

Numb

by firefly124

Nagini's bite carried some severe consequences, and Severus has a long, rocky road to recovery ahead of him. Traveling that road leads to healing, and not just for him.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 5

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A/N: Written for Bluestocking79 for the Winter 2007/8 round of the SSHG_Exchange on LiveJournal. Huge thanks to my beta, ubiquirk, and my Brit-picker, Saracen77. Any remaining errors are mine.

Disclaimer: Does anyone actually think these characters are mine? Didn't think so.

Chapter 1

He was in hell.

That was the only explanation. Not even the Dark Lord himself could have imagined a curse that would have him trapped in his own home and dependent upon all the most annoying Order members.

First it had been Molly Weasley, who'd attempted to assuage her own guilt by cooking him enough food to feed her entire family, followed by her son Charlie, who might know a thing or two about creature bites and the rehabilitation that followed them but was disgustingly cheerful about it all, succeeded by Hestia Jones, who was also disgustingly cheerful but had at least given him the satisfaction of seeing her reduced to tears, after whom had come Hagrid, with whom he'd gotten on well enough over the years but who snuffled disgustingly whilst carrying on apologizing for, well, everything, and who had no business in anyone's kitchen ever.

But that, apparently, had been only the prelude. A warm-up, so to speak. Because now they'd gone and sent him one of the three banes of his existence.

Truly. He had, in fact, died and was now residing in hell.

"... Because after this past year, I've had about enough of your entire sex," the frizzy-haired menace in his sitting room was saying. "The lot of you seem to think you can just cock things up and then expect someone else to pick up after you. And you! You've run through four Order members already, and you have weeks ahead of you if you're to walk on your own and get the use of your wand arm back."

Of course, as this was hell, neither of those things would happen. If they did, he would be able to hex these intruders out of his home or at the very least walk away from them with a satisfying and dismissive air of disdain. Then it would no longer be hell; ergo, it would never happen.

If, on the other hand, he had not died and this was not in fact hell, well, then, she had a point. Damn her.

"Are you quite finished?" he asked wearily.

"No, I most certainly am not!" Hands on hips, she continued her tirade. "If this is going to work at all, there need to be some ground rules, and the first one is that ..."

"Miss Granger," he cut in, "as this is my home, I do believe that the setting of any such rules falls under my purview and mine alone."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Mister Snape, as I am taking this time to help you away from my preparations to sit the N.E.W.T.s without having actually attended my seventh year at Hogwarts, and as I believe I mentioned, you've run off four of the other people who were willing to help you, meaning the rest of us have to pick up at least one additional day with you, yes, I think it's about time someone other than you set a few rules."

He longed to loom over her menacingly but had to settle for scowling up at her from his increasingly uncomfortable armchair. At least she'd learned from the others not to call him Professor any longer.

"Far be it from me to detain the only member of the Golden Trio with two brain cells to rub together from memorizing the entire seventh year curriculum in order to spit it back verbatim at the examiners without actually learning a bloody thing. I suggest you get to it, especially as you clearly consider this endeavor a waste of your time."

"I didn't say ..."

"I confess I find myself somewhat relieved not to be turned into the latest of your pathetic projects. When the Ministry comes to their senses and releases my vault, I shall pay for a professional mediwizard or witch to assist me rather than a pack of amateurs trying to assuage their guilt for doing and believing exactly what they were supposed to."

The impertinent girl stomped her foot at him.

"That isn't how it works," she snapped. "You can't just start your physio anytime you like. If you don't keep up with it from the start, you'll have permanent damage."

"This is not mere Muggle physiotherapy ..." he started.

She held up a hand. "I know. But the principles are the same, and I know the Healers at St. Mungo's told you as much." She drew a deep breath and let it out with a huff. "So, here are my rules. First, you'll cooperate with your therapy. I don't care if you think it's stupid, the Healers know what they're on about. I don't even care if you complain about it while you do it, but you don't fight me on it."

He gave that a snort and a reluctant nod, settling back into his chair a bit, looking away from her and surveying the dingy room.

"Second, for as long as you need my help in the kitchen, you simply *te!* me if you don't like something I've cooked, and I'll either make something else or go get take-away. Throwing things would be good therapy for your wand arm, but your good arm doesn't need it, and frankly, I've had all the ducking and dodging practice anyone could want in a lifetime over this past year. Besides, it's a waste of your dishes, as there are only so many times you can use *Reparo* on stoneware before it just won't hold."

"Are you quite finished?" he demanded, gripping the armrest of his chair with his undamaged hand.

"No! Well ... yes." Her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. "I was going to make a third rule that you'd save any disparaging comments about me or my friends until I'm not around to hear them, but that would probably be like ordering the Giant Squid to come out of the lake and have a walk around the grounds."

"A wise decision." He fumed silently for a moment, but it seemed he could not quite call her demands unreasonable. At least she was not being cheerful, maudlin, or pitying. And she did have a point that he was subjecting himself to larger doses of the same people by running off the other volunteers. "Your terms are ... acceptable."

"Good." She sniffed, and he looked at her suspiciously. It seemed to have been a disdainful sniff rather than a prelude to tears, so he decided to ignore it. "So, then, what is it you'd like for breakfast?"

He restrained the urge to suggest her liver.

~o0o~

He had to admit that his home therapy wasn't all that different from Muggle physio. The primary difference was the Nerve-Regeneration Potion. Muggles had to take their best shot at convincing the appropriate nerve cells to re-grow along the pathways they were supposed to, particularly those in the neck and spine. The Nerve-Regeneration Potion was applied topically along the relevant pathways and absorbed through the skin to not only encourage and speed re-growth but also to guide the cells as to where they should be growing.

The Healers had applied the potion frequently enough during his stay at St. Mungo's that his skin was darkly stained to show precisely where it should be applied. They assured him it would wear off once it hadn't been used for awhile. This had barely calmed his fury at having still more marks etched into his skin.

The girl had managed well enough for the part of his therapy involving his wand arm. He had to admit that the Sartorial Charm she used to add buttons that ran from the side of his neck to the end of his sleeve was vastly preferable to being required to remove his shirt. The problem was that his leg was similarly affected, and this meant that, no matter how carefully she altered his clothing to expose only the skin to which she actually needed to apply the potion, she was still required to not only see but touch parts of him that he had been loathe to allow the Healers to access.

On the bright side, she did not seem too happy at the prospect either.

"Just get on with it, will you?" he snarled from where he lay face-down on the bed that Molly had Transfigured from his threadbare sofa so that he would not need to be moved up and down the stairs. "You knew what you were signing on for, did you not?"

As she sniffed, lifted the hem of his shirt, and used another Sartorial Charm on the back of his trousers and pants, he felt the fresh air touch his skin. He winced in embarrassment as he felt her begin to trace the potion onto the lines that led from his spine down his leg. He supposed he was fortunate that only the major nerve pathways were treated this way for an injury such as his, else it would take her hours just to complete this step. As it was, the process took nearly fifteen minutes, every second of which seemed pure agony as he tried to ignore the fact that this was Potter's little friend tracing the potion onto his back, his arse, his leg, and his foot.

When she was done, she used another Charm to button his clothes back up. He could only imagine how ridiculous they must look with this new addition. Still, it was preferable to disrobing as all the others had insisted he do.

"And just how do you expect me to sit down on these infernal things later?" he demanded.

"I've added a Cushioning Charm along the inside. You shouldn't even know they're there," she replied, seemingly unruffled. "I could have just used a Slicing Hex and then a Mending Charm, but you can't just keep using those over and over on the same clothes unless you want them falling to bits. This way, we do it once, even if it's on a few of your shirts and trousers, and then fix them once you don't need them to be like that anymore, and they should be fine."

"We shall see," he muttered, not willing to concede anything until he'd tested her supposed Cushioning Charm.

"Good," she said. "Now, your instructions here say that you can do more with your leg than your arm. That makes sense, considering it's further from the bite."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said, "I had no idea my leg was further from my neck than my arm is."

"And," she continued as if he had not spoken, "you are to begin by trying to bend your knee."

As if he were not already familiar with the infuriating routine! He did, however, comply with that and all of the subsequent exercises, after which she assisted him in returning to his chair and took herself off to make another pot of tea.

Perhaps this would be moderately tolerable after all.

~o0o~

The following two days were a slight improvement over the first four. The girl had apparently taught Arabella and Dedalus the key to activating the Sartorial Charm she had used, a key that fortunately did not require one to be magical to use it, and so he was no longer required to disrobe for the application of the Nerve-Regeneration Potion. They were still disgustingly cheerful, however, and he found himself gritting his teeth to avoid chasing them off as he had the others. After all, if they took themselves out of the rotation, he would be stuck with only the Granger girl.

At least she wasn't cheerful.

When she returned for her day with him, she was still snippy. Thinking of what she'd said the first time she'd come, he had to admit (to himself) that being stuck in a tent with Potter and Weasley for months on end would probably sour any girl on the males of the species. At the very least, she would probably not waste herself on either of those two dunderheads.

Not that he cared.

"Good," she said, bringing his attention back to his exercises. "It looks like the muscles in your arm are responding a bit better. I could almost see your elbow bend just a little."

"Wonderful. My elbow almost bends. Truly, this is amazing progress," he snarled as she assisted him over to the Transfigured couch-bed.

"Well, if you don't care about getting your wand arm back, you could always try learning the wand movements with your left," she said in a matter-of-fact tone as she arranged him face down and prepared to apply the potion.

As if he had not spent enough time in his youth learning to rely on his right hand. An image flashed through his mind of his father, looming over his mother with his left arm raised to strike her. As if he would change back to being like him at this late date.

"I think not," he said with a sneer.

"No real difference with your leg," she went on. "It's a bit harder to tell though. Are you sure you're doing it right?"

"Of course, I'm sure I'm doing it right, you impertinent girl! What do you think the Healers had me doing while I was in hospital for a sodding month?"

Actually, rather a lot of that month had been spent unconscious, but that was hardly the point.

"All right, all right. No need to get snippy."

"I am not snippy," he retorted. "I am, however, profoundly annoyed and done with this for today. Get me up."

Once he was back in his chair, he saw that she was making notes.

"What in Merlin's name are you scribbling over there?"

She held up a piece of parchment. "I'm making a chart so that you can see your progress. I think you'll appreciate the results you are getting better if you can see them this way."

He stared at the parchment.

"Miss Granger," he said, "each section has a pair of dots with a line connecting them. What, exactly, am I supposed to infer from that?"

She pulled up a chair next to his so that she could show him more closely.

"You see, this part shows the results with your arm exercises, and today's dot is a bit higher than the one from three days ago, showing that you had some improvement. This part over here shows the results with your leg exercises, so they're at about the same level for now." She sighed. "It's a bit subjective, though, so I'm trying to think up a Charm that would record some sort of actual measurements directly."

He sneered at her. "Don't waste your precious study time on it. I would not permit it in any case. Such a Charm would be highly intrusive."

"More intrusive than having people paint a potion onto your arse?" she asked with a roll of her eyes.

"Get out," he spat. "You are done here, and I will not be spoken to in such a manner in my own home!"

Disappointingly unruffled, she rose, gathered her belongings, and left without another word.

~o0o~

He'd been certain he'd seen the last of her. He should have remembered how disgustingly stubborn she was. Besides, she'd tolerated Potter and Weasley for seven years. Obviously the girl was a glutton for punishment.

"So, you see, that's sorted it," she said, holding up the multicolored chart. "Now all any of us have to do is say the passwords to start and stop recording at the beginning and end of your exercises."

"Certainly, no one will ever confuse *Satus Stilus* and *Subsisto Stilus*. Did Filius never teach you that all incantations, never mind passwords, are not required to be in Latin? How exactly do you expect to pass your Charms N.E.W.T.?" He did have to admit that the Charmed parchment was rather clever. Just not aloud.

"I think Mr. Diggle and Mrs. Figg can manage to remember that *Subsisto* means 'stop.' But I've written it down just in case." She pointed to the directions she had inscribed in the corner and looked at him with an expression he remembered all too well. She hid it quickly, but it was too late.

"And did you not think that perhaps Mrs. Figg would not appreciate that you chose passwords that sound so very much like incantations? Or have you overlooked, in your self-centered pursuit of achievement and approval, that Squibs might find it offensive to have something arranged in such a manner?"

Her face fell. Clearly this self-appointed champion of underdogs everywhere had not given the matter any consideration whatsoever. But then her shoulders straightened.

"That's a bit rich coming from someone who has probably never in his life allowed the possibility that something he said or did might offend someone influence him," she

snapped as she folded the parchment sharply.

And without another word, she gathered her things and stormed out. He supposed it was fortunate she had not decided to discuss her ridiculous Charmed parchment until after he was done with his exercises. It was irksome, however, that he had not thought to look more closely to see what sort of progress the document had recorded before she had folded and taken it.

~o0o~

It had been nearly a month, and he was now required to do two sessions of therapy per day. One would think that improvement would lead to fewer exercises. Unfortunately, one would be wrong.

The parchment had grown to accommodate all the data it had gathered and was now tacked up on one of the rare blank bits of wall in his sitting room. It was rather encouraging to see the colored lines measuring his progress, though the fact he could now walk unaided and move his arm almost freely told him more than any foolish chart ever could.

The Nerve Regeneration Potion was, fortunately, no longer needed. The nerve damage caused by that foul snake's venom had been pronounced healed, or at least as healed as it was likely to be. There was still a numb spot on his arm, and he couldn't quite feel one of his toes. But now the task was to strengthen his muscles and develop the fine control needed for both magic and writing. He still could not quite grip a quill properly or cast any spell that required anything more complex or precise than a swish and a flick of his wand. Filius' protégé was simultaneously the most useful and the most aggravating person to have assisting him with re-teaching his arm to perform said movements correctly.

"You almost had it," she said. "Just a little twist to the left should do it."

"I am well aware of the necessary motion," he said through clenched teeth for what felt like the thousandth time. "And I do not believe I require a nanny whilst practicing said movements with a completely non-magical twig!"

"It's not my rule," Granger replied with a shrug. "I certainly think you're capable of determining when you're ready to move on to using your wand with a given spell. But when you do, you'll need someone here anyway, just in case anything goes wrong."

"Nothing," he said, giving the twig a jab and a twist, "is going to go wrong!" Flick-jab-twist.

"Wait!" she cried. "Do it again, just like that!"

He scowled and complied. Flick-jab-twist.

"One more time to make it three!"

Flick-jab-twist.

The irritating girl actually clapped before handing over his wand. As he took it from her, its familiar feel soothed the vague anxiety he felt over trying this Charm that he had mastered in his third year.

"*Incendio!*" The wood in his fireplace ignited, as it had done since he'd mastered this one last week. "*Frigeo!*" Flick-jab-twist. The flames froze.

"You did it!"

Before he knew what was happening, she had thrown herself into his arms and was kissing him hard on the mouth.

Shocked, he tried to push her away with his good arm, only to find that his treacherous hand stole from her shoulder down to her breast, palming it through her rough jumper. Now other parts of him were waking, and she knew it, the minx, as she ground against his swelling erection.

He plunged his tongue into her mouth, awkwardly drawing his damaged arm around her shoulders to pull her a bit closer.

She tore into his clothes and ran her hands along his chest before unfastening his trousers, which slid off oddly easily considering they way she had him wedged into his chair. Then she settled herself onto him, drawing him into her wet heat and gliding up and down along his length, never freeing her lips from his. And it had been so long, so very long, that it was mere moments before he knew he was going to lose the last shreds of his control.

A split second before he did, she gasped against his mouth and gripped her fingers into his shoulders painfully.

"Hermione!" he cried out as it seemed every cell in his body exploded into her.

He opened his eyes, saw that it was already past dawn, and groaned. There would be just enough time to deal with the sticky mess before she arrived.

~o0o~

By the time she did, he was in a rare mood. It wasn't her fault, he knew. She was simply the only female he'd seen in weeks other than Arabella, and not only had Arabella ceased coming around once he'd started working with magic, but if he had ever had such a dream about her, he'd have had to claw his own eyes out and possibly castrate himself.

It was probably a good sign that he'd finally had such a dream. No doubt he'd be much happier about it had it starred almost anyone else. Almost. He certainly had been happy enough while it lasted.

Not anymore.

He snarled at her while she hung up her cloak and set down her bag. He glared at her when she set him up to begin the day's exercises. And when she tried to be encouraging, he nearly took her head off.

"I am well aware of the necessary motion," he said through clenched teeth for what felt like the thousand-and-first time. "And I do not believe I require a nanny whilst practicing said movements with a completely non-magical twig!"

"It's not my ..."

"Get out!" he cut her off, suddenly realizing he'd just repeated the tirade from his dream. "Your assistance is not required until I inform you that I have managed the wand movements for any new spells. And yes, I shall demonstrate them correctly for you or Dedalus three times with this *stick* before attempting them with my wand. Go study for your N.E.W.T.s. Go chase after Potter and Weasley. I don't care where you go, so long as you *go!*"

"You ... you ... you absolutely infuriating man!" Hermione sputtered, color rising in her cheeks. "How, precisely, is it my fault that you aren't progressing as fast as you'd like?"

"Granger," he snarled, the fingers of his good hand digging into the armrest.

"Don't you 'Granger' me! You'd think that a man who's spent my entire lifetime living a double life could manage to keep up a few exercises to get the use of his wand arm back! You'd think when that same man has managed to go from barely able to stand to walking up stairs in just a few weeks, he might take that as encouragement to keep working!" She gathered up her bag and cloak and strode over to the door.

Before he could say another word, the door slammed behind her.

At least she was gone.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 5

Nagini's bite carried some severe consequences, and Severus has a long, rocky road to recovery ahead of him. Traveling that road leads to healing, and not just for him.

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Chapter 2

Hermione was so furious that she forgot herself and slammed the door when she got back to Grimmauld Place.

"Mudblood filth! Thief of my ancestor's portrait! Vile ..."

"Sod off, you old bag!" Hermione snapped. "I've put him back, and you know it."

"Oi, Hermione, what's got into you?" Harry demanded as he ran down the stairs and tried to close the curtains over Mrs. Black.

"Snape," she muttered.

"What?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, realizing how that must have sounded. "No, I mean he's driven me completely around the twist today."

Harry yanked on the curtains again.

"Traacherous half-blood! You've no right to this house! I shall not be silenced ..."

"I only meant you're the one always insisted we call him 'Professor Snape.'" Harry screwed up his face in disgust. "What'd you think I meant?"

"Never mind. Come on let's go somewhere else. She'll shut up if we ignore her long enough."

"I heard that, you Mudblood slut!"

"You were meant to, you demented hag! And if you don't shut it soon, we'll find out whether dousing you in turpentine does anything to improve your disposition!"

"Well, I never!"

Hermione stalked off into the library, flatly ignoring anything else Mrs. Black might have to say. She plopped herself down on the couch, and Harry arrived right after to take the armchair. He just stared at her for a minute.

"So what's got your knickers in a twist, Hermione?" he asked. "You don't usually come back from there this upset."

"You know," she said, "if it isn't bad enough chasing after you and Ron to keep up your studies for N.E.W.T.s and you still want to be Aurors, so you'd think you could be bothered to actually care now Snape, I mean Mr. Snape, is sabotaging himself just as he's starting to show some real improvement! I'm about to wash my hands of the lot of you, deficient y-chromosomes and all."

"Deficient what?"

She sighed and rested her face in her hands.

"So ... how's he sabotaging himself?"

Looking back up, she leaned into the armrest of the couch. "Well, today it's that he won't have anyone watching him use the practice wand until he's good and ready."

"I can't say as I blame him," Harry offered. "I mean, it's one thing when you're just learning stuff in the first place, but it has to be pretty embarrassing when it's all stuff you used to be able to do. He might have gone on a bit about foolish wand waving, but he was a hell of a duelist, so it's not like he wasn't an expert."

"And there's the other thing!" she huffed. "How can someone be an excellent duelist, live a double life as a Death Eater spy, run bloody Hogwarts with half the staff out to get him as well as the students, and be so bloody stubborn about using his wand with his other hand? I know it's harder, but we've all learned to do at least some spells with our other hands. Mostly the ones that don't need a mirror image wand movement, of course, but still! Professor Lupin was very emphatic that we needed to be able to use both hands to cast, in case one was ever hurt. How can a man like Pro... Mr. Snape be so stubborn about not even *trying* to use his other hand, when his wand arm is hurt, has been for over two months now, and he's practically defenseless?"

"He's not *defenseless*," Harry protested, squirming uncomfortably in his seat. "Professor Flitwick ..."

"I know, all right?" Of course, she knew that Professor Flitwick had placed very tight protective enchantments on Spinner's End when he'd put it under a Fidelius Charm, the same as he'd done for Grimmauld Place. She spared a moment to think that it would've been nice if someone had asked him to do *that* just about a year ago rather than dithering about twenty Secret Keepers for the older Charm. "He's still basically a prisoner in his own house, and it's his own fault! If he were able to ... what?"

Harry was squirming again.

"What is it?" she repeated.

"Well, erm, I kind of think Kingsley is just as glad he's not ready to be out and about."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean?"

"Erm, well, you know that it's not just the other Death Eaters they haven't rounded up. There're other people that want to kill him, too."

"Starting with every non-Slytherin student he's ever had. Tell me something I don't know."

"There're also plenty of people who think he ought to be in Azkaban, and, well, since he can't be out anyway, there aren't people protesting at the Ministry every day about it. Well, not as many people as there would be if he were being seen on Diagon Alley, for example."

Hermione stared in shock. "But that's ... that's just ..."

"I'm not saying it's right!" Harry fidgeted some more. "He should be able to live his life in peace now. Hell, he should be able to get into his Gringotts vault! But as much as everyone seems to think otherwise, I can't just say what I think needs to happen and make it happen. Not even for him. Maybe especially for him."

"They think you're being soft on him because he was friends with your mum?" Never mind that he probably was. She doubted even the fact he'd turned out to be on their side all along would have made Harry defend him so thoroughly if not for that.

"Something like that. Doesn't matter if I tell them I know he's still an annoying git. They don't think I'm being 'objective' enough."

Hermione sighed. While it had made for a somewhat dramatic moment, shouting things like that in front of a crowd was probably never a very good idea.

"Hang on what'd you say about third year?" Harry leaned forward in his chair.

"I said Professor Lupin..."

"Right," he interrupted. "Well, that's it, then."

Hermione crinkled her nose at him. "What's it?"

"Well, he's been stuck in the past all this time, sort of, and that includes hating anything to do with my dad and his friends, right?"

"Oh, you can't be serious! Mr. Snape would never..."

"Hold a grudge for twenty years and hate someone for just looking like someone else? Hermione, he nearly had a stroke when I tried to visit at St. Mungo's!"

She thought Harry might have actually given Snape plenty of other reasons to hate him over the years, but it was a bit unreasonable that he'd hated an eleven year old he'd just met simply for looking like his father. The man certainly could hold a grudge past all reason.

"You might be onto something," she admitted. "Not that it'll do any good to know that. He's still not going to change. I just think he'd get less frustrated if he could at least *do* more than the most basic magic."

Suddenly, she noticed the time and the glaring absence of one Ronald Weasley.

"Harry, where's ...?"

"At the Burrow." He looked wistful, suggesting that this visit probably involved Quidditch as well as food.

She sighed.

"You both realize that N.E.W.T.s are in less than two weeks?"

"Not like you'd let us forget," he muttered.

"You know what? Fine. Go, join him. Pass, fail, whatever. I don't care. Just don't come crying to me about it anymore, all right?"

"Hermione, I ..."

She levered herself up off the couch and made her way, quietly this time, past Mrs. Black and up to her room, where she grabbed the seventh year Arithmancy text and sat down to read over the Fifth Fundamental Theorem of Arithmancy.

~o0o~

The next afternoon, she was still struggling with some of the corollaries when Ron arrived. She nearly knocked her tea everywhere when he sneaked up behind her at the kitchen table and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hi, Ron," she sighed. It wasn't worth getting annoyed with him really. He meant well enough.

"Still at the Arithmancy, then?" He sounded amused.

"I did mark on the schedule that I'd be at it for most of today," she replied without looking up. "We can do Transfiguration later, like we planned."

"Like you planned," he muttered as he pulled out a chair for himself and slumped into it.

She finally looked up.

"Well, it's true! You're the one came up with this schedule and won't bend it!"

"That's because I have more subjects to prepare for than you, and I'm helping out with Snape, while you two run around doing Merlin knows what. Maybe you don't care about these bloody exams, but I do!"

"Mione, you know it's not the end of the world if we don't pass ..." Ron extended a hand placatingly.

"I'm not going back there," she snapped, slamming her book shut and feeling oddly satisfied when Ron jumped. "I don't care if we have the option to go back and do seventh year. I just ... I just can't go back there!" She willed the tears she felt welling behind her eyes to just dry right back up. "I can barely stand being here."

"I know it won't be the same," he said. "Only, maybe it would be good to actually have a bit of time to get used to things before we move on to whatever we're going to do next."

Hermione goggled at him. "Get used to things? Get used to what? I don't want to get used to walking down the same hall where your brother died, Ron!" She pushed back her chair and stood up to leave. "I don't want to get used to eating on tables that were covered in dead bodies. I don't want to get used to being back someplace we had to fight for our lives over and over again and saw people killed and as good as ... I'm not going back there!"

Ron's face turned crimson, and he stood up so quickly that his chair clattered to the floor behind him. "Don't go bringing Fred into this!"

"How can I not? How can *you* not? How can you seriously even consider going back there?"

"Maybe I just don't want to be so bloody *serious* all the time is all!"

She pressed her lips together hard to keep from saying all the things that sprang to mind at those words. Finally she settled for saying, "I'll go finish studying in my room. I'll be down at three like we talked about."

She thought she managed a reasonably dignified exit. Once she was safely in her room, she locked it both physically and magically, cast a two-way *Muffliato* on the door, and let herself have a good cry.

~o0o~

Neither Harry nor Ron were anywhere to be found when she came downstairs at three. She couldn't quite find the energy to care, so she simply set herself to practicing on her own.

Once she'd successfully turned the poker into a chair, a rabbit, a wall sconce, and a fox, she decided to try something a little more challenging and switched hands. Within a few minutes, she thought she understood why Snape was so insistent about not trying to use his non-dominant hand after all. Defensive spells mostly used fairly simple wand movements, largely consisting of jabs and flicks. Transfiguration spells and many Charms, however, had very complicated flourishes, and you couldn't just do the same movement with your opposite hand. The flow of magic was all about where the wand was in relation to your own body, so using the other hand meant tracing out the movement in mirror image. Get that a bit wrong, and instead of a rabbit, you'd get a very chair-like badger that snarled and snapped and went and hid in the fireplace until you switched hands and fixed it.

Not the sort of thing you'd want to deal with when switching hands wasn't exactly an option.

She still thought he was being a bit extreme about it all, but perhaps she should stop harping at him about it.

~o0o~

"I thought I made it clear the last time you were here that your presence was not required until I sent for you."

She squeezed past him, shrugged out of her cloak, and hung it on the hook by the door. "Yes, you did. However, I'm still going by the rules we set at the beginning, so I'm here to assist you with your exercises anyway."

The glare he gave her would once have made her shudder in his classroom. Now she just found it a bit sad.

"Look, the thing of it is, once you get your arm to cooperate on some of these charms, the rest should just fall right back into place. Then you'll be rid of me and we can both go on with our lives. With a little luck, that'll be sooner rather than later. So, shall we get on with it?"

He huffed a bit but eventually settled in to demonstrate the wand movements he had nearly perfected over the past two days and then tried a few with his wand. It was all going reasonably well until he tried the Flame-Freezing Charm. For some reason, it gave him more trouble than some of the others that had more complex movements, and his mantle ended up rather scorched. He scowled at her as though it were her fault, but she ignored that. After a few more tries, he managed it well enough.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he demanded, looking as though he had just been force-fed a rotten lemon.

"What do you mean?"

"What is it that you are so eager to ask?"

"What makes you think I want to ask anything?"

"I taught you for six years. I know that expression entirely too well. You are simply bursting to ask me something, and only the fact that we are not currently in a classroom is restraining you from actually waving your hand in the air like a hyperactive Crup's tail."

She felt her cheeks warm up a bit. "Well, it's only that I wondered if we could figure out just what it was that caused the Flame-Freezing Charm to present you with such difficulty. Because if we manage to sort that, perhaps we'll be able to head off further problems. I didn't think you'd appreciate my asking you straight out though."

His expression became, if anything, even more revolted, and his voice was even and forced as he replied, "I do not believe that would be a helpful approach in this instance."

Now that she had been given an opening, however, she was unable to simply let the matter go.

"But why not? Surely if we could determine what is causing the difficulty with that particular wand movement, you could ..."

"I said no! You are here merely to observe and assist, not to dissect my progress, not to create bloody charmed charts, and above all, not to argue with me about every bloody thing!"

She took an abrupt step back, suddenly very aware that he was still holding his wand. "I didn't mean ..."

"Yes, you very well did mean, Miss Granger. You always mean. You seem to believe you know what is best for everyone. Considering the dunderheads with whom you have chosen to surround yourself, who no doubt require you to instruct them on the finer points of wiping their arses if not to actually do it for them, it is no wonder you believe this. However, you do not always know what is best for everyone, and you most certainly do not know what is best for me."

"I ... I'm sorry, sir." She took another step back. "I only thought ... I'm sorry. I'll just be going now."

She turned, grabbed her cloak and bag, and fled.

~o0o~

She was glad the boys weren't there when she returned to Grimmauld Place, as she really just wanted some time alone to think quietly and didn't really have anywhere

else to do so. That was one of many reasons she could hardly wait to just take the damned N.E.W.T.s and then get a job. While it was nice of Harry to let her stay here, she really wanted someplace to call her own.

She wondered if Ron was going to be able to understand that.

Ron, however, wasn't what she wanted to think about, and as she sat down on her bed and hugged the pillow to her stomach, she ran through her afternoon in her mind. She'd expected that he wouldn't want to dissect why such a simple charm gave him so much trouble, but she hadn't expected him to blow up quite like that. And ... he might have a point. About some things anyway.

Her failed S.P.E.W. campaign was a classic example of Hermione Granger thinking she knew what was best before she had all the information. Even with all the information, she was hard-pressed to see the wizarding world's relationship with house-elves as a sort of symbiosis rather than slavery, but she had at least learned that she ought to listen to what the elves themselves wanted rather than deciding for them.

So what information was she lacking about her former professor? Perhaps it would be easier to start with the information she had. The relevant information anyway.

First, he was right-handed, and it was his right arm that was the most damaged by Nagini's poison.

Second, he had a bug up his arse about learning to use his left hand, which might or might not have anything to do with Remus Lupin being such a staunch advocate of learning to use both hands to cast spells. She had a feeling this was important, but she couldn't see how.

Third, the spell that had given him so much trouble today didn't use any movements that he hadn't already mastered for other charms.

Perhaps it was the specific order of the movements? Some transition?

And here she was, trying to solve someone else's problems for him when he'd told her outright he didn't want her to.

She sighed and pressed her face into the pillow as a couple of tears rolled down her cheeks.

Where did she get off trying to solve other people's problems when she couldn't bloody well solve her own? She wasn't exactly worried about the N.E.W.T.s, for all she kept harping on the boys about it. The exams didn't seem all that important compared to everything they'd been through this past year. They were just a means to not ever having to return to Hogwarts again. She was much more worried about what she'd do after. She still didn't really know what she wanted to do for a job, and as much as she wanted a place of her own, she was afraid she was going to be very lonely once the boys either started their Auror training or returned to Hogwarts. It wasn't as though she'd ever made friends easily, and she didn't think a mountain troll would be quite so obliging as to show up and terrorize her hypothetical new coworkers so they could bond over defeating it.

And if, by some bizarre coincidence, one did, then one of those new friends would eventually decide he was in love with her, and she might even think she was in love with him, too, for a little while, but then there would be no more trolls or basilisks or adrenaline-laden snogging sessions in the middle of a war, and suddenly one of them would realize they were just really good friends after all but the other wouldn't, and did she really want to go through all that again when she hadn't managed to figure out how to work it out this time? Hoping he'd find someone else when he got to Auror training or back to Hogwarts was the coward's way out, she knew, but she had no other idea how to handle it without hurting him.

So, of *course*, she'd rather try to fix something nice and simple like having trouble with sorting out wand movements! Whatever *Snape's* problem was, it certainly wasn't as complicated a mess as her own life.

She didn't entirely realize she'd cried herself to sleep until she found herself back at Spinner's End. It was obvious that there was something strange about it this time, because she didn't remember actually Apparating there or coming in the door or anything. She was just activating the Sartorial Charm to unbutton his sleeve from the neck down so that she could paint the Nerve Regeneration Potion on.

Except that was wrong. They hadn't needed that for awhile now. And when she started painting, it wasn't to trace out the nerve pathways. For some reason, she was painting Runes onto him. One on his neck, right between the scars from Nagini's bite, and a pair just below where his neck met his shoulder. One on his elbow and another on his wrist.

"Surely you are not going to stop there, Miss Granger," he said sternly as he indicated his palm.

As if it were the most sensible thing to do, she rested his hand in one of hers and painted one last Rune onto his palm. Then she looked at them all as they flowed from his neck to the hand she still held.

Protection. Restriction and challenge. Rewards of long efforts. Trustworthiness. Gift.

The rest made a sort of sense. But ... giff?

He rose to go lie on the transfigured couch-bed that they had returned to a couch once he'd been able to take the stairs without help. So if she hadn't known she was dreaming before, she'd have figured it out now. She looked at the line of buttons she'd charmed into the back of his trousers, and for the first time in a very long time was embarrassed by the idea of opening them to expose his skin so that she could paint the Potion onto it. No, for the first time ever she felt an entirely different sort of embarrassment about it.

"I ... I can't, sir," she said, setting down the potion and brush on a rickety end table.

"Will you just get on with it already?" he snarled. "It's not as though I can paint my own arse, even now that you've fixed my arm."

"Actually, sir, if your arm is fixed, you should be able to charm the brush to do it yourself. So I'll just ... be going then."

"Miss Granger! Hermione!"

Her heart was pounding when she woke. What was worse was that she wasn't entirely sure why.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 5

Nagini's bite carried some severe consequences, and Severus has a long, rocky road to recovery ahead of him.

Traveling that road leads to healing, and not just for him.

A/N: Written for Bluestocking79 for the Winter 2007/8 round of the SSHG_Exchange on LiveJournal. Huge thanks to my beta, ubiquirk, and my Brit-picker, Saracen77. Any remaining errors are mine.

Disclaimer: Does anyone actually think these characters are mine? Didn't think so.

Chapter 3

"Well, Severus, I think you're doing just splendid! Just splendid!" Dedalus grinned inanely. "At this rate, you'll have finished working your way through the last of the elementary Charms before the end of the week, and after that, you won't need me at all!"

While certainly pleased at the prospect of being done with this ridiculous exercise in babysitting, for some reason the possibility that it might end before Her... Miss Granger returned from completing her N.E.W.T.s was a bit irksome. He shrugged off the fanciful notion.

"I believe we are done for today," he said stiffly.

Dedalus chuckled. "Yes, yes. You're *welcome*, Severus. You can't fool me. Well, not anymore. You're pleased as punch. I'll be seeing you tomorrow then."

Not dignifying that with a reply, Severus simply held the door for the other wizard and shut it behind him.

The quiet that settled into the house was refreshing. Mindless chatter annoyed him, and only the prospect of either being forced to acclimate a new assistant at this late date or, worse, to wait for Miss Granger's return and then to work with her alone for the remainder of his rehabilitation held him back from verbally flaying Dedalus alive.

That fleeting thought of being subjected to an extended amount of time with Miss Granger, unrelieved by the company of anyone else, was rather less dismaying than it should have been.

Bugger.

The dreams had, if anything, increased in her absence. Clearly, what he needed was a visit to Knockturn Alley to alleviate these un-sated impulses. Unfortunately, Kingsley had made it quite clear that, while he was not, of course, under house arrest precisely, it would be unwise to venture out in public just yet. Polyjuice would be one solution, but he lacked some of the more expensive ingredients as well as the funds to order them. While having the Ministry cover his basic living expenses was, in his opinion, the very least that was owed him, requesting funds to purchase powdered bicorn horn and lacewing flies so that he could go screw a whore would be degrading. And he thought he'd had rather enough of feeling degraded.

And so the dreams continued.

~o0o~

He did not, in fact, finish his elementary Charms work before Miss Granger returned. Having the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests behind her had not, fortunately, improved her disposition. If anything, she seemed snippier than ever.

After he'd heard one too many of her obnoxious remarks, he finally asked, "What, pray tell, is your problem, Miss Granger? Is it not enough that you will most likely have achieved a record-setting number of N.E.W.T.s without being troubled to actually attend your final year? Can you not wait patiently for your results like anyone else?"

She looked first startled and then incensed by his question, but she did not reply.

"Cat got your tongue, Miss Granger? How very surprising. Perhaps you were expecting the wizarding world to shower you with accolades and gifts as well as allowing you to ..."

Her face abruptly turned crimson, but not, as he might have supposed at first, with rage. It seemed she was embarrassed.

"You did," he said wonderingly. "That is precisely what you expected. How very naïve."

"I did *not* expect ... gifts," she sputtered. "I didn't expect anything except maybe a chance to live a normal life."

"If you wanted a normal life, you'd be home with your parents and not here plaguing me," he pointed out.

"You don't know anything about it," she huffed. "And stay off my parents! We're done."

"Clearly."

As she snatched up her things to leave, he shocked himself by adding, "You'd be surprised how much I know about it, Miss Granger. Both the ingratitude of the wizarding world and the impossibility of ever living a normal life."

She turned and looked at him oddly, then left without another word.

~o0o~

It was strange that she was running so late, he mused as he set water to boil for another pot of tea. He wondered whether he had finally pushed her past the point of no return. Oddly, he found that idea disquieting.

Just as the water was starting to simmer, there was a knock at the door. She appeared rather more out of sorts than usual. He merely acknowledged this with a raised eyebrow and returned to the kitchen.

After setting her things down, she followed him in and uncharacteristically plopped herself down at his table, propping her chin in her hands to watch him. No, she was not really watching him. The glazed look on her face was one he was more accustomed to seeing on almost any other of his former students but her.

"And what is wrong this morning, Miss Granger?" he asked in spite of himself. "Have you, perhaps, received your exam results? Surely you can not be so terribly shocked if you did not do as well as you had hoped."

She looked up at him warily and then down at the table. "No, it's nothing like that. I mean, yes, our results arrived this morning. Much faster than we'd expected."

He was irritated to find himself curious. "And?"

"And I passed all mine, and the boys didn't." She waved a hand. "Go on, have at it."

Ah. So she was not returning to school but the other two would be. For this to be bothering her as much as it apparently was, she must be quite disappointed.

Disappointment, however, was not what her expression appeared to show. She looked ... bleak. She looked as though she had just lost her best friend. Best friends.

"Surely, Miss Granger, not even those two young louts are shallow enough to begrudge you your success."

"I can't imagine why my life is suddenly so interesting to you, sir," she retorted.

"It isn't," he said with a sniff, leaning back against the countertop. "I merely wish to ascertain how this change in mood will affect our work today."

"It won't."

He found that hard to believe and gave another disdainful sniff. This time he smelled something very wrong, and he worked it out just as she yelled, "Professor Snape! You're on fire!"

The heat finally hit the area around the dead spot on his arm, and he quickly moved his arm away from his body before the flames could spread, lunging for the sink.

"Frigео!"

He heard her cast the Flame-Freezing Charm a split second before he managed to turn on the tap. The small flames froze, and as the tap water hit them, they melted and ran down the drain. He found himself mesmerized by their strange appearance so that he barely noticed when Her ... Miss Granger yanked on his wrist and pulled his arm out of the stream of water. It wasn't that he didn't notice the searing pain that exploded outward from that one dead spot. It was just less interesting than watching frozen fire melt.

"Professor! Professor!"

Why was she calling him that? He thought she knew better. He really ought to tell her so. His arm twisted, and she looked at it strangely.

"Shit! What did it do? Are you even hearing me?"

He looked down and saw his sleeve vanish. The hissing sound of her indrawn breath chilled him, though he could hardly blame her. From around the burnt flesh, black and red lines were spreading. The burnt spot didn't hurt much, but the lines did, and he wondered what they would do if they spread past his arm.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't know if this will even stop it, but ... *Petrificus Totalus!*" He felt his arms snap to his sides and his legs snap shut. "*Mobilicorpus!* Don't worry, sir, I won't let you fall." Well, that was rather nice of her. He hurt enough right now without falling over. "Good. It's stopped. It probably still hurts though. You can hex me for this later. *Stupefy!*"

~o0o~

The black and the gray swirled around him. Where was he? Perhaps he was dead, and the bits he thought he remembered about surviving that damned snake were just bizarre hallucinations his brain threw out as it was dying. At least the pain was gone. No, wait, there it was. But it wasn't in his neck. It was in his arm. So either that had all been real or this was part of the same hallucination.

There were voices he didn't recognize. Could you hallucinate voices you'd never heard before? He hadn't thought so, but then, it wasn't something he'd ever questioned before.

"Pocket of venom ..."

"Encapsulated ..."

"Never seen anything like it ..."

"So fortunate you were there ..."

"But it's my fault!"

Well, that voice he knew.

"Were you the one set him on fire?"

"Not this time."

Not this time? When else had he ever been ...?

"Now, where was that other spot he said he still couldn't feel?"

"His toe. He never said which one. Why didn't anyone tell us this could happen? Why weren't you checking in on him before now?"

"I told you, we've never seen the like of it. Should probably have a look at anyone else who's been bitten by that ruddy snake make sure they don't have any venom capsules left in them either."

"That'd be Mr. Weasley. And Harry. There might be others, but they're the only ones I know about."

Nagini had bitten Potter? If the Dark Lord was going to do that anyway, why did he care so much about the sodding Elder Wand in the first place? At least he was gone for good this time.

Hopefully.

He became aware of a soft hand holding his. Impertinent girl! Still, as he couldn't quite seem to open his eyes, it was rather nice to feel that someone else was there. Her thumb moved across the back of his hand soothingly.

"There's no need for you to stay, miss."

"Well, someone should."

"Suit yourself."

A door opened and closed.

"Please be all right, sir."

Why did she care? Her thumb kept moving slowly back and forth across his hand, lulling him to sleep before he could figure out the answer to that question.

~o0o~

The grays were getting lighter, and he was starting to feel more things. This was definitely not his bed. Nor was it the temporary bed that had once been and was once again his couch. The stiff sheets did feel familiar, though, and he guessed he was in St. Mungo's.

There was something heavy next to his arm, and something soft and fuzzy draped over it. Not his injured arm either. That was odd enough that he managed to pry his eyes open and turn his head to look.

It seemed that the fuzziness was a riot of brown curls, and Hermione had fallen asleep and laid her head down next to his arm. Given her position, he imagined that had not been deliberate, as she would surely be very uncomfortable when she woke.

Turning his head again, he looked at his wand arm, which was swathed in bandages. He tried to flex his fingers.

Nothing.

Surprised at how tired he could be after a bit of head-turning and finger-not-flexing, he closed his eyes and sank back into sleep.

~o0o~

"Mione, why are you still here?"

A better question might be what the boy was doing here, Severus thought fuzzily. Once again, his eyelids did not want to open, but the voice was clear enough.

"Go pack for school, Ron. You'll have to make the train tomorrow."

"We could at least have this afternoon. Maybe go to Diagon Alley? I won't even pester you for taking too long in Flourish & Blotts."

"No, Ron, we couldn't. Maybe when you've moved on we can have a day as friends, but not now. It's too soon."

The thumb was moving across his hand again.

"At least you don't have to be here all the time. Harry says you haven't been back to the house at all."

"Kreacher brought me a few things, Ron. I'm fine. I just ... I can't leave Mr. Snape again. Not till he wakes up anyway."

Something about that sounded rather off. Several things, actually, but he still felt too fuzzy to sort them all out. However, it now sounded like a very good idea to stop trying to open his eyes, at least for the time being. He decided not to try and sort out why that was either.

"It looks weird, 'Mione, seeing you sitting with him like that. Why're you holding his hand?"

"The Healers say sometimes that helps an unconscious person, so they know someone's there."

The Healers were right, it seemed.

"Well, it's creepy."

She sighed. "Go home and pack, Ron. I'll owl you and Harry to see how you're doing in a few days."

"You sure you're going to be all right?"

As she didn't say anything, Severus imagined the look she must have given him.

"Right then. Well, bye."

"Bye."

The door opened and shut.

There were long minutes of quiet. He felt her shift and take his hand between both of hers. Presumptuous in the extreme, but also rather nice.

"They don't understand. I thought at least Harry would. I know it's not quite the same as before, but you did almost die again. I'm so sorry, sir ... Severus. It's strange, trying to call you that, but the Healers say I should. I think it would make you mad, but if you got mad enough to wake up, I suppose that would be all right."

She was right. He should be furious. However, his name sounded rather pleasant when she said it like that, so perhaps he wouldn't hex her once he was back to full strength. Or at least not for that.

"Anyway, I'm sorry we left you. I'm sorry we didn't check more carefully. Even if you were evil, if V...Voldemort had been right about the wand, then the thing to do would have been to keep you alive somehow. Except you were still alive anyway, and you were stuck there by yourself, and ... well, I know it's not the same thing at all, but I won't let you be left all alone this time."

He should have known. Another one with a guilty conscience. Fighting the lethargy that held him still, he pulled his hand from between hers and rested it on his stomach.

"S-Severus? Sir?"

This time, it did not sound pleasant at all. Fortunately, she did not speak again, and he was able to go back to sleep.

~o0o~

The next time he awoke, he was alone. At least, no one was touching him, and he could not hear anyone. When he forced his eyes open, he confirmed that he was, indeed, alone. His right arm was still wrapped like a mummy's, and his fingers still would not respond to his commands. This seemed rather worse than before. How could a small burn cause that to happen?

The door opened, and Hermione entered. A split second's relief that she had not left was followed immediately by irritation that she was inflicting her presence on him, as though he were in some way supposed to help her expiate her guilt.

"Se-sir. You're awake!" Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Obviously," he rasped

She tapped her wand in a rapid staccato on a purple tile on the wall, clearly signaling the Healers as they descended upon him en masse within seconds.

"Follow my finger with your eyes without moving your head."

"Can you feel this?"

"Can you move your head?"

"Wiggle your fingers."

"All right, now the toes."

"Do you know what year it is?"

"That depends," he croaked, "upon how many months you have used up asking me useless questions. May I please have some *water*?"

"Oh, right. Certainly." One of them produced a glass and filled it from her wand-tip as another of them used a charm to raise the top of the bed so that he was sitting rather than lying down. He took the glass awkwardly and sipped it a bit, moistening his mouth and throat gradually before taking a large swallow.

"Now," he said a bit more clearly, "what has happened to me?"

One of the Healers he remembered from his last stay here stepped forward. Wilbert, perhaps? And he began to explain.

"It seems that due to some unusual properties in the venom of the snake that bit you, two parts of your body retained bits of that venom in an encapsulated form that none of our prior treatments detected or affected in any way. When you burned your arm, the capsule there ruptured, releasing the venom again." Wilbert or whoever he was took a deep breath. "Miss Granger's instinct to bind and Stun you was a good one. Your body was slowed down enough by the combination of spells to prevent the damage spreading beyond your arm. As it is, we do not know yet how well it will be able to recover from this second trauma."

He pressed his lips together tightly.

"While the damaged tissues had mostly recovered, they were still rather fragile. It will be some time before we know anything for certain."

"I see." That did make some sense of the snippets he'd heard earlier. Trust the Dark Lord to have a pet that did things no one could predict, even after it was dead. "And the other capsule?"

"We located and removed it. Now that we know what we are looking for, we scanned your entire body to be certain no more of them remain."

"And you did not know this before? How is that possible, when you have had at least one other victim of that damned snake in here, not three years ago?"

The lot of them squirmed like first years caught without their homework.

"We, er, didn't discover that property of the snake's venom at the time. In fact, we've had Mr. Weasley come in to be examined. He had three capsules one in his liver. It's fortunate the man doesn't overindulge in Firewhisky."

Was that supposed to make him feel better? Arthur had been walking around with these time bombs in him for nearly three years without incident. Of course, Severus Snape would cause one to rupture just as he was nearly recovering the use of his arm. That was simply how his life worked.

And that was patently unfair. Had he not suffered enough? Had he not *done* enough? Now he was supposed to resume those ridiculous exercises in what was fast becoming a clearly Sisyphean task, as evidently some other complication would arise as soon as he'd begun to regain the ground he'd just lost.

He caught sight of Miss Granger still standing where she'd been since she'd summoned the Healers, and the pitying look in her eyes set his stomach on fire. As he gritted his teeth, one of the lanterns on the wall exploded in a shower of glass and wax, making everyone in the room jump.

"Get out, all of you!" he snarled.

"Mi-mister Snape, you'll want to calm down," stammered Wilbert.

"What I *want* is for all of you to leave. Now!" Another lantern burst, leaving the room substantially dimmer.

There was a bit of a scramble for the door as they finally complied.

Just as she left, Miss Granger turned to look at him, her eyes no longer filled with pity. She held her hand against one of her cheeks, and at first he thought she looked shocked. Then one of the Healers bustling her out pulled her hand away and clucked over the piece of glass wedged into her flesh.

The rage that had been swirling inside him abruptly stopped, leaving him feeling adrift on suddenly becalmed waters, and if he'd actually eaten anything in the past couple of days, he thought he would probably have been sick. For the next several hours during which he was left to his own devices, all of his thoughts continued to return to that hurt and accusing look she'd given him and that piece of glass sticking out of her cheek with blood welling around it.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 5

Nagini's bite carried some severe consequences, and Severus has a long, rocky road to recovery ahead of him.
Traveling that road leads to healing, and not just for him.

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Chapter 4

She couldn't quite believe it. Of course, she knew that a witch or wizard under extreme emotional strain might cause spontaneous magic to happen. That's why she hadn't

been shocked, only startled, when the first lamp had blown up. Who wouldn't want to blow things up when they'd just found out they might lose the use of their wand arm entirely? Who wouldn't want to blow things up when they'd just found out they might lose the use of *any* arm entirely? But then when she'd felt the bite of the jagged bit of glass and spatters of scalding wax ... She knew he hadn't done it on purpose, but somehow she'd felt as hurt as if he'd slapped her across the face.

"There you go now, dearie," the mediwitch said with a last dab of some potion or other. "Put a bit of this on again later, then twice a day until it disappears, and it shouldn't leave a scar."

"What? Oh, thank you," she answered absently.

"Now, don't you worry about your Mr. Snape in there," the mediwitch continued as she made a few notes and cleared away a few odds and ends from the little room she'd brought Hermione to. "He's just had an awful shock. From what you've said about his rehabilitation, he'll probably be able to regain most of what he's lost."

Hermione bristled. "Most of what he's lost since when? Since last week, when he was almost comfortable with wand movements most of us have been able to do without thinking since we were fourteen?"

"Well ... yes."

She sighed. There was no way he would ever find that acceptable. She certainly wouldn't. Who could? Besides, there was the slight problem of who was supposed to help him with it now. Staying with him until he woke up was one thing, but she couldn't put her life on hold indefinitely. She needed to figure out what sort of job she wanted, obtain said job, find herself a flat, move out of Grimmauld Place, and actually get her life started. There wasn't going to be time left over to baby him through fits of pique and stubborn refusals to try to use his good arm for magic, but she didn't think Dedalus was going to be up to managing him *every* day. Maybe Mrs. Weasley could be persuaded to try again?

She slid off the examining table and stuffed the little pot of potion into a pocket.

"I'm not sure you should go back into his room quite yet," the mediwitch said.

"I wasn't planning to. I ought to go home for a bit, now that he's awake."

The other woman looked a bit worried.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Well, you will be back, won't you?"

She shrugged. "I'll have to be. Some of my things are still in his room."

"But ... you'll still be by to sit with him, won't you?"

"If he wants visitors, I'm sure I'll stop by sometimes," she hedged, certain he wouldn't want her to do anything of the sort. "Why? It isn't as if I'm family or anything."

"No, but ... well, he's been much easier to manage this time, with you here."

"He's been unconscious," she pointed out with a roll of her eyes.

"That didn't stop him from causing all sorts of havoc the last time he was here," the mediwitch countered. "Today was the first bit of spontaneous magic he's shown. Before, we were cleaning and repairing his room at least three times a day."

Hermione took a second to wonder why they didn't simply put Shield Charms around things, then shrugged and moved on to wonder why it should make any difference that she'd been there. Perhaps it was what they'd said about just knowing there was someone there? Whether or no, that was all well and good while he'd been unconscious. Surely her presence would only aggravate him further now that he was awake.

The look he'd given her had been like a bucket of ice water dashed over her head. Had she actually started to feel close to him over the past few days? Holding his hand and calling him "Severus" was just something they'd told her might help. He'd never have allowed that if he'd been conscious, and he'd probably be horrified if he knew she'd done it while he wasn't. It shouldn't hurt her to acknowledge that, as she couldn't have imagined otherwise. Could she?

"We'll see," was all that she'd say until she'd had some time to figure out what she was doing, not to mention how he'd react when she came back to fetch her things.

~oOo~

She wasn't sure if it was fortunate or not, but he was asleep when she returned, and she made every effort to keep it that way as she quietly Summoned her toothbrush, hairbrush, purse, blanket, and slippers from the bedside table she'd stored them in and under.

It was decidedly unfortunate, however, that when the table drawer closed, it made a very distinctive click that woke him with a start.

She froze.

"Miss Granger?" He was looking at her as though questioning whether she was actually there.

For a moment, she considered letting him think she was a figment of his imagination in hopes he would go back to sleep. The moment passed. "Yes?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I've just come to collect my things. Don't worry, I was just leaving."

When she was little, her best friend next door had got a puppy for Christmas one year, but then had to give it away when it turned out her mum was allergic. The look on his face was exactly the same one Melanie'd worn the day they took Corbie away. Perhaps he wasn't as eager to see the back of her as she'd thought. For some reason, she found that idea comforting.

"Miss Granger, I ... apologize for injuring you." He turned his head to look away from her. "It was not intentional, but it was still inexcusable."

She took a step into the room and allowed the door to close behind her.

"I know that, sir. You've never done anything to actually hurt any of us, even when you were obviously furious." Was that the reason for her feeling of betrayal? Somehow that didn't feel quite right.

Not entirely sure why, she pulled up the chair she'd spent the last three days sitting in. It must have been habit, as she had to almost forcibly restrain herself from taking up his hand. That would have been a very bad idea, she thought.

"You thought I would hex you for Binding and Stunning me," he said, still looking at his bandaged arm.

Had she said that? Oh. Perhaps she had.

"No, not really," she admitted. "I mean, I thought you'd be angry. But if you haven't cursed me yet for any of the things we did in school, I don't imagine you'd start now."

Now he looked up at her, clearly focusing on her cheek, which she knew still sported an angry red line. She briefly wished the mediwitch had put a bandage over it, even though the cut was already well sealed. Her breath caught as he lifted his uninjured hand as if to touch her cheek. Only it stopped when it was mere inches away and dropped back to his side.

"I swore I'd never be like him," he murmured.

She crinkled her brow but thought better than to ask who he meant.

"When I asked why you were here," he said more strongly after a moment, "I meant the question more generally. Clearly you have been here for several days. Why?"

She squirmed in her chair. How could she explain without giving him some false impression? She had to say something. As best as she had been able to learn, he did not need to use his wand to simply pluck the answer from her mind, and she was afraid of what he'd find if he did.

"I didn't feel right about leaving you all alone," she finally said.

"That did not seem to be a problem when I was bleeding to death in front of you," he snapped.

She bit her lip. What could she possibly say to that? "I know. I'm sorry."

He let out a sigh that she couldn't quite interpret and said, "Where do your parents think you've been these past few days, Miss Granger?"

"They have no idea I exist," she said stiffly. She hadn't meant to admit that.

He looked at her as if finally slotting a puzzle piece into place. "I see. Do you plan to restore their memories?"

"It was enough of a risk to modify them the first time," she replied with a twinge of guilt. "I won't risk turning them into Lockharts. It'll have to be enough that they're safe."

"They could still be at risk, in any event."

She nodded. While the odds were that any remaining Death Eaters would go after Harry first, the lot of them were reminded regularly of the need to remain on their guard at all times.

It occurred to her that he might now think she had nothing else to do than to return to working with him when he was discharged to his home once again. She wasn't quite sure how to dispel that notion without outright telling him she didn't plan to do so.

"What, then, will you do now? Where have you been staying? At the Burrow?"

"Erm, no." Not that Ron wouldn't have wanted her to or that Mrs. Weasley wouldn't have welcomed her. "Harry's been letting me stay at Grimmauld Place until I get a job and a flat."

"I see," he said, looking once again like a minor mystery had been solved. When had he ever wondered about her living arrangements?

An uncomfortable silence fell, and she was suddenly certain that, with or without the use of Legilimency, he knew she had no intention of playing nursemaid to him any longer, and not because she already had other specific plans.

"I should be going," she said as she stood and returned the chair to its normal position by the wall, strangely reluctant to follow through on her words.

"Yes, I expect you should."

"Shall I come visit?" she asked almost in spite of herself.

"If you have nothing else to do, I suppose that would not be objectionable," he surprised her by saying.

"All right then. I'll see you later." She took her leave, closing the door quietly behind her and feeling somehow both pleased and unsettled by their conversation.

~o0o~

Hermione sipped her tea and munched on her toast as she leafed through the newspaper. There weren't exactly loads of jobs being advertised in the *Prophet*. Surprising, really. You'd think there would be all sorts of things needed while everyone rebuilt from the war. Perhaps those jobs had all been advertised and taken during the summer. The few jobs she did see listed did not interest her in the least.

She could, she supposed, owl Professor McGonagall for advice. Had things been a bit more normal last year, had she actually done her seventh year, no doubt she would have spoken with her many times about her interests and what opportunities might exist. Not that it was ever a fair comparison, but if things in the wizarding world were at all like they were in the Muggle world in so far as employment, the very best opportunities were not the ones a person would find in the newspaper, and she didn't know where else to look.

Of course, Professor McGonagall had quite a lot to be getting on with herself right now, getting Hogwarts' school year started with a larger than usual seventh year, a new Transfiguration instructor and Head of Gryffindor to break in, and repairs probably still ongoing. So Hermione didn't really want to bother her until she was certain she'd exhausted all the avenues she could on her own.

"Is Miss be wanting more toast?" Kreacher asked.

"No, thank you," she replied. "It's been a couple of days. I think I'll go visit Professor Snape."

Her mood already a bit brighter at the thought of doing something other than moping over her situation, she spent an extra few minutes taming her hair before leaving for St. Mungo's.

~o0o~

"And to what do I owe this honor? Have you grown tired of the search for employment already?"

She supposed she should have expected as much. And it wasn't as though there weren't any truth to that.

"It's a pleasure to see you as well, sir," she replied, hoping he hadn't seen her flinch and realizing that was probably unrealistic in the extreme. She brought her chair over by the bed and sat down. "How are you doing?"

"I am in hospital, Miss Granger. How do you bloody well think I am doing?"

Annoyed, she crossed her arms and replied, "I think you could be doing either better or worse than when I last saw you, which is why I asked."

He made a scoffing noise and said, "They say that if I am very fortunate, I may regain almost as much use of my arm as I had before burning it."

Her heart sank. That was what she had been told as well, but she'd hoped it was just the sort of "don't get your hopes up" thing that Healers and mediwizards said. That could still be true, but somehow hearing him say it gave the prognosis a bit more weight.

Of course, he could always try using his left hand. He almost had to now. She bit her lip to keep herself from actually saying it.

"If you were about to suggest what I think you were, Miss Granger, I suppose I must finally concede your point. I shall, indeed, be required to learn to use my wand in my left hand." He looked as though the very idea made him want to vomit.

"I'm sure it won't be that bad," she said hastily. "I know you didn't want to. But after all, just because Remus, er ..."

He looked puzzled. "What has Lupin to do with anything?"

She shifted in her seat. "Well, he was always so insistent that we learn to use both hands, and you two never got along, so I thought ... never mind."

"Never mind, indeed." He snorted. "As if anything I said or did was ever influenced by Remus Lupin."

Hermione felt more uncomfortable than ever. While she supposed that wasn't precisely speaking ill of the dead, it felt awfully close. She wished she'd never let that slip.

"Dedalus was by yesterday," he continued. "You needn't worry. He will resume assisting me once they finally let me out of this place."

She supposed that ought to make her feel better. It didn't.

"I could probably carry on helping for a while," she heard herself say. "At least until I find a job."

He looked at her as though she had just sprouted antennae and wings. Considering that she hadn't intended to say anything of the kind, she imagined she wore a similar expression. For the briefest second, she thought she might have even seen a hint of a smile pull at the corner of his mouth.

"That would be acceptable."

"Well. That's settled then."

While any suggestion of a smile on his part was clearly a product of her own imagination, she couldn't deny that she wore a smile herself for the rest of the day. It was nice to have something to do besides stare pointlessly at the *Prophet*.

~o0o~

Within a week, he had returned to his home and Hermione was back to painting Nerve-Regeneration Potion onto his arm and supervising the exercises he had to do in order to regain even the most basic use of that arm and hand. The difference this time was that this was followed immediately by wand-work practice with his left hand, something he took to much faster than she would have expected for someone so resistant to doing so.

Well, the other difference was that every time she applied the potion, she found herself remembering that very strange dream about him. A dream that had recurred a few times since with some rather ... surprising variations. She made it a point to be quick and efficient painting the potion onto him so that she wouldn't have time to think about that.

"Maybe it's just because this arm wasn't damaged," she said, "but it seems to me you're making amazing progress. You've done as much this afternoon as we managed in two whole weeks with your right hand!"

Seeming far less pleased than she thought his achievement warranted, he merely nodded and said, "That should be sufficient for today."

While she had hardly expected him to dance a jig, she found his lack of reaction somewhat disappointing. She decided to add the left-handed wand-work to the Charmed parchment and took it down from its place on the wall to do so. In the process, she bumped one of the many rickety bookshelves with her elbow, knocking a couple of books onto the floor.

"Ow! Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed as she bent to pick them up. One, she noticed, was a photo album that had fallen open. The picture that caught her eye was of a much younger Snape with a man who must have been his father. It was a Muggle photograph, so neither of the figures moved, caught perpetually in the moment the older man had been taking aim to throw a dart at a board that appeared to have been more or less in the same area of wall where her Charmed parchment had been hanging. Fascinated, but unwilling to be yelled at for looking too long, she snapped the album shut and replaced it and the other books on the shelf quickly. "Would you like me to set this a bit sturdier? Or would you rather wait and do it yourself later?"

"I believe my shelving was functioning adequately before you assaulted it," he snapped. "As you are clearly the one who broke it, fixing it is surely the least you can do."

She shot him a dirty look and cast a non-verbal *Reparo* before answering, "If I'd hit it hard enough to break it, my elbow would hurt much worse than it does, so I hardly think it's my fault."

"And does your elbow hurt, Miss Granger?"

"Not hardly at all." Did he just ask whether she was hurt?

"Then I thank you for fixing my bookshelf."

"You're welcome."

Turning her attention back to the Charmed parchment, she finished the spell to add a section that would cover the left-handed wand-work and re-hung the chart. Considering the dramatic dip on the portion reflecting his progress with his right hand, perhaps he would find it encouraging to see this for comparison. At any rate, he didn't say anything further about it, merely wishing her a good day when she finished hanging it and took herself off.

~o0o~

The next day was a free day for her, and it started, as most days had lately, with flipping almost aimlessly through the utterly useless *Prophet*. She was starting to wonder if she shouldn't just start looking for a Muggle job instead, though the problem of explaining her educational credentials (or lack thereof) would be sure to come up. When she thought of owling Professor McGonagall, however, something in her just rebelled.

She wondered at that a bit. Was it simply that she didn't want to bother the busy Headmistress? Or was it more that she didn't want to feel like she was back to being a student again? If so, that was ridiculous, and she knew it. Certainly others who had left Hogwarts went back to see their former Heads of House or other teachers from time to time. She'd seen one or two of them in the halls when she was younger. And it had nothing to do with not wanting to go back to Hogwarts herself, as it would only be sending an owl.

Of course, she hadn't quite got round to sending one to Harry and Ron either.

It was rather ridiculous, when she thought of it, that she couldn't bear the thought of returning there, after all that had happened, when she was voluntarily spending time with a man she thought she had watched die. Ever since learning he had survived, one of her worst memories was of leaving him behind in the Shrieking Shack. Her worst nightmares included him lying there in a pool of his own blood, croaking for help with no one to hear, or even paralyzed and unable to call out, as he surely must have been for some time. And yet she went to see him every other day, had stayed with him almost constantly at St. Mungo's while he was unconscious.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Kreacher looking at her cooling tea reproachfully. She took a dutiful sip and returned her attention to the advertisements for welcome witches, store clerks, and owl attendants.

~o0o~

When she looked over his chart the next afternoon, she was pleased to see that it did, indeed, show a sharp contrast between the fairly gradual improvement he was showing with his right arm and the amazing progress he was making with his left. He was up to fourth-year Charms and Transfigurations already, meaning that between his time with her and his time with Mr. Diggle, he'd covered about a year per day. Once he managed some of the fifth-year Charms, he wouldn't need them at all, as he'd be able to charm the brush to paint the potion onto his right arm himself.

She berated herself for being dismayed by the prospect of no longer being needed to come around and assist him.

Truly, though, even looking at the progress he'd made previously with his right arm, there was no comparison to the rate at which he was proceeding with his left. Of course, his left arm had the benefit of not having been affected by the snakebite. Something tickled the back of her brain as she thought that.

"Are you planning to admire your own handiwork for the remainder of the day?" he asked.

"No, of course not." She turned and walked back over to where he was standing. "I just got lost in thought."

"No doubt one of many reasons you have yet to secure yourself gainful employment." He stared down his nose at her. "Have you even organized any interviews yet? Or are you still sifting through the no doubt plentiful offers that have collected at the Employment Branch of the Examiner's Office?"

She stared at him blankly.

"Surely not every offer you will have received is beneath you, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

"Offers?" she asked, surprised to hear how very small her voice sounded.

"Yes, offers," he drawled. "Sit down, Miss Granger. You look as though you are about to pass out."

She all but fell onto the couch and just looked at him, wondering why it hadn't occurred to her to ask him about all this in the first place. No, he hadn't been *her* Head of House, but he'd been *a* Head of House. Of course he knew about this sort of thing.

"Clearly, Minerva never had the opportunity to talk to you about how to proceed after your N.E.W.T.s. Equally obviously, the examiners assumed she must have done, or they would have informed you that employers come to them to make offers to those who have achieved Outstanding or Exceeds Expectations in relevant subjects. By now, there is most likely a stack awaiting you that is nearly as tall as you are."

Her mouth opened and closed several times, but no sounds came out.

"No doubt these prospective employers will be as impressed as I am by your stellar impression of a goldfish. However, they will be more impressed if you actually owl them for interviews. Really, Miss Granger, what have you been doing all this time?"

"Apparently not what I should have been doing," she admitted, furious to have wasted so much time and embarrassed that he'd caught her in this apparent failure. How many of those offers must have had expiration dates that had passed by now? "May I please ask you some more about how this works?"

"As I have never been able to stop you from asking a question before, I hardly think I shall succeed now," he said with a smirk that really ought to annoy her but didn't. In fact, she thought she quite liked it.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 5

Nagini's bite carried some severe consequences, and Severus has a long, rocky road to recovery ahead of him.
Traveling that road leads to healing, and not just for him.

A/N: Written for Bluestocking79 for the Winter 2007/8 round of the SSHG_Exchange on LiveJournal. Huge thanks to my beta, ubiquirk, and my Brit-picker, Saracen77. Any remaining errors are mine.

Disclaimer: Does anyone actually think these characters are mine? Didn't think so.

Chapter 5

It was nice to no longer require assistance to continue the work he needed to do on his right arm. He could almost grip a quill with it, though the Healers said he should not expect it to progress much further than that.

Dedalus was, therefore, no longer coming round, and that was something of a relief. Miss Granger, however, still fancied herself necessary to his continued recovery and continued to show up every other day. He thought it likely that she missed having her erstwhile companions to nag over their homework and fervently hoped she would soon settle on some other means of making herself feel useful, even if he had grown rather accustomed to her visits.

As he awaited her arrival, he prepared a pot of tea rather more carefully than in the past, keeping his right arm well away from the heat despite its return to full sensation if not use.

The problem was that she was quite right to look askance at many of the offers that had been made for her. While she should certainly expect to start out at a very beginning level, she would be utterly wasted training Security Trolls, had insufficient interest in Potions to undertake being an apprentice, and would quickly be stifled working for almost any department of the Ministry of Magic save one, and the Department of Mysteries was apparently every bit as inclined to offer for someone who had helped destroy their Hall of Prophecy as she was to return to the site of that ill-conceived "rescue mission" in her fifth year.

While the interdisciplinary requirements of Curse-Breaking did intrigue her, she, in her own words, "didn't much fancy banking," and even if she did, it seemed that Gringotts was not offering to train her either. Small wonder, considering that rather bizarre escapade of merely a few months past. The goblins would have to be mad to take on someone who had been willing to participate in a break-in such as that.

In short, what few fields would be appropriate to a witch of her talents seemed to be cut off from her by her own foolish Gryffindor behavior.

He poured his tea and set out an empty cup. She should arrive at any minute.

Had she been one of his Slytherins, then she would, by now, have a network of contacts who would owe her various favors that she could selectively call in rather than a lot of wizards, witches, and goblins who might be grateful for her contributions to the war in the abstract but wanted little to do with her in reality. He supposed they had that rather in common. The difference was that he did have a solid reputation as a Potions Master upon which to fall back, and he had some hope of turning to research once he regained access to his funds.

He did not even bother to rise for her perfunctory knock. She no longer waited but rather came right in these days. It was not worth the effort to be annoyed by her growing familiarity. He expended enough effort to refrain from recalling any of the persistent dreams in her presence.

"Hello," she called out as she entered. He heard a rustle of parchment as she separated her latest stack of employment offers from her other belongings that he knew she was arranging neatly on the small table by the door.

"What, pray tell, are you doing out there?" he called out when more than enough time had passed for her to collect herself and come in to join him.

Her footsteps drew nearer, and she bounced into the kitchen and set her parchments down on the table. "I just had to check your chart again."

"And what could you have possibly learned from it?" he asked. "It has not changed substantially since you looked at it the other day."

"It hasn't," she agreed, sitting down and pouring herself a cup of tea. "But that isn't what I was looking for."

He raised an eyebrow at her, something that had long since ceased to intimidate her but still elicited the desired explanation.

"I was comparing your progress with left-handed wand-work against your progress before with your right hand."

"Surely you did not require a chart to tell you that it would, of course, be easier to learn wand movements with a non-injured limb," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

"Of course not. But it made me think of something else while I was over there."

Considering the labyrinthine tangents of which her mind was capable, it was only safe to assume that whatever that something was, it would not be anything he might guess.

"Do you remember that shelf I fixed for you?"

"You mean the shelf you knocked loose?" he asked, amused rather than dismayed at the brief look of irritation that crossed her features.

"The shelf that was already loose," she said. "Anyway, one of the books that fell was a photo album."

Now, he noticed, she began to look somewhat nervous. A knot began to form in his stomach. He didn't like the idea of her seeing any of the pictures of forced normalcy his mother had insisted upon staging and collecting. He should probably have destroyed them long ago.

"And there was this picture that must have been you with your father," she continued hurriedly. "He was getting ready to throw a dart. And you were copying him."

He had no memory of any such thing, but then he preferred to think as little as possible about those days and certainly did not pore over old photographs.

"Yes, well, I suppose many children copy the things they see their parents do. In fact, I would venture to say that would explain much of the classroom behavior I have seen repeat itself in the children of people with whom I attended Hogwarts."

She let out a disgusted huff. "Harry didn't even know..."

He saw the moment she realized she had been baited and got herself back on track. Taking a sip of tea, he hid both the smile that tugged at his lips at her animation and the twinge of anxiety he felt at where he feared she was going.

"You were both using your left hands."

He set down his teacup and gave her a look that had, in years past, reduced many a student to tears, Hermione included. It was no longer effective, but at least it allowed him to slip behind a familiar mask, behind which he found himself focusing intently on her cheek. Whoever had treated her at St. Mungo's had done well. There was no trace of a scar except the one projected by his own memory, in which he could still see the glass protruding from her skin. It seemed she was aware of his scrutiny, as her hand rose to touch that spot briefly before returning to her cup.

"And I suppose you have combined this observation with whatever Potter has told you about my youth."

She looked startled. "Harry knows things about your youth? I mean, he told everyone about you being friends with his mum and all."

The way she shifted uncomfortably in her chair reinforced just how much "and all" encompassed. A brief flash from last night's dream made him wonder just how uncomfortable she would be if she knew of that as well. Still, it seemed she was not, after all, aware of the things Potter had seen during his futile Occlumency lessons.

"That is not the matter to which I was referring. However," he added, deciding to take advantage of the situation, "so long as the subject has arisen, I will thank you to dismiss any romantic schoolgirl tales that may have been spun by his interpretation of the memories I chose to share with him."

"Then ... you're not still in love with her?"

Merlin help him, that question had actually sounded hopeful.

"I still regret the loss of her friendship, and I shall always deeply regret the role I played in her death. But no, I am not still pining after her nearly two decades later."

"Erm, that's good then." She wrinkled her brow. "How did we get onto this subject? Oh, right." She set her jaw slightly. "Actually, I combined that observation with what you said to me at St. Mungo's. At the time I thought you meant V-Voldemort."

He flinched inwardly at the name.

"But you really meant ... Well, I don't think you're like either one of them, if you meant what I think you meant."

"I have never hurt a woman deliberately. Not even Bellatrix." His stomach churned again at the memory, not only of how his uncontrolled magic had hurt her, but why. He might not have intended to harm her, but his anger had most certainly been directed at her. Was that why he had become so involved in helping her find her way into the adult wizarding world? Must he always spend his life atoning for impulsive mistakes?

"I think *she* might have deserved it," she replied with a shudder.

His eyes narrowed as he was suddenly certain that Hermione was not shuddering merely at the woman's reputation. Instinctively, he caught her gaze, and the memory that was at the forefront of her mind all but leapt out to him. Gritting his teeth, he silently agreed that the deranged witch would have deserved any pain he could have given her, then cursed himself for his own hypocrisy.

"Yes, well, now that the conversation has become decidedly unpleasant, shall we look at the offers you brought, or would you prefer to spend the remainder of the day dwelling upon and comparing the horrors of our respective pasts?"

She quickly agreed with him and spread out the latest installment of pathetic career "opportunities" on his table.

~o0o~

When the owl arrived to let him know that his Gringotts vault had been released from seizure and he now had access to his own money, it was actually a bit anticlimactic. He could now purchase whatever he wished, no longer restricted to the generous but still controlled allowance upon which he'd been dependent until now. There would still be hearings and other unpleasantness to face, but as Kingsley was deliberately holding off his own case until after all the other Death Eaters had been tried, it would be some time yet before he had to concern himself with any of that.

In the meantime, he could utilize some of the money he'd accumulated over the years. Though not much in comparison to what there might have been, had he not been constrained to working at Hogwarts, it was enough to purchase the ingredients to begin some of the Potions research he had yearned to do for some time now. While he could hardly publish the results until his name was cleared - and he almost dared hope it would be, given the amount of strategic planning Kingsley had expended toward that end - it would be quite awhile before he would be ready to do so in any case.

He briefly considered whether he had enough to hire an assistant - possibly an assistant who could focus on some of the non-Potions aspects of his research, such as Arithmantic projections and possibly the occasional relevant charm. Annoyed at himself, he dismissed the notion as self-indulgent foolishness. He was supposed to be looking forward to ridding himself of the young woman, not seeking out ways to keep her coming by. It was pathetic enough that he had been dragging his feet with the more advanced wand-work for the past week or so, and he did not particularly care to examine his reasons for that.

Summoning a fresh sheet of parchment, he began to make lists of ingredients he would need for various projects and the order in which he thought he would like to begin working on them. While it was probably still inadvisable for him to go out yet to obtain the items, there was no reason he could not order them by owl.

~o0o~

"I don't understand what the difficulty is with this one," she said, a frown creasing her brow. "Imperturbable Charms must have been second nature to you before."

They certainly had been. However, there was something about the last jab and twist that did not seem to quite work. It was infuriating because he could not safely begin his research until he had mastered this. There were far too many volatile compounds that he would need to keep completely isolated.

A tap at his kitchen window interrupted the frustrating session. He turned and flicked his wand in the direction of said window, nonverbally opening it and permitting the delivery owl to enter, and excused himself to see to it.

Though she stepped back to let him by, he still had to pass rather close to her. There was a protracted instant during which he was tempted to linger near her, a temptation he firmly ignored along with the curious look in her eyes.

He fed the owl a biscuit and sent it on its way before examining and unpacking the armadillo bile, capsiicum oil, lacewings, and monkshood. It was as well that Hermione had remained in his sitting room, for all he could have used her assistance. While he had another use entirely for the lacewings, their arrival led to some uncomfortable associations he would prefer not to arise in her presence.

Once all was secured - and fortunately none of these items needed to be Imperturbed - he returned to find Hermione looking over a shelf of his books. The rapt expression on her face intrigued him, and he stepped closer to see what esoteric tomes had entranced her so.

"You have such a wonderful collection of Muggle literature," she said, a wistful note in her voice.

He realized she must have left her own such collection behind when she'd packed her parents off to wherever they'd gone. While he'd often expected to lose this house and all it contained, he knew the loss of his books would have been the thing to trouble him the most.

"You may borrow some if you'd like," he offered.

She turned and looked up at him, and a shudder ran through him.

"Even the Yeats?"

It was a first edition, but he trusted she would treat it with the respect it deserved.

"Of course," he replied, reaching over her shoulder to take the book from its spot and hand it to her.

Her fingertips caressed the book's spine, sending another shudder down his own.

"Thank you," she said, her voice nearly too soft to hear.

"You are welcome," he replied stiffly, taking a step back and turning to gesture towards their work area. "Now, shall we get back to work?"

~o0o~

"I got it!" she shouted as she bounded into his kitchen. When had she abandoned the formality of knocking entirely?

"Are you planning to elaborate upon that?" he asked as he pushed his chair back a bit from the table and rose to greet her. "Or shall I have to use Legilimency to determine what you are talking about?"

He actually knew precisely what she was on about, but it was enjoyable to watch her sputter indignantly for a moment, hands on hips and sparks in her eyes.

"The Arithmancy apprenticeship at the Summer River Research Institute, you great prat!"

While he was pleased she had not returned to addressing him formally since St. Mungo's, he thought that might be going a bit far. Before he could compose a sufficiently scathing reply, however, she had barreled onward.

"They want me to start next week! The letter says there will be plenty of interdisciplinary work, though I'll be expected to focus on pure Arithmancy for the first few months. And the stipend's small, but it'll be enough for a flat if I'm careful with it."

So soon. Well, what had he been helping her for, if not for this? And it was, certainly, the most suitable offer she had received, even if it had required his, Septima's, and Minerva's combined recommendations to bring her to their attention. For such a forward-thinking Institute, they had been rather lax in recognizing that not all the students who had taken their N.E.W.T.s off-schedule this year were lazy dunderheads who simply didn't want to repeat their seventh year. At least they seemed finally to have got the message. In triplicate, as it were.

"Though I might just stay at Grimmauld place through the Christmas hols and save up a bit first. This is going to be wonderful!" She was practically glowing. "Thank you so much. I never even knew such a place existed, but it's just perfect!"

And with that, she took a step closer, stood on her toes, and in what he could only assume was a moment of impulsive exuberance, kissed him on the cheek.

When she pulled back, he was relieved to see only shock, not horror, written on her features, and perhaps a bit of fear. However, she didn't retreat. She was still far closer to him than she ought to be. The silence between them was deafening.

"You are welcome," he replied in a voice that came out far more gruff than he had expected. Seemingly of its own volition, his still somewhat clumsy right hand lifted and touched the invisible line on her cheek.

He'd experienced precious few of these moments, but there had been enough to enable him to recognize this one for what it was. It would be self-indulgent in the extreme to take advantage of it. Self-indulgent and foolish as she would most likely not darken his doorstep again once she began her apprenticeship.

However, when she leaned towards him again and pulled him down so that she could brush her soft lips against his, it would have been far more foolish to refuse. As she became surer of herself and her tongue darted across his lower lip, he let his arms surround her, reveling in her softness as he opened to her explorations. She tasted of tea and mint, and if her kiss lacked anything in expertise, she seemed determined to make up for it in enthusiasm, leading him to wonder whether this was just an exceptionally vivid if somewhat tamer than usual dream.

When they separated, he knew a moment of panic. What was he supposed to say or do now? This was most certainly *not* a dream, and thus simply sweeping her into his arms and carrying her upstairs to his bed was out of the question, even if the way she was looking at him suggested she might not actually mind.

"So ... it'd be all right, then, if I were to stop by to visit at the weekends now and again?" she asked breathily.

"I believe that would be ... acceptable," he murmured.

"I should ... um ... I should probably go home and revise a bit," she said. "Make sure I'm fresh for Monday."

"That would probably be wise," he agreed and leaned forward to kiss her again.

She grinned and stretched up to meet him. "Perhaps wisdom *is* overrated."

Fin