plan my existence, to cover any and every possible contingency...yet I, too, am at a loss to know what to do next with my life. If I *can* do anything, considering most of the wizarding world still loathes my guts for what I had to do."

Not being an idiot, Hermione connected the two. "You want to know if this will just be a...a summer fling, or perhaps something more. Something to invest time and energy in. Something to *plan* for."

The heat warming his face felt uncomfortably like a blush. Severus ignored it. "Not just *us*," he stated, forging ahead despite the way his chest squeezed a little at that word, *us*. "How will you make your living? Do you plan to be an Auror? A Mediwitch? A shop clerk? Which would be a waste of your talents, even if you worked at Flourish & Blotts."

She smiled wryly at that. "Perhaps. Or I could take over for Madam Pince, in the Hogwarts Library...if she were ready to retire. I don't know... I honestly *don't* know, Severus." Twisting onto her back, Hermione allowed herself to deliberately contemplate the future. "I'm normally the sort to make a gazillion plans, too...just ask Ron and Harry about my insane studying schedules, back when I was in school."

"But, there's the rub, isn't it? I'm *not* in school. I never took my seventh year, never sat for the N.E.W.T.s. What decent-paying, interesting sort of career could I get, if I never got any N.E.W.T.s?" Twisting her head, she glanced at him. "What about you? If you'll forgive me for saying it, I don't think the board of directors will approve of you going back to the school to teach there. Certainly, you shouldn't go back to teach until all those who were in school when you...did what you had to do," she hedged delicately, "...have left the place. It would be easier to resume teaching if the students hadn't personally known you, in the past."

"I wouldn't go back anyway for a few years," Severus dismissed. "Not until it's proven that the Dark Lord's curse on the Defence position has been lifted with the finality of his demise. I don't want to be the sap selected to prove *that* theory, not after suffering it once already," he muttered. He ran one hand through his hair, thinking. "I do have my skill for potions-making. If I could afford to set up a lab, I could make a living selling brews to apothecaries, or perhaps a mail-order business. Under a company name, of course, to avoid the stigma of my own name. And perhaps do some research on the side..."

"Is that what you'd like to do, then?" she asked him.

"I'd *prefer* to be teaching the next crop of dunderheads how to protect themselves," he found himself confessing, making her blink. "It may be a year from now, or a decade, or half a lifetime, but another Grindelwald, another...Voldemort," he forced himself to say softly, "...is bound to rise up again. As Alastor used to say, 'constant vigilance'. That, and competent lessons in Defence against the Dark Arts, are the only things we'll have to save us, each and every time. But as you suggested, that's not a very likely option at the moment."

Hermione studied him quietly for a few moments, thinking. "I looked through your Potions textbook, you know. The one Harry used, our sixth year. I don't have the instinct for Potions that you have. I'm *good*; I know I am. I can make just about any Potion out there...but I don't have the instinct for it that you clearly have. Whether I worked for you, or for the twins, I'd be a helper, and not that much of a partner. Not in a research-and-development sense. I could *do* the work...but you'd have to tell me what to do," she sighed. "That doesn't add much to the creative process."

Severus didn't coddle her ego by protesting otherwise. She *was* good...at rote Potions-making. A conversation with one of his former fellow teachers prompted him to speak.

"No, you're not a natural at Potions, though I will admit that you can follow directions to a T," he admitted quietly. "But you are a natural at Charms; Filius admitted it himself. He was quite gleeful at the prospect of having you all the way through your seventh year, when you signed on to take your sixth year in it. There was even some speculation as to whether or not he should take you on as an apprentice, to teach you all that he learned in his dueling master years. Minerva, of course, was arguing for you to study Transfiguration, and there was some additional contention in the teacher's lounge regarding your future in Runes and Arithmancy."

"But not in Potions?" Hermione asked with a wistful, rueful smile.

He gave her a pointed look. "I'm certain Slughorn would take you on, these days. Just because you do not have an extra instinct for it does not mean you should look elsewhere for your employment."

"But you didn't discuss apprenticing me in any staff meetings."

"I could not have discussed the possibility, Hermione. Not even if you had a natural aptitude. For one, you were a Muggle-born...a Mudblood, if you will forgive the vulgarity," he apologized in an aside. "I couldn't favor one, and still maintain the pretense of being a follower of the Dark Lord. For another...you were a friend of Potter's. Two strikes against you," he reminded her.

"But the war is over," she stated.

"Yes...and we're going in circles. The war is over. Each of us needs to find a way to make our living," he agreed.

"You said you could do potion-making," Hermione reminded him, sitting up. She scooted a little closer to where he sat on the edge of her bed, too.

He gave her another pointed look as she squirmed closer. "Hermione, I was unemployed for a full year. My accounts at Gringotts were seized by the Ministry. For all they have *pardoned* me, they have not seen fit to restore my missing funds. In fact, if I hadn't performed the Fidelius Charm on my house straight away, I would have lost everything else in a Ministry raid. As it is, I had to sell some of my books over the last year, in order to pay for food."

She winced in sympathy at that. "Well...maybe it's just because they don't know where you are..."

Severus sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "Perhaps...but though I could and did craft a few potions for the other side, I would need a real laboratory in order to make a living at potions-making. The makeshift one I have in my home is utterly inadequate for serving the needs of a fully commercial venture, and even if I did get my vault restored...I didn't have enough to make myself a proper lab. Since I always had the one at the school, I spent all of my money on my books. I really do not want to have to sell any more of them if I can help it."

"I'm sorry you had to sell some of your books. I do understand," Hermione murmured. She reached across the space between them, touching his hand. From the way he glanced down, she suspected he wasn't accustomed to sympathetic touches. The corner of his mouth quirked up a little.

"I think only you and perhaps Madam Pince would understand the full horror inherent in that statement."

Hermione laughed. She couldn't help it. Shifting onto her knees so that she was closer, she wrapped her arms around the startled wizard, hugging him where he stood at the edge of the bed. "I'll share my collection with you. Provided I have access to whatever's left of yours, of course."

A wordless laugh left him. "How mercenary of you."

Since she wasn't letting go, Severus awkwardly returned the embrace. Hermione smiled into his shoulder, enjoying the warm male scent of him. "So...if the two of us combine our libraries, and...as much as it pains me to suggest it...we sell off any duplicates, do you think we could come up with enough money for the most basic of

potions supplies?" She felt him pulling his head back and leaned back as well, meeting his gaze. "Even if we start out small, just a few basic products, it would be a source of income that we could gradually build upon. And we still have over a month and a half, here. We could start with brewing and selling a few things right now, while our living expenses are still low."

Severus studied her face, a faint frown pinching his brow. "Are you throwing your lot in with me? Why? Why would you kiss me, for that matter? Why *me*? You,," He flushed as he admitted, "You could have anyone you wanted in your life..."

Hermione already knew the answer to that question. It was as easy as looking at his uncomfortable, diffident face. Cupping the edge of his jaw with one hand, she smiled at him when he glanced at her, surprised at how easy it was to be brave enough to admit that answer.

"Because I realize I have enjoyed all of the conversations I've had with mycat in the last few weeks, far more than I've enjoyed conversations with anyone else in the last few years. I was never the prettiest girl, growing up, but I was often the smartest. Girl or boy, it was always hard to find someone I could talk *with*, not just talk *to*, or talk *at*...and therein lies all the difference in the world. I've always admired you, and your intellect."

He gave her a skeptical look, releasing her.

"...Well, except when you made fun of my teeth, and when we thought you were a traitor," Hermione admitted with a blush. He ducked his head, or tried to, but she lifted it again with her hand. "But even then, I wanted to make excuses for you."

"Someone that brilliant *couldn't* be a traitor. You *had* to be smart enough to know that all that nonsense about 'purity of blood equals purity of magic' was just that: nonsense. Certainly you've taught enough through the years to have learned that someone like me, coming from a purely Muggle family, is just as capable as anyone coming from a longstanding wizarding family like the Malfoys."

"*More* capable," Severus admitted, returning his gaze back to hers. He stared into her tawny eyes, studying her. A lock of curly brown hair dangled at the edge of one eye. Lifting his hand, he brushed it back, gingerly tucking it behind her ear before lowering his arm again, though he was beginning to understand that she probably wouldn't protest his touch. "...When did you become a woman, Miss Granger?" he finally asked, searching her warm, smiling gaze. "Why wasn't I there to see it?"

Her smile broadened. "Because if you *had* been there, I doubt you would have seen it. Now, come on," she prodded him, lifting his chin a little higher with her palm. "Admit you've thoroughly enjoyed debating with me now that we're both adults, free and clear. Confess that you enjoy my company."

Warmth infused his face. Years...decades...of hiding his true feelings made Severus want to deny it out of instinct...but her fingers slid softly, gently along the side of his throat. Rubbing that tendon below his ear, down at the bottom of his jaw. It felt almost as good as when she did it to the cat version of him. He held her gaze as he spoke. "Yes, I have enjoyed your company. And your mind...and your touch."

"Then let's throw in our lot together," Hermione offered with a grin. "I have an idea...if you can tolerate it...that should add to the value of any potions we'd brew."

At the arch of his brow, she explained.

"*Charmed* potions...don't pinch your brow like that," Hermione chided, shifting her hand so she could smooth out the crease in his brow with her thumb before dropping her arm. "I know you sneered at the thought of 'foolish wand-waving' in your Potions class, but I've been studying some of the concoctions the twins have come up with for their shop. Some of their processes, enhanced by Charms, have really speeded up the production, quality, and efficacy of those products. They've been able to restock their shelves at a faster rate than their competitors. I think it's worth investigating."

All this touching she was doing...it was alien to him. At least, to the spy and the false Death Eater he had been. To the man who had learned how to enjoy being touched as a cat...it was...it was probably only tolerable because it was her. Then again, he had touched her, and she had shown no signs his touch was repulsive, unwelcome.

"I held that stance against wand-waving in the classroom because combining potions and spellwork required Advanced-level study and skill," he reminded her, trying to regain some of his normal asperity. "*Seventh-year* advanced skill. You haven't gone through your seventh year of study, yet."

"No, but I've read the textbooks," Hermione admitted. At his puzzled blink, she added, "I made sure to buy all the course-books for my seventh year and studied them in my free time, when we were chasing down all those Horcruxes...what?"

His blink had shifted to a wince...and from there, into a wry chuckle. "You *studied* for a year you weren't going to take?"

"*Scientia est Potentia*: Knowledge is Power," she quoted. "I made sure Harry and Ron studied some of it, too, though I only insisted vigorously on certain spells we all thought would be most useful for them to know. It was worth it, too, seeing as how we won."

"If you say so," Severus murmured, uncomfortable with the mention her friends. Setting aside his dislike, Severus pondered her offer. "You think the Charms are proving a help, and not a hinderance? What if they're just dangerous short-cuts in the potion-making process? Some potions cannot tolerate the use of magic in the preparation of the ingredients, or the energies used will create an interference in their efficacy."

She shrugged. "Some of it may be short-cuts, but I was thinking more along the lines of charms to hold a potion or salve in stasis until it's ready to be applied. Or a charm that's applied to the container...Wrackén's Disease requires the counteragent, a potion, to be enchanted to achieve full potency just before it's applied, but the spell and wand-movements are a bit complex for most people to handle."

"Yes, but Wrackén's Brew cannot have a stasis charm applied to the bottle, Hermione," Severus reminded her. "Stasis charms make moonroot sap curdle and sour, rendering the potion ineffective."

"Ah, but what if the potion is *double*-bottled?" Hermione counter-offered. "You craft a bottle with two layers, and only the *outer* layer is stasis-charmed; the inner layer is not, and it's the *touching* of the charm against the potion that would sour the moonroot sap. It's the same principle as a thermos flask, only in this case it's not being protected against heat-loss by a vacuum; it's being protected from magical energies by a vacuum."

"Perhaps, but an activated potion would still go stale within half an hour," he protested. "You only use small amounts at a time, which is why most people apply the ointment, *then* enchant it to work."

"Not if you enchant a mess of *tiny* bottles...say, a boxed set of a dozen dram-sized ointment bottles, pre-enchanted...you could even make each compartment in the box stasis-charmed, with a paper or foil seal over each segment."

"Paper would be better than foil; metal and glass in combination can sometimes conduct magical energies, while paper and glass are far less reactive," he mused, rubbing his chin. "Of course, we'd need to come up with the boxes..."

"All we'd need would be a stack of card-paper, and two Charms: the Origamus, and the Papieras. One to fold the paper, the other to mould it so that the joints are rendered seamless. A thinner bit across the top of the partitions so that it's easy to break through, a lid to close over it, and there you have it," Hermione said smugly. "An environmentally sound, recyclable delivery system for pre-enchanted, stasis-maintained medications. It's almost as good as a Muggle chemist's bubble-packs."

"Environmentally sound? Recyclable?" he queried, arching a brow. "Sounds more like a fire-starter, to me. And much more practical, considering how many wizarding homes have Floo connections."

"Well, at least it's more biodegradable than the plastic in a chemist's bubble-packs," Hermione retorted. "And we can...or rather, I can...enchant each of the compartments to end the stasis charm once it's been opened *and* its bottle removed."

"But then we'd have a slough of tiny bottles running around Great Britain," Severus reminded her. "If the stasis charm is going to preserve everything within its compartment, then why not use a Vassopulpa Transfiguring Charm, and just make the jars out of paper as well? If they're suspended in stasis, then it doesn't matter that the Transfiguration from paper to glass will only last twelve hours at best."

"We'd just have to make sure the jars were loaded and sealed into the box within an hour or two of being enchanted," he mused, following that thought. "and put a disclaimer on the labeling saying that the jars are completely disposable, biodegradable, burnable, whatever they prefer...and the stasis charm on the outermost container will keep the medicine still potent, so long as each compartment hasn't been broken open."

"Oh! I just thought of something," Hermione said. "If I use a certain set of Runes on the top of each compartment, then the touch of a wand would open it up, but it could be constructed strong enough to be proof against puncturing, and especially proof against children trying to get into it...this could be a whole new line of packaging for medicines!" she exclaimed softly, enthusiasm shining in her eyes. "We could patent it, and get royalties from it! It would be highly useful in the medical field as well as the private sector...and in the Herbology field, for shipping specimens as freshly as possible."

Severus found his thoughts arrested by the way her face glowed with excitement; he wasn't used to anyone looking that happy while looking at him, even if she technically wasn't happy at *him*. A longing to reach out and touch her cheek, to smooth back the curls by her ear, to claim her mouth in a kiss seeped through his bone. It took him a few moments to realize he didn't *have* to restrain that impulse. Not only was she no longer his student by a full year and more, she had indicated his touch was welcome. Which was a near-miracle, in his opinion; there weren't many women who would willingly allow him to touch them.

Taking advantage that unspoken permission, he lifted his hand to her face, gently brushing the backs of his knuckles along the softness of her cheek. Her eyelids drifted shut and her head twisted into his hand. A blush stole across her cheeks as he opened his fingers, allowing her to nuzzle his palm. As much as he wanted to kiss her, Severus restrained himself. There was one question she still had to answer, first.

Instead, he softly repeated his original query. "...Where do you see yourself, five years from now?"

An image popped into her head. It was the same way she'd seen herself being the best student she could be, and the best witch she could be, and every other goal she had set for herself and succeeded at. There were some goals where the visualization hadn't come through quite so clearly, and tasks she had concomitantly failed...but whenever the dream in her head was clear enough, strong enough, she had found a way to make it come true.

Opening her eyes, Hermione told him exactly what she saw. Because if it scared him away, she wanted to know right now, before it was too late. "I see the two of us, in our own home, one with a good, solid potions laboratory. A home where we create popular, well-crafted brews each day...and make love to each other each night."

Severus felt something in his heart thump hard against his ribcage. He fancied it was his heart. "You see us in a relationship?"

As tempting as it was to answer, *Why not?*, Hermione aimed for a more direct and thus utterly unambiguous reply.

"Yes."

Determinedly ignoring the voice in the back of his head, the one filled with skepticism, sarcasm, and self-doubt that screamed at him she was lying, she'd never want to be in a brief fling with *him*, of all people...let alone a five-year relationship...Severus closed the last bit of distance between them. Pressing his lips to hers, he kissed her. Just kissed her. It was enough, for that moment.

When he pulled back, she opened her eyes and looked at him. Her expression was sober, though her cheeks were softly flushed from kissing with him. "So...where do you see yourself, in five years? What's your own long-term plan?"

"I...didn't have one, other than surviving long enough to complete my Oathsworn task in bringing down the Dark Lord. I haven't *had* one, before now," Severus amended as her brow started to arch up. "I didn't know if I'd survive...and I fully believed I wouldn't. If I hadn't been hexed into staying as a cat like that, if I hadn't escaped from Pettigrew, I most likely wouldn't have lived past the Dark...past Voldemort's final battle."

She could accept that; his position had always been the most precarious of anyone's, in the war. "Alright. Then how about, where would you *like* to be, five years from now? Where would you like to find yourself, if you could use a Time-Turner to go into the future and visit your future self?"

It only took a few heartbeats of thought to find the answer to that question. "Sitting in your lap," Severus stated. "Reading a good book together, as you stroke my back."

"As a cat, I trust," Hermione returned dryly. "You're a bit bigger than my lap can hold, as a man."

He smirked, and she laughed. Shaking his head, Severus sighed. "It's an impractical image, Hermione. It doesn't address employment, housing, the acquiring of food and clothing..."

"But it is somewhere that you want to be?" Hermione offered quietly.

"Yes."

Her mouth quirked up on one side. "You do realize that, if you and I *were* to become partners...in several senses of the word...you'd definitely be on hand five years from now, and my lap would be available for you to cuddle upon, as either a cat or a man? There's nothing in the rulebook that says we cannot combine those two visions...and it not only comes with employment, housing, food and clothing, but the all-important necessity of companionship, too."

"An eloquent argument," Severus murmured, daring to tuck another wayward curl behind her ear. "But that begs the question, what kind of a partnership? Business, that would be a given, in order to acquire the tangible necessities of life. Personal... Housemates? Witch-and-cat? Wizard-and-cat?"

She giggled at that. "You make it sound like a pet ownership time-share scam."

A snort escaped him at the absurdity. Sobering, he continued. "Would you want a friendship, or...or perhaps a friendship-with-benefits? Or..."

He couldn't quite bring himself to say it. After all, if he didn't ask, she couldn't say 'no'. Like that famous, silly poem about the turtle and the bagpipe. For a moment, Severus' brain snapped, and he had an image of Minerva in a tartan dress shouting, "AWOOOGAH!" when squeezed, like in that odd poem. He shook it off mentally, banishing it with a picture of Hermione in something plaid...but he couldn't picture her shouting that. Not when his libido insisted on picturing her shouting his name in ecstasy.

Hermione studied him, noting the way his normally sallow cheeks had turned a little pink. She knew very well what was more than friends-with-benefits. While he was too old to be called a 'boyfriend', calling him a 'significant other' was a bit too stuffy for her own tastes. She also didn't like the wishy-washy feel of either label. *No, I've decided what I want. And I always go after what I want*, she reminded herself. *I always have, after I realized within the first two years of grammar school that, if I didn't go after what I wanted, I'd never get whatever it was.*

And I want Severus Snape in my life. I want my lap-cat, who loves a nice, quiet cuddle with a good journal or book. I want the man who kisses me like I'm precious to him, though he hasn't actually said the words. Someone who's honestly concerned about my future, five years from now. And I want a man who can keep up with me in a good, rousing discussion about anything and everything. One who thinks a woman is good for more than just draping decoratively off a fellow's arm, or rodgering senseless in

bed...though I wouldn't mind an occasional bout of thoroughly rodgered senselessness, of course...

"...You know," she stated idly, "there *is* another option."

"There is?" Severus asked, nervous. *Is she going to turn me out? Suggest just being platonic friends? Ask to keep me as her cat most of the time?*

"Yes, there is." Gathering her courage, Hermione looked him in the eye. "We could try being engaged for a while."

Severus choked. Coughing, he cleared his throat, making a vague motion with his hand. The last thing he wanted was for her to think that his choking at the suggestion meant he found it offensive. "Go...go on..."

"A longish engagement, at least a year or two," she offered. "So that we could really get to know each other. To live with each other long enough to see if the way we hang the bog roll or squeeze the toothpaste tube irritates too much, or if we can handle the fine art of compromise in each of our personal lifestyle preferences."

"Ah. So this would be like...an experiment in compatibility."

"Yes, but with more honorable intentions involved than just shacking up together," Hermione offered, blushing as she did so. "I mean...well, you did say you wanted to respect me, just now."

Respect me. The two words echoed in his head, and ached in his groin. Severus winced. "Hermione...I'm not sure I could live with a young, attractive woman, and *respect* her for an entire year. You are not one of my students, anymore...and I don't have to fear you being used as a hostage by the other side to make me compliant, either."

She blinked at him, then blushed and frowned, catching his meaning. "Don't be ridiculous! I'm not saying we should hop into bed together...erm, as two humans, or two cats...for the first month or two, but I'm *not* saying we shouldn't try to have any sex at all, either! I'm just..." Searching for the words she wanted, she finally settled on the blunt approach. "Look, I really like the man I've gotten to know in the last few weeks, and because of that, I'd like to *court* you. With honorable intentions."

"I don't want you to think I'm just toying with you, or playing with your affections. I *also* don't want to treat this so casually that we'd be off snogging other people while we're living together. I respect myself too much, and I respect you too much, and I demand that you respect me too much, too. Will you, or will you not, get engaged to me?"

Severus frowned at her. "I may not have dated that much, Hermione, but even I know it is the man's responsibility to ask the woman if she wants to marry him!"

"I'm not asking you to marry me; I'm asking you to be engaged to me. To be exclusive, and to *consider* the possibility of asking for my hand in marriage in the future," she retorted tartly, cheeks heating at his scolding. "Besides, this is the modern age; a woman *can* ask a man to marry her, you know! Especially if the fellow is too shy to do it himself."

"Too *shy*?" It felt like his eyebrows were trying to merge with his hairline. "I may be many things, but *shy* is not one of them!"

"Oh, really?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms under her breasts. "When you couldn't even bring yourself to discuss the possibility of marriage as one potential form of partnership between us?"

"I didn't want you to laugh in my face!" he retorted just as tartly...and flushed, embarrassed by the admission.

"...Do you hear me laughing?" she snapped back.

"No! Will you marry me?" he blurted out, allowing the heat of their argument to kick the words out of his chest.

"Yes!"

They paused and blinked at each other, both stunned by how easy that was. And how surprisingly quick. Hermione recovered first, shrugging diffidently, arms still folded across her chest.

"...I mean, if both of us find ourselves still interested in the idea after the trial-by-fire of living and working together for at least a year, that is," she allowed, "then yes, I could definitely see myself marrying you. I certainly can't think of anyone else I'd rather marry."

Severus narrowed his eyes, his suspicious nature coming to the fore. "What does *that* mean?"

"I mean, you're the best candidate I could probably find. You're incredibly intelligent, so I won't ever have to struggle with boredom, like I do with just about everyone else," she admitted. "You're attractive, in a brooding sort of way. You're also quite mature, and..."

"Hermione, I'm twice your age," Severus interjected, uncomfortable with the subject but knowing it needed to be aired. "I'm old enough to have been your father."

"Yes, and because of it, you're actually mature. I'm a lot older on the inside than most young women my age," Hermione confessed. "I aged quite a lot, inside, thanks to the war, and I grew up a long time ago. I'm not the sort to be impressed with the boys who are my own age; they're still rather immature in some ways. Enough ways to give me a headache when I think about trying to date one of them. Take Ron, for example..."

"...I'd rather not," Severus retorted dryly.

She rolled her eyes at him, but continued. "...First the prat couldn't get up enough courage to ask me out on a date, then he had problems with me dating someone else, while *he* was busy snogging the daylights out of another girl, then he decides he wants me after all, at the very moment everything starts blowing up in our faces and I have to turn him down so neither of us will be distracted at the wrong moment. And then, *before* asking me to go out on a proper, post-war date, he up and asks me to *marry* him! He has never *once* asked me what my favourite colour is, let alone enquired where I pictured myself five years from now! I want someone who *thinks*, in my life."

"I don't deny that I'd like a man of action...someone who, when he comes up with a good, solid plan, carries it through," Hermione qualified, "but first he has to be *able* to come up with a good, solid plan. Something that he's carefully thought his way through. Not just some spur-of-the-moment idea."

"I also want someone who is organized. Not to mention, someone with a sense of humor that is at least a few steps higher in quality than the kind most frequently based upon bodily functions!" Subsidizing a little as he smirked at that, Hermione sighed. "Look...right now, I'm roughly half your age. But in another two decades, I'll only be two thirds as old as you. Forty to sixty isn't as big a span as one might think. And then two more decades down the road, I'll only be three-quarters your age, sixty to eighty...and by the time I'm eighty and you're a hundred or thereabouts, we'll both be equally old and wrinkly, and it won't matter anymore."

"The important thing is that we're both *mentally* the same age, or at least close enough to make a go of it. And in that regards, I feel like I'm at least thirty! So there; I'm already three-quarters your age, internally," she offered logically. "Thirty to forty is a far smaller gap than eighteen to forty. If I don't snag *you*, who am I going to date? Someone who's only just left school? Someone who cannot even begin to picture where they'll be, five years from now?"

"So, I'm the only prospect, is that it?" Severus asked acerbically.

Shaking her head, Hermione corrected him firmly. "No, that's *not* it. If I weren't genuinely interested in *you*, I wouldn't have made any sort of an offer. It's not as if I'm drowning in my spinsterhood, and flailing around for the nearest piece of flotsam! I've got decades of dating-years ahead of me. I'm *choosing* to try and make a go of it with

you, because I'm *choosing* you. I'm choosing *you*, Severus. Because I *want* you. Or at least, I currently think you're worthy of me, and I want to know not only if my thoughts on the matter are accurate, but also if I'm worthy of *you*."

The shuttered way he studied her made her uncomfortable. Until he murmured, "I'm not accustomed to anyone thinking like that. Thinking that I'm worthy of a relationship."

"Well, you *are*," Hermione huffed, settling her arms more firmly across her chest. She realized in the next instant that her body-language could be interpreted as either defensive or pouting. Defensive on *his* behalf, yes, but she didn't want to think she was trying to defend herself *against* him. Unfolding her arms, she closed the distance between them, leaning forward until their noses almost bumped. "Look, all the talking in the world won't tell us what we really need to know. We need to live together, work together...court each other," her gaze dropped briefly to his lips, "and then we'll know if we have what it takes to *be* together. If there's one thing I learned from the war, it's that life is too short for doing things you'll regret. Or *not* doing things.

"I want to see if I can have a relationship with the most intelligent, exciting man I know. That man happens to be *you*," Hermione stated as bravely as she could. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Aside from a certain, natural level of bewilderment and skepticism...no," Severus found himself replying. A pause, a swallow, and he added, "And...I find you to be remarkably mature, intelligent, amusing, and fascinating in return. I certainly couldn't imagine myself bothering to...to court anyone else."

The smile that spread across her face startled and bothered him. He wasn't sure what he'd said to please her so much. As far as compliments went, it was certainly a pitiful thing. Of course, he silently acknowledge that he had a problem with delivering compliments; the ones he'd given to his Slytherin students hadn't entirely been sincere, and he had rarely handed out even the most grudging ones to the pupils in the other Houses, as part of his cover. Compliments...sincere ones...just weren't his style.

He hadn't had much practice with giving them to adult women, either. The rare few he had dated as first a student, then an adult, had usually done so in exchange for something from him...notes for classes, or information or a bit of extra status in the Dark Lord's service. The occasional woman whose services he had bought...well, they hadn't been paid in compliments.

"This will not be easy for me," Severus admitted quietly. "I have many years, decades' worth, of bad habits to overcome. I've pushed people away far more than I've allowed them to get close. I've never stayed the whole night through in the same bed as a woman...sex and my stint as a cat notwithstanding. And...I'm rather..." A steady breath, and he forced himself to admit, "I'm rather unnerved at the prospect of being your first lover."

"Oh. Well. Erm...how should we handle it, then?" Hermione found herself asking. She winced in the next second, mortified by how stupidly clinical that sounded.

For his part, Severus found himself wanting to chuckle. Pulling her torso against his, he tucked her curly head under his chin and held her in his arms. Just held her. It seemed the appropriate thing to do, even if he felt awkward in doing so.

For her part, Hermione found some of her embarrassment easing, and snuggled her arms around his white-clad torso. Clearing her throat after a few heartbeats, she offered, "Well, we *are* both the sort who like to have a plan for everything..."

"Yes, we are. I think your suggestion earlier has merit. We court each other, get to know one another," Severus outlined, "and we kiss, for the first few weeks."

"And cuddle," Hermione offered, cheek pressed into his shoulder. "I like this part, too."

"And...cuddle." He didn't really consider himself the cuddling sort. Or rather, hadn't, until his sojourn as a cat. "Then we...touch. A little further each time, but not beyond what would be respectful."

Hermione liked that plan, but it had a flaw. "What if we end up wanting more than that, from each other?" She pulled back a little, looking up at him. "What if we get 'carried away on a tide of passion', or something like that?"

Here was an opportunity too tempting to resist. "Then I'd say you'd been reading too many 'girlie novels'," he drawled. "I have never in my life been 'carried away on a tide of passion'. I have always been in control of myself."

To his surprise, she arched a skeptical brow. "Even when you were foaming at the mouth with rage and furious loathing when confronting Sirius, or Harry?"

His face flushed. "...I meant sexually."

"You know, some people do say that the more passionate you are in one area of your life, the more passionate you'll likely be in another." Smirking, she snuggled close again. "If that is so, then all you'd need is the right woman to turn you into a love-tiger."

Wincing, he muttered, "Hermione, I am *not* a 'love-tiger'. Kindly dispense with that nonsense immediately."

She muffled a giggle into his shoulder, then pulled back, still grinning. "*Prove* it. Kiss me as passionately as you can! If you're *not* a love-tiger, you won't be able to curl my toes one bit. But if you do curl them, then you are one."

The chit was challenging him. Daring him, even. There was one flaw in her plan. "How would I know if your toes were curling from my kiss, and not from your own scheming, woman?"

Not having considered that, Hermione bit her lower lip in thought. It took her a few moments to offer, "Well...we'll make it a challenge. If I'm *not* impressed with your most passionate, lover-like kiss...you have to do not only the cooking and the dishes...since dinner was very tasty...but the laundry, too." Her nose wrinkled in distaste. "I *hate* doing the laundry. It's my least-liked chore. That's incentive for me to keep my toes uncurled, right there."

Considering the offer, Severus asked, "And what is my incentive to kiss you with all the passion I can muster? A negative consequence isn't enough, not when the anticipation of a positive reward awaits me."

Hermione eyed him, her mind blank. "Er...what would you like, as your reward?"

For a moment, his own mind was blank. Drawing in a breath to admit he didn't know, Severus inhaled her scent, and remembered a longing he had held just a short while ago. His face filled with heat at the very idea, making her blink at him.

"Severus? What is it?" She wasn't used to seeing his face quite so pink.

"You, ah, wouldn't agree to that."

That earned him a frown. Loosening his grip around her, Hermione sat up and eyed him firmly. "Don't make up my mind *for* me, Severus Snape. Tell me what you have in mind, and I'll give it due consideration. And don't assume that you know how I will answer. You only *think* you know, and frankly, you don't me well enough yet to actually, really *know*."

His face heated further. Clearing his throat, Severus opened his mouth, licked his lips, and managed to reply. "I...want to taste you. Intimately," he added at her blank look. "Down...there."

Thank Merlin and his purple undershorts...*her* face flushed as red as his own had felt a moment ago. He felt slightly better at his own embarrassment. Especially when she didn't run screaming from his presence.

Clearing her throat, she breathed deeply, then nodded shakily, finding her voice. "Ahh...alright, then. If you fail, I get out of cooking, dishes, and laundry, and if you win, I let you...erm...yes. So, when shall we enact this test of your sexual prowess?"

Right now! Severus' libido asserted. His mind, however, knew that if he succeeded, he would have to set the stage a little better. "First of all, your feet need to be bare. The toes in question have to be visible."

"Visible, right." Still a little dazed-looking, she pulled out of his arms and pulled off the canvas boat-shoes she was wearing. They thumped onto the floor beyond the edge of the bed. She wasn't wearing socks, since the weather was a bit warm for that. "There. Now what?"

"Well, one doesn't start out absolutely cold, with these things," Severus informed her. "In fact, it's rather like a Muggle automobile; the engine has to be warmed up a bit, first."

That made Hermione giggle. "...A *car*? Are you comparing me to a *car*?"

"You do make my heart race," he murmured. Before he could begin to wince at how stupid that sounded, the look in her eyes made him pause. She looked both startled and pleased. Hermione even blushed again, ducking her gaze. And suddenly, it was just that easy. Lifting her chin with the edge of one finger, Severus touched his mouth to hers. She held her breath until he deepened the kiss, then sighed and leaned into him.

Her lips parted, tentatively inviting him inside. He didn't plunder them, but rather eased himself inside, like a spy slipping into a previously locked chamber. Licking cautiously around the edges, he found himself countered by a tentative lick of her own tongue. They met, probed, parried and tangled. It was good enough that sitting upright was annoying, burdensome. A twist of his body, a bit of pressure from the arms wrapped around hers, and he lay on his back, with her sprawled over him.

Perhaps he should have taken the dominant stance, lying on top of her to help further dominate the kiss, but Severus didn't really care at the moment; the position reminded him of how she'd transformed from cat to young woman, straddling him earlier. With a muffled sound, she let her limbs drape to either side of his body. He liked that soft moan. In fact, he wanted to hear it again, in case it lead to toe-curling. Of course, it was growing hard to concentrate on toe-curling activities; the cat within him just wanted to sink into the sensations and snog, not think. Snog, and grope a bit.

Reminding himself he was a sentient being, capable of rational thought, Severus touched her gently, thoughtfully, rather than just groping blindly. Sliding his palms up to her shoulders, he caressed her arms as their mouths nipped, then slipped them back down again to the curve of her rear, clad in soft blue cotton. There, he allowed the inner feline he had so recently learned existed inside of him to knead, alternating rubbing and squeezing her flesh between each of his hands.

His neck started to ache, making him realize that he was lifting his head off the bedding, trying to kiss her more thoroughly. It was definitely time for a position change. Carefully, he eased her over to his left side, grateful the bed was wide enough for the maneuver. She slid with a wordless protest, but since he didn't allow their kisses to pause for more than a fraction of a second, she didn't have time to verbally object. From there, it was a matter of sliding one of his knees between her thighs, and pushing her over with the sweep of his right hand up her ribs, over her shoulder, and onto her breast.

That broke their kiss. Hermione tipped her head back onto the foot of the mattress with a soft cry. The last person who had touched her there was Ron...and it had been unwanted and unwelcome...and the person before that had been the late Viktor Krum. Viktor had come closer to arousing her like this than Ron had, but never had it gone past a grope; she hadn't let it go past a grope. Right now, Hermione wanted to feel more than the heat of his palm through her blouse and bra. As he shifted over her, mouth ghosting over her chin, his breath warming the skin of her throat, she lifted her hands to undo the buttons of her top.

BRRRRRIIIING! BRRRIING BRRRIING! BRRRRRIIIING!

That was the phone. They jerked apart, almost as if they'd been caught. Hermione scrambled out from under Severus as he shifted onto his side. Since the phone was on the nightstand, she picked it up on the third single-ring...her aunt had strange taste in phone bells, preferring the sound of an old-fashioned party-line. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was heavily accented, sounding Indian...or rather, Burmese. They rattled off something, only she couldn't make sense of it. Frowning, Hermione closed her eyes, struggling to remember the Translation Charm.

"I'm sorry, hang on just a moment..." Pressing the mouthpiece to her thigh, she drew out the wand stuck by habit through her curls. "*Paralingua Burma!*" The hissed spell rippled over her head and shoulders. Lifting the receiver back to her ear, she cleared her throat and addressed the person on the other end of the line in Burmese. "I do speak Burmese; could you please repeat yourself? Your English was too heavily accented for me to understand."

"*Thank you! Is this the niece of Miss Eumenia Stobbs, the archaeologist?*"

"Yes, this is. My name is Hermione Granger."

"*Yes, that is the name I have for the contact information. I am sorry to have to relay this news to you, but the aeroplane your relative was flying in has crashed in the jungle. The government sent rescue teams yesterday morning when the weather cleared, to search for survivors...but I am afraid your aunt was not among the ones who survived. Her travel papers indicated that we should contact you, if anything happened, and her work permit indicated we should contact a Mr. Jeffrey Granger as well.*"

"He's...he's my father. Eumenia's cousin," Hermione stammered. Hands slipped over her shoulders, warming her chilled skin. She found herself confirming her parent's telephone number, and that it wasn't too late to call, British-time. She ended the call and gingerly hung up the phone. Almost absently, she cancelled the translation spell.

"What has happened?" Severus coaxed her. "You're as pale as the Grey Lady."

"Aunt Eumenia...is dead," she whispered, and looked up at him with stricken brown eyes. "My aunt is dead!"

Severus found himself grasping more than her shoulders, as she first leaned into him, then burrowed her arms around his ribs. Holding her, he rocked her gently as she first sniffled, then gasped with each indrawn breath, then sobbed quietly. It was strange, being cried upon, a definitely strange feeling. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had trusted him this much. His Slytherins had been mostly a self-sufficient lot. Occasionally a homesick, teary-eyed first-year would come to see him for comfort; Severus had given speeches, tissues, and maybe a touch on the shoulder. No cuddling, though. And yet, with the witch in his arms, it was remarkably easy.

Maybe there had been more to the hex Pettigrew had cast than just an Obliviate that had trapped Severus as a cat, making him forget all about Animagi, and how to change back. Maybe he had forgotten how to be cold and unfeeling, too. If so...he wasn't missing it nearly as much as he should have, if he hadn't been rescued by her.

Chapter 05

Chapter 5 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat... (Sorry, but I'm just not feeling creative when it comes to these things, tonight...)

V.

...

Her father had been named executor of her aunt's estate. Hermione thought that was a good thing; that meant *she* didn't have to deal with the British government insisting upon proof-of-death, arranging to have the body shipped home, waiting for the will to go through probate, paying the inheritance taxes... Jeffrey Granger had done something similar when his parents had passed away back during her third Hogwarts year, so it was familiar to him. Well, not the bit about shipping a body home for a funeral, but the rest of it was familiar enough. And he did have his wife Rachel to comfort him.

Hermione was grateful she had Severus. He hadn't really said anything, just lent her his chest to play sponge for her tears, and made sure she had cold compresses for her eyes. And when it was time for her to sleep, he made sure she was tucked into bed, then shifted shape and wormed his way under her arm. He found himself a little squished when she fell asleep with her arm still cuddling him, but not uncomfortably so.

They did discuss what would happen with the house. Whoever inherited it would undoubtedly want Hermione cleared out, cats and all. The joint bank-account would go to her, since it was a joint account; she would have to pay a bit of death-tax out of that, but Hermione fancied there might be enough to fix up a better potions lab in whatever Severus' Secret-Kept home was. When she broached the idea to him, and asked him who his Secret Keeper was, Severus admitted that it had been himself; he had coached Draco Malfoy into casting the spell upon him, allowing him to hide the boy. It had meant allowing Pettigrew continued access to his home, however...and he had yet to go back and see what sort of damage the rat had done to his domicile.

The day after Aunt Eumenia's death was announced, Severus fed Hermione lunch, wrapped her in his arms, and Apparated both of them to a nearby alley. They nearly had a bad shock; a moving van was crowded into that alley, its bonnet not more than a foot away. Edging around the bulky, boxy vehicle, they emerged on the street into a scene of chaos. Muscular men were moving furniture out of the few houses that were still occupied. Some of that furniture was going into the moving van, but some of it was going onto the pavement, and into overflowing rubbish bins. The occupants of the houses whose goods were being unceremoniously dumped were yelling at a clutch of business-suited fellows by a billboard with some sort of notice printed upon it.

Curious, Hermione headed that way. Rolling his eyes, Severus caught up to her, ready to tug her back. Except the words at the top of the signboard caught his attention, too. It had two parts. On the left was written NOTICE OF EVICTION, and on the right was NOTICE OF PROPOSED LAND DEVELOPMENT.

Someone had apparently bought up all the derelict old houses they could find, and was busy planning on tearing them down. The drawing at the bottom of the second notice showed a lovely sketch of brick-and-glass condominium-townhome things. A solid block of them...including the house at the end of the row, where Severus technically lived.

"When it rains cats, it rains dogs, too," he muttered under his breath, catching Hermione's wrist. Tugging her to the end of the lane, he whispered in her ear, waited just long enough for his house to unsqueeze itself into existence, then pulled her inside. The door wasn't locked, but then why bother? No one could find the place, and Pettigrew had never possessed a key.

There was no front hall, just a front room. It was lined with bookshelves...half of which were scattered over the floor. A soft cry of dismay escaped Hermione. She rushed forward, stooping to pick up the tomes. They weren't ripped or anything, just tossed onto the floor. Some of the pages were bent, and one or two had footprints, but that was the extent of the damage, thankfully. Severus joined her in picking up the books, fitting them back haphazardly onto the nearest shelves. Somehow, re-shelving them properly didn't seem as much of a priority, in the face of the townhome complex problem.

"We'll have to clear these out," Severus murmured. "Shrink them all, pack them up...take them back to your parents' home. We can't take them to your aunt's. Well, we can, but we won't be staying there for much longer."

"Come again?" Hermione asked, not following him.

"The townhomes," he reminded her, waving his hand in the direction of the billboard down the road. "Even if this place is at the end of the row, if the construction overlaps the site of this house, it could tear the Fidelius Charm apart, and cause both structures to collapse. It has to be placed on existing buildings...and if something new is built over it, then the spell fails, the next time anyone attempts to go in or out. Spectacularly, according to what I've read."

Hermione, head full of housing prices already, from the worry over where they'd have to live next, if not at her parents' place, blinked. "You mean...you're the hold-out for this block of houses?"

Severus blinked at her in turn. "...Brilliant. Utterly brilliant! We clear out the house...there's not that much magic to worry about dismantling and transporting, so it'll be the work of a few hours at most, and much of that the shrinking and packing of the books...and we break the Charm concealing it. The moment they see it, we'll approach them with the hold-out price. We'll have enough money to...well..." His speculation fell apart at that point. Running a hand distractedly through his hair, Severus shrugged. "I don't know if we'd have enough to buy our own place, actually. This neighborhood isn't the best, even if real estate is at a premium, now, and I couldn't afford a house in this sort of neighborhood, after taxes."

"Let's get to work. Even if it's not enough for a house, it might be enough for a flat with a spare bedroom we could turn into a lab, and enough for the tools and ingredients we'll need," Hermione reminded him.

She glanced around at the walls, taking in the spots of mildew-stain on the ceiling, the sagging, creaking floorboards underfoot, the secondhand furniture crowding the front room, and didn't find any of it appealing enough to feel sorry it wasn't going to be their new home. Aside from the books, of course. This new problem was an awkward thing, but at least it was a distraction from her aunt's death. They needed boxes, however. Even shrunk, he owned a salivatingly large number of books.

"...Do you want to keep the sofa?" Hermione asked him, an idea forming in her mind.

Severus eyed it critically. Compared to the nicer furniture of her parents' place, and the posh furnishings of her aunt's, it was downright shabby. "No. We can toss it out on to the curb without any problem."

"I have a better use than that." Drawing her wand, Hermione dissected the couch, reducing it to its components of cotton-stuffing, fabric, wooden frame and metal springs. The wood and metal, she charmed into wire-bound crates. The matted stuffing and fabric, she Transfigured into cotton-paper cardboard boxes held together with cloth tape. "There we go...boxes for the books to go into!"

"I'll trust you to shrink the books. Watch for the ones that are enchanted," Severus added in warning. "I'm going to go pack up my lab. Or what passes for it, in the kitchen."

...

The business-suited fellows were just getting ready to leave when Hermione and Severus were ready for them. They had Apparated the boxes and crates back to Aunt Eumenia's place, for lack of a better location; the Grangers undoubtedly had relatives dropping by, as they contacted various family members about their kinswoman's death. Even the upstairs had been cleaned out, and the crawlspace of the attic had been searched. There wasn't much up there, just a few broken remnants of Severus' long-ago childhood. It was with relief that he pitched an old toy into the rubbish bin at the curb, guided Hermione past the edge of the Fidelius Charm's boundaries, and broke the spell with a complex murmur and pass of his wand.

The Suits, climbing into two posh town cars, paused, stared, and climbed back out again. They approached as a pack, five of them, but left the sharpest-dressed male to speak for the lot of them. He was middle-aged, in a grey suit with a burgundy tie with purple stripes...a school tie, from the looks of it...and a mustache "Hey, you there! What are you doing at that house? All the tenants are supposed to be off the property by no later than five o'clock!"

Severus, still clad in white shirt and black slacks, studied the fellow in a way that reminded Hermione of how her former teacher would study some deceased animal, before dissecting it for potions ingredients. "I am at that house, because I still *own* that house." As the other man bristled, Severus allowed himself a smirk. "Apparently, you forgot that 42 Spinner's End is still privately owned."

"Privately owned!" the mustached man spluttered.

"*Very* much," Severus confirmed, "privately owned. As I said."

"Smythe! You were supposed to buy up *all* the houses!" Mr. Red-Faced Yeller asserted, whirling on one of his companions.

"But...but I *did* buy all of the houses!"

The yeller in the burgundy tie whirled back to face Severus, a smirk twisting his own mouth. "There you have it. You're nothing but a squatter!"

Pulling a fold of paper out of his back pocket, Severus unfurled it, displaying its contents. "As it quite *clearly* states on this copy of the title, I still own it. Now, if you are interested in purchasing my lot, you may name your opening price, gentlemen. If I find it amenable, I will accept it. If not...you'll have to make a second offer, and so on, until I am satisfied with the purchase offer."

The leader of the group spluttered a little, growled a bit, consulted with his fellows, and finally offered, "Fifty thousand pounds!"

Severus folded up the copy he had enspelled into existence. "Your paltry offering does not appeal to me. And as your building design places my house square in the middle of that...cabana...in the drawing over there, I'm afraid you'll have to cut back drastically on the racquetball courts, or whatever it is you had planned for that section of space."

"Indoor pool," one of the other business men muttered, glaring at them. They huddled for a moment, then came back with a second price.

"Sixty thousand pounds."

"I thought you were businessmen, gentlemen. Not comedians," Severus retorted coldly. "The value of that property is exponentially higher than what you're offering. Try two hundred thousand pounds."

"Two hundred thou....!" Mustache Man spluttered again, then gritted his teeth. "*Seventy* thousand pounds."

"One hundred ninety-five thousand."

The business man turned a shade of red almost as dark as his tie. Hermione held herself ready, in case he suffered a heart attack and needed CPR. She'd performed it successfully on Harry, after all. But though he growled and he argued and threw himself against the stubborn rock that was Severus Snape, he didn't keel over. He looked like he wanted *Severus* to keel over, but he didn't drop into cardiac arrest.

When they finally settled on the parting price of one hundred fifty-five thousand pounds-sterling, the white-knuckled grip with which Red-Faced Mustache Man sealed the deal looked like the handshake should have crushed Severus' bones. Growling under his mustache, but promising the papers would be brought by on the morrow, the man departed with his equally glowering cronies. Only after they had driven out of sight did Severus gingerly shake out his fingers.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked him, concerned. "He looked like he had a grip as strong as Crabbe or Goyle did."

"Try Crabbe or Goyle Senior," Severus muttered under his breath. He shook out his hand one last time, flexing his digits, then sighed. "We'll have to be here tomorrow, to receive that contract. It's a good thing Minerva isn't coming back for our next lesson until the day after tomorrow."

Touching her back, he guided her back toward the aging brick structure. With everyone else in the neighborhood either moved out or evicted, the place was a bit spooky. He didn't want to risk Apparating back to her late aunt's home until they were out of sight, however.

"Let's put up a few wards to warn us as to when they come back," he murmured, absently stroking the curve of her spine, "then return home. Even if it's our home only for a short while longer. This was never a real home, for me. Not since I was an unhappy child, stuck in an unhappy family."

Hermione felt sorry for him. She stepped inside, waited for him to turn and lock the door, then asked, "Was there any place that you could call home, growing up?"

"Hogwarts. From which I am exiled, for the sin of doing whatever it took to win the war."

She touched his mouth with her fingertips for a moment, soothing the sneer of his upper lip as she had soothed the pinch of his brow, then stretched up on her toes and replaced them with her lips. It was a soft kiss, sweet with sympathy. Unsure if he liked it or not...and fearing he did...Severus said nothing, just stepped back and flicked his wand. Within moments, the cramped little house was protected with wards sheltering it from vandalism...since it was no longer hidden by being Secret-Kept...and alarm-spells to let him know if anyone came to the door while they were gone.

...

The next day was taken up in reading through the contract, signing it, collecting the cheque, and cashing it at a Muggle bank. Like a number of Half-Bloods, Severus had maintained money in both worlds. Not much of it was kept in the Muggle world until now, but the cheque for his home was worth a substantial amount. Once it cleared and the full amount of funds had been deposited...Severus had insisted upon a payment in full, up front...he would have to pay Her Majesty's taxes...and if he converted any significant amount of it into wizarding funds, he'd have to pay the Ministry taxes on that as well. That would put a significant dent in the amount accrued. No, it was better to keep the funds of each world separate.

Except for the money they needed for the Animagus registry fee. Hermione and Severus argued back and forth over breakfast, regarding as to who should pay the money.

He said that it was his responsibility, that he had far more money than her...albeit only a small fraction of the funds had been released by the bank as an advance, waiting for the rest of the cheque to clear and prove valid. She argued back that she had a Gringotts account already, so why waste the money that would be lost in the conversion fee and taxes that would be demanded.

They were still arguing when Minerva arrived, Apparating into the parlour as she had since her third visit, when Hermione had suggested she do so to cut down on the curiosity of the neighbors. Wincing at the raised voices, the Headmistress strode into the kitchen, where she found the pair arguing on either side of the butcher-block island in the middle of the room. Neither really noticed her visit, both of them too intent on sniping at each other, stubbornly insisting each would pay for the registry fee.

"...Enough!" Minerva's sharp voice cut through the argument. "I will pay for the registry fee! Severus, you haven't been employed in over a year. You cannot afford to spend the funds on something that isn't food, shelter, or clothing. Hermione, you haven't been employed yet, so the same goes for you. And if I hear one more word out of either of you, I'll march down there and have you both registered as *illegal* Animagi!"

That silenced them. They both glared at her, but it silenced them. Minerva wasn't quite satisfied.

"Now, apologize to each other."

They glared mutinously at her.

"Oh, come now! I'm not demanding that you kiss and make up! Just *apologize* to each other," the older witch snapped.

This time, when Severus and Hermione glanced back at each other, they could see the same thought lurking behind each other's eyes. Leaning over the butcher-block, Severus cupped Hermione's cheek even as she leaned over as well, pulling on the nape of his neck. Their heads tilted and their lips met, lingering together in little nibbles.

When they pulled back from their kiss, it was to see Minerva McGonagall's cheeks flushed almost as red as her favorite tartan. But rather than railing at them for such lasciviousness, she cleared her throat and addressed something that made the two of *them* blush tartan-red.

"Well. My only piece of advice for you...aside from may you be happy together...is that you do *not* attempt to copulate whilst both of you are cats. Felines only feel inclined to do such things when they're in heat, and I'll remind both of you that they usually get pregnant in *multiples*. So it's best not to risk it."

Hermione shivered, feeling like someone had dumped a cup of ice water down her spine; the thought of having twins was scary enough, but most cats had litters of four or five. Severus felt his loins shrivel and shrink to pre-pubescent size at the thought of having a wife who was pregnant with quintuplets. He hadn't even asked *himself* how he felt about having children or not, let alone Hermione.

Clearing her throat, Hermione stated delicately, "...I don't think that will be a problem over the next few days. And...we've already decided to get to know each other first, over the next month or so. We *are* adults, Minerva. We don't have to be mindlessly ruled by our passions."

"I should hope not," Minerva returned primly. "Now, are you ready for your next lesson?"

Hermione exchanged a look with Severus, then shifted shape, leaping up onto the countertop between them. He shifted as well, though he stayed on the floor. A moment later, both of them reappeared, with the younger witch now perched on the island, her legs dangling over the edge, ankles primly crossed, and the wizard leaning his hip against the butcher-block, arms folded across his chest.

"I'm impressed! Excellent work, both of you. Since you can do that on the spur of the moment and so easily, there's no need to wait any longer, is there? Come along, both of you. We'll need to Apparate to the Ministry, since you're not on the Floo, here."

...

Somehow, the Headmistress convinced the duty-guard to let them both into the Ministry proper with their wands on their persons, due to, "...the need to register a new piece of magic with the Ministry, which would *require* their having their wands with them, now wouldn't it?" He was very suspicious of Snape, who was drawing double-takes and dirty looks from the various visitors and Ministry employees, but with Headmistress McGonagall and war-heroine Miss Granger vouching for him, they were let inside, wands still tucked up their sleeves. Or rather, with Hermione's stuck in her upswept hair, which was where she favored putting it during the summer months.

Minerva leaned in close during the ride in the lift to the appropriate floor, whispering into Severus' ear, "...I didn't want you to come in here unarmed, in case someone hasn't read all those lovely articles I've been having spread around the wizarding journals, regarding your work as a war-hero. But do try to just Stupefy them, rather than hex the boogies out of the idiots, should anyone be foolish enough to attack."

Nodding his thanks, Severus remained stoic in the face of the startled expressions and narrow-eyed stares he received. Sandwiched between the two witches as they walked single-file between the cubicles and office doors, he knew they had done it to protect him from the others in the Ministry, but he supposed the others thought it was to guard him, in the sense of protecting *them* from him.

The doorway they stopped at had a sign next to the frame: TRANSFORMATION REGISTRY, and the name *Noleta Corrigan* printed underneath. It had a sub-sign listing things such as Lycanthropes, Half-Breeds (resulting from pairings with other species such as Veela and Merfolk), Metamorphmagi, Animagi, and Accidental Animorphs. Hermione suddenly remembered that woman stuck in the bed in the Spell Damage Ward at St. Mungo's, the one who looked like a half-woman, half-dog. She herself had once had the ears, tail, and muzzle of a cat, thanks to her accidental use of a cat hair in a dose of Polyjuice Potion. That had been thankfully reversible...and might have actually helped predispose her toward a cat for her Animagus form...but this, she gathered, was for those individuals who couldn't have the process reversed.

Tapping upon the partially open door, Minerva stepped inside. "Miss Corrigan?"

"Mrs.," the woman inside grunted.

She was fairly unattractive, with frumpy, grey-streaked brown hair, smudged glasses, and a rumpled brown calico dress. Her desk was covered in paperwork that looked like it was organized on the geologic principle, but she did have one of the few, highly coveted, magical windows in the Ministry, depicting a sunny day overlooking a flower-filled meadow. An orb-spider had taken up residence on the outside of the window frame, with a beautifully spun web covering the lower left corner of the picture. Because it was on the outside, it wasn't a real spider, but the illusion was very detailed.

Mrs. Corrigan eyed them skeptically. "Who are you, and what brings you to my office?"

Minerva gestured for Severus to shut the door, since the office did actually have enough room to hold all four of them, plus enough room to have held a hippogriff or two. Despite the mess, it really was a very nice, very large office. Hermione suspected it was because whoever came here had to have enough room to transform and display their markings for registry.

"I am Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts. These are Miss Hermione Granger, and Mr. Severus Snape. I have been engaged in teaching them how to become Animagi over the last month, a task at which they have now succeeded," the older witch stated formally, if with a few white lies hidden in her words. "They have come here to be duly examined and legally registered as such."

"Right." The woman's grunt was skeptical. She twisted her swivel-chair, opened a drawer in a cabinet, and pulled out a white disk something the size and shape of a hockey puck. "I'll have to Truthstone each of you. Place that between your palms, state your full name, and the date of your first successful Animagus Transfiguration."

Hermione was the first to receive the stone. Placing it between her palms, she glanced at Minerva, then nodded to herself and spoke. "My name is Hermione Jane Granger,

and to the best of my recollection, the day that I first successfully shifted my shape to that of a cat and back, all on my own, was just two days ago."

Opening her palms, she displayed both sides of the stone. It was still white and pristine. Mrs. Corrigan grunted and nodded for her to hand the stone to the wizard in the room.

Pressing it between his palms, Severus followed her statement, glad she had phrased it that way herself so that his own word-choice wouldn't seem amiss. "My name is Severus Septimus Snape, and to the best of my own recollection, the day that I first successfully shifted my shape to that of a cat and back, all on my own, was just a few days ago as well."

A display of the Truthstone showed it was pristine as well. He handed it back to the registrar, who grunted and pressed it between her own palms. "My name is Helga Hufflepuff, and I am a pygmy puff." The stone, when it was revealed, was pure black. Pressing it between her palms again, the woman stated, "My name is Noleta Regina Evans-Corrigan, and I am a bitter-seeming old fart who secretly loves her job."

The stone had whitened again. Smirking...she actually had a nice smile, when she deigned to use it...the witch tossed the stone back into its drawer, then gestured for Hermione to stand next to her.

"Alright, young lady. Tell me what you are, and demonstrate a successful transformation and back, three times. Hold yourself in your Animagus shape on the third time, if you please."

Nodding, Hermione concentrated, shifted into her cat-form, shifted back, shifted again, shifted back, and on the third shift, remained a cat.

"Impressive, in one so young. Up here, if you please," the woman stated, patting the pile of papers covering her desk.

Hermione eyed the stack warily, uncertain if it would shift under her if she leapt up there. Severus scooped her up while she was still debating, depositing her on the most level, stable-looking spot he could find. Grateful, she purred, sat on her haunches, and curled her tail around her feet.

"No sitting on the job, young lady," Mrs. Corrigan grunted. "Upon on all fours, tail up, chin level. Just like you were being judged at a Cat Fancier's Ball."

Assuming the position indicated, Hermione allowed herself to be photographed, touched, prodded, turned, photographed again, and peered at, even to her pale cream underbelly, while the other witch wrote down her distinctive markings. Once finished, the registrar told her to get down and transform back. Leaping free of the paperwork, Hermione Transfigured herself mid-act, landing with only a slight wobble on two human feet as she steadied herself. The Ministry worker asked Hermione a few questions about herself, her residency, and other such wizarding-world legal matters. She filled out the necessary forms, then nodded.

"...Nicely done. And now you. Same thing," Mrs. Corrigan directed Severus. She arched a thin brow as Severus changed himself into his own cat-form. This time, Hermione lifted him to the desk. The registrar poked and prodded at him, hmm-ing. "...I've never heard of two such distinctly cat-like cats before, in all the images of all the Animagi ever registered through this office. In fact...if I remember correctly, *you* are a cat Animagus, Madam," she said to Minerva. "And if I remember the old files correctly, you merely have squares around your eyes in the shape of spectacle-markings?"

"That is correct," Minerva confirmed, adjusting said spectacles.

"Extraordinary... Alright, then. Get down, puss; I'm all done with you, save for the filling out of the forms," Mrs. Corrigan directed Severus. He, too, transformed as he jumped, twisting to face her as soon as he was properly upright and human again. Again, she asked him questions about his age, date of birth, employment record, residence, and so forth. Her quill danced across the lines on the forms, filling them out quickly and neatly. "...Very good. And now, the painful part of this whole process. The registration fee is two hundred fifty Galleons."

Minerva spluttered, hand rising to her throat. "Outrage! Highway robbery! It was only a hundred when I was registered!"

The slightly younger witch eyed her over the tops of her smudged glasses. "That's a hundred and twenty-five apiece. Inflation has risen the costs since then, but it's no more than what inflation should demand over that much time."

"It's still highway robbery," Minerva snorted, digging into her purse. "Luckily, I don't trust the government to keep its hands out of my pockets, so I brought enough to cover an impossible increase..."

Pulling out a sack that was larger-looking than the purse itself, proving it was enchanted for expansion room inside, she counted out the requisite number of coins, then tucked the rest back into her reticule. Mrs. Corrigan tucked the money away, muttered words over Hermione's certificate, touched her wand to the paper, then to the younger witch, and back to the paper again. It *poofed*, creating three duplicates. She shrunk one of those duplicates, laminated it with a charm, and passed the wallet-sized card to Hermione, then repeated the whole process for Severus. Each of the originals...unshrunk...went into one filing cabinet, and the remaining two were folded into paper aeroplanes and enchanted so that they lifted into the air and hovered there, waiting for the door to open.

"There you are. Two duly registered Animagi. Now, get out of my office and stop wasting my time. Mind you let the memos out when you go!"

Tucking his registry card into a pocket of his frock coat, Severus opened the door, ushering out his two companions; he was forced to duck reflexively as the four paper planes zoomed past his head, escaping to their pre-spelled destinations. Catching up to the other two, he accompanied them back to the lift, where he murmured in Minerva's ear, waiting for the next car to arrive. "I should repay you for the extra expense, on our behalf."

"Nonsense," Minerva muttered back. "But if you insist on some sort of recompense, you had better treat my favorite ex-pupil with *honorable* intentions, if you intend to continue kissing her like that."

As much as he liked and admired the older witch, Severus had spent too many years in opposition to her, Head of Slytherin to her Head of Gryffindor. Smirking, he murmured, "Allow me to introduce to you my betrothed, Miss Granger."

Hearing him, Hermione turned to see what her former teacher's reaction was. The lift door chimed at that moment. A gasp and a shout made her whip back around.

"...You! You *murderer*!"

Yanking her wand out of her hair, Hermione crossed arms with Harry Potter, all but poking him in the nose with her vine-wood shaft. His own holly-carved wand arrested itself mid-swoosh. "Care to *rephrase* that, Harry?"

"I don't care what the Ministry says...he's a murderer!" He tried to shift around her, but Hermione blocked his path out of the lift car. "Hermione, move out of my way!"

"Oh, *look*, everyone," she drawled tightly, loudly. They were drawing a crowd anyway, so she might as well play up to their expectations for a rousing show. "It's the Boy Who Conveniently Forgot All The People Who Helped Him To Win The War. Or should I say, the Boy Who Wouldn't Be Alive Today, If It Weren't For *Me*."

"Hermione!" Harry protested, glaring at her. His eyes looked even more green, contrasted with the reddening of his face.

"I *told* you to grow up, Harry James Potter!" she snapped, cutting him off. The lift doors chimed, letting them know they were holding up the other passengers on the other floors. "You wouldn't even be *alive*, if it weren't for me. And since you refuse to do it of your own free will, you are forcing me to call upon the life-debt you owe me!"

He paled, at that. Pettigrew had been forced to answer to his life-debt to Harry, at the final battle. It had helped them to defeat the Dark Lord, but it had cost the ratty little

man his life. "Hermione, you don't..."

"I *call upon your life-debt to me, Harry James Potter*!" Hermione intoned, her wand beginning to glow with a faint bluish light. He lowered his own wand in shock. "From this day forth, you will be *polite* to Severus Septimus Snape. You will be *respectful*. You will be *civil*."

"But..."

"You will *not* attempt to deliberately harm him by either magical or Muggle means, nor collude with others to harm him, nor stand aside and just watch, if you see him being harmed or plotted to be harmed in your presence, while you have the power to prevent that harm from happening to him."

"Hermione, I..."

"You may defend yourself from him, if he is foolish enough to attack you, but you may not kill him, nor cause lasting nor life-threatening injury in doing so. And lastly, you will *acknowledge*, publicly, the truth that he is just as much of a war-hero as you, as he has suffered *evemore* than you, in the cause of freeing the wizarding world from the depredations of the Dark Lord and his followers. You will do so in the face of anyone attempting to decry him a murderer, a true Death Eater, or any other of the falsehoods you *know* to be untrue, and you will do this for the rest of the life which I have restored to you."

"But..."

"...Or you will forfeit the new life I have given you"

The magic illuminating her wand intensified abruptly, spearing out and smacking him in the chest. It washed over him in a wave of blue, absorbing into his clothes, skin and hair. Satisfied on the outside, though trembling on the inside, Hermione carefully re-inserted her wand into the pinned-up mass of her curls like an overgrown hair accessory.

"...Is Severus Snape a murderer?" she asked Harry in the stunned quiet that had followed his binding, a quiet broken by the chiming of the lift as it tried to get them out of the way so its doors could close.

"No," Harry stated, half-choking on the words. "Severus Snape is...a war-hero. He...did whatever he had to do. Just to help us end the war."

"There. That wasn't so difficult, was it?" Hermione remarked, knowing she was poking him in the wound of his prejudice by doing so. "You obviously didn't drop dead from acknowledging the *truth*."

The elevator pinged again, then kept pinging, apparently taking offense at how long they'd been blocking the doorway.

"Clear the way, clear the way! What's the holdup with the lift?" an irritated, authoritative voice demanded. The gathered wizards and witches started scattering, suddenly remembering they had work waiting for them somewhere else. Harry fell back into the elevator car with a petulant frown. Hermione pressed forward, stepping inside. She backed him up until there was room enough for both of their former teachers to enter as well. No longer being held open, the lift doors slid shut with an almost happy sigh.

"What *are* you doing here, anyway?" Harry hissed at her as the lift slid into motion.

"I just got my Animagus license," Hermione told him with a touch of pride. "It took me less than a month, too!"

"So why is *he* here?"

Overhearing that, Severus decided he didn't want the Idiot Who Lived to know about his newfound ability. He also knew that, after her little display of Potter-management, she would expect *him* to get along with the scarred twit. Or at least be civil in his presence. "I have invited Headmistress McGonagall to lunch. Since she and Miss Granger were coming to the Ministry for registering and wanted to celebrate it afterward, I thought it would be convenient to accompany them."

Harry blinked at him, then scowled. He couldn't say anything scathing, however, only a muttered, "*That's* nice."

"What are you doing at the Ministry, Mr. Potter?" Severus found himself asking. He almost sneered it, but considering the lengths Hermione had gone to ensure that her friend behaved *civilly* toward him, he thought it would be prudent to please *her* by being civil as well. Hermione, he cared about. The Potter Twit could stew in his own juices, for all Severus cared. Personally, he had enjoyed the sight of Potter impaled on Hermione's wand like an olive on a swizzle stick.

"I'm an Apprentice Auror. I *work* here. Good day," Harry added tersely as the lift opened on his destined floor. He couldn't escape them fast enough, from the quick way he dodged around two witches and a fluttering horde of paper aeroplanes out in the corridor. The lift moved on, taking them toward the main lobby.

Minerva eyed her former colleague. "You're taking us to lunch, Severus?"

It had been an impulsive comment on his part. Seeing the pleasure on her face, and the matching light in Hermione's eyes, Severus found himself nodding and admitting, "We have much to celebrate."

"So, then where should we go?" Hermione asked.

"There's a Muggle place I know, somewhat upscale, specializing in seafood," he offered, exiting the lift car with them. "Does that appeal to you ladies?"

Minerva fussed for a moment, digging out her wand. She tapped her clothing, changing her blue Wizarding gown into a more modern-looking office dress. "I believe I look presentable enough."

Hermione checked her own clothes, jeans and a blouse. Wrinkling her nose, she drew her own wand, changing the denim trousers into a knee-length skirt in royal blue. "Will this do?"

"Eminently. If you'll take my arms, ladies, I'll Apparate us there..."

Someone spat on him. Severus flinched, glancing down at the globule of saliva on the front of his frock-coat. Looking up again, he glared at the wizard responsible, a youngish fellow with an ugly scowl on his face. The other man spat again.

"Goddamned Death Eater! You should have whatever passes for your rotten soul sucked out by a..."

Grabbing the elbows of his companions, Severus concentrated, Disapparating with them. He left the spittle behind as he did so. Appearing in an alleyway that reeked of the Thames, he released Minerva's elbow and shifted Hermione's arm so that it was tucked through his own. The younger witch faced him, concern pinching her brow.

"Are you alright, Severus?" Hermione asked him. She'd had an impulse to hex the boogeyers out of that nameless man, but her first concern was him, now that they were well shot of the fellow.

It felt good to have someone concerned about him. Nodding, he muttered, "I'll live. The restaurant is over here."

"I think I knew that fellow," Minerva muttered, taking his other elbow as they walked out of the alleyway and crossed the street toward the restaurant. "...Thaddeus

Finkerleigh, that was it. Terrible in Transfigurations, if I remember right. He must have been a good four, five years ahead of your own year. Hufflepuff, but mostly I think only because he wasn't quite smart enough for Slytherin."

Hermione snorted at that, hastily covering her nose with her hand. "Erm...how can you *not* be smart enough for Slytherin? *And* still get a job working for the Ministry, I mean..."

Severus was glad for her amendment; he'd hate to hex his betrothed before he had even bought her a ring.

"In the sense of cunning, of course. He was just a little too honest for his own good. What do you think, Severus?" Minerva quipped. "Was that a janitorial outfit he was wearing?"

"Since I left his saliva behind, it would be only fitting for him to have to mop it up," he muttered back. Releasing Minerva's grip, he reached for the door into the establishment, opening it for his companions. "Come. I have enough Muggle pounds for this place...and much to celebrate."

"Do tell, Severus. And do explain that comment you made, right before Mr. Potter showed up," Minerva instructed him.

He made them wait until they were shown to a table overlooking the wharf, then picked up his water glass. "A toast: to successful transformations, old and new friendships, *silenced* dissidents, enforced peaceful interactions...and a five-year future to look forward to."

"Come again?" Minerva questioned, though she clinked her glass against his and Hermione's and sipped from it all the same. "We know what the transformation bit is, and I'm pleased to see you including Hermione in your admittedly rather small circle of friends... Silenced dissident and peaceful interactions would be young Mr. Potter, but I don't get the bit about the five-year future."

Blushing, Hermione cleared her throat. "It's a private matter, between him and I."

"Actually, not that private," Severus corrected her lightly, smiling slightly behind the rim of his glass. At Minerva's questioning look, he deigned to explain. "It's part and parcel with our betrothal. We've decided we enjoy each other's company enough to want to still be in each other's lives five years from now. To that end, we have agreed to a longish engagement...and if we're still compatible within a year or so, we will most likely marry. It's a very practical solution to our regard for each other, wouldn't you agree?"

That made Minerva snort. "I wouldn't call romance a *practical* sort of thing...but if you're both happy with each other, then I'm equally happy. Frankly, I was wondering whether you'd ever find a woman worthy of you, Severus," Minerva added, tucking her napkin into her lap. "And despairing at the same time whether you'd realize it or not, if an when you did. Hermione is definitely worthy of you...and you, my dear boy, are definitely worthy of her."

"I doubt I would have found anyone, if that rat Pettigrew hadn't done to me what he did," Severus hedged delicately. They were in a Muggle restaurant, after all. "I am forced to admit that having to live like that has changed my perspective on life...and on how to live it."

"Hear, hear!" Minerva praised, lifting her water goblet again. "To *felis domesticus*, and all the joys contained therein!"

Once more, they clinked glasses. The waiter approached at that point, wanting to know if they were ready to order. The trio bent their heads to their menus, hungry after the morning's excitement.

The appetizers didn't take long to arrive. Severus had ordered oysters on the half-shell, which Hermione daringly decided to try, while Minerva ordered an 'onion blossom', confessing under her breath that, lingering heart condition be damned, she was in the mood for something *fried*. The enthusiasm with which she tore into the batter-dipped vegetable had the other two intrigued enough to try it. The onion blossom was indeed good, but Hermione eyed the half-dozen oysters arrayed on Severus' plate, fresh and raw, and wondered where her earlier daring had gone.

"Er...do they really taste all that good?"

"With lemon and horseradish, yes," Severus told her, squeezing a lemon-wedge over the first oyster. Using the knife provided, he made sure the mollusk had been loosened from its shell, then added a dollop of the root-paste and tipped the shell up over his lips. It slithered into his mouth, and he chewed and swallowed with one of his usual slight smiles.

"Oh, stop teasing the girl! It's only a Muggle aphrodisiac," Minerva muttered. "Even I know it has no basis in Potions-making."

"Not entirely true, Minerva," Severus stated as he set the shell down. "The liqueur, the oyster juices, are used in at least three such brews that I know of. Shall I prepare you an oyster, Hermione? Or are you going to disappoint your former Head of House with a lack of bravery?"

Biting her lower lip, Hermione wavered, then nodded. "Alright. Pick me out a good one."

Severus eyed the oysters on his plate, resting on a bed of lettuce leaves. One of the shells caught his eye. Squeezing the lemon over it, he prodded at it with his knife. Unlike the first one, which had been properly cut free of its shell, this one had somehow missed that process in the kitchen. A little bit of sawing slipped the knife under the muscle clinging to the mother-of-pearl surface...and a faint *tik* reached his ears.

Frowning softly, Severus prodded again with the tip of the knife. *Tik*. Brows rising, he peeled back the muscle. A pearl lay in the liqueur, sliding a little as the oyster meat moved. It wasn't outstandingly large, but neither was it exactly small...perhaps about eight millimeters in diameter, and a lovely silvery-blue in colour. Hearing Hermione's appreciative sigh and Minerva's astonished mutter, Severus set his napkin on the table and reached for the salt shaker. Several hefty shakes, a dribble of water, and he transferred the pearl to the damp spot on the napkin.

Folding over the cloth, he rubbed the pearl into the salt, using the granules to scrape off any lingering mucus. Rolling it into a clean spot, he dampened the cloth again, polished the pearl a little, and exposed it to the air. It wasn't perfectly round, being just a little bit teardrop-shaped to one side, but it was mostly round. If it were set just right in a ring, one wouldn't be able to see an imperfection.

"...It's *beautiful*," Hermione breathed, admiring the sea-gem. "And so big! I didn't think that eating-oysters were the same as pearl-oysters."

"Usually, they're not. Most eating-oysters these days are farmed on long lines dangling in the ocean, strung above the sandy floor where grit is most likely to get into them, and well above the normal range of predators who could devastate them. Most pearls these days are also cultured, artificially implanted and grown in a similar chain-like fashion in specially bred stock for that purpose. This one appears to be naturally seeded," Severus murmured. An idea came to him. Scooping up the pearl, he tucked it into his pocket. From the disappointed look on Hermione's face, he thought he had made the right choice.

"So, what are you going to do with it?" Minerva asked him.

"I have something in mind." He resumed preparing the raw oyster with a dab of horseradish, passing it to Hermione before she could question him. "Here, tip this into your mouth, give it a chew, and swallow it down. Or just swallow it, if you're not brave enough to chew."

"Do you really think prodding me about bravery will get me to do anything you want?" she countered skeptically, though she did accept the shell from his fingers.

"Why not? It usually works on most Gryffindors," he teased, and earned matching dirty looks from both women.

"I ought to hex you, for that, Severus," Minerva muttered.

"I was almost placed in Ravenclaw," Hermione informed him tartly. "So I'm too smart to fall for that."

She tipped back the shell, chewed a few times, then swallowed. Severus smirked. "And yet you did as I suggested."

Breathing through her mouth to cool the fire instilled by the horseradish, Hermione scoffed, "Only because it was good advice! Wow...spicy. Not quite so much sauce on the next one, if you please."

"And do check for other pearls," Minerva added, tearing off another piece of her batter-fried onion. "I'd hate to see either of you choke on a small fortune."

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When Severus and Hermione returned to her late aunt's house, with its parlour now crowded with boxes of his belongings, Severus excused himself with a murmur, heading for the various chests and crates Transfigured for storage out of spare sofa parts. A moment of thought, and his wand flicked through the air. "*Accio Svenir's Artifactum! Accio Dee's Annulum!*"

Two of the crates banged open, crafted as they were with hinged lids. Two shrunken books sailed out of those crates. Severus caught them deftly. Curious, Hermione joined him.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for something."

"Going to have a good read?" she teased, tucking her hands around his elbow. "Want a cat to cuddle with as you do so?"

Severus appreciated the flirtatious pose; he hadn't had many chances for a witch to drape herself around him so coquettishly, given his past. Unfortunately, if he wanted to keep her properly in the dark, he couldn't let her know what he was researching. However, a blunt *no* would not be appreciated by her, either. Even he could figure out that much. And he definitely knew that lying was *not* an adequate way to hedge. "Normally, yes. In this instance...I would rather give you free reign with my books, as a distraction. Additionally, if I remember correctly, today is the day you are to water the houseplants. Perhaps you could occupy yourself with either task?"

Puzzled, Hermione studied him. She had never heard him speak so bluntly, before. Normally the wizard liked to keep his secrets behind his crooked, yellow teeth, even the fact that he *had* secrets...but if he wanted to keep those secrets, he could, she supposed. For now. It did make her want to research something of her own, now that she thought about it. Lifting her head, she kissed his cheek, then replied loftily, "As you wish. You may read what you like. As I will read what I like."

Watching her flounce off, Severus frowned softly in confusion. Unfortunately, he couldn't protest too much, since he didn't want her to accuse him of applying a double standard. Settling into an armchair, he unshrunk the tomes and started flipping through their pages. Somewhere in these two books were the spells he wanted. Not that he had anything truly specific in mind yet, just a general idea of what he wanted.

For her part, Hermione retreated to the far end of the cottage, and Disapparated. Flourish & Blotts should have the information she wanted. If not, St. Mungo's surely would.

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She found the spells she needed in the wrong section, at the bookstore. Mainly because, while she was on her way to the right section, she spotted a book with an intriguing cover. Normally it wasn't the sort of volume she'd read, but Hermione had some ideas in mind for things she wanted Severus to try. The young shop clerk arched a brow at her choice and smirked. It took Hermione a moment to place his face, a Slytherin from two years ahead of her.

"Looking to make yourself vaguely presentable, Granger? You'll need something more powerful than *Better Magic For A Better You*, to make you look good," the clerk scoffed.

"Whereas you, Jacob Marsters-Smythe, have free access to this entire bookstore and all of its contents, *all* of its books...not just this one...and yet you still look like...you." Grabbing her book, glad she'd paid in exact change, Hermione left the bookshop. If it weren't such a good bookstore, she'd not patronize it while that particular idiot worked there.

The book was interesting mainly because it contained the same tooth-reshaping charm that Madam Pomfrey had used on her, years ago. And a whitening potion, and shampoos and conditioners, skin exfoliants and smoothing cremes. There were charms to determine which colours went best with one's hair, skin-tone and eyes, and what cuts were most flattering for a specific figure. And the fashion advice wasn't for fads, like shades-of-orange stripes or something equally silly. The solid-colored garments being displayed in the illustrated plates were the kind that endured more transient trends. Plus, the details of the garments could be seen without the clutter of a pattern or prints to the fabric.

It was time he stopped hiding his potential. He wasn't a spy anymore, so he didn't have to push people away with either a repugnant personality, or a repulsive physicality. Especially if they were going to court each other. To be fair, Hermione intended to try out these things on herself as well, though at least her own teeth were already white, straight, and neat. The Hair Care section looked like it had some promising unguents for managing her type of bushy, frizzy hair, as well as for degreasing and livening dull, flat locks like his. *And perhaps there's a way to alter and improve some of these recipes. The Beauty Industry makes millions of pounds every year in the Muggle world; it's bound to make some money in the wizarding one, since women are women everywhere...*

Rather than Apparating straight back to her aunt's cottage, Hermione detoured to her parents' house, banging into her bedroom. She felt a little guilty at not being there to help her father with managing Aunt Eumenia's estate, but she'd had her own concerns to deal with. Given it was a Friday, the day her parents didn't see patients in their joint practice, she headed downstairs to look for them. They were seated at the kitchen table, going over what looked like a mess of paperwork.

"Hello Mum, hello Dad," she stated, swooping in and giving each of them a kiss on the cheek. "What's going on?"

"We got Aunt Eumenia's will back from the barristers. It passed the probate, and came with an Inland Revenue Service form attached. We're figuring out which of your Aunt's bank accounts to drain to cover the costs...nearly 50% of it's been taxed to death," Rachel informed her daughter with a grimace.

"Mostly because it turns out Aunt Eumenia was as rich as Croesus," Jeffrey added, wrinkling his own nose. "But not enough of it lies in funds. Most of it is tied up in her artifacts collection. It's a good thing you're here, actually. If you could tell us which of her artifacts you'd be willing to sell at auction, either before or after the inheritance tax is settled, maybe we could recoup some of the losses for you. Your mother has a friend who works at Sotheby's, remember?"

"Er...why are you asking *me* which of the artifacts I'd be willing to sell?" Hermione enquired, thoroughly puzzled. "What say do I have in any of this?"

Rachel and Jeffrey Granger blinked blankly at each other for a moment, before her mother muttered, "...You didn't tell her?"

"Well, no; I think it just slipped my mind," he muttered back. "And we haven't exactly seen her until now."

"Would one of you please tell me what's going on? I know I haven't been around here, but I've been keeping an eye on her place, at least until the new owner needs to kick me out so they can take over," Hermione reminded them.

"Sweetie," Rachel told her daughter, "*you're* the new owner."

Hermione gaped, stared. Then fumbled the third chair out from the kitchen table, sinking into it to get off her suddenly rubbery legs.

"She left almost everything to you," Jeffrey confirmed. "There's about a tenth of her artifact collection that is being farmed out to various family members, maybe as much as an eighth of it, but the rest is to go to you. Here...a copy of the will."

Setting her package down, Hermione took the stack of photocopied pages, thick with information detailing the various artifacts in her aunt's collection. Some of them were on loan to museums, she noted, mind whirling with the news. The cottage was now hers, if they got the taxes paid on it. It was hers. This wasn't in their plans.

Severus had been forced to sell his own property, since he wouldn't be able to hide it underneath the weight of Muggle construction and progress; as a result, they had near-silently resigned themselves to just holding place in Aunt Eumenia's cottage until the new owners kicked them out. Originally, that had meant trying to find a place to live that wasn't in her parents' home. They couldn't stay here; Severus wouldn't be able to be his human self very often, if they stayed too much at the Grangers'.

But now, it wasn't going to be necessary. Hermione hadn't let herself fall in love with the overgrown cottage, not thinking she would ever be anything more than a mere houseguest...but now she could admit that she did love the place. It even had a basement that could be cleared out, hidden, warded, and turned into a laboratory, spare bedrooms to be turned into library space, and still have room for children, eventually...

"...Earth to Hermione," Rachel stated, patting her daughter on the hand. "You look a bit done-in by the news. Why don't you take some time to think about it, while we handle coming up with the funds to pay the inheritance tax for you?"

Nodding, clutching the papers in her hands, Hermione Disappeared with a crack. Her parents jumped, then chuckled wryly. Sometimes they forgot they had given birth to a real, live witch.

...

Crack!

Severus fumbled with the Galleon in his hand, hastily resorting to stuffing it between the sofa cushions to hide it in his startlement. Nearly impaling herself on the wand in his other hand, Hermione flung herself at him, straddling his lap and peppering his face with noisy, pecking kisses. This was highly unusual behavior for her, not to mention something he had never received from anyone, before. While he was still reeling from her attack, she fastened her lips to his and kissed him hard enough to steal away half of his breath, and most of his senses.

When she finally pulled back, he realized through his befuddlement that she was clutching a rumpled sheaf of papers in one of the hands on his shoulders. She was also grinning. Blinking, he gathered his scattered wits. "What...what was that about?"

Giddy with realization, and the feel of his lips, Hermione asked in a rush, "How would you like to stay here? Permanently?"

That made him frown. "But what about the new owner?"

"*I am* the new owner!" she all but squealed, lifting both arms into the air.

The way that action changed the shape of her breasts right at his eye-level was definitely a distraction. Severus sternly focused his mind on her face...after a moment of aesthetic enjoyment. And higher than her face, on the papers still clutched in her fist. "You...are the new owner?"

"Aunt Eumenia left most everything to me," Hermione admitted with a grin, lowering her arms. She smoothed out the stack of papers and presented them to him. "I inherit the house, and her bank accounts, and most of her artifacts. Now, Mum and Dad are still figuring out what will have to be sold to pay the inheritance tax, but I figure we can sell most of the artifacts to cover that, and have enough left over for sundry expenses. Then, we convert the basement into a laboratory, buy supplies with the funds from the sale of your house, ward it, secure the property without actually making it Unplottable outright, and have the best of both worlds. Electricity and gas for light and heat, space and privacy for magic and manufacturing.

"Mind you," she stated, sobering a bit, "I could rather wish Aunt Eumenia hadn't died, and that none of this was achievable at her expense...but it's a good piece of fortune for both of us. With the upscale quality of this neighborhood, it's not very likely that they'll be buying up lots and tearing down homes for a good, long time."

Severus realized she had just flung herself into the future with *him* firmly in tow, his presence in her life firmly accounted for in her mind's eye. It was a new sensation for him, being included in someone else's life-plan. Not a battle plan, nor an espionage plan, but a life-plan. He decided that he liked it, unnerving though it might be. He also realized after a moment that she was peering quizzically at the book open on the end-table, and hastily shut it, hoping she hadn't read the spell on the pages. "Don't you have a will to read?"

"Actually, I have a book of my own to...oh! I left it at Mum and Dad's!" With another *crack*, she disappeared.

Severus sighed in relief and fished the Galleon back from the depths of the settee, his secret temporarily safe.

Chapter 06

Chapter 6 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

VI.

...

Damned female, Severus thought, giving his hostess and co-habitor a dark look. Not to her face, of course; he didn't want her to misinterpret his discomfort as a distaste for her.

Having retreated to the crate-crowded basement with his own books to work on his task, he had managed to finish the matter within two days. Aside from giving him a few odd looks whenever he surfaced, Hermione had left him to his own devices. Now, with her humming and seasoning the sauce for their pasta, industriously slaving over the Muggle stove, he couldn't quite figure out how to do it.

Why does she have to be so...so busy all the time? Why can't we eat in a fancy restaurant?...Oh, yes, right; known ex-Death Eater and a bushy haired heroine, that's safe to take out into public... Dammit...how do men do this without making utter, bloody fools of themselves?

She turned to grab a bowl for the sauce, forcing him into smoothing his brow. He even attempted a smile. From the slightly puzzled glance she gave him, the attempt failed. Retreating to the table in the breakfast nook, where they had taken to eating their meals, Severus sat down in the chair that had quickly become 'his'. Since he had already set the table and poured the wine, that was the only thing left to do. Wait for her to bring the meal to him, since she'd said she could manage it on her own.

How do other men do this? he wondered, pinching the bridge of his nose to ease some of the tension that was forming. *It's even more complicated, because she's the one who proposed to me...though there weren't any bended knees, or declarations of undying love...or flowers* he thought suddenly, staring at the label on the wine-bottle he'd opened. It had an arbor of roses arcing over the name of the vineyard it had come from. *I should have gone out and picked some flowers, at the ruddy least...*

Bowls of food settled onto the table in front of him; Hermione settled herself in the seat across from him, the one that was now hers. "Is something wrong?"

"What?...No," he quickly denied, shaking out his napkin and placing it on his lap.

"Severus," she stated, placing her own scrap of linen below the edge of the table, "you look as upset as if you'd had your tail trod upon, but like you're trying to hide it. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing!" he protested brusquely, reaching for the pasta tongs.

She stared at him for a long moment, then helped herself to salad and garlic bread. "At the age of eight," Hermione informed him, "I was tested by my primary school teacher...we all were, in that class...and at the time, I proved to have an I.Q. of 134. Just a smidge short of qualifying for MENSA. I assure you, Severus, I am *not* an idiot. Something is bothering you, and if you would be *willing* to discuss it...maybe I could help you come up with a way to make it stop bothering you. All you have to do is talk with me."

He ladled the white sauce over his noodles, thick with chunks of chicken, broccoli, and zucchini, but didn't say anything.

"Among the many things the war taught me, Severus," Hermione said quietly, exchanging bread basket and salad bowl for sauce bowl and pasta dish, "is that life is too short and precarious to waste it in hiding the truth. Not when you don't have to, and we don't have to. Not with each other. If we're to make this arrangement work, we cannot afford to hide the truth from each other."

Dropping the tongs back into the salad bowl, Severus dug into his shirt pocket and held out the object he had hidden in there. There was no easy way to say what he wanted to say, so he just stated, "I made this for you to wear."

Hermione stared. It was the silvery-blue pearl, gently caged in a filigree knotwork of gold. A ring. Her hand crept up to cover her mouth, then stretched out, almost touching it. "You...made *that*? For me?"

"Yes." It was awkward, doing this, but he was getting through it all the same. "If we are, as you say, to make this arrangement work...then you need to be wearing a betrothal ring."

She exchanged her right hand for her left one, fingers trembling but extended. "It's beautiful."

Relief coursed through him. "Good." Catching her fingers in his, he sorted out the third one and slipped the ring into place. It was large and loose. "I crafted it with a few protection charms built in, some for the pearl, some for you. And a sizing charm. The most I know about your fingers is how good they are at scratching my chin. *Implera*."

The ring squeezed down around her finger, then relaxed to the perfect fit. Hermione blushed at his comment, studying him more than her engagement ring. "Your own are rather talented. You know, when I was trying to date Ron, I daydreamed about..."

"...Please," Severus cut her off, wincing at the linking of that name with hers. "I don't want to know about you with anyone else."

"Severus, this is important," she countered, catching and holding his gaze, squeezing his fingers to let him know she wanted his attention. "Listen to me. I daydreamt about an evening in my future. Of quietly sitting on a couch with my future husband, of reading some book, some journal...and I realized I would *never* have that with Ron. If I'd stayed with him, he'd want me to be exactly like Mrs. Weasley.

"Don't get me wrong...Molly is a very nice woman and a wonderful mother, someone many a young witch could look up to and want to emulate, and be proud to have as a role-model. But I'm not like her. I don't want a garden patch, I don't want half a dozen children, and I do not want to give up that dream of sitting on the settee with my husband, enjoying a quiet read. The only man in my entire life that I can see myself doing that with is *you*," she stressed. "I won't have anyone else in my life, because of that dream. I'd rather stay a spinster until my dying day, with half a dozen cats, than turn into a Molly Weasley clone for a husband I cannot even hold a five minute conversation with, without it involving Quidditch, or nagging, or an argument of some sort. And not the good kind of argument."

Her sincerity pinned him in place. Severus wanted to squirm, but there was only so much one could do when fixed to a piece of cardboard like this. Except maybe give in, and write out his own label. "So long as I'm one of those half-dozen cats..."

She smiled at that, squeezing and releasing his fingers. They busied themselves with serving the rest of their meal, then Hermione picked up her wine glass, lifting it in a salute. "To a lengthy future of contentment and happiness that your years of suffering and hard work long ago earned."

Clinking his glass against hers, Severus nodded an agreement. He sipped, thinking, then offered his own glass in a toast. "To the inclusion of you in that future, to help ensure it."

It wasn't exactly a statement of undying love, but from the pretty way she blushed and smiled, ducking her head, Severus figured it should count for at least partial credit. Their glasses clinked together, and they settled into their supper. He considered her words as he enjoyed her cooking. Thoughts ran through his mind, wriggling free with honesty, and surprising him with his conclusions. By the time they were on their second glass of wine, he had made up his mind to speak on the matter. It had to be addressed at some point in their association, after all.

"Hermione...you said that you don't want half a dozen...children," he managed to say without too much faltering. "Do you want any at all? Or none?"

Hermione swallowed her mouthful of salad and Roquefort dressing hastily, to keep from choking. The thought of Severus Snape not only willing to discuss the matter, but to bring up the topic himself, wasn't expected. Clearing her palate with a sip from her goblet, she considered his words carefully. "Well...I definitely don't want half a dozen. And...well, I don't want any right away. But I wouldn't mind having two at some point, maybe three. Mostly if the second lot turned out to be twins. No less than two, though, and no more than three at most. I was always a bit lonely as an only child. My mother miscarried when I was five and ended up having her uterus removed. So...no chance of siblings for me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Severus found himself offering. He'd permitted Mrs. Granger to pet him a few times, in the guise of being nothing more than a cat; after having observed her for several days, he could honestly say Hermione's mother was a nice woman. Gritting his mental teeth, he admitted it aloud. "Your mother seems a very nice woman. And she did a good job of raising you."

Hermione smiled wistfully. "Yes, she is. She and Dad are taking my being all grown up now rather well, I think. I miss being their little girl, sometimes, but I didn't have any other choice than to finish growing up, this last year or so."

"I'm sorry for my part in that," Severus muttered.

"Don't be," she countered, smiling at him. "I'm not." At his quizzical, skeptical look, she added, "I've come to believe that everything happens for a reason, even the bad stuff in life. You helped us win the war, at great personal and moral cost. You deserve happiness, loads of it, in recompense. I'm glad I can be a part of that."

"A philosophical Gryffindor," he found himself daring to tease. "Will wonders never cease?"

"Hey, I was almost sorted for Ravenclaw," she shot back lightly. "And watch your mouth; we're both well shot of Hogwarts, so no more of all that House rivalry nonsense."

Leaning his forearms on the table, Severus asked, "Do you really think you can order me around that easily?"

"No, but I expect you to put as much effort into our betrothal as I'm willing to put," she countered. "And, erm..."

He arched one brow at her hesitation. "And, what?"

"And to that end...I'd like to discuss a delicate subject with you," Hermione stated, taking a deep breath to quell her nervousness. "With the understanding beforehand that I'm saying these things to help you move toward a better life than you had previously...and *not* meant as an insult to you, or anything offensive. Just...helpful advice."

"Helpful advice about what?" he asked warily.

"I have some, erm, charms, and potions I'd like you to try. Or to try upon you, some of them. You have a *lot* of potential," Hermione added quickly, earnestly. "I'd like to see you achieve it, that's all."

That sounded ominous. "Potential for what?"

Drawing in a breath, Hermione took the plunge. "Your hair, and your teeth, for starters. I've been practicing a tooth-straightening charm, and there's a whitening potion I can make...and something for your hair. A wizarding potion, since I realize you're probably not very confident about Muggle products."

Hygiene? All of this was about making him *look* better? Severus stared at her, taken aback. "You think I'm ugly!"

"No!" Her instant outrage carried both the sting of a whip to his back, and the soothing of what he had thought was the actual lash. "I *think* that you need to start taking *better* care of yourself. It's as if your subconscious has been trying to punish yourself for the role you've had to play in the war. I know you hate tongue-baths, and frankly, I can't blame you after having been a cat myself," she admitted frankly, "but you also haven't availed yourself of the showers in this place more than twice, the whole time we've been here."

"I've bathed four times," he admitted in a mutter. "Twice while you were out of the house, off doing something elsewhere."

"Well, that's just not going to cut it," Hermione retorted. "If I can bathe every other day to keep myself clean and sweet-smelling, you can bathe every two days, too. And if I can get my teeth straightened by one of Madam Pomfrey's spells, you can, too. And... Well, it's not any different from wearing nice clothes and brushing out your hair and putting on deodorant, and just wanting to look good for your partner in general, so they can appreciate you at your best as much as possible."

"I'm *not* asking you to turn into another Gilderoy Lockhart, for godsake," she added quickly as he frowned. "Just...to make a little more effort than whatever was your habit in the past," she finished. "It's not necessary to hide your better qualities anymore, in order to push away the potentially curious who could have exposed you...and some of those qualities *are* physical, you know."

The gist of her words sunk through his suspicions, penetrating his awareness. "You think *I* have physical potential?"

"Of course!" she all but snorted, stabbing at the next mouthful of salad. From his skeptical look, she guessed he needed convincing. Rather than coaxing, however, she enumerated his qualities matter-of-factly. Coaxing, she suspected, would only have made him even more suspicious. "You've already used your voice to good effect on many occasions in the classroom. I can only imagine how much more effective it could be, if you coupled it with your intensity and mated it with your passions. *If* you could bring yourself to seduce me with it. In fact, I think your voice could be quite devastating to the female psyche, if you ever deigned to wield it properly. Or rather, improperly."

He tried not to blush at the suggestion.

She continued. "Your hands are talented, too. Deft, is the word I'd use. Graceful, precise, skillful and trained in both the arts of Potions making, *and* cat-petting. I look forward to seeing how deft they are at the art of woman-petting, when we get to that point."

That was definitely a blush warming his cheeks.

"I also happen to like dark hair, but I prefer mine to be silky and clean, not greasy from neglect...honestly, Severus, what do you scrub it with, regular soap?" she asked him pointedly. "Do you realize what kind of a residue that leaves on your locks, never mind the way it clogs the pores in your scalp? For that matter, you should use a bodywash. Regular soap is none too good for the rest of your skin, either."

"I suppose you'll be demanding that I get a tan, next," he muttered, twirling pasta onto his fork.

"A little more sun wouldn't be amiss, but only because of the nutrients the sun helps your body to process. Vitamin D, and so forth," she agreed. "But not too much. Personally, I kind of like the contrast between your dark hair and eyes, and your pallid hide. You've always been a brooding sort, dark-haired and clad in black. Though I think I wouldn't mind seeing you in a nice shade of blue. Green just brought out the yellow tones in your skin, whenever you wore it to a Quidditch match."

"Observing me all the way back then, were you?" Severus quipped, eyeing her warily.

"Just as I observed *everybody*," she retorted. "Frankly, Professor Sprout looked far better in green than you ever did, though she'd always wear that hideous yellow overrobe on Quidditch days, whenever her House played. It made her look like an overdeveloped squash, if you ask me."

"Did you have...feelings for me? When you were a student?" Severus found himself asking.

"I admired and respected you, as a student," Hermione told him. "Mostly in private. But nothing more. Not until recently."

He stared at her, silently questioning her statement, until she ducked her gaze and carefully, truthfully replied.

"When I realized you were playing a role, back at the start of my fifth year...I realized you *had* to be nasty to nearly everyone, to maintain that role. If I had tried to do more than admire and respect you in private, it could have spilled into my reactions to you in public, and that would have put your role into jeopardy. So I didn't let myself see you as anything other than a man to be respected in private. I mean, it wasn't as if I could do so openly or vigorously without the others calling my sanity into question. You weren't exactly free to be nice to us, you know, and they didn't exactly think your situation through, properly."

"No, I wasn't free to be nice," he agreed quietly. "Nor did I know you enough to respect you, beyond a vague, carefully denied pride over your abilities as a student. You're right, in that I couldn't deviate from my role. But...I don't have to remain that way now, do I?"

"No, you don't," she agreed gently. "Which is why I want to help you get in touch with who you really are. To help you cast off the shackles of your previous guise. To stop

hating yourself for surviving, and for doing what you had to do." Casting about for a way to get him to understand, Hermione reached across the table, covered his hand with hers, and said, "I care about you, Severus. The more I know of you, the more I care *for* you. I just want you to care about yourself, too. That means taking care *of* yourself. Which I'd like to help you do."

Severus studied her for a long and thoughtful moment. "I...would like that. A lot." Unable to help himself, he grimaced a little, adding, "Even if it means imitating that idiot, Lockhart, by fixing my teeth."

"We're not aiming for *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile, you know," Hermione teased him. "If we did, I'd have to beat the other witches off of you with a stick, and I'd rather spend my time doing something a lot more fun. Like snogging you."

Flushing, Severus grunted, "Good. I'd hate to see you desperate to avoid time spent in Azkaban for assault just because of me."

"That's a good sentiment. Just remember, it's no excuse to keep hiding your potential," she chided him. He had relaxed a little under her reassurances, so she solicitously changed the subject. "...More alfredo?"

"Yes, thank you."

...

The next two weeks turned very busy. Severus permitted Hermione to nag him into trying Muggle shampoo and conditioner for his hair, and to bathe more frequently in the shower. There was more to his acquiescence than the pursuit of cleanliness, of course; it was the one place where he could guarantee a certain length of privacy. That privacy allowed time to relieve some of the ache their increasingly less tentative, more passionate kisses built up within his body. He suspected her of using her own bath-time for the same reasons, as she emerged from her lengthy soaks with a certain relaxed air about her, an air that appealed to his senses.

There wasn't that much time for snogging, however. The artifacts had to be tagged for either sale or retention, and there were quite a lot of them. Hermione insisted that Severus have a say in keeping some of the pieces, since they would be sharing the house and he'd have to look at them and live with them. Unfortunately, he had to spend most of his time doing so in his cat form, since her parents came by to help unpack, study, repack and tag the various crates of artifacts and artworks in the basement of the overgrown cottage.

Severus communicated his wishes by studying each piece, and either walking away from it, or padding up and bumping his head against it. Her parents, amused by these antics, petted him fondly whenever he passed them. He was getting used to being touched by others, and they did touch him gently enough, so sometimes...just sometimes...he'd walk past them deliberately for a gentle pat or ear-scratch.

There was also Aunt Eumenia's things to sort through, plus her funeral to attend. Severus couldn't go with Hermione to the memorial; a cat would be out of place, and a human...well, no one in her Muggle family knew him on sight, but her two friends had offered to accompany her. Severus spent the time in one of the spare bedrooms instead, transforming it from a guest room to a library. Using a portion of his own funds, he Apparated into town to buy several sturdy bookshelves at a Muggle office supply outlet, arranging for them to be delivered that afternoon while she was gone.

Assembling them was easily done via magic; some edged the room, while others stood back-to-back in the center of the chamber; there wasn't a lot of maneuvering space for more than one person at a time, but it wasn't as if the two of them were going to dance in here. Of course, he could picture kissing her among the shelves, combining two of his favorite things: books; and her. Kissing, and fondling...he had to direct his mind back to his task more than once as the morning progressed. By the time he heard her return with a *crack* of Apparation, he had already loaded half the shelves with the books from his collection, with what would hopefully be enough room leftover for her own volumes, once brought from her parents' home.

Then it was back to more of the unpacking, deciding, repacking, and separating the artifacts into their stacks: those to be sold at Sotheby's; and those to be kept. The latter were stored upstairs, and the former in the basement.

When the auctioneers finally came to haul everything off to London, it was a relief to see a completely empty chamber afterwards, broken only by supporting walls and posts. Leaving Severus to pad around, no doubt plotting away as to how their impending laboratory would be arranged, Hermione accompanied her parents upstairs. Her father flashed her a rueful smile.

"Well. The auction will be in a couple weeks, once they've had a chance to examine and assess the value of each piece for us. Looks like you can get your life back to normal, or as normal as it'll ever get, all things considered." He gave her a serious look, his smile fading. "Now, promise your mother you won't bury yourself in your reading and your research and whatever witchy things you plan on doing, and don't become an old spinster-maid."

"Dad!" she protested, blushing. "I'm not going to become an old maid, for heaven's sake."

"You're not dating Ron, you're not dating Harry, you don't have any other prospects on the horizon...!" Jeffrey protested.

Rachel shook her head slowly. "I don't think that's quite true, dear... Isn't there something you want to tell us, Hermione?" She picked up her flustered daughter's left hand, displaying the ring the younger woman had been wearing for the last few weeks. "Or rather, *someone*?"

"Er...well... I'm seeing somebody. In the wizarding world. We're, erm...taking it slow, but with honorable intent," she hedged.

Her father narrowed his brown eyes. "Is that an *engagement* ring? When I haven't heard a thing about the fellow, let alone met him and given him a good third-degree?"

"Ah, well...er..." Hermione stammered. "Well, for one, he's a bit...reticent around others."

"Reticent? What does that mean?" Jeffrey asked. She started to hedge again, and he arched an eyebrow pointedly.

"Well...he was a spy, during the war. He worked for the good guys," she hastened to reassure her parents, "but because he had to play the opposite role for so long, it's left him with a tarnished reputation, even though we wouldn't have won at all without his help. Even the Ministry has acknowledged that he's a hero, but... He's really...well, I wouldn't want to whitewash some of his more glaring flaws by calling him 'nice' outright, but he's *nicer* than one would be led to believe. And he's super-smart; I don't have to dumb down *anything* I say in a conversation with him," she added, enthusiasm warming her tone. "It's not easy to find someone who can keep up with me, you know. And he's a gentleman. He wants to respect me."

"What does *that* mean?" her father interrogated, frowning at her. Unnoticed, Severus had climbed the stairs in his cat form and now lurked in the doorway, listening to her waxing eloquent over him.

"I think it means they haven't had sex, yet," Rachel answered dryly.

"...*Mother!*" Hermione felt her face burn with embarrassment. "That's none of your business!"

"Well, I'd like to meet this fellow, and gauge his intentions personally. Especially if you're wearing his ring," Jeffrey stated firmly.

"Dad!" Hermione protested, upset with his inquisition idea. Her parents eyed her askance, making her sigh roughly. "...Look, it's a bit complicated. He's an older man, and, well...we knew each other during the war, but we weren't dating, by any means. In fact, you could honestly say we were at loggerheads with each other more than once, and it's only been in the last few months since the war ended that we stopped arguing and started to actually get to *know* each other. And we're *still* getting to know each other. Now, I'll bring him by...but not immediately. Not while you're still reeling from the shock of my having an actual *boyfriend*. One who isn't Ron, and who definitely isn't a

boy."

Severus padded forward and rubbed up against her ankles, silently praising her for unequivocally affirming *he wasn't* some spotty-faced adolescent. She scooped him up, cuddling him on the slope of her breasts. Purring, he lounged against her sternum and studied her parents, enjoying her defence of him. It wasn't often that he had someone defend him, and even less frequent for him to actually witness it happening.

"Exactly how much older is 'older'?" Rachel asked her daughter. "Five years? Ten?"

Hermione wasn't going to fall for that trap. "Does it matter? I could easily live to be a hundred and fifty, as a witch. Even two hundred, if I take really good care of myself. If the man I'm falling for is ten years older than me, when I'm forty, he'd be fifty. If he is thirty years older than me, when I'm eighty, he'll be a hundred and ten...but he'll still have a good *forty* more years of life in him, at that point. Age is a matter of the mind...you always cautioned me, Dad, to not give in to the whims of an immature adolescent. And I *haven't*. I've held out for a man who is mature and intelligent, with plenty of self-control, patience, and loads of respect for me. Be happy for me that I've found all of that, and more in a good man."

"No man is good enough for *my* daughter," her father asserted. "I won't countenance this relationship!"

"Jeffrey!" Rachel protested.

"Well, they're not good enough! No man will *ever* be good enough for you, Hermione. Certainly not a man I've never met. I want to see him before I'll allow you date him!"

Severus felt Hermione draw a deep, self-controlling breath, her arms tensing briefly around him.

"...With all the love and respect you are due as my father," she stated quietly, calmly, pleasing the cat in her arms, "that is no longer your decision to make. It hasn't been, for nearly two years. And until you come down off of that rather tall saddle you're perched upon, and *calm down*...to the point where you're reasonable...I'm not going to introduce you to him. It is *my* decision, not yours. I realize you may have misgivings about my ability to make a wise decision, but then we haven't been around each other very much, this last year. I grew up while I was away, Dad. All little girls grow up, sooner or later; I just happen to be one of the 'sooner'."

The cat in her arms squirmed, stretched up...and licked her on the nose. Startled, Hermione wrinkled her nose and looked down, into his black eyes. He held her gaze and did it again, making her laugh.

"...Thanks, Puss." Rumpling his ruff, she looked back up at her parents. "I am an adult, a woman, a grown-up. However you want to call it, I am it. You did a *good* job in raising me, in teaching me how to be independent, to make good choices, to think for myself. To accept that my decisions come with consequences, and to accept those consequences. To be responsible, thoughtful, and compassionate, as well as practical. Be proud of all of that. I had you to look up to, as my examples, and I know that I'm proud of you. Now, as the auctioneers have cleared out the basement, I have things I'll need to do to it, while it's still empty."

"What sort of things?" Jeffrey asked his daughter.

"I'm turning it into a workroom and laboratory, and I'll need to ward and enchant it for various things before I can work down there." She smiled at them, cuddling Puss a little closer. "I've come up with a new product for the wizarding world, something that will help revolutionize the packaging of our version of over-the-counter medications and such. I expect the patent money should be quite good when I sell the idea to the mediwizard community, plus the income from the potions and such themselves that I'll be brewing. As you can see, I've not only a home of my own, I have a career already planned."

"But...what about your social life?" Rachel asked. "Are you going to spend all of your time down in the basement of this place, with no company but for your cats?"

She didn't quite control the rolling of her eyes, but she did hide most of it by closing her eyelids for a moment. Sighing, Hermione replied, "Mum, I told you. I'm engaged to a fellow. I'm quite sure that he'll pop up from time to time, and even take me out once in a while, or I'll take him out, to make sure that we both have a social life outside of these walls. And I'm quite sure that Ron and Harry will continue to pop in on me. And that I'll be invited to the Burrow for supper once in a while, and that I'll be coming home from time to time to dine with the two of you as well. Honestly, this isn't the Regency Era; I'm neither a bluestocking for being so ruddy smart and book-learned, nor a spinster for living on my own with two cats!"

From the looks on her parents' faces, Hermione thought she was finally getting through to them. Nodding cordially, she freed an arm from cat-Severus and hugged each of her parents in turn.

"Now, don't you worry a thing about me. Worry about getting good auction prices at Sotheby's. Remember, you'll have to pay the sales as well as inheritance tax after that." Kissing her mum and dad on the cheek, Hermione saw them to the front door, waving as they left in their car, ready to follow the lorry filled with artifacts.

As soon as they were gone and the front door closed, Severus jumped down from her arms, Transfiguring back into his human form. Hermione, caught in the act of turning away from the door, found her shoulders bumping into the panel as he crowded her into it, dark and insistent. Bracing his palms on the panel to either side of her, Severus leaned in and kissed her, as a reward for her eloquent description and defence of him.

Expecting her to stiffen up a little from the suddenness of his attack, Severus found himself wrapped in her arms. She pulled him closer, encouraging his whole torso to press her bodily into the door with a hand at the nape of his neck and another at the small of his back. That pressed his loins into her lower abdomen. He liked that; in their previous sessions, they hadn't quite gotten this graphic in their interactions. Not since that first time on her bed. He deepened his kiss in reward, one hand cupping her head, the other caressing her ribs until he could cup her breast.

*Ohhh, and there go her fingers at the nape of my neck...*The kneading sensation sent prickling shivers of pleasure down his spine and out along his limbs, raising goose-spots under his trousers and shirt. He echoed it with the fingers brushing over her curves.

Hermione inhaled, pressing her breast further into his caress. Her thighs parted at a nudge from one of his knees. That allowed him to twist his hips and stoop a little, rubbing the hardness of his erection against her pelvic mound. It wasn't in the right spot for her own enjoyment, though the muffled sound that escaped him proved it was something he seemed to like.

Gathering her boldness, Hermione lifted her thigh, hooking it up over the bony edge of his hip. He groaned into her mouth at that, shifting his hand from her breast to her buttock. Stooping a little more at the same time, he hitched his hips into hers, rubbing her groin into the flesh between her legs. *That* hit the right spot. It hit the right spot so much that she shuddered and broke their kiss, dropping her head back against the hardwood of the front door.

Severus lifted his head quickly. Examining her in concern, he realized her open mouth and closed eyes revealed a state of bliss. Experimentally, he nudged up into her again. She shuddered a second time, this time with a slight buck of her hips. He liked that, himself. Enough that the goose-spots came back.

"Hermione," he breathed, rocking into her a third time. Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyelids opened, showing brown eyes that were dazed. A fourth press of his hardened loins into her softness focused her gaze on his. Here he was, loin-to-loin with this lovely young woman, and the most intimate part of it was sharing his awareness of it with her, eye-to-eye.

His hips twitched and flexed of their own volition. Severus felt her fingers clutching his body at his action. Her gaze unfocused just a little bit, too. Instinct had him rocking into her again, picking up a lascivious rhythm. Here she was, embracing him, not just permitting him to thrust against her in fully clothed froitage, but actively encouraging him with the kneading of her fingers, and clearly enjoying the rub of his hardness against her intimate flesh.

He wanted to strip her naked, to thrust into her soft, undoubtedly tight folds, to claim her primitively, primally. Breathing heavily, rhythmically through parted lips, Severus

ground himself against her. Touching himself in the one place he had privacy, the shower, wasn't quite the same as her touching him so willingly as this, even if this glorious moment was mere frottage. When she flexed her own hips, circling them when he ground into her on the next stroke, pleasure spiked up through his body, searing him from shaft to scalp.

That familiar feeling swept up through him, but this time, it was unbearably private, indescribably intimate. In previous encounters, he hadn't felt nearly this vulnerable. Unable to continue looking into her eyes, but unwilling to pull away, Severus buried his face in the curve of her throat, hiding his expressions from the world. One hand had wormed its fingers into her upswipe curls; the other had wrapped its arm around her back, clutching at her buttocks.

Grinding up into her, he held back as long as he could. She seemed to respond best to a rubbing motion, so he clamped her hips in place with his right arm and flexed his body back and forth just so... A cry escaped her, ragged and surprised, accompanied by a bucking shudder of her whole frame. Her fingers clawed at his back, spasmed against his muscles, scratched at his skin through the crisp cotton of his shirt.

Picturing this was how she would react if he were actually inside her, Severus loosed the lightning within his own body, groaning into the shelter of her throat with his release. Wetness pulsed into his undertrousers, sticking to his lower belly in a warm mess. He kept rocking into her, softening gradually, afraid to lift his head, embarrassed to face her awareness of his vulnerability where she and this moment were concerned. He tried to will the world to stay at bay.

Awareness seeped back into his passion-drugged wits anyway. Her hand shifted from his back to his hair. Gently, her hand stroked his dark locks, while the other soothed the trembling muscles of his shoulders. Slowly, warily, he allowed himself to relax into her, to permit her to continue to touch and to soothe him. It wasn't often that Severus let down his guard with anyone, but he was cautiously willing to try with her.

Hermione could still feel the thrumming energies of her orgasm zinging through her bones, shimmering through her veins. She was blushingly aware of his own climax, could still feel him pressing up into her with less of the hardness to his flesh than had been there before. The leg that she had wrapped around his hip, giving him enough access to thrust and rub against her, now trembled with strain, as did the leg she was still standing upon. Lovemaking...however fully clothed this version might have been...clearly used muscles she was unaccustomed to exercising.

His nose was still buried in the curve of her throat; his nose, his forehead, his lips...she noticed his lips because he pressed them against her flesh in a soft, almost ephemeral salute. Torn between not wanting the intimate closeness of their bodies to end, and the threat of spasms in her thigh-muscles, Hermione reluctantly lowered her right leg, returning her foot to the floor. That eased their loins apart; with it came a silent exhalation against her throat, just a puff of his breath that warmed her skin. With what she hoped was regret, Severus eased himself upright, though he kept his chin next to her ear, preventing her from seeing his face just yet. No doubt he was as shaken by their moment as she was.

It took Hermione a moment to realize why she couldn't quite balance right. It wasn't just her trembling legs. It was her toes as well. Unable to help herself, a soft laugh escaped her. The very masculine body still wrapped in her embrace stiffened slightly. Intuition warned Hermione that he was on the verge of misinterpreting her mirth.

"I think," she offered, tilting her head up so that she could murmur in his ear, "that we have definitely solved our little challenge from earlier."

"...Challenge?" Severus asked her warily. He couldn't see her face, and that was a drawback, but until he knew what she meant, he didn't feel quite safe enough to let her see his expression before he had mastered his emotional response to their quasi-coupling.

"You know...to see if your kiss could curl my toes? You win," Hermione admitted, her lips parting in a grin. He pulled his head back, staring down at her with dark, inscrutable eyes; she beamed up at him, unafraid of his self-protectiveness. "Totally curled. I guess I have to do the next batch of laundry, don't I?"

It took Severus only a fraction of a moment to remember their silly bet, interrupted by the tragedy of hearing about her aunt's death, and forgotten in the ensuing turmoil that news had engendered. But he remembered it now...and he remembered the agreed-upon prize he would win, if he managed to successfully curl her toes. Conflict tore through him: on the one hand, his body voted for claiming his prize with more vigor than he should have possessed right after such a satisfying climax, demanding instant gratification and a continuation of their interactions. On the other hand, he truly didn't want to rush her into his bed. Of course, there was the problem that he didn't really have an official bed of his own, just one of the overgrown cottage's guest-beds that he was borrowing. And the problem that she was still a ten-feet-tall-flamingly-lettered *virgin*.

Oddly enough, it was that side-thought that made up his mind. Managing a smile, small but genuine enough, Severus caressed the edge of her jaw. "I'll collect my reward soon enough. But first, I think we still have a bit of rearranging ahead of us, to claim this house as our home."

Flushing with pleasure at that smile, Hermione nodded. "Yes, the basement needs to be warded against Muggle detection, and perhaps against Plottability, not to mention vents and filters installed, and shields to contain any possible potions accidents or explosions. Then there's the sizeable hearth with a Floo connection that will need to be added..."

Severus silenced her with a finger placed over her lips. "I was also thinking of the master bedroom. It needs to be cleared, perhaps redecorated, and definitely a new and more suitable bed purchased. After living in a drafty castle, I have grown...attached to beds with draperies. Curtains which can be embroidered with runes designed for protection and privacy...and quiet." He hesitated again, then forced himself to add honestly, "I am uncertain how far I will be able to make myself go, in showing you public affection. I suspect I was infected with Gryffindor bravado in Minerva's presence, the day we kissed in front of her. Either that, or I simply transmuted the...the passion of our argument into another sort. But I do wish to be much more open in my feelings for you in private, once we get that far into this relationship."

Nodding, Hermione could guess how hard it was for him to admit that much; his voice was the softest she had heard it in a long time. The more time they spent together, the more the two of them seemed willing to invest in the relationship between them; it was heartening to know he wasn't backing away from that, emotionally shy though he might be. Certainly not as physically shy as he could have been, given he was looking into her eyes steadily despite having rubbed both of them into an orgasm. She blushed at the lingering memory of what they had just done, but let it and his steady regard warm her from the inside out.

"So long as we talk to each other...share thoughts and ideas, and take each other's thoughts and opinions into consideration," she offered, looking up into his dark gaze, "I think we can go quite far, in this relationship. But...as my parents said, we do need social interaction. Both of us."

"It won't be easy. Saliva is the least that will be flung at me," Severus muttered, looking away, looking down. He stared at nothing for a long moment, then returned his gaze to at her. "Do not fool yourself, Hermione. I will *never* be fully accepted by the wizarding community. By some of it, maybe. By half of it, I could hope. By most of it...that would take a miracle nearly as great as the defeat of the Dark Lord himself. But never by all of it." Black eyes held brown in a steady, matter-of-fact regard. "Socially, I am anathema to most of that world. We would be more successful to venture into the Muggle realm...yet that would leave us isolated from wizarding society and constantly on our guard against being uncovered as wizard and witch.

"I should let you go," he whispered, his voice dropping too low and quiet for vocalization. "My conscience demands it, if you are to have any sort of viable social life...but I find my chest aches uncomfortably when I think of doing it...trust someone as brilliant and tenacious as you to find what I didn't think could exist."

Hermione knew what he meant. Lifting her hand, she touched his chest, flattened her palm over the faint but steady thump beneath his ribs. "You do have a heart, Severus. You have always had one. You gave it to help save the wizarding world, when you swore that Unbreakable Vow with Albus Dumbledore. I suspect it hurts so much because you didn't expect to live long enough to get it back, and aren't used to feeling your emotions with it so close to your soul, anymore."

His lip curled up on one side in a sneer, but she guessed from his words that it was self-directed. "Our world continually debates as to whether or not I still have one of those, as well."

"You have one," she reassured him, curving her own lips in a smile. Her other hand touched her own sternum, pressing at the spot just above the curve of her breasts. "I can feel both of them in here. Curled up like the sort of homeless cat one finds in a back alley. Starved for love and affection like an alley-cat is starved for shelter and food." Sliding her fingers up to the underside of his chin, Hermione rubbed his jaw much like she would have rubbed him in his cat-form. "If I can take you into my heart and my

home as a cat, I can just as easily keep you in my heart and my home as a man. In *our* home."

"Our home," he found himself agreeing. In a way, it wasn't fair that she could use his vulnerability to her touch against him. In a way, it was perfectly alright. Severus hadn't know just how starved for gentle physical contact he had been, all these years. Not that he could have indulged; the war had indeed forced himself to push everyone away. "The war is over, and I find I have survived. But that isn't quite enough. I need... I *want* to learn how to live," Severus corrected himself. He could feel the dampness in his clothes beginning to dry, knew he needed to clean himself and focus on the tasks ahead of them, but this discussion was important. "If I could be a different man...take on a different identity, a different name, it would be vastly easier. But I cannot. Are you strong enough to stay with me, to stand beside me?"

She smirked. "Severus, if I can stand beside Harry and help him take down Voldemort...oh, stop flinching! It's only a name, now," she chided him. "If I can stand beside Harry and help him take down Moldie-butt, *and* survive, then I can stand beside you and take on the rest of the wizarding world. I could even go marching out to the Burrow right now and tell them all to either accept the fact that I'm engaged to you, or to respectfully stuff it, if you like."

"One step at a time, if you please," Severus quickly cautioned her. "Allow some time to pass between the war's end and our relationship being revealed. Let Minerva continue her campaign to clear my name. Let Potter be forced to speak from the truth rather than from his rage, whenever he must discuss my name around the others. Let their anger grow thin and old. And let us get this place warded first against unwanted intrusion, before we start announcing to all and sundry that we are together," he added, glancing at the walls of the entryway. "I would rather have a safe place to retreat to, if time and the distancing of memory cannot calm the reactions of others."

"Let us make this place our sanctuary. Once we are safe here, we can venture out there."

Hermione nodded. "You're right. We should have a sanctuary for both of us. I don't think the Weasleys would think well of my sanity, at least until they've had their own memories dimmed by time and distance...and the patient application of a two-by-four to their heads that's been deeply inscribed with the truth of your role in the war."

"Make it a four-by-four, 'lest it should break too soon. I taught most of them, and I assure you, Weasleys have very thick heads," he muttered.

Glaring in mock-outrage, Hermione pinched him. He jumped, scowled, and pinched her back. Hermione switched to tickling him...and startled a laugh and a squirm out of him. Her eyes widened in surprise, while his narrowed in wariness. She tried to give him an innocent look, but couldn't suppress the smile on her lips. Giving her a haughty look worthy of his feline side, he turned away, heading for the stairs.

"Start mapping out illusions of the workspace layout we'll need, in the basement. We'll discuss the bedroom layout afterward. I'll join you as soon as I've showered."

"Why are you going to take a shower, all of a sudden?" Hermione asked him, following him to the foot of the staircase. "Not that I'm complaining, mind, but I'm rather puzzled. You showered this morning already, and I'm not asking you to shower twice a day, if it's not absolutely necessary."

He had hoped to get away without mentioning this crassly, but it seemed his betrothed was as tenacious in the pursuit of knowledge as ever. Swinging around to face her, Severus arched one of his brows. Dignity was difficult to maintain in the face of her curiosity and the bluntness of the subject. "Hermione...I just frothed the two of us into blissful happiness against the front door."

Her smirk came back, this time laced with feminine smugness. "Yes, I know. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Unfortunately, there is more of a side-effect for the man, in such circumstances, than there is for the woman."

That made her frown in puzzlement. "Come again?"

Cheeks heating at her inadvertent pun, he forced himself to explain. "I have...spent...in my trousers."

Her face flamed with embarrassed comprehension. "Oh."

Severus nodded, closing his eyes briefly. "Yes. Considering the substance in question has a tendency to dry into a consistency not unlike Muggle grammar-school glue, I need to remove it soon."

"Oh." She thought about that, long enough for him to turn back around and mount four more steps. "...Can I watch? I mean, watch you shower?"

He twisted quickly to face her, heart pounding behind his sternum. *That* was an unexpectedly bold request. About to deny her, Severus found he couldn't quite disappoint the shy yet lascivious curiosity apparent in her red-faced regard. "...I suppose so. But *only* watch. For now. And only if you agree to return the favor, and allow me to watch you bathe as well. It would only be fair."

"Just...watch?" she wanted to confirm.

"I am still trying to respect you, and take this thing between us at a slow and manageable pace," he reminded her.

"Of course. Um...alright. I'm due for a shower tomorrow; you can watch me then," Hermione agreed as nonchalantly as she could. Her heart was trying to imitate a hummingbird's wings, but she thought she managed to come across worldly enough to hide her trepidation and her excitement.

"Then come. You have already seen me bathe as a cat," Severus managed to state calmly, hiding his uncertainties. He knew what he looked like, compared to what was popularly thought attractive. But he also knew he couldn't spend the rest of his life clothed in her presence. It would be better to see her reaction...and any possible disappointment...when he wasn't under a concomitant pressure to perform some act of intimacy with his body. "...You might as well see me bathe as a man."

Heart in her throat, Hermione followed him up the stairs.

Chapter 07

Chapter 7 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

VII.

...

Climaxing in his trousers had been embarrassing, but to strip off those same trousers, that was far more intimate to Severus' way of thinking. After the humiliation of being stripped at wand-point of the few clothes he could afford in his fifth year, he had taken care to keep himself as fully clothed as possible. Reducing himself to shirtsleeves around Hermione had taken a greater deal of courage and trust on his part than she had probably realized. Now she wanted him to strip himself nude, baring his ugly, imperfect body...and the semen trying to glue his pants to his skin.

Part of him wanted to stop at the top of the stairs, to block her path, to tell her in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going to do this. Part of him also reminded Severus that he had licked himself as a cat in her presence. He had tried not to lick his *genitalia* in her presence, at least, but he had performed personal hygiene under her watchful gaze. Part of him also reassured himself that it was better for her to see his ugliness now, so that she could hopefully get used to it and accept it before they became more intimate. Or, if she chose to reject his bony, scrawny body, it would give him a minor reprieve of sorts; being rejected during a much more intimate and fragile moment would be far worse to endure than stripping for a simple shower.

They reached the main bathroom. There was a nicer master bath...by Muggle standards...in the master bedroom, but that room was still Aunt Eumenia's. Some of her belongings had been removed, sent to other relatives, but it still needed a thorough emptying before the place would begin to feel inhabitable. Muggles couldn't become ghosts, only wizarding kind, but their presence could still linger in one's mind. Severus didn't even know the woman personally, and *he* felt the room had to be emptied and remade before it could be theirs.

It made him think, as he let her close the bathroom door behind her, that they shouldn't occupy that room until it and they were ready for marriage. Or at least, they shouldn't be deeply intimate until that room was ready for them to claim. Until then, they would either sleep as human-and-cat, or in separate rooms.

Hermione cleared her throat, waiting for him to begin. Shaken out of his thoughts, Severus drew his wand out of his sleeve, setting it on the toilet tank lid, then unbuttoned his shirt cuffs. He could do this, if he blotted her presence out of his mind. Since she fell silent once he began to move, he focused on unbuttoning the front of his shirt. With his back to her, he could pretend she wasn't even there. *Just an ordinary shower, on an ordinary day...just a shower, nothing more...*

It worked to the point that he unbuttoned the top of his trousers and freed his shirt. Unfastening the last button, he shrugged out of it, wadding and tossing the shirt onto the counter next to the sink. The touch of her hand on his back shattered his concentration, however, freezing him in place. He *wasn't* alone...and she was touching him, touching his naked, bony back, of her own free will. Sliding her hand up the length of his stringy muscles of her own volition.

Severus discovered it was a very strange thing, feeling both a chill of apprehension and a flush of pleasure at the same time; the sensations mottled his skin in patches of hot and cold. He just stood there, torn between cringing from and leaning into her touch, unsure what to do.

She knew he was thin; he'd been thin as a cat, and thin once returned to the body of a man, though he'd put a little weight back on again. The sight of such lean muscles flexing over all those bones told her just how long he'd been living on the edge. Hermione couldn't resist touching him, wanting to know physically that he was alive, that he was real...that she *could* touch him with impunity, and learn the warmth of his pale skin. It wasn't that he was cadaverously thin, but he definitely needed to put on a couple stone in both muscle and fat before he would feel truly healthy under her fingertips.

Making up her mind to feed him more, and feed him better, Hermione lifted her other hand to his back, running her palms from his waist to his shoulder-blades. His muscles flexed, his back straightened, and his breath drew in with an audible hiss. But not a bad one, she decided. Moving her hands higher, she kneaded gently at the tension in his shoulder muscles. He relaxed gradually, leaning slightly but palpably back into her touch. Hermione stepped closer, wanting better leverage, but he was taller than her by eight or nine inches. So instead of massaging him further, she slid her hands down, then slipped them around his ribs, embracing him from behind.

Severus stiffened for a moment, surprised by the maneuver. The feel of her teeshirt-covered breasts pressing into his back was pleasurable, but the touch of her mouth on his left shoulder-blade was a shock. She was *kissing* him, willingly! Holding and touching him, even tentatively exploring his chest. Her fingers certainly encountered the thin patch of hairs that trailed from his sternum to his navel.

At the top, those hairs spread out just enough to feather across his pectoral muscles; when her fingers followed the crinkly texture to the softer skin of his nipples, her lips now brushing the bones of his spine, he stiffened twice. Once from the tensing of his muscles, twice from the hardening of his loins. A groan escaped him. Knowing that if he didn't stop her, he'd want more than just to shower for her, Severus caught her hands in his. Gently but firmly, he peeled her arms away, stepping free of her embrace.

Hermione pouted as he twisted to face her at arm-length. "I wasn't done touching you! I was enjoying that..."

That made him flush, surprised and secretly pleased by her disappointment. Still, he muttered defensively, "I'm not very attractive."

That quirked Hermione's brows. "What do you mean, you're not attractive?"

"Look at me!" he demanded, spreading his arms and gesturing at his chest, with its outline of ribs. He had muscles, but they weren't bulging by any means. Nor very many scars, and the skin of his left forearm had been freed of its Dark Mark with the death of Voldemort, leaving it blemishless, but he wasn't in the picture of health.

"I *am* looking you...and I'm very attracted to what I'm seeing," Hermione confessed. "Here, sit on the toilet, and I'll help you get your boots off."

The odd change in subject confused him for a moment. Flipping the lid down, Severus sat and watched her kneel at his feet. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Besides, the faster I help you, the faster I'll get to see the rest of you," she quipped. There was enough boldness in her to declare those words, but enough shyness that she didn't quite meet his gaze. Unfortunately, she did lift the level of her eyes just enough to look at his crotch...and see the dampness that had finally seeped through the black fabric of his trousers.

He came in his pants oh my god he actually came in his pants and he's all wet right there because he was frothing with me and oh my god is that a hard-on in his trousers is he getting hot again for me?

Blinking, Hermione clamped down on her whirling thoughts, tearing her gaze away from his loins. It felt like even her ears were burning, she was so embarrassed, and yet so turned on. There might not have been quite as much liquid produced on her part, but she was pretty sure her knickers were soaked at least a little, down at the crotch.

In the close air of the bathroom, she could smell her own musk, alright. And his musk, too. The scent of sex. Well, not the scent of intercourse-sex, but close enough. Tugging at his boots, Hermione couldn't help wonder what subtle differences there might be, if they had actually shagged instead of frothed in the front hall.

More of him, and less of me, from reduction by friction? More of me, and less of him, from his...his sperm being deposited within me? Oh god his sperm inside of me his seed in me making me his marking me his...get a hold of yourself, woman! You don't want children, just yet!

Yanking the second boot free, she set it by the first, then peeled off his socks. His feet were long, somewhat narrow, and bony, pale on the tops and pink on the bottoms, with a hint of dark hairs at his ankle-bones. The cuffs of his trousers covered most of that up, though. And his feet...well, they smelled a little, but more of the leather of his boots than of that awful, stale, tortilla-crisp odour she associated with Harry's and Ron's feet, those few times they'd peeled off their socks in her presence.

Setting aside his socks, Hermione sank back on her heels and looked up at Severus. She licked her lips, then asked, "The trousers...?"

He swallowed. "I'll get those." He waited for her to shift out of the way, to give him plenty of room to stand, but she didn't move. Clearing his throat, he waited for her to get the hint. She just licked her lips and stared at his face, his chest...his thighs. Waiting for him to stand and shuck his trousers, and do it practically in her face. Severus cleared his throat again, aroused and intimidated by her expectations. "...Right."

Levering himself up with a hand on the edge of the counter, he stood with his feet planted on either side of one of her knees. Just seeing her there, in a position damn near perfect for fellatio, had him hardening again. Not that he hadn't hardened a little bit earlier, but this was outright stiffening. And since his hips were just about at her eye-

level, there was no hiding it. Swallowing again, Severus lifted his fingers to the placket of his pants. The top button was undone, but there were four more to undo. Trying not to fumble, he unfastened them one at a time, burningly aware of her gaze.

Now was not the time to doubt his size. There was nothing that could be done to change it; not without access to a potions lab and certain supplies. Not that he was grotesquely undersized, thank heaven for that, but Severus wasn't exactly hung like the proverbial horse, either. Proportionate. Of course, he was a tall man; he supposed he was above average if one just used a Separating Charm on the thing and lined it up side-by-side with other men's...but that was something he had no inclination to attempt. Reattachment Charms sometimes didn't work, and he wasn't *that* eager to compare himself with, say, Arthur Weasley's willy. But that thought wasn't conducive to the moment, so Severus banished it from his head.

Severus knew that she had enjoyed having him rub it against her, but that was while his masculinity had been contained and hidden. And while it was still dry, not damp from his ejaculate. But with the last button undone, there was nothing left to do but push his trousers down, off his hips. The fabric tickled his thighs, making him painfully aware of his vulnerability. Yes, he wore undergarments, and they were white...but they weren't clean anymore, and that damp spot was a large, translucent, blatant blotch.

One that held Hermione's gaze. One that...and his heart nearly stopped...made her lick her lips as she stared at it.

It was then that his mind snapped, realization breaking his uncertainty and shattering his fear. The witch kneeling at his feet was all but hypnotized by his 'trouser-snake'. A flush of masculine pride warmed Severus from the chest outward. His woman...and there was no doubt in his mind at that moment that she was indeed going to be his woman...was all but hypnotized by the sight of him. Recognizing that fact gave him a sudden, heady sense of power over her.

Not the cruel power of being a teacher and thus capable of punishing miscreants, and not the dark, dangerous power of being a Death Eater and thus knowing that he could make people cower in fear, something which they had never done around him back when he had been bullied by others in school, making it a novel head-rush when it happened the first few times. No, this was something different, something deeper and purer, and yet at the same time he knew that if he weren't careful in how he handled it, could be warped and twisted into a blasphemous impurity. It was the power of entrancing her, of giving her pleasure with his body.

Only to please her, Severus found himself vowing silently. *Only ever to give her pleasure; never for revenge or petty manipulations...only to make her tremble with bliss, never in fear.*

A subtle twist of his legs made his trousers drop the rest of the way, puddling at his feet. He intended to peel down his dampened briefs next, but she licked her lips again and lifted her fingers hesitantly. Hermione wanted to touch him. Severus had two choices: knock those fingers away in self preservation; or permit her to touch him, and god help him if she did... Tightening his gut, he quickly slipped his hands behind himself, lacing his fingers together tightly at the small of his back.

He was now exposed for anything she wanted to do to him.

Hermione paused, recognizing the way he tucked his hands behind his back. For such a closed-in, buttoned-up, physically repressed man to render himself so...vulnerable...to whatever she wanted...it was an unexpected gift. Intimidating, because she didn't want to hurt him, emotionally or physically. She didn't think she would, but there was always a small chance. So, while she hesitated for a moment, she finally gathered her courage and pressed forward, gingerly cupping the somewhat slanted, elongated shape lodged within his underwear.

Cool dampness met her fingertips; it was quickly replaced by dry warmth as her palm made contact as well. Soft knit cotton lay over slightly spongy, somewhat hardened flesh. It pulsed under her touch, twitching against her hand. Her breath caught, just a subtle hitch; experimentally, Hermione pressed back. It twitched again, hardening further against her touch. Thickening. Lengthening.

Bringing up her other hand, Hermione tentatively cupped the somewhat rounded, large bulge at the bottom of his briefs. She knew what they were, his testicles, wrapped inside his scrotum. The sideways twist of her hand was awkward. Deciding to go in for a pound as well as a penny, she withdrew her hand, turned her wrist so her fingers pointed forward, and wormed them gently between his thighs. And heard his own breath catch, accompanied by a shifting in his stance so that his lean, muscled thighs were parted just wide enough for her to cup him fully.

Heaven. Tortured in heaven! When she slid her hand slowly along his length, rubbing him experimentally, Severus dropped his head back. His shoulders and arms strained, tugging at his interlocked hands, but he didn't release them. His thighs quivered, bucking his hips into her hands just a little. Her gasp was quiet, but he heard it; oh, he heard it, over the pounding of his heart and the rasp of his own breath entering and exiting his lungs. Her hands were just large enough to cover him, to enfold him in her grasp.

Despite his earlier sating, Severus felt himself thickening, pushing away from his stomach in the need to straighten, to jut out in proud masculinity. Licking his lips, he looked down at her. Her hands slid against him for a moment more, then slipped up to the elastic at the top of his briefs. Her gaze slid up to his as she hesitated. Nodding, trying not to hold his breath, Severus gave her his permission.

Daringly, Hermione pulled his pants out, mainly to clear the bulk of his erection without pulling awkwardly on it, then tugged them down. She almost forgot what she was doing as she saw him bared. Thicker than a summer sausage, and definitely paler, a light creamy pink in colour, his...well, his penis had a cowl-like flap of skin covering all but a thumbnail-sized patch of reddish flesh at the tip. It sagged a little, now that it was free, but didn't flop. Instead, it bobbed in subtle twitches, arcing out toward her. His scrotum crinkled a little at being exposed, but the size of his testicles surprised her; somehow, she expected them to be smaller.

Around them, and especially just above the base of his shaft, grew a thatch of black hairs not much more than twice as thick as the ones dusting his chest, which wasn't much to begin with. Some of it was smeared with a translucent liquid, and some of it was dry. Most of that thicket lay above his pelvic bone, leaving only a sparse scattering around his family jewels. It made her wonder what his legs looked like. Once that white, damp cotton had come into view, she had forgotten to look at the rest of what his falling trousers had bared.

Dragging her gaze down, Hermione found his thighs to be sparsely haired. They were much like his upper arms, in that respect. And like his forearms, his shins were darkened with a thickening of body-hair, but not by much. No, the spots that had the most hair on his body were his scalp, the pits of his arms, and the skin just above his masculinity. Realizing after a moment that his briefs were still tangled around the pale flesh of his upper thighs, Hermione tugged them down to his ankles. He assisted her by stepping out of them, allowing her to tug pants and trousers off to one side.

For a moment, his hands were free, allowing him to balance himself...then Severus deliberately tucked them behind his back again. Her gaze returned to his groin, and with it, he could swear he could feel the caress of her breath. It didn't help his composure that she was breathing through open lips. Nor that she licked them, then left them parted again. His hands trembled as his shoulders tensed, pulling at the fingers keeping him from reaching for her curly brown head.

Strangely enough, the self-bondage added to his desire. He was keeping himself helpless, for no other reason than he wanted *her* to be the one to touch him, for *her* to decide how she would pleasure him. Though he had some experience in staying his hand in the face of torment, submitting to the punishment of the Dark Lord whenever he had failed in order to retain his place as a spy, this was the first time he had ever restrained himself to submit for his own pleasure...and for the pleasure of another.

Her hand returned to his skin. It was a tentative touch, fingertips only. Curiosity got the better of Hermione; he was hot and silky-velvety, but she needed to know what was underneath that cowl of skin. His foreskin. She'd done some educational reading on the subject as well as fictional reading; she knew what it was, had seen pictures and drawings. But this was the real thing. Three-dimensional-real.

Bringing up her other hand, she circled the base of his shaft, steadying him. Hermione quickly discovered that not only did her fingers not meet up with her thumb in the attempt to encircle his circumference, she could have easily wrapped her other palm around him, with the edges of her hands resting together at about mid-shaft, and left about an inch at the tip. Proportionate in length to his overall height, yes, but a bit thicker than expected for such a thin body. Her mind flashed to a better-fed version of Severus Snape, one where an increase in his muscles gave more definition and bulk to his frame, and decided he would definitely be *well*-proportioned then.

A rhythmic throbbing against the skin of her left hand filtered into her awareness. She could feel his heartbeat. Adjusting her right hand, Hermione wrapped it loosely

around the cowed head of his penis, then gripped just enough to pull his foreskin down and back, baring the mushroom-shaped tip. It peeled back, damp with more of the same liquid on his belly...and his discarded clothes. Semen. Jism. Ejaculate. He smelled musky, sweaty, male, but most of all, he smelled of sex. Hermione hadn't realized it at the time, but a few times during sixth year, Ron had smelled like this...usually after having gone somewhere private with Lavender Brown.

Her fingers stopped, tightening slightly. He groaned and swayed forward, pushing into her grip. The act peeled back the rest of his foreskin and rubbed the base of his shaft through the grip of her lower hand. It brought an awareness of just how straight and hard he had grown. Hermione refocused her attention fully on Severus; Ron was totally in her past, and his sex-life no concern...or interest...of hers. This man's sex...no, his *love*-life, was infinitely more interesting to her. Especially as she had caused the majority of what perfumed him now.

Severus couldn't help himself. Bared to her, gripped by her, being explored by her, he needed more. He needed friction. She tightened her fingers a little more, a startled squeeze. It jolted something in his mind, this fact that he had startled her. *Virgin*. Flaming letters that were threatening to burn both of them, him at the loins and her at the hands. With a level of discipline Severus didn't know he possessed, he brought his arms around and carefully removed her hands.

She resisted for only a moment, then complied. Disappointed and confused, Hermione looked up at him, lowering her hands to her lap in compliance. "...Why are you stopping me?"

"Because if we don't stop, I will spray all over your hands and your face. And I am trying to resp..." Severus choked as her hands flew back up to his groin. Not because she grabbed him roughly, but because she cupped his testicles gently in one palm and encircled him with the other, stroking with fingers that pulled down his foreskin. "...God!"

"You can thank *me* later," she quipped, rising up onto her knees, "not God, for this."

"Hermione!" he hissed, struggling to control the heaving of his lungs. Hell, he struggled to remain upright, but it was too hard...*he* was too hard, and she was petting the underside of his bollocks, stroking his skin from perineum to scrotum. His hands fell to her shoulders, leaning on her heavily. She sank back down under the force of his weight...then leaned forward and kissed his damp tip. He choked again, then gasped when he felt her tongue lancing over him in a curling lick, while one of the fingers of the hand not stroking his shaft pressed up between his thighs, and experimentally fluttered. "Oh, fuck! Oh, God! Oh...C-cuming!"

Wanting to try and swallow him, like she'd read about, Hermione held him in her mouth, rubbing the underside of his glans with her tongue. Definitely musky, and somewhat salty. She felt it first down by her left hand, felt his scrotum drawing up, a pulsing under the middle finger attempting to gently tease his prostate gland. Felt it in her other hand, too, a sort of pumping jerking, and the bobbing of his flesh in her mouth...and then the salty-musky trickle became a bitter-salty-musky flood.

She swallowed the first trickle as more spilled onto her tongue, and discovered quickly that the bitterness burned very unpleasantly at the back of her throat, making her want to gag. By sheer willpower alone, she suppressed the reflex, making her tongue stroke his still-spurting tip, stimulating him, though her hands no longer moved. He gasped and shuddered, not quite bucking into her, then panted heavily.

A little more leaked out on its own, then his hand came down, covering hers, showing her how to gently stroke him toward his tip, milking out the last of it. Hermione held on, accepted the musky-bitter mouthful until he withdrew himself, sagging his trembling, sweating body onto the closed lid of the toilet. Unfortunately, she was stuck with a mouthful of semen, and no clue of how to excuse herself to go elsewhere so she could spit.

The look on her face finally sank through his post-orgasmic bliss. Naturally talented though the minx might be, she clearly had never tasted ejaculate before. Of course, she struggled to conceal it, but he could guess what she really wanted to do was spit in his lap. Or rather, into the toilet under his lap. Taking pity on her, he pushed the shower curtain back.

"Spit into the tub; I'll rinse it down when I shower."

Grateful, Hermione turned and leaned over the bathtub rim. As delicately as she could, she let his semen dribble from her mouth, then carefully worked the rest of it out with her tongue, trying not to actually spit. Forcing herself to ignore the residue, she straightened up again, brushing her hair back from her face. "Sorry, I'm not used to the taste. First time, and all that...I *can* do better!"

Severus could guess where her insistence came from. Undoubtedly she had run across pornographic materials that proclaimed how men preferred women who swallowed. Cupping her chin, he lifted her face so that her gaze met his. "Hermione, it is *not* necessary to complete the act of fellatio by swallowing. Frankly, I don't know why anyone would; I've...well, I tasted myself once out of curiosity, and I found it to be quite nasty. So if you'd rather spit, by all means, do so. I *will* understand and not take offence."

Relief coursed through her when she realized he really meant it. Turning, she worked up the last of the nasty taste and spat it into the tub, grateful she didn't have to be delicate. Hauling a second time, she cleared her mouth as much as she could, then turned back to him. "*Thank* you. I love making you get to that point, but...um...maybe next time you could just, you know...do it on my face or something."

"I'm not the sort who likes humiliating a woman in that way, Hermione...your breasts, yes, that would be something I might enjoy seeing," he allowed, forcing himself to be truthful, "but I don't 'get off' on seeing my seed on a woman's face. Your face is lovely on its own; it needs neither make-up nor any other sort of 'paint' to make me appreciate it."

That made her smile shyly. Then screw up her face and turn for another expelling of the flavour in her mouth. Turning back to him, she gave him a wry, apologetic look. "It doesn't taste *that* bad, really. It's just that when I swallow, it burns the back of my throat. Like a bad cold. It just literally makes it hard to swallow."

"Well, I *have* been called that," he managed to jest. At her puzzled look, Severus repeated, "'Hard to swallow?'"

Hermione choked on a laugh. "...I can't deny that one!...I'll work on it," she promised. "Maybe if you ate some fruit or something, changed the Ph of it... We'll have to look into it."

"Only if you absolutely, unequivocally want to, Hermione," Severus stated firmly. "Truthfully, it does nothing for me. Pursue it only if it pleases *you* to do so. It would distress me more if you felt you had to force yourself to endure it, rather than just seeing you spitting it out, afterwards."

Nodding, Hermione accepted his words. If he didn't find the thought of her swallowing his seed a turn-on...well, she could live with a discreet Evanesco or two. The tub was handy enough this time around, but they wouldn't always be in the bathroom. Promising herself silently to learn how to cast an Evanesco both wordlessly and wandlessly, Hermione rose from her knees. Padding over to the sink, she turned on the faucet and rinsed her mouth with a palmful of water.

When she finished doing that, she turned in time to watch him stand. He lifted his arms over his head, stretching. It was a beautiful sight, a level of humanity and vulnerability she couldn't ever remember seeing in him before. Odd, but there it was: until this moment...and excluding his time as a cat, which didn't count...Hermione had never once seen Severus Snape stretch.

It brought his muscles into nice definition, too.

She admired him from arms to head, then from chest to groin...and noticed his equipment had shrunk. In fact, the way his foreskin dangled made it look something like a wrinkled, longish turnip. Biting back the urge to giggle, she smiled up at him, then impulsively stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. For a moment he tensed, then lowered his arms and embraced her in return.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered against his chest, enjoying the sticky feel of his drying sweat under her cheek.

"My pleasure," Severus purred, and felt her shiver. Suspecting it was from his voice, he filed that way in his thoughts to examine and experiment with later. Drawing back after a few moments, he disengaged her arms gently and addressed her disappointment. "I do need to shower, now."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. She wanted to hold him longer, but she also wanted to watch him bathe. Shifting back, she gave him room to step into the tub. He drew the curtain most of the way to contain the spray, but left her a gap at the back so she could lean in and watch him turning on the tap. When she did so, she discovered his arse.

For such a skinny, lean, hook-nosed man, he not only had very nice legs, he had a damned-near-perfect arse. His buttocks were mostly hair-free and as pale as the rest of his hide, but were as well-rounded as a pair of cantaloupe halves. Hermione felt a very strange urge to sink her teeth into them. Not to cause him pain or to bleed or anything, but in the sense that she enjoyed sinking her teeth into a juicy slice of melon. It was a little disconcerting to realize the sight of his arse was turning her on...or rather, keeping her turned on.

It was a pity his backside had been hidden all these years in his teaching robes... *No, that's not entirely true*, Hermione reminded herself as he tugged on the shower lever and straightened. *There was that time with the Dueling Club, when he doffed his robes and just stood there, looking incredibly dark and competent...I cannot believe I had a crush on that idiot, Lockhart! Going for style over substance, really. I will admit I was very impressed with Severus' substance, that day...but I was too impressed by a pretty smile.*

She thought of the potions and charms she wanted to try on him, watching him twist his body under the spray. She really didn't want to turn him into a Lockhart knock-off...but her parents *were* dentists, and she wanted to see him with straightened teeth. And whiter teeth. Not blindingly bright, just not quite so tea-stained. He did brush and floss; she granted him that. *Blame it on my upbringing, but how a man cares for his mouth says a lot about how he cares for himself...and if he makes just a little more effort with himself, he'll be perfect. As in, perfect-for-me. Which is all I want, and everything I want.*

He turned around, wetting his spine and tipping his head backward, into the spray. Water trickled down his chest, making his chest hairs even darker. An urge to lean in further past the curtain, to press her lips against his chest and lick those trickles and droplets from his skin welled up within Hermione. Not wanting to get that wet, she resisted. Leaning against the wall, she contented herself with squinting against the occasional bit of ricocheting spray and watching him reach for her nylon scrubby-pouf.

Severus, mindful of her admonition to use bodywash or shampoo on his skin instead of soap, found one of the bottles she had bought for her own use and poured a dollop onto the pouf. Conscious of her gaze, he worked it into a lather, then carefully scrubbed his face, working his way down onto his throat. Stepping back, he rinsed off so that he could see again, then stepped forward so he could scrub himself from the neck down. At least the lather didn't smell overly flowery, though it did have a fruity scent to it.

Her gaze followed his hands down onto his chest and stomach, watching him lather his arms, his ribs...he skipped his groin, lifting one leg to the rim of the tub so he could scrub from thigh to calf and back. Lathering the other, he cleaned that one as well, then held out the silly bundle of woven nylon.

Hermione blinked, confused by the offering. "What?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "If you're just going to stand there, you should be put to work...and I cannot reach my back nearly as well as you can."

Turning, he presented his bony spine, and that magnificent arse. A glance over his shoulder challenged her to comply. Invited her to get her hands on his wet, naked frame. Leaning forward, Hermione obeyed with alacrity. Scrubbing his nape, she worked her way down, over his shoulders and around his shoulder-blades. Across his ribs and along his waist, to that beautifully rounded bottom. She didn't care how many droplets from the spray landed on her hair, her face, her teeshirt. She just enjoyed fondling his bottom under the guise of scrubbing it.

Mindful of her own bathing needs, she even daringly rubbed the pouf between his nether-cheeks, wanting to be sure he was clean absolutely everywhere. But even a thorough clean didn't take that long, couldn't take that long, so it was with reluctance that she tapped his hip, silently offering to relinquish the scrubby. Turning to face her, allowing the shower spray to rinse off the lather, Severus waited for her to finish the job.

When she just continued to hold the pouf out to him, he grasped her wrist gently, bringing her hand down to his groin. He kept hold of her hand, too, since that wasn't a location where vigorous scrubbing would be appreciated. Guiding her fingers, he helped her gently knead the wadded nylon under, around, and over his flesh. Then he pulled back his foreskin and showed her how to thoroughly clean him there, as well.

For Hermione, it was almost as intimate as fellatio had been. More intimate, in a way. She could feel him thickening a little under her touch and had to resist the urge to stroke him harder. This was a shower, not a prelude to lovemaking. And he'd climaxed twice already; she wasn't sure how often a man of his age could have an erection, but she did know it took time to replenish the various fluids involved. *I don't want to break him just as I've started to play with him, after all.*

The thought made her smile. Releasing him, she handed him the scrubby to rinse and hang-dry. He turned himself into the spray as well, then picked up the same bottle as before. Lathering his hair, he scrubbed, then rinsed it. Unsure if he should use conditioner...and which conditioner, given there were three different bottles available...Severus debated for a moment, then turned to his partner.

"Should I use anything else?" he enquired. Then clarified at her blank look, "I mean on my hair."

"Oh. Er...use that shampoo over there," Hermione directed him.

"If you weren't paying attention, I just used shampoo on my hair," he stated.

"Yes, but that other stuff is a different type. It'll help your scalp guard against dryness and flakes," Hermione told him. "And then you use that conditioner, there. It says to leave it in, but that's for my hair-type. You'll want to rinse it out of your own locks...but leave it in for a minute, first."

Severus rolled his eyes. He complied, first scrubbing his scalp with the minty-smelling shampoo, then used the citrus-scented conditioner. Stuck with a minute to wait, he felt the urge to complain. "Hermione, you have three bottles of shampoo, and three bottles of conditioner. Why didn't you just settle on one each?"

"Because each one is formulated to do something different from the others," Hermione replied logically. "Some strip more oil out of the hair, others add bounce and shine, some enhance curl, some add manageability..."

Picking up two of the conditioner bottles, Severus squinted at the ingredients, comparing them side-by-side. "They're mostly the same."

"A Shrinking Potion and a Deflating Draught are similar in content and have similar effects...but they're not the same. Or do you not remember that lecture from your second-year classes?" Hermione asked dryly. The dark look he gave her told her that he did, indeed, remember his lectures. She rolled her eyes. "Look, Severus, despise it as you will, the Beauty Industry pours millions of pounds into both research and marketing...and they make *billions* of pounds in profits as a result. In both the Muggle and the wizarding worlds."

"Yes, but *two* rounds of shampooing my hair?" he asked her, setting the bottles back.

"Yes, two rounds of it. You aren't standing over steaming cauldrons anymore, but your hair still gets a bit greasy. Especially if you go more than a few days without showering. That's why the instructions say *lather, rinse, repeat as needed*. And it's why you should shower more frequently." She watched him rinse his hair, then added, "Now, doesn't it feel good to shower? Doesn't your body enjoy being pampered and scrubbed, and getting all nice and clean?"

"I wouldn't quite put it that way," Severus stated.

"Well, does it feel absolutely horrible?" Hermione challenged him.

"No," he conceded.

"There you go. It's enjoyable."

"Your logic is flawed; there are several shades of nebulous grey between 'horrible' and 'enjoyable'," he countered.

"Severus, if you put your mind to it, *you can* actually enjoy life," Hermione chided him, exasperated. "Happiness is as much a state of mind as a state of being, or a state of circumstance." At the quirk of his eyebrow, she added firmly, "Just think, *I am happy doing this, and I will be happy doing this.* Try it for a full month, and then see if it doesn't change some of your perspective on the tolerability of life."

Skeptical, Severus didn't say anything, just turned, rinsed off his body one more time, and shut off the shower. When he pushed the curtain back, she had already fetched two towels from the cupboards under the sink, one medium and on the thin side, the other thick and fluffy. Handing him the larger towel, she reached up and scrubbed his head with the smaller one. It threatened his balance, but since she was still touching him willingly, Severus didn't complain. He even bent over a little, giving her better access to his hair. Finally satisfied, she released him, allowing him to use the towel in his hands to scrub the rest of his body dry.

They had neglected to bring in fresh clothes for him to wear. Blushing at the oversight, Hermione scooped his dirty clothes into a bundle and carried them out of the bathroom; she muttered as she did so that she would toss them into the washing machine along with a load of other clothes, then come back upstairs to fetch him something to wear. Severus wrapped his drying towel around his hips and reached for the comb she had set on the counter for his use. Dragging it through his damp hair, he tried not to admire how snarl-free his locks were, compared to their normal stringy mess.

Maybe there was something to this 'Beauty Industry' stuff. He wondered idly just how much money one could make off of a 'perfect conditioner' in the wizarding world, if he examined some recipes for the necessary potions, maybe experimented with a few modifications... Dragging the comb back over his scalp, he slicked his hair back from his face, wanting to see what 'potential' she saw in him. Seeing his face in stark relief, without the sheltering of his shoulder-length hair to soften his angular features, Severus scowled.

He was too stern-looking, too large-nosed for a woman to like. With his hair scraped back, he didn't even look like himself, like the Greasy Git he had become over the years. That thought made him close his eyes. *Like you've become over the years...but you don't have to be that man anymore. You know you don't...and you know she doesn't want a shallow, appearance-obsessed, Gilderoy Lockhart type, but she doesn't want a bitter old bastard in her life, either. You can do it for her sake, if not for your own. Make her proud to be with you, or as proud as she can be.*

He still hadn't allowed her to straighten his teeth, but he supposed he could allow her to try. Trying to imagine what he would look like with straight white teeth had him making faces in the mirror. Mindful of how silly he looked, Severus stuck out his tongue at himself and lifted the comb again to drag his hair down into its usual central part. He heard Hermione coming back up the stairs and smiled wryly; she was humming to herself, as she sometimes did.

They hadn't lived together for more than a couple of months now, including his time spent stuck as a cat, but he had learned a few of her habits. After having disposed of some disliked household task, she sometimes hummed when moving on to something much more tolerable. Laundry was a hated task, of course. Fetching his clothing, however, seemed to be far more agreeable to her. Either that, or she was going to insist on watching him get dressed.

"...Augh!!"

The startled shriek alarmed Severus. Snatching up his wand, he darted out of the bathroom. Hermione stood in the doorway of her bedroom, one of the guestrooms in the cottage. She was staring into the room with a disgusted, shocked expression, frozen in place by whatever lay inside the room. Severus slowed, wary, and watched her inhale a shuddering breath.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley...*what*, in God's Name, are you doing in my bedroom?!" Hermione yelled, yanking her wand out of her hair. "*Naked*, no less!"

The thought of a naked, freckled hide was enough to churn anyone's stomach. Severus debated whether or not to make his presence known. On the one hand, he wanted to chase off the overly hormonal twit, securing the safety and sanctity of *his* woman. On the other hand, revealing his presence in her life like this, clad only in a towel, was liable to create an explosive situation. He'd had enough of those as a Potions teacher and a spy; he didn't need them in his personal life, now that the war was over.

Through the doorway, he could hear the youngest male Weasley attempting to sound seductive. "Well, I decided to drop by and see how you were doing, maybe see if you'd want to move out to Harry's place with him and me, since your aunt died and all...and when I heard the shower running, thought I'd surprise you in bed. I mean, I thought you'd be all nice, and wet, and naked, and so I'd get myself all nice, and wet, and naked..."

Grabbing the doorknob, Hermione yanked the door shut between them, all but slamming the panel. She shuddered, head bowed. "He was *touching* himself," she hissed under her breath, glancing sideways at Severus. "I found it enticing when *you* did it, but when *he* does it...I just want to scrub myself in the hottest shower I can stand!"

"Hermione...do you want him to know about me? About us?" Severus whispered back, touching her shoulder. "If I reveal myself, I'm certain I could make it clear to the idiot that this sort of uninvited invasion of your...our...privacy will no longer be tolerated...but it could also start a war, with you trapped in the middle."

He had a point. Two points, really. She didn't want to be stuck in the middle...but she would be stuck in the middle, no matter when her preferences were revealed. Lifting her chin, she straightened her shoulders and flung open the door. Nearly hitting Ron in the face, as a result. He had slipped off her bed...she would have to thoroughly launder said bedding, now...and approached the door, still disconcertingly naked.

"Watch it!" he protested, rubbing the shoulder smacked by the edge of the door with his gilded replacement hand. "That hurt!"

"No, *you* watch it, Ronald!" Hermione ordered, thrusting her finger at his face. "You and I are nothing more than friends, and you and I will *never* be anything more than friends! But after *this* asinine little stunt, I'm not sure I *want* to be your friend anymore! You do *not* have permission to enter this house uninvited, EVER!"

"Krum is *dead*, Hermione...if you ever really loved him!"

"It doesn't really matter, now does it?" Hermione retorted, angrier with him than she could ever remember being. "Because I *do not* love you!"

"Hermione..."

"Don't you 'Hermione' me!" she hissed, jabbing him in his pale, freckled chest with her finger. She didn't need a wand to make him back up; her furious, bruising poke forced him back a step. "Yes, I'll admit I used Krum as an excuse, back at St. Mungo's. I didn't want you to think I was rejecting you because of your injuries, because it wasn't about that. I *thought* I could spare your ego being pricked, but it's so over-inflated with self-worth, a whole *gallon* of Deflating Draught wouldn't make a dent in it!"

Seven years of frustration and anger were boiling up within her. The majority of that time, they had been good friends, yes, but not all of it. She stepped forward and poked him again, making him flinch back and scowl.

"For seven years, you and I have been friends, Ronald Weasley, and in those seven years, you and I have had *very* little in common, aside from being Gryffindors, sharing some of our classes, and getting into and out of trouble together. That's enough to make a friendship between us, but it is *not* enough to make a relationship! You will never, *ever* enjoy sitting down and reading a trade journal on Arithmancy, and I will never *ever* enjoy listening to you blathering on about the Chudley Cannons! *Get it into your head*, Ron Weasley! You and I are *only* friends, and will *only ever* be friends! And *friends* do not invade each other's privacy!"

A third jab rocked him back. He started to say something, raising his gilded replacement hand in self-defence, but she cut him off.

"While *some* women may find you to be attractive, Ron, *I do not*. For a while, I thought I was. You have many good qualities...but what you want in a wife is not what I want to be. And what I want in a husband is something *you* could never be! I would rather spend the rest of my life as a spinster with a *hundred* cats, than waste my time trying to jam your round peg into my square hole...or any *other* protruding part into any part of my life, other than the parts that belong to friends, and friends*only*. And if you ever...*ever*...try to get near me with more-than-friendly protruding body parts without my clearly and explicitly expressed permission, *I will cut them off!* As I would *any* man who dared try to force themselves on me!

"If you *ever* see me with a naked man in my life, Ronald Weasley," she finished, "I assure you, he will be there because *I want him* to be there!"

Severus could not resist. He knew it was the wrong thing to do, that it was very bad of him, that it was pouring petrol onto the flames of their argument...but he just had to do it. Stepping around the corner, he leaned his shoulder on the doorframe with a smirk and crossed his arms over his chest. His naked-to-his-towel-wrapped-waist chest.

Ron's blue eyes snapped wide, spotting him. They stared blankly in non-recognition for a long moment, then widened to the point of bulging. Of all the people to be lounging in Hermione's bedroom doorway in nothing more than a towel, his ex-Professor Snape was not one of them. With his point silently, wordlessly made...that *he* was welcome in her home, naked as a bath towel could let him be...Severus pushed away from the doorway, retreating further down the hall.

Turning her head to see what Ron was gaping at, Hermione caught sight of Severus just as he left. She had mixed feelings over his appearance: on the one hand, she was glad he had showed himself right when she said that bit about only having naked men in her house that she wanted to have naked in her house. On the other hand, she was glad he hadn't pressed the confrontation any further than that. Returning her attention to the other male in the cottage, a gaping, stunned Ron, she arched her brow.

"...Yes?" she enquired as his mouth opened and closed several times soundlessly. "You have something to say?"

"That...that was...that..."

"Yes, that was Severus Snape," Hermione confirmed bluntly. "Naked...well, wrapped in a bath towel...but entirely *welcome* in this house. Because he *asked* to enter this house, and *asked* if he could do things like take a shower in this house. He was courteous in doing so. *You*, on the other hand," and she let her tone show that she did not approve of Ron's tactics, "invaded my house without my awareness, without my permission, and you not only stripped yourself naked without asking if it was alright with me, you touched my *bed* with your unclothed, unbathed hide.

"Not only that, you *were touching* yourself, and leaking God-knows-what all over my bedding! Now I'm going to have to scrub and Scourgify those blankets and sheets before I can touch them again, thanks to your inconsiderate invasion!"

He squawked at that. "Now, that's going too far!"

"Coming in here *uninvited* for a *wank* on my bed was going too far, Ron!" Hermione returned sharply. "La-ven-der Brown," she enunciated, and pointed at the door. "You have one minute to get your clothes on and yourself out of this house. If you want to wank on anybody's bed, I suggest you try hers, since she's far more interested in you than I...and I suggest you *ask* her for her permission to wank off on her bed, because if you don't, I'll tell her to hex off your rod-and-tackle!"

"Hermione!" Ron protested.

"Forty-five seconds," she asserted crisply, lifting the wand in her fingers, showing him she was ready and willing to use it. "If you *and* your clothes aren't out of here by the time my count reaches zero, I'll Portkey you straight to the Burrow in all your...*glory*."

The sarcastic drawl of her voice was worthy of the man who had briefly appeared in the doorway moments ago. Ron flushed, but started gathering his things. "I cannot believe you've allowed *Snape* into your home!"

"Snape *asked*," Hermione reminded him. "Moreover, he asked *politely* and *respectfully*. He had never *assumed* anything, in regards to my house, my person, or my permission."

"You drop by Grimmauld Place without arranging *permission*," he grumbled.

"That's not true, and you and Harry both know it. Either I arrange it in advance, or I knock on the door and wait to be let in," Hermione told him tartly. "Either way, I'd *never* just Apparate straight in, now that it's Harry's home. When it was Headquarters, anyone could go when they needed during the war, but now it's Harry's home, and I *always* ask, because I was raised to be polite!...And you have twenty seconds to be out of here."

He flashed her his arse, bending over and fishing for the trainers that had been half-pushed under her bed. Hermione shuddered, repulsed. Unlike Severus', his was freckled, hairy, and flat. Decidedly underfed, even if the rest of him wasn't nearly as bony as the older wizard. And his body hair...ginger body hair. Bristly, furry, ginger body hair... Wishing there was a way to Scourgify her eyes and her memory, she kept her expression adamantly stern as he straightened and faced her, his things bundled into his arms.

"Just one question..."

"Five seconds."

"Why Snape?" he asked, bewilderment in his eyes. "Why did you allow *him* in here, and not me?"

"Aside from the fact that he *asked*, instead of *assumed*, you mean?" she asked him sardonically. "If you cannot figure out all that he has in common with me, Ron, then you certainly don't know me well enough to have a relationship with me. And you've just run out of time. Apparate out, before I turn one of your trainers into a Portkey, and dump you in the middle of Diagon Alley!"

He glared at her, but gripped his clothes, squeezed his eyes shut, and concentrated. With a *crack*, Ron vanished from her bedroom. Hermione checked the air carefully to make sure he hadn't left behind even so much as a splinched eyelash, then flicked out her wand, Scourgifying the place of his smell. Unlike Severus, she didn't think he had bathed very recently...his exposed feet had certainly left behind that awful, stale-corn-crisp smell.

It gave her all the more incentive to want to buy herself and Severus a brand-new bed, with brand new blankets and sheets. Something that hadn't been touched by that freckled, self-centered idiot. Something where she could enjoy Severus' scent. Even when he sweated, the older wizard's body odour wasn't nearly as unpleasant.

Flicking her wand again, she cast a Cleansing Charm on the bed, then a Folding Charm. Blankets and sheets stripped off the bed, organizing themselves into neat stacks. Even the pillow-slips wormed their way off their synthetically stuffed contents so that they could be added to the piles. These were blankets that had been here to begin with, not ones she had brought from her parents' home, so she felt no particular attachment to them; Hermione had no qualms about donating them to the nearest charity store.

With the mattress stripped and the stacks of bedding levitated to one side to await their donation, the bed didn't remind her of Ron anymore, thankfully. Another swish of her wand scoured the mattress-pad, mattress and pillows, and a wriggle pulled out fresh linens and a quilt from the closet. Within moments, the bed was freshly made. Perhaps it was going overboard, but she considered moving into another guest room...because she could still see Ron's hairy buttocks and ginger pubes sprawled in front of her on

the bed, one freckled hand caressing himself, in her mind's eye.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she growled in frustration. *How many times do I have to tell that freckled git to leave me alone?*

"I'm glad he left."

Sighing heavily, Hermione opened her eyes and turned around. Severus stood in the doorway again, this time clad in yet another pair of black trousers and a white shirt, which he was buttoning at the cuffs. It was a warm summer day, yet he insisted on covering himself up, silly man. If it had been *him* lying on her bed, wanking...

The idea made her blink. "Severus, would you do me a *really* big favour?"

One of his brows rose. "What?"

"Would you please go lie on the bed, unbutton your shirt and trousers, take out your...your wedding-tackle...and stroke it for a few minutes while I watch?" Hermione asked. His other brow rose as well, making her blush at the audacity of her request. "...It's Ron! I can't get the damned image of him *lying* there out of my head! *Ginger pubes*," she stressed, hunching her shoulders in a shudder. "...Urg! Some people go in for that, and more power to them...but *not me*!"

He had sauntered down the hallway only a short distance after his little self-display and had lingered there in case she needed assistance routing Idiot Boy. Thus, he had heard every word. Only after hearing the Freckled Idiot leave had Severus gone on to the spare bedroom containing his wardrobe, to dress himself again. She had stripped and changed the bed, a good idea, but if Ronald Weasley was still dominating the guestroom with his memory, dominating and horrifying her thoughts, Severus knew his masculine duty. Hermione was *his* woman, and this cottage was *their* house. That meant every single room was *his* room, as much as it was hers. No other man should be allowed to make a mark on this place. Not without *his* permission.

It was a primitive way of looking at the situation, not the least bit civilized, but it was logical. His mate had requested that he re-dominate this chamber in her eyes, and thus dominate it in her thoughts. Actually, that was the civilized thing to do, since Severus realized that stringing the Freckled Idiot up by his 'ginger pubes' was a lot more barbaric. So perhaps the *primal* thing, not necessarily primitive, was to re-stake his claim. Visibly.

Stepping silently around her, he unbuttoned the cuffs he had been working on, then turned by the bed to face her. Opening his shirt in an echo of their time in the bathroom, he unfastened the buttons of his trousers as well, but didn't drop them down. Instead, he reached inside, adjusting the layers so that he could tuck everything underneath as he gently lifted his loins out of his clothes.

Despite having climaxed twice, he could feel himself hardening, his flesh responding in tune with his primal thoughts. Trailing the tips of one set of fingers up and down the length of exposed skin on his torso, he kept the other hand tucked under his 'wedding tackle', as she had referenced it. Kept it on display for her.

The view was magnificently confident, magnificently male. Hermione stared, breathless. It wasn't until he spoke that she managed to tear her gaze away from his body and back to his face.

"...Is this enough?"

"Huh?"

He allowed himself a slight smile at her distracted response. "Is this enough to make you forget another man? Or shall I continue?"

She almost answered, *Another man, who?* But that would give him perhaps a little too much ammunition against her. That tiny smirk let her know that he realized he could distract her with this much of himself. "That'll do. Very nicely, in fact. Thank you. Erm...you may redress, if you wish. Thank you. Not, erm, too quickly; no need to rush, or anything..."

Okay, so she was giving herself away. Who could blame her? The sight of him was simply too good! It was a pity to have to cover up all of that deliciousness, but she didn't protest him doing so; they did have work to do. Regrettably.

Smirking, Severus complied. When he got himself tucked back into place and everything re-buttoned, he crossed back to her side. "I think it is time we focused on warding the whole house against uninvited guests, and not just the basement. Even if your other friend weren't life-debted to be pleasant to me, and thus prohibited from coming here and making trouble for me, Mr. Weasley could always go crying 'foul' to his relatives. I'd rather not have more freckled faces to deal with, today."

"Quite. You're quite right," Hermione agreed, dragging her brain back out of the gutter. It was a very nice gutter, not nearly as unpleasant a place to be as one might think, but she did have work to do. "Warding the house. I believe I saw a couple books in the library room that had some good spells we could apply. Runes, Charms, that sort of thing..."

"I enjoy how well you can get your mind back onto the tracks again, after your train of thought has been derailed," Severus purred in her ear, stepping close enough to her that she could feel his body heat.

Hermione almost let her thoughts be derailed again. She cleared her throat. "Yes, well, just remember, I get to thoroughly derail your thoughts tomorrow."

"I shall enjoy watching you *try*." Brushing past her, Severus headed for the room he had converted to store all their books.

Chapter 08

Chapter 8 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

VIII.

...

The doorbell rang, halfway through supper. Severus and Hermione exchanged looks, then Hermione pushed back from the table. Setting aside his napkin, Severus

followed her. At the front door, she peered out through the spy-hole to see who was there. A rough sigh escaped her.

"It's the twins."

"Ten to one, their second-youngest sibling decided to sic them upon us," Severus muttered. "Do you want me to stay on two feet, or shift to four?"

Hermione twisted to face him as the twins rang the doorbell again. "You know what? I'm not going to hide you. I have no reason to hide your presence in my life, and I am not going to hide you. I'm *also* not going to talk about you to any nosy-parkers that come poking around. You're *my* business, not theirs."

Turning back to the door, she unlatched and opened it. Fred and George Weasley stood on the other side, looking fairly normal in Muggle jeans and teeshirts, though George's had an advertisement in red on white for their store, and Fred's had a big lipstick mark and the words *Give Us A Kiss, Love* printed in red on black. They started to smile at her, then glanced past her and lost their smiles.

"So, it's true," George stated, staring at their former professor. "Little Brother wasn't exaggerating."

"Why is *he* here?" Fred asked Hermione. His tone wasn't quite hostile, nor outright belligerent, but it was definitely confused and none too happy.

"*He* was invited. If you would like to come in, I will have to insist that you behave and be polite while on the premises," Hermione forewarned the twins, before holding the door wide. "But...you *are* welcome to come in. Just behave yourselves."

Knowing the admonition to behave and be polite was something he should also heed, Severus resisted the urge to frown at the twins. Mindful of what they had interrupted, he dredged up some manners. "We had just sat down to supper, but there is enough extra if you wish to join us."

"Us'?" George questioned. "What do you mean, 'us'? As in, *you* and Hermione, that kind of 'us'?"

"What would you have him say?" Hermione countered. "Severus and I are in the middle of sharing a meal, and enjoying an intelligent conversation. Now, if you can contribute to the intelligent conversation aspect, you are welcome to join us. If you're just going to keep questioning the proper use of pronouns, I suggest you head on back to Ron...oh, and did he tell you what he did to *earn* being thrown out of this house, earlier?"

The twins exchanged wary looks. Fred shook his head slowly. "No, he didn't. He just went on a bender about Snape being here, and wanting to go to the Aurors to report the possibility of you being under the influence of mind-altering potions."

"How ironic," Severus said, drawing the others' attention back to him. "Considering it was he who attempted to use a mind-altering potion on her not too long ago. A potion from your own shop, no less."

"You told him about that?" George hissed at Hermione, jerking a thumb at Severus.

Hermione hadn't known at the time that Puss was Severus, but she recalled quite clearly his reactions around Ron, both during and after the incident with the Love Philtre. "He knows. In fact, he knows quite a lot...which is one of the reasons why I was enjoying a very good conversation with him over a meal, one which is now growing cold."

Fred, still frowning, looked at Hermione again. "You said you threw Ron out of here, earlier. What was that all about?"

"He entered the cottage without being invited, heard someone in the shower upstairs, and snuck into my bedroom, stripped himself naked, and sprawled himself on my bed, without my permission. Whereupon he started to *wank* himself," Hermione added disdainfully. "No doubt thinking that I'd be happy to find an uninvited, unclothed intruder on my bed, rather than appalled, dismayed, and even disgusted...and if you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss his state of being any further, because the memory of it is putting me off my meal."

"Hey, he's not a bad-looking bloke," Fred told her.

"I know he isn't, Fred; there's lots of witches out there who would be more than happy to find him naked on their beds," Hermione agreed readily. "It's just that I don't find him attractive, and I *don't* want to find him naked and uninvited on my bed ever again!"

"You will have to date *someone*, at some point in your life," George reminded her. "You can't stay a single woman forever."

That irritated Hermione, the assumption that she *had* to get married, that she *couldn't* have a fulfilling life without a man in her life. But before she could finish wincing, while she was still deciding just how badly to lambaste the redheaded entrepreneur, Severus stepped into their breach.

"That is a rather unenlightened attitude, Mr. Weasley. This isn't the nineteenth century. Witches are every bit as equal as wizards...they always have been. I see no reason why she should *have* to have a male in her life, just to be happy. If she wants one in her life, then yes, she could have one," he stated. "But if she doesn't want one, then she doesn't *need* one. A person's happiness is not dependent upon being in a relationship, but rather upon the quality of one's life, and in being free to enjoy a variety of relationships, including friendships and family."

"Exactly," Hermione agreed, recovering her breath. "Besides, what Ron wants in a wife, I cannot and will not provide for him...I cannot even hold a conversation with him without it devolving into an argument! Trying to get him to talk about Arithmancy, Charms, or Potions is like trying to sit him down long enough for me to pull out one of his teeth! *You*, I could sit down and chat with about those things. *Severus*, I could sit down and chat with, too. But Ron? He has his mind on chess, Quidditch, sex, and becoming an Auror. And not necessarily in that order."

"But...*him*," George protested, gesturing at Severus. "Why *him*?"

"Why not?" she countered. "I have far more in common with him than I do with Ron. With Ron, I have our years at Hogwarts and our various experiences in fighting Voldemort. It's enough to be friends, and I'm willing to stay friends, but it's not enough for a real relationship. You can't plan for your future when the most of what you have in common is your past. It's a sad thing to realize, but there it is."

"Ron thinks you have something in common worth pursuing," Fred said.

"Ron is pursuing me because I turned him down. I'm 'the one who got away'," Hermione quoted. "He has more in common with Lavender than with me. She likes chess, Quidditch, Care of Magical Creatures, and snogging with Ron. I care for him as a friend, but she cares for him as something more than that. And since he deserves someone who can care for him as far more than just a friend, I'd rather see him trying to date her than wasting his time with me."

"Which leads us back to the question of why *him*?" George said, poking his thumb at their ex-professor. "Why is he here? And I don't mean for supper and a conversation. Ron was saying something about him being *naked*, earlier."

"Actually, he was wrapped in a towel earlier, having just gotten out of the shower," Hermione countered. "Which was a lot more than your brother was wearing. Ron mistakenly assumed that I was the one in the shower."

"Yes, but why were you in Hermione's shower in the first place?" Fred asked, glancing between the two of them before settling on Snape.

"Because I had made a mess, and wished to get clean. I had just stepped out and dried off when I heard her give a startled shout. I thought it more prudent to investigate

what was wrong immediately, rather than waste my time by getting dressed," Severus said.

Hermione did her best not to blush at his words, given what that mess had been, and how they had made it. She faced the twins coolly. "Any other questions, or may we return to our supper?"

"What kind of mess?" Fred asked, ignoring her comment.

Severus glanced at Hermione, weighing how much to admit. "Hermione has inherited this cottage from her late aunt. We had just finished clearing out the basement, which we plan to renovate into a potions laboratory."

"Severus and I are going into business together," Hermione explained at the twins' bemused looks. "Each of us has different areas of strength, and by working together, we figure we could make more money together than we could by working apart."

A thought crossed Severus' mind. He narrowed his eyes for a moment, then turned and gestured down the hall, toward the kitchen and its breakfast nook, which would just be big enough for the four of them. "...Why don't you gentlemen join us? Some of our impending projects might be adaptable to your own business. Hermione has some innovative ideas in the realm of packaging, and I think she should pick your brains. A collaboration between our two enterprises might prove suitably profitable."

George eyed him askance. "You would be willing to work with us?"

"But, you said our Weasley Wizard Wheezes were literally a joke," Fred added. "And you didn't mean it in a good sense."

"In fact, you turned us down, when we came to you with ideas for improving our product line," George finished. "Now you want to help us?"

"You were still at Hogwarts, and I was still living a lie. As a spy, I couldn't allow anyone to think I was favoring and helping the sons of Order members. I had to tread a very fine line, in case anyone else on our side turned out to be a spy for the other side...or need I remind you how the Potters lost their lives, thanks to someone they thought was a friend? But the war is now over," Severus told them, "and I am now free to live whatever life I may choose. Right now, I choose to finish my supper. Come, or go. Either way, do not linger on the doorstep."

With some of his old, peremptory, professorial air, he turned and headed down the hall without glancing back. Hermione glanced at the twins. "I agree. Either come with us and be ready to talk business, or take yourselves off and leave. I'd like to finish my own supper, too. Which is what I am going to go do, now."

Fred and George exchanged a long look. Hermione shrugged and passed between them, leaving them to let themselves out. To her relief...well, somewhat of a relief...they followed her. It would be a complete relief if they could actually stop their badgering about her relationship with Severus and his presence in her home, and concentrate instead on business matters.

...

"...And then the cauldron exploded, and the whole batch was ruined! Of course, George, here, got splashed with it," Fred said as his twin blushed and grinned. Hermione laughed, and even Severus chuckled. "He not only developed the bosom of a woman, but he also had purple hair! Eyelashes, knuckle-hairs, the whole works!"

"I looked like Tonks, only with freckles," George admitted wryly.

"...And much uglier!" Fred added. All of them had a good chuckle at George's expense, even the wizard himself.

"You must have mis-picked the fluxweed, and then boiled it in the hippogriff tears, rather than simmered it, to have your hair turn purple," Severus offered.

George eyed him askance. "...How did *you* know, and just like that?" He snapped his fingers, then gestured between his twin and himself. "It took us two weeks to figure out what the problem was."

Hermione reached across the table, covering Severus' hand with her own. "Because he's a genius when it comes to potions."

Severus flushed and carefully avoided eye-contact with anyone. About to say something, Fred's gaze fell on their hands. He frowned softly at Hermione. "Oy, is that a ring on your hand?"

George leaned closer, nudging Severus' arm. "And isn't that sitting on her ring finger?"

"You mean, on her *engagement* finger?" Fred corrected his twin. Both of them looked at Hermione, whose cheeks were a little pink, and just like that, the conversation deteriorated from business back to relationships again. Fred shook his head. "Don't tell me you've up and agreed to get married?"

"No, we did not," Severus replied calmly, coolly. George let out a sigh of relief...only to choke when his former teacher added blandly, "We agreed to get engaged."

"We won't agree to get married until we know we can stand each other for long stretches of time," Hermione explained. "It's quite logical, really. Too many people rush into marriage, and then find themselves having to rush right out again, when they wake up and realize they have nothing in common with each other, once the hormones have worn off."

Silence followed her words, until George sat back in his seat with a slow, thoughtful nod. "...Like you and Ron. I remember listening to the two of you, back at the Gryffindor table. Most of the time, it was either him going on about Quidditch, or it was you nagging him to do his homework. Not exactly the sorts of conversations that would lead to marital bliss, in the long run. Either you'd drive each other mad, or drive each other into sullen silence."

Fred nodded sharply. "Exactly. And yet here we've been sitting for the last...forty minutes, was it? The two of you have chatted with both us and each other about six different subjects, if not more, and I didn't even notice it was for forty whole minutes until now."

Exchanging a look with his twin, George nodded and sat up again. "...That settles it. Whatever Ickle Ronnikins says about the two of you being all wrong together, from now on out, we're going to ignore him."

"Now, we're not as prejudiced as a lot of people are, regarding you," Fred added to Severus. "We've always admired your abilities in the classroom, even as we disliked how strict you were, and hated the whole Slytherin-favoring thing. But you'll run up against some resistance, aside from Ron. And yet she's right; you're one of the best brewers we've ever seen. You're as smart as Hermione, here, and that's saying quite a lot."

"A right genius," George agreed. "And if what Minerva's said about you is true, about you agreeing to be a spy for our side from Day One, then you're twice as brave as any Gryffindor we've ever seen."

"Twice as ambitious, not twice as brave," Severus corrected them. "It wasn't a matter of courage. I was merely determined to end the racial prejudice between wizards and Muggles. It was bad enough..."

His voice trailed out and he looked away. Hermione, her hand still covering his, gently stroked his skin with her thumb. "What was bad enough?"

Her gentle question warred with the twins' presence. Debating silently, Severus finally ploughed ahead. "It was bad enough seeing my father's Muggle prejudice against my mother, just for being magical. For us to turn on our own kind, just for being born..."

"We don't choose to be born this way. We just are, whoever our parents may be. Even then, I could see that Muggle-borns were just as magical as Purebloods and Half-

Bloods. In fact," Severus added, warming to the subject, "in all my years of teaching, I could see that some were just as weak, and some were just as mediocre, and some were just as powerful. The only thing Muggle-borns lack is knowledge of the wizarding world. Once they are educated, they are every bit the equal of their wizarding-world-raised contemporaries...you take a Pureblood like Potter, someone with both a witch and a wizard for parents, stick him into the Muggle world as an infant, and he'll know as little coming into Hogwarts as any Muggle-born by birth, despite the so-called purity of his blood."

"Or know even less, if that Muggle-born is our Hermione," George added, giving her a smile.

"...I never knew you felt that way, Snape," Fred told his ex-professor.

"You weren't supposed to. And...even I succumbed now and again to the prejudices of my peers, while growing up," Severus admitted reluctantly, before adding curtly, "Everyone makes mistakes, in the course of their life."

"The important thing is to learn when you are wrong, to admit it, and to make reparations for any harm your mistakes may have made," Hermione said, squeezing his hand gently. "Not to mention doing what is right, in the end."

A rap on the window at the back of the breakfast nook startled everyone. Severus and Fred snatched for their wands, while George peered through their reflections on the glass. "Oi! Speak of purple hair and a great pair of breasts, and the she-devil herself will appear! You have a back door into this place, 'Mione?"

"Watch your language, George," Hermione admonished him. Rising from the table, she moved around to the mudroom. Inside the smallish room, which was designed for boots and coats to be donned or removed in inclement weather, stood the back door. Unlocking it, she let Tonks step inside. The Metamorphmagus didn't have purple hair, though she was wearing a purple shirt. Instead, she had denim-blue hair, to match her jeans.

"Wotcher, 'Mione. Hate to barge in on you like this, but Ron's going on about illegal potions or somethin', and how th' twins hadn't come back, yet, and he was demandin' someone go have a look. So I thought, why bother the Ministry when I could just pop 'round for him, off the record?" Tonks added, though she didn't sound to happy about it. "I'll admit I didn't give him much credence, until I saw Snape in the window just now. Erm...not that I *think* he's gone and dosed you with somethin', mind. Just that I should check it out thoroughly, so I can go back and tell Ron to bugger off. 'Zat alright with you?"

Ron, Hermione decided, is definitely going to pay for this...

"I am not under the influence of a potion," she stated flatly, carefully keeping the lid on the bubbling cauldron of her temper. "Nor a charm, nor a talisman, nor an amulet, *nor* a rune. I am *definitely* not under the influence of the Imperius Curse, nor am I being forced into Severus Snape's company via blackmail, or being forced by *any* other method, magical or Muggle. Severus Snape is not going to go to Azkaban, just because I have chosen to spend time with him over Ron...though I might end up going, if I ever get my hands on that freckled idiot!"

"Sorry...but think of it this way; if I question the two of you as an Auror, and make sure it's all on the up-and-up, there's nothing he can do about it except swallow down th' truth," Tonks offered.

"Fine. Come inside." Holding the door, Hermione bit her lip as Tonks tripped on the step leading up out of the mudroom. The Auror caught herself on the edge of the door, then waved half-heartedly at the three gentlemen around the corner. Hermione waited impatiently for her to clear the kitchen door, but the older witch lingered there.

"Wotcher, Gred, Forge...Snape."

"Hey, Tonks!"

"What's up, Tonks?"

"Nymphadora. Good evening."

Giving up, Hermione gave Tonks a push from behind. The often-clumsy Auror lurched further into the kitchen, allowing the younger witch enough room to enter. Stepping around the blue-haired woman, Hermione gestured at the table. "As you can see, we were all just enjoying a pleasant supper together. All four of us. I'm sure the twins would be happy to tell you I've been perfectly normal all evening long."

"What's this?" Fred asked Tonks. "Did Ickle Ronnikins send you out to see if Hermione's been magically bamboozled?"

"Cause that's definitely not the case," George agreed. He flashed the Auror a teasing grin. "If *anybody* is acting all weird, it's Snape, here; our sweet little Hermione's gone and wrapped him around her finger, turning him into a veritable pussy-cat in her presence."

Unable to help himself, Severus smirked at the reference. He thought about scowling over the idea that he could be wrapped around anyone's finger, but the part about the puss was too accurate. He looked at Hermione and discovered she was smirking in his direction, equally amused by the inadvertent joke. A quick glance at Nymphadora Tonks showed the other witch was a little skeptical, but willing to play along.

"Mind if I sit in on the chat, then? To sort of witness it, firsthand?" Tonks asked them.

Sweeping a hand at his chair, Severus silently offered for her to sit in it. Tonks gave him a grin in thanks. As she did so, Hermione flicked her wand at the table, silently enchanting the dirty dishes to waft their way over to the dishwasher, which lowered its door at a second, equally silent command. Wordless magic was convenient at times, such as when one didn't want to interrupt a conversation, or the mood of a moment. Severus gestured for Hermione to take her seat, but she shook her head, and pulled back the chair for him.

A silent argument passed between them, with Hermione stubbornly refusing to budge. Giving in with a sigh, Severus sank down onto it...and hooked her around the hips with one arm, pulling her onto his lap. The twins looked away, all but whistling in their attempt to Not Notice, capital letters included, but Tonks watched avidly. Her currently blue eyes dropped to Hermione's arm, wrapped over the top of Severus' grip on her waist, and to the hand at the end of it.

"What's that, then? A ring?"

"They've agreed to be engaged," George filled her in, nodding at the couple seated together.

"But haven't yet agreed to be married," Fred completed. "Which is sensible, if you think about it."

"Oh, yes," George agreed, glancing at his twin, then at Severus and Hermione. He flashed them a grin. "I mean, we all know what a harridan Hermione is; he might not want to marry her, in the long run."

"But an honorable harridan," Fred admonished his sibling. "After all, she is giving Severus time to scream and run for it."

"I dunno," George said, shaking his head mock-sadly. "Some ladies can be rather bewitching even in the non-magical sense, when they put their minds to it. I think he's done-for, mate. Too late to save himself, and all that; once some witch has got her dainty little claws into you, that's it. You're hooked for life..."

Folding her arms under her breasts, Hermione fixed the redheaded, freckled wizards with equal shares of a mock-glare. "Has it ever occurred to you that *he* might have bewitched *me* in the non-magical sense, just by opening his mouth?" Glancing over at Tonks, she added, "Even *you* have to admit, the man's voice is like liquid sex, when he wants it to be."

For a moment, all Tonks could do was gape at the suggestion. Then she threw back her head and brayed with laughter. She rocked back and forth in her chair, snorting and choking for a few moments, then wheezed and wiped at her eyes, chuckling. "Oh, gods, that was funny! *True*, but funny...and to watch him just *sit* there and take it..."

"Rest assured, I *am* contemplating my retaliation," Severus muttered.

"Mm, see what I mean?" Hermione teased, grinning. "That low voice is utterly *scrumptious*."

Fred and George's freckled faces burned with discomfort, but Tonks' cheeks pinked with a different sort of embarrassment. Fred cleared his throat. "Erm...please don't use the word 'scrumptious' in conjunction with Snape, in our presence."

"Please?" George added. "I mean...he's a *bloke*! Blokes aren't scrumptious."

Tonks giggled at that. "Oh, I don't know; us girls find certain blokes to be a bit scrumptious, at times..."

Both twins shuddered. With Hermione seated on his lap, her shoulder was just the right height for Severus to use as a chin-rest. It also allowed him to whisper into her ear. "*Behave*."

Twisting her head just a little, she whispered back, "*No*."

In retaliation, Severus shifted the hand around her waist, dropping it into her lap. Since she was seated with her legs slightly splayed, it was easy enough for him to slot it through the folds of her shorts, down between her thighs. She stilled for a moment, startled, and felt her cheeks beginning to burn. Desperate to distract the others, Hermione cleared her throat.

"Would anyone like some pudding? It's marble-cake, with fudge frosting. Nothing fancy, but I did toss a few walnuts into the batter when I made it."

"That'd be lovely," Tonks agreed. The twins added their enthusiasm.

Severus, flexing his fingers against Hermione's mound, smirked at the Auror. "I'm afraid we cannot serve you anything, Nymphadora. Nor offer you a drink. Someone might try to accuse us of having slipped you a potion that could have impaired your judgment while you were here."

Tonks grumbled under her breath at that, almost pouting.

A twitch of her arm thumped Severus in the bicep with her elbow. He grunted, and Hermione smiled. "...Never mind him, Tonks; I'll wrap you up a slice to take with you when you go. You can eat it after you've reported to that freckled idiot. Think of it as a delayed thank-you for putting up with all of this nonsense."

The blue-haired witch cheered up again at the suggestion. "That'll do nicely. Thanks."

Since she didn't think Severus would let her go, Hermione drew her wand and enchanted the cake, some forks, and a stack of dessert plates to come floating their way. Another swish dissected part of the round cake into even slices when its platter alighted on the table, and a third flick served the slices onto each plate. Fred took two, one each for George and himself. Hermione passed Severus a fork for his, and made sure the slice was within easy reach of his hand. She started to serve herself a slice as well, but he speared a piece of his cake and lifted it to her lips, distracting her.

It was a very intimate thing to do, for him, showing her public affection by seating her in his lap, then feeding her with his own hand. It would have been hands, except the other one was still snuggled between her thighs, where he was definitely aware of the moist heat being generated by her body. Carefully, Hermione wrapped her lips around the tines of the fork, cautiously accepting his offering. He lowered it and cut another piece, doing his best to ignore the stares from the twins, and the speculative look from Tonks. Bringing it up to his own mouth, he chewed with his chin still resting over her shoulder, as if none of their three guests were actually there.

Fred gave him a wondering look. "Damn...no wonder you could fool old Moldiemort for all those years! Sitting there like you haven't a care in the world..."

The admiration in the wizard's freckled face soothed some of Severus' lingering resentment that his sacrifices had never really been appreciated by anyone outside of Albus, and maybe Minerva. Only some of his resentment, but it did soothe him. He permitted himself a small smirk as he carefully fed Hermione another piece of cake.

"So...erm...you *haven't* gone and fed either of each other any odd potions that you've made, or anything?" Tonks asked idly, awkwardly.

Severus answered, since Hermione had a mouthful of dessert. "No. We haven't even had a chance to set up our business facilities, yet."

"Any potions we've used have been commercially made ones for hygiene and such," Hermione added as soon as her mouth was clear. "You can check the bathroom cupboards, if you like."

"I'd take your word for it on my own and believe you, but if I don't actually check..." Tonks trailed off.

"If you *do*, it'll shut our baby brother's gob for sure," Fred finished for her.

Hermione nodded, giving in to the inevitable. "I'll show you around, prove we don't have a potions lab anywhere, and that we aren't trying to intoxicate each other behind each other's backs."

Tempted to hold her in place, reluctant to let his hand give up its very nice, warm haven, Severus permitted her to slide from his lap. As he did so, he allowed his hand to subtly pat her bottom. "Do not take too long, or we'll eat the rest of the cake."

"Do that, and there'll be no 'bath time' for you," Hermione retorted, blushing from the tingling in her bum.

Wisely, Severus let her go without saying another word.

Fred and George leaned closer as soon as the two women had left. George raised his brows. "'Bath time'?"

Ignoring them, Severus calmly ate another forkful of cake.

...

They were in the bathroom, discussing beauty products...Muggle versus wizarding...when Tonks asked, "So...have you kissed him?"

"Tonks!" Hermione stared at the Metamorphmagus, then narrowed her eyes into a glare. "That is none of your business."

Tonks shrugged, unfazed. "A girl's gotta ask. Besides, with that nose...well, I was thinkin' it would get in the way, y'know?"

"A good kisser is a good kisser, whether his nose is long or snub," Hermione retorted.

"So he's a good kisser, eh?" Tonks asked slyly.

Hermione blushed. "None of your business! And you won't be finding out first-hand, or...or..."

"Or what?" Tonks prodded.

"...Or I'll kiss Remus!" Hermione stated, sure that the Auror wouldn't go for *that*.

Sure enough, Tonks reacted as predicted. "Like bollocks, you will! Remmie is *mine*."

"Exactly. As Sevie is *mine*," Hermione said primly.

Tonks eyed her askance, then chuckled. "You're braver than any other Gryffindor I know. What if he heard you say that?"

"What, that he's mine?" the younger witch repeated. She lifted both hands, using one to point at the ring on the other. "Hello? We're *engaged*."

"No, I meant calling 'im 'Sevie'. Somehow, I don't think he'd go for that at all...which argues very strongly against you being under the Imperius Curse," Tonks joked.

"...And again, we're back to my wanting to strangle Ron," Hermione sighed. "How do I get him to back off, once and for all? We don't have anything in common, except for our school years, our adventures, and our friendship...and I refuse to try and build anything *more* than a friendship on just those few facts! He's not a thickie when it comes to academics, but he *is* on this one particular point! He isn't in my league as far as my hobbies and preferences go, and he isn't interested in *being* in my league. And I refuse to abandon or ignore my intellectual pursuits just to dumb myself down enough to date someone!

"If they can't keep up with *me*," she continued, letting out her feelings on the matter, "then I won't bother with them. I will instead go and find a man who *can*...and I *have*. Ronald is not stupid by even the wildest stretch of the imagination, but Severus has a vastly wider range of interests, just as I do. We don't agree on everything, and sometimes our discussions get rather heated, but Severus and I still respect each other even when we're yelling at each other. And we respect each other's right to have a differing opinion. Ron wants someone to think he's the king of the Quidditch pitch...and I don't even *like* Quidditch."

Sagging back against the bathroom counter, Hermione sighed roughly.

"...Ron's *not* an academic thickie; he passed his O.W.L.s with fairly good scores, much the same as everyone else. He's not a dunderhead. But when it comes to relationships, and what *makes* a good relationship...he's as thick as Thames mud." She sought for the words to explain the matter. "It's like...it's like he's wearing swim-fins. They're fine for whenever you want to go snorkeling and visiting the merfolk in the Hogwarts lake, even perfect for it, but unless you want to live underwater...and I don't...you don't wear them around the house, you don't walk in them to the green-grocer's, and you *don't* go dancing in a ballroom, flopping around! And the fact that he cannot *understand* that is all the more frustrating!"

"He's a freckled fish who thinks you should go swimming with him," Tonks agreed slowly. "Only you're a bird who likes to flit through the trees. You'll go diving into the water once in a while when you want a little variety in your supper, and that's when you'll meet and say hello, but you need to live most of your life on dry land. What you need to do is find a way t' *show* 'im he can't breathe air, and doesn't *want* t' breathe air, an' that *you* don't want t' breathe water, and *cannot* breathe water. Not for the rest o' your lives."

"Exactly," Hermione agreed.

"But you can't show him by telling him 'no, I can't breathe underwater'. He's a thickie when it comes to relationships, and he just won't believe you, because it's not what *he* believes," the Auror added wisely. "You need to find a way to make him realize that if he wants to keep pursuing you, *he'll* be a fish out of water, not a bird in it. Y'know...if you could get him into a conversation with you and Severus, and the two of you...you and 'Sevie', that is...go off on some obscure, high-browed tangent and have a rousingly good time of it, and sort of...well, shut him out because he can't keep up...and if you play it up a lot that you're having the time of your life interacting with Snape, and he's having the time of his life interacting with *you*..."

"Well, at least it's a shot at pounding it through his head," Tonks offered, shrugging. "Maybe you can come up with something better."

"I don't know; it might work. I mean, if nothing else, it could show him that I'm *happy* when I'm with Severus," Hermione offered. "Certainly I'm happier with him than I've ever been with Ron."

Tonks asked, "...Are you? Happy with 'im, I mean?"

"Very," Hermione confirmed, smiling wistfully. Mainly because, as nice as their unexpected company had turned out to be, she wished she was still alone with him, tonight.

"Good...*weird*, but good," Tonks teased her. "Let's get back down to th' boys, shall we?"

...

"Thank god *that's* over," Severus muttered, closing the front door on their visitors. He flicked his wand, sealing the house in a variation of the Impeturbable Charm, then turned to face the hall. And found himself pressed back against the stout panel by an armful of Hermione. She looped her wrists around his neck, buried her fingers in his hair, and pulled him down into a warm kiss. Not a heated one, just a warm one. A thoroughly warm one.

Leaning back after a bit, she smiled up at him. "That's a thank-you for putting up with everyone tonight, and for not making a fuss."

Severus, his arms around her waist and his mind somewhat dazed, muttered, "...What do I get if I'm *actively* pleasant?"

She blushed and cleared her throat. "That, um, reminds me. I'd like to propose an idea to you."

Arching one of his brows, Severus waited for her to explain.

"Erm...well, I'd like to prove to Ron that he's just not my type. That I'm not *his* type. I'd like to invite him over for dinner and conversation," Hermione stated, and felt Severus stiffen in her arms. She touched his cheek, making sure he looked at her. "*With* you. I want us to engage in an absolutely fabulous, high-brow conversation, and, erm...shut him out, while showing him that I'm quite happy interacting with *you*."

"He is my friend and I do care for him as a friend. But I need to show him that he's a fish and I'm a bird, and I'm not going to spend the rest of my life submerging myself below the surface of the world in an attempt to be with him. He also needs to realize that a relationship with me would leave him a fish out of water, unable to keep up as I flit from topic to topic," she explained. "I don't *want* to hurt his feelings, because he'll just retreat into his own little underwater universe and refuse to believe I won't dive down to be with him, but I do need to show him I'm happiest flitting about up here with you."

The older parts of Severus suggested that being cruel to the boy would cause him to back down faster than this...display of conviviality. He couldn't invalidate her feelings, though. She was friends with the Freckled Idiot, and had been friends with him and the Boy Who Annoyed Him for a very long time. Even he knew such a long-term friendship wasn't something to be cast aside for a new lover. Accommodations and adjustments had to be made...on all sides.

Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against hers, thinking. Hermione had effectively shut down Harry Potter from ever being an arse toward him again. It was a pity she didn't have a similar life-debt between her and Ronald Weasley that she could call upon; it would have made things so much simpler. Their three names rattled around in his skull. Harry, Hermione, Ron. Ron, Harry, Hermione... A flash of insight reached him. Ron's sister, Ginevra Weasley. Ginny.

"Is...Harry," he managed to say politely as he opened his eyes, "still dating Miss Weasley?"

"Well, yes...sort of. I mean, she has to go back to Hogwarts for her seventh year in a couple of weeks, but yes. Why do you ask?" Hermione enquired.

He stared into the air past her shoulder, thinking aloud. "We need a third female. I believe he was dating Miss Brown for a while...no, she wouldn't do. We need a neutral third party. Someone who could bridge the gap between the two conversations. Someone smart enough to see what will be going on, and be able to confirm it. Someone Ron Weasley knows and has interacted with... There was a blonde hanging around with you...a Ravenclaw...Miss Lovegood."

Hermione couldn't quite follow him. "What about Luna?"

"She's smart enough to interact with the two of us, yet convivial enough to get along with the other three," Severus stated. "We are going to have a house-warming party. A small one. You and I will host Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley, and Miss Lovegood. Approach it under the direction that you're inviting...Harry and Ron...over to see the cottage, once we've finished moving in and decorating it, and that you're inviting Ginny and Luna as well.

"Don't even mention my name, and be vague and avoid the subject if one of them asks if I'll be present. Don't lie, but don't confirm it, either. Just tell them you wanted your best friends over for your first dinner-party in your new home, a cozy little group of close friends," he instructed her. "We don't want a lot of people. That would confuse the issue. But we do want witnesses to our...happiness together."

She was following along now, and nodded slowly. "If we can convince Tonks and the twins, we might be able to convince Ginny and Luna. With Harry geased to be pleasant, that'll be five-to-one. Of course, we might not be able to convince Ginny, but Luna's smart. Daft at times, but smart nonetheless. She'll go along. The only question remaining is if you'll be able to be convincingly pleasant."

That lowered his brows. "You lack faith in my abilities. I faked my way through twenty years of supposed loyalty to an incarnated demon."

"I'm not questioning your ability to act pleasant. I'm worried about whether or not they'll *believe* you're capable of being pleasant. And being *fake* isn't going to cut it. Not saccharine-fake, at any rate," she said. He drew breath to argue, and she quickly covered his lips with her fingertips. "I'm not saying you were saccharine around the Dark Lord; you couldn't have survived if you were. But he wasn't exactly the tea-and-biscuits sort, now was he? You didn't have to prove your loyalty by being tea-and-biscuits."

"More like lemon juice on an open wound," Severus muttered against her flesh, closing his eyes against the memories. That didn't work very well, so he opened them again, meeting her brown gaze as her fingers slipped from his lips. "...Fine. I shall tread the balance between the sour lemon they know, and the tea-and-biscuits of a happy man. But I will remind you of the reward you promised for this...effort...on my part."

"Reward?" Hermione questioned. "When did I mention a reward? Not that I wouldn't give you one, but..."

"At the very beginning of this conversation," Severus reminded her, resting his forehead against hers once more. "You gave me a reward for merely tolerating our unexpected guests. I wondered aloud what you would give me if I were actively pleasant, and you said that reminded you of an idea for inviting your best friends over for dinner. The implication being, I would be rewarded for being *pleasant* toward them. I wish to discuss my reward."

Hermione smirked. She almost said, *How mercenary, like a Slytherin*...but remembered she'd banned House affiliations between them. Instead, she threaded her fingers through the soft black locks at the nape of his neck, remembering how he had washed it under her watchful gaze earlier in the day. And how, with their positions reversed, he had given her such a good time against this very same door. "Alright. Let's discuss your reward. What do you think you'll deserve, after an evening of being pleasant and enjoyable?"

"If I try to be 'enjoyable' toward the others, they will never believe me," he reminded her.

"I meant, enjoyable toward *me*," she admonished lightly. "The object is to show them that you and I are well-suited to each other, and a better match for each other than anyone else. How would you like me to reward you?"

Several possibilities flitted through his mind. One of them involved their current position. Letting the corner of his mouth curl up, Severus admitted, "I believe I am growing rather fond of this door. You do seem to enjoy kissing me whenever we are near it."

"Like this?" she murmured, rising up on her toes so that she could press a kiss to his lips. He returned it, and another, and another. When she eased back onto her heels again, her smile was warm, feminine, and content. "Yes, I think I'm rather fond of this spot by the door, too. Would you like me to kiss you whenever you are near it, as your reward?"

Only the gleam of desire in his dark eyes kept his smirk from looking cruel. "Oh, no...kissing is only the *start* of my reward. A down-payment, as it were."

"Mercenary," she couldn't help muttering, though she smiled as she said it.

"I have half a lifetime's worth of service to others waiting to be rewarded," he told her quietly. Lifting hand to her upswept curls, he tucked a stray wisp behind her ear. "God Himself must have given you to me. You are..."

"I am...what?" Hermione asked him as he faltered.

Severus hesitated, swallowed, then lifted his chin slightly, arrogantly...defensively...and answered, "You are the *only* thing in this universe worthy enough as a recompense for all the suffering I have endured."

She melted inside. She couldn't help it; that was the most romantic thing Hermione had ever heard from anyone, least of all Severus 'Snarky' Snape. "Oh, Severus..."

"I'm...sorry," he stated stiffly, mistaking her use of his name. "I shouldn't have said that. I..."

"Nonsense. It was a very romantic thing to say."

"Hermione, I am *not* romantic!" he protested.

"I didn't that say *you* were romantic," she retorted. "I said that what you *said* was romantic."

That earned her a skeptical arch of one black brow. "Hermione, enough is enough. Even I know that if you say romantic things, you *are* romantic."

Hermione smirked at him. "Well, then, there you have it. You have said something romantic, ergo you *are* romantic. Hoisted on your own petard...*you* said it, Severus; I didn't!"

There was only one way to win this argument...which was to shut her up...and Severus took it. She didn't resist. In fact, she enthusiastically cooperated in her own silencing...if one didn't count the hungry little moans she made, arms twining around his neck like Devil's Snare when she mated her mouth more firmly to his.

...The small foyer by the front door was indeed a wonderful place to kiss.

...

When Hermione had first moved into her aunt's cottage, the neighbors had popped round nearly every afternoon, curious about Eumenia's niece. Once their curiosity was

satisfied by a couple quick conversations...she had carefully refused them entrance to her home by blocking the doorway and having a short chat right there on the stoop, followed by an excuse of chores that needed doing...the visits had trickled to nothing over the last two weeks. Aside from a few enquiries about Professor McGonagall's visits, easily explained away as a schoolteacher visiting her favorite ex-student, things had grown peaceful.

No sooner had she gone out onto the drive to pick up the next day's Muggle paper, however, than Hermione was hailed by her neighbor to the right. Stacey Atteborough, middle-aged, a recent empty-nester, and in desperate need of someone young to fuss over. She was the most persistent of Hermione's visiting neighbors...or as Severus had snarked in the pages of his diary while still trapped in cat-form, the most nosy.

"Oh, my poor dear! I cannot believe it! What a tragedy!"

Hermione's curly head jerked up, much like a deer upon hearing the crackle of a twig breaking under a hunter's foot. A quick, desperate glance back up the path showed her to be a good forty feet from her front door and its promised safety. At the rate Mrs. Atteborough was chugging around the low fenceline toward her, she wouldn't even make it to the broad stoop. Bracing herself, Hermione waited where she was. Running for cover would be like waving a flag in front of a bull; Stacey would never leave her alone until she found out why.

"You poor thing!" the brunette-dyed woman exclaimed, scooping Hermione against her age-softened figure. A figure doused in something floral-scented.

"Please, don't. I don't like being hugged," Hermione snapped reflexively, pushing to free herself.

"But, your *aunt!*" Stacey wailed, embracing her more tightly.

The curtains on the other side of Hermione's new home twitched; that would be Mr. Edgars, who had retired from the automotive industry to a life of golf tournaments, cigar-chomping...Mrs. Edgars didn't allow him to smoke the foul things, thankfully...and opinionated diatribes on Parliament's doings over the morning paper, if Hermione and he went out to get it at the same time. No doubt he could hear his opposite number caterwauling. No doubt half the whole street could.

"Your poor aunt, and her tragic, tragic death!"

"Mrs. Atteborough, *please!*" the young witch asserted sharply. After the emotional turmoil of last night, between Ron, Tonks, and the twins, she didn't want to be touched by anyone other than Severus. She added a twist of her shoulder and a shove of her arm, freeing herself. It didn't help that the woman's perfume was cloyingly musky. Stepping back...closer to her front door...Hermione gave the older woman a hard stare. "My aunt's passing does *not* give you liberty to maul me!"

"But your dear kinswoman! Poor Eumenia...her plane crashing like that in the jungles of Borneo, her body no doubt eaten by savage head-hunters!"

Oh, dear god...and poor Viktor Krum cannot save me from this one... Mastering the urge to roll her eyes, Hermione gave the woman an icy look worthy of her favorite cat. "Madam, it was the jungles of *Burma*, there were no cannibals or head-hunters involved, the aviation investigators think it was some sort of problem with the quality of fuel that clogged the injection nozzles, and if you don't mind, I would like to *grieve in private*...and do not *ever* grab me like that again!"

"Well!" Stacey exclaimed as Hermione retreated again, one ringed hand rising to the base of her throat. "Well!"

Hermione wasn't about to play the guilt-game. She gave the older woman a level look. "You have said that already. Have you anything useful to say, other than that you're sorry for my aunt's passing? Because I have far too many things to do, handling her estate and the *private* nature of my grief while doing so, than to stand here being 'well!'-ed at all day."

"Well, I never!"

"You already did...and that makes the third time today, no less. Good morning to you...*and* good-day!" A curt nod of her head, and Hermione spun on her heel, taking herself and her newspaper back to her home. She almost slammed the door shut, but caught it at the last moment with her fingers, and closed it quietly.

Severus, lurking in the shadows of the hallway, quirked an eyebrow at her. "You seem to have picked up some very bad social habits from me."

Chagrined at her bad manners, though still annoyed, Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Heard that, did you?"

"Half the street heard it."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione headed into the kitchen. She preferred skimming through the paper at the table in the breakfast nook. "So long as it sends them running *away* from me, rather than toward..."

"You are definitely acquiring some of my worse habits. So...when were you planning on taking that bath, today?" Severus enquired, unable to make the question seem casual, and not really caring. He fixed two cups for their breakfast tea and brought them to the table. Hermione took hers with a grateful sigh, made with a dollop of milk, extra strong, and no sugar, just the way she liked it in the morning.

They had parted the previous night with some reluctance, trying not to rush things, yet definitely interested in exploring further. For Severus, rushing into and through his previous sexual encounters had been mainly a result of paid-by-the-hour opportunity. This time, everything was different. He wanted to avoid rushing, to avoid mistakes. To get it right. He might not know much about courting, but he did know that rushing wasn't respectful.

And yet, yesterday's experiences had been rather heady and worthy of further exploration...

Hermione, paper spread out in front of her, set down her half-drunk tea. "I was thinking we could perhaps go shopping for lab equipment, visit the Ministry to get a license for a Floo-linked hearth for the basement, and while we're there, look at sub-contractors who could handle a sub-floor installation like that. Then finish cleaning up the basement and prepping it for said installation, and anything else we can think of, based on your current funds. Operating expenses can come out of the estate monies, once all of it is tallied and passed on to me. The most important thing is to get that lab up and running, so it can start paying for itself all the sooner.

"After all of that, I think I'll be dirty enough to want to take a nice, long, relaxing bath," she stated, glancing up at him with a smile that lay at some feminine spot between shy and sly. "Or do you have a better idea on how to get dirty enough for a bath?"

Lifting his teacup to his lips, Severus paused just long enough to state calmly, "I was thinking we could clear out the master bedchamber, today. Empty it and plan its redecoration. The sooner we make it into *our* room," he reminded her, "the sooner we can move into it together. But if you really want to spend all of today dealing with petty...and I emphasize, *petty*...bureaucrats, rather than preparing the room in which you will eventually be ravished senseless...by all means, let us frustrate ourselves in a far less fruitful manner."

Hermione bit her lower lip at that. At the silent arch of his brow...he was busy sipping his tea, one lump of sugar, no milk, but extra strong like hers...she shrugged. "As much as I'd like that...and I mean *really* like that, Severus....my practical side says we should focus instead on getting the lab up and running as soon as possible. It is our future source of income, after all."

He grunted into his tea, acknowledging her logic reluctantly. "Then once we've had breakfast, we should finish taking dimensions and plotting floor plans, downstairs. I would like to have the Floo hearth open into a separate chamber, to cut down on potential potion-contamination by billowing soot. And to have an automatic chime installed on it, to let us know when it's in use."

"I agree." Pulling her wand from her upswept hair, she Summoned a pen and a pad of notepaper. "Let's sketch out what we *want*, prioritize it, and figure out from there what we *can* have..."

The doorbell rang. Wincing, Hermione rose from her seat, tossed the pen on the table, jabbed her wand back through her curls, and stalked out to the foyer, grumbling under her breath. Peering through the spy-hole, she spotted Mr. Edgars. Manfully, she resisted the urge to growl as she opened the door. "Yes, Mr. Edgars?"

"Heard your aunt passed away. Is that true?" he asked her, a speculative look in his grey eyes.

"Yes, it is."

"My condolences, then."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, getting ready to close the door again.

"I was wondering about those artifacts of hers," Mr. Edgars started to say, switching the unlit stogie from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Sotheby's will be having an auction of the pieces," Hermione stated, cutting him off. "Their website will have the details shortly. Good..."

"So, who's that, then?" Mr. Edgars interrupted her, lifting his gaze past her shoulder.

Hermione glanced behind her. Severus had left the kitchen, coming up to stand behind her in the foyer. With his arms folded across his white-clad chest, he looked rather imposing.

"That's not your father," her neighbor added, his tone reproving. It was evident even in the shade of the foyer that Severus was solidly between Mr. Edgar's age and Hermione's.

"William Edgars, this is Severus Snape, my fiancé. Severus, this is Mr. Edgars, the neighbor to our left."

"Our' left?" Mr. Edgars asked, picking up on that with a quirk of one brow and a shifting of his half-chewed cigar. "Are you living in sin, then?"

Catching the edge of the door, Hermione prepared to shut it on him. "Yes, and we'd like to get *back* to it, so if you don't mind..."

"Hermione," Severus chided her, "you shouldn't have said that." Mr. Edgars lifted both brows at that. Then lost his cigar from the increasing gape of his mouth when Severus added, "I would have said we were about to indulge in mad, passionate, screaming-primate sex, the kind that comes with a 3-ring circus of 5 elephants, 20 clowns, a dozen flying trapeze artists, and a giant, flashing neon sign that says 'Do Not Disturb Us Ever Again, You Hypocritical Prude'...or was I mistakenly informed about this man's current wife being a mere 26 years old?"

"My *wife* is 58...not that it's any business of yours what her age is!" Mr. Edgars retorted, stooping to pick up his stogie and brush off anything it may have picked up when it hit the stones of the front steps.

"Then it would be your mistress who is the 26-year-old, the one with an excessive taste for lavender in her perfumes...do pay attention, my dear," Severus added to an amused Hermione as their neighbor spluttered, indignant. "It is not necessary to be blunt when it comes to shutting down nosy-parkers. Sometimes subtlety is preferred."

"Subtlety, and a hint of blackmail?" Hermione daringly asked, trying not to laugh.

"Tut, tut. Blackmail is too ugly a word," he chided her. "I prefer 'presenting an undeniable incentive to practice greater circumspection on the part of the indiscreet.'"

Grinning, Hermione lifted herself onto her toes, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "And that's why I like you."

"You're enamoured with my superior extortive qualities?" Severus enquired, arching a brow at Hermione.

"Actually, I'm lusting over your long, hard, and thick...vocabulary. But that, too," she chuckled, leaning into Severus and looping her arms around his shoulders. His hands lifted to her waist, rubbing her sides in slow, tantalizing circles, allowing him to pull her hips into his, emphasizing the worth of another of his many assets. Hermione shivered with pleasure.

"Whereas I am drawn to your huge mounds of...books," Severus murmured, his gaze dipping to her cleavage for a brief, smirking leer.

"Disgraceful!" Mr. Edgars spluttered, drawing their attention back to their visitor.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione gave him a disdainful look. "Only if you're not skilled enough to please your partner in all meaningful ways...and *only* your own partner. *That* is the true disgrace. Good-day, Mr. Edgars!"

Hooking her foot around the edge of the door, she kicked it shut with a satisfying *bang*. A grin was hard to kiss around, but she found a way. Severus cooperated willingly, too, despite the brief, awkward bumping of their noses and their teeth.

They were in the front hall, after all.

chapter 09

Chapter 9 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

IX.

...

Transfiguration was almost never used in the wizarding world when it came to building things. Fire off the wrong charm, and a small piece of lumber magically shaped to fit

as, say, a strong, stout, structural support timber might revert to its original, puny form...and bring the whole building down upon its occupants' heads. Magic was used, however, to help get the maximum in space, support, and strength out of whatever already suitable materials were being used.

Wards, charms, runes, and enchantments of various types could be used, even if by preference the building materials had to be the real sorts. Thus it was that Hermione and Severus bought most of their home-improvement materials from a local Muggle lumber and hardware retailer, but installed it with spells garnered from a wizarding book filled with magically enhanced home improvement and repair techniques.

There wasn't much they could do about the actual silhouette of the walls in the original basement, not without risking the house's structure integrity; the overgrown cottage had been constructed only a few years ago. Its walls were formed from stout concrete blocks sandwiched between layers of insulating foam blocks, plus the usual gypsum panels, paint, and a faux exterior designed to mimic the graceful beams-and-plaster of Tudor construction techniques. But they could, and did, cut a doorway in the back wall, and built deeper into the ground, since the cottage sat on a fair piece of property.

Now the basement had an addition that stretched out beneath the back gardens, insulated against the threats of dampness, temperature changes, and freezing by spells carefully carved into the cement blocks bracing the space they had created, after Vanishing the necessary dirt one section at a time. Their laboriously enchanted efforts doubled their floor space, something that was deemed absolutely necessary once they had finished arguing over their breakfast as to how much room would be devoted to which activities.

The Muggle furnace was still enclosed in its modest, walk-in-closet sized space behind the stairs leading down into the basement. The section next to those stairs had an area set aside for a fireplace, located more or less underneath the one in the front parlour. They would only share a chimney in the smoke-venting sense; the hearth that would be constructed in the basement would be Floo-connected, but none of the others in the house would be magical in nature. The smallish space, formerly the room Aunt Eumenia had kept her household tools in, was stripped of its shelving and given the makings of a bench-seat along one wall instead. With the original carpeting ripped up and replaced by tile and a throw-rug brought down from upstairs...which was far easier to cast a Cleaning Charm upon than carpeting...it would make a reasonably nice entryway for their wizarding guests.

Of the four remaining original rooms beneath the house, one was converted into an enchanted, walk-in icebox, as some of the rarer ingredients worked best when they were kept cold, while some had to be kept frozen...which meant the back half was blocked off for the necessary self-sustaining temperature charms, and thoroughly insulated. Another chamber was enchanted with racks of shelving suitable for Severus' bottled ingredient collection. The third room was given more shelving and cabinets for dried goods storage, plus a set of cupboards for drying said ingredients, and the fourth was lined with yet more storage space for finished potions and other eventual products.

Under the garden was a large, longish room, which would be filled with workbenches, sinks, cupboards and counters, racks of implements, and space for tending half a dozen cauldrons with room to spare. It was a bit ambitious in its size, considering the paucity of their current equipment, but both Severus and Hermione agreed it would be better to plan large and have extra space, than to plan small and run out of room at a crucial moment. Three more rooms branched off from that one along the right side.

The first was a space to store empty bottles, jars, flasks, and other supplies. A second room had been added, one-third the size of the main workroom, but designed to be a smaller, secondary lab, with room for two cauldrons and a double-sink, plus sufficient workspace. Severus had insisted upon that one, in case they found themselves working on two different orders that, for production reasons, should not be crafted in the same room together.

The last chamber was a bathroom, replete with sink, toilet, and bathtub with a shower head. The actual plumbing would have to be installed by a wizarding plumber, the same as for the sinks and drains out in the main and secondary workrooms, but at least the room was there, as were all of the necessary parts, waiting for their installation.

Hermione insisted upon having a bathroom down there. It raised their costs considerably because of the extra plumbing, but she pointed out that they needed a room close at hand to wash off anything caustic that they might encounter. Not to mention, sometimes one of them might need a quick lavatory break when a cauldron couldn't be abandoned for more than a minute or two; a minute or two was how long it would take just to get upstairs, never mind actually using the facilities up there.

There were still cupboards to build, cabinets to install, drawers to craft, tables to create, and of course the ventilation to install for cauldron fires and potion fumes. But it was a good day's work. Satisfied with their visible progress, the pair headed upstairs to have supper, a roast set to slowly cook in the oven all day with vegetables put into the pan during their last break over an hour ago, soaking up the juices and turning quite tasty. Plus leftover marble-cake, served by Severus with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the side. It was an excellent way to finish a hard day's work, really.

In fact, it wasn't until Hermione settled back in her seat at their preferred table in the kitchen, full and content, that her housemate and fiance reminded her of their agreement.

"Not too sleepy, are you?" Severus asked her, running a forkful of cake through the last bits of melted ice cream on his plate.

"A little bit, but not terribly so," she conceded. "Why do you ask?"

"I believe you owe me a bath," he stated, his attention seemingly on the important task of sopping up the traces of his pudding, and not so much on his enquiry.

Hermione wasn't the least bit fooled. The day Severus Snape didn't have his mind racing to process every little iota of information around him...some of them admittedly leading him to erroneous conclusions in the past, but at least he *thought* about everything around him...was the day the Healers at St. Mungo's would have to declare him officially dead. Since he was very much alive and breathing, she permitted herself a small smile.

"I think a nice, long, hot bubble-bath would be lovely. But not immediately after supper; that *would* put me to sleep," she admitted wryly. "Unless a way were found to keep me awake, of course."

"What would you suggest to keep you awake, then?" he asked before taking a bite of his dessert.

"Oh, I don't know. A pity the path to the bath upstairs doesn't swing by the front door, otherwise I'd suggest a nice, long, hot snog," Hermione dared to tease him.

Chewing and swallowing, Severus regarded her levelly. "...As much as I admire that particular locale for that particular activity, we will *not* limit ourselves to only being able to kiss in the foyer, and nowhere else. I trust I make myself perfectly clear?"

She grinned at him. "Now, that's a threat I'll gladly heed...not that I'll let you bully me all the time, but since it's for such a logical, worthwhile cause..."

Severus finished the last of his cake with a smirk. Hermione rose and started putting away the untouched portions of their meal. Severus did his part of the after-tea cleanup, too, stacking the dishes into the washer tucked under the counter and making sure it had soap. He tapped it with his wand, however, rather than using the controls; the same amount of water would be needed to wash and rinse their dishes, but magic was cheaper to use than electricity.

Once everything was tidied, he followed her out of the kitchen, turning off the light. But he didn't let her get far; snagging his housemate by the elbow, Severus pulled Hermione back toward him, drawing her into his arms. In the near-dark of the hallway, lit only by the light spilling down from the stairwell, he found her mouth with a skill born mostly from his increasing familiarity with it. All he had to do was tilt his head just so, lean over like that...and there it was, tilting and lifting to meet his lips eagerly.

Hermione pressed herself against him, moving her mouth after a moment in little nibbling motions. Sometimes she liked a heated snog, all tongues and heat; sometimes she liked sweet little kisses, quick but tasty nibbles. Tonight, he was dessert, pure and simple.

Severus gauged Hermione to be in a slower sort of nibbling mood, tonight, until she licked his lips. Literally tracing the outline of his mouth with the tip of her tongue, she sent tingles of lust racing through his limbs. He revised his assessment of her attack plan from slow-nibble to slow-torment, and responded in kind. Catching her tongue, he sucked on it, then ate her mouth in lipping bites and curling licks, reminding himself to go slowly. Palms sliding down her back, he curled his fingers under her buttocks, lifting her abdomen up into his hardening loins.

Groaning, Hermione gently bit his lower lip, tugging on it delicately until he relaxed it, then sucking on it with added little flicks of her tongue-tip. Shortly after doing so, she found herself pressed back against the hallway wall; apparently, he liked that a lot. One of his hands shifted to the small of her back, the other to the curve of her breast. Her own curled in the fabric of his shirt, then started tugging at his buttons.

Regretfully, that act brought Severus partway back to his senses. Dragging his mouth free of hers, he struggled for both air and self-control. Her fingers stilled on his shirt as she panted, too; their foreheads rested together and their eyes met, their muscles trembling with sexual electricity. Tongue moistening his parted lips, Severus managed a word. "...Bath."

"Right," Hermione breathlessly agreed.

He pulled back enough to allow her to slip past him, heading for the stairs...then grabbed her and hauled her back against his body, pressing his loins to the small of her back with the aid of the arms he wrapped around her hourglass figure. Sagging back into him, Hermione enjoyed the way he nuzzled her curls, burying his face in her hair so that he could inhale her scent.

"Mm...Severus..."

The way she sighed his name made his knees weak. Severus wasn't sure if he entirely liked the sensation. True, his heart had raced worse than this during the most frightening moments of his life...and there had been several of those, thanks to the damned war...but never had he felt so disarmed, so helpless *and* so happy to feel this way, before now. The urge to say something...to say something *emotional*...threatened his composure. Forcing his wits back into place, he slid his hands to her waist, straightening a little more. Clearing his throat, he managed coherency. "We need to be upstairs, to continue this."

Sighing in regret, Hermione stopped leaning into him. Covering his hands with hers, she grasped his fingers and tugged him in her wake. "If you insist..."

She didn't look back at him as they mounted the stairs. The realization that she would soon be stripping herself naked in front of him was starting to make Hermione nervous. Not looking at him helped bolster her courage a little, but she had to lecture herself to continue up the stairs.

At least until they reached the bathroom. Severus turned her to face him when they were inside and the door was shut, pulling her close enough to dust her brow with a soft kiss, then her nose. When he reached her lips, she leaned into him, relaxing once more in his arms.

This was Severus. Sourpuss to some, but Puss-in-Boots to her. He hadn't complained when she had stripped him naked, had in fact participated willingly in baring himself to whatever she might do to him. It was only fair and just that she be as open with her body's secrets as he had been.

With that in mind, she broke off their kiss, stepping back a little. That bumped her into the sink counter, but it did give her enough distance from his intoxicating presence to think. "Um...so, do you want to fill the bath, or shall I?"

Considering Severus had never prepared a bath for anyone in his life, he didn't have to think hard or long about her question. "You do it," he instructed her. Then found himself curious enough to add, "Show me how you like your baths."

Hermione flushed at the implication, that he was interested so that maybe he could replicate it for her some day; it left her feeling both embarrassed and pleased. Embarrassed to share this part of her privacy, her feminine needs, and pleased that he seemed sincere in his quest to know her preferences. Clearing her throat, she gestured at the bathtub. "Well...usually, I start by enlarging the tub. Muggle ones just aren't big enough for a good soak, and I've been, um, a bit spoilt by the prefects' bath."

Gesturing for her to proceed, Severus watched as she drew her wand, muttered, and cast the appropriate room-Transfiguring spell. Her mentor and House-head would have been proud. Within moments, the bathroom had enlarged just enough to accommodate a sloped marble tub broad enough for two. A flick of her vine-wood shaft on the tap not only turned it on, but broadened the spigot so that plenty of water spilled forth, filling the broadened basin quickly. Another flick of her wrist caused one of the bottles on the tower-like shelves tucked into the back corner to levitate over the swirling water, tipping in a generous glob of pale green.

The water quickly turned murky-white and frothy, releasing perfume into the air. Something citrusy, Severus decided, with an under-note of sandalwood. *Not a bad combination*, he acknowledged. *And if I joined her...if I joined her, in the future...perhaps I wouldn't mind this scent on my skin.*

Another swish of her wand shut off the water when the level of the steaming liquid satisfied her. Since even her hair had gotten a little sweaty from their construction labor in the basement, Hermione didn't sweep it up and pin it in place with her wand. Instead, she set the vine-wood shaft on the broadened back ledge of the tub, straightened again, and turned to glance at her betrothed. "So. Erm...would you like to undress me? Or shall I do it?"

Severus decided he wanted that privilege. Grasping the hem of her shirt, he lifted it up over her head. Hermione quickly cooperated, lifting her arms for him.

Dropping the garment behind him, he paused to admire her pink bra, edged along the cups with a tiny bit of lace. If the color hadn't been a nice, bright blush in shade, it would have been rather virginal in appearance, with or without any blazingly tall letters. That might have made him pause. But the color of it was bolder than expected, and he admired it. In fact, its boldness compelled him to lift one hand and trail the tips of his first two fingers along the swell of her breast.

Hermione blushed at his touch. He liked seeing that; it meant she wasn't accustomed to a hand on her flesh...and that she aroused by his hand upon her flesh. Of course she still had on summer shorts, and shoes and socks that needed removing. Severus wanted the pleasure of removing them, too. It took a few moments of internal debate, his fingers gently tracing back and forth across her cleavage before Severus decided it would be worth it to drop to his knees in order to remove her footwear. He wasn't infirm, but neither was he entirely young anymore. Still, it would be worth it.

First, though, he cupped her hips lightly in his hands, guiding her back to sit on the edge of the tub. Then he lowered himself to the floor, resting his knees upon the rounded rectangle of bath rug laid over the tiled floor. In the steamy heat of the bathroom, when he glanced up, she looked like a frizzy-curling angel perched on the precipice of falling. *Hopefully she will only fall far enough to join me* Severus found himself thinking, *and perhaps lift me up to a better life than I've known, before.*

He looked so serious, yet so earnest, Hermione lifted her hand to his face. She could feel a hint of stubble rasping against her fingers as he leaned into her touch. The time he had spent as a cat was evident in the way he nuzzled his cheek into her palm, eyes drifting shut. An indulgent smile curled the corners of her mouth. She, Hermione Granger, had taught this pessimistic, repressed man to indulge in his senses.

Her smile stilled when he opened his eyes again. Never had she seen them so black, before. Not when they were filled by an emotion other than overwhelming anger. No, this time, desire glowed in their depths, a knowing darkness that held all of the secrets found in the depths of the night, constrained only by the regard of a man for the woman he wanted. Desire clenched in her belly; Hermione knew without a doubt that she had too many clothes on, now.

The feeling intensified when he lowered his gaze from her brown eyes to her pink-clad chest...making her aware of how much fuller they seemed to be, under the warmth of his regard...then down to the waistband of her shorts. Again, her belly tightened with need. When his hand lowered from her chest to her leg, warming her bare skin, she involuntarily parted her legs a little, wanting more than just the almost platonic touch of his palm upon her knee.

The heat in his dark stare intensified, and his hand slid up the curve of her thigh...dipping into the leg of her shorts. Not far; not closer than a finger-length to the crease of her hip, but close enough to make her muscles tense with anticipation. His other hand lifted to her knee, rested there a moment, then it, too, quested partway into the sheltering fabric of her shorts. Her legs twitched apart in inadvertent, if undeniable, invitation.

Inhaling sharply at her movement, Severus caught a whiff of her scent. Musky, yet feminine. It was almost as entrancing in his human form as it had been in his feline one. Dragging his mind as well as his hands away from her legs, he sank back on his heels so that he could lift one of her feet into his lap. It didn't take long to remove her shoe, nor her sock, nor for him to replace that foot with the other one so he could repeat the process of baring her flesh to his touch.

Her feet weren't entirely sweet-smelling, not after a day of hard work casting spells to dig out the new basement section, laying and quick-drying concrete, crafting counters

and cupboards out of the lumber they had bought, and everything else they had done. But they were attractive enough, for feet.. He didn't hesitate to cup her foot in his palms, nor to knead her flesh from ankle to toes.

The moan that escaped her writhed its way up into the rest of the sensual steam heating and perfuming the bathroom. Hermione dropped her head back, lips parting on a second groan as he worked the tension out of her foot...and up into different parts of her flesh. Not until he released both of her feet, placing them on the bathmat, did she realize he had more in store for her than an unbelievably pleasurable torment like that. In fact, it took her a moment to register the meaning in his rasped command.

"Up. Stand up," Severus ordered her, his throat not the only thing thick with rising desire. "Please."

He had never considered himself to be a foot-man; more of a hip-man, really. That had been the good thing about his existence as a professor among so much nubile, barely-legal flesh among the sixth and seventh years at the school; the robes the students constantly wore tended to hide his preference in feminine assets. Now, as she gathered her wits and struggled to her feet in front of him, he was face-to-groin with his favorite region: a woman's pelvis.

There was something...luscious...about this region. Let other men stare at breasts or legs or buttocks all they wished. He admired the dip of her waist the flare of her hip bones, the tapering curves that led to her thighs; they were attractive, but they were merely the frame for his most favourite part on a woman. That sweet, ultra-feminine spot just below her navel, where her belly curved ever so slightly...and it was almost entirely his to play with. They were engaged; she would not object if he caressed her, worshipped her... Having been stuck as a cat for over a month had clearly tapped into hitherto unknown sensualities within him.

Lifting unsteady fingers to the waist of her shorts, he unsnapped them, then drew down the zipper. The soft rasp was matched by a sharp inhale of her breath. Severus licked his lips, then ran the backs of his fingers beneath the waistband, until he could twist his hands and cup her hips. Warm flesh and soft cotton met his touch. Gliding his hands down, he pushed the shorts free, letting them fall to her ankles. Baring her low-cut knickers.

Hermione felt nervous at being so exposed, so bared before him. This was the same man, after all, who had cut her to the bone on a number of occasions back when he had been one of her teachers. As brave and bold as she was in regards to knowing what she wanted in life, and that she wanted some sort of relationship with him...she couldn't help but remember in that moment how he had disparaged her intelligence, disparaged her eagerness...even disparaged her teeth.

But when he glanced up at her, she didn't see Professor Snape, Potions Master & Professional Bastard. She saw a middle-aged man who, while not the most handsome middle-aged man in the universe, was still a man who clearly wanted her. Who almost seemed to worship her, when he returned that dark gaze of his to her abdomen.

Unable to help himself, he slipped trembling fingers under the leg bands of her matching blush-pink underwear. Drawing the garment down an inch at a time, he leaned in and pressed a kiss to the soft curve of her abdomen, below the dimple of her navel. Though the scent was different than in his cat form, less complex thanks to his less sensitive human nose, Severus could still smell her arousal. His loins hardened with matching desire. Reverently, he kissed her belly again, suckling her bared flesh until he felt her fingers brushing through his hair.

Hooking his hands more firmly in the waistband of her knickers, he drew them down completely, assisting her to step out of them. Without the barrier of silky material, her scent was even stronger. Almost too strong; his nose was sensitive to smells, which was one of the things that made him good at brewing. In cat-form, the scent was intoxicating and strong. In man-form, intoxicating but strong. A subtle difference, but he had to conclude that cats smelled things differently than humans did. He was also forced to admit that, after a hard day's work, even he was a little ripe; in the close, moist air of the bathroom, that much was becoming rather apparent.

There was just one more garment to be removed. Trailing his hands from her hips to her ribs, he smirked when she squirmed from the ticklish sensations. It wasn't easy, unhooking the back of her brassiere, but he managed with a minimum of fumbling. For a moment, she cupped her bra to her breasts with a blush, then let him draw the straps down her arms, removing the garment.

Pressing a kiss to that deliciously feminine softness below her navel, Severus sank back on his heels. Looking up at her face, past the half-apple curves he had just bared, he offered her a hint of a smile. "Time to bathe."

"Don't you want to...?" Hermione asked him, letting her words trail off.

"Afterward," he reassured her. "First, I shall pamper you. Then I shall pleasure you."

From the way her eyes unfocused and glazed, from the way her body trembled just a little, Severus guessed she liked that combination. Smirking, he offered her his hand, rising back to his knees and steadying her while she stepped into the tub. She hissed a little, sinking into the still-hot water, then relaxed into the bubbles.

After a moment, Hermione glanced at her soon-to-be lover. "...At this point," she admitted, "I usually have a book or a trade journal to read. Something to stimulate my mind whilst my body relaxes. I mean, if I were just getting clean, I'd take a shower, and be done with it."

Severus considered her words. He wanted her to relax, but didn't want to be ignored at the moment, either. "Perhaps we could discuss something stimulating?"

She considered his words, then bit her lower lip, hesitating.

"...Yes?" Severus prompted her.

Hermione grimaced a little. "It's just that...well...you probably wouldn't go for it, but..."

"Ask," he instructed her, curious to know what she was hesitating over.

"Could you...recite some poetry?" Hermione managed to bring herself to ask, cheeks burning with embarrassment at her bravery.

That wasn't expected. Severus arched one of his brows and repeated the word. "...Poetry."

"Yes...it's just that you have such a sensual voice," she added quickly. "And I know you don't want to, and you don't have to, but...oh, never mind. What do you think of possibly going into cosmetics as a line of potions pursuit?"

She fell silent at his sardonic look. Rising from the floor, Severus strode to the bathroom door, cracking it open. A silent slash of his wand, and a few moments later, a book smacked into his palm. Returning to her side, he closed the lid of the toilet and seated himself upon it, thumbing through the pages. Finding a likely spot, mostly based on how worn the spine was at that point, he cleared his throat and began to read from the story.

[A miniature, sunset-coloured elephant rollerskates gracefully into view, towing a banner propped up on a skateboard that reads: This is an excerpt from *The Song*, ©2007 (well, technically it'll be ©2008) G. Jean Johnson, used here with the author's permission (duh); don't mess with any of it because it's copyrighted original stuff, another duh-btw, this story won't be released until February of 2008, so suffer waiting for the rest of it in the meantime...and yes, I'm cruel. You love me anyway, third duh, *mwah*!]
The elephant winks at all the FSS fans, waves her trunk in a friendly fashion, and skates out of the room again.]

"Go get ready for bed," he directed her, enjoying the way she swayed toward him a little when he pulled back. She opened her eyes and he smiled. 'I owe you a massage'

That reminded her of his promise to reciprocate the special, extra touch she had given him at the very end of his massage, last night. 'You don't have t...'

Evanor silenced her with a finger laid on her lips. 'I know I don't have to. I want to. Will you let me pleasure you?'

Oh, dear Natua... Mariel wondered how her legs were still managing to stand under the seduction of that simple, straightforward question. Managing a nod, she forced herself to move toward the refreshing room. Once away from his lean frame, she felt cooler; perhaps not all of her blushing had been from embarrassment. Perhaps some

of it had come simply from being in close proximity to a handsome, intelligent, charming, attractive male. Whose touch she wanted very, very much right now...

Watching her close the refreshing room door, Evamor released his self restraint long enough to raise clenched fists in victory. It was a very good thing he didn't have a voice right now; hissing in triumph was bad enough, but if she heard his triumph through the closed door... He didn't want her mistakenly thinking he was some callow youth just interested in luring her into his bed for some temporary fun. Ev was very much interested in luring her into his bed for some permanent fun..."

Hermione melted. It was her favorite scene in that book. Not because it was very smutty, but rather because it *wasn't* all that smutty. It was the start of a passage wherein the hero treated the heroine to a truly sensual massage, and it melted her just reading it. Now, hearing it in Severus' voice, it heated her as well, and made her wish fervently that he was going to give her a sensual massage, too.

Closing her eyes, she let her head loll back against the ledge of the bathtub, listening to his deep, quiet voice caressing the words as he continued. When the story got to the point where the heroine mused on how fabulous a voice the hero had, she couldn't help but wonder herself if Severus had as wonderful a singing voice as his speaking one was.

Of their own accord, her hands skimmed up through the bubbles, cupping and caressing her breasts. Severus' voice was just so...so sexy, especially when discussing the proper pleasuring of a woman. She knew to the moment he realized what she was doing; his voice faltered, his breath hitched, and it took him several seconds to resume his recital. He continued reading but paused and stumbled now and again, no doubt from the need to look up and see what she was doing.

It took her a few moments to realize he wasn't following the text anymore. No, the words he spoke now were different things...erotic things...which *he* was making up on the spot. Deciding to open her eyes a tiny bit, she peered at him through her lashes as he spoke.

"...and then he circled the tip of her nipple with his finger, brushing against it just enough until it perked up..."

His gaze was fixed on her chest, not on the book. Daringly, she circled her nipple with her fingertip. His lips parted, and the tip of his tongue licked his upper lip, lingering a bit longer than absolutely necessary for moisturizing needs. Licking her own lips, Hermione forced herself to ask him before she lost her boldness, "And...and does he lick it?"

His gaze flew to her face. Caught making up his own fantasies, Severus felt his face growing warm with embarrassment. Of course, her own cheeks looked a bit flushed, but from the gleam of curiosity in her eyes, he felt reassured that she wasn't offended. Deciding it was time to focus on her bath, he set the book on the counter and started unfastening the buttons of his shirt.

"Once it has been cleaned and rinsed, yes." At her puzzled look, he let the corner of his mouth curve up a little. "We need to move on to the bathing part of your bath, before we progress too far."

Stripping off his shirt, Severus knelt by the tub. Stretching over her, he snagged the nylon pouf from its shelf on the corner-tower, then a bottle of body-wash as well. A dip of the scrubby into the bathwater to get it wet and a dollop of bodywash poured over its tufts allowed him to lather it. With her cooperation, arching her back, shifting her arms, parting and lifting her legs, Severus bathed her from throat to soles. He stroked her skin more than he scrubbed it, but Hermione didn't mind at all; she fell in love with the way he made her feel deliciously dirty, circling her breasts and her buttocks repeatedly while ostensibly making her clean.

After making her kneel up in the bathwater so he could get at all sides of her, save for the part where she squirmed the most, Severus finally dipped the wadded netting between her thighs. Needing him, needing this touch, Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, rocking onto his fingers. This was a different sort of stimulation from frotting fully-clothed by the front door; this was slick yet rough in texture, soft from the suds yet hard from his fingers. Exciting, too, for in order to balance both of them while he scrubbed her gently, intimately, Severus leaned over the rim of the tub and wrapped his free arm around her, pulling her against his bared chest.

It also made her aware that he himself smelled of sweat and dirt, and that while he had scrubbed everything of hers from her neck down...including an intimate stroking between her buttocks that had been shocking yet titillating...she had yet to get her soapy hands over the rest of him as well. Twisting in his grip, very aware that she was smearing her lathered breast against his naked flesh, Hermione met his gaze. She blushed as she did so, but she found her voice. "I think it's time you bathed, too, Severus. You got just as dirty as I did, working in the basement. And...I'd like to cleanse you all over, too."

Severus didn't know if he could trust himself if he got completely naked in the same tub as his lover. His naked, virgin lover. But to deny himself the pleasure of letting her touch him everywhere was too much to ask. Twisting to sit on the rim, he settled on a compromise by removing his shoes and socks, then stood and dropped his trousers. It gratified him that she didn't look away, that her brown eyes fastened on the actions of his hands as he released the buttons of the placket covering his groin. But only his trousers; leaving his pants in place, he stepped into the tub.

Hermione frowned softly in confusion, glancing from his dampened groin...and the thatch of dark pubic hair visible through the now somewhat translucent white cotton...to his face. "...Severus? You're, erm...still in some of your clothes. And they're getting wet."

"I know." He sighed as he sank into the spell-broadened tub at her feet; the heat of the water soaked into his thighs. "But if I remove my pants, I might go too far, tonight. I would rather not do that."

Puzzled, Hermione accepted the pouf from him, twisting to snag the bottle of bodywash to lather it up again. "Why not?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, his patience tested. Opening them when he was fairly sure he was firmly in control of himself, he gave her a sober, sincere stare. "Because I want to wait until the time is right for both of us for going that far, together."

"Oh."

Part of her was flattered by his consideration, and part of her was disappointed. Torn, she hesitated over offering to 'go that far', since her body still tingled from his lathered caresses...until her practical side piped up. *You'd need a contraceptive draught first, remember? You're not taking anything, and neither of you want children right away.* Clearing her throat, Hermione worked on lathering the pouf for his bath.

"Well, that's good. First we have to get the lab up and running. Then we can brew some Nihou Dze, and while that's steeping, we can get the master bedroom into shape so that we'll be properly prepared for going that far when it's the right time to, erm, go that far."

Staring at her, Severus acknowledged two things. One, that she was remarkably practical as well as intelligent, to remember the need for a contraceptive potion. Something which he himself had forgotten about. And two...that he loved her.

Blinking, he absorbed that revelation silently, and carefully considered revealing it to her. After a moment of thought, he decided to keep his mouth shut for the moment; she was a Gryffi...rather, she was occasionally brash and impetuous...since she had requested the cessation of House comparisons between them...and female. The combination would not only have her finding a declaration of love from him to be highly romantic, she'd likely fling herself at him, pepper him with kisses...and wind up deflowered in a bathtub, of all places.

While it would be a potentially amusing anecdote for future remembrances, Severus decided he would rather be a bit more traditional in both the location of her deflowering and the revelation of his feelings. That, and he would rather be practical about said revelation.

First, it was a brand-new realization. It had to be tested for validity, weighed, measured, probed, prodded, and puzzled over, since he'd never been in love with anyone before and wasn't sure if this feeling was a fluke, or even merely his imagination. Second, he knew by now that they could live together in reasonable domestic bliss, but another hurdle still awaited them: the question of whether or not they could work together in commercial bliss. Hermione's ideal for her five-year-future required that they find out if they could actually do so.

Severus wanted to give her that five-year future.

Letting her pick up his arm so that she could scrub it, Severus contemplated Hermione quietly. Her body was streaked with slowly drying soap, her hair was damp at the ends and frizzy near her scalp from the steamy heat in the bathroom, and she kept stealing little glances below his waistline. Every time she did so, a faint blush would briefly appear on her cheeks, while the tip of her tongue swept out to moisten her lips.

Thinking about those lips being moist led to the memory of those lips being soft and her tongue being wet. The next time she glanced down, her gaze lingered, studying the change in his flesh. Touching her hand, which had stilled in its scrubbing, Severus silently encouraged her to resume bathing him. He encouraged her to touch him everywhere, that was, save for the parts covered somewhat inadequately by his underclothes.

When she tried to wash him there, he moved her hands elsewhere, until only their heads and his...well, his other head...needed bathing. Pulling the drain open, Severus shifted the curtain into place and turned on the water, heating it up for a shower. They took turns scrubbing scalps and gently washing faces, but when she tried to get the scrubby into his underpants, Severus held her away from him, rinsing her under the spray. Then turned her toward the rim and patted her on her delicious, firm rump.

"Out you go."

"But, Severus..."

"Out!" he ordered firmly. "Towel off and fetch us some dressing gowns, while I clean the rest of myself. And if you see any unwanted intruders this time, do not hesitate to hex them silly."

Disappointed but knowing his choice was wise, Hermione exited the tub and dried herself with a bath towel. Wand in one hand and towel held in place by the other, she retreated to her bedroom cautiously. No one was inside, thankfully. Slipping into her bathrobe, she padded out to his room, fetched his own lounging robe, and crossed to the master bedroom.

A few moments was all it took to use the facilities; she needed to go, and didn't want the pressure making her foray into being pleased turning into an awkward, wait-I-gotta-piddle moment later on. Taking a moment more to clean herself with a damp washcloth, Hermione returned to the other bathroom. Now that the shower was off, she could hear rain falling on the roof, making her glad they had spell-sealed the concrete of the new basement section against leaks and potential flooding.

Of course, her practical side immediately fell quiet when she returned to the bathroom and saw her ex-professor drying his genitals, one foot propped up on the lid of the toilet. His hands stopped their rubbing for a moment when he noticed her...then started rubbing again, more slowly than using a towel normally dictated. His dark eyes remained locked with hers as he did so. It was strangely erotic, watching Severus stroke himself while staring so blatantly at her.

Hermione licked her lips and held out his bathrobe. She didn't want to cover up the view, but knew they had to move things into the bedroom, lest she end up deflowered on the bathroom floor. It might make an interesting tale to embarrass their grandchildren with, but she didn't want to disrupt Severus' plans for a 'proper place and time'. With his methodical, thorough approach to everything, she knew he would make it special for both of them later if they didn't rush things tonight.

Rubbing himself one last time, Severus draped the used towel over the drying bar attached to the wall, then took the proffered garment. With the same graceful precision he had used with his teaching robes, he donned the dark dressing gown. Of course, wrapping it around his waist did nothing to hide his erection, which tented the fabric blatantly. Covering her mouth with her hand, Hermione tried not to giggle aloud. Thankfully, he took no offense, choosing to smirk just a little instead. His smile faded after a moment, replaced by an intensity that, while sober, was still softer than his usual stern stare.

"To bed with you," he ordered her softly.

Hermione shivered. It took her a moment...long enough for her to turn and leave the bathroom...to realize it was a shiver of anticipation. A pleasant sort of shiver. Entering her bedroom, she crossed to the bed, then glanced behind her. Severus was right behind her; how such a tall man could move so silently, she didn't know, but it startled her. Leaning down, he murmured in her ear.

"I *said*, to bed with you." It was a sensual threat and a promise rolled into one, and it was accompanied by his arms encircling her, by his fingers unknitting the sash of her dressing gown, by his hands peeling the folds of it back from her shoulders.

When the material pooled at her feet, he cupped her breasts for a moment, then her abdomen, pulling her back into his frame. Hermione could feel the hard press of his erection through the soft, velvety terrycloth of his dressing gown. She felt vulnerable, naked while he was still clothed, but not in a bad way. Not when he held her like he cherished her. Leaning her head back, she lifted her arm, twisting her head so that she could pull his mouth into range for a kiss. His fingers splayed over her abdomen; she heard him moan softly, felt the exhale of his breath, then he pulled free and pushed her toward the bed.

"*Accio* clean pants!"

Hermione, crawling onto her bed, glanced behind her. Severus caught the undergarment, flushing a little as he turned away from her. His robe fell open, folds hanging at his sides as he donned it, then turned back to face her. Twisting onto her hip, Hermione covered her mouth. She didn't quite succeed in muffling her giggles, but she couldn't help it; his underwear was clean and white, but it looked silly considering how he still tented the cotton y-front of his pants.

Flushing, Severus shrugged out of his dressing gown and crawled onto the bed, determined to ignore her laughter. He knew it wasn't aimed *at* him, that it wasn't cruelly meant...but she still deserved some sort of chastisement for it.

Lowering her hand, she smirked at him. "Still trying to protect my virtue?"

The amusement lingering in her tone was such that Severus wondered briefly if the young woman were about to say *how sweet*. Choosing to retaliate verbally, he purred, "No, to protect my own."

As he hoped, she laughed aloud, tossing her head back. Severus pounced, pushing her onto her back on the bedding. That made her breasts jiggle more than nicely in his opinion, for all they were mere handfuls. Deciding they needed rewarding for being so enticing, he nuzzled them with his lips, chin and cheeks. Not kissing them yet, just enjoying the softness of her curves against his face. Like a cat nuzzling something nice.

Smiling, she stroked his hair back from his face, enjoying the way he rubbed himself against her. "Nice puss...very nice puss. Did Puss-in-Boots want some milk?"

Milk. Severus froze for a moment, thinking. Breasts were designed to produce milk. Breasts thickened with pregnancy. Hermione pregnant, carrying *his* child.

His loins tightened sharply at the idea, forcing him to breathe hard through his nostrils for a few moments, controlling the urge to take her now and damn the consequences. But doing so meant hurting her...and they weren't married yet. There was a spell that could be cast on a bride on her wedding-night that diminished the pain of a deflowering; it was an old-fashioned, out-of-favour spell, but if he waited to claim her, it could be used.

He was certainly smart enough to know that if he conceived a bastard with her, the head of the Weasley clan would attempt to castrate him the moment she got wind of it. Minerva would, too, not just Molly. Plus there was the Potter idiot and his freckled sidekick who would take offense, causing him all manner of headaches, since he doubted Hermione would let him silence them in a truly satisfactory manner...like a one-way Portkey to Timbuktu, sans their wands.

Such thoughts were sufficiently un-sexy to quell some of his desire. Not all of it, of course; he was still buried face-first in the delicious, virginal breasts of his smart and sexy beloved. But enough that he didn't run the risk of tearing off his final garment and ripping through her hymen.

He hadn't moved for a few moments. Concerned, Hermione stroked her fingers through his damp scalp. "...Is everything alright?"

Actually, everything was perfect, with his painfully aroused status temporarily set aside. Proving it to her, Severus twisted his head just enough to lave her right breast from sternum to crest with his tongue. She sighed in pleasure, fingers delving into his hair, and he suckled at the tip of her nipple.

That engendered a squeak. Pleased, Severus licked her slowly again, then sucked once more at the peak. She moaned softly, so he turned and did it to the other side, just to be fair. He might've been an unfair bastard for far too many years, having to disguise his motives as a spy, but the Dark Lord was finally and completely dead...halleluia...and that meant he could be very fair to the maiden of his choice.

After treating her breasts to a bit of worship, Severus moved his lips to her arms. He might not have a lot of experience with women...some, but not a lot...but he'd overheard his female compatriots bitching behind their hands in the staff room over and over about how men were "...just T&A creatures, always interested in the Tits & Arse, and nothing else. God, how boring!"

He couldn't remember if it was Pomona, Rolanda, or Violetta who had stated that, but those three ladies had often gotten together for hen-sessions. Rolanda had suspected that Severus liked to sit near them to put a dampener on their conversations with his sour-faced proximity, but in truth, he had simply been curious about the feminine mind. What better way to learn than to eavesdrop on his fellow teachers?

Violetta was the first one who had confessed that having a man suckle her fingers was highly erotic; he did remember that. The others had quickly agreed. Severus was just as diligent a student now as he had been as a youth; licking Hermione's fingers, he sucked in her littlest digit as soon as it was damp enough to be swallowed into his lips. She inhaled sharply, then let it out on a moan when he mouthed her ring-finger and tongued the little web of flesh between their bases.

He didn't rush the savouring of her hand. By the time he suckled her thumb, she was squirming restlessly. When he shifted to pick up her other hand, Severus found himself shocked by her lasciviousness; she had squirmed to the point where she'd dropped her free hand between her thighs, stroking and swirling her fingertips through her moist, sensitive flesh. Nostrils flaring, he dragged her hand up to his mouth, inhaling her musky self-perfume. The scent had been strong with sweat and other things, earlier. This, however, was pure essence of woman, distilled because of *him*.

Something dark and hungry welled up within him. It overpowered his sensibilities, making him suckle her fingers strongly, laving her fingers for more of her scent, her taste, trying to sate his sudden hunger. But that only exacerbated the urge within him.

Discarding her hand, Severus pushes her thighs apart and buried himself face-first in the source, bracing his toes against the floor since his position left his legs hanging somewhat awkwardly off the mattress. Dimly, he heard her squeak, then gasp, but the only sound he cared about was the way she moaned within the first three laps.

It wasn't her scent, which was still a bit strong as an odor when sampled this close by his admittedly sensitive nostrils. It wasn't entirely her taste, either, though that was part of the attraction. Instead, it was the *knowledge* that he had made her this aroused that released something almost feral within Severus, unleashing it on her. Pure instinct drove him, tempered only by his awareness of her occasional discomfort, and goaded by those moments of increasingly expressed pleasure.

Her gasps and moans turned to wild, panting cries. He pursued her pleasure, growling into her flesh as he figuratively devoured it, from lapping strokes of his tongue to suckling pressure from his lips, and scraping little love-nips.. It wasn't until she tugged rhythmically on his hair, pulling him into her flesh, that he realized he was rocking into the mattress, nudging his thighs against the edge of the bed. Grinding his cock into the blankets in time with the hunching, bumping, humping rhythm of her nether-lips against his face.

Clutching at her hips, Severus growled into her damp folds, then held her in place while he suckled strongly on the little peak of turgid, feminine flesh. Her heels flew over his head, her spine bowing and bucking as she grunted his name. Wanting to pleasure her further, but not wanting to penetrate her with anything, Severus whispered a spell he'd heard one of the other Death Eaters bragging about. It was designed to 'flutter' this special spot inside a woman's body, analogous to the prostate gland...

She screamed and shuddered. He had just enough time to remove his face from her crotch for fear of her breaking his nose...and then liquid gushed out of her, spurting in a long, hot, musky-wet stream. Startled, Severus made the mistake of blinking. It got in his eyes, making him squeeze them shut, suddenly afraid she had just done something highly unhygienic...but the smell wasn't right for *that*, thank God and Merlin both. Which was good, because she managed to snag his hair and yank him back down to her crotch, gibbering with incoherent pleasure.

More liquid trickled from her body, though not with quite as much force as before. She still shuddered and grunted, gasped and bucked, growled and made a mess all over his face. Caught up in her excitement, Severus found himself humping the bed frantically. Pleasure rushed through his body, spilling into his undergarment with a strangled growl and several stomach-wrenching jerks of his own overwrought frame.

It wasn't until some of his afterglow had faded that he felt the yanking of his hair and heard her whimpering his name, begging him to stop it. To stop his spell. In fact, it sounded like she was sobbing for release from it, in fact. Alarmed, Severus cast the Cancellation Charm, tugging her fingers away from his locks. Gritting his teeth at the pain of a few lost strands, he scrambled up onto the bed, limbs trembling from exhausted satiation.

She was crying, trembling and looking utterly overwrought with her face scrunched up like that. Guilt flooded him. Severus scooted himself next to her and pulled her into his arms, unnerved by the way he had made her cry. He hadn't ever done that before...well, there was that regrettable time with her teeth and a hex, several years ago, but that didn't count, since she had run away before he'd been forced to say worse things to her, all thanks to his untenable position at the time.

Pulling Hermione into his arms, Severus did his awkward best to soothe the crying woman, murmuring her name under his breath. Under the gentle stroking of his hands, she slowly calmed; her shuddering faded, her breathing slowed, then her tension eased, leaving her a warm, damp weight against his ribs.

"I'm...I'm sorry," Severus whispered, shifting the arm not holding her so that he could stroke some of her dampened hair from her face. He felt awkward apologizing, since it wasn't in his nature, but he hadn't meant to make her cry.

Hermione sniffed, clearing some of her nostrils. She blinked sleepily against his shoulder. With her sweat and tears drying on her skin and the summer storm still pattering on the roof of the cottage, she was getting a little chilled. That had been...it was...he had...she hadn't...it completely...

"...Wow," she finally managed, and felt him shift to stare at her askance. Licking her lips, Hermione craned her head to look up at him, given how he had pillowed her cheek on his shoulder. "It...wow... Just not...not for everyday use, alright? I think I'd die, if that were for *every* day use."

Severus felt his brows rise sharply. "You *enjoyed* that?"

"Mmm. Yes. Sort of... But not," she paused to yawn, shifting closer to him, "for everyday use. Definitely. Mm...m'a little cold..."

Amazed, some of his fears melting into an astonished sort of male pride, Severus focused his mind for just enough wandless magic to summon the slender ebony shaft. A wordless flick, and the covers draped over both of them. His underpants were once again stained with male ejaculate and much of his face and chest with the female version, but he was too tired himself to go and cleanse everything. A second soundless swish removed most of the stains from their skin. Not the smells, not entirely, but the stains vanished, taking away the dampness that had plastered him from face to pants.

To be on the absolutely safe side, he Transfigured himself, too. Curling up beside her as she mumbled a complaint, he put up with her hauling his smaller, furry self against her cheek. Squirming just enough to get comfortable, Severus purrrrrrrd at her, soothing her into sleep. This was a bit better than staying in his masculine form. Safer, at any rate.

He couldn't do anything to her as a cat that would endanger her flamingly-tall-lettered status as a maiden, and he really liked the idea of a virgin bride. It was horribly primitive of him...not primal, but primitive...to think of her in such a way, but sometimes even a man of high intellect had to admit to himself that he still had a truly unevolved hind-brain. A wise man also kept his mouth carefully shut about such matters. Smashingly intense climax or not, he knew she'd hex him severely if he ever told her the full truth of some of the thoughts that wandered through his head. Sometimes women were perversely impossible, never knowing how to take it as a compliment that a man

wanted to be their one and only lover.

Besides, just before she fell asleep, he could have sworn she mumbled the words, "...sex-god..." though Severus supposed it could have been his name instead. Envisioning it as the compliment, he purred himself to sleep, too.

chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

X.

...

In retrospect, Hermione was fairly sure she had finished falling in love with her ex-professor on bath-night, as she called it in her mind. Not during the mind-blowing pleasure which had driven her into tears of desperation to make it stop...though that had been quite an experience, one that convinced her he was, if not a sex-god outright, then at least a sex-god in training. No, she was fairly sure it was the way he had cuddled her afterward, his concern very evident as her body had finished quaking from overstimulation.

But she didn't *know*, not for absolute certain, until about a week later. They were having trouble with brewing the Nihou Dze, a normally reliable weekly contraceptive draught. After three potions in a row turned an insipid, muddy shade of yellow instead of the clear dark wine colour expected of a properly brewed potion, Severus finally tracked the source problem to their moonweed supply. Hermione, slowly stirring the base potion to keep it from congealing as it cooled, propped her chin up on the other hand whilst he vilified whatever idiot had allowed their moonweed to grow next to their fluxweed, which looked similar when cut and dried and bundled together for sale, contaminating their attempts.

A separation charm was all that was needed to segregate the two differing plants, but Hermione was so caught up in listening to Severus' increasingly impressive, vituperative vocabulary, never once dipping into anything remotely related to four lettered-words, that she didn't think about the solution to their problem. Until he stopped mid-tirade, giving her a sharp look.

"Hermione, would you stop your mooning, and concentrate on the problem at hand? I can't remember what the wand-movements are for the *Plantia Parta* charm...is it a flick to the right, then an S-curve, or is it a flick to the right and an L-slash?"

Picking up her wand, Hermione flicked left and swished in an S-curve. "*Parteligne!*"

The dried stalks and leaves spread across the surface of his workbench skittered and separated into two piles, replete with little dust-clouds. Severus dipped his head in thanks and started examining the two bundles to see which one was moonweed and which one was fluxweed. "Do not stop your stirring, though you may go back to mooning over me for another four minutes and thirty seconds." He paused briefly, then gave her a shuttered look softened only by the hint of a blush in his sallow cheeks. "...I don't mind it."

I am definitely in love with that man Hermione sighed to herself, left hand still stirring the bamboo spoon through the contents of the pot by her elbow. She sat up a little straighter, startled by the realization. *I am in love with that man, aren't I? Wow... Well, of course I am!* she chided herself. *How could I not be? But I cannot tell him right now, since we're in the middle of a project, and One Does Not Interrupt Severus Snape Whilst He Is Brewing.*

She resumed her mooning over him with a soft sigh and a return of her chin to her right palm, though it was mooning edged with a touch of practicality. This was their first full week of production in their basement labs, and they had already sold their first case of self-enspelled potions to St. Mungo's in self-sealed, stasis-charmed paper packets and *vassopulpa* vials (patents pending). In that time, she had learned he was exacting, snarky, thorough, intense, commanding, commandeering, and brilliant to the point of abstraction.

One would think a man of such passionate professionalism would be a bit absentminded about non-work items, such as remembering to stop and eat, but he scheduled that into their working hours. Almost obsessively, too. It was rather like being back in school, having to follow precise schedules. Of course, since she'd been known throughout Gryffindor Tower for her 'insane, colour-coded study schedules', she could hardly complain. In fact, she liked that they were both methodical and precise. Even if she was taking time to moon over him while they worked.

Being thrown off by the improperly harvested moonweed had made her beloved irritable...scratch that, more irritable than usual...but she didn't mind his sharp tongue so much when it wasn't being aimed her way. He rarely aimed it her way, these days. There was the time she forgot to clean out the hair-trap on the bathtub drain, of course, but she figured she made up for it when she lectured him about not leaving little beard-hairs in the washbasin when he used his shaving charm in front of the mirrored cabinet in there.

Of course, his retaliation had been to refrain from shaving for a day, then marking her with scratchy-rough nuzzlings of his face all over her skin. That had been fun, even if it had left her skin too tender to touch for a while. They still hadn't gone all the way to intercourse, but they had done other, distinctly fun things...

"Stop your mooning for a moment and be ready to whisk this into the brew."

Resisting the urge to snap into a parade-ground salute, Hermione refocused her attention on the task at hand. She grinned when she realized he had said *for a moment*...meaning he still wanted her to moon over him. When he finished dusting the finely ground moonweed across the potion surface, she tapped the bamboo spoon with her wand, changing it to a bamboo whisk. "*Frappeto!*"

As the Transfigured whisk vibrated through the potion, Hermione decided to keep her revelation to herself for now. The contraceptive potion still had a few more days to completion; while it was simmering, she planned to go shopping for a few more items for their slowly building household...such as linens for the new bed that was supposed to be shipped in the next few days. Any fervent declarations of love could lead to a situation in which both potion and bed would be needed, after all.

...Well, that, and I think he needs at least a few more days to fall in love with me she thought, glancing at him briefly before returning her attention to her part of their task. *Though I can't suddenly go all lovey-dovey on him, or he'll wonder what I'm up to. Which could be detrimental, if he gets the wrong idea in that gorgeous but sometimes erroneous mind of his...like Sirius being the bad-guy, back in our third year, and how Severus refused to listen to the truth simply because of his lingering school-aged*

prejudices... Deserved prejudices, but foolish, blinding ones all the same.

As brilliant as he often was, there were just some thoughts and opinions about him...and thoughts on the idiocies of men in general...that Hermione was too smart to share openly. She loved him, but he was a man, and men were decidedly strange, perverse creatures at times.

...

"Severus, I'm back!"

Severus winced as the door to the basement banged shut behind Hermione. The stairs creaked under the tread of her feet. He wanted to shout at her, to tell her to get away, but he couldn't speak. He had failed himself, the spy he had once been, by being caught off-guard like this, but worse, he was about to fail her, too.

"You won't believe the price I got for the roast we'll be cooking for the party, next week..."

"*Accio* wand!"

He winced again, though he kept his eyes open, waiting to see the slim shaft of vinewood sailing across the room. Instead, it dragged Hermione partway into the laboratory, clinging hard to her wand with one hand, the other clutching a large plastic bag. Her adversary shouted again.

"*Accio*!"

"*Protego! Argencustoda!*" Hermione snapped back, partially jerked forward by the other witch's spell, but still managing to retain control of her wand enough to cast a counterspell.

"*Protego!*" the witch behind Severus countered, before flinging up her free hand in warning. "I wouldn't, if I were you. Fight me again, or come any closer, and I'll close my trap on the Greasy Bat!"

Hermione clenched her jaw, glaring at their intruder. They were at an impasse magically, since it was patently obvious from the shimmering red rings fastening Severus to his chair that he was indeed in a trap of some sort.

"*Rita Skeeter*. How did you manage to crawl in here? And *why*?"

"Well, I *would* say I came to interview the Bastard Blackguard here," the aging blond witch allowed sarcastically, "except you'd probably try to hold the same damnable blackmail over my head, now that I know you've been bumping bellies with the beaky-nosed beast."

If he could have, Severus would've demanded dryly as to why every third-rate hack writer had to be attracted to alliteration. Of course, it was redundantly obvious. His assailant, having sneaked into the laboratory and caught him with a Stupefaction Hex from behind, was Ms. Skeeter, after all. It was beyond embarrassing, and beyond frustrating. Because he, Severus Snape, had allowed his guard to slip, he had allowed the so-called journalist to get herself into a position where she could threaten his witch.

"...Oh, yes, that would make a lovely exclusive," Rita drawled, continuing that line of thought as if she had a Quick Quotes Quill at the ready. "I can see it now: 'Gryffindor Princess Kisses Slytherin Toad'. I'd have to hire a photographer to get some suitably sleazy shots, maybe even enchant some photographs into posting your face on some two-spark tramp's half-naked body...but then there's the blackmail. There's *always* the blackmail, you little extortionist."

Hermione didn't pretend to not know what the older witch meant. Setting her bag on the nearest table, carefully keeping her wand at the ready, she raised one of her brows. "So *why are* you here, if there's always the blackmail standing between us?"

"Because I want the blackmail to *end*," Skeeter told her in a poisonously sweet tone. "And the moment I found out what *he* had somehow done, I knew I had to *beat* it out of him. But then, when I came here and he called out your name in *loving* greeting, thinking I was you...*how touching* it was, finding out you're both so desperate for a good lay that you've shackled up with each other!"

"Get to the point, Rita," Hermione ordered, fingers tightening on her wand. "*Why* are you here? And how did you know where we were?"

"I was interviewing Death Eaters," the journalist admitted, shifting and moving into the corner of Severus' field of view.

One of the shimmering red bands lay across his mouth, keeping him from speaking or even turning his head, but he could still see. Clad in a red jacket and skirt with a pink blouse, her hair swept up on her head and a new pair of rhinestone-studded glasses perched on her perfect nose, she looked like she was ready to interview Madam Malkin of Malkin's Robes For All Occasions about her upcoming line of fall fashions. Compared to her overblown accessorizing, Hermione's simple jeans and blouse looked perfect to Severus. Comfortable, too. Or they would, if his witch wasn't currently endangered.

"And, whilst doing so, I learned something very interesting. That little rat, Pettigrew, had apparently told one or two of his colleagues that he had discovered Snape was an Animagus, in the final few days before the Dark Lord's downfall. I didn't know he was an Animagus, so I snuck into the Transformation Registry Office, expecting to find no information...and a tidy little article to write for a tidy big sum.

"Imagine my surprise when I discovered that he was in the files, registered just a few weeks ago...*long after* his reported existence as an Animagus during the war," Skeeter drawled. "Imagine my consternation that Snape the *War Hero*," she disdained, "wasn't in trouble for having been unregistered...which meant he had somehow figured out away around the truth-spelling they do to prove you haven't been an Animagus for years before being registered."

"So you looked up the address and came here, thinking to get the secret of it out of him," Hermione summed up.

"Yes, and imagine my surprise when he called out *your* name oh so lovingly...I could've gagged, had I not been too busy securing him for interrogation," Rita admitted dryly. "But then I didn't know when you were due home. If you caught me in the act, or if he went mysteriously missing...well, it would've ruined my plans. But then I thought...*why* not kill two birds with one stone? Once I get the secret of how to get oneself registered as an Animagus, even after having been one already for several years, *you* won't be able to use it to blackmail me any longer.

"And if *you're* so cozy as to be shacking up with the Blackhearted Bat, surely you know how he did it...and if you're really so desperate as to sleep with the man, you might even be insane enough to *care* about him in return...which means I have you right where I want you...ah, ah, ah," Skeeter warned her as Hermione started to shift closer. "Come any closer, and a single syllable is all it will take to make these little ribbons slice right through his skin. Personally, I think it would improve his looks, but then there's no accounting for taste."

"Get to the point, Skeeter," Hermione ordered tersely.

"And here I thought you were supposed to be the intelligent one," Rita quipped mockingly. "I *said*, I came here to find out *how he did it*. How he managed to get around the Ministry's stupid restrictions against unregistered Animagi registering themselves without a stint in Azkaban! *How did he do it?*"

Their eyes met. Severus kept his dark gaze calm, blank, the same sort of emotionless neutrality he had used to guard himself for too many years. Her brown stare was anguished for a moment, then a double-blink showed a brief moment of determination before it was smoothed back into anxiety.

Trapped across the length of the longish room from her beloved, unfamiliar with the strange, glowing red bands binding Severus to one of the lab chairs, Hermione thought rapidly. Ms. Skeeter was clearly a little unhinged. Not crazy, but desperate to avoid Azkaban, and desperate to go back to selling her tabloid-style articles. Rita was desperate to know how Severus had escaped Azkaban, but to tell the older witch that all it had taken was a simple...

"...If I tell you how he did it...will you promise to let him go? You won't hurt him?"

"The only one doing any promising will be *you*," Rita retorted, flicking her manicured hand at her captive. "To *him*. Or him to you, if you don't know it. *I'll* be the one applying the Unbroken Vow. Swear a wizard's oath that you will tell me how to get around the truth-spell questioning on how long a wizard or witch has been an Animagus...and I'll let you go. After you have handed over your wand, of course."

"It...it doesn't work that way," Hermione stated, putting a quaver into her voice. A sharpening of Severus' gaze made her cut back a little on the dramatics. "It's not a spell that the Animagus can use. It has to be used on them, by someone else...but if you promise to let him go, I'll take the Oath, and cast the spell on you."

"No dice," Rita retorted. "The moment he gets free, he'll retaliate against me..."

"...If you have me swear the oath, to cast the spell on you, on the condition that I'll do it as soon as you set him free...then he *cannot* retaliate, or I'll drop dead. And he won't risk that." At the elder witch's skeptically arched brow, Hermione lifted her chin. "We're in love."

"How *touching*," the aging blond witch drawled. "As in, a finger touched to the back of my throat...but your compromise *does* have merit. You don't have to cast the spell until I have freed him, but as soon as I have freed him, you have to cast the spell. Now, what is this spell?" Skeeter demanded.

Hermione gave the older witch a stern look. "If I told you that, you could just attack us both and find someone else to cast it on you. 'No dice', as you said."

"Maybe you aren't as stupid as I advertised," the blond witch murmured, eyeing Hermione with wary respect. "What *can* you tell me about this spell? I'm not walking into this blind, even with a wizard's oath."

"It has to be applied while you're transforming yourself into your beetle body. It doesn't work, otherwise. And that's all you'll get to know. Cast the Vow, and get what you want...or let him go, and get out before I hex you into little potion pieces."

"Put your wand on that table, and I'll let you approach," Rita ordered her, lifting her chin at the one holding the shopping bag. "You won't need it for the Vow, after all....and you're not getting any closer to him with it until you've sworn to help me."

Part of Severus wanted to shout at her, to tell her not to do it. But part of him wanted her to comply. The latter half was the part of his racing mind to realize why compliance was far smarter than resistance. Again, their eyes met. He tried to give her encouragement with his gaze alone, since he couldn't move anything else, nor show his emotions more openly with the rest of his face. He didn't want to tip his beloved's hand.

...And as soon as I get out of this, and have hexed the vociferous bitch to oblivion, I swear I *will* tell Hermione I love her, he added in silent promise, watching his curly-haired betrothed slowly setting her wand on the table.

"Remember, if you try to pull a fast one, Skeeter, I won't tell you what the spell is...and you *will* go to Azkaban," Hermione stated in warning, before releasing the vinewood shaft. Rita snorted, but didn't attack. She gestured for Hermione to approach, wand still trained on the younger witch.

"Don't try to pull a fast one, either. Swear you will correctly cast the right spell to circumvent being caught as a longtime unregistered Animagus upon me, as soon as I have freed Snape and am ready for it to be cast upon me."

Nodding, Hermione approached Severus, touched one of the hands bound by shimmering crimson to the arm of his chair, and nodded at her beloved. "You'll have to free his mouth to ask the oathbinding, and his hand to hold mine, if you're to be the one casting the spell."

"No funny stuff from either of you," Rita warned them, tapping Severus on the cheek with her wand. The red bond disappeared from his mouth. She tapped his wrist next, but didn't free the band holding his bicep to the back of the chair. "You know the wording, murderer. Deviate, and we'll see if you can successfully slither out of being sliced into several slimy snippets."

"Your alliterations are atrocious..." Severus stilled, wary of the wand threatening his eyebrow, "...but I will comply. When you are ready, witch."

"Begin," Rita instructed them, as Hermione took his right hand in hers.

It didn't take long to ask and confirm the questions; when it was done, when the fire wreathing their hands had vanished, soaked into the spell, Rita flicked her wand. With each tap of the dark cherry shaft, another red bond on his body dissolved. Hermione hurried back to the table to fetch her wand, knowing Rita would expect the spell to be cast upon her immediately. Indeed, the last one vanished from his left ankle as soon as she returned.

"...There. Prepare yourself, little girl. When I count down to zero, I will transform, and you will cast the spell. Or drop dead," Rita added with a smirk. "Either way, I get what I want."

Gripping her wand, Hermione prepared herself. A nod, and the journalist started counting backwards from five. As soon as she reached zero and started rapidly shrinking, Hermione slashed her wand through the air.

"*Oblivate!*"

The spell struck the half-transformed witch, crackling over her diminishing form. It only took a single second to transform, and once begun, the process could not be stopped nor reversed. Which left them with a little beetle on the floor.

"*Accio* Skeeter!" Hermione snapped as the black bug started scuttling toward the door. Catching the insect, she held it in her hand, mouth tight with grim disgust. She paused long enough to cancel the spell binding Severus to his chair before glaring at the problem that had been literally and figuratively bugging her since Fourth Year. "You threatened my Severus," she told the leg-squirming thing pinched between her thumb and forefinger. "You actually threatened *my man*. I should squash you like the ugly little bug you are!"

"Hermione, if you kill an Animagus, the body reverts to its natural form. I would prefer not to bury her corpse on our property...not to mention she *is* a witch. She could linger and haunt us for her murder," Severus reminded her, rising to join her. "Even if we made it look like an accident, if she manifests as a ghost... *We are* entertaining your friends in a few more days, and one of them *is* an Auror-in-training."

"Then I should stick her in a jar and *keep* her there, as I threatened to do the last time she messed with someone I cared about," Hermione huffed, still angry. But her conscience nagged at her. "I *should* turn her over to St. Mungo's so they could cure her...but do I tell them that she's an unregistered Animagus, so they know how to fix her? Or leave her in their care for years and years, trying to figure out why she's stuck like this, since she cannot remember how she did it?"

Severus kept his mouth shut at those choices. He could understand all too well the need for vengeance. So long as his beloved didn't try to break the law...

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. Her conscience was still nagging at her. "If we don't do something about why she came here, she'll just continue to be a problem...a canker-sore, a blight on wizarding-kind."

"Whatever you choose to do, *don't* get caught," Severus murmured, making her glance at him sharply. "I agree, she needs to be locked up...but only her memory of how she got to be this way has been erased. She will still remember that she came here for a reason and that she bound me and threatened you in order to get what she wanted, though she will not remember exactly what that reason was."

Hermione returned her gaze to the beetle squirming helplessly in her grip. Just a *little* more pressure...but they'd have a body to bury, and a ghost to placate. She did *not* want Skeeter's spectre hanging around this otherwise perfect, overgrown cottage for the rest of her life. Sighing, she lifted her wand.

"Nothing illegal," the wizard standing at her side cautioned her.

"Oh, it's not illegal." Hermione looked up at him again. "How long ago did she catch you?"

Severus looked at one of the clocks on the wall. "Just under an hour ago...much to my chagrin. We warded against human guests entering the cottage unannounced, other than into the Floo chamber, but not against Animagi pests."

"We'll cover that," she soothed him. "An hour is all I need. Where did she put your wand, did you see?"

"It is in her right-hand suit pocket," Severus admitted. "She showed it to me while I was recovering from being Stupefied, in order to taunt me for my lapse. That is the other reason why I wouldn't care for you to crush her body; it might break my wand before her transformation is complete.

"Don't worry; you'll get it back. But we'll have to give her a reason for having been here, something juicy and real enough, she won't realize it's a blind."

"Distasteful though it may be, I suggest using our relationship as a distraction," he offered wryly.

Hermione considered it only for a moment before nodding in agreement. The pairing of an ex-Death Eater and one of his recently former students should be enough to distract the odious woman. Stooping, she set the beetle on the floor and quickly cast her spell before Skeeter could scamper out of sight. "*Obliviate!*"

The beetle stopped running, momentarily stunned by the force of losing the last hour or so of her life. Hermione stepped back and silently cast the same transformation spell that Minerva had used on her former colleague, forcing the reporter back into her human form. Dazed, blinking, Rita Skeeter stared at the two of them. She didn't even notice when Severus stuck his hand into her pocket, fishing out his ebony wand.

"Oh...you?" the journalist witch muttered, blinking and focusing her gaze finally on Hermione. "I *know* you. Hermione Granger...what am I doing here? And where is here?"

"You interrupted a very delicate stage in our brewing process, Ms. Skeeter," Severus lied smoothly. "Your memory may have been affected when your uninvited arrival released certain potion vapours, just now. What is your first name, and why are you here?"

"Rita, of course. My name is Rita Skeeter, and my profession is journalism. I haven't lost my wits!" she added sharply. "Just a little bit of my memory. I came here to...I came here...what is Miss Granger doing in your home?"

"It's her home, actually. You said you came here to write an article on our relationship," Severus told her. "Select areas of your memory may have been affected by the vapours you inhaled. Unfortunately, the process is irreversible, and as you were foolish enough to enter an active lab without a Bubble Head Charm..."

"Your relationship?" Skeeter asked, seizing on that part of his soliloquy. "The two of you...?"

"Yes, you were muttering something about 'Gryffindor Princess Kisses Slytherin Toad' for an article heading," Hermione added, forcing herself to sound irritated. "That was when you bumped the table, dislodged the protective wards, and inhaled the wrong fumes."

"I bumped the table?" Skeeter repeated, frowning in confusion as she glanced around her. There were a few ingredients in various stages of preparation on the table next to her, but nothing looked particularly dangerous. "Why would I do that?"

"Well, you *were* backing up under the threat of my wand, at the time," Hermione added, putting a hint of menace into her tone. She nodded at the other table, which had a couple beakers with colourful liquids in them. Their contents were actually quite stable and innocuous, but the reporter didn't need to know that. Ms. Skeeter just needed to be intimidated by them.

Severus showed her how it was properly done, his voice dipping into quiet, dangerous depths. "I suggest, if you wish to avoid being threatened at wand-point in the future...or dosed with potions unexpectedly...that you do not barge into other people's homes, demanding to know the intimate details of their life."

"Now, we have been kind about your rude intrusion; we have cleaned up the mess you made...and you made a big, expensive mess, forcing us to throw out a lot of costly ingredients, thanks to your interference...and we have even decontaminated you, whilst you stood there like an idiot for half an hour," Hermione continued, elaborating on their ruse. "But I think it would be best if you just turned around and left. You'll get no interview out of us, today."

"The Floo is *that* way," Severus added, pointing at the door out of the lab. "I suggest you use it. *Immediately.*"

"You cannot threaten me! I am a member of the press!" Rita protested, glaring at him.

Severus swayed close enough to loom over her, arms folding across his chest. "*Watch me.*"

The older witch stumbled back a few steps, intimidated. She straightened her jacket after a moment, cleared her throat, and edged toward the door. "Well! We'll just have to see about this. The people have a right to know about the two of you...shacking up with a girl who's half your age...snogging a man old enough to be your father..."

"Allow me to show you to the door," Hermione offered mock-sweetly, following the retreating journalist. "*There's* the door!"

Scuttling out of the room, the blond witch found herself trailed by the pair...stalked, rather, for they pointed her firmly all the way to the Floo-connected hearth at the base of the stairs, fingers jabbing unerringly at her exit point. Only when the green flames had died and vanished along with the annoying reporter did Hermione allow herself to sag with relief. "Merlin! I almost didn't know what to do..."

"She'll get her revenge, you know," Severus murmured, pulling his curly-haired witch into his arms. "She'll stalk us, and write tabloid tales about us, and try to make our lives a living, vituperative, reputation-tattered hell."

Hermione groaned, burying her face in his shoulder. "Don't I know it. There's a part of me...a very mean and petty and *ugly* part of me...that actually wanted to kill her, for a moment," she confessed quietly. "Only for the smallest moment, but...she *threatened* you, Severus. I don't think I'll ever quite forgive her for that. But if we can't kill her, then what can we do to her to stop her from plaguing us and trashing our reputations?"

"There *is* a possible cure," he offered, trying not to sound tentative.

"There is?" she asked him, twisting her head so that she could glance up at his face without leaving the comfort of his embrace.

"Her readers will want stories filled with scandal and gossip. A young witch living in sin with an older, notorious wizard is very scandalous and gossip-worthy. But hardly anyone ever cares to read about a happily married couple. *That* would be boring."

Her heart skipped all the way up into her mouth for a moment, then returned to its home in her chest. It left a silly grin in its place, though. "It's only boring to those who don't know what goes on behind closed cottage doors."

"And may they *never* know," Severus muttered fervently. Dipping his neck so that his forehead rested against hers, he stared into the brown depths of her eyes. "I only had one regret in all of this...aside from the embarrassment of being caught like that."

"One regret?" Hermione asked. "What, my not squishing her when I had the chance?"

"No. My not telling you previously that I have fallen in love with you."

Hermione smiled smugly and shifted her arms from his ribs to his neck, looping them over his shoulders. "That's good. I mean, it's *good* that you've fallen in love with me, because *I* have fallen in love with *you*, my sweet little Puss-in-Boots."

Severus winced, ducking his head a little. "Hermione, I would far rather be considered snarky than *sweet*."

"Fine. My *snarky* little Puss-in-Boots," Hermione quipped, rolling her eyes briefly before resuming her smile. She rubbed him lightly behind his ears, in that spot he enjoyed immensely as both a cat and a man. "Now, shall we count the Floo chamber as a sort of foyer, like the front entryway upstairs?"

Lifting his head, he glanced around them. A brief perusal was all he needed before returning his attention to her and giving her a nod of approval. "I *suppose* it could pass for an acceptably kissable locatio...mmm..."

"Mm-hmm," she agreed, sighing against his lips, ensuring there was less talking and more kissing for a while.

...

Rasping Grillowbies had been spotted by American wizards in the Appalachian mountains...wizarding photographed, in fact, proof of their existence...and Luna Lovegood had taken off to go and interview the discoverers two days before the party. It was hoped, she had explained in a Floo call as soon as she got tapped by her father for making the trip, that she would make it back to Hogwarts for the start of her seventh year...but it was doubtful that she would be able to make it back in time for the house-warming, "...And the undoubted gastronomic delights that would have awaited me," as she had put it with a wistful sigh.

But Hermione didn't let that stop her plans. Instead of Luna Lovegood, she invited Lavender Brown. The timing couldn't have been better; Lavender had been faithfully following Quidditch, and Ron had just landed an alternate position on the Banbourne Beaters. Rather than Hermione and Severus having to forcefully demonstrate that he just wasn't interested in the sort of conversations Hermione preferred to have, the pair practically monopolized each other. Thankfully they were at one end of the dining room table, while Hermione and Snape were free to argue amiably at the other end over such subjects as whether Egyptian hieroglyphs or Pictish runes were more potent when inscribed during the Artifact enchantment process.

In the middle seats, Harry and Ginny occasionally joined either conversation when nudged or asked a question, but mostly they stared at each other, blushed, smiled, chatted about this or that, and made the occasional awkward comment. Coming back from fetching dessert, Hermione discovered just what had her two friends blushing so much. Ginny had slipped her feet out of her pumps and had worked her hose-covered toes up the cuffs of Harry's trousers. In turn, he had managed to work off one shoe and was rubbing the back of her calf with his sock-clad foot.

She said not a word as she set down the layer-cake, just let Severus cut several pieces and helped him hand out each plate as soon as it was loaded. As soon as she handed Harry his slice, having to nudge his fingers with the plate to get his attention, Severus spoke.

"Given that Molly Weasley is the most intimidating woman outside of the Death Eaters when her protective instincts are roused, I strongly suggest *Harry*, that you wait until you are out of my house before you touch her precious only daughter any higher on her leg."

Harry jerked upright in his chair, straightening out of his slouch. His cheeks reddened and Ginny looked away, while Ron shot them a glare. Lavender covered her mouth, trying not to laugh, which would have been inappropriate for the moment.

"I'll also trust, as both of you went through sixth year Potions with Horace Slughorn, that you both know how to brew the Nihou Dze correctly?" Severus added lightly.

Harry reddened further and scowled but didn't dare say anything, thanks to his life-debt geas. Ginny frowned and lifted her hand, cutting off her brother before Ron could do more than draw in a breath. "Are you implying that we *should* brew that draught? As in, you wouldn't take House points off of us if we...well..."

"What, shagged like niffers?" Hermione supplied as she accepted her own slice. That earned a muffled snort of laughter from Lavender, which in turn earned the other woman a dirty look from Ron.

"Well...yes," Ginny mumbled, embarrassed.

Severus fielded the question in a dry but not unfriendly tone. "I am not your teacher anymore. As something of a friend to your family...at least through the Order...all I care about is that you do not do anything foolish...and that Molly doesn't think she can somehow blame me for it."

"And what about *you*?" Ron dared to challenge. "Have *you* brewed some Nihou Dze?"

"It is steeping in the lab as we speak," Severus agreed mildly, serving himself the last slice of cake.

"So you *do* plan on taking advantage of Hermione! You're taking advantage of her right now, living in sin with her!" Ron accused him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," Hermione snorted. "Neither of us are 'living in sin'."

"But you *are* living together!" he argued.

"Living in the same house does not automatically guarantee that we're shagging like niffers," Severus stated mildly. His choice of words turned their four guests interesting shades of pink. Those shades deepened as he added, "Unlike some men, I happen to respect the women I let into my life."

"Oh, do shut your mouth, Ronald," Hermione ordered as the redhead gaped. "*I'm* the one who brewed it, because *I'm* the one planning on taking advantage of *him*."

"*Not* until we're married," Severus countered firmly. "I've told you that before."

Harry choked at that, spewing bits of cake halfway across the table. Ginny quickly flicked out her wand and cast an Evanesco, cleaning the tablecloth, while Hermione tapped his water glass with her own wand, refilling it so he could clear his throat with a drink.

It was Lavender who caught on the fastest, while Ron was still spluttering. "...The ring! You're wearing an engagement ring! Oh my god! You're *engaged* to him?"

Hermione held out her hand in that universal gesture of all engaged women, showing off the pearl-and-gold ring he had made. "Isn't it lovely? Severus found it in an oyster at a restaurant, of all places. That was at the lunch we went out to, with Professor McGonagall. He saved it, and made it just for me."

Ginny, eyeing the stone, flicked her gaze around the table. Clearing her throat, she boldly stated, "That's very romantic, finding it like that, and him making it for you. I hope

you'll both be very happy together."

"...*Happy?*" her brother demanded, his voice cracking with the exclamation.

"Yes, Ronald. *Happy*," Hermione repeated crisply, giving him a hard look. "As *happy* as you have been, tonight, in Lavender's company. You really should consider asking her for a second chance at dating her, since the two of you obviously have so much in common, and get along so well. The two of you haven't fought once all night long. Isn't that wonderful?"

"What do you mean, we haven't fought?" Ron challenged her. "She thinks the Banbourne Beaters are a third-rate team!"

"I said I thought they were a third-rate team, but that *if* they let you play as Keeper in a few key games, they'll come up a few notches," Lavender corrected firmly. "As soon as you get out there in play, you'll get noticed. You need to work on your game strategies, as well as your Keeper skills. If you can translate your chess-skills into Quidditch, you'll make team captain in just a couple years...even my father thinks so, and he was captain for the Wasps in his twenties...but you have to play so well when you first get out there, they'll *keep* putting you out there, and that takes dedication."

"It'll take more than just a couple years to make captain for a professional team, even a 'third-rate' one...and *will* put a lot of dedication into it. I'll be even better than your father was, you'll see!" Ron argued back.

"I'd see it, if you ever invited me to a game!" Lavender retorted...and like that, they were off again.

The other four members of the dinner party rolled their eyes, and caught each other doing it. Ginny was the first to snort, struggling to control her laughter. Catching sight of Severus' smirk, she lost control and leaned against Hermione, who grinned at her friend's uncontrollable giggles. Even Harry chuckled...and he didn't lose his mirth by too much when Severus reached across the end of the table and covered her hand with his, though he did look a little uncomfortable for a few moments.

It wasn't until the end of the evening that Ron challenged Hermione again on her relationship. Severus was giving Ginny some very good advice on passing seventh-year potions, and Lavender was promising Harry to pass along his well-wishes to several of the teachers, when Ron pulled Hermione aside into the storage room just off the Floo hall.

"C'mon, Hermione, *Snape?* You'd get along much better with me!" he protested again, though at least he had the courtesy to do so under his breath.

"Weren't you paying attention, Ron?" Hermione whispered back. "All that time you were laughing and chatting and having a great time with Lavender, talking about all the things both of you like...and there were many things the two of you talked about together...Severus and I were doing the exact same thing. Laughing and chatting and having a wonderful time talking about anything and everything that we both liked. With each other."

"But, it's *Snape*!" he whinged. "How can you have anything in common with him? At least you and I are good friends. We have been for years. What have you got with him, years of him calling us names and assigning detentions?"

"Ron, do you know what happens when you mix acids and bases together?" she asked him.

He blinked at her non-sequitur. "What?"

"Exactly my point," she sighed. "When you put the wrong ingredients together, either nothing happens, or things explode painfully, doing a lot of damage. If you put the right ingredients together, you get something better, Ronald...and you and I are not the right ingredients to throw into the same cauldron together. We can sit on the same shelf and be happy next to each other, but we're not meant to be mixed together for the rest of our lives. What I want is for you to be *happy*. We tried dating, you and I, but we *weren't* truly happy when we were dating."

"Yes, we were," he protested stubbornly, folding his arms defensively across his chest. "We had fun kissing, didn't we?"

"But what about when we weren't kissing? We fought, we nagged, we whinged, we argued, we pouted, we glared...does any of that sound like 'truly happy'?" Hermione countered. "It's a different sort of arguing when you're talking with Lavender. You both listen to each other, you both have good points to make, and you can both see each other's side of the argument, because you have similar interests, similar experiences, similar viewpoints. If we threw the two of you into a cauldron and gave you a stir, I honestly think you could make something really good together."

"Just take a minute, Ron, and try to picture what your life would be like with Lavender in it, five years from now. If you're honest, it'll be much like tonight; you'll still be talking and laughing and sharing similar interests five years from now. You and I, however...we can't even go five minutes without arguing about something, and not the fun kind of argument. Do you see that?"

He nodded reluctantly.

"There you go, then. We may argue and yell and not talk to each other for weeks at a stretch, Ron, but we'll *always* be friends. We don't *have* to be anything more to each other, because that's enough, and that's all we need to be, for each other."

"So, that's the best way our two ingredients can be mixed? The only way?" he asked. Sighing, he eyed the black-haired man partially visible through the doorway into the Floo chamber. "But...*him?*"

"You wouldn't think ashwinder eggs could combine with raw pufferfish and oyster liqueur to make an edible aphrodisiac, but they do," she reminded him lightly. Ron made a face, prompting her to laugh and hug him. "I'll be kind and spare you the details. Go escort Lavender home...and make sure you arrange a date with her! That's an order from your best friend. She might be the right ingredient for you, or she might not be, but you'll never know until you honestly try."

Nodding, he allowed her to nudge him toward the door, and his waiting future date. Hermione tucked her arm around Severus' waist, watching the hearth until the last flicker of verdant flame had faded. He hugged her shoulders gently, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. She sighed and leaned into him contentedly.

"Well. *That* went a lot better than I feared it might."

"Indeed. It was disingenuous to invite Miss Brown instead of Miss Lovegood. I stand corrected," Severus agreed. "He hoisted himself on his own petard, spending most of the evening talking with her. That left us to talk to each other, and the other two to...moon over each other."

Something in his tone made her glance up at him. She couldn't imagine he'd be *that* happy about Harry and Ginny making calf-eyes at each other. "Severus, why are you smirking?"

"Just remembering the expression on Potter's...on Harry's face, as he spewed out his cake."

"Wicked man, toying with him like that." She mock-pinchd him for it, but didn't put much effort into the nip of her fingertips.

"It was the truth...and no toying with me," he ordered, catching her hand.

"No toying with you?" Hermione teased. "Not even if I call you my personal cuddle-bear?"

The disdainful sneer he made would not have been out of place a few years ago, back when he had still been her teacher.

"Okay, fine, nothing cuddly. You don't do cuddly...outside of your cat form. How about...my favourite hobby-horse, something I'd love to ride all day long?" she offered teasingly. "My personal pogo-stick?"

Severus stifled a groan. The idea of her bouncing up and down on his shaft was excruciatingly appealing. Swatting her backside, he chivied her toward the kitchen. "We are *not* going to deflower you in the front hall, so get your mind out of the toy-box and into the soap-box, woman. We have dishes to wash."

"...I think having the ring to flash at the others helped," Hermione told him as they moved toward the stacks of dirty plates and glasses. "It lent verisimilitude to our engagement."

"Telling them that I *made* the ring lent verisimilitude," he corrected, grimacing a little. "Even I find it hard to believe I'd go to such lengths under normal circumstances."

"So, what, I'm an aberration in your life?" she teased, enjoying the way his dark gaze caressed her face, absorbing her happy smile. She didn't think he was consciously aware of it, but an answering smile had curved his own lips, just a little.

"Absolutely," he agreed, dropping a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Hermione sighed. "You realize that I have to get around to telling my parents just who you are." Severus merely sighed, so she continued. "I'm thinking...over the phone. From a nice, safe distance. And then arranging to see them a month later, so they have time to cool down."

"A good plan. But it's still not going to get you out of helping with the dishes."

"Not even if they kill me?" she asked wistfully, and got a smirk in reply.

"Not even then."

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"...So then I thought, what if it was the potatoes?" Molly related as Hermione listened intently, making notes of what the Weasley matriarch said. "After all, potatoes are a part of the nightshade family of plants, and I seemed to remember from my old classes that belladonna has a counteractive effect on the tanglevine sap. So for the next five nights, I refused to serve potatoes at all. Naturally, Arthur thought I'd gone mad, but it worked. By night three, no more abrupt, middle-of-the-night snoring sounds!"

"Well, we can't ask the British Wizarding community to cut potatoes out of their diets forever," Hermione sighed. "Based on belladonna itself, there are three choices I can think of to modify the Stop Snoring Solution, but they come with side-effects of their own, and they're not the same as dealing with potatoes. There shouldn't *be* any abrupt snorkings, with this formula. I'll have to wait until Severus gets back from the apothecary, but I'll let him know about this. Thank you for making this discovery. What about tomatoes? Did you cut those out of his diet as well?"

"Oh, you're right! I forgot tomatoes are part of the nightshade family, too," Molly admitted. She shrugged. "No, no effect either way. Every morning, he has a rasher of bangers or bacon, three slices of fried tomatoes on his toast, and a bowl of Muggle breakfast cereal...Harry got him hooked on it. Dreadful stuff; very sugary, and utterly unnatural in hue."

At that, Hermione laughed. "Considering some of the foods I've seen at Hogwarts feasts...?"

The middle-aged witch smiled ruefully. "True. Speaking of Severus, the two of you have, erm, been living in sin together for at least three months, now. Or however long it's been since Ron came home and told us about you two. Are you...you know...still happy?"

Hermione blushed. She couldn't help the grin that stretched her mouth, either. "Yes. Very. And we're not living in sin, exactly. We still have separate bedrooms, you know. And we *are* engaged."

"Yes, well, that's not the same as a proper marriage. I know it would be more of your mother's place to help with the arrangements, but, well, she *is* a Muggle," Molly pointed out gently. "And the two of you, well, you aren't. So if it isn't too forward of me suggesting this, if you need any help arranging a wizarding ceremony, I would be delighted to do so. You've been like a daughter to me. I'm sorry you're not marrying Ron, but..."

"But while I'm a *good* woman, I'm not the *right* woman for him," Hermione stated firmly. "Ron's a good man, and he deserves the best woman for him in his life."

"True. And I don't have any doubts that you're, if not *the* best woman for Severus, then you're at least in the top five," Molly added blithely. At the younger witch's bemused look, she confided, "You've had a couple points knocked off the Suitability Scale for being at least half his age. May-December relationships don't always work out, so I'm still reserving judgment a little bit."

Unable to take offense at such a logical and therefore valid point, Hermione confined her response to a noncommittal shrug.

"Still, I can't think of anyone better than you, off the top of my head. He's been through such an awful lot of misery, with the war and all," the motherly witch sighed. "He deserves something *good* in his life. I'm glad that you're able to give it to him."

"...As am I," Severus stated from the doorway.

"Severus!" Molly exclaimed, turning to beam at him. "Welcome back!"

"Thank you, Molly." He stepped into the lab, arms laden with bulging canvas sacks. Hermione hurried over to relieve him of some of his burdens, sneaking in a peck on his cheek as she did so. He kissed her back, and...as had become their habit since the Rita Incident...paused long enough to whisper in her ear, "I love you."

Shivers rippled down her spine, prickling at her arms. It amazed Hermione that he would be so daring in front of company, even in just a mere whisper. But it was better to share it and risk discomforting others than to miss out on an opportunity to confess it one more time. "I love you, too."

"Good. I stopped at the green grocer's in the village; the sacks for the refrigerator are all in this bag, since I could risk shrinking them. There's a chilling charm on some of them, so they can wait. The thistleberries need to go into the stasis locker as soon as possible, along with the dragon spleen. Molly, how is the medicine working for Arthur's snoring problem?"

"Well, aside from a slight problem with potatoes, but not tomatoes, it's going rather well," she related, launching into her explanation.

Taking the ingredients for their business to the herb room, Hermione let Molly and her notes speak for themselves. When she came back, Severus was in what she privately liked to call his Thinking Mode, one arm folded across his chest, clasping the other elbow, while his free hand tapped his chin thoughtfully. She didn't have to wait long.

"Garbanzo beans. If we replace the wheat-based binder for the pills with chickpea flour, and add a little willow bark extract, that should take care of the problem. We'll have a fresh batch for you to test in a week. In the meantime, deprive him of tomatoes as well as potatoes for three days, see if that has any effect, and then give him his potatoes for three days, but no tomatoes. It could simply be an excess of the nightshade family...a case of one or the other, but not both, so I'd like you to experiment with that."

"I'll do that. And I really, really wanted to thank you in person. These last few weeks have been the best nights' sleep I've had in *years*," the Weasley matriarch confessed.

"Ever since the twins were born, Arthur's been snoring louder than a half-giant. Even Arthur admits he's been more well-rested since volunteering to be your guinea pig than he can ever remember...the two of you are going to be *rich*, off of this. Witches everywhere will be praising your names with this Stop Snoring Solution of yours."

"Witches everywhere will be praising *your* name, if your observation about the nightshade plants can be countered with the chickpea flour," Hermione countered. "A pity we won't be ready even for last-minute sales in the holiday season, but we might be able to open the new year with a bang, if the trials continue to work out so well. If you hadn't caught that bit with the potatoes..."

"...We *will* get it pinned down and fixed," Severus promised Molly.

"Well, we can't go around depriving our men-folk of their potatoes, just to get them to stop snoring," Molly snorted. "We'd have all the witches thanking us for stopping their snoring, but all the wizards vilifying us for meddling with their suppers."

"Speaking of which, I've a meal to go off and cook. I'll be back in a week for those new pills, though." Hugging Hermione, then Severus, Molly took herself back to the Floo hall. Then popped her head back into the lab again, leaning past the doorframe. "...Oh, and don't forget you're still invited to the Burrow for Boxing Day! Are you sure you can't convince your mum and dad to join us for Christmas, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged. "They're hosting the extended family, this year."

"Have you met them yet, Severus?" Molly asked Severus, still leaning in through the doorway.

Severus winced, remembering the nagging phone calls Hermione's mother had given her, and the reports of their shock and bewilderment that their precious daughter was not only dating, but engaged to one of her former...and not very popular...teachers.. "We're meeting this Sunday, for brunch."

"Well...erm...good luck on that. I'm sure you'll need it. Ta-ta!" With a flutter of her fingers, she vanished through the doorway. A moment later, the opening flared with a bit of green and a firmly voiced, "The Burrow!"

"Wonderful. She had to ruin my good mood," Severus muttered.

"Ruin?" Hermione questioned, turning to him. He let her tuck her arms around his waist, pulling her closer with one of his.

"Mentioning your parents," he muttered, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"It only took them a month and a half to get used to the idea of you in my life."

Wrapping his other arm around her, Severus wasn't so sure. Enjoying the warmth of her curves pressed to his body, he inhaled the faint perfume of her shampoo and took comfort in the way she burrowed into him, sniffing the scent from his clothes. "We'll see."

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"So. You were her teacher."

Hermione wished her father had just allowed the awkward silence to stretch on between them, interrupted only by the clinking of silverware against pottery. The tension had been bad, yes, but not this bad. She felt like her muscles were pulling too tight, anticipating the row that her father was about to start.

"I haven't been for over a year and a half."

"But you *were*. Did you ever...?" Jeffrey asked, trailing off awkwardly as his daughter glared at him.

Severus put down his fork and knife. He wiped his mouth with the napkin provided by Rachel, made sure his mouth was clear of food...then pinned the other man with a dark, hard look. "While she was a student at Hogwarts, I saw your daughter from halfway across the Great Hall at meals, in the corridors in passing, and during the occasional rule-breaking escapade, wherein she was usually the insufficient break being applied to her friends' runaway schemes. She was one of the more competent students in my classes, but in being so, she required very little of my attention and supervision during class-time."

"I found her to be annoyingly verbose and overly interested in showing off her excessive knowledge, so I did my best to ignore and forget about her. In short, sir, madam, I didn't *know* your daughter. And I have *never* been interested in any of my students. With rare exception, I considered most of them snotty-nosed, mindless brats who were as determined to push out every single piece of advice and information I attempt to stuff into their empty little craniums. I had even less interest in their puerile attempts at courtship, most of which consisted of awkward blushes, fumbling gropes, and slobbery kisses of a sort that a St. Bernard could have performed...and with far better breath on the dog's part."

"In short, sir, had I not been removed from the school by circumstances, I would*never* have bothered with getting to know your daughter in any way, shape or form."

Taken aback, Jeffrey Granger eyed him. "Well. That was...erm..."

"...Rather blunt," Rachel finished for her husband, touching Jeffrey's hand before looking at Severus. "But I believe you. Now that you *have* gotten to know our daughter...what do you think of her?"

"Mum!" Hermione protested, thinking the previous line of questioning might have been less embarrassing, if more rude.

Aware of the parental minefield that he had just successfully navigated, Severus debated how blunt to be in this second round of interrogation over their brunch of quiche florentine and brussel sprouts. Finally, he shrugged. "That I am glad I did not bother with getting to know her while she was a student of mine. It spared me from what might have become a rather difficult moral dilemma."

All three Grangers blinked at him, though Hermione at least didn't look quite as bemused as her parents did.

"Time and distance have since freed both of us from our previous association as student and teacher, and have given us opportunity to view each other as both friends and adults," Severus lectured. "As two adults who share many interests, from an increasingly profitable potions research business to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, the more I get to know Hermione, the more I enjoy my time with her, and the more I *want* to spend my time with her. That is what I think of her...and anything further than that is personal, and...respectfully...none of your business."

Another awkward silence passed around the table, then Jeffrey lifted his water glass. "...Well said. So long as she continues to enjoy your own company, we'll do our best to accept it. *All* we want is for our daughter to be happy. Right, love?"

"Right," Rachel agreed. She lifted her own glass. "A toast: May you *always* enjoy each other's company."

Lifting her glass, Hermione relaxed a little. Not completely; in the whole, awkward, getting-to-know-him stage, her parents would probably still put their feet in it...even dentists were subject to foot-in-mouth disease...but at least they *seemed* to finally be warming up to him.

"So...how is your new cat getting along?" her mother asked, changing the subject.

"Oh! Er...swimmingly." Hermione glanced at Severus for help, since she didn't know if he wanted to reveal that part of himself or not.

Once again, he set down his silverware and wiped his mouth. A flex of his magic, and Severus turned himself into Puss. Blinking his dark eyes at her startled parents, he stayed on the chair for a moment, whiskered head just barely above the table-top, then Transfigured back to his normal form.

"Goodness! You...*you* were Puss-in-Boots?" Rachel asked, giving him a wide-eyed look.

"It's a long story," Hermione explained quickly. "But that's how we ended up spending a lot of time together. And I've learnt how to do it, too. I can also change into a cat and back, myself."

"We'll save the demonstration of that for after pudding," Jeffrey told his daughter. "Let's talk about this new business of yours, instead."

Glad they were back to a much safer topic, Hermione finished relaxing. Mostly.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 11

You know what they say about a woman who prefers to live with her cat...

XI.

...

Severus hated stress. Having finally gotten rid of the Dark Lord, had his name cleared, and even made a life for himself...their Snoring Solution was already flying off the shelves at the Weasley twins' shop under the brewing imprint of *SH!*, short for Severus and Hermione...he had grown used to a life without much stress. In fact, there were only two points of nerve-twanging tension in his life. One, he still hadn't gone all the way with his Hermione, and two...he could hear Ronald Bilgewater Weasley trying to argue with her in the room just down the hall.

In fact, most of the guests could hear them arguing, including the idiot's vociferous, venomous shout of, "...I will *not* let you marry that *greasy git!*"

The snap in Hermione's voice as she replied pleased him, even as it creased his brow with worry. Not that she'd cave to his demand, but that she might do something that would land her in Azkaban. His other source of stress would be made a thousandfold worse if their wedding night had to be postponed.

"Well, *what* do you suggest, Ron? That I never marry *anyone*? That I live out the rest of my life as a spinster, with just my *cats* for company?"

"*Yes!*...I would rather see *you* marry one of your bloody cats than marry *that man!*"

"...*Fine.*"

The wedding guests blinked en masse, at that. Severus could see the speculation in their eyes, though none dared say a word just yet, for fear of missing whatever else she might say in that tight, clipped tone. There was a startled exclamation in the hall, and the swift-striding rustle of satin as Hermione Jane Granger stalked into the chapel, marching straight up the aisle. A red-faced Ron and a grim-faced Harry, both in tuxedos trailed after her. Along with them came Ginny in a bridesmaid's dress, two bouquets in her hands. She distinctly looked like she would rather be anywhere else than in the same location as her youngest brother.

The organist, startled by the bride's sudden appearance, tried to play the wedding march, but fumbled only after a few chords, and finally gave up. It allowed the gathered crowd time enough to whisper a few choice comments to each other before falling silent again. No one wanted to miss *this* confrontation, either.

"I'm terribly sorry, Severus, but the idiot, here," Hermione apologized, poking her thumb over her shoulder at the redhead, "is insisting that I marry one of my cats. As I am tired of arguing with the bonehead, I have agreed to do so...just to get him to *shut up*. Do you mind?"

Aware of their avid audience, Severus considered her offer. "...Did you have a particular cat in mind?"

"Puss-in-Boots. Crookshanks feels more like a brother to me. And besides, he's been neutered. I *do* eventually want offspring," his betrothed asserted firmly.

"Duly noted." Claspng her hand in his, Severus smiled at her, then turned to the vicar...and scowled when the man didn't move. "...Well? Get on with it!"

"But...I...you...you can't marry a cat!"

"I can, too!" Hermione protested. Turning, she pushed Ron and Harry back so that they could serve as her bridesmen, next to Ginny. A flick of her hand gestured for Fred and George, Severus' attendants, to take their places, too. "And since Ronald has blow the original ceremony right out of the water, let's get right to the good part, since we've already delayed long enough.

"I, Hermione Granger, take Severus Snape to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold..."

"...Hang on!" Ron protested. "You just said you'd marry your cat, not *him!*"

"...Excuse us, mate," George interjected politely, touching Severus on the elbow as he passed. "This has gone on long enough."

"Yes, please do pardon us," Fred agreed. Both twins advanced on their brother, catching Ron by the arms and dragging him backwards to the nearest empty pew. There were Muggles in the church, so they were very discreet about using any magic, but whatever they did, it was enough to hold the youngest male Weasley firmly and *silently* in place. Marching back up the aisle, they took their places next to their best potions supplier, staunch supporters. Harry grimaced but took his place next to Ginny, and the wedding commenced.

...

After it was over, after the receiving line and the guests had scattered to the buffet tables, Severus discreetly followed the Weasley brat into the lavatory, disillusioning

himself as soon as he was out of sight of the Muggles. He waited until the prat was finished, then snatched him by the ear in a hard-pinching grip.

"Listen well, *boy*," Severus hissed as Ron scrambled to try and release himself. "You were *lucky* that Crookshanks and I didn't claw off your balls, that night...and if *ever* catch you with a Love Philtre in your possession again, I shall inject my strongest, most concentrated Shrinking Solution under your foreskin!" Shoving the boy away, he allowed the concealment charm to fade, revealing his disdain. "You are so *stupid*, you have utterly failed to realize that there is no force in this world capable of making Hermione *Snape* do anything she doesn't wish to do.

"If you wish to retain her friendship, it is up to *you* to apologize for causing a scene, and to make amends to her. Starting with polite, civilized behaviour. *If* you can."

Making a show of stepping up to one of the bathroom sinks, Severus scrubbed his hands, glancing over at the young man.

"...As you can see, I literally wash my hands of you. If you ever choose to visit, do try to be polite and civilized."

"Or what?" Ron challenged him.

"Or I shan't stop my *wife* from casting whatever spells she wants on you. *Do* try to enjoy the party in a civilized manner."

Wiping his hands on a towlette...rather than that freckled face on the floor...Severus returned to his bride in the church's reception hall. Hermione clasped his hand, leaning close to whisper a query in his ear.

"What happened?"

"I gave him a warning. Either he acts politely from now on, or I'll refuse to stop you from hexing him six ways from St. Mungo's."

"You say the sweetest things." Kissing him on the cheek, Hermione wrapped her arm around his ribs, snuggling close. "My pretty Puss-in-Boots."

"Hermione, I am *not* 'pretty'," he complained, wincing at the appellation.

"You haven't looked in the mirror since you put on your tuxedo, have you?" she retorted lightly. "Trust me, you are the most drop-dead gorgeous man in the room."

"How apropos, considering some of these guests do want me to 'drop dead'. A pity, as I shall not be able to oblige them," he murmured with a smirk.

"Let them suffer. As for myself...I'm too busy thinking about *tonight*."

"Hm. Yes." Now that they were safely and legally married, that was his other source of stress. Their wedding night. "Do you think Nymphadora and Kingsley could Obliviate all the guests quickly enough, if I were to just throw you over my shoulder and Apparate out of here with you?"

She paused, visibly giving it careful, serious thought. Hermione's grandmother approached before she could reply, though.

"What a beautiful wedding, dearie. My goodness, he cleans up handsomely! Christmas wasn't bad, but this is much better! Mind you put him in some colours, of course" Gran Granger ordered her descendant. "Black makes him look a little sallow. And *you*, my dear child, look like the perfect bride...except for your hair, which you get from your grandfather's side..."

Hermione met his gaze over her grandmother's shoulder as they embraced, giving him a silent plea to be patient, and sympathy for having to be patient. Severus sighed and rubbed at the crease in his brow to try and prevent another scowl. Just a few more hours, and they could finally be alone as husband and wife.

...

"*Finally*."

Severus wanted to echo the sentiment, but he was too exhausted. After having had their Portkey to the Romanian village of Bruga-Azuga...a newly established wizarding ski-resort...rerouted three times to avoid a huge snowstorm covering half of Eastern Europe, their plans for their honeymoon had almost fallen through. But they were here at last, with the door to their suite safely locked behind him.

They definitely weren't here for the skiing, though Severus did have vague ideas of coming up for air long enough to go hunting for rare snowblood flowers...an ideal additive for most potions and unguents that had to be kept chilled at all times, since it physically chilled its surroundings even when dried and ground into a fine powder, but didn't actually interact with most other ingredients. No, they were here to spend as much time alone together as possible, without having to bother with mundanities, such as cooking their own food. This suite was ideal for that, since it came with a fully stocked snack-bar, a jacuzzi, and a big, bouncy bed. Severus knew it was bouncy, because Hermione bounced when she dropped onto it, then bounced again when she flopped onto her back with a sigh.

And promptly fell asleep.

Stifling a yawn, Severus flicked his wand at his newly married bride. Hermione had changed out of her wedding gown into jeans and a brown jumper, practical, comfortable garments meant for traveling. Practical was the word for it, since she had worn a pair of white trainers under the long hem of her gown, to give her feet something comfortable to wear all throughout the ceremony and reception. But when he magically stripped off her outer layers, he found her still clad in white satin lingerie, replete with a ribbon-trimmed suspender-belt holding up a pair of silk hosiery. It provided a frame for the scrap of fabric shielding her mound, and matched the ribbon-trimmed scraps cupping her breasts.

Part of his body stirred at the sight, but only because it was such a lovely sight. The rest of him yawned again. Two more flicks of his wand divested his own outer layer of clothes...a dark blue jumper and dark grey wool slacks...and a third removed his boots and undergarments. A swirl of his wand, a wordless command, and her body lifted from the edge of the bed. Pulling back the thick feather duvet, Severus settled Hermione on the soft white sheets.

She shivered a little and rolled onto her side, giving him a lovely view of her delightfully rounded, satin-clad buttocks. Some of his interest rose further...but he could barely keep his eyes open. Climbing into bed behind her, he scooted up against her back, spooning as close as he could. A tug of the sheet and duvet covered both of them, and the warmth of their cuddled bodies overcame the chill in the air.

The last thing Severus did was to worm his left arm under the pillow beneath her head, and delve the fingers of his right hand down under the waistband of her bikini-cut knickers. Neither of them had spent an entire night with the other while both were in human form; it hadn't been deemed safe by either of them. As much as he really wanted to deflower his wife and bind himself to her in that last and most physical of ways, he knew his performance would suffer if he didn't get at least *some* sleep. With the scent of her hair tickling his nostrils, and his erection nestled between the satin-covered cheeks of her bum, Severus closed his eyes and gave in to his exhaustion.

...An unknown time later, the most heavenly feeling roused him from the depths of slumber. Wet, sliding heat enveloped his prick, while gently scraping nails teased at his scrotum. Soft hair tickled at his thighs, while the crackle and hiss of a fire in the bedroom hearth mingled with the suckling noises his bride made as she savoured him from glans to root and back.

This wasn't the first time she had awakened him this way. The first time, he had bedded down with Hermione curled up in a fuzzy bundle just under his chin, carefully shaped as a cat while he remained shaped like a man. Back then, he had gone to sleep with her juices smeared happily over his face, content that he had pleased her thoroughly.

Waking up to her mouth combined with her scent had been indescribable. Bliss on earth. Since then, sometimes she would wake him, and sometimes he would wake her, and often they would finish waking each other together. But not this morning.

He missed that scent. He missed *her*, though she was only half a body-length away. Unfortunately, months of practice had made his beautiful bride quite proficient at pleasing him. Slipping one saliva-lubricated finger into his rectum, she twisted her hand just enough to curl her finger upward in a *come-here* motion, sliding the pad of her finger gently, repeatedly over his prostate. At the same time, her thumb...also dampened by occasional passes of her tongue whenever she worked her way down to his sac...rubbed his perineum in a gentle, circular caress.

And then, the *coup de grace*. The far-too-smart and way-too-observant woman *breathed* on his nether-hairs. Severus' eyes snapped open, then rolled back in his head. His abdomen clenched against the lightning that prickled across his nerves. It was followed by a choked sound as she lunged up and swallowed him down, lodging the head of his erection against the back of her mouth.

Severus didn't know if he was into her throat or not. All he knew was that the pressure was mind-blowing. Loin-blowing, too. Clutching her head, trying not to pull on her hair, he groaned with the shuddering force of his release. She coughed a little, backed up an inch, and sucked on him, at first strongly, then more gently, with little pauses in between to silently, discreetly Banish his seed directly from her tastebuds.

When the streaks faded from his vision, when his eyes could relax enough to focus upon the ceiling of their ski-lodge suite, Severus managed to release her head. Hands flopping onto the bed, he breathed and blinked, and felt her crawling up the length of his torso. Squirming to brace herself on one elbow, Hermione dropped her other arm around his ribs, giving him a squeeze and a pleased grin.

"Good morning, husband!

A very *good...yes...* Managing a nod, he licked his lips and asked the question uppermost in his racing mind. "Have you visited the loo, yet?"

She quirked her brows at him, chuckling at the off-beat question. Months of enjoying each other's company as human-and-lapcat had rendered a few biological boundaries obsolete, but even he had to admit it was an odd thing to ask on one's honeymoon. "Yes, of course. I woke up a little cold, so I built up the fire, then had a pee. I even brushed my teeth!"

"Good." That fit in with his plans quite nicely. *Now if only I can get some energy back into my legs...*

"Shall I order breakfast? Or shall we just snuggle under the covers and sleep in some more?"

That wasn't in his morning plans, though he supposed breakfast wouldn't be amiss at some point. "I'd rather visit whatever passes for a litterbox, then come back to you."

"Snuggling it is!" Twisting onto her back, Hermione grinned and stretched her arms over her head. She angled an amused look his way. "...You know, you *don't* have to be a cat to be naked in a bed with me, anymore."

"I know. I'll be back shortly." Aware of the potential for morning-breath, Severus merely caught her hand and kissed the back of it with dry lips, then hauled himself out of their bed before he could be tempted into doing more, just yet. Taking his wand, he retired to the bathroom.

The sight of both of their toothbrushes laid out on the lavatory counter touched him. Hermione hadn't just unpacked her own toiletries, she had unpacked his as well. Resolving to show his appreciation, he attended to his various morning needs, then quietly placed an order via Patronus for a suitable breakfast to be readied and brought to their door in roughly two hours.

By the time he re-entered the bedroom, most of his energy had come back from its bliss-filled vacation. Seeing his bride sprawled across the covers revived his erection. The sun had risen a while ago, and now peeked in through a gap in the velvet curtains sheltering the bedroom window. It poured golden-white light across a strip of her abdomen and defined the shadow of the arm she had angled across her belly, giving her fingers access to her groin.

The sight of Hermione pleasuring herself almost made him miss the spoon she was licking. A glance at the bedside table showed an opened vial of neatly labelled Nihou Dze, replete with the *SH!* logo on its label. Relieved, Severus crossed to the bed, set down his wand, gently plucked the spoon from her fingertips, and poured himself a dose of the contraceptive draught. Once it was drunk, Severus found himself pulled into bed before he could set the spoon down. Smirking, he tossed the spoon onto the floor, delved his fingers through his bride's mussed curls, and claimed her mouth.

The seaweedy taste of the Nihou mixed awkwardly with the mint of his toothpaste, but Hermione didn't care. Finally...*finally*...they were going to go all the way. Frankly, the only reason why she had slept at all was due to sheer, waylaid-traveller's exhaustion. And since it was her fault that she had fallen asleep first, well, she had done her best to make it up to her man.

My man. It was hard to kiss him when she wanted to grin at that thought. He wasn't the first stray she had picked up and adopted...Harry, Ron, and Crookshanks had come along well before Severus...but he was definitely the best. Nuzzling her way to the soft spot below his ear, she licked the side of his throat while he nipped at her collarbone. *My kitty-cat, too...my grumpy, snarky, utterly cuddle-worthy pussy-cat...*

A few minutes later, as he nipped his way past the curls below her belly, swirling the tip of his nose in counterpoint to the flicking of his tongue, she silently added, *Though he's the one about to lick my pussy...* The naughty thought combined with the tickling from his shoulder-length hair, making her laugh. Curling her stomach-muscles, she reached down and cupped his head, guiding him into place.

Ignoring her silent suggestion, Severus pushed her knees up and out, laving the soft skin of her inner thigh. He mock-bit her muscles, growling and scraping his teeth lightly, then darted in for a lightning-fast lap of her moistened flesh. But that was all he did with the seam of her femininity for several minutes more, choosing instead to torment with ticklish licks of the seams between her hips and thighs.

"Please...please, Severus!" Hermione finally begged.

Stopping for a moment...deliberately, so that each word would breathe itself on her nether-curly...he dared to say, "That is precisely what I am trying to do. *Please* you."

"*Lick* me!" she demanded. Then bit her lower lip, whimpering while he complied.

He, too, licked his fingers and tucked them inside her body, though not into her rectum. And he slid two inside, not just one, before fluttering them in an upward, beckoning motion. Hermione felt her toes curling as that unbearable, urgent sensation built up within her again.

"Come for me," Severus urged her, speaking in that same, quiet, ear-straining tone he had used back in his classroom days. "*Come* for me...come, my pretty puss...let me pet you until you *come*..."

Sparks streaked behind her fluttering eyelids as Hermione came. They mixed madly with images of her and him in a classroom setting, yet also of her being *graded* on her performance in bed...and she nearly laughed as she orgasmed, thinking, *Double-O score, for Outstanding Orgasm...ah, Severus!* His name emerged as a choked, broken cry, for he had shifted his hand so that his long first and middle fingers rubbed against her inner wall, while his thumb circled and stimulated her clit. The rest of him was busy suckling up the juices she spilled over his palm.

Gentling his touch, he soothed her through her sensitive stage, then began all over again, though he didn't remove his fingers from her flesh. First he tickled her inner

thighs with his hair and his breath, then he licked and nipped with his tongue and his teeth. After a few more minutes, the pressure in her blood built up again, making her undulate into his gentle, pumping strokes. She winced a little when he slipped three fingers inside, relaxed as he lapped again for moisture...then whimpered when he withdrew his fingers after only a few minutes.

"Severus! ...Why did you *stop*?" Hermione whinged, hating that she was whinging, unhappy that he had stopped and thus frustrated her, yet perversely loving *how* he had frustrated her.

Licking the last of her dew from his fingers, Severus crawled up over her. Dipping his head, he nipped at her mouth with his own, then growled in her ear. "Because I want you on all fours when I *mate* with you."

The suggestion went straight to her hindbrain. Moaning, Hermione writhed and twisted onto her belly, then pushed up onto her palms and knees. Back swaying, thighs shifting, she purred and kneaded her fingers into the bedding. Rising over her, curling over her back, Severus covered her with his body. With his body cradling hers, thigh to thigh, belly to back, he nuzzled aside her curls with nose and chin and kissed the muscles of her shoulders. At the other end of her torso, his revived erection bumped and rubbed between her thighs, nudging her slick center.

They stayed like that for a few moments, nuzzling and rubbing, until Hermione bowed her back. Needy, she reached between her legs, and tilted her hips, trying to grab his tip to get it in the right spot. She wanted actual penetration, not just unclothed frottage.

Her frustrated growl was incredibly sexy. Sliding back, Severus levered himself upright. She growled again, the hand between her thighs straining to reach his shaft. Grasping the problem...literally, with one hand on her hip and the other on his erection...he aligned their bodies just so, prodding the desire-swollen folds of her loins.

The one thing he didn't have to worry about was lubrication; plenty of it had rubbed off onto his shaft, and enough still coated the back of his hand to rub against himself. But it didn't matter; once he had her positioned, she pushed herself back onto him, more than eager to see the deed done. Shifting both hands to her hips, he guided her into a gentle, increasingly penetrative rhythm. She actually provided most of the effort; all he had to do was bite his lower lip in the struggle to keep from losing control as his woman, his bride, his *wife* sheathed him inch by delicious, warm, wet, tight inch.

Hermione moaned, thrusting back more and more. This was better than his fingers, a little larger, smoother, firmer... It stung a little, but the rest of felt so good, so needy, so *primal*, she had to have more. Panting, rocking, she impaled herself deeper, until that thickest spot on his shaft, about a third of the way from the base, lodged against the ring of skin forming her hymen. Bracing her arms, she rested for a moment, then gritted her teeth and pushed her hips backward with a grunt. Severus caught on within a moment, pulling her against him as he thrust his own hips forward, and a glance down that had him biting his lip even harder.

This image...I must get my hands on a Pensieve, and preserve this image for posterity...and future perving... Nothing could have been more perfect than the sight of his shaft glistening with essence of Hermione as it delved deeper and deeper into his wife's body. *Nothing...*not even Voldemort's death, which he would only ever be able to see via a Pensieve, should someone who had been there be so kind as to share that moment with him. And now...his black hairs brushed up against her brown, she had buried him that deeply within her body. *Must bottle this...momentous moment...for our wedding anniversary... God, yes!*

Hermione was glad he had had gone slow. It didn't really hurt, but it was tight. There had been a brief, private wizarding ceremony during the signing of the marriage contract, involving the pricking of thumbs and the mingling of blood, which took care of silly, archaic things like one's maidenhead...provided one's deflowerer was one's husband...and was even supposed to ease some of the pains of labour, though hopefully it would be several years before they'd find out about that. Right now...Hermione was just happy to rest and enjoy the strange yet delicious sensation of being filled. Of being connected to her mate.

Severus had to swallow carefully, swirling his saliva in his mouth to make sure it didn't contain any blood. The worry came from the stinging pain of his lower lip, which was keeping him just on the near side of an orgasm. When he was sure he hadn't pierced his skin, when he was reasonably sure he could move without climaxing, he rocked gently within her tight embrace, lubricating their connection.

One of his gentle thrusts was a little more forceful than the others, mainly because Hermione added to its impetus with a shift of her weight. That rubbed the head of his shaft against that spot inside her depths, and *that* rolled her eyes back in her head. A strangled grunt escaped her...and the considerate bastard stopped.

"Are you all right?" Severus enquired quickly.

Hermione managed another strangled sound, and strained to rock against him. He held her still, frustrating her, until she gave up and grunted, "*Fuck me!*"

One of his brows rose. He was so non-plussed at her bluntness, Severus wasn't even sure if he was aroused or shocked by it. Or both. He could do both. Rocking gently once more, he was met with a growl and a shove of her arms, forcing herself backward onto him. Buttocks met groin, and though she grunted, she pulled herself forward and thrust back again.

It felt so good, his eyes rolled back behind his lids. Grabbing her hips, Severus thrust back, yanking her into a hard rhythm. The first shriek from his mate unnerved him, but he wasn't imprisoning her, wasn't forcing himself on her; *she* thrust back even harder, and growled his nickname.. *Puss!*...and clawed at the bedding, going wild. It took Severus a few more thrusts to realize why, as his body sorted out the sensations of his prick thrusting deep inside her slick flesh. He was rubbing against her magic-spot with each firm stroke.

Safe behind her back, Severus grinned ferally and bucked into her all the harder. Hermione shouted, then grabbed the nearest pillow and hauled it under her chest, growling and biting the corner. All he could think when he saw that was, *My mate! Mine!* Giving reign to his instincts, he folded himself down over her back, shifted his palms from her hips to her breasts for a quick caress, then curled them up over her shoulders from beneath.

Letting her take some of his weight, Severus hauled hard on her torso, slamming her onto him as he jerked his hips. A growl of his own escaped his throat...the friction was unbelievable, the position and its pressure blissful beyond words. Their flesh slapped together, but within moments it was lost under his growls and her shrieks. Within moments, she howled and writhed wildly beneath him, making it all he could do to hold onto her body, to hold onto their rhythm. Warm wetness showered his loins as she shrieked again in her climax.

The release of his own pleasure heated and flooded her depths, soothing and smoothing out an act that had threatened to chafe from friction. His own shuddering thrusts, breaking and losing their rhythm only briefly, made her tremble with a second, smaller orgasm, and a third... Gulping down heaving lungfuls of air, Hermione clutched at the mangled hotel pillow that was holding her up just enough to keep her face from suffocating in the bedding beneath their combined, slumped weight.

And then he pulled out of her, eliciting a faint whimper of disappointment and loss. At least her very thoughtful husband had the presence of mind to shift his hands from clutching to caressing, soothing her down from her shuddering plateau. He also pressed his lips to her shoulder blades, then her ribs, saluting either side of her spine until he reached her buttocks...where he gently bit each one, scraping his teeth lightly over her flesh.

And then the brilliant bastard licked her center, lapping up their combined moisture and circling the orgasm-swollen peak between her nether-lips. Hermione moaned clutched tightly at her pillow, binding herself in place, a willing victim to such sensitive, sweet torture. Adding in his nose, lips, and fingertips prolonged and re-aroused her pleasure.

Only when she had shuddered through two more medium-sized orgasms did his bride finally shift away from his mouth, twisting so that her crossed legs protected herself from any further exploration and manipulation. Crawling up over her body, Severus dipped his head, pressing soft kisses to her chin and cheek. The sound of her sigh, deeply sated and very contented, accompanied another twist of her body, until she was lying mostly on her back. Easing down beside her, Severus half-covered her, hauling her close with an arm around her ribs.

Severus kissed her, gentle salutations of his mouth meeting hers. A gentle dessert, the kind meant to accompany a robust meal. He wasn't normally a man for sweets, but

this was the perfect time for sweetness.

Hermione kissed him back, wrapping her upper arm around his waist. Her lower one was getting squished between them, while his was providing her head a sort of pillow...with the real one shoved out of the way, now that it was no longer needed...but such discomforts weren't overly important. Particularly when he eased onto his back, urging her to shift and plaster herself against his side. Once settled, Hermione couldn't reach his lips anymore, but she could press kisses to his chest. A final, contented sigh, and she snuggled her head against his sweat-clammy skin.

"I ordered breakfast from the lavatory," Severus confessed. That shifted her head enough to glance up at him. "It won't be here for another hour or so."

"Mm, good. I feel like sleeping in again."

He smirked. "Poor puss. Did I wear you out?"

"Mm. Prrawrrrrrrr," she mock-growled, and nipped at his chest before resettling her cheek against his muscles. "*Mine*."

"Hm."

"Mm?"

"Great minds think alike."

"...You know what I'd like?" Hermione asked after another moment.

"Name it."

"What?"

"Name it, and you'll have it," Severus elaborated.

Hermione grinned and squeezed his ribs with the arm still wrapped around his body. "That herbology book I packed in my bag, the one that has the description and uses of snowblood? Could we...you know..."

"...Fetch it and read it?" Severus enquired, finishing her request. Stretching out his arm, he managed to snag his wand, and flicked it. "*Accio*."

Then quickly snapped his wand through the air, stopping the sudden lurching of her entire suitcase from its spot on the low bureau-dresser over by the bathroom door. The snickering of his wife didn't help, though he did do a neat job of unzipping the case, extracting the book, and levitating the two in opposite directions, the suitcase back to the dresser-top and the book into his wife's outstretched hand. Tucking his wand onto the dresser, he plucked the book from her hand, nudged her arm back into place around his chest, and thumbed open the tome, searching for the right spot.

"I love you." The almost shy way she said it made him smile. Hermione elaborated, snuggling closer. "I mean, this isn't a sofa, and it isn't five years in the future...but what other man would be *willing* to read a book with his bride on their honeymoon? And do it right after the best smashing sex of her life?"

That made him scowl briefly, looking down his nose at her. "Hermione we did *not* 'have sex'. We *made love*. Rabid, sheet-clawing, pleasure-howling *love-making*. Do get it straight."

"Or what?" she asked, smirking. "You'll demonstrate the difference."

Wincing, he gave her an irritated look. "I have just orgasmed twice in a row, Puss. Give me at *least* six hours to recover, or you'll break me before you've had me out of the box for a single day!"

Hermione thought about that for a few moments, before offering, "...How about eight hours?"

"Eight?" he asked, curious. "Why eight?"

"That gives us an hour to read, an hour for breakfast and a shower, four hours for hunting down snowbloods, another hour to warm up in that scrumptious bathtub-built-for-two I saw in the loo, roughly an hour for dinner, and then we can get back to the rabid, howling, toe-curling, wild-beast-style *love-making* we were doing earlier. Though I did rather like those tender kisses at the end, there. Do you think we could try tender, next time?"

"Provided you don't attack me like a puss-in-heat next time, I suppose we could *try*," he teased, and cleared his throat as she opened her mouth to object. "'*Dicentra frigidopida*, commonly known as winterhearts in the Americas and snowbloods in Europe, are a rare variant *otlicentra wizardosa*, or wizard's bleeding heart,'" Severus recited. "'Transplanted to Europe in the late nineteenth century by wizarding explorers of the Pacific Northwest, the snowblood is of particular use in the Arts of Alchemy and Artificing for their unusual thermal properties...'"

Feeling so happy, she could have purred even as a human female, Hermione rested her cheek on his chest, feeling his voice as much as hearing it. *And to think, it all started because Ron wanted to marry me, and I had to escape him after I said no...and found a poor, starving, stray cat in that alley behind St. Mungo's...*

Thinking about that moment made her think of poor Viktor Krum. *He liked me. He wanted to date me, and I tried for a little while...but though he was as handsome in the same way I find Severus handsome...dark and in need of a good cuddle...he was rather like Ron. More into physical pursuits than cerebral. We'd never have made it.*

Still, I think I owe him a thank-you. Maybe I can convince Severus to name one of our children Viktor, if we ever get around to having any? Not that I want any for several years, and maybe only one or two, if that... Yes, Viktor is a good name for a boy. Or Viktoria for a girl...

"Hermione, are you even paying attention?"

Honesty was the best policy. "Nope. I'm in love with the sound of your voice, and am happy to just hear you speak."

Non-plussed, Severus blinked, cleared his throat, and found his place again. "Well...I'll just have to assign you a twelve-inch parchment on the identification features of the plant."

Hermione laughed at that. Shifting her arm from his ribs to his abdomen, she cupped his relaxed loins. "How about a nice six-inch scroll, instead?"

"You don't get to go out and buy a replacement, so kindly do not break me, Madam Snape."

That made her shiver. "Ooh! Say it again."

"What, do not break me?"

"No, my name," Hermione ordered, giving him a quick, gentle squeeze.

"Madam Snape...Madam Snape!" he repeated firmly, scowling at her...though she could see the gleam of love lurking in his dark eyes. "Unhand me at once, and open this book to page 279, or I'll give you a tongue-lashing!"

"How about, *and* you'll give me a tongue lashing?" she asked, feeling her desire returning, now that it had enjoyed sufficient time to rest.

Considering her words, Severus arched a brow and shifted the tome out of her reach. "I've changed my mind. You will give me an *oral* presentation...consisting of repeated laps whilst I start again from the beginning. At the end of it, if you can recite the ten salient features and properties of the snowblood..."

This was a much better idea. Intrigued, Hermione levered herself up on one elbow. "Yes?"

"...You may attempt to break me. *After* we have broken our fast."

Squirming down the bed, she crawled between his legs, settled herself on her belly, elbows propping her up and ankles crossed over her buttocks, since otherwise her legs would have hung off the end of the bed. A smile, and she positioned herself just so. "Ready when you are!"

"*Ahem. 'Dicentra frigidopida*, commonly known as winterhearts in the Americas and snowbloods in Europe....'"

Grinning, Hermione enthusiastically began her 'assigned' task.

God bless poor Viktor Krum...and God bless my very own, book-loving Puss-in-Boots. Mmm, yesss... Thank you, God, for giving me my Severus Snape!

THE END