

Auld Lang Syne

by Celisnebula

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"You do realize that this treatment might not work," the American Healer said, his long fingers absently toying with the mechanical pen. "It comes down to various factors, the first being the Memory Charm you placed on your mother ten years ago. While I am sure that it was done properly, the human mind is a tricky thing, so there really is no way to tell if this is a by-product of that charm, or a natural case of dementia."

"She's only fifty-six years old. These symptoms didn't start manifesting themselves until my..." I broke off, trying to compose myself before continuing. "Until my father died."

"As I said, the human mind is uncharted waters for both the magical and the Muggle medical communities. That is why Memory Charms, in all forms, are on the prohibited magic list, at least here in the States. There's no telling what the actual, long-term effects will be on anyone. Quite frankly, it's no surprise to me that your mother is having these sorts of episodes, not when you consider the considerable strain your father's death must've caused; that in conjunction with the fact that you removed whole portions of her memory ten years ago."

"It's all my fault," I whispered softly, interrupting him.

"No, Miss Granger, that isn't what I'm saying at all. You are not responsible for this. Theoretically, there is no reason why the spell you placed on your mother, and later dispelled, should be causing this..." His voice trailed off. "In any event, laying blame does no good. This is a medical problem, and we shall do our best to help your mother's situation."

"What will I need to do?" I asked. I had every intention of doing whatever it took to make my mother well; it was obviously my fault she was in this state, despite what the doctor claimed.

The chair creaked in protest as he swiveled around and opened a filing cabinet just to his right. He shuffled through a few files before extracting a thick packet of documents.

"These," he said, handing the papers over to me, "explain the process we'll be undertaking after the initial physical and magical work up. The regimen of potions, along with observations from both magical medical specialists, in conjunction with the Muggle dementia and Alzheimer's specialist we have on staff, should hopefully lead to, well, not a cure, but at least a lessening of her severe symptoms."

I quickly scanned the first few pages while he continued talking.

"There is a time-table attached. If you'll notice, about once a month she'll be required to stay in our facility for five days of observation; this is an imperative part of the treatment, as we need to see how each and every patient reacts to the various combinations of potions."

"Are they harmful?" I asked, interrupting him.

"While preliminary tests show no, you do have to remember this is phase one of the clinical trial, so we won't know until we actually start administering them."

"Wait a minute. This is still in clinical testing? How, then, did my mum become a part of this?"

"I assume through the normal channels." He opened the chart on his desk. "These records indicate that St. Mungo's was initially consulted about her condition, yet rejected because of her non-magical status. Despite St. Mungo's initial rejection, it appears as though one of the attending Healers cared enough to forward your mother's case on to us. From there, we contacted her Muggle physician. In fact," he said, flipping through the pages, "it looks as if there was significant correspondence between one of our key specialists, Dr. Shaw, and your mother's primary Muggle physician, after the Healer at St. Mungo's contacted us regarding your mother's case."

"Oh," I said softly. "Is that how it's normally done?"

"On occasion. There's also an introductory letter from your Ministry of Magic, I suppose that didn't hurt either." He closed the file and stood up. "Now, I'm sure you'll want to take that paperwork home and read through it. If you have any questions at all, please feel free to use the clinical number provided in that packet."

I quickly scrambled out of my chair, gripping my purse so hard my fingers were nearly white. "When will the treatments start?"

"Stop by the front desk. I'm sure we can schedule some sort of physical in the next day or so. From there we'll decide which course of action to take next. I do caution you to read over that informational packet before your mother's first appointment. Once she's inducted into the trial, we'll need you to adhere to the outlined policies."

"Thank you, Dr. Albright." I stuck out my hand, and he gripped it in a firm handshake.

"You are quite welcome, Miss Granger."

oOo

Since Dad's death twenty-seven months ago, Mum hasn't been herself. It started with simple things, a missed appointment here or there...but it progressed past that very quickly. I was so wrapped up in my own life that I didn't notice. Or maybe I just didn't care to notice.

I suppose it was rather easy for me not to notice. I lived in London with Harry and Ron at Grimmauld Place and rarely went to my parents' house; the memories were too painful with Dad gone. I was too caught up in my life now that Voldemort was gone; too caught up in righting all those perceived wrongs of the British Wizarding world. I had taken the concept behind S.P.E.W. and, with some backing from Harry, 'the savior of the wizarding world,' had convinced the Ministry to create a new, adjunct position in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It was a rather tenuous position, since the long-held prejudices against magical beings were hard to eradicate; I'd been fighting an uphill battle for more years than I cared to admit, but I was filled with righteous indignation on their behalf.

I freely admit, I probably didn't see what was happening with Mum because I didn't want to see it. By the time one of Mum's neighbors found a way to contact me in London and explained what they had witnessed, it was clear I couldn't leave her on her own any longer.

At first I tried various options, from hiring a house-elf (which was a singular disaster of untold proportions on so many levels), to hiring a Muggle home aid to stay with her. Nothing worked. Mum didn't react well to strangers in her house (or as in the case of the house-elf, strange creatures). It quickly became apparent that I had to live with her.

I applied for a leave of absence from work and started focusing on what was important, taking care of my mum. Things with Ron started getting strained after that. He knew how important this was to me, family *is* everything, and I thought that I could count on him and count on his support during this ordeal. Family is everything all right... when it's *his* family.

Wait... I'm not being fair. Ron honestly tried. He was understanding, to a point, and he tried to be supportive, but I was (or rather am) obsessed with getting my mum well, and so everything else was... well, Ron wasn't my number one priority any longer. It was as much my fault as it was his, and so it was without malice that we agreed to take a break from each other. I honestly believed we'd work things out once I got Mum on firmer footing.

After that I threw myself into seeking treatment for Mum's symptoms. St. Mungo's did an initial exam and said it could possibly be the result of a spell or that it could also be a natural progression of a Muggle illness, but they couldn't (or rather wouldn't) treat her because she was a Muggle. No amount of cajoling or endorsement from Harry would change their stance. The first Muggle doctor I took her to had no idea why she had slipped into dementia so quickly after Dad's death and suggested I look for an assisted-living treatment center for her. The rest of the Muggle doctors I went to afterwards all had the same advice, and frankly, I found that untenable.

I was at my wits' end when I received an acceptance letter for Mum to this posh American medical facility. Now, I didn't apply for it, and I honestly wasn't sure how they got Mum's information, but I was relieved. Not relieved enough to go running off to them without investigating the company (no easy feat when you're an ocean away), but what I did learn was that the medical facility was a legitimate company, a collaboration between Muggle and magical medicine. It was an intriguing idea, a blending of two medical cultures in the hopes of servicing all. The fact that all the employees, Muggles and wizards alike, were from a magical background allowed the company to work around the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy.

The program required major upheaval; to take part in the program we'd both have to live in the States. I wasn't about to send Mum off to a foreign country on her own. There was no telling how long the program would take, or even if...and yes, this was a *major* if...the program would work. When I initially sent back my first inquiry about the program, I mentioned the fact that living in a hotel for an undetermined amount of time whilst Mum was receiving treatment might not be the most economical plan, and that alone would make the treatments too financially exorbitant to consider.

I didn't expect to hear from them again after that. It wouldn't have made economic sense. If I couldn't afford to put Mum through the program, then they wouldn't want to use her; emerging medical studies had to be very conscious of the amount of money coming in and out of the clinical trial program.

A month later, I received a letter from the program director stating funding and living arrangements had been provided for Mum and me if we were still interested in the program. In all honesty, I had thought Harry pulled some strings, though he'd never admit to using his famous position for any gain. And I wasn't about to complain, had he done so. Mum needed this.

It took nearly four more months to get to the point where we were ready to leave England...packing, making arrangements for the house, passports, visas (since Mum's a Muggle, and Muggle authorities don't take too kindly to the concept of open borders), and things of that nature. Thank goodness I didn't have to worry about the dental practice. It was still technically Mum's practice, but she and Dad had pared down their hours and hired two dentists before his death in anticipation of retirement.

It could've (or rather would've) gone far faster had I used magic, but Mum was skittish around it, so I decided it would be far easier, and less of a headache, to do things the Muggle way.

Ron and I had one of our biggest rows during this time, and he made it very clear that he wasn't going to wait around, being second in my life when I should've been putting him first (time off notwithstanding). There was no way I could just abandon my mum. She needed me, and there wasn't anyone else I could trust to take care of her. I couldn't understand why he was being so stubborn about it. Had it been anyone in his family, he would've moved heaven and earth to ensure that they were taken care of. Why was my mum less important?

That was one of the last conversations I had with anyone before Mum and I flew to the States.

One of the clinic's representatives met us at the airport, a nervously chatty witch who talked around a wad of chewing gum. In her nasally accent, she explained that the building we were going to be living in was actually owned by the parent company of the clinic. It normally housed various doctors, potions experts, executives and other employees, all of whom lived abroad but were required to spend weeks at a time in the States. It was far easier to have furnished apartments for these various people to move into than to send them to a hotel for an undetermined amount of time.

I was so tired; I don't remember what else she talked about as she drove us to the apartment complex.

oOo

Between the packet of papers from Dr. Albright and the shopping I had to do afterwards, I was quite overloaded as I trudged into the apartment building. Our flat was on the tenth floor, and I for one was extremely glad the building had an elevator.

As I made my way to the elevator, I noticed a tall, dark-haired man entering it. I called out for him to, "Hold on a second, please," but he must not have heard me because the silver doors closed just as I neared them. With a sigh, I pressed on the little up arrow, readjusting my grip on the shopping bags. The elevator seemed to take forever to reach me.

Mum was sitting in the reclining chair, stroking Crookshanks, when I barged through the apartment door, arms awkwardly full of chintzy plastic shopping bags.

"Margaret, what on earth are *you* doing here?" she asked in a startled voice.

"Mum... it's Hermione," I replied, kicking the door shut with my foot.

"Oh... Hermione..." She shook her head. "I swear you looked exactly like my sister Margaret for a moment."

"I know, Mum."

"Oh, do put those down, Hermione, and tell me why you've come to visit."

"I live here, remember?"

"Yes, yes, that's right... You live with me now that John's gone."

"That's right, Mum." I leaned down to give her a quick kiss on the cheek as I moved around the recliner, the handles of the plastic bags cutting into the palms of my hands. "I'm going to put this stuff away, I'll be right back."

"You shouldn't be doing that by yourself," she said, getting up from the chair. "I may not remember a lot of things lately, but I think I remember how to put away groceries."

oOo

Frustrated, I threw the hammer across the room. Crookshanks gave me an evil glare as I sucked on the finger I'd just mangled with the hammer. It isn't as if I threw the damn thing in his direction. I wanted to scream out...wail at the enormity of what I had to do...the bitter tang of regret coating my tongue, but I couldn't afford to indulge myself.

With a weary sigh, I navigated around the enormous pile of packed boxes, haphazardly placed furniture shoved in different directions to make way for our own possessions, and other odd bits and ends, to where the hammer innocently lay. My finger throbbed painfully as I bent down to pick up the hammer, the weight of it resting heavily in my hand like a thick, cumbersome wand. I quickly dropped it again.

Crookshanks let out a plaintive "*meow*" and butted his face against my leg, scattering orange fur all over the black material. I scooped him up and hugged him tight to my chest before plopping (most ungainly my mother would say) on the lone piece of furniture properly set up.

"It will get better," I whispered to myself before pressing my face against Crook's neck. His answering purr was almost enough to reassure me.

It will get better, I told myself. It had to.

I looked around the room, the sheer enormity of the mess almost overwhelming. I itched to dig out my wand, I wanted to do it the easy way and sort everything out with the flick of my wrist, but I couldn't. I had to do things the normal...Muggle...way. My mum's health and sanity depended on it.

Giving Crook one last scratch under his chin, I set him on the floor and reached for the nearest box. It was going to be a long night.

oOo

"Who are you?" a voice screeched. "And what are you doing in my..."

I shot up, wiping the sleep from my eyes as I focused on the figure of my mother.

"What happened to my house?" she wailed.

"Mum," I said thickly, trying to gain her attention.

She spun around, her face twisted in confusion. "Who are you?" she cried.

"It's me, Hermione," I said softly, sitting up on the couch where I must have fallen asleep the night before.

"Hermione?" She shook her head. "No, you're not Hermione. Hermione is..." Her face crumpled as she backed up, bumping into the wall behind her. "John, John, where are you?" she sobbed. "Please, John, this isn't funny."

"Mum," I said with a bit more force, causing her to gasp. Her eyes went wide and she wrung her hands. It was far too early to be dealing with something like this. I pushed myself to my feet and crossed the room to where my mother stood, cowering against the wall.

"Mum," I said in a soft tone, gently touching her hands.

Her fingers stilled and she lifted her face up, blinking her bright eyes. "Hermione?" she whispered.

"Yes," I breathed out with a sigh. "It's me."

"Oh, Hermione, I've had the most horrible dream."

"I know, Mum," I said gently, taking her hand and navigating her down the hallway to her room. "But I'm going to make things better, I promise."

"You're such a good girl," she said with a soft smile.

"Why don't you get dressed," I suggested as I opened her bedroom door. Her room was the only room completely unpacked. "You and I have an appointment."

oOo

As soon as the nurse showed us to one of the patient rooms, I left Mum and ran to the loo. It never fails. I spend any significant amount of time in a waiting room, and a short time later, my bladder feels as if it has to explode. I've been this way since I was little. It's one of life's cosmic jokes, especially since I spent loads of time in my parents' waiting room when I was little...a quirk of fate that existed solely to torture me.

Washing my hands, I caught sight of my reflection. I looked horrible...far too pale with dark circles under my eyes. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to soothe its outrageous condition, and my fingers caught on a snarl. I tugged my way through it, but it was no use; I was a mess. I wearily rubbed my hand across my face and stepped away from the sink. I straightened my shirt, pushed another hand through my hair in a useless effort to control it, and then exited the bathroom.

I wandered back to the patient-room where Mum waited, pausing just outside. I could hear voices on the other side of the thick wood.

"Oh, please call me Ruth," I heard my mum say through the door.

"Fine, Mrs. Granger...er, I mean Ruth."

I stood there, frozen in shock. My mind whispered, *That voice... I know that voice*. It was a voice I hadn't heard in over ten years (and really shouldn't have heard now). I shivered; that voice still had the power to twist up my insides. Instinctively, I reached for the door handle, ready to barge in and confront the owner of that voice.

"Now then," I heard that familiar voice say just as a nurse, dressed in a horrible green hospital uniform, interrupted my impulse with a soft, "Miss Granger?"

"Yes?" I snapped impatiently, turning from the door.

Her features hardened at my harsh tone and she gave me a scathing look. I'd obviously not made an endearing impression. "Dr. Albright would like to speak to you," she said coldly.

"I... but... my mum. Shouldn't I be in there with her?" I asked. "What if she has an episode? It would terrify her to be in surroundings she doesn't know." The nurse's expression changed from one of harsh indifference to sympathy.

"I'm sure Dr. Shaw will be able to deal with any situation that might arise. Many of our patients find him soothing."

"Dr. Shaw? I don't think I've met him..." I said, letting my voice trail off. The nurse noticed my open-ended conversational gambit.

"Oh, he's a shy one. Doesn't care for many people at all...at least not us regular employees...but the patients all love him. Don't be too surprised if you never meet him. If you're not one of the people he's plying his potions to, then you're not important." She glanced down at her wristwatch. "Now, Miss Granger, if you'll please follow me, Dr. Albright is on a tight schedule and he does require a few moments of your time."

I gave the door one last glance before reluctantly following the nurse to Dr. Albright's office.

oOo

I wish I could say that I gave Dr. Albright my full attention, but I was too preoccupied with my suspicions.

Rationally, I knew it couldn't have been him...he was dead. Whilst I didn't witness his demise, Harry had. I had seen the pool of blood staining the rotting wood floor of the Shrieking Shack. I knew how potent Nagini's venom was. I'd seen, first hand, how it affected the human body when she attacked Arthur Weasley in my fifth year. Arthur had barely survived and that was with immediate medical attention.

Snape hadn't been as lucky. Harry had seen the neck wound Nagini inflicted...had seen the man gradually lose consciousness. There was no way Snape could've survived in those circumstances.

Yet, the voice in the back of my head whispered that his body hadn't been recovered.

I was mistaken. That's all. Simply mistaken. One of Mum's doctors merely sounded familiar...a voice garbled by the thick wood of a door.

I shook my head, trying to clear it as the voice in the back of my head whispered *what if* in a seductive manner.

"Do you have any other questions, Miss Granger?" Dr. Albright asked, cutting into my thoughts.

"No," I said softly. "I think you've covered most of what I wanted to ask." Then, giving Dr. Albright a weak smile, I asked him for directions to Dr. Shaw's office. He gave me a puzzled look, until I lied through my teeth and told him I wanted to speak to Dr. Shaw about his initial assessment of my mum.

I would prove to myself that I was mistaken.

oOo

"It *is* you," I whispered, stepping into his office. The door closed with a soft click behind me.

He spun around. "I beg your pardon?"

"I can't believe it. You're alive. I...we all thought you were dead." I let my eyes wander over his body.

"I think you are mistaken."

"No, I'm not," I said softly, stepping closer. "You've changed; your hair is shorter and you've gained some color and weight, but it is definitely you." I hesitated a moment, then whispered, "Professor Snape."

He backed up a few feet and I had to fight off a fit of hysterical laughter. The man who'd terrorized thousands of students, who'd terrorized me and my best mates for nearly six years, was inching away from little old me with a look of abject horror on his face.

"What do you want from me, Miss Granger?" he asked, narrowing his eyes dangerously, dropping all pretenses.

"How about the truth?"

"The truth?" he scoffed. "The truth is I am quite happy with my life as it is right now, and I really don't think I need to justify myself to you, nor to anyone else."

"But, but," I spluttered.

He quirked his left eyebrow. "But what? For all intents and purposes, Severus Snape *is* dead...may the miserable bastard rest in peace...and I would really rather he stayed that way."

"What about all the people who cared for you?"

He let out an inlegant snort. "Surely there were people who cared for you..." I trailed off, looking at him expectantly.

Silence stretched between us, broken only by the sound of someone knocking on his office door.

"Dr. Shaw?" a short nurse inquired, sticking her head inside his door. "Oh, sorry, sir, I didn't realize you were with a patient."

"She's not a patient, and I do believe we are done." He gave me a measured look. "We are finished here, aren't we, Miss Granger?"

His tone brooked no argument, so I simply muttered, "For now,*Dr. Shaw*." He stiffened at my tone, but I wasn't at all ready to let this pass. "I'm sure we can have a *nice* chat at a later date."

oOo

Civilized society could not exist without takeaway. It's one of my fundamental truths. What rational person would cook for themselves when there is such a variety of takeaway, made by people who possibly know more about cooking than the average person? I freely admit, I hate to cook. I hate it with a passion. Mum, even when she was in her right mind, wasn't one for cooking either. That was always Dad's domain.

Just around the corner from the apartment, there's this lovely Indian restaurant. They serve (in my humble opinion) the world's best chicken vindaloo and puliyodarai. Next door is a traditional Italian restaurant, so I'm able to kill two birds with one stone (Mum isn't a fan of Indian food). Now, an intelligent person would use the restaurant's delivery service, but I needed to get out of the apartment for a bit, so when I called in our order, I offered to pick it up.

Though it was only September, the air had a bitter bite to it; I bundled up in my winter togs. I strolled down the street, idly congratulating myself for solving the mystery of Dr. Shaw. While I didn't know all of the particulars, I was pretty sure I could deduce why Snape chose this avenue.

I picked up Mum's order first, then quickly went next door to pick up my own. The scent of exotic spices and cooking meat assailed my nose as I entered. On impulse, I added some garjarela to my order because I was craving something sweet.

Loaded with the food, the warmth tickling my fingers as I carried the bags down the block, I let my mind wander. I should have paid more attention to where I was going. I should have... well I should have done many things.

One minute I'm walking up the apartment walkway, the next, I'm sprawled over some poor bloke, the both of us covered in alfredo sauce and vindaloo chicken. I shifted my weight, trying not to notice how nice the male body under me felt.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, I shifted my weight, trying to find a way to scoot off him without hitting any important appendages.

"Bloody hell," came a muffled oath. "It would be you!"

"Professor Snape?" I gasped, scrambling back and accidentally kneeling him in the groin. "... errr... what are you doing here?" Good Lord, that delicious body belonged to Snape?

He grunted in pain, muttering, "Bloody Arthur Weasley."

That brought me up short. I scooted back over to him. Why would he be cursing Arthur Weasley? "Professor Snape?" I called out hesitantly.

"Don't call me that," he hissed. "It's *Dr. Shaw* or Sebastian."

"Fine. Noted. Don't call the lying bastard by his real name," I snapped.

"I knew this was a mistake," he muttered under his breath.

"What are you doing here?" I asked again.

"I live here," he practically shouted.

"What? Here?" I was aghast. He lived here? "No. You can't live here. I live here." I know I sounded irrational, but really, this was Professor Snape. Who in their right mind would want him as a neighbor?

"Really?" he said in a deceptively soft voice. I stiffened at his tone. He had a way of going deceptively mild before striking with a venomous tirade. "And why would your living here preclude my living here?" he continued. "Do you honestly believe that your venerated presence would be enough to keep the iniquitous and vile masses of the world at bay? Tell me, do you hold your Merlin First Class out from your beating chest like a holy crucifix to ward away those you perceive to be beneath you?"

I gritted my teeth, and then grimaced, giving him a toothy, false smile. "So nice to see that you're as pleasant as ever, *Dr. Shaw*. As you can see," I waved my hands, indicating my position on the hard cement, "I'm fairly swooning at your charm."

"Your wit, as ever, Miss Granger, is startling," he muttered, sitting up.

I sighed. I could feel a colossal migraine forming, throbbing painfully behind my eyes. "I see that time has whittled down the sharp edges of your tongue. Tell me, are you always this pleasant?"

He let out a harsh, barking laugh. It reminded me of Sirius Black. "I am as *needs must when the devil drives*," he said, rising to his feet. He held out a hand. I simply stared at his hand, not quite sure I wanted to take it.

"I stopped grinding up the gristle and bones of little girls for my potions years ago, Granger, if that's what you're afraid of."

"I'm not afraid of you," I said mulishly, grasping his hand firmly. I shifted my body so that he bore the brunt of my weight as I got up.

"And you're certainly not *little*," he grunted.

"How kind of you notice," I shot back. I deliberately turned my back on him and bent down to gather the leaking food containers...supper was an absolute waste. I walked over to the glass door and yanked it open. All I wanted to do was go upstairs and lie down.

"Oh, don't run away on my account," he said in a mocking tone.

I spun around. "I'm not running away."

He shrugged. "Could've fooled me."

"Yes, and you'd know all about running away, wouldn't you," I shot back, then walked through the doorway. I barely heard his reply of, "Touché."

oOo

The rest of the night wasn't much better.

You would think that wizards...or rather British wizards (American's didn't seem to disdain progress), would have better means of communication across vast distances. This is one area where I am not hesitant to say that Muggle technology far outclasses anything the Wizarding world has come up with. American wizards on the whole prefer to use telephones or the public postal system. Apparently, it is far more reliable and faster too. British wizards are... well... less adaptable. They prefer the *traditional* means.

Floo calls across the Atlantic aren't practical, and owls (which are what most British wizards prefer to use) take a bloody long time to deliver a letter. If the letter is urgent, it will be sent via Portkey to one of the local owltries, but it still takes an inordinate amount of time for mail to arrive.

I entered the flat, covered in various sauces and wanting nothing more than a shower and then a long date with my bed. As I entered the kitchen, I noticed the Weasley's batty old owl Errol sitting at the table, a piece of parchment tied to his leg.

I opened the sodden container of vindaloo chicken and put it in front of the owl just before I untied the letter.

I had to read it three times before the words sank in. Ron was married.

There was no rational explanation for the sharp pain I felt in my chest upon reading those words.

Ron was married.

It seemed almost incomprehensible.

I crumpled to the floor, tears spilling down my cheeks as I clutched the letter to my chest.

"Margaret?" Mum called out, rushing to my side. "Whatever is wrong, dear?"

"Ron," I whispered as she sank down to the carpet beside me. "He's married."

"Oh, Margaret," she breathed against my forehead as she gathered me in her arms. "Oh, my poor, poor love."

"I can't believe he did it," I cried against her shoulder as she rocked me back and forth, not caring that she called me Margaret.

Mum hugged me tighter, stroking my hair the way she use to when I was little, muttering, "It's all right, love," over and over again.

She said it with such conviction that I almost believed her.

oOo

The first few weeks of Mum's treatments had her... well... almost normal. True, she called me Margaret more than I'd care to admit and there was a minor meltdown when she discovered we were in the States, but I couldn't deny that she seemed almost like her old self. She shooed me out of the flat on more than one occasion, stating I "needed to go out and do the normal, everyday things young people do." Unfortunately, I didn't feel like going out. I just wanted to bury my head under the covers. The drawback to that, of course, was hearing all about Dr. Shaw.

Mum was clearly enamored of him. It was always Dr. Shaw this, followed by Dr. Shaw that. It was enough to make me want to throw up. I mean really, a personable Snape? Despite the fact that he lived in our building and was, by some horrible twist of fate, one of the specialists treating Mum, I rarely saw him.

Feeling depressed, redundant, and unneeded now that Mum's treatments seemed to be working, I spent time doing research into American Wizarding society...how the Wizarding world meshed with the idea of the American melting pot as well as the Muggle world, and all of the laws surrounding how the various cultures seemed to thrive together. It was rather fascinating, especially given how the American Wizarding society worked. There wasn't one core tradition, as in Britain and most of Europe. It was more a set of core traditions from the various settlers of America. There was the traditional Native American Wizarding culture, the European Wizarding culture, the Vodoun Wizarding culture, along with the various Asian Wizarding cultures. Each were distinct, yet hardly separate as cultures blended together.

I was in the middle of a fascinating book about the Vodoun Wizarding culture when my Mum's voice caught my attention.

"Hermione."

"Hmmm?"

"Did you hear what I just said?"

I looked up from the book I'd been reading. "What's that, Mum?"

Mum shook her head. "I swear, you're as bad as your father. Nose buried in a book and the rest of the world just fades away."

"I'm sorry." I slipped my finger into the book to hold my page and gave her my full attention. "What is it you were saying?"

"Did you know that Dr. Shaw lives in our building?"

"He does?" I asked, trying not to groan.

"He does. Just a floor above us." She wiped a hand down the front of her shirt. "I think we should have him over for tea."

"What?" I spluttered. "But, but..."

"Now, don't take that tone with me."

"You want to have Dr. Shaw over for tea," I said as calmly as possible.

She let out a small snort and shook her head. "Isn't that what I just said?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Snape in my home was an unfathomable idea.

"Hermione Jean Granger, when did you become so ungracious? I raised you better than that," she chided.

I bit my lip, knowing any further arguments would be met with resistance. I came by my stubborn streak honestly. "You're right," I mumbled a moment later.

"Brilliant." She gave me a bright smile. I suddenly felt consigned to hell.

oOo

"Would you get that?" Mum called from the kitchen at the sound of someone knocking. She'd been in there practically all morning, baking. My mum, baking. Apparently the world was spinning backwards.

I pulled the door open, and my jaw dropped in shock. Snape... bloody hell... Snape was hot! I shook my head, trying to clear that errant thought, but it couldn't dispel the vision of him in simple Muggle clothes.

"Are you going to invite me in?" he asked sardonically.

"Oh, right," I muttered, moving aside. "If you would, Dr. Shaw."

He slightly inclined his head and entered the flat.

"Sebastian," Mum called out from the kitchen. "Is that you?"

"Indeed, Ruth," he responded, walking towards the kitchen. I inwardly groaned. Just what I needed, my mum on first name terms with the incognito Snape...a hot Snape no less.

"Oh, you shouldn't have," I heard my mum say as I slowly followed Snape into the kitchen. "Look, Hermione, he's brought a lovely bottle of wine," she said with a bright smile as she handed the bottle to me. "Why don't you air it out, and we'll have a nip of it in a bit."

Alcohol, just what I needed! I searched around in the drawer for the corkscrew as Snape leaned against the wall. I could feel his eyes on me, like a physical caress. Grasping the corkscrew, I viciously plunged it into the cork...a small childish move, but it made me feel better.

I was just reaching for a glass (and nearly dropped it too), when my mum asked, "When did you first come to the States, Sebastian?" I shot Snape a covert glance as I poured the wine. I didn't think he'd answer her.

"Almost ten years," he finally said as I handed him a wine glass.

"Ten years?" Mum exclaimed. "Goodness, that was about the time of that Lord-what's-his-name's mess, wasn't it?"

"Just about," I quipped.

"Well, I'm just thankful Hermione was too young to be involved with that whole mess." She patted me on my cheek, and I flushed. Snape arched his eyebrow.

"Yes, well technically," he said, after a measured moment of silence, "that whole mess was around for years. I moved to the States towards the end of it. I had no desire to see factions of the Wizarding population congratulate themselves for a job well done when most of the bloody bastards did nothing at all."

"Oh," Mum muttered. "It sounds all... well, rather complicated." She took a sip from her wine glass. "Were you a doctor there too?"

I snorted into my wine glass, waiting to hear his response.

"Technically, I'm not a doctor. It's a courtesy title. In Europe I'd be called a Potions master. Here, I'm merely a mad scientist."

Mum wrinkled her brow. "What exactly is a Potions master?"

"He's someone who invents new types of medication, Mum," I answered.

"Ah, that makes sense. So technically you are a doctor, just not a physician." She gave Snape a bright smile, just as the oven alarm gave a slight ding.

"That's one way to look at it," Snape responded as Mum bent down to take the pan out of the oven.

"Oh, just perfect," she exclaimed, pulling out a delicious smelling batch of raisin and currant scones. "Pity these Americans don't understand the beauty that is clotted cream. Ah, well, we shall simply have to make do." She set the pan on top of the range. "Hermione, grab the smoked salmon and dill sandwiches out of the fridge, and please slice them before setting them out. Sebastian, why don't you take a seat at the table. We'll be right there."

As I pulled out the plate of sandwiches from the top shelf, Mum arranged the freshly baked scones on another platter. I moved around the kitchen counter, pulled a knife from the drawer, and started cutting them into little triangles. As soon as I had them all cut and arranged, I picked up the plate and placed it on the table near Snape, moving back into the kitchen to help Mum.

"Grab the tea kettle, would you, love?" Mum asked as she pulled some preserves from the refrigerator. I pulled the kettle out of the cupboard, scattered some tea leaves into the bottom of it, and poured the steaming water on top. I closed the lid tight and wandered back over to the table, sitting as far away from Snape as possible without appearing to be rude.

"This all looks so lovely, but you really shouldn't have gone through so much trouble," Snape said as Mum carried the preserves to the table.

"It was no trouble at all," Mum replied, taking the seat across from him.

"Still, I appreciate the effort. It's been some time since I've had a traditional tea with anyone." I had to bite my tongue to keep from uttering a scathing retort to that admission.

"I'm sure it has been." Mum lifted up the teakettle. "I think this is the first time we've had a proper tea since coming here. Milk or sugar before I pour the tea?" she asked, reaching for his cup.

"Neither."

"Ah good. A man who likes a proper cuppa." She poured the dark liquid into each of our cups. "Not too much sugar, Hermione. It isn't good for your lovely teeth."

I nearly groaned. "Mum," I said as calmly as possible, ignoring the look of faint amusement on Snape's face, "I do think I can handle putting the right amount of sugar. I've been doing it for years."

"Now, if only John...goodness, where is John?" She craned her neck around, confusion etched on her face. "Where am I?"

"Mum?" I called out, hoping I could gain her attention.

"Who are you people?" she whispered, eyes going wide. She scrambled out of the chair and backed up against the counter. She slowly inched her way around it into the kitchen. "You...you tell me what you've done with my John."

"Mum, please."

She cast about the small kitchen with a wild gaze, and then snatched up the small paring knife I'd used earlier. "Tell me who you are," she hissed. "Where's John? What have you done to him?"

"Does it normally happen like this?" Snape asked me in a soft tone.

"Sometimes, though mostly when she's overly tired, which given the amount of baking and cleaning she did earlier, could be today's case as well." I turned my attention back to my mum. "Mum, it's Hermione."

"No, no, no, no!" she yelled. "You're not. Hermione's a little girl, a child. You're some strange adult." She brandished the knife in front of her. "Tell me what you've done with my husband." I could only watch, helpless as she slowly descended into the midst of a horrible episode.

"Ruth," Snape said firmly. "Look at me."

"You keep away...you..." she ranted.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, pulling out his wand. With a swish of his wrist, he called out, "*Petrificus Totalus*," and she crumpled to the floor.

I rushed to her side and tried to pick her up, but she was too heavy.

"Here, let me," he said, picking her up as if she weighed nothing.

"This way," I said around the lump in my throat, leading the way. He said nothing as we walked down the hallway. I wrenched open the bedroom door, holding it so Snape could follow.

"Turn down the covers," he said as he stepped into the room. I quickly complied and he gently set her down on the bed. "*Finite Incantatem*," he muttered, then coughed, as though clearing his throat. "I'll just leave you to make her comfortable." He hesitated for a moment. His hand twitched, as though he were about to raise it, but then thought better of it.

"If you need me," he whispered, walking to the door. "Just call out."

"Thank you," I choked out, turning to the prone figure of my mum. I brushed back her hair from her forehead, muttering, "Oh, Mum."

I pulled her shoes off, tucking them in the spot, just in front of her closet door, the spot she seemed to always assign to shoes. I thought about leaving her fully clothed, but I hated sleeping in a bra, so I went to the dresser and pulled out a nightgown. She didn't stir as I propped her up to pull her shirt and bra off. I quickly slid the nightgown over her head, tucking her arms in each sleeve. Her trousers were more difficult. I unsnapped them and tried to pull them off, but I couldn't lift her hips up enough. I finally just left them on her, unbuttoned enough to be comfortable.

"Why didn't you use your wand?" Snape asked as I walked into the hallway.

I merely shrugged, and opened my mouth to make a smart retort when I caught his expression. The compassion on his face was my undoing. He gathered me close, and I, tired of being the strong one for so long, burrowed into his embrace. It was as if all the pain, frustration, and fear had finally released from deep within my chest.

"I want my mum back," I sobbed into his coat. I was covering it with tears and snot, and lord knows what else, but I didn't care.

"It's all right," he said soothingly, patting my back awkwardly.

"It's not... it's not all right," I wailed, hiccupping over the words. "It's my fault she's like this. I messed her up." I snuffled into his coat.

"I doubt that, Miss Granger."

"But, it's true!" I clutched at the dark material, trying to dig myself into the warmth of his chest. "If...if I hadn't made her forget me..."

I felt his hands grip my upper arms as he thrust me from his chest, his face inches from mine as his dark eyes caught mine. "Look, Miss Gran.*Hermione*...you can't blame yourself for this; there was no way this could've been foreseeable."

"If I hadn't, somehow, botched that wretched Memory Charm, she wouldn't be like this. She wouldn't be forgetting who I am," I wailed, pulling myself violently from his grip.

"You can't blithely say it isn't my fault when you know damn well that it *is*!"

"Fine!" he ground out. "You're bloody responsible for this mess. Now stop that useless sniveling and compose yourself. She needs your help, not your self-flagellation." He stalked over to the closed door and yanked it open. "When you're done prostrating yourself on the altar of guilt, and ready to be of some use to me and your mother, you know where to find me," he said in a scathing tone before walking through the door. It shut with a dull thud.

I stared at the door seething. *How dare he. How dare he make light of the situation...make light of what I've done*

I threw open the apartment door and chased after him.

"You're a bloody coward!" I yelled as I caught up to him at the elevator's entrance.

"Like you have any room to talk." He moved in closer, his face just inches from mine. "At least I'm not lying to myself."

"I don't know what you mean."

"When's the last time you practiced magic?"

"I..." I shook my head. "What has that to do with anything?"

"And you call *me* a coward," he said softly. His breath fanned against my face.

"I'm not a coward."

"Liar."

I don't know who moved first. One moment we were calling one another names, the next we were kissing. I clutched at his coat, feeling the warmth of his body seeping into mine. My tongue moved against his and I heard a harsh moan. I'm not sure if it was his or mine. It felt brilliant. Better than brilliant...like indulging in bitter dark Belgian chocolate. He gently nibbled on my lower lip, and I pressed against him. I was kissing Snape... Oh, gods, I was **kissing** Professor Snape!

"Ron," I groaned as his mouth trailed down my neck. He immediately stiffened, and pulled from my embrace. Oh, bollocks... Had I really said that?

"No..." I moaned in protest, thumping my head against the hallway wall.

"I'll not be a substitute for someone else," he said harshly. His face was impassive.

"I...gods, this is so embarrassing... I'm..." I stuttered.

"Indeed," he said softly, and walked into the elevator (goodness but he had remarkable timing). I watched as the silver doors closed, calling myself all sorts of names.

oOo

I kissed Snape... and I liked it.

I gingerly touched my lips. I could still feel him.

I kissed Severus Snape...no. I was ready to do more than kiss him.

I shivered, recalling the way his body felt against mine, the subtle taste of him.

This Snape was a man I didn't know. He was kind to my mum, kind to others even, in a gruff way. It was hard to reconcile the memory of the man I had known with this gentler version.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts.

With a sigh, I got up from the couch and pulled the door open, only to find Snape standing there.

"You're supposed to ask who's there," he said gruffly, thrusting a vial of greenish blue potion into my hands. "When your Mother awakens, give her two spoonfuls of this. It should help."

"What is it?" I asked, my voice sounded entirely too husky. "Oh, never mind, if you say it will help, then it will help." I set it on the small side table beside the door.

"Your faith in me is startling," he said sarcastically.

"Look... I..." I ran a nervous hand through my hair. "About earlier..."

"I don't think we have anything to discuss." He turned to leave.

"Wait... please," I cried out. "I...it's not what you think. You... I wasn't thinking of him. God, why is this so hard to get out?" I took a deep breath. "It was nice...no more than nice. It was... Well, what I'm trying to say is..."

"Fine, I believe you. You weren't thinking of Ronald Weasley whilst my tongue was down your throat. Is that all you wanted to say?"

"No... yes..." I groaned. "You're not understanding me. Ron was the furthest thing from my mind. I don't know why I said his name, but it had nothing to do with me wishing you were him. Believe me, it was... brilliant, better than brilliant. I...I felt things I hadn't before," I said in a massive jumble of words.

His expression said he didn't believe me, so I did what any rational woman would do: I kissed him.

It wasn't my best idea, and I soon realized that when he didn't respond. I pulled back, startled by the harsh expression on his face.

"Are you happy now?" he spat. "You've convinced me how utterly faithless you are."

"Faithless? I...What do you mean faithless?"

"Your future father-in-law called in his life-debt to get your mother into this program so that you'd not have to go through the pain of losing another parent, and this is the sort of respect you show him? I hope the Weasleys know how fickle you truly are!"

"No," I whispered around the lump in my throat. "You're wrong. It was all Harry's doing."

"I'm *wrong*? I hardly think so!" He pointed a finger at me. "A wizard does not call in a life-debt for anyone other than himself, unless family is at stake. Arthur certainly had no compunction about pulling my strings to get your mother here. He demanded that I do everything possible to help her."

I shook my head. "But, that makes no sense. I...Ron and I were together... but..." I backed up. "Wait here."

I raced to my bedroom, pulled open my secretary desk searching for the letter. I rushed back, praying he hadn't left in a pique of anger. I slowed down and let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. He was still standing in the doorway, his features dark and foreboding.

"It's not what you think," I said handing him the letter. His upper lip curled disdainfully as he took the letter. "Ron's...he married someone else. We're not together. Haven't been together, really, for some time."

"He called you his daughter, I assumed..." Snape said roughly.

I let out a small laugh. "I think I understand now. He..." I wrapped my arms around my waist, "...thinks of us, of Harry and me, as his children. He's always treated us as if we're a part of his family."

"Still, to call in a life-debt..." He trailed off, looking perplexed.

"That's Arthur," I said softly. "He's... a truly remarkable man."

"More like a bloody fool," Snape said with a snort.

In the distance, I could hear Mum getting restless. I picked up the vial. "I'd better give her a dose of this." He nodded and stepped through the doorway and out into the hallway. I touched his arm, and he stilled. I arched up onto my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," I said softly.

He dipped his head, and for a moment, I thought he'd kiss me, but he only whispered, "You're welcome," before walking down the hallway to the elevator. I watched him for a moment, feeling as if somehow I'd turn the corner into Wonderland.

oOo

The next few weeks were rather disquieting. All that I had believed I knew about Severus Snape was utterly changed, or perhaps he had changed, morphed into someone else when he threw on the moniker of Sebastian Shaw. He was still a ridged perfectionist, he didn't suffer foolishness easily, and he could still reduce a person to tears with the sharp edge of his tongue, but all of those rough edges were somehow blunted.

He was also concerned about Mum's everyday troubles, he took an active interest in every part of her treatment, and he took great pains to ensure that I was up to speed on everything they were doing, or planned on doing to her.

Mum's treatments were going rather well. I think, after witnessing one of her episodes, Snape had a clearer picture of how her dementia affected her. He specifically designed his potions with her symptoms in mind. She, as a result, had more lucid moments, and while Snape wouldn't take credit for her progress, I happily attributed it to

him. I was happy she was doing so well.

That is, until her first overnight stay as required by the program's schedule. I knew she had to stay at the clinic for at least five days...I'd even prepared myself for that...but the reality was much more difficult.

It shouldn't have affected me this way. I'm a grown woman who's lived without her parents since going away to boarding school. Yet, for some reason, leaving her there, at the medical clinic, with her little overnight tote and toiletries left me wanting to weep.

I was an emotional mess, though I thought I was disguising it well. And then, I ran into Snape.

I didn't have to say a word. He just pulled me close, wrapping me in his arms. I snuggled into his warmth. He felt so strong and capable.

"Let me take you home," he said softly, the breath of his words fanning against my hair. I nodded into his chest, afraid to speak lest I started crying uncontrollably. I could hear the audible "pop" as he Apparated us from the medical clinic.

I lifted my face from his chest to thank him, and my breath caught in my throat. I was caught by the intensity on his face, pinned down as his head dropped lower. His lips skimmed across mine in a soft teasing pattern. I lifted my chin just a fraction, and he groaned, deepening the kiss.

My hands slowly slid up his sides until I could wrap them around his neck, bringing my body flush against his. His sinful tongue swept into my mouth, and my knees went weak. His arms tightened around me in response, holding my weight. With little licks and nibbles, he devoured my mouth, sucking on my lower lip before sliding his tongue into my mouth for a small taste, only to retreat to start all over again.

Feeling light-headed, I pushed against him, and he reluctantly (or at least it seemed so to me) released me. I sagged against the wall, panting slightly.

"I...err..." I said softly, touching my lips. "I think we should..."

"Did anyone ever tell you," he growled, moving into my personal space. My breath caught in my throat as he pulled me against his body. "You think too much?" Then his lips were on mine again...hot, demanding, so utterly sinful. This was no tentative kiss; it was a kiss filled with a promise of immeasurable passion. I moaned against his mouth as his hips flexed against mine, my arms once again finding their way around his neck.

I grabbed fistfuls of his hair, spearing my fingers through his dark locks as his mouth claimed mine. I could feel the powerful assault all the way to my toes and they curled in anticipation. I felt utterly desirable.

I gently sucked on his tongue, and he groaned in the back of his throat, his fingers digging into my hips as he held me. I shivered in anticipation as one of those hands slid upwards, under my shirt, and I gasped as his hand cupped my breast through my bra. I wiggled my hips against his, reveling in the feel of his erection pressing against my stomach as our mouths mated.

I could feel his fingers slowly inching under my bra. The heat of his hands seemed to sear my flesh, causing my nipples to harden. I whimpered, clenching my fingers in his hair as he lightly grazed the taut peak with the rough pad of his finger.

"I... shouldn't we..." I said on a breathless whimper as his mouth moved across my jaw.

"Shouldn't we what?" he growled before drawing the lower part of my ear into his mouth.

"Oh, dear lord," I moaned as his teeth gently pulled at the fleshy bottom of my ear lobe.

"Shouldn't we what?" he whispered again, releasing my ear lobe.

"... room... bed," I gasped as his fingers pinched at my right nipple. I found it hard to form coherent thoughts, much less voice them.

"Please... Se..." I broke off. "Gods, this is so ridiculous," I hissed as his mouth nipped along the length of my neck. "I don't even know which name to call you."

"As long as you don't call me Ron," he whispered in a chuffing breath against the base of my neck. "I don't care what you call me."

I groaned, dropping my head against his shoulder. "You're never going to forget that, are you?"

"And let go of an advantage?" he asked in an amused tone, grabbing my hand. As Snape tugged me forward, I realized he hadn't Apparated us to my flat.

"Where... your..." I stuttered, following him down a darkened hallway.

"That is a bad habit you're developing," he responded, pulling me through a doorway. "Of course, it's an improvement over your incessant chatting."

I turned to face him. "You're so charming."

He crowded in, grabbing my hips. "Is that a complaint?" he asked, walking us backwards. The back of my knees hit the edge of his mattress.

"Not yet," I muttered as his hands slid around my back and deftly unclasped my bra, before trailing down to my waist. I bit my lip as his fingers pulled at the hem of my shirt; a moment's hesitation of worry. My body wasn't the greatest, and I'd never been comfortable naked in front of myself, much less in front of others. He moved without hesitation though, sliding his hands upward, taking the material of my shirt and bra up. I lifted my arms so he could tug them up over my head.

I had to fight the urge to cover myself. I felt so exposed.

His eyes darkened as he took in the sight of me, bared to the waist. Making a low groan of approval deep in his throat, his head bent down. I nearly jumped out of my skin as his tongue lapped at the underside of my breast. Gasping for breath, I arched up, my breasts pressing forward...a silent plea for more.

With a soft chuckle, he positioned his mouth over my taut nipple, sucking it into his mouth as one of his hands slid over the rounded curve of my stomach. He stopped just as he reached the fastener of my jeans, pausing a moment before tugging at the clasp. The button pulled free with ease.

I tried to close my thighs, an involuntary action, as his fingers slipped beneath the material. I quivered as his fingers trailed through the curls at the apex of my thighs, soft touches that had me tingling all over. As he sucked hard on my nipple, I gasped out, my thighs relaxing enough for him to slide his fingers into the soft folds of my sex.

I arched my hips into his bold touch, feeling them press deeper into my flesh. *He certainly knows what he's doing* was my fleeting thought as his fingers teased me. Eagerly, I tugged at his shirt, two buttons popped free, scattering into the nether regions of the room. I wanted to feel his flesh against mine.

"Impatient hussy," he muttered, pulling his fingers from me. I whimpered in protest.

Stepping back from me, Snape's hands raised to the collar of his shirt, yet instead of unbuttoning it, he merely tugged it over his head, tossing it behind him. I licked my suddenly dry lips, and heard an answering moan of appreciation from him. His movements were so fluid and graceful that I couldn't help but watch him, completely fascinated.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked as his long fingers deftly unclasped the button on his trousers. I could only answer with a mute nod; I couldn't help but remember how those same fingers had manipulated my flesh. I shivered in anticipation. His movements were slow and deliberate as he pushed the trousers down his slim hips. The material

dropped down, pooling at his feet. I watched as he reached down to pull the trousers up just enough so he could toe his shoes off. When he was done he stood silently in place, waiting.

My eyes were fixed on his cock, jutting proudly from a patch of dark, curly hair at the apex of his thighs. I took an involuntary step forward, toeing my own shoes off. His cock seemed to swell under my gaze. It looked huge in the shadowy darkness of the room, and I felt a trickle of apprehension. I raised my eyes to his, transfixed by the raw, stark need I saw in them.

He crossed the distance between us, running a hand down the front of my chest, down my stomach to rest on the waistband of my jeans. His head dipped, and his lips met mine, all the while tugging my jeans and knickers down over my hips and thighs.

I broke off the kiss, stepping out of the material pooling at my feet and climbed into the bed. I could feel his eyes wander over my body, yet instead of feeling embarrassed, his heated gaze emboldened me. I raised my arms, beckoning him. The mattress dipped as he climbed in beside me, lowering his head to my breasts.

He blew a chuffing breath across my right nipple, causing it to pucker tightly. His fingers traced soft, circling patterns across the flesh of my left breast, as he slowly lapped at the taut peak of my right. When he lifted his mouth from my right nipple, I whimpered impatiently, threading my fingers through his hair and guided his face to the left. He quickly obliged me by sucking my nipple deeply into his mouth. I moaned, arching upwards.

Snape pulled his mouth from me and gave me a superior smirk. I itched to slap that self-satisfied look from his face...a thought that was quickly dispelled as he lowered his lips to my abdomen and began to kiss a trail down my body. My body quivered beneath his lips, his breath fanning across my overly sensitized flesh, causing me to arch my hips. I made a soft mewling sound as he spread my thighs wide with his shoulders, tucking my knees up on his shoulders.

Feeling vulnerable and exposed, I tried to close my thighs, but his tongue flickered out, teasing my clit. I groaned deeply in the back of my throat, my hips bucking upwards. I could feel his tongue circling around it, teasing the sensitive area, only to retreat. He drew back slightly, then blew softly on my dampened skin before lowering his head again to slowly lap at my labia.

He teased me with his tongue, licking along the length of me, blowing cool air across my fevered skin, and suckling at my clit until I was writhing and pushing against his mouth. I grabbed at the bed sheets, arching up, seeking the orgasm I was just on the brink of. And when I thought I couldn't take it any longer, he fastened his mouth to my clit, swirling his tongue around it at an impossible speed until I shattered, screaming, "Fuck... yes..."

As tremors swept through my body, he lowered my legs to the mattress. He shifted, rising above my body, drinking in the sight of my flushed, orgasmic body. I reached out, and trailed a hand down across his chest, across his abdomen. I hesitated as my fingers brushed the curly thatch of hair leading downwards. I wanted to run my fingers along the length of his cock, but was unsure of what to do.

"Do it," he said in a husky voice.

My eyes darted to his face in surprise. Was he practicing Legilimency? Now of all times? I opened my mouth to chide him when he took my hand in his, guided it to his hard cock. He sucked in a huge, gasping breath as I wrapped my fingers around his length. I watched, mesmerized, as a small droplet of pre-come peared at the top of its mushroom head. I ran my hand down the length of his shaft, experimenting with various strokes and was rewarded with another pearly droplet.

I reached out my other hand and gently cupped his ball sacs, when he moaned harshly, taking my lips in a deep, bruising kiss. I could taste myself on his tongue as plundered my mouth. He moved between my thighs, sliding his hands down my body as he positioned himself against me.

Grasping my hips, he tugged me against him, the tip of his cock settling against my entrance. Then, with an animalistic grunt, he plunged deeply into me. I closed my eyes, arching my back and hips against his wanting to feel him as deep inside of me as possible.

His fingers tightened on my hips as he slowly withdrew only to slowly push back into me. It wasn't enough though. He held far too still. I ran my hands down his back, my nails scratching at his flesh as I bucked up against him, trying to encourage him to move more. Snape sucked air through his teeth at my actions. I opened my eyes in time to see him clench his jaw as he struggled for control. Yet, being the perverse bastard that he is, Snape moved at a slow and steady pace.

"Please..." I whimpered. I needed, oh how I needed.

"Patience is a virtue," he grunted, flexing his hips against mine.

"To hell with patience," I countered, squeezing my muscles all around him again.

He groaned and nipped my shoulder as I clenched myself tightly around his cock; then he placed his hands on either side of my head. He raised himself up on those arms, and then drove into me with all the force he'd been holding back. Thrust after hard thrust he pushed into me and all I could do was moan and arch up against him in response. I grabbed at his arse, pulling him to me.

I screamed as my orgasm hit, my nails digging into his flesh. His harsh cry soon followed, and I could feel the force of his orgasm deep inside of me. Snape collapsed on top of me, his cock still buried within me.

Satiated, I ran my hands down his sweaty back, marveling at how right his weight felt. He kissed my lips softly, then withdrew from me, falling to the mattress on his back. I curled against his side, feeling the warmth of his body seeping into my pores. His arm draped over my shoulders, pulling me in close.

"This is so odd," I said into the darkness. "Never... not in a million years would I've thought I'd be in this position... and with you."

"Regrets already," he said softly into my hair.

"No, not regrets..." I broke off, twisting my body. I propped myself up on my arm. His face was inscrutable, a mask of indifference. I hesitated just a moment, and then touched his face with my left hand. "No regrets," I said firmly. "I've just..." I shook my head, my hair falling into my face "...never done this before."

"And that's a terrible thing because?"

"It's not terrible," I said, dropping my head against his chest. The wiry hairs tickled my nose. "Unexpected... freeing... strange... It's all jumbled up inside." I brought my hand up and gently circled it around one of his flat nipples. He drew in a deep, gasping breath. "Is this natural? To feel this way, I mean." I ran my nail lightly over his nipple and it puckered tight. "We just finished, and already I want you again, need to feel you again." I raised my head. His dark eyes caught mine. "I want you inside of me again," I admitted in a husky whisper.

"Has anyone ever told you," he said with a growl, cupping my face with his rough hands. "That not only do you think too much, you talk too much as well."

"Only you," I said with a soft smile, as he twisted his body, maneuvering the both of us. I rolled onto my back, carrying his weight on top of me.

"Only me," he whispered with a deep, low growl, threading his fingers through my hair. Gently cradling my head, he pressed his lips against mine in a bruising, possessive kiss.

The thought that this was...that he was...nearly too perfect to believe fluttered through my brain. It was pushed aside by the physical evidence of his need pressing intimately against me in a way I couldn't deny. I felt wicked as he wantonly kissed me; it was a heady feeling. He wanted me. Severus Snape wanted me. I'd never craved anyone like this, nor had anyone crave me in the same sense. I shuddered, arching upwards.

I could sense the raw, savage hunger within him as he took my mouth, his body pressing into my soft curves, and it left me breathless. I felt the strongest desire to provoke

the savage lurking underneath his tight leash of control. I wanted him to feel as helplessly lost in passion as I felt.

His hands moved down the sides of my body, my stomach clenching in anticipation as his rough fingers parted my thighs. As his fingers stroked the soft, curly flesh of my mons, my eyes closed. The sensations were indescribable. My breathing hitched in my throat, coming out in whimpering gasps. It felt as if my whole world narrowed down to the feel of him touching me.

I nearly bucked him off me when his fingers touched my clit, flicking at my sensitive flesh; my last orgasm had left me tender.

"Roll over," he whispered. I rolled onto my stomach. The mattress dipped and shifted as he moved behind me. His hands curled under my stomach, pulling my arse up and back. I could feel him against my back as his body covered mine.

His mouth closed over the base of my neck as he pushed against me, the tip of his cock brushing against my labia. His hands slid up my stomach, and he cupped my breasts, his fingers gently pinching at my nipples. I groaned, thrusting my hips back.

"God, you feel so good," he groaned, slowly sliding into me again.

I dropped my head down to the mattress, my fingers tightening on the sheets as he slowly withdrew only to surge deep into me. He felt impossibly thick and hard as he thrust into me.

"Please... Severus," I cried.

He groaned, thrusting into me hard. "Again," he demanded. "Say that again."

"Severus," I whimpered.

His tempo increased. I could feel his thighs slapping against my arse as he pushed into me. His hands returned to my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as he fucked me.

"I want to hear you scream my name as you come," he grunted, driving himself deeply into me.

"Severus," I cried out in a ragged breath, pushing my hips back against his.

"Again," he demanded.

"Severus... Severus..." I chanted, moving with his every thrust. I was so close to coming. Wiggling and squirming, I pushed my hips back. I wanted him deep inside of me. "Severus... Oh, God... Severus," I screamed out as my orgasm hit. He continued to thrust into me, driving as deep as he could until his own orgasm came.

Panting, we dropped to the mattress in a sweaty mess. His arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me to him. *I could get used to this* was my last thought before succumbing to sleep.

oOo

"Look at you," Mum exclaimed as she walked into the kitchen. She'd been home since last evening, though we hadn't had a chance to talk.

I blushed. "What?" I asked, running a nervous hand through my hair. "Do I have something on my face?"

Mum let out a tinkling laugh. "Of course not, silly." She bumped her hip up against the counter. "You have that glow. That new love glow," she teased.

"Really, Mum, there's no such thing," I snorted disdainfully.

"It's quite all right," she said blissfully. "I think he'd be rather good for you...stable. Unlike that redheaded boy."

My eyes widened. "Mum," I gasped. "I... I don't know what you mean."

"You're a terrible liar, Hermione."

"You... I... Mum!"

"Close your mouth, dear. It's quite unattractive, the way you're standing there with it hanging open." She moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of orange juice. "Besides," she continued, setting the juice on the counter, "he's already asked permission to... oh how did he put it? Oh yes, court you." She reached up, opened the cupboard and pulled out a small juice glass. "Isn't that a quaint phrase?" she cooed, pouring a measure of liquid into the glass. "Courting you."

"He... ah... he spoke to you about us?" Good lord, he talked to my mum about us? "What... mmm... did he say? No..." I shook my head. "Never mind, I'll ask him myself. Will you be okay for a bit?"

"I can't imagine why I wouldn't be. Though, you might want to change into something other than your pajamas."

oOo

I raised my hand to knock on his door and knocked with more force than I intended. The door swung open to reveal Severus Snape, bare to the waist, wearing nothing other than a large bath towel around his hips.

"I...sorry. I can come back later," I gasped out. I turned to go when his hand reached out and grasped mine.

"Don't go on my account," he said in a husky voice, tugging me into his flat. The door shut with a soft click behind me.

"You're... clearly busy," I said, trying not to stare at the bare expanse of flesh before me.

"Not too busy for you. What is it you wanted to talk about?" he asked, rubbing his thumb across the top of my hand.

"You... ah... talked to my mum about us?"

"It seems to be a sensible measure. I would hate to startle her one morning if I passed her in the hallway on the way to the bathroom."

"Startle her..." I repeated dumbly.

"I don't plan on returning to an empty bed," he said, crowding in close. "And I know there are times when it wouldn't be prudent for you to stay here with me." He dipped his head, his breath fanning across my cheek. "I don't plan on spending those nights alone."

My lips suddenly felt dry, so I licked them. "You... ah... plan on sleeping... downstairs? With me?"

His lips twitched a bit, curling at the edges. "Well, I certainly wasn't planning on sleeping...at least much." He placed a soft kiss just below my ear. "Besides," he whispered,

"I'd hate to have her scrambling into your room when you make too much noise."

"I...I do not," I protested, backing up against the door. Before I could say more, he pressed his warm lips against mine. Whatever else I was going to say was lost as I kissed him back. His tongue traced the seam of my lips, and I parted them, allowing him to slide it into my mouth. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I moved my tongue against his.

I gasped against his mouth as one of his hands inched up my side, those long, lovely fingers cupping the weight of my breast through the material of my shirt. Somehow he worked the buttons of my shirt loose. He dragged the material off my shoulders, pulling the straps of my bra down as well. Gently, he pushed one bra cup down, his fingers finding my nipple.

Our kiss became intense, his fingers teasing and pulling at my erect nipples. He pressed a knee between my thighs, pulling the material of my skirt up as he pressed me against the wall. I sagged my weight down on his knee, feeling the exquisite pressure of his flesh between my legs. My skin felt electrified.

I nearly screamed as his mouth closed over one of my nipples, his teeth scraping against the tender peak. It was like I could feel his hands everywhere on my flesh. My nails dug into his shoulders as he nipped along my sensitive flesh, teasing and tormenting my taut nipples with his mouth and fingers.

I shivered as his left hand slid down my stomach and over my thigh. His body shifted as he pulled the material up more, his fingers tracing along the edge of my knickers. He stroked me lightly though the material.

"Severus... please," I groaned. I ran my fingers through his hair, and tugged his head back up for a kiss as he hooked a finger through the leg of my knickers. A quick tug and the material tore away, leaving me open and exposed to his expert touch.

I felt one of his fingers slide along the length of my labia, teasing the flesh with soft strokes before pushing in. I moaned deep in my throat as that finger found my clit. I arched my hips against his hand as he began to tease me with a rhythmic circular movement.

He roughly pressed his mouth to mine; the towel had disappeared. He shifted his hips, pressing himself against me. Those glorious hands cupped my arse, lifting and shifting me up a bit.

"Please..." I cried out, just as he pressed forward, burying himself deeply inside of me.

He held still for a moment, his dark eyes captured mine. I squeezed myself around him and trailed my fingers down his bare chest. He shivered as my nails scraped across his flat nipples. He bucked up in response, causing me to gasp.

"More, Severus," I demanded, hitching my hips to urge him on. I needed him to move...to take me hard, against this door, and I needed it now.

He shifted and slightly withdrew from me. Then with a savage thrust, he was deep inside of me again. He dropped his head to my shoulder; I could feel the muscles in his body bunching as he moved. My lower back thumped painfully against the wooden door behind me as he slammed against me, thrusting into me with a hard, fast pattern.

I cried out as his teeth grazed my neck, nipping at the soft underside near my ear. He shifted my legs again, spreading them a bit wider so he could thrust deeper into me. I could only hold on, marveling at how powerful I felt in this moment...how utterly wonderful that I could drive him to this state.

"Severus," I screamed as every muscle in my body contracted at once...I could feel myself clenching tightly around him and his low answering growl in my ear.

My fingernails dug into his flesh, my body going rigid as a powerful orgasm ripped through my body. I gasped out his name again...a fervent prayer as he continued with his powerful thrusts.

His mouth caught mine, drinking in my moans of pleasure as he thrust into me one last time. His fingers tightened on my hips, digging painfully into my soft flesh as he convulsed deep inside of me. He dropped his head to my shoulder, panting loudly.

"You do too," he panted against my ear.

oOo

Who knew? Eight weeks ago, I would've called this whole situation insane. Me in a relationship with Severus Snape, how utterly laughable. Yeah, so laughable that I can't wait to rip his clothes off and get him into bed again.

Mum will never be back to one hundred percent normal, though the potions Severus provides do keep her on an even keel. She'll always need to be monitored, though Severus doesn't mind her presence. In fact, he states she's easier to deal with than Harry will be. He's remarkably patient with her, and she adores him.

Speaking of Harry, I suppose I should eventually let him know my circumstances. It wouldn't do for him to come visit the new Mrs. Shaw only to learn it's actually Snape.

That reminds me. I need to send a huge thank you gift to Arthur Weasley.

oOo

Author's Notes:

Many thanks to mariannelee for the beta read, as well as to shiv5468 and selened for helping when I was stuck. Any and all errors contained within are solely my own.

Warnings: Completely disregards the epilogue. If that makes this AU...well, then I'll gladly slap that label on.

Written for HowlingMojo during the 2007/2008 Winter round of SSHG Exchange on livejournal.

Prompts from HowlingMojo:

1) All that's left in the Shrieking Shack is a small pool of dried blood. What happened to Snape? (Hopefully answered)

2) Hermione and Snape travelling in some random foreign hot country. Bonus points for sex in a train/bus/car pretty much anywhere halfway public. (Somewhat fulfilled).