Overview of potential pre-emptive measures to mitigate ICW sanctions

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...the establishment in 1982 of the Department of Wizard Resources, Populations Division was just in time to collect sufficient data to see the negative trends appear, as summarised in the following table:

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<th>82-97 *</th>
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<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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*Average expressed per one thousand of the entire population.

These numbers remain an unacknowledged fact among the population, and quite probably err on the side of conservatism, particularly where squib births are concerned, as there is a decided tendency to under-report for the following reasons:

- Some families with squib children are reported to give up their squib children to Muggle orphanages.
- Hearsay indicates that some families otherwise dispose of squib offspring, possibly illegally and inhumanely.

The under-reporting is clearly demonstrated by comparisons of the Census records, from which otherwise healthy children (per the family Healer's last examination) simply disappear once they pass the age for their magic to show. Sadly, unofficial investigation and autopsies on several exhumed bodies (the few available given preference for cremation) prove that Cause of Death was not natural (see Appendix B). These families have not yet been officially charged, and the matter of legal action is pending with the Wizengamot...

*How ironic,* Hermione thought as she flipped through the proofsheets of the latest report, jotting down marginalia. *To have finally defeated the man who used Wizarding Eugenics as an excuse, and then to find it was too late anyway....*

Pureblood families had intermarried for so long in an attempt to keep the magical lines pure and strong that less desirable, more insidious traits had woven their way into the delicate helices that made Magical humans possible.

Hermione Granger was in a position to know. While her speciality was Theoretic Arithmancy, her thorough, overall grasp of other Magical fields -- and some Muggle ones which she made it her business to acquire a grasp of, such as Genetics -- made her a Generalist, able to easily see connections between the dry numbers spewed out of the Wizard Resources Division of the Ministry, the Registry of Marriages and Births, and the scientific information provided by the Research Department at St. Mungo's. It had earned her the unusual and unique position of International Confederation of Wizards' Populations Consultant for Wizarding Britain, Department of Wizard
Resources, The Ministry. She processed the statistics, made the correlation between numbers and social trends, and put them in some form understandable to the Ministry officials (by far the hardest part of her work), and oversaw the annual presentation to the ICW, which was coordinating the worldwide effort to reverse the damage to the Wizarding genepool.

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...the unfortunate tendency of many Britons overall, and Pureblood Wizards specifically, to cling to class structure is contributing to the poor compliance with previous measures.

Case Study: Family X.

- Pureblood;
- low economic and social status;
- proven fertility (eight issue: seven sons [six living], one daughter).

Of the surviving sons one is unavailable (reason withheld for privacy issues), four are married (all Mixed unions), and the daughter married (Pureblood union). Only one son has not yet married. Inquiry has revealed that several of the sons had approached other Pureblood families (prior to current proposed measures) with intent to pursue unions, and were rebuffed due to low social standing. The daughter was accepted by a relatively wealthy Pureblood family of more moderate views and no past allegiance to Voldemort.

The natural conclusion is that while some families have plenty of individuals to marry out and are of proven magical skill and desirable fertility, the higher class is resistant to accepting them.

While it is possible to encourage individuals to marry across class lines, it is nearly impossible to mandate. It would very well require an entire re-ordering of the current social system to abolish any class distinction whatsoever, a feat which has never been accomplished in the known history of the world. Socialism has been proposed, but I find this impractical and inadvisable for several reasons:

- All known attempts at pure Socialism have resulted in a privileged, minority Overclass and a vast Underclass, leading to economic and social instability as the Have-Not's eventually revolt.
- Wealthier families are likely to flee Britain at the earliest opportunity, further depleting our resources by putting their economic and genetic wealth out of the reach of the general population.

Frankly, there wasn't much the Ministry could do short of locking two genetically-ideal people in a room and force-feeding them a Lust Potion -- and Hermione feared that it might well come to that eventually, given the Minister for Magic's inability to accept the population's poor "performance."

However idiotic the Ministry's initial plan had been -- whatever bumbling, wizarding proto-geneticist had caught the Prime Minister's ear, convinced him of the necessity of such drastic measures -- it must be admitted that the Ministry had tried at first to implement the strategy with some delicacy. Headless of the inability of governments everywhere (Muggle or Magical) to enact social change by persuasive rhetoric alone, the Ministry had tried.

But it had failed miserably.

The movement had started even before Hermione had Left Hogwarts, she'd realised, during that last, awful two-month period after the defeat of Voldemort: sickly patronising and ineffectual posters on the bulletin boards (*Have You Hugged a Muggleborn Today?* and *Heal War Wounds -- Knit Us All Together With Your Choice of Magical Lifemate*); Ministry-mandated curriculum that
forced poor Binns to stammer his way through an entire week of revisionist history that downplayed the marginalisation of Muggleborns and Mixedbloods; other mandates that included tutorials by a genetic specialist from St. Mungo's, who carefully explained basics of Genetics and Breeding to the entire school, and who stressed that there was no magical difference, none, between Pureblood, Mixedblood, and Muggleborn, and that the old prejudices should be discarded.

It was, in its own way, an intriguing problem -- an academic one, Hermione had thought at first -- and at the time she'd quite naïvely decided that it was one she might help fix. To aid in the assimilation of her kind into the closed society of Pureblood Wizarding; to continue, in a way, the fight that she had unconsciously entered when she'd become Harry Potter's friend. So she had slogged her way through her apprenticeship in Arithmancy while interning at the Ministry, despite Ron's occasional derision at her aspiration to become a "glorified Ministry bean-counter." (She'd got used to that, though, and managed to take it in good humour -- most of the time.)

Once she'd attained her position at the astonishingly young age of twenty-one, however, she'd realised how dreadfuly naive she'd really been.

The numbers in the first annual report she'd read told the story: the Purebloods were ignoring the rhetoric.

### Page 58

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Union Composition</th>
<th>2001*</th>
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<td>Mixed/Muggleborn</td>
<td>168</td>
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*in individuals, per one thousand of general population

Millennia of prejudice could not be reversed overnight. Had Ministry officials been aware of Muggle social history, they might have realised from the first that to expect to do so in a single generation was foolishly optimistic at best.

But the Ministry did not have the time to waste even a single generations' resources. The numbers in the latest report weren't good. Britain was letting down the side: only India had a higher rate of non-compliance, and both were far behind the rest of the World.

### Page 72

...Ministry institution of financial incentives in 2005:

- tax benefits for Pure/Mixed or Pure/Muggleborn marriages;
- waiving of marriage license fees for Pure/Mixed/Muggleborn unions;
- property tax cuts for mixed-marriage homeowners.

The next logical step in terms of financial incentives would appear to be "rewards" or tax benefits for each birth from a mixed union.

More purely legal means have currently been proposed, but which I stress should be discarded: considered with great caution: banning of any Pureblood/Pureblood unions. This measure should be dismissed out of hand avoided at all costs for both humanitarian reasons and issues of civil unrest among the population. Likewise, compulsory Pure/Mixed or Pure/Muggleborn marriages are
Hermione knew that after any compulsory laws, she was sunk: it was only one step away from forcing all wizards to marry, and she had little hope that she would escape the measure, even with the considerable privilege that her position gave her. She was too valuable an asset to them to shove into marriage and childbearing as yet -- but not for long.

She didn't want to think about what might happen if even compulsory mixed unions didn't help. The possibility of restrictions on contraceptive potions, forced examinations to prove fertility, mandatory divorce if one partner proved infertile....

It was stupid, really. The American Council of Wizards had solved the problem by changing legitimacy laws, and managed to turn away censure with the scientific argument that multiple partners would increase genetic diversity and encourage compliance from those not interested in marriage or monogamy -- and it had: the United States had seen a dramatic upswing in the magical birthrate, second only to France.

That would never happen in Britain, though -- at least, not with Fudge still at the helm, head stuck firmly in the sand as usual. He was too deeply committed to what he called the "sanctity of the family," spouting yet more rhetoric about the dignity and traditions of British wizarding: ignoring that the needs of a society are dictated not only by proprieties and moral judgements, but by choice -- of partner, certainly, or even the choice of whether to mate at all. While there was, generally speaking, a primal, biological need for the human animal to preserve the species, there were factors that outweighed it (not everyone felt the urge, Hermione being one of them). She reckoned it would take considerable pressure from the ICW to shake his convictions, far more than would be placed on him when she had to present this new report at the ICW Conference in a week's time.

Should've married poor Ron when he asked, I suppose, she thought, rueing her decisiveness all those years ago. If I'd known what I know now, I probably should have done. It's not as though I was holding out for a Grand Passion. I might have been able to make him happy, if I'd... really tried. And then I shouldn't be right in the thick of this, at least personally.

She couldn't have done, though. If truth be told, she valued herself too highly to settle for Ron, absolutely no insult intended toward him. She might care for him dearly as her friend -- or rather, former friend -- but she'd have been miserable. It wouldn't have worked even had everything turned out all right, and certainly not with him the way he was now....

She'd tried to give him a great deal of leeway. Ron had seen what happened between Harry and Voldemort, not she; he was the one who'd been scarred in the battle, in all possible ways; and she knew she'd hurt him a great deal when, after his proposal, she'd gently told him she couldn't possibly marry him. (On reflection, she shouldn't have told him he was like a brother to her -- that was apparently a greater blow than if she'd simply said she didn't love him.) He couldn't seem to understand that she did love him, but not in the way that she felt she ought: Ron was too straightforward, too uncomplicated to understand -- as she did quite early on -- that love has many forms, and not all are suitable for marriage. She'd suspected, too, that he'd seen their potential
marriage as a way to keep what was left of the Trio together and inseparable; and while she could understand the impulse, and while she thought that after his sacrifices he deserved anything good that might come his way, she resented being thought of as a reminder and legacy of their childhood first, and a person in her own right second.

And when it came right down to it, Hermione wasn't certain she could love anyone. Forget that -- Love, full stop. She never seemed happy with anyone for long; she constantly analysed their behaviour, their intellect, the habits that might begin to annoy her, and she always found them wanting in one area or another. ('Four-date Granger,' she'd heard through the grapevine that one bloke had called her: and an indignant counting-up of the time she'd spent with the few men she thought even vaguely worthwhile had proven the bastard entirely correct. By the fourth date she'd discovered something horrific with all of them -- she'd classed them dull, or patronising toward her, or she couldn't quite see herself going to bed with them.)

*Moot point now. Good Lord, I haven't had a date in.... I don't remember how long. Might as well be a nun, really.*

Ron was married, had done so disgracefully soon after she'd turned him down, and already had three children -- two boys and a girl -- and another on the way. Or so Hermione had heard from Arthur: she and Ron didn't really speak anymore, and that was as much her fault as his.

She caught herself staring at the only picture on her desk, of the Trio. (She often thought of it that way, now -- as something separate from herself, not really part of her at all, but of a group of friends that included a young girl who merely looked like her former self.) Two of the three Sixth Years waved back at her: Ron, cheeky (and still, then, irrepressible), stuck out a tongue stained a brilliant blue from a Honeydukes gobstopper; the girl, whose face was just beginning to lengthen and grow into something resembling actual attractiveness, wild hair whipping about her shoulders in the wind, irritably pushed the strands out of her face, smiled cheerfully, and waved at her adult self.

The third person -- Harry -- stared solemnly into the camera, all awkward angles and scraggily beginnings of a moustache on his upper lip, and tried but couldn't manage to muster a smile for posterity.

*We'd only just really made up, Hermione remembered. Had a lovely, massive row just two weeks before to clear the air and set Harry straight.*

Their friendship had still been strained the beginning of Sixth Year as it had been in Fifth, Harry impatient and demanding and occasionally cruel: and Ron, finally fed up with it all and ignoring Dumbledore's counsel that Harry was going through a great deal, read Harry the riot act. Ron pointed out that Harry was behaving like at utter pillock, and that he could ill afford to continue to alienate his only close friends; had insisted -- rightly, though not entirely compassionately -- that while Harry blaming Black's death on Bellatrix Lestrange was appropriate, blaming it on *Snape* was misplaced. (She'd been stunned by that -- Ron had always been first and foremost among the "Greasy Git" proponents.) Ron had stated outright that Harry badly needed to grow up and take responsibility for his thoughts and actions, including forgetting about that bloody mirror that might have kept Sirius out of the Ministry.
Harry had not taken it well. Hermione had to put them both in Body Binds, in fact -- but not before enough blows had landed to produce significant bruises. And, after a week of sulking, Harry had thought it through and apologised -- an event that was as startling to Hermione (given Harry's anger at everyone and everything) as Ron's perceptiveness about the whole bloody mess.

But they had never been quite the same again. Never as close, and certainly never as carefree and easy with each other. The Trio had, in a very real sense, died the day Ron said his piece.

*Oh, Harry.... Who would you have become? What might you have accomplished?*

The young man in the photograph had no answers for her. He was only partly-formed, a sculpture only just beginning to emerge from the lump of clay, and the solemn eyes behind the perpetually broken glasses gave absolutely nothing away about his soul.

She pushed the useless speculation to the back of her mind, and then dismissed it entirely. It did no good to mourn any longer, for either the past or for one unlucky young man, long dead, destiny accomplished. Her life was now centred in hard, factual numbers: concrete, tangible evidence that could not be contradicted or second-guessed, and she preferred it that way, even as she hated the bureaucracy that both consumed and produced it... and which, incidentally, utterly ignored her counsel and interpretations of those facts.

Emotion and regrets had caused great pain in her life, and they had wounded Harry to the point that he had acted rashly. She abhorred them. She refused to indulge in them now, and seldom did, save for brief moments of weakness like this.

Hermione's mental and emotional barriers were tall and deep, and the chinks few. She intended to keep it that way.

She pulled the report back over and began the rewrites on the sections she'd edited.

*****

*July 25, 2007, morning
Saint-Gervais, France*

The conference was a smokescreen, really. It was more a tribunal, where each wizarding nation gave evidence of its progress (or lack of such) before the ICW's Genetics committee, and, in the event of poor performance, would have to submit to the ICW's directives or face significant financial fines. But it was all cloaked in the pretense of an every-day academic conference -- smaller symposia on anything from Genetic Mediwizardry to fertility-enhancing Potions, to advanced Transfiguration methods to optimistically provide for ones' hypothetically burgeoning population.

*All bloody boring, really,* Hermione thought, annoyed with her compulsory attendance at Brazil's presentation to the ICW judges. (Attendance at all the other nations' presentations was intended to shame the low achievers, apparently, though it was pointless. Hermione couldn't single-handedly repopulate Wizarding Britain.)
Not without considerable help from the citizenry, she thought grimly, and winced as a less-than-enthusiastic fellow attendee trod on her foot in an attempt to leave the Hall.

That's not a bad idea, actually. Leaving.

She'd dutifully signed in, and could duck out on the pretense of needing the loo: they seldom checked to see that one stayed in the Hall after reporting in. And she badly wanted to escape from the stifling air of the building and her impending humiliation tomorrow -- for it would be all hers: her superior Dennis Corcoran, who was supposed to actually present the report, had managed to become violently ill the day before the conference began.

Blast Corcoran, she thought, flights of fancy suddenly evaporating. Of all the bloody times to gorge on prawns and get food-poisoning.... Probably did it purposely, the cowardly prat.

If she was going to be stuck in the Hall all day tomorrow, by God she was going to get out and about today. What was the use of attending a conference in the middle of summer if you couldn't get out and enjoy the place? She wanted to walk up the gorge toward the base of Mont Blanc, perhaps try to get a glimpse of the glacier, if her legs could make it that far. It was probably the last chance she'd have for anything enjoyable in a very long time. (If she tried it after her presentation tomorrow, she'd be tempted to throw herself into a crevasse.)

She picked up her handbag and briefcase, tiptoed her way to the aisle with whispered apologies, and fled the Hall.

*****

Hermione never made it out of the Spa; never even made it up to her room to discard her things and change to trousers and a sensible pair of shoes. The marquee leading to the East Wing -- where the research presentations were scheduled -- caught her eye and her interest.

11am - 12:30pm: Potions: Use of Viral Delivery Systems to Repair Genetic Damage
Augustus Bachelhoffer, C.H., Ph.M.R., M.Po
Wizards' University of Heidelberg

Hermione tried to deny it, but she was intensely interested.

Well, I'll be -- So they've finally caved and considered Gene Therapy. But that means they're resorting to Muggle methods.... Or have they made a breakthrough in sub-atomic Transfigurations? Good God, have I really missed that much? ...No. Potions. Definitely a biochemical approach.

It was too intriguing to resist. She swerved toward the East Wing, trotted down the corridor, flashed her identification badge at the door attendant, took a packet of information from him, and slipped into the back of the conference room: it was too crowded to find a seat, so she put her things on the floor and quickly flipped through the packet to catch up to the right point.
"-- no, no, you do not understand," Bachelhoffer was saying tiredly. "There iss no possibility off harm to the patient --"

"But to deliberately infect a patient with a disease --" a worried-looking Healer interrupted him. "There iss no disease involvt," Bachelhoffer roared (quite unpleasantly -- his voice was already magnified, but judging from the purple colour of his face his audience was particularly obtuse on this point). "The genetic material vissin the virus iss removt and iss replacet viss the repairt, healthy genetic material off the donor. The virus -- the virus' exterior -- this iss only the delivery system."

"But how can you know?" piped up another nitwit. "How can you be certain there's no infectious material left?"

Bachelhoffer threw up his hands and spewed forth a stream of very blue but totally appropriate German, and then drew his wand and clicked backward several slides to an illustration of extraction of the virus' nucleus.

*Good luck, confrere,* Hermione thought. (The Wizarding mind was incredibly resistant to Muggle scientific methodologies and techniques.)

*It's an interesting proposition though. It won't cure squibbishness, but it might be effective against the physical deformities and inherited diseases....*

"The nucleus iss extracted viss a very tiny pipette --"

"But how do you see it?" someone whined from the front row.

Bachelhoffer's shoulders slumped. Apparently no-one had read their information packets or bothered to calm down enough to listen to his earlier comments.

Another of the attendees, in a back-row aisle seat, snorted, and Hermione glanced over -- and then took a closer look at the back of the man's head in the half-light of the auditorium. Black, messy hair nearly to the shoulder -- shoulders with a very familiar, rounded, slightly tense look to them, clothed in a deep blue-black broadcloth....

She shouldn't have stared: the man seemed to sense that he was being observed, and slowly swiveled his head to stare back at her with hard, dark eyes.

*It is Snape.*

He wasn't involved in any research that she'd heard of: he had, in fact, become Hogwarts' Deputy Head when Minerva McGonagall had been appointed Headmistress. Hermione hadn't expected to see him here, even though it was the middle of summer. She hadn't thought of him at all in years, in fact, except for that brief, passing thought of him last week.

*How odd. I wonder why he bothered to come? He's certainly not on the presentations roster....*
Snape continued to stare back at her for several seconds, and then, without even a flicker of recognition or an acknowledgement, returned his attention to Bachelhoffer's pained explanation of microscopic procedures.

Later -- much later -- Hermione would decide that that was when the seed had been planted in her mind: Snape's absolute disinterest to the point of a deliberate snub. It hadn't been that long, after all; she was still recognisably Hermione Granger, Chief Know-It-All. The hair was perhaps a bit sleeker and less wild -- she usually wrestled it into a chignon at the nape of her neck, now -- but her face hadn't changed that much from Seventh Year.

Without really thinking why, Hermione decided she wanted very badly to know what Snape was doing here: whether he was considering engaging in research... ...whether he was simply as curious as she...

...whether he's the same old Snape, still viciously anti-social and acid-tongued and solitary and... unattached.

Hermione knew trying to wrangle a place at his table at luncheon was pointless. She was supposed to dine with the other national delegates in a separate dining-room, in any case, so -- as Bachelhoffer wasn't likely to get to anything really interesting anyway, given the stupidly of the majority of his audience -- she reverted to her original plan, slipped upstairs and changed, and bribed a housekeeping elf to liberate a sandwich for her to take on her hike.

She also bribed it to divulge the room number for Professor Snape of Hogwarts School.

*****

"Where's your pet Ministry official, Granger?" Chuck Anderson asked. "Haven't seen him all day."

"Ill," Hermione said shortly as she took her seat at the dinner-table, and repressed the urge to dump her salad into Anderson's lap. "Not along this time."

"Awwww. Sudden? Too bad. You're stuck with the presentation, huh? That's rotten."

Hermione clenched her fingers around her napkin, under cover of the table.

Chuck -- Charles -- Anderson always had that effect on her. Relentlessly cheerful in that particularly shallow, fake American manner, and arrogant enough not to give a damn about how anyone felt about him. He could afford to be arrogant: the American numbers were spectacular this year.


"Merci, François," she muttered back, cast a sidelong glance at him from beneath her lashes, and tucked into dinner to avoid further conversation with either of them.
Apart from the humiliation of being seated with representatives of the two most successful nations, Hermione might have enjoyed François's company... except that she knew that he would try to wriggle confidential information out of her, probably after a thorough shagging, and disguised as pillow-talk. Were it not for that -- the verbal wriggling that is, not the shagging -- she might have seriously considered responding to his overtures of previous years. He was attractive, witty, and taken. No possibility of real, emotional attachment, but a good chance to finally... well, to get some things over with.

It's about time.... It's rather ridiculous, really, that I've no real sexual experience by twenty-seven.

Then again, she'd always thought she'd have plenty of time to sow her wild oats, when and if she ever got the urge.

So much for having all the time in the world.

On the other hand, there was no need to start now. There was an annoying part of her nature that wasn't interested in anything but a real, emotional attachment, although if tomorrow went as badly as she anticipated, she -- and every unmarried British adult witch -- would have to compromise eventually.

She got through dinner with a minimum of chit-chat, avoided François's subtle overtures (in delicately-phrased French, which of course Anderson didn't speak), and then embarked on her main mission for the evening.

*****

Bearding the lion (or serpent, as it were) in his den proved problematic. Hermione had expected Snape to hole up in his room, not to participate in the ridiculous social activities the Spa had arranged for the conference attendees. But three minutes' persistent knocking at the door got no response, and a surreptitious charm cast at the room proved that it was empty.

Blast it.

She wandered back downstairs to the ballrooms and pushed her way among the crowd, searching in vain; and then the vague memory of Snape's usual behaviour popped into her head -- that solitary impulse to absent himself from the Great Hall, to wander among the rose bushes on the Grounds. (She'd always assumed, like everyone else, that he did so merely to catch snoggers; but perhaps it was more straightforward than that, though she had difficulty thinking of Snape as a Nature-Lover.)

As it happened, the Resort had a very fine garden of flowers and flowering herbs tucked into the walls of the gorge, and that's where she found him. She stood watching him stroll among the plant-beds from the safe cover of a rose-covered pergola. Now that she'd found him, though, she had no idea how to initiate a conversation. She was ready to give up and slink away as soon as his back was turned when he took matters into his own hands.

"I was not aware, Miss Granger," Snape said dryly as he straightened from examining a clump of costmary, "that I was such an object of intense fascination."
Thank God he couldn't see the blush that rose to her cheeks. It was only just dusk, still light enough to see, but she was in the shadow of the pergola.

"I was surprised to see you at the conference, Professor," she managed to say quite calmly. "Or should I say Deputy Head?"

"Professor will do," he shot back. "I still teach, despite McGonagall's best efforts and those of the bureaucratic idiots at the Ministry. Of which, if I'm not mistaken, you are one."

He turned to face her head-on, and she took stock of him.

He hadn't changed much. She could still clearly see the facial scar he'd earned in the last battle, running from his left temple to jawline -- *I wonder why Pomfrey hadn't been able to heal it?*; and the grooves that ran from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth were perhaps a bit more firmly etched, but his hair was still midnight-black and stringy. She allowed that he might have put on a bit of weight, but that was natural for a man his age, and she suspected his life was a bit more sedentary than it had been. (It wasn't a bad change by any means -- he'd always been skinny as an alley-cat on the few occasions she'd seen him out of those billowing teaching-robes.)

He was certainly the same nasty, verbally-abusive git.

"I don't think it's quite fair to blame me for the mess, is it?" she countered, embarrassment banished by quickly-controlled rage. "I simply interpret the data. I don't make the laws."

"You enable them. Tell me, Miss Granger, why should one of Hogwarts' more capable and ambitious students choose to become a Ministry drone?"

"Because it needed to be done," she said steadily, refusing to respond to the fresh insult. "Because I felt it was better if someone with more general knowledge of the technical and medical problems was involved. Because I have actual knowledge of the prejudice that has to be surmounted, in terms of the social issue."

He snorted at that.

"Congratulations are not in order, Miss Granger. For your information, the proportion of hexing incidents due to racial insults has not declined in the least at the school. It has, in fact, increased."

"I didn't expect that they would end, not this soon. They're symptoms of a problem that will take a long time to change, and that won't happen until the bloodlines are thoroughly mixed. You obviously know why *I'm* here," she said, determined to change the subject and get to a more comfortable footing. "But why are *you*?"

"Because *I* have to deal with the ramifications of government meddling," he shot back. "The directives regarding the curriculum, the turmoil it's causing in my students' lives. What *were* they thinking, Miss Granger?" he added bitterly. "That Purebloods would become one happy family with the rest overnight? Tolerating their presence is one thing, but forcing Purebloods to *accept* them is something else altogether."
"I think that was their hope, to take the easy way -- I would have told them it wouldn't work, had they bothered to consult me. I don't think they anticipated such resistance."

"Idiots."

"I quite agree. But aren't you dealing with the consequences of doing nothing? Have been, for many years?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Crabbes and Goyles, for example. One can hardly claim those boys and the others like them were sterling examples of the Pureblood philosophy."

"Touché, Miss Granger," Snape admitted with a thin-lipped smile. "I think you'll agree that those weaknesses helped the Order in the long run, however, so I beg you not to belabour the point. It reeks of gloating."

He turned on his heel and continued down the path, and Hermione darted from under the pergola, trotting to catch up to him.

"I'm not gloating, I'm only saying that there is good, solid science behind the reasoning," she protested. "They're a good example of the genetic problem, that's all."

"But gloating is how it's seen in the Pureblood families," he said, bending to examine a brilliantly-coloured rose. "As an insult. And you and your kind must accept that scientific arguments hold no weight with us, not when we see ourselves consistently labeled 'weak' and 'congenitally unfit.'"

"That report was issued before I began at the.... I don't think of --" Hermione started to argue, and then clamped her lips shut before she could blurt out something unfortunate. This was precisely what he wanted: for her to lose her temper and leave him in peace. "Are you researching Gene Therapy?" she blurted out instead, ignoring for the moment that he had placed himself squarely in the Pureblood camp.

"No," he said shortly. "Why ever would you think I have time? I simply refuse to allow my knowledge of the Potions field to stagnate. I have had to increase production of therapeutic potions to help Pomfrey treat some of the more unfortunate congenital illnesses, however," he grudgingly admitted, "which is alarming. I'd like to keep up on suitable treatments. And it's rather amusing to see the idiots at St. Mungos and elsewhere attempting to stumble their way through forty years' worth of Muggle genetic research."

"Quite," Hermione said. "If I had a Galleon for every time I've had to explain the simplest Genetic principles...."

"You understand them? I thought your field was Arithmancy."
"Of course I understand them," she said indignantly. "I made it my job to learn, since it affects my work. It's really not that difficult, the Wizarding mind just can't wrap itself about the techniques. The mechanisms are really quite logical."

"Or would be, if someone could manage to publish a decent article or abstract."

"I fail to see why they haven't," Hermione said bluntly. "If the Muggle schools can manage to teach the basics to teenagers, even a Wizard should be able to understand. Haven't you checked Muggle sources? After all, you have a remarkably logical mind if you were able to --"

_Oops. Damn it --_

"-- or at least I certainly had that impression," she finished lamely, belatedly avoiding mention of the Potions Puzzle.

"And when do you propose I find time to do that?" Snape said. "Take the time to traipse about Muggle London and find a decent bookseller with a text both clear and advanced enough?"

"Ah. You're too busy to take even a day, then?" Hermione said casually -- greatly relieved that he'd ignored her slip. "I realise that the Deputy Head's duties are absorbing, but.... You have a family now, perhaps?"

"Don't be stupid, Miss Granger, and don't pry. At least not in such a cack-handed manner."

_Ah. No, then_, she thought with a curious sense of triumph.

"I didn't mean to, I was simply making conversation. I have several suitable books, in fact," she retorted mildly. "Shall I send them on to you?"

Snape eyed her warily.

"Acceptable," he finally said. (His curiosity was apparently greater than his unwillingness to deal with her).

"Very well, then," she said brightly. "I'll send them on soon. I'd best turn in, I've got the devil of a day tomorrow. Good evening, Professor."

He grunted a goodbye, and she left him with his back to her, staring moodily up into the gorge that wound its way up to Mont Blanc.

Once back in her room, Hermione pulled out her presentation materials and grimly concentrated on surviving anything thrown at her next day.

She refused, as yet, to allow herself to mull over what she'd learned of Snape today, why she was so intrigued with his status, or what she might intend to do with the information.

*****
The presentation went every bit as badly as Hermione had expected.

The format was dictated by the ICW: first the factual data -- the raw figures that listed population increase and decline in actual numbers, and the percentage of the population those represented -- and then more complex sets of figures that attributed population increase to existing marriages sorted by bloodlines and the incidence of squibbishness and birth defects, among many other variables. There were even, in some cases -- such as Britain and India -- requirements to demonstrate the mix of race and class (or in India's case, caste) of all marriages in the past year. (This was highly unfair, Hermione thought -- the United States had an exemption on providing those figures, claiming to be the original "classless society," when everyone knew damn well that it was no such thing: the only difference was that in the U.S. the class lines there were drawn by economic factors rather than bloodline.)

Hermione did her best with the figures -- a modest three and three-quarters percent rise in the birthrate, accompanied by a one percent decrease in squib births. Yet mixed marriages had only increased by four percent. Which, when one took into account the actual statistics of who was born to whom, meant that the few people who ventured into the murky social depths of a mixed marriage were providing most of the new so-called "viable" citizens -- magical children with no discernable birth defects or squibbishness.

"Are you telling me, Miss Granger," huffed Adolpus Dusselbum, "that the majority of the advances made this year were accomplished by a relative few?"

"That is what the statistics appear to indicate, sir," she said, trying to keep a 'Didn't I just say that?' tone out of her voice.

"And there has been an increase of marriages out of the country among the Purebloods, this is true?"

Shit. That was the figure she'd really hoped she could slip past them.

"A very slight increase, yes, sir. There is, of course, absolutely nothing illegal about that," she said. "The trend started well before now, actually -- in the 1970s, when more people started traveling and studying internationally. I don't think the figures are significant in terms of the present problem."

"Hmmmmpf. Optimistic of you, I think. Very well, proceed to the Annual Summary," Dusselbum said irritably, and Hermione launched into an overview of the Ministry's financial incentives and public relations efforts.

It was over far too soon, and Dusselbum rose from the table.

"We shall recess for thirty minutes," he said, fussing with his robe, "and reconvene in the Flamel Conference Room for the recommendations, Miss Granger."
She nodded, and Dusselbum and his juniors on the judicial board left the auditorium, leaving Hermione at the podium with cheeks blazing: the auditorium had been packed with national representatives who had no earthly business being there as their numbers were much better, and who had only come to watch avidly as Britain was humiliated.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit.*

"Jesus, Granger," Anderson's voice floated up from the auditorium floor. "I knew you Brits were supposed to have uninspiring sex lives, but that's just pathetic."

She couldn't help it: she fumbled and dropped her notes, and glared down at him.

"It's called respect for Civil Liberties, Anderson," she shot back. "And we've an irritating tendency to be patient, and not to get ahead at all costs. Not when we're dealing with peoples' lives."

"Hey, I'm *joking*, Granger. No offence intended."

"Eh, Chuck," DeLaine threw at him from halfway down the aisle, "Nous avons faire du ski, c'est ça? Vite!"

"Huh?"

"You have plans to go skiing," Hermione translated. "He's ready. Shift your arse."

"I love it when you talk dirty Brit, Granger," Anderson threw back at her. "Okay, François, I'm comin'."

He turned and strode up the aisle, head down -- and DeLaine looked up at Hermione, unseen by Anderson, and gave her a sympathetic wink before they both left the auditorium.

As Hermione gathered her notes together a flutter of movement caught her eye, and she glanced over to find Snape pushing past and glaring at the careless idiots who brushed against him as they filed out: when he was certain he had her attention he strode to the platform's edge and beckoned her over with an arrogant flick of the wrist.

"Good morning, Professor Snape. How long have you been --"

"Since five minutes in."

"I didn't know you were interested in the populations data."

"I'm not particularly, Miss Granger, I assure you," he hissed. "I am *trying* to give you some advice. You're giving quite a bit away. When you are unsure of yourself, or think that your information is vulnerable to attack," he said in an undertone, forcing her to crouch down to hear him, "you... *fiddle* with your hair."

"I most certainly do not!"
"Yes, you do, you push the... curly bits in front of your ears, behind them. Just as you used to do in my class. Dusselbum was an interrogator for the Swiss Auror Service for many years, and he's noticed. That's why he pinned you down on precisely the things you'd hoped to gloss over."

"Blast," Hermione muttered. "Thought I'd broken that habit. I'm not used to doing the bloody presentation, it's Corcoran's job."

"Dennis Corcoran?"

"Yes, he's my superior. Head of Wizard Resources."

"Yet another idiot -- a few years behind me at school. A craven coward. You have my condolences."

"Damn it. I've bolloxed it up for certain, then...."

She caught herself in the middle of "fiddling," snatched her hand away from her hair, and glared at Snape when he smirked at her.

"That's how you always knew what to quiz me on, isn't it?" she hissed at him. "You'd never call on me when I was absolutely certain of the answer."

He smirked again. "Of course. It took several years to determine, however -- most of your female classmates fiddled with their hair also, though it didn't signify anything but vanity with them. At any rate, good luck."

He turned and strode away from her: she didn't even know if he'd heard her muttered, "Thank you."

*Odd, distinctly odd. Why would Snape bother to take the time to attend my presentation, let alone give me advice? And to wish me luck, no less?*

She dismissed the thought, shoved her notes into her briefcase, and debouched to the ladies' loo to give herself a pep talk before facing the tribunal.

*****

The meeting with the tribunal was awful, simply awful. She managed to wangle from them a three-month delay on implementation of the recommendations on the grounds that she'd made the presentation, not Corcoran: she wasn't above playing the Subordinate-Who-Might-Have-Missed-Something card, not with the stakes this high, and argued that Corcoran might be able to get enlighten them on points she might have misinterpreted. (He wouldn't, though, and she knew it. The delay was simply the best she could do to wrest some victory out of her defeat.)

Afterward she grumpily submitted to the ministrations of the spa staff, in the hopes that the masseuse would work out the kinks that the tribunal had put in her back. (The other advantage was that Anderson was unlikely to find her and gloat further if she was in the sauna with a layer of mud
over her face, and she wouldn't have to resist the urge to pull her wand on him. She wished she'd had the forethought to jinx his skis.)

By the time her voluntary exile in the spa was over, dinner was as well; and when she made her way back to Snape's room to thank him for his advice, she found he'd already checked out and returned to Hogwarts.

Good. That gave her time to really think about the amorphous, rather sneaky plan she'd begun to devise while in a half-trance in the sauna.

*I'll be damned if I let the Ministry force me into an arranged marriage. With my luck, I'd get some rotten bastard who'd try to keep me constantly pregnant. Or worse, abuse me or try to get rid of me.*

*Plenty of time, really, three months,* she thought lazily. *I should be able to think through any objections he has and find good rebuttals. It's really for his protection, as well as mine.*

She stopped dead, glass at her lips, and frowned.

*But what if he's... Well, I don't know anything about him, really. He might be gay, for all I know. Not that that matters, the Ministry would still force him to marry, perhaps even force him into aversion therapy if they found he was a persistent homosexual who refused to try for children.*

*All the more reason for him to agree,* she finally concluded triumphantly.

*I think I'll put off sending the books, for now. Make him wait just long enough to look forward to a visit.*

She finished off the last of her wine, took another long look at the peak of Mont Blanc hovering above the resort, and left the balcony for her bed.

**Chapter 2: Wherein a Gryffindor attempts to out-Slytherin a Slytherin, with predictable results.***

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_Hogwarts_  
October 15th, 2007

*Good gods,* Snape thought in disgust, and scrawled a scathing comment in the margin of a two-foot essay. _And to think I felt Longbottom's Form was the epitome of idiocy.*

He wasn't exaggerating. The quality of work -- both academic and practical -- declined every year, and Severus Snape had to face the fact that there was, indeed, a far greater incidence of physiological problems with more and more of his students; that an increasing number of them were simply unable to comprehend anything but the most basic concepts.

They were, in short, congenitally stupid.
He wasn't the only one who felt so: it was a common topic of discussion in the Faculty Common Room. There were far more accidents in the Potions classroom now, despite his best efforts and increased safety measures: the current lot of idiots had, despite his vigilence, managed to chalk up as many explosions by mid-term as Longbottom had in an entire year. McGonagall had similar experiences in Transfigurations, which she still adamantly taught; Flitwick's replacement -- a vapid female who Snape couldn't stand -- was in the Infirmary more often than in her classroom due to Charms gone awry.

He threw his quill down and stared at the sickly fire in the grate.

*It's true, too, that the worst cases are among the Purebloods. I can't deny it any longer. The Mixedbloods are only slightly affected, and the Muggleborns not at all....*

After he'd returned from the conference he'd pulled the end-of-term marks for the past five years and done laborious comparisons, to confirm his gut feeling as much as to attempt to refute Granger's figures... to no avail. Regardless of Pureblood resistance to scientific evidence, it was true.

Not that Snape cared in principle: the Purebloods should have seen it coming. *He* had, but had considered it in his best interest not to be proactive. It was a relief, in a way, that he'd never been expected -- or invited, until recently -- to contribute to the bloodlines. He couldn't stand the social machinations involved, certainly didn't care to involve himself emotionally, and found other ways to relieve his sexual urges.

*I don't fancy risking having an imbecile for a child, either.*

Snape was brutally honest with himself on that score. He knew he'd make a slow child's life a living hell, and he was not quite such a bastard as to not care about that; the memory of his own upbringing, as a bright child with an overly-critical and unreasonably demanding father, was too raw for him to wish on anyone else. Some people weren't suited to have progeny -- particularly if the offspring mightn't be able to meet expectations -- and he was one of the unsuitable.

*Better to let the bloody name die out.*

*Almost.*

For there was a niggling at the back of his mind (the primal part of his brain, the part fuelled largely by hormones, he suspected) that was urging him to reconsider. The thought of marrying into his only option to date, however -- the Parkinsons -- had dampened any enthusiasm he might have scraped together.

*The thought of bedding that nasty bint Horace and Alvinia produced.... I'd have to take a bloody potion every damned time.*

He'd tolerated Parkinson as his student and as her Head of House, but the idea of fucking her -- even for the sake of continuing the Pureblood lines -- was disgusting. Apparently other potential suitors thought the same, for nine years out of Hogwarts, Pansy Parkinson *still* hadn't found a
prospect, despite her father's wealth. In addition to the problem of sex, Snape couldn't imagine putting up with the stupid woman's mindless, malicious chatter for more than an hour without hexing her into silence.

_I'd be expected to support her in some style, too, of course -- Horace and Alvinia's little darling can't be expected to live at Hogwarts, of all places.... I refuse to waste my hard-earned pay on such a disgusting lump of inferior breeding material. And I suspect that all the worst traits from both sides would out._

He'd been horrified at the numbers Granger had presented at the ICW conference -- not the marriage numbers, he didn't give a fig about those -- but at the medical statistics. The Purebloods were going down, and were too finicky to pull up their bootstraps and do what needed to be done; so he assumed that the ICW would, eventually, force them all, including himself. Perhaps _that_ was why he'd felt compelled to warn Granger of that nervous tic: hoping that she might convince the ICW to hold off on extreme measures.

It was probably in vain. While she'd done well enough in the poise and vocal departments, Dusselbum couldn't possibly have missed that one, prominent weakness.

_Damn Corcoran for being a lily-livered coward. Send in a subordinate to do the dirty work, so you may pin the blame on them.... That's reason enough to assume things are going to get much worse. He's covering his arse rather early in the game._

There was also the matter of Granger's unseemly observation to consider, as well. The damned chit has been totally transparent in her interest, and for the life of him Snape hadn't yet been able to determine why. Gods knew he didn't see why she should take any notice of him whatsoever: he'd never bothered to conceal his disgust for the frizzy-haired little Mudblood swot she'd been. He'd grudgingly accepted her for intelligence later, true -- much later -- but that intelligence hardly offset the lies and outright thievery he knew she'd perpetrated on Potter's behalf over the years.

_A pity she never received proper recognition for her part in the victory, though. Saints Potter and Dumbledore, bloody heroic Weasley -- bloody hell, they couldn't avoid mentioning even me after that, but the Arithmantic brain behind the plan.... _

Then again, his last memory of Granger before their encounter at the conference had not been precisely outstanding. She'd walked about the corridors in a daze those last few weeks -- like many of the students -- and at the Leaving Feast, he'd _felt_ her staring at him and bothered to return the glare: she'd seemed sharper, angry, as if accusing him for surviving when bloody Potter hadn't, as if she were finally waking from a nightmare and blamed him for appearing in it.

No, she had no reason to take such a keen interest in him. None at all, unless she was plotting some kind of bizarre, misguided revenge for an imagined misdeed. (Gods knew he'd done his best to keep the damned boy out of trouble long enough to complete the mission; it wasn't his fault that the idiot hadn't lived.)

_She never bothered to send the bloody books she promised, either, he thought irritably. Whatever it was she wanted, it wasn't worth keeping her word._
Well, there was nothing for it: he'd have to wait and see what happened on the political front, because the results of the conference hadn't yet been announced, and he'd be damned if he enquired of Granger. In the meantime, he refused to settle for the Parkinsons or any of the other more desperate families, though he might have to eventually.

They'd damned well have to make it worthwhile for him, though. He imagined he could make quite a dent in Horace Parkinson's bank account, if he chose.

_Gods know I can manage a more than adequate contraceptive potion if I end up with someone objectionable. Even if I have to force it down the stupid breeder's throat with Imperius._

He pulled the essay back over, picked up his quill, and re-commenced mutilating the pathetic bit of parchment.

*****

He'd only two essays left to mark when the knock came at the office door.

"Enter," he barked out, head still bent over his desk.

"Good evening, Professor," a pleasant alto -- and adult -- voice said as the door opened. "I've brought those books I promised. I'm terribly sorry it took so long, but I've been held up at work."

He jerked his head up and met Granger's eyes.

"Three months' delay, and unable to simply send an owl?" he said caustically. "I take it the recommendations were quite elaborate, then."

"Not entirely," she admitted as she crossed to his desk and set several thick books on it. "And I wangled a delay out of them. But it's not very good news, I'm afraid. We've been trying to take some pre-emptive measures to prepare the population."

"I haven't heard anything. Or did I miss the announcements?"

"Not publicised yet," she said quietly.

"And you cannot, of course, divulge them to the mere Deputy Head of the National School."

"I'm not supposed to, but I shall," she said.

Snape felt his eyebrows shoot up at the admission before he was able to conceal his surprise.

"Whatever for? And why do I rate a special visit?"

"I came to see Professor McGonagall, actually -- we do keep in touch, though she still hasn't forgiven me for choosing Arithmancy over Transfigurations," Granger admitted with a smile. "No, I.... I wanted to speak to you directly, because the measures are going to affect all unmarried wizards and witches."
"Intriguing," he said dryly, and set aside his quill. "Though I still don't see why I rate insider information. The Ministry proposes, and we dispose."

Granger started to speak, hesitated, and then pointedly removed herself to the first row of desks.

"The first recommendation," she said slowly, "is the forbidding of Pureblood unions."

"That's despicable," Snape said promptly, "not to mention unenforceable."

"I agree. No matter the necessity, I don't think you should force people into such a personal decision. It's a grave violation of personal and civil liberties. And they intend to enforce it," she continued, "by closing the borders. No possibility of sneaking off to the Continent anymore."

Snape stared at her, appalled.

"How do they propose to do that? Ward the entire bloody island?"

"Revocation of Apparition Licenses," Granger said briskly, ticking the points off on her fingers, "monitoring of air space -- as you know they've already developed a governor for brooms, to prevent dashes across the Channel."

"And Muggle methods? I suppose they think we're too defective to think of those --"

"Tracking spells on wands to monitor movements. Even if someone slips through, they can be... retrieved."

"Those are incredibly fascist tactics," Snape said viciously.

"Quite. We're back to Martial Law, I'm afraid, though unofficially."

"And how do they expect the population to respond? Gladly hand over their wands and brooms to be tampered with? There will be a massive emigration the minute it's announced."

"No," Granger corrected him. "They've already put it into practise -- it's too late. The National Security measures they enacted during that last year of the war? The Wizengamot has renewed the spells --"

"That's highly illegal! They were emergency measures only --"

"-- Yes, I know, but when the government is the one doing the law-breaking.... The monitors and governors are already in place, they only needed to be re-activated. Most people are going about their business as usual, but I think in a day or two you'll start hearing of some people -- those considered a flight risk -- being denied the right to leave. No-one has a choice."

Snape felt the blood rush to his face. He was struck with the urge to overturn his desk, but settled for rising and swatting at his stool, sending it flying. Granger flinched at that.
"I suppose you're happy," he hissed when he could manage to speak coherently, and glared at her; she stayed silent, leaning against a desk, slender arms crossed over her torso protectively. "That ought make your job immensely easier."

"No, it doesn't," Granger said. "Make me happy, I mean, or the job easier. I don't think a government ought to force social policy, to subvert its citizens' free will. And I think it's a dangerous tactic as well. It's likely to throw us back into the same old mess, even without a Voldemort to spearhead a movement."

"Did you bother to explain that to the ICW judges?" he said acidly, pacing across the room to retrieve the stool.

"I did, and they couldn't care less. The damage then was confined to Britain, so they're underestimating the risk as they think the general world population isn't affected. The government's underestimating the threat, too."

"Thank the gods someone in the bloody Ministry has sense and foresight. How does it feel, Miss Granger, to be the proverbial unhonoured prophet?"

"Like shit," she said bluntly.

Snape threw himself into the wing-chair by the fire and rubbed at his forehead.

_Bloody hell. This has the potential to undo everything the Order fought for. And if even Hermione Bloody Granger can see it, why can't the ICW and the Ministry? They can't possibly be that dense...._

Granger cautiously walked over and perched -- uninvited -- on the chair's mate.

"The first step will be a moratorium on Pureblood unions," she said, "with the excuse that it might persuade people to consider other options. They want to avoid an outright ban if at all possible, at least for now. Then, if the numbers don't improve -- and I don't think they will, not enough -- they'll proceed to announcing that only mixed unions are valid."

"Won't work," Snape said tiredly. "Many would rather stay childless than pollute the blood. Why the geographical restriction? There would be some improvement if we married outside."

"I think that's the ICW's eventual plan," Granger said thoughtfully. "But they want to increase genetic diversity within discrete geographic areas first, to prove that there's good material worth saving. We are one of the smaller populations, after all. And then -- in a generation or two, perhaps -- they'll allow, if not actively encourage, marriage outside the 'tribe,' so to speak."

"That's a rather elaborate explanation. How did you arrive at your hypothesis?"

"I didn't. François DeLaine -- my French counterpart -- did. Someone at the ICW got careless and left a twenty-year plan lying about, and he read it. He's sympathetic to our problem, I've found, and..."
he's more than happy to pass me information like that as he's at loose ends. The French are far more egalitarian than we, so there was far less resistance -- I think he's bored."

Snape snorted.

"All this begs the question of why you're informing me, Miss Granger. Do you expect me to trot over to the Parkinsons and Goyles and tell all? If they've already locked down the borders, it won't do a damned bit of good to leak the information unless you want another civil war on your hands sooner rather than later. Why do I need to know this now? Why do you want me to know?"

"I told you, my commitment to the issue of free will is stronger than my commitment to the Ministry," she said. "If you choose to divulge the information.... Well, I think it's the Ministry's just desserts -- though that's not my goal. And I only found out that they'd activated the monitors and governors yesterday. Far too late to warn you ahead of time, though I probably should have done if I'd had the chance. There'd actually been some talk of defying the ICW, but Fudge caved in the end and they hopped right on it."

"Why does that not surprise me about Fudge?"

"And more to the point, you did me a good turn at the conference, even if it was too late. I never got a chance to thank you properly."

Snape waved her thanks away and sat staring into the flames until Granger spoke again.

"Actually, I have other, more personal reasons for telling you. We're both in the same boat, after all."

"Whatever do you mean?" he said irritably.

"Well, if validation of only mixed marriages doesn't produce results, they'll be made compulsory."

Snape froze. "You're joking."

"No. They're already discussing methods to ensure compliance."

"What in bloody hell do they propose, a national lottery?"

"More or less. A genetic lottery. Pairing-up of genetic traits and skills based on family history."

"Bloody --"

"The real question is whether they'll try to pair strong with weak to dilute the undesirable traits, or let some people go hang and pair best with best."

"They cannot force --"

"Yes, they can. There may be significant sanctions against those who refuse -- including Azkaban. And if a desirable union does not produce offspring, there may be mandatory fertility testing. I
imagine that if the parties are proving... obstinate, the Ministry might, if necessary, use restricted potions or Imperius."

"That's outrageous."

"Agreed, but some of those options are being seriously considered."

"Unforgiveables seem a bit extreme, even for the bloody Ministry. Aren't there Muggle methods other than mucking with the Genetics problems? They inseminate cattle -- why not go that route? Why bother with marriage? The bloody Americans dispensed with it."

"Because Fudge is adamant on the legitimacy issue," Granger said. "And even if they did try Muggle methods -- and there are methods even more effective than basic insemination, as you'll see when you read the texts -- you still need women willing to carry each child to term. I rather imagine," she added bitterly, "that many of them will feel as I do, and resent being considered as breeding machines. Perhaps some will engage in a nasty form of civil disobedience...."

(Snape had rather forgot the human side of the equation, and shifted uneasily in his chair.)

"And what does one do with the children if the families can't support them all? Do we chuck them into wizarding orphanages? Boarding schools from birth onwards? No, it's perfectly acceptable to condemn people to an incompatible marriage and poverty, as long as everything appears respectable," Granger concluded, her nose wrinkling in obvious disgust.

Snape abruptly rose, crossed to one of the many shelves that lined the room, moved aside a jar of pickled glumbumbles, and extracted a bottle of Firewhisky and a glass from the back row; and after a moments' hesitation he conjured a second glass, splashed some whisky into both, and returned to his chair, handing Granger the extra glass. He took a long swig of his drink before stating, quite succinctly, "Fuck."

Granger sputtered into her glass. "Sorry," she gasped, dabbing at her lips with the back of her hand. "I don't think that in seven years I ever heard you use language that strong."

"I think the situation requires it, don't you?" he said, rummaged in his frock-coat pocket, and tossed her his handkerchief.

"Yes. I think it frequently, myself," she said, and blotted at her lips with the linen.

They worked away at the whisky for a bit in a strange, companionable silence, and then Granger hesitantly said, "That's really not all on the personal front...."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'd thought.... I don't know anything about your personal situation, of course, but I assume from the way you snapped at me in Saint-Gervais that you haven't married, yet."

"No -- haven't," Snape retorted with a growing sense of dread.
"Neither have I. Don't think I ever want to, actually, and certainly not under these circumstances."

"And?" he demanded, hating her roundabout approach. "Get to the point, Granger."

She carefully set her glass aside and braced her hands on the chair-arms, staring at him defiantly.

"And I'm proposing an alliance."

"Alliance? You and --"

"In name only," she said hastily. "No cohabitation, no financial support. We needn't even socialise."

Snape stared at her for a very long time, and then laughed until he howled.

"I thought it might be marginally better than submitting to a lottery," she snapped when he'd finally got the worst of his chortling over. "If, however, you have other prospects, I'll simply apologise for wasting your time and go."

She'd made it halfway to the door before he could breathe well enough to demand, "Stop. Sit."

She returned to the chair, glaring at him all the while.

"Let me see if I understand you properly," he said, deciding to humour her. (He hadn't been this amused by anything in a very long time.) "You propose that we marry to... what? Remove us from a pool of potentially objectionable persons, of being forced to make objectionable genetic contributions?"

Granger bit her lower lip and nodded.

"You want to defy both the Ministry and the ICW, even though they may eventually become suspicious when we produce no offspring?"

"It might not come to that."

"Might not, but unless you're exaggerating the situation --"

"I'm not."

"So. A marriage in 'name only,' no cohabitation, no financial support," he said carefully, "which would only postpone the inevitable? Possibly leave us open to substandard pairing in a lottery as opposed to the best if there's a delay in obtaining a dissolution? Or if a deception is proven and our stock is lowered, so to speak?"

"We could always divorce quite early on some grounds or other if it turns out the pairings are the best," she reasoned. "I'm in a position to find out earlier than most."
"True. And you could also be testing me. You are a Ministry employee, after all. You could be testing my personal willingness to adhere to the laws, or you could be setting up any Pureblood families who try to take pre-emptive action, based on your word alone. I have absolutely no proof that you're being truthful."

"Have I ever been able to successfully lie to you?"

"Frequently," Snape said bluntly. "Although, quite frankly, often only because of Dumbledore's intervention leading to lack of evidence."

"When?" she demanded.

"That incident with Black and the blasted Hippogriff, for starters," Snape said dryly. "Or did you think I'd not work out the possibilities with a Time-Turner?"

Granger's face coloured up. "Fine, then -- if you won't take my word, then look for yourself."

"Really? You know I'll see it, Miss Granger. Potter should have told you how thorough I am."

"Go ahead," she insisted. "I trust that you'll confine yourself to the matter at hand. No intentional rummaging for memories about Harry and Ron, or about my personal life."

"Very well. Have you ever been --? No? Sit back in the chair, then -- I don't need you toppling off and cracking your head open."

She did. Snape didn't bother to pull his wand (it wasn't necessary, with a willing subject and close proximity), stared into her eyes, delicately probed her mind with his, and wound his way through to her more recent memories. It wasn't difficult: she had a very orderly mind, as it happened -- surprisingly so, much more so than most peoples'. He was impressed with the orderliness, if rather appalled by the emotional naïveté and idealism that he sensed there, as well.

He located a memory from several years back -- her first memory of her Ministry job -- and grasped at it: sensed her growing concern with the populations figures as she sorted through them. He followed the thread to her first attendance at the ICW, felt her disgust with Corcoran's ineffectual presentations; found another memory -- this far more recent -- of her standing before Dusselbum, taking the reproval and the recommendations with outward calm, but with considerable inner indignation (and fighting the urge to play with her hair, he noted with amusement). Saw her attending Ministry meetings from the past three months, noted how her common-sense concerns were dismissed by her superiors, felt her growing rage at the draconian measures proposed.

He saw nothing whatsoever duplicitous on her part, and sensed no intent to entrap him or anyone else on behalf of the Ministry.

That was the sticky part, of course. On behalf of the Ministry. He really ought to investigate her memory of their meeting in Saint-Gervais.... But there was a certain ethic he held about Legilimency, when not used against an enemy: he'd agreed to investigate only her possible involvement in a Ministry set-up, and to depart from that agreement was akin to a violation, one he
(having been on the receiving end of, often) found repugnant. Needless to say, said ethic did not apply to a teaching or interrogation situation, but this instance did not fall precisely into any of those categories.

He could determine her possible motives for that by other means, in any case -- far more entertaining means. He was, if truth be told, rather bored with his life as Deputy Head: the idea of watching one clumsy Griffindor attempt to out-manouever him was strangely appealing.

He released his grip on her mind and she lapsed back into the cushions, hands shaking. He'd taken just a bit too long for a subject who'd never been exposed to Legilimency, and the strain was showing on her face.

Snape silently rose, refilled her glass, and pressed it into her hands.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Your memories are remarkably detailed, and I lingered."

"Did you find what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes. You're being truthful about the Ministry. Either that, or you're highly skilled at creating false memories, and I think that doubtful."

"That," she said shakily, and took a sip of whisky, "feels bloody awful."

"And I'm one of the best living practitioners. Imagine what it feels like if a bumbler attempts it."

"You're as skilled at Occlumency as well?"

"More. How do you think I survived the Dark Lord?"

She shuddered.

He gave her the courtesy of another minute to calm down, and then said, "Back to the matter at hand. My main question, Miss Granger, is what could possibly make you assume that I would find even a marriage 'in name only' congenial with you, of all people?"

What little blood there was left in her face drained immediately.

"I didn't assume anything," she said. "I had no way of knowing your feelings on the matter until I'd spoken with you. And as you're not interested, you might simply say as much. There was no need to put me through that... invasion."

She stood -- shakily -- to leave again, and he barked out "Sit -- down."

She did, quite ungracefully. (Good -- he'd got her even further off-balance.)

"I did not say the idea had no merit," he said carefully. "However, it's a risky tactic. How do you propose we explain such unconventional arrangements?"
"Our work, of course," she replied. "I work nearly seventy hours a week, and with all your duties. It covers a multitude of sins, doesn't it? Not much time to spend together, a disinclination to cohabit because of those hours, your duties, and the commute -- except, possibly, during term breaks. Delayed pregnancy due to lack of opportunity and bad timing...."

"Ah. And why me, Miss Granger? I should think you'd approach one of the Weasleys, for example."

"Well, only one's available, since Percy's out of the running. I didn't even consider them, actually," she said steadily, "because most of the boys are like brothers to me, and I didn't think they'd appreciate my reasoning. You, on the other hand, impress me as solitary by nature and more inclined to look at the situation logically, not emotionally."

"The Weasleys are far more honest and law-abiding than I, you mean," he said dryly.

Granger's cheeks flushed a brilliant pink, and she unthinkingly pushed an errant curl behind her ear. "There was no insult intended, I assure you."

"None taken," he said, not entirely truthfully. "It's an accurate observation, in this specific instance." He thought for a moment, tapping potions-stained fingers against the chair-arm. 

Do I tell her to sod off now, or shall I let her make even more a fool of herself?

He decided on the latter course. Given the shocking information she'd shared, he badly needed the entertainment.

"How soon do you require a decision?" he asked eventually, startling her.

"Oh, there's plenty of time, I think. Unless they decide to jump ahead to mandatory unions."

"Very well. I will consider the proposal, Miss Granger... no pun whatsoever intended... and let you know what I decide as soon as possible."

She looked stunned, as if she hadn't quite believed that he'd give the matter any thought.

"Thank you," she finally murmured. "I... I know it's a terribly unconventional suggestion --"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. As it happens I object to the coercion quite strongly, and civil disobedience appears to be the lesser of several evils. I'm not averse to protecting my own best interests, as you no doubt surmised." He watched her for a moment, and frowned. "Are you well enough to Apparate back? You look quite pale."

"I'm all right, thank you." She rose and awkwardly extended a hand. "I really do appreciate you hearing me out so... reasonably, no matter what your decision. You must be terribly busy. Not to mention enraged."
"No, I'm glad to have heard about the mandates beforehand," he said, giving her hand a minimal shake. "You needn't have worried about that -- I'm well acquainted with the propensity of some to kill the messenger, having been one myself, and I'm not likely to practise it on others."

She almost smiled at that: and then she murmured "Good evening, Professor Snape," and showed herself out.

Snape sat by the fire for a very long time, sorting through the factual information and pondering his options.

He decided not to leak the information. It would do no earthly good, and might, in fact, do a great deal of harm. Something would have to be done, true, but it would take a concerted effort on the part of the entire population, not just the Purebloods: he didn't deceive himself as to their ability to make a dent in the situation on their own, not after the restrictions that were placed on the Isolationist minority after the Dark Lord's final defeat.

No, it will take a great deal more than that. Compulsory mating, in all likelihood. That should have everyone up in arms, I imagine.

In the meantime, Granger's proposal makes a great deal of sense, logically speaking. Protection for both of us until the situation sorts itself out. Odd, I never would have thought such an annoyingly rule-spouting child might propose such a blatantly deceptive action. Although she had developed quite a tendency to take expedient measures, by the end.

Satisfied that he'd thought through the logical implications quite thoroughly, he turned his mind to the more disturbing implications – particularly Granger's motives, which he strongly doubted had anything to do with civil disobedience whatsoever.

Granger's proposition. An actual proposal.

He snorted at the irony of being proposed to by anyone, much less by one like Granger. Not to mention that she apparently thought so highly of herself that she felt it possible he'd wish to associate with her in any way at all, much less allow her to take his name.

I've often wondered, he thought idly, what one might find in a dissection of the Gryffindor psyche. I suspect that the sheer amount of self-absorption would choke the average Slytherin.

She's far too transparent, really, to waste time on. To walk in here and baldly throw such a scheme at me, with no delicacy or negotiation whatsoever.... She doesn't give a damn about what I might actually want.

He didn't care for that at all. He'd been made a fool and had his choices made for him far too often in his life, usually by Dumbledore. He hadn't forgot those instances at all, much less forgiven them: it had simply been prudent to defer his vengeance until the Dark Lord was out of the way. It was Snape's one regret with the outcome of the struggle – that Dumbledore had been removed from the field of play before Snape had had a chance for his paybacks: it would have been intensely
satisfying to have turned on Dumbledore at the last, to have told him how he truly felt and seen the shock on the old man's face, before....

But that couldn't be helped: it was over and done with -- except that he might be able to get a bit of his own back in -- in general -- with variety Gryffindor, after all. And how... delicious, that it might be with one of Dumbledore's pets. And McGonagall's, now that he thought of it. It was disgusting, really, how the old woman still rabidly protected the interests and stupidity of her former charges.

_I could simply turn her over to the Ministry now, _he thought. _All it would take is a replay of tonight's conversation in my Pensieve. It might even get her tossed into Azkaban for Treason, given the confidential information she shared._

That was a _lovely_ thought. It was a very nice parallel with gods-damned Black, too. She was partly responsible for Black getting away, after all, and Snape had never got satisfaction on that score either.

_Yes, it's definitely an option to consider._

_On the other hand.... That's so very cut and dried. It might be much more fun to allow her to make a fool of herself -- take her up on the offer, and then insist on all the proprieties and duties...._  

Granger had been so very careless, after all. She'd left him a great deal of leeway in interpretation.

_'Marriage in name only -- no cohabitation -- no financial support.'_  

He chuckled and took another sip of whisky – and then another thought hit him.

_There might well be certain advantages to marrying Granger above and beyond merely avoiding the Ministry's dictates or turning the tables on her._

He'd resigned himself to paying for certain favours, and never considered that an opportunity to obtain them as a matter of course might ever present itself (at least in a way in which he actually _wanted_ them, unlike the deplorable Pansy Parkinson). He'd never expected to marry: he knew he was neither attractive nor congenial enough to appeal to most women, and the kind he _did_ seem to attract -- that curious variety that were intrigued with his intelligence -- were either so put off by his naturally vicious tongue and his lack of social skills, or so unattractive themselves, that it was a lost cause. He assumed that Granger had determined this as well, and that was the reason for her solicitation to him. He wasn't particularly pleased with that; he was rather offended, in fact, no matter how practically and honestly he assessed himself.

But she'd left that major loophole in the proposal, one which, he thought, she might neglect to close. She seemed to trust him, as evidenced by the Legilimency. She'd seemed to take his words about his own best interests at face value.

It was so very, very foolish of her.
A typical Gryffindor. It would serve her right if I took advantage of her lack of thorough forethought -- after all, she's attempting to take advantage of me. And if I buy the cow, isn't it only to be expected that I get the milk as well?

It wasn't a bad proposition. He'd never paid attention to Granger while she was his student -- not physically, beyond those horrible buck teeth and the messy hair -- but thinking over it now, he admitted that she'd grown into a rather attractive young woman. Not in that insipid, pretty way; she was too sharp and intelligent, she didn't school her features into a bland acceptability, and she was more slender than he actually preferred -- but she was certainly what he thought attractive, now that she was taking some pains with her appearance.

He was beginning to wonder what she might look like naked, in his bed, with that mass of hair spread out around her. (And preferably with that Know-It-All intellect reduced to an inability to string two words together. He thought he might be able to tolerate her, then.)

*She can hardly object. And if she does, I've got ample reason to reject her and turn her over to the Ministry -- the deception is her idea entirely. And no authority will blame me for cutting her loose if she refuses to treat me properly.*

There was the lamentable issue of her blood, of course, or lack of it. He'd be taking a calculated risk there if they were reduced to attempting offspring in the end: there was a possibility that said issue might not be magical at all. The idiot mediwizards couldn't offer assurance that Muggleborns would pass on their magical traits, and he doubted that the Muggle books Granger had brought him would offer any enlightenment on that score.

*Then again, Evans was Muggleborn and look what she produced. What a pity the boy took after his father in nature.*

Even if squibs, though, any offspring Snape might sire on Granger would almost undoubtedly be intelligent, barring any terrible genetic defect: and he'd seen how neat and orderly her mind was -- he'd suspected that well before now, of course, since Dumbledore had confessed that the little chit had solved his potions puzzle. It had made his foray into her mind tonight both easier and harder: easier to find the appropriate memories, but impossible to poke about into her motives toward himself without her knowing.

At any rate, if he was forced to breed with her and any offspring were squibs, he suspected that the Ministry would have made that grounds for divorce -- if or when he wanted one.

*I'm afraid that those are the only terms on which I'm interested in playing, Miss Granger. To either turn you over immediately, or to take full advantage of the situation. The latter really is the best way, after all -- it's far easier to appear involved if one actually is. And since you can't, apparently, lie worth a damn and aren't an Occlumens, it's far safer for both of us.*

*Yes, it's a pretty problem. Very intriguing.*

The mantel-clock struck ten, and he sighed and set the matter to rest for the night: he had the last two essays to mark, and he doubted his ability to resist the siren call of the Genetics texts. He'd
likely be up for some time, tonight. He'd think more about the proposal in the next few days and make a decision after he was absolutely confident that there was little risk of discovery, and that he could string Granger along far enough to get his way.

*It probably shouldn't be that entertaining, after all. Not worth the time and trouble, in all likelihood.*

*Then again, it might.*

He finished the whisky remaining in his glass, Banished the glass Granger had used, and with a wave of his hand Summoned his handkerchief from the arm of the chair, where she'd left it.

It was faintly stained with Granger's lip-rouge.

He hated that. He liked his linens crisp and white, and felt he should always wonder, as he pulled a fresh one from the drawer, if it were the one she'd used.

He rose, tossed the soiled linen into the fire, and returned to his work.

*****

The more Snape thought about Granger's mad little scheme over the next few days, the more enraged he became.

*How dare she? How dare she propose to use me this way? Use my kind, even as she is the instrument of our obliteration?*

In the end he decided to proceed with her mad plan, carefully ordered his priorities, and set his own plot in motion.

*****

October 21st, 2007

*Miss Granger,*

*I have considered your proposal and I find it acceptable. Advise (if you are still agreeable) dates possible and whether London or Queerditch. (The latter has advantages, including no need to wait for a license.)*

*S. Snape*

*****

October 22nd, 2007

*Pro Severus,*

*Yes, I am still of the same mind. I can take leave whenever necessary -- shall I make arrangements for Queerditch?*
Hermione

*****

October 23rd, 2007
Hermione,

Next Saturday. I have already arranged rooms for us -- I assume an overnight stay per inquiries into usual procedure. All else can be managed on the day. Advise ring size. I understand it's traditional, though you may of course decline.

Severus

*****

October 24th, 2007
Severus,

The 28th it is, then. Ring already provided for -- no need for you to bother. Unless you prefer.

Hermione

*****

October 25th, 2007
Hermione,

Shall accede to your wishes on the ring. Will meet you at the Registrar's Office, Council Building, Queerditch, 10 am on the 28th.

Severus

*****

October 28th, 2007
Queerditch Marsh

Snape had expected Granger to be nervous, and was rather surprised to find her composed and smiling when he met her on the steps of the Queerditch Council Building a few minutes before ten o'clock.

"You're certain, then?" she asked. "No second thoughts?"

"I wouldn't be here otherwise," he said, and offered her his arm. "And certainly not after taking great pains to conceal the reason for my absence. I'll catch hell from McGonagall for an elopement, and with one of her pets, no less."

"She wouldn't," Granger said, and laughed.
"She would and will. She goes very shrill and proprietary over you lot," he said matter-of-factly as he opened the door for her. "Worse than a hen with one chick, but she's hundreds."

They applied for the license in the Registrar's Office, took it from the clerk, and stepped through a door into a waiting room -- and had to cram themselves in and stand against the wall: the room was packed with other prospective newlyweds, many of them Purebloods. (Pureblood unions hadn't yet been banned, but the closing of the borders had sent a strong message to the more perspicacious: Snape imagined he was seeing the last gasp of defiance before ignominious defeat.) Most of them recognised him -- and some, Granger -- and those that recognised both were ogling at his outrageous choice.

"So much for getting it over with quickly," Snape muttered under his breath.

"You didn't.... Did you?" Granger asked delicately.

"No, I didn't," he whispered, bending to her ear so the others couldn't hear. "I think it's blindingly apparent, though. We've had several elopements among the Sevenths, and two actual disappeared -- left even their wands behind, so we assume they're on the Continent,"

"My God --"

"Yes, and that's only students, not the general population. I imagine Gregorovich will be busy for a while. Pity the Ministry didn't think of that."

"The ICW's restricted him and the others from supplying new wands to British wizards, though," she whispered back.

"There's always been a thriving black market, and wand-makers to fill the demand. How do you think members of certain organisations avoided detection by Prior Incantato?"

"Oh, I -- No, I hadn't thought of that. They won't be allowed to return to Britain, you know."

"I hardly think they'll wish to," he whispered dryly, and then abruptly straightened away from her.

He'd caught a whiff of her scent -- something very clean and understated, and quite pleasant -- and while he certainly liked it, he had no intention of signaling his approval by sniffing at her or allowing his more primal instincts to express interest in public.

"Oh," Granger said suddenly, and rifled in her handbag. "I forgot to give you this outside --"

She pulled out a jewel box, withdrew a plain little band, quite thin, and placed it in his palm.

He wasn't quite certain which was worse: that she hadn't chosen something large and heavy to symbolise the false marriage, or that she'd chosen something he thought was distinctly cheap. On the whole, he thought it rather neatly summed up her expectations for the marriage, and her opinion of him.
Oh, Merlin, I am going to enjoy this evening so much....

But the stupid ring really didn't matter. What was important was the vow made before the Registrar, and what Snape intended to do later; and as the others in the waiting room were taking an indecent interest in the fact that the bride-to-be had just handed the groom her own wedding band, he simply slipped it into his coat-pocket and looked as menacing as possible to discourage them. (As most of them had been his students in the past, it was a very effective tactic.)

Another clerk entered by a second door, and called the first couple into the inner chamber: soon they heard the Registrar begin to speak in a wavery drone that went on and on....

...for ten minutes, and the bloody ceremony still wasn't finished.

"This is ridiculous," Snape hissed. "How long does it bloody take?"

He held out for another five minutes, and then grabbed Granger by the elbow.

"What -- You're not changing your mind, are you?" she asked in a whisper as he pushed her through the door, staring up at him with panicked eyes.

"No," he said, and he marched them both over to the clerk's desk. "Where are we in the queue?" he barked.

"Er, Snape, was it?" the nervous man stuttered.

"You know bloody well it is, Picklesworth," Snape growled. "Hufflepuff, 1992 -- and don't think I've forgot that you never cleared your account of the last cauldron you melted. What number are we?"

"Twenty-one, sir --"

"And how long does the blasted man usually take?"

"Er, ten minutes if he doesn't lose his place, and fifteen if he does. And he'll want a tea-break, one-ish."

Snape swore under his breath, unbuttoned a few buttons at his waist, pulled out his watch-chain, and unclipped one of the fobs.

"We are not waiting about," he said as he plunked the fob down in front of Picklesworth. "When he's closer -- much closer -- to our number, you are to tap your wand against this, and it will alert me."

"Buh-- but it's not done to leave the premises, sir --"

Snape leaned over the desk toward him. "I -- do -- not -- care what is 'not done,' in this instance, Picklesworth," he said distinctly as he re-buttoned his frock-coat. "I have no intention of standing
in that stifling little room for the next three hours. I am Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts School, Miss Granger is a Ministry official, and -- as this is our only free opportunity to marry in the near future -- we shall be very put out if you don't do as instructed. In fact, I might be compelled to inform the Hogwarts Bursar of your whereabouts, so the outstanding charge might be deducted from your pay. With interest."

"Yes, sir," Picklesworth said immediately.

Snape took Granger's arm and marched her out of the office.

"What do you propose we do for three hours?" Granger said.

Snape shot her a look: her voice had gone a bit funny, and he decided she was trying very hard not to laugh.

"An early luncheon, I think," he said, "and we'll find something to do afterwards, I'm sure. Other than the bloody Quidditch Museum, if you don't mind."

"No problem there," Granger muttered. "I got my fill at Hogwarts."

"How did you survive those two Quidditch-mad fools?" he asked her idly as they walked along toward the commercial district.

"Selective hearing, eventually," she said with a straight face. "And you'll be pleased to know that I often practised herbal properties and potions receipts to drown out the idiocy."

"No wonder you excelled," he said dryly, and guided her to a likely-looking café.

*****

Luncheon was pleasantly calm, as it happened: neither of them was in the mood to talk much, other than about the Hogwarts elopements.

"But what did McGonagall say?" Granger asked.

"Not much, the first time -- she was far too livid to form words. By the time the third pair pulled it off she had a standard half-hour lecture all worked out. They're not allowed to cohabitate, of course, they stay in their own Houses. The pair that are in Hufflepuff have been separated. Mercy Weatherwax -- Moulton, that is -- is sleeping in Sprout's quarters of all places."

"Have you caught anyone --?"

"Good gods, yes," he said in disgust. "I've taken more points this term than in your cohort's entire career, and the most from those three couples. Hasn't done much good."
Granger smothered a laugh. "I am sorry," she said, the skin about her eyes crinkling when he glared at her. "I know it can't be pleasant. I'm thinking of their reaction when you pounce on them, that's all."

"I do not pounce," he retorted.

"Stalk and apprehend, then," she said mildly, and returned her attention to the passers-by outside the window.

He observed her for a moment: the neat, conservative suit and modest pearls at her throat; the nearly ineffectual attempt to pull her hair into order; the discreet application of cosmetics, and the way the laughter lines lingered at the corners of her eyes. She really was quite attractive -- and so terribly innocent and naïve.

If only you knew, Miss Granger, he thought, anticipating the evening's activities. If only you knew how close you are to your own revelation, I doubt you'd be so amused.

They nearly decided to waste the next two hours at the local history museum (not the Quidditch one, which paled in comparison to London's, anyway), and might well have had not Granger seen a bookseller's shop tucked into a row of shopfronts and practically dragged him toward it.

Note to self: should I ever be in the unlikely mood to purchase gifts, books would be The Thing.

He nearly had to drag her away when the chime of his watch pinged insistently: Picklesworth had done his job (or rather, Snape's threat had done its job).

Before he knew it, he and Granger were standing before the doddering old wizard of a Registrar, who stared at their license with bleary eyes.

"Severus Snape, single.... My word, not the Snape?" the old man wheezed.

"Yes," Snape said through gritted teeth (blast McGonagall for insisting his name go in the news reports on the last battle). "Might we proceed?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Severus Snape, single wizard --" (wheeze), "-- aged 47, and Hermione --" (wheeze), "-- Granger, spinster witch, aged 27, you have by these --" (wheeze) "-- presents announced your intention to marry --"

The old idiot fumbled with his book and the license fluttered to the floor.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," he muttered, and smiled when Granger bent to pick the bit of parchment up for him. "Thank you, my dear. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Severus Snape, single wizard, aged --" (wheeze) "-- 47, and Hermione Granger, spinster witch, aged 27, you have by these --" (wheeze) "-- presents announced your intention to marry...."

He dropped the damned paper twice more before they got to the ridiculous, archaic vows, and it was only with great difficulty that Snape prevented himself from hexing the man's bollocks off.
It was time for dinner by the time they left the Registrar's Office.

*****

Later that evening

"Well, we're in the clear -- for a while, at least," Granger said quietly as they lingered over dessert.

She refused to meet his eyes. She'd avoided them all evening, in fact. She'd undergone a minor transformation the moment he'd slipped that pathetic ring onto her finger: all her earlier ease with him had disappeared, and dinner had been a largely silent affair, made even more awkward when she merely picked at her food.

Snape hummed noncommittally. "I wonder why they've been so careless? We had to report the elopements, after all. And I don't know why they didn't stop the adults that skipped across the Channel -- they should have caught them, with the borders closed."

"Someone fouled up the paperwork," Granger solemnly informed him. "An entire list of likely runners didn't make it down to MLE, so they weren't considered a high flight-risk via Muggle transport."

Snape quirked an eyebrow. "I wonder who that someone might be...."

"Oh, no," she said hastily. "I don't process the lists -- that's the Undersecretary's job, and he claimed he sent them on. Someone's lifted them from the mail chutes before they reached MLE, I suppose. I don't know who, and I don't want to know. But it's a good sign -- there's someone else on the inside who's disgusted with everything. No, it's not me," she reiterated, and spooned up another bit of chocolate mousse, "I'm three weeks behind in my paperwork, though, and with entirely valid reasons."

"I wonder you could make the time to meet today," Snape said dryly.

"I've not taken a holiday in three years," she said. "It's owed to me, so frankly I don't feel the least guilty."

He had to smile at that -- pleasantly, he hoped. He intended to make her feel very guilty by evening's end.

"Have you told your parents, yet?" he asked casually.

"No...." Granger set aside her spoon and fiddled with the handle of her coffee-cup. "We don't really talk any longer, you see. I.... They were very supportive of my education -- they seemed to think of Hogwarts as a kind of ultra-exclusive boarding school. But I wasn't entirely honest with them about everything that was going on, and they didn't subscribe to The Prophet. When I had to confess, eventually --"

She stopped and had to take a deep breath before continuing.
"When I had to explain how I'd been injured during that last Autumn Term, they weren't at all pleased. Wanted me to come home, in fact. And I defied them and went back anyway. Things were never the same after that. I don't blame them," she said carefully. "I may not have children, but I can imagine how you could love someone so deeply that you'd want to protect them from any danger whatsoever. Even if it meant denying them something they loved doing very much, something they defined themselves by."

"And did you? Do you, define yourself by your Magic?" Snape asked.

"Yes. I don't know if you can understand it, because you've always been around it -- or I assume you have," she said, shooting him a doubtful glance, and he nodded affirmation. "Even before I Showed, I knew there were things that other people couldn't do that I ought to be able. I was very impatient for it to arrive. And once it did, I wasn't going to let anything keep me from it, even my parents' disapproval. I don't think they understood that it wasn't simply a skill. That it was an entire way of life and of thinking all its own, and that I couldn't just pack up my wand and go back to life as usual."

"The commitment," Snape said immediately. "They could not accept that you might choose a life so utterly alien from theirs, one they saw as more dangerous. They saw it as a rejection of their lives and values."

"Yes, I think that's it precisely," she said, startled eyes wide, searching his. "And it's odd, because they're very committed people. They've always been dedicated to political change and social welfare. They couldn't seem to understand that I feel the same commitment, but in a different society. Practically a different country."

"Different, world, I should have said. They're both still living, I take it? Then there's still time to... make your peace with them, should you choose to," he said pragmatically. "Whether you tell them of... this, is your own concern, of course. I won't pretend to have an interest in playing at being a son-in-law, but you needn't worry about concealing it from them on my account."

She nodded and stared down at the remains of her dessert.

She seemed even more subdued; for a brief moment Snape doubted himself.

**Have I tipped my hand, somehow?**

He'd thought by expressing understanding of her difficulty he might make her feel secure with him again: it was an old interrogation tactic, to persuade the subject that you were there to help them, to give them a sympathetic ear so they could unburden themselves, leaving them vulnerable. Unwary. But there was nothing for it: if she'd sussed him out, it was best to act as chivalrously as possible and take whatever chance he had to get his foot in the door -- literally, if necessary.

"I, for one, am ready for bed," he said, and finished off his brandy. "Shall I escort you upstairs?"

"Here?" she said, surprised. "I didn't think -- My God, Profess--"
"Severus," he interjected with a sigh (it was the third time he'd corrected her that day). "You shall have to get used to it, you know -- your co-workers might think it odd...."

"I know," she said, blushing, and blotted at her lips before tossing the napkin on the table. "I just didn't expect the finest hotel in Queerditch."

"I did," he said as he pulled her seat out for her. "I'm past being resigned to sub-standard lodging. And I preferred knowing there was an acceptable restaurant available, as well -- No, don't bother with the cheque, I shall put it on my room number," he added with a nod to the maître-d'.

"Thank you," she murmured.

They rode the lift up in silence, and Snape walked her to the door.

"I'm so glad you agreed," Granger blurted out quite suddenly, and smiled at him for the first time that day since luncheon. "I didn't think you would, you know."

He smiled. "I don't know why," he said lightly. "The offer was made in such logical and generous terms that I could hardly refuse, given the circumstances."

"Good-night, then," she said, and turned to the door -- and stopped dead in her tracks when Snape reached over her shoulder, laid his hand against it, and the ward dropped and the door swung open.

She whipped around, staring at him: she knew as well as he that the doors were to be warded only to the occupant.

"What --"

"Inside, my dear," he murmured as he grasped her by the arms, backed her in, and slammed the door closed with his foot.

"-- do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

"More to the point, what are we doing?" he said as he released her and -- quite blatantly -- warded the door locked, and to respond only to himself. "Did you bring luggage? Anything to Engorge, before we proceed? Well, it's no matter -- you shan't need anything for the time being. For quite a while, in fact, as I intend to keep you otherwise occupied. We are preparing for bed, where we will consummate this marriage, Madam Snape."

Granted, Severus Snape had every expectation of living a long life: but he rather thought he should never enjoy anything more in future than the look of mingled shock, outrage, and fear on Granger's face. It ran a close second to the exquisite moment he'd seen the Dark Lord's body and essence go up in smoke.

**Chapter 3: Wherein Snape turns the tables.**
"Severus," Hermione said, very carefully, "I'm afraid.... I'm terribly sorry. I thought you understood the matter quite clearly."

"You needn't speak to me as if I'm an idiot," he shot back, blocking the door: while he still had a smile on his face, he looked more dangerous and forboding than ever, and Hermione had to stifle a shiver. "I understand what you intended quite well. The problem is, you don't appear to have taken my wishes into consideration in the least."

"I most certainly.... How in bloody hell could you mistake what I meant? How can you misinterpret 'marriage in name only'?"

"I haven't. Your terms do not preclude consummation, as opposed to a false marriage," he said calmly. "No cohabitation and no financial support certainly do not preclude sexual relations, I'm afraid. I am perfectly agreeable to those points -- in fact, I have no desire to live with you, and no intention of supporting you financially. I merely insist that my interpretation of marriage in name only is correct and yours is not."

"That's a rather sticky semantic distinction!"

"But an important one. Particularly," he said as he pulled his wand free of his sleeve and placed it on a side-table, "in a business transaction, which, I think you'll agree, is what this amounts to."

*Shit* --

"You lied to me," Hermione accused him. "You knew full well that I didn't mean that, and yet you agreed. And you said *rooms* for us. How did you expect me to --"

"Sitting-room, bedroom, ensuite bath," he said, smirked, and -- most alarming -- began to undo his coat-cuffs. "Rooms, plural. I never said they were separate suites."

"You knew that a... a physical relationship wasn't what I meant," she shot back desperately.

"I'm well aware of that, my dear." He glanced up from his cuffs and added, "You really should parse your language more carefully."

"You're taking advantage of the situation, damn it --"

"And you weren't of me?"

"I didn't *intend* to. I thought you agreed to the terms as I meant them. And I *thought* you had a sense of honour," Hermione blurted out -- and only realised how great a miscalculation that last bit was when the blood rushed to Snape's cheeks.
"You stand there, Miss -- Madam Snape -- having proposed and nearly completed plans to deceive the Ministry and defy the ICW, and dare throw honour in my face?"

"Look, I've admitted that I'm sorry. I hadn't thought it through in that sense, and it's not the same --"

"Yes, it is, precisely," Snape said viciously, so angered that he jerked at his right cuff, and two buttons popped off and went flying. "Bloody Gryffindors, assuming that the end justifies the means -- particularly when their own well-being and betterment are at stake. Slytherins are at least honest about their ambitions. And this Slytherin," he added as he began on the buttons of the coat-collar, "intends to make an honest woman of you in more ways than one."

Oh God oh God oh God --

She sank down onto the pouff in front of the fire, searching frantically for some argument to stop him,

"Did you really think that after all I've done that I would pass up a chance like this?" he continued as he worked the long line of buttons free. "After I've put myself beyond the best society of my own kind? It's what you were counting on, after all, wasn't it? 'The greasy, nasty git of a Potions Master -- no-one could possibly want him, could they?'' he chanted, mocking her. "No-one could possibly bear to touch him, therefore he be happy to accept crumbs from the Gryffindor table....' Well, Madam Snape, I'm not. That was your chief error, assuming that I'd willingly chosen to forego the potential benefits of a liaison. If you want the protection of that ring, my name, and my blood, you'll have to do -- your -- duty."

Buttons finally sorted, he flung the coat off, threw it over the chair next to Hermione, extracted his watch and chain and placed them next to his wand, and started on his waistcoat.

"Duty?" Hermione blurted, instantly distracted from his actions. "My God, how can you speak of sex as a duty?"

"Because it is," Snape said. "The duty of a husband is to protect and to provide, and the duty of a wife is to obey and submit. Simply because you've chosen to dispense with some of the provisions due you does not mean I'm obliged to accept anything less."

"That's absolutely medieval --"

"It should be abundantly clear to you by now, Hermione, that my society has rather more conservative views than yours on several significant matters, and in choosing to live in this world, my world, you've accepted them absolutely. Or was all that whinging about your 'commitment' to it not a half-hour ago mere tosh?" he said, untying and unwinding his neck-cloth. "My world does not, I'm afraid, have a very enlightened view of marriage, unlike its general attitude toward witches. What is that quaint Muggle term.... Feminist?" he said thoughtfully, stilling the implacable movement of his hands. "Charming idea." He shrugged and continued with the neck-cloth. "Of course, it reflects rather badly on Muggles that such a movement should need to exist. We don't claim that women have lesser standing as human beings, or that they shouldn't be
treated as equals -- merely that if one chooses a particular path, as you have, one should be prepared to meet the traditional expectations and requirements --"

*It's now or never,* Hermione thought, and took the only effective option she thought available: he was distracted in mid-rant, his hands tangled in the long length of silk, and his wand two feet away on the table.

She fumbled and drew her wand from her jacket -- and Snape promptly halted, threw up a hand, and hissed "*Expelliarmus!*"

She'd managed to close her gaping jaw by the time he'd neatly laid her wand on the table next to his.

"I shouldn't try to Summon it if I were you," he said casually. "I can counter you quite efficiently, as you see."

"Don't you dare come near me," Hermione threatened. (It was useless, and she knew it -- an empty threat was as good an admission of defeat as outright surrender -- but by God, she wasn't going to give up without a fight.)

"I dare and I will, Hermione, and what's more, you'll learn to tolerate if not like it," he said, tossing the neck-cloth over to join the frock-coat, "or I walk out that door and obtain an annulment. Grounds for annulments and divorce become a matter of public record. That might tend to quash your chances of trying this with anyone else."

"You realise, don't you," she said fiercely, "that this is tantamount to ra--"

He moved quite fast -- so fast that she started, lost her balance, and fell to the floor, sprawling ungracefully at his feet -- and before she could squirm away he'd clamped one hard, callused hand over her mouth, and gripped her by the nape of the neck with the other.

"*Don't you* -- Don't you *ever* say that, you spoiled, stupid girl," he hissed, face red, nearly spitting in his rage: she'd only ever seen him this distraught that awful night at the Shrieking Shack. "*Don't you ever dare* accuse me of rape. There are many things I've been guilty of, but *that* is not among them. How you have the breathtaking gall to speak of something of which you have no knowledge.... Do you *know,* Hermione, how many of your schoolmates were inflicted with it? *Do you?*" he demanded, giving her a shake. "How many of my schoolmates and my own bloody students I had to watch undergo it, unable to lift a finger to help them? Do you realise how you demean their suffering, *minimise* it, when you attempt to label this situation -- to which you arrived by your own carelessness and mendacity and selfishness -- as anything at all like theirs?"

No, she hadn't. She'd had no idea at all. She'd been sheltered and protected, especially after that horrid hexing incident in Autumn Term, and hadn't been allowed to participate in the last battle or any of the skirmishes that had preceded it. And she had never been able to find information on the methods used by the Death Eaters, despite considerable illicit research: her Ministry clearance did not extend to access to the confidential files and testimony of those who had survived torture.
Snape was waiting: she managed a shaky nod, the tears standing in her eyes, and he abruptly released her and strode across the room to the window and ignored her humiliated sniffles.

"I have no intention of forcing you. You have a choice," he said when he was breathing more normally, and without even bothering to look at her. "Here are my terms. We will consummate this marriage, tonight. In fact, we will continue sexual relations when time permits and at my pleasure. If or when either of us are in jeopardy of exposure due to lack of pregnancy, we will attempt it." He turned to watch her, voice far more steady now. "Should things come to that pass you might try to flee the country, you know, as you're not likely to be one of the watched. I shouldn't object. I would consider it ample grounds for divorce."

"Why, if I disgust you so much?" Hermione managed through a hiccough as she stared at the floor. "And why bring a child into it?"

"Because, thanks largely to the texts you lent me, I've decided that it's better to pollute the line with strong traits than weak." He smiled unpleasantly. 'How did you put it? 'Good, solid science,' yes. I've no desire to father idiots, and while I would prefer a Pureblood, you are unquestionable intelligent, reasonably attractive.... Careless of others' feelings, true, and far too trusting and inexperienced, but I'm aware that was largely Dumbledore's doing -- he always coddled your lot, and when he couldn't protect Potter any longer he turned his efforts to you. Frankly, I'm more concerned with any potential damned Gryffindor tendencies than anything else at the moment."

"And I suppose I'm to be responsible for any children, am I? On my own?"

"How does anyone else deal with them, singly or together?" he retorted. "A nanny is always an option -- I'm perfectly capable of providing a salary for one. I'm well aware that many females have some odd biological imperative to care for their children, and if you should choose to I wouldn't care how you raised it, as long as it's raised as a Wizard -- and assuming it is. You may even poison the child's mind against me for all I care, as long as it bears the Snape name. On the other hand, I've no objections to raising it myself if you can't be bothered. The Deputy Head is entitled to larger quarters if he or she has a family."

He'd moved across the room during that last and was looming over her again, and bent to grasp her by the arms and pull her to her feet, ignoring her flinch at his touch. He'd shed his waistcoat and loosened his shirt while she wasn't watching him: she could see his naked chest through the gap in the shirt-front, a thin layer of skin over bones, and caught his scent -- potions vapour in his hair, strong soap and overheated, slightly sweaty male skin with a faint, unfamiliar tangy undertone to it that, she was horrified to realise, wasn't at all unpleasant. She'd always assumed his physical condition might match his outward appearance, given the greasy hair and nasty teeth -- but then she'd assumed a lot about him, much of it wrong.

"Foolish woman," he said softly, "you know, better than anyone, that they will eventually require compulsory examinations for childless couples. They'll be able to see whether you're sexually active or not. Do you really want to be exposed that way? What will that do to your credibility and standing in the Ministry? I won't have you on my hands if they chuck you out, not if I'm not allowed what I want -- now. It's a simple business transaction, really. It's just that the currency is
your body." His eyelids half-closed, but she could still read a challenge in the dark glitter of his eyes. "So is it yes or no?"

She fought with actually having to say it.

She knew he wasn't bluffing: he had her dead to rights -- on everything. And much as she wanted to tell him to go to hell -- calmly and reasonably, considering that she had tried to dupe him and she didn't want him further enraged with her -- she couldn't manage to spit out 'I'm sorry, but I just can't.' Some sense of self-preservation wouldn't let her do it, and her conscience -- which had been woefully absent for the past three months -- appeared to have re-awakened with a vengeance.

I could give it all up, she thought wildly. Turn in my resignation and my wand and walk away. Mum and Dad'll put me up, help me until I get back on my feet....

Admit defeat, in other words. Leave in the middle of a crisis, and run home -- which wasn't really home, hadn't been since First Year -- and admit failure. Live with her parents' pity and an unspoken but tangible 'I told you so,' from both of them.... Never be able to use her magic again.

Snape seemed to sense her internal struggle, and despite his earlier rage with her he carefully wiped her cheeks dry, took another step in to her, and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"It needn't be horrid. You might even enjoy it. I am not by nature a brutal man in my sexual inclinations. Persuasive power is far more an aphrodisiac for me than force," he admitted, and pulled back far enough to give her a faint, crooked smirk, "and you've already provided ample stimulation on that score."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut against the whisper of his fingertips on her cheek and tried not to shiver: he noted that, and laughed.

That decided her. He damned well wouldn't be able to hold this over her head; she wouldn't allow him to destroy her career and force her to give up Magic, especially as it was entirely her fault for giving him the means to do it.

She opened her eyes and stared fiercely into his.

"Yes. All right. Let's just... get it over with."

He stared back -- he looked a bit surprised, or she might have thought that, if she didn't know better -- reached into his trouser-pocket, and pulled out a vial: a contraceptive potion, she recognised from the colour. She took the vial from him, uncorked it, and drank.

"Good," he said softly. "I shouldn't have enjoyed ruining you, but I would have done."

"I rather doubt you wouldn't have loved it," she said, and resolved never to forget his words. She'd be damned if she ever underestimated him again.
He took the emptied vial from her and tossed it into the grate, turned her toward the bedroom, and with a firm, warm hand at the small of her back, guided her in.

*****

Snape was wrong. It was horrid.

Not that he was cruel, not physically, at least: he kept his word about not being brutal, though Hermione almost wished he hadn't. It was sheer torture, standing there in the light -- for he'd insisted on lighting the candle -- while he first pulled back the coverlet and sheets, and then turned and stripped her of her clothing, bit by bit: wordlessly chivvied her out of her shoes first; pulled her jacket from her shoulders; unclasped her necklace and unbuttoned her blouse when her fingers fumbled the job.

She was surprised he didn't snap at her clumsiness, but then he seemed to be enjoying her ineptitude. And, in fact, he seemed to be approaching the activity with a certain reverence: not business-like at all, and not speaking, but merely acting and re-acting, his eyes never leaving her body as each bit was unclothed and revealed.

Then he backed her over to the bed, pushed her down onto the cool, crisp sheets, and began to explore with his hands and eyes -- first a clinical examination of neck, collarbones, shoulders, and arms, his hard eyes following the path of his lightly-haired hands -- and then his touch became lighter, callused fingers a mere ghosting over her skin. He bent and pressed his lips to her skin and followed the same routes, actually tasting, sending a shiver through her: and while Hermione herself couldn't tell whether the shiver was from terror or pleasure, it seemed to please him. She supposed he didn't particularly care which it was, as long as he could tell he was affecting her in one way or the other. The age-old question of tyrants, she thought -- whether it's better to be feared or loved.... She assumed that, like Machiavelli, Snape was willing to compromise on the side of fear.

What a pity that she hadn't considered that before.

He rose from the bed and pulled the waistband of her skirt down about her hips and over her legs, carelessly tossing it away, and then her tights followed; and then he pulled his braces from his shoulders, removed his shirt, and lowered himself on her, intent on exploring her neck with his lips.

She barely noticed when he wormed his hands beneath her back to undo her brassiere -- he'd begun inflicting a love-bite on the side of her neck, and she was quite effectively distracted, her senses on overload from his mosuth and breath on her skin, the brush of his hair the weight and heat of him against her; and she only realised he'd managed the clasp when he pushed himself off her and tossed her bra to the floor with everything else.

"Don't --" she gasped, and flung an arm across her exposed breasts.

"Get used to it," he said, grasped her wrist, and pulled her arm aside, pinning it to the bed. "You needn't touch me if you can't bear to, but by the gods you're not going to ruin my total enjoyment."
And he lowered his head to her breasts and nuzzled them, breathing in the perfume that she'd unthinkingly dabbed between them that morning, and finally feathered kisses over them before taking a nipple into his mouth and suckling it. Her knees jerked reflexively and she gasped; he chuckled at that -- a rusty, not entirely unpleasant sound.

"I told you, you foolish girl," he murmured, and glanced at her face before bending to the other breast. "There's no need to deny whatever pleasure you can take, as well."

Hermione turned her burning face away, unable to watch him as he repeated the kissing and suckling on her other breast; he finally released her arm so he could fondle the breast he'd left, his calluses rough against the flesh he'd worked into an exquisite sensitivity.

She tried -- not very successfully -- to relax.

_I agreed to this. I made my deal with the devil -- a bad, careless one -- and it's the dues I'll have to pay. Knowing him, he'll turn me in for even proposing that we do this, not only demand an annulment...._

In one sense, yes, he was right -- she might have sent him on his way, ordered him out, taken the consequences; but she hadn't. There was no reason, then, that she shouldn't do this willingly. She'd been stupid, but he'd given her the chance to refuse the terms.

_It's only my body he's touching -- only the package. He'll never be able to touch my mind or soul. I don't think he's even remotely interested in doing so, except in that sense of having power over me, and he freely admitted to that._

Perhaps that approach was the key. Not that she thought she could dissuade him: she knew better than that. (No-one could go through seven years' tutelage with this man and think that he'd change his mind.) But she might be able to mitigate his victory somewhat -- control the fear and panic, stay calm, let him do as he wished, and remain as unmoved as possible. She even managed it for the next few minutes as he worked his way past her breasts and down her torso, until she felt his fingers hook under the waistband of her knickers.

She stiffened involuntarily, and he paused.

"They have to come off sometime, you know," he reminded her, voice dry, his faint beard-stubble rasping the skin of her belly as he spoke.

"I know," she said.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, forehead still pressed against her ribs, his hair splaying across her skin and concealing his face from her.

_Oh, if only you would...._

But it was a test, and she knew it. She recognised that soft, calculating tone: he was _not_ being solicitous. ('Are you quite certain, Miss Granger, that you wish to add agrimony to this potion?’ --
questioning to mislead and test her even if the choice had been correct, just to throw her off.) If she accepted the offer to halt, even for a while, he would, in all likelihood, retrieve his clothing, dress, thank her for wasting his precious time, and leave for the Registrar's Office to get his annulment.

Hermione took a deep breath and strove for a light tone. "I think not. Best finish what you've started, don't you think?"

He went very quiet for a split second, and then chuckled and looked up along her body, into her eyes.

"There it is."

"What?" she shot back irritably.

"Gryffindor bravado. I wondered when it would rear its ugly head."

She felt the blood rush to her face, and to cover her embarrassment she hissed, "Get on with it."

He laughed outright, and she got a rare glimpse of his crooked, yellowing teeth.

*Thank God he hasn't kissed me properly yet.*

And then he rose, one knee on the bed and one foot on the floor, wriggled her knickers down and over her ankles, stood, and reached for the buttons of his fly, eyes never leaving her face, challenging her to look away.

She didn't: she kept her eyes on his face, refusing to assess his body as he muttered a charm to unbutton his boots and then toed them off. Then his trousers and braces dropped to the floor and he stepped out of them, and began to unbutton the faintly ridiculous, old-fashioned white linen pants he wore beneath.

"You expected grey, perhaps?" he asked, and it took her a moment to connect the non-sequitur with the incident Harry had -- eventually -- told her and Ron about, the one he'd seen in Snape's Pensieve.

"I've never concerned myself with the state of your underthings, past or present," she shot back, and he grimaced.

"I knew the idiot boy wouldn't be able to keep his damned mouth shut," he muttered. "I suppose the entire Gryffindor Common Room enjoyed that. They did the first time."

"If so, they didn't hear it from the three of us," she said truthfully, and then added, "I thought it was horrid of them, actually. Potter and Black, I mean. And Harry wasn't an idiot."

Snape's eyebrows shot up, and he sneered derisively as he stepped out of the pants and kicked them aside; and then he crawled onto the bed and up her body, halted, and stared down at her a moment.
"Sit up," he muttered, and sat back on his heels.

"What --"

"Sit -- up," he commanded in clipped, precise diction -- the voice that told you you were on thin ice.

She did so, warily.

"Turn your head," he ordered, and when she did he reached around and fumbled for the pins that kept the thick knot of her hair imprisoned. "How many of the bloody things are here?"

"Five."

He worked his way around the knot, fingers probing and freeing the twists of her hair as his pulled the pins free; Hermione focussed on breathing properly, and tried -- and failed -- not to examine his body. It was very hard to ignore certain... portions of his anatomy now.

He was going just the tiniest bit thick about the middle: on another man it would have merely looked solid, but his chest was so thin that he couldn't pull it off. There was a scar that wrapped around his left side, just above his hip, white and stretched -- a very old and vicious one, then, perhaps from when he was very young and much more slender, something a mediwizard had never properly healed.

She couldn't ignore the way that his body hair grew more dense below his navel, either, as it traveled down to his genitals, or that he was most definitely aroused, his penis blood-flushed and, she imagined, painfully erect. She now realised he'd taken great pains not to let her feel that as he'd moved along her body in what must be another exercise of power, to prevent her knowing how much he'd been aroused. Not like poor fumbling Neville, in their one abortive attempt at a thorough snog and semi-shag, when Neville had desperately ground his groin against her hip and then ejaculated in his trousers before he'd even managed to fumble his way into her knickers.

_Mustn't think of Neville_, she thought, and suppressed an hysterical giggle. _Poor Neville -- so embarrassed he couldn't look me in the face for the rest of term...._

"You are not," Snape growled in her ear as he tugged out the final pin, "about to snivel like some terrified First-Year, I hope."

"No. I don't imagine that would stop you," she murmured. "Didn't stop you from doing the terrorising."

"Quite right. I take it you're amused at something, then." He tossed the handful of pins at the bedside table: several of them missed and clattered to the floor.

"Not about you."
"Good. You shouldn't be." He fluffed her hair out behind her back -- curious, that was, he seemed to be pleased with the heavy weight of it as it slithered through his fingers and the strands coiled about his finger-tips -- and then he commanded, "Lie down."

She did, reminding herself to breathe again, thinking that he wasn't going to draw this out much longer. But he did, still leaning back on his heels, gazing at her body from tip to toe, the fingers of one hand idly tickling the skin on the inside of her nearest ankle; and Hermione couldn't prevent another blush from staining her cheeks.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," he murmured. "It's what lovers do every day, isn't it?"

That sent her over the edge: she nearly lost her grip on her tenuous control of her anger and fear.

"As you so kindly informed me earlier," she said, voice hard, "this is no more than a business transaction. I hardly think 'what lovers do' applies in this case."

"True. However," he shot back as bent over her and nestled first one and then the other leg between hers, "as I also told you, there is no earthly reason to be unpleasant about it." He lowered his weight onto her body and stared down into her face, examining her mouth, cheeks, eyes, and then whispered, "Quite the reverse, in fact. If we're to be bound together for no reason other than expedience, we might as well make the best of it and enjoy something, wouldn't you agree?"

She stared into his dark eyes, and reminded herself that the statement was no more than Slytherin tactics at their most refined: seductive, promising pleasure, lulling her mind and body into complacency. He'd been using this particular tactic on her since he'd pulled her to her feet in the sitting-room and insinuated that she could, possibly, find the whole awful mess enjoyable -- and then she had no more time to arm herself against him, for his mouth was on hers, insistent, becoming more demanding as she reluctantly allowed him to explore.

His tongue was bitter with the spirit he'd had with dinner; his free hand moved down her body to caress first her breast, then waist, then hip. Then he shifted his weight and the hard, hot flesh of his penis onto her right hip as his hand slid downward, probing delicately at her sex to test her readiness.

And, to Hermione's shame, she was ready. No matter that her conscious mind didn't want this: her body had responded to him, and he enjoyed the accomplishment, chuckling so hard that he broke the kiss.

"Get on with it," she demanded, fighting panic again.

"I intend to," he murmured, breathing hard, and bent his head to her neck as he shifted again, and found her, and began to thrust -- and she gasped and bit back a whimper.

"Good gods," he muttered, and jerked his head up to stare at her. "That is surprising."

"How dare you imply --" she began to sputter once the insult hit its mark.
"Don't be stupid, woman," he shot back, voice rough. "It's gratifying, actually. At least I shall have 
had this -- I retract the crumbs statement. But there's nothing for it, I'm afraid...."

And he nuzzled her cheek, his hand pinning her hip to the bed before he thrust again, breaking into 
er her, and groaned in her ear when she whimpered and jerked against him.

"Don't move, damn you," he hissed, and she instantly stilled, rigid against him. "Just stay quiet for a bit."

"Please, can't we just get it over --"

"No, we -- It is over in one sense, you fool, but there's no need to hurt you needlessly any longer if 
you'd simply relax."

She tried, she truly did: but the famed Gryffindor guts had apparently deserted her when she needed 
them most. She couldn't seem to get enough air -- her breaths were shallow and far too frequent -- 
and as he'd taken much of his weight on his left elbow, she couldn't really blame him. Snape 
remained still, slid his free hand up to the side of her face, stroked her hair away from her cheek, 
and quietly commanded, "Breathe, Hermione. Properly." She managed a deep, shaky breath and 
exhalation, and he said, "Again," and she did until her jitters had abated and her body had begun to 
adjust to his.

"Hold on if it helps," he muttered. "Dig your claws in, if you like, you won't hurt me. And if it 
doesn't help... that's too bloody bad."

He resumed thrusting, quite slowly and carefully, and then took his weight on both elbows and set 
to it more intently: his face taut with the strain of the effort, his hair stringing across his cheekbones 
and clinging damply to his forehead, fingers of one hand clenched in the fall of her hair across the 
pillow. She tried not to touch him -- tried to keep her fingers wrapped in the creases of the now- 
rumpled bedding -- but as his thrusts became more forceful, she had to give in and brace herself 
against his shoulders.

It was a curious experience, actually -- intellectually speaking -- now that the panic was nearly 
behind her. She was still intensely uncomfortable; her body's earlier arousal had subsided, all 
physical pleasure (unwanted or not) gone, and all she could feel was the bruising force of his 
hipbones digging into her pelvis and the pressure of his flesh repeatedly invading hers. But her 
mind had cleared, and she forced herself to watch his face as he worked over her, his pale cheeks 
flushed, eyelids tight-closed save for moments when he seemed to force himself to open them, 
checking her face briefly (*For what? Pain? Enjoyment? Disgust?*) before closing his eyes again 
and retreating back into the purely tactile senses.

He was, in a way, as vulnerable as she at this moment: and it was very odd to realise that this harsh, 
cruel man would actually be willing to abandon any self-control whatsoever, even for something as 
primal and basic as physical gratification. (But then again, he didn't have anything to hide, any 
longer. Unlike Hermione herself.)
Suddenly his breath hitched: his thrusts became more erratic, deeper, and he finally gasped, lowered his head and muffled a groan into the pillow, spasmed against her and thrust once more so deeply that, from the stab of pain deep in her belly, she was certain that he'd torn her somehow. She felt him shiver as he came, and then all his weight pinned her to the bed.

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"You might have said," he finally rasped in her ear.

"Wouldn't have made a bit of difference," Hermione said dully.

"It bloody well would," he said retorted. "Not the end result, no, but I might have prepared you better. I suppose you thought your pride was more important, you fool."

It was, as it happened.

Hermione waited until he dragged himself from her body, and then rolled to her side and made for the edge of the bed.

His arm shot out, and he pulled her back.

"What --"

"Stay here," he demanded.

"I need the loo."

"No," he said firmly, dragged her back to the middle of the bed, pulled her close to him, back-to-front, and wound his arm firmly about her waist.

"Yes, I bloody well do --"

"And I know why. You'll have the decency, just this once, to stay put until I manage to drop off -- it shan't be long -- and then you may go scrub yourself raw for all I care." He tucked his knees behind hers and added tiredly, and with a strange note of defeat, "You can spare me that much consideration. And to still be here in the morning, now that I think of it. In the bloody bed."

Hermione wasn't at all certain she could. Her nerves were frayed, and her conscience was screaming hysterically at the top of its metaphoric lungs; but he hadn't given her any choice, his arm firm about her waist, hand splayed across her ribcage. So she tried to remain calm, staring at the window across the room until his breathing slowed and the blunt fingers on her body unclenched and relaxed, and then she slipped away to the loo.

The thin little wedding-band on her finger flashed in the light as she wiped Snape's semen and a faint streak of blood from her thighs: and for a very long time she sat huddled on the toilet-seat, arms clasped about herself as bruises slowly blossomed on her hips and thighs.
Stupid. So stupid. How in God's name did you think you could get away with it so easily? And what streak of cruelty in you convinced you it was all right to ask it of him? Of anyone?

The only immediate conclusion Hermione could come to was that she didn't particularly like the person she had apparently become: she was too unnerved at the moment to contemplate what the future would be like, now that she'd shackled herself to Snape -- the one man, it seemed, who could see not only himself for what he was, but her as well, far too clearly.

Finally too exhausted to sit upright, she stumbled back to the bedroom.

Snape was sprawled out across most of the bed, the covers still pushed down to the foot: he was deeply asleep, not quite snoring yet, open and vulnerable in his unconsciousness.

After a brief consideration of defying him and sleeping in the sitting-room -- which she rejected after remembering his last words before dropping off, and a quick check of the armoire proved there were no extra blankets or pillows -- she blew out the candle, crawled in beside him, and pulled the covers over them both.

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October 29th, 2007

Snape woke her early the next morning, again spooned behind her, his breath warm against her ear and an arm thrown over her hip: his fingers were lazily caressing her belly and moving downward.

"What --" she said groggily.

"Shhhhh," he whispered into her ear, voice raspy with sleep. "I'm well aware last night might have been more... fulfilling for you. I'm not often in a generous mood, and I suggest you let me indulge you."

And he did, disproving his reputation as the most impatient man at Hogwarts; despite considerable effort on her part to ignore what he was doing, he eventually worked her into such a state that she gave in and allowed him to stroke her to a respectable climax.

Hermione wasn't a prude, by any means: she was certainly adept at pleasuring herself, but she'd had no idea it could be so pleasant to allow someone else to do so, even someone she thought she detested.... Even when Snape then nudged a knee between her legs and took her from behind -- though he was restrained, seemingly careful not to bruise her further or cause her more discomfort than necessary.

"I told you," he mumbled into her hair when he was sated, and as her brain spiraled down from its temporary and unwelcome hormonal high. "I told you it needn't be unpleasant."

And then he abruptly rose, went to the bathroom, locked the door behind him, and finally re-entered nearly a half-hour later, already fully clothed: he'd managed somehow to Summon his clothing through a locked door without her noticing. (She badly wanted to know what charm he'd
used. As far as she knew, there needed to be an unimpeded flightline between Summoner and Summoned, and the bloody door hadn't opened. She knew; she'd watched it every second he was in there.)

Hermione sat upright as he crossed to the mirror beside the armoire, wincing at the ache in her pelvis and legs. "Where are you--"

"Common Room meeting this afternoon," he said tersely, adjusting his collar in the mirror and checking his coat-cuffs. "And I have considerable marking to do. If you'd wanted a more leisurely *honeymoon,*" he added with a hint of a sneer, "you might have considered proposing this before Autumn Term was underway."

Hermione gaped at him. "As I didn't expect--"

"Ah, yes. What is that Muggle saying? Hindsight is 50-50?" His eyes met her reflection in the mirror, and he smirked.

"20-20," she corrected him with a glare.

"In any case, you know where to find me if you need me. Or *want* me, though I think that highly unlikely, don't you?" he retorted coolly.

"How can you just take off as though nothing's happened, when--"

"Because," he said, and crossed to the bed to take her chin in his hand, forcing her to look him in the eyes, "as you finally acknowledged last night, this is a business transaction. Our business is concluded for the time being, and there is no point in hanging about when more urgent matters require my attention."

She felt the barest whisper of something in her mind – some alien presence – and then realised, horrified, that he was using Legilimency on her again, this time without her consent: he was looking at her memory of that lazy encounter not an hour ago, and he was obviously pleased with what he saw, for he began to chuckle.

"Very gratifying," he said. "*Do* remember, should you ever be tempted to tell me that I disgust you, that you enjoyed that last time." He dropped her chin, and took an obvious and indecent amount of amusement from the sight of her, barely covered by the sheets and hair wildly flaming about her shoulders, before he added, "We should renew our acquaintance in future for the sake of the appearances, but I think it unlikely to happen until Yule Break or until the Ministry forces us to take more drastic action. So until then..."

He bent, placed a chaste kiss on the hinge of her jaw, and chuckled when she scrubbed at the spot with the heel of her hand; and then he turned to go.

"Your wand is on the side-table, out here," he threw over his shoulder, and then stopped in the doorway. "Oh, and--"
"What?" she hissed.

"-- tell me, Madam Snape, how many uses are there for Maidens' Blood?"

"Five," Hermione spat back automatically.

"Quite correct. A pity you didn't inform me beforehand -- I might have been able to salvage something quite useful from the whole fiasco. Good morning."

He disappeared from view, and she heard the snick of the sitting-room door as it closed behind him.

When Hermione checked out of the hotel she discovered that the bastard had had the decency to pay the bill; but she had to pay for the pretty little vase that she'd hurled at the wall and broken beyond hope of repair.

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_Hermione's flat_

_October 29th, 2007_

Hermione's mood was not improved when she returned home and found an elaborately decorated scroll waiting for her: a document which noted that her marriage had been officially registered at the Ministry, and which expressed felicitations in particularly fulsome and sickly-sweet language. She nearly threw it in the rubbish-bin, and then automatically filed it away with her other official documents.

Getting mildly drunk seemed appropriate, accompanied with a thorough soak -- she felt absolutely filthy, and as she hadn't wanted to hang about to bathe at the hotel she was, and could still smell Snape on her skin: so she opened a bottle of wine and headed straight for the bathroom, and tried to think of absolutely nothing until she'd relaxed for a while.

_Of all the stupid.... Why, Hermione? What possessed you? What made you think you could trust him, of all people?_

It was his work for the Order, she supposed. She'd formed an unrealistic view of Snape, every bit as skewed as Ron's and Harry's had been, but in reverse. Yes, he'd decided to fight against Voldemort -- though no doubt for his own reasons, not from any altruistic motives -- and she'd made the prime error of assuming that meant that he was an inherently good if unpleasant person. That the sacrifices he'd made -- the torture she'd later found he'd gone through, the risks he'd taken -- meant he was honest and noble, somewhere deep below the nastiness and the verbal cruelty.

_And in a way, doesn't that make my actions even worse?_

She'd taken advantage (or tried to) of the man precisely because she'd thought he wouldn't object too strongly, would be willing to settle, as it were. He was certainly right on that point: she was no better than the nastiest of Slytherins, willing to take what she could without regard for his feelings,
ignoring that he deserved the same respect and courtesy that she expected as a human being, nice or not.

No, I don't like that at all. When did I become so ruthless and self-centred? I didn't even stop to consider how that might make him feel....

She couldn't deny that she had the potential to be cruel herself. She'd been blatantly duplicitous before, and intentionally harmed people.

I wonder when it all started.... Skeeter, I suppose. Though I did Petrify Neville, that once.... No, that didn't harm him at all. In fact, that helped him -- he couldn't have stopped us, he couldn't take blame for what we did.

There was that lovely incident in Fifth Year, though, when she'd put Umbridge in danger, and her only regret at the time had been that the centaurs hadn't actually killed the bloody woman. Come to think of it, she still didn't have a single regret about that.

But those were Skeeter and Umbridge, who clearly deserved it and who'd tried to harm Harry. Snape did not deserve that kind of treatment. Still doesn't. And at least he doesn't attempt to conceal that he's not the nicest person in the world.

Unlike me.

She ran some more hot water into the bath, and wriggled further down to let the warmth sink into her neck, wincing slightly: she still hadn't worked out the aches in her muscles -- and elsewhere.

All in all, he treated me better than I feared. He might have been rougher... might have ignored that I was panicking. God knows he looked ready far earlier.

No, she couldn't lie to herself and think of it as rape, not physically -- and certainly not after that horrific lecture about her schoolmates, and his exposure of her naïveté and selfishness.

Good God.... I wonder if that's why Lavender didn't return last Spring Term, after that nastiness in Hogsmeade. Blast it, I really want to lay hands on those reports.

While Hermione wouldn't characterise Snape's actions as tender or solicitous, she had to admit that he'd tried to make the act itself physically pleasant for her. (Although she supposed he had an ulterior motive there, as well -- his own enjoyment, as he'd said: and if he meant to insist on sexual relations in future, it probably behooved him to make certain she couldn't object that he was cruel and sadistic, at least physically.) He might even hope that she'd be persuaded to enjoy him fucking her. She wouldn't put it past him, and imagined that would only heighten his enjoyment -- that he might be able to make her actually want him, or at least make her desire his attentions.

Well, she'd just have to make certain that she didn't.

So where does that leave me? I either put up with his occasional demands... or I call it quits, file for divorce, and take the consequences. There's no need to let him victimise me further.
But was that fair?

Am I really a victim here? I made a choice, after all. And I don't like that I'm beginning to think like that.... I've never cared for those self-pitying people who continually bleat about 'victimhood' without good reason.

No, she had no right to think of herself as a victim. It was like the folktale a Native American shaman had once told her: if Scorpion requests a favour and stings you in the midst of it, you have only yourself to blame because you knew his nature. Or in Snape's case, she should have done.

And she might, after all, had said no and taken the consequences. But instead she'd ordered her priorities and consented, put her standing in the Ministry above her moral objections. (Some moral objections, she thought gloomily -- Do I have a right to worry about those, with the way I'd intended to deceive everyone?), and he'd given her every chance to change her mind -- in an entirely logical and unemotional Slytherin way, of course, not to mention a very blunt and outright cruel Snapeish fashion.

Pity yourself for being a fool and regret it all you like, Hermione, but don't try to pin the blame entirely on him, and don't claim to be a victim. You're equally at fault.

And in a way, isn't this better? A business arrangement of sorts, rather than some messy emotional entanglement? It's what women, Muggle and Wizard, have had to do for centuries. It's what you wanted.

She'd never found anyone that moved her emotionally; never found anyone that seemed worth the sacrifice of her independence or worth giving herself to, once the novelty of intense snogging had been got through without actually losing her virginity. Snape certainly didn't seem to care about the emotional component; didn't care whether they lived apart (in fact, seemed to prefer that they did), didn't care, at this point, whether they ever had children or not: and should they ever be forced to, he seemed content to leave well enough alone, apart from some financial contribution in the event. He'd even given her the hypothetical choice of raising the child herself, or of turning the poor little bugger over to him. (She shuddered at the thought. She wasn't thrilled with the idea of children -- wasn't in the slightest maternal -- but she couldn't imagine turning a baby over to Snape, of all people.)

She couldn't quite help a twinge of regret about the cut-and-dried arrangement, though. He was getting off far too lightly. There was the matter of that Pureblood arrogance and prejudice, for one: she was apparently good enough to fuck but not good enough to live with, and only good enough to bear his children because she had some desirable genetic traits.

She snorted.

'Better to pollute the line with strong traits than weak,' indeed. Bastard.

She finished her glass of wine, carefully set the glass and the rest of the bottle out of reach, and then -- finally -- consciously shut down the more rational portion of her brain and allowed herself to indulge in a good, long, messy cry, until the bath had gone quite cool and she barely had the
energy to drag herself out of it. It was pointless to stay in: she would never be able to wash some
stains away, after all, save with penitence and acceptance of the bargain she'd made. Perhaps not
even then.

And then she got on with it. She returned to work Monday morning, tried to gracefully accept
felicitations from her co-workers (and the occasional shock at her choice of spouse), and did her
damndest to ignore the ring that circled her left-hand fourth finger and the thought that Snape might
appear at any time to demand attention.

*That* was the easiest part. She didn't hear a single word from him for two months.

**Chapter 4: Wherein Snape tries to make the best
of a bad job, and so does Hermione.**

*The Ministry, London
December 21st, 2007*

"Department of Wizard Resources?" Snape enquired of the runty-looking man at the reception desk
as he registered his wand.

"Why?" the man said with a suspicious look. (He recognised Snape, he could tell: there was hardly
anyone who didn't, given all the publicity after the last battle.)

"Because," Snape said, narrowing his eyes, "I should like to take my wife to luncheon, and it
appears that she's forgot. I'll have to retrieve her. Hermione Snape, Populations Consultant?"

"Oh. Er, Level Three, turn right when the lift opens."

"Thank you very much," Snape muttered, and made his way over to the lift.

He'd lied, of course. Not that he didn't intend to take Granger -- *Hermione* to lunch: he certainly
did. The lie was that she'd forgot, because he hadn't bothered to inform her in the first place. Snape
knew he had every right to simply show up on her doorstep later that evening, but he thought it
wouldn't hurt if he made an appearance at the Ministry, to allay any suspicion that the marriage
wasn't as it should be.

Not to mention the fact that he thought he might enjoy the look on her face when she discovered
him in her territory.

He stepped from the lift when it stopped at Level Three, made a sharp right, and negotiated the
rabbit's warren of hallways before he finally saw something approaching reasonable directions: a
placard on the wall pointing down a dark little corridor, with *H. Granger, Populations, Room
376* etched on it.
Hmmmph. I wonder if the Ministry was too bloody cheap to change it or whether she didn't bother, he thought, intensely annoyed. Careless, if she didn't. She's not making the most of the situation.

After a moment's consideration he dismissed the idea of withdrawing his wand and changing the damned placard himself. Security was bound to pop up to investigate any unusual magic performed on premises: he'd simply have a word with her about it, at luncheon.

He finally located Room 376: the door was open, and he could clearly hear an argument ensuing inside. Rather than showing himself immediately, he put his shoulder close to the wall and slithered a bit closer. (Old habits, engrained from years of espionage, died hard.)

"-- afraid I don't see it the same way, sir," Hermione was saying: she sounded terribly tired to Snape, even though he hadn't got to know her well yet. "The resisting Purebloods are already feeling harassed, and going this far may well --"

"Oh, bollocks, Granger," a man's voice retorted. "Firstly, that bloody group's a tiny minority -- the rest of us have sucked it up, and they can too. What can they do, storm the Ministry? In any event it will be the law, and they've flouted the others long enough. They deserve a damned good put-down, or they'll just keep on dragging their feet."

Snape felt the fingers of his wand hand twitch.

"Secondly," the idiot man was continuing, "it's not your concern to worry over them, anyway -- you're just here to provide me with the data."

"Not true," Hermione shot back: Snape could hear the anger and wounded pride in her voice (and he didn't blame her, though he longed to tell her that showing emotion weakened her case). "I am a consultant, sir, not merely a statistician, and I have a responsibility not only to the government and your department, but to the ICW as well. I'm basing my argument on past ultra-conservative Pureblood response. Being a minority didn't stop a small faction from wreaking havoc in Britain for nearly twenty years, and it won't stop them now --"

"And how do you know this? How can you possibly know what such an isolated group might do? I wasn't aware you'd conducted surveys and polls among them, Granger. I suppose your husband still has a finger in every pie --"

Well, that was quite enough: beside the fact that Hermione was entirely correct and that the man, whoever he was, was an absolute, fucking idiot with a grudge against him, Snape knew a good entrance line when he heard one. He sidled around the doorjamb and lounged against it.

"-- and is keeping you apprised, hmmm?"

Hermione saw Snape a split second before he spoke -- her desk faced the door, and the idiot's back was to it -- and her eyes widened in shock.
"Actually, no," Snape said coolly. "'No' to the finger in every pie, that is. But I think my wife's fears are not groundless."

The idiot whipped around, ready to lay into the interloper, and stopped himself when he recognised who it was.

"Snape," he said, obviously shocked.

"Of course, some people never seem to learn their lessons," Snape added. "And Snape is my wife's name as well as my own, by the way. Corcoran, I presume? I'm not at all certain as it's been thirty years. If so, the acne has cleared up rather nicely -- congratulations."

"What are you doing here?" Corcoran demanded, face purpling and highlighting the old scars. "You don't have clearance, surely."

"The reception clerk didn't mention any clearance, and I registered my wand as required. I'm taking my wife to luncheon, actually.... Did you forget?" he asked, turning to Hermione.

"Lun--?"

"It's nearly one, and I expected you at twelve.... Or were you delayed?" Snape added with a glare at Corcoran.

"Oh. No, I'm terribly sorry, Pr- Sssseverus, it totally slipped my mind...."

"Ah. While I quite admire Hermione's devotion to her work," Snape informed Corcoran, "I have made a special trip. I assume your... conversation can be continued at another time?"

"Go ahead," Corcoran muttered, pushed past Snape, and stomped off down the corridor.

"Oh, bugger," Hermione muttered.

"And good afternoon to you as well, Madam Snape."

"Wha--? Oh. Hullo and thank you. I think."

"Think?" Snape stepped into the office and pulled the door closed.

"Well, the acne comment wasn't exactly called for, was it?"

"Un-called for, but true. Spottiest student ever. It drove him mad to have it pointed out then, and I don't imagine he's changed in the least."

"He already can't stand me."

"I think you sealed your fate with your choice of marital partner. judging by his opinion of me. Not that I think you should give a damn, anyway. He's clearly an idiot."
"Agreed, but there are certain idiots you don't.... Oh, never mind," she muttered. "I suppose this means you're ready to...."

"I mean to take you to luncheon," he said dryly. "Unless, of course, you've already eaten. And we may discuss the other arrangements later."

"Oh. No, I haven't.... I often work through lunch."

She glanced at the wall calendar, and then back up at him.

"Yule Break?" she asked weakly.

"Your grasp of the academic schedule is breathtaking."

"No need to be shirty," she mumbled, and scrabbled behind her for her handbag and coat. Snape took the opportunity to take stock of her office.

The bulk of the floor space was taken up with filing cabinets, all neatly labeled in her hand, recognised from their brief pre-wedding correspondence: he didn't doubt the files inside were exceptionally orderly. The rest of the office looked as though a Hippogriff had rampaged through it, though: huge piles of parchment littered every surface, including her desk, and the few shelves contained only tottering binders labeled "Genetic Reports 2004-05," "Demographic Data 2005-06," and the like. There was a framed picture on the desk as well, but he couldn't see the subject.

"Not much of an office, considering the supposed importance of your work," he noted.

"It's not that bad -- you should see Arthur Weasley's," she said, and quickly shooed him out, doused the light, and closed and warded the door.

They took the lift to the Atrium without speaking: only after they were in the centre of the room did Snape take her elbow and steer her away from the Departures floo to Diagon Alley."

"But --"

"Not Diagon Alley. I refuse to eat at Fortescue's -- I have no desire to have people staring at me, and I certainly don't wish to see any students until next term."

He escorted her to the call-box lift instead, and then out into the London streets; and, taking her arm, he led her a few blocks away (quite neatly glamouring his own clothing to appear more Mugglish for the walk -- hers were adequate) and to a dingy shopfront with boarded-over windows.

"Hang on a moment," he muttered to her, and tapped at the door.

A little peep-hole shot open and a rough voice said, "No solicitations."

"Right, sir," the voice said: the peep-hole slid shut, numerous security bolts were thrown back and the door opened, and Snape escorted Hermione into the marble-tiled entryway of a very nice establishment.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape," Rough Voice said as he closed and bolted the door: he was well-heeled, with a certain oily Continental look about him.

"Good afternoon, Smithers. What looks best on the menu today?"

"The roast pork with apricots, sir, and you know that the beef filet is always quite nice. There's a very young but promising Sauterne available as well."

"Very good -- No, it's quite all right, Smithers, I'll give the lady the tour on the way to the dining room. Is the coast clear?"

"Yes, sir. Only Master Bluett, and he was sleeping as usual when I last checked."

"Where --?" Hermione whispered as Snape walked her into the right-hand wing of the building.

"My club," he said. "Guild of Potions Masters and Brewers, established 1643."

"Oh. Somehow you've never impressed me as the clubbable type...."

"Well, I don't socialise," he retorted. "But it's handy to have a room and decent dining available. I don't care to stay at Hogwarts throughout the entire holiday. And as you can see," he said, cautiously peering into a side-room and then pulling her in, "the library is excellent."

"Oh my God."

The room was lined floor to ceiling with shelves full of books: some of them were securely locked behind grilles -- Dark Arts texts, presumably, and many scrolls, probably very ancient. Old Master Bluett sat snoozing in a wing-chair by the window.

"Alchemical texts and herbals as well, of course. And anything you were unable to find in your numerous forays into the Restricted Section," Snape said dryly, "is undoubtedly here."

"I didn't make that many," Hermione muttered. "Are women allowed?"

"Of course -- anyone in the Guild, that is, which includes apothecaries. There is an auxiliary club next door for women which shares access to the library, laboratory, and dining room. Lodgings are separate, as are the recreational facilities."

"I had no idea something like this still existed outside the pages of a Mills and Boon."

"It's the last remaining private Wizarding club, I believe. Now any fool can buy into a membership at the others."
He drew her out of the library, walked her toward the back of the building, and ushered her into the dining-room; a discreet waiter (no lowly serving-elves for the Guild of Potions Masters) led them to a table near the long windows that lined the far wall.

"Do you have a preference?" he asked as he slipped into his chair.

"Fish, if possible," she murmured. "And anything but sprouts or aubergine."

Snape placed the order, and the waiter hurried off.

"Let me guess," Snape said, given that she'd avoided red meat in Queerditch as well, "you refuse to eat anything to which you might, in different circumstances, form an attachment?"

"Is that so awful?"

"No, but from someone who plotted an Elf-insurrection it's utterly predictable."

She coloured up, glanced about the room where a few antiquated men were dozing over their lunches, and compressed her lips to avoid retorting.

"Go on, say it," Snape said, amused. "Silencing Charms on every table."

"It wasn't an insurrection," she hissed. "And I didn't plot, I.... Oh, forget it."

"It was one of the more entertaining student follies of its year, I'll grant you that," Snape said. "There were wagers made in the Staff Room as to how long you'd persist."

"And who won?"

"McGonagall, of course. She already had a good grasp of your tenacity. Or at least that's what she called it. Others of us had a less complimentary phrase."

"I can imagine," Hermione said. "Don't tell me."

"I shan't, then."

They sat quietly until the waiter silently poured their wine, got Snape's approval of the vintage, and left.

"The window panorama is very fine," Hermione ventured, staring out the windows where the Thames glinted dully in the weak sun. 'Better than the Ministry's, certainly."

"It's not. We are precisely where you think -- very near the river."

"But.... All right, where was it?" she asked, and sighed. "I didn't feel it at all, and I should have done...."
"The threshold of the entryway. There are several thresholds, actually, scattered about London. I don't pretend to understand the Arithmancy, but I imagine you should -- you might ask Smithers on the way out."

"I might grasp it if my brains haven't ossified," she muttered, looking a bit sick at the admission.

"Does Corcoran always give your advice so little respect?" Snape asked (tactlessly, he supposed, but then tact was a useless commodity if espionage wasn't involved).

"Usually. Let's just say that my competence is often called into question and I'm not utilised to best effect."

"Idiot."

"Yes, you said that. I have other, less polite names for him."

"Why on earth do you stay?"

"Firstly, no-one else wants the damned job and I've given up looking for another. Secondly, I still have a hope -- vain, in all likelihood, I know that so don't say it -- that I might actually make a difference."

He snorted.

"And what -- if you're at liberty to tell me -- were the two of you arguing over?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"No, you needn't tell me --"

"It's.... You're certain the Silencing Charm is working?"

"Yes."

"You know they went ahead and banned all Pureblood unions December first?"

"Of course. I could hardly miss the uproar."

"Yes, well, there was fallout from that that the Ministry hadn't anticipated. You were quite right about refusal to marry at all -- there have been absolutely no new licenses issued for Purebloods. But what's worse is that there were several licenses issued for Mixed unions which have been allowed to lapse, and inquiries to the jilted parties proved that the Pureblood families demanded the engagements be broken."

"So they're organising," Snape guessed. "Putting pressure on those who were willing to compromise."
"Exactly, that's my best explanation, too. The Ministry is proposing to haul the Purebloods to court to face charges, sort of a governmental Breech of Promise suit. And as they're afraid that the jilted parties may go reactionary and choose other Mixedblood spouses, they're going to outlaw anything but Pure-to-Mixed unions for them, as well. For us, rather."

Snape toyed with the stem of his wineglass for a moment, and then gravely pronounced, "We have left the land of the merely absurd, and entered the realm of the horrific."

"I don't think a lottery is too far away. Corcoran's given up any pretense at reasonable behavior. I think he's under a great deal of pressure from Fudge." She hesitated, and then asked, "Do you know the Purebloods organising?"

"No. I shouldn't put it past them -- the Isolationists, at least -- but I was being truthful with Corcoran. I no longer have good contacts."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "The Parkinsons were the only family I was really on social terms with...."

"Yes?"

"And the fact that I refused to court that stupid cow Pansy and then promptly married you has rather blocked that avenue of inquiry, I'm afraid."

"You're joking!" Hermione gasped, leaning forward, and then straightened abruptly as the waiter brought their meals.

"No," Snape said when the man had left. "I'm not certain which was the worse sin in their eyes -- telling Horace Parkinson that I wouldn't marry his daughter if she were the last breathing female on the face of the earth, or effectively announcing that I preferred a Muggleborn instead. So unless I mend fences -- which I'd prefer not to do -- I really can't be of much use."

"Oh, I didn't expect that you should, though it would have been helpful. Poor Pansy," Hermione said softly. "We'd all assumed she and Draco would marry, and then.... She won't be likely to marry anyone now, not unless the lottery goes through." And then she began to eat.

They worked away at their meals, largely silent: Snape noted that she hadn't much of an appetite, and that in fact she seemed more drawn and pale than when he'd seen her last. It certainly wasn't his presence that might have put her off her feed for two months, so Corcoran must really be giving her hell.

If the truth be told, he was a bit surprised by her reaction to the information on the Parkinsons. He knew she probably didn't care for Pansy, though Millicent Bulstrode had always seemed more her personal bête noire; but she hadn't seemed offended by his off-hand reference to her as a Muggleborn, either. (But then, it was true: she was. He was probably worrying unduly. In fact, why worry at all? It was her look-out.)
It was only after the waiter had brought them coffee that Hermione finally addressed what was, apparently, the most pressing issue for her.

"I suppose you'd like to... resume where we left off," she said hesitantly.

"That was the general idea, yes. I don't imagine you've applied for leave, so I'm perfectly content to stay here in town and visit in the evenings. And perhaps make my presence known once or twice more at your office."

"I see."

"You'll work entirely through the holiday?"

"No, I'll.... Everyone has Yule Day off, of course, and Boxing Day. I hadn't made any plans, though."

"Blast."

Her eyebrows shot up.

"I have been informed that I'm expected to escort you to Hogwarts for Yule Day dinner," he explained.

"Professor McGonagall hasn't ragged you too terribly, has she?"

"I haven't been so soundly lectured since.... Well, never mind. Suffice it to say that I'm in disgrace for not bringing you back immediately and for not telling her before she read the notice in The Prophet. Not that I care, but as your presence confirms the validity of the marriage...."

"That wasn't me, you know, they're automatically submitted when the license is witnessed --" Hermione said.

"Yes, I know. It's no matter. Although you should have -- what's the point, without publicity?" Snape said idly, and sipped at his coffee. "And by the way, I noticed that your name-placard still lists your maiden --"

"Not in the budget, I was told," Hermione said wryly, "and I haven't had time to look up an appropriate charm to change it myself. It's untrue about the budget, of course, it's not that expensive. Corcoran just doesn't want to see your name every time he walks down the hall. Whatever did you do to him at school, that he hates you so?"

"Nothing proven.... Although I might have switched his spot-ointment for a formulation of my own that turned his skin a fetching shade of green. Viridian, to be precise."

"Oh, for God's --"

"Retribution for many rather nastier pranks on his part, I assure you."
Hermione snorted disbelievingly.

"Which shall it be?" Snape prodded, impatient.

"I suppose it's Hogwarts for dinner, then. Or my parents'," she added hastily, "though I hadn't planned to go there. I still haven't... haven't told them."

That was... predictable. Still ashamed of the whole matter, Snape thought. He assumed the idea of two whole days absolutely alone with him was so disturbing that two days with her estranged parents might actually be preferable.

"Hogwarts on Yule Day it is, then," he murmured. "And in the meantime... I have research to do this afternoon. Shall I meet you later at the Ministry, or shall I have Smithers give you a pass in for dinner? We'll eventually wind up at your premises as I can't have you in my room here. And I'd prefer not to waste money on an hotel."

She glared at him. "The Ministry, five-thirty," she finally said, "at least if you're willing to risk my cooking. I've a bit of.... Never mind, trust me. I oughtn't let it wait, and I don't want to waste it."

"What is it?"

"Plaice," she admitted with another glower that dared him to mock her again.

"If your cooking is as good as your potions work," he said, "I've no doubt it will be acceptable."

They finished their coffee, and Snape walked Hermione back to the Ministry -- he normally shouldn't, as she was fully capable of walking there on her own; but then he had an ulterior motive, of course. The Atrium was crowded with people using the Arrival and Departure floos, and he made certain he and Hermione had been noticed before he bent, swiftly kissed her, and strode back to the call-box lift and then back to his club.

He spent much of the afternoon trying to forget that when he'd kissed her, she'd looked more shocked than appreciative.

Bloody Gryffindors. No dissembling capabilities whatsoever, he thought as he quite illegally made a viciously-worded notation in the margin of a very old and very incorrect text.

He resigned himself to an inedible dinner, and ducked into the laboratory later to brew an anti-acid -- among other things.

*****

Hermione's flat
Later that day

Hermione Granger -- Snape -- was certainly the most perverse specimen of female humanity Snape had ever met, with the exception of Bellatrix Lestrange (although in an entirely different way,
thankfully). The bloody woman hadn't taken a flat near Diagon Alley, or even in one of the old squares like Grimmauld Place where wizarding houses were concealed between Muggle ones: she'd taken a Muggle flat, a run-down floor in an equally run-down house in an otherwise decent neighbourhood which was further away from the nearest available floo than Snape cared for.

"For the gods' sakes, why?" he asked irritably when she'd shown him in and flipped -- actually, manually flipped -- a little toggle to light the electricity.

"Why what?" she said, surprised and indignant.

"Are you or are you not a witch?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"I said I'd thought you were unclubbable," she said as she dropped her handbag and briefcase and shrugged off her coat. "I didn't say unhexable. If you really need proof...."

"It's foolish. I suppose you picked it for some idiotic, sentimental reason. Reminder of your childhood, perhaps?"

"It was chosen for my convenience and pleasure, not yours. If it's that distressing, you're welcome to leave," she said with a sniff, and walked away from him down the narrow little hallway. 

_Bloody...._

He strode after her into a tiny, cramped kitchen that was all too obviously equipped with Muggle cooking implements.

He was rather put out, actually. He'd imagined a quick, magically-prepared dinner followed by an efficient and thorough fuck, and then a return to his club well before ten: but that was doubtful now, if the way she fired-up the battered cook-stove was any indication. (He was also amused by that -- Muggles apparently named their cook-stoves, for Hermione's had a placard labeled "Aga," and yet he knew there was no possibility of it having sentience like any respectable wizarding stove.

_They do the oddest things, Muggles...._

"It takes a while to heat," she murmured. "I feel rather grotty, actually -- I think I'll have a shower. Can you amuse yourself for a bit?"

"But --"

"Sitting-room's back up front.... I shan't be long," she said, and then she trotted across the hallway and firmly closed -- and locked -- what he assumed was her bedroom door.

_Of all the bloody cheek.... Does the damned women expect me to throw her up against the wall with no preliminaries?_
On reflection, he thought it likely that she did. He hadn't been terribly subtle or patient last time, after all. Wasn't feeling particularly patient today, either: he'd greatly enjoyed their encounters in Queerditch, for a variety of reasons.

There was the simple matter of physical release, of course -- and he admitted that it had been far too long since he'd sought that out -- and, as he'd told her, turning the tables on her in that manner and having her submit to him had been quite gratifying -- and arousing. There'd been a certain feeling of... possessiveness involved as well, though, which had made it seem all the more exciting. Not entitlement, not merely in the legal sense with which he'd verbally bludgeoned her -- but possessiveness, as in 'my wife,' despite his insistence that it was purely a business transaction, like any between a whore and a client. He hadn't expected that: it had nearly made him go off the rails at one point, and he was anxious to see if he might feel the same again. (He wasn't certain yet if it were a good or bad thing, but he intended to find out -- and if it was bad, to quash it.)

But there was no point in fussing now: she'd darted out so quickly that he'd had no time to protest that he didn't mind a little honest sweat, or that she might as well save her energy until afterwards.

He wandered back down the hall and into the sitting-room, and engaged in a wanton rummaging-through of her things (carefully, of course, so she shouldn't know). It was very much as he expected of her: everything neat and orderly. She'd acquired as many books in her twenty-seven years as he had by forty -- an impressive number, but of course her collection included Muggle fiction, so those didn't count. There was tiny, glass-paned box which he recognised from his long-ago Muggle Studies class as a Tellyvision -- a kind of electric scrying-glass that, if memory served, they used for the totally frivolous purpose of entertainment; he couldn't quite suss out the purpose of a similar box that sat on the desk, however, although he suspected it was some kind of correspondence device, given the alphabet-keys that were connected to it. (He had absolutely no idea what to make of the odd little oval... thingey that was similarly attached.) While the buttons labeled "Power" on each box had seemed ever-so-slightly intriguing, he knew better than to meddle with them -- one never knew what dangers might have been stuffed into those boxes. Pandora had found that out the hard way.

A quick run-through of the files in the desk revealed nothing much -- mundane paperwork, paid bills, personal documents (including a copy of their marriage certificate, hastily stuffed into the file, one corner bent rudely back). There was also a file of letters from her parents.... But the latest postal-date was 2005. He opened that one and read it thoroughly: the tone held that false brightness that masks insincerity or awkwardness, and there was absolutely no mention of anything remotely magical, or even a query as to how her work was going. She also had a wireless system of some sort, with odd little disks that, he determined, encoded music in some way. No Wyrd Sisters, thank the gods, although the names of some of the Muggle artists were distinctly more bizarre than that. (Beatles? What genus and variety, pray tell, and is the mis-spelling significant?)

The only other furniture, besides the desk, was a small, shabby settee, a low table, and a side-chair, clustered about an empty fireplace.

There were no photographs on the mantel or the desk. There were no pictures on the harsh, white walls; no garish Yule decorations about, not even a card tacked to the mantelpiece. The
overwhelming sense was one of sterility and utility: even his own rooms were more colourful and inviting. This was almost certainly calculated to give the impression of order, coolness, self-control -- but it was only an impression: Snape knew otherwise. The woman couldn't control her temper to save her life -- probably literally -- and she was far too easy to throw off-balance. She might like to think of herself as controlled, and she was certainly better than some, but by no means to this extent.

He was engaged in experimenting with the wireless system when Hermione emerged from her bath. (She'd apparently -- and thankfully -- missed his first, unfortunate attempt with the genus-unspecified Beetles, when the volume she'd left the machine at had been far too loud.)

"Oh," she said, standing in the door.

"Rather ingenious," Snape murmured. "Music on demand, and in such a compact form."

"I hadn't realised you liked music."

"On occasion, when not detrimental to the concentration. I don't claim to have much knowledge. Do you have a preference?"

She thought about it a moment, and then said faintly, "Anything but Ravel," and disappeared back in the direction of the kitchen.

He finally located something he recognised -- Monteverdi, one of Dumbledore's less-objectionable favourites -- slipped the little disk in to the machine, punched the Play button, hastily turned down the volume, and adjusted it when the music had begun before following her to the kitchen. She was cleaning vegetables, slicing them, and chucking them into a steamer.

"Anything I can --?"

"No, no, I've got it," she said.

_Hmmmph. You'd think she had a Potions Master offering to help with dinner every night, and thought them a distinct nuisance._

So he sat on one of the stools at the counter instead, and watched her. It seemed to unnerve her -- that amused him: by the time she'd reached her NEWTs she'd been nearly immune to his hovering, one of the few students who could perform under his watchful eye with equanimity.

"Must you?" she muttered as she filleted the plaice.

"Why not? You said you didn't want help."

"Must you stare? Go read a book, or something."

"This is much more interesting."
"Watching me _cook_?"

"Yes."

"It can't possibly be that different from Potions."

"It is, though. Potions are always the same, with proven physiological effects -- you seldom find they are ineffectual from person to person, except in cases of allergic reaction. They're either made properly and work, or they don't. Food, however.... It's much more mysterious. Much more creative. How one ingredient can appeal to the palate, but a minute quantity too much or too little can overpower or underwhelm.... Or how a particular combination can totally change a dish from something mundane to something extraordinary."

She froze, knife in mid-slice. "I've never heard you wax eloquent over anything but Potions before, and that only the once."

"They're both Arts. And this is one I'm not well-acquainted with."

"You must have seen plenty of meals prepared," she said dismissively, and focussed on her work again.

"No," he said, and continued watching her until she slapped the knife down on the counter, glared at him, stomped over to the... whatever it was (he couldn't remember the name, after thirty-odd years), pulled out a chilled bottle of wine, and thrust it at him.

"Make yourself useful, then," she demanded, and went back to her task.

He drew his wand, uncorked the bottle with a well-practised Charm, and set it aside to breathe.

_She may have resigned herself, but she's not taking it at all gracefully_, he thought, and suppressed a smile. _I wonder how long it shall take for her to acquire an ability to conceal that from me?_

All in all, he suspected she was going to keep him entertained for a very long time.

*****

"I suppose I did it in _part_ for sentimentality," she confessed over dinner.

"What?" he mumbled. (He was intent on the plaice. It wasn't quite to the standard of the club, but it was much better than many restaurants, and certainly better than Hogwarts' kitchen-elves. Granger--Hermione-- had surprising talents of which he hadn't been aware.)

"The flat. Partly that, and partly because it was useful."

"How so?"

"I'd seen -- when I stayed at the Burrow -- how poor Arthur could be dragged from his bed in the middle of the night over the slightest, most stupid incidents, and I didn't fancy that. Especially
when I realised what a bastard Corcoran is. So I wanted to put myself beyond easy reach. I'm not on the Floo, obviously, and I want to keep it that way."

"Would he be a nuisance? Doesn't seem likely, with a job like yours."

"It's not only entirely possible, it's proven. When I was living at the last place -- in Diagon Alley -- he'd take reports home, and then flame me at all hours to explain or justify something. So I put paid to that pretty quickly."

"Sensible, then. Although I don't like the fact that you're so far from the nearest floo."

"What in the world does that matter?" she said irritably. "So I have a longer commute. Why should it matter?"

"It wouldn't matter ordinarily, no. But you do realise," he said, and blotted his lips with his napkin, "that if the situation reaches a crisis and there are attempts at... reprisals, you and Corcoran are top of the list."

"Oh, surely they wouldn't --"

"Remember," Snape interrupted her, and stared at her steadily to impress her with the gravity of the situation, "with whom you are dealing, and of what some of them have been capable in the past. I highly doubt that my name will protect you if they should mark you down."

"I'm very careful," she retorted. "I can defend myself, no matter what Albus bloody Dumbledore thought...."

"I'm sure you can, under normal circumstances. But not against a whole group." He made a mental note to consult certain contacts of his who were particularly skilled at warding. (She shouldn't like that: so he decided he'd take advantage of her work schedule and have the necessary things done while she was out.)

She set her own napkin aside, and began fiddling with the stem of her spoon again. She'd done it off and on throughout dinner, and Snape thought it should drive him mad: he reached over, clamped his hand over her fingers, and stilled them.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out.

"I thought perhaps you'd got used to the idea, given your behavior at luncheon."

"I am, it's just...."

"Was it so terrible, then?" he asked, and bothered to take a sip of wine to clear the fish from his palate. "I quite clearly remember reminding you that it hadn't been."

"No, you were... very kind," she muttered. "At least physically. It's just too new. Too awkward."
"Ah. Well, years of pedagogy have proven to me that the only solution is practise," he retorted, tugged her out of her chair and toward him, shoved his chair back slightly, and pulled her into his lap.

"But there's afters," she protested.

"But after what?" he mumbled, face buried in the curve of her neck.

_Gods, she smells good -- freshly-bathed female with the barest hint of manufactured scent._

His groin was already tightening with anticipation.

"I haven't... I really had forgot, you know," she said. "I haven't been to the apothecary."

He fumbled in his coat-pocket with his free hand, pulled out a vial, and plunked it on the table.

"You --"

"-- perfectly capable Potions Master who shows a great deal of forethought and covers every contingency?"

"That would not have been my choice of words, no."

Snape never got the full, official tour of the flat (not that he wanted one). He was too preoccupied.

*****

_Hermione's bedroom, the wee hours_  
_December 22nd, 2007_  

A piercing shriek rent the darkness, and Snape jolted upright, grabbed his wand, and shot a surprisingly accurate hex in the right direction: the shrieker wailed forlornly, burped once, and died.

"My God, Snape --"

"Who or what the bloody hell was it?" he slurried, sought vainly to see in the darkness of the room, and cursed when repeated commands of 'Lux' were ineffectual. (He was horrified: he was so sleep-stupefied that he'd been taken utterly unawares. Shocking, for a man who used to wake at the slightest sound.) He was absolutely mortified when his bed-partner began laughing, and then she chortled, "You've killed my alarm-clock, you suspicious bastard."

_Oh, Merlin's bloody beard and balls...._

The unneeded adrenaline hit Snape's system like the Hogwarts Express at full throttle: he growled, dropped his wand, and rolled atop his mocker.

"Se-- oh, don't, please, I'll be late for work --"
"Good," he muttered between savage nips at her skin. "Use it. Stammer out a preposterous excuse and blush. Especially if it's Corcoran doing the ragging."

*****

When he woke a considerable time later, she was gone: light was spilling through the curtains, the sheets and her pillow had gone cold, and he didn't hear any movement in the rest of the flat.

Fuck.

He hadn't planned on spending the night. Had wanted to avoid it, in fact. He didn't usually sleep well in unfamiliar surroundings, and was surprised and unhappy that he had in this instance. (Not that he thought she might hex him in his sleep: after all, he'd taken the precaution of physically hiding her wand under something heavy -- something that should fall and make a great deal of noise if she Summoned it -- while she was mucking about in the kitchen last night.)

No, it was just the principle of the thing.

He dragged himself out of bed, wincing; he must have strained a muscle, that last time. He pulled on his pants and trousers, and surveyed the potential damage to the room.

His autonomic responses hadn't degraded, even if his subconscious awareness had. He had, in fact, quite neatly hexed her alarm-clock, and the display was winking a persistent 5:00 -- 5:00 -- 5:00, although it was clearly much later. He supposed he'd nearly fried whatever electronic wizardry made the damned thing go.

*Didn't even scorch the wall.... The old man still has it, apparently,* he thought smugly.

He stumbled out to the kitchen, and found she'd left him a note on the counter.

*Plenty of breakfast things about -- I suppose you'll go back to your club, but if not, help yourself. Do try not to burn the flat down, however. I will be back after seven tonight."

*I found my bloody wand, no thanks to you. Bastard -- I wasn't serious about the hexing. Don't try that again, or I shall use it on you at first opportunity.*

*H.*

*Bloody hell.*

Hermione Granger Snape obviously had no idea of proper wifely respect for ones' husband. (But then, she wasn't a proper wife.)

Snape badly wanted to return straight to the club, but both that muscle at his hip and his knee were aching abominably; that ruled out walking to the floo for at least an hour, and he simply didn't feel up to Apparating without some form of morning stimulant. He thought he was probably a bit whiffy, as well -- waking to that damned alarm has put him into a significant lather, not to mention
the subsequent exertion -- so he wandered to the bathroom instead. It was still faintly humid, and he could smell a trace of her perfume in the air: but he ran a bath anyway, and had a hot, soothing soak. (She quite sensibly had mineral salts in the cupboard, for which he was grateful.)

*Hermione behaved quite oddly yesterday,* he mused. She must have thought everything through in the last two months, and accepted the generalities, somehow -- perhaps, given that she hadn't objected to bringing him to her flat, even accepted some of the responsibility. (Her invitation had surprised him. He'd fully anticipated having to take her to an hotel, but she'd fallen for the bluff and fed him an acceptable dinner, besides.)

Not that *everything* had changed. She'd still been uncomfortable with her nudity and his deliberate visual and tactile observations, and he'd had to work bloody hard to get her in a state where he wouldn't hurt her. But once it was underway she'd lain unresisting and silent, though tense. She'd managed not to touch him this time, bracing herself against the headboard rather than him.

Better than he'd expected, he supposed -- he'd thought she might actually fight him, as she'd had plenty of time for that Gryffindor righteous indignation to work itself up to an hysterical pitch.

*Good, then,* he thought. *Perhaps she's not as hopeless as the rest of them. I'd hate for any spawn to acquire that particular bone-headed trait.*

*Or perhaps she's only waiting for the right opportunity to get a bit of her own back. One can't really put anything past a female, even the more stupid ones -- and Hermione certainly isn't in that class. Only naïve.*

His stomach growled, demanding attention, and he decided he couldn't ignore it any longer.

*Gods, I've gone soft in the last few years. To think I used to exist on nothing but coffee and tea and Pepper-Up for days at a time....*

On the other hand, in previous years all his energies had been focussed on staying alive, not on shagging Hermione Granger Snape nearly senseless (and himself, as well).

He muttered a cleaning charm at his pants and shirt, left the tub, dried, dressed to his waistcoat, tidied the bath -- force of habit, to be certain he hadn't left anything potentially damaging about -- and went back out to the kitchen. He opened the...

-- *refrigerator, that's it* --

-- and found eggs and butter (no rashers or sausages, damn the woman's nearly vegetarian eyes), and bread and oatmeal in the cupboards. He wasn't quite certain how to accomplish toast: there was an odd, squat, shiny thing in the corner that looked just the size for sliced bread, but he wasn't in the mood to risk it. There ought to be a long-handled fork somewhere about, however, so he should simply have to do it the old-fashioned way.
He eyed the stove warily and experimented with lighting it, as he'd seen Hermione do it last night: the flames sprang up immediately, far too high. He hastily adjusted it down and moved the teakettle onto it.

_Hmmm. Not much different than a gas-ring in the lab. In fact, it is a glorified gas-ring._

"All right, Aga," he grimly informed the monster as he rolled up his sleeves. "Play nicely, and perhaps I shan't have to do to you what I did to your compatriot in the other room."

Aga remained silent and inscrutable, and aside from a minor incident with flaming toast, Snape had a surprisingly decent breakfast.

*****

He didn't return to her flat that evening, but stayed at the club.

He wasn't entirely certain why, at first: he tried to explain it away to himself as solicitousness toward Hermione, an attempt at self-delusion that he later found shocking. He'd been terribly enthusiastic early that morning -- so much so that he thought he very well might have hurt her a bit -- and while it wasn't precisely his fault (it was the damned shrill alarm she used), he thought she deserved a rest. She wasn't used to frequent sexual activity, after all, and certainly not with the male need to exercise off excess adrenaline. (It was a common and documented side-effect of going into battle, one _he_ was well-acquainted with, and his nervous system had convinced him that the situation that morning was battle-worthy.)

Eventually, though, he had to admit that the last bit was closer to the truth than worry about her: he was embarrassed by his lack of control. That he still, nine years after the danger was over, jumped at unexpected noises and pulled his wand with very little provocation. And while he had every right to be more forceful and passionate if he _chose_, the incident that morning hadn't been about choice, but the working-off of fear and stress.

He didn't like that at all. It made him weak, and it made him appear vulnerable. Given enough incidents like that, Hermione would eventually find a chink in his armor and exploit it.

_Blast. And I'd so been looking forward to another nice, leisurely exploration of her.... To find her weaknesses. Not to mention that it feels fairly bloody wonderful, no matter how much a sulky cow she's being._

He couldn't deny that, either. He was enjoying Hermione's body a great deal, even though he had to be terribly persuasive and careful before satisfying himself.

Well, he'd have to make it up next night instead. And, of course, there would be the night over at Hogwarts. (He didn't intend to let her slip back to London after Yule dinner, not after she'd confessed that she needn't be back Boxing Day.) He had high hopes that once he'd had her in his rooms and in his bed -- in his own territory, so to speak, and in several more inventive ways than he'd hitherto thought wise to introduce her to just yet -- this odd fascination with having her would abate.
She was just another female, after all. There was no physiological difference between one and another, and no difference to him (with the exception of extreme examples like the Parkinson bint) other than the fact that one day Hermione Granger might have to bear his child.

After a half-hour he finally located the text he'd been searching for -- in Bluett's lap, well-concealed under the old man's messy, egg-stained beard; carefully slipped it out of the man's fingers and brushed away the biscuit-crumbs; and locked himself into the laboratory on the premises to experiment.

He didn't think to send an owl to her flat, to say he wouldn't be by after all.

****

Hermione's Flat
December 23rd, 2007

"What's happened to your nose?" Hermione blurted out when she opened the door.

After a moment of extreme disorientation in which Snape groped at the bandage that covered his nose and then winced in pain, he confessed, "Accident in the lab. Some bloody careless fool tainted a reagent I needed --"

"Did you have it looked at?"

"Smithers fixed it up, but it's still rather pink --"

"Oh. You might have let me know," she said, every bit as tartly as Minerva Bloody McGonagall.

"Why should I? You're not my bloody mother," he shot back, equally miffed.

"Not that -- you may blow yourself to perdition, for all I care. I expected you last... Oh, never mind," she muttered, and stepped aside so he could enter.

By Merlin, what the bloody--? You'd think she wanted me here....

"I was working last night," he said stiffly, highly indignant and equally confused that he felt so defensive. "Rather late, in fact, and there was no need to wake you."

She ignored him and took off down the hallway in a huff, and he had no choice but to follow.

"Would you mind," he nearly spat, "telling me what the bloody fuss is about?"

She turned, opened the refrigerator, pulled out a lump wrapped in butcher's paper, unwrapped it, and tossed the object onto the counter.

It was beefsteak. A marvelously thick filet, in fact. If the odour was to be believed, it was quite probably aged to perfection -- as of the day before.
"Oh."

"I think it's gone off, now," she said, "so you'll just have to eat what I'm making tonight."

He didn't quite know what to make of the fact that she'd gone to special trouble for him. "I've offended your principles in some fashion, haven't I?" he asked cautiously.

"Shall I count the ways? No, don't bother to get shirty again. I'd just.... I hate buying beef, and it was pricey, besides," she muttered as she picked up the spoilt meat, wrinkled her nose, re-wrapped it and thrust it back into the bottom of the refrigerator. "Doesn't matter."

Snape sighed. "So far, then, I've destroyed one alarm-clock and forced a near-vegetarian to stoop to shopping for expensive and objectionable comestibles.... At this rate, I shall have to give you an allowance, shan't I?"

She glared at him, and then she did the unthinkable. "Sitting-room. Book. Sofa." She flung her arm out and pointed, as though he were an idiot child. "Now."

Snape did the unimaginable. Totally unnerved by the potions accident that morning and with Hermione's ill-tempered response to what he'd meant for once as an actual, sincere offer, he turned tail and did as she commanded.

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_Hermione's flat_  
_December 24th, 2007_  

He woke late again the next morning, again with muscles stiff and strained... but not from the activity he'd planned: he'd fallen asleep on the bloody settee, and Hermione had quite considerately (and no doubt conveniently for her, he thought sourly) thrown a blanket about him, neglected to wake him for dinner, and had ducked out for work before he'd wakened.

Again.

He stomped about the sitting-room, restoring the circulation to his legs and cursing quite viciously; went to the loo to address the issue of his aching bladder with a long piss, and peeled the plaster off his nose; and then went into the kitchen and cursed at Aga for a while. (It didn't respond, of course, but Snape made certain it heard precisely what he thought of its shrew of an owner.)

There was another bloody note for him, too.

_Repeat performance of two days ago if desired, and thank you for cleaning up after. Left-overs also available. I will not make special arrangements tonight._

_H._
Snape supposed he deserved that. A Ministry consultant couldn't have that high a salary, and the spoilt beef was a waste. She must have spent... well, he had no idea what she'd spent, or in what currency.

He was, however, going to make her pay for her shrewishness. Tonight. He decided she'd wanted to put him off her yesterday, and he wasn't going to give her that satisfaction again. He disdained the offer to help himself to breakfast, swore at poor, innocent Aga once more, and Apparated to the nearest club threshold in high dudgeon.

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The Ministry, later that evening

It was nearly six-thirty, and there was still no sign of Hermione.

Damn the woman, but she totally threw me off, he thought as he paced the room. I need to re-focus....

The lift behind him opened, Hermione walked into the Atrium, and nearly passed him by, unseeing.

"Hermione --"

She stopped and stared at him blankly for a second, and then her face crumpled.

"Oh --"

He was alarmed: she looked as though she was about to drop. "What is it?" he asked urgently, stepping close so they couldn't be overheard.

"No, I'm all right."

"Clearly you're not," he said.

"I can't talk here," she muttered.

"Where, then? I was going to take you to the club for dinner --" -- to make up for the bloody beef, he almost said, and stopped himself just in time.

"I don't think I can.... Can we just go home, please? I need to have a lie-down for a bit," she said.

Good gods, she must be in shock to include me in 'home.'

Snape took her by the elbow, escorted her up the call-box, and Apparated her straight to the entryway of the flat, any Muggle passers-by be damned. She refused to talk until she was curled up on the settee and had a cup of tea in her hands: Snape helped himself to a glass of wine, and waited more-or-less patiently in the side-chair until she was ready to speak.
"There was an incident in Calais this morning," she began. "Someone was foolish enough to try to skip with their wand.... Martin Flaherty. Perhaps you remember him?"

"No. In your Form?"

"No, rather older, but not as early as you. Hufflepuff, I think, and Pureblood. At any rate, he'd slipped onto the train early this morning to take the Chunnel across --"

Snape had no idea what that was, but restrained himself from interrupting.

"-- and MLE picked up on the wand trace and contacted the FAS. They followed him until he was in an isolated area and tried to arrest him so they could turn him over to MLE, but he.... He killed himself. Right there in the street."

"Bloody.... It wasn't in the evening *Prophet.*"

"No, it's being withheld. The only reason I found out was because François Delaine flooed me, supposedly on another matter entirely, and told me. He works closely with his Auror Service, so he heard first thing."

"Why should he tell you?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"Why should he have told me about the twenty-year plan, for that matter?" she retorted, and shrugged. "I think he's afraid of any furor over here spilling over into France. He thinks Fudge and Corcoran are incompetents as well, and the only reason he hates Corcoran more is because he's actually met him. He's trying to help, Severus."

"Or working with the ICW to root out corruption and security leaks," Snape muttered. "Back to Flaherty. He didn't defend himself?"

"No. He threw a few shots at them, but they could tell he was just trying to hold them off long enough to.... He poisoned himself. He had it all prepared."

"Good gods. The stupid, stupid fool --"

"Oh, no, Severus, I don't think so," Hermione insisted. "You see, as far as we can tell he had no compelling reason to be over there. He wasn't initially considered a flight risk, and was only put on the list two days ago. He must have got notification yesterday."

"Then for the gods' sakes, why?"

"Martyrdom," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Upstanding, Pureblood family man takes his own life rather than submit to the Ministry's new proposed law -- the one that landed him on the fucking list. His wife couldn't have children, you see, so he might well be forced to set her aside some day. That's the next regulation coming down the pike."

"Merlin's --"
"As far as his widow knows -- and I got this from Shacklebolt, after I'd talked with DeLaine -- he'd probably run across to buy her a Muggle perfume that she loves, duty-free. He'd always Apparated over and done so, apparently, and their anniversary is -- was -- next week. But why the poison if the trip was innocent, and why take his wand when he knew it would be traced? He wouldn't need it, not to go to a Muggle duty-free shop, turn around, and go right home. Why go at all, rather than getting her something else or paying the damned duty? No, I suspect that a letter will show up in a few days, one meant for The Prophet, explaining why he acted as he did. I almost wish it would happen," she said. "At least people might actually get off their bloody arses and do something, if only they'd print the bloody thing!"

"Are you seriously telling me you want a revolt?"

She shuddered. "No, I don't want any violence, but what if it's the only way? Can you imagine, Severus?" she asked, the tea-cup beginning to clatter on its saucer as her hands shook. "Can you imagine the outrage and the fury a letter like that will cause? The demonstrations in the Atrium were bad enough, before they kicked everyone out and restricted the Arrivals floos --"

She was in danger of spilling her tea: Snape darted from his chair, took the cup from her, and put it on the table.

"-- and there's not a bloody thing to be done about it, to stop it even if I wanted to. No way to tell if he had the sense to drop any bloody letter off with a friend, or --"

"Quite right, there's no way of telling," Snape said sharply. "You can't even be certain that you're correct and that a letter exists. Why wouldn't he simply leave it with the wife? It would be all over the Wireless by now --"

"So she wouldn't be implicated and tried as an accessory, that's why, I and no, it wouldn't --"

"Foolish supposition. There's absolutely no point in upsetting yourself to this degree."

"But it's happening all over again!" she cried. "We're back to the same bloody mess with people martyring themselves over the same damned thing!"

"It's not the same at all. The Dark Lord's goals had nothing to do with racial purity, not really."

"You thought they did, didn't you?" she challenged him. "Didn't all the Death Eaters and their supporters, at least at first?"

"Yes," he retorted, far more viciously than necessary.

"Then the only difference I can see," Hermione said, "is that while Voldemort portrayed himself as a martyr to a cause, Flaherty is, whether he intended it or not. And that's far more dangerous, because he can't betray himself by showing his true colours later on as Voldemort did."

Snape wanted very badly to tell Hermione she was idiotic and acting like a fool: the problem was, she might well be right.
"Supposing -- just as an hypothesis, mind you -- that you're right.... Why the bloody hell do you care?" he said quite savagely. "You're not only a Ministry official, my dear, you're one of them. What the fuck do you care whether we live or die?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because this is all so very beneficial to you and your kind. It must be very satisfying to see us -- those of us still devoted to the bloodlines, of course I can't include myself in that number any longer -- humbled. Pushed to the brink of a hopeless war and of pointless martyrdom, after all those years of being told that you yourselves aren't worthy to exist in our society."

She stared at him, shocked: and then she drew herself upright and said, very slowly and distinctly, "You, Severus Snape, are a fool."

He very nearly struck her. "How dare you --"

"You may very well think that of my kind, as you persist in calling me," she pushed on, voice going shrill, "but you may stop deluding yourself that I feel the same about you and yours this instant -- don't ever, ever assume that I have the same prejudices as you. Yes, I got more than my fair share of mudblood and muggle trash thrown my way, mostly by that ferret Malfoy and his mates. Did I like it? No. Do I hate all Purebloods because of it? No -- only the vicious, stupid, individual sods like Malfoy," she shouted, her face going an ugly, blotchy red. "I don't hate you as a group and I never have. I wouldn't be doing the bloody job I -- I am if I --"

She stopped, seemed to struggle to finish the sentence, and then gave up and burst into tears.

"Don't. Miss -- Hermione, stop it, now," he barked. "You needn't bother trying that -- it's pointless. You proposed this idiotic scheme precisely because I'm Pureblood, never intending to allow me to touch you, so you can hardly expect me to believe that rot."

"Yuh- you're right," she managed in between sobs. "Because you're Puh- pureblood and I thought you wouldn't have the slightest interest in actually sullying yourself with muh- me. It was duh- dishonest and cruel, but it has nothing to do with my juh- job."

"Really."

"I thought I could make a difference," she managed to gasp. "I thought I might be able to influence Corcoran and Fudge. Make the tr- transition easier for everyone, and keep the stupidity to a minimum. But I can't. I'm exactly what Ron always said, a glorified bean-counter. They don't want my bloody consult, all they want to do is avoid any more sanctions from the goddamned ICW. So here I am, right back in the thick of things again, and absolutely unable to do a fucking thing that really matters while other people.... Just like Seventh Year, stuck in that bloody Room of Requirement strategising while Harry and Ron and Duh- Dumbledore and you and every bloody one else actually did something --"

She was taking in huge breaths again, nearly yperventilating.
Snape was as close to terrified as he'd been the other morning by the bloody alarm-clock. So many of the students in his House had suffered from this... affliction in that last, terrible year of the war that he'd got quite good at dealing with it, but it never ceased to unnerve him. He did as Pomfrey had taught and chivvied him to then, quite automatically: he crossed back over to the settee, sat on the edge, pulled Hermione into his arms, tightly, and let the steady beat of his own heart and the rhythm of his breathing calm her -- or so he hoped. It had worked with most of his students when he'd finally broken down and tried it, in violation of his rules about and distaste for touching them.

Pomfrey had explained it all to him quite clearly and carefully.

"Survivor's Guilt is what they call it, Severus," she said. "It's psychic damage due to the traumatic deaths around them. They don't understand why they survived, and not their friends. They feel that if only they might have done something differently, been there when it happened, they might have prevented their friends or family dying, you see --"

"That's ridiculous, Poppy -- what in blazes could they have done?"

"It doesn't seem ridiculous to them, and you mustn't ever say you think it is -- they only know what they are feeling, and you expecting a reasonable explanation from them is pointless and... and cruel. May I continue? Thank you. It's worse if they were actually there and think they behaved in a cowardly manner -- they don't have to have done, you see, but even the normal reaction of seeking cover may be interpreted as cowardly. Totally irrational, of course, but it is a very real emotional and psychic scar. St. Mungo's is used to seeing it in... in survivors of Death Eater attacks, and I'm afraid we're going to see a great deal of it in the students now."

She peered at him with exhausted, sad eyes, and added, "Do you understand? There isn't much to be done, I'm afraid, but to make them feel secure, get them to talk about it if you can, and to try to make them understand that it isn't their fault."

Yes, he had understood Pomfrey, intellectually. He'd never felt it himself, of course: he'd been too bloody busy fighting like hell to stay alive to allow himself the luxury and weakness of guilt of any kind. (At any rate he deserved to live, after all he'd gone through for the gods-damned Order, no matter who else had died.) He certainly couldn't deny that the phenomenon existed, though. Slytherin House had been one huge, seething mass of guilt and disruptive, recurring nightmares by the end -- guilt over the deaths, guilt over killing, over many of their parents' humiliating exposure as Death Eaters and murderers, over being on the wrong -- the losing -- side....

Hermione had managed to stop sobbing, now, but she was shivering uncontrollably.

"I told him," Snape muttered grimly as he chafed her arms and back to warm her. "I told the bloody man he wasn't doing you a favour by shutting you up, not in the way he did. You deserved to make your own choice. But you must understand, Hermione, there was a great need for your work, and it precluded putting you in the front lines. You did everything you could -- quite well, in fact -- and it did help."
She shook her head violently against his shoulder and started to sniffle again, mumbling something about "that bloody mess."

"You bloody well did," he said impatiently. "That plan went south because Finnegan bolloxed up his part of it. The rest of us only survived because you insisted on a Plan B, and Longbottom, of all people, finally did something right."

"And we lost him too, anyway," Hermione said, and her shivering re-commenced. "Him, Ha- Harry -- Ron nearly, as well, and Dumbledore --"

"Oh, blast it, Hermione, it.... Look, would you agree that I have vastly more experience than you, in this area?"

She nodded, her hair ticking his jawline.

"Answer me this, then. Are you upset because Potter was your friend, or because perhaps Dumbledore told you Potter was your special care and responsibility?"

"Both."

Snape swore under his breath, and Hermione stiffened in his arms. "No, don't be offended, that's not my point. The former is quite natural, apparently, and there's not a damned thing to be done about it but to accept it, when you're able. But the latter.... I suspected he might have done that to you, it was one of his favourite tactics when he had no time to be subtle. Dumbledore had no business putting that burden on you, and he did it deliberately to assuage him own guilt. He was a duplicitous, manipulative bastard. I know you didn't see that side of him, but I did.

"Those two boys -- Potter and Longbottom -- were marked, one or the other, to be the instrument of the Dark Lord's downfall, long before Potter actually acquired that damned scar. And rather than accept that and do what needed to be done, Dumbledore refused to go about preparing them properly. He did everything possible," he said, sneering, "to protect them -- by which he meant keeping them ignorant of their destinies as long as possible -- and to manipulate them into being suitable pawns instead of training them properly. He kept them in the dark about the Prophecy, because he feared that they might, quite sensibly, tell him to sod off. Longbottom was more malleable, being so thick, but Dumbledore couldn't be at all certain of Potter, not when he hadn't had a direct hand in raising him, or indirectly by counting on the influence of his parents.

"He wanted to cheat Fate, in other words, and he did his best to stack the deck -- including mandating that people take on jobs they didn't want, like you. Like me." He smiled grimly. "I didn't want to teach at bloody Hogwarts, you know. There was no real need to, but I suspect he wanted to keep an eye on me, so he gave me no choice."

"Then why are you still --"

"What else am I fit for, now? No-one in their right mind will hire a former Death Eater as a Potions researcher, will they? McGonagall mayn't like me, particularly, but she respects my competence. At any rate, what I'm trying to tell you is that your choice in the matter was negated because
Dumbledore not only needed your tactical skills elsewhere, but because he didn't want Potter -- or Weasley -- to be distracted, to go chivalrous and protective of you if you were pinned down or hurt. Not only a denigration of your ability to protect yourself, but a denial of their right to choose their actions and priorities, as well.

"So," he added softly, and found himself stroking at her messy, tangled hair -- it had escaped many of its pins -- "for the gods' sakes, Hermione, grieve for Potter and the rest all you want, but you have no cause to feel you let the old fool down. He quite willingly kept you from of doing your job as you see it properly, and I for one know he would have sacrificed you if it meant he could keep Potter under control."

"I can't quite believe that," she said. "I never heard him express anything negative about Harry at all, much less say he wanted to control him."

"Of course not. But think about it, woman. While the Potters were alive -- while the Longbottoms were intact, for that matter -- Dumbledore knew the children would be raised with certain values and allegiances, to himself and against the Dark Lord. But when Potter's parents were disposed of, he left the boy with that disgusting Muggle family -- no, don't mistake me, I'm not saying that, I'm saying they were horrid specimens of humanity in general -- and claimed it was for the boy's own good. McGonagall herself offered to take the child in at Hogwarts, if necessary, and the gods know he would have been just as safe. But Dumbledore left him to the tender mercies of those people, despite frequent testimony from Figg that the boy was being mistreated. I saw it myself, in the Occlumency lessons -- persistent degradation. And the older the boy got, the more frequent and extreme the abuse became.

"And why? Why did kind, wise Albus Dumbledore allow this to continue? Because when it came time for Potter to enter Hogwarts, he would automatically find the wizarding world more congenial. He would commit to it as a matter of course. And when Dumbledore would eventually have to tell him of the Prophecy, the boy would feel he hadn't any choice but to see it through. It's a form of mental conditioning, I suppose --"

"Brainwashing," she muttered.

"Is that what Muggles call it? Accurate. And the damned boy never suspected a thing, never questioned Dumbledore's authority or his judgement, until Black was killed. Then, finally, he started to realise the position into which he'd been manoeuvred, though I doubt he ever actually thought through the specifics."

"How can you possibly be certain of all this? You're not the most unbiased person, you know."

"I tell you I saw it in the boy's mind. Figg's judgement was questionable, but I couldn't deny it once I'd seen it myself, and when I told Dumbledore and pressed him on the issue he admitted that he'd known. He gave me some sop about it being in Potter's best interest to stay with family, magically speaking, but I thought that was rot as excuses go. Absolute shit, in fact. There is no special protection offered by blood, none at all. The impulse to protect the weak, certainly, particularly if they're your own flesh and blood -- but that has nothing to do with being either Muggle or Wizard. It's the same for both."
She was silent for a very long time -- though the shaking had stopped, at least -- and Snape was starting to worry when she finally said, "That's why you always badgered Harry so, wasn't it? Always threw the 'Boy Who Lived,' business back in his face. You wanted him to wake up."

Snape thought it through for a moment -- there were certain advantages to allowing her to think that, after all -- and then admitted, "No. Not consciously, at least, not until the Occlumency lessons. No, I did it because I knew he hadn't earned the right to all that celebrity, and he was the image of his bloody father -- temperamentally, as well -- and I assumed he'd been spoilt and could use a good dose of reality. And gods know he couldn't be bothered to show me proper respect, so why should I show any to him? But by the end of that year, I think he'd begun to understand what Dumbledore intended.... The Fool made bloody King For A Day, and not told that he'll be the evening sacrifice to protect the tribe."

Hermione shuddered at that, and Snape squeezed her tighter.

"I detested the boy, but I also abhor that he wasn't given a decision. Wasn't allowed to realise he had one for a very long time, much less exercise it. And I think that's why it all went so badly in the end. It's much harder to do those things properly if you haven't willingly taken them on."

Hermione went very quiet for a moment, and then she said, "Shit."

"Precisely." He drew back a bit and peered down at her. "Or is that due more to the fact that we might have a common philosophical point?"

"Both. But more on the other matter."

He snorted.

"I can't quite wrap my mind about the possibility at the moment," she said, sounding quite listless and miserable.

"You shan't, not in an evening. But the fact that you're not clawing my eyes out in Dumbledore's defence leads me to suspect that you'd sensed some of it. That, or you resent him so deeply that you're willing to consider it's possible, which amounts to the same thing."

Just then his stomach growled -- Hermione couldn't have missed it, even if they'd been more than a foot away from each other.

"I'd meant to stop at the grocer's on the way home. I'm afraid all there is is bread and cheese --"

"No matter."

"Yes, it does.... There's an Indian take-out just up the road. Do you like curries?"

"The milder ones. And not vindaloo."

"Right, then," she said, extracting herself from his arms. "I'll order a delivery."
He watched her as she rose and rummaged about for a menu, and telephoned in the order: and then she excused herself and left to go tidy up. She hadn't offered to clean up the mess she'd made of his frock-coat -- it was soiled with whatever it was she put on her face -- and Snape grumbled a bit as he removed the coat and performed the cleaning charm himself, and then returned to his abandoned wine.

*Well, that explains quite a lot. No wonder she had the stones to propose this whole, mad business -- and with me.*

She'd picked the one person she was absolutely certain would offer no emotional entanglement whatsoever, because she couldn't bear the thought of investing in someone and then losing them. (It was utterly irrational, of course, but then as Pomfrey had said, there was no Reason involved.)

Human nature was, simply, very odd and quite mad. That Hermione Granger, who'd done absolutely nothing objectionable in the war (as far as Snape knew or thought) should feel such guilt over coming through unscathed, while he felt absolutely no guilt at all (and had, technically, much better reason) was ridiculous.

She padded back into the room, hair smoothed (as smooth as it ever got), face composed and skin more evenly flushed, though her nose was still pink: and she put something on the wireless machine, plopped back down on the settee, and they waited in silence for the Indian take-out to arrive. She didn't eat much of hers once it had (she excused herself from the table before he'd finished, in fact); went back to the sitting-room and curled up on the settee again; and sat staring at the empty grate.

Instead of immediately shooing her to bed for the vigorous activity he'd planned, Snape -- motivated by some vestigial sense of duty toward a student, he supposed, though she hadn't been in his House (and though he had done his best, since bedding her, to ignore the fact that she'd been his student at all) -- pulled a book from the shelf and sat in the side-chair reading, occasionally checking on her with cautious, upward glances of which she seemed totally unaware.

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Somewhere just past midnight Snape set the book aside and decided to try to distract her in as effective a way as possible, short of making himself ridiculous. (It suited him to do so, anyway -- he got what he wanted, though in a rather less exciting fashion than he'd hoped.) And, perhaps because Hermione was so tired and in such desperate need of distraction, she almost seemed to welcome it. She didn't fight her arousal, clung to him rather than the bed, and fell asleep immediately and in his arms.

*Probably just... wishful thinking on my part,* Snape decided muzzily as he dropped off. *She's just got used to the idea, now, or she's too worried and heart-sick to care. I suppose any warm body willing to hold her would... do....*

Thankfully, he didn't remember the 'wishful thinking' bit for a very long time: and by the time he would, it was far too late to do anything about it.
Chapter 5: Wherein Hermione and Snape face the Hogwarts Inquisition.

Hermione's flat, early afternoon
December 25th, 2007

"Think of it in this way. If you pass McGonagall's eagle eye, there is no way the Ministry is going to trip you up."

Hermione briefly interrupted her case-packing to glare at Snape -- he was taking this far too lightly, damn it, lounging against the doorjamb with a self-satisfied smirk on his face -- and she said, "I'd prefer to take my chances with the Ministry."

"I thought the two of you were great friends."

"Not bloody likely," Hermione muttered, and snapped the case shut. "I said we kept in touch. It's not quite the same thing."

"Does she still bother you about refusing the Transfigurations apprenticeship?" Snape asked.

"Constantly, whenever she writes. 'Waste of potential -- might have been a great Transfigurationist.' Even said that on my Ministry reference letter. Never mind that I didn't want to be one."

"Yes, she's always had the propensity to know what's best for everyone. Nothing at all to do with being a Gryffindor busy-body, of course."

Hermione ignored the mockery, and yanked her case off the bed.

"I'll get that," Snape murmured, took it from her, and strode off down the corridor. "Are you ready now?"

"As I'll ever be. I need to take out the rubbish, first."

She darted into the kitchen, emptied the bin -- she certainly wasn't going to leave it, not with the remains of the steak and the take-out in it (God only knew what alien life-form might have evolved by the time they got back) -- and trotted out the front door and round to the rubbish tip in the mews. She stood there as long as she could after dumping the lot, shivering in the cold, away from Snape's sharp, observant eyes.

The man is driving me mad....

She could tolerate the situation overall: she'd had two months to get used to the idea. But she hadn't expected Snape to be so courteous about it. Rescuing her from Corcoran's nasty little tirade, taking her to lunch -- well, that could very well be for show, but still; behaving more patiently than she'd ever seen him while she fiddled with preparing supper, when she'd assumed all he wanted to do
was bed her and get the bloody hell out.... More manipulation, probably, or enjoyment in seeing her grasp at anything to put it off.

But when it came down to the act he wouldn't simply get on with things: he insisted on taking his time, on touching her in ways that... well, that made it nearly impossible for her to keep from responding. She resented that, even as she grudgingly admitted that he hadn't bothered to gloat, as he had that first horrid time. He didn't insist on having a light on any longer, either, for which she was grateful. She was actually able to forget, for brief moments, that it was Severus Snape touching her: to pretend that the stringy hair that tickled the side of her neck as he hovered over her wasn't his at all; to ignore the thought of his crooked, stained teeth as they grazed her ear-lobes and collarbones, and that she remembered all too well from that first experience, as he grimaced in the midst of the act.

She could explain all that behaviour away as what she'd come to think of as his grand manipulation, meant to lull her into accepting him and responding to him.

What she couldn't quite explain away as easily was his behaviour last night.

He never touched her if it wasn't necessary, other than certain basic courtesies (usually in front of others). But last night when she'd... ...flipped out, she ruefully admitted, he'd held her in an unsexual way until she was calmer, and reasoned her through the problem when no doubt he wanted badly to tell her she was being an idiot.

_I think I let something rather bad slip, there_, she thought, and worried through what she could remember of the conversation leading up to the hysterics. _I can't really remember much beyond telling him to take his prejudice and shove it..._.

But the specifics eluded her, and she gave up. Whatever it was, it hadn't kept him from fucking her later. She supposed she ought to be grateful that he simply hadn't dragged her straight to bed after dinner; and he had actually been rather gentle, and she hadn't had the energy or willpower to resist in any way.

_I've got to be more careful. I have to tolerate him, but I oughtn't give him encouragement, even by seeming to give in._

A gust of wind came down the mews: she shivered again, and reluctantly turned to go back inside. She didn't want to go to Hogwarts, but it seemed the only option. At least there would be distractions for him there (_and_ the double-edged sword of the need to socialise with people, which she didn't feel at all up to managing). That might keep him at a distance, even if it was indisputably his territory and not hers.

He was in the sitting-room when she went back inside, one arm draped across the back of the sofa and his long legs stretched out toward the empty grate, the fingers of his other hand drumming on the arm-rest.

"I was just trying to figure-up the probabilities," he informed her.
"Of what?"

"Whether you'd skived off down the road in fear of facing McGonagall, or of two days in the dungeons with me." His lips remained thin and immobile, but one brow quirked upward.

"50-50," she retorted as she pulled on her coat. "Probably should have done, if only I'd had my coat."

"You're not wearing those, are you?"

"What?"

"Those ridiculous shoes. There was at least two feet of snow when I left, and we'll have to walk up the drive unless McGonagall's thought to send a carriage to the gates."

"Oh. I'd forgot. It's so much milder, here...."

Embarrassing, how quickly you forget those things when you're stuck in your own little world.

She rummaged in the hall cupboard for a pair of boots and slipped them on in lieu of her shoes, while he flung his cloak about his shoulders and hefted her case in one hand.

"Ready?" he asked, rising and joining her in the hall. "Come here."

"I'm perfectly capable of --"

"I'm sure you are, but I'm perfectly capable of a Double Apparition. Come here," he said impatiently: and since he was apparently back to his usual arrogant, demanding self and she didn't particularly want him irritated with her, Hermione stepped over to him and wound her free arm -- the other hand held her handbag and shoes -- about his waist.

"There," she muttered. "That's what you wanted, isn't it."

"Yes, as it happens," he said. "Just in the event she's sent someone to wait for us, for appearances' sake. Hold on tight."

Bloody --

There was a brief tug at Hermione's navel, a flash of absolute blackness, and then a distinct crack that made her ears ring as they Apparated in front of the Hogwarts gates: she had to drop her things and fling her hand in front of her eyes to protect them from the sudden, blinding-white light reflected off the unbroken expanse of snow.

-- hell, she finished the thought sourly as she wrestled herself out of Snape's grip, and bent to pick up the dropped shoes and bag.

"Ah. Good," Snape said, and when she stood Hermione discovered that McGonagall had sent a carriage -- a small one with isenglass curtains, drawn by a single Thestral.
She shivered.

"Not used to them?" Snape asked as he led her over and helped her into the carriage, and then stowed her case.

"Not to seeing them," she muttered. "I can't say riding one was a pleasant experience, either."

"When --?"

"The night we... The night Black was killed, at the Ministry."

Snape climbed in beside her and flipped the lap-robe over their legs. "I'd wondered. None of you had your Apparition licenses yet and all the brooms were accounted for -- although that didn't mean a damned thing where your lot was concerned." He clicked his tongue irritably at the Thestral, and after a mean and moody glare over its shoulder at them it started off down the drive.

"I didn't actually see them until... until I was with Neville when he died. Lucky, I suppose, but then I guess most people don't see them for a long time. When did you?"

He was silent for a while -- she thought he hadn't heard her, for a moment -- and then he said, as he peered at the snow-draped trees through the curtain, "I've always done. From the first."

*Oh. Oh, shit. What a first impression of Hogwarts, to see those bloody ugly things waiting at the station.*

Snape sat back in the cushions, lips tightly compressed, and didn't say another word or look at her all the long ride up the drive.

*****

No-one met them in the Entry Hall, thankfully -- not even Filch or McGonagall -- and so Hermione trotted along behind Snape as he made for the dungeons, her case firmly in his hand.

"I didn't request a room for you," he said under his breath when she caught up to him, "for obvious reasons. And as I don't allow the elves to clean when I'm not about, you'll just have to put up with the clutter."

"You didn't move elsewhere, after the promotion?"

"No -- why should I? I'm still Head of Slytherin. It's better to be close by." He halted at a thick oak door that had the Slytherin crest carved into it, unwarded it -- several wards, actually, Hermione was unsurprised to note -- and ushered her in. "Not what you'd anticipated?" he murmured as he brushed past her, taking her case into what she assumed was the bed-chamber.

"I hadn't formed an opinion," she said, and surveyed the room as she took off her coat. His were much like McGonagall's rooms -- including several large windows, which she hadn't expected of the dungeons -- but much dustier and not, counter to expectations, smothered in Slytherin green.
"Of course," she added when he stepped back into the room, "I know several people who would be disappointed to learn they'd lost wagers on there being chains and manacles on the walls."

He stopped dead in mid-step and sneered at her.

"I refused to speculate," she said.

"Wise -- although you haven't seen the bed-chamber yet, so perhaps you shouldn't make assumptions. That," he said with a jerk of his head to a door next to the fireplace, "leads to the office, and I should prefer that you don't muck about in there. Or in the private stores," he added with a glare. "The bath is through the bed-chamber, and I suggest you freshen up now. McGonagall is likely to keep us occupied until dinner." He pointedly turned his back to her, flipping through the correspondence and back-issues of *The Prophet* that must have arrived while he was gone.

"Very well," Hermione said, and fled in the right direction.

She ignored the huge four-poster in the bed-chamber, washed her face and hands in the bathroom basin, and stared into Snape's blessedly silent mirror for ten minutes, talking herself into the right frame of mind to pull this off.

*****

Snape was on the floo when she returned, his back to the bed-chamber door.

"-- very tired, Headmistress, and --"

"Nonsense," McGonagall's sharp voice came through the floo. "It's Yule, for goodness' sake."

"Yes, and it's the first holiday she's had off since the ICW conference, which can hardly be called a holiday, at any rate."

"It's tea, Severus -- I shan't ask her to run rings about the Common Room, you know. Or are you simply too jealous to share her with us for long?"

"I am worried," he said -- Hermione fancied she could hear those awful teeth of his grinding -- "about letting her rest. Her job is more stressful than you might think, and returning to Hogwarts can't possibly be as easy or restful as you seem to think."

*Or, more likely, you wanted to shag me silly before dinner,* Hermione thought, and an hysterical giggle escaped before she could stop it. Snape whipped around and glared at her.

"Hermione? My dear?" McGonagall craned her neck further into the room, through the flames. "Oh. Oh, my, you *do* look tired --"

"I am, but I think a lie-down before the feast will solve that," Hermione said, crossing to the fireplace. "Tea sounds quite nice, actually. If that's all right with you," she belated asked Snape.
His lips compressed tightly, but he nodded.

"Good. We shall see you in the Faculty Common Room in a few minutes, then," McGonagall said, with an 'I told you so,' nod to Snape, and broke the connection.

Snape snorted.

"I thought you wanted us to parade ourselves about?" Hermione said.

"I do. But it would look rather odd for me to act against my nature and seem particularly happy about it," he said coolly. "She'll either think I am, indeed, a jealous bastard -- which is how the other faculty prefer to think of me, at any rate -- or a terribly solicitous husband. Preferably a combination of the two."

"Oh. I should have known you weren't serious," Hermione said.

"I am in some respects, you don't look particularly well today. I suggest you use that, especially if they pry into Ministry affairs. If you could brighten a bit when felicitations are offered, however," he added caustically as he moved to the door, "that would be useful as well. But don't overdo it."

_Bloody.... What the bloody hell is the man's problem? Behaves like a human being one moment, and the next he's...._"

Hermione reminded herself she was dealing with Snape -- all Slytherin, three-quarters bastard, and half social-inept -- drew herself up to her full height, sailed out the door past him with as much dignity as she could muster, and ignored him all the way to the Faculty Common Room.

*****

The felicitations were blessedly short as only McGonagall, Sprout, Vector, and Pomfrey had remained at school over the holiday. (And Binns, but then one never really counted him.) Everyone was too upset over the latest Ministry action to whitter on about the nuptials: Hermione barely had time for a single biscuit when the questions about her job, and the recent legislation, started.

"What _does_ a Populations Consultant do, Hermione?" Vector asked. "I was rather surprised to see you'd gone that route, a Ministry job."

"Technically I'm answerable as much to the ICW as the Ministry," she explained. "And in short the job consists of taking raw data -- the populations and demographic data, and the assessments of the health and genetic welfare of the population -- and preparing reports for my superior which explain the terminology and implications, and forecasts trends and developments. Generally to act as a consultant to the Ministry on effective and socially-responsible measures to meet ICW guidelines. In reality, though...." She paused, and took a deep breath. "In reality, I churn out the damned numbers, submit the reports, and my superiors do their best to ignore my suggestions."

That met with dead silence from the others. Hermione felt Snape stiffen beside her, and could practically hear him swearing mentally.
"You mean they don't bother to consider your --"

"No, they don't. Minister Fudge and Corcoran -- Dennis Corcoran, I understand he was here around Severus's time -- are far more concerned with appeasing the ICW than they are with dealing with the problem in a sensitive and sensible manner. And they do that," she added, "by ignoring most of the scientific data, underfunding research, and then blaming the lack of progress on segments of the population they claim are 'intransigent.' Their only worry as far as the population is concerned is whether they can manage to stay in office, and as long as the majority aren't affected and have someone else to blame for any severe ICW measures, they probably shall."

"Scape-goating the Isolationists," McGonagall muttered. "I suppose they're playing that tune to the ICW as well."

"Yes, exactly."

"But why?"

"Slogans and jingoism are cheaper than medical research," Pomfrey offered, jabbing at her knitting, "and they avoid the indignity of lowering themselves to looking into the Muggle science on the relevant subjects. My grandson's been submitting research grants on Muggle genetics techniques for years, and every time they tell him the equipment is 'too dear.'"

"But some of the, the propaganda is absolutely asinine... What are they thinking, Hermione?" Sprout fussed. "I've received no less than three owls hinting that I ought to consider marrying and doing my part. I finally had Madam Pomfrey write them after the second, pointing out that I couldn't even have babies any longer --"

Hermione felt Snape wince, and she mentally agreed with him: Too Much Information where Sprout was concerned, like realising one's quite proper grandmum and granddad still had sex."

"-- and they still sent the third letter."

"It's an automated system, like the Hogwarts letters," Hermione explained. "Any witch even remotely of child-bearing age and any unmarried wizard is sent them -- form letters, you see -- and I doubt they'll stop until you're well past the cut-off age. I doubt there's even a human being on the other end to get Madam Pomfrey's note."

"I suppose they think it's a waste of resources," McGonagall said, sniffing.

"Very likely. The ICW regulations have strained Wizard Resources' work pool past tenable limits, and the Ministry won't hire additional staff."

"I can verify that," Snape murmured. "Hermione is swimming in paperwork, and she isn't even allowed an assistant."

McGonagall looked suitably chastened.
"I've got those letters as well," Vector said, her expression miserable. "They make you feel guilty for not doing your part, even if you can't. Some of us have no opportunity, after all. I mean, they can't force someone to take you on."

Hermione quickly brought her cup to her lips, to prevent herself from correcting the woman.

"It's quite ridiculous," McGonagall said. "Poor Filius Flitwick has been dead for seven years now, and I still get letters on his behalf. How they persuade the owls to deliver the blasted things when the birds know he's gone, I can't imagine."

"I'm sure he's not the only one," Hermione said. "They probably consulted an old Census when they charmed the system. I'll have a word with my superior and see if it can't be fixed. It shan't help most people, of course, but you're quite right, Headmistress -- it is very wasteful."

"It certainly reflects upon the Ministry's competence," Snape said, leaning in toward her. "I should think that would be an effective argument."

"Far more compelling, yes," Hermione agreed, overly-conscious of the way his elbow brushed hers.

"Hermione," Pomfrey said, "I know there's a great deal you can't tell us, but really...." She leaned forward, very serious. "It's going to get a great deal worse than it already is, isn't it? I don't mean the legislation alone, but the situation overall, the children themselves. I'm not asking for specifics, mind you, but...."

Hermione stared into her cup, and then met Pomfrey's eyes. "You of all people know that, I think," she admitted. "You see the problems in the Infirmary every day, after all, and Severus has told me he brews many more therapeutic potions for your patients than in earlier years. St. Mungo's is nearly overwhelmed, and the waiting-room is constantly full. The Occupational Demographics show that healers are leaving the field -- they're too demoralised and stressed to keep up. And I know the rest of you must be seeing the proof in the classroom...."

They did, apparently -- there was a murmur of agreement from all, and Vector looked on the verge of tears.

"If it's not the marriage-mad ones who won't apply themselves, it's the ones who simply can't keep up," McGonagall muttered. "We've all had to revise our curricula downward to adjust. And obviously we shan't see any improvement for six or seven years, at best."

"I'm terribly sorry to spoil everyone's holiday, but I think that's a very accurate forecast. And," Hermione said cautiously, carefully phrasing the statement, "I think you should expect even stronger measures from the government and the ICW to address the problem."

Snape didn't have to pretend worry over Hermione's supposed exhaustion: that statement put a significant damper on everyone's enthusiasm, to the point that they began excusing themselves (Vector much more ineptly than the others), until only Hermione, Snape, and McGonagall were left.
"I'm sorry," Hermione said. "Not the cheeriest tea-time news."

"No, the question was asked, and you answered it," McGonagall said. "There's no point in avoiding the issue." She sipped at her tea, grimaced when she found it cold, and Banished it. "At any rate, you wanted a lie-down. Although I had hoped to show you...."

Snape rose quite suddenly, setting his cup and saucer on a side-table.

"I have some work to do before dinner," he informed them. "I'd like to finish what's accumulated in the past few days -- I'll be returning to town with Hermione, unless you need me."

"No, Severus, that's perfectly acceptable. It's Yule Break, for heaven's sake, and I know the two of you haven't had much time to spend together."

"Thank you," he said, and turned to Hermione. "I'll ward the door for you, and I'll be in the office if you need me."

"Yes, Severus," she replied, and he turned and left the room.

"Come along, Hermione," McGonagall said as she rose. "I should have shown you this when you visited at the beginning of Term."

Hermione followed her down the corridor to the doors of the Great Hall: the doors parted for them and they slipped in, and McGonagall commanded the candles to light.

Hermione, startled, sucked in a breath.

"I didn't want you to see it for the first time tonight," McGonagall said.

A mural now ran along the walls on both sides of the Hall: a depiction of the war since Hermione's First Year, starting with the wizard's chess match that protected the Philosopher's Stone. Harry had predominance throughout, of course, but there she and Ron were, along with Neville and the rest.... And on the wall directly behind her, to either side of the doors, was painted the last battle, most participants accurately rendered (though in symbolic, heroic garments, and with rather less blood than Hermione gathered there had been).

_Harry isn't strictly accurate_, she thought critically. He looked far more imposing than he ever had in life, and he practically glowed with the kind of aura one saw on saints' icons. (Dumbledore greatly resembled God as drawn by William Blake, and Hermione had to repress a shudder.) She herself wasn't shown on those two panels, of course, no doubt in the interest of accuracy once again. No, her last representation was much further down the adjoining wall, bent over an Arithmantic chart in the bloody Room of Requirement.

"We'd debated having the usual memorial brass," McGonagall explained, "but it didn't seem enough. And the blasted artist had it moving, of course, but it was too unnerving and distracting, so we charmed it still. We let it play out on the anniversary."
"It's... ambitious," Hermione murmured. "What do the students think of it?"

"Most of them now are too young to remember, of course -- it's ancient history to them," McGonagall admitted, and laughed quite cynically, Hermione was surprised to note. "They've no idea of the sacrifice this represents. I'm afraid Harry Potter is just that Boy Who Lived bloke who made Seeker First Year, and Albus Dumbledore a very odd, old wizard on their Chocolate Frog cards."

"And those who forget their history...."

"Yes, precisely. Even if they manage to retain the facts, though, they can't seem to understand the implications for today. Understanding how the decisions their government makes affects them, for example."

"You are preaching to the choir, Headmistress."

"I suspected as much. So your probably quite-sensible views aren't given much weight, then?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I thought that, given all the ridiculous measures being enacted," McGonagall said, "but I hadn't realised precisely how bad it must be for you...." She stopped abruptly and cleared her throat, eyes fixed on the mural. "I'm terribly sorry that I've given you grief over your decision. Not that it isn't true, but it musn't be easy, dealing with that and hearing from your former Head that you've chosen wrongly."

"I'm used to dealing with disapproval by now, you know," Hermione said, and attempted a smile.

"Yes, but it wasn't fair of me." McGonagall studied her with those shrewd, assessing eyes: that look always meant trouble. "Are you happy, Hermione? Aside from the work?"

She thought about it a minute, staring up at the mural. "I haven't been happy since beginning of Seventh Year," she finally admitted. "But I've learned to take satisfaction from whatever I can. That has to do."

_and there isn't much, at the moment._

"But what about Severus?"

_Oh, damn. He's right -- she is a busy-body...._

"It was totally out of the blue, you know," McGonagall went on, oblivious to what must be Hermione's reddening face given how hot it suddenly felt. "I didn't quite believe him, when he'd said you two had reached an understanding at that conference. Is he...." She hesitated, and then plunged ahead, "Is he treating you well, my dear? I realise that he's far better than his reputation, he's very conscientious about some things, but...."
Well, there was nothing for it but to brazen it out. "It's not a very conventional marriage, I suppose," Hermione said, struggling to find a balance between the absolutely unbelievable ("Oh, he's wonderful!") and reality ("I can't stand him, actually, and I wish I hadn't done it"). "But he is kind in his own way, I think. Far more than one would expect given our former relationship."

"Ah -- I didn't imagine love had much to do with it, not with the way the pair of you think. He was better than your other options?" McGonagall asked. "I'd often thought you and Mr Weasley might marry, you see, before...."

"No, I couldn't have married Ron. Far too... emotional," Hermione said. "No, Severus is much better in some ways. He's quiet -- most of the time -- he sees things very logically and practically, for the most part."

"Well, if you're certain it works for you," McGonagall said, and sighed. "Gryffindor-Slytherin matches are often a bit tricky, you see, and I'd worried. But I shan't pry any longer. Go have your lie-down, my dear." She patted Hermione's shoulder and shooed her out the doors: and Hermione did her level best to avoid the woman's ridiculously sentimental, tear-misted eyes.

She was quite angry by the time she reached Snape's rooms, and lay fuming on the bed for a good ten minutes trying, but unable, to sleep.

The bed-chamber door creaked as it opened behind her.

"Tell me you didn't kill her," Snape said from the doorway. "I'm not ready for headmaster."

"Near thing. And you were wrong."

"How?"

"Not a busy-body," Hermione grumbled, not bothering to roll over to face him. "She's a Nosy Parker."

He snorted. "I assume you mean totally presumptuous. Not good enough for you, am I?"

"No, it's not that, just... concerned if you were being kind, I suppose. I told her you were. I didn't tell her it was love, if that's what's worrying you."

"I'm not worried. I don't give a toss about what she thinks of it, as long as she understands it's a valid marriage."

The door started to creak shut, and Hermione rolled to face him.

"Why didn't you warn me?"
He stopped, and stepped back into the nearly-dark room: his body was backlit by the fire in the sitting-room, and she couldn't make out his expression. "About the monstrosity?" he said. "Some things have to be seen to be believed. What do you think of it?"

"I think you should have hexed the damned artist. My hair was never that messy, and your nose isn't that bloody big."

He froze, gave another strangled snort -- Hermione might have thought it was an attempt not to laugh, if she didn't know better -- and then said, "Count yourself fortunate that you don't have to stare at it every damned day. Try to sleep, and I'll wake you before dinner."

He left, closing the door behind him.

*Odd that he didn't try to.... Oh, well. I suppose even Snape must get his fill of sex. Though you might have fooled me, given the last three days.*

She tried to take his advice, settled her pillow more comfortably, and stared, unseeing, up at the shadows on the ceiling.

*I could have done better with McGonagall.... She might well have swallowed some tripe about admiring him after I'd joined the Order, been thinking about him ever since....*

*Oh, who am I trying to fool? She doesn't care either way, obviously. She didn't seem concerned that it wasn't for love -- only that I said he'd been kind. If that's the biggest lie I have to tell from now on...*

*... but is it really a lie?*

How much of his behaviour was for show, and how much sincere? (Sincere as far as being a bit solicitous, of course, not about really caring for her, not the way one should.) Was it even possible to tell? She couldn't forget that he might be trying to lull her into complacency, after all.

*Oh, bloody hell, Hermione, just this morning you were thinking he'd been decent last night. And he was very nearly pleasant this morning -- for Snape -- until you opened your cake-hole and asked him about seeing the Thestrals.*

*How awful. To have not only seen a death by eleven, but to know exactly what it meant -- to really understand and feel it.... I wonder who it was?*

There was little chance of her finding out, she knew. He was so private and closed that she hadn't seen anything remotely telling in his rooms -- no photographs at all, even of family, and nothing that appeared to be family heirlooms. There was that reference the other day to mother (or rather to Hermione not being his), but that was a generality, not at all specific.

*Easy enough to find out, I suppose, when I get back to work -- just look it up in the census records. If he's forty-seven... or is it forty-eight? I didn't bother to check his birthdate on the license.... How odd. He's so old-fashioned for someone born that late, even a Pureblood....*
But why? Why should you pry, just to satisfy your idle curiosity? Good God, Hermione, haven't you meddled enough? Look where that got you. You're as bad as McGonagall.

Disgusted with herself, Hermione pounded at the pillow again, rolled over, and finally dozed.

*****

**The Great Hall**

On reflection, Yule at the flat might have been better, even with the embarrassment of no presents to or from the other, and the distinct possibility of a long sexual encounter. No other faculty had stayed at Hogwarts other than those Hermione had already seen, and of the staff only Filch had hung about: even Hagrid had taken off that year, and frankly he was the only one she missed. The Hall, like the corridors, was as gaily decorated as it had ever been during Hermione's residence, but now it only seemed pathetic, a misguided attempt at holiday cheer for people not in the least capable of it. The only other diners were the rag-tag assortment of students who'd had to stay over. There were far more of them than had ever been in Hermione's time. "There are so many," Hermione noted under her breath while McGonagall was in the midst of a speech to the students.

"Orphaned, most of them," Snape murmured back, his teaching robe brushing her sleeve as he leaned in toward her. "Mostly Muggleborn, though there are a few Mixed- and Purebloods with absolutely no family left. They're no longer sent back to Muggle orphanages of last residence or foster-homes, not after they receive their letters."

"Who finally made that change?" she whispered back. "Riddle was always sent back, wasn't he?"

Snape tilted his head in McGonagall's direction. "Dragged the Board of Governors into agreement kicking and screaming, but she managed it at last."

"You mean Dumbledore hadn't?" she asked carefully, trying to keep the horror from her voice.

"Remember our previous discussion?" Snape muttered back. "That one may be all starch and no nonsense, but she has a far better grasp of the kind of damage that environment can cause, and of the risk at which it puts everyone involved."

There wasn't time to consider that further: McGonagall had finished her speech, and the meal popped into existence on the table -- a ridiculous amount for such a relative few, but it was a venerable Hogwarts tradition that had only been suspended that last, terrible year of the war.

Sprout — fat, bustling, totally tactless Sprout was, of course, the one to put Hermione on the spot after everyone had begun to tuck in, perhaps in an attempt to avoid further discussion of the political situation, given her brightness (probably false, a bit too bright, Hermione thought).

"Well, my dear, have the two of you decided upon a house?" she asked.

Hermione almost choked on a bite of roast goose (she'd compromised, as it was Yule).
"No reason you shouldn't, you know, not when it's so easy to pop back down to London," the oblivious Sprout babbled on. "There's a lovely little cottage in Hogsmeade that I pass every time I go in to town, and it's been to let for some time -- it might suit."

"No, I -- er, we haven't...." Hermione stuttered.

"We hadn't got quite that far, Pomona," Snape said smoothly, and Hermione reached for her wine-glass to cover her gaffe. "It's an unnecessary expense at this point."

"Severus is entitled to larger quarters here, after all," McGonagall offered firmly, lips pursed, in an obvious attempt to quash Sprout's enthusiasm. "But I imagine Hermione prefers London. An everyday commute to that distance can't be pleasant."

"Oh. Oh! I hadn't even thought of quarters here, it's been so long since we've had a family in residence --" Sprout said, pursuing that tangent.

Hermione winced, and Snape trod on her foot under the table to send a very clear 'Pull it together,' message.

"-- Oh, my, that would be jolly. And just think, if you should someday have --"

Oh God, oh shit, here it comes, she's going to bring up sprogs --

"I don't particularly want her Apparating back and forth, actually," Snape interrupted Sprout. "She works nearly seventy hours a week, and she's quite tired by day-end. I should hate for her to Splinch herself just so I have the pleasure of her company every evening --"

Bastard. Wouldn't care, and do want some things every evening, just not my 'company,' per se --

"-- so we've decided against making any great changes, for the moment. When we decide to start a family, of course we shall re-evaluate," he added in a remarkably mild tone.

Damn the man. How can he manage to sound so calm and sincere when he's lying through his teeth?

Or maybe he's not.... Oh, damn.

"Oh. Oh, of course that's far more sensible," Sprout said, disappointment writ large across her face. "Rather difficult for you both, though. And you really shouldn't work so hard, dear."

"Pomona, stop fussing," Pomfrey muttered. "I'm sure she knows her limits, and Severus shall remind her if she doesn't."

Hermione leaned over to Vector to change the topic, and had to stop herself and withdraw: Vector had gone still and pale, eyes plastered to her plate, her lower lip trembling.

Oh, for God's sake.... Who managed to put their foot in it, and how?
"More vegetables, Hermione?" Pomfrey asked, serving-spoon poised above the platter.

"No, thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said. "I don't care for sprouts, I'm afraid."

She was almost certain the shiver Snape gave at that was a suppressed snigger.

*****

"You'll have to do better than that," Snape muttered as he steered her down the corridor after the festivities -- if they could be called that -- were concluded. "I'll wager that Pomfrey guessed, and if McGonagall hadn't worked it out already, she bloody well has now --"

"I told you I'd admitted to her that it wasn't conventional," Hermione hissed back, and jerked her elbow from his grasp. "I said absolutely nothing else. What is it with some people? For years all I've heard is 'When are you getting married, Hermione? Getting a bit past it, aren't you?' even though I'm not, and now it's on to bloody children after only two months."

"Certain people apparently think children are the be-all and end-all. And you'd best cultivate the impression that you're not averse," Snape shot back at her. "Otherwise, you're liable to excite comment -- Marsters, what are you doing in the Slytherin corridor?" he interrupted himself as they rounded a corner and nearly ran into a very small, very messy sandy-haired little boy who could barely be twelve.

"S- sorry, s- sir, I w- w- wanted to ask the l- lady --"

"Well, spit it out," Snape said, glaring at the child.

"Are y- you H- H- Herminey Gr- Granger?" Marsters stuttered. (The speech impediment was rather bad: Hermione assumed Snape's nastiness was only a contributing factor.)

"Hermione, yes," she said, ignoring Snape's muttered, disgusted "Snape, Marsters, Madam Snape."

"You wuh- were Harry P- Puh- Potter's friend?" the boy finally managed.

Hermione took a deep breath: she hadn't got this question for a very long time, and had almost forgot how sick she was of it. But Marsters was just a child, and she supposed it was gratifying, in a way, that at least one current student seemed interested. "Yes, Marsters, I was," she said. "Did you want to ask me something about him?"

He nodded, eyes big. "Wh- what was he like?"

Well, that was surprising: usually the question was, 'Was he really as great as they say?' or, even worse, 'Was he a good snogger?', as if she'd even considered kissing one of her best friends that way. (All right, there was Neville, but that was different -- Harry was more like a brother, damn it, at least until Sixth Year when it had all gone to hell.)

"Well, I, er.... I don't really know what to tell you, Marsters. He was very much like any other boy."
"Oh."

Marsters was clearly disappointed, so she made a special effort.

"He was Quidditch-mad -- would be, of course, as a Seeker -- and he liked Honeydukes and Zonko's a great deal. And," she said, suddenly inspired, and she leaned down toward the boy, "he was terrible at Potions."

Snape snorted.

"Wuh- was he?" Marsters said, perking up.

"Absolutely horrific. Second only to Neville Longbottom," Hermione confided inaccurately, and with a pang of affection for poor Neville.

"Cr- crikey. They duh- don't tell you that," Marsters said.

"I see. What do they tell you, Marsters?"

"Wuh- well, it's.... L- like the painting in the Huh- Hall. And the Slytherins," he added with a nervous glance at Snape, "say he was a big, nasty pr- prat."

"Do they? I shouldn't put a great deal of stock in what the Slytherins say, you know, because the Houses were such rivals. Let's take the painting, then. You mean very grand and heroic?"

"Yeah."

Snape snorted again, and Hermione resisted the urge to glare at him in front of the child.

"I see. Well, he wasn't. He looked rather ordinary, in fact. But I'll let you in on a secret, Marsters," she said quietly. "You don't have to be big and impressive to be a hero, because what it takes doesn't show on the outside. You don't have to be happy or very intelligent, or even particularly nice. It's what's in here," she said as she reached out and gently poked at his chest. "And how you use what you've got up here," she added, and tapped his forehead. "Those are far more important. Most people aren't heroes -- they simply find it within themselves to behave in heroic ways at the right time. Does that answer your question, at least a little bit?"

"Yeah," Marsters said doubtfully.

"Give it time, you'll understand some day," Hermione said.

"Speaking of time, Marsters, you are about to break curfew. Get going before I take points," Snape ordered.

"Yes, suh- sir," Marsters said, and shot off down the corridor, throwing a belated "Thanks!" over his shoulder.

"Bloody --"
"Gryffindor?" Hermione coolly supplied.

"Hufflepuff, they're far worse about hero-worship," Snape muttered.

"You needn't have been so harsh," she shot back as she straightened up. "And it's holiday, not Term. Why be so hard on him? He obviously has problems --"

"I know that far better than you, thank you. And I wasn't harsh -- it's past curfew, it doesn't matter if it's Term or not, and I didn't take the blasted points," Snape said, and hurried her along the corridor again.

"I remember a Marsters...."

"A cousin. This one's an orphan, Muggle mother, and what's left of the family wouldn't take him on. He had a hare-lip that was only healed after we got him, and between that and the blood they were put off him."

"Oh, for God's sake...."

"Yes, it's disgusting," Snape said as he unwarded the door and pushed her in. "He's a Merlin's Scholar. One of many, as I said."

Hermione stopped in the middle of the room, thought a moment, and cautiously turned back to Snape as he was warding the door. "Severus, would you... consider doing me a favour?"

"Not until I know what it.... Let me rephrase that," he said, staring at her as he shucked off his teaching robe. "I am not adopting a Hufflepuff. Not the slightest chance."

"I'm wasn't going to suggest adoption, I just.... I wondered whether the Merlin's Scholars got pocket-money, that's all. Though I suppose it doesn't matter, since he's obviously not old enough to go into Hogsmeade."

"Yes, he is. He's a Third, though you couldn't guess by looking. Their uniforms and necessities are charged directly against the scholarship fund, and there's nothing left for luxuries like pocket-money."

"Oh. Then would you --"

"You want me to give money to one student, while ignoring the rest?" Snape shot back, unbuttoning his coat. "Not quite done for the Deputy Head to behave in such a fashion -- at least not this one, no matter what McGonagall may have done."

"Oh, bloody...." She plopped down on one end of the sofa. "Look, it would be a couple of Galleons a Term at most, and I'd pay you back. I mean, a sponsor or patron might well have taken him on in the old days, correct? Before the scholarship was established?"

Snape muttered, "Yes, I suppose."
"Then what's the difference? I'm just going to supplement his scholarship -- and yes, I know it's not fair, but I can't do it for all of them, not on my salary. Who would I talk to about it? The Bursar, I suppose --"

"You are," Snape interrupted her. "The Deputy Head administers the Merlin's Scholar program, the Bursar only keeps the accounts. However," he said, tossing his coat over a chair-back and crossing to the console-table, "I'd prefer you didn't go through the Bursar, as I don't want any additions to the fund itself. We've been hounding the bloody Governors for four years to increase the endowment, and they'll only put it off longer if they think alumni contributions are possible." He poured each of them a whisky, crossed to the sofa, and handed her a glass before seating himself, wincing as he extended his legs. "I will do it -- on the understanding that he knows it's from you, and not me. No pulling a few knuts from my pocket every week, he'll have to come to me quarterly. I don't care to be seen playing favourites, not any longer," he said.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, quite surprised that he'd compromised.

He waved the thanks away irritably, and muttered, "He's a decent child, all told. I simply can't take an especial interest in the charity cases -- there are too damned many of them."

They sat silently for a while, and then Hermione asked, "What on earth was wrong with Vector tonight?"

Snape sipped at his whisky, and then said, "Jilted only last month by the damned Pureblood fool she's been engaged to for ages. He decided not to defy the Ministry."

"Oh, good God."

"Quite. She seemed to handle it well at the time, but the holiday appears to be taking its toll. Not that I know first-hand, of course -- I avoid the biddies' cluckings as much as possible -- but one can't help hearing bits."

"Poor woman.... No wonder she was a mess. And to have us sitting there, together...."

"Possibly, though she'd professed to be happy for us in October -- surprised I'd got you, but happy. You were her prize student from your Form, after all, and she was very proud when we heard you'd completed your apprenticeship. She actually dared to lord it over McGonagall for a few days afterward." He shifted, uncomfortable, and massaged at his knee.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Wrenched it badly that last battle, and it plays up in winter with the damned snow and cold. One reason London is preferable when I can manage it."

"Can't Pomfrey --"

"Has done, as much as possible." He stared at her, assessing, and then set his glass on the side-table. "One thing's proven effective in terms of distraction, though...."
Hermione didn't care for the look in his eyes at all; and her fear was confirmed when he took her glass away and laid it by, and suddenly pounced on her, pulling her to and nearly under himself. (He might object to the characterisation, but he most certainly was capable of pouncing, on occasion.) And, oddly, he attacked her lips first: he never had before, evidently preferring a more leisurely seduction starting somewhere about her neck.

_Urk --_

He was demanding and forceful -- far more than he'd ever been at this juncture -- and Hermione could barely breathe, and struggled with a mix of surprise and outrage that did absolutely nothing to deter him.

_Oh, Hermione, just give over_ , part of her brain whispered. _It's Yule, you're stuck with him, and you're stuck here on his turf with no other option but a long hike into Hogsmeade.... And I think he is trying to behave decently, even if only to --_

_Damn it, that felt.... Oh...._

-- _he is trying to be pleasant in his own fashion, even if it's only to get what he wants...._

She finally told her brain to sod off, and ignored everything but the softness of his lips on her jaw and his rough, callused fingers as they slid under the edge of her blouse and up her ribcage.

*****

They were twisted into a fair impression of a knot, there on the sofa -- though they hadn't got _too_ far along -- when the tapping started on the window.

Snape jerked his head up from her breasts and cursed.

"Who in bloody fucking hell sends a bird on Yule night?" he snarled, shoving his hair out of his eyes; and then he clumsily untangled their limbs, staggered as he rose from the sofa, and limped over to the casement. (Hermione could have sworn she heard him mutter something about "gods-damned, blasted.... _Mother --"_, but she couldn't be entirely certain: she was too busy fumbling for her bra and, failing to find it nearby on the floor, hastily pulled her blouse back on.)

By the time she peered over the back of the sofa, Snape had already opened the casement and was wrenching a little packet from the owl's leg.

"Off to the Owlery," he barked at the poor bird. "Fly east, second tower on the right."

The owl hissed at him, and puffed itself up in what Hermione thought was justified indignation (proper form definitely involved a treat, if not a perch for the night): Snape bared his teeth at it in challenge, and it decided discretion was the better part of valour and flew off through the casement. (Hermione would have flown too: Snape had managed to wrench off his neck-cloth and rip open his waistcoat, and his hair was mussed every which way. He looked every inch the madman.)
"Is everything --?"

"I don't know," he snapped as he closed and locked the casement. "Let me get the bloody thing open." He ripped into it (another parchment-wrapped packet fell out of it), scanned the text of the cover sheet, and grimaced. "For you, apparently. From Delaine."

"What?"

"'Professor Snape: I cannot send this directly to Madam Snape...' What, you couldn't bother to change your office placard, but you told the bloody Frog? '... through the usual channels, so I hope you will forgive any intrusion or inconvenience. It is of utmost importance that your wife receives this.' Bloody hell." He stooped to pick up the packet, and tossed it to Hermione: she broke the seal, spread the parchment open -- and an odd little chunk of plastic and metal fell into her lap.

"What is it?" Snape demanded, looming over the back of the sofa.

"I really don't think I need to deal with it now -- Probably just business, and it's holiday, for goodness' sake --"

"Oh, I think you do need to read it," he retorted. "You're up to something, Hermione, and by the gods...."

She glared at him, challenging him to wrestle it from her: he glared back and didn't budge.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit --

He wasn't going to back down. She could sit there all night glaring at him, and he'd do the same.

François, if I ever get my hands on you, you're going to be a eunuch.

"Well?" Snape prodded.

"Just a moment," she grumbled, giving in. "Let me read it first --"

H:

I could not drop this through the floo -- someone became suspicious after our last call and a trace has been put on my connection and, I suspect, yours. A contact (very trustworthy) found it among the effects on the body and passed it to me. It does not appear on the Coroner's inventory or report and will not be missed.

The media here have been forbidden to report on the incident, and I assume there was arm-twisting on your end to accomplish that.

There was also a note to the man's contact here in town with instructions that he'd 'know what to do.' It contained potentially identifying information, so I have destroyed it.

This does not fit the facilities at the destination point, so it must there.
Bon chance, m'amie.

F.

Oh. Oh, no.... Damn it, why does everyone think I'm crying wolf, when I'm almost always right about the worst-case scenario?

"What the hell is that thing?" Snape said of the plastic as he snatched the letter from her hand and read it.

"It's a key," Hermione said, slowly rolling it in her palm and noting the incised number on the end.

"Doesn't look a proper one."

"You wouldn't recognise it. It's a Muggle key, the kind they have for Left Luggage drops in train stations. And I'm willing to wager," she added, "that this fits Box 305 at either St. Pancras or Ashford, the two stations where Flaherty could have boarded the train for Calais."

Snape went very still for a moment, and then said, "Well, well. It appears that you were correct after all. I do hope you've learnt your lesson."

"Whatever do you mean?" she retorted and glared at him, and clutched the edges of her blouse together over her bare breasts.

"First me, and now this. Be very, very careful what you wish for, my dear, because you may get it - - in spades."

*****

"All right," Snape said, and stared Hermione down, looking his most severe and forbidding as he stood at the mantelpiece. (He'd stormed off into the bed-chamber after his last verbal jab, and returned far more neat and presentable, and twice as surly.) "It's time you owned up."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't, Hermione," he warned. "And don't forget to whom you're speaking. I have every right to know what you're mucking about with, as your husband and as one of the parties concerned in the whole bloody mess."

"You don't need to know, Severus, and it's probably better for you if you don't --"

"You and DeLaine are co-conspirators, that's clear. Don't give me that rot again about DeLaine being bored or afraid of a spill-over in violence -- if this is what I suspect, then it is a treasonable action as far as the ICW and Ministry are concerned. I want to know what you are up to -- now -- because you're swimming in very deep and murky waters, and it's very likely you're in over your head."
Oh, fuck --

"I don't want you dragged into it," Hermione shot back. "You're the first person they'll blame if something goes wrong --"

"No, you are the first -- if you're foolish enough not to Obliviate yourself before you're caught -- I'm second, and DeLaine's third. And if I'm going to be hauled before the Wizengamot, the ICW, or chucked into Azkaban," he said very deliberately, "then I bloody well want to know what for."

He took two long paces over to the sofa, leaned down, and boxed her in with his arms, his hands clamped over the wood filigree along the sofa's back. "Which is it, Hermione?" he said. "If there is indeed some kind of testament or manifesto, is it your intention to suppress it or publicise it?"

Shit. Oh, shit. I really didn't want him meddling in this....

She dropped her eyes to her lap, where the little key was clenched in her hands: Snape forced her face up to his again, fingers gripping her chin.

"I might simply look for myself," he said. "Considering that I'm potentially at risk, I should feel perfectly justified in doing so. But I shan't, yet. I am asking you to acknowledge that I have a right to know what you are getting yourself -- and me -- into. This is bloody dangerous, and the least we can do is to be honest about it. I deserve that much respect from you."

He released her chin and waited.

I really wish he hadn't put it that way....

She almost -- almost -- blurted it all out, and then stopped herself.

He's at risk of being blamed one way, and might get ahead the other -- he might well turn me in. Or forbid me to continue... although how he could do that given the living arrangements, I don't know.

And on the other hand, there was last night. When he said he hated what Dumbledore had done to Harry, restricted his choice, limited his options....

When it came down to it, Hermione decided she couldn't live this way any longer -- constantly mistrusting him, always questioning his motives.... Even if he turned her in, at least then it would all be over --all of it. The bloody marriage, the horrid job, dealing with Corcoran, the agonising decisions....

And, if he didn't betray her, it was just possible that she'd gain an ally.

She took a deep breath. "I wasn't sure at first what I might do," she finally said. "Part of my job is assessing probabilities, trying to extrapolate likely outcomes.... And I knew it might come down to something like this, hypothetically. I thought I'd probably suppress any attempts. But that was when I was still new to the job, and still thought I could make a bloody difference in the decisions that were made.
"Now... now I know how pointless my work is given the environment, and I can't in good conscience sit in that damned office and merely regurgitate the figures. I've known it for a while, I just didn't want to admit it. And given the choice now... and depending upon what, precisely, is in the luggage drop -- if it's what I think -- I'll try to find a way to publicise."

"Did you know what Flaherty was going to do?" Snape asked her, voice rough. "Was he part of the plan to begin with?"

"No, no, I had no idea, and there's no bloody plan. I didn't even know the man existed before I heard about the incident."

"Hermione, you knew there would be a document or gesture of some sort. You were absolutely certain of it yesterday, to the point of panicking."

"No, I just knew it was likely that someone would decide to... to make a statement, someday -- but I certainly didn't expect this to land in my lap. Flaherty's tactic isn't unknown in either world, you see, although the method's usually different. There was the old man who cursed himself at the Quidditch Championship in 1994, seven Buddhist monks who immolated themselves in the 1960s to protest oppressive government policies.... It's a very... vivid way to make your point without harming anyone else. You won't willingly live under the oppressor, and if you're willing to die so horribly for your cause then others might be moved to protest and fight. But if Flaherty's action isn't publicised...."

Snape searched her eyes for another long moment, and then sank down into a crouch before her -- still keeping her pinned on the sofa, but giving her breathing space. She no longer felt quite so intimidated. "So," he said slowly, "you are willing to incite a revolt to stop the Ministry from further excesses?"

"I don't intend to lead the mob, if that's what you mean. But people need to know what happened, Severus. They need to know what's being done to other people, the lengths of desperation to which some of their peers are being driven. What they do with the information is up to them. I'm not fooling myself that one little action will start a revolution -- in fact, I hope it doesn't, at least not a violent one. But it may send a wake-up call to everyone involved, including the Ministry and the ICW. Including people in other countries who may not know how bad the situation is getting, and those here who think they aren't affected -- because they are. They just don't realise it yet."

"Yes, well, the Ministry and the ICW won't see it that way."

"Of course not. It's always Treason when it's your authority and power being questioned and challenged, isn't it? I can't worry about that. What I do worry over, what's absolutely enflaming me, is how everything is being white-washed and how information is being withheld. Flaherty isn't the only one who's done something desperate, and I'm not talking about something relatively harmless like running off to the Continent to get married."

"I haven't heard --"
"Of course you haven't, Severus. The *Prophet's* editor and Lovegood have had their hands tied behind their backs with all sorts of Top-Secret injunctions. You need a bloody Top-Secret clearance to know there are secret injunctions, much less know the contents. I've got a few documents at home.... I'll show you later, if you go back to town with me."

"And who provided you with --"

"No," she said firmly. "No, I can't tell you that. I won't."

He seemed oddly satisfied with that, and moved on to another line of inquiry as he stood, wincing as his knees cracked. "And DeLaine? How does he figure in all this?" he asked as he moved back to the mantelpiece.

"He's something of a subversive," Hermione admitted. "He thinks the whole bloody thing is disgusting. And his mother was English, a Whittingdon, so he has cousins who've been badly affected. Not that he needs that excuse -- I think he's got something of a James Bond complex...."

"A what?"

"Bond is a -- oh, never mind. Let's just say François likes the idea of bolloxing up the ICW's plan and fucking with its overly-paternal mindset. At least I *think* that's what he meant -- he drops into very fast and colloquial French when he's fashed, and I miss a lot."

"But isn't the ICW's goal laudable?" Snape idly asked her. "We are speaking of the genetic betterment of the race as a whole, regardless of the Pureblood objections."

"Don't do that," she shot back at him.

"What? Ask you to consider the rationale behind the measures?"

"Don't do it with your bloody pseudo-Socratic questioning -- I'm not a Potions student any longer, Severus. I'd figured out that tactic by early Sixth Year."

"Had you? *Brava* -- your miserable compatriots never did."

"Yes, there is a valid scientific reason. But what scientists and politicians often forget," Hermione told him, "is that human beings are more than their genetic composition. That there is an emotional and spiritual component as well that they often fail to consider, especially with things like reproduction and bonding. The ends do not justify the means when human --"

She realised what she was saying, and bit her tongue.

"When human feelings are involved?" Snape said sharply. "Yes, it's a hard lesson to learn, and a difficult problem to solve. One we're not,' he added more quietly with a glance at the clock, as it chimed midnight, "going to solve tonight."

"But...."
"Yes?"

"What are you going to do? About me, I mean. I'm know you might forbid me to --"

"Try to forbid," he said dryly. "I'm aware there's not much I can do to stop you, short of handing you over to the Ministry."

"Well?"

"I don't know," he said. "But by now and through hard experience I know better than to make a decision when I'm tired, frustrated, and more than a bit angry. I intend to sleep on it, and then we may discuss it further in the morning."

His tone was final, and the decision -- on not to decide just yet, at least -- was irrevocable, she knew: so she nodded.

He held out a hand to her, and when she took it, he drew her up from the sofa and walked her into the bed-chamber.

*****

She thought Snape had fallen asleep quite a while ago -- without touching her, as it happened, apparently too tired or angry to pick up where he'd left off before the damned owl had shown up -- when he asked, "Who taught you Occlumency?"

Her breath hitched -- Caught me, after all -- and then she laughed. "Bill Tallchief, in a way," she admitted. "He's an American shaman at the Cross-Cultural Institute. He'd been helping me with techniques to centre myself, after.... Well, I was a bloody mess after Seventh Year. Occlumency wasn't the goal, but when we weren't making progress he discovered I was doing it unconsciously, very crudely, of course. Didn't want me to -- it was detrimental to the other matter. But I thought it might be useful, so I worked at it a bit."

"Ah. You're a savant of sorts. People practise for years to attain that level, but then your mind is more orderly than most. Why don't you use it, aside from that evening with me?"

"I do," she admitted quietly, "but only when I absolutely must. When it's very, very important."

"And that evening was an absolute must? Why was it so important? I'm more a liability, given that everyone thinks I'm still in the Isolationists' pockets."

"It was really an entirely separate matter, and I was truthful about my reasoning. Although I admit that I thought the... arrangements, if acceptable, would give me more freedom to pursue whichever course I decided upon, remove some suspicion regarding my motives. How did you guess?"

"The upset last night. It's very difficult to conceal that strong an emotional trauma," he said, "and there is invariably a bleed-through into almost every other area of the life and mind in a subject
who doesn't practise Occlumency. It can be bloody difficult to sort through the chaff sometimes, and I should have seen it when I read you."

"Oh. I've only read up on Legilimency, never tried to practise it. For the record, I only use Occlumency when I know I'm dealing with a potential Legilimens and a dicey situation. It seems dishonest, otherwise."

He was silent for a long time, and then he said, "Your Gryffindor conscience chooses the oddest times and situations to show itself, Hermione, and it may well get you in damned deep trouble. There are advantages to Slytherin ruthlessness."

He offered no further comment: and in a few minutes his breathing had slowed and deepened, and Hermione knew he'd finally fallen asleep.

She didn't.

_God damn you, François.... How foolish. You had no way of knowing if he'd open the whole bloody thing himself, or turn it over to me without sticking his finger in the pie...._

But then, she'd represented the marriage to François as totally congenial and above-board -- she could hardly do otherwise over that bloody floo connection, though Francois' eyebrows had shot up, disbelieving: and as he was aware of the roles Snape had played in the war and his Pureblood status, he'd probably assumed that Snape wouldn't be averse to "helping."

_Happy Yule to you, too, François, and thank you so very much for the lovely present, _she thought sourly before she fell asleep.

*****

_Snape's rooms, 9 am
December 26th, 2007_

Neither of them felt up to breakfast in the Great Hall next morning. (Snape apparently didn't feel up to a morning shag, either -- but for once Hermione wasn't relieved by that: she knew it probably meant he still hadn't decided what to do with her and was refusing to cloud the issue with sex.) At any rate, their absence from the High Table would cause some predictable speculation as to what they might be doing, so it was fine with her, though nerve-wracking.

Snape had already bathed when Hermione wandered out of the bed-chamber, and had called an elf to bring a full breakfast: he was still in shirt-sleeves, although his waistcoat was fully buttoned and his neck-cloth done up.

_More comfortable in his own rooms than my flat. Good. Let's hope it stays that way._

He nudged the teapot closer to her when she sat, and returned to his careful reading of _The Prophet_: he seemed to pay particular attention to the Agony Column, and then, finally, threw the paper
"Nothing," he said, and sneered at the paper as though it were its fault. "Not a bloody hint. Nothing even remotely encoded, either."

"I did tell you," Hermione said.

"Yes, yes...." He sat back in his chair, staring out the window, and ignored the congealing eggs on his plate. Hermione had nearly finished her breakfast when he finally spoke.

"I think," he said, "that the first order of business is to retrieve whatever is in the bloody box -- by any means that does not involve us directly. And preferably by making an educated guess as to which station, so we're not at risk more than once. Where did Flaherty live?"

My God, is he saying what I think?

Hermione stared at him for a moment, and then stammered, "I don't know.... I'll have to look it up in the Census, when we get back. I could go straight in this afternoon --"

"No," he said. "No, that's quite unwise. You don't want to do anything at all out of the ordinary."

"But I often nip in on my days off -- the paperwork piles up, otherwise."

"On a normal day off, yes. But when you're on holiday with your husband?" he said, quirking one brow upward.

"Oh. No, I suppose not."

He shot her a sour look and muttered something under his breath about "Wouldn't have lasted a minute," before adding more clearly, "We'll assess whatever the bloody thing is, providing we acquire it, and then decide how to proceed further."

He reached over, dumped her cold tea in the slop bowl, poured her a fresh cup -- seemingly ignoring her frank, astonished stare -- and returned to his keen observation of the view beyond the window, his fingers steepled before his lips.

Holy.... Well.

It appears I've acquired a partner. The former best bloody spy in Wizarding Britain, no less.

Will wonders never cease.

Hermione finished off her breakfast, too happy for the moment to bother over the fact that her food had gone stone-cold.

*****
Chapter 6: Wherein Snape makes a disturbing discovery, and Hermione proves a more astute agent than he hoped.

A few minutes later
December 26th, 2007

That's it. It's official, I'm afraid. Granger's accomplished what Voldemort, Potter and Dumbledore together couldn't manage. I've gone barking mad.

It wasn't that Snape hadn't thought through the implications of Hermione's mucking about: he had, quite thoroughly, and had even considered the advantage to himself of turning her in. (It was far better to be proactive about it, after all, than to protest later that he hadn't known what she was doing.)

On the other hand, he was almost certain to get part of the blame anyway: he had no illusions about the Ministry's actual opinion of him, no matter the official view. The Ministry would always assume that he was capable of betraying others to the Isolationist movement (for it still existed, as they had to know). At best, they would expect him to do the most personally rewarding thing. And they weren't far wrong, though they probably vastly underestimated the price at which he might be bought.

No matter how well he'd acquitted himself, however much personal risk he'd taken and how much he'd accomplished for the Order, that first decision to join the Isolationist Party would haunt him the rest of his life. (Not that he regretted it. The Dark Lord had been the problem, not the party, and it had worked out well in the end, hadn't it? At least until now, and the Ministry's absolutely criminal harassment: but even that was preferable to the mischief that the Dark -- that Voldemort should have caused eventually.)

What's that old saying? Better to hang for a horse than a sheep? True, I suppose.

But this is a bloody big horse.

The problem of Voldemort had been an internal matter, after all. This involved the ICW. And if he and Hermione were caught, and then prosecuted by the ICW rather than the Ministry....

He shuddered.

He knew what really happened to violators of ICW top-level "standards" -- they called them "standards," but they were in reality laws and prohibitions -- and he was one of the few who did, having searched rather desperately for years for a fellow Potions expert who had disappeared mysteriously. Snape, after going to great lengths, had finally found out what had happened to the man.

He thought he would prefer Azkaban, Dementors and all.
"Well," Hermione said, tossing her napkin back upon the breakfast-table, "I suppose I ought to get my things together...."

"Going somewhere?" he murmured.

"Back to... aren't we?"

"I think not," he said. "I have correspondence to attend to, and I must check on the Common Room.... McGonagall has some ridiculous ideals about House Heads spending time with the little blighters who board over."

"Well, I can Apparate myself back perfectly well --"

"No," he said bluntly. "I don't think it wise to let you out of my sight, for the moment -- you'll hare off directly to the Ministry and muck everything up."

"I will not," she said, indignant. "There's no earthly reason for me to hang about here --"

"You have traveled all this way to spend the holiday with your husband, and any return to town on short notice without me will be viewed with suspicion, as I've already told you," he retorted, pretending far more patience than he felt. "That's reason enough. And even if you don't feel it necessary, I do. If you want my collusion with this madness, you're going to have to take my advice and wishes into account."

"When may I leave, then, sir?" she said with a glower as she rose. "Put it off until tomorrow, and I'll be late. Again."

"As I think you should be," he said. "You and your dear husband don't have much time together, after all."

"And what the bloody hell do you propose I do while you muck about here?" she fumed.

"I really don't care as long as you're not underfoot. Go to the Library. Or if you can find the willpower to be useful, I'd suggest brewing some Pepper-Up Potion for Pomfrey -- she's constantly requesting more than I have time to brew during term, and I'm sure you're competent enough to do that. Provided," he added, "that you don't liberate anything from the stores in the process."

"I wouldn't --"

"Boomslang skin and Gillyweed," he shot back at her. "Not to mention Puffer-fish eyes and an alarming amount of Wolfsbane."

"Not the Gillyweed," she informed him. "That was Dobby. And the Wolfsbane was used on Dumbledore's order, for Lupin, because you weren't available to brew his potion that last February."
Snape felt his eyebrows shoot up before he could prevent it.

"Successful?"

"Yes, with Dumbledore's help. After the second try," she admitted. "Now, do you want me to brew the damned Pepper-Up, or not?"

"By all means," he said, and waved languidly in the direction of the classroom. "It's unwarded now, do your worst -- but do try not to harm the equipment. You do remember how to --"

"Yes, damn it."

"What, by the way," he threw after her as she headed for the door, "were the Puffer-fish eyes for?"

"No idea," she retorted. "But as the Weasley Twins came up with a Bulge-Eye Bromide their last year, I suspect you ought check with them."

She slammed the door on her way out.

Well, that solves those mysteries definitively, Snape thought with satisfaction. Although the Wolfsbane was a surprise. And while she didn't confirm the Boomslang skin, she didn't deny it, either. Not that I needed further confirmation on that.

He'd thought at the time that Granger made a better-looking cat than human, and of course he'd thought the silly girl had got what she deserved. Then again, he'd always had a fondness for black cats.... although he admitted to himself that he preferred Hermione as she was now.

One obnoxious task taken care of, he thought, content. Assuming she doesn't muck it up -- and she won't, no matter how long it's been. Her retention was always quite good. I suppose I ought to get the visit with the brats over with....

*****

Snape did bother to check on Hermione after his excruciating visit to the Slytherin Common Room; much to his surprise he found the classroom and equipment spotless, and freshly-canted bottles of Pepper-Up neatly lined on the worktable -- but no Hermione.

Off sulking, I suppose. Or at least that had better be all she's doing.

He checked on the potion's efficacy -- top-drawer, as he expected -- boxed up the bottles, and took them to the Infirmary.

"Oh, thank you, Severus," Pomfrey muttered, glancing up from some paperwork. "If you'd just put them in front of the stores cupboard.... Whyever did you mess about with that on holiday?"

"I didn't, Hermione did," he said, and set the box down before sitting in the chair facing her desk. "I had to keep her busy this morning, as I was otherwise occupied."
"You let someone else muck about with your equipment?" Pomfrey asked.

"She was perfectly capable of brewing _that_ by Fourth Year," he retorted. "And, apparently, Wolfsbane by Seventh Year. Why didn't you tell me when I returned?"

"We _were_ a bit busy by then," Pomfrey shot back. "And as I recall, you weren't in much condition to discuss anything. It had quite slipped my mind by the time you were."

"Ah."

"I've always wondered," Pomfrey said, setting aside her quill, "why you didn't encourage her to apprentice for Potions or Alchemy."

"One: trespassing upon McGonagall's territory. Two: while she asked to be admitted to the advanced classes, she never expressed interest in actually apprenticing. And by the time I thought she might make an above-average brewer, she'd apparently decided upon Arithmancy. Luckily for us, as it happened."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"It's not a field for everyone, no matter how competent they are in the actual brewing, in any case," Snape added in a mutter. "The possibility for potentially dicey ethical situations... She didn't quite impress me as having sorted through those aspects by that time, nor did she seem in the least intrigued with the more esoteric and philosophic problems in Alchemy."

"You hadn't by that age, either," Pomfrey said gently.

Snape probably should have snapped off anyone else's head for that observation: but of all the staff and faculty, he was admittedly closest to Pomfrey. It was hard, even for him, to remain distant with someone who had -- one way or another -- stitched you back together on more occasions that you cared to remember.

"I am not such a monster," he retorted, "as to wish that kind of life-lesson on anyone. With one or two significant exceptions who are, unfortunately, already dead."

Pomfrey gave him a reproving but largely indulgent look -- she must not be taking him seriously on that last bit, and he was, damn it. "She's not using Arithmancy much now, though, is she? 'Populations Consultant' -- that can't possibly involve a great deal of Advanced Arithmancy."

"None at all, as far as I can tell, beyond the statistical methodology."

"That must be terribly frustrating for her," Pomfrey murmured. "Have you spoken about it?"

"Why should I? It's _her_ career, her choice, none of my business."

"Really, Severus? I suppose you're going to try to convince me that you haven't been married long enough to have got to that discussion, either."
"No, not at all. You've quite accurately assessed the lay of the land by now, I imagine, or should have done after dinner last night. Or have you and McGonagall been gossiping?"

"Haven't needed to. Don't worry, the others don't seem to have noticed. Or they chalk it up to your reticence."

"Good. None of their bloody business, anyway."

"But really, Severus, isn't it bit of a... an extreme measure? And risky?"

"Potentially. We're taking appropriate precautions. And if it helps put your mind at ease, the entire thing was proposed by her, not by me -- I was perfectly content to leave well enough alone until the worst happened. She's a far better option than I would have got in the end, Muggleborn or not."

"That doesn't seem like you at all," Pomfrey said bluntly, and Snape sighed.

"I'm tired, Poppy. For twenty years I saw the worst one human being could do to another.... I should have liked nothing better than to be left bloody well alone and to return the favour. This is a respite from the idiocy, and by the gods I decided to take it. There are other advantages, of course," he added, and Pomfrey tsked indignantly, catching his meaning entirely too well. "What, that's all? No lecture on morality?"

"No. The whole nasty business has nothing at all to do with morality, I'm afraid, or at least proper morality. In an ideal world it should, of course."

"Yes, well, the ICW and Ministry have said bugger that."

"Agreed. How is the knee feeling?" she said, abruptly changing the topic.

"Rotten -- I shall probably spend the rest of holiday in London."

"You ought to try a better climate, you know, at least over Break. The Mediterranean, perhaps. Take her with you -- she looks as though she needs the time away, too."

"I might," Snape said, thoughtfully, "save for the fact that I'm on their blasted flight-risk list. Can't leave Britain."

"No --"

"Yes. Have been since late October -- put there just before we were married, apparently. And one is not taken off the damned list, it seems, until one has produced at least one child."

"Good gods, Severus --"

"Exactly."

"Does she know?"
He shrugged. "I haven't told her. Nothing she could do, at any rate. I have no intention of producing a child simply to get off the list. I do have ethics of a sort about that kind of thing."

"I know," Pomfrey murmured. "You've never seemed the type to take that responsibility lightly. I wish I could say the same for others I know." She glanced at him sharply. "You would, though, if push came to shove?"

"Probably, if either of us were in danger. I'd do my best, but it's fair to say that I'm not optimistic about my ability to be a particularly good parent, to vastly understate the matter. Assuming she'd allow me to try."

"You might surprise yourself. You've been a much better Head of House than anyone anticipated, if you'll excuse the back-handed compliment. Does Hermione feel the same about the possibility?"

"Resigned to it, I think. It was part of the bargain."

Pomfrey winced. "It's a terrible thing, to require that of a woman. I remember quite well what it was like before contraceptive potions were allowed."

"I know it's terrible," Snape said heavily. "I know that better than anyone."

"How is she, then?" Pomfrey asked delicately.

Snape glanced upward at the vaulted ceiling, knowing precisely who she meant. "No change since last year. Rather less correspondence, but that's to be expected, they tell me, given the progression of the illness. They appear to have given up, and are simply trying to keep her comfortable."

"That's the best that can be expected, I suppose."

"I owe her a visit. Twenty years of visits, actually, but I simply couldn't bear to do it then. It raked up too many old memories and emotions, put me at too much risk...."

"I know. It's never easy, but with what you had to do as well.... You did your best at the time, you know, but you were only a child."

Snape refused to comment.

"Have you told Hermione?"

"No. Again, we haven't got that far. I suspect we never will. At any rate, it's not something I particularly care to share with anyone." He glared at her. "I shouldn't have with you, except you had me drugged to the gills that time...."

"No, I knew. Things like that go into a prospective student's medical file, you know that. I simply didn't have the... the human side of it until you told me."

"And I bloody well wish I hadn't."
"Oh, give over, Severus. I've not said a word, never, not even to Dumbledore when you started here. And there were times I should have done."

"I'd prefer not to be an object of pity, thank you very much," he muttered as he heaved himself out of his chair, wincing as his knee protested, and made for the door. "At any rate, he knew. He was an Interrogator at the time, I remember seeing him at the hearing."

"Oh," she said, and picked up her quill. "Oh, and Severus --"

He turned with a long-suffering sigh.

"She -- Hermione, that is -- she's very strong-willed, you know..."

"Yes, I had observed that," he retorted dryly.

"... but she's not altogether... Well, I worry, that's all. Some people are able to deal with trauma and come out of it more or less whole, but I have the impression that she simply shut everything down, afterwards. I haven't seen her at all since that last term, but I imagine that in some ways she's... fragile. And she really is quite young, you know, relatively speaking."

"Yes," he said, "I've had some indication that there's damage. After the fact, of course -- I probably shouldn't have done this if I'd known."

"And --?"

"And I am trying to make allowances, within reason," he admitted grudgingly, aware that his patience was waning fast. "But on the whole she shall simply have to learn to deal with it. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life, if it comes to that, coddling someone who has the intelligence to realise they have a problem, but who refuses to acknowledge it. I got on with it, and so can she."

He glared at Pomfrey, challenging her to argue with him; her lips tightened, but she apparently knew him well enough not to belabour the point, and simply nodded.

He spun on his heels and left the Infirmary.

*****

He found Hermione, finally, in the Library, a few minutes after the luncheon gong had rung. She wasn't alone, though: somehow Marsters had found her (or she'd sought him out), and they were tucked into one of the window-seats in the Reading Room, chatting.

"No, Marsters, you -- Look, watch," he heard her say a bit impatiently; she pulled her wand from her pocket. "You're not doing the Third Operation properly, and this is the result." She muttered an incantation and flicked her wand, and a column of figures danced in the shaft of weak light coming through the window behind them. "Now, look at the second set," she said, and repeated the operation; a set of identical figures flared to life, but with a slightly different set of decimals. "By the time you reach the fifth decimal place over, the figures are off."
"Buh- but that doesn't make any difference," Marsters protested.

"Not now, it doesn't, besides a quarter-mark off," she said. "But it will next year, when you begin on Physical Equations. The Third Operation takes into account all dimensional forces on the Arithmantic action. With Physical Equations it's gravity, mass, and other niggly little bits like excessive heat or cold or appreciable wind speed that might throw the calculation off. With Temporal Equations, which you'll get to Sixth Year, it's passage of time between the action and the desired effect. If you try to actually perform the result with inaccurate figures, who knows what could happen. Has Professor Vector told you about Ali Sedek yet?"

Snape rolled his eyes and leaned against a shelf. She was going off on a tangent to prove a point: he knew the signs from that last, awful year of Order meetings. This idiocy with Marsters might take a while, which was one reason he, as a teacher, never tolerated ridiculous questions about why one had to do something a particular way.

"He's the bl- bloke who first Apparated," Marsters said.

"Right, and what happened?"

"Duh- disapparated in 831 and duh- didn't Apparate back in until 911."

"901, actually, but you've got the point. Apparition and Time Travel are complicated because they involve both Physical and Temporal Equations, but that takes a special Operation you won't learn unless you go into NEWT-level Artithmancy."

"You duh- don't have to do an action for every Apparition, duh- do you?" Marsters asked, horrified.

"Oh, no, not any longer--they made the Equations automatically render when they developed the charm itself, you see. But the pioneers like Ali Sedek had to, of course."

"Cr- crikey."

"Right, exactly. So you see now why it's important?"

"I guess," Marsters said. "Duh- don't think I'll be doing much Arithmancy, though."

"You never know. It's tough to be certain what you'll end up doing, at your age," Hermione said. "And you can't anticipate how your interests may change by the time you have to declare a field."

Snape was now thoroughly bored, and cleared his throat, startling them.

"The luncheon gong's rung, if you hadn't noticed," he said pointedly.

"Oh," Hermione said. "Well, hang on just a moment. Let's try one more, shall we?" she asked Marsters.

"Nuh- no, that's okay --" Marsters said with a cowed look at Snape.
"Yes, please," she said firmly, and flicked her wand at the equations that still hovered in the air, to erase them and to form another, unworked, equation. "I shan't feel right until I know you've got it -- here, don't muck about with the paper, just put your hand over mine and think about the numbers. I'd teach you the charm, but it'll take too long."

Snape felt a brief and unaccustomed pang of pity for the boy, being bullied by Chief Swot Granger.

Marsters did as she demanded and painstakingly manipulated the figures, backtracking once when she corrected him, until he'd worked it all out and removed his hand from hers.

"Good," Hermione said. "Spot on."

"But huh- how do you know it's right?"

"That," she said, "is the standard equation for a three-dimensional polygon, and it can be checked this way...."

Another flick and muttered incantation, and the numbers exploded and re-formed themselves into a neat little polygon, proudly spinning on its axis to show itself off.

"Wow," Marsters said.

"Exactly. All right, you -- off to lunch," she said, and gave the boy a nudge. "And don't forget about that until Term starts -- practise."

"Yes, ma'am," Marsters called back as he scrambled for the door.

"That," Snape said after the boy had left the room, "is cheating."

"Bending the rules," Hermione coolly corrected him as she continued to watch the polygon whirl about in the sun. "It's only cheating if you use it to check during an exam."

"We weren't allowed to mix Arithmancy and Transfigurational charms. I suppose it's part of the new method."

"No, you're still expected to know and use the standard method. But the other way's a hell of a lot more fun, and you have to admit it impressed him much more."

He snorted.

Hermione sighed and Banished the polygon before slipping her wand back into her pocket. "All right, I'm ready."

"Do try to smile a bit, this time," he muttered as they walked out the doors and toward the Great Hall. "People will get the odd notion in their heads that we're not happy together. Pomfrey's sussed it out."

"At the moment," she retorted under her breath, "I don't really give a damn what people think."
He very nearly read her the Riot Act, and probably should have if they hadn't been just outside the Hall doors.

As it happened, she behaved herself through lunch. She didn't even protest when he informed the rest that they'd dine alone in his rooms that evening and make an early night of it, owing to their return to London the next morning.

He thought, however -- mulling it over during said private dinner -- that he'd better remind her who was in charge, so to speak, given that she was becoming truculent and rude with him, and for no apparent reason but the delay in returning to London; and so he made up for the previous lost evening by shagging her thoroughly, until she was limp with exhaustion and he was certain his bad hip and knee were about to pop out of their joints.

*****

He woke gasping, sitting upright, skin covered with a thin sheen of cold sweat: and it took a few seconds to realise that he'd been reliving the bloody battle. Again.

It often happened when he didn't have much to occupy his mind: it was another reason he'd been determined to enjoy Hermione's body as much as possible over the holiday. But apparently the tactic was losing effectiveness. (No-one could dispute that he'd made an immense effort tonight.)

He hoped he hadn't wakened her during the nightmare. Pomfrey had told him -- after several nights of listening to him going through it, in the Infirmary -- that he could get a bit vocal in the middle of one, and he bloody well didn't want Hermione to know of it.

*Love that, wouldn't she? The evil Potions Master, Git Extraordinaire, terrified by a few insubstantial memories....*

He groped carefully for her in the dark, and found her side of the bed empty.

*Oh, fuck -- probably woke her and ran her out into the sitting-room....*

He pulled himself from the bed, crossed to the door, and peered out into the sitting-room.

She wasn't on the settee.

*Blast, Where --?*

He hurried to pull on pants and trousers, slipped on his dressing-gown and grabbed his wand, hurried into the office, and pulled a tattered bit of parchment from the bottom drawer of his desk.

*Stupid.... The silly chit's probably trying to contact DeLaine, and didn't want to use my floo....*

He unrolled the parchment and tapped it with his wand, and grimaced when the bloody charm activated itself.
"Oh, give over, Snivellus!"

"Haven't you had enough, you dense git?"

"You're dripping grease all over, you prat --"

He smacked the bloody thing with his wand again and barked out a painstakingly-acquired counter-charm: the words disappeared, replaced with the Hogwarts ground-plan.

"Show me Hermione Granger," he commanded.

"?"

"Snape, Hermione Snape, you bloody --"

"Oh. Why didn't you say that, thicko?"

He snarled at it -- and then stilled when a little red dot labeled "Hermione Snape" appeared in the Great Hall.

What in bloody --?

He rolled the parchment up, stuffed it back in the drawer, and took off for the Great Hall.

*****

He thought he'd known what to expect, but it hadn't been this.

She must have come in through the main entry, but the doors were closed and he didn't dare try to slip in; so he detoured to the Anteroom and peeked around the door there. The candles were lit in the main room, but not on the dais: he cast a charm at the hinges to silence them and crept through, crouching, despite the pain that caused him, behind the cloth-draped High Table to observe her.

She was in the middle of the room, her back to the dais, in nothing but the thick flannel night-gown she'd had the sense to bring from London (or perhaps she'd thought it would put him off, but of course it hadn't). And she was staring up at the mural-panels at either side of the doors.

She turned back to the very first panel, quite suddenly, and Snape resisted the urge to duck, as she might catch the movement. But she seemed totally oblivious: her eyes were focused on the mural, and Snape had plenty of time to take her in -- sweat-drenched hair sticking to her forehead, her eyes suspiciously bright and her nose distinctly pink (she wasn't a pretty crier, he could already vouch for that), and he could clearly see sweat-stains on the bodice of her gown, even though the room was terribly chilly and she was, in fact, shivering.

Merlin's balls, what has she been doing?

As if to answer, she raised her wand, murmured a charm, and the mural sprang to life, playing out the whole, sorry mess from the attempted theft of the Philosopher's Stone.
Bloody fucking hell, he thought, astonished. That's... unless McGonagall gave her the charm -- and I doubt it -- that's damned fine charm-breaking. She can't have been at it for more than an hour, if that....

Hermione followed the action avidly as it ran along the room, only faltering, impatient, when a panel seemed to concern events with which she was intimate.

It's not pride or arrogance, then, Snape thought, and slid beneath her line of sight before she turned to face him. She's... she's looking for the parts she missed, holed up in that damned room.

When he knew it was safe to watch her again -- when the muted sounds that the bloody artist had included in the blasted mural told Snape she ought to be well past the other end of the dais -- he peered over the edge of the table again, and watched as she stood, transfixed, as the last battle played itself out: and then she sank onto a Hufflepuff bench, buried her face in one hand, and sobbed.

Ah, he thought, and slid back down to the dais floor, leaning against the legs of a chair. Fuck.

For once in his life, he had absolutely no idea what to do. Should he go to her, or leave her alone? She wasn't panicking in the way she had been the other night, but this... he had no idea if it might be doing more harm than good. Perhaps it might actually help her, for all he knew.

And what the bloody hell could he do, in any case? This was her own personal demon; she'd decided to face it alone, and he had no doubt she'd be mortified and probably very angry if she knew he'd been spying on her. (And he had -- he had enough honesty to admit that he'd been more angry than worried, before he'd seen what she was doing.)

She'd quieted, now: he risked another look, and found her standing and scrubbing at her face, and then she faced the beginning of the mural and started the whole bloody process again, with predictable results.

Snape did the most blatantly cowardly thing he could recall doing in a very long time. When her back was once again to him, he fled.

*****

Snape decided in the end that he'd give her another half-hour to work through whatever had possessed her and to come back to bed, or he'd go fetch her on the pretext that he'd only just wakened and missed her. But twenty minutes later the ward at the door of his rooms alerted him that she was back, and he hurriedly shucked off his trousers and pants and jumped back into bed.

A moment later she slipped into the bed-chamber and padded over toward the bath.

"Hermione?" he mumbled.

She jumped, dropped her shoes, and said, "Yes, Severus," as she bent to scoop them up.
"Where --?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I went for a walk. The Quad, not the Grounds."

"Oh. 'S cold, come back to bed before you catch a chill. I can't abide sniffling."

"I will, I just need to...."

She entered the bath and quietly shut the door.

_Damnation. If she still had the energy to put herself through that, after all the exercise I gave her.... I do believe I've found the major disadvantage to bedding a much-younger woman._

_Not to mention one with, apparently, a far more significant problem than I thought._

Snape didn't allow himself to sleep until she was safely back in bed and had, almost instantly, dropped off.

When he checked the Quad later that morning before their hurried Apparition back to London, he found that she had indeed made several circuits of the Quad, her shoe-prints clearly visible in the snow -- though whether that was before or after her experience in the Hall he couldn't tell.

*****

London
December 27th, 2007

"Don't do anything this morning," Snape warned Hermione under his breath as the approached the Ministry. "Wait until after luncheon. In fact, I shall stop by to pick you up, and you should excuse yourself on account of the paperwork. Then -- if everyone else goes to lunch -- try to get at the records."

"I'm perfectly capable --"

"Yes, yes, I know -- and under no circumstances are you to attempt anything else today. Just get the information, and we'll discuss it tonight."

"All right. You needn't follow me in --"

"I bloody well do. We've had a perfectly enjoyable holiday, so much so that I've made you late returning, and I can hardly bear to let loose of you," he snapped.

"Fine," she snapped back, and was quite short with the call-box operator.

He kissed her good-bye in the crowded Atrium -- less chastely than the first time -- and sauntered off to the club.

*****
Snape desperately hoped Hermione would bother to heed his instructions; she'd seemed in such a foul mood that he feared she'd disobey on principle. But when he returned the Ministry a mere three hours later -- noting, with great amusement, that Corcoran dodged into the charwoman's closet rather than pass him in the hall -- Hermione was calmly working away at an enormous stack of parchments.

"Good afternoon, my dear," he murmured for the benefit of any listeners passing the office, crossed to her desk, and brazenly leaned across it to kiss her. "Luncheon today?"

"Afraid not, darling," she managed, plastering a smile across her face. "The work piled up so much while we were away...."

"Damnation -- are you certain? I'd looked forward to taking you someplace new."

"No, really, Severus, I'm terribly sorry. If I don't catch up today, I'll be behind for a week. I'll make it up to you tonight, I promise."

"Very well," Snape said, resisting the temptation to throw in a jibe at that last statement, and added a low "Be careful," as he leaned in for another kiss; a sudden movement caught his eye, and he glanced down to see Ronald Weasley, in the photo, pulling a particularly grotesque face at him.

"Cheeky little wretch," he murmured.

"Don't talk about him like that," Hermione muttered under her breath. " Either of them."

"I was speaking," Snape said, "of the bushy-haired one in the middle who's sticking her tongue out at me."

He stole another kiss, and strode out of the office before she could find something to chuck at him; he didn't need to perform Legilimens to know that was precisely what she wanted to do.

*****

Hermione looked terrible when he saw her exit the lift that evening, in the Ministry Atrium; she hadn't been fibbing about the work, apparently, and had tried to do too much on top of a largely sleepless night.

"No dinner out?" he guessed as he took her arm.

"I think I'd fall asleep in the middle," she admitted. "And I don't feel up to much more than tea and toast, at any rate." (She managed to throw in a wan smile for the benefit of the others in the room, he noted with approval.)

Serves you right for wearing yourself out last night, he thought, but there was no spite in it: much as he thought her actions of last night foolish, he was seriously concerned for her health, at the moment.
He steered her over to a Departure floo and followed her on to the Hanged Hag -- the pub with the public floo nearest her flat -- and they walked the quarter-mile to the flat in silence. (She stumbled twice; Snape nearly gave in to the temptation to Apparate her directly home, but there were too many Muggles about, and she insisted that she needed the air.) Once inside -- and once he'd cast a Silencing Charm over the entire flat -- he got her settled at the kitchen counter and, despite her protests, set about preparing what little dinner there was himself.

"I'm perfectly capable of producing tea and toast," he grumbled as he added water to the kettle. "Tell me what you found, if anything."


"And where are they when they're at home?"

"Here," she said, sounding confused. "London, northwest."

"I'm not a Londoner," he shot back. "If it isn't near the Leaky Cauldron, Kings Cross, the bloody Black house, or a club threshold, I don't know it."

"Oh. I'd assumed...."

"Well, don't," he said, pulling the bread from the cupboard. "Presumably St. Pancras is the most likely, then. At least I know that Ashford's east."

"Yes,"

"St. Pancras is also the most obvious, then."

"Well, we have to start somewhere.... What are you doing?" she asked as he poked what he now thought of as 'my toasting fork' through a piece of bread and wrapped a tea-towel about the fork-handle.

"I believe it's known as 'toasting bread.' Aga and I have come to an understanding about what happens if it ends up burnt."

"Oh, good God...."

She got off the stool and wandered into the kitchen, pulled the odd little metal box away from the wall, snatched the bread from the fork, and popped it and a second slice in the box before depressing a lever on the front; the bread dropped into the slots, and Snape heard the box begin to click in a decidedly annoyed manner. (He peered into the top of the box, and noted that the insides had begun to glow.)

"And don't shove the fork in if it sticks," Hermione muttered as she stomped back to her stool. "You'll do an Arthur Weasley and electrocute yourself."

"You'd appreciate that, I'm sure."
"Not if you did a good job of it and killed yourself. I don't care to explain to the Muggle authorities how an adult male with no identification was stupid enough to stick a metal fork into an electrical appliance."

"There's the tried and true under-the-floorboard method," he retorted viciously as he tossed the fork on the counter. "You might resort to that."

"Too risky, the plumber has to come entirely too often."

"Plumber?"

"For the water lines. They're old, they spout leaks all the time. Can't afford to rip them out, yet."

"I've no comparison, of course, but I have the distinct impression that this flat is absolutely terrible even by Muggle standards. Why do you put up with it?"

"All the mortgage I could afford, and that was with an inheritance from my grandparents. London's expensive," she muttered defensively. "I didn't want to let, I wanted something of my own. The neighbourhood's decent, at least."

Snape decided to give her a moment to cool down -- he didn't fancy pushing her into another fit, not tonight -- and busied himself with pulling out the teapot and warming it when the kettle was hot.

"Don't you have a cat?" he finally said to break the silence, and to steer them toward a less-hostile topic. "I distinctly remember you hauling about a huge ginger-coloured furball when you arrived every Term. I haven't seen it."

"Part Kneazle," she said. "Crookshanks. He died last year, and I buried him in the back garden. What there is of it."

Well, so much for innocent and soothing topics.

He gave up, prepared the tea, and cautiously plucked the toast from its slots when it popped up and set it before her.

"What else," he asked as he poured them tea, "could you find out about Flaherty?"

"Father Irish, mother English, raised here in London," she said, waving away the milk and sugar when he offered it. "Pureblood. Mother's family," she said delicately, "was Nigellus, several generations back."

"Hah," Snape said, and added a generous spoon of sugar to his own tea.

"But Flaherty had no obvious connection to the Isolationist movement -- I was able to check the Index of Trial Transcripts as well as the Census, and there's no mention of him at all. Hufflepuff, 1983, so I suppose you shouldn't remember him as a lower-Former from school."
"No, I don't. And I wasn't hired until 1984, so I'd have missed him as a student."

"He was second vice-president of Mangel and Mortars -- at the headquarters here in town, not the manufacturing facility in Wiltshire -- and had been with the company since he left Hogwarts. There's a family interest in the company, I believe. Very stable history, moved up in the company rapidly, judging by the press announcements. I checked those as well."

"Married when?"

"1989, to Olivia Featherstone. No children in seventeen years. I wasn't able to find any medical information, so I've no idea if they'd tried or not. But to all appearances, they had no reason not to - more than financially stable. Wealthy in fact."

"Yet he bothered to go, himself, to France for a damned bottle of perfume every year?"

"Shacklebolt told me he got the impression they were absolutely devoted to each other, and Mrs Flaherty said they'd spent many holidays in France and loved it." She shrugged. "He must have been one of those people who believes the gesture is as important as the gift itself, I suppose."

"Now that you bring it up, how is Shacklebolt involved in this?" Snape asked, suspicious. "Beyond his official duties, of course?"

"Not at all, that I know. I've seen him occasionally at work, of course -- passing in the Atrium, mostly -- but we hadn't spoken since the Order disbanded, until a few days ago."

"Anything else on Flaherty?" he said, buttering his now-cold toast. (Aga did a much better job of it than the electric box, he thought.)

"Nothing. Absolutely law-abiding, beyond avoiding duty on things like the perfume -- didn't even have a single tick for a moving violation or against his Apparition record. I don't dare contact anyone at Mangel and Mortars to ask about him, it's too far beyond my purview. I suppose Shacklebolt might have learned something from them by now, but I don't have a good excuse to contact him, either -- my position isn't like DeLaine's, I have no direct contact with the Aurors."

"Seventeen years," Snape muttered. "Seventeen bloody years, spotless record, and they put him on a fucking list because he was Pureblood and hadn't bred, for whatever reason."

"Right."

"And Shackebolt is certain Flaherty got the bloody notice? He'd signed for it?"

"Yes, that was one of the first things they checked, assuming it was a horrid accident.... How do you know they send out Certified owls?"

"I've... heard about the procedure, by now," Snape muttered. "Could hardly not. And one of the Slytherin Sevenths turned eighteen last month and got a Certified owl the next bloody day."
"Oh. So, anyway, that's as far as I can go at this point on information."

"Save for retrieving whatever he put in Left Luggage, yes. And determining if it's worth the risk."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"What if it's simply a bloody briefcase of work documents? It was a workday, after all."

"Oh, Severus, come on. DeLaine as much as told me he was up to something, what with having a contact in Calais to do some kind of dirty work for him."

"Yes, I'd forgot that," Snape admitted grudgingly. "But it still doesn't make sense, and it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the government. If he had no connection to the Isolationists...."

"No obvious connection. And that doesn't take human nature into account. Here we have a man who's desperately in love with his wife -- whom he may be forced to set aside in future, if infertility is proven -- and who believes very strongly in making gestures. In making a statement. He's an executive, he's used to making educated guesses about trends, about how things may develop or play out... The only flaw that I can see in his plan is that he did it so soon, before the rest of the population are really aware of how it's affecting their own liberties."

"He mayn't have known they wouldn't hear. You said the papers were restricted from some reportage, but he couldn't know, could he?"

"I've no idea, although the fact that he had a helper in France makes me think he might have -- the French Press is quite reactionary about the restrictions, and he might have thought they'd have more luck spreading the word.... But that reminds me, I meant to show you those documents."

She rose from the stool and walked back up the hall to the sitting room; Snape gulped down the rest of his tea, and then followed.

She'd turned on the odd little box in the corner when he got there, and was drumming her fingers impatiently as the box alternately flashed images and went dark.

"These aren't the originals, of course," she explained as the machine warmed up. "They're scans of copies."

"Scans?"

"An electronic copy. Any Auror could find physical documents here, no matter how well I warded them, but it would take them a long time to figure this out. And I encrypted the bloody things and buried them deep on the hard drive, besides, and I doubt they'd even find them, let along decipher them."

_Aha -- it's an encoding device of some sort. I'll be damned...._
The picture finally stabilised, and Hermione quickly sorted through the files (he assumed they were, there were little pictures of files that she was clicking on with the thingey), and then -- with a suspicious glance over her shoulder at him -- she entered a password and opened another set of files.

"There," she said, and stood. "I'm actually feeling a bit more peckish, now -- I think I'll heat some soup. Tinned, sorry. They're all in that directory. Just click on each document, and -- Oh, hell, look, sit down."

He did.

"You move the mouse until you see the cursor -- the little arrow, there?" she said, leaning over his shoulder, grabbing his hand, and placing it on the thingey. "Move the cursor over the document you want to view, and then click twice, very fast, on the mouse-button. It will open in a format you can read."

"I can't hurt it, somehow, can I?" Snape asked, suddenly feeling inept.

"No, no, I've made them read-only, so you won't delete anything if you hit the wrong button. And it's a mack, so you'd have to blast it as you did the alarm-clock to do any damage. If it were a bloody windows system," she threw over her shoulder as she left the room, "you'd only have to look at it cross-eyed...."

Snape ignored the impulse to demand she explain "read-only" and "mack" and whatever the bloody hell a "windows system" was, and cautiously clicked on the first document to the left.

It worked. He blinked, astonished, as the image (looking very like a standard piece of Muggle paper, save for the old-fashioned script) popped up in the box.

**LEVEL PLUM CLEARANCE ONLY**

*This Proclamation of August 12th, 2006, made on behalf of and for the Wizarding population of Great Britain by the Wizengamot, hereby declares that all matters pertaining to the Genetic Health and Welfare of said population, and any collateral matters whether political or personal, civil or criminal, are hereby restricted from reportage by any media agency or organisation, including but not limited to The Daily Prophet, The Evening Prophet, Witch Weekly, The Quibbler, Wizarding Wireless Network, Obscurus Books, Dust and Mildew, Whizz Hard Books, Cassell & Sons Publishers, Little Red Books, or any other method of communication including but not limited to privately-printed books, owl communiqué, personal correspondence, and any other form of transmission now in common usage or those developed in future.*

*The Government also prohibits the publication of any such information or reportage of collateral matters by the Foreign Press under the regulations of Paragraph G, Section 92a of the International Confederation of Wizards' "Standards of Acceptable International Media Reportage" Directive of August 2nd, 2006, an addendum to the International Statute of Secrecy.*
Any necessary media coverage related to said Genetic Health and Welfare, and any reportage of said collateral matters, shall be instigated by the Wizarding Ministry of Great Britain alone, and shall consist of official press releases, which shall not be edited by the media agency in any way, and which shall receive placement deemed proper by the Press Liaison Office of the Ministry. Editorial comments on said press releases are hereby expressly forbidden, as are the use of any charts, graphs, illustrations, or images which might intentionally or not skew perceptions of the information presented in said Press Releases.

The Editors of said media agencies and organisations are also hereby ordered to withhold from publication any documents submitted to said media agencies or organisations by private citizens, and to immediately submit said documents in the Original to the Press Liaison Office.

Failure to strictly observe the regulations in this Proclamation shall result in a mandatory one (1) year term of imprisonment for the Editors without benefit of trial or any rights previously guaranteed by the Charter of Rights; seizure of personal property to the maximum of 100,000 Galleons; and closure of business premises and seizure of any and all printing or transmission equipment, until such time that the Wizengamot deems Management shall be willing to operate within the terms stated herein.

This Proclamation falls under the restrictions of the Top Secrecy Act of 1944, and may not be disseminated, discussed, or submitted into evidence outside the confines of the Wizengamot Council Room, the Ministry. Any outside participants involved in the Proclamation are hereby enjoined to refrain from mentioning its existence under threat of the penalties previously stated herein.

Affirmed unanimously by the Populations Committee of the Wizengamot of 2005-06, as evidenced by the signatures below.

Amelia Susan Bones
Phineas Aeowyth Grendel
Lucrezia Lucille Mockton-Thorpe
Tiberius Ogden
Erasmus Wartworthy
Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic

Snape stared at the bloody thing for a full ten minutes, processing the implications of each paragraph; he didn't even manage to get to the other documents. By the time he was done, Hermione had heated the soup and was standing in the doorway, a bowl in each hand, watching him as he paced the room.

"This is -- it's --"

"Yes, it is," she murmured.

"How do they think they can bloody well get away with it?" he shouted, and felt his face heat as the blood rushed to the surface. "Even during the worst of the Death Eater attacks they allowed the Press to report. Why all the bloody secrecy now?"
"They want the information released how and when it suits them," she said quietly. "If you take a
careful look at the press releases, they're almost always biased to include reference to a 'small,
refractory group,' who are hampering our progress, as I said in the Faculty Common Room.
They've decided to kill two birds with one stone, in other words. They know the Isolationists still
exist, know they're still a potential political threat as well as a problem in dealing with the Genetics
issue. If they can turn the rest of the population against them now, it will be easier to chuck them
into Azkaban, if need be, to get them out of the way."

"McGonagall hit it on the head, then, and the Isolationists are being made scapegoats -- and the rest
of the Purebloods along with them."

"Yes. Which is not to say that they aren't causing problems with the Genetics situation -- they are,
but on the other hand, much of the problem is caused by the Ministry's approach. And I object to
the fact that they are being manoeuvred into behaving badly so Fudge and the Wizengamot can
finally get rid of them." She crossed to the settee, set the bowls on the table in front of it, and said,
"Severus, sit down, please, there's no use in --"

"There's no way to get the information out through proper channels, even if there's something in the
bloody lock-up, is there?" Snape demanded.

"Not necessarily," Hermione said. "There are the French, of course. And the Americans, they're
likely to buck the ICW regulations, they can afford to -- if their vanity is appealed to. And I think
Lovegood might as --"

"I did say proper channels, not ridiculous ones--"

"-- as he's a bit of a maverick," Hermione continued, ignoring the interruption, "and as long as he
knew there would be enough furor to get him sprung quickly. Come over here and sit down, before
you have a heart attack."

He collapsed on the window-seat instead.

"How could this happen?" he asked her. "I understand withholding vital strategic information, but
information that directly affects people?"

"More importantly, information that sways public perception of Ministry actions," she corrected
him. "Far more damaging than any factual data."

"I've never given much thought to the possibility of something like this on such a massive scale,
ever considered it might happen," he said, bitter. "I suppose you think me incredibly stupid."

"No. Who has considered it, really? It's something we all take for granted. Freedom of the Press
depends on two things -- the willingness of the government to allow it, and the willingness of the
people to demand it. Besides," she added gently, "you've always had other, more urgent things to
deal with before. It's difficult to spend time worrying about abstract concepts like a Free Press
when you're on the front lines, actively fighting."
"I don't suppose it happens out there," he said, jerking his head toward the street.

"Yes, it does, though not usually on such a large scale," she said thoughtfully. "It depends on the market, in one respect. If there are many competing viewpoints, everything's fine. But when you have the majority of the resources owned by a relative few -- a relative few who impose their own political views and agendas onto the reportage -- then you have a problem. There are more egregious examples, too, like this. Governments that don't allow images or film footage of soldiers' bodies being shipped home, things like that."

"Let me guess -- a number is abstract and easily forgot, but a picture is worth a thousand words?" Snape said.

"Yes, exactly. An image is much more visceral and immediate, like a chart that translates the actual statistics into something most people can really understand."

"But to put an absolute blackout on everything.... How do they expect to control word-of-mouth?"

"Surveillance of floo-calls -- they're already doing that," she explained. "I expect they shall start random sampling of owls, if they haven't already."

He swore again.

"The root problem," she continued, "is that there simply aren't enough checks on the Wizengamot's power. Even in an ideal system, you need one or more agencies that can challenge another, and it doesn't exist in our government. The Wizengamot is our judicial system as well as the legislative one, and there simply isn't another entity to balance or curb their decisions."

"Bloody.... You're taking this terribly calmly," he accused.

"No, I'm not. I've just had nearly a year to process it, and you haven't. I got over my immediate rage quite some time ago."

"And you've stuck with all this idiocy for over a year. Three, actually."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"So there might be someone in a position to do something, Severus, or at least someone to leak the information to people who can. Someone who knows what both the Ministry and the ICW are up to. But it's been slow going, and I haven't been able to make contacts as I'd hoped. Everyone's totally cowed by the whole mess. Everyone except Martin Flaherty, it seems," she added in a mutter.

"That alone," he said, stabbing a finger in the direction of the encoding machine, "ought to be enough, if you might only get it out."
"How would that alone help? A document that says simply that the Ministry has the sole right to issue press releases on a particular matter? That's the explanation they'd give, they'd excuse away all the other bits -- they only intended to discourage irresponsible and inaccurate reporting, or some such rot. No, there has to be evidence of an actual cover-up, I'm afraid, or they'll wriggle out of it. Not to mention the fact that if this is the only thing leaked prior to public demand and an investigation, they'll root out my contact. I don't have the right to muck about with his safety -- he's a family to support."

He snorted, and stared out the window at the evening dusk.

"Why did you steal those documents?" he asked.

"Insurance, I suppose. I fully expect to be called on the carpet by the ICW eventually, if all this comes out, and I wanted to be able to mount an effective defence."

"Sensible in one respect," he muttered. "Utterly foolhardy in another, particularly if the Ministry gets to you first."

"I can't cover all the contingencies, damn it," she said, and glared at him; he gave up picking at her motivations and decisions, and let the silence stretch out between them.

"Almost wish you hadn't given up on the Movement?" she asked softly. "If they'd been able to achieve political recognition we probably shouldn't be here, after all. I certainly wouldn't."

"I never did -- I gave up on the Dark Lord." He shifted uneasily, and then admitted, "My views are no longer that extreme, in any case. More due to the fact that I realised it was hopeless than anything else."

He returned to watching the Muggle street; Hermione sighed, and he heard the chink of a spoon against bowl as she gave up waiting on him, and started on her soup.

"I don't know what you think you can accomplish," he finally said, and turned to look at her.

"I don't know, either," she said, and glanced up at him, dark smudges of exhaustion under her eyes. "But I have to try."

That deserved a certain respect, he supposed, no matter how foolish and dangerous he thought the whole mess.

*There she sits -- a perfectly competent Arithmancer doing a job that's beneath her, and not allowed to do even that properly. She's put up with continual failure, overwork, incredible stress on top of a bad case of traumatised nerves, constant blows to her ethics and that ridiculous, overblown idealism....*

She rather reminded him of another young fool he once knew.
"Fine," he said eventually, and crossed to the settee to sit and drink his soup. "We'll try to get hold of the damned... whatever it is, tomorrow. *No further action* until we analyse it. I need to figure out *how* to get at it, of course --"

"Already taken care of," Hermione said, and winced when Snape dropped his soup spoon back into the bowl.

"What the bloody hell have you *done*, Her--"

"*Don't* throw a fit, please --"

"I'm *not*... Did I or did I not say *do nothing* beyond getting information today?"

"I didn't have a *choice* -- I had a chance to ask the one person who might really help and be discr--"

"*What* person?"

"I'm not saying, and you'll see soon enough."

"I knew it," he said through gritted teeth. "I knew you'd go haring off the minute my back was turned."

"Let's get something straight," she said, and plunked her bowl down on the table. "I didn't anticipate having a full partner in this. Certainly not *you*. I appreciate it, I truly do, because in many ways you're the best possible person to deal with many of the obstacles. But when I see the opportunity to move ahead on something, I'm not always going to have a chance to ask first. So I'm asking you to at least *try* to trust me on some of the smaller things. I think you can -- you certainly did Seventh Year, and don't think I didn't notice that you were one of the few who did."

"That's not precisely accurate, 'trust.'"

"You challenged aspects that concerned you, yes -- you made me justify them. And that's a *good* thing. But when push came to shove, you followed through brilliantly. Much better than others I could name," she added bitterly.

He knew precisely to whom she was referring -- Finnegan -- and entirely agreed.

"It's bloody dangerous," he said. "I don't think you really have any idea of the potential for a massive cock-up, particularly when DeLaine said your office floo might be traced."

"It's someone quite trustworthy, Severus," she explained. "And it was a chance face-to-face meeting. Otherwise I'd have waited, truly."

Snape rubbed at his tense, aching forehead with the heel of one hand, and finally gave up.

"Very well," he muttered. "If it all goes south tomorrow, I shall have something to say about it. Not to *you*, of course, we'll be in separate cells."
"I don't think it will come to that," she said patiently, and took the soup-bowl from his other hand. "It's gone cold. I'll reheat it for you, and then I'm going to turn in early. Are you done with the computer?"

"The what? Oh. No, I'd only got through that first one. I'd like to continue, actually."

"Hmmm. I'll probably find you on the floor tomorrow, dead of apoplexy. No, it's fine, just hit the Power button when you've done, it shan't hurt anything." She giggled as she made for the door -- he'd never heard that from her before -- and he glared at her. "No, it's not that," she said, apologising. "'Haring.' You'll see how appropriate that is tomorrow."

"I'm terribly glad one of us can find some levity in the situation," he shot back.

"One of us has to, or we'll go mad. But then I suspected a total lack of humour would be a significant drawback, with you."

*****

Hermione went to bed shortly after she brought back his soup -- she had, indeed, nearly fallen asleep sitting up, though she'd tried to remain awake long enough to answer any questions he had ("keeping him company," she'd called it). He'd finally, irritably, ordered her to bed, and she'd been so tired and grateful that she hadn't even snapped back.

Snape was glad she was out of the way, actually. She wouldn't see how horrified he was with the documentation.

She'd managed to smuggle an impressive amount out of the Ministry -- memos from Corcoran; drafts of reports (some with Corcoran's angry and degrading commentary in the margins, refuting her conclusions or ordering her outright to under- or over-state a point); she'd even laid hands on the official, published reports, which showed on comparison just how drastically the results had been manipulated.

He was incensed with one statement in particular:

"I don't give a damn about their bloody rights. Half the bastards ought be in A. -- they don't deserve rights. T.M. wants them out of the way -- change the bloody statement."

T.M.? The Minister? Must be, he's Corcoran's direct superior.

What was truly astounding was the absolute gall and shamlessness of it. Corcoran (and, by implication, Fudge) didn't seem the least concerned that their commentary and attitudes might ever be revealed -- a level of sheer hubris and stupidity that Snape found mind-numbing

Unless, of course, they've decided they have a way to put blame on someone else. Like Hermione.

That, or they'd decided she was too stupid and helpless to ever do something as unthinkable as revealing them for what they were, which was nearly as bad as the first possibility, in Snape's
estimation. Whatever he'd thought of her as a student, he'd had to face the fact by her Fifth Year that, of all things, she wasn't those: the way she'd dealt with Umbridge had put paid to any notion that she was a gormless female. (He'd rather envied her the opportunity, actually, and totally approved of the way in which she'd managed the evil bitch. Yet another unacknowledged service Hermione Granger had performed for the Order and the Wizarding World, and long before anyone should have expected it of her.)

The whole bloody mess was so unnecessary, that was the real pity. She'd got hold of the ICW's twenty-year plan as well -- DeLaine had given it her, Snape guessed -- and, all in all, the proposals set down in it were actually very sensible, and very nearly humane. It was the human factor involved in the execution of it that bolloxed it up, he supposed -- that happened often enough, even with good intent, but when you had conscienceless bastards like Fudge and Corcoran deciding to further their own agendas on top of it....

He powered-off the machine and sat staring at the blank screen for a very long time before trying to distract himself with some piece of Muggle drivel from her bookshelves, but it wasn't any use. He was tired himself, too overwrought to go to sleep immediately, and, he admitted, too apprehensive about the enormity of it all.

*It's one thing to oppose a single man and a small group of his followers, even when they've proven their capacity for evil. It's another to take on an entire bloody government and the attitudes that allow it to get away with such despicable acts.*

*Why the bloody hell didn't I cash out my pension and buy that quiet little house in Dieppe when I had the chance?*

He briefly considered waking Hermione for sex, but frankly thought that he had insufficient interest to see it through properly. By his age stamina was hard to come by at the best of times anyway, and he'd already indulged more in the past four days than at any time in the past two years. He'd be damned if he resorted to a bloody potion, even if he had one to hand.

She needed her rest, at any rate. It was one thing to insist on his rights when the only thing involved was their idiotic little charade, and something else entirely to put another agent at risk due to unnecessary stress and exhaustion. (Because she was another agent; he had to concede that point, whether he liked it or not, and whether he'd really had much choice in the matter.) And he was absolutely frank in his estimation of what it would do to her. He knew damned well she didn't take any pleasure out of it, not even of the simple physical release involved. Some people could, without a sense of shame or degradation; Hermione Granger wasn't among them, though she'd apparently decided to put up with it. He'd counted on that fact, in truth -- on being able to keep control of her with such a vivid reminder of her foolishness and his rights -- and with great regret decided it wasn't a tactic he could afford any longer.

*Not that I won't still initiate things on occasion, mind you. I'll just be a bit more... selective of the opportunities.*
He bloody well wasn't going to go so far as to sleep on her damned settee, though. It was entirely too short. And he didn't fancy returning to the club to sleep, either -- rather pointless, give the impression they were trying to establish.

He gave up on solving any other problems that night, checked the locks on the doors and windows and warded them all, for good measure, and wandered down the hall toward the bedroom, unbuttoning his frock-coat as he went; he cautiously cracked open the door so he shouldn't wake her (assuming she was asleep, and not sitting up plotting).

Bright moonlight -- it was a full moon, and as always Snape had a brief, unbidden worry over where bloody Lupin was, in what condition, and how many people might be harmed -- filtered in through the curtained window that looked out over the pathetic little back-garden; a shaft of it spilled across the room and over the far side of the bed, where she'd curled up as close to the edge as possible, the light silvering the coverlet and the tangled mass of her hair across the pillow.

She was breathing very slowly and deeply, and even on such little acquaintance he knew she was probably out for the duration.

What kind of mental stamina does it take, he thought as he slowly undressed, to keep pushing on against that kind of bureaucratic idiocy?

He knew what had kept him going, of course -- rage. Rage, and hatred. But while Hermione certainly seemed angry with the whole bloody mess, she didn't seem to hate. Had absolutely rejected that, in fact, when they'd argued over why she cared in the first place, the night she'd gone off the rails and had that hysterical fit.

It was something totally alien to him, this abstract tenacity of hers -- the very tenacity he'd twitted her for at the club a mere four or five days ago. It was, he supposed -- in its own way -- a kind of courage.

He wondered if he should ever understand it, or her.

She stirred when he slipped under the covers, and managed a sleepy, "Hmmmm?"

"I've locked everything up," he muttered. "It's all right, go back to sleep."

"Oh. G'night, then."

By the time he thought to return the sentiment, she was out again; and even a minor nightmare on his part didn't wake her later that night.

*****

Chapter 7: Wherein Hermione nearly gives Snape a heart attack (again), and finds out precisely how much he has at stake.
She woke, groggy, and groped for her wristwatch -- she hadn't had a chance to replace the alarm-clock yet -- and nearly upset the cup of tea Snape had left for her on the bed-table. Dipping one's fingers into scalding water was a fairly efficient wake-up, however.

_Cripes, nearly a half-hour early_, she thought as she peered at the watch. _And he must already be up for a while, if there's tea...._

She managed a few sips before stumbling out of bed, and then decided to see how nasty a shambles he'd made of the kitchen.

He hadn't, though; he was in shirt-sleeves, supervising last night's dirty dishes as they washed themselves up (she'd never learned that charm, she'd refused to take Witches' Housekeeping as an optional course, and felt vaguely envious). He looked sleek and freshly-bathed, hair still damp -- and as if he hadn't slept much.

"Cheater," she mumbled. "Ta for the tea, though."

He snorted. "Aga and I will sort something out for breakfast," he said. "Go have your bath."

"There's.... Look, if you ever again rag me about this, I shall never feed you meat again, ever. There's a packet of sausages in the deep-freeze, and you can defrost them with Cauldero." She shrugged defensively when his eyebrows shot up. "I fall off the wagon occasionally."

He managed not to comment, although his eyebrows went up again.

"'Aga' isn't its' name, you know," she added. "That's just the brand."

"Brand?"

"The label, the manufacturer. Just the way that Tom Tittifer's Tummy Tonic is the same damned thing as Horatia Hornswaggle's Heartburn Helper, only a different colour."

"Nonsense. Tittifer's is vastly superior," he muttered, and rooted about in the deep-freeze for the sausages. "Why bother with a bloody placard, then?"

"Marketing. They did it, not me."

"Money -- I should have guessed," he said derisively. "I must say, Hermione -- now that I've experienced a bit of it first-hand -- that the Muggle World is far less interesting and far more prosaic, in comparison to mine."

"It's certainly a lot less fun to swear at the damned thing when you know it can't talk back."
That earned her another glare; she set down her teacup and trotted away to the bath, before she goaded him into poisoning her breakfast.

*****

Hermione quite deliberately took her time in the bath, much to Snape's disgust -- she barely had time to wolf down a few mouthfuls of fried egg; and his initial disgust was only exceeded when she mashed the remainder between two slices of bread and walked out of the flat with the paper towel-wrapped sandwich in hand, eating as they walked.

"Absolutely ridiculous," he muttered.

"Do you want me to eat it, or not?" she retorted around a mouthful. "'S too good to waste.... You're not bad at it, you know."

He sneered and quickened his pace.

"Slow down, would you? I think I've got a stone in my shoe."

"Oh, for Merlin's --"

"'Ave an extra quid, luv?" a raspy voice interrupted them from a doorway they'd just passed.

Snape spun toward it, hand already reaching for his wand, and fumbled it when his fingers met Muggle clothes cuffs instead of his accustomed frock-coat.

"'Aven't 'ad a meal fer two days, mister," the homeless woman said. "Got ennyfink yeh can gimme?"

"No," Snape spat out, and straightened his cuffs.

"Oh, Se-- teven, give her something," Hermione said, balancing on one foot while she tried to juggle briefcase, bookbag, handbag, and egg sandwich while emptying her shoe.

"I don't have anything but --"

He punctuated that with a glower; he must not have thought to bring any Muggle currency.

"Well, all I've got is a tenner...." She finally got the shoe back on, and then lamely offered the last bit of the sandwich to the woman. "Best I can do, I'm afraid."

"Fanks," the woman said, snatched it away, and began wolfing it down.

Snape grabbed Hermione by the elbow and pulled her along, quite fast.

"Severus, hold up --"

"I do not believe you," he muttered. "You have no idea who that might be, or how dangerous --"
Hermione glanced up at his face, ready to retort -- and then bit it back when she noticed how pale and set his face was. He looked angry, certainly, but Hermione fancied there was more to it.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. "It's just some poor woman --"

"Nothing," he shot back. "Just that you're wasting time with trash."

She wasn't particularly pleased with that, but didn't care to argue with him at the moment; and they were almost at the Hanged Hag, besides.

"Pick me up for lunch again," she instructed, "since you've set such a precedent."

"Fine."

"But be prepared to keep your clothing as is -- we're dining Muggle."

"Oh, bloody --"

"My treat, don't complain."

"You had better," he said more or less pleasantly as they entered the pub (he had less pleasant intent, she was certain), "have a good explanation later today. Why is there no-one here?"

"Not staffed in the morning, since it's not as popular as the Leaky Cauldron. Don't worry, the floo's automated -- watch," she said as she fed the tollbox and took the bit of floo powder it spit out. "You don't need to follow me, really --"

"Do," he said, and rooted in his coat-pocket for the required knut.

Oh, for....

She didn't wait to see if he followed, but stepped into the fireplace and rapped out "The Ministry."

*****

Snape had, unfortunately, found a knut and got the hang of the tollbox before she could make it over to the lift.

"Twelve sharp, then?" he asked, brushing soot from his shoulders.

"Yes, please. And thank you for the escort -- it's quite sweet."

She hoped such a cloying statement would curdle his blood, but he had too good a poker face to tell.

"Not at all," he murmured, and bent to kiss her. "Noon, then."
She watched as he strode off to the call-box lift; then she flashed a brilliant smile at the security

guard, and reluctantly took the other lift up to her level.

It gave her pause to realise just how unwilling she was to work, today. Of the two -- her job and

Snape -- Snape had apparently become the lesser of the two evils.

Oh, cripes.

*****

He got back at her at noon, quite predictably fussing over her for the departmental staff's benefit --

arriving a few minutes early and tracking her down in the Undersecretary's anteroom, where he

slipped behind her, wound an arm about her waist, and kissed her temple while she was trying to
give instructions to a very dense secretary.

"Was that strictly necessary?" she grumbled in his ear (or its general vicinity, given that he refused
to glamour his hair to a more Muggle appearance along with his clothes) as they took the
Northern line toward St. Pancras.

"I'd hoped Corcoran would walk in and see," he muttered back.

"Hah -- early and long lunches, most days. What is it with you and Corcoran? Surely not just the
one incident."

"I told you, justifiable retribution. I took quite enough grief from... certain parties, I was damned if
I'd put up with it from Corcoran as well. Where are we going?" he asked abruptly, and braced his
feet against the floor as the train took a particularly fast curve.

"A nice little place near the station," she said.

"Hermione --"

"Necessary, absolutely necessary. We won't go there ourselves, we're stopping at Euston."

He glowered at her and sulked until she prodded him to his feet, off the carriage, and out into the
Euston hub; and then she led him east from the station to a crowded little bistro a few blocks away
from St. Pancras, and they wedged themselves into a tiny table at the very back.

"Good gods, what on earth is that?" he muttered, and stabbed a finger at something on the menu.

"Oh -- a glorified sandwich, really. I'm afraid you won't get a standard Ho-- school meal, here. But
the espresso and the desserts are excellent."

He didn't seem impressed, but managed not to sneer at the waitress who took their order.

"I'll be back in a moment, I need the loo," Hermione murmured, and rummaged briefly in her
bookbag before giving up and taking it with her to the facilities; once there, ignoring its single,
occupied stall, she carelessly dropped the bag beside the basin, freshened her makeup, and then picked the bag up again and returned to their table.

She quite missed the fact that she'd lost a book in the process -- or at least she appeared to.

"Is there a problem?" Snape growled when she'd seated herself again.

"Hmmm? Oh, just girl stuff."

"'Girl stuff'?"

"Female stuff. Don't make me spell it out, please, dear," she shot back, and he finally got it and reddened.

"Ma'am?" a soft, accented voice said, and Hermione glanced up into the bright blue eyes of a Goth girl with magenta hair and more nose-piercings than the human face should be subjected to. "You dropped this, I think."

She held the book out to Hermione, who took it gratefully.

"Oh, yes, it is mine -- Thanks ever so. It's out of print, and I'd miss it."

"I've read it, it's good."

"What did you think of it? I thought the structure was quite original.... My name's Hermione, by the way. And this is my husband, ah, Steven. You're Australian, aren't you?"

"Lizzie, and yeah, Brisbane," Goth-girl said, and Snape rolled his eyes as she leaned on their table. "I'm over for a holiday from uni -- just got in town. I wasn't as impressed with the structure as much as the imagery, actually. Well, I'll leave you to your lunch. It was nice to meet you, Hermione. You too... Steven."

Snape nearly choked on a sip of water as Lizzie winked at him; then she slouched back over to her table at the window, managing to stumble over the generous cuffs of her loose denim trousers.

"Of all the cheek," he muttered.

"I think she likes you, dear," Hermione said absently as she stuffed the book back into her bag. "Odd, the effect you have on young women -- must be the air of authority. Can't possibly be the nasty scowl."

"Why you seem to attract every freak and oddity of human nature is beyond me..." he snapped, and then trailed off, thunderstruck. "Did what I think just happened, happen?" he whispered

"Hmmm? A very nice young woman retrieved something I'd lost, that's all," Hermione said matter-of-factly as the waitress brought over their meals. "Quite surprising, actually. Most people would have left it there, and a quarter would have cheerfully taken it for themselves."

Snape waited until the waitress had moved away, and then leaned across the table and asked in a very low voice, "Please tell me that wasn't --"

"Never seen her before in my life, dear," Hermione muttered. "Do eat your sandwich -- I have to get back to work soon."

Hermione managed to finish the meal well before Snape had, and then cravenly pled lateness so she could leave the bistro without him. (She paid the cheque: but she'd decided, after twenty straight minutes of glaring from him, that he could bloody well make his own way back to the centre of town.)

*****

"Tonks"? he raged at Hermione the minute she'd closed and locked the door to the flat. (He hadn't bothered to pick her up at the Ministry, and had managed to break into the flat before she'd made it from work, to the grocer's, and then home.) "You picked Tonks the Bumbling Wonder for a sensitive assignment?"

"She's not a bumbler. Who better?" she countered, and pushed past him to take the groceries to the kitchen. "She's got natural camouflage. Put her in a crowded setting, and she can look like anyone. Several anyones, actually, given a loo to duck into."

"Anyone with a tendency to fall over their own feet, yes. Let me guess -- she was the old woman this morning, as well? You handed off the key then?"

"Got it in one. Classic Hare-and-Hounds scenario."

He snorted, but seemed to admit Tonks' usefulness in the disguise department.

"I hadn't known she was back in commission," he admitted.

"Oh, she's been off medical leave for a few years," Hermione told him, "but they've kept her at a desk job. She hates it."

"Are you certain it's wise, bringing an Auror into it?"

"We've always had kind of a... well, a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy toward things. She won't grass."

"Oh, I'm sure she can withstand Veritaserum. A freak of nature in that area too, is she?"

Hermione glared at him, and shoved a store-bought roast chicken into Aga --

Good God, now he's got me doing it.

-- to reheat.

"I suppose you mucked about with the damned thing without me?"
"Of course not. I didn't even touch the bag once I'd got back to the office."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he said. "Close the bloody curtain over the window, would you?"

"Do you want dinner, or not?" she retorted. (But she did as the suspicious bastard asked.)

"It can wait. Where is the bloody thing, Hermione?"

She sighed, pulled the book from the bag, and handed it over.

"How did Tonks --?"

"Try 'Erumpe Sesamum' to open the compartment, and then turn to page 289. It's like a magical trunk."

"Sweet Merlin, you're charming Muggle items now --"

"It's not, it just looks like a Muggle book. And you might have to Engorge anything that's in there, I've no idea how big it is."

Hermione busied herself with putting the dry goods away and pulling out the vegetable steamer, and did her best to ignore Snape working away at the charms on the book. (She had kept him out of the loop all day; better to give the testy bastard some investment in it.)

"Well?" she asked, after he'd performed the Engorgement Charm and she heard the scrape of heavy parchment on the counter.

"A sealed letter...."

She turned to find him staring at the thing.

"Well, go on," she urged, and he glanced up at her, face tense, before breaking the wax seal and unfolding the parchment.

""To the Editors of the International Press of the Wizarding World," he began. "'If you have received this or a certified copy of it provided by my representatives, then I have been forced to take an action which is personally repugnant to me, but which may serve the greater good of the Wizarding population of Great Britain. Others will be able to explain accurately what, precisely, that action is -- or was -- so I will leave it to them to provide the details and any relevant documentation. I have no way of knowing how the next few hours will play out, save that it is my intent to protest the violation of British citizens' rights and to bring to light the corruption of the Ministry, the full extent of which I fear no-one realises.'"

Hermione couldn't help it; she stopped washing the vegetables and drifted across the kitchen to read over Snape's shoulder.
"I became aware of the Ministry's alarming and egregious action on August 14th, 2007," Snape continued, "when, in my capacity as Vice-President of Mangel and Mortars, Ltd. (a private company engaged in the development and mass manufacture of potions and apothecary supplies), a document came into my possession which detailed plans to subject some British Wizarding citizens to compulsory mating...."

...via the use of a potion. It was never intended that I should see this document; I believe that the original exists within the files of the M&M Research and Development Division, though under what security I can only imagine. In short, the document -- which I have not included here, for reasons of safety and discretion, but the location for which I shall include directions -- provides details for the manufacture of a Class 3 Prohibited Potion to be used on those segments of the population who have "not yet bred, whether for reasons of choice, disobedience, or dilatory compliance with future marriage mandates."

Said details include:

1. Results of clinical trials made by the Ministry's Potions Research branch upon prisoners held in the penal facility at Azkaban;
2. Instructions to the researchers at M&M to further refine the potion and the procedures used to manufacture it, to enable production on a massive scale;
3. Indications that the potion is to be administered by St. Mungo's under the pretext of a "genetic therapy" which would cure congenital disease in future progeny.

In addition, M&M is enjoined to secrecy under stringent penalties, and the company promised "significant compensation to offset any additional security measures and other concerns, in addition to standard manufacturing costs and profit." This, I believe, partly consists of the first payment of a government grant received in November 2007, and which was represented to the Board of Directors by Chief Officer Bingelwort as the first phase of a manufacturing contract for the purposes of producing a "new genetic therapy."

Given the information in the documents, I can only draw the conclusion that the Ministry plans to enforce compliance of its legislation by coercing the participation of many of its citizens, by methods which are both morally reprehensible and strictly forbidden by the International Confederation of Wizards.

I have tried to temper my cynical view of the Ministry's recent acts, but the discovery of this document has made it clear to me (and I hope when it is revealed to others) that the current government is so corrupt as to attempt to subvert its citizens' wishes and is choosing to meddle, by illegal and insidious means, in very personal and private matters. Whether this is due to a misguided desire to meet ICW population quotas by any means, or a more personal agenda on the part of its highest ministers, I cannot speculate.

I am admittedly a biased party, one likely to be drastically affected not only by future legislation, but also by the so-called "genetic therapy." On a personal level, I refuse to allow the government to coerce my participation; as a citizen, I abhor the lengths to which our rights and liberties have been, and continue to be, rescinded.
It is my hope that some intrepid member of the foreign or domestic press will publish my act and the supporting documentation I offer in the interest of provoking an ICW investigation into the British Ministry's illegal actions and/or hidden agenda.

Martin V. Flaherty
December 23, 2007

"Good God," Hermione said. "What the hell are they doing? A Class 3 Prohibited Potion -- that's considered a Dark Arts potion, isn't it?"

"Yes," Snape said, and grunted. "Not the usual, either, if they have to put that much work into it."

"Really? You have an idea what it might be?"

"No, not without seeing a bloody receipt, since the fool was so obscure," he muttered.

"And they tested it on prisoners?"

"Who else?" he said shortly. "Standard procedure, if there's no pre-existing condition required. One they can't induce, at least." He shuffled the pages of the letter free of the cover: two loose little squares fell out and to the floor, and Hermione scooped them up.

"That's to the wife..." she said after checking the address on the first, and set it aside on the counter before breaking the seal on the second. "... Oh, bloody --"

"What?"

"The directions, I suppose -- as a poem. Partly plagiarised, no less."

"Well?"

"I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows;
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine:
There sleeps the secret hidden in the ground,
Where march the deathly sentinals all round;
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to trap a Wizard in:
And with the juice of this they'll streak your eyes,
And make you full of hateful fantasies."

"Oh, that's helpful," Snape said dryly. "What the bloody hell is it from?"

"It's Shakespeare, I think -- or two-thirds, at least. I don't remember which play...."
"Wonderful. Couldn't be bothered to say 'Two hundred yards east from the monolith at Avebury, and X marks the spot,' I suppose."

"Well, he could hardly.... He'd want to make sure someone who understood the significance sussed it out, wouldn't he?"

"Getting the damned thing found and published would rank higher, I should think. That could be nearly anywhere -- his garden or a favourite trysting-place, for the gods' sakes. It's a bloody scavenger hunt."

"Difficult, I grant you, but not impossible. It'll just take a bit of nosing-around."

"That's precisely what we can't afford," he snapped back, shoved the parchments away, and stood and paced about the kitchen. "This changes everything."

"What do you mean? Severus, this is immensely important -- more than ever, now that we know they might be --"

"Do you realise how deeply the Ministry is implicated in all this?" he demanded. "How much they have to lose if the ICW isn't aware of their actions? And if the ICW is, then Flaherty's as good as signed our death-warrants."

"The ICW won't tolerate something this egregious, and it wouldn't come to that, in any case," she argued.

"Really? Are you really certain of that, Hermione? Because -- and I say this not to call your competence into question, but because it's true -- I think you vastly overestimate the level of commitment to law and justice in the Ministry and the ICW."

"No. No, there are very clear ICW restrictions on the kinds of acts governments can take to fulfill the quotas, and this clearly oversteps them," she retorted, voice hard.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Hermione," he snarled, and turned on her, grabbing her by the arms and shaking her until her teeth rattled, "grow up. How, after living through the war and seeing what they've managed to date, you can still be so bloody naïve --"

She whimpered -- as much from surprise as his fingers biting into her flesh -- and he stopped dead, suddenly aware of what he was doing; the blood drained from his face, he wrenched his hands away, and turned and made for the back door.

He cursed viciously as he fumbled with the security lock, threw the door open, and escaped into the garden.

*****

She decided quite sensibly -- after sorting through the shock of the incident -- not to follow him out.
Finally found his breaking-point, my girl. Proud of yourself?

No, she wasn't.

She'd known he was capable of hurting her physically, when he was enraged; she could hardly not, after Queerditch. She'd managed to ignore the memory of it, though, as it was so twisted in with her shame over her own idiocy, and as he'd been relatively calm and dispassionate the last week.

At least until the last day or two.

She'd seen the signs of his increasing emotional instability all day -- well, as much as she'd been about him: the jumpiness on the walk to the Hanged Hag, and the automatic reach for his wand; his unease with the trip on the Underground, and the way his eyes had darted about the bistro, assessing every patron as a potential threat. Even -- though she'd tried to ignore it -- the nightmare he'd had very early that morning and that had woken her as well, though she'd pretended sleep, and the exhaustion on his face later that even three heavily-sugared cups of tea hadn't erased.

It was certainly convenient to label it all as paranoia, but Hermione doubted that that was all there was to it.

*Paranoia kept him alive and in one piece far longer than anyone might have expected, at any rate. The least I can do is give him credit for having a highly-refined sense of self-preservation and the cunning to put it to good use.*

She reached for the curtain, and twitched it aside to see if he'd stayed or if he'd Apparated out: he was there, furiously pacing the little rectangle of barren ground, and he kept at it until a particularly hard blow of his fist connected with his bad leg and sent him, limping and cursing, over to the lawn-chair she'd left out for the rare sunny summer day and forgot to bring in.

*Best give him time to sort it out for himself. I need to calm down myself, anyway.*

She finished up with the vegetables and chucked them in the steamer and set the table; and when it was all nearly done, she walked out into the fast-darkening garden.

"Severus, come inside."

He didn't respond: she crossed to him and lay a hand on his shoulder, and he flinched, refusing to look at her.

"Come inside," she insisted in her best no-nonsense voice. "Dinner's ready."

He remained silent, but rose and followed her in, hanging back to lock and ward the door; and then -- still unnervingly wordless -- helped her carry the food to the table, sat, and hesitated when she offered him the carving-knife and fork.

"You didn't have time to roast that," he said of the chicken.
"Already done at the shop. I only popped it in the cooker to reheat."

He seemed about to comment -- probably on her weak-willed lapse in buying something resembling actual meat -- and then stopped himself, carved the chicken, and served her first.

Hermione managed to restrain herself until he'd nearly finished. (Or rather, until she couldn't stand the silence any longer.)

"I know you're very frustrated with me," she said carefully, "but I wish you'd tell me what's causing it. Besides my stubbornness, of course."

"It's nothing," Snape muttered. "And it doesn't excuse.... I'm sorry."

She did her damndest not to gawp at him.

_Bloody hell, I didn't know 'sorry' was in his vocabulary._

"Thank you," she finally managed. "On the whole, though, it... made it quite clear that it's not just me. You're terribly concerned about something, and I wish I knew what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"I've never heard of you actually touching someone when you're angry. You always use _words._ Except for Queerditch, and I suspect that was frustration about the r- rapes as much as anger with me. There's something else bothering you, something you're not telling me.... And perhaps if you do, I'll understand."

Snape stared at his plate for another long minute, and then ventured, "Do you know what happens to people who violate ICW restrictions?"

"They're remanded to the country of origin for incarceration."

"Usually, but not always. Particularly _not_ when the Statute of Secrecy is involved, or any matter the Confederation chooses to interpret as a treasonous act."

He took a sip of water -- he'd avoided his glass of wine throughout dinner -- and continued.

"A few years before you entered Hogwarts, I had reason to contact an old friend.... Terence Kingsley. Or rather, we'd apprenticed together and actually got on, so I suppose I'd call him a friend. At any rate, I couldn't find him, he'd seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth. As it was a rather important matter and I had little else to bother with at the time, I tried to track him down. I knew he'd moved to Switzerland and taken a research position with Bundiswald Potions.

"But when I enquired with them, they said he was no longer there. No comment, no forwarding address, no explanation that he'd resigned or been sacked. Nothing, even when I pressed them. And I thought that very odd, because he was quite good, and a decent sort.
"So I asked about with some of the laboratory help -- the ones with a paltry salary, who might be bought off. They said he'd simply disappeared. Hadn't shown for work one morning, and the Swiss Aurors had been in to ransack his laboratory. They thought, though, that there was an outside investigator involved as well -- some loud quibbling over who was in charge, apparently -- and that it might be an ICW official."

He hesitated, gave her a wry smirk, and shrugged.

"I'd decided to let it drop, but almost a year later an ICW man contacted me to brew a very illicit potion. Rather than accept a cash payment, I demanded information on Kingsley. And he wanted that potion badly enough -- I shan't tell you what it was, you'd be shocked -- that he told me everything.

"It turns out Kingsley had violated the Statute of Secrecy, in a big way. He'd treated a Muggle child with a Class 2 potion, and even charmed some of the girl's personal effects so she could manage things better for herself. Thought himself in love with the mother, apparently -- how he'd met them I don't know -- and told them everything."

"Good God --"

"Right. That's always been the major concern with Mixedbloods, you see -- how the devil did their parents meet, and how much was blabbed? How loyal is the Muggle partner, and what the bloody hell happens if the relationship doesn't last? Almost as worrying as how Muggleborns' parents will react, and enough to give the most liberal Wizards hysterical fits. Any road, Kingsley had violated scads of statutes and restrictions -- including use of an experimental potion on a Muggle subject, because the blasted thing hadn't been approved yet. The charges were so grave that the ICW elected to prosecute him instead of turning him over to the British or Swiss ministries.... If you can call it a prosecution. I doubt anything like an actual trial was involved.

"I was told he received the standard punishment for severe or recidivist cases. Stripped of his wand, first. Then his magic was bound and wrenched away from him --"

"How? I didn't know they could --"

"Can, and do. It's a very nasty ritual, so Dark that.... They're very selective about who's allowed to know of it, let alone perform it."

"Why not just imprisonment, though? It's bad enough with the Dementors."

"The ICW can't use them -- not all countries and principalities allow the use of Dementors on the grounds of cruelty and given the difficulty in controlling them, so the ICW must deal with international criminals in other ways. At any rate, the ritual is often fatal. But in the cases where it's not...." His voice trailed off, and he stared past Hermione's shoulder, at a point across the room.

"They exiled him?" Hermione guessed. "Sent him off to live with --"
"No, they didn't. That would have been some consolation, don't you see? He'd known what he was risking, and it was worth it to him. They were worth it to him, the woman and the child. No, they Obliviated him -- of everything. Of any memory that he was or had been a Wizard, of the fact that magic exists, that it's a real way of life. And then they shipped him off to Canada so he shouldn't somehow make his way back to her, presumably, or be recognised by former acquaintances. Simply dumped him in the middle of nowhere, with no preparation and no resources. I assume they Obliviated her and the child as well."

Hermione could only sit and stare at him, horrified, for several long moments. "Did you ever find him?" she finally asked.

"Yes, eventually. Summer holiday after you and Potter started. They hadn't bothered to do Fidelius, so with a bit of travel and a little mucking about with a restricted tracking charm.... It wasn't any use. He was wandering about Toronto, a derelict. Utterly mad, actually. Didn't remember me, or anything about his past. He knew, though. He knew there was something missing, some great chunk of his life that had been ripped away from him."

"Could you help him?"

"How? Give him money, assuming I had Muggle currency? He'd have simply drunk it away, he was that far gone. And if I'd tried to get him to hospital, a proper one for cases like his, like... I'd have been reported. No," he admitted, and grimaced, "I gave him a phial of Eternal Sleep."

"Oh, my G-- Severus, that's.... My God --"

"Why not?" he retorted. "He was irreparably damaged, Hermione, for either world. Even if the Obliviate could have been mended, he'd never have got his magic back. It's an irreversible procedure. Regaining his memory would have made things worse, knowing of what he'd been capable and never should be again. I didn't force it on him, I simply handed it over and told him he would go to sleep and never wake up. And he looked at me, quite clear-eyed -- he knew precisely what I meant -- and opened the damned phial straightaway and drank it. His choice."

"Oh, fuck...."

Hermione buried her face in her hands.

No wonder he's.... Why haven't I heard of this fucking ritual? Why haven't we all?

"So, my dear," Snape continued softly, "that is the gravest risk -- an effective death warrant, as far as I'm concerned. One of those papers stated quite clearly that the restrictions on the Press are part of the Statute of Secrecy, and I'm not willing to wager that the ICW will be understanding of any violation. Certainly not if the Ministry has their approval."

"You're certain? He's not an isolated, extreme case?" Hermione managed carefully.

"He's not the only one. My worst estimate is eighteen percent of those prosecuted directly by the ICW. It's all right for the Muggleborns, I should think," he added. "They've a foot in both worlds,
you see -- they don't feel absolute aliens, even if they *might* have a sense of loss. They have a good chance to cope, to adjust. But for the Purebloods who've little or no experience with the Muggle World... Most of them end up on the streets, I imagine. I'll admit I haven't done an actual study -- too risky, and not enough time when it mattered. And in one sense, I bloody well don't want to think of it.

"That's why you were so upset when Tonks --"

"Probably. It's incredibly unnerving, walking down a Muggle street and not knowing if that pitiful scrap of humanity dosing in an alleyway in simply an unfortunate Muggle, or is someone you once knew."

*Or someone you might someday be* hung, unspoken, in the air between them.

"But the ICW was intended to *protect* Wizards, not...."

"Yes -- *all* of them. At the expense of individuals, if need be -- hadn't you worked that out? That's what this whole bloody business is about, after all."

He suddenly tossed his napkin on the table, shoved his chair back, and rose.

"That's plenty of food for thought, then," he muttered. "In the meanwhile, I want to look at the bloody directions. Not to actually *do* anything, mind you, but just to.... To get the lie of the land."

He retrieved the parchment from the counter and fled to the sitting-room.

Hermione sat alone at the table for a very long time, thoughts churning, and then cleared away their largely-untouched meal with shaking hands.

*****

She left him alone for a good hour, and when she finally had the guts to check on him, she found him with her shamefully pristine *Complete Shakespeare* in his lap.

"Did you find it?" she asked.

"Yes. *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*"

"And?"

"And the man knew absolutely nothing about fairies, obviously."

"*Besides* that."

"Ah." He glanced down speculatively at the page. "Decent writer, for a Muggle."

"*Severus* --"
"There really isn't anything helpful, except to separate the bits that Flaherty put in. Unless.... Did Shakespeare have a particular wood in mind?"

"I've no idea. Doesn't it say? Look at the beginning of that scene, at the stage directions."

Snape checked, and grunted. "'A wood near Athens' -- lovely. He had a year to actually hide the things and could still travel early on, but that implies a foresight on his part that I'm not certain is reasonable."

"Shakespeare grew up in Stratford-upon-Avon, near, uh.... Blast it, can't remember."

"Stratford? Probably Arden, then," Snape said absently. "But I rather think that's taking it too literally, and it's still not specific enough in any case. Except for the 'deathly sentinals,' and gods know what they might be."

"Oh. I thought you might be serious about Avebury. Or the Henge."

"Of course not -- they were worship sites, not grave-markers. At least not initially."

"What about the flowers themselves, then?" she asked, perched on the sofa next to him, and scanned the poem again. "Is there anything remotely clue-like in them? He worked at a Potions manufactory, after all."

"No," Snape said, brow knitted. "All common flowers, as you say -- though true oxlips's technically not common any longer, nearly extinct. They have useful individual properties, but not in combination. Except in...."

"Yes?"

"Nothing," he finally said, shaking his head. "Though there's something about that idea.... It's no use, really, as you don't have any herbals here. I shall have to look them up at the club, tomorrow."

"Will you be able to find anything about the potion itself?"

"Doubtful. If they've mucked about with it in the past year and then newly-classified it, it mightn't resemble anything I'd recognise. And there shan't be mention of it in the trade journals -- or of its supposed use, rather."

"Oh. Well.... Come to bed, then."

"No, I.... I think I want to read the remainder of this, see if there's anything at all that might fit. I'm running out of time. Term starts in a week -- I have preparations for that -- and there's a personal errand I have to run before then that shall take an entire day, as well," he said, and irritably turned another page of the Shakespeare. "I shan't be able to stay in London past Sunday."

"I see," Hermione said, and gave up. "Don't frustrate yourself too much -- you look done in. Goodnight."
"Goodnight," he mumbled as she left the room.

*****

Holy shit.... No wonder he's a wreck, Hermione thought as she lay in bed. And just yesterday I thought it was only his natural viciousness and disgust with the Muggle World.

Well, it is in a way. Only it's not so much disgust as... terror. He's terrified of being exiled.

I can't say I blame him. He's right, it's one thing for people like me to have to deal with that, and another for people like him. No less awful, but at least I'd be able to live.

While she supposed one couldn't really miss what one had no memory of in the first place, Snape -- any Pureblood who'd never ventured into the Muggle World, actually -- would be utterly at sea, with no way to function, no knowledge of how things were done, no identity, and no skills other than a basic education and the ability to do manual labour. Assuming, of course, that one was sane enough after that horrid ritual to get a job to begin with (much less with no Muggle identification), and in good enough shape to keep it. And she doubted Snape was, with that knee playing up on him with every change in the weather.

I wonder what really happened with that. Even if Pomfrey couldn't fix it properly, you'd think he'd have gone to St. Mungo's.... And then the fool punched that leg, deliberately, when it had already been paining him. I'll bet he bruised it pretty badly....

Well, he bruised you.

He hadn't meant to, though. That was clear from the look of shock on his face, when he'd realised what he was doing. And striking himself was more.... Well, it was certainly frustration with the whole situation, but it had seemed too deliberate. Almost as though he was trying to punish himself in the same manner as he'd hurt her, for hurting her.

That's a slippery slope, my girl, she warned herself. Making excuses for someone who harms you can't be good. It certainly isn't smart.

Yes, but he did apologise, afterwards, and I suppose quite handsomely, for him. He's a proud man, and that couldn't have been easy.

No buts. He lost it, and he took it out on you. Not done.

But even her Mum and Dad had. Not deliberately, of course, but out of instant, clutching parental panic: at turning round in a shop and finding her six year-old self gone, only located after fifteen frantic minutes -- she'd wandered out into the back alley and was playing with a stray cat; at her one major attempt at teenaged rebellion when, on holiday, she'd deliberately sneaked out past curfew and stayed up until three, drinking wine with a French boy, and returned to the hotel to find them awake, ready to call the gendarmerie and the British Embassy; that last Yule hol when she'd had to confess why she'd returned home in what amounted to a magical body cast, and to explain why she would need to visit St. Mungo's every few days until she returned to Hogwarts.
She'd never seen her father so angry -- first at Malfoy, and then at her, because the whole bloody mess and all her lies about the real state of things had come out. Daniel Granger -- mild-mannered, pawky-humoured, gentle Dad, who'd never been able to see his little girl hurt in any way without practically crying himself -- had morphed into someone totally alien and unrecognisable to her: red-faced, spitting with rage, and he had finally laid hands on her when she'd flatly refused to withdraw from Hogwarts.

He regretted it too, she thought, and cried when he realised what he'd done, and begged Mum and me to forgive him.... But it was never the same. It might have been more so, of course, if I'd listened to them and hadn't hurt them so....

Part of the difficulty with the estrangement had been the way she'd handled it, that refusal to stay home and give up Hogwarts. They couldn't possibly understand, after all, she'd argued. They weren't a part of her world anymore, or rather, she wasn't of theirs, and never would be again. There were benefits for her they couldn't possibly imagine, and for them to try to keep her away from her life was cruel and idiotic -- "Typical, really," she remembered saying to them quite clearly, "a prime example of what most Wizards think of closed-minded Muggles...."

No, I didn't handle it at all well, she thought grimly. I was very cruel, in retrospect, even though I was frantic to get back to Harry and Ron....

That's not quite the whole truth, though. I wanted to go back anyway. Badly enough to hurt them.

Snape, however, was not her dad (thank God for that, on several points); he hadn't the excuse of temporary parental madness, so to speak. No, he was simply a quick and impatient bastard with little tolerance for challenges or arguments. And if you added his personal fear of the potential repercussions of being caught, on top of that....

She found herself giving that a great deal more consideration than she ought. Severus Snape, whom she never remembered acting as though he feared anything, reduced to admitting to her that he was frightened. (Not in so many words, of course, but then he didn't have to be explicit. Not after Terence Kingsley's story.)

Snape realised what was at stake, for her as well as himself -- far better than she had. Even if he was primarily concerned for his own welfare, she'd better concede that he had a clear understanding of the dangers -- clear enough to be justifiably panicked, to the point of losing it so completely that he'd hurt her.

I think it's time to put your money where your mouth is, my girl. He's either a full partner in this, as I claimed the other night -- deserving to have his concerns taken seriously and not dismissed -- or he's not. He's taking a terrible risk, far more than me in some respects.

Perhaps if I really try give him the consideration and respect I think I deserve, he'll be a bit more... well, calmer.
And as far as the incident tonight... Well, we'll see. It might have been just a horrid slip, given the stakes. And if not, I can always try divorce on grounds of physical cruelty. I owe him the benefit of the doubt, for now....

*****

It was well past midnight when she woke, bladder urging her to use the loo; so she did, and carefully slipped back into bed. Snape had joined her at some point: he was still asleep, lying on his side, one forearm (the left, where she assumed the Dark Mark still lay dormant) splayed out on the pillow, fingers loosely curled in toward the palm.

*I can't begin to imagine what terrible things those hands have done, besides handing over Eternal Sleep,* she thought, pensive. *I don't dare ask, of course. He'd probably tell me -- not all, not the worst -- and even that would be more than I think I want to know. I don't want to know how much damage, and the many ways....*

But his hands had done much good, as well -- she had first-hand proof, besides speculation about several events (the hexing of Harry's broom First Year, for example).

She'd seen him gently cradle a Hufflepuff's blistered arm after a nasty potions spill, even as he verbally lashed the idiot for carelessness; he'd made countless potions and medicines for use in the Infirmary as well, something she knew wasn't usually done. (Faculty, doing the work of an Apothecary? Ridiculous. Yet she knew he did it as a matter of course: detentions for Upper-Form students usually involved helping him prepare the potions.) And when the accident --

*Hexing, Hermione, it was a bloody hexing,* she corrected herself angrily. *The fact that Malfoy didn't intend to cause as much damage as he did has nothing to do with it.*

... well, at any rate, she'd been left at the bottom of the staircase half-blind with fear and pain, with only a panicking Neville for company (and Filch, who stood nearby ineffectually muttering, "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear...") until Snape had suddenly hovered at her side, viciously barked out orders to them both, and ordered Hermione herself to stay calm and *not move, Miss Granger.* And when she'd really begun to panic -- when she'd realised she couldn't feel her legs -- he'd spoken to her quite reasonably, chivvying her into focussing on something other than the fear (very much as he had the night he'd... that night in Queerditch); smoothed her hair out of her eyes and wiped the blood from her face; and kept her calm until Pomfrey had arrived. He hadn't been *kind,* precisely, but he'd kept her from further, possibly irreparable, harm.

*I don't remember ever thanking him for that,* she thought guiltily. *And I should have done. Things would have been much worse, if Neville had tried to move me or if I'd thrashed about.*

There hadn't been much opportunity to thank him at first: the next time she'd seen him had been a few days later at the hearing in the Infirmary, when the Auror had asked for her version of the incident; Snape had stayed silent in his chair, listening, and then answering the few questions about his own actions briefly and without volunteering additional information. He'd left the room at the hearing's conclusion without a word to her.
I wonder if he tried to make excuses for Malfoy, she thought. Everyone expected that he would. 'Student scrum got out of hand' and 'nothing worse than poor judgement on Malfoy's part,' that's what Ron and Harry had expected him to say.

On the other hand, they'd expected him to clean their clocks for what they did to Malfoy -- and he didn't, beyond a scathing comment about taking matters into their own hands.

No, he might well have left her with Neville and taken off after the boys to protect Malfoy, but he'd stayed with her instead. Doing his duty to a student regardless of House, she supposed, but it put him in a precarious position in the long run: choosing to stay with a Gryffindor rather than getting one of his precious Slytherins out of physical danger and then weasling them out of the consequences.

There were limits, it appeared, to how far Snape had been willing to go to protect his status with the Death Eaters. (She wondered briefly if what had happened to him the following February had anything to do with that lapse in ruthless self-interest, or whether it would have happened anyway; she'd never got the whole story on that, only the rough outline.)

In other words, he was capable of choosing to do the good and right thing, despite compelling personal reasons to behave otherwise. Even if he didn't always exercise it.

What a pity it would be -- for others, as well as him -- if that choice were taken away from him. If those hands were effectively stilled.

She reached over and slipped her fingers into Snape's palm, feeling the heat that seemed to radiate off of him everywhere except in the chill of the dungeons. It was a mistake, as it happened: he snorted a bit, and then his eyes shot open, instantly alert, and his fingers clenched tightly about hers.

"Still upset?" he rasped.

"Yes."

"Good." He closed his eyes and relaxed, but didn't bother to pull his hand free from hers; and when she made the further error of running her thumb along the backs of his fingers, he opened his eyes again and peered at her, suspicious and sleepy-eyed. After a long moment of searching her eyes he apparently decided to take it as an invitation, and pulled her to him for a lazy snog that turned into a wordless, intense, and surprisingly comforting fuck, which Hermione rationalised with the thought just this once.

Next morning, on waking, she didn't feel in the least ashamed for taking comfort from it, and couldn't be bothered to despite considerable grumpiness with herself for encouraging him.

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Chapter 8: Wherein Snape begins to put the whole mess together, and makes a visit he'd really rather not.

December 29, 2007

Snape woke feeling strangely relaxed, given the upset he'd had the night before. In fact, he felt practically benevolent toward the world in general (with the exception of the Ministry as a whole, Fudge and Corcoran in particular, and the ICW most of all).

Good gods. If this is what nearly a week of fucking Hermione Granger does to me, it's a bloody good thing it's almost Term-time.

Fucking Hermione -- or rather, well-fucked Hermione -- was already gone, apparently: she'd returned his favour of the previous day and left a cup of tea on the bed-table, but it had gone quite cold.

She behaved quite oddly last night. I certainly expected her to ward the place against me, after I....

He deeply regretted that, although it had seemed to wake her up about the more important matters. But he also regretted that she'd seen so clearly that he was worried, though at least she hadn't guessed the worst reason of all. (He certainly didn't want her to pry: she'd likely run screaming for the nearest Solicitor for a divorce, and he wasn't ready for that. This experience was, in some respects, quite enjoyable, despite the woman's obvious efforts to drive him mad with her stubbornness and lack of caution.)

She might go gushy and maternal if she found out, on the other hand. Incredible though it was to think Hermione capable of that, she was a woman, damn it, and it was entirely possible. He didn't think he could stand that.

The last thing I want is a pity fuck. Although last night felt oddly like one.... Well, I rather pitied her, too, in the moment. If it's mutual, does it still qualify as pity? Not that I'm going to turn down the opportunity regardless, mind you, particularly if she doesn't make me have to work at it so bloody hard. I'm not stupid.

He had a bath, muttered in disgust when he realised he'd used a scented soap she'd left in the tub (he did not care to smell like that effeminate ponce Gilderoy Lockhart, thank you very much), dressed, and Apparated to the nearest club threshold.

*****

The Club
Four hours later

Blast it. Why couldn't the bloody man be sensible and leave clear directions?
Snape shoved Artemis Wartwiggle's *Wizard's Compleat Book of English Herbs and Flowers, Bothe Magical and All Else* (First Edition, 1759) across the table and stared at his notes. He'd given up on Culpeper long ago.

Absolutely nothing. Nothing that makes sense, at any rate.

He flipped back to his first page of notes, and ran through the possibilities again.

*I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,*

*Common Thyme or Mother of Thyme, found in commons and barrens. Dominion of Venus, element Water. Appropriated to the head. Use in cleansing magical rites. Effective in treatment of cramps. Like all thymes, rich in thymol, and a good anti-sepsis and strengthening rub. Found everywhere.*

*Where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows;*

*Primrose, Dominion of Venus, element Earth.... Purportedly cures madness -- utter bollocks, but does has good sedative properties. Violet... another herb of Venus -- damn, I'm seeing a trend. Element Water. Arouses lust when combined with lavender, but that isn't the case here.... Not good for much else, beyond fragrance and over-rated sweets. True primrose -- oxlip, that is -- is relatively rare....*

*Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,*

*Honeysuckle... Jupiter, this time, and element Earth. Culpeper refutes medicinal soothing qualities, which is quite correct as infusion is astringent. Fragrance foremost.*

*With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine:*

*Musk rose and briar rose, respectively. Venus and Water. (Damn.) Use in love-philters highly over-rated, if you ask me. Rosebud tea may induce prophetic dreams -- hadn't known that, no wonder Trelawney was addicted. Gods knew she could use the help. The first for fragrance, the second for the rosehip. Rosewater effective in relieving headache pain when applied via a compress. Also used in soothing and vitamin tonics.*

*There sleeps the secret hidden in the ground,*

*Where march the deathly sentinals all round;*

... absolutely no bloody idea, damn the man's eyes.

*And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,*

*Weed wide enough to trap a Wizard in:*

*That's... that's ringing a bell. Nadder-skin, perhaps? But there are no useful therapeutic properties, as with the tongue -- the skin is purely an hallucinogen. Recreational use only, if you like.*
And with the juice of this they'll streak your eyes,  
And make you full of hateful fantasies.

Well, that fits in with Nadder-skin, certainly. And I don't like the direction that takes me, with all the blasted references to Venus.... Is he saying it's along the lines of an aphrodiasiac? Something to drive the population mad with lust?

It was so terribly frustrating. The ingredients taken together simply didn't make sense: you'd have a bloody mess with no useful application. A sickeningly fragrant mess, to be sure, but still a mess, barring the interesting experience one might have with the Nadder-skin. It was pointless to try to pinpoint a location, either -- gods knew most of these things were commonly found throughout the island.

No, I'm going at this from the wrong end. There's got to be something else, something not stated in the poem itself....

"Stymied, are you, Snape?" Bluett wheezed from his chair across the library.

"Yes, damn it all."

"Oooooh. Bad, then, for you to admit that," the old man said with more than a touch of unexpected sarcasm.

"How kind of you to point it out. Not at all helpful, however," Snape muttered.

"You didn't ask for help, you wretched little beggar. And you never wanted it, anyway."

"Not when it came at the expense of criticism of my personal habits, no. You never could separate the work from everything else."

"Because you can't, not really," Bluett said reprovingly. "'S why I could never get you beyond the basics of Alchemy. You never acknowledged that the one affects the other. There's very little in life that isn't that way."

Snape spared a moment from his notes to glare at his former mentor.

"I've never had the luxury of time to muck about with it anyway, unlike some. Do brush your beard off, old man -- you've biscuit crumbs all over. As usual."

Bluett meekly fiddled with his beard, flapping the crumbs loose. "What's the problem, then?"

"Nothing, really, except I'm not looking at it from the right perspective. It's not properly a potion, at any rate."

He turned back to his notes, and repressed a sigh when the ancient Brewer and Alchemist rose and shuffled over.
"Let me see it, boy -- No, no, don't show me your blasted notes, show me the problem," Bluett insisted, and Snape handed over the parchment. "What do you mean, not properly a potion?"

"It's directions, actually. To... well, I shan't tell you the purpose, just that it's presumably to a specific location. But it's far too general."

"Hmmmmph." Bluett scanned the poem, and then dropped it back on the table. "No, I can't think of anyplace that evokes." He turned and shuffled back to his chair.

"Thanks ever so. I'd already determined that."

"Not that it wouldn't be an effective distillation, mind you," Bluett added as he cautiously dropped back into his chair. "Except for the snake reference, I don't quite see how that fits."

Snape swiveled in his chair to stare the old man down.

"What do you mean, effective distillation?"

Bluett glanced over, astonished. "Have you remembered anything at all that I taught you?"

"Yes, blast it, but --"

"If it looks like a Hippogriff and smells like a Hippogriff, then it is one."

"Don't go obscure and philosophical on me, old man --"

"It's a scent, you idiot. Barring the snake reference it's a scent, and quite probably cloying given all that heavy stuff."

"Prepos-- Well, it could be, I'd thought it might at first, but that's not the point. It's not even a proper receipt, it's just a bit of doggerel from a Muggle writer. The damned m-- It was appropriated from the original, with a few tweaks."

"Doesn't mean it isn't effective," Bluett said coolly, and poured a cup of tea with a tremor-prone hand. "You needed a different perspective, and you've got one. You just need to find the connection between the scent and whatever the location is. And I reckon 'deathly sentinals' and the snake have something to do with that."

"Fuck," Snape said, and ignored Bluett's reproving clucks. "That's it, then. It's too bloody obscure -- what kind of snake? They're all over, blast it. And whatever the deathly sentinals are, gods damn it all--"

"Time for a tea-break," Bluett sang under his breath. "Cool down a bit...."

"I haven't time, blast it, it's... it's a terribly important matter," Snape muttered, managed to sulk for a few moments, and then shoved his chair away from the table, rose and strode across the room, and threw himself into the chair furthest away from Bluett as he could manage.
Bluett calmly poured Snape a cup as well, started to send it over, belatedly remember that this man, as a apprentice, had had a considerable sweet tooth: he Summoned the cup back over, heavily sugared it, and sent it to hover at Snape's elbow.

"Take a breather," he counseled. "Read something else for a while, at least until you finish your tea. Let the other part of your mind work on it."

Snape snatched the cup out of the air, pulled one of the trade journals off the side-table next to the chair, and flipped through it, highly disgruntled, as he sipped at the tea.

*Hold on, that looks interesting.... They've propogated a non-biting aspidistra, at last? I wonder if that affects the potency of Swelling Solutions....*

He was quite involved for the next half-hour with the reading until he'd finished the article, and felt much more calm by the time he had; and then he continued paging through, idly reading the adverts that littered the back of the journal -- until one caught his eye.

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**Figwort & Sons Apothecary**  
**Purveyors of Top-Quality Potions, Perfumes, and Other Toiletries**  
**Located at 592 Diagon Alley**  
**Specially Licensed for Exclusive Rights to provide products from these Excellent Manufacturers:**  
- Abercrombie & Filch  
- Bloom & Dell's  
- Fortnight & Mason's  
- Grease Brothers  
- Chris P. Creams  
- Mangel & Mortars  
- Old Nervy  
- Starbucks Stimulants

*Perfumes. Mangel and Mortars....*

A long shot, but it was worth it. He could hardly do worse than he already had.

Snape set aside his tea and the journal; shot across the room to collect his notes; and delayed leaving only long enough to backtrack to Bluett's chair, where he gently took the cup and saucer from the sleeping man's knee before it spilled down the front of his robe.

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**Figwort & Sons Apothecary, Diagon Alley**  
3:45 pm

"Yeth, thir?" lisped the annoyingly pert shopgirl. "What may I do for you? A headache powder, perchhaps? A strengthening tonic?"
"No, no -- something a bit more intimate, actually --"

"Ah, I know *prethithely* what you require, thir," she said confidentially. "We carry a new product called Withard'th Willie Wonder Worker. *Much* thuperior to Little Withard Intha-Gro. You thertainly aren't the only gentleman to require a little extra, ah, help, at your age."

"*Not* that," Snape hissed at her (once he'd worked through both the lisp and her implication). "I wish to see the perfumes. I'm.... A present. Wife. Anniversary."

*Ye gods, what insolent help they hire nowadays.... As if I couldn't brew something far better. Assuming I needed it. And I don't, damn it.*

"Of courth, thir," she chirped, absolutely unconcerned with either his rage or embarassment. "Thith way, pleathe."

She led him over to one corner of the shop, where a dizzying array of brightly-coloured bottles and atomisers vied -- literally, with much pushing and shoving -- for pre-eminence on the shelves.

"Now, what doth the lady like? Floralth? Thomething a bit lighter or heavier than thith?" She grabbed a tester, squirted a bit on her wrist, and shoved said wrist under Snape's nose.

"I'm... not sure," he said, shying away as the overpowering musk of her selection assaulted his nose. "She wears something lighter, I think, not too.... Look, perhaps if you let me sample them myself...."

She gave him a rather odd look, but said, "Thertainly, thir," and put down the bottle and wandered back to her counter.

*Good gods.*

He didn't sample much, as it happened, but shooed the little buggers aside so he could reach the boxed samples further back on the shelf, and rapidly scanned the ingredients lists.

*Disgusting, the claims they put on the damned stuff, he thought. 'Keep Him Entranced Forever!' 'You'll have to beat them off like bees about a flower!' 'Obsessive -- Especially for that Brooding Slytherin Man in Your Life'.*  

*Do females actually fall for this tripe?*

It wasn't any use, really. Many of the products had *some* of the ingredients from the blasted Shakespeare, of course, but not all.

*Well, so much for that flash of brilliance. Totally off.*

A disconsolate squeak from the lowest shelf attracted Snape's attention, and he shoved a small, noisy gang of bottles aside and saw a dull green flask huddled behind them, its lip and stopper
chipped from the rough-and-tumble. He lifted it, cradled it in his palm with the stopper held firmly in place, and checked the label on the bottom.

**Arden Wood**
by
Mangel & Mortars

There wasn't a box left on the shelf, though, blast it, so he had to pull the stopper and take a whiff.

*Uch. Definitely musk-rose and honeysuckle. I fancy there's a bit of thyme there, too, though -- a sharpness beneath the sweet....*

*Is it really that simple, that's the place? Or is there something more insidious about the damned stuff? It certainly appears popular, with none left on the shelf....*

That was it. It *had* to be a clue. It was the only Mangel and Mortars product on the shelf, as well.

The only thing for it was to buy the flask and... experiment with it to rule out its potential as *the* potion. (Preferably on Hermione, not the obnoxious shopgirl.)

He strode over to the counter and set the flask down.

"That will do nicely, thank you," he said. "If you'd be so good as to wrap it up quite tightly --"

"Oh, I can't thell you *that* one, thir," the girl shot back, shocked. "It' th a tethter. You mutht have a boxthed one." She looked as though he'd proposed buying illegal ingredients.

"There *aren't* any boxed ones, blast it."

"Then I'm terribly thorry, thir, we mutht be out of thtock, but --"

"Look, this is the *only* one that will do -- I don't care about the bloody box. Just wrap the damned thing up."

"I can't do that, it' th *quite* againht thtore polithy," she argued. "I thould have to athk the manager."

"Then ask," Snape growled at her; she glared at him indignantly, and flounced off toward the back room bawling "Mithter Figwort, are you *free?*"

*Bloody.... What a palaver over a damned bottle of scent. And what I shame I don't recall the Twist-Tongue hex, that would fix her insolence quite nicely....*

The idiot girl returned shortly with the manager. (Snape was *not* impressed -- the man was quite obviously of Lockhart's persuasion and had similar fashion sense, complete with a lavender carnation in his button-hole.)

"Yes, sir? There is a *problem*, sir?" the man asked, with such emphasis that it was clear he thought the problem was *Snape.*
"Do you or do you not sell the products on your shelves?" Snape demanded.

"Of course, sir, but -- Oh. That old thing. No wonder -- they don't make that any longer, it wasn't popular."

"I don't care if it sold well, man, I simply want to --"

"It was a novelty to begin with, of course -- the whole Literary angle. I'm quite shocked you hadn't tossed it already, Amaryllis, quite careless with restocking."

The girl glared at Snape as if it were his fault she'd been reprimanded.

"I don't care about.... What Literary angle?" Snape asked.

"Oh, Famous Literary Places. Salazar's Swamp -- that had a base of bog-water, I believe, and was very peaty. Gryffindor's Glade, things like that. Some marketing genius threw in a Muggle writer no-one recognised, and the blasted stuff would not move at all. I'm afraid they've ceased production. Of all their perfume lines, in fact."

"Then it won't matter in the least," Snape said through gritted teeth, "if you let this one go as well, will it?"

The man eyed Snape speculatively, and then sighed. "Wrap it for the gentleman, Amaryllis. And give him a fifteen per cent discount for the usage."

Amaryllis sullenly wrapped the flask, and then wasted another minute laboriously working out the discount on her pad.

"You'll get another twenty per cent off if you open an account today, thir," she grudgingly told him.

"No, bl-- Thank you. That will do nicely," Snape said, and slammed the requisite knuts down on the counter.

The urge to hex the bloody girl was so strong that he didn't even wait for his change, but grabbed the package and left for Flourish and Blotts.

*****

Hermione's Flat
6:21 pm

"Happy Anniversary," Snape informed Hermione when he plunked the chipped flask on the kitchen counter, and glared at it when it squeaked and hopped up-and-down in excitement.

"What?" she said, shocked -- and then glared at him. "It's not."

"Two months," he shot back, and then amended, "And a day or two late."
(He could have sworn the bloody flask burbled something that sounded like "Uh-oh," but when he glared at it again it was absolutely stationary and silent.)

"You don't seriously expect me to think you went to the trouble of --"

"Of course not. That," he said, "is called Arden Wood, and it is -- or was -- made by Mangel and Mortars."

"Oh. Research, I should have.... Oh."

"Quite. It appears to be the last bottle available in Diagon Alley. They don't manufacture scents any longer."

"So you think Flaherty really meant Arden, then. And you bought it why, precisely?"

"To test it. Just in case there's an aphrodisiac quality to the damned stuff in and of itself, not just a location clue."

Hermione pulled the stopper free, took a sniff, and jerked her face away.

"Oh, God -- it's awful."

"Never mind that, put it on."

"No thank you," she said, stoppering the bottle and shoving it away from her, and then sneezed. "I can't wear scent that heavy, it irritates my nose."

Snape grabbed the bottle, pulled the stopper free, wetted his forefinger, and advanced on her.

"Severus -- don't, don't you dare --" she said frantically, backing into the basin-counter.

He did dare, managing a swipe at her that left a streak of the noisome stuff in her cleavage and an oily smear across her blouse-lapel.

"Snape!"

"Purely in the interest of scientific experimentation," he retorted. "If it's any consolation, I don't care for it either. In fact," he said with a sniff and dubious glance at the flask, "it seems to have an immediate effect quite the opposite to that you'd expect."

The flask squeaked in outrage and struggled in his hand, and he bluntly told it, "Shut up and be still," as he re-stoppered it and placed it on the counter.

"What do you expect to prove by this?" she asked with a glare, and sneezed.

"If I'm unable to keep my hands off you for the rest of the evening, we'll know," he said coolly.

Wait. How many days has it been since... ?
He froze in horror, and then rooted about a bit frantically in his frock-coat pockets. "Perhaps you'd better.... It's almost time, anyway, it's close to a week," he muttered, and pulled out a phial of contraceptive and thrust it at her.

She did *not* appreciate the sentiment, but managed to swallow the potion down before the next sneeze.

Snape washed his hands thoroughly to rid them of the perfume's stench, and then debouched to the sitting-room to go over his notes and make a log of the experiment.


6:35: No effect noted from distance of twenty feet (approx.). H. has sneezed thrice more.

6:45: No effect. (Might be distance from H. Perhaps shall experience some arousal at dinner-table due to proximity?) H. has sneezed twice more. Much banging of pots in kitchen, and muffled cursing. Smell of frying sausages foremost, blessedly, covering up the wretched substance. At least for me.

6:55: H. comes into room to retrieve face-tissue (four more sneezes since last entry). Complains of dripping nose. I note that no effect on me other than slight flaring of nostrils due to her noxious smell. H. claims will serve me right if she drips into my soup. Returns to kitchen in ill-temper -- totally unwarranted reaction, as I was simply stating a fact. (Contradictory Hypothesis: substance would, in fact, make a far better contraceptive than aphrodisiac by virtue of effect upon H.'s mood.)

7:05: H. sneezes twice. Adulteration of soup no longer a concern, as H. dropped the saucepan in mid-sneeze Number Two. Have hopes that the sausages will *not* follow -- I rather like her bangers and mash.

7:15: Three sneezes. H. calls me to dinner-table between Numbers Two and Three. Attempts to dissuade me from log-keeping; says sneeze-count is off-putting. (Shocking lack of concern for experimental documentation procedures -- thought I'd taught her better.)

7:25: Four sneezes.

7:35: H. unable to eat properly due to paroxysm of sneezes. (At least eight more, I lost count.) I am unable to eat properly because, at closer proximity, H. stinks. (Absolutely no interest in sex with H. by virtue of effect upon me.)

7:38: Must physically restrain H. from taking perfume-flask outside to dust-bin. Bloody thing ran away and hid from her, so consequently my only remaining sample is lost for the duration.

7:40: H. declares experiment concluded whether I like it or not. (I concur, as it happens. I'm feeling quite ill from the stench. It's far worse on her skin than in the flask.) H. abandons dinner-table for bath, I open windows to air out room and return to my dinner. (Not entirely unpleasant prospect despite lingering smell and ill-tempered cursing and sneezes from bath: more sausages for me.)
Hypothesis that perfume is aphrodisiac -- resoundingly disproved by the following evidence:

- Psychological interest on my part in initiating sex, Nil.
- Physiologically-demonstrable effects of arousal on my person, Nil. (To a frightening extent, in fact -- wonder if Little Wizard Insta-Gro shall be necessary in future.)
- Similar observable effects in H., Nil. (When asked H. regarding this, response was 'Are you bloody mad?' Shall interpret as a negative response.)
- Desire to throttle H. for petulance and hysteric: Immense.

"I hobe," Hermione said, voice dripping sarcasm and sullenness from the sitting-room door, "thad you're quide sadisfied." She blew her nose to punctuate the statement.

"It had to be done," Snape retorted, not bothering to look up from the papers and books strewn across the table. "We can't assume he didn't mean an existing product, not when he was so bloody general about it."

"Ride. Nod possible to just go oud to bloody Arden and look, doe."

"Hermione.... Do you want to see the other research, or not?"

"Yes. Fide. Well, dow you know. And I'be a big, whobbing batch ob hibes on by chest, damnbit." (Sniff.)

Snape mentally translated that, sighed, pulled himself off the settee to reach for his discarded coat, rummaged in the pockets, and pulled out a little kit.

"Whad are you --" (sniff) "-- doink?"

"Hush and blow your nose," he snapped as he sat down, "and come here."

He Engorged the kit and fumbled out a little jar, opening it as she (already nightgown-clad) perched uneasily next to him; she flinched when he reached over to unbutton the neck of her gown.

"Damnbit, whad are you --"

"Burn-Healing Paste. Best I can do at the moment, unless you happen to have a jar of billywig stings lying about.... No? Then this will have to do. It will help the inflammation," he muttered, and slathered the paste in the general vicinity of her cleavage.

"Thad's nod the hibe, you randy --"

"I beg your pardon, that was entirely unintentional. Here?"

"Yes," she said, still sulking.
"Stop acting like a child, or I shall send you off to bed," he said in his most whithering voice as he capped the jar and wiped his greasy fingers on his handkerchief.

"Alone? Prombise?"

He glared at her, and she stared back, defiant, as she buttoned up her gown. "It nod only itches, it hurts, and I don't hab an anti-histamine in the cabinet."

"Unfortunate, but I couldn't have known you'd have an allergic reaction. Perhaps if you tried to concentrate on the matter at hand --?"

"Whad is this?" she said, giving up on the whinging.

"A map of Arden Wood," Snape said. "Or, more properly, magical Arden."

"You bean it's like the Forbidden Forest?"

"No, not quite.... Wait," he said, and picked up Eustace Pugworthy's Guide to Magical Places in the British Isles, "listen to this. 'The Ancient Forest of Arden may no longer be properly called such, having suffered greatly from Muggle encroachment. What was once unbroken hundreds of forested acres is now reduced to isolated groves, often of relatively new growth. Recent studies by Herbert Snorthog have proven that its magical denizens -- fairies, brownies, the Greater Snaggle-toothed Woodland Gnome -- have lost their habitats almost completely, and are rarely reported in even the magical oases that exist in some otherwise ordinary groves.'"

"Oases?" Hermione interrupted. "But how does that work, then?"

"I don't know, yet -- you're the bloody Arithmancer. Possibly a portal similar to the club threshold. 'There have, however, been some notable and welcome survivors in the more isolated areas: an oak grove to the east with particularly fine growth of magical mistletoe; one of the last remaining heavily-planted areas of true native magical oxlip; and several areas with curious, man-made or -adapted features, such as a ring of yew trees said to have been planted by Morgaine in which to celebrate Dark rituals.'"

"Yew," Hermione breathed, and snatched up the copy of the poem. "Do you think --"

"The modern identification of yew with death is quite strong, yes. Earlier cultures would have said immortality."

"And... Round. Not around, but round as in ring," she noted.

"Precisely. Although the attribution to Morgaine is absolute rot, of course. Which isn't to say it wasn't intended for something, but who knows what. I'm particularly pleased that Pugworthy noted oxlip -- corroborative evidence."

"But what about the snake-skin? Is there anything in the book that hints at that?"
"No, nothing at all. And Irwin's *Bestiary* wasn't helpful, either, beyond noting that some snakes seem to gravitate to sacred groves. Nadders tend to prefer sites where magic was performed for their breeding sites, for example."

"So that's it, then. The documents are somewhere in Arden, or in magical Arden, rather."

"Yes, but as you can see," he said, pulling the map into his lap so she could see it more clearly, "there are at least ten oases, and none of them are marked with the specific features. For each one we must find the portal, enter, and then try to locate the sites."

"Oh, bloody --" (sneeze) "-- hell."

"Right. I expect it shall take all day, unless we can find a guide --"

"-- and you'd rather not, for obvious reasons."

"Yes."

"If you can wait until week-end I can come along. It would be easier if we could get a local to help, though."

"Out of the question."

"Unless... well, it should be a stretch for you, I suppose."

"What?"

"Playing at Tourist. Or at a love-sick couple looking for a nice picnic spot where they shan't be disturbed. Or a combination of the two."

"A picnic in late December? Don't be stupid."

"I don't mean a *picnic*. I mean.... Well, Saturday *will* be December 31st. New Year's Eve. I suppose some people would think New Year's Eve alone together in a magical wood might be... romantic."

He snorted.

"Do you have a better idea? Don't tell me you intend to collect mistletoe -- not a great excuse, once you've found it. No need to keep looking."

"Don't be ridiculous.... All right, then," he said, and sighed. "I'd prefer a more reasonable excuse, but until I can think of one I suppose tourists looking for a nice, private sky-clad shag to celebrate the New Year is as good a cover as anything."

She glared at him. "*Don't* assume that I'm willing to --"

"If we're observed, we'll *have* to, you know, until any voyeurs are bored. Or sated. It's a far more compelling reason to want privacy, at any rate."
"There's verisimilitude, and then there's taking advantage, damn it."

"I am willing to admit that it's a far more innocuous pretext than collecting mistletoe," Snape said irritably, "and you shall have to put up with any consequences. It was your idea, after all. I don't fancy having an audience, myself."

"Fine. I'm going to --" (sneeze, sniff) "-- bed," she retorted as she rose, and stomped off toward the bedroom.

"I'll be in shortly," he muttered, and began to clear away the papers.

*****

It was by far the most unrestful night Snape had spent in Hermione's flat: every time he was on the verge of dropping off, Hermione would have another sneezing fit.

"Blast it --"

"Go out to the sitting-room, then," she snarled at him. "I can't help it."

"I know you can't, but I'll be damned if I put my back out sleeping on your bloody inadequate settee.... I have to run that errand tomorrow, and it shall be a long and tiring day."

"Then deal with it," she said, and blew her nose. "It's your fault, anyway. I told you it would bake me ill, but doe, you just had to do it."

They both sulked for a while before Hermione added, "Last week I only thought I hated you. Dow I'm certain."

"It's a large and illustrious group," he shot back. "Join a very long queue. Given your infantile whinging, the feeling is mutual."

She didn't seem to like that at all: she rolled onto her side, giving him her back, and tried to tug the lion's share of the covers to her side of the bed.

"I shan't see you for lunch, by the way," he said, clutching at the coverlet and fighting back. "And I might not be back in time for dinner," he added in an attempt to be more reasonable. (She had been feeding him rather well, after all, and hadn't insisted that he observe her ridiculous diet; he supposed he owed it to her to make certain she didn't go to any trouble when she needn't.)

She refused to answer him, blew her nose again, and pulled the covers up to her ears.

_Merlin's bloody balls. Try to be considerate, and look what happens._

_A man just can't bloody win._

*****
Hermione beat him out of bed and out of the flat next morning -- and didn't leave him a cuppa on the bed-table, this time. Snape supposed he was in her bad graces yet again. (Not that he minded having her ticked with him if there was a good reason; but being petulant over a little case of hives was certainly not reasonable. There'd been a valid scientific need for the experiment, damn it.)

He rose, bathed, and ate; and as he was trying not to think much about his errand that afternoon, he mused over a hazy memory of spooning up behind Hermione in the middle of the night, despite her protests. (He hadn't intended to disturb her, for once, it had just... happened, and he hadn't even taken advantage of the proximity.)

Rather admirable self-control on my part, actually, because I'd quite recovered from the physical aversion.

He distinctly recalled thinking, before he'd dropped back off, that she smelled much better (despite the faint odor of stewed flobberworm and Burn-Healing Paste) than she had with the bloody perfume on. But even stewed flobberworm hadn't come close to overpowering her own subtle, now-familiar scent when he'd buried his nose in the curve of her shoulder.

Almond, he thought suddenly. She smells of sweet almond, and of cucumber as well when she's straight from the bath -- must be some of that wretched soap she uses, although that's far better than the ones with a chemical scent. And when I taste her skin, there's a tartness.... Citrus. Not orange, though, too bitter. More like clementine.

Utterly unaware of the oddness of his analysis -- not of its accuracy, but that he of all people should be so intrigued and precise about the intrinsic qualities of Hermione Granger's unadulterated scent and taste -- he reluctantly conceded that he was running late, and Apparated from the premises.

*****

Early afternoon
Nottinghamshire

He hated travelling to Nottinghamshire, and it never seemed to get easier. His Apparition License hadn't been revoked -- yet -- so he couldn't stay away on those grounds; and as much as he would like to forget certain incidents and reminders of his past, he couldn't stand living with that idiotic and irrational guilt that gnawed at him when he put it off too long, now that there was no reason for him to do so.

He trudged up the long flight of stairs that fronted the grey, institutional main wing of the building, stopped at the reception desk to sign in and check his wand -- it was required, for the sake and safety of many of the patients -- and took the lift to the second floor, stepping out directly in front of the duty-desk. The Sister on duty was startled to see him: she was a veteran employee and knew how infrequently he visited.
"Good afternoon, Mr Snape," she said brusquely, covering her lapse of manners. "She's already had her luncheon and bath, so you may go right in."

He didn't bother to correct her form of address.

"How is she?" he asked. "I haven't had a report for six months, and her letters have stopped."

Sister hesitated and then admitted, "That last stroke led to a sharp decline, Healer Williams says. Very few totally lucid moments, though thankfully the hysteria has stopped as well. She's very calm and docile, actually. I imagine," she added, not unkindly, "that she shan't recognise you. She rarely remembers our names, and we're with her every day."

"Thank you," he said. "She hadn't the last few times, either, so I'm prepared for that," and moved down the corridor to the last room but one on the left.

She was sitting in front of the window -- it was barred, of course, though as decoratively as possible, as if to deny that this place was a prison of sorts -- and she looked more presentable than the last time Snape had seen her, hair clean and smoothed back far more nicely than he remembered her ever managing herself. It had grown far thinner, though, and Snape could see pink patches of scalp peeking through the strands, and an old scar that ran above her right ear.

"Good afternoon," he said quietly from the doorway, and she started and turned to see who it was.

As always, there was a flash of panic in her eyes at first sight of him. (He hated that, that instinctual panic. He looked entirely too much like his father not to frighten her, and knew it.)

But as suddenly as the fear had surfaced, it vanished, and she stared at him with dull eyes.

"Good afternoon," she said uncertainly. "Who --?"

"Oh, just a visitor," he said. "My mother's having her bath, so I thought I'd stop round and visit with everyone else. Just to pass the time, you know."

It was, by now, a well-practised lie, and she never remembered it. It was easier on both of them than tormenting her by trying to jog her memory.

"Kind," she said, and turned back to the window. "Not many would bother."

Snape had to cross closer to catch that last bit, moving slowly and carefully so as not to startle her again; her words were slurred and halting, no doubt from the stroke.

"May I sit?" he asked, since she didn't offer.

"If you like," she mumbled, and he pulled over a chair next to hers and did.

"Nasty weather," he finally volunteered for lack of anything better.

"Yes," she said. "Very grey... picture. No, that's not right...."
"View?"

"Yes, view." She brightened slightly and offered, "It'll be better come Spring. Masses of flowers. They're good about that, trying to make it cheerful."

They sat silent for a long while before she added, "I see children out there, sometimes. Playing on the, the... the green, the --"

"Lawn."

"-- the lawn. They don't allow them up to the rooms, but I can watch from here." She suddenly turned to him, more intent. "Have you?"

"Seen them? Or do I have them?"

"Have them, yes."

"No," he said. "I've only just married, actually. Haven't got round to children."

"Oh. You seem rather old for it," she said critically, and he nearly snorted.

"No time to marry until now. And no-one worth the bother, either."

"Ah. A nice woman?"

"Can be. Young, and just a bit foolish, but very bright. You might call her a 'New Woman,' I suppose. Very assertive, verging on obstinate."

"Oh, my. Children should settle her down, a bit, though you're probably wise to wait. They can be a terrible worry, I... I think."

Snape bit the inside of his cheek until it bled, and stared out the window.

"Are you comfortable?" he finally asked. "They're treating you well, the Sisters?"

"Oh, yes. Not as many trips out to the gardens as I'd like, but...."

"Good. That you're comfortable, that is. One never knows for certain, without asking."

She plucked restlessly at the lap-robe, becoming uneasy with his presence: he recognised the signs, and knew it was best to leave her in peace before she began to understand who he was.

"I'd.... I'd best check back with Mother," he lied, and with some sincere regret that it would be such a short visit. (It usually happened that way, that he was eventually glad he'd made the effort no matter how unwilling he was to go in the first place.) "I expect her bath's over by now."

He rose and bent, unthinking, to kiss her cheek; she flinched away and said, "What are you --"
"Sorry," he said, and mentally chided himself. "Terrible liberty, isn't it?"

"To dare with a stranger, yes," she said indignantly.

"Well, you're someone's mother, aren't you?" he retorted, and gave her a crooked smile. "And as he or she isn't here, I dare on their behalf."

"Him," she said quite clearly. "At least, I.... Yes, him."

She didn't relax, though, and didn't offer her cheek; so Snape lifted her fragile, age-spotted hand from the chair-arm and formally kissed her fingers instead, ignoring the faint, sour scent that lingered on her skin no matter how recently she'd been bathed.

"Perhaps I'll stop by again, next time," he said. "Unless you prefer that I don't."

"Oh, it's.... You needn't, of course, but it's pleasant to see people," she allowed as she pulled her hand away and tucked it under her lap-robe, safe from any further depredations.

"Goodbye, then," he said.

He waited for a farewell, but she was already intent on the view outside the window.

*****

Well, that went far better than usual, he thought as he descended the stairs to the lawn and began the long walk down the drive.

Perhaps he should be able to bear it, now that she wasn't having those horrid flash-backs and fits of hysterics that had seemed to happen every other visit. It was a fair trade-off, he supposed: that she didn't recognise him, in exchange for all the unpleasantness that occurred when she did. (Not unpleasantness toward him, no -- or at least, not usually -- but it put her under terrible stress.)

He actually chuckled a bit at her indignation with his "liberty." She'd never been what you'd call a warm or affectionate woman -- she'd been too much like McGonagall that way, though without anywhere near the backbone -- and that, at least, hadn't changed. (The times she had touched him were inextricably linked, in his mind, with considerable previous... nastiness on his father's part, at any rate, so it didn't bother him as much as it might others. Or so he told himself.)

Shan't be much longer if the strokes continue, he thought as he strode through the gates. And then it will all be over, and I can let it go finally and forever.

He adamantly ignored his sudden inability to swallow properly, and Apparated back to London.

*****
Chapter 9: Wherein Hermione learns that two days' holiday at Hogwarts is not the worst way to spend time with Snape.

Hermione's flat
December 31, 2007

I am so going to regret this, Hermione thought, hastily pouring hot soup into a vacuum flask. What in God's name possessed me to offer to help?

Well, it was technically her "project." And Snape had gone to great pains to determine they were on the right track (so had she -- her chest still itched), and was giving up a considerable amount of his holiday to hunt down some potentially dangerous -- strike that, definitely dangerous -- documents.

Of all the rotten times for this to happen, though. The end of bloody December.

The weather was the least of her worries. Snape hadn't returned to her flat last evening; he'd presumably spent it wherever his "errand" had taken him yesterday, or at the club. She didn't dare ask -- he'd shown up quite early, snappish and moody, and exceptionally put out that she wasn't already dressed for the weather and ready to go. She'd only prevented him from roaring about it by pointing out the wisdom of taking something hot along, so they shouldn't have to stop searching to find a pub or restaurant out in the middle of nowhere.

Pathetic luncheon finally packed, she left the kitchen, dropped the rucksack in the hallway, and popped her head into the sitting-room as she pulled on a heavy coat and boots.

Snape was occupied with prising a brick out of the fireplace facing; he'd already pulled off one of the flimsy wood mantelpiece panels that covered it.

"What are you --"

"Hiding my notes," he said tersely. "No sense in someone finding everything on us, if we're apprehended."

"Oh."

"It's not as though you use the bloody thing, and it came right off in my hands anyway. Have I told you how terrible a flat this really is?"

"Yes."

"Good," he grunted, crammed his journal into the recess, replaced the brick, and pounded the panel back into place with his fist. "Are you finally ready?"

"Yes, damn it, I've even got my coat and boots on, which is more than I can say for you."
He glared at her and reached for his cloak, which he'd slung over the back of the sofa.

"If you are going to be this contrary," he spat as he flung it about his shoulders and worked at the clasp, "we might as well call it off -- I'll do it alone. I refuse to inflict myself with a foul-tempered female on what promises to be an exceptionally frustrating day."

"Oh -- Look, I'm sorry," Hermione grudgingly said. "I'm rather wound up about it, that's all, and it's not fair for you to do it by yourself. Is there anything else we need? I've got the lunch."

"No, I've borrowed secaturs and a trowel from the club just in case -- You have a bag? Good, chuck them in there," he said, handing them over. "And this," he added, and snatched a throw from the back of the sofa and tossed it to her.

"Whatever --?"

"If we have to follow through on the initial excuse," he said, quirking an eyebrow, "I have no wish to roll around in the snow and catch my death."

"Oh, bloody --"

"Unless, of course, you're offering to cushion my old bones and risk a cold yourself --"

"Wouldn't be any different than usual," Hermione muttered as she Reduced the throw and stuffed it into the rucksack.

"Shall I take that as an interest in options requiring more initiative on your part?"

"No," she said, cringing at the thought. (He was quite inventive as it was, having shocked her with different "options" on two occasions, and she had no absolutely no interest in encouraging more experimentation. Especially any that required her active participation.)

"Stop whinging, then. Ready?" he asked, reaching for her.

"Where exactly are we going?"

"There's a small wizarding community on the edge of Henley-in-Arden. We'll Apparate there, and then see if we can't find a guide."

"Very well," she said, and wrapped her free arm about his waist without being chivvied.

"Hang on, then. It might take a second longer -- I've never been there, I'll have to focus on map coordinates."

He muttered the charm, and they popped out of the flat.

*****
"Damn," Hermione muttered as she unwound herself from Snape's grasp. "It seems much colder."

"Not in comparison to Hogsmeade. Enough to make my knee ache though, blast it," Snape muttered back, and glanced up and down the deserted little lane.

"Where should we start, do you think?"

"The pub, of course, since there doesn't seem to be an apothecary."

"Oh, of course. Sorry. I'm new to some of this, you know," she said, defensive, when he glared at her. "Some explanation would be welcome."

"The pub," he said after a long-suffering sigh, "is often the heart of such a small community as this. Prime spot for picking up gossip and information about the residents, or finding the contact you need. Also," he added under his breath, "for spreading misinformation about oneself and the reason for one's presence."

"Oh."

"Moreover and, frankly, more importantly, I want something hot to drink before we commence freezing out arses off. Come along."

He took off down the lane toward the dilapidated little pub -- the sign of which, hanging loose from one hinge above the door, declared it to be the Groggy Gnome (complete with an actual, severed Gnome head) -- with Hermione trotting fast to keep up with him; he pushed open the sticky door and shooed her in first.

The interior was dim, which was probably fortunate because Hermione guessed it was so filthy that it would turn her stomach otherwise: and she could hear a ruckus from the back of the building, some of which was the shrill voices of a pack of children, or at least two or three very loud ones.

"Not hours, yet," someone grunted from across the room. "Shove orf."

"Don't want a pint," Snape retorted cheerfully, and flashed a grin in the direction of the bar. (Hermione gaped like a fish, and only closed her mouth when he squeezed her elbow in warning.) "Tea or coffee would be wizard, though. Blimey, it's cold out there!"

"Someone" poked his head up from beneath the butterbeer taps (he'd been fudging with the pressure, she guessed, and hastily scratched behind his ear with his wand to cover the misdeed). Hermione fancied that somewhere in the man's family was an unhealthy dose of Troll: there was a slight green cast to his skin, and a characteristic flattening of the bridge of his broad nose.

"Oh. Southerners, are yeh?" Troll-face said with more than necessary derision.
"'S right. Any chance for that hot drink?"

Troll-face sized them up, suspicious.

"Awright, then," he finally muttered. "I'm ready for my elevenses anyways. 'Spose the missus can make you a pot as well. Hang on," and he turned and shuffled into the back room.

"Is he...?" Hermione muttered as Snape pushed her over to one of the scarred tables.

"Hush. Their hearing's bad, but not awful. And yes, probably," he admitted as he sat. "You often see things like it in little backwaters like this. Hogsmeade is a notable exception. Whatever you do, don't stare."

There was a thud from the back room, a wail from one of the children, and a woman's sharp retort to someone or other.

"But isn't that...? Wasn't cross-species mating prohibited, back in...? Ewwww." He snorted. "What a typical reaction. Look," he said, and leaned across the table, "if you behave and stop acting so suspiciously, perhaps I'll tell you the real reason Slytherin objected to Muggleborns and Mixedbloods."

"The real reason?"

"And stop being so jumpy about what I say and how I say it. Let me do the talking, and play along."

"All right, all right," she retorted, and unbuttoned her coat.

"Now," he said, and pulled the map from his pocket and spread it across the table, "we're going to have to decide just how much time to spend on this, assuming we can find a way to get into any of the damned things."

"Split up, do you think?"

"No, definitely not. One, because of the excuse for being here. Two, because we don't know what we'll face if we do find the right grove. He might well have booby-trapped the area, and I don't want one of us injured and with no way to contact the other. In an area this widespread, Auxiliatus isn't of much use."

"All right, that's sensible, I suppose," Hermione granted.

Troll-face plodded back in with a squat, chipped-spouted teapot and dumped it and two grimy cups on the table without waiting for Snape to pull the map aside; pointedly neglected to offer milk and sugar; and retreated behind the bar, where he glared at them as he spit-polished the glassware.
"Ta," Snape threw over his shoulder at Troll-face, and then poured the tea as Hermione watched with disgusted fascination.

"Won't kill you," he said sotto voce.

"I'm not thrilled with his cleaning technique," she muttered back. "Passing acquaintance with Tr--with bogeys and mucus of a certain variety."

"I still have a jar of that in the stores," he said pleasantly. "That was a particularly yielding specimen, as I recall, no difficulty at all getting it to express the substance. Wonderful stuff, keeps forever."

"What on earth would you use that for?"

"As a binding agent. Natural mucillage. Totally inert, won't harm you a bit."

"Do I want to know what it's used in?"

"No, but I'll tell you anyway," he said, glancing at her over his cup-rim. "Restorative Mandrake potions, foremost."

Hermione felt instantly nauseous.

"You would have preferred remaining --?"

"No, but I could have done without the information," she muttered.

"You did ask," he said, and sniggered at her, showing far too many teeth: when she glared at him, he explained, "You're nearly as green as our host."

"Oh, shut it."

"Drink up, you'll offend the missus," Snape gravely advised, and she took the smallest sip possible, trying to avoid the slick of... whatever it was, floating on the surface of the tea. "You don't want to see how they react to insults like that."

"Wot might two Southerners be doin' muckin' about on hollyday here, then?" Troll-face blurted out loudly.

"Oh, I'm here on business, like," Snape said cheerfully. "The wife's just keeping me company. Thought we'd see the magical parts of the Wood, before they're all gone. Spend some time alone together, away from the sprogs."

Hermione choked on the murky tea, and Snape trod on her toes to shush her.

"And wot business is that?"

"Collecting a specimen or two. Oxlip root, if I can find it under the blasted snow."
"Wait, now," Troll-face warned, indignant, and belligerently slammed a slimy glass down on the bar. "That's restricted, that is. Wood's protected, like -- off-limits wi'out proper clearance."

"I've got it," Snape said mildly. "It's not for me, you see -- it's for Master Bluett. I've got a letter from him. Member of the same club, don't you know."

Troll-face blinked, surprised, and then said with great disappointment, "Oh. Oh, well that's different, then. How's t' old codger? Ain't seen him in, oh, twenty years or more."

"Getting on. Can't move about much any more, so he asked me.... Finish your tea, dear," Snape told Hermione in a bossy voice, "we're already running late, we shan't have time for the, ah, more pleasurable possible activities if we dawdle...." (Hermione glared at him, but kept her mouth shut, verbally speaking, and took another queasy-lipped sip.) "Problem is, he couldn't remember which grove the best specimens were in, or how to get in it."

Troll-face ruminated over that -- literally ruminated, working up a good spit, which he then deposited in a glass and absentely wiped away -- and then admitted, "I dunno. 'Spose you oughter ask Runty Roxbury -- Dolly!" he bellowed over his shoulder as another crash-and-squall came from the back, "send buggers out t' yard, they're botherin' customers. Runty," he said placidly, attention back to the two of them, "knows t' place better'n anyone else round here."

"Wizard. And where can I find Runty?"

"Cottage over near east edge of Morton Bagot," Troll-face said, and wandered over to look at the map. "Here," he added, jabbing a thick finger at a pokey little lane. "You take Redditch Road to Oldberrow, then road toward Morton Bagot, an' there's a lane on left after miler so. Follow that till you see t' stile on right. Cross that, an' another half-miler so's Runty's place."

"Ta," Snape said, and grinned again. "That's a help."

"Well, f'you'd said you was workin' for Master Bluett, I'd a been more friendly-like in first place," Troll-face grumbled, and then stared at Hermione in frank interest. "So ye've got yourselves wee 'uns? How many?"

"Three so far," Snape quickly supplied. "All under six. Doing our duty, and all that. Not that it's not a pleasure..." he added, and gave Troll-face an absolutely indecent wink.

Hermione badly wanted to kick his shins, even as she marveled at how easily the lie came to him.

"S'trewth," Troll-face said, and shook his head. "Mighty well-preserved in spite of it, f'I may say, Madam. We've eight," he added morosely as he stumped back over to the bar, "and wot I wouldn't give for a hollyday alone wi' missus...."

"That's why I hope to get the business over with quickly," Snape agreed, and pre-emptively trod on Hermione's toes again, "so we can have some privacy and work on Number Four. It's no reflection on my skills, mind you, it's just that the sprogs need attention at the most inconvenient times...."
Troll-face finally caught the implication, guffawed, and then, satisfied with the haze on the glassware, disappeared into the back.

"That's disgusting," Hermione muttered.

"That's the average male psyche -- I should have thought you'd be acquainted with it from your Common Room, given prevailing Gryffindor attitudes. And it was more or less your suggestion, if you recall. No point in having a cover if you don't use it. I really expected you to be better at this, you did an acceptable job at that café."

"I knew what to expect, then, I'd set it up. No, I mean that you have to broadcast it with such... enjoyment."

"Part of the persona. Which you should recognise," he said, shoving the teapot aside so he could study the map.

"No, don't."

"Ah. Perhaps it's the lack of purple robes that's throwing you off," he said absently.

"What? You're channelling Lockhart?"

"Channelling? Don't know what you mean. I'm certainly using a toothy 'hail fellow well-met' attitude that was his forte, though a rather more manly version. Odd, you don't seem inclined to make cow-eyes at me."

"It loses something in translation."

"Of course it does -- because I'm not overdoing it and I'm being sincere, whereas he couldn't manage actual sincerity if his stones were in a vise."

Hermione choked again, and grabbed her teacup and sipped to cover the gaffe as Troll-face trudged back in the room.

"My Dolly," he announced proudly, "remembers old Bluett very well, and she's makin' ham sammiches for yeh to take with. Compliments of the House."

"Thank you," Hermione managed as Snape shot Troll-face another grin. "Very kind."

"Not at all. Old Master Bluett's well-thought of, these parts, and anyone he cares to send."

"Well," Snape said, and folded the map, "I suppose we'll get going as soon as the comestibles are ready, then...."
They Apparated close to Morton Bagot, and hit something which wasn't quite the target, unfortunately. Hermione promptly lost her balance, fell backward over the tombstone that had materialised just behind her knees, and landed flat on her arse.

"Ow! God damn it, Severus, you've --"

Snape was too busy cursing, rather more creatively than she, to notice her: he'd barked his shins badly on the tombstone's mate.

"I thought you were perfectly capable of --"

"I am, blast it -- the damned place isn't marked on the map. It looked like pasture."

"Well, it's not."

"I see that, now," he said with a glare, and limped over to give her a hand up. "Have you broken anything?"

"No," she said, scrambling to get her feet under her as he tugged at her hand. "Just got a lovely jolt."

"Where the bloody hell are we, then? I can't have gone that far off...."

"Let me look at the map -- No, not out here in the open, let's go into the church," she said, and started picking her way through the minefield of tombstones.

"Are you sure --"

"What?"

"Well, look at the place," Snape said, scuffing away a patch of snow to reveal a tangle of dead vegetation. "It's overgrown. They'll have locked it up, won't they?"

"Even if they have it doesn't matter if we use it for a few minutes, just to get out of the wind. It isn't necessarily abandoned, anyway," Hermione explained. "It could be a Living Churchyard."

"Which is --?"

"A wildlife conservation effort. The won't keep it mown flat like a meadow any longer, but let things grow. Encourage the right kind of plants, provide shelter for birds and animals, that sort of thing."

"Ah. I wouldn't have expected that kind of... sensitivity," Snape admitted, and limped along after her through the lychgate and toward the porch of the squat little church.

She glanced at the road-signage in the lane, at the placard in front of the church itself, and then cautiously checked the door, found it open, and slipped inside, dropping the rucksack beside a bench.
"Are you sure?" Snape said uncertainly behind her.

"Come along. As it's open they won't mind at all. They're probably used to tourists and academics popping in for a look -- it's quite old." She shot him a glance, and took a guess as to the real reason for his unease. "Really, it's all right, Severus. It's just a building. A sacred one, but you won't be unwelcome unless you steal the communion plate, if that's what's worrying you."

"Very well," he muttered, and moved past her into the nave, still limping a bit.

"Map?" she asked, took it from him and unfolded it, and moved into the weak sunlight filtering through one of the windows. "You were shooting for where, precisely?"

"There," he said, jabbing a finger at one point first, and then at a second, greasy mark. "And that's where our host said the turn-off to the stile was. I didn't think it wise to get closer -- Roxbury might be the hermit type."

"Well, you were spot-on, that's exactly where we are. They just haven't noted any smaller Muggle features like churches on this -- we probably should have got an Ordnance map as well, and checked against it. Apologies for calling your Apparition skills into question."

He grunted an acceptance of the apology and sat on the bench, rubbing at his shins.

"Given that the map mayn't be strictly accurate," Hermione added as she folded it up, "I think we ought to hoof it the rest of the way. Roxbury can point out any other obstructions in other areas."

She wandered over to look at a plot of the conservation scheme, posted on the wall behind the door.

"Fine. Let's hope there's only one method to get into all the oases," Snape muttered, still working away at his shins. "Otherwise, your Arithmancy skills will get a lot of use."

"Are you all right?"

"Will be," he said, and rose and wandered toward the sanctuary. "Why do they leave it unattended?"

"Sleepy place like this with little crime? They'll have a caretaker check in once a day and lock up at night. The priest is probably shared between another church or parish, but they'll leave the doors open for any parishioners or visitors. There's certainly yew about," Hermione observed after a moment's study of the ground-plan. "That's not unusual for a churchyard, though. Most older churches have them about."

"Co-opted," Snape said absently. "They're long-lived, some here long before Christianity. Many mark sacred sites for the pre-Christian Muggles."

"Do you think it's worth considering? That he might have meant someplace more general? The whole area was once one big wood, after all."
"I sincerely hope to the gods not. If so, our job is immensely more difficult. He shouldn't have done, anyway -- it's a distinctly magical problem, I can't imagine why he's resort to that."

Hermione returned to the ground-plan, and had almost forgot about Snape until he said, "Are you observant?"

"What?" she said, and turned to him: he'd wandered halfway down the nave, and was staring up at the altar.

"Are you observant? Of Religion?"

"Oh. No, I'm not. Mum and Dad were agnostic, though Dad was raised Catholic."

"Ah. Easier for you, then."

"Than for students with religious backgrounds?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't see why," she said. "There was nothing in the curriculum that even remotely clashed with personal religious belief. At least the little I know of it."

Snape snorted his objections to that. "Nothing to do with belief, everything to do with antipathy and fear," he finally noted. "On both sides."

"I suppose. But then, people will keep telling silly stories -- fear-mongering at its best, on the one hand, and encouraging idiocy on the other. Like Wendelin, when nothing of the sort happened."

"Sussed that out, did you?" Snape said, and turned to watch her, one corner of his mouth twitching. "Bagshot is an idiot for repeating that hoary old tale. I suppose is was the historical inaccuracy?"

"Yes," she said, and walked into the sanctuary to join him. "Did she think no-one would check the actual evidence?"

"I'm sure Binns appreciated your refutation. How many inches of parchment did you inflict upon him?"

"Twenty, if I recall rightly, with graphs and charts as addenda. The horrific thing to me, regardless of the burning issue," she added soberly, "was the thought of the ones who weren't wizards and who couldn't escape. The squibs or herbalists or ordinary people who were charged and who were tortured for it anyway."

"Wendelin is much more effective as propaganda," Snape retorted. "When it's one of your own...."

"Yes, I know. But there comes a time when one needs to set aside bogey-tales meant to frighten children and face the truth, isn't there? To see things as they really are?"
"That," Snape said, "is far harder to do than one might suppose. I'm sure Wendelin served a purpose at the time. A cautionary tale."

"Too much comfort in old prejudices to let it die now?"

"Perhaps that," Snape granted.

They stood silent for quite a while, looking around at the ancient beams above them and the sea-blue light flooding in through the stained-glass, before Snape said, very softly, "It's much more peaceful than I would have thought."

"You expected a hail of fire and brimstone? Or a Divine presence manifested?" Hermione said, and tried not to let her amusement show: he wouldn't appreciate it, and it was a bit churlish of her to think the observation funny. She was surprised at his interest, actually: he didn't seem the type to be taken with religious matters, and certainly not Muggle ones, at that.

"I didn't know what to expect. A... disturbance, perhaps, considering that a place this old is probably built on ancient pagan ground. You wouldn't think them compatible."

"Ah. It's like magic, I think. It's the people and the community who tend to make the difference, not the place. Barring a few instances like Hogwarts." Something prickled in the back of her mind, and she added, "My parents took me on holiday, once, to... well, I shouldn't call it holiday, I suppose, it was more of a pilgrimage. My great-grandfather Granger was killed at Ieper -- that's a battlefield in Belgium -- and it had that feeling, too. Even if you didn't know the history or bother to look at all the memorials about the place, you knew that something had happened there, something terrible. It wasn't magic, of course, but...."


Thoroughly unsettled with the turn in the conversation, Hermione held out the map: he took it from her and tucked it away in one of his pockets, and then stared down at her and said, abruptly, "You haven't been to the battlefield, have you."

It was a statement, not a question, and she knew exactly which battlefield he meant.

"No," she managed. "No, I... I've thought about it, but haven't had the guts."

"You've experienced something like it already. Given that, I'd advise you to continue to fight the urge," he said, and turned and made for the door.

_Whatever does the man mean? One visit to a Muggle battlefield, and I'm supposed to --?_

She stared after him, perplexed with the advice, and then hurried to join him outside on the porch, snatching up the rucksack and carefully closing the door behind her.
"You left Tr- -- the barkeep -- far too much," she said after twenty minutes' walking, desperate to break the silence.

"I left him precisely what I thought it would take to keep his mouth shut," Snape said. "That and the connection to Bluett should do the job. Any Ministry nobs who come poking about will get the sullen treatment we had at first."

"Bluett's the old fellow at the club library, right? How did you know they'd recognise the name?"

"Because he told me. I saw him yesterday. He, ah, helped clarify the situation, the day I bought the perfume."

"You *told* someone else --"

"You involved Tonks, I involved someone whose expertise *I* needed," Snape said, arrogance firmly intact, judging by his tone of voice. "It's proven a good decision so far."

"Fine," Hermione said, conceding the point. (She was too much out of breath to argue, anyway: Snape wasn't bothering to slow his pace, no matter how badly his knee might ache.) "I don't suppose he just blithely gave you a letter though, did he? How much did you have to tell him?"

"Generalities."

"But why should he help you?"

"Because," he retorted, "I apprenticed with him. Because I asked as a favour, and he obliged. Shall I ask him to submit his vitae to you, so you can have him thoroughly vetted?"

"No, damn it, I.... Oh, never mind," she grumbled, and stopped dead when Snape made a sharp turn onto the verge, picked his way over to a stile, and climbed over it.

"Come on, we've wasted enough bloody time today " he said impatiently, and held a hand out to help her over. "Watch your step, it's slippery..."

*If I kill him now, no-one will find the body for months*, Hermione thought uncharitably as she plodded across the verge.

It was utterly maddening of Snape, this habit of slipping into something that marginally resembled actual humanity, and then the inevitable backslide into everyday, nasty-git Snape. She'd never noticed it much before: of course she wouldn't have at school, but then that was quite different to living with him on a near-daily basis.

*Ron would absolutely have a cow if he knew that*. A whole herd, actually....

*Oh, Christ. Ron. He must have heard by now, or seen it in the Prophet --*
"What's wrong?" Snape said, voice sharp, and she glanced up to find her hand still firmly clasped in his, and that she'd frozen just on the other side of the stile.

"Nothing," she stammered. "Just something I forgot to do. Nothing important for this."

"Come along, then," Snape said, dropped her hand, and took off along the cow-path that (hopefully) led to Runty Roxbury's cottage.

"Hang on, I've got the bloody sack to drag about," she muttered, and trotted along after him, trying desperately to shove further thoughts of Ron to the back of her mind.

Roxbury's cottage was, thankfully, just around a bend in the path, in a little cluster of birch trees: Snape slowed his pace and put up a cautionary hand to halt her, and called, "Halloo the house!"

One of the shutters opened and hit the wall with a bang, and something that looked suspiciously like a blunderbuss was pointed at them.

"State yer names and business!" a reedy tenor voice bawled out at them.

"Samson Agonistes and wife, on business for Master Bluett," Snape called back.

"Bluett? What's t'old bastard want?"

"Oxlip root."

"Woff'er?"

"No idea, I'm just the brute labour."

"Got proof?"

"A letter."

Roxbury seemed to pause to consider that: the end of the blunderbuss wavered a bit.

"How's old fooker 'spect you to find it now? Three bloody inches snow!"

"Presumably that's why he sent me to dig, rather than shifting his arse."

"Typical. Always was lazy bugger, makin' me haul his kit for him."

The blunderbuss was withdrawn and the shutter smacked closed.

"Samson Agonistes?" Hermione muttered, sidling up to Snape. "That's odd, even by Wizarding standards."
"It's not mine -- or anyone else's, as far as I know -- and it's memorable for purposes of misdirection. And it's far more original than *Steven,*" Snape retorted sotto voce as the front door opened.

"Awright, then," Roxbury said as he scurried toward them, blunderbuss still in hand. ("Runty" was apt -- he was barely five feet tall, and looked as though the next wind would blow him away.) "Lemme see t' letter. Careful, like -- f'I see a wand, I don't ask no questions."

Snape pulled another bit of of parchment from his pockets and handed it over, and Roxbury opened and scanned it.

"Looks right," he finally admitted, and handed the letter back to Snape. "Sorry -- have to be careful last few years, wi' all idiots muckin' wi' Wood. How d'ye do, Madam," he said, finally acknowledging Hermione.

"No, I entirely understand the precaution," Snape said easily, and gave the man a pseudo-Lockhart grin. "A lot of trespassing? Muggles, damn their eyes?"

"Oooo, I don't care about them. Not a blessed thing they can do to Wood, not important parts, leastways. No, it's buggers from apothecary comp'nies, mostly, muckin' wi' restricted plants," Roxbury added, and his seedy moustache gave an irritated twich. "Not even proper herbalists, really -- wantin' flowers an' such, stuff they could get almost anywhere. I'm caretaker, they're 'sposed to check wi' me first, but do they ever? No, just barge on in and de-nood half a grove."

"Damned shame," Snape said, and Hermione added a muttered, "They ought to know better."

"That oxlip root, now, though -- that's differnt, you can only find that here, an' if it's for Master Bluett.... You've come t' right place."

"Ah, yes -- I'd hoped you could point us to the most likely bits -- Bluett can't seem to remember where he got it last," Snape said. "And we've never been before, so we've no idea how to get into the groves."

"That's easy, if you know t' trick. Lemme get get my cloak --" "I can probably manage any charms. Unless it's not allowed, of course," Hermione said as Snape rooted in his pockets again. "We've got a map, if you don't want to bother."

"Oh. Well, seein' as Master's Bluett's spoken for ye, I can let you go on -- just put stew on t' fire an' I don't want to leave it. Right, then," Roxbury said, and stepped closer as Snape unfolded the map. "Two most likely groves are here -- Bannam first, that's right over hill." He pointed at the nearest rise. "And next best bet is Withycombe Wood, over t'other side of Henley."

"Wizard," Snape murmured. "Oh, would you suggest a good Apparition point for Withycombe? We nearly had an accident getting here. They hadn't noted that church up the road."
Roxbury snorted. "Careless buggers. Church was there well before Wood was felled good an' true. There's a little clearing here, on western edge -- I'd shoot for that, and then skirt the edge."

"Thanks."

"Now, as you enter northern edge of Wood, you'll want to look for t' King Stone."

"King Stone?" Hermione asked.

"Standing stones," Roxbury explained. "Wee cousins to stones down near Oxfordshire border."

"Oh -- like Henge stones?" she said, and Snape shifted a bit, apparently intrigued as well. "I hadn't known there were any here."

"Oh, they were all over," Roxbury said. "Leastways until Muggles carted 'em off. Old grave entrances, mostly, but not strictly magical, so they've not been noted much in the bloody academic books. Now, speakin' of Muggles, you'll have to look close -- some of 'em look more like tree stumps, now, they're that old, and that helps hide the doorway to the magical parts from the Muggles. You have to invoke the guardian -- not really, 'course, that's just old stories, it's just so the ignorant won't figure it out -- an' then the stones will let you pass."

"Wizard," Snape murmured again (Hermione managed not to start, this time), and after a long pause he finally prodded, "What's the invocation?"

"Oh, right. You put your hand on the stone and say, 'I' -- or we, in your case, you'll both want to touch it -- 'We supplicate for entrance to the guardian of the Wood, Herne, Lord of the Forest.' That simple, really, takes no special skill at all."

"Great, thanks," Snape murmured as he refolded the map. "Is there any way that we can, ah.... An entrance fee, perhaps?"

"Ooooo, no, not f'yer on Master Bluett's business. I'm paid by t'Warwickshire Wizard's Council, any road, and not 'sposed to take gratuities. But don't tell bastards from comp'nis that," Roxbury added slyly. "They've got a choice -- pay me, or pay Council a great bloody fine if I catch 'em."

Snape laughed at that -- the sound sent a shiver up Hermione's spine: unlike his usual wry snort, it was relaxed and open, and disarmingly pleasant. "Serves them right. We'll be off then, and leave you to your dinner."

"Stop by f'you come back this way," Roxbury offered, "or f'you need a warm-up, like. And tell old fooker Runty says hello."

"Shall. Ta," Snape said, turned Hermione back the way they'd come, and linked his arm in hers as they plodded up the slow rise of the hill.

"Watch out for t'gnomes," Roxbury called after them. "They're rare, now, but nothin' like spendin' a sickle to get li'l buggers to attack when your guard's down"
"A blunderbuss?" Hermione asked when they were a reasonable distance away.

"Probably a squib," Snape said. "Or at least he wants to give that impression. Nothing quite like the thought of a Muggle firearm in the hands of a barmy caretaker to give a trespassing Wizard pause."

Hermione snorted.

"Yes, it's just the same," Snape said. "But it's using the prejudice to your advantage. Can't really fault him for that in the circumstances, and it probably makes the Muggles wary of such an eccentric old coot as well."

They reached the crest of the hill, and found Bannam Wood spread out at the base of the other side; Snape shot a cautious glance behind them toward Roxbury's cottage, and then dropped her arm as they began the descent.

"What did you mean, the real reason Slytherin didn't --"

"Later," Snape muttered. "When we... stop for lunch."

_Bloody hell, why can't the man...._

But he seemed a bit breathless -- as she herself was -- so Hermione shut her gob and trotted along beside him, trying to keep her balance on the snowy grade.

Another ten minutes' walk brought them to the northern edge of the wood, and they entered and began searching for the King Stone -- vainly, as everything vaguely stump-shaped was covered in snow. Hermione put up with Snape's increasingly ill-tempered mutterings for a good three minutes before she finally said, "All right, just -- Hang on, all right?", dropped the rucksack, and pulled her wand.

"What --"

"Shhhh. I'm trying to remember a ward-revealing spell."

She couldn't, though -- it had been far too long since Bill Weasley had shown her that helpful little trick, and she hadn't used it since -- and she finally resorted to working the operation out manually, and then directing it in three wide swathes before her. (And _bloody hell_, it worked: a faint, harmonic hum began over to their right.)

Snape hunted down the jagged little monolith in question while she kept the spell going, and then brushed it clean of its blanket of snow.

"Good work," he murmured when she joined him next to it. "If I'd known you could do that, I might have asked you to just break the bloody ward."

"Not done, unless it's an emergency," she said. "Besides, I'll bet Roxbury would have known and come after us. Shall we?" She lay her hand against the stone.
"Go ahead --"

"Ah, why don't you. I'm a bit.... I haven't had to work that hard for a while," she admitted. "I feel a bit tired."

(She hadn't had to make such a concentrated effort in a long time, not the way she lived, and was rather disgusted with herself and ashamed to admit it: Snape looked at her quite sharply, but rather than sneering at her as she expected, he simply nodded.)

"We supplicate for entrance to the guardian of the Wood, Herne, Lord of the Forest," he rattled off: the ward dropped, and they stepped through into the magical oasis of Bannam Wood.

*****

"Bloody hell," Snape muttered after an hour and a half, and collapsed against a boulder. "No circle of yews -- or anything else remotely like it, blast the man."

"I vote for lunch," Hermione said in agreement. "Are you ready?"

"Might as well."

"The sandwiches are all yours," she noted as she rooted in the rucksack, pulled out the throw, and Engorged and spread it on the ground.

"Don't be stupid, I'm sure they're perfectly fine," he said testily, lowering himself onto the throw. He winced as he extended his bad leg, and Hermione felt a pang of pity for him: she wasn't exactly fresh herself, and she had two good legs.

"You first, then," she said, and handed over the napkin-wrapped bundle. "I don't like surprises."

He glared at her, pulled one of the sandwiches free, and lifted one piece of bread to examine the gooier contents.

"Pickle," he announced, and took a bite. "Nice ham, and a very good cheese. I'll be happy to finish them all, since you're so squeamish."

"All right, I'll have one. D'you want some soup now, or wait?"

"Now, before it cools further. Tea's worn off, I'm afraid."

She handed the flask over, and he busied himself with opening it while she pulled out a sandwich and took a bite -- and stopped in mid-chew when he gave a muffled, inhaled snort.

"What?" she demanded, shocked: it had sounded suspiciously like a tease, and as such was certainly from a most unlikely source.

"Nothing," he said nonchalantly (he couldn't quite seem to manage actual innocence).
"Yes, there is, you just... you just oinked at me! Are you implying that I'm a --"

"I'm saying that for an avowed vegetarian," he observed, not bothering to refute the charge, "you have demonstrated a decided preference for pig. That deep-freeze of yours is stuffed with sausages."

"I didn't have any breakfast at all," she sulked, and went right on chewing. "At this point, food's food -- as long as it doesn't contain Troll mucus."

He sipped at the soup, and then said, "With the possible exception of yesterday, you've had meat at least once a day since Yule. I'm afraid it's a matter of willpower."

"You're a rotten influence. Happy?"

"Oh, I'm quite satisfied. I'm simply pointing out that your habits don't match your ideals, and you have very little resistance to temptation."

"I'll feed you nothing but vegetables for the rest of the weekend, if you'd prefer," she threatened.

"Ah, but I now know where you hide the sausages, and I'm perfectly capable of cooking my own."

"Bastard," she muttered. "Stop hogging the soup, hand it over."

(His snarking didn't stop her from finishing the sandwich, though, or picking out another.)

"So," she said, largely to change the subject, "who is Herne?"

"Guardian of the --"

"I know that, and you know what I mean. Mythologically."

"Why should I know about ancient Muggle mythology that doesn't apply to --? Very well. Probably the local version of the Horned God. Protector of the animals and all wild things. You've heard of the Green Man?"

Hermione nodded.

"Another face to the local deity which would take that role."

"Oh. Fertility and all that," Hermione noted sourly.

"Not necessarily," Snape said. "Or rather, the darker aspect of it. Death, that replenishes the earth -- that must, to make way for rebirth and new growth."

"I don't think I like that, in the larger context," Hermione said. "Do you think Flaherty might have been trying to --"
"I shouldn't read so much into it, if I were you -- probably coincidence," he said, took another sandwich himself, and leaned back against the boulder. "Anything else you'd care to annoy me with before we move on?"

"You did promise to tell me about Slytherin," she said, ignoring the barb.

"Ah, so I did, blast it. The problem with Muggles and Muggleborns," he said thoughtfully as he chewed, seeming to disregard any offence she might take at that, "is not that they dilute Wizarding blood. It's that they dilute magical blood."

"What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"Think of Classification, but not solely of human subgroups, not Muggle or Wizard. Think of the larger issue."

"Magical creatures in total?" she said, shocked. "Regardless of whether human or animal?"

"Human or humanoid, to be precise. It's a question of the introduction of non-magical creatures and humans into purely magical bloodlines."

"Are you telling me," she demanded, "that Slytherin would have preferred that wizards breed with something like trolls, resulting in cases like that... that man back there, rather than a non-magical human?"

"Infinitely preferable, as far as he was concerned. Not that troll would be a good choice, mind you - that's a bit beyond the Pale for even the most dedicated magical purist, though in some isolated areas it was obviously done well past the legislation. Slytherin had a hierarchy of desirable humanoid types, with what we would classify today as homo sapiens wizardii at the top, Veela next down, and so on -- with Muggles classified as non-magical creatures rather than homo sapiens, I'm afraid. Nothing at all wrong with being a magical hybrid, as long as the mixture wasn't too far down on the scale. A specimen like Hagrid would have been perfectly acceptable three thousand years ago, for example, and as late as a thousand years ago to someone who shared Slytherin's views."

"That's --"

"Disgusting?" Snape said mildly. "Is that how you feel about Hagrid, as you felt about our host?"

"No, of course not. Come on, Severus, how can this even be... Cross-species mating is impossible - -"

"For non-magical creatures, yes. For magical creatures that might once have shared a common magical ancestor? Entirely possible, at least before the species became so distinctly different. Again, there's Hagrid. How do you explain him, if it's impossible? Or Flitwick? He was one-quarter human, did you know that?"

"No, I -- But why? Why take such a restrictive stance?"
"It's not restrictive, it's inclusive, magically speaking -- inclusive of species you think of as inferior. And he did so because of precisely the kind of problem we have today," Snape said more-or-less patiently. "Because Slytherin foresaw that if wizards continued to breed with Muggles, it would eventually lower diversity of gifts and skills in the magical population. Not in those terms, of course, but that was the gist of it, even if he was terribly off on genetic undesirability of Muggleborns.... Better a wholly magical creature, even if there were some annoying traits involved, than risk diminishing magical power and losing valuable skills. He'd already noted the trend -- gifts and talents such as Animagism beginning to disappear, for example."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said stubbornly.

"Is it? Look at your culture's mythology and folk tales, Hermione -- good gods, you don't have to look at it overall, you can confine it to Britain. What were Selkies, if not witches and wizards in their Animagus form? Any of the stories involving animal transformation and communication will do, really, and there are a great many, because in ancient times the talents were fairly common. Slytherin's own gift of Parseltongue was one reason he developed an interest in the problem, and wanted to examine why those gifts were becoming unusual. Now, of course, they're actually rare, and a case could be made that Slytherin was entirely correct."

"But there are people like Tonks, too --"

"Yes, and she's considered a freak, in certain quarters. That gift was always rare to begin with, and highly prized -- and here she is, a half-blood who by all rights shouldn't have any outstanding special skill at all, and she's a bloody Metamorphmagus and a quite good one. She's a sport, a throwback, at least to those who care to assume that Mixedbloods must be inferior. She makes both camps uneasy -- the exclusively-human proponents, or at least the ones who know how the gifts were acquired, and the Pureblood. It could only have been worse if she were Muggleborn, as far as the latter are concerned.... Are you going to drink all the rest of that yourself, or do I deserve more? I rather think I'm earning my upkeep, with the lecture."

Hermione shoved the cup over to him.

"So you're telling me that as far as Purebloods are concerned, a creature is better than a Muggle?" she demanded.

"No, I'm not saying that at all. You're confusing Slytherin's ancient philosophy with modern Pureblood attitudes," he retorted coolly, and poured more soup for himself. "Slytherin objected on the broad principle that what was not purely magical didn't belong at Hogwarts, or anywhere else in the magical world for that matter, and that resorting to a cross-species mating of magics was preferable to anything else. The modern Pureblood -- most of them, at any rate -- would no more accept that than you. Slytherin's was never a popular view to begin with, for obvious aesthetic reasons," he added. "As far as Pureblood belief goes, it's a matter of a similar philosophy, but on a smaller scale, if you will. More exclusive -- mating with only other Pureblood wizards or witches. And the Isolationists take it a step further by calling for expulsion of all Mixedbloods."

"I see. Now. Why on earth didn't Binns cover this in History?"
"Would you care to try to explain all that to a room full of hormonally-addled adolescents? It's difficult enough with an adult female with the wits to understand, but who has a vested interest in having her knickers in a twist."

"I'm not being hostile," she mumbled. "I just.... I had no idea."

"It brings up sensitive issues, in any case," Snape said. "Few people mind admitting to Veela blood, but if you've something else that's now considered... undesirable, hanging off a branch of the family tree, you don't want it known nowadays. Gregory Goyle's great-great-uncle turned out much like the barkeeper, for some reason. They kept him locked up in the cellar until the day he died."

"But why the.... Oh, that's just disgusting, locking someone up. I really didn't need another reason to detest the Goyles more.... Why the antagonism now? I mean, look at the way giants and trolls -- well, full trolls deserve it, given how destructive they are, but -- the way giants are marginalised."

Snape laughed cynically. "That's quite an understatement. The unpolluted homo sapiens form was always considered more desirable. By the fifth century before the Common Era, it was the absolute norm. And what people dislike or fear, they denigrate. In this instance, they go so far as to subjugate, because the fully-human wizard must be superior. Whether they can really be called 'fully-human' or not, given that somewhere back along the line there may be creature blood, as well as Muggle."

Hermione stared off into the trees. "Hating what they are, or were," she said slowly. "No wonder Malfoy thought me a freak, with all those stupid notions floating about." She shot Snape a sidelong glance. "I don't suppose you know whether --?"

"The Malfoys, or the Snapes?"

"Snapes."

"No idea," he said, thankfully more amused by the question than offended. "Not enough information, and the line has... bred true as far back as I'm aware. What were the wagers in the Gryffindor Common Room?"

"Bat," she admitted. "Or vampire, but I knew that couldn't be right after you'd refereed Quidditch. One hundred percent git, certainly. Cripes," she muttered in disgust. "So Slytherin really did start it all, just not precisely the way I'd thought."

Snape had the decency to let her sit alone with her thoughts for a few minutes -- and to get away with her jibe -- and then nudged her elbow and handed her the last cupful of soup.

"I suggest that we go on to Withycombe," he said. "If it's here, it's so well-hidden that we can't find it. And it will be getting dark, soon."

"All right. Hold on a moment," she protested as he stood, his knee audibly cracking.
"Stay put and finish that, I have to... attract a gnome or two," he said vaguely, and wandered off into the brush.

What the bloody.... Oh. He has to pee.

She felt the blood rise to her face, and mentally swatted at the embarassment.

Funny, that you could learn to stand someone touching your body in very intimate ways, and yet become so stupidly silly over other normal bodily functions.... But then he must feel a bit awkward, too, or he wouldn't have used that ridiculous euphemism. That, or he was being deliberately teasing again, but she didn't think so: his "teases," such as they were, were usually quite pointed, mocking (like the one this morning about sex), and frequently vicious.

The oink was a definite anomaly, however.... Probably just a vestige of the Lockhart persona. She remembered that he'd had one of those annoying laughs, some disgusting mix of a bray and a snort. No, Snape was simply undoubtedly happy to get off that damned knee, and a bit confused from acting like silly-ass Lockhart. That must be it....

All in all, though, Snape was far too much work to attempt to figure out, and she wasn't going to do it in the middle of the bloody cold Warwickshire woods. (She was absolutely certain she wouldn't ever, regardless, but certainly not today.)

And she was very glad that she didn't have to pee yet herself, because she was just nervous enough about gnomes that she'd feel the need to have him watch her back. Literally.

She had the things packed away in the rucksack by the time he ambled back into the clearing, map already in hand.

"Ready?" he murmured, and she nodded. "Let's backtrack to the King Stone, I imagine we can't Apparate from within the oasis. Perhaps you'd care to try the Apparition? I'd suggest going singly, but if one of us is off we'll waste time tracking the other down --"

"I suspect," Hermione said with some regret -- because she should like to try it, "that you're much better than I at doing it blind. I've never had to go solely by a map."

He nodded. "It does take a bit of trial-and-error, unfortunately, until you get the knack of it," he said, "but now that you've experienced it, you could always practise later in the general area since you've a reference now."

They made their way wordlessly back to the King Stone and stepped to the other side of the ward; and then Snape drew her next to him, took another look at the map, and then popped them over to Withycombe Wood.

*****

Withycombe Wood
They repeated the process of finding the King Stone all over again, once they'd trudged to the northern edge of Withycombe -- which was a bit confusing as another wood abutted Withycombe to the north, but thankfully Snape had noted that, and took care to consult the map often; the King Stone let them pass, and they searched for anything at all like a ring of yews, moving through the brush and undergrowth, and trying to keep the other in sight at all times.

Snape's odd good mood was deteriorating fast: after a long hour's hike, he was muttering curses under his breath -- Hermione could hear him quite clearly, even at a distance.

"I'm beginning to think it's no use," she admitted when they took a break, both seated on a deadfallen oak; Snape had pulled out the map again, and they'd made a guess as to how much area they'd covered. "It's a very small needle in one of many possible haystacks."

"There's nothing you can do Arithmantically, is there?" Snape asked. "No tracking charm, or --"

"No, those only work on wands and people, I'm afraid. Or if there's a deliberate attempt to leave traces, but I doubt he'd have left breadcrumbs, so to speak. A letter written in his hand just isn't enough." She glanced at Snape. "How did you track down, er, whatshisname?"

"Kingsley. I'd prefer not to.... It's a rather complicated story, and the tracking involves a Dark spell you're better off not knowing," he muttered. "Nothing that would work with Flaherty, at any rate."

*That* was perplexing -- until she remembered a Dark Arts ritual she'd seen described in a restricted text, one she'd "borrowed" from her mentor out of sheer curiosity: it required a certain... prior intimacy on the part of the Caster and Subject, as she recalled.

*Oh. Oh. Snape and Kingsley were... lovers?*

*Oh, good God, Hermione, why shouldn't they be?*

There might be *other* spells that didn't have potentially shocking implications, of course, but given that he didn't want to talk about it....

*Not certain I like that he could track me the same way too, either....*

She filed the information away for future reference -- it might do to research the ritual and any counters later, in case she ever found herself needing to disappear from Snape's radar -- and quashed the impulse to ask totally impertinent questions that would no doubt make him snap her head off. It had been a *fairly* uneventful day for that, considering, and Hermione didn't feel like breaching their uneasy truce.

"Have to keep on slogging, then, I guess," she finally said, and stood.

"Hang on a moment," Snape said irritably.

She nearly retorted, swinging around with a retort on her lips, and saw how pale and drawn his face was -- the lines about his mouth deeply carved, and both hands clasped around the blasted bad
knee, presumably attempting to warm it -- and instead she said levelly, "I'm just going to the top of that rise, and I shan't be out of sight. According to the map we're near the edge of the wood, so if we can rule that direction out...."

"Fine," he muttered. "Come back straightaway if I call to you."

"I will," she said, and took off up the slope.

It was nasty going: snarls of brambles had grown up under the areas not thoroughly shaded by oaks, and she had to pull her wand and cut her way through at one or two points: by the time she reached the top she was out of breath and sporting more than a few scratches, and had to lean back against a tree-trunk at the summit to rest for a moment.

It was no wonder that what was in the hollow below her didn't quite sink in for a while: a ring of jagged protruberances sticking out of the snow, around a little hillock with an ancient yew rising out of the centre.

*It -- but they're not yews, and it's not a complete circle -- it's breached on the eastern side....*

"Severus!" she shouted over her shoulder.

He started. "What is -- *Get back here* if it's dangerous, you fool --" he snarled, and shot up from the log and started to limp up the slope, wand in hand.

"No, no, it's not. Don't rush, I just think you need to see this."

(He rushed anyway, slipping once and nearly going down when his knee buckled under him.)

"What?" he managed between gasps when he'd reached the top.

She pointed, he stared, and then he barked out a laugh.

"Do you think --?"

"Better possibility than anything we've yet seen," he admitted.

"But Pugworthy said yews."

"Pugworthy's not noted for strict accuracy -- more interested in being *poetical* than precise. He probably conflated one yew into an entire ring. *Henge* markers, and around a barrow, no less -- deathly sentinals, indeed."

"It's a barrow?"

"That's a man-made hillock, it's far too regular in shape. Might have been more an observatory or worship site, once, before they built the barrow -- they must have moved on, and perhaps left their dead behind in their sacred site. You see that jumble of stones, at the base? Probably the entrance."
Hermione felt slightly queasy. "So we might have to dig at an old burial?"

Snape's mouth twitched. "I doubt the occupant is in any condition to object."

"It's not *that*, it's a disruption of an archaeological site, that's all. Very bad form."

"Ridiculous. Muggle archaeologists aren't getting in here, regardless," he noted. "And if there is any digging involved, it shan't likely be much -- I doubt he was able to enter the barrow itself. Come along," he added, went ahead of her down into the swale that surrounded the barrow, past the standing stones, and carefully picked his way up the side of the hillock; he halted at the top and reached for her as she scrabbled after him, and pulled her the rest of the way up.

"What if it's not --"

"It is," he said sharply, and nodded to one of the yew-branches: an odd bit of tattered, translucent fabric fluttered from it, secured with several loops of stout twine.

"What on earth is it?"

"Nadder-skin," he said, voice oddly content. "Hallucinogenic properties when the infusion is ingested."

"*Oh* -- 'weed wide enough to --''

"Exactly. The bloody man didn't exactly mark it with an X, but he certainly sent a clear signal to any expert."

"What do you mean?" she asked as he moved to the base of the tree.

"It's an old herbalist's trick," he muttered. "Pull out the trowel, would you? Nadder-bite is quite unpleasant -- as are any number of things -- so you leave some kind of sign if you've run across a dangerous patch of whatever-it-is. A symbol scratched into a tree or rock, or as in this instance, you secure a bit of the substance where it will be seen. Anyone else seeing that would assume it's a nesting-site for nadders, avoid it during mating season, and be careful at any time," he added, taking the trowel from her.

"You never told us that."

"No use -- the centaurs will obliterate any human attempts to leave signs in the Forest, just to be bloody-minded," he said, and squatted next to the tree, wincing. "Come over here and block the sight-line. If I hit something, I don't want any watchers to see."

She crouched down next to him, and watched as he swept the snow clear from the ground.

"They wouldn't have planted the tree, would they?"
"No, it's not *that* old. A few centuries at most, probably a volunteer. *Ha,*" he said, examining the dead matter underneath. "Fortuitous -- I think he'd found a patch of oxlip as well. Do you have a handkerchief?"

Hermione rooted in her pockets, found one, and held it ready while Snape struggled with the frost-frozen soil, and then he dumped several wizened little roots and bulbs into it.

"And *that,* he muttered, and nodded to an odd bare patch in the middle of the vegetation, "looks very like someone's been here fairly recently."

Snape pulled another handkerchief from his own pockets, and then dug into the bare patch: it was a bit more yielding for being recently turned, and about five inches down he uncovered an oilcloth-wrapped package, about the size of a very small biscuit-box.

"Cripes," Hermione muttered. She couldn't quite believe they'd done it.

"Right, then," he said, tucking the box away into a pocket on the inside of his cloak, "put that lot away in the sack -- very visibly and casually, mind you -- and I'll clear up here."

She fussed with putting away the oxlip, and then took the trowel when he was done and put it away as well.

"All right, let's get out of here," she said.

"There's no rush now," he said, and she turned to find him propped up against the tree. "Bit of daylight left."

"*Severus,* we've got to get that thing open and --"

"And totally ignore the secondary excuse for being here?" he said mildly. "I think not."

"I am not going to shag you or anyone else in the middle of winter, in the open, on top of a bloody burial mound," she hissed.

"Don't be stupid," he shot back. "And you needn't worry, I'm not in any shape to do anything strenuous at the moment. Although I shall make an effort if you insist on being intractable. *Come here."

She glared at him, and then dropped the rucksack and stomped over to the tree: his mouth twitched at the victory, but he had the decency to spread one wing of his cloak over the ground for her. (The better to wrap his arm about her shoulders and pull her closer, she noted.)

"I'm tired, I'm cold, I'm hungry again, and I shall have to pee, soon," she muttered.

"If it's any consolation, I didn't see a single blasted gnome," Snape said. "Just remember, 'Leaves of three, let it --"
"Oh, shut it," Hermione said, and he snorted and perversely drew her even closer, and, most alarmingly, began to unbutton his coat, at the chest.

"Don't even think of it."

"Put your hand in, idiot," he growled. "What adult woman doesn't bother with gloves in the middle of winter? Your fingers are practically blue."

"I don't usually.... Oh, bloody hell."

Well, he was right: she'd forgot to dig her gloves out of the pile in the cupboard, and her fingers were aching from the cold. She snuggled closer and slipped her left hand inside his coat, (cripes, it is warm -- he has a blast furnace hidden about him somewhere), and her other arm around his waist.

"How long do we need to keep this up? I'm serious about the pee," she grumbled, and blew at a wayward strand of his hair that was tickling her nose.

"You know.... Firstly, this is quite an accomplishment, all concern about the cover aside. We deserve a minute's rest. And secondly, there are moments when I vastly prefer you with your mouth stoppered," Snape muttered, and promptly shifted, bent his head to hers, and initiated a thorough snog.

Hermione quite forgot about having to pee, at least for a few minutes. "We are right on top of a grave," she finally noted in desperation once he'd let her up for air.

"Consider it an experiment in the juxtaposition of Sex and Death," he noted distantly once he'd straightened and leaned back against the tree again. "An extremely mild one."

"Don't be faceti-- ...are you serious? People get worked up about that?"

"Some. You'd be horrified by the lengths to which some will go," he said, staring out at the eastern end of the standing stones. "I am not among them."

"Ewwwww. I don't mean squicky ewwww, I mean horrible ewwww."

"Yes, I'd gathered that. I feel the same. An innocent encounter in an otherwise lovely setting, in the presence of a dead someone unburdened with modern morals who would probably have wholeheartedly approved in any case, is another matter. Besides," he added with an upward glance, "I've needed the time to think. Been trying to figure out how to get the blasted snakeskin down. It might be important, and it's hard to find -- I don't want to have to come back, if I can avoid it."

"Oh. Can't you just pull it off?"

Snape pulled his wand and tried, but the skin stayed put.
"Thought so," he said, and grunted. "He's fixed it too firmly, damn it, with a spell. The skin will have to be cut, not the rope -- it's delicate work, and a charm will likely shred it."

"Levitate me?"

"Terribly high for that, it must be twenty feet up, and.... No, it's not safe."

"Well, then," Hermione said, and pulled herself free of his arms, "I'll have to go up the tree."

"I don't think that's wise --"

"I used to do it all the time, at home -- we had an apple tree," she said as she stood, "and Dad sent me up for the top ones. He secured me with a harness, of course, but.... You'll just have to cushion the ground for me if I fall, that's not nearly as rough as Levitation. Have you got a knife?"

"There's a bloody big difference in springiness between apple and yew, blast it. I don't want you to --"

"I'll be fine -- I'm skinny, and it's a bloody big yew. I'll just have soggy socks when it's done," she said, shucking off first her coat, and then boots. "Knife?"

He stared at her for a moment, and then went through his pockets and finally withdrew a penknife.

"If it's too slippery, come down," he said, stern. "It's not worth it."

"I will," she said, and took the penknife from him, slipped it into her back pocket, and started shinnying up the tree, careful to brush the snow away as she went so she wouldn't slip. (She did once anyway, and had to reassure Snape that she was fine despite his angry, "Hermione, come down this instant.")

"There are four or five of them, actually, all in the same bundle," she called down once she'd reached the slender branch they were fixed to.

"Leave one, then," Snape called back. "In case it's an actual warning."

She hooked a leg firmly about the nearest thick limb, pulled free the knife, and bent across to saw at the skins, sending them floating down to Snape: and then, teeth chattering, she folded and dropped the knife to him and began the perilous climb down.

"Hold on," Snape muttered when she was close enough to the ground to jump: he grabbed one sodden-socked foot and jammed her boot on it, and then the other, and then caught her about the waist as she dropped, to make the landing easier. "Let's go -- you're sure to catch cold, now."

"D- don't suppose you have P- Pepper-Up on you?" she asked as she wriggled back into her coat.

"No," he said, scrambling after the skins. (He must have resisted the urge to catch them and kept his wand and eyes trained on her, she decided, surprised.) "And the apothecaries will be closed by the
time we return. I can make you some tomorrow at the club, if need be. A hot toddy will have to do	onight."

"That'll work. Let's g- get out of here."

It was a long hike back to the King Stone -- with two stops interspersed, one ostensibly to address
Hermione's aching bladder (she didn't need to go that badly, really, but she could tell Snape needed
a rest), and the other when Snape stumbled into a fox-hole, twisting that damned knee -- and they
finally stepped clear of the wards; and without even asking, Hermione reached for Snape's hand,
clased it firmly, and Apparated them directly to her flat.

*****

Snape didn't grumble about her taking charge, as it happened: he merely quirked an eyebrow, took
the rucksack from her, and said, "Hot bath now, hot toddy soon as I can manage, and hot soup
after," and gave her a push toward the bathroom.

"You won't --" she began anxiously as she shucked off her coat.

"No, I won't open the blasted thing without you," he growled, and pulled it out of his cloak. "Go on,
before you start sniffling."

"All right. Whisky's in the --"

"I know, I've already found it," he said, and waved her away: so she trotted off to the bath, turned
the hot tap on full, and prayed that the ancient boiler would provide something other than tepid
water. (If it died before she could have it replaced, she would have to have the water line hooked
back up to the Aga, something to be avoided at all cost: the bloody thing was almost as
temperamental as Snape when it was required to do its entire job properly.)

The day hadn't come without cost, Hermione noted once she'd stripped. A few of the brambles had
poked through her trousers and left nasty scratches down her legs, matching those on her hands; she
had rather spectacular bruises along the backs of her knees from the tumble over the tombstone,
and her bum hurt from the same incident; and she'd managed an abrasion to her stomach as well,
shinnying up the damned tree.

Flaherty, it better have been worth it. I think Snape's probably in far worse shape, and he's going
to be an absolute bugger about it.

She clipped her hair up, rooted in the cupboard for the salts and dumped a generous handful in, and
then followed them into the tub. Whatever god oversaw the proper functioning of water-boilers was
gracious, and the bath was blissfully hot (though she hadn't had to add any cold), and she'd nearly
forgot about Snape until the door opened.

Oh, cripes -- should have used bubbles --

"Drink this down," he said, and matter-of-factly crossed to her and handed her a glass of toddy.
And then he promptly turned to leave.

"Severus --"

He halted. "Yes?" he said over his shoulder, not meeting her eyes.

(Funny, that he wouldn't look at her: he had no trouble doing so in other circumstances....)

"There's a heating-pad in the cupboard, if you want it for your knee."

"A what?"

"Kind of an electric hot-water bottle."

"Ah.... I think I'll pass, thank you. I'm putting the soup on, so as soon as you're warm...."

"Thanks."

He slipped through the door, leaving it ajar.

Hermione took a sip of the toddy -- wonderfully hot and buttery, although the tremendous amount of whisky he'd used made her eyes water -- set the glass on the tub's edge, and sank further down into the water, letting it lap about her earlobes.

_Odd, I'd have thought he'd.... Well, no, Stupid, he must be feeling like utter shit himself. Might be another story if he felt better. Although I ought to give him credit for some thoughtfulness -- the toddy is a nice surprise._

She worried over some of the day's thoughts -- Ron, mostly (_I shall have to write, the sooner the better -- if he's heard and I just show up, I'll get an earful_), and then, very briefly, of Snape and Kingsley.

Was that why he'd been determined to find Kingsley, because they'd been... involved? And if they were -- if it were an emotional attachment, rather than casual -- how could he bear to give the man Eternal Sleep?

It _couldn't _have been something serious, though. Could it? Severus Snape had -- in the last week, certainly -- impressed her as unmistakably heterosexual....

_Oh, for fuck's sake, Hermione -- why do you care? At any rate, let's not be hypocritical or jump to conclusions -- he's a human being, no matter that it took you forever to figure that out. No need to be squicked by it, either, they were adults, and presumably chose each other. At least I hope so, for Kingsley's sake._

She took another long drink, scrubbed at her face with wet hands, and _tried_ to put everything out of her mind.
Doesn't tell me a damned thing about Snape, anyway, other than that someone might have found him desirable in whatever way, she thought, grumpy. No accounting for taste.

*****

Hermione didn't spend nearly as long in the bath as she'd anticipated, the toddy neatly warming her from the inside-out; and she suspected Snape needed a hot bath as much as she had, though he'd have to wait a while for the boiler to recover. By the time she'd decided a good hair-wash was in order, though, the smell of tomato soup wafting through the flat convinced her it could wait: she managed to drag herself out and pull on some clean clothes -- and to snag the heating-pad from the cupboard -- and went out to the kitchen to see what Snape had wrought.

He was seated at the kitchen counter, in his shirt-sleeves, had already started on his soup, and had unwrapped the box though he hadn't opened it.

"Better?" he grunted at her, eyes fixed on the box.

"Much, thanks," she said, and filled a deep mug with the soup. (He'd added *something* intriguing to the tinned muck, though she couldn't identify it: it could only be an improvement.) "There should be enough hot water for yours in a half-hour or so."

"I'd like to sort this out, first."

"Well, let's take it to the sitting-room, then. I need to put my feet up."

She padded on ahead of him with mug in hand, left it on the table, and had plugged the heating-pad in by the time he'd slowly made his way in after her and seated himself.

"Here -- put this over the knee," she said, switching it on.

"What? No, thank you."

"Severus, *come on*, it won't hurt in the least.... Or would you rather try cold, first? Is it swollen?"

"What I *want*," he hissed, "is to get this over with. My bloody knee is not your concern."

"Fine," she managed and dropped the heating-pad, doing her best to keep the hurt from her voice. "I just don't think you need to be uncomfortable, that's all. How did he ward it?"

"He didn't."

"Let's get on with it, then. Go ahead," she said, and curled up next to him, sipping at her soup.

He fumbled with the catch for a moment, and lifted the lid: there was a tightly-folded bundle of papers inside, and he prised them out and spread them apart.

"What --" she said, wriggling closer.
"First is a contract, it appears. For manufacture of the substance," Snape said, scanning the paper. "Signed by Bingelwort, Cunningham, and Fudge himself."

"Bingelwort's the CEO, but who is Cunningham?"

"Head of Research, I think. I'd heard he was with them.... Took NEWTs a few years ahead of me, decent Potions scores. Not good enough for Bluett to take an interest, so he must have worked his way up. This is.... It's absolutely blatant," Sanpe said, not bothering to conceal considerable astonishment. "They're very forthright about the actual purpose of the blasted stuff."

"They'd have to be with the Research and Development Division, wouldn't they? It would have to be tested for effectiveness on premises before they shipped it."

"I imagine so," Snape murmured, and passed that paper to her. "Particularly if they wanted to make certain it shipped directly from Mangel and Mortars to St. Mungo's, that would keep the Ministry out of the distribution. They can pin the blame any so-called tainting squarely on M and M, then -- tricky, that. This," he said of the next sheet, "is results of the tests in Azkaban."

"Oooo -- what does it --" Hermione said, dropping the contract and unconsciously wriggling even closer, leaning against Snape's arm.

"Roughly seventy-two percent effectiveness," he said, voice strangled. "Of one hundred fifty-nine female test subjects, one hundred fifteen became pregnant within two months, although there was a higher incidence of miscarriage than in the general population --"

"Christ --"

"-- and another twelve percent achieved pregnancy in the following two months, with a similar rate of miscarriage. There were significant side effects for the male test subjects, including instances of priapsim and madness in cases where the mated pairs -- that's exactly how they phrase it, 'mated pairs' -- were isolated after pregnancy occurred, and no other mating partner was provided."

"My God."

Snape swore a blue streak, and dropped the paper as if it were red-hot.

"So it's a fertility drug," Hermione said. "Pregnancy rate in the general population has dropped to sixty percent in the last decade -- that's a damned huge increase."

"A fertility drug with a significant aphrodisiac quality," Snape corrected her. "Look at what it did to the male subjects."

"They can't possibly hope to pull this off. What's the use of a fertility drug when people have contraceptives available?"

He turned to face her, unaccountably angry. "How an otherwise intelligent woman can miss an obvious.... Are you certain they will?" he asked more cautiously, searching her eyes.
"What do you mean? I haven't seen any evidence at all of.... All right, Severus, what do you know that I don't?"

The tense lines about his mouth softened and he asked uncertainly, "You really hadn't thought to go to an apothecary, had you? Or haven't been in any case, so haven't noted the changes?"

"No, I seldom need anything that I can't get up the road at the chemist's -- I hate dealing with the mess in Diagon Alley. Why?"

"Last year," he said, "several rather important ingredients were put on the Restricted Usage list, including two vital to Contraceptive potions, and the Ministry has limited the amount of brewed contraceptive that manufacturers can produce. Consequently, you can't simply buy a potion any longer. You must have a healer's order, and you have to sign for it at the apothecary just as you must for Slug Repellent or any number of more dangerous substances. They have the means now to track contraceptive users, Hermione. Have probably been doing so for a while."

"But how can they --"

"The Ministry can't keep people from going out and collecting the herbal ingredients, no -- if they don't need them in great quantity, if they can get hold of the restricted ingredients, and if they have the skill to brew it themselves. And I can tell you that most don't, no matter how hard I've tried to knock Class 1 potions into the idiot's heads. Even those of us with perfectly above-board reasons for requesting the restricted items have to jump through hoops. I have to submit very precise requests for many things, and justify each. I'll wager that's why half the people on the flight-risk list have been put there, because they've signed for contraceptives or have access to the restricted ingredients --"

He broke off, suddenly, and took a deep breath before continuing. "That's why I elected to brew it for you myself, so you shouldn't have to sign... or sign any longer, as I didn't know what you'd been up to before October. Not to mention that I didn't trust that pre-brewed muck before, and certainly don't now."

"Holy.... I had no idea about those restrictions, none."

"Wasn't announced, even in the Prophet -- they simply put it in place. The next step, I presume, will be an outright ban on contraceptive, which shall be almost impossible to enforce in the first place and impractical at any rate as people find other... options. And that's where this fucking thing comes into play. Require at least part of the population to undergo the supposed treatment -- those who haven't proven their fertility and that they can produce healthy children, at minimum -- and then sit back and watch the pregnancy rate shoot through the roof."

"But... but I've told them," Hermione said, utterly bewildered. "I've told them you can't try to force things like reproduction. It has tremendous social consequences -- increased death rates for mothers and children, increased poverty -- and those don't even begin to address the long-term consequences."
"They don't care, Hermione. The Ministry simply don't care. Their agenda -- whether it's meeting the blasted quotas, or some zealous commitment to their own personal morality at the expense of others' lives -- is paramount, and anyone else's choices and opinions don't matter. Not in the least. You might as well try arguing the Fourth Arithmantic Operation with a dedicated anti-Apparitionist. There's no logic involved, and no consideration for actual evidence. It's all about belief, not common sense and science. Surely you've had some proof of that by now, judging by Corcoran's behavior."

She lapsed back into the corner of the sofa, hands trembling; Snape stared into the empty grate for a moment, and then reached over, plucked the mug from her hands, set it on the table, and pulled her close to him. He was hot and stank of sweat from the day's exertions, and his neck was grimy with it as well as his own scent when she buried her face against it.

Hermione didn't care in the least. At the moment he was the one fixed point in her universe, as unlikely as that seemed or as unthinkable as it might once have been.

"I retract it," he said, voice unsteady, though Hermione couldn't tell whether from suppressed rage or horror.

"What?" she mumbled against his shoulder.

"Anything I said about the idiocy of your meddling. Not that I approve of the way you've gone about it, but...."

She shivered, and he chafed her arm and back.

"If you must sneeze," he muttered, "try to miss me, please. You're no Troll, but I'm sure it's unpleasant."

"Don't need to, I think the whisky staved it off. No, I was thinking about their... test subjects."

"Yes, that's a particularly horrid image, isn't it? I wonder how many of my former associates were among them."

"Does it say how many deaths there were as a result of --"

"Probably, but I didn't get that far and frankly I don't want to look again, at the moment."

"All right, I can't blame you for that."

They sat silent for a while, Hermione not at all inclined to pull away -- nor, apparently, Snape willing to shove her off -- and she finally ventured, "They won't be able to cover it up for long, even if we can't do anything. Someone will start to question the rising death rates. Or the economic impact."

"Who is there to question the death rates? You, and a few healers at St. Mungo's. I shouldn't try that if I were you -- not overtly. And the economy.... How long will that take? A decade? A generation?"
They've always blamed poverty squarely on the poverty-stricken. Laziness, lack of ambition, alcoholism -- as far as the government is concerned, they're a cause of poverty, not a result, and as long as most people are getting by the public don't bother to question that. Look at the Weasleys -- they've always been blamed for their situation precisely because they were so fruitful. Living beyond their means, with all those mouths to feed -- and to some extent it's true."

"But they were an unusual case," Hermione argued, "and God knows Arthur Weasley's done his damndest to provide for them, successfully. I understand your point, though -- it will be a quite different matter when it becomes far more common. There'll almost certainly be a backlash. Cripes."

Snape sighed, and looked down at the last bit of paper in his lap: it was obviously a potions receipt, but it was far beyond Hermione's comprehension, even with NEWTs-level training.

"Can you make any sense of it? Does it look at all like a --"

"Aphrodisiacs are not my speciality," Snape said dryly. "I chucked those out of the curriculum first thing. The antidotes, yes -- every few years some idiot decides it would be great fun to do extracurricular brewing and wreak havoc in their Common Room. This simply doesn't look right, in any case, from the little I do remember. They're not the kind of ingredients one would associate with an aphrodisiac. Then there's the fertility component, and I really have no idea whatsoever on that score."

"It's not a straightforward potion?"

"No, it can't be, it's a hybrid. You see here, where they've added Mugwort? That's to buffer the reaction between the Doxy egg and Skullcap, because the two react rather violently in combination -- they're from totally different potions. They've taken a great deal of care to minimise several problems like that, because so many of these are uncomplimentary. I'd go so far as to say dangerous, in terms of the potential interactions."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked, and pointed at a scribbled notation.

Snape held the paper closer to his eyes, squinting, and then snorted. "'The last active ingredient is to be delivered to M and M by a third party, and is not to be analysed or stockpiled.' It's proprietary, in other words -- the Ministry doesn't want the company to be able to produce the potion on its own."

"Oh --"


He flicked the receipt away from him, and it went, spinning, to join the other papers on the floor: Hermione gave up the fight, closed her eyes, and buried her face against his neck again.

"All right," she finally said. "What do we do now?"

"Do we do anything?" Snape said softly. "Don't forget, that's always an option."
"I don't know about you, but I don't think I could live with myself, knowing this is a possibility. And it has nothing at all to do with our own situation."

"Hmmmph." He sighed. "Unfortunately I agree with you, although I'll admit that it's largely because under no circumstances do I want to be inflicted with that... muck. And we should be concerned about the possibilily, because I now have no bloody intention of... of bringing a child into this mess simply to avoid detection. Not in the current climate."

*Oh, thank God. I don't think I could do bear to, either. No insult intended to Severus.*

"We could always leave, relocate. Separately, I mean," Hermione added hastily. "I'm not implying we'd have to *remain* together, although a joint holiday would be a decent excuse to get out of the country."

"I... don't think that would work," Snape said. "Not that you're not free to make your own decision, but... I should appreciate knowing, because there's no point in pursuing this if you don't stay. You have all the useful contacts on the dissemination end of things."

"True. And I don't think I could get all the documents out with me, at any rate, not with my present...."

Snape sat upright and stared down at her. "Your present *what*, Hermione?"

"Present arrangements," she said weakly. "I *did* have a backup plan, you know. I just didn't count on finding this much additional info. Or having to get someone else out, as well."

He stared at her for another moment, and then snorted several times in succession and ran his free hand over his face.

"I should have guessed," he admitted. "'Plan B Granger,' indeed."

Hermione's cheeks burned. That hadn't been a compliment the first time around, though she'd noted Snape, at least, had glowered at Finnegan when the idiot had jeered about her caution.

"Yes, well this one isn't good enough to handle recent developments. And it shall take a bit of work to make it viable."

"Very well. I'd suggest, then," Snape said, "that we *do* split the work, for the time being. I'll have to take the receipt -- a copy, actually -- to the club tomorrow, and see what I can do to decipher it before Term starts. After that it will be very slow going. Among your other... arrangements, I'd suggest finding a good hiding-place for this lot. *Not* here, and I certainly don't want to take them to Hogwarts. Find someplace no-one would connect with either of us."

"All right, I can do that."

"I think I need that bath, now," he said, and unwound himself from about her and stood. "Much as I'd like to start on that tonight --"
"No, go in the morning," Hermione said, mind already racing. "Have a fresh start. I'll clean up here, just have your bath and go straight to bed."

"I shall."

He left the room, limping slightly; she heard him moving about in the kitchen for a moment, and then he entered the bedroom and closed the bathroom door.

*Oh, cripes. What a mess.*

She gathered all the documents together, folded them, and stuffed them back into the box: and having no better hiding-place for the time being, she wedged it up behind the flue's damper, and then wandered into the kitchen to tidy up. (There wasn't much to do: Snape was unusually considerate about that, but she imagined it was force of habit for a Potions Master with a spotless classroom.)

There *was* one thing she probably ought to do tonight, though, or it would bother her: write to Ron. She'd keep putting it off, otherwise -- just as she'd put off writing to her parents -- and it wouldn't do, not any longer. The problem was how to do it without him hitting the roof. (Too much to think he wouldn't question her sanity -- that was a given.)

She went back to the sitting room, sat at the desk, pulled out her stationery, and mentally composed her letter.

*Dear Ron -- Guess what? I've finally done it! Married good and proper. Need a hint? Think Greasy Git --*

*No, definitely not. And that's not fair to Severus.*

*Ron: DON'T BIN THIS JUST YET. You've probably heard already, and I'm terribly sorry for not writing sooner, but things have been a bit hectic. I know it will be a great shock, but I've gone and married Snape --*

*Why the bloody hell am I being so apologetic? I haven't done anything wr-- well, yes, I've done a lot wrong, but not to Ron. Except not talking to him for years. Cripes, that's half the problem, I feel like I'm writing to a total stranger rather than someone who ought to know me well enough to be decent about --*

She froze for a moment, and considered the implications of that: and then she uncapped her pen and made a start of it.

*Dear Ron,*

*I haven't been in touch because you weren't very happy with me when we last spoke, and you're probably still not. This is terribly important, though, and I really need you to bear with me and hear me out.*
There's a favour I need to ask of you, in person, and if you want to talk about anything you've heard about me recently (or not), that's fine. The important bit really doesn't have anything to do with that, but I'll be happy to have you tick me off on anything else if you'll only say it's all right to come see you. As soon as possible. I'm not joking about how important this is, unfortunately. I shouldn't bother you, otherwise.

Please let me know if it's possible. I'm sort of counting on you for this: my back's against the wall, at the moment.

I hope Laura and the kids are well -- I saw little Arthur's birth announcement in the Prophet. Big Arthur must be tickled pink, but I haven't seen him around to ask about the latest addition.

Hermione

Well, that will have to do.

She folded the letter, tucked it into an envelope ready for owling and set it aside with Flaherty's letter to his wife, and then made the rounds of the flat, turning out the lights and locking up: and then she got ready for bed and waited, impatient, for Snape to vacate the bath so she could brush her teeth.

After a half-hour she gave up and tapped at the door.

"Severus?"

No answer. She opened the door and peeked in.

He was still in the bath -- which was steaming copiously, far more than it should have been, given the condition of the boiler -- and his wand was on the tub-edge, next to a nearly empty and very large glass of hot toddy, his second as far as she knew, and looking as if there wasn't much water in it at all (none, possibly). Severus himself was asleep, and so far down in the water that his nose was nearly touching the surface.

Oh, bloody -- Brilliant. I thought he might conceivably electrocute himself, not drown in the bath.

She padded over, moved the glass and wand out of harm's way, and gently jiggled his shoulder -- and he jerked and wakened instantly, and foundered in the water.

"Wha --"

"You fell asleep," she said, and grabbed a fresh towel for him. "Put a heating charm on the water, didn't you? Not wise, given how tired you are --"

"I'm not, and I'd appreciate it if you'd --"

"Come on, out," she bossed him, and flipped the towel open to give him some measure of privacy.
"-- get the bloody hell out!" he sputtered.

"I shall, when I'm sure you can stand without keeling over. Very hot water and alcohol? Not a good combination, and now you're probably dehydrated, too."

"I don't need you treating me like a child, damn it."

"I'm not insisting on scrubbing your ears, I just don't need you cracking your head open. I'm being sensible. Come on, Severus. I shan't look."

He glared at her: she glared back, and refused to move.

"You are the most bossy, irritating --"

"-- impertinent, presumptuous bitch, yes. Let's consider that said and get on with it."

He finally gave up, struggled to his feet, promptly slipped, and had to grab for the edge of the tub.

"And, in this, instance, I'm right," Hermione added levelly.

He didn't appreciate that, not at all. He actually snarled at her as she wrapped the towel about his waist, and then he had to grab for her shoulder as he swayed again.

"Good God, your knee is swollen," she said, horrified, as he stepped out of the tub, giving her a good look at it -- and at the bruises on his shins.

"Blast you, it's none of your --"

"Severus, shut up," she said, and wrapped an arm about him and steered him out of the bathroom and toward the bed, barely getting him to the edge and the coverlet down before he collapsed. "Let me just get another towel to -- Stay," she commanded, and headed for the bathroom.

"Woof," he shot back sullenly, and she stopped and turned back to him.

"Playing at being Lockhart does very odd things to you, do you realise that?"

"No, that was Black. Fucking bastard," he muttered. "If I were acting like Lockhart I shouldn't be in your bed, believe me."

Hermione bit her tongue before she snapped out something involving the words testosterone or machismo or pig, and fetched another towel from the bath.

*That statement about Lockhart is interesting, though. Perhaps I'll have to revise the hypothesis about Kingsley. Or... oh, hell, I didn't know. Will never know.*

By the time she'd returned he'd splayed out across the sheets, wet body and all.
"You're going to regret that," she said, beginning to rub his shoulders and bony chest dry. (He'd managed to wash his hair before falling asleep, thankfully, although the pillow would be damp come morning: she'd have to remember to pin it up and leave the covers down, to air-dry.)

"Won't notice a thing," he said, damp hair stringing all over his face, and lay quiescent while she patted at his legs, and finally returned to the top to give his hair a vigorous scrub.

"I'm going to get you a big glass of water, and I want you to drink it down before you go unconscious," she informed him: he squinted up at her, and swatted her hands away.

"Yes, Matron. Must I pee in a basin -- which I shall inevitably have to do, in the middle of the night -- or shall you escort me to the loo and help me piss, Matron?"

_He's half-drunk -- more, I think, those toddies were damned potent -- he's exhausted, in pain, and very, very upset_, she reminded herself, and then smiled sweetly and said, "I'll be happy to help, if you'd like."

It almost backfired: a very intrigued and calculating look crossed his face, he opened his mouth to retort -- and then he seemed to re-evaluate the situation and give up. "Don't be ridiculous," he mumbled, and drew his left forearm over his eyes.

"Right, then. You'll thank me in the morning, anyway," she said. "Are you certain.... I know it's none of my business, Severus, but are you certain you don't want some ice for this?" she asked, and gingerly prodded the angry, swollen skin around his knee: he hissed and jerked his leg away, and said, "Yes. Yes I'm certain, no I don't want ice."

"That's no simple bolloxing-up, no matter what you told me earlier. What happened?"

"Firenze fell on me," he admitted thickly. "After we.... The field outside the house."

"The bloody horse _squashed_ you!"

Snape chuckled, a rusty, pained sound, and peered at her from under his forearm. "Your prejudices are showing again, Miss Granger."

"Three-quarters horse is enough for -- Never _mind_ my bloody prejudices, what happened? I knew you'd been in Infirmary for two weeks, but I didn't.... Well, I was preoccupied with Neville, and I didn't even see you in the ward."

"Understandable," he muttered indistinctly. "He was in extresh- _extremis_, you were allowed to be preoccupied. Was as it should be."

_Note to self: when trying to get information from Snape, exhaustion, two huge whiskies on nothing but soup, and an hour in a very hot tub work wonders."

"Well?"
"We'd... we were searching for survivors," Snape admitted, arm once more firmly across his eyes. "Firenze and I. We'd missed McNair, he'd been chucked in with their dead, and he took a shot at me. Firenze stepped in front and... took it. Fool. Collapsed on me, crushed the leg from the knee all the way to the hip."

*Oh, shit.*

"Why on earth didn't they send you to St. Mungo's?"

He snorted. "Half the Death Eaters who'd escaped went there directly. *Not* the place to be, I'd be dead within an hour. Pomfrey did a damned fine job, anyway...."

"Obviously not."

"Yessss, *did,*" he contradicted her, and glared. "She's *bloody* good. Just took a bit longer. She had to work all the... crushed bits out before she could adminish -- *administer* Skele-Gro."

"Oh, bloody.... Never mind, I don't want to know how long it took. It sounds awful."

She wisked away the damp towels (including the one over his privates, ignoring an abortive swipe and growl from him), and went to the kitchen for the water: by the time she'd returned he'd wriggled under the sheets -- the need to protect his modesty greater than his drink-induced sloth, she assumed -- and she had to chivvy him to sit up and drink.

"Serious about the pee," he said darkly.

"So am I. Wake me if you aren't steady by then."

"Sorry."

"Don't be stupid, Severus, it's... it's been a long and tiring day, and very upsetting. I don't mind helping under the circumstances, really. Do you want a basin, in case your stomach --?"

"No, not that bad off. Usually a better head than this. Disgusting."

"Yes, it is, and no, I don't care -- *I told* you, I understand. Do you want to brush your teeth before --?"

"Fuck it," he said succinctly. "Not moving."

*Well, that explains a lot.*

"All right," she said, and went in to brush her own.

He was asleep by the time she slipped into the bed herself.

*Cripes. Severus Snape is... well, it's with good reason, but it's fair to say that he is totally f**ked up.*
Hermione had quite forgot what day it was until the ruckus outside woke her, seconds before Severus shot up in bed and groped frantically at the bedtable.

"Where's my --"

"It's all ri-- Severus, calm down, it's just fireworks. It must be midnight."

"Fireworks? Where's my bloody --"

"And noise-makers. It's New Year's Eve, it's nothing bad, really. Your wand's still in the bath -- No, no, I'll get it."

She stumbled into the bath in the dark and grabbed it, brought it back to him -- despite second thoughts on the wisdom of giving a tipsy, paranoid wizard his wand -- and then wriggled back under the covers.

"Bloody fucking hell," he cursed, and flopped back down flat.

*I'm definitely not telling Ron about this bit*, Hermione thought, and snorted.

"What?" Snape said belligerently.

"Nothing. Just the... the whole day. The last six months, actually."

"Lucky you, finding it amusing," he muttered.

"I don't, precisely, it's just.... It's either laugh or cry, at this point, and I'd rather laugh."

"Better than my solution, I suppose."

She wasn't certain why she felt the need to reach out to him -- residual pity for his physical pain, perhaps, or his embarassment at his over-reaction, or knowing that in his condition he wasn't likely to be able to take advantage of the gesture for once: but she followed the impulse anyway, leaned over, and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips.

"What the bloody hell do you --"

"It's a tradition. Happy New Year, Severus," she said, and snuggled back down under the covers, her back to him.

"Oh," he said, sounding more than a little shocked. He was silent for a bit, and then said more softly, "May it be a better one than the last."
She didn't know if he had to use the loo later: she was so tired herself that she didn't wake next morning until the sun was well up. Snape was snoring heavily beside her, with his wand still tightly clenched in his fingers.

*****

Chapter 10: Wherein Snape decides that things are getting a bit too personal, and Bluett sticks his long nose into things once again.

Hermione's flat  
Sunday January 1, 2008

Snape woke, vaguely aware that there was light and movement around him, and came to the conclusion that he was not in fact dead (although he suspected he might wish he were if he actually tried to move). This was mostly on account of the stiffness in his back, however; while a hangover was present, it was the least of his problems. It was by no means the worst hangover Snape had ever experienced but it was different, and therefore uncomfortable: very little nausea, and less headache and sense of one's mouth being stuffed with cotton-wool (probably because Hermione had forced water on him, blast her for being sensible), but he felt weak. Washed-out and unsteady, and he could already feel the aching in muscles that had had far too much exercise yesterday. It was probably a good thing he hadn't had to use the loo in the night after all: he might have had to crawl there, because he bloody well wasn't going to take Hermione up on her offer.

It was surprising he hadn't had to piss, actually: the sad fact was that the older a wizard got, the more often he had to. He shuddered a bit at the thought, remembering many occasions when Dumbledore's eyes would suddenly go glassy and vacant in mid-sentence, and he'd abruptly excuse himself and begin peeking around the edges of tapestries, looking for the Room of Requirement.

(Hermione had noted once after an Order meeting, that last year -- utterly mystified -- that Dumbledore seemed to check in on her quite frequently when she was working in the Room, and would for no apparent reason disappear into one of the little anterooms, stay in there a bit, and then just as suddenly leave. Snape had been hard-pressed not to laugh at the time, or to tell her what the old man had interrupted her for: but he wasn't laughing any longer. He reckoned that he was on the cusp of Old Coothood -- not surprising, given that his plumbing had got more than its fair share of wear and tear, for one reason or another -- and he was not looking forward to the long, downward slide.)

He heard a rustling next to the bed, and a blast of cool air hit him below the waist.

Bloody.... What --?

He forced open his sleep-caked eyelids to find Hermione bent over him, the covers lifted, her head half-buried under them: and while in other circumstances that sight and her warm breath on his bare thigh might have brought some interesting thoughts to mind (and activity elsewhere), the fact that
she was poking -- actually polishing -- at his bad knee, roughly twelve inches too far down from where she might be, rather blasted any hope that she was doing anything constructive about making him feel better. (Not that he expected it. She was still adamantly unresponsive to hints about reciprocating favours, and he wasn't about to force her, not given the parameters of the agreement they'd reached.)

*But a man can dream....*

*That* plumbing was still working to satisfaction, thankfully, if not as frequently or quickly as when he was a youth.

"Your technique leaves a lot to be desired," he managed to say with maximum nastiness, and Hermione jerked upright, dropped the covers, stared at him, defiant -- and blushed.

"It's still very red and swollen," she said.

"Ah. Not uncommon in the morning, you should have sussed that out by now. Tactile examination is the usual method, however, not visual, and not *poking*, either. A bloke's bits are rather sensitive in that state."

"I meant the knee," she sputtered after a moment's shocked fuddlement, and looked very much as if she wanted to throttle him before she flounced out of the bedchamber.

He managed to stagger to the loo for that pee, then, sniggering all the way, quite justifiably pleased with himself. (He still greatly enjoyed keeping her off-balance, and it was pleasant to see her cheeks redden. Even if it usually meant she had murder on her mind.) And after a lovely, long pee he staggered back to the bed, collapsed in it, and spent the next half-hour trying to go back to sleep, when in fact he was doing his best to ignore the thought of Hermione's head bent over his groin, unruly hair feathering over his skin, fingers not prodding but stroking, and of wet heat and intense pressure on some very sensitive bits indeed.

The smell of fried black-pudding snapped him out of the fantasy.

Fantasising wasn't productive, anyway -- she could walk in at any moment, and he wasn't about to be caught wanking away or rutting at the mattress like some pubescent idiot. He pulled on his clothing instead (it was all in disgraceful condition, and he wished he'd brought some things over from the club, because there were some things a Cleaning charm just couldn't address), and made it out to the kitchen without too much protest from the gods-damned knee -- although everything else was giving him hell.

"Sitting-room," Hermione muttered at him, busy with Aga.

"What have I done now?" he asked indignantly.

"Nothing, other than being deliberately disgusting first thing in the morning," she retorted. "On the sofa, prop the leg up, and I'll bring this out."
Oh. That was different, considering the knee was aching a bit, along with everything else. And he had been deliberately suggestive (he refused to characterise it as disgusting, because it wasn't), and couldn't quite blame her for being appalled: she simply wasn't the earthy type, and was absolutely unable to take sexual innuendo in stride.

He wandered into the sitting-room and did as Hermione ordered. (It was best to do so when she was in She Who Must Be Obeyed mode. Frightening, how much she sounded like Pomfrey at those times.)

She brought him tea in a minute -- nicely sugared, he was pleased to note -- and then she put something like a hot-water bottle on his knee, but it was cold.

"Blast it, woman, I told you --"

"Severus.... Shut. It. All right? It looks terrible, and there's absolutely no need for you to suffer that much."

And with that arrogant statement she went back to the kitchen to finish up breakfast.

Bloody hell....

Some part of him knew he should appreciate the gesture, but he couldn't quite manage it. He was rather proud of his ability to keep going despite minor (sometimes major) pain and annoyances: there simply hadn't been time or opportunity, most of his life, for coddling. He hated it, actually, because it made him feel helpless. It implied that he was incapable of taking care of himself. And it certainly proved that he was getting older and unable to keep up to his old standard.

Worse, Hermione sounded as though she were on the verge of going completely maternal and smothering, and he bloody well knew she didn't feel that way for him, precisely.

No, she pitied him.

Ahhhh, fuck. Did I tell her about Fir--? Yes, I did. Bossy wench prised it out of me.

Then again, I made it very easy for her....

The second whisky had been a definite error, much as he'd felt he needed it. He'd done it to himself, really: he'd tried to convince himself that Flaherty was wrong, or mad, and it had taken seeing those bloody documents to fully realise that the man wasn't, and that the whole blasted mess was actually far worse than either he or Hermione had imagined.

Probably shouldn't have held her, that last bit. Gave her ideas. Couldn't think what else to do, though, she looked ready to start snivelling, and I bloody well didn't want that.

I rather felt like howling, myself.

Never mind that, it was immaterial.
He shifted uneasily, and the cold-pack slipped from his knee to the floor: he glowered at it and let it lie.

What else had he blabbéd? He'd got rather nasty about Lockhart, but that was nothing new and he couldn't care less. (Besides, it was true: the idiot was a flaming homosexual as well as a lying piece of research-stealing shit.) He might have done about Black, as well. Had done. Whatever had possessed him to behave so ridiculously, besides Hermione's intolerable bossiness? And he'd told her about the restricted ingredients earlier, and bloody hell, he'd almost let slip about being put on the flight list.... She hadn't picked up on that, though, he was certain.

Although, come to think of it, perhaps he ought tell her about that. If she was making worst-case scenario arrangements to leave the country it wouldn't do for her to put in for holiday leave and submit the appropriate paperwork, only to be told her husband wasn't allowed out.

Shit.

He hadn't said anything about Mother. At least, he couldn't remember doing so. Although he had indirectly told Hermione more about the tracking spell he'd used to find Kingsley, early in the day. He didn't think she knew what he was talking about -- he hoped she didn't, and not only because it was none of her bloody business: she didn't need to be mucking about with something that nasty. Or rather, he didn't want her to, for her own sake. He was willing to admit that much, although with her brains and talent she might have made a rather effective Dark Arts practitioner.

*She went very quiet, after I told her it wouldn't work with Flaherty. She'll make the connection with the need for personal contact eventually.*

Fuck.

If she figured it out she might use it against him, someday. He'd given her more than enough... material to work with, in a very real sense, and he didn't fool himself about her skill and tenacity, lack of Dark Arts experience or no. He hadn't fucked Kingsley more than twice or thrice, after all, and that had been enough for him to use.

*Bluett's fault entirely, damn the man.*

He shifted uneasily and sipped at his tea.

They'd been two lonely, oversexed young idiots with absolutely no access to females at the time (blast Bluett for living out in the middle of nowhere and not allowing them to travel), bored with solitary wanking, who'd decided to experiment. (To a point. He hadn't appreciated being on the receiving end, and that had brought it all to a halt. Snape had been damned if he'd play the girl more than the once, and Kingsley had chosen not to be generous after that, not that Snape blamed him.)

*And I've bedded Hermione how many.... Is that all? Really? Granted that's in less than a fortnight of actual proximity, but that's absolutely pitiful given that it's been two months total. And not a very exciting fortnight at that. She's still shocked by anything but the usual, especially that time I*
suggested that I.... Damn. Is it something I'm doing wrong? I really had expected her to give in a bit, by now....

Snape stopped to consider that. It wasn't impossible that he wasn't satisfying her physically to the point that she'd appreciate a bit of change, it was just that, given his greater experience and that he took care with her, it wasn't likely....

He rubbed irritably at his knee -- it had begun to ache again, for no apparently reason -- and then with a final glare at the damned ice-pack, he picked it up and plopped it back where she'd left it, and returned to the problem at hand.

Noooooo. I've had no other complaints. She's just a stubborn wench and doesn't want me having anything but the bare minimum. I'd best like it or lump it. I don't think I can afford to push her, not now. Business has to come first.

Well, he bloody well wasn't going to abstain totally, even with the threat of her picking up on the tracking spell: it was too late, anyway, and he was rather disgusted that his holiday (which he'd hoped would be sexually eventful) had degenerated into a long series of mishaps, personally dangerous idiocy, and very little sex, on the whole. (The decent food was a benefit he hadn't anticipated, but it didn't quite make up for the latter point.)

In fact, he ought to make arrangements to see Hermione during term: perhaps Hooch could be persuaded to see to his House duties for a few week-ends. He and Hermione needed an excuse to see each other, to work out the rest of this business -- he didn't want to send owls back and forth unless absolutely necessary. Too much risk of discovery.

Her poking about in his business, however.... That was something else altogether. And it wasn't entirely her fault, her blasted curiosity notwithstanding: he'd got careless the last few days, and yesterday in particular. (Shocking, that -- a lapse like last night could have got him killed, in different circumstances.) He was very fortunate that he had, to his satisfaction, proven that she could be trusted in general. But in the specifics, about matters that had nothing to do with the bloody Flaherty business....

He'd have to fix that. His past and personal life was absolutely off-limits from now on, even if it meant he had to restrict himself to a single glass of liquor in her presence and, if necessary, take himself off to the club afterward.

Yes, that seemed the sensible course, and he'd best start immediately.

Right after he told her about his flight-risk status, of course.

Merlin's balls. Shall I take a wager on her reaction? Will it be more indignation with them, or more blasted fussing over me?

He'd find out soon enough: she walked into the sitting-room, balancing two plates on one arm and a second cup of tea in the other hand, and carefully set them on the table.
"I didn't think to ask if you like black --"

"Do," he admitted. "There isn't much I don't, if it's cooked well."

_Bloody hell, man, there you go volunteering information --_

She didn't fuss over him again, thankfully, only handed him his plate, fork, and a napkin, went back to the kitchen for the teapot and sugar; then she refilled his cup, and let him otherwise fend for himself while she curled up in the armchair, knees tucked up on the arm, with her own plate.

She remained silent, and Snape felt obliged to start the conversation himself.

"I'll need the formula, of course."

"In the fireplace," she said absently. "Above the damper."

"Ah. I'll take a copy and leave the original with you. Have you thought of where you'll hide it?"

"I'm working on it," she said. "Sent an owl this morning, and hopefully I'll have it sorted in a day or two. I sent Flaherty's letter as well --"

"What?"

"The one to his wife, Severus."

"Oh."

"Should have done so earlier, but it's probably for the best, in case she's been watched."

He finished breakfast first, and fidgeted with his napkin. Hermione was uncharacteristically slow with her meal this morning, and the fact that she wasn't (for once) peppering him with questions was frankly unnerving: he'd got used to it.

"I shall work on deciphering the formula at the club today, then," he said. "I might be quite late, so, ah, I shouldn't count on having to feed me at all today."

"Very well."

"In fact, if I don't make much progress I might stay there overnight."

"Ummmmm," she said, and stared out at the street, seemingly barely aware of his presence.

"What," he asked, immensely irritated, "is wrong?"

"Wrong?"

"You're not paying the least attention."
"Oh, I... I'm just thinking, that's all. Sorry, did I miss anything important?"

No, only that I probably shan't inflict you with my presence tonight....

The reasonable part of him recognised the idiocy of his pique: the more sulky part told the reasonable bit to sod off. "Not really," he muttered. "There is something you need to know, however."

"Yes?"

"Regarding your arrangements. I shouldn't plan on trying to get approved travel clearance. Not for both of us, at any rate. I'm on the damned list."

She stopped with a forkful of tomato poised in mid-air, stared at him, and said, "Well, I'll think of something else, then," and went right on eating.

"You don't think that's significant, in some way? Important? Or had you written me off?"

"No, I hadn't. You said you thought people with access to restricted substances were under suspicion," she said matter-of-factly. "It stands to reason you're in that group. I'd meant to ask you before I actually did anything."

"Oh."

"There's more pudding," she added.

"No, I.... Thank you, I'm done."

He watched her, not even bothering to conceal it, and noted that she hadn't slept well -- circles under her eyes, and how her eyelids drooped and then shot back open as she re-focussed on whatever thoughts were keeping her from... well, from whatever. Namely himself.

Blast it, why the silent treatment? And why am I complaining of that, when for seven years I longed that she'd simply shut up?

He ought to be a bit more considerate, he supposed. She'd been through as much as he had yesterday: he could plainly see scratches along the curve of one calf, and the shocking, purple-red of an angry bruise in the milky skin just behind her knee -- that was his fault, really, for choosing an unmarked area rather than something more sensible, like a road or clearly-marked field....

Odd, that she's in a short gown this morning. She usually wears that awful flannel kind, bundled up neck to ankle, and if she's not in that she's fully dressed. At least when I'm about.

Hermione finished up the last few bites of her breakfast, refilled his teacup, and then cleared away their plates and went back to the kitchen without another word.
Snape simply didn't know what to make of it, but he suspected he'd put his foot in it somehow. He was torn between the unaccountable urge to find out why, and the voice of self-preservation that told him to leave bloody well enough alone, she's fine, and what does it matter, anyway?.

He finally gave up, retrieved Flaherty's box and his own notes from their hidey-holes, and copied the formula; and then he pulled on his frock-coat and cloak, took the ice-pack to the kitchen, and then gave in to the urge to check on Hermione before he left, if only for the sake of the most basic courtesy. She was in the bedchamber -- back in bed, in fact -- and seemed startled when he stepped into the room, glancing up from the book she was reading.

"I'd thought to go back to Hogwarts tomorrow, but I suspect I'd better give it an extra day, just in case."

"Oh," she said. "I'll see you sometime tomorrow, then?"

"Yes, although I don't know that I want to commit to luncheon.... You were going in, tomorrow?"

"Should, but I don't feel particularly well. I think I must be fighting off that cold. I may stay in tomorrow instead, so perhaps you shouldn't stop by the Ministry."

Oh, good, Snape thought. Feeling poorly, that's all.

"I won't, then. Ah.... Damn it, this is ridiculous. "I didn't intend to be a nuisance last night."

"You weren't, really," she murmured. "I was just concerned that you'd nearly drowned yourself. Your head had almost slipped under by the time I found you."

Oh, Merlin's balls.

"I'll... be off, then," he muttered, took himself back to the entry of the flat, and Apparated to the club threshold.

*****

The Club
11:45 am

Fresh clothing was definitely first thing on the agenda, and, while he was at it, another quick bathe; he felt unaccountably filthy, somehow, and he suspected it had to do with his ill-temper with Hermione, or at least that he'd misread her feeling poorly for indifference. (The bath didn't help, of course, though he caught some grotty spots he'd missed last night.) He dismissed his worries about what else he might have said to her -- particularly what he might have called her, in the shock of her invading the bath, and the fact that he hadn't had the guts to ask or to apologise -- and then dressed in clean clothing and left the damaged and filthy things with Smithers, and holed himself up in the Library to begin sorting through the formula.
Bluett was, for once, absent; and three hours' determined study on Snape's part to separate the two constituent potions and to research known similar formulae made clear that this wasn't a good thing, because Snape couldn't make heads or tails of any of it. The aphrodisiac component simply didn't match previously established potions, and while the substances involved in the fertility component looked as though they might work, there was no precedent, no record of research trials into anything similar, and no available Muggle research to attempt to correlate it with.

Damn and blast. And I've less than forty-eight hours before I ought get back to Hogwarts.... Well, I suppose I might fudge a bit on putting away any shipments have arrived at the school, but that still leaves me with only a day and a half, and this looks bloody difficult --

There really wasn't anything for it but to try to duplicate the blasted stuff in the next twenty-four hours, separately, first, and check for any negative reactions among the little population of mice and toads that the club kept for experimentation. That would only work with the aphrodisiac component: the fertility component would take far longer to prove out, and he should have to work on that at Hogwarts.

It was probably useless -- there was the matter of the Ministry's damned proprietary ingredient, and which potion it properly belonged to -- but a start had to be made somewhere: if he and Hermione couldn't side-rail any attempt to implement the damned stuff, any research at all that might lead to an antidote would prove useful.

But the laboratory was, unfortunately, occupied. Bluett was mucking about with a very large cauldron, and had bottles and crates scattered across the work-tables.

"What are *you* doing in here?" Snape demanded.

"Brewing, of course," Bluett said innocently, and absently-mindedly tucked his beard -- now plaited -- back behind his shoulder. "Like to keep my hand in."

"What the bloody hell are you..."

Snape crossed to the nearest table, scanned the hodge-podge of ingredients Bluett had left strewn across it -- the jars were almost all empty, now, and some of them were labelled in his own handwriting -- and glared at the old man.

"You're brewing contraceptive?"

"Why not? Someone has to."

"Two-thirds of this lot is mine, you old thief, not Guild stock. You've raided my cupboard --"

"Well, what were you going to do with them?" Bluett shot back. "Not much call for this lot for anything else, is there?"

"I'll have to replace them," Snape noted in disgust. "And now half of them are bloody restricted."
"Toss Slug-Repellant into the curriculum this term," Bluett said, "and blame it on wastage by the little buggers. It's what you'd do anyway. Probably have done, to get together all this. You always raided _mystock_ rather than buy your own, don't tell me you've given that up."

"You paid a pittance, old man, and I don't have _time_ to add another potion to.... That's a bloody great lot of contraceptive."

"'Course. Booming black market, now. Did you see the _Prophet_ this morning?"

"No," Snape said, and snatched it up off the table (it was smeared with marmalade, blast it -- one always wanted to get to the paper before Bluett did) and scanned the front page: there was brief mention of a raid by the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department on a Knockturn Alley apothecary that had been selling 'morally-questionable Muggle artifacts of great illegality', but nothing else seemed out of the ordinary.

"Well?" Snape demanded.

"Cruikbeak and Figgity's," Bluett said. "They'd been selling Muggle condoms out of the back room. Quite reasonably, too, considering the cost of a legal potion. They caught a few customers as well."

"Disgusting," Snape noted, tossed the paper down. (He tried, with little success, not to think about how Bluett knew of condoms or what a reasonable price might be, or what Arthur Weasley would make of them.)

"Effective, mostly, even if they are that India-rubber stuff. What _d'you_ expect now that proper French letters are illegal?" Bluett said indignantly, utterly misinterpreting Snape's disgust, and then gave him a sly look. "I suppose you were only whipping up contraceptive for that sweet bit of crumpet you smuggled into the Library last week, and no-one else. Very selfish of you, Severus."

"Never mind that. Do you honestly think I believe you're supplying the black market?"

"No," Bluett admitted quietly, and continued canting the potion. "Actually, my third cousin's boy is a healer at St. Mungo's. He's been giving it out to the needier women, the ones who've already got two or three little ones and can't afford the restricted or illicit stuff. I've been making it up for some time, now."

"Oh," Snape said, the wind quite effectively taken from his sails. "It's still highly illegal. You could get the club in a great deal of trouble."

"When laws transgress the boundary of private morality -- barring laws against harming other sentient living creatures, of course -- _they're_ bad laws," Bluett serenely informed him. "And it requires the determined efforts of those capable to protest and circumvent them. The club can take care of itself."

"Never thought I'd hear _you_ say something so --"
"My boy, I was engaging in Civil Disobedience when your grandfather was a mere tadpole. Before it was even called that," Bluett said. "I don't intend to stop now. Does your lovely lady require a bottle?" he added, and waggled a stoppered one in Snape's face. "Mine tends to keep very well, hence a bottle rather than a phial...."

"No, she.... Well, yes, she might," Snape grumbled, and snatched the bottle from the old man. "You're certain it's --"

"Looks right and smells right," Bluett said cheerfully. "If not, you'll find out in a few months."

Snape collapsed against the edge of the bench and rubbed at his temples.

"Of course it's right, you fool," Bluett growled. "I'm not so old that I can't manage a simple Class 1 Potion."

"Fine," Snape said, feeling immensely tired. "I actually need the facility for something else entirely. Will you be done soon?"

"In a tick. Found whatever it was, did you?"

"Don't pry into.... Yes. Are you happy, you nosy beggar? And I still can't make sense of it."

"Give me a moment, then, and I'll clear up here," Bluett said calmly. "Of course," he added, "you might roll up your shirt-sleeves and help me finish, and I'll be out of your way that much sooner...."

If the suggestion hadn't made eminent sense, Snape should have throttled the manipulative old coot.

*****

The Laboratory
4:57pm

"No, I don't understand it at all," Snape muttered, bent over the formula. "It certainly has elements of an aphrodisiac, but not enough to be effective on its own. It must be the bit that includes the proprietary ingredient...."

"That might to be the strongest coercive element, yes," Bluett said, stroking at his plait. (He'd insisted on staying in the laboratory, much to Snape's rage, but Snape couldn't very well boot the old man out; verbal viciousness had never worked on Bluett before, and Snape wouldn't stoop to physically pushing him through the door.)

They'd been going over it all for hours, now, quite illegally hauling many of the herbals and relevant potions texts into the lab for ease of consult; but they were getting nowhere at all. And if two such excellent brewers couldn't manage to piece together the evidence....

"Can't be a proper aphrodisiac, I'm afraid," Bluett continued. "Those other bits seem familiar, but I'm damned if I can see how they'd work with human beings...."
Bluett straightened suddenly, nearly falling off his stool, and his expression hardened. "What do you know of Elf reproduction, Severus?" he said sharply.

"Absolutely nothing. I assume the Ministry has some kind of breeding programme."

"Not the Ministry. Greenaway Limited used to, back in the day -- my great-grandfather Prewett was one of the keepers for the initial breeding stock, after the Elf Alliance of 1602." Bluett snorted. "'Alliance' my hairy hole.... The little beggars can shut their reproductive systems right down, did you know that? Took Greenaway two years of intense study to figure out why he couldn't produce more breeding stock. His test subjects kept mating happily away, but no sproglets were ever conceived. Turns out the little devils -- both sexes -- can just shut everything off. Females won't release eggs, and the males won't produce spermatozoa."

"This is something they can do as a matter of course?"

"A natural adaptation, yes, but not precisely passed along by inheritance alone -- hang on, I'll get to that. They don't conceive particularly easily in any case, and they're prone to miscarry in poor environments. The ability appears to have developed to take advantage of only the best circumstances for bearing and raising the young, because while their birth rate may be far lower than most magical mammals, their success rate for raising sproglets to sexual maturity is much higher. Anyway, nothing Greenaway tried could circumvent that adaptation, not even Imperius.... The little beggars couldn't do anything about being subjugated, but they could bloody well refuse to breed.

"Greenaway theorised that while the ability to prevent conception was a magibiological factor, if he could only get two or three generations removed from the initial stock -- totally isolate them -- he'd be able to make the later generations forget that they could do it."

"So he developed a potion to get around that."

"Right. He was able, through trial and error and some damned sneaky research into Elf culture, to find the one thing that can counteract the shut-off mechanism. Developed a hybrid potion that included an aphrodisiac, administered it, and the poor little buggers went wild. Incidence of pregnancy shot up before the Elves cottoned onto it, and with some careful tending of the females, he managed to produce a new generation."

"Merlin's -- Forced breeding," Snape said grimly. Damn. I shall have to tell him about the Azkaban trials.

"It turns out that he was quite right. In the wild, their systems shut down naturally in response to bad environment -- lack of food and appropriate nesting-sites, things like that. But the ability to shut everything down consciously is learned, and the parents have to teach it just as we have to teach specific spells. Took a lot of nasty work to get enough viable second-generation stock. He tried to leave the sproglets with the females as they did poorly when raised by hand in the laboratory, but the mothers actually... well, they killed the poor little things, deliberately. So he found human wet-nurses and managed it that way. Females were kept drugged to prevent
miscarriage or self-harm, females in labour were restrained, sproglets were birthed, then they were snatched away and handed over to humans who raised them just like a human babe."

"Merlin's bloody balls and beard," Snape said viciously.

"For once, my boy, I agree whole-heartedly. By the time he got to the third generation not only were they totally ignorant of the adaptation, but they'd bonded to humans more closely than to their own kind."

"The ramifications of this are...."

"Exactly. Look at the poor little buggers themselves. Totally bonded to their human owners, and with such a low birth rate -- because conditions in captivity are seldom ideal for successful reproduction -- that they're still, to this day, a valuable commodity. Greenaway Limited made a packet in the first hundred years or so, because there simply weren't enough produced outside of his laboratory to make a dent in his sales. His methods and the potion itself were closely-guarded trade secrets, of course."

*Thank the gods Hermione hadn't this information during the whole SPEW business.... I rather wish she'd been successful, now.*

"And the Ministry's got hold of the potion and fiddled with it, obviously," Snape murmured. "What was the substance Greenaway found? It's not likely to be the same, but --"

"Oh, that was kept secret from everyone, even the most trusted keepers and laboratory assistants -- Great-Grandpapa Prewett had no idea. But I can make an educated guess, can't you?"

Snape stared blankly at Bluett, who cackled.

"Don't remember your Magical Creatures classes, do you? It's right there in Irwin's *Bestiary.*"

"Bloody -- Just tell me."

"Elves are averse to snakes in general," Bluett said. "And one in particular is avoided and reviled by them --"

"Nadder," Snape shot back. *Bloody hell. *"Damn it all, Irwin didn't say why, though."

"I don't think he knew. He was a purely observational naturalist, not a biologist. But Greenaway made the connection. I'll wager that's where your snake-skin comes in, isn't it? From that first bit you had me look at."

"But can it be used to similar effect? Is it a fertility booster in humans as well?"

"I don't know, my boy, I've never seen a study done of it. I'd venture to say that it isn't, but the hallucinogen would be quite enough as part of the *aphrodisiac* as it is. Humans don't have a similar adaptation, after all, so if they've no access to contraceptives they've got no way to prevent
conception, but abstinence, which the aphrodisiac addresses. And humans have, furthermore -- most of them, at least -- such an aversion to ending a pregnancy that even if a woman and her mate don't want another child, she'll only resort to abortificients with very compelling reason."

"Not that that matters," Snape said. "Those have always been restricted."

"No," Bluett corrected him gently. "They'll always be available, no matter what the Ministry does. They always have been, you know that. It's just that the poorest women can't afford them, and have to live -- or die -- with the consequences."

"Yes, I know," Snape muttered, and grudgingly gave Hermione high marks for latching onto the main point. "Fuck."

Bluett didn't chide him, and in fact awkwardly patted him on the shoulder. "You're certain the stuff works?"

"Trials in Azkaban," Snape admitted. "Seventy-two percent effectiveness within two months. Higher over a four-month period."

"My word."

"And they already have a plan to disseminate it. A different pretext, of course."

"Oh, good. I shouldn't muck with trying to prove its effectiveness, then," Bluett said contentedly. "They've well and truly got themselves in a hole, ethically and legally speaking, whether it works or not. You simply have to be able to prove they're doing it."

"We may have. Proof of the plan, at any rate. It's a question of who we can get to listen. They've got a bloody media blackout."

"What about the ICW?"

"Are they aware of it? Have they approved it? I have grave reservations about that point."

"Oh, my...." Bluett said. "That bad, really?"

"I don't know. And I don't think I'm willing to place my neck on the block, not until I'm certain."

"Hmmm. Quite the quandary," Bluett said helpfully, and rubbed at his eyes. "Well, it's past time for my pre-dinner nap...."

"Nap?" Snape said, astonished. "I've just told you the Ministry's planning to --"

"I can't do anyone good if I'm half-asleep, can I?" Bluett retorted. "And this is something for younger minds and tougher bodies, in any case -- I'm well past the age when running about behind the authorities' backs to this extent is wise. I'll do my little part on the Home Front, my boy, and I'll
advise you as well as I can, but I simply don't have the energy or the contacts that it takes, any longer."

"Bloody...." Snape mumbled, and buried his face in his hands.

"If you, er, do get any restricted ingredients in, I should appreciate any extra you have -- you wouldn't mind, given that it's for a good cause, would you?"

"No," Snape moaned. "But I can only claim to teach Slug-Repellant so many times in a term, you know."

"Good lad," Bluett said, and patted Snape's shoulder again. "Don't give up -- it's early days, yet. When they announce whatever-it-is --"

"Prophylactic genetic treatments."

"-- yes, well, when you see them start to crow about their wonderful new treatment in the trade journals, you shall know your back's against the wall. Is your lady working on this, as well?"

"Yes. She's... she's got the potential ICW contacts, I think."

"Good. I should let her worry about that angle, then, and help her as best you can. Be supportive, all that. Make your case as strong as you can, and then take it to the ICW if you think it will help."

"You're taking all this very calmly," Snape accused.

"When you've lived as long as I have, Severus, you'll have seen just about everything. The actors are different, that's all, and the ways they try to muck up peoples' lives aren't nearly as original as they think. No use in getting upset. And you have to know your own limits. I often wonder," Bluett said thoughtfully, "if that wasn't part of Albus's problem."

"The inability to see the other side, the getting upset, or the over-reaching?" Snape retorted snidely.

"All of the above, but particularly the last. One may be an Elder, and one may be admittedly powerful, but that doesn't make one a great strategist and leader," Bluett said mildly. "I know my limits. You're the strategist, Severus, not me, and you've the enviable ability to do what needs to be done without fussing about casualties and inconvenience. The question is whether you've the stomach to do it once again, and I can't say I blame you if you decide otherwise."

Bluett stood and tottered on his feet, gave a tremendous yawn, and then shuffled off toward the door. "Be a good lad and tidy up my stuff, would you? I'm quite --" (yawn) "-- knackered. And tack down the crate-lids."

Snape grunted an affirmative, eyes still fixed to the research, and heard the soft snick of the laboratory door when Bluett left.

*Double-damn and blast.*
So, we have a hybrid potion comprised of a (potential) fertility treatment -- which is, presumably, 
only totally illegal if it's not represented as such to the recipients -- and an aphrodisiac which may 
or may not actually work, but which is prohibited and is classified as Dark Arts anyway, although 
its efficacy will be questioned as it might be formulated for Elf physiology, not human. And there's 
still the matter of the proprietary ingredient, which may or may not be Nadder-skin. And if it is, it 
has no proven efficacy in humans other than as an hallucinogen.

Not, in short, enough evidence to be getting on with, in terms of grassing to the ICW. Not given the 
risk.

Their speculations could be wildly off, after all. There was no telling if the Nadder-skin 
really was the missing factor; Flaherty might simply have left it as a clue to the historical problem 
of Elf-breeding, in hopes that someone would make the connection. (And thank the gods Bluett 
had.)

No, Snape bloody well wasn't going to get anywhere on the Ministry's formula. Bluett was quite 
right: he wasn't going to prove anything by trying to replicate it, and he didn't dare turn it over to a 
researcher elsewhere, someone with the facility and resources to really work at it properly; it was 
too dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands. The gods only knew what an unscrupulous researcher 
or company would make of it, if it proved effective.

But he simply wasn't used to sitting by and doing nothing, which was more or less what Bluett had 
counseled, at least for the time being. There must be ways to make a stronger case, certainly, but at 
the moment he was too tired and outraged to think about it properly.

Shan't have to take the extra day off, at least.

In the meantime, Bluett had left a bloody mess in his wake: so Snape set about clearing away, 
trying to distract himself with the mindless labour of putting things back where they belonged. (The 
Guild stores really were in a deplorable state; that was undoubtedly why the reagent had been 
tainted and blown up in his face.) He really ought to sort it all out. So he did, starting with the jars 
of herbs and extracts.

Abcess root, Abyssinian shrivelfig, Aconite, Adder's tongue, Adonis, Agrimony (Hemp), Agrimony 
(Water), Alder, Alecost, Aloes, Angelica root, Armadillo bile --

He frowned and set that aside: animal extracts belonged in a different cupboard entirely.

-- Aralias, Archangel, Arnica, Ashwinder egg -- blast it, there's another, he thought, and plucked it 
out. Asphodel, Avens....

His hand halted over that last, and he paused and scanned two jars back.

Useful properties, Arnica. Not used much any longer, not when the average mediwizard can charm 
something right in a trice, but still....
He set the Arnica aside, and the others required for what he had in mind as he came to them. Lastly, he found a clean, dark jar and carefully tucked away the Nadder-skin (blatantly mis-labeling it as garden-snake, which no-one in their right mind would want to use) and tucked it in the very back of the cupboard where only Bluett would think to snoop about.

Then he began the finicky and soothing process of a brewing. Never mind that it was an incredibly easy potion, and quite a minor thing when compared to the larger problem: the rituals of grinding, chopping, blending, of adjusting proportions to the relative freshness of the available ingredients -- these calmed and centred him, as they had for as long as he could remember, since long before he'd entered Hogwarts and determined -- to the great surprise of at least one person, and eventually despite his interest in Dark Arts -- that he would master Potions.

*****

Snape had Smithers send a late dinner up to his room. (It wasn't done, not really, but he and Bluett were the only two in residence at the moment, and Smithers tended to turn a blind eye in that circumstance -- just as he managed to ignore that food in the Library was absolutely forbidden, despite Bluett's habit of smuggling it in.) As he ate, Snape carefully enciphered the Ministry formula and then destroyed the unenciphered copy, in case his journal should fall into the wrong hands.

And then he lay on his bed in the near-dark, still in shirt-sleeves and trousers, staring up at the ceiling, unwilling to continue to beat his brains against the problem but quite unable to fall asleep.

*Odd, how everything feels... wrong.*

Snape usually found the club quite restful: everything orderly (with the exception of Bluett); Smithers, who seemed to know in advance precisely what one might want or require, and who fulfilled his duties quite to satisfaction but never seemed in the way; plenty of rules which made it entirely possible to avoid speaking to anyone at all, if one wished (that was an odd one, but then the club's Founder, a Muggleborn, had been the member of a similar Muggle club in which one was not allowed to speak *at all*, save in the Visitor's Room); a comfortable if not capacious bedchamber Silenced against the snores of any adjoining neighbours... of which there were none at present. There hadn't been for years, besides Bluett: the last time Snape could remember another member lodging in the residence was well over a decade ago.

Snape and Bluett were, in fact, the only two members who ever stayed over any more. The rest -- and there were few -- only ever came for meals or to consult the Library texts, and their numbers declined every year. Snape briefly wondered how much longer it should be until he were the only one left.

*A dying breed, the independent Brewer. And the damned Apothecaries -- union men, the pack of them -- have thrown in their lots with the big corporations, and won't be seen dead in a restricted-members club....*

The silence was totally unnerving. Snape was well-accustomed to the night-time sounds of Hogwarts -- creaking from the ancient beams overhead, and a sort of hum that emanated from the...
stones themselves; they were familiar and comforting, and so much a part of him now that their absence made him quite uncomfortable. This place, despite his familiarity with it, was totally unnatural tonight, its silence unbroken as it was by so much as a human breath other than his own....

He found himself groping at the other side of the narrow bed, and only then noted that he'd kept to the one side, out of a habit that he shouldn't have picked up nearly this soon.

_Ahhhhh, fuck._

****

10:39 pm

In the end there was nothing for it but to get his arse up, get fully dressed, gather his things together, and leave. (He _had_ tried to ignore the problem, but even another forty-five minutes of determination to sleep -- after pointedly wriggling directly into the middle of the mattress -- had been fruitless, and for once he decided to accept defeat with some grace.) He Apparated into the entry of Hermione's flat --

_Darn, I forgot to floo Harrison about the warding the place for Anti-Apparition --_

-- and groped his way down the hallway, stumbling into the little side-table where Hermione always dropped her handbag and keys, and had just sidled into the bedroom when something smacked him in the solar-plexus and knocked him against the wall.

A wand-tip was digging into his throat, squarely against his Adam's apple.

"Don't move."

He finally managed a wheezing, pained "Hermione?"

"Severus?"

After a second's hesitation the wand withdrew, Hermione snapped on the lights, and all hell broke loose.

"What in _bloody_ hell do you think you're _doing_, sneaking in here --"

"Wasn't _sneaking_ --"

"-- in the middle of the night?"

"I thought I'd check on you as you'd felt unwell," he said defiantly, and had to stop for a coughing fit.

She stared at him, all raging eyes, blushing indignance and sleep-snarled hair -- and wand still very much at the ready -- and demanded, "What happened to _knocking_?"
"Should I knock on what is presumably my own door, at --" he shot a glance at her alarm-clock, which was still blinking an unhelpful 5:00 - 5:00 - 5:00, "-- at whatever blasted hour of the night?"

"It's not your own door, damn it."

"I said presumably, to anyone watching," he said, his own anger growing by the second.

"I thought you said you wouldn't be back tonight," she muttered, stomped back over to her side of the bed, set her wand on the bed-table, and plopped down.

"Ah. I've interrupted an assignation, perhaps?" he retorted. "Congratulate him for me on his Apparition skills -- I didn't hear him go."

She twisted around to stare at him, shocked, the blood draining from her face: and then she finally managed to say, "There was absolutely no need for that. You know it's not true." And she curled up on the bed, back to him, and buried her face in the pillow.

"Oh, bloody --"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, forced himself to reassess the situation, and took a deep breath.

Yes, he did know it, and it was unnecessary of him to... cruel of him to have said that. (It certainly wouldn't have been the kind of assignation he'd implied, in any case.) The one surprising thing about Hermione (besides her prior virginity and sexual naïveté) was that she had few or no personal ties to anyone. There were no pictures of anyone significant littered about, no letters he'd found from admirers or potential lovers. All the names in her address-book had been carefully notated as to relationship; no meetings written in her calendar other than doctor, dentist, banker; and barring any obfuscation on her part that those labels might represent, he'd concluded that she was remarkably isolated -- a condition he approved whole-heartedly, given the risks she was taking.

He wasn't going to apologise, though, damn it. Yes, he'd obviously given her a fright: but he thought she was also considerably disappointed that he'd turned up like a bad sickle after all.

"I had to give up on the bloody formula," he explained quietly. "It wasn't any use. I didn't think it would do any harm to return here."

"Oo scrd d hl odov ee," she muttered, voice muffled in the pillow.

"What?"

"I said, you scared the hell out of me," she said more distinctly after raising her head. "I'd fallen asleep early, before I'd checked the doors. And then I heard someone pop in."

"I see. That was careless, but I'm glad to know you were ready to shoot first, at least." (He was, actually. Never mind that second of absolute terror he'd felt when she'd dug the wand into his neck. Hermione could take care of herself, and that was some consolation.)
She refused to answer him, and burrowed back down into the pillow.

He walked back through the flat, checking and warding doors and windows, and then returned to the bedchamber to shed cloak and frock-coat and boots: Hermione continued to ignore him even when he sat on his side of the bed (might as well admit it, damn it, that was how he thought of it).

Well, let her ignore him all she wanted. She was in just the position he wanted, anyway, arse up and her nightshirt rucked up halfway above her knickers....

She did perk up a bit when she heard him unscrewing the jar-lid.

"What are you --"

"Nothing," he muttered.

"Severus, that is not the bloody aphrodisiac, is it?" she said, obviously worried, and fidgeted.

"I told you," he said, and planted his left hand in the middle of her back to keep her down, "I couldn't get a blasted thing done on it."

He slathered a dollop of the ointment on her before she had a chance to wriggle away, and began to work it into her skin.

"Sever -- Ow! What the hell are you --"

"Arnica," he finally bothered to tell her as he worked the ointment in around the margin of the first nasty bruise. "Used to be the standard treatment for bruising and mild abrasions."

"Oh." She shifted uncomfortably, and he let up on the pressure on her back just a bit. "If I'd been that upset about them, I'd have --"

"No you wouldn't. I doubt you've seen a healer in years, have you? You don't go to St. Mungo's, you have a Muggle physician. You go to the chemist's for Muggle slop, not the apothecary," he said, intent on his work. "You don't even bother to use magic in the flat, much less keep up with your Arithmantic skills. Is there anything you do in Wizarding fashion any longer, Hermione, other than at the Ministry?"

He'd taken great care, for once, to keep his voice soft and level, and as far from accusatory as he could: and perhaps that was why instead of taking offence, she lay silent for a moment before finally admitting, "Not much."

He took another dollop of ointment -- he bothered to warm this one in his palm, first -- and then began working on the second bruise.

"Any particular reason?"
She seemed to struggle with that one for a while: he could feel the muscles of her back tensing, and knew that it was only partly in response to occasional discomfort as his fingers hit a particularly tender spot.

"I don't know," she finally muttered.

"It doesn't make a great deal of sense," he said reasonably. "Perfectly capable witch, top of your Form, and yet you seem to have as little to do with magic as you can."

"I don't know why," she reiterated. "It just seems... It's wasteful, somehow. Just because you can do nearly everything by magic doesn't mean you should, not when you're -- ow --"

He gentled his fingers on the bruise.

"-- when you're perfectly capable of doing things..."

"Normally?"

"The usual way. The way I'm used to," she said sullenly.

"Ah."

He thought he ought leave it at that, though he suspected there was much more to it: but she was still irked with him, and he didn't want her snappish again, not tonight -- he was too bloody tired and achey, and wanted nothing so much as to simply sleep, never mind that Hermione looked rather enticing.... She might be more slender than she ought be or than he really appreciated, but he'd grown used to it, and her body now appealed to him. (What curves she had were very much in evidence at the moment, with that nightshirt nearly up to her waist and those chaste-white-but-daringly-cut knickers that barely covered her arse.... He couldn't recall ever seeing her in this state of undress before, unless he himself had done the undressing.)

He decided to confine himself to visual appreciation tonight. Once started on anything else he'd probably fall asleep in the middle it, and he didn't want to risk the embarrassment.

"What do you mean, you couldn't get anything done on the formula?" she asked, and wriggled under his hand again.

"Stay put, I need to work more of this in."

"What does it do?"

"It soothes the damaged tissue, mostly. And the massage helps disperse the bruise." (He suspected the latter action was the truly useful part of the treatment, really, but he wasn't about to tell her that.) "Bluett and I sorted the bloody formula into what we think are the two separate potions, but it's no use going ahead without the proprietary bit. It might be the Nadder-skin -- he believes it was used to stimulate fertility in Elves when they were first, ah, acquired -- but there's no way to know for certain, and he doesn't think it's been tested in humans."
"And if it is, there's no way to know if it's chopped, ground, infused --"

"Precisely, so attempting duplication is useless, for the moment. I left the Nadder-skin at the club, by the way -- Bluett can find it if... if I'm put out of commission. He also thinks that we might have a bit of time before it becomes absolutely necessary to act, so perhaps we ought work on strengthening our case before taking it to the ICW."

"What do you think?" she said, craning her neck to look at him.

"Lie down. I think it's the most sensible thing, at present," Snape admitted, slipped his left hand down to her lower back, and leaned over to grasp one of her slim ankles with his right, pulling her calf up to examine it.

"What --"

"Blast it, I'm seeing if you -- No, no bruising there. The scratches are already healing nicely. The unfortunate fact," he said, lowering that ankle and checking her other calf, "is that we'll have a much stronger case if we wait until they actually begin to implement the damned plan."

"Severus, we can't wait that long. Bloody hell, how many people will they bollocks up if we --"

"And if we don't, they'll simply hide or destroy the evidence, wait until we're disposed of, and then go ahead. I'm afraid," he said, "that there shall have to be a few sacrifices."

"But that's horrible."

"Regrettable, yes, but necessary, Hermione. All we have at present is evidence that some unethical fool developed an illicit and morally reprehensible potion. We don't even know if the bloody thing works, or exactly how as the damned Azkaban trial doesn't go into the procedure. It isn't enough to be getting on with, not yet, not when we're risking so much. We must try to time it so as few as possible are harmed, but enough to prove malfeasance. My job, therefore, is to keep my eye on that part of the situation. And yours," he added, fingers idly stroking the small of her back, "is to proceed with your arrangements and keep your eyes open for any documentation that helps prove the case."

"But it's.... Oh, God," she muttered. "I just can't bear to think about those poor people."

"I know, it's a Devil's bargain. But we simply can't afford to tip our hand too early, not if we want to keep the majority of them from harm."

She lay silent and unresisting under his caresses for a while, and then said, "I wonder how things would have played out if you'd had Dumbledore's job."

He smirked. "You're the second person today who's made more or less the same observation. I don't know, and I don't want to speculate about it -- it's over and done with. What I do know is that, in the end, I'd rather take responsibility for a few lives ruined for the sake of the rest, rather than lose them all because of timidity. If I'm blamed, so be it."
And I bloody well don't intend that your life or mine should be among the lost.

She shuddered a bit at his last words, and tried to slip out from under his hand with a muttered, "I need a glass of water."

"Just a moment longer -- it needs to dry," he lied, and then bent to blow air across the bruises. He was quite gratified when she shivered in response, and to see gooseflesh rise on her legs; and then after a minute he took pity on her, pulled his hands away, and let her pad off to the kitchen.

I'd quite forgot the utility of ostensibly non-sexual touch, he thought smugly, untying his neckcloth. Not to mention not doing the expected. All right, I admit it -- I'm out of practise. Only proves one shouldn't take anything for granted. (One should not, most particularly, take one's 'sweet bit of crumpet' -- as Bluett had called her -- for granted, whether one was technically entitled to or not.) Not that he'd planned to use the Arnica for that purpose: he hadn't, actually, not until she'd begun to relax under his touch, something he could seldom persuade her to do. But, like most people, Snape felt that killing two birds with one stone was a very attractive and efficient proposition, and he wasn't one to pass up the chance.

He'd stripped and got beneath the covers by the time Hermione came back into the room.

"I made up some Pepper-Up as well," he murmured, "although I wouldn't suggest taking it at bed-time."

"No, I'm... I'm fine, really," she said. "Tired, mostly. But thank you."

She turned out the light and slipped in next to him, and fussed with the edge of the coverlet for a moment before asking, "What did Bluett mean about Nadder-skin and Elves and fertility?"

Oh, bloody hell.

"The short version," he said after a long sigh, "because I really am quite tired, is that Elves can shut their reproductive systems down. A man named Greenaway developed a potion to override that mechanism, which effectively boosted their fertility and made the first Elf breeding programme possible. Nadder-skin appears to have been the most effective ingredient in that, according to Bluett. He doesn't know for certain, because Greenaway's potion was a trade secret."

"Oh. But you said Nadder-skin wasn't anything more than an --"

"Yes, but at the moment that's not the point. What is is that someone knew about Greenaway's approach or may have stumbled across the potion, and they've used it as the basis for this idiocy," he said, and rolled onto his side, back to her. (She'd keep going with questions all night, otherwise.)

"I wonder where, and who," Hermione mused.

"What does that matter?"
"Documentation, of course. Someone had the idea to apply the same approach to humans, and they'd have to approach the Ministry, or their superiors in the Ministry. There's likely to be a memo of the 'I have a bloody brilliant idea' variety."

"I shouldn't be surprised, considering how careless they've been with everything else...." he mumbled, and stifled a yawn. "By the way, are Flaherty's originals sorted?"

"Not quite yet," Hermione murmured, hesitant. "I have a meeting set for tomorrow which should do."

"Hermione," he said, slightly alarmed despite feeling immensely groggy (the urge for sleep had finally hit, and now that the light was out he was having trouble keeping his eyes open), "if you're involving someone else--"

"Not directly, no. This person really... well, they really owe me a lot..."

For several blissful, contented moments everything receded as he teetered on the knife's edge of sleep: he could still hear Hermione, it was just that the words weren't making any sense. All he could seem to register was the music that underlay the specific words; she did have a pleasant voice when she wasn't shrieking like a fishwife or babbling on quite pedantically about something.

"... will keep their word--"

He managed to pick that out, and forced his eyes open.

"-- just a bit awkward, that's all," she was saying. "I'll tell you who it is if I'm successful."

"Very well," Snape mumbled, closed his eyes, gave up all pretence of listening, and fell asleep.

He was gratified on waking next morning -- though not particularly surprised -- to find Hermione curled up against his back, like a soft, fragrant version of a sulky little hedge-hog (her generally-prickly temperament made it an apt comparison, as far as he was concerned): what was surprising was that when he carefully persuaded her to unfurl her limbs, pulled her closer, and woke her in what he considered was a very nice way indeed, she gave him only token protest.

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Chapter 11: Wherein Hermione has to face the facts of life, and deals with a great deal of guilt.

Hermione's flat, 7:03 am
January 2, 2008

Hermione:
We're at Mum and Dad's through Tuesday morning. If you could make it Monday afternoon, that would work -- I have to travel later this week. Most everyone will be there, have been off and on all holiday.

Yeah, you've got some explaining to do.

Ron

Hermione stared at the letter for another moment, and then folded it and burnt it over the kitchen basin. It didn't look any better or worse than it had when she'd received it last night, and she still couldn't get a feel for Ron's likely reaction.

But at least he hadn't told her to sod off. She'd half-expected that.

She fiddled with the breakfast things, keeping an ear out for any movement from the bedroom: she heard none. Severus was still out like a light, having quite inconsiderately woken her for sex and then dropped back off to sleep himself immediately afterward. (She'd heard stories about men's tendency to do that, but hadn't quite believed it until the last week.)

Just thinking about what Severus had managed to put where he had, before she'd woken enough to realise it, was intensely embarrassing. So was the fact that by the time she'd worked out what was going on, she'd found herself clinging to him.

She felt her cheeks redden.

_Bloody randy bastard._

She supposed she was lucky, though: she'd thought he was going in that direction last night, and had been damned happy when he'd left off mucking about with her legs and had gone to sleep.

_Odd, that he went to all that trouble. I mean, the contraceptive's understandable, and Pepper-Up isn't that difficult or time-consuming to brew, but an ointment.... That would have taken hours to reduce. You wouldn't think he'd be patient enough to do something that considerate, not given his disposition._

He hadn't just slopped it on, either. He'd been careful and thorough, and had paid attention to whether it was hurting or not.... And then he hadn't expected anything in return, apparently, even though she suspected he was taking a bit _too_ much time: judging by the way he'd shifted frequently on the bed, he'd been staring at her bum rather than her legs for a good part of the incident.

_Note to self: do the wash -- need the long granny gowns.... Well, why the bloody hell didn't he take the advantage, then? Nothing's stopped him before now._

She pondered that for a while, and then irritably dismissed it with _Oh, give over, Hermione -- he was probably too tired. The bloody man fell asleep while you were talking to him._
Breakfast was nearly done at any rate, and she needed him awake before she left: so she tiptoed into the bedroom -- mindful that, as usual, his wand was on the bed-table and he tended to reach for it first thing if startled -- and gently prodded at his shoulder.

"Huuuuunnnnnh?" was the only response she got.

"Tea's getting cold," she wheedled.

"Oh. Bloody.... Whatimezit?"

"Forty-five minutes after you last woke up."

"Can't be -- took longer than that."

"No, you didn't. I've almost finished cooking breakfast."

He peered up at her through the stringy mess that was his morning-hair, and glared. "Is that a complaint? I bloody well made certain you --"

"No, I'm complaining that the tea's getting cold."

"Start without me," he mumbled. "Be out in a moment."

Right, then, I shall.

And she did, though he didn't make her wait long: he stumbled out of the bedroom five minutes later, dressed to shirt-sleeves and trousers, and hair marginally tidied. He plunked two bottles on the counter, one of Pepper-Up, and the other of....

"Is that contraceptive?" Hermione blurted out indignantly when the colour registered. "Good God, Severus, do you expect me to stay on the damned stuff during Term?"

" Probably wise," he muttered as he sat at the table. "I intend to ask Hooch if she would take my House duties every few week-ends -- she's got little to do this time of year, it'll make her earn her pay. And you will visit on the week-ends in between."

"That wasn't agreed to," Hermione said decisively and pushed her plate away, appetite fleeing.

"I don't care what was.... Firstly, as I recall one of the terms was 'at my pleasure.' Secondly, given what was in that bloody box, it's even more important that we give the impression of a marriage for the right reason. Which, I think you'll have to agree, requires proximity on a fairly regular basis regardless of any scare tactics about sex that Pomfrey and McGonagall may have inflicted on you lot." He poured himself tea, and added, "And as I shall be going to the trouble of taking time off during Term -- and as you'll be there on the other week-ends, anyway -- I have no intention of abstaining."
"That's not fair. It's one thing for you to show up here, and another to make me change my plans and present myself --"

"You plans are what, precisely?" he shot back crossly. "To keep impressing Corcoran with your dedication to your job and your vigilance? I'd advise you become a bit more careless toward your duties, Hermioine -- remember, your priorities should have changed a bit --"

He stopped himself, took a deep breath, and moderated his tone. "I am asking you to because I cannot possibly leave the school every week-end, and part of the responsibility for maintaining this charade is yours. I am also concerned for your... ...because the closer they come to implementing the plan the greater their risk of discovery, and consequently yours. I'm quite certain they don't trust you in the least, but can't yet dispense with you. So the appearance of other interests and priorities beyond your work may allay some suspicion."

Hermione buried her face in her hands.

_Oh, cripes. I hate it when he tries to be reasonable. I have to be as well._

"All right," she mumbled. "It's sensible."

"I'm sure it's distressing, for someone who takes pride in doing their job well, to appear to slack off," Snape added, and helped himself to the scrambled eggs. "In this instance, pride will have to take second place to the mission. We have no idea if others are working on this, and if we're caught --"

"Yes, yes, I understand." She dropped her hands and stared at the potion. "That's a bloody big bottle."

"You'll have to make it last. I oughtn't brew it regularly at school."

"But won't it go bad? Pre-brewed's only got a shelf-life of a few weeks."

"Watch the colour and the taste. If it starts to go cloudy and bitter, it's off. But that lot shouldn't for a while -- Bluett brewed it."

"Bluett?"

Snape grimaced. "Yes. He's an excellent brewer despite his age, possibly the best living, and that's better than anything you could get at an apothecary. He's been doing so for a while, for women who can't afford the legal stuff. Which may not be legal for much longer. I should conceal it, if I were you, in case the flat's searched while you're out."

"All right, I shall."

He tucked into his eggs -- no problem with his appetite -- and Hermione reluctantly pulled her plate closer and picked at hers.
"Shall I wait for you?" Snape asked. "I don't fancy not knowing who has the thing."

"Yes, you might as well, if you can afford to take the time... I'd thought you'd planned to go back today, though. I could always tell you later --"

"No," he said firmly. "I'll stay through tonight. If for some reason we can't communicate later --"

"All right," she said quickly, to mollify him, and poured him more tea -- though she had to stop in mid-pour to sneeze.

"Take the Pepper-Up now," Snape muttered.

"No, I'm going to wait a bit. I thought," Hermione said, "that I'd go in this morning -- late -- and act a bit pathetic and ill, and then skive off. I have that meeting this afternoon, and it might do to make an appearance and have a witnessed excuse for the absence."

Snape's eyebrows shot up. "How do you intend to fake a full-blown cold?"

"That's why you're awake," Hermione said. "I think I've cornered that bloody perfume-flask, but I need you to help me shift the refrigerator so I can grab it...."

*****

The Ministry, 10:56 am

Hermione couldn't have felt much worse if she'd actually had a cold: the damned perfume worked wonders when it came to sneezing and watery eyes, and it was a good thing she'd brought clean handkerchiefs other than the one she'd drenched with the awful stuff. A few sniffs at intervals of the tainted one soon had her sneezing almost continually, and a quick check in her makeup mirror proved that yes, her nose was distinctly red, and her eyes were catching up fast.

She made a few trips to various offices with paperwork, sniffing through the resultant conversations, and casually mentioned to Corcoran's secretary -- a notorious blabbermouth -- that she thought she'd take a half-day and go home to bed; and then she holed up in her office and waited.

It didn't take long. Corcoran summoned her not a half-hour later with a terse request for the draft of a report, scanned it while she stood in front of his desk (she wasn't invited to sit), and then tossed it to the desk-top and glared at her.

"How am I supposed to interpret that?" he snarled. "It's disgracefully incomplete."

"The preliminary isn't due for another two weeks," Hermione said indignantly, and swiped at her dripping nose. "It's only a draft, and I haven't yet integrated the latest numbers from St. Mungo's. If you'd wanted it earlier, you should have said."
"I expect you to be better prepared -- you never know when I might need the information. Been too concerned with personal matters to actually do your work, I suppose."

"I'm entitled to the same holiday as everyone else. I was out of town for some of it, in fact, and I wasn't about to take classified documents out of the building," she shot back.

"Mucking about with your new family, were you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, like most people on holiday," she said, and managed a lovely wet sneeze: Corcoran winced in disgust, and then glared at her. "Sorry," she said weakly, wiped her nose, and then mopped at the edge of Corcoran's desk with the sodden hanky. "Severus wanted to go out on New Year's Eve, and I've picked up a cold."

"Well you've had your holiday, and I expect you back and at top form, not whinging about being ill," Corcoran said, voice laden with spite. "I want this bloody thing in two days' time. If you can be bothered."

Hermione wouldn't be. The draft was actually done, save for the final proofread: she'd simply taken out a few chunks of data earlier that morning, mindful of Severus' concern. She didn't mind having to rush the final proof, but she certainly minded the "whinging" portion of Corcoran's tirade, for entirely personal reasons.

She briefly considered the wisdom of loosing her temper on Corcoran, and then decided what the hell. It neatly addressed Severus' worry, in any case.

"In three years," she growled, leaning on the edge of desk and toward Corcoran, taking advantage of his attempt to make her feel like a servant, "I have not taken a single day of the sick leave to which I'm legally entitled. Not one, which is more than I can say for some people who've weaseled out of attending important conferences because they were 'ill' with something that Tittifer's Tummy Tonic would have cured in an instant. Nor have I taken my holiday leave, enjoyed two-hour lunches, warded myself up in my office to play with items lifted from the Muggle artifacts lock-up, or hung about the scribes' lounge chatting up the prettier ones and implying that I'm Merlin's gift to witches. I am ill and I am going home at noon -- where Severus will probably have a tonic waiting for me -- and going to bed for the rest of the day. And you'll have the completed draft in two days' time anyway."

Corcoran's face turned a violent shade of purple-red, though Hermione couldn't tell whether it was from her insolence, her mention of Severus, or the fact that she seemed to know how he usually wasted a great portion of his workday.

"You may think that the fact that your position and appointment were required by the ICW gives you the licence to insult me --" he began to bluster.

"I'm not insulting anyone, I'm merely giving examples of the way some people might take advantage."
"-- but I'm telling you otherwise. I'm filing a complaint with Staff Disciplinary Board, and there shall be a demerit placed in your employment file. How dare you --"

"I'm entitled a rebuttal to both, and you may be certain I shall provide them," Hermione said triumphantly, and ignored a drop of mucus that hung tenuously at the tip of her nose: Corcoran fixated on it, and watched it in horrified fascination. Drip, damn you, go on. (It didn't, blast it. She probably needed another whiff of the bad hanky.) "And I shall be happy to point out, by Pensieve if necessary, that you have not only attempted to bully me into working while ill -- a clear violation of workplace regulations, and utterly ridiculous given my exemplary attendance record -- but that I believe much of your current animosity is directed toward the fact that I've recently married. Given that your attitude is discriminatory and directly contradicts one of the missions of this department, not to mention your total lack of concern for my health when my husband and I are attempting to do our duty as good citizens, I rather doubt your complaint will carry much weight."

Corcoran went paper-white: Hermione assumed it was the threat of a Pensieve memory of the whole conversation, including her enumeration of his favourite time-wasters. The head of the Disciplinary Board, a rather fussy and rules-obsessed wizard, was not noted for passing up hints about wasting Ministry time and resources, and was no respecter of one's standing: department head or scribe, all were fair game. (Corcoran had already been censured for "irregularities" when he'd exceeded his conference per diem on at least two occasions -- both involving, Hermione knew, ladies whom he'd claimed had been "potential employees," but whom further investigation had proved had absolutely no qualifications whatsoever for Ministry jobs, and who were already well-established members of the Oldest Profession.)

"Two days," Corcoran hissed through gritted teeth, and shoved the report back across the desk.

"You'll have it," she said as she daintily blotted her nose, and then picked up the draft and headed for the door.

"And if you ever dare repeat such scurrilous claptrap about me, I shall have you sacked," Corcoran threw after her.

"I would never do such a thing," Hermione said, shocked, at the doorway. "Can you imagine the uproar that would cause? The havoc it would wreak on the department? The Board might be forced to waste a great deal of time and money on investigating totally idiotic things. Why you're known among the scribal pool as 'Creepy Corcoran,' for example."

She didn't wait to see if he went red again, but spun on her heels and left his office.

I swear to God, ill-tempered, lying, bombastic Hufflepuffs are the worst possible supervisors in the world. Give me an honest Slytherin any day. At least they're more discreet and creative with their malfeasance.

That was a rather alarming thought, on the whole. Not to mention that Corcoran's transparency was, in this instance, a decided advantage for Hermione, one for which she ought to be grateful.
Probably shouldn't have yanked his chain that much -- he really wants to be rid of me now, she thought as she tidied up her desk. On the other hand, perhaps he'll stay clear for a while....

She probably ought to invest in a Pensieve, just to be safe -- a small one, the kind that would only hold a few memories. Or a sphere, which would be more portable and more easily hidden. And she ought be very careful indeed of the type of thing that might "accidently" turn up in her office.

She left the incomplete draft quite prominently in the centre of her desk, locked up (taking care to leaves signs that something might have been disturbed, should anyone enter), and left the Ministry at noon precisely.

*****

Getting home proved a bit problematic: she decided for once to Apparate directly, given that she was supposedly feeling lousy. But when she tried to pop into the hallway, she got a blinding smack to the front of her body, bounced off what felt like a brick wall, and landed on her arse.

Bloody hell....

It was a brick wall -- the wall of the house, to be exact, and she was sprawled on the flagstone walkway that led back to the mews. After a half-minute of stunned silence, she let loose with a string of obscenities that would have done Severus or Mad-Eye Moody proud.

"Madam Snape?" a timid voice queried from above her, and she glanced upward to find a very apologetic young man in a bowler hat leaning down to help her up. "So terribly sorry, but we didn't know you would be Apparating back home."

"What in bloody hell is going on?" Hermione demanded, struggling to her feet.

"The warding. Your husb--"

"Warding?"

"Yes, Madam Snape, your husband said you normally walked from the Hanged Hag, you see, so we'd got a head start...." The man trailed off, apparently alarmed by what must be a murderous look on her face. "Oh, dear. It was meant to be a surprise, I see."

"Yes, it's certainly that," Hermione retorted, rubbing at her bruised elbow, and glared at him.

"I am sorry, really -- as I said, we shouldn't have proceeded this far if we'd known you were popping in. However," he said more brightly, "this means we can set your initial password right now, and be out of your way in another instant. Your husband has already chosen his, he elected for Residential Deluxe with separate passwords. This way, please -- given the, ah, proximity of Muggle neighbors, we thought it best to work at the back. Residential Deluxe automatically adjusts to all ingresses, no matter which the warding is worked upon."
He grasped her by the elbow -- the *bunged-up* one, blast it -- and steered her further down the walk, through the garden gate, and up to the back door.

"This is Alf," he said of a wizened and dour-looking goblin who waited for them there, "best Wardsman we have on staff. *Now,* if you'll just place your wand against -- Oh, very *good,* madam, very quick thinking," he said when Hermione whipped out said wand before he'd got the words out. "*Now,* when Alf performs the incantaion, he'll pause and I will nod to you. I want you to choose a word or short phrase, anything at all you like, and that will become your password until you wish to change it.... Ready? Right then, here we go."

Alf gabbled an incantation: Hermione felt the ward yield just a bit, and she spit out the first thing that came to mind before the young man had a chance to nod.

"Utter bollocks."

The young man's eyebrows shot up.

Alf finished the remainder of the incantation flawlessly: Hermione heard the tell-tale little *ping* that announced the ward had taken, and Alf picked up his workbag, respectfully tugged the tip of his right ear, and popped away.

"Wonderful, very nicely done, madam! *Now,*" the young wizard said, and pulled an alarmingly thick manual from his satchel, "*when you are ready to change the password --* and I should advise doing it soon, though of course all such matters are kept confidential -- you'll find the instructions on page three hundred ninety-four. Let's go over the procedure just in case, though, I'll explain a bit about the --"

"Mr.... *What is* your name?" Hermione asked wearily, and sneezed.

"Harrison, madam. Wilberforce Harrison, junior. Of Harrison, Harrison, and Harrison Warding and Booby-Traps," he said, pulled a card from his jacket-pocket, and presented it to her.

"Thank you, Mr Harrison. However, I'm well aware how one changes a ward. Moreover," Hermione said, trying desperately to keep her temper, "I had the second-highest NEWTs in Arithmancy in twenty-five years and apprenticed with Verity Hawking, so I fancy I could explain exactly *how* it works in far more detail than you. It simply isn't necessary."

Harrison's eyes nearly popped from his head. "Second-highest.... Not Miss *Granger*?"

"Yes," she said sourly.

"Oh, *my.* I beg you *pardon,* Miss -- Madam Snape, I'd no idea. I *say,*" he wibbled, and shook her hand vigorously, "*that* thesis you submitted to the Guild journal -- *that* was absolutely *spiffing.* 'The Problem of Time-Turners: An Historic Survey of Temporal Paradoxes and Potential Errors in Wizarding Timelines, and How to Avoid, Track, and Fix Them.' *Just* lovely, especially all that information about how Muggle Twine Theo--"
"String Theory --"

"String Theory, yes, how that might explain the odd unsolvable Paradox. I'm only an amateur in Advanced Temporal Arithmancy, of course, but --"

"Mr Harrison, it's already been a long day," Hermione said, and sneezed again. "And as you can see, I've got a cold. I appreciate the work you've done, but I really must get inside."

"Oh, of course, I'm terribly sorry, Madam Snape. If you need anything in future, simply Floo or flame us," Harrison said, took the card back from her and tucked it into the manual, and handed it all over. "I so hope you're feeling better soon. Good afternoon." And he tipped his bowler to her, stepped back, and Apparated out with a pop.

Hermione, mentally cursing Severus, dumped the manual into her bookbag and lowered the ward with a very ill-tempered "Utter bollocks"; the ward dropped and the Muggle security bolts automatically shot back, and she pushed the door open and stepped into the flat.

"Snape!" she bawled as she closed the door, and had another sneezing fit before she could continue moving toward the sitting-room. "What the bloody hell have you done to my flat?"

"I should think that blindingly obvious," she heard him call back levelly.

When she looked into the room he was lounging on the sofa, feet up, and with the Prophet spread open in front of him.

"What gives you the bloody right to --"

"The entire bloody situation," he said coolly, never lifting his eyes from the paper. "Particularly since you're careless about checking the locks before you go to bed."

"It's my flat, damn it, not yours. If I'd wanted warding, I'd have done it myself -- I'm perfectly capable."

"But you hadn't. Moreover, Harrison offers an additional security measure. If anyone attempts to break in, the company is alerted and sends a representative over to check up on the occupants."

"You ordered the whole bloody package?" Hermione said, horrified. "Severus, I can't possibly afford the contract on that."

"You don't have to, it's taken care of."

"You --? No. No, I will not allow you to walk into my home and do th- this," she said, and sneezed again. "I don't care if you're paying for it. I don't want you paying for it --"

"It's done," he snapped, and glared at her as he folded the newspaper up. "I shall be here occasionally as well, and I'd prefer to feel more secure.... Oh, go take the bloody Pepper-Up," he added irritably. "You look disgustingly ill."
That, from someone who nearly drowned himself in a drunken stupor --

He was right about one thing, though: she felt like absolute shit, so she dropped her bags in the hallway and shrugged out of her coat, and stomped back to the kitchen for the Pepper-Up. (He'd made it nearly double-strength, damn him: she could feel the hair at her temples and above her ears wilt and then spring into their usual unmanageable tendrils as more than usual steam shot out of her ears.)

When she returned to the sitting-room, Residential Deluxe manual in hand, Snape was crouched in front of the fireplace: his back was to her, and he was rooting about above the damper for Flaherty's box.

"You might have warned me," she sulked as she sat on the sofa -- and jumped when something poked her in the back: she reached behind the cushion and discovered the heating-pad. It must have just been shoved there, because it was still quite warm. She quietly tucked it back down, and added, "I tried to Apparate in and bounced off."

"Unfortunate," he grunted, withdrew the box. "Had I known you'd change your habits, I should have told them to wait."

"Oh, never mind," she said, and sighed. "Though I notice you took the liberty of setting your own password."

"Of course I did. Don't worry, I shall make certain you know when to expect me anyway," he muttered, brushing a bit of ancient soot from the box. "Do you intend to Transfigure this?"

"No. I'm going to Apparate directly to the B- ...to the meeting location, so there shouldn't be any problems."

Snape's more sardonic eyebrow -- the right one -- went up a bit, but he managed not to comment on what he must think was more carelessness. "I should change your password before you leave," he did say as he placed the box in front of her.

"Bloody right. Not to mention seeing if there's a --"

"Yes, you may drop the ward long enough to Apparate out. Page four hundred twenty-six. It automatically resets once you've popped out."

Hermione leafed through the idiotic manual -- half of the text was fulsome, self-congratulatory praise for the company, and blatant attempts to interest the user in the company's other products -- and found the section: there was nothing to the procedure that she wouldn't have guessed.

"Massive waste of money," she muttered. "Utterly ridiculous, given that anyone with half a brain and a decent amount of talent can do the same thing, with a bit of work."

"Most are too lazy," Snape said, a sneer curling his upper lip. "Or busy, or careless," he added with a glance at her. "Do you require any lunch before you go?"
"No," Hermione said, intent on the manual, and then noted her own brusqueness and added, "Thank you, no. I probably shan't be long, anyway."

"Very well," he murmured, and went off to the kitchen, presumably to make his own.

"Severus?"

"Yes?" he called from the kitchen.

"Don't get any brilliant ideas about purchasing a House-Elf."

She heard him let out a muffled snort, and he said, "No point -- you'd hand the blasted thing clothing straight off. Simply throwing money away." He added something else in a monotone, but she couldn't catch it.

The password change came first, and after a few minutes' deliberation during which she discarded several possibilities (fucking arrogant bastard being too obscene and cumbersome for daily use, and greasy git being too odd and not at all nice of her, not to mention embarrassing if he happened to be with her), she settled for the time being on home again, jiggity-jig as being marginally less objectionable than the saccharine home sweet home (which she suspected far too many people used, anyway). Hers was predictable as well, but for the time being it would do.

Once the password was reset she pulled on her coat, tucked Flaherty's box into her bookbag, dropped the ward, and Apparated to Ottery St. Catchpole.

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The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole
1:49 pm

Visiting the Burrow was not high on Hermione's list of undilutedly pleasant things to do, mostly because of Molly Weasley. It wasn't that Molly made her feel unwelcome or uncared-for, precisely -- though there were times she had, like the year the boys had got massive sweetie-filled eggs while hers had been pathetic. The problem was now rather the opposite one: Molly tended to smother her. (It had taken her a while to get over Hermione's refusal of Ron's proposal -- those were some tricky months; but once he'd married Laura, that had all blown over.) Molly's concern tended to take the form of fussing and implicit criticism, which drove Hermione mad.

She suspected there would be a great deal of fussing this visit, as she hadn't been to the Burrow for over two years.

Arthur was happy to see her, at least: he smiled when he opened the door, and pulled her inside immediately.

"Hullo, my girl! I haven't seen you much at work -- how are you?"

"Fine, Arthur, fine. Bit of a cold, but I just took some Pepper-Up."
"Let's get that coat off you -- I say, it that one of those Muggle synthetasmatic fabrics?" he asked. "Waterproof, is it? You haven't charmed it that way?"

"Nearly waterproof, and no, I haven't," Hermione said, greatly amused with the covetous way Arthur was stroking the coat as he hung it on a hook.

**Good God, the whole brood's here -- two and three cloaks and jackets on every hook....**

"What's the occasion, Arthur? Ron didn't say."

"Bill's home," Arthur confided. "Brought the whole lot of 'em with him, first time ever -- thought we'd make one long party of the holiday, and by gum I took a half-day off today, it's been so much fun. Well, come along, into the kitchen -- I've got a pot of cider on, that'll warm you up."

She trotted along after him through the little, low-ceilinged warren of front rooms -- oddly empty -- and into the kitchen: Arthur shooed her over to the far end, where Laura (baby in lap) and George's wife, Hannah, were speaking quietly with a quite beautiful and exotic woman Hermione recognised from pictures as Bill's wife, though she couldn't for the life of her remember the woman's name. There were surprisingly few children in the house, and a quick glance out the window proved why: there were masses of them out in the back garden with Bill and Ron, all bundled snugly against the cold, and they were intent on building a tipsy-looking snow-homage to Hogwarts.

"Hermione!" Hannah said, surprised. "Dad didn't say you were coming --"

"I'm not certain he knew -- I wasn't invited until yesterday," Hermione said, and glanced at Laura, who gave her a knowing and tired smile. (Laura didn't look at all well, really, but Hermione supposed with a new baby in the house that was the norm.)

"Well don't stand there, come have a look," Laura said, and Hermione crossed the room and peeked into the blanket at Little Arthur: he was sleeping, and still looked much like any other generic infant, but his hair was already as dark as Laura's. (They'd finally had one that missed out on the Weasley red hair, then.)

"He's beautiful, Laura. Five months or so?"

"No, only three and a half -- he's so long and podgy that it's hard to tell. Still wakes me up at least three times a night, the greedy little beggar," Laura said fondly, and gently stroked Little Arthur's fat cheeks. "You've never met Youssra, have you?"

"No, I haven't," Hermione said, and turned to shake hands with Bill's wife. "First trip to England?"

"Yes, unfortunately. They keep Bill quite busy, and the school holidays never seemed to match up with his until this year," Youssra said in a lovely, barely-accented voice.

"Got used to the cold yet?"
"No," Youssra said quickly, and shivered despite several layers of jumpers. "They have, obviously," she added, and inclined her head toward the window overlooking the garden.

Arthur placed a chair behind Hermione, urged her down into it, and handed her a mug of cider. "I'll just pop up and see what's keeping Molly," he said, sounding a bit worried. "She'll be livid she missed you at the door," and then hurried off.

That's odd -- why would that...

"Everything all right?"

"Nothing major, just an upset. One of mine I'm afraid," Hannah said with a laugh. "Katie, the drama queen -- she will make the biggest fuss out of anything at all. Too much sugar over the holiday, and too much sympathy from Grandmum and Pa. She had a bad turn about an hour ago, and Mum took her upstairs for a lie-down."

Hermione wasn't sure the 'drama queen' title was justified -- at least, not totally. George's middle child had always had a strange tendency to unnerve her: the last time she'd seen Katie, the girl -- all of six, then -- had demanded that Hermione read to her, and then had gone a bit queer, snuggled close to her, and confided softly in her ear, "You must be very careful not to step on the Nadder." When Hermione had retorted (admittedly quite patronisingly), "Well, it's never wise to tread on any snake, is it?" the child had shook her head and stated emphatically, "Some serpents are very useful, and we shouldn't hurt them because it's not kind. But the Nadder isn't useful. The Nadder will hurt you if you don't watch out. I thought you ought to know." And she'd plucked her storybook from Hermione's hands and trotted off.

Oh, cripes, I'd forgot about that day....

Hermione was rather glad the child was out of the way: she didn't feel up to any more strangeness, not at the moment. She wasn't willing to write Katie off as simply odd, not any longer -- it was a strangeness more along the lines of a Luna Lovegood, rather than a Sybill Trelawney. (By the end, Hermione had learned to respect Luna rather more than she ever had the Divination teacher.)

They chatted quietly for a minute or two about classmates they'd seen recently or lost touch with (and then, when they realised they were leaving Youssra out, about the wizarding school in Aswam), until Molly rushed into the room and promptly smothered Hermione with a hug and an exasperated "There you are! -- Oh, dear, Hermione, you're looking quite thin --"

"No more than last time, really --"

"-- and what have you been doing to your face?"

Laura, behind Molly's back, rolled her eyes -- and Hannah gave her a 'behave yourself' nudge.

"Getting over a cold, Molly," Hermione said firmly. "I'm prefectly fine, really."
"Oh. You really ought take better care of yourself, especially now that.... Well, I'm sure it's just overwork, isn't it? Arthur says he hardly ever sees you about any more, you keep such long hours now...."

Molly settled herself in her rocker, pulled her knitting into her lap -- she was perfectly capable of charming it to knit automatically, Hermione knew, but she tended to do it manually when something was upsetting her -- and steered the conversation toward babies, which House each Weasley grandchild was likely to be Sorted to (overwhelmingly Gryffindor), and whether Gringotts would ever reassign Bill to work in England. (Youssra responded politely, but Hermione thought she wasn't particularly thrilled with the possibility.)

Something was off, though. By now, Molly had usually launched into what a shame it was Hermione hadn't married yet, how she ought to get out more and find a nice young man (Molly's friend Letitia had three unmarried sons, all healers, did Hermione know that?), and after that litany was done, she usually started in on housekeeping or politics, and how things were going with Hermione's work.

But she didn't. And while that wasn't terribly odd considering that half of the "advice" was no longer necessary, she wasn't even really addressing Hermione at all, other than shooting a comment or two her way. There was absolutely no difference in the way everyone else treated her.... But it wasn't quite right.

They're avoiding any mention of Severus. Molly especially, but no-one's even congratulated me in general, or asked after him.

It might be the awkwardness of the situation with Ron, but she didn't think so. There was no need for anyone to censor themselves at the moment, not with Ron out in the garden.

It was as if Severus didn't exist, or they didn't know she'd married.... And she knew that was bollocks, because even if they'd missed her wedding-band, Arthur had poked his head into her office one morning early in November and had babbled, "Just heard, Hermione, congratulations, lovely, just.... Well, must rush!" and had fled before she'd even had a chance to thank him.

For some reason, Molly's deliberate omission and everyone's general lack of interest got Hermione's goat. Not only got it, but pulled at its metaphoric beard and ears, and Hermione had the nearly irresistible urge to kick out at them, to bring Severus up deliberately just to see what would happen.

For fuck's sake, they're acting like I've done something unmentionable. Like I ought to be ashamed of him.... Well, I do have some things to be ashamed of, but Severus himself isn't one of them, God damn it. They know him, they know he fought on our side....

Yes, but now that they don't have to deal with him, he's a pariah. Now that he's done his bloody job for the Order, he should just crawl off to a dark cupboard and stop being.

By the time she'd sorted through her thoughts, Hermione was nearly livid: and she decided it was best if she removed herself before she said something cruel or stupid.
"I think I'll go out and say hello to the boys," she murmured, rising.

"-- and I told him, Young man, if you think I won't jinx you for a comment like.... What, dear?" Molly said with a start.

"Ron and Bill. I'm going out to say hello -- please excuse me."

"Oh, of course, dear, certainly. I said, if you think I won't jinx you for such an impertinent comment, well, you've got another thing coming, you have. Where they find these insolent clerks these days I'm sure I don't know...."

Hermione left her mug on the counter, nipped back to the hallway for her coat and bag, and went back through the kitchen -- where Molly was still going on at full steam -- and slipped through the back door.

She nearly went down when one of the kids flung himself at her and wrapped himself about her middle, and she wasn't certain whom or whose until a bright, freckled face looked up at her -- Ron's eldest, predictably named Harry -- and the boy chirped, "Hi, Aunt 'Mione!"

"Hullo, Harry! I'm surprised you remember me."

" 'Course I do," he said with a scowl, and then ran off to re-join the group; Bill, preoccupied with the rest, barely had a chance to turn and wave at her before one of George's boys threw a quite accurately-aimed snowball that hit him in the back of the head and knocked his hat off.

"Good God, Bill, there's nearly a foot out here and only a few inches out front!"

"My fault," he shouted back with a grin. "A little Transfiguration that I tweaked. We conflate the sand around the more dangerous tombs to cover them -- don't have to actually move the blasted stuff, then."

Another snowball went sailing toward Bill, and he had to turn his attention back to the kids.

Ron was halfway across the garden, chasing after one of the toddlers. (Hermione couldn't tell which: the poor mite looked like nothing so much as a ball waddling about on legs, there was so much coat and muffler.) She followed them, wincing as snow worked into her shoes, and finally caught up with them.

"Can we have a moment, Ron? Privately?"

Ron glanced up at her, shaggy, flaming hair sticking out from under the edge of his cap: he looked down at the child clinging to his hands, and said tersely, "Dad's put a Warming Charm on the bench. Bill," he flung over his shoulder, "can you handle the horde alone for a few minutes?"

"Sure, no problem --!" Bill called back, just as he was hit with a flying tackle by two of his own, dark-haired kids that sent them all into the snow-castle, utterly demolishing it.
"Come on," Ron said, and hefted the toddler up into his arms.

"Are you sure? He's got his hands full," Hermione said uncertainly as the rest of the children jumped into the fray, with Bill floundering at the bottom of the dogpile.

"He's fine. His lot's going a bit berserk, that's all -- first time they've played in snow."

Ron loped ahead of her over to the bench -- which was warm, practically steaming in the chilly air - - and sat, settling the toddler on his knee.

"Which one is this?" Hermione asked as she sat beside them, and reached over to tickle the child's chin. (Chin, pert nose, a wisp of the patented Weasley hair, and two little bright blue eyes were the only things visible, given how warmly wrapped the little sprog was. She -- Hermione assumed it was, as she knew they'd had a girl last, before Little Arthur -- could barely move for all the padding.)

"Molly," Ron said, and then smiled wryly and admitted, "But Bill's got one too, beat us to it, so we've settled on Lee."

"Ah. Twoish?"

"Close to. Next month, I think. I can't keep all the birthdays straight," Ron muttered, and grinned when Lee giggled at Hermione's tickling and flung herself backward and nearly over his arm to try to escape.

Well, no point in trying to sidestep everything, Hermione thought, tucked Lee's muffler back up where it belonged, and plunged in.

"So you've heard?" she asked.

"Yeah," Ron said, grin fading. "Bit of a shock, to say the least. Come on, Hermione, Snape?"

"Ron --"

"If you'd wanted a Pureblood that badly, any one of us would have done, even if not me," Ron said, managing to sound immensely hurt. "Percy's obviously not a great choice and Bill and George are out of the running, but Fred didn't get married until last summer. He would've been a good sport and given it a go, always did like you."

"Ron, I.... That wasn't the point, Ron," she protested, actutely aware of the lie: it was precisely why she'd married Severus, that and not having any messy complications.

Wait a minute -- a good sport? What am I, a booby prize?"

"I suppose it's intelligence. I'll give him that," Ron was saying, totally oblivious to her indignance. "I can see how you'd find intelligence attractive. Don't try to tell me you love him."
"I -- Look, you don't know a thing about him. Not really. I'm not going to justify my choice to you, either, because it had nothing to do with you, or with us."

"It was just a bit of a shock, that's all," Ron mumbled. "To find out you'd prefer someone like him over one of us."

*Oh, cripes.*

This was far worse than Hermione had imagined. She could deal with an angry and impetuous Ron: hurt Ron was something she'd always had difficulty with, because he always tried to excuse his feelings by making it into a matter of pride. She'd had a hell of a time convincing him all those years ago that her refusal had nothing to do with money and status.

"I told you," she said, doing her best to sound patient (even if she was longing to smack the back of his head), "I wasn't ready to be married straight out of school, and I didn't think we'd suit. I don't love you, Ron, not the way I should, and you deserve someone who does."

"Might've learned," Ron muttered, and stared bleakly ahead of him.

"Or not. And in the meantime I'd have driven you mad insisting on my apprenticeship and a career, when all you wanted to do was settle down. I just wasn't willing to put us through that. Isn't it better, this way?" she asked desperately. "You don't have all the baggage with Laura that we should have done. You certainly look happy to me. At least you did before I came out here."

"We are happy!" Ron retorted, indignant. "Bloody hell, I adore Laura. And the kids are the best."

"There you are, then. You know I don't go funny over children, but even I'll admit they look very sweet." And rowdy -- ye Gods, she thought, watching as Bill took another good pummelling from the assorted ebony, red, and brunette heads. "You've a lovely family, Ron. That's more than many people have. Can you be happy with that, and let the rest go? Admit that it's worked out for the best?"

Ron kept staring down the long length of his nose, absolutely obstinate, and she sighed.

"I suppose Arthur told you."

"No, Laura saw it in the *Prophet*. He only admitted it when I asked afterwards."

"Oh. I should have.... Well, no, it didn't occur to me at all to write earlier. I didn't think you'd care for the news, at any rate."

"Don't, but it doesn't matter. You haven't bothered to write or flame for years, 'Mione. I think that sums up your opinion nicely."

She bit back a wounded retort at that, and resisted the urge to snap at the ridiculous nickname.
Take it easy, my girl. Mending fences is what's important now, not defending every little thing you've done or getting upset over something stupid....

"All right, I deserved that," she admitted. "It doesn't have a bloody thing to do with my opinion, though, I'm just careless about keeping in touch... and the last few times I'd seen all of you weren't exactly comfortable."

"D'you think it might have helped to talk about it rather than just skiving off?" Ron said bluntly.

"No, Ron, it wouldn't have helped. You know I adore your mum, but she will -- would always cluck over me like I was the runty chick of the brood. She'd actually started bringing 'nice young wizards' to my attention, had you noticed that?"

"Of course she did. She'd always wanted another girl, and you were the closest she could get," Ron explained earnestly, totally missing the implication of his misphrasing. "After Ginny married you were all she had left to sort out, then, 'cause Fred told her to let him alone. There's Charlie too, but... well, I don't think he's getting sorted anytime soon. Not sure if he's just hopeless with women or if he bats for the home team, but either way --"

"Too much information," Hermione said, wincing.

"I don't care, he's my brother. He could bugger dragons for all I know or care, I'm just saying," Ron said defensively. "Anyway, he's still in Romania, so of course she fussed over you -- you're here. Sort of. Might as well be on the other side of the world, the way things have been."

"Well, I couldn't take it. And I couldn't be rude and tell her to mind her own business, even nicely." Hermione shot back. "She wouldn't understand."

"I could've said something if I'd known it was bothering you that much," Ron said, and twitched a bit as Lee tried to flap her arms (as best she could) and nearly smacked him in the face.

"Oh, right. No thank you, Ron, won't marry you, and by the way will you tell your mum to stop shoving other men at me now that she's given up on us?"

"Well, yeah. That's how you have to do it in this family -- come right out and say it. Everybody gets worked up, there's a bloody great lot of squalling, and then we get over it and care for each other anyway. That's what a family does, 'Mione. It sticks together." Ron shifted uncomfortably. "Except for Percy, but he made his choice. I expect we'll do exactly the same when he gets out, if he's changed his mind. I thought you knew we felt that way about you whether you married in or not."

Hermione snorted. "Not sure I like being put in the same black-sheep class as Percy."

"I don't mean that."

"When is he due to be released, anyway?" Hermione asked.
"Another year or two."

"And he's.... He's still all right? Have you heard anything?"

"Dad's heard that he's put on weight from lack of exercise -- probably looks good, considering what a beanpole he was, anyway -- but other than that, top-notch. Too bloody insensitive to be depressed, fucking Dementors don't seem to be able to make a dent in him." Ron peered down at Lee. "Don't tell Mummy I said that word."

Lee gurgled.

Percy was not a great topic of conversation. Ron had been absolutely humiliated by the whole business, and Hermione was quite surprised that he could say Percy's name without spitting; he hadn't been able to, for a long time.

It was kinder to drop the subject altogether.

They watched the kids beating up on Bill for a while, and the little huddle of sprogs -- the tweenies, too old to be toddlers, but not old enough to handle the rougher play -- over on the other side of the garden: they were batting a very odd-looking balloon back and forth, and it took Hermione a moment to work through what it actually resembled.

"Ron," she said cautiously, "what's Reggie playing with?"

"Huh? Oh, some kind of Muggle balloon, 's called a Playtex, I think. Dad brought some home from work this morning -- said they got boxes and boxes of 'em, so a few wouldn't be missed. Dunno why they confiscated them, they're not charmed. Harmless enough."

Hermione decided not to tell Ron that Muggle balloons didn't generally have reservoir ends. (Or that, in her opinion, the Weasley clan might put them to far better use than as toys.)

Then she decided to 'fess up.

"It wasn't just your mum," Hermione admitted. "It was everything. I felt awkward around you and Laura to begin with, and when the sprogs started coming...."

"That's stupid," Ron said bluntly. "She knows, and she doesn't care."

"Ron, you told her you'd asked me?"

"'Course I did, right away. And why you'd turned me down."

"And she doesn't care?"

"No." He looked uncomfortable. "Actually, she said she thought you'd been very sensible. Wouldn't mind having you about more -- says she needs a good dose of Sensible once in a while, since I'm useless at it."
After a moment's shock, Hermione laughed.

"All right, don't rub it in," he muttered, and glared at Lee when she started giggling too: and then his shoulders slumped, he groped for Hermione's hand, squeezed it, and wouldn't let go.

Hermione knew she was... well, not forgiven, precisely, but that Ron still cared for her anyway. She should have guessed that: they'd always had absolutely horrid flare-ups, like the proverbial cat and dog, and then once the air had cleared they'd been fine. Ron had never seemed able to hold a grudge too terribly long... with a few notable exceptions.

If truth be told, she was the one who'd chosen to stay offended after that last row, and had never given him a chance to make it up. It had been a very convenient excuse to avoid this whole bloody thing: the bizarre little house bursting at the joins with noisy, happy people who tended to see things in a quite uncomplicated way, and who'd often insisted on nearly smothering Hermione with attention when all she'd wanted to do was fade into the woodwork.

"Does Molly meddle?" she asked him.

"Gave it a go, at first," Ron admitted. "Laura set her straight, and Dad and I backed her up. Mum leaves well enough alone now."

Hermoine tried very hard not to snigger, and then gave up when Ron did so himself.

"She's a lovely mum, really," he protested amidst the chortling. "She just doesn't know when to stop."

"Yes, I know, I think she's lovely too. But you see, I'm not like Laura -- I should have kept it all bottled up, and everything would have festered. It would have made things awkward for you. No matter how you whinge about the family, you're really not very happy away from them."

"'Spose not," he admitted, and grinned when Bill was hit with another tackle, this time from Harry.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Fred and George had some investor's meeting or something, they'll be by later. Patrice -- that's Fred's wife, went to Beauxbatons, I don't think you know her -- had to go back to work today, won't be in until this evening. Ginny... won't be here. Some family thing, I guess," Ron said, and shot Hermione a pensive look.

"Does that happen often?"

"Yeah, does. And I don't think it's all his doing, either. She... I get the feeling she's ashamed of us, in a way. Not giving herself airs, or anything -- Mum wouldn't let her get away with that. She's just got really standoffish."

"Maybe it's all the kids, Ron," Hermione said. "They've only got the one, don't they?"
"She lost the second one, and they haven't managed another yet."

"Hurts to see the little ones about here, perhaps?"

"I suppose," Ron said, and sighed. "But they're her nieces and nephews, damn it."

"I doubt that matters," Hermione said softly, and reached over to tweak Lee's nose; the baby squealed and bounced up and down on Ron's lap, pulling at his jacket, and he had to take his hand from Hermione's, stand Lee upright, and let her bounce some more. "It's got to hurt like hell if you want them and can't have them."

"'s funny, though," he mused. "I always thought she was more like you. You know, more ambitious. She didn't seem at all concerned about having kids until she married."

"Well, people change, Ron," she said, trying to keep her tone light. "You thought I'd end up in academia, and look what happened."

"Yeah. Sorry about that," he muttered. "I shouldn't have ticked you off about it. It's just that I've seen what a Ministry job can do to someone. Didn't want that for you."

"I have to agree with you, now. But I had my reasons, and I can't say I'm sorry. It's worked out for the best."

They were quiet for a while -- except for Lee, who was still bouncing vigorously -- and Hermione was finally brave enough to ask, "How've you been?"

"Tired," he said. "We still have to practise through winter -- if we're out of shape come spring they'll cut us, it's a contractual thing -- but there's no pay, so I've two jobs right now as well as that."

"No pay, but you have to do it? That's criminal!"

"That's professional Quidditch for you. 'S all right, I'll be fine. Just stretched a bit thin, but the holiday's helped."

He looked 'stretched thin,' too. Hermione couldn't recall him ever looking that skinny -- even with the thick jacket he was wearing -- since he'd had a huge growth spurt Sixth Year; and she hoped the trousers he was wearing were his fourth-best or so, because they were patched at the knees and showed the wear, despite careful mending on Laura or Molly's part.

Lee squealed directly in his ear, and he winced. "I think she ought to go in soon. What was this thing you wanted to see me about, then?"

"There's something I need you to keep for me. Hide, actually, if you've a good place -- not here, because it could get your dad in a great deal of trouble. I can't tell you anything about it, and you'll have to promise me that you won't try to open it."
Ron sat up very straight and stared at her.

"Are you in some kind of trouble? Is Snape being an arsehole? -- No. With the Ministry?"

"Not yet. Potentially, yes. A bloody great shitload, in fact. There's something terribly wrong, and that's all I can tell you."

"Hermione, for Merlin's sake --"

"No, Ron, don't. Don't tell me I can't, or shouldn't -- it's far too important, for everyone. And I need you to keep this thing safe for me until it's needed, until I ask for it. Or Severus, you may give it to him if I can't come."

"Snape's helping you? Is that why you --"

"No, Ron. I mean, yes, he's helping me, no, it's not why I married him. He's.... It's not been easy working with him, you can imagine, but he's been wonderful about it, really," Hermione said, surprised to hear the words coming out of her mouth -- and that they were true. "He's taking a huge risk, and he's kept me out of a lot of trouble. I owe him a great deal for that. And before you ask, no, that's not why I married him, either. If we're right and if we're successful, a great many people will owe him, as far as I'm concerned."

"No, I can see that," Ron muttered. "He, uh, he really came through, that last bit, especially after Dumbledore was.... I'd expected him to turn, you know."

"Yes, you made that clear at the time. Why didn't you tell me about Firenze?"

"What about him?"

"That he'd fallen on Severus and smashed his leg to bits, what else? ...You didn't know?"

"No," Ron said, shaking his head. "No, I stayed inside with Neville and Huh- Harry. Didn't even go back out -- the Aurors took us straight to the Infirmary after they broke the Anti-Apparition wards. Didn't even notice Snape was hurt, until he limped into class with a cane. I was surprised he'd got hit with something -- last I'd seen, he only had a scratch or two on him. Quick bloody bastard when all the hexes were flying."

"Yes, well, I didn't notice either, and he's not any longer. Not when he's tired."

Ron peered at her. "Is he nice to you? I'm not being an idiot, here, 'Mione. I mean seriously. The truth."

Hermione snorted. "Nice? Severus? No, I don't think you'd call him nice, not politeness and tact and that sort of thing. But he's not cruel, not the way he was at school, and he's not horrid. At least, not now that we've got used to each other, and when he makes an effort."
"And are you really.... I mean, come on," he stuttered, blushing furiously; and for a split second Hermione could see Ron beneath the veneer of fatherhood and maturity -- the old Ron, the boy who'd nearly passed out from the nervous heebie-jeebies when he'd given her perfume for Christmas. (He and Severus had equally awful taste in perfume, in Hermione's opinion -- possibly the only thing they had in common.) "You're really married?"

"Are you asking if we have sex?" Hermione asked levelly.

"Yeah."

"Do you really want to know that? Has your squick tolerance improved that much?"

"I can change nappies without puking, now," he said quickly, and then after a moment's consideration admitted, "No, I.... Forget I asked."

"I shall. Cheeky."

They sat silent for a bit, and then Ron guffawed. "So tell me, Hermione, is it true what everyone said about Slytherins like Snape?"

"What?"

"'Cause Dean and I had a wager going that we could never settle, and I reckon he owes me a packet by now, just from the interest."

"What, Ron?"

“That the really Slytherin ones are just like snakes. Forked tongue, forked --"

“Ron!"

He grinned and shifted Lee onto his shoulder. "C'mon, give over. I could use the dosh, new baby and all."

"If you're wrong, you'll lose the bet and have to pay up."

"Bet I'm not. He was always more gullible than me, Dean. Had him thinking for a good two years that Trelawney was McGonagall and Dumbledore's love child."

"You didn't."

"Did."

"I refuse to answer. It's none of your business."

"'Mione --"

"No, absolutely not. Violation of his privacy, even if I don't mind. And I do."
"Oh, all right. Spoilsport," Ron said, and sighed. "I reckon you're in good hands, anyway." He winced. "Not that way. Sneaky bastard'll keep you out of trouble, I mean. So what's the bloody thing, anyway?"

"You'll do it?"

"Yes, I'll do it -- you need to ask that?"

"It is dangerous, Ron. I really hate to ask, what with the family, but --"

"Sod 'em," he said decisively. "The Ministry, I mean. We'll just have to make sure they don't suspect, that's all."

"That's what I'd thought, too, since we haven't talked for a while. Bad blood, all that."

Lee whimpered a bit and began to squirm.

"Let's have it -- she's on the brink of a major fit, I can tell," Ron moaned.

Hermione pulled her bag into her lap and drew her wand.

"Isn't she talking, yet?" she asked, trying to keep up a semblance of conversation to cover her activity. "I remember Harry running off about the mouth constantly at that age."

Ron went very quiet. "Both boys did," he finally said. "Recognisable words. She isn't, at all."

"Oh, Christ, Ron, I'm sorry," Hermione said, horrified. "I didn't mean to --"

"No, it's not anything awful. Not yet. She might just be a bit slow that way, that's all -- she's damned bright at everything else, especially at getting into trouble. Doesn't matter anyway," he said, and peered down at Lee (who was intent on burrowing into his jacket-front, face sulky): he tipped her face up, dropped a kiss on her nose, and gravely informed her, "Our particular cabbage patch doesn't take returns, and we wouldn't even if we could." He glanced at Hermione. "She's ours and she's stuck with us, I'm afraid."

"Wouldn't expect less, from you lot," Hermione said gently, and then charmed Flaherty's box into a stuffed pink rabbit, pulled it from her bag, and dangled it in front of Lee -- who grabbed for it and promptly stuffed its left ear into her mouth.

"That was a mistake," Ron said, wry. "She'll bawl her head off when I take it from her."

"Sorry. Spur of the moment. It's wrapped in oilcloth, but I shouldn't let her drool on it too much...."

They both enjoyed Lee's facial contortions for a moment -- the rabbit apparently tasted interesting, but not quite pleasant -- and then Ron said, "It's all the stupidity over the Mixed marriage laws, isn't it?"

"Ron, I can't tell you."
"That's a yes, then."

"It's even worse, this bit. And I swear that if you open that bloody thing and snoop, I'll hex you six ways to Sunday."

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "Look, can you stay for a while? Mum went a bit wild, when I said you might stop by."

"I'll bet she did," Hermione said, and glanced up at the darkening sky. "I wish I could, but I'd best get back -- we have some things to straighten out before Severus goes back for beginning of Term."

Ron's face went bilious. "He's been staying with you over holiday?"

"I refer you back to your low squick tolerance. Don't ask."

"All right. That's why you married him, isn't it? The bloody laws?"

"Partly," Hermione admitted with a sigh. "There's... there's a lottery in the works. I haven't been able to find out how they're setting it up, because it's been assigned to another department entirely, but --"

"Oh, Merlin's balls."

"Right. And we both sort of figured that we could... do worse."

Ron still looked a bit sick, but said, "Probably could. Mum and Dad've always thought pretty highly of him." He shrugged. "Don't see it myself, of course, but...."

"No, I doubt that they feel that," Hermione muttered. "What he did for the Order, perhaps, but not about him."

"What d'you mean?"

"Oh, just.... Everyone's side-stepping my being married, that's all. Didn't even ask after him, so they can't think that highly of him. Got up my nose a bit."

"They haven't? Well, it ought to get up your nose," Ron said indignantly. "I mean, you marrying the git's a shocker, but still...."

Hermione sputtered a bit, and then laughed.

"What? You don't ignore someone's family even if you don't like them -- it's really, really rude." Ron said. "And it's not like you needed their bloody approval, though they'd probably have liked the chance to talk you out of it. I'd have done, too."

"Oh, Ron," she finally said when she could speak, "I have missed you. Only you would be disgusted with someone's choice and make no bones about it, but still defend it...."
"Yeah, I've... I've missed you, too, you stubborn twit. Go on, then. Get going."

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said. "And I am sorry, truly. I just.... I don't deal with some things at all well, so I try to avoid them. That wasn't fair to you."

"No, it wasn't.... Oh, just bugger off, you," Ron muttered, face going red again. "And don't worry about the thing, we'll keep it safe."

Hermione stood and made for the back door -- and froze when Ron suddenly barked out, "People change, all right, and not for the bloody better. Merlin's balls, but I got out of a bad thing, didn't I? Suppose I ought to thank you for being such a stuck-up cow."

_Bloody hell, has he gone mad?_

He'd made it good and loud: even Bill had heard, all the way across the garden, and shook off three of the kids to pay attention to her and Ron.

"Ron," Hermione said, turning back to him, "what the hell is --"

"Just go on, get back to your bloody husband," he sneered -- and winked at her. "It's not my house, of course --"

_Oh, hell. Might have warned me, Ron._

"Ron?" Bill called.

"-- Shut up, Bill, it's not your concern. 'S not my house, of course, but do me a bloody favour and don't grace it with your presence when I'm here, all right?"

The sudden change in Ron was too much for Lee: she dropped the rabbit, started to wail, and twisted in his arms, trying to get away.

"I can do that," Hermione spat back. "Why you think I'd want to after the way you've treated me is.... You'll never change, so stuck in the past. He died, Ron," she added maliciously, and felt a pang when Ron's face went pale. "He's dead, and you can't change it, and I bloody well don't want reminders of it, even if you're happy to torture yourself."

"You bloody -- Get out. Just get out," Ron yelled, struggling with the frantic toddler.

Hermione stomped off to the back door, ignoring Bill's muttered, "Hermione --" and the stares of the kids, and tried to ignore that half of the people inside the house had their faces plastered to the windows.

"Hermione, what --" Laura said when Hermione entered the kitchen; Molly shot off up the stairs.

"Sorry," she muttered, not bothering to stop. "Sorry to spoil the get-together."
She'd made it all the way out the front door -- past the frankly amazed Fred and George, who were just wiping their shoes on the mat -- before Molly burst out after her, a parcel in her hands, and bawled, "Hermione Gr -- Snape, you get right back here!"

She didn't, but at least she stopped and waited for Molly to catch up. "I'm sorry, Molly. I really thought.... I thought I'd give it a go, but he still hates me, I know it."

"No, he -- Oh, Hermione, he doesn't. Never has. You know him, you know he'll get over it," Molly pleaded as Arthur lumbered out the door, past the twins -- who were still staring -- and over to them. "Give him a chance to calm down, love, you'll see."

"No, I don't think he will. I think this is the last straw, as far as he's concerned -- and I think it is for me as well. I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have picked today. I've spoilt everything."


"Just give him some time," Molly urged, and shoved the package into Hermione's hands. "That's just a little present. It's not much, but I didn't want you to think we'd forgot."

"Thanks," Hermione muttered, eyes stinging, and clutched the package tight before bending to kiss Molly's cheek. "I'll see you about," she added to Arthur, and gave him one too.

"Take care, my girl," Arthur said -- a bit too anxiously than the situation warranted, Hermione thought -- and pulled her in for a quick squidge before she had a chance to step away.

Hermione was intensely aware of their eyes on her as she pushed through the gate, muttered the charm and password to drop the new ward on the flat, and then Apparated home.

*****

Severus was sprawled out in the chair when she stormed into the sitting-room (no heating-pad in evidence now): she tossed the package on the table, and then backtracked to the hall to pull off her coat and wet shoes.

"Unsuccessful?" he called after her.

"No, very. I don't know what that it is, actually. Go ahead and open it," she said, and stomped back into the room, throwing herself on the sofa. She put her feet up, and scrubbed at her face as though that might erase the whole bloody incident and her rage over everyone's deliberate, squeamish 'tact.'

She heard Snape sit upright, and the crinkling of the butcher's paper as he unwrapped it: and then after a long silence he said, "These look suspiciously like Weasley knitting."

"How can you tell?"

"Eighteen years of staring at Weasley jumpers, how could I not?"
"What are they?"

"I've no idea."

She glanced over: Severus was holding between his thumb and forefinger, by a loop at one corner, a garish knitted square.

There was an intertwined "S" and "H" worked into the pattern.

That was all it took. Hermione lost it and howled.

"What?" Severus said.


He pulled out another odd bit -- it looked rather like a child's cap, with an gay little tassle on the top -- and they both stared and blurted out simultaneously, "Tea cozy."

Hermione lost it again.

"Why?"

"Belated wedding present, I'd guess."

"Ah," Severus said with a frisson of revulsion, and dropped the pot-holder and cozy back into the wrapping. "You didn't give the thing to Arthur, did you?"

"Bloody hell, no. Ron. And he knows he can hand it over to you, if need be. They're in Dewberry Lane, Chudleigh."

"Marginally better, but are you certain it's wise?"

"Yes. We haven't spoken for years, literally years, and we'd had a great bloody row last time. And did again."

"He behaved wretchedly toward you, but took the bloody box?"

"No, we patched things up. He started another fight intentionally, just in case anyone thought of him. You would have been proud of him."

"That's far too incredible to believe. I shall have to take your word for it."

"You know, I think," Hermione said, ignoring the jab at Ron, "that Arthur might suspect something."

"What do you mean?"
"I got the usual squidge when I left, but he told me to take care as well. And I got the impression he wasn't speaking of generalities."

Snape considered that a moment. "Possible. Weasley always coordinated the more subversive element in the Ministry. I'm not certain I appreciate that at the moment, however -- it might mean others know what you're about. You and Shacklebolt have spoken, for example. And Tonks."

"But no-one's approached me directly about anything. I know there is someone doing mischief -- those names for the flight list that went missing early on, for example. I get the impression that it's very disorganised, though."

"Weasley trademark, the appearance of disorganisation. Very similar to Death Eater structure, in fact. One or two people in the Inner Circle knew all the operatives involved, and no-one further down had more than one or two contacts that they could turn in if they were caught."

"But why has no-one contacted me?"

"Protecting you, perhaps, as well as themselves. You're very visible, given how closely you work with Corcoran. Better not to have any of the old crowd associate with you."

"Oh."

Hermione stared up at the ceiling for a while, and then said, "He doesn't look very well."

"Arthur?"

"Ron. Very... threadbare. Awful, actually."

"Well, he would, wouldn't he?" Snape said, idly paging through a book. "Second-string Beater for Chudley Cannons can't pay a great deal."

Hermione snorted, and Snape glanced up and retorted, "That's not a judgement, it's the truth. He is, and it mustn't."

"I suppose you're right," Hermione said, unable to keep up indignation for once. "In fact, I know you are. Did you know they make them practise through winter, without pay? He's working two bloody jobs to make ends meet and practising, as well. He looks ready to drop."

"I'm not surprised," Snape murmured. "I can't tell you how many students I've seen pin their hopes on Quidditch, only to find that excellence on the Hogwarts pitch is mere mediocrity in the professional venue."

"He's not mediocre."

"I'm not saying he is overall, but he joined the wrong team at the wrong time. He probably should have done well, had they not managed to sign Ngase. The man single-handedly pulled the team up to second place, last year."
Hermione rolled onto her side and stared at Snape. "How do you know that?" she demanded, suspicious. "You don't impress me as a Quidditch fan unless Slytherin is playing. In fact, you've sneered at it."

Snape looked exceedingly self-conscious. "At least one idiot attempts to smuggle the Quidditch Quotidian Quiz into class at the beginning of the year.... I might page through before binning it. And I don't sneer at the game, I sneer at idiots who revere it above all else."

_That's an understatement -- a lie -- if I ever heard one. He's a closet Quidditch fan...._

_Oh my God. Randy, snores, occasionally drinks to excess, insists on being primary Apparator, and likes Quidditch...._

_Oh, hell, I've married a typical male._

She rolled over onto her back and tried desperately not to giggle, but it was almost impossible. They (everyone in Gryffindor, that is) had always imagined Severus Snape spending his free time -- when they could bring themselves to imagine it -- in his dark, dank private rooms, hunched over a well-thumbed Dark Arts grimoire (although Dean Thomas had always bet it was the centre-fold Witch of the Week in _The Quibbler_, and made nasty comments about what Snape was probably doing with his free hand while perusing), when all along it was just as likely a grubby, confiscated copy of the $Q^3$....

_Well, Dean, wrong on the nasty rooms, probably wrong on the Quibbler pin-up witch, and definitely wrong on the issue Ron mentioned as well...._

"What?" Snape asked querrellously.

"Nothing, I'm just tired."

"You seem prone to hilarity nonetheless. I take it it wasn't an unpleasant visit."

"Not exactly. But it wasn't fun, either," she said quietly, sobering.

"How so?"

She thought through it for a while, trying to find the most diplomatic phrasing, and then said, "Some topics were avoided, that's all. I wasn't particularly comfortable. But then I seldom am when most of the family's there -- too crowded."

"Ah. Had I known where you were going, I should have warned you of that."

"Of --?" She glanced over at him: he was staring at her gravely, giving her an 'I know what you meant, and you know precisely what I'm saying' look, and returned to his reading.
"No, I don't see why you should have warned me," she said. "And I didn't appreciate it. Even Ron thought it very rude of them. I didn't expect that of him, bless his heart." She sat upright and stretched, and moaned, "I've no idea what's left in the fridge. And I'm sick of tinned soup."

"S--"

"Don't suggest sausages, or I shall throw something at you."

"My first thought had been Indian curry, as we deserve a bit of sloth after last week-end," he said mildly. "But I've no pounds."

"Oh. Well, I do. I usually order take-out far more than I have been, in fact. And you're right, we deserve a treat in any case."

She heaved herself off the sofa, retrieved the take-out menu and phone, and called in the order; and while they waited, she carefully asked -- for she had nothing to occupy herself with, and now that the box was out of their hands there was nothing at all to talk about, really -- "Did you go to the club today?"

"No," he murmured.

"Oh. Oh, well, you wouldn't -- Harrison had to be let in, didn't he."

"Correct," Snape said, eyes still glued to the book.

"So you just...?"

"I just stayed in reading," he said. "I've lost a day of putting the new stores in order, so I shall be quite busy the rest of the week, and might as well relax now. Not that I'm particularly anxious to return anyway, given the weather up there."

"Ummmm. There's got to be something that would make you more comfortable, short of taking analgesics constantly...." Hermione mused, and ignored the irritated glance he threw her way -- but she dropped the subject, since it bothered him so. (She didn't stop thinking about the problem, though.)

_Heating-pad won't work, obviously, and Warming Charms would only work on his clothing and have to be renewed every hour...._

"Of course, you might help with the stores and inventory if I'm still behind come the week-end," he said after three minutes' silence and the turning of two pages.

"Yes, I could.... Oh, bugger. Hang on."

She scrambled to her feet and checked her desk-calendar.

"I already looked, and you've nothing --" Severus began to say.
"Snooper. Did you see the little tick next to the date?"

"Yes. And?"

"And I may not be in any condition to.... Oh, bloody hell, it's a fact of life and you'll have to get used to it. I'll have my period. Or at least I'd better, or we have more problems than we think. I don't suppose you'll want to deal with it, so I'll only be a distraction and a nuisance, won't I?"

He looked immensely irritated at that, and opened his mouth to protest: and then he struggled for a bit, irritation turned to resignation, and he admitted, "Can't be avoided, I suppose. Put the visit down for the week-end after."

Oh, thank God. I absolutely draw the line there.... And it's a good thing he'll go tomorrow -- any closer, and I should probably try to kill him if it's a bad month.

The rest of the evening passed quietly, between the take-out and the lack of topics for conversation: and Snape actually set aside his book and watched the telly when Hermione resorted to turning it on. (He wasn't terribly impressed on the whole, but seemed a bit intrigued with an old episode of *Cracker.*)

"Rather pointless," was his only remark about television in general when he rose after declaring his intention to go to bed.

"Mindless entertainment, mostly -- some people need that, I guess. I do occasionally. Although there are some educational programmes as well."

He snorted disbelievingly, muttered a "Good-night," and left for the bedroom.

*****

Snape was sleeping soundly when Hermione finally went to bed herself: she wasn't really sleepy, given the afternoon's upsets -- and she was still upset over the idiocy, despite Molly's parting gesture. (She had absolutely no intention of using the silly pot-holders, much less the tea-cozy, but supposed she ought to put them away as a souvenir of the whole mess: they were the only wedding-present she'd got.)

Unfortunately, pushing aside the thought of the adults' childish behavior brought other things to mind. She kept hearing Katie Weasley's solemn advice *Some serpents are very useful and we shouldn't hurt them because it's not kind,* and couldn't help applying it to the man in her bed.

*Well, Katie, I must admit that you may be right. I wonder if you really knew what you were saying, or if it was just words to you?*

*Oh, bloody hell, Hermione, the child couldn't possibly be Divining anything. She's just an odd little girl, for pity's sake. It's you who's making something out of it.*
That didn't mean there wasn't some truth in it nevertheless, whether one was speaking of a wild serpent or her particular, semi-domesticated Slytherin (emphasis definitely on semi-domesticated: he certainly cleaned up after himself in the kitchen and bath, and he didn't leave the toilet seat up, but that was as far as even the most charitable interpretation could be stretched).

She hadn't been kind to him at all, not really. She was trying, but that was more to assuage her own guilt than for his benefit. (She ought to have been willing to go to Hogwarts this week-end, for example -- if only to help him with the stores should he need it, since running about all week had set his schedule back -- but the thought that he might insist on sex while she had her period.... It was simply too squicky a thought. She'd be irritable and moody anyway even if he didn't insist, and it was probably kinder not to take her temper and hormonal fluctuations out on him.)

*I ought to try harder at other things, though. He is, I think -- he's been practically meek the last two days, for him -- and if he can manage it....*

*Oh, Lord. Why does life have to be so bloody complicated? Just this once I'd like to be eleven again, when everything seemed perfectly clear, no shades of grey. All black-and-white.*

She got to sleep eventually, though her dreams were filled with snakes and serpents of all kinds and permutations, from nadder to basilisk: but they didn't quite undo her resolution to be kinder to Severus Snape, if she could. In fact they probably reinforced it, for when he reached for her quite early the next morning, she did try to be accepting, if not enthusiastic. She even tried not to be irritated after the sleepy encounter when he wriggled further down her body, used her shoulder as a pillow, and dropped back off, snoring gently just below her ear, his weight pinning her to the bed.

*We'll have nearly two weeks away from each other, she reasoned. And we'll only be together once a week rather than a week at a time, after that. Surely I can manage to be more tolerant if that's the case.*

*He really doesn't have anyone else, I don't think. He's said the Purebloods won't have him about now, and if even the Weasleys try to ignore that he exists.... Well, that just leaves the Hogwarts people, doesn't it, and perhaps his mother? Though that's more than I have, considering.*

Motivated by what she could only describe as a kind of maternal pity -- and as he was out like a light and wouldn't be able to construe it as anything like interest or encouragement -- Hermione consciously and momentarily divorced her opinions about Severus Snape and her disgust for the whole situation from the man who lay sleeping in her arms, and stroked at his tangled hair.

She could see, now, how this might be pleasant. To have someone about who, even if he didn't really need you, wanted you -- if only on the most basic, and in some ways, primitive, level. It probably should be pleasant, if they'd chosen each other for the right reasons....

*Too late for that given how we've mucked it up. But I wonder if it couldn't be mended, somehow.*

She lay quiet for a very long time, stopping her absent-minded petting of his hair once when he snorted a bit and stirred, and only resumed when he settled down again; and she only dragged
herself out from under him when her need to use the loo became Chapter 13: 
Wherein Hermione learns less than she wanted and more than she bargained for.

The Ministry  
Thursday, January 19th  
10:14 p.m.

Bloody hell, Hermione thought, even the charwomen have gone. If I'd known it would take this long I'd have popped home for supper....

She wished she'd never agreed to Snape's conditions for breaking-and-entering the Records Room. It had been absolutely nerve-wracking all week, waiting for her illicit appointment with some unknown agent on Thursday evening: it had even overshadowed the relief she normally felt when Corcoran was scheduled to be out of the department. And there was the uncomfortable feeling of putting her fate in someone else's hands, of not being the one making the plan, not knowing the specifics; for in the past, even as early as Second Year, the mastermind behind most illicit plots had been Hermione herself.

It's not that I don't trust Severus, she thought uneasily, and scribbled over an inaccurate footnote phrase in the next report due. It's that I don't necessarily trust his contacts. I mean, who the bloody hell can he know in the Ministry who can get me in there? Now, if it were him, I'd --

She paused for a moment, and assessed that last thought.

Good Lord, Hermione, only weeks ago you were reminding yourself to be on guard against him....

I trust him. I'd trust him with my life. In fact, I am. The man only blackmailed me into a sexual relationship I didn't want, insists on shagging me no matter what I say -- well, except for the week I had my period -- he mucks about with my flat, and he orders me around and argues with every damned thing I want to do. When the hell did I begin to trust him?

She set down her quill, gave it some serious thought, and came to the conclusion that it was because Severus Snape was a man of his word. It wasn't necessarily a word you liked -- often wasn't, in fact -- but if he said he'd do something, he did it, even if it was something nasty. You mightn't be able to tell what he was feeling (she'd been surprised last week-end when he'd admitted to irritation rather than anger, for example, because you bloody well couldn't tell the difference with him), but his actions were consistent with his word.

Hermione hated to admit it, but consistency was a character trait she found very attractive. Consistency was, after all, the logical and ethical counterpart to constancy of affection, and probably as close to loyalty (an attribute that appealed quite strongly to her Gryffindor sensibilities) as anyone had the right to expect from a dyed-in-the-wool Slytherin.

One can't say he's particularly honourable, though. I mean, the whole mess in October....
But she found herself unwilling to make that conclusion definitively, not now that some time had
passed and she had a better perspective on October's events. "Honour" was a highly subjective
matter, after all, totally dependent on the views of the assessor: Severus' former associates among
the Death Eaters had undoubtedly branded him dishonourable because of his defection, while
Dumbledore might have insisted precisely the opposite. (Presumably Arthur and Molly felt the
same, though that apparently wasn't enough to induce them to associate with him.)

Hypothesis: when faced with a larger issue and the well-being of the group, many Slytherins
(Severus, for example) are quite capable of acting honourably (per the subjective parametres of the
situation) and ignoring their own best interests. In purely personal matters, however, the same
Slytherins (especially Severus) will almost always choose what benefits them most, irregardless of
considerations of honour or ethics....

Well, that bloody well covered most of the population of the world, didn't it? The only difference
was that Slytherins seemed to be more ruthless and sneaky about it. Or at least Severus was.

Not fair, she reminded herself. He offered to let you off the hook, you just weren't willing to face the
consequences. And that brings me back to his consistency, that he does what he says. Even that
stupid warding on the flat -- he'd said back in October it was his job to protect me and he is, even
when I act like a cow about it.

Consistency. So much nicer, in the end, than that generally-careless Gryffindor attitude.

That had nearly driven her mad about Harry and Ron, she remembered, those casual promises made
that had then been forgot or swept aside in favour of extra Quidditch practise or loafing about with
Hagrid, or any number of distracting things that turned out to be more fulfilling to the adolescent
male Gryffindor than studying or practising spells and charms. (The casual assumptions drove her
wild as well, as when Ron had decided she was his fall-back date for the Yule Ball without ever
asking her.) It was a sweeping generalisation to claim that of all Gryffindor males, of course: it was
simply an unfortunate truth that Ron and Harry had both possessed the trait, and as one of their
closest mates she'd put up with it on far too many occasions.

But Severus.... Barring that one slip the night he didn't show up, when I'd bought that God-awful
beef for his dinner, Severus is terribly consistent.

Good Lord, I've found something praiseworthy about Severus Snape --

"Report's not getting done with you staring at the wall, is it?" Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice rumbled
softly from the door.

Hermione nearly gave herself whiplash, her head snapped toward the doorway so suddenly: then
she blushed and muttered, "Not due for two weeks anyway," and shuffled the papers into a drawer,
too embarrassed to ask how the hell Severus had got hold of Shacklebolt, or how the man had
stepped into her office without her noticing.

Shacklebolt's lips twisted into grim smile. "Come along, then," he said. "I've bought you an hour,
hour and a half at most, so best not waste it."
"How --?"

He put a finger to his lips to shush her. "No talking in the corridor. Something's gone wonky with the Sneakoscopes on this floor, but the Elucidating Ears are still on. Follow me, and don't make any noise."

Hermione grabbed for her wand and put a dampening charm on her shoes -- that had come in handy several times since she'd run across it -- and then she followed Shacklebolt out of her office and down the corridor to the charwoman's cupboard: he opened the door, wincing when the hinges squeaked, and shooed her inside before stepping through and closing the door. (She was suddenly aware in the confined space of just how large a man Shacklebolt really was, and if she'd trusted him less she'd have been quite uncomfortable.)

"Toward the back," he said under his breath, and she groped for the back wall. "No, to the right -- there you are, hang on. Give us a Lumos, would you? I'll need to do something else."

Hermione did as he asked, and Shacklebolt reached around her and tapped the wall with his wand: a hidden door popped open, revealing a grimy, twisting stairwell.

"Aurors' secret access to all levels," he whispered. "Put in when they renovated after the Grindelwald business. We've been trying to get a lift for years, but they're too cheap to install one."

"What's it for?"

"Internal Affairs Division of the Auror's Service. Let's say Corcoran's not the only Ministry employee requiring a bit of supervision. Play your cards right and stick it out, and you might have his job soon."

"Don't bloody want it," Hermione muttered back as she started down the stair, free hand clenched about the rail: the stairwell didn't seem to have been updated since the place was built.

Shacklebolt laughed quietly. "Could be handy for us, having someone that far up."

"Fudge wouldn't have me, hates my guts. The only reason they took me for this job was because I was the only damned applicant. Corcoran's said so on many occasions."

"Not quite the only one," Shacklebolt said. "Funny, that. The other applicants' letters got mislaid, somehow, soon as they hit the mailroom."

Hermione stopped dead on a landing, turned, and glared up at him. "Are you saying the Order rigged ...? Now isn't the best time to tell me that, Kingsley. At the moment I'm tempted to hex someone for getting me in this mess, and you're closest. You never know what horrific things I might've picked up from Severus."

"Yes, I do -- we were within a year or two at Hogwarts. Bastard hexed me twice, but then I deserved it," Shacklebolt retorted, his smile visible in the light from Hermione's wand. "Besides, you didn't have to take the job, so it's on your own head. Go on, we're wasting time."
Well, that explains that, Hermione thought, disgruntled, as she started down the next rickety run of stairs. Severus must have spoken to him. I wonder what else they've talked about? Or if Severus is still active in the Order?

It took them nearly ten minutes to reach the bottom of the stair, and when they had Shacklebolt pulled her back with a hand on her shoulder and bent to whisper in her ear.

"We're just outside the Records Room. I'm going out first as it isn't unusual for one of us to patrol and check in on certain areas when the Sneakoscopes are down," he explained. "There's a guard. He had his tea-break at nine-thirty and we'd put a sleeping potion into it, but he mayn't have had enough yet to knock him out. You stay here until I come for you."

Hermione nodded and doused her wand's Lumos: Shacklebolt opened the door and slipped from the stairwell, and she waited in the dark for several interminable minutes before Shacklebolt came back to fetch her.

"Come on."

"But the Sneakoscopes --"

"Like I said, non-op at the moment on several floors including this one, as are the ward alarms and the Elucidating Ears on this level," Shacklebolt muttered as he chivvied her out of the stairwell. "Happens all the time, and the company won't send the repairman outside business hours. Or rather, the Ministry refuses to pay for emergency after-hours repairs, so we're safe."

Hermione glanced at the sleeping guard, a fat, gluttonous-looking specimen who'd demolished half a tin of biscuits with his tea: he'd nearly slid off his chair in his sleep, and his wand had dropped from his fingers. "And he's --"

"Pot's empty, so you're safe for at least an hour and half," Shacklebolt said, "but I wish you'd keep it to one. Have you ever been down here?"

"No."

"It's not warded nearly as well as the Department of Mysteries, but you may still run across the odd ward that needs breaking. Most of the paper records aren't high security any longer as the more sensitive things are now recorded in spheres. Those are in an anteroom off to the side -- and that room is bolloxed, so don't even try it even if you're certain what you want is in there. If there's not a summary of the proceedings on paper, you're not going to get at it tonight, and probably not ever."

"Okay."

"I've unwarded the main door, but you're on your own inside -- I need to stay here and keep an eye on him. If he stirs at all, I'll poke my head in and you're to drop everything immediately and get out before he wakes. Understood? Because my orders are to get you in and out, but not to put myself in any danger. I can justify staying here while he's asleep, but not if he wakes, and I will walk off on you if you muck about too long."
"Got it. Thanks, Kingsley."

"Go on, get to it," Shacklebolt whispered, settling himself in the shadows of the nearest corner, his wand out and ready: Hermione glanced at her watch, noted the time, and slipped past the snoring guard and into the Records Room.

She stumbled in the dark and barked her shins rather badly on a piece of furniture which turned out -- once she'd charmed the lamps lit -- to be the archivist's ancient and grotty desk, piled high with files and thickly-bound ledgers (someone wasn't doing their job at all efficiently): a forbidding-looking door behind it was, she assumed, the anteroom Shacklebolt had mentioned. (He was right -- she fancied she could almost sense a nasty vibe coming from the wards about the door, and heavens knew what she'd set off if she tried to break in.)

She knew better than to even think about cracking a sphere, in any case. They had come into use in the mid-70s, just in time for Trelawney's prophecy and other sensitive items: the Wizengamot had apparently decided they were useful for word-for-word recording of judicial hearings as well. She didn't know exactly how they were protected: it might well require the archivist to access a particular sphere, so it was a dead avenue. She'd have to hope the Flaherty matter wasn't considered enough of a high-security risk to warrant a sphere alone.

The Records Room itself was vast, and it seemed to stretch the length of the Ministry building -- nearly an entire city-street length -- and was packed with rows of modern filing-cabinets at the near end. Hermione could faintly make out a point at which the cabinets gave way to wood shelving with cubbyholes for parchments and scrolls, and she was tempted to trot down and see what came after that. (It was a fascinating thought, that the Wizengamot records might actually go as far back as hides, bark-paper, and ogham or runic stones....)

But there wasn't time for that, so she cast another Lumos (the lighting was predictably atrocious), and made for the cabinet-row signed "F," peering at the scribbled labels until she found "Fi - Fo." She fumbled with the latch on the cabinet, finally got it open (it shrieked as the drawer slid out, maw gaping, and she dropped her wand and had to scrabble for it before throwing a Silencing Charm on the damned thing), and thumbed through the file-tabs before finding the only Flaherty.

It was the wrong one, unfortunately: she could tell before she even pulled it, because the file was so old that the stock was foxed and torn. Flaherty, Bartley might well be Martin Flaherty's grandfather, but it had nothing to do with her inquiry.

Shit.

It certainly looked interesting in other circumstances: a quick scan of the indictment at the top of the papers said that Bartley Flaherty had been accused of performing magic during the Muggle Easter Rebellion and otherwise meddling in Muggle political matters. But Hermione couldn't afford
to indulge, so she quashed her curiosity, shoved the file back in the drawer and closed it, and stomped back over to the archivist's desk as it was the next most logical place to find any file on Martin Flaherty.

*You'd think they could be bothered with a card system*, she thought grumpily, pulling over one of the huge ledgers.

The ledgers proved to be Indices: documents were logged in, cross-referenced, and then put into a bin to be filed at a later date. She scrabbled amongst the other ledgers littering the desk and found the "F" index.

There was no Martin Flaherty logged in.

*Bloody fucking antiquated systems -- There's absolutely no need for this, really, so inefficient....*

It was quite easy to charm a quill to record these things immediately as they hit ones' desk: the archivist must be one of those ancient wizards who refused all newfangled gadgetry and methods. Hermione cast a desparing glance at the tottering stack of files on the floor next to the desk -- probably the new arrivals -- and then began slogging through them none too carefully. (If they hadn't yet been logged, no-one would likely notice if they were out of order.)

Flaherty's was somewhere in the middle of the pile, with a cryptic designation 2007, *ref. s07.29.12b*, which Hermione interpreted as the filing number of the sphere.

*The full proceedings are out of reach, then. Have to hope the summary is accurate and truthful....*

Luck was with her. While there was no literal transcription of the Wizengamot's proceeding in the file, there was a copy of the French inquest, including the Coroner's report (thank God her French was up to the task). And someone had instructed the court scribe to make notations on the French transcript as to the British conclusions.

**Decedant's Effects:**

* Clothing consistent with passing as a Muggle (Charmed; noted in Procedurals as it was removed from body.)

*Umbrella*

**Pocket contents:**

* Muggle train ticket, Eurostar, return to Calais-St. Pancras.
* Muggle ticket-stub, St. Pancras-Calais.
* Muggle identification (forged), in name of Marcus Flannery, Southwark, London.
* 455 Muggle Euros (Brit. Wiz. exchange rate unknown).
* 6 Galleons, 3 sickles, 5 knuts (Charmed to resemble sweets).
Bleu. Parfum, lotion, bath salts. Ask for gift-wrap. Auror's note: interview w/Mrs Flaherty prior to Autopsy results bears this out -- she supposed gift purchase was his purpose for travel.

Other: also found near body:

Empty vial (analysis pending).
Wand, 22.225 cm, beech. Core undertermined.

Thank God François's people got the letter and key out before the body reached the mortuary, Hermione thought, and flipped through the rest of the report looking for other notations or interesting findings.

Abrasions consistent with a glancing blow against brick wall (FAS reports Deceased was disarmed by Expelliarmus before death -- may have been blown into wall by backlash, see Site Forensics Report.) No other wounds found. Trace evidence on body of ingestion of a substance immediately prior to death (see Autopsy, Section B, G/I Tract for further information; and Toxicology report [pending]).

There was very little notation on the Autopsy report proper: the Wizengamot apparently trusted the French coroner, for there was no effort made to question the results or to order an autopsy by a British coroner.

There was apparently, however, some debate (as there should have been) over why the bloody hell Martin Flaherty had defied the Ministry's travel ban, and why the bloody hell he had a vial of poison with him when he did so: three pages of notes were tacked on to the end of the French report.


Int. Watkins notes family history of trouble-making; Wiz. records indicate criminal incidents several generations prior to immigration to England, but MLE reports a spotless record for both M. F. and his parents (deceased). Aur. interviews with associates (see MLE file) unilaterally claim outstanding reputation, a few eccentricities (fondness for Muggle travel, as evinced by Muggle identification), dedicated to wife, no history of political activism or anti-government attitudes or actions, including no known association with Death Eaters or the Isolationists. Well-respected,
spotless work record, no financial difficulties or recognisable emotional/mental problems. Int. Watkins asks, if not political, then industrial espionage?

Minister Fudge offers that MLE already investigating this angle: a survey of office at M&M revealed nothing untoward; all records intact. Exceptionally orderly individual, trusted implicitly by President of company, though could demonstrate exceptional stubbornness if felt company was going in wrong direction. Exceptional loyalty to company demonstrated throughout career. No evidence whatsoever of malfeasance.

Int. Finch queries poison. Did F. expect to be detained/arrested? Why such a drastic measure if nothing to hide?

MLE confirms that F. received notification of ban and returned confirmation several weeks before his trip -- not a case of a mistake or lost notification as with Mortlake incident of September last. Opinion of MLE that F. knew might be apprehended and did not wish to take consequences, but had hope of slipping through -- no need for expense of return ticket otherwise. Appeared to have every intention of returning. Reason for "drastic measure" unknown.

Conclusions: with no evidence of wrongdoing other than defying restriction, Martin Flaherty deliberately chose to flout the ban for purely personal and frivolous reasons. Eccentricity = mild mental imbalance? Cannot be determined, but probable, given evidence of poison. (This in itself leads several Int. to lean toward mental imbalance [extreme and unreasonable paranoia?] and Suicide.) Possible that F. simply panicked when confronted by FAS? No witnesses to testify as to how FAS approached F.; possible heavy-handed approach frightened him.

Given no evidence of deliberate attempt to undermine Ministry, Wiz. directs a verdict of Death By Misadventure, with Minister Fudge directing that no mention of mental imbalance or Suicide to be made to Mrs Flaherty in the interests of compassion. Reports to be withheld from media until further investigation into FAS method and FAS report of the incident can be examined by MLE.

'Compassion' my arse, Hermione thought indignantly. Fudge is afraid that if Olivia Flaherty thinks they're blaming Martin, even in a roundabout way, she'll get suspicious and start asking nasty questions. He's planning on blaming the FAS for mucking up the arrest, I bet.

All in all it was fairly inconclusive, with the exception that Hermione was pretty certain that at least the entire Wizengamot couldn't know what Fudge was up to: if the whole body knew what was up, there would be no need to conceal concerns about the possibility of 'industrial espionage' (assuming Fudge told the truth about the state of things at Flaherty's office at Mangel and Mortars). And if some of the Wizengamot were unaware of Fudge's agenda, she thought it likely the ICW wasn't, either. Several of the Interrogators were members of the ICW as well -- Finch, certainly, she recalled, remembering that she'd seen him listed on the full roster in her conference packet.
She doubted that supposition would be enough for Severus, though. And he wasn't going to be thrilled that they'd gone to such effort -- and danger -- for so little evidence, and inconclusive evidence, at that.

She slipped Flaherty's file back into the pile and glanced at her watch. Surprisingly, it had only taken thirty-five minutes from start to finish...

...and this was unfortunate, because the thought of having twenty-five minutes -- or nearly an hour, actually -- to kill before she absolutely had to get out gave her ideas.

Foremost among them being a test of Severus' trustworthiness.

*After all, it's prudent,* she argued with herself. *I'm still rather squicked that I trust him -- that's really unforgivably careless and naïve of me, especially when I don't have any proof that he's telling me the truth about everything, just a feeling.*

Besides, the alternate explanations were that she was barmy or going Stockholm Syndrome-ish over Severus Snape, and she wasn't sure which of the two was worse.

*I need to think of something I can check, something verifiable, here in the records, that he's told me....*

*The rapes. Lavender Brown.*

That wouldn't be conclusive, either -- Severus had never named names during his diatribe, not that she could recall. For all Hermione knew Lavender could have got herself in the club and been sent down or called home; she might have cracked under the pressure of preparing for NEWTs, along with the escalation in hostilities and the nastiness in Hogsmeade. But she didn't think so. While she'd always thought the girl a bit silly, Lavender had grown steadier and more mature during Sixth Year. If she was right and Lavender had been assaulted, it would at least prove that Severus had been truthful in general about at least one thing.

She made her way over to the B aisle, found the right cabinet, and thumbed through a depressingly long row of *Bl* through *Br* tabs before she finally located one labeled *Brown, Lavender (1997, ref. s97.19.11c)*; she pulled it from the drawer, and, rather than trudging back to the desk, she charmed Lumos, flipped the file open one-handed, and began to read.

The file's contents nearly sickened her.

*Severus is telling the truth.*

Lavender, at least -- Hermione couldn't bear to check for other familiar names, not yet -- had been physically assaulted, abducted, and tortured. Like Flaherty's, the file didn't go into specifics; it was merely a summary, not a full transcription. There were, however, copies of the supporting evidence in Lavender's file, including a written statement from a healer at St. Mungo's. After her abduction from Hogsmeade, Lavender had been sexually and physically assaulted -- by which he meant, he explained, subjected to non-magical torture and abuse -- as well as hexed with Unforgivables.
Oh, bloody.... And she's an obvious one, one who couldn't face coming back.... How many others came back to school and hid it?

The other frightening notation was the name of the rapist (the only one of several Lavender had been able to identify). Rupert Skellington. Hermione vaguely remembered him, a Ravenclaw who'd Left two years before she.

Skellington? That awful, bookish weed who.... Skellington, a Death Eater? He always looked as though his worst crime in life would be overdue library books.

Further reading confirmed that yes, Skellington had been apprehended and was a Death Eater, and at the time was being held pending trial by the Wizengamot for "other crimes, including but not limited to assault on Muggles, unauthorised use of Imperius, and several counts of rape."

Well, at least they caught the bastard. Should be a file on him, as well....

Hermione stuffed Lavender's file back where it belonged and trotted down the long row of cabinets to pull Skellington's file: it was one of many slender ones shoved in before a very thick, dog-eared folder.

She pulled Skellington's file and scanned it in the light of her wand's Lumos.

Convicted as a Death Eater.... Twelve counts of Use of Unforgivables, yes, fine, where's the.... Ah. Three counts of rape.

But there wasn't a list of his victims' names included; the précis of the hearing quite inconveniently said "Victim 1" or "Victim 2" to protect their privacy, though presumably they were named in the testimony documented in the sphere. There simply wasn't any other useful information, save the further notation that Skellington had been condemned to a life term in Azkaban in January 1998. But there was a scribbled bit of marginalia dated almost two years previous, in Latin as awkward and crabbed as the handwriting, that Skellington was "animus et anima exstinguentur ab Dementorii 21/4/05 et Sk. in genera redescrimimus 'animal tenebrocosus.'"

What the bloody.... 'Reason and Soul extinguished by Dementors and "reclassified" as a dark creature.'

Not dead. 'Reclassified as a dark creature.'

Skellington's soul had been sucked, and he was now a Dementor himself (or as good as). And he was very probably being used within Azkaban to guard and torture others.

Hermione shoved the file away from her across the top of the cabinet, and tried to still the shaking in her hands.

This is what you get, my girl. If curiosity didn't kill the cat, it certainly drove it mad....
For that's what it was -- curiosity, and nothing more. She'd come here to try to find files on the Flaherty matter, and instead of leaving it at that she'd meddled in other things and put herself at further risk of discovery, wasting another precious fifteen minutes poking about where she didn't belong.

*Severus will kill me if he finds out. If I'm caught, he is too....*

Hermione gathered up Skellington's sick little file and hurried to replace it, her trembling fingers fumbling with the tabs and overshooting the proper spot. She promptly dropped Skellington's papers to the floor, though, when she found the huge folder that had been jammed in a bit further on.

It was obviously mis-filed, for the names *Slocombe, Smart, Smedley* marched along *behind* it....

The name on the tab, in age-faded ink, was *Snape, Severus (1970).*

*****

Of course she pulled the file. She didn't even think twice, and she allowed herself the luxury of returning to the archivist's desk to read it, where the light was better.

*In for a penny, in for a pound....*

The file had certainly been compiled before the spheres were developed. (If it wasn't, then Severus Snape had been in trouble with the Wizengamot *many* times, quite young in a relatively short life, and Hermione didn't want to think about the possibilities.)

*Please don't let it be Death Eater information.... I don't think I.... Well, it wouldn't be, would it? 1970. Unless he was the youngest known Death Eater ever.*

She took a deep breath and opened the file. The first document was an indictment.

*In the matter of*

\[ W v Severus Snape (1970), a wizard minor charged with Patricide. \]

*Holy shit.*

*The Prosecutor for the Wizengamot charges that on or about the 20th July, 1970, Severus Snape, aged 9, did wilfully and with malice aforesaid commit murder upon his father, one Julius Snape (a wizard in his majority), Apothecary, at the family home in Knockturn Alley.*

*The Prosecutor shall show that this was a deliberate act on the part of the Defendant; that the Defendant has confessed to said murder; that the Defendant has offered the Prosecutor no*
'Maximum penalty possible' -- My God, they were going to send a nine year-old to Azkaban?

She flipped though all the blasted legalese until she came to the trial transcript -- an actual, physical transcript of the entire mess, thank God -- and began to read.

August 5th, 1970, afternoon session
All present with exceptions noted below:
Absent: Prosecutor E. Umbridge (holiday leave). Chief Warlock shall assume the duties of Prosecutor.

Chief Warlock (Minister Stump) begins the questioning.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Severus Snape, you have been charged with a very serious crime. Do you understand the charge?

(Defendant [Severus Snape] does not respond.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Speak up, boy. Do you understand what murder means?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Tell me.

DEFENDANT: It means I killed my father.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Yes, precisely. Do you understand what killing is?

DEFENDANT: It means I... It means he's dead.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Yes. Do you understand that means that you took a human life?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

CHIEF WARLOCK: And do you understand what a terrible act that is?

(Defendant does not respond.)

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Snape, if you do not at least attempt to answer the questions, we shall direct the Bailiff to administer Veritaserum. Do you know what that is?
DEFENDANT: Of course.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Don't be impudent. What, then?

DEFENDANT: A potion that will make me answer all questions truthfully.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Got it in one. Finally. So, do you understand how horrible an act murder is, much less when committed upon one's father?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: And you understand that your refusal to cooperate with the Prosecutor and...

(Interrogator Crouch questions the Court Scribe)

... and with Auror Moody in his investigation leads us to believe that you have no excuse for having committed the crime?

DEFENDANT: No.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: What the devil do you mean, boy?

DEFENDANT: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Speak up, boy.

DEFENDANT: I told him.

CHIEF WARLOCK: You told the Prosecutor why you'd done it?

DEFENDANT: Yes. The other one, I mean.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Auror Moody?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Then suppose you tell us why.

(Defendant does not respond.)

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Bailiff, if you would fetch the Veritaserum --

(At this point in the proceedings, Interrogator Dumbledore requested of the Chief Warlock the favour of examining the Defendant. Request was granted.)
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Good afternoon, Severus -- may I call you Severus? I don't see a need for formality, really. My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I am also the Hogwarts Headmaster. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions? Just to clear a few things up?

(Defendant did not respond.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Severus, you told Auror Moody why you killed your father?

(Defendant did not respond.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: It's quite all right to tell us, Severus. We're here to find out what really happened, and you shan't be in any more trouble, no matter what the reason was. I hope it will help you, in fact.

DEFENDANT: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: He said he told Moody and that other man -- the Prosecutor, he must mean -- and he doesn't wish to go over it again.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: He doesn't wish --? Does the boy understand that this is a Court of Law?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I would respectfully remind the assembly that the Defendant is very young, and appears very frightened. Might I suggest that we confirm this information with Auror Moody before proceeding further?

(A vote is taken, and the majority concurs. A short recess is taken to summon Auror Moody.)

(The Court has re-convened. Auror Moody has been sworn in as a witness, and Chief Warlock has granted Interrogator Dumbledore the right to examine him.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Auror Moody, as Chief Auror you were in charge of the investigation into the death of Julius Snape, is that correct?

MOODY: Yeah.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And you were present at the Snape home on the 20th July?

MOODY: 21st. Evidence says the death occurred on the 20th.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you. At that time, did you question the Defendant, Severus Snape?

MOODY: Yeah.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Was he forthcoming about what happened on the 20th July?
MOODY: Oh, yes. I asked him who did it, and he said he'd done.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: To your knowledge, was there anyone else in the home on the 20th July who might have committed the murder?

MOODY: I believe the mother -- Mrs Snape, that is -- was also on the premises.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: You believe?

MOODY: She had been removed to St. Mungo's by the time I got there.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Owing to what?

MOODY: Owing to injuries suffered the previous day.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Injuries suffered how?

MOODY: Undetermined for certain. The woman's unable to respond to questions.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Very well, we'll leave that for the time being. Did you ask Severus Snape why he might have chosen to harm his father?

MOODY: I did. He said his dad hurt his mother something terrible, and he'd had enough of that.

(Chief Warlock has to bring the Interrogators to order.)

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Yet instead of reporting the event immediately, he waited an entire day? How did the event become public knowledge?

MOODY: The lad's mum was in a bad way, Mr Crouch, and he tried to take care of her himself. By the morning of the 21st she didn't respond to him, so he flooed St. Mungo's from a neighbor's house. The healer contacted us when he arrived at the apothecary and discovered the state of things.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Auror Moody, was all this written up in your report?

MOODY: Every word, and more besides.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And it was submitted to the Prosecutor?

MOODY: Yeah, that's normal procedure. Handed it over to him myself.
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I'd very much like to know why Prosecutor Umbridge didn't include that information in the Indictment.

MOODY: Don't ask me. No bloody idea.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Quite. Minister Stump, I should like to have a copy of Auror Moody's report submitted into evidence, since lack of mention of this information in the Indictment is an apparent... oversight.

*(Chief Warlock grants the request.)*

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Before you return to your duties, Auror Moody, I should like a description of the scene, to the best of your recollection.

MOODY: I found the Deceased, Julius Snape, in the back room of the apothecary -- the home is above the shop, you see -- with his head bashed in by a large mortar. There was some evidence of a struggle. Jars of herbs and such swept off the shelves, things like that.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: 'Bashed?' Did this appear to be a single blow, or --

MOODY: No. The perpetrator continued to hit the Deceased after he fell, several times. In my estimation, at least.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Which do you think might have been the killing blow?

MOODY: I've no idea. Ask the bloody Coroner.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Quite right, sorry. But -- given the evidence of a struggle -- you would agree that there was perhaps a first blow which did not totally incapacitate Julius Snape, and that one or more followed?

MOODY: That's reasonable, though the struggle might have occurred first, before anything else.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Would you characterise the force used as extreme? As egregious force?

MOODY: Not necessarily. In my experience, when a perpetrator hates the Deceased's guts, they'll keep at it until the Deceased is nearly unrecognisable. This seemed enough to make certain the man out of commission, but no further. That's how I read it.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Ah. Meant to immobilise --

ITERROGATOR CROUCH: Oh, come now, Moody -- the accused is a child. He couldn't possibly have the strength to do that kind of damage, to beat someone to a pulp. You can't possibly make an assumption about his intent based on that. He did his best, it was a lucky blow and enough to kill, but not enough to cause the damage you assume.
MOODY: It was a bloody big and heavy mortar, sir. If he could manage to lift it, as he says he did, it'd do far more damage than you'd think. And I think he called a halt to it before he got to that point.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: May I continue, Barty? Thank you. Force meant to immobilise, but not to kill?

MOODY: That's my interpretation given the evidence, and that's what I got from the boy's statement. But I only have the boy's word for that.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Of course. Was there evidence that the Defendant was injured in the struggle, or at any point before?

MOODY: Yeah, the whole left side of the lad's face was blackened, and his left eye swelled shut -- you can still see, there, where it's a bit greenish yet.

(Auror Moody indicates the Defendant, whose face does appear to be slightly bruised.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Did the Defendant admit to using that method, striking his father with the mortar?

MOODY: Yes. Lad said it was the nearest thing to hand.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And did he express why?

MOODY: He said -- I remember this quite clearly, word for word -- he said, 'I wanted it to stop.' Said that over and over.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And he confessed this when? After he was taken into custody?

MOODY: No, right then and there.... That is, Mrs Snape had been removed to St. Mungo's, but the boy was still upstairs, in the back bedroom with two of the Sisters from hospital to watch over him. I asked him in their presence what had happened, and he said, "I hit him," and I said "With the mortar?" and he said "Yes, it was there, it looked like it would work." And when I asked why, he said "I wanted it to stop. He kept hurting her, and I wanted it to stop." That simple.

(Chief Warlock has to call the Interrogators to order.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Was there evidence of further violence in the house?

MOODY: Yeah, up in the flat itself. There was blood on the hearthstones, on one corner. It looked like the lad's mum had fallen and struck her head.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: How can you be sure it was her blood?
MOODY: The hair. There was brown hair in the blood, some of it still attached to a bit of scalp-skin where it caught on the stones. The deceased's hair was as dark as the lad's, so I know it wasn't his. I've since learned that Mrs Snape is a brunette.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Minister Stump, I should like to have statements from the hospital staff involved submitted into evidence, as well as any medical documentation regarding the injuries to Mrs Snape and a statement as to her current condition.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Very well. The Court Scribe shall see to it.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Furthermore, I should like to call Prosecutor Egbert Umbridge to answer as to why this information was not included in the documentation along with the indictment and the Coroner's Report --

CHIEF WARLOCK: Yes, yes, I'm sure we shall get to that eventually, but it's a separate matter entirely. Let's get through this first. Are you quite done with Auror Moody?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: For the time being, yes. Thank you, Moody.

(The Court is adjourned until the morning session to allow for collection of statements, and the Defendant remanded to custody of the Aurors.)

August 6th, 1970, morning session

(The Defendant is brought in and restrained in the chair. Chief Warlock brings the hearing to order.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Interrogator Dumbledore has requested that he be allowed to continue with the questioning and the examination of the statements, and I have agreed. Proceed, sir.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you. If the Scribe would distribute the documents brought to light since yesterday --? Thank you. As you can see, the first document concerns Mrs Snape's current condition. She is absolutely unable to testify in the matter, I'm afraid, so we shall have to go by the available evidence alone, and young Severus' testimony --

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: What we can prise out of him.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Ah, of course, Barty. He is, as I stated before, quite young and possibly traumatised by the events, and I'm rather dismayed that this fact has been unacknowledged.... But no matter. The Interrogators will notice that the Healer's Report includes evidence that the abuse Mrs Snape suffered on 20th July is not an isolated incident. That is, there is evidence of fractured bones and lasting damage to the soft tissues, such as tendon damage, which might indicate abuse of rather long-standing -- damage which appears not to have been properly treated. In addition, I, ah, took the liberty of requesting that a healer examine Severus Snape last evening, and he has found similar damage, though possibly of less severity and duration.
INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Hang on. Why is the woman unable to offer testimony? It's in defence of her child, for Merlin's sake.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I'd rather not say, Barty, in the presence of --

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: This is a Court of Law, Dumbledore, and the Law requires it.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Very well. Mrs Snape only just woke from a coma a few days ago, and her thoughts still appear to be... disordered.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Explain further, please.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I really would prefer not to say in.... Very well. She is utterly incapable of responding to questions on the matter without becoming hysterical. She is in restraints, in fact, and the healers feel they have no recourse but to transfer her to St. Alwych's in Nottinghamshire.

(The Defendant became distraught at this point and had to be removed from the Court. Interrogator Dumbledore would not continue until such time as the Bailiff returned.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Is he --? Is someone with him? Thank you, Bailiff. In short, the woman is mad, Minister. It's unclear yet whether it is a result of this event, whether she was unstable to begin with, or whether she will fully recover.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Thank you. Bailiff, could you return the Defendant to the --

(The Bailiff confers with the Chief Warlock.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Oh. Well, calm him down. Get him... get him some tea, or chocolate or something. I want him back in as soon as possible, you understand, the docket's full.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I can, of course, ask the healers involved to testify personally, but as you have sworn statements in your hands --

CHIEF WARLOCK: No, no, I'm certain it's all quite correct. Let's get on with it.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: 'It' appears to be a gross error, Minister, given the information now before us. The Indictment is obviously invalid, given that there is indeed exculpatory evidence.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: I'm quite certain Prosecutor Umbridge had good reason to submit the Indictment as is, Dumbledore.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Then he should be here to refute the evidence and defend his decision, should he not, Barty?
CHIEF WARLOCK: Not as a matter of course, Dumbledore, as you know. There's no precedent for dismissing a charge of Patricide or questioning the validity of an Indictment if the Prosecutor deems the evidence sufficient.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I'm not advocating that it the charge be dismissed, Minister - - the boy has plainly admitted that he is responsible, though frankly I question that as well.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Whatever are you playing at, Dumble--

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: For all we know his mother might have done it herself, and the child has chosen to take the blame to protect her. If he's willing to put himself at physical risk to protect her, he's certainly capable of lying to protect her from the legal consequences of a murder conviction -- in which case, convicting him is a gross travesty of justice. We simply cannot tell at this point without subjecting him to Veritaserum, and given his condition that is, as far as I'm concerned, a last resort. I shall be happy to call back the healer who examined him last night to testify to that effect.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Very well, very well, let's just --

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: What do you propose we do, then? Pat the little blighter on the head and send him off?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Nothing, Minister, nothing. Let me clarify the situation, first, and see if we are all in agreement on the likely explanation -- assuming that young Severus himself did indeed do the killing. On the 20th of July, Julius Snape battered his wife in the flat above the shop, leading to a severe head injury when she fell as a result of the battery.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: We have no proof of that --

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Circumstantial evidence, but it's a reasonable argument from Moody's testimony and the description of her condition in the Healer's Report.... Have you got that far? Have you seen the extent of Mrs Snape's injuries? Very well, I'll assume I may continue. Furthermore, Julius Snape continued -- again, per the Report and Moody's statements -- to batter her once she was incapacitated. He then left the flat and went below to the back room of the shop. Young Severus -- who, we know from his statements in Auror Moody's report, witnessed the entire incident -- then descended the stair to the back room, picked up the mortar, and bludgeoned his father several times in an attempt to 'make it stop.'

INTERROGATOR MCGILLICUDDY: That's a rather damning admission, Albus. He didn't try to stop the beating itself -- he acted after the fact. Definitely forethought.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: True. A -- what, an eight- or nine-stone child, would you say? he's rather thin -- chose not to attempt to stop a....
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: ... a twenty-seven stone man in the middle of a violent assault. A child who's been on the receiving end of abuse from that man, and whose mother is left lying bloodied on the floor of the sitting-room. He attacks his mother's abuser, incapacitates him -- but does not, apparently, take special care to take out what must be his rage or fear on the dead or unconscious man -- and then drops everything and returns upstairs to take care of his injured mother. And when he realises that she is wounded beyond his ability to help her, he calls the appropriate authorities, despite the knowledge that he will surely bear full blame.

(The Bailiff returns to the court and consults with Chief Warlock.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Oh, good. Glad we caught him before he left.... Bring him in, and let's get this over with.

(Prosecutor Umbridge is admitted and is sworn in.)

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: What's all this about, then, Minister? We were just ready to leave, blast it. My little girl's quite upset she shan't have her whole holiday abroad. Eighteenth birthday present, you know.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Interrogator Dumbledore appears to have objections to the Snape Indictment, Umbridge.


INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Clear case of Patricide, quite possibly. Not necessarily cut and dried. Could you explain to the us, Umbridge, why there was no supporting documentation submitted into evidence?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Not required, of course. Not when the Prosecutor feels it's a clear case.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: You didn't feel that the statements in Auror Moody's report clearly indicate that there was exculpatory evidence in this case?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: No, that evidence is based heavily on Moody's interpretation. Besides, Severus Snape admitted it. Interviewed him myself, and he said it bold as brass. Doesn't regret it, either.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And you didn't feel an investigation was required as to why a child might feel it necessary to take such a drastic measure?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: The Law's the Law. Look, Minister, what's the problem, here? I've paid for two full weeks in Corfu, and it's not fair to --
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Were you aware of recurring physical abuse to both Mrs Snape and Severus Snape?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: What has that got to do with it?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: What do you mean, what has that got to do with it?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: All right, then. You obviously don't understand the laws involved, here, so I'll explain it in layman's terms. Murder's murder. The only possible excuse for it is self-defence. Severus Snape was not acting in self-defence. That's the Law.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: There's Law, Umbridge, and then there's Justice. You, apparently, are fulfilling the letter of the former and ignoring the spirit of the latter.

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Now hold on, here --

CHIEF WARLOCK: Dumbledore, that's quite enough.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I beg the Court's pardon. My point remains, however. The purpose of the Wizengamot is not only to see that the law is observed, but that justice is carried out as well. And in this system, it is the Prosecutor's job to determine not only the legal strength, but the justice of a charge before submitting it to the Wizengamot for trial.

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: There's no precedent for letting the accused go on the basis of anything but self-defence.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I said, then there bloody well should be.

CHIEF WARLOCK: That's out of order, Dumbledore.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: No, it's not. What good is a legal system if it can't address extraordinary circumstances? Why should Severus Snape -- a child -- be sent to Azkaban simply because there is no precedent for a child trying to protect his mother in the only way he can see how?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: That's not my problem. He knew right from wrong, and he knew it was wrong. He committed the crime, and he shall have to take the consequences.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: A crime committed in the interest of saving another life.

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Nonsense. The woman's alive. It's not a question of that.

(Interrogator Dumbledore hands documents to Prosecutor Umbridge.)
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: For the record, I have just turned over the Healer's Report on Mrs Snape's condition to Prosecutor Umbridge. Turn to page three, if you please -- yes, the photographs, thank you. Do you see that damage? Do you realise... well, I assume not, since you’ve been preparing for your holiday... that the woman was left in a coma by that beating? That she has quite possibly been driven mad by the abuse, and presumably by the lengths to which her son had to defend her? That there is evidence of many prior beatings? The question is not one of her being alive, Umbridge, it's a question of when and how Julius Snape would have managed to kill her, and why he hadn't already.

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: The Law had no basis on which to make that judgement, blast it, there were no reports --

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: No it didn't, because you didn't bother to request them. I have. Justice, however, now has basis, given the entire body of evidence. And Severus Snape as a witness to it all, did.

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: -- and how was I supposed to know that this was going on? The child might have gone to the authorities, damn it, and all this would have been avoided.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: We don't know that. We don't know that he or his mother didn't try, and were perhaps ignored or hushed-up. We don't know what kind of coercion Julius Snape put on either of them to keep them quiet, or to what lengths he went to conceal the abuse.

(Auror Moody rises.)

MOODY: I do, blast it.

CHIEF WARLOCK: Sit down, Moody, you've already been examined --

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Yes, and he's still under oath. What do you mean, Moody?

MOODY: I mean the floo wasn't on the Network, and there was a bloody Silencing Charm over the entire flat. Permanent, like. The neighbors I could get to talk couldn't say anything was wrong, because they couldn't hear anything to begin with, and they said the woman and child rarely left the flat.

INTERROGATOR CROUCH: Oh, surely someone would have --

MOODY: No, no-one I could get to admit it. This is Knockturn Alley, Mr Crouch -- it's a different world entirely than yours. You don't grass, especially not on someone like Julius Snape. You turn a blind eye and a deaf ear because a wizard's home is his castle, and that particular wizard was a nasty piece of work to begin with. (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What was that?

MOODY: Nothing, sir.
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you, Moody. And I quite agree. Now, Umbridge.... Are you willing to admit that the battery detailed in that report is extraordinary, and required drastic action to prevent further abuse?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: No, not to the extent of Patricide.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Perhaps not to a deliberate and cold-blooded murder, agreed, but an accidental Homicide due to extenuating circumstances is something else entirely. Take a closer look at the Healer's Report, if you would. At all of it. And at the report of the evidence of abuse inflicted on Severus himself.

(Prosecutor Umbridge reads the report.)

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Uh, I, ummm.... Might I have a few moments, to.... I'm not feeling terribly well, actually.

(Chief Warlock calls for a recess, with the Court to reconvene at the afternoon session.)

August 6th, 1970, afternoon session

(The Defendant is led in and restrained, and Chief Warlock calls the court to order.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: You may proceed where you left off, Dumbledore.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you. Now, Umbridge.... With the knowledge you now possess, would you still say that Severus Snape had no valid reason to defend his mother?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: No, I... I wouldn't.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: You would perhaps rescind some of the statements you made in the Indictment?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Yes.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: To wit, that there is 'no exculpatory evidence or compelling reasons which might satisfactorily explain his actions'?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: Yes.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And you might be convinced -- given the evidence that we now have -- that it is unreasonable to expect a child of nine to deal with such a traumatic and dangerous situation in a rational and totally lawful manner?

PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: I, uh.... Yes.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Would you, in fact, still recommend that imprisonment in Azkaban is a reasonable penalty for his actions, and that it is in the best interest of Justice -- not Law, but Justice -- to impose that penalty on him?
PROSECUTOR UMBRIDGE: No, I.... I wouldn't.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you. That is all, I think.

(Prosecutor Umbridge is dismissed from the Court.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Well, that solves the objection to the Indictment. However....

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: However, you still want to hear the child's testimony?

CHIEF WARLOCK: Of course.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Nothing, Minister, nothing. Technically another Indictment should be presented if the Prosecutor feels it warranted, but....

(Interrogator Dumbledore approaches the Defendant.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Are you feeling better, Severus?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Good. I think I ought explain to you what all the.... Might we dispense with the restraints, please? He's an unwanded child. Really....

(The chair loosens the Defendant's restraints.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you. Now, Severus. What all that means is that you shan't be sent to Azkaban. We've examined the evidence -- after finally having it admitted -- and we think you may have had good reason to act as you did. But we should like to hear you explain the whole thing, in your own words.

DEFENDANT: (mumbles)

CHIEF WARLOCK: What?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: He said, he wants to see his mother. You shall, Severus, I'll see to it myself, I promise you, but we've got to get through this last sticky bit. Do you feel up to it? Would you like a glass of water, first?

(Defendant indicates 'yes,' and the Bailiff brings a glass of water.)

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Now, Severus.... Do you remember what happened the day your mother was hurt?
DEFENDANT: *(mumbles)*

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: No, my boy, I... I mean the last time. Do you remember your father striking your mother?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And when he struck her, she fell?

DEFENDANT: Not right away. She... she'd dropped a jar of Graphorn powder in the shop, and he started yelling. It's very expensive. I heard him hit her down there.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: What happened then?

DEFENDANT: Then she... she came upstairs for the dustpan, and he followed her up, and he... he started....

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: He hit her again?

DEFENDANT: Yes. He started hitting her, a lot, and then she stumbled and fell and hit her head, and she... she couldn't get up. And he just kept hitting her....

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Did you try to stop him, Severus?

DEFENDANT: I yelled at him. And then I tried to pull him off, but he shoved me away. And then he... he went back downstairs.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And what did you do then?

DEFENDANT: I tried to help m- mother to her room, but she couldn't move. And then she had a, a... some kind of fit, or something.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: A seizure?

DEFENDANT: I don't know. Her head and arms went like... like this --

*(The Defendant demonstrates.)*

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Yes, a seizure, that's what it's called, Severus. What happened then?

DEFENDANT: Then he... he yelled for her to come down and clean up the mess, but she couldn't, so I went down instead. And I asked if I could fetch a healer for her after I'd cleared away the.... That she was really sick. And he said no, and yelled for her to come down, to stop faking, and then he started for the stairs, and....

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Yes, Severus?
DEFENDANT: I knew... I knew if she couldn't get up that he'd hurt her more. That's when I saw the mortar. When I thought of it. So I stopped him.

*(Chief Warlock calls a ten-minute recess at the request of Interrogator McGillicuddy, who leaves the chamber.)*

*(Interrogator McGillicuddy has re-entered, and Chief Warlock reconvenes the session.)*

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: All right, Severus, you've done very well, been very brave. Just a bit more, and we'll be done. So, you struck your father with the mortar? Was it just the once, or did you do more?

DEFENDANT: More. I mean, the first was while h- his back was turned. He... he tried to hit me, but he missed and stumbled into the shelves. So I hit him again and he fell. And he... he was still moving and saying awful things, so I hit him again, and then he stopped.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And then you went back up to your mother?

DEFENDANT: Yes. I... I couldn't.... I don't have a wand yet, so I had to... I had... to dr- drag her to the bedroom.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: And you tried to take care of her all day?

DEFENDANT: Yes. But she couldn't.... She woke up for a while, but she couldn't eat or drink anything, it all came back up. And in the morning I couldn't wake her at all.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: I see. Severus, are you certain that this is how it happened? It's.... Your mother shan't be in any trouble if she did it, you see, you don't need to protect her from that. Are you certain that you and only you struck your father?

DEFENDANT: Yes. I did it. Sh- she couldn't, she was already....

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Thank you, Severus. I think that clarifies the matter. Are there any questions from anyone else? Very well. Minister Stump, I think, owing to his age, that it would be kinder to have the Bailiff take him out before we delib--

DEFENDANT: He's really dead, then?

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Yes, Severus, he's dead. He can't hurt either of you any longer.

DEFENDANT: Good.

INTERROGATOR MCGILLCUDDY: Mr Snape, do you understand that what you did was wrong? Yes, there were extenuating circumstances, but it was wrong.

DEFENDANT: Exten-- ?
INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: You had good reason, Severus. You were trying to protect your mother. But it was still a terrible thing to have to do. Ah... what we call the lesser of two evils. It isn't... good in that sense, is what Madam McGillicuddy means.

DEFENDANT: Oh.

INTERROGATOR DUMBLEDORE: Do you have any other questions, Severus?

(Defendant indicates 'no. ')

CHIEF WARLOCK: Very well. Bailiff, would you escort the Defendant to the anteroom while we deliberate?

(The Defendant is taken to the anteroom.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: The scribe will now cease recording the proceeding until we reach a verdict.

(Recording ceases at 3:08 pm.)

(The Chief Warlock reconvened the Court at 4:23 pm. The Defendant is brought in.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: The Defendant will stand.

(Defendant rises.)

CHIEF WARLOCK: Severus Snape, you have been found guilty of Patricide by unanimous vote of the Wizangamot. This would usually carry the strictest possible penalty available to this Court. However, due to extenua-- Due to evidence which shows you were trying to protect your mother, and that your intent was not to kill your father but merely to prevent him from further commission of a terrible act, the majority of the Interrogators direct that the punishment be waived.

The Wizengamot further directs that as there are no other family members to care for the minor Severus Snape, he shall be remanded to the custody of the Bertie Botts Home for Troubled and Recalcitrant Boys until such time as he shall be of age to enter Hogwarts -- assuming that Headmaster Dumbledore consents, given his history -- or until his mother shall be able to care for him.

Lastly, owing to the Defendant's youth and the extenuating circumstances, the Wizengamot directs that the court record be sealed and all mention of the regrettable incident, whether past or present, be stricken from the public records so that it shall not be held against him. This Court is adjourned for the day.

(Scribe ceases recording at 4:28 pm.)

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Hermione had no idea how she'd got home. She barely remembered leaving the Records Room nearly a half-hour late and slipping past Shacklebolt (who'd looked furious at the delay and relieved that she'd finally got her arse out). She could only pray that somewhere in the tearing rage that had possessed her while reading the transcript -- and especially after viewing the medical reports, including the horrid, fading photographs of the injuries to Severus' mother -- that she'd had the sense to tidy up the file and cover her tracks.

She opened a bottle of wine first thing, flung herself on the sofa, and neatly downed the first glass before allowing herself to think coherently. (*Marginally coherently,* she corrected herself.) She could hardly remember ever being so enraged. She wanted to hit someone or something, commit palpable damage: anything to rid herself of this horrid, gut-scorching anger.

_How could they? How could they consider summarily sentencing a child, a child, to Azkaban? Skellington only lasted eight years. How long would a child have survived?_

Well, true, Umbridge's father was the idiot responsible. Like father, like daughter, only stupid and callous rather than vicious.

_I hope the son-of-a-bitch was sacked when he got back from Corfu. Crouch should have been too, the cruel bastard._

It was all so... so _barbaric._ She'd known that the accused didn't have an automatic right to Counsel in the Wizarding World: she _hadn't_ known how bad it really was, though, that the Prosecutor wasn't required to submit _all_ the evidence. Harry hadn't spoken of his own hearing, much -- mostly what the room and the Wizengamot were like, but not about how easily the evidence could be dismissed or how it had felt. He'd been rather older than Severus, too, able to understand what was going on; but _S_severus had been so young that he couldn't possibly have defended himself competently.

_Thank God for Dumbledore. And I never thought I'd say that again, not after Seventh Year._

For the Prosecutor and Interrogators to assume that there couldn't possibly be a good reason for what Severus had done.... It was truly appalling, that unfeeling, misogynistic assumption that an adult wizard's life was somehow more important, or his death more compelling, than the welfare of another who just happened to be his wife. Not to mention the welfare of his child.

_And they still sent him to the Bertie Botts Home. Jesus Christ, they.... I know bloody well those boys weren't counseled. The place was little more than a workhouse, absolutely horrific conditions when they shut it down, I remember the article in The Prophet...._

Of _course_ Snape had learned more curses by the time he entered Hogwarts than the average Upper-Former (if it were true, as Sirius Black had claimed). Take a child and put him in the kind of environment the Bertie Botts Home had provided -- living cheek-by-jowl with older and
deliberately criminal youths -- and it was no wonder: it was a form of self-defence to perfect as many nasty hexes and tactics as possible.

_Severus is right. The values and mores of this world are far different than the one I left behind._

No, that wasn't precisely true. More like the Muggle World had advanced a bit further than the Wizard, at least on this particular score. Or she _hoped_ it had, but the more pragmatic part of her brain told her to stop kidding herself. The Law, whatever land or culture you were from, still had far more to do with Property and preservation of the rights of the favoured class -- the adult male, in this instance, and the wealthy and powerful -- than with Justice or morality.

She thought again of the battering Severus' mother had taken -- she hadn't really needed to read the Healer's Report, the photographs were quite enough -- and shuddered.

_I wonder if she's still.... Of course she is. Yule, he thought perhaps DeLaine's owl was from her. Well, that's something, then -- she recovered. Perhaps he didn't have to stay in that rotten Home for long._

_I don't suppose he'll ever tell me. I don't dare ___ask him, he'd kill m--_

...he'll be terribly upset if he finds out I snooped.

_Oh, God. No wonder he doesn't touch people, why he uses words when he's angry. Why he was so angry with himself when he bruised me.... He's afraid he'll be like his father. That's why he barely touches me, except for...._ 

_He must have loved her very much to do that, and been very desperate. To sit up with her all night trying to make her better, and then to floo St. Mungo's even though he knew everyone would find out and blame him...._ 

_Oh, Christ._

Hermione finally gave up thinking and wept for a dark-eyed, skinny little boy she'd never known, and who'd seen the Thestrals far too soon.

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Chapter 12: Wherein Snape returns to Hogwarts, and none too gracefully puts up with a lot of meddlesome women.
Snape was admittedly relieved to get back to Hogwarts, despite the inconvenience of having to pop back to the club to retrieve his things, and despite the fact that he'd wakened quite late (and with an odd crick in his neck) and missed Hermione's leaving for the Ministry. (All right, he was irate that he'd missed *breakfast*, both hers and Hogwarts'.) He was a bit miffed that she hadn't seen him off, too, but then he'd given her a sufficient farewell earlier that morning, so he supposed everything balanced out.

*Felt quite odd when I woke, actually,* he puzzled to himself as he trudged up the drive. *Very... peaceful, pain in the neck notwithstanding.*

He couldn't set it down to anything, though -- it was quite different than straightforward satiation -- and gave up wondering about it, and decided to return to pondering the things he *wasn't* terribly happy about. Namely, the imposition of over a week of sexual abstinence after the last two weeks' worth of fun.

He supposed that couldn't be helped given certain biological truths, or rather, Hermione's apparent attitude about them.

'Oh, bugger' indeed. *I'm surprised she didn't hop up and down for joy at the thought of putting it off....*

He had no doubt she would have had a tantrum should he have suggested -- as he'd been tempted to -- that, in theory, menstruation wasn't a great impediment with certain adjustments in locale: but he'd also decided that Bluett had hit the nail on the head with his advice to *be supportive*, confirming his own suspicion that he shouldn't be so dogmatic about his rights when she was under such stress.

*She behaved quite strangely when she returned from the Weasleys'. Those fits of laughter, and then the sudden gravity....*

And the bludger was on her side of the pitch at the moment, after all -- firming up the documentation, making arrangements for flight, if necessary -- and he'd best leave her to it, let her concentrate solely on those things for a while, and steer clear of the hormonal muck. Hermione was usually a bit snappish in the best of circumstances: Snape shuddered to think what she might be like immediately before her menses.

*I shouldn't wonder if that was going on the last two days, actually. Last evening, and the night before when she nearly excised my esophagus with her wand.*

He knew from twenty-odd years' experience and observation of his female students that they could be damned irrational and unbalanced at certain times. It was conclusively proven, in fact, to his satisfaction at least: hexing and jinxing of the more obnoxious male students by females often occurred roughly every three weeks, and one could fairly accurately predict when a particular dorm of girls were on the same cycle, because the number of incidents shot up proportionately.
He really ought to warn his male students about that. Flitwick always had, because Ravenclaw girls were no more immune to the mood swings than any others: however, it was not only amusing to see the buggers absolutely and indignantly in the dark about it, but served as a warning system of individuals who were likely headed for trouble later on. After two hexings Snape could almost always safely assume the boy in question was an harasser, and give the little shit a talking-to that would put him off abusing females as long as he thought Snape was alive to throttle him or hex his bollocks off (assuming his victim didn't).

In his years as Head of Slytherin, the incidence of harassment had declined markedly -- lower than any of the other Houses, in fact, though of course what might happen after his students Left was another matter altogether, at least while the Death Eaters had still been recruiting. But Snape was proud of the accomplishment nonetheless: it just wasn't done, not in his House. Not upon one student by another, or by anyone else, either. (Thank the gods he'd never sensed any paedophilic tendencies on Lockhart's part, seen them in his mind, or caught him at anything dicey, or the man would have met a very messy end in the depths of the Forest.)

He and Hermione did not fall in that disgusting category of victimiser and victim, of course. They were adults; they had a business arrangement. And he thought he was showing remarkable restraint, considering, and he certainly wasn't harassing her, no matter how she might fuss. She was benefitting too, as it happened -- not only with the protection of his name and the guidance of his counsel with the Ministry idiocy, but in other, more concrete ways. Residential Deluxe service was not cheap, for example, but he couldn't let her sit there in an unsecured Muggle flat: he'd told her it was his job as her husband to protect her, by the gods he was serious about it, and her misplaced pride would have to go to the devil.

_I don't begrudge her the expense_, he thought bitterly as the doors of the Entrance Hall swung open for him, _but a Thank you, Severus would have been appropriate and appreciated._

His rooms, when he reached them, were undisturbed: no House Elf dared enter when he was gone. They smelt musty and damp, and he dropped his valise by the door and crossed the room to open a window. (His knee was already beginning to ache, and he spared a regret for Hermione's electric hot-water bottle.) He couldn't stop to fuss over it or the lack of breakfast at the moment, though -- McGonagall should have already been alerted to his return, and he had no intention of undergoing an "interview," no matter how much his stomach was urging him to order early elevenses. Better to be occupied with work when McGonagall chose to stick her long Scots nose in -- he might put her off with that -- so he ignored the correspondence that waited on the table and went directly to the classroom.

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She found him there, of course (the nosy auld bitch) a bare ten minutes after he'd begun to unpack the crates that had arrived in his absence, and she didn't any waste time.

"Ah, you're back! You look well-rested."

"It was not precisely restful," he shot back, intent on his inventory, "but bits of it were certainly _pleasant_."
McGonagall snorted, and he was forced to look up and glare at her.

"I'm sure 'bits' were," she said, "but I imagine 'pleasant' is an understatement. I may never have married, Severus, but I'm not ignorant of one of the main functions of marriage."

Oh, _that_ deserved a challenge.

"Do enlighten me, Headmistress," he said, voice silky. "Everyone seems intent on informing me what a marriage _should_ be."

"Companionship primarily, of course. I sure you don't need me to point out the more _sensual_ aspects, because you look far too pleased with yourself for me to believe you haven't indulged quite a lot."

He grunted. "You, at least, aren't babbling about cottages and children as Sprout insists on doing."

"Speaking of that, I've had a word, there. Silly woman means well, of course, but she's no idea how badly she put Hermione on the spot. Not to mention poor Vector."

"And what about putting _me_ on the spot?"

"You're perfectly capable of handling it, Severus -- you always were such an easy and convincing little liar. No, don't go all prickly, it's the truth, and we were damned lucky in the end that you are. I'm simply saying I told Pomona she ought curb her enthusiasm, that's all."

"Thank you," he said grudgingly. "Hermione will be visiting on the week-ends, and I shouldn't care to have to restrain her from hexing the bloody woman. Not on a regular basis."

"Is she going to be about?" McGonagall said, and slipped onto a bench behind one of the desks. "That's nice, I shall enjoy seeing her once in a while."

"Not this one, but after.... I suppose I ought ask if I might arrange for Hooch to cover my House duties every third or fourth week-end? Can't expect the girl to drop everything _every_ time."

"Of course you may. I agree that Hooch is best, as asking Vector would be a bit much given the circumstances. Hooch will be more on top of them, at any rate.... _Really_, Severus, 'the girl?' Your _wife_, surely."

That deserved nothing but a glare, and McGonagall got it.

"Severus, _please_ tell me you're trying to --"

"Yes," he admitted viciously. (This was precisely what he'd wanted to avoid, this absolutely presumptuous prying into his and Hermione's business.) "Yes, I'm doing my best to be congenial. Have you and Pomfrey decided to double-team me on this?"

"No."
"Then please take your own advice and leave well enough alone --"

He stopped himself quite abruptly -- some part of him recognising that whether it was McGonagall's business or not, she was still his superior, and he owed her more respect than this -- and he quite deliberately laid down the inventory, leaned back against the table, and met her eyes.

"I realise," he said more reasonably, "that you're very protective of Hermione. Of any of your lot in general, rather. And I'm not going to attempt to convince you that our... relationship is anything at all as it's supposed to be, not according to what everyone apparently assumes it should. It is, however, working for us, at least on some level."

"I didn't mean to insult you, Severus," McGonagall said softly. "I don't think you'd intentionally harm her. It's just that you've always been so solitary, and by now you're very set in your ways -- one reason I chose not to accept the offer I had.... Don't look so shocked, boy, I had one, once." Her thin lips twisted wryly at his ill-concealed surprise. "It's very easy to forget that there has to be compromise involved, particularly when the parties come from such different backgrounds."

"Yes I am used to being alone, and no, it isn't by any means the easiest thing I've ever done. And there are... complications which I'm not at liberty to discuss, but which are putting her under even more stress. So I'm trying to give her a great deal of leeway, and I'm certainly not insisting on a strict Pureblood interpretation of a proper marriage, if that's what is concerning you."

"It's not, not entirely. I didn't expect she'd let you get away with that, anyway. She's having more trouble with the Ministry, then?"

"Yes...." Snape admitted quite slowly, and stared at McGonagall: it was an innocuous enough question, considering, but there was the slightest bit of strain in her voice that signalled she was up to no good. "How much do you know?" he finally asked, resigned to it.

"No specifics, but Arthur Weasley keeps me informed as to rumours," she promptly said. "He thought for a while that the old crowd might be useful."

"Has he? And he came to you?"

"I've apparently inherited more than the Headmastership, as far as he and the rest are concerned." McGonagall said dryly. "I can't say I appreciate it -- the one thing is quite enough, and I've no intention of plotting coups or leading any charges. And I don't agree with his estimation of the old crowd."

"Ah. Well, I think you're right in this instance, it's quite different to the old situation. It's a purely intellectual and strategic problem, and most of the old crowd are useless with that. Barring occasional mischief, which I gather Arthur is indulging in anyway."

"Perhaps. Is it helpful?"
"Might be, on the one hand," Snape mused. "As long as Hermione's well out of it and can't be blamed for any of it. Might be a good distraction. I'll keep it in mind, and... Shall I tell you if something definite is required?"

"Why don't you. It will look far less suspicious if I contact him. And I shall tell you if there's a reason you might want to keep Hermione clear of the Ministry for a bit, to give her an alibi."

"Very well."

"It's something rather awful, isn't it?" McGonagall asked tentatively. "Far more than we suspect, I mean. Arthur's been working on that assumption, given that they haven't been able to pry any information out of anyone in Corcoran's department. He didn't dare approach Hermione, of course. Don't tell me specifics, but--"

"It's absolutely horrid, you can't begin to imagine it. It will suffice to say that Fudge may be taking advantage of the whole situation to re-fashion society into his view of something proper and respectable, and if it meets the ICW goals as well, he doesn't much care how he accomplishes it. Even if it means breaking every rule and law on the books, and ruining many peoples' lives."

McGonagall quite shocked Snape by using some very pungent Scots words. (He didn't understand them, precisely, but the subtext was clear.)

"Well," she finally said as she stood, smoothing her robe-front, "I'm glad I asked. Even if you didn't appreciate the way I went about it."

"Might have got right to it," he muttered. "Don't think I'm not aware there's idle curiosity involved, as well."

"Don't be intentionally dense, of course there is-- it's rather fascinating, in some ways, seeing you cope with it. You do know, by the way, that if it's ever necessary for her to spend more time here, that you may change 'round your rooms if required? Add some space?"

"I assumed so. Not that I anticipate needing to."

"I didn't think you would. Far more intimate this way, isn't it?" McGonagall said primly, ignoring his sneer at her implication. "At any rate, I was far too shocked at the time to offer you proper felicitations, so you have them now."

"Not required, under the circumstances," Snape said through gritted teeth, and buried his nose back in the inventory.

"Nonsense, of course they are," she threw at him over her shoulder as she left the room. "And I'm very glad Hermione has you looking out after her, 'under the circumstances.' Oh, and Severus?" she added, stopping at the door.

"Yes?"
"Do see Poppy about the knee, would you? You're an absolute terror to deal with at this time of year."

Snape quickly decided that while Bundimum sc分泌物 was far more expensive than powdered Bicorn horn, the jar of secretion would shatter far more satisfactorily and messily against the door: but by the time he reached for it, McGonagall had nipped out of the room and was well away.

*Bloody women.*

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He was quite busy with the inventory and re-stocking all through the week-end, and with sorting through the inevitable problems that had cropped up among the Merlin's Scholars in his absence; by then it was Sunday night, and he hadn't the energy to do much but collapse in front of the fire with a glass of whisky, girding his loins for the resumption of classes next morning. (And girding was all he did with his loins: he refused to acknowledge any sexual tension, much less do anything about it.)

There was, however, a visitor to his rooms that evening: a runty little owl bearing a packet. As the handwriting on it was Hermione's, he forbore his usual brusqueness with messenger-owls and grudgingly fed it a treat before sending it off.

Two Galleons fell out of the wrapper and into Snape's lap when he opened it.

Severus,
I quite forgot about Marsters. When you get a chance, would you see to him? Thank you.

H.

P.S. No progress on our little project, I'm afraid. Better luck next time?
P.P.S. -- XXOO

*Oh, bloody....*

Yes, he too had forgot about Marsters, and his ridiculous promise, despite seeing the child in the Great Hall every day since his return. He ought take care of that tonight, so as not to excite comment by holding the boy back after class....

'No progress on our little project?' Which bloody.... *Oh. The whole thing, and easily interpreted as 'not pregnant yet.' Very good, my dear, ten points. Though I wonder how badly you choked on 'Better luck next time'...*

...What the deuce does 'XXOO' mean?

He struggled over that for some time, trying to decide if it was some obscure encipherment: he even pulled out his wand and tried various Revealing Charms -- including the one he used on the Map -- to no avail, and finally gave up in disgust.
If it is a cipher, it's some horrid Arithmantic shorthand. Good gods, what does she expect me to do, beg Vector for a translation?

On the whole, though, he deemed it probably unimportant; and while his initial reaction was to toss Hermione's note into the fire -- as he did with most non-essential correspondence -- he had second thoughts and tucked it away with his personal things, the better to provide evidence for any investigators as to the validity of their marriage. Then, with extreme ill-humour, he dressed fully and resorted to visiting the Hufflepuff Common Room (disgustingly 'cosy,' as McGonagall would no doubt call it -- Snape called it stifling and twee) to track down Marsters and pull him out and into a nearby classroom.

Marsters looked terrified: best to get it over as quickly as possible, while impressing the little bleeder with the need for discretion.

"Do you know what a Patron is, Marsters?"

Marsters shook his head and mumbled a nearly voiceless "No, sir."

"Before the Merlin's Scholarships were established, students in need would have to be supported by a patron. Fees, uniforms, books -- all paid for by the patron. Now, however, the scholarship covers these necessities. It does not, however, cover items like pocket-money." Snape did his level best not to sneer through the next bit, not entirely successfully. "Madam Snape.... My wife has taken an... interest in you, and has provided two Galleons a term for you for Hogsmeade week-ends --"

Marster's jaw dropped, and Snape held up a hand to forestall any questions.

"-- and you alone, which puts me in a somewhat difficult position, so I am setting some terms. You will not divulge the identity of your benefactor -- her, that is, and certainly not me -- unless asked by one of the teachers. And you will restrict yourself to one Galleon per quarter-term, no asking an advance on the remainder should you splurge well before quarter-day. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't care how you spend it or what upon, though I should suggest avoiding restricted items as being a total waste, and I don't require an accounting. You will present yourself at my office just before curfew on quarter-days to collect the next allowance until I am satisfied you can be trusted with the entire amount. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Snape pulled the Galleon from his watch-pocket, and then thought better of it: a hitherto penniless student suddenly possessing a Galleon would excite comment, and possibly put the child under suspicion of being a thief. (Snape knew this from sad personal experience.) So he rummaged in his other pockets and carefully counted out the proper amount, in knuts and sickles, into Marster's grubby little palm.

"All accounted for?"
"Yes, sir."

"Go on, then. And don't blab or flash it about."

Marsters shot off for the door, and only barely managed to remember a "Please thank her for me," before taking off.

When Snape returned to his rooms, he decided to offset the indignity of dealing with Marsters with an exercise in getting a bit of his own back.

Sunday 8th Jan.

My dear wife --

He stopped to bask in the glow of that deviltry a little: not that he took any pleasure from it in and of itself, but because it served a dual purpose of misdirection to snoopers, and should probably put Hermione's nose vastly out of joint as well.

Marsters is sorted. If he spills any information about the allowance, however, I shall decline to participate further. He said to thank you.

While I am just as anxious as you that our little project come to fruition, we ought to be patient: the literature suggests to me that it isn't nearly as easy to achieve as some authorities claim. It may take as long as a year, especially considering our current living arrangement and the stress that blighter Corcoran puts you under at work.

I can't say that the trying is terribly arduous or that I'm not enjoying it immensely, either. And I am looking forward very much to your visit next week-end. (Please do bring that short, clingier night-dress, rather than the flannel one. I shall see to it that you're warm nonetheless.)

Severus

That should get her good and proper, he thought, quite unaware of the feral grin on his face as he folded and sealed the note. And I'll wager that when she shows up she's flannelled-up head to toe and twice as prickly as usual.

He continued to grin unconsciously well after the owl had left with the letter.

*****

Friday January 13th
Evening
Getting a bit of the middle-aged wizard spread, Snape thought critically as he stared into the mirror. Ought to do something about that.... He'd thought he was getting enough exercise over the holiday despite the Hermione's agreeable cooking (especially the sausages), but perhaps not.

He gave himself another critical stare, checked his chin for smoothness (he's actually shaved again as soon as he'd cleared away from his last class, something he never ordinarily bothered to do), picked a bit of non-existent fluff from his waistcoat, and sauntered out into the sitting-room to wait for Hermione to show up. He was quite looking forward to her arrival, although he knew that, realistically, she probably shouldn't have had a chance to accomplish much on the documentation end of things.

At the moment, however, he didn't give a fig about the Ministry situation. The Slytherin Trouser-Snake had been giving him hell the last few days (the spoilt beggar), and Snape had every intention of seeing to its care and feeding first before attending to any other business. (After a private dinner, that is. He'd decided to try a more seductive approach for once: suavity and a good meal had seemed to put her at ease that first day in London, at the club; and he'd begun to regret his nasty little note about flannel night-dresses, as he wasn't in the mood to waste time struggling with getting her out of said ugly flannel gown.)

He settled himself in front of the fire to begin an exhaustive pouring-over of the trade journals -- he hadn't been able to all week, given the press of classes and largely successful attempts at keeping the little shits from blowing themselves up -- and looked for any hint of Ministry mischief, any sign that they were close to implementing their plan. It was all he could do, really, much as he hated to admit it.

He only woke from sleep when the mantel-clock chimed two o'clock in the morning to find his whisky-glass upended on the floor, Potions Today crumpled on his chest and slightly sticky with what he suspected was sleep-induced drool, and absolutely no sign of Hermione anywhere at all in his rooms, much less in his bed.

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Saturday, January 14th
Eleven a.m.

He was in the middle of marking papers when the ward-chime on his rooms pinged (he hadn't reset the ward, so she could enter at will), and he shot up from his desk, raced to the connecting door, and flung it open.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" he snarled.

Hermione blinked in surprise as she stood from a crouch: he'd caught her in the middle of setting down her bag. "I've only just got here ---"

"I know that. Where were you last night?"

"Home," she said as she shrugged out of her coat. "I'd had a long day at work, and ---"
"Do you have any notion how.... You might have owled or flamed, damn it. I had no idea if you'd been discovered, or if you might have been attacked --"

"Severus, we didn't set an actual day," she protested. "And week-end usually means... well, the week-end. Saturday."

He watched her face carefully -- or as carefully as he could given his irritation at being made to worry about her, at the ruination of his plan for a long, leisurely seduction-by-fine-dining (or as close as one could come at Hogwarts), and at the delay in obtaining his satisfaction -- and found nothing but bewilderment and indignation, and not one whit of caginess or intent to put him off deliberately.

"Next time," he said, stalking toward her, "use the bloody flame. I'm sure Aga can manage if you'd only resort to a bit of bloody charming."

He decided to demand a promise of her that she'd do so in future -- later.

*****

Eleven thirty-four a.m.

Snape was totally unaware that there was anyone else at all in his rooms -- much less in his bedchamber itself -- until Hermione (who, after a few minutes' verbal wrangling over his single-minded exuberance, had finally shut up and allowed him uncontested rights) suddenly clutched at his forearm and whispered an urgent, "Severus."

"What?" he mumbled against her torso, not quite registering the difference between her usual, irritated 'You're an unreasonable and randy bastard, Severus' or 'I really wish you wouldn't do that, Severus,' and this (which was, on later reflection, most definitely 'We have a problem, Severus').

"You'd b-better.... We've c-company," she stuttered, and he finally understood that she was panicking. And not from anything he was doing.

He froze, mind racing (as much as it could, considering the circumstances), and realised with horror that technically he held office hours on non-Quidditch Saturdays, he'd probably left the connecting door to his office open and unwarded, and that, moreover, it wasn't unlikely that one of his more stupid or driven students might have got nosy about his rooms, since the connecting door was standing wide and was probably quite tempting.

"Whoever you are," he growled, lunging up Hermione's body and groping for his wand on the nightstand, "you have two seconds to get the bloody hell out."

"It's only Pinky, Professor sir," squeaked an Elf: he halted and glared over his shoulder at it, and at the ridiculous pink ribbon it always tied about one ear as an identity badge. (He hated this Elf. It couldn't learn to leave his rooms as he liked them, was particularly dense and resistant to his attempts to put it off, and he'd told it time and again never, ever to come back.) "Professor sir's
rooms were very messy today, and Pinky was worried about the ladies' clothing." She held up Hermione's blouse in front of her -- the one Snape vaguely remembered ripping a few buttons off of, in his haste -- and added pridefully, "I fixed the buttons for Professor sir --"

"Fine, get out --"

"-- but Pinky is *so* happy that it really isn't Professor sir's, is it? It's hers," Pinky said, trying to peer past Snape for another glimpse of Hermione. "Pinky didn't think peach was Professor sir's best colour."

Snape's fingers fumbled the wand, and it slipped off the edge of the nightstand out of easy reach: so he picked up the next available item, twisted to face the door, and heaved it at the idiotic Elf.

****

"Severus!"

"Gods-damned bloody little sneak --" he snarled, hauling himself over the edge of the bed to retrieve his wand once the stupid creature had popped out.

"She didn't deserve to have glassware chucked at her head," Hermione said indignantly, clutching the bedclothes to her chest. (Snape was extremely narked at that. He'd just managed to get the blasted covers off her so he could explore to his heart's content without squirming about under them, like a hog rooting about the undergrowth for truffles.)

"They are supposed to *knock* in Faculty and Staff rooms," he said, narrowly avoiding treading on the shattered carafe as he hurried out to the sitting room to ward the office door itself against any students, and to close the connecting door as well. "In everyone's, but I've told them quite particularly that they must in mine," he added in a bellow for Hermione's benefit.

"Another 'Get out' would have done just as well," Hermione retorted in a yell. "Besides, if you didn't ward the door to the bedchamber it's partly your fault."

"No, it's not," he shot back as he returned to the bedchamber, muttered an ill-tempered Reparo at the shattered carafe, and returned it and his wand to the nightstand. "They can pop through the standard wards if they're so clueless as to try it -- and that one is. I suppose you shouldn't have minded had she popped right into the bed with us, would you?"

"Don't be stupid -- but I wouldn't throw things at her, either. It's not her fault she's been assigned to you."

"She *isn't*. They draw bloody straws every week among the junior ones for who gets me, when what I need is an older, more sensible one, damn them."

"And they've probably rigged it so she gets the short straw because they know she irritates you no end. That's what you get for being nasty to the help.... Oh, for God's sake, Severus, don't take your anger at me out on the scouts," she said wearily, and collapsed back into the pillows.
Snape halted, half-in and half-out of the bed, and stared at her. "What in bloody hell do you mean?"

"Just what I said. You're angry at me for being late -- even though I didn't know I was -- and you're taking it out on anyone in chucking distance."

"I am most certainly not," he said distinctly, one foot still on the floor. (Part of his brain told him he must look ridiculous, and he hastily climbed the rest of the way into the bed.) "I am angry with the bloody Elf for not knocking. I am not angry with you."

"Really? 'Where the bloody hell have you been' sounded angry to me."

"I was... concerned, I told you that."

"Not enough to Apparate to the flat," she said stubbornly.

"Of course not, it was two in the morning by the time I'd realised you weren't here, and --"

"And you'd decided I was standing you up," Hermione interrupted, and fixed him with an even gaze that was quite unnerving. "So you bloody well weren't going to be seen dead coming to get me, because you wanted to see my reaction this morning. And if that meant not checking on my safety, so be it."

He really would have liked to refute the statement. The problem was, it was very accurate.

He'd known rationally that she was probably fine; had he not had Harrison install the ward, or had he suspected she'd do something stupid like intentionally disabling it, he should have gone to check on her, Hogwarts duties be damned. But he'd assumed that she was simply being obdurate and avoiding him, rather than considering that she might have been tired and hadn't thought he expected her immediately.

The look on his face must have given it away, for Hermione nodded in satisfaction and settled back down, staring at the ceiling.

"That's all this morning has been about, in fact," she said softly. "Teaching me another lesson. And it's not fair, Severus, because it was an honest misunderstanding. I'm not trying to cheat you out of anything -- not any longer, at least -- even if I can't pretend to be happy about it."

Well, she was wrong about one thing, and he needed to set her straight on it. "I have not touched you in anger since... I haven't touched you sexually in anger since that first time. I've gone to some trouble not to do so, in fact," he said carefully. "I know you were truthful earlier, and I'd quite set that aside. I was simply... over-enthusiastic."

That was as far as he could bring himself to go. It simply wouldn't do to admit Bloody hell, I've looked forward to bedding you for over a week, and I've gone so far as to ignore every discomfort - - and they've been many, considering how much I've anticipated this....
No, that gave her entirely too much power in the situation. Sexual politics were very delicate, and it was far too easy to tip one's hand: once she had the idea that she might have the advantage, this would become even more a tussle and a bother than it already was.

Hermione was silent for a while, and then said, "I see. It's very easy to misunderstand you, you know, because you don't tell me, and it's usually very hard to read you visually." (He snorted -- of course it was, that had kept him alive more times than he liked to think -- but she apparently decided to ignore his commentary.) "I can't always tell when you're angry as opposed to simply irritated. Or not irritated at all."

"I admit to frequent irritation. Not necessarily with you, not always, but with the situation in general. Life in general."

"Why is that?" she asked softly, and rolled to her side to face him when he again snorted in derision. "No, I'm serious, I really want to know. I think we eventually find ourselves on the same side of an issue or a problem, but we lose a great deal of time arguing because we've arrived there by separate paths. And I don't think we have the luxury of that any longer, do you? It was different when you weren't part of the muck, but if we're going to work together effectively, we've got to cut through all that. We mayn't have the time in future."

That made a great deal of sense, blast it. They did seem to spend a great deal of time second-guessing each other and quibbling over reasoning and methodology. And while that was acceptable in the planning-stages of a campaign -- was, in some respects, necessary and helpful -- it would be a tremendous disadvantage when they were required to act quickly and decisively as a whole. As a single, cohesive unit.

And it was possible -- just possible -- that if he were forthcoming with Hermione she would learn to trust his judgement, to defer to his greater experience more than she had hitherto.

"I hate waste, for one thing," he finally said. "Wasted time, wasted effort. I don't particularly care for people who squander their potential, either, but that's a personal decision. As long as they stay out of my way, don't hamper my own efforts, and don't bother or slight me, I don't give a damn what they do to themselves, really."

"Do you think I've squandered my potential?"

"Why should you?"

"You went on about me avoiding magic the other night."

He stopped to consider it a while, and then admitted, "I think it's deplorable, but it doesn't precisely bother me. It has little bearing on the matters that directly concern us, other than often being a generally inefficient way of living one's life. That is, however, your prerogative. I was more concerned with what seemed like a completely idiotic decision in working with the Ministry, but you had a very good reason for staying, if not for the initial choice. It was fortuitous, if not prescient. Why did you join?"
She shifted uneasily, but finally said, "It was a bit prescient, I think. After the war, everyone was convinced that everything would be wonderful. No more Voldemort, blue skies, no worries.... I couldn't quite believe that. I mean, the very fact that Fudge turned his back on Dumbledore and then actively opposed him, opposed us, when we had such clear evidence of what was happening, was just.... It was arrogance of the highest order. And I was gobsmacked when the bloody man came out of the whole thing squeaky-clean and managed to stay in power.... I got the feeling something was up, too, with all those stupid attempts to turn the school into some kind of marriage-market. Trying to brainwash people into doing what someone else knew was right for them, whether they wanted it or not."

"So when you saw the consultancy, you jumped at it because it might put you in a position of influence at best, or enable you to do precisely what you're doing, at worst."

"Something like that, yes. It wasn't nearly that clear or conscious a decision at the time, I'm afraid. It simply felt right."

"Instinct. I'm the last person to sneer at that, provided it's coupled with logic and common-sense."

"Really? You've always impressed me otherwise."

"You haven't seen me work in circumstances which require it, although there's a certain amount involved in Legilimency. It's a question of balance. Take Black, for example," Snape said cautiously, because he wasn't certain how much loyalty and sympathy she had felt for the bastard. "Much as I hated the man -- for purely personal and justifiable reasons -- I will admit that he was a better-than-average duelist. Had he leavened his skill with common-sense, he might have survived that jaunt into the Ministry. Instead he gave in to his natural tendency to behave like a bullying fool, dropped his guard, and died for it."

"How do you know what happened? You weren't there."

"I got the story from both sides. And of course I wasn't there -- how could I be? I should have been exposed to one side or the other. I should have had to fight for the Order and be branded as an outright enemy of the Dark Lord, or for the Death Eaters and thrown away my cover as their agent here. Useless to them, in other words, and entirely expendable. And in any case, I was de facto head of Hogwarts at the time. Dumbledore had been relieved, McGonagall was in hospital, and Umbridge missing in action through someone's agency.... I could not leave the school unprotected."

"Wouldn't Flitwick have been Acting Head? I know he'd been here quite a while longer than you."

"Good gods, yes. Which is why every year since I came to teach, he'd regrettfully hand in his resignation at the end of Spring Term to Dumbledore, who more regrettfully accepted it, and who then never quite managed to fill the Charms position before Autumn Term -- so he had to ask Flitwick back as a new hire. Filius was junior even to Hagrid, at one point...."

"Oh, bloody.... To have a good excuse to keep you here, you mean?"
"Precisely. The Death Eaters assumed it was enough of a sop to my vanity and ambitions to explain why I stayed, and gave me high enough standing to be able to spy on Dumbledore. At any rate, Black died because he had, as usual, to lord it over someone, and that someone was quicker and more intent than he. He wasted his opportunities -- what he had left of them -- and for nothing but a chance to belittle someone." He shot a glance at her. "You aren't objecting to my view of him."

"It's skewed by your animosity, of course. But I... After I'd been at the Black house for a while I'd begun to form my own opinion of him, and it wasn't positive. There was just something there that made me terribly uneasy. The way he egged Harry on to be reckless, I suppose -- I nearly backed out of the independent Defence classes simply because he thought it was a wonderful idea.... I felt sorry for him, certainly, but I didn't think all his problems were because of Azkaban."

"Too bloody right," Snape muttered, and resisted the urge to tell Hermione precisely how fucked-up he thought Sirius Black had always been: he was by no means the only student who had suffered at Black's hands, though he was the most visible and favourite target.

"I see. So, back to the main problem.... You're sometimes frustrated with me. You assume, because we've started out on the wrong foot -- to put it mildly -- that I'm not trying to be fair and that I'm wasting time intentionally, if not slandering you outright," Hermione said carefully. "But as you don't ask me, and as you've been very good about not resorting to Legilimency, your interpretation of my actions is, perhaps, a bit off at times. Do you think that's possible?"

"Yes," Snape said grudgingly.

"Well, for what it's worth, I have tried to avoid you. Tried to avoid holding up my end of the bargain. I admit that, and it's just as bad as my original intent. I'm not going to lie and tell you that I'm thrilled with much of our... our interactions, either. But I've faced up to the responsibilities I owe you, I'm not intentionally avoiding you, and I wish you'd ask me about it in future rather than jumping to incorrect conclusions."

Damn and blast.

He hated that. He hated the idea of having to solicit information -- of having to ask up-front about it, because it went against his nature and nearly thirty years' training and conditioning. Moreover, women were... well, they always insisted on dragging their feelings into everything, and he didn't do well with those. Cold, hard facts, yes: those couldn't be denied, though they could be manipulated or ignored. And he certainly didn't want to know about Hermione's feelings and emotions (not beyond a certain superficial knowledge that was useful for his own purposes), because he suspected she didn't understand why she did acted as she did at least half the time. He was by no means the most emotionally adept person in the world, but at least he admitted that: she didn't, and he thought she had a very steep learning curve to master before she could even face that fact.

"I can ask what your intentions are," he finally granted. "Why you choose to act as you do is your business, as long as it doesn't put either of us in danger or violate our agreement. Is that acceptable?"
"It's better than the way we've been muddling through, yes."

"Fine, I shall attempt to do so," he said, and self-consciously pulled the covers further up above his waist. (This was definitely business—business, not sex, and lying nude in bed was a very odd circumstance in which to be carrying on a negotiation of this sort.)

"Good," she said, and lay silent for a while, still watching him. (He tried to ignore her, but it was unnerving.) "Well, do you want to...."

"What?"

"Do you want to continue with what you were doing? I'm here, after all. And if you weren't angry with me, then you were certainly, ah... looking forward to it. I didn't mean to put you off it, it was just a good chance to bring the subject up."

"Unfortunately, my enthusiasm has been dampened, if you hadn't noticed," he said dryly. "More trouble than it's worth, at this point."

"Oh." She was silent again for a while, and then cautiously asked, "Totally dampened, or only somewhat?"

He glanced at her, suspicious. "Somewhat."

"Ah. Well, I'll take a ten-minute nap, shall I? And knowing you, by then you'll be back at top form. Wake me when you're properly enthusiastic," she said levelly, and settled back down.

*What the bloody...?*

Was she offering herself? She certainly wasn't offering to help re-awaken his enthusiasm, but she wasn't saying 'Too bad, sod off, then,' either.

While it couldn't be taken as an expression of actual interest -- in either the act or in him -- Snape decided it was a bit of a thawing-out of her attitude... and, that being the case, that the experience might not be as one-sided or require quite as much work on his part as it had to this point. That she might, eventually, even begin to respond on her own behalf and start to actually enjoy the proceedings. Perhaps.

He wasn't certain why that seemed important at the moment, and set the thought aside for the time being: while it bore some thinking about, his 'enthusiasm' was beginning to urge him to consider the fact that he had an intelligent, attractive, and relatively unobjectionable female in his bed who a mere hour ago he'd wanted to shag senseless.

Hermione's nap lasted only five minutes before Snape decided it was worth the effort.

*****
"I take it," Snape asked Hermione over their late -- very late -- luncheon, "that you had no success on either front this week?"

"Why?"

"Because you would have blurted it out immediately as you know damned well that's the one thing that would have slowed me down this morning. Lack of opportunity, or do you think you're being watched?"

"Opportunity, mostly," she said mildly. "People have been putting in long hours after the holiday. And I'd, ah... I'd rather ticked off Corcoran my first day back, and I've had to be careful about his response."

"You did it intentionally?"

"Yes. He ripped into me for wanting to take the half-day, and I let him know I didn't appreciate it. Also that I'm aware what a bloody slacker he is. And that I'd file a report on him for being a bully. And that he really ought be more understanding, as my husband was intent on impregnating me --"

"Good gods, girl, there's such a thing as subtlety. Did you really need to go that far?"

Hermione stared at him, fork poised above her salad-plate. "This from the man who twitted him about his adolescent acne?"

"Totally different. He's not my superior, is he?"

"He's had it coming for a long time. He threatened to file two separate complaints against me, but he shut up when I said I'd file a Pensieve record of the meeting that would have the accountants on his back. I haven't had any reprisals, so I think I scared him rather badly."

"That is not necessarily a good thing, you know. The more unprincipled ones can become very dangerous when they're frightened."

"He's not that kind of frightened, not yet. And I made it clear I'd do my job, but that I wouldn't be as whole-hearted about it -- that was a definite plus of the encounter. Don't worry, I've taken some pains to secure my office from meddling."

"Good."

"And I've acquired an orb and put my memory of the meeting in it, so if anything happens to me for a stupid reason -- I mean, if he tries to sack me for insolence or something -- you or I can pull the bugger out and show it to him or the Board of Inquiry. It's in a box of christmas ornaments in the hall cupboard, by the way."

"How the bloody hell did you get your hands on one of those? They're restricted to official use."
"Fred and George Weasley. Don't ask me why they wanted them or how they got them, but they've got loads. They swore they hadn't 'fiddled' with this one yet, so I know they're up to no good. But beyond that, I didn't think I ought to ask."

Snape filed that information away for later potential use, and turned to other matters. "And no progress on your Plan B?"

"There I have got something done. You won't like it, though," she said, and tucked into her salmon. (Snape had ordered the aborted Friday dinner for Saturday luncheon, instead. The Elves had gone to some trouble to find everything he'd requested, and he'd made other plans than a leisurely dinner for the evening.)

"Go ahead," Snape said wearily, and prepared to restrain himself from shooting out of his chair and hitting the ceiling.

"I've forged some incriminating documents that I can forward to François now. If we're in danger from the Ministry we contact him, he turns them over to the ICW, and they arrest us and send us to Liechtenstein for prosecution."

Snape dropped his fork and buried his head in his hands.

"It really is the only thing I could think of," Hermione said apologetically. "After all, the point is to get out of the bloody country, and who better to do it than the ICW? And if the ICW is involved with Fudge we're in for it anyway, aren't we?"

"Not only in for it, but totally and absolutely fucked," Snape muttered into his palms.

"I really couldn't see any way around it. We're going to have to testify in any case, and this way François can back us up."

"If he does. He might let us hang."

"Oh, I doubt that. I'm not saying it's impossible, but I doubt it. I can get him into a great deal of trouble because he passed on the Twenty-Year Plan, after all."

"Unless they know he did. Unless that was precisely the point."

"Why? Really, Severus, I... I understand your caution, I do. But that simply doesn't make sense, that the conspiracy extends all the way upward. There are other countries just as badly off as we, and there's nothing of the sort going on there."

"That you know of."

"Well, I'm in a better position to know than most, aren't I? We've got sort of an unofficial network of sorts, we share ideas and strategies -- stupid, useless stuff, mostly, but it's fairly obvious whether someone's upset and whether they're withholding information about what's really going on."
"Let's... hope you're correct," Snape said, mentally wincing at the word. (One had no business hoping for anything in war. And this was war, never mind that it was being played out on a purely intellectual battlefield.)

"I might have a good opportunity to snoop about next week," Hermione offered. "Corcoran is scheduled for a few days' leave, so I need to decide whether it's worth breaking into his office."

"For what?"

"Any supporting evidence of the plot."

"I should be very careful," Snape said: even to himself, his voice seemed as tense as the aching muscles of his shoulders and neck. "He'll expect something like that, or he should."

"Are you saying you don't want me to?"

"I'm saying... I should prefer if someone else did."

"Who the bloody hell else is there?"

"There are possibilities," Snape said firmly. "I oughtn't tell you, so you can deny any hand at all in it. When will he be gone?"

"He won't be in from the evening of the eighteenth -- the Wednesday -- until the next Monday."

"Let me check and see if something can be arranged."

"All right. I'm wondering about something else as well, though...."

"Yes?"

"Do you think the Wizengamot will have ordered an inquest on Flaherty's death? I know there was one in France, but the record's been sealed -- François can't get at it. Don't you think it likely there would be one here as well?"

"I've no idea. Why?"

"There would have been questions asked about why he was over there, for one. And I'd be interested in seeing if Fudge made any attempts at misdirection. It might be a good indication if he suspected Flaherty, and if the Wizengamot knows what Fudge is up to."

"Hermione, what earthly good would that do?"

"I don't know, not yet, I've just got a feeling.... I only need to get into the Wizengamot Records Room, just for a few minutes."

"A feeling's not quite good enough, I don't think."
"What about Bingelwort and Cunningham, then? Why were they willing to go along with the plan, and to lie to their own Board about the potion?"

"You think Fudge has something on them? It might simply be for the profit. Or something illegal, true, but nothing that's come before the Wizengamot."

"Possibly. We won't know unless we check, will we?"

He had to resist the urge to throttle her. "It's a bloody great risk for potentially no payback," he said through gritted teeth.

"I know. But I really don't have any other avenues open, at the moment, not if you don't want me searching Corcoran's office myself."

There was absolutely nothing to do but forbid her outright, at this point. Except.....

"Again, let me check with my contact," he said, sighing, and thanked his stars for McGonagall being a nosy and interfering bitch.

"So you'll --"

"If it can be managed without putting you at risk, yes," Snape said, and tried to salvage what was left of his appetite.

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He managed a half-hearted attempt to exercise his rights early in the evening, with rather less of the intensity that had apparently shocked Hermione earlier: true to her word, while she wasn't precisely enthusiastic, she seemed to make an effort to relax and to follow the few directions he gave her. (Contrary to what most might think of him, he found resistance more than a little off-putting. Brute force was a sordid tactic, and, given the human male's general physical strength in comparison to the female's, utterly predictable and despicable. He preferred to exhaust all other avenues before resorting to that.)

Afterwards (while in some respects it was quite pleasant to lie abed with Hermione dozing beside him) he had to accept that he'd pulled monitor duty that night, and rose for a quick bathe.

"Where are you --?" Hermione mumbled through her hair as he quietly pulled on clean clothes.

"Patrol duty until midnight," he informed her. "Feel free to choose something from the bookshelves if you're so inclined, but do stay here -- I shall worry if you go wandering."

"Too tired," she muttered. "I'll probably just sleep tonight."

Well, the afternoon wasn't wasted, then, he thought as he slipped out of his rooms, warded the door, and strode off down the corridor.
He was worried, as it happened. She still looked as tired as she had after their foray into Arden Forest: probably back to her routine of long work hours and ridiculous, unhealthy avoidance of good, solid meat-and-potatoes fare, so to speak. But there wasn't a thing he could do about that while she was in London: at least he could chivvy her into eating properly on her visits, so that would have to do in future.

It bothered him nonetheless and he should have welcomed any distraction from the thought, but for once the idiot students seemed content to stay out of mischief. (He didn't even catch either of the married student couples mucking about in the darkest corners, as he'd half-expected.) He had plenty of time to worry over how to approach McGonagall about arranging mischief at the Ministry on such short notice: and then, motivated by an odd prickling of his senses at the thought of McGonagall, he detoured to the Headmistress' office.

She was already there, dressed in a revolting tartan dressing-gown, hair in a long plait down her back, a mug of whisky-laced hot cocoa in her hands, and looking quite irritable.

"Up this late so early in term?" Snape asked.

She glared at him. "Your fault. Albus put in a charm and now the blasted castle knows when someone's looking for the Head and wakes them. I can't break the bloody charm and neither could poor Filius. I'm sure Albus thought it useful, but I call it bloody annoying."

"Ah," Snape said, resolving that if anything ever happened to McGonagall that he should resign immediately rather than put up with Dumbledore's idiocy. (He might have guessed the bloody old coot would manage to make a nuisance of himself even from the grave.) "I did need you, actually, but I was going to wait until tomorrow. It's not quite that urgent."

"I'm up now," McGonagall said, sour-faced. "Go ahead."

So Snape told her of Hermione's ridiculous idea to pillage both the Wizengamot Records Room and Corcoran's office -- both actions against his wishes and best judgment, but particularly the former -- and wondered if anything might be arranged for the coming week....

"Perhaps," McGonagall said cautiously. "I shall have to consult Arthur, of course. Severus, do you really think she ought?"

"No. No, I don't. But she's convinced it might be useful, so...."

McGonagall's eyebrows shot up at the admission, but she managed to hold her tongue.

"I do wish, however, that Corcoran's office were done by someone else," Snape said stubbornly. "She's far too close to that situation -- she's probably the first person he'll think of, in fact."

"And what are they looking for?"
"Memos or other documentation on a proposed genetic treatment, a prophylactic treatment that would fix genetic errors in offspring before birth. That's not what it is, of course, so the agent should look for anything about genetic treatments or fertility potions."

"Oh, Merlin's beard --"

"Yes, my thought exactly, rather more politely phrased. Next week-end would be far better for that work, when Hermione's here."

"Or elsewhere, somewhere quite visible," McGonagall murmured. "Cornelius Fudge and I are not on the best terms any longer, of course, and if something goes wrong I'm not certain Hogwarts would be an acceptable alibi."

Damn and blast it....

"I'll think on that," Snape muttered. "After Wednesday would be best for the Records Room, I think. She'll have to do that one -- she's the only person who might make certain important connections."

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear, then," McGonagall promised, and heaved herself out of the chair. "Go to bed, Severus -- I am. I'm too old for such late nights."

"I've patrol until --"

"Oh, never mind that," she said dismissively, waving him off. "I'll wake the portraits and have them keep an eye out. They can't take points, but they'll certainly inform me if anyone was about tonight. Go on, get some sleep."

Despite a nagging sense of neglecting his duty, Snape was too tired from the day's activities to argue or to disobey, so he returned to his rooms and did just that.

*****

Sunday, January 15th

The morning passed very quietly. Hermione was, surprisingly, not at all a bother, leaving him in peace during their breakfast in his rooms, and curling up with a Potions journal afterwards while he marked essays; he made good progress until luncheon, when he felt obliged to take her to the Great Hall to dine with everyone. A certain amount of lurid speculation regarding the intensity of their private activities was fine in terms of their cover (and accurate, at least for this week-end), but it wouldn't do a bit of good if no-one even knew Hermione was about.

Toward the end of luncheon Marsters trotted up to the edge of the dais, and Hermione left the table to speak with him. (Good, Snape thought, the bloody little fool won't feel obliged to pass messages through me.)
McGonagall leaned in to Snape's shoulder and whispered, "Someone will come for her at her office late Thursday night -- tell her to wait for him. And someone very skilled in disguise will handle the other matter on the Saturday."

Snape suppressed a groan: it had to be Tonks. Again. He'd bloody well better come up with a damned good alibi for Hermione, then, because he thought it likely Tonks would manage to set off every alarm on the premises.

*****

He made certain he took advantage of Hermione's company in the way he felt best spent the time before sending her back off to London quite late in the afternoon, despite some physical discomfort on her part (and, if truth be told, his as well -- he wasn't used to such frequency either). But he decided it was better than sitting about doing nothing or listening to her speculate over next Thursday's events, once he'd told her about the arrangements. Seven years' experience of her in his classroom had taught him to nearly dread that intense and excited gleam that lit up her eyes....

He couldn't deny once he'd seen her off, however, that he was very worried (less so about Thursday than Saturday). While he believed Hermione was now attempting to do right by him, he wouldn't put it past her to try to skive off her visit for the week-end: not to avoid or enfuriate him, but out of a misguided and foolish wish to hang about the Ministry in case there might be trouble.

Something should have to be done about that, to nip any little plot of hers in the bud.

Unfortunately, making certain that she kept well out of it required him to get her not only out of London, but out of Hogwarts as well in the event that McGonagall's fear was well-founded. He should have to speak to Hooch rather earlier than he'd hoped, muck about with his schedule, and plan something rather more spectacular than he'd acticipated. It would likely be something rather more expensive than he'd thought as well, and considering the hit his bank account had taken from the payment to Harrison, he wasn't well-pleased.

So, immensely irritated, he left his rooms to try to track down Hooch, and on his return (with Hooch's eventual, grudging consent and some pertinent advice), he grudgingly initiated a floo call to the agency Hooch had recommended.

He tried not to snarl or reach for his wand when the representative actually squealed at his admission that he and Hermione were still, technically, newlyweds.

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Chapter 14: Wherein Snape takes a holiday.

Hermione's flat
Friday, January 20th
Good gods, I had no idea she'd anything other than plain, serviceable cotton, Snape thought, and ran the satiny and faintly intriguing knickers over the back of his hand once more, before tossing them back in the drawer and rooting about for something more her usual.

He'd stolen from more than his fair share of desk drawers, trunks, potions cupboards, and poorly-tended Hogsmeade market-day stalls (the latter only as a penniless student, of course). But nothing in his recollection -- with the exception of a bottle of butterbeer lifted from a boozy and inattentive Hog's Head patron, again when a student -- came close to the illicit thrill of pillaging Hermione's lingerie drawer: it seemed equal parts guilt, fascination, and anticipation of her horror when she realised what he'd done. (He was also a bit indignant that she'd been hiding more attractive items than she wore when he was visiting, but he reasoned that was understandable, given the circumstances. He couldn't expect her to go out of her way and actually encourage him. He regretted, however, that he'd probably never feel what those silkier things felt under his fingers when warmed by her body, but chalked it up as a lost cause.)

He did remember -- despite his distraction -- to toss her tooth- and hair-brush into the valise along with the other things he'd selected; and he congratulated himself on remembering to chuck anything from the refrigerator which looked as though it might turn noxious, before dropping the ward and Apparating from the flat.

*****

The Ministry

Hermione was surprised to see him waiting for her among the crowd in the Atrium, and none too pleased (the corners of her mouth tightened, though Snape was pleased that she otherwise controlled her expression). When she reached him she stood on tiptoe, unbidden, to kiss his cheek.

"Didn't trust me to show up tonight, did you?" she muttered under her breath before stepping away.

"Of course I did, or I would have should you known where we were to meet," he said, and drew her arm through the crook of his elbow as he pulled her toward the Departures floos. "But as you didn't --"

"What do you mean, where we were to meet? Where are we --"

"You'll see," he interrupted smoothly, hurrying her onward. "As we couldn't afford much time for honeymoon, I though we could do with a week-end holiday."

He had an inkling that he'd hit a snag when she began to drag her feet.

"A --? Not at Hogwarts? But, Severus, I don't have... I've got to pack a few things --"

"Already done," he shot back, and tried to look as if he weren't actually hauling at her arm. (He was.)

"You went through my things?" she said, voice rising.
"Of course, why shouldn't I?" he said, beginning to panic. He'd thought she'd wait to lay into him once they were safely at their lodging, but, judging by her expression and the fire in her eyes, he'd miscalculated badly. He dropped the valise, tossed a knut at the floo attendant (who threw a handful of powder in the floo), and told Hermione, "Whitemarsh."

"Where the bloody hell is --"

"You'll see," he said through gritted teeth. "Go on."

With a final, nasty glare at him, Hermione stepped into the floo, snapped out "Whitemarsh," and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Try to do something bloody romantic...." Snape muttered for the attendant's benefit, wincing at the soppy word as he fumbled for another knut. (Intentionally fumbled, as it happened. He reckoned the time he could kill before actually flooing would be the last peaceful seconds he'd have all weekend.)

The attendant chuckled. "Hven't been married long, have you. Wanted to surprise her, eh? Don't work, mate. Next time, drop hints. Lots of 'em."

"Not much of a surprise then, is it?"

"Naw, but they like to pretend as it is. And don't buy 'em nothing practical for Yule or birthdays or anniversaries, either. Early on, my Gertie went on as how she wanted one of them automatic carpet-beaters, so I got 'er one for her birthday...." The attendant's voice trailed off, and he shuddered.

"What happened?" Snape asked as he handed over his knut.

The man leaned toward Snape and he confided, "She hexed my little wizard limp for a week. Stick to pretty stuff -- jewelry and gee-gaws -- for the important dates, mate. Don't try to cheap it out. And drop hints."

Even though he knew it was very unlikely that Hermione would resort to such nasty tactics, Snape made certain he held the valise squarely in front of his delicate bits, at what he judged maximum hex deflection angle.

*****

Hermione had wandered away from the Wizard's Metropole Hotel floo by the time he arrived, and her wand wasn't in evidence: she was leaning against an iron support and staring through the lobby plate-glass at a distant, gaudily-lit pier further up the beachfront from the one the hotel occupied.

"You didn't," she said, accusing, when he joined her.

"Yes, I got into your bloody bureau drawers," he hissed. "I had to -- I need to prove we came here directly from the Ministry."
"I don't mean that. Really, Severus, Brighton?"

"Whitemarsh," he corrected her irritably. "What's wrong with it?"

"But the Muggle city's Brighton, and it's about as clichéd a holiday-spot as you could have picked, in-season or not."

"I've no bloody notion of the place's Muggle reputation -- Whitemarsh was recommended to me. Been here forever, since before the Normans."

"Who recommended it?"

"Wizards' Wonderful Week-Ends," he blurted out truthfully before he thought to fudge the answer. She stared at him, and then started to snigger.

"I don't arrange things like this every day, you know," he snapped. "Hooch recommended the bloody agency, and it suits the purpose."

He resolved to hex Hooch's broom on his return to Hogwarts. *Blasted witch must have known the bloody agency would sell me a hackneyed package...* 

"And the purpose is...?"

"Our little project, of course, since we're having trouble conceiving," he said with more than a little malice, and added in an undertone, "Later."

"Oh. All right, sorry," Hermione said, and tried to compose her features. "Room? I'm dead tired, and I need to put my feet up."

"Not here, unfortunately. Security was far too lax."

"Oh, for God's sake, Severus--"

"Not *that* way, I mean.... Just wait, would you?"

"Fine," she said, sighing, and pushed herself away from the windows. "Where to?"

"A few streets inland, I was told."

They made their way over to the lobby doors and exited -- earning a snobby and disapproving glare from the Manager, who'd expected them to pay his exorbitant nightly rate, and whose outrage Snape was counting on to impress them in his memory -- and Snape led Hermione along the pier toward the beach.

"Hang on," she said halfway across the delicate ironwork of the pier, and stopped dead in her tracks.
"What?"

"If that," she said, stabbing her finger in the direction of the gaudy pier, "is the amusements pier, and that, (another stab at a closer pier) "is Palace Pier, then this is...."

She went very pale indeed, the wind whipping the looser bits of her hair free from its clasp.

"For Merlin's sake, what is it?"

"Is this West Pier?" she demanded.

"I don't bloody know, Hermione, I don't know a damned thing about Whitemarsh."

"Brighton. Because it's gone. Kaput. There shouldn't be anything here at all -- it was all swept out to sea not too terribly long ago. Not even enough left for wizards to build on."

"Obviously not," Snape said, attempting patience. "We're here and it feels remarkably solid."

"But --"

"We'll go into the history later, shall we? Perhaps when we're off the bloody thing, and you may question its identity and reality in safety?"

The silly chit apparently concurred, for Snape had a difficult time keeping up with her once she could get her legs moving again.

The agency representative had lied about their hotel being 'a few streets inland': it was far inland in a much less fashionable part of Whitemarsh, quite inconvenient to the beachfront and shops, and they had to detour through many cramped little passaged jammed willy-nilly between Muggle streets and structures. But eventually they located it -- a rather shabby, mock-gothic establishment huddled on the side of a hill, and bearing the sign "Foybel Spires."

"Should've guessed the honeymoon was over," Hermione muttered through chattering teeth, and pushed irritably at her wind-blown hair.

"Not for the reason you think," Snape shot back. "I told you I'd done with sub-par lodging. I'm making an exception for a practical reason."

He ushered her in out of the wind, toward the concierge's desk, and pinged the bell: and after a moment, a frowsy-looking witch popped out of the office.

"Yes?"

"Snape. We've a room reserved," Snape said, drumming his fingers on the desk.

"Oh, let's see, let's see...."
The woman peered short-sightedly at her ledger, and then shook her head. "No Snape, I'm afraid. Are you quite certain you --"

"Yes, I am," Snape said through his teeth. "I made the arrangements through Wizards' Wonderful Week-Ends on the fifteenth."

He ignored Hermione's sniggering for the time being, though he resolved to make her pay for it later.

"Oh, did you? Oh, you poor man, I'm so terribly sorry. My husband probably frightened off their owl or mucked it up, he's quite useless when it comes to keeping track of things -- BASIL!" she shrieked across the lobby.

"So you are telling me that we do not have lodging for the week-end, is that it?" Snape said; his ears were beginning to burn (never a good sign).

"Well, as I don't have it in the book, no, not here. But I think.... Yes, we do have one room available, two-person with an ensuite bath, sea view, very nice, one of our cosier rooms. Should you like that?"

"It will have to do. Through Sunday afternoon, as was already arranged."

"Very good! There are a few little peculiarities of the establishment. Doors are locked at warded at 9:30 p.m. precisely," she gabbled, "and the public floo -- just there, in the corner -- is for floo-calls only, I'm afraid, the floos just can't handle full-body insertion. We have first-quality Anti-Apparition wards for the security of our guests, as well. Let's see, three, no two nights, that would be... ...thirty-two galleons, twelve sickles, seventeen knuts, please."

Snape winced. He might as well have paid for the more expensive hotel and have had done with it.

"Is that your regular rate, or the package-rate through the agency?" Hermione interrupted.

"Oh, the regular, of course -- we can't possibly extend the package-rate if you haven't actually gone through them, you see. Not fair to anyone who comes in a tick or two later looking for a room. BASIL! GUESTS IN THE LOBBY!"

"My husband did make the reservation through them, though -- did you pay them directly, dear, or was it to be made here?" Hermione said serenely.

"Directly," Snape said, keeping it as short and civil as possible. (Short, yes. Civil.... Well, as civil as a snarl can be.)

"Ah. Well, that's that, I'm afraid. You can't expect us to pay twice for the same service, and at a higher rate to boot," Hermione said, and slipped her arm through Snape's elbow. "Come along, dear. I'll wager that nice place we flooed into has rooms available, and I can have Ermentrude look into this first thing Monday morning, get it straightened out and our account credited --"
A quite extraordinary look crossed the frowsy woman's face -- something between fear and revulsion -- before she stuttered, "Erm- Ermentrude?"

"Ermentrude Montescue-Wiggins, yes -- I work with her in the Ministry. Quite the go-getter, Trudy, I understand she's the foremost expert on the Wizards' Fair Lodging Act. Let's go, dear," Hermione added earnestly to Snape. "I'd rather like to get settled in for the night."

"Oh, really, there's -- BASIL! -- no need to walk all the way back, my dear, really, I'm sure we can -- BASIL! -- can come to some compromise...."

A dour-faced wizard poked his head into the lobby from what appeared to be the dining room and hissed, "Yes, dear?"

"Basil, you quite forgot to add these poor people to the reservations list, and now I can't give them their package-rate."

"I most certainly did not, you -- What's the name?"

"Snope --"


Basil loped behind the desk, stared at the ledger, and jabbed a long forefinger at one line. "There."

"That says Snike."

"No it doesn't, you bat-blind old --"

"Basil!"

"No problem, no trouble," Basil assured them, smiling toothily and insincerely at Snape through what appeared to be a caterpillar along his upper lip, but was in all likelihood his idea of a respectable moustache. "Package-rate assured, room available, all that -- what number, dear?"

"301."

"301, jolly good, just sign the register, sir," Basil said as he grabbed for the huge, old-fashioned key, scurried around the end of the desk, and wrestled the valise from Snape's hand. "And this way --"

Snape scribbled his signature in the register and they followed Basil up three flights of eccentrically-twisted stairs, Basil muttering under his breath all the way: Snape was certain he heard the words "vain," "bint," and "vicious addle-brained viper," and decided that he concurred completely.

"There you are," Basil said after struggling with the sticky lock and shoving the door open. "Ensuite bath, all mod cons, do let us know if there's anything you need. The dining-room closes in
a half-hour, so perhaps you'll want to go down straightaway. Needn't dress, under the circumstances," he added with a leer at Hermione, who'd crossed the room to look at the view as she shed her coat.

Snape found he didn't appreciate the leer much. "That's all, thank you," you said icily, and plucked the valise from the man's hand.

"I thought this had a sea view," Hermione said. "I can't quite --"

"Is. Just there to the right, between the Muggle Chinese Take-Away and Squigglecombe's Magical Squid Hatchery. Little week-end getaway, eh?" Basil continued sotto voce to Snape, oblivious to the ice. "Nice, relaxing few days with the secretary away from, er, humdrum obligations? Away from the old ball-and-chain?"

The man did everything but a nudge-nudge wink-wink, and Snape was only prevented from reaching for his wand by Hermione -- whose hearing was, obviously, excellent -- who contributed an equally frosty "Actually, I am the old ball-and-chain. Does one tip the proprietor, dear? I admit I'm not well-versed in the customs at this class of establishment."

The catepillar-moustache on said proprietor's lip bristled, and then with a muttered "Have a good stay," he handed the key to Snape, slunk from the room, and shut the door with a bang.

"I'm gratified," Snape said as he dropped the valise to the floor, "to learn I'm not the only victim of your more acid comments. In fact, I think you were sharper with him than you've been with me...."

"He deserved it, the nasty old lecher. 'Needn't dress,' indeed, or as if I'd bother in this kind of place. Not that I have anything, anyway."

"You have a change of clothing, and two of underthings," Snape said to mollify her. "Not anything formal, so it's just as well."

"Oh. Good," she said, and plopped down in a grubby chair by the window, shivering: the bloody room was freezing, even to Snape's dungeon-hardened senses. "I suppose we ought to head back down, or no dinner...."

"I need a moment to recuperate," Snape said, unclasping his cloak. "Who the dickens is Ermentrude Montescue-Wiggins, is she real, and if not, why was our hostess terrified of her?"

"Commerce and Measures Department," Hermione said. "She is to lodging and fair business practise what Percy Weasley was to cauldron thickness. Worse, really, an absolute dragon. I don't actually know her, but her reputation's legendary."

"And the Fair Lodging Act?"

"Real. Couldn't have fudged that -- the nasty cow knows of it, I'm sure. That sort always do, so they can wriggle through the loopholes. She hadn't lost the bloody reservation, of course -- it's the off-season, she just wanted to make a bit extra."
"Ah. To answer your earlier question," Snape said as he straighened his cuffs, "I chose the place quite deliberately because --"

"Nothing but public floo-calls, no Bodily Flooing off-premises, no Apparating, and the doors are locked at 9:30 sharp," Hermione shot back. "Not to mention that odious idiot who'll probably have his ear pressed to our door to get a thrill, but you couldn't anticipate him. The question now is, why did you want to make certain we're accounted for every minute?"

Snape reached for his wand to cast Silencio over the room, and then hesitated: it might be considered suspicious when they didn't need privacy for more... intimate matters. So he crossed to Hermione (not a great effort, as the room was abysmally small), bent, and whispered in her ear, "I was advised to have you clear of London this week-end, and Hogwarts as well because an alibi from the faculty mightn't be trusted. There's an action planned at the Ministry."

"What?" Hermione gasped and jerked upright, nearly bashing into Snape's nose.

"Hush. Corcoran's office," he said. "I fully anticipate that when it's discovered you'll be called in and interrogated. So we shall simply have to put up with some discomfort this week-end."

"How did you --?"

"I didn't. Someone else arranged it, but they were concerned for you and contacted me." He straighted and inspected his cuffs a final time, and then said, with little enthusiasm, "Shall we dine before you tell me what you found this week? If the food is totally inedible I suppose we could resort to the Muggle Chinese Take-Away, if it isn't too late."

*****

The food wasn't quite inedible, but there was no doubt the Chinese Take-Away would have been better.

Basil seated them at the worst possible table (near the kitchen door) despite the dining room being empty; he then airily informed them that the kitchen was out of both the vichyssoise and cream of asparagus soups only after they'd chosen those things, and foisted the remainder, a lobster bisque, upon them; the Andalusian squib of a waiter stumbled during the serving of the soup course, the bisque nearly landed in Snape's lap, and he was only saved by Hermione's quick and wandless charm which froze the clotty mess in mid-air (she seemed more surprised at that than he -- she mustn't do wandless magic often, if at all), which wouldn't have mattered much in any case, as once the waiter had brought a replacement the soup proved only lukewarm; Hermione's broiled sole was over-cooked to an India-rubber texture, Snape's lamb rare to the point of tartare, and the dessert mousse obviously owed far too much of its consistency to the hoofs of many long-dead hippogriffs.

*Merlin's bloody balls, I'll never complain about the Hogwarts Elves' occasional muck-up again.... The wine might have been acceptable, had it not already begun its transmutation into vinegar.*

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"Good gods," Snape groaned from the chair by the window, and tried to ignore an ominous squelching from his stomach (the damned lobster bisque had turned, he was sure). "Before you say anything, we'll dine at the other hotel tomorrow if I can manage a reservation. And if I'm not in St. Mungo's by then."

Hermione left the bath and stepped directly in front of him, glaring: he'd thrown the shorter and far more flattering night-gown onto the pile in the valise, and she already had goose-flesh rising on bare arms and legs.

He managed a half-hearted smirk when she wailed, "I'm freezing."

"Good thing the bed's on the small side, then. We'll conserve body heat.... Oh, stop snivelling and transfigure it, woman. My stomach's in no shape for activity tonight in any case, so it's wasted on me."

"Wish I'd known a dicky tummy would put you off. Wouldn't have cooked so nicely for you before," she muttered as she pulled the gown off and transfigured it into long, sensible flannel one. (Snape was rather surprised that she didn't retreat to the bath, but she merely turned her back, chastely, and then struggled into the longer gown she'd charmed.)

Snape pulled his wand to cast Silencio and she halted him with a quick "Wait -- let me," and did it herself, muttering something extra that he couldn't catch; and when she'd put her wand on the night-stand, he asked, "What, if anything, did you discover in the Records Room?"

"Nothing absolutely definitive," Hermione muttered, and cautiously lifted the covers from the bed and leant over it, scanning the sheets.

"For the gods' sakes, woman, it's not that awful an hotel." (It wasn't quite as irritable an observation as it might have been: even swathed in flannel Hermione's bum was rather attractive, and Snape's libido was all too willing to war with his indigestion, despite his earlier promise.)

"I don't see any bed-bugs, true.... But," she said, and pounced on something down at the foot of the mattress, "there is something."

"What?"

She stood and examined a little pill-like object in her palm before handing it off to him. "A dream-beetle, I think. It's the only one."

Snape nudged the dry husk with a finger. "Hah. Predictable -- something decent about the place after all, but dead and useless." He risked opening the window against the horribly cold sea-wind that managed to make its way that far inland, and flung the carcass outside.

"Isn't there a potion you can use them in?"

"Not a legal one," he said as he latched the window. "And it takes an entire colony, at any rate."
"Oh."

"Well?" he demanded as she climbed into bed.

"Not much," she admitted. "They seem to have accepted the French coroner's report without question. Flaherty did receive an injury -- probably blasted against a wall, at one point -- but self-administered poison was definitely the cause of death. Some of the council tended toward Suicide, possibly the result of mental imbalance. Report from the company -- Binglewort, I presume -- is that he was an exemplary employee, and no problems found in their records.... I really wonder about that, Severus. Who got the bloody documents to Flaherty?"

"Never mind that now, keep going."

"There's not much more. I couldn't get to the actual minutes as they're in a sphere, so I had to go from notes on the French report. Fudge seemed keen on the Suicide explanation, but directed that the verdict should be Misadventure instead, supposedly out of compassion for Olivia Flaherty. Bollocks says I -- I think he doesn't want her taking offence and kicking up a fuss. But I didn't see anything else suspicious."

"Inconclusive, in other words," Snape said. "More or less a wasted effort."

"Yes, it's not terribly useful -- I admit it, you were right. Except that I think it proves the Wizengamot don't know what Fudge is up to. Why not speak of it openly, otherwise? And why allow dissention and disagreement, or not order a more thorough investigation at Mangel and Mortars?"

"And how is that significant?"

"The whole government isn't corrupt. There are some who'll be horrified if the mess is exposed. And even if the ICW is aware of the plan, if the majority of the Wizengamot doesn't support it they can chuck Fudge and the ICW. It's been done before, during the Napoleonic --"

"Yes, I know, that Muggle war with the Frogs -- I do remember bits of Binns' tutorials, unfortunately."

"Well, it is important. The French wizards had no business mucking in the Muggle situation, and the ICW had no business trying to pressure the Wizengamot into supporting them," Hermione argued, brow furrowed, as she arranged her pillow and pulled up the covers.

"At any rate.... Is there anything else?"

Hermione shifted restlessly, but didn't say anything: Snape felt compelled to stare at her for a moment before she admitted, "No, not about Flaherty." He felt his eyebrow creep up (the left one, the one allied to his more benevolent sceptical look which he reserved for the Slytherins, as opposed to the disbelieving sneer for all else), and he waited until she finally said, "I did... look at Lavender Brown's file. And Skellington's, the man who assaulted her."
"Why on earth?"

"Because I.... It wasn't that I didn't believe you, Severus -- I know you wouldn't lie about that, or at least I've realised since October that you wouldn't. It had always bothered me that she disappeared after the Hogsmeade raid, and it was never explained to any of us why exactly. So when I started really thinking about what you told me --"

"You should have asked, and saved yourself the trouble and the danger. Yes, she was harmed, physically and mentally -- not as much as the Longbottoms, but she was in far too fragile a state to return to the school and the Seventh-Year curriculum. And of course the student body wasn't told, even the Order members, to protect her privacy and reputation."

"Oh, Severus.... You weren't --"

"No, I wasn't there. I was often excused from actions too close to Hogwarts, presumably in the event I might be recognised, but in reality because they didn't quite trust me not to tip their hand to Dumbledore. Her case had to be discussed among the faculty, of course."

"Oh."

"For what it's worth, she continued studying from home and eventually took her NEWTs -- a year later than the rest of you, and privately, but she did well enough, considering."

"Oh, good."

He turned back to stare out at the darkness beyond the window-glass, unsettled at the thought that Hermione had snooped in something absolutely unconnected to the Flaherty business -- he should have to set her straight on that, it was far too dangerous, and if she intended to continue she required more self-discipline -- and it was nearly a minute before he sensed that her eyes were still on him.

"Yes?" he said, not bothering to turn.

"Are you coming to bed?"

"Not yet, I don't dare without a tonic. I shall have to sit up a while until that muck settles. Congratulations on having a cast-iron stomach, by the way."

"Not my doing, but thanks. D'you want the light on?"

"No, you may --"

He waved a hand at her, still intent on the darkness, and she extinguished the light; he heard her burrowing deeper into the covers, and they stayed silent for a few minutes until she asked, hesitantly, "But who do you think passed the documents to Flaherty in the first place?"
"I don't know," he said. "And you're not to meddle in that, because you have no good reason whatsoever to deal with Mangel and Mortars or their employees. Leave that to others."

"Very well, Severus. Good night."

Snape waited until she was safely asleep, the cadence of her breathing slow and steady: and then he unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat, slid down in the chair to relax both churning stomach and mind, and watched the tiny, visible slice of the winter sea wash against a pier. It was far easier to see a night-time, with the room light off and the moon glinting off the surface of the waves, than in the daytime; and the very monotony of it was quite surprisingly soothing.

He was more than a little surprised, too, at Hermione's meekness at his admittedly sharp instruction to leave well enough alone, particularly as she must still be upset with him; but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

I suppose that... openness tactic is paying off, thank Merlin. I'm bloody sick of wrangling over everything....

Snape knew he wasn't a patient man; and he had avoided being placed in the circumstance of having to defer to someone else since the end of the war and the disbanding of the Order. (McGonagall, for all her faults, let him well enough alone when it came to matters pedagogic, and was a surprisingly sensitive superior in terms of the Deputy Head's duties as well.) He doubted whether, had Hermione approached him with this whole bloody problem directly, he should have taken it on: but she'd quite effectively made him responsible for her, and he couldn't ignore that.

Of course, if it had been anyone but her, I should have forbid any meddling at all.

All the more reason she ought bloody well listen and obey him in things like this, then.

If I catch her trying to snoop at Mangel and Mortars, I swear on Merlin's balls I'll shackle her to Aga and impregnate her at the first opportunity. And I'll bloody well enjoy it, seventeen years of subsequent spawn-raising or no.

He'd been quite reasonable, really, giving her permission to investigate the Records Room, and it had proved as pointless as he thought it would. He wasn't about to have her risk herself -- and, consequently, himself -- at the potions manufactory.

It was just possible that he might be able to identify who had leaked the documents to Flaherty: he had his suspicions. It was exceedingly risky to try to determine even without actually setting foot in the place, because his bargaining-chip might no longer have the blackmail potential it once possessed..... But it might, in the long run, be worth it.

I have to do something. I can't bear it, watching her run about like a young fool trying to accomplish something, while all I can do is sit and read bloody journals and teach idiots....
He was doing something, though: he was protecting her as best he could, and advising her, even when she acted like a stupid little cow about it and argued with him. (Or, worse, when she disobeyed the spirit of the advice while accepting the letter of it.)

*You did that often enough too, though. How many times did Dumbledore give you a dressing-down for taking too great a risk, before you grew wiser?*

Far too many, actually. 1981 had been fraught with situations in which he'd pushed the sensible limits of his job, and in the end it had hardly paid off. Dumbledore had said otherwise, of course: the boy had survived, and that had been the saving grace of the whole bloody mess -- that, and Voldemort's disembodiment. He'd behaved more sensibly the second time around, despite the sneers of idiots like Black and the poorly-concealed disdain of Potter's whelp.

He scratched thoughtlessly at his left forearm, and then caught himself and deliberately clamped the offending hand about the chair-arm. The mark didn't burn any longer, of course, but it irritated him nonetheless, like the pain and sensation that amputees experienced that he'd read about somewhere -- *phantom limb syndrome* they called it, he remembered.

*A part of you gone forever that you can never have back, but that leaves you marked for life and with an occasional, unwelcome reminder. Invisible, but there.*

There'd been some talk of the syndrome in the trade journals, of the therapeuetic potions that might help treat it, just after the war, because it was regrettably necessary. (But for Poppy Pomfrey's skill and swift action, he might have truly needed something for it himself....)

A noise in the hallway disturbed him -- faint, but it sounded like a muffled yelp -- and Snape carefully pulled himself up from the chair, reached for his wand, and trod soundlessly over to the door: hearing nothing else he unlocked it and cracked it open, and scanned the hall for any interlopers, but found none.

*A poltergeist? The proprietor? Well, he'll be disappointed tonight....*

He locked the door (leaving Hermione's Silencio in place), put his wand on the night-stand next to hers -- he hated not having it next to him, but there was only the one stand, and she'd taken her usual side of the bed -- and undressed as quietly as he could so as not to wake her, despite some residual grumbling from his gut.

*Have to pamper it tomorrow, I suppose. It's a working holiday, granted, but did it have to start with a comedy of errors?*

Too chilled to sleep only in his skin (which he preferred when with Hermione, the better to be ready for any early-morning activity), he wound up transfiguring his underclothing into his usual, nondescript grey nightshirt, and slipped into the bed: he nudged her over just a bit to steal a few precious inches of already-warmed mattress, and earned a sleepy mutter and a gentle kick from one of her ice-cold feet.

*Oh, bloody....*
That sparked a memory -- not entirely welcome, but useful: something his mother had done on the
winter nights when the flat was all too frequently freezing-cold.... He rose from the bed and finally
settled on an object to transfigure, turned it into a brick, cast several warming spells on it, and
wrapped it in a bath-towel before wriggling it down to the foot of the bed, dead centre, where it
would warm their feet.

He finally slept, propped bolt upright as much for the shortness of the bed as for the indigestion,
and not at all well.

*****

Whitemarsh
Saturday, January 21st

Hermione, both conversely and perversely, apparently had slept quite well: she looked much less
frazzled and tired, and seemed totally unaffected by the previous evening's horrid meal.

"What do we do today?" she said brightly. (It was an unfortunate choice of attitude on her part.
Snape fought the urge to snarl, and then reminded himself that it was far preferable to her being
miffed over his rifling of her clothes-drawers.) "Besides the obvious," she added hastily, he guessed
to forstall any lascivious comment on his part.

"No idea. Nor do I particularly care, as long as it's public and traceable," he muttered, and winced
as his hip protested as he rose from the bed.

Note to self: seashore in winter was a stupid idea, no matter how good the rates were....

"I suppose we ought hit all the public venues, then, silly as they are. Make a few purchases, things
like that.... Oh, damn," she added. "I've got a streak of that wretched mousse on my skirt. And
where's my other --"

"Foot of the bed. Under the covers," he grunted, and brushed past her on the way to the loo.
"Another pair in the bottom of the valise, and other clothes."

"Oh. Than-"

He closed the door so he could pee in peace, cutting her off in mid-thanks; and he managed a quick
bathe, with a pass on his hair. (He'd just washed that three days ago, at any rate.)

She was dressed when he left the bath. And she looked distinctly grumpy.

"What?"

"This," she said, hefting the brick in one hand. (She didn't quite look as if she wanted to bash his
head in with it, but he was acutely aware that the situation could change within a breath or two.)
"This was one of my only pair of Italian shoes."
"Transfigure it back, then," he said irritably, and pulled a fresh shirt from the valise.

"Can't. You did it more than six hours ago, didn't you?"

"What the bloody hell does that --"

She lay the brick on the bed, pointed her wand at it, and transfigured it back -- or tried to: while it had the shape of a shoe, it certainly didn't resemble leather in the least.

It looked, in fact, like a shoe made of brick.

"Are you certain you paid attention in Transfigurations, Severus Snape?" she said. "If you had, you'd have remembered that it takes a highly-talented Transfigurationist to keep a transfiguration between two such different materials stable for longer than six hours. Then it reverts to one or the other, usually the less intricate object. You can get away with underthings to night-shirt because they're both fabric, but this...."

Oh, bloody fucking --

"All right, the score so far is one electric alarm-clock, one piece of beefsteak, and one pair of most likely ridiculously over-priced Wop-made shoes," he said, buttoning furiously to cover his embarassment, "or at least over-priced in all likelihood, as I'm willing to wager their Muggles aren't any less fanatical and pricey than their wizards. Not that you're without, as I packed you another pair. Anything else to put on the account?"

Hermione gawped at him in outrage -- why, he couldn't tell -- and then snapped her mouth shut, picked it up the idiotic shoe, let it drop, grimaced when it dented the mattress, and then grinned wryly at him.

"They were my one stupid, girly extravagance," she explained. "Some time in her life every woman ought to own a pair of Italian shoes."

"Oh, for the god's.... There ought to be a bloody cobbler in the Muggle town, oughtn't there? It can't possibly be that small a backwater. I've little Muggle money with me, of course --"

"No, it doesn't matter. They pinched my toes, anyway, totally impractical."

"Nothing better to do," Snape muttered as he shrugged on his coat.

(There was, actually -- he'd have liked to work a good shag into the afternoon: but he wasn't certain he wanted to risk another failure after beginning the day in so humiliating a fashion.)

*****

They elected not to inflict the hotel breakfast upon themselves, and determined to find something better elsewhere. As they made their way across the shabby little lobby, they caught sight of Basil
behind the desk: one side of his head was bandaged and the hair on that side singed. He shot them a baleful glare and dodged into the office to avoid them.

"What the devil... ?" Snape said under his breath as he held the door open for Hermione.

"I do believe he's scorched his ear," Hermione said as they stepped out onto the uneven pavement. "I wonder how that might have happened?"

"Shrew of a wife probably knocked him about with a...." Snape slowed his step, and then glanced at Hermione. "You did actually cast Silencio last night, didn't you? And forgot to undo it."

"Oh, yes, but I didn't forget -- I let it stand as you weren't likely to want exercise, given the tummy trouble. I gave it a little extra adjustment. My speciality isn't fire-related charms for nothing, you know."

Snape found it very hard not to smile at the innocence with which she'd announced her deviousness, given that there had been nothing of a prurient nature for Basil to overhear anyway: it very nearly made him forgive her the embarrassments of the holiday hitherto.

*****

He managed to remain civil through breakfast at a cafe, Hermione's pointless attempts at conversation, and most of the morning's stupid activities (wandering about "admiring" the ludicrous Wizarding resort architecture, interspersed with small, idiotic purchases simply for the receipts). There was also, however, a foray into Muggle Brighton, starting off with an excruciating fifty-minute visit to a Muggle shoe shop -- which did, unfortunately, have several pair of ready-made Italian shoes, but all of which (given their cost) Hermione thankfully deemed too ugly or too impractical by virtue of their spindly heels. After that horrendous experience Snape deemed it wise to take a breather, and steered Hermione toward the most reasonable, discreet, and Muggle-ish restaurant he could find. (Hermione would blend in perfectly; he would do well enough, having sacrificed his pride enough to ask Hermione to glamour his clothes; but any wizard other than another Muggleborn would stick out like a sore thumb in their surroundings.)

"What have you been doing all week, then?" Hermione asked after they'd placed their order. "Besides planning this week-end, of course."

"The usual," Snape muttered, "and watching the _Prophet_ and the bloody journals. Nothing useful, nothing at all."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" she countered. "A new medical treatment's not the kind of thing they can spring on everyone, particularly as they're going to tout it as some kind of miracle cure. They'll have to build it up a bit."

"Not necessarily. Kept under wraps so as not to disappoint people if it didn't prove effective, it has been, and they're ready to implement as soon as people can sign on. Which is more or less the actual case."
"Oh, damn it. Do you really think people will flock to St. Mungo's if they don't have actual proof, though? Surely they don't intend to trot out the trials."

"Falsify the subjects. Bribe or Imperio people who haven't actually had the treatment, but who've recently produced healthy children.... The Purebloods will be anxious to believe it's possible in any case, as they've got the most to lose if a lottery or re-assignment is instituted."

"But they're the group who shouldn't --"

"Exactly, but it will produce a rise in birthrate, and at least some of those children will be healthy. That would, of course," Snape said delicately, "require the collusion of the healers or you, or both, to fudge the numbers -- which does not make me optimistic about your chances of remaining in the Ministry long, at least in your present position."

"Sod my current position --"

"It's how they'd choose to dispense with you that has me worried," Snape retorted. "Fudge was perfectly willing to send Dumbledore to Azkaban, if you recall. I'd wager you're rather lower in his estimation, and he needn't worry about an uproar if you were to simply disappear as you're far less visible and famous than Dumbledore was."

Hermione wilted visibly: Snape almost regretted his sharpness, but the impulse was balanced by his belief that she still didn't truly understand the dangers.

"Do you think, er, they're done with the investigation?" she asked after a bit.

"Don't ask me that. The less you know, the less you can give away," Snape said, and repressed a sigh. "I shouldn't have told you that much, because you might implicate yourself as it is."

"Yes, but --"

"No buts. I shan't know myself until tomorrow night at the earliest. I hope you've made your... arrangements with the Frog," he added, to change the subject.

"François," Hermione hissed. "Why do you.... You're so enthnocentric and prejudiced sometimes, I just don't --"

"And you think centaurs and trolls are lower forms of life," Snape said coolly. "What's the difference?"

"Oh, come on. Calling someone 'frog' or 'wop' simply because they're a different nationality to you is, is simply ignorant -- I'm sorry, Severus, but there it is. I suppose you trotted out 'wog' for Shacklebolt and the Patils."

"That's roughly analogous to calling a centaur 'horse.' As for Shacklebolt and the Patils, of course not -- they're as British as you or I. Although I might have done once, to Shacklebolt, early on," he said thoughtful. "I'm quite certain he put paid to that, though, and rightly so."
"The point is --"

"The point is, I despise foreigners because I can't tolerate their attitudes and national characteristics, not because they appear different to me. You deplore many magical creatures because they are distinctly different to you -- because they aren't human, in other words, or fully human. And if you expect me to allow you your prejudice while you won't tolerate mine, you're badly mistaken."

He had her well and truly flummoxed on that one: she stared at him, gape-jawed, and only managed to close her mouth when the waiter brought their meals.

_Hufflepuff_: unaware of their attitudes, publicly repentent when called on them, privately entrenched, but manipulable, Snape thought grimly as he tucked into his entree. _Ravenclaw_: unusually sensitive, and when error found, intellectually shift to the correct attitude, particularly when one finds the right argument. _Slytherin_: bloody well don't care what others think, but know when to keep their mouths shut for diplomatic reasons. _Gryffindor_: absolutely bloody-minded in asserting that their attitude is the right one while totally oblivious to double-standards....

He should have to revise his opinion of Hermione's educability. Given an intellectual or strategic problem she usually came 'round: but in matters emotional, she was 99.9 per cent Gryffindor. Hopeless, in other words.

She was sulking now, picking at her food, and looked keen on staying sulky: so he resorted to a rare and sincere attempt at diplomacy with a quiet, "I'm not saying I'm better than you, my dear, I'm saying you're as bad as I. The difference between us is that I can accept that and you cannot. It's not the end of the world, it's a simple disparity in self-knowledge."

She actually considered that for a moment, and then mumbled "Doesn't hurt to be politically correct."

"I'm not familiar with the term.... Lying, you mean?" he said lightly. "That's what it is. If you believe something you should accept it, say it, and live it. Unless to do so in certain company would put you in danger, of course."

"It's polite."

He snorted, and she wryly added, "All right, that was a rotten justification to use with you...."

She thawed a bit through the rest of luncheon, and by the time they were ready to leave she was nearly back to normal, though still subdued.

_Good, I shan't have to work her into a better mood tonight. Much._

 *****

"Wait just a moment," she said when they stepped out of the restaurant. "Just look over there -- the pier with that awful roller-coaster, you see?"
"Is that what that monstrosity is? What of it?"

"And the one in the middle is Muggle as well. *West* Pier," she said, pointing, "is that one."


"No, no, don't look at it as a wizard does, suspend that for a bit if you can. Try to see through the glamour."

Snape squinted at it a bit -- it was difficult, as they were quite far away from it -- but finally he noted a shimmering about the wizarding structures, and then it all seemed to fall away: all that was left were some odd, skeletal bits sticking out of the sea, and one lonely island of platforming at the far end, totally separated from the mainland, inaccessible.

"Bloody fucking hell," he blurted out, and glared at two Muggle blokes who passed and ogled at his words. (Poofters, he could tell -- the one had his hand on the other's arse, a shamefully public display. There seemed a lot of them in Brighton....)

"Exactly. Incredible, isn't it? It usually takes a great deal more structure to build onto or adapt," Hermione whispered, voice admiring. "They'd have had top-notch Transfigurationists and Arithmancers on *that* job, and it must have cost a packet...."

It certainly was incredible, and he could see now why she'd been panicked the night before: and he didn't fail to observe an note of wistfulness in Hermione's voice that she couldn't quite conceal. But she shook it off quickly, and they went on their way.

The afternoon involved much puttering about the Muggle town, including a tour of an execrable structure -- the Royal Pavilion, Hermione called it -- which convinced Snape that Muggle royalty could be every bit as eccentric and mad as wizards, though even in winter the gardens were lovely: and then they returned to Foybel Spires, where Hermione nipped upstairs to deposit the packages while Snape made a public floo-call to Hooch, to check on his students. (Basil's wife eavesdropped, the nosy wench, which suited Snape admirably.) His second call was to the Metropole to secure a dinner reservation, which was only possible as it was out of peak tourist season; and so they left Basil's ratty establishment and braved the winds once more to dine in some actual style and substance.

They only just made it back to Foybel Spires at 9:28.

"Missed dinner, I'm afraid," Basil said as they entered, and pointedly locked and warded the door behind them. "So terribly sorry...."

"Oh, we had a *lovely* one at the Metropole," Hermione said cheerfully. "My husband wagered there wasn't a decent restaurant to be had in Whitemarsh, but I told him he shouldn't be a pessimist just because of our *first* experience."
"I think you've quite put him off between that and the scorching," Snape said under his breath as they started up the stairs. "Not certain that was wise -- I'd have liked him to know we were otherwise engaged tonight, with no intent of nipping off through the window."

"I'm sure I haven't. It takes a great deal to put that kind off for good," Hermione said. "Besides, the bandage is off and the ear's only pink now. And he has another one to risk, anyway."

Snape took that as a good sign (perhaps she intended to actually help him do something about satisfying Basil's lascivious interest). He considered hinting that cooperation would be welcome, and then discarded it: she'd been in an unusually good mood most of the day (with a few bobbles), and he was far too tired to try to talk her into being creative, or to risk putting her in a foul mood now.

_Probably couldn't fake an orgasm to save her life at any rate_, he thought as he closed and locked their door, and tried to dampen the more predatory, immediate impulses of his libido as it was so soon after dinner.

That unfortunate, derogatory thought was, undoubtedly, why he was surprised to the point of losing his concentration when she began moaning in the midst of their encounter later that night.

"What's wrong?" he hissed in alarm, instantly stilling, and focussed on her face (she'd not attempted to douse the light, for once): her face was flushed and her brow furrowed, but she didn't particularly look as though she were in pain.

"Nuh- nothing," she gasped.

"Nonsense, you sound like I'm hurting you."

"No, you're not," she muttered in his ear, "keep going -- Ohhhhhhh....."

"Hermione," he said desperately (the little wizard wasn't appreciating the cessation of combat whether she was in pain or not, and was threatening a retreat), "you sound like a wounded hi-hippogriff."

"How would you know -- have you wounded many?" she countered in a whisper, and managed a glare at him through her fringe. "Basil's outside, I charmed an alarm ward while you were in the loo -- Oh, don't stop --"

Torn between the ignominy of little wizard deflation and a sudden spike in his arousal at that last, loud command -- and it was a command, and Snape was amazed not only that she was capable of it, but that it actually sounded sincere -- he thrust again, and shuddered when she tilted her pelvis upward and ground it against his in response.

_That_ was new, and totally unexpected; so was the way her thighs tightened about his legs, and then, after she wriggled an adjustment, about his hips; and, lastly, when -- moaning away each time he thrust -- she scrabbled at his arms for purchase, and began thrusting upward to meet him (or to oppose him -- he wasn't sure which, or when it had become a contest between the two of them, and
he bloody well didn't care. He managed to draw it out for a respectable though not outstanding length of time despite the distraction of her moans and the pain of trying to hold back, but finally and irretrievably lost control when she wailed, "Oh, God, Severus -- Ohhhhh --"

He thrust forcefully twice more, and came so unexpectedly and with such relief that he collapsed atop her, stunned motionless.

*****

"Are you still alive?" Hermione asked and poked at his shoulder, provoking a shiver from him. (He was still sweating quite a bit, the covers had slipped all the way to the foot of the bed, and he'd subsequently begun to notice the chill in the room again.) "Sorry, but I can't quite breathe."

Alive, but you've given me cerebral haemorrhage....

" 'M Fine," he muttered, rolled ungracefully off her body, and couldn't muster the energy to pull the covers up for decency's sake.

Hermione propped herself up on one elbow (he'd a lovely, seldom-seen display of her breasts if he could only be bothered to appreciate them, and he couldn't at the moment), peered over his shoulder, and smiled.

"Alibi guaranteed," she confided in a whisper as she settled back down on her pillow.

"How --?"

"You left the key in the lock, and he's poked it out to try and get a view as well."

Oh, for fuck's sake.... How desperate can the poor bugger be?

"Good on him," was all Snape could manage verbally. "Hope he enjoyed it."

"I imagine so," Hermione retorted, and stifled a yawn. "Good Lord, you didn't even let me brush my teeth...."

She slipped from the bed -- a little unsteady on her feet, true, but far more steadily than Snape imagined he'd be at the moment -- and he thought it a great pity that he couldn't appreciate the view of the back, either, as she unselfconsciously walked naked into the bath and quietly closed the door.

Merlin's balls, what the fuck was that?

It was the best bloody fuck Snape had had in his life is what it was, he was sure. And the fact that Hermione had been faking it was quite off-putting....

On the other hand, it could be a back-handed compliment, in a way. She's never bothered to be duplicitous with me in bed.... There's been truth in this, at least.

It was a depressing truth, though.
Snape's sexual partners had not been the vocal type, nor was he himself. One's time was limited by one's resources, it had been all too often rushed, and vocal gymnastics weren't required as it was a simple transaction (physical gymnastics were another matter, on occasion). He'd always been uncomfortable with noise at any rate, particularly when it was obviously insincere, and had once slapped a whore quite sharply when she'd assumed he'd appreciate the blatant lies she was whispering.

He had occasionally moved Hermione to unwilling, stifled moans; he could now tell from the hitches in her breathing when she was fighting a genuine arousal, and had got used to that and to deciding on the spur of the moment whether to pursue it and push her over the edge, or whether to sod it and satisfy himself alone. He hadn't realised, though, that she was capable of sounding like *that* -- even when acting, and with such ridiculous words -- and he was alarmed that it had aroused him so.... That it had made him lose control enough to make some rather disgraceful, appalling noises himself, at the very last.

He wondered if he could make her sound like that again -- truthfully, next time -- and nearly despised himself for the thought. That wasn't what their arrangement was about: it wasn't what they'd agreed to. And while he was intrigued with the challenge it presented, he was wary of the origin of the impulse.

_Ego, perhaps?_ he thought as he drew the covers up, shivering. *You've proven you can make her feel something whether she wants to or not, though. Why this sudden caviling over sincerity? Over a stupid demonstration of abandon?*

..._Is it because you want to be certain of what she's feeling, or because you actually liked how it made you feel? To have her wrapped about you, of her own choice, sincerely or not?_

The bath door opened, and he snapped his eyes closed so he shouldn't see Hermione cross the room toward him.

"Cripes, it's bloody cold. Light on or out?" she asked: he heard her cross to the door, then back to her side of the bed, and the faint *chink* of metal on wood. "I've taken up the key, don't worry, but d'you think he'll want to snoop later?"

"Sod him," Snape muttered. "He's seen enough, light out."

She doused the light, clambered into bed, and gently pulled her share of the covers from his grasp. "You'd think for what they charge they could be bothered to actually heat the room."

He didn't answer her, or respond to her "Good night, Severus," and within a few minutes she was asleep, curled up on her side, facing him.

Snape was left awake, acutely aware of her by smell, if not sight: the mint of her tooth-paste, her own scent still faintly overlaid with that of his sweat (she hadn't bathed this time as she often did afterward -- probably too cold, so she must have settled for a quick wash-up), and, consequently, she still smelled of sex, something that disgusted him in whores, but which he didn't seem to mind.
of Hermione at all. The bed smelled of it as well, and that also was odd behavior from her: it wasn't unusual for her to mutter a quick charm to cleanse the worst of it from the sheets before sleeping.

Leaving the evidence intact for the chambermaid's benefit? Or is this some... shift in her attitude?

And why do I bloody care?

He wasn't happy with this particular development at all, this internal debate over her motives, when all he usually bothered with was a quick and self-satisfied survey of the encounter before he dropped off. It wasn't Hermione's fault, certainly: he'd insisted on more than one occasion that she learn to dissemble more easily, and she'd just proved to him that she could, in spades.

Unless she just... gave in for the occasion, and it wasn't acting at all. Amazing, that just a few weeks ago she bristled at the thought of merely snogging for the benefit of any observer....

He rather wished, now, she'd behave this way for him as a matter of course. Accept his touch willingly, open herself to him without demur, allow her body to respond to him without such a bloody fuss every time; to touch him as well, and encourage him, as she'd unintentionally done tonight, with hands and voice....

Bloody hell.

No, the fault was, apparently, with him. In his estimation there was a very strict demarcation between deciding what you wanted and doing your damndest to make it so, and dithering about wishing for it. Dithering and wishing were weak; they were un-Slytherin and unmanly. They put you at the mercy of the person who could grant you what you wanted -- the Dumbledores and Fudges of the world (as he'd learned to his cost and humiliation) and the Hermione Grangers. The Hermione Granger, as there was, thankfully, only one.

Snape was terribly afraid that he might be crossing that line, if he hadn't already. Lust was natural and understandable, a normal function of the male body and psyche: it could be controlled and harnassed through willpower, or allowed free rein as one chose. But to wish for something one knew was bloody well unobtainable -- to desire.... Well, one was back to wishing again, wasn't one? And that gave the grantor all too much power, whether they knew it or not....

He might well have lain awake all night, had the day's walking and the glorious-deplorable sex not totally exhausted him.

*****

Whitemarsh
Sunday, January 22nd

Hermione seemed oblivious to his discontent next morning. It occurred to Snape that there was a great deal she'd been unaware of (or deliberately ignoring) all week-end: they'd had fewer verbal spars than usual, excepting at the very start and the outburst at the Muggle restaurant, and he had a sneaking suspicion that it might have something to do with her responsiveness in bed as well.
He bloody well wasn't going to ask her about it, though, and as asking her was presently the only way of determining for certain (short of Legilimency), he set it down to his normal, overly-cautious speculations into others' motives.

Basil smirked when he took their breakfast-order: Snape was tempted to transfigure the bloody sneak's moustache into an actual catepillar, and to make it stick longer than six hours. Hermione, on the other hand, ignored the unpleasantness, and nattered on about the histories of Whitemarsh and Brighton, consulting a tatty little guide-book she'd picked up somewhere the day before.

"It's not bloody *Hogwarts, A History,*" Snape muttered at last to shut her up: he couldn't quite stand listening to her and trying to ingest his terribly runny egg-cup at the same time. "You aren't to be marked on knowing it all."

"Of course not. It's just.... Well, it was a nice surprise, going someplace new, and it *does* have an interesting history," she said as she laid the pamphlet aside. "I apologise for being a nasty little cow about it at first. It was a very handsome gesture on your part, even if you felt it was a necessary one."

Snape looked up from his egg, astonished by the apology, as she serenely tucked into her grilled tomato.

She'd slept well again. The enforced inactivity and freedom from her concerns at the Ministry did wonders for her: gone were the dark half-moons under her eyes, and Snape had determined that her chipper behavior first thing in the morning was *not* a put-on, not when she'd had a good sleep. And even though she'd not a bit of cosmetics or scent on -- for he'd neglected to pack any of those feminine fripperies, sneering at the thought of picking through all those idiotic toiletries on her dressing-table -- she looked bloody wonderful, her nose and cheeks a bit wind-pinked. (Very much as she had last night, in fact, flushed in the midst of sex.) A top specimen of witchly health, in short: bright-eyed, intelligent, delicate English complexion blooming, attractive though not stunning, glowing with natural health and youthful vitality, and... potentially quite fertile. What every right-thinking wizard intent on procreating could wish for in a wife, pureblood or no. What every right-thinking wizard could get quite a good bit of procreation out of, in fact, and in the process of which he could anticipate *more* than a bit of pleasure, given the right inducements -- unstressful surroundings, a more congenial relationship, perhaps a bit more dedication to encouraging a certain wantonness that would benefit them both....

Snape felt, at the moment, every second of the twenty-one year gap in their ages, and for once admitted to himself that he didn't feel up to such a challenge, even if he wanted it.

He most certainly didn't want it, did he?

"What's on the schedule today, then?" Hermione asked, and resorted to the decidedly second-class sausages on her plate.

"Stay in Whitemarsh, I should think," Snape said. "Must check out in a few hours, anyway. A bit more walking about will probably do."
"That's fine with me," she said, and finished her breakfast with a final, appreciative swipe with her toast at the juice left on her plate.

"You are, ummm.... That is, you had taken your potion this week before I abducted you, hadn't you?" Snape asked in an undertone.

"Yes, Friday morning. Why?"

"Nothing, I just.... It occurred to me that perhaps you'd put it off until evening, not expecting me to be at the Ministry," he said, relieved.

_Bloody hell, that was careless of me. Should have thought of that._

Whether he wanted it or not, Severus Snape had no intention of impregnating Hermione by accident. For good or ill, and no matter the consequences, it would be -- if it happened -- a deliberate decision.

*****

For all the flash of Muggle Brighton, Whitemarsh was decidedly quiet, having stayed far closer to the spa model than amusement-park. Like the Muggle town, many of the shops and more ridiculous attractions were closed for the season: there simply wasn't much to do but browse among those shops still open, and to walk along West Pier.

Hermione fidgeted on and off, and Snape knew damned well she was worried about what was going on at the Ministry: while he appreciated that she'd managed to restrain herself from speaking of it, he was concerned.

"Put it out of your mind," he murmured, eyes fixed out to sea, which was proving just as soothing close-up as it had the other night, from the window of their room. "If you worry about it so, it will imprint on this week-end's memories and they'll see it right off."

"Do you think they'd --"

"Check your mind? If it's been mucked up royally, yes, almost certainly. If it's only suspicious, you might well pass with a good questioning, or Veritaserum at worst. Do you remember how it felt?"

"Yes," she said, and gripped the rail more tightly as a particularly strong wave hit the pier, shaking them ever so slightly. "Of course I do -- you administered it, after Dumbledore said --"

"And how do you avoid repercussions?"

"Never try to lie," she said quietly. "An oblique answer is far better than a yes or no, and a partial truth that can be misinterpreted is preferable. Don't try to qualify verbally, but you may do so in your mind once they've gone on to another question."

"Full marks. But then I expected no less, from you."
"Why didn't you try it, that night?" she asked him suddenly. "When I proposed. You couldn't know for certain that I wasn't an Occlumens."

"Because certainty is a fine thing in life-and-death matters, but it takes quiet a bit of the challenge and... entertainment value away from an enterprise, if not."

"And I was entertaining?"

"The proposal was. Seeing how far you'd go with the whole silly plot most certainly was."

"And you were just offended enough to hope I'd go through with it all, weren't you?"

"More that just enough," he admitted.

"Yes, well, I've said I'm sorry for bits, but never for that, I don't think," she said steadily, "and I am. Not this, not the way it's worked out, but for getting you chained to me in the first place, even though I'm grateful for your help."

"Hermione, what is this about?" he asked, suspicious.

"What?"

"The sudden... affability, the apologies -- this is two in one day, which is a record for you so far --"

"You're right, that's all. I hadn't quite got the measure of how dangerous this all is until very recently, and I should hate for it to go south before I've had time to... to settle the reckoning, no matter that it's very inadequate repayment. I shouldn't worry, I'm sure I'll put my foot in it many times before it's over," she added, and smiled wryly. "Many more opportunities for apologies, most of which I'll ignore." She shivered in the next gust of wind, and then said, "Do you feel up to walking some more? I've got quite chilled...."

Snape wanted very badly to press her on the issue: he felt certain there was more behind it, but he was damned if he could pin it down. It was possible that she was simply coming around -- that she was beginning to realise just how mucked-up everything was, and to take it seriously....

He sincerely hoped so, because the longer it dragged on, the more danger they were in.

"Given the stakes," he murmured as he took her arm, "it isn't entirely... objectionable, in the end. But for Merlin's sake, Hermione, never forget that the decisions you've made in the past affect the people you associate with in future, whether you're aware of it or not."

She nodded soberly, and they left West Pier for the last time, passing the occasional out-of-season tourist or native; they toyed with the idea of a tour of the squid hatchery for the sake of acquiring the ticket-stubs, but Hermione backed out at the tour guide's cheerfully oblivious offer of calamari at tours' end. (That brought up the subject of lunch: but as they were both bored witless, it seemed best to leave Whitemarsh a bit early and head straight for Hogwarts, where they were assured of
something palatable. If the Ministry business hadn't been finished by then -- and it should have been -- it was too bloody late to worry over it.)

There wasn't much to do in the end but to return to Foybel Spires, pack, and Apparate to Hogwarts.

*****

"My word," McGonagall said, eyebrows shooting upward, "where did you go? You're both quite pink in the face."

"Whitemarsh," Hermione volunteered as she slipped into the visitor's chair at the High Table. "And Brighton -- Severus actually let me drag him about, and we got loads of sun, considering."

"Oooooo -- is the Muggle concert hall still there?" Sprout interrupted, eyes shining. "I had a beau who loved to go there...."

"Gone, I'm afraid," Hermione said gently, quite surprising Snape: he'd got the impression Hermione was ready to take Sprout's head off after the last two times they'd had to dine with her. "All that's gone. There's a wizard hotel there now, but nothing as spectacular as the pictures I've seen."

Sprout wilted, and brightened again with a "But you enjoyed yourselves?"

"Yes," Snape murmured. "Very relaxing."

It was a far more relaxing week-end than Hooch had had, apparently: she entered from the Anteroom looking fit to be tied, and glared at Snape as she took her chair.

"Hope you're happy," she growled. "Two hexings, one bout of hysterics, and Caldwell is, apparently, an Animagus. Congratulations, and good luck."

"How did you determine that?" Snape asked, secretly quite pleased that she'd had a bad time of it: it served her right, the sly boots, for putting him on to that agency.

"Because he's a bloody garter-snake, and he managed to slip past the wards and into the girls' dorm. Into Cecily Bingham's bed, actually. She was the fit of hysterics."

"Good gods," McGonagall said. "When did you find this out, and how?"

"This morning. Shrieks from the girls, something slithers down the stair past me as I run up, Bingham babbles about a snake, and that she'd broke her hair-brush trying to give it a good cosh.... No snake in evidence, and Caldwell unable to satisfactorily explain why he looks as though he's been bashed about the head with a bludger-bat, the lousy little liar. He's in the Infirmary. She got a few good licks in, and I think she's fractured his arm in a few places, if not actually broken it."

Snape groaned -- Caldwell, in addition to more worrisome problems, was the best Keeper Slytherin had had for several years: McGonagall was uncharitable enough to snigger, and Hermione was doing her best not to. (Her best wasn't very good, unfortunately.)
"What?" he hissed.

"Oh, just --" (chortle) "the House mascot, more or --" (snigger) "less, being coshed over the head with a hair-brush...."

There were few things in life more irritating than a tableful of women sharing a joke at one's expense, especially when it also involved one's House and gender.

"Come now, Severus," McGonagall finally managed. "It is funny."

"I'm sure it is to you," he muttered.

"He'll be ready for the next match, I'm sure."

The biddies collectively decided Snape had had enough, and everyone changed topic.

"Come and see me after you visit Caldwell," McGonagall said in an undertone. "Some, erm, school business came up while you were away."

_GOOD, he thought. It's over and done with. Now to avoid any repercussions.... And to deal with bloody Caldwell._

*****

Snape made straight for the Infirmary after luncheon.

"Severus, I admit that it isn't _that_ funny, but you needn't be so grim," Hermione protested, trotting along beside him. "And it's only a few fractures, he shan't miss any matches."

"Oh yes, he _will_," Snape corrected her, and didn't bother to hide a scowl. "I've got to suspend the little bastard myself."

"What on earth _for?"

Snape stopped dead in the middle of the corridor, Hermione collided with him, and he had to grab for her arm to steady her: and then he drew her over to one of the windows overlooking the Quad, and explained.

"He's one of the problem boys," he said quietly. "I know it seems a minor incident on the surface, but he... terrorises the girls, and I can't abide that. It's not always overtly sexual, but he's been warned, and he must have done it to take advantage of my absence. Hooch is right and he's a lousy little liar, and I shall have to be forceful -- it won't be in the least amusing, so you might as well go to my quarters and wait for me."

"If that's what you want, of course I shall," she said, taken aback. "Not that I expected it to be amusing, but if you're more comfortable without me there...."

He very nearly sent her on her way, and then thought about it again.
"On the other hand," he said slowly, "an audience might be useful...."

*****

Caldwell's face paled when Snape entered the Infirmary -- and went even paler when he saw Hermione, except for the bruises about his eyes and temples; and Snape, who was determined to cut through any idiocy the boy might attempt, left Hermione at the door, strode directly to the boy's bed, and straddled the chair next to it.

"Yes, Caldwell. I'm back a bit early," he said, voice low. "While in other circumstances I'd require a full accounting of you I find I don't have the patience today, as you've ruined what was an otherwise quite pleasant week-end with my wife."

Caldwell's eyes darted over to Hermione, and then back to Snape.

"Sir, I --"

"I warned you last term," Snape said, staring the idiot down, "that I wouldn't tolerate any further misbehavior involving the girls -- particularly the girls -- and I have to assume you didn't take me seriously."

"Sir, does that Gr- Does she have to stand there and --"

"Shut -- up. 'She,' and I take it you intended to say 'that Gryffindor,' is my wife, and I may require her expertise in a moment. Now, I doubt that Madam Hooch's eyesight is so bad -- some of her calls on the Pitch notwithstanding -- that she wouldn't see a snake take off down the stair past her, or that she's so dense that she can't put two and two together. You were out of bounds, badly," Snape continued, leaning over the back of the chair. "You chose a very... ill-considered method and place to pull your little prank, ones which verge on the suggestive and lewd. You're old and intelligent enough that I shouldn't have to spell out the specifics for you, so I must assume that you did it deliberately and with malice, and specifically to be suggestive and lewd."

"But I'm not an Animagus, and nobody can prove otherwise," Caldwell said, all innocence.

_Hah -- this should be fun._

"Is that true, Hermione?" Snape asked her, tone light, his eyes never leaving Caldwell's face. "I assume you know the procedures, as a Ministry employee."

"I'm afraid it's _not_ true. A suspected but unregistered Animagus may be placed under arrest and forced into their Animagus form, either by Imperio or, if they prove resistant to that, to Trial by Fire and Water."

Caldwell paled again.

"I hear the Trial is quite barbaric," Hermione continued dispassionately, "but very effective, once the subject has been restrained from casting any mitigating charms."
"So, Caldwell," Snape said, "I think we should take it on trust that you are a bloody Animagus, since you won't admit it and as I don't fancy seeing any of my students undergo that unless you make it necessary. You shan't, shall you?"

Caldwell shook his head.

"Very well. Once the arm has healed we will be visiting the Ministry, where you will be registered. Furthermore, you are suspended from any extra-curricular activities -- including Quidditch -- for the remainder of Term. And if there are any further incidents of any kind, I shall have you sent down after I've done with you. Understood?"

Caldwell reddened and looked likely to spit nails -- at both of them -- but he nodded dumbly, and stared out of the window.

"Don't test my patience again, Caldwell," Snape said, and added even more softly, so Hermione shouldn't hear, "I warned you that I would make you pay if harm came to any of the girls.... You've come very close, today, and as far as I'm concerned your luck's run out. There won't be a third chance, not matter how harmless or stupid the incident."

*****

"What on earth did you threaten him with?" Hermione asked when they'd left the Infirmary.

"What makes you think I did?"

"The look on his face when you turned to leave," she said matter-of-factly. "You terrified him."

"Oh, good -- he remembered what I said last time. Pity he didn't before he pulled today's little stunt."

"Severus, you wouldn't actually harm a student, would you... ?"

"After he's sent down, he's no longer officially my student, is he? Trial by Fire and Water was a nice touch, by the by," Snape added to change the subject.

"It wasn't a touch, it's what they really do."

"Really? How... old-fashioned of them. Look, I must see McGonagall on school business," he said. "I should only be a half-hour or so."

"I'll just fetch my things and Appa--"

"No, I want you to --"

"-- to stay put until tomorrow morning," Hermione finished for him wryly. "Fine. I'll just go pillage your book-shelves again, shall I?"

"That will do," he said approvingly, and left her at the entrance to the Dungeons.
McGonagall got straight to the point as soon as he'd stepped into her office, occasionally glancing upward at him as she continued to scribble on a parchment.

"They got something yesterday, it looks interesting, and they shall have it to you later this week," she said. "It didn't go off without a hitch, though...."

Snape swore under his breath, but for once McGonagall didn't chide him for it.

Bloody Tonks probably tripped something. Or tripped over something.... Fuck. I'd best move on the Mangel and Mortars angle, before the Fudge or Corcoran start putting things together.

"Don't tell me what happened, not yet -- I don't want Hermione prising anything out of me."

"Very well. Not that I know, as I didn't want to know either. Good thing you took Hermione away," McGonagall added. "She looks far happier than she did when last I saw her, but I think she should anticipate some trouble tomorrow."

"We have plenty of alibi," Snape assured her. "She wasn't exaggerating about dragging me about."

"Severus, you've gone soft in your old age -- allowing a slip of a young witch to run you ragged?"

He sneered at her for the jibe, knowing that was precisely the response she expected of him. (Unfortunately, however, he'd begun to think exactly the same thing, and he was entirely serious about it.)

"Go on," McGonagall said, waving him off. "I'll quite understand if you're not at table tonight."

Snape turned to leave, and then thought to tell her, "Caldwell is sorted, for the time being."

McGonagall peered at him, surprised, and said, "Of course he is. You always handle those things admirably in your own House, Severus. I've never thought otherwise." She returned to her writing, and Snape quietly closed the door as he left.

Caldwell doesn't quite believe me, though, Snape thought as he rose the stair down. Pity I can't show him what I did to Malfoy....

Draco Malfoy had paid in the end for what he'd done to Hermione in Autumn Term of seventh year: Snape's only regrets were that he'd been obliged to wait until that last, nasty battle to actually do it, and that Draco hadn't survived the rest of the muck, so he should have had to live the rest of his life with the consequences. It would have killed Lucius Malfoy -- had he not already been dead a year -- to know that Snape had quite effectively and without remorse put an end to the legitimate Malfoy line by making his son an eunuch.

Snape was tempted to tell Hermione that hitherto he'd only had to threaten his students with it: but he rather doubted she'd appreciate the gesture.
The Hog's Head

The barkeep was surly as ever, but nodded to Snape when he entered and poured him an Ogden's straightaway.

"Haven't seen you about," the man muttered. "The new wife keeping you busy?"

"How did you hear?" Snape demanded.

"Never you mind. Business, I take it?"

"Yes," Snape said, and lowered his voice. "Is your floo still untraceable?"

"Yeah. They find the connection every once in a while, and I bugger it up again," the old codger said. "Fixed it again just yesterday, so they can't have cottoned on yet. Travel, or a call?"

"Just a call."

"Finish your drink, then, and go out and nip up the back stairs," the man said, and slipped a key across the bar, under a filthy napkin. "I'm sure the hag in the corner's a watcher for them, but I'll keep her busy."

Snape spent an interminable twenty minutes sipping at his Ogden's, alternately staring at the moth-eaten goat's head on the wall and fending off the attentions of the bar slut; and then he checked the clock in the corner, made a bit of a show of resignation, left the pub, and detoured through several streets before doubling back and entering the upper floor through the back stairs.

"Ambrose Forsythe," he directed the floo once he was certain he was alone; and after a few moments the connection cleared, he stuck his head into the fire, and found himself nose-to-nose with Forsythe, an unhealthy-looking specimen in a shabby bed-sit, clutching a fly-specked glass of inferior whisky, who went pale when he realised who his caller was.

"S- Snape," he stuttered. "Haven't s- seen you for t- ten years --"


Forsythe went even paler, and he snarled, "He cut me out, damn you, five years ago. You must have heard...."

"No, I hadn't. I did warn you that the potion would only work so long, and there were limits to what you could induce him to do. I don't suppose you admitted it to him, did you? I imagine he'd do you a serious injury if he heard what you'd done to him -- Jarvey always was a vicious sort."

"What do you bloody want? If it's m- money, you're out of luck."
"Don't be stupid, Forsythe. The question is, what have you done for money?"

"Don't know what you mean," Forsythe grumbled, and took a swig of his whisky.

"I happen to know," Snape said, quite thoughtfully, "that within the last six months or so, someone leaked very sensitive documents -- documents to which I suspect you, as a high-level secretary at Mangel and Mortars, might have access -- to an executive in that firm."

Forsythe choked on his whisky.

"Now, on the face of it, that seems a very stupid act," Snape continued. "If the documents were that spectacular, why not try to sell them to the *Prophet* or *Quibbler*? Why not go straight to the Ministry and collect a handsome reward? But no, this individual, who shall remain nameless -- for the time being -- approached an executive in the company, presented these documents, and sat back to wait for the Galleons to roll in. Except they didn't."

"Don't know what you're implying," Forsythe managed through his choking. "That is stupid. They'd've offed the bloke. Chucked him in the Big A, at the least."

"Not necessarily," Snape said, rolling his eyes at 'the Big A.' "Not this particular executive, who was known as a fine, upstanding person with great loyalty to the firm. I have two hypotheses on this, and perhaps you can tell me which is the more likely....

"First, the executive would protect the firm's interests by paying off the provider of the documents, lest they find their way out into the world, and given the executive's character it is quite unlikely that the provider... shall we call him 'the blackmailer?' ...would be harmed. Nice, tidy, all kept in-house, and the blackmailer would probably not be asked to leave the firm, as he would be more dangerous when loose. He might even get a promotion out of it, as well as an exorbitant rise."

"Or, second, the executive -- who, again, was a fine, upstanding person -- might choose to go to the media himself, as a credible authority on the issue. He might even go to the Ministry. And in the end, the provider -- let's not call him 'blackmailer' now, shall we? it's such an ugly term -- would receive accolades and a sizable reward, for helping expose such a terrible act as might be outlined in those documents."

Snape allowed himself to smile -- really smile, something he seldom did, but which he knew had a terrific intimidation effect upon certain persons -- and asked, "So, Forsythe, which do you think more likely? Hypothetically speaking, of course?"

"No idea," Forsythe whimpered.

"Oh, I think you do, Ambrose. I know you have a very, very good idea."

"You don't know anything, you fucking arsehole," Forsythe snarled with a sudden show of spirit. "Why're you fishing about? I told you I don't have any money -- can't you see that?"
"I don't want money, you stupid sod, I want information.... All right, I'll tell you what I know, Forsythe. The executive is dead. The blackmailer -- let's call a spade a spade -- is frightened, because he doesn't know if the executive was killed for trying to release the documents. I know he can't find the documents he gave to the executive, and the reason he can't is that the executive hid them, along with very specific notes as to how he acquired them and from whom," Snape said, the last bit -- the lie -- rolling smoothly off his tongue.

Forsythe finally gave up any pretense at facing Snape down, and started sobbing: Snape let him wear himself out, waiting until he was merely snivelling, and then asked, "Where are the documents kept, Forsythe?"

"I don't know," Forsythe wailed. "I can't bloody find them --"

"I don't mean the copies, you idiot, I mean the originals. Where are they kept?"

"In the -- in the vault, in the cellars," Forsythe said. "The third-level cellars, where they keep the proprietary potions receipts. Top-secret stuff."

"Any chance that they've been moved, or that they'll be moved in future?"

"I don't know that. Or leastways, I know they were still there as of last week. The white coats have to go down there to consult the receipt."

"So they're working on it now?"

"Yes. Masses of it. We've had lots of deliveries from the Ministry, the last two weeks. I've been checking the log-books to see who enters the facility."

_Bad, very bad_, Snape thought, immensely worried. _Either the shit has a long shelf-life, or they're preparing to implement it soon._

"Zat all?" Forsythe asked, shivering.

"Not quite. You might be useful, Forsythe...."

"Ohhhh, no," the man jabbered. "No, I'm not mucking about with this any more, Snape. They killed him, I know it, and I'm not putting my neck out again."

"You don't have much choice, really. Here are my terms -- let's see which you like best. When all this hits the news -- and it will, Forsythe, it's already set to, any day now -- one of two versions will be presented to the authorities. In Version One, my first hypothesis, the blackmailer is exactly that, and he is indirectly responsible for the executive's death, and he pays the penalty for that."

Forsythe sneered at Version One, but looked suitably cowed.

"In Version Two he is a concerned but ultimately powerless individual who goes to the one person he can trust, who he knows can do the right thing, and he is understandably frightened when his
ally is... removed from action. However, when other concerned individuals contact him, he does the right thing and tells them exactly where the incriminating documents can be found. Furthermore, he alerts them in the interim -- carefully -- if he sees or hears any suspicious activity, whether it involves moving or destroying the documents, or whether it involves harm against them. Laudable actions in the end, if a bit craven in the middle bit."

Forsythe's shoulders sagged, and he nodded. "How?" he whispered. "How d'I get hold of you?"

"Send something to your old school chum Steven care of the Hog's Head, Hogsmeade -- something innocuous, a product sample or something. 'Steven' will contact you."

"All right."

"I should be ill for a few days if I were you, Forsythe," Snape advised. "Things might be a bit hot for the next day or two, as there was some activity recently. Acquire yourself a nasty case of elf-flu, and make sure you don't hang about this disgusting room, it's the first place they'll look. It should be safe to go back in a few days, provided you've a healer's excuse."

"All right, Snape," Forsythe said, sweat beading his brow, and he took another swig of whisky.

"And don't even think," Snape said deliberately, "of grassing on me. I don't have the documents, I don't know where they are now although they're in safe hands, and if you go to them they'll kill me first and you second -- unless, of course, they decide to kill you first. I imagine those brewing vats can reduce a body to bone in a matter of days."

Forsythe was still blubbering when Snape withdrew his head from the floo.

*Cowards make rotten blackmailers,* he thought as he made his cautious way down the back stair, *but what wonderful sources of information....*

He managed to restrain further gloating until he was safely on the verge of the Forest: then he collapsed against a tree-trunk and pounded at it with one fist out of pure exuberance.

*That is something worthwhile. Something useful. That's not sitting on one's arse pissing away time with bloody journals, mucking about on holiday, and watching little girls run about doing the real work....*

...*all right, not fair. She's not. She's not a little girl, and the larger burden has fallen on her. But by Merlin's hairy arse, it feels good to actually do something. Something no-one else could have done.*

He'd forgot how satisfying that could be: to accomplish something, acquire some bit of vital information, that no one else had the stones or wherewithal to get. Even Flaherty's potions puzzle (so to speak) had come to him through Hermione, but *this* was something all his own.

*Yes, and you can't bloody well tell her about it yet. Probably shouldn't ever, considering, at least not until you're both out of the bloody country. Assuming we make it. Assuming she doesn't bollocks up tomorrow....*
Bloody hell, I've left her alone for nearly two hours, and I'd said I'd only be an hour... or was it a half?

**Damnation. Chances are she's got her knickers in a twist and buggered off.**

****

She hadn't buggered off, as it happened: she was curled up in a ball on the settee, sleeping soundly, when Snape entered silently by the office door. She'd accidentally creased one page of *Philtres and Potions for Philandering Past-times* (odd choice on her part, that) when it had fallen from her hand, but Snape was too grateful that she was still at Hogwarts to care much.

"Hermione," he said, and shook her shoulder: her eyes shot open, and she seemed confused for a split second.

"What? Why is it dark?"

"Because it *is*. I was detained, I'm afraid, and we've missed dinner. Shall I ask the Elves to bring something?"

"Better," she said, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "I don't suppose you'll give me time tomorrow for a full breakfast."

*No, I certainly don't intend to....*

****

Thank the gods there wasn't much left in the evening, because they'd apparently exhausted their stock of small-talk well before their late dinner arrived. (Or to be more precise, Hermione had exhausted hers. Snape had none to begin with.)

She did, however, bring up the one subject he wanted to avoid.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked. "Have they got --"

"Don't ask that, Hermione."

"But I --"

"Hermione --"

"Look, what am I walking into tomorrow?" she said, indignant. "Do I need to worry, or not?"

Snape tossed his fork onto his plate and buried his face in his hands.

"It's done," he said carefully. "It's likely it's been discovered, or will be by the time you're there tomorrow. I *really* don't want to tell you more than that, Hermione -- I don't know anything else, at any rate. And I'd feel a damned sight better if you'd leave some things here in my Pensieve."
"Absolutely not," she said. "What if --"

"Hermione, I can't Obliviate you of the conversations we had. Even if I were skilled enough to be that selective, they'd find the holes. If bloody... ...if the agent mucked it up badly enough, they'll certainly call in a Legilimens."

"I fooled one of the best living before," she said matter-of-factly. "Why shouldn't it work with them?"

Oh, bloody hell.

Well, that was that. He'd definitely have to give her something to think about before she left in the morning....

...but not until morning. Between the stupid mucking about on holiday and the excitement of dealing with Caldwell and Forsythe, Snape was ready for nothing but sleep.

And to think that a few months ago I was complaining of boredom, he thought muzzily as he dropped off.

*****

Snape's bedchamber

Monday, January 23rd

He got the "something to think about," begun in an interesting fashion, by carefully unbuttoning the front of Hermione's night-gown and nuzzling at her breasts; a sound sleeper under most circumstances, she didn't wake for an amazingly long time.

When she did, he already had his hand well into her knickers.

"What.... Bloody hell, Severus, what do you think you're --"

"Enjoying myself," he mumbled around the contents of his mouth, smacked at her knee when she reflexively drew it up, and put his hand right back where it had been.

"But I'm going to be -- eep! -- be late again," she complained, squealing when his hand found her sex.

He didn't bloody care how late she was today, actually. Besides his ulterior motive this morning, he'd suspected Hermione was actually quite responsive to him, physically speaking, if only her brain were disengaged from thinking about what he was doing: and that sneaky foray into her knickers was proving him right -- for she was already moist, a state he normally had to work quite hard to get her to.

Damn. And I haven't time to do things thoroughly this morning....
"You're going to get me -- uh, get me sacked for tardiness, I hope you --"

His fingers twitched.

"Ah, I hope you realise that, and then -- oh -- stop it, Severus! -- and then where will we be? I don't mind you enjoying yourself at a sensible hour --"

More finger-twitching, and another jerk of her knee -- deliberate, this time, to try to trap his hand, which he fixed by nipping at a very sensitive bit.

"-- OW! -- Damn it, Severus! -- but seven-something in the morning --"

"Shix orty-ive," he mumbled to correct her, and set to something a bit more intense than mere finger-twitching.

"I don't bloody care, I have to be at work aaaa- at eight-thirty, you randy son of a -- a -- "

She never did finish the phrase; or if she did, it was so garbled that it made no difference.

He gave her just enough time to gather some wits about her (but not enough to catch her breath to lay into him) and raised his head, stared into her eyes, and softly commanded, "Remember this, Hermione. When they ask what we were doing, remember all that glorious noise you made Saturday night, remember the places we walked all week-end. Don't think of our discussions, whatever you do -- except the ones about how bloody awful the food was."

"Do you r- realise how bloody embarrassing that will be?" she demanded.

"Quite, I'm sure. And hopefully as much or more for them as for you," he said, and began re-buttoning her night-gown, one-handed.

"You're not the one who has to.... What are you doing?"

"Oh, quite right, you're only going to be getting dressed. Sorry."

"But aren't you...."

She only then seemed to notice that Snape was in trousers and shirt, and stared at him, indignant, when he rose from the bed, fetched his boots, and sat in the chair across the room to pull them on.

"It won't work, you know," she said. "Not if they use Veritaserum."

"Of course it will. What were we doing in Whitemarsh? A small holiday for the express purpose of fucking each other silly --"

"Severus!"
"-- so we can do our duty by the Wizarding World. Did we ever leave Whitemarsh by any means? No. Did we talk much? No, my husband isn't a talkative man.... You may elaborate on what he does care to do, if you like."

"Severus, be serious --"

"Did you talk about the Ministry? Yes, of course, it's your workplace, and you're so terribly upset by the way your horrid, incompetent -- etcetera, etcetera -- superior, Corcoran, treats you, but of course you wouldn't dream of discussing confidential information. Note, please, that 'wouldn't dream of it' is quite different, if you take it literally, to trying to deny that you have. Metaphors and idioms are your friends when under the influence of Veritaserum," he added as he rose, turned away from her, and reached for his waistcoat, "so use them."

Turning his back was not, perhaps, a good idea, for in the midst of buttoning-up, something walloped him squarely between the shoulder-blades: he staggered and nearly fell before he caught his balance, and twisted to find one of the bed-pillows lying on the floor.

The bed was missing one. It was also missing Hermione, but a flash of bare leg caught out of the corner of his eye, and the banging of the bath door, made it clear where she'd got to.

"I believe the Elves cleaned your skirt," he called through the door.

"Pissovandie," was all he could hear over the running of water into the tub.

_Curious. I wonder if she's more upset that I started something, or that I didn't properly finish it?_

It couldn't possibly be the advice she was upset with. Good, solid, sensible suggestions, every one of them. And he hoped she didn't need to use them.

If she did, then of course her interrogator -- possibly even Corcoran, who without doubt would insist on being present -- would certainly have the impression that Severus Snape was, indeed, a randy son of a bitch.

_Or, at best, Hermione Granger Snape's odd version of some overblown, over-rated... sex god._

Snape pulled a fresh neck-cloth out of the bureau, set to tying it, caught his own eyes in the mirror, and shrugged.

_I've been called worse. I'll just have to grin and bear it._

*****

Chapter 15: Wherein Hermione gets a surprise (or two, or three); one of every HG romance ficcer's dreams comes true, in a manner of speaking (*cough*); and things take a turn for the worse.
God-damned, manipulative, egostistical, randy... Severus --

Hermione was, indeed, late. As a matter of record she was exceptionally late, and the fact that she hadn't had time for more than a quick bath, had had to pass on shaving her legs rather than attempting it with Severus' cut-throat razor, was in last Friday's charm-cleaned clothes, and had no time to do anything whatsoever with her hair only made it worse.

So laddering her tights on the call-box door as she struggled in, arms full of the week-end's purchases, was the icing on the cake.

"Oh, bloody...." she wailed, and tugged the door shut.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. State your --"


There was a slightly longer pause than usual before the operator gave the standard, "Good morning, Hermione," and then added in a reproving tone, "You are precisely forty-eight minutes and nineteen seconds late this morning, Hermione," before the call-box began its descent.

"Thanks for stating the obvious," Hermione muttered.

"No need for nastiness, Hermione. Please be advised that the Atrium lifts are experiencing difficulty today due to Poltergeist infestation. Your correct Level may be reached by multiplying its number by six and applying the Second Arithmantic Rule, or you may remain on board until it opens at your Level at random."

Oh, bloody wonderful -- I'll be even later. The ruddy Ministry, and they can't manage to clear out a straightforward Poltergeist infestation.

Unless someone keeps deliberately infesting it, perhaps? Hmmmmm....

Hermione waited until the call-box had reached Atrium-level and the door had opened, and then said quite clearly, "I liked you far better before they charmed you a personality. And that's Madam Snape, to you," before she stepped out and hurried over to the interior lifts, wedging herself in between a very fat witch with a huge wen on her nose and an excessively ugly two-headed parrot on her shoulder, and a weedy-looking scribe with an armful of parchments and no less than three quills stuck behind one ear.

"Level Three," Hermione ordered the lift, and it closed and moved upward.

"Tarty little wench," someone murmured.
Hermione glared at the scribe.

"Hush, Merlin," the fat witch crooned, and chucked the parrot under its beaks. "It's not polite to call young ladies that, poppets. Even if they look it. Treatsies, babykinses?" She rummaged in her pockets and pulled out an owl treat for each head.

"Awwwwwwwk," Merlin -- both of them -- said, and gobbled up the treats, shedding crumbs all over the lift floor. "Tasty tarty little wench!" Merlin One said when he'd done, and Merlin Two chimed in with "Tarty wench! Tarty wench! Tasty-tarty! Awwwwwwwk!"

Even the scribe was offended on Hermione's behalf.

"You ought muzzle that -- those things, if they can't behave," Hermione said. "And rewarding them for bad behaviour is irresponsible."

"Muzzle Merlin? How dare you suggest.... Why, I've had him since he hatched," the witch said, face purpling, and added, "He's Mummy's little poopsie-woopsie babykinses," all indignation with Hermione melting away into syrupy baby-talk.

"Level Four -- Departments of Trrrrrraaaaaantransportation and Nasty Magical Beasties that eat tarty, naughty girls all up, Awwwwwwk!" screeched a disembodied voice; Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin, and the scribe muttered, "Poltergeist. Really nasty one, this." Fat Witch and the Merlins lumbered out when the doors opened, but not before the damned bird's two beady and salacious pairs of eyes raked over Hermione once more, and Merlin One hissed a final "Tassssssstty."

"I shouldn't be too narked," the scribe said once the doors had closed. "It'll get it comeuppance in a moment or two, given where they're headed."

"Where? I seldom go up above Three."

"Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Oh. It's illegal?"

"Right. Not even magical, technically. Just a freak, although the old bat's been claiming for years that it's some kind of Doomsday sign," the scribe volunteered.

"Level Six -- Bumbling Scribes and Underpaid Skivvies' Pool, off now!"

The scribe -- not headed for Six, apparently -- sighed, and waited until the doors closed before adding, "I drew up the orders last week, myself." He struggled to free one arm from his parchments, and drew his index finger across his neck with a descriptive, "Ecccccech."

"Pity they don't sell tickets," Hermione muttered. "I'd pay good money to see that."
"Level Three -- AHA! *Ha-ha-ha!* Departments of MagicalOopsies and Bureaucratic Horse-shite!"
the poltergeist cackled as the lift decided to stop at Level Three; Hermione murmured a "Good-
morning," to the scribe, stepped off, rushed down the corridor, turned the corner nearest her office -
- and plowed headlong into two persons who were blocking the way. One of them, the owner of a
pair of very large, coffee-brown hands, grabbed at her arms to keep her upright.

"Hermione Snape?"

She glanced up in the midst of juggling the packages before they all fell.

"You know it is, Shacklebolt. Good mor-- "

"Official, I'm afraid," the younger man -- clearly another Auror -- said quite priggishly. "Requires
an answer. Hermione Snape?"

*Oh... cripes.*

"Yes."

"You're to come with us," Shacklebolt said evenly, with no trace of friendliness or recognition. (He
could be so damned intimidating, even when one knew he was on your side....)

"Why... ? Look, just let me drop these things in my office --"

"Afraid not," the other man said. "And we'll need your wand before we go any further."

*That* was frightening. So too was the fact that Shacklebolt made no attempt to help her with the
packages, but stood and watched impassively while she struggled, set tote and handbag down,
located her wand, and handed it over to him.

"Right, then," the prig said as Shacklebolt pocketed her wand. "Let's go."

"What's happened?" she asked, scrambling for her things. "Am I sacked, and what the bloody hell
for?"

"Rather depends on what you have to tell *us*, I imagine," the prig said.

*Oh, bloody.... Stay calm. Focus on... oh, hell, don’t worry about what Severus said now, just....
Bewilderment is natural, to a point. You can get angry later.*

Shacklebolt and the prig, each with a hand at her elbows, marched her back to the lift; and
Shacklebolt informed it "Level Two." True to today's form, however, it went in the opposite
direction, toward Level Four.

"Level Four -- Departments of *Traaaaaanspor* --"

"Oh, shut up!" Shacklebolt barked.
They heard shrieking even before the lift opened.

"Merlin! Poopsie, darling, speak to Mummy!"

"Madam, you must cease this disturbance immediately...." 

Oh, good God....

The doors opened: the fat witch, tears streaming down her face, was clutching the now-obviously expired Merlin to her sagging breasts, its heads lolling drunkenly at distinctly unnatural angles, while an ancient wizard was attempting, with no success, to drag her toward the lift.

"This parrot is my baby! You can't expect him to behave like some ordinary creature, he's a portent -- "

"Bloody hell," Shacklebolt muttered, and bellowed, "Level Two, damn it."

" -- a warning of the fate that waits for us all, in the form of a living, breathing parrot --"

"That, madam," roared the wizard as the doors slid closed, "is an ex-"

The doors closed completely, and the lift started downward.

"I say, standards have dropped, haven't they?" the priggish auror said to Shacklebolt, totally ignoring Hermione. "Used to be exciting things, that department. Renegade hippogriffs, smuggled dragon eggs, fire-breathing Pekinese dogs.... Now all they muck about with is oddities."

"Request a transfer, why don't you," Shacklebolt muttered. "Straighten out their priorities." (Hermione got the impression that Shacklebolt didn't care for the prig.)

"Ought to," the prig said. "Better than mucking about with all this Internal Affairs nonsense."

"Level Two," the poltergeist announced, "Half-Arsed Magical Coppers and --"

"Don't even think about finishing that," Shacklebolt said flatly, and the poltergeist shut up as the doors slid open into a large room -- dingy, windowless, and poorly-lit; it was crowded with bunged-up desks and chairs, obviously rejects from other departments. (Hermione had never been down to Magical Law Enforcement before, but she wasn't surprised: it was typical that the Ministry would present MLE as glamorous, but treat its aurors shabbily.) The aurors scattered about the room glanced toward the lift, sized Hermione up as a hard character, and went on with their work (much of which seemed to involved eating pastries and doing paper-work at the same time). She didn't see anyone she recognised, and she wasn't certain whether that was good or bad.

Harry might have been here, had things.... Oh, sod it, Hermione. No time for regrets at present....
"This way," Shacklebolt muttered, turning to the left: the prig fell in behind Hermione, and they escorted her down a narrow corridor and into a plain, white-washed room with no furnishings other than a table and several uncomfortable-looking chairs.

"Shacklebolt, will you please tell me what's --"

"Sit down and stay quiet," the prig ordered as he swaggered in.

*Well, that's quite enough* --

"Unless I have been arrested and charged with whatever this is about, and sacked, which you haven't bothered to tell me," Hermione said, doing her best to skirt the fine line between indignation and arrogance, "I am still a Class 3-A Civil Employee, and you are not. Unless you want a complaint against your record for harassment, perhaps you'd best shelve the tough act -- it makes people think you're trying to *compensate* for something."

"Look here --" said the prig, scowling, as he stepped quite close to her. (It might have been effective, had Hermione not pegged it as one of Severus' intimidation tactics. The prig didn't perform it nearly as well as Severus, however.)

"Save it for Borgin or Burkes, Ferrars," Shacklebolt said. "She's only being questioned, not given the full treatment. Madam Snape, would you have a chair, please?" he added courteously to Hermione, and pulled one out for her -- one squarely in the middle of the table, she noted, and she assumed that there was an invisible viewing window in the wall opposite. "And if you'd forgive my junior.... Ferrars has difficulty remembering that not *all* the people we deal with are rotten."

"Thank you," Hermione said, laid down her packages on the floor near the chair, and sat. "It won't take long, will it? I'm already terribly late, and my Department Head will be very cross with me --"

"I shouldn't worry about that," Shacklebolt said briskly. "Mr Bretchgirdle will be in momentarily.... Ferrars, tea for the lady?"

Ferrars glowered at Shacklebolt and flounced from the room, all swagger thoroughly quashed.

Shacklebolt pulled out another chair from the far end of the table -- not quite pointedly, but with enough emphasis that Hermione knew he was trying to tell her that she *was* being observed -- sat, and pulled a small notebook and pencil from his pocket, and studied the pages, ignoring her. She did her best to stay quiet for a few minutes and managed not to fidget; after a bit she glanced at her watch, sighed, and reached for her handbag.

"I shouldn't," Shacklebolt said softly -- and then laughed under his breath when she pulled out a comb and hair-clip. "Rather rushed this morning," she apologised, and tried to work her hair into something other than a rat's nest.
"Married recently, did you?" Shacklebolt said rather more loudly, eyes still fixed to his notebook. "I remember seeing your file when you applied for your clearance. You weren't Snape then."

"October, to my old potions master if you'd believe it."

"That Snape," Shacklebolt said, as if there were more than one. "Very little time to adjust?"

"Yes, rotten timing, what with school in term," Hermione said, struggling to work the clip through a knot, and giving up on her fringe as a lost cause. "I'm looking forward to the summer hol and being in the same place for once."

Ferrars returned with a chipped cup and saucer, set it down in front of Hermione, retreated to a corner near the door, and glowered; Shacklebolt returned to his notebook, apparently unwilling to continue priming the observers with Ferrars in the room. With nothing else to do -- for she was damned if she'd try to slop on makeup with Ferrars staring at her -- she sipped at the tea, and grimaced: Ferrars had sugared it heavily, and the milk was off as well.

_Bastard knows it, too. Probably part of his "bad cop" routine._

After another ten minutes (she knew, for she'd been unable to resist checking her watch twice more), the door opened again and a cadaverous-faced wizard entered, crossed to the end of the table, and sat, laying a thick folder in front of him.

"Shacklebolt," he murmured a greeting, and Shacklebolt gravely nodded. "And this is... Hermione Granger, ICW Populations Consultant for Britain, is it not?" he added, not bothering to actually look at Hermione.

"Snape, actually," she corrected him.

Bretchgirdle's eyebrows twitched disapprovingly. "Not noted on your file."

"I've been married since October. I certainly put the change in by late November."

"Very well," Bretchgirdle said, and made a note on the outside of the folder.

"Mr... Bretchgirdle? Why in the world have I been --"

"All in good time, Madam Snape," he said repressively. "For the time being, I shall ask the questions, if you please. For example, Mr Corcoran expected you at eight-thirty this morning, yet you were extremely tardy. Is there a reasonable explanation for this?"

"I was running late this morning," she said, convinced Corcoran was in the observers' room, and had deliberately set Bretchgirdle to asking the question.

"Running late. You have been extremely punctual for most of your history with the Ministry, and yet on... three occasions in the last six weeks," he drawled, checking the top page in her file, "you've been late. Why?"
"God damn you, Corcoran.... If this is all this is about, I'm filing that complaint no matter what.

"When my husband and I share rooms it's a bit of a chore to get ready, what with sharing the bath."

"And where where those rooms?" Bretchgirdle asked sharply.

"What do you mean, where --"

"We know you weren't in London this morning, Madam Snape," he interrupted. "There was no-one at your flat."

"Now, hang on a moment. Why was someone trying to find me at home? Was there an emergency of some --"

"Answer the question."

"At Hogwarts, in my husband's rooms -- Severus Snape, Hogwarts' Potions Master."

"Do you often spend time at Hogwarts?"

"I have recently. He can't be away often as he's Slytherin Head, and we'd agreed at Yule that I should visit most week-ends this Term."

"I see. Unusual arrangement...." Bretchgirdle murmured, and noted it in her file. "So inquiries at Hogwarts will prove you arrived... when?"

"Sunday, about luncheon."

Bretchgirdle looked at her for the first time in the whole uncomfortable interview, fixing her with suspicious, alert eyes. "And the rest of the week-end?"

"Oh. You didn't ask that, I thought you only meant this morning...." Bretchgirdle looked likely to explode, so she added, "He surprised me, you see -- I was expecting to pop home Friday and throw a bag together and then go to Hogwarts, but he met me here instead and took me elsewhere."

"Where?"

"Whitemarsh."

"In winter? Whatever for?"

She shrugged. "Holiday. He wanted to surprise me. It certainly worked --"

"Whitemarsh. In winter, out of season," Bretchgirdle interrupted her. "As a surprise holiday. What would possess someone to think that a nice holiday?"

"He isn't exactly spendthrift," Hermione admitted, and bristled when Ferrars snorted and smirked. "I believe he got a very good package-rate. Mucking about outside wasn't the point, at any rate."
"And what was?"

"Time together. We haven't had much."

"But you would have that at your flat or at Hogwarts."

"No, I mean..." Thank God for Severus' nasty little comments... "...I mean, we're trying to... start a family, and it hasn't been, erm, taking. Our timing's been off, and I've been under a great deal of stress at work. So I believe he wanted to go somewhere we could, ah, concentrate on each other alone, so to speak."

Shacklebolt suppressed a chortle, and shot Bretchgirdle an apologetic look.

"And when did the two of you leave for Whitemarsh, and from where?" Bretchgirdle continued, ignoring Shacklebolt. He was staring openly at Hermione now, unblinking, practically daring her to slip.

"Friday evening, by one of the Atrium floos. He'd already packed a bag for me, you see, called it an 'abduction' -- sort of a joke."

Bretchgirdle's nostrils flinched in distaste, and Ferrars snorted again.

"Ferrars, if you can't keep the commentary to yourself, leave," Bretchgirdle rapped out, and Ferrars muttered an apology. "And you floo'd where?"

"The... Metropole, I think it was. On West Pier."

"What time did you arrive?"

"I've no idea, really. I didn't think to check my watch."

"You'll want to check the floo-logs, Shacklebolt.... So the concierge can confirm you stayed there?"

"Oh, no, we didn't stay there -- too expensive, even out of season."

(Ferrars turned pink with the effort not to snort.)

"It was a place called, ah, Foybel Spires," she added.

"And they can confirm your stay?"

"Oh, I should think so -- there was a muddle over the reservation, they should remember having to sort it out. And the proprietor was rather a nosy type of fellow, as well. You know, the kind who's always hanging about one's door, trying to hear things," she explained earnestly, and shot a glance at Shacklebolt: he was maintaining an absolutely straight face but for a suspicious twitching at one corner of his mouth.

"You stayed in the hotel the whole time?"
"No, we did go out on the Saturday. And Sunday morning."

"Really.... So you have no way of confirming that you were in Whitemarsh the entire time?"

"No, no, we never left Whitemarsh -- oh. Well, we did go into Brighton itself, the Muggle town, because there were more shops open there, you see. And far better restaurants than the hotel's. Why should it be a problem, if we --"

"Because we need to know where you were at all times, Madam Snape," Bretchgirdle informed her with a thin, unpleasant smile. "To rule you out as a suspect."

"A suspect in what?"

"Never mind that for now. So you can't prove that you didn't return to London sometime on Saturday, in between these... activities?"

"Well, for Merlin's sake, how can one prove one wasn't somewhere if one isn't...? I certainly can't account for every single minute," she said, and sighed, reaching for the tote, "but we did do quite a bit of shopping."

"Wait," Bretchgirdle commanded, and jerked his head at Ferrars: Ferrars jumped over to the tote and begin rooting about in it.

"Oh, really -- is that absolutely --"

"Yes, it is.... Receipts, Ferrars, look for receipts, don't admire the craftsmanship," Bretchgirdle ordered as Ferrars fondled a particularly twee set of tea-towels emblazoned with the slogan *Brighton is for Lovers!*. "So, you arrived in Whitemarsh Friday evening, went from the Metropole to this... Foybel Spires, and then did what?"

"We dined there, and then went to bed."

"You didn't go out?"

"No, they lock their lobby doors at nine-thirty. Anyway, the food was terrible," Hermione said, one eye on Ferrars' thorough pillaging of her packages (he'd got to the new shoes, and was intrigued with the Muggle sales-slip), "and Severus got an awful case of indigestion, so an early bed-time was really the only option."

"And next day?"

"Next day we breakfasted out, did some shopping, and in the afternoon we toured some of the Brighton attractions. The Royal Pavilion, places like that -- "

Ferrars had pulled a smaller, pink bag from the larger tote -- one Hermione didn't recall acquiring, but couldn't help recognising, given the colour and design -- and he rooted in it for the receipt, pink wrapping-tissue flying as he ripped it aside.
Oh, please, *God*, don't let that be what I think it is....

" -- *I should* have all the ticket-stubs in my handbag, because I had more Muggle currency --"

The most extraordinary looked crossed Ferrars' face, and he reached into the bag with thumb and forefinger, as if the contents might bite.

*When the bloody hell could Severus have nipped over there? ...oh, cripes, when I was buying the shoes -- he disappeared for a bit. I'd have loved to see that, actually -- Severus Snape in that shop, terrorising the clerks....*

Ferrars withdrew a scrap of fabric, dropped the bag, and spread the scrap apart with both index fingers.

It was a pair of knickers. Silk, and faintly racey in an understated way. Severus had, quite predictably, picked a shade as close to Slytherin green as he could manage.

Hermione almost wished one could actually die from embarrassment.

Ferrars looked intrigued; Bretchgirdle was staring at the knickers with disgust. Shacklebolt was silent, but Hermione could feel little tremours coming from his end of the table, as if he were shaking with repressed laughter.

*So that's why he didn't have any Muggle cash for lunch and the tours -- he'd dropped a packet on those awful things.... Damn the man, I don't for a moment believe those are just corroborative evidence. They're a bloody hint. Well, he can take them and shove them up his --*

"No receipt," Ferrars accused.

"I... didn't buy those. I didn't even know they were in there," Hermione admitted, face hot. "Severus must've got them while I was buying the shoes. That place is just across from the shoe shop."

"So you weren't together the entire time?" Bretchgirdle verbally pounced. "For Merlin's sake, Ferrars, put them away...."

"Other than *that* we were together the entire time. It couldn't have taken him more than ten minutes, I should think. He'll have the receipt, since he must have meant them for a surprise," Hermione explained as Ferrars stuffed the knickers back into their bag.

"And the rest of the afternoon?" Bretchgirdle prodded, quite forgetting she'd already volunteered that.

"Um, as I said, the Royal Pavilion and gardens, some of the Regency attractions.... May I?" she asked, gesturing to her handbag, and when Bretchgirdle nodded wearily she pulled it over, dug through the jumbled contents for the receipts, and handed them to Ferrars.

"Evening?" Bretchgirdle asked.
"Dinner at the Metropole -- he'll have the receipt for that as well, he paid -- and we were back at Foybel Spires just before they locked the doors."

"After that?"

"After that, we went to bed. " Hermione said with a puritanical little blush, making it clear that they did indeed go to bed, but not to sleep.

"And you did not leave the room again until the next morning?"

"No, it had an ensuite bath. No need to. We didn't even open the window for air, as it was so cold out."

"Very well," Bretchgirdle muttered, and closed Hermione's file with a petulant slap of his hand. "That's all for the time being, I think. Ferrars, you'll establish a time-table given those receipts --"

"But I don't have all of them --"

"I'll pop up to Hogwarts," Shacklebolt said. "Unless you'd care to go yourself, sir?"

"No, no, you're perfectly capable of speaking to the man, Shacklebolt," Bretchgirdle said.

"You don't need Sunday's itinerary?" Hermione asked.

"Not relevent at the moment. You may return to your department, but don't leave town for the time being without informing Shacklebolt," Bretchgirdle said, rose from his chair, and left the room without another word.

"You get to working on that, then. I'll get the rest of them this afternoon," Shacklebolt instructed Ferrars, who grumpily gathered together the receipts and left the room. "Madam Snape, apologies for the delay, but...."

"Can anyone tell me what all this is about?" Hermione asked, trying to shove all the packages back in the tote (Ferrars had left them all lying about the floor, the arsehole). "I shall have to explain --"

"Mr Corcoran knows about it," Shacklebolt said. "An intruder in the department. This is just a routine check-up of department personnel whereabouts for the time of the incident."

"An intruder?" Hermione blurted out, and paused. "Good God, I hope I remembered to ward my office --"

"Already checked, and everything seemed fine," Shacklebolt assured her. "Your commitment to security measures isn't in question at all." He rose from the table and handed her back her wand. "So it's a bit difficult, getting back into the swing of things Monday mornings?"

"Yes," Hermione mumbled, stuffing the remaining packages into the tote willy-nilly.
"Funny. I was at school with your husband -- different House and year, true -- and I'd never have pegged him as a morning man, myself."

Hermione gaped at him. Shacklebolt was known to make the occasional wry, straight-faced observation, but never anything quite that ribald. He grinned, but his eyes darted toward the wall opposite: Corcoran must still be there, then, and Shacklebolt was having some fun at the man's expense.

Given that, Hermione decided she might as well, too.

"Severus Snape," she said primly, "is very much an anytime man, as the mood strikes him. Which I don't mind at all except when it makes me late to work. I'm expected at Hogwarts Friday evening, by the way...."

"Shouldn't be a problem, if Snape's got the receipts to round out the timetable," Shacklebolt assured her. "I'll ask you, however, not to speak with him today until after I've seen him."

"No question of that, we're not the type to call back-and-forth during the week," Hermione said as she stood, and grabbed for tote and handbag. "We're both far too busy."

"Thanks. And good luck on starting a family," Shacklebolt added, opening the door for her. "How will you manage a sprog, between your jobs? Hard enough for me and the missus with both of us in London...."

"I'll stop work for a while and move to Hogsmeade, I expect. Professor Sprout -- remember her? -- told us of a lovely little cottage," Hermione said, and headed for the lift. "Of course, think of all the doting aunties to do baby-minding if I moved directly into Hogwarts...."

Shacklebolt boarded the lift with her, commanded, "Level Three," and after the doors closed, mouthed, "Good show," while the poltergeist cackled insanely.

"Why not" Hermione mouthed back, and mimed slugging back a dose of Veritaserum.

"They thought you had," Shacklebolt mouthed back. "Ask Snape later." And then he clammed up when the doors opened on Level Three.

She went straight to her office, closed and warded the door, dropped the bloody tote in a corner, and sat for a very long time with her head on her arms, until the shaking in her hands had stopped.

All that sugar, and something that curdled the milk.... Something that should have curdled the milk. I wonder if Shacklebolt switched it for something harmless without Ferrars knowing? He must've done, surely.... I didn't feel the least compelled to answer.

It took all of Hermione's nerve to act calmly for the rest of the work-day, and particularly when she passed an enraged and practically snarling Corcoran in the main corridor.

*****
The long and short of it -- when Hermione finally got the story out of one of the gossips in the scribal pool later that day -- was that Corcoran's office had been burgled on Saturday in the early evening: he'd returned from his own holiday, decided quite uncharacteristically to stop in at the office on the Sunday afternoon, had found something missing, and had raised the alarm. ("Absolutely hysterical, I heard he was," Hermione's informant confided. "Nearly blubbering, went straight to the aurors and then wouldn't tell them what was actually gone. I reckon it's a high-level document he left in a desk drawer rather than sending back to the lock-up, the lazy sod.") The only activity the Sneakoscope records revealed was a visit by a heavily-pregnant charwoman who'd entered Corcoran's office to clean and who, after a longer stay than usual -- which the auror then on Observation detail had explained away to himself as natural, given the woman's slow and lumbering gait -- had shuffled off down the corridor, gone into the cleaning-cupboard, and had never come out again.

The problem was, while it appeared to be the charwoman who did normally clean Level Three on the week-end, that lady was, at the time, actually in St. Mungo's in the middle of a thirty-two hour labour.

MLE would never live it down. New mother of triplets Hilda Blodgett falsely arrested mere hours after giving birth! had been The Quibbler's lead story on Monday.

*****

Hermione's flat
6:38 pm

The aurors hadn't just knocked at her flat: they'd barged in. She didn't need confirmation of that: she felt it, a faint sense that everything wasn't quite as she'd left it; but she hadn't been home ten minutes when there was a timid knock at the back door, and she opened it to find Mr Harrison, Junior, looking abashed and apologetic.

"I thought I should tell you," he said in a whisper, "that there was a bit of unpleasantness on premises yesterday. Some Aurors came around and --"

"Yes, Mr Harrison, I know," Hermione said wearily. "They told me this morning when I got to work."

*That liar Bretchgirdle only said they'd come round this morning....*

"They didn't ask us, you see, because they know our loyalty to our clients won't permit us to give them entrance. But the alarms went off when they broke the wards, and when we got here -- one minute four second response time, I'm proud to say -- they showed all the proper warrants. We hung about and reset everything after they'd gone."

She'd figured that: her last-set password hadn't worked, and she'd resorted to "utter bollocks," which had.
"It's quite all right, Mr Harrison, not your fault. And I appreciate that you set everything right again."

"They didn't, er, remove anything that we could see. Very worrying, this," Harrison said. "It's been happening a lot."

"Raids?"

"Yes. Not just to Ministry persons like yourself, either. Absolutely ordinary clients. They carted one poor woman off right in front of my eyes, said she'd some kind of illegal potion.... Didn't look the type to me, frankly. Left her five little kiddies with only the next-door neighbour to watch them."

"Good God...."

"Well, I'll leave, then -- I just wanted to check on you personally, as Pa told me to."

"Has he?"

"Oh, yes. Said your husband's done him a good turn or two. We should take a special interest in you anyway, even if you hadn't chosen Residential Deluxe." Harrison tipped his bowler to her, and popped away.

Cripes, that's frightening, she thought as she closed and bolted the door. 'Illegal potion' and five kids.... Bloody hell, they're not going after contraceptive users now, are they?

....Shit.

She made a beeline for her hidey-hole, and then stopped herself, calmly stepped into the kitchen, poured a glass of wine, and settled in front of the telly to waste time watching it until dark fell; and then she drew the curtains and began scouring the flat, starting with said hidey-hole -- the little niche Severus had made in the chimney, behind the facing-panel. The contraceptive was still there, fortunately, as was the packet of documents that she still hadn't been able to get to François.

Holy.... Dodged that, but too close for comfort.

Except she hadn't. When she pulled the panel back over, she noted a little scribble of soot on the unfinished side: a crude sketch which, after a moment's puzzling-over, she determined to be of old-fashioned manacles and an arrow.

Shackle and bolt. Oh, fuck me....

So much for being clever. She'd known an auror would find any warding: she'd hoped they'd overlook something this mundane and unmagical. The only saving grace was that Shacklebolt had been the one to find it, not that bastard Ferrars.... She licked her finger and scrubbed at the soot until it was hopelessly smeared, and then pounded the panel back in place.
A check of her desk proved that the paper files had been gone through; she was certain they'd attempted the computer's hard drive as well, and set to checking on that. She'd been careful with the computer. When she'd bought it -- well before all this idiocy, but with an unaccountable urge to give herself plenty of privacy -- she'd had Mark, her computer geek, program a log file.

The file proved that yes, the computer had been powered up on Sunday. They'd figured out how to use the mouse, for the desktop icons had been activated and their files opened; they'd opened her financial software as well, and probably printed off those records, judging by the level of paper left in the printer.

They hadn't, though, got into the operating system and found the hidden directory that contained the stolen Ministry documents.

_They didn't find it this time_, she cautioned herself. _Now that they know about the computer, they'll read up a bit and discover just how easy it is to hide things... and then I'm done for._

She should have to get rid of those files, and soon. Perhaps ask Mark to swap out another hard drive, and to keep this one at his shop.

The little orb she'd got from Fred and George was still safely tucked into its tissue in the Christmas box, although she noted indignantly that some clod (Ferrars, it must have been) had badly bent back one corner of the antique pasteboard St. Nicholas she'd had since she was eight, a gift from Grandmother Granger. It was surprising that they hadn't taken the orb; Ferrars should have recognised it for what it was, and she should have been questioned about the contents. (It would have been relatively innocuous on examination -- a dispute with her superior that she wanted documented, and had hidden among like-looking things to conceal it from any Muggles -- but still, she was amazed that they'd let it slip.) She was also practically frothing at the mouth from the indignity of having her home invaded and her privacy violated.

She gave up on both rage and the search by the time she'd got half-through the bedroom, though. There wasn't anything she'd hid there, and she couldn't tell what might have been the aurors' snooping and what might have been Severus' pawing-about (although she suspected the aurors wouldn't have left quite such a mess in her lingerie drawer, and chalked that down to Severus).

He was also, she assumed, responsible for the disappearance of a beautifully-fragrant wedge of Stilton from the kitchen, though whether he'd mistaken it for something going off or had nicked it for himself, she couldn't guess.

_Probably nicked it, the bastard. Or it's additional commentary on my less than perfect vegetarianism. Bastard. God-damned, bloody-minded --_

It was all too much: her hands had started to shake again, her head to swim, and she sank down onto her haunches and huddled, arms tightly clasped about her knees, until she felt she could manage to crawl to the bathroom.

_That's terribly cruel toward him_, she thought, draped a cold, wet flannel across her forehead, and leaned back against the tub, legs splayed across the cool floor-tile. _He was right about this morning_
-- over-estimated it a bit, perhaps, but right in the main -- and right to worry about a pretty damned air-tight alibi for Saturday. I may not always understand why he insists on doing things his way, but he has good reason....

But... damn. I'd been looking forward to that Stilton. It was nearly ready, too.

The absurdity of that hit her, and she started giggling; and she didn't quite notice when her laughter turned to sobs, or remember later that she'd desperately wished Severus was there so she could talk to him.

*****

The week was an agony. She couldn't floo Severus to ask what he'd heard about the burglary or what he'd said to Shacklebolt; Corcoran was even more snappish and nasty than usual, and she couldn't find out anything more than the scribe had told her initially.

She thought it likely, however, that whatever had been found in his office related directly to the problem of Flaherty and the potion. There was no official censure issued against Corcoran: it wasn't, therefore, anything that related to official department policies and Ministry matters. That Corcoran had got a censure from Fudge was indisputable -- he'd been called upstairs, had been absolutely livid on his return, and had holed himself up for the rest of the day; but no other action was taken against him. (As far as Hermione was concerned, that was a very bad sign.)

The only good thing was that he didn't seem suspicious of her. Unpleasant, yes, of course -- even more than he'd been since their last confrontation: but he seemed to have taken her alibi as given, especially after Shacklebolt had sent a memo to them both, stating that Hermione's whereabouts on the Saturday were accounted for and that she was cleared of any suspicion in the matter of the break-in.

The Level Three charwoman's cupboard, however, was warded and padlocked shut, and a low-level auror set to guard Corcoran's office at all times; his notoriously loose-lipped personal secretary had been demoted to the scribal pool, and a viper of a woman who Hermione knew wouldn't give one the time of day had taken her place.

Most of her time at home was filled with stupid and niggling, but necessary, tasks: calling Mark and arranging for a new hard drive, an expense she really didn't want to go to, but must, with much nail-biting over whether to keep hard copies of the stolen documents somewhere; deciding in the end to hide the contraceptive potion in a shampoo-bottle, in plain view -- an act she kicked herself over, for not thinking of before; and, lastly, after a desperate and rushed trip to Harrods' toy department, to buy a ridiculously over-priced baby-doll for nefarious purposes. (She knew François had daughters, one of fairly recent vintage, so to speak; and as anything resembling a letter or documentation going from her to the man would likely be opened and searched, she couldn't think of anything more seeming-innocent than a birthday present to a colleague's little girl.)

Worked with Ron, she thought grumpily as she wrestled with all the idiotic packaging. At least I hope it has -- I don't dare check up on him. My God, I think half the cost goes for all the damned pasteboard and cello-wrap.... How do parents afford it all?
She finally got the wretched doll free of its box and ruthlessly stripped it of its clothes, searching for the best way to hide the documents; there was an on toggle at the back of the doll's neck, and with a What the hell Hermione switched it on.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh --"

It was truly revolting: a high-pitched, slightly electronic whine that rose in volume and wouldn't stop, even when she turned switch off. She scrabbled for the instruction book and flipped through with one hand, and discovered to her great disgust the reason for the doll's expense: this was no ordinary doll, but a mock-baby complete with the latest electronic circuitry. It wouldn't stop screeching, the booklet noted, until she... comforted it.

Oh, bloody hell....

Her only consolation was that there was no-one about to see her sprawled on the floor of the sitting-room, cradling a naked baby-doll in one arm and frantically paging through the owner's manual with the other hand. (The rocking wasn't helping, unfortunately -- the bloody thing seemed to be getting worse, in fact, and Hermione had to concentrate very hard on the manual.)

Half a moment.... It drinks, too? You have to feed it every three hours?

Oh, hell. If it drinks, it must have to... pee.

Wait, how did they do that?

She flipped the damned thing arse over head, and discovered to her great surprise that the doll was anatomically correct -- alarmingly so, with latex-like folds of skin (presumably to teach all good little girls about cleaning up messes, as well), and a... a...

The bloody thing has a wee-hole. Good God....

The baby didn't like being turned on its head, and shrieked.

Bloody computer chips, Hermione thought, plopped the baby upright on her shoulder, and jiggled it. I hope they didn't prime the bladder at the factory.

Baby didn't like the jiggling, either, and let Hermione know it; and it took a good ten minutes of a more moderate rocking to get the damned thing to belt up.

I'm probably lucky they didn't make it able to poop as well.

Or did they?

Some judicious groping of Baby's bottom proved that it wasn't quite as anatomically correct in back as it was in front.

Thank God.
There was only one thing for it, as far as hiding the documents: Hermione would have to engage in some surgery (and in this case, she'd do it with a certain amount of satisfaction).

She charmed a slit in the latex of the baby's belly and the plastic underlayment -- carefully, not quite trusting that the thing was actually off -- and pulled the edges aside to take a look: the abdomen was crowded with tubes and simulacra of a stomach, rudimentary intestines, and bladder, but Hermione thought she could just wedge the documents in, if she shrunk them a bit.

*One little modification first, though,* she thought, and bent closer to snip apart the tube that constituted the doll's urethra. *Have to give him a reason to look inside*....

She shrunk the documents and wrapped them in a zip-bag to keep them waterproof, just in case François didn't get the point straight off; and then she shoved the bag in and sealed the baby back up, rather proud that the new seam didn't show at all. (She didn't dare turn it back on, though. It was terribly life-like, or as good a one as she'd ever seen, and she probably ought feel a little guilty at her panic and impatience with its crying -- even though it was simply a computer of sorts...)

*Well, that answers what kind of mother I'd be, I think. I wonder what Severus would make of something like this?* ....*No. He'd take one look at it, hear one squall, and then blast it to Perdition. Probably be different if it was an actual baby, of course. Or at least, if it were **his.**

*Maybe. ...oh, who knows, with him?*

It was a silly and fruitless -- though easy -- fantasy to indulge in: the doll's scanty hair was jet-black, its eyes a dark brown.... (She hadn't planned that, really. It was the first one she'd grabbed off the first shelf of dolls she'd come to, and might easily have been blue-eyed and blonde.)

"All right, you poor little sod," she told it, sighed, re-clothed and re-boxed it, finished it off with a fussy and frilly gift-wrap that she didn't really have an aptitude for, and reached for the gift-card.

    *Pour la petite demoiselle DeLaine. Bonne Aniversaire!*

    *F. -- I know it's late --*

That was a lie: she had no idea, of course. But neither would Wizarding Customs.

    -- *but I saw this the other day and couldn't resist. I hope she likes it. All the plumbing is in the tummy, and it looks fairly easy to fix if something goes wrong. Probably shall -- you might want to take a look before the first test run. The crying is another matter.... Bon chance.***

    *Hermione*

She sent it off by cross-Channel owl the next morning, confident that no snooper would notice the surgery.
Friday's headline in the *Prophet* didn't inspire confidence.

*Ministry Announces Marriage Scheme: Genetic "lottery" proposed.*

*Dennis Corcoran, Minister for Wizard Populations and Health,* announced yesterday via press release that the Ministry is taking further steps to encourage unmarried witches and wizards to take the plunge.

'Speaking as a happily married man myself, I can tell you there's no more fulfilling role than that of husband and father,' he writes. 'And I can tell you, my lovely wife Margaret feels the same. Now, some of our folk are admittedly a bit shy or perhaps a bit challenged in the social arena, so the best minds at the Ministry have come up with a grand idea -- a sort of Marriage On Approval, to encourage people to give it a go.'

The scheme involves the assignment of all as-yet unmarried witches and wizards between the ages of seventeen and fifty to a partner, based on geographic proximity and avoidance of similar negative genetic traits.

'No need for any testing, no,' Corcoran assured this reporter, when contacted for clarification about the specifics of the scheme. 'We've got loads of info on people from the records at St. Mungo's, just need to finish sorting through it all. We anticipate making the first assignments around St. Valentine's Day -- appropriate, that! -- so all you single lasses and blokes out there watch for the owl that'll have your partner's name. Everyone else, watch out for those wedding duds flying out of Madame Malkin's!'

Minister Corcoran stressed that while cohabitation will be a necessary requirement of the lottery, the partners are not obliged to remain married at the expiration of the 'on approval' period.

'It'll be like having a flatmate,' he said. 'And we're betting that lots of people will discover just how much fun it is, and, er, begin to appreciate the possibilities of the arrangement.'

*Bloody hell,* Hermione thought, stunned. *How do they think they're going to pull this off? And what bloody section of the department's responsible for it? I haven't heard a damned thing.*

*The Quibbler* had a slightly different take.

*What the Ministry proposes is the wholesale marrying-off of the remainder of the population with no regard to compatibility in anything other than genetic profile -- in short, a selective breeding program.*
While Minister Corcoran jovially claims these marriages will be 'on approval' - mandatory for one year only, and easily dissolvable if either party wishes after that period -- The Quibbler has determined that the government has as yet made no provision for easily-obtainable annulment or divorce for these coerced marriages.

Furthermore, an unidentified source at the Ministry indicates that further legislation is in the works to require, at a later date, proof that a marriage is indeed 'valid and true,' if the union has not produced a pregnancy within one year of marriage, up to and including proof of consummation and mandatory fertility testing, and resulting in penalties from stiff fines in the instance of non-consummation or pregnancy avoidance, to 'reassignment' in instances of infertility. As there is no provision made for those couples yoked together under 'Marriage On Approval,' this Editor is highly sceptical of the characterisation of these coerced unions as 'easily dissolvable,' as the Ministry can conveniently demand, at a later date, that they fulfil any regulations and strictures made in the interim for all married persons. 'Marriage On Approval' is, in other words, forced marriage and procreation.

OTHER NEWS

The Editor is excited to announce the sighting of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack Tuesday last in Tunbridge Wells....

Oh, Lovegood, you're in the soup now, Hermione thought sadly.

Indeed he was: by noon Friday Lovegood had been arrested, The Quibbler's staff detained and then locked out of the building, and the equipment and all undelivered copies of the paper confiscated.

*****

Hermione decided to play it safe Friday afternoon -- notifications had an odd way of going amiss, lately -- and stopped at MLE to check in with Shacklebolt before leaving: she found him far in the back of the auror's nasty communal office, in a little cubby that had a modicum of privacy, and with one of the better desks and chairs.

Seniority counts, I guess. That, or he intimidated the hell out of everyone to get them....

"Hullo, Shacklebolt."

The big man glanced up, surprised, and snorted.

"Didn't need to stop. Or didn't you get the memo?"

"Got it, just thought I'd best double-check. I'm cleared, am I?"
"Between the timetable and the... other measures we took, yes, it's safe to say you're no longer a suspect, Madam Snape. Off to Hogwarts, are you?"

"Yes, I --"

A familiar, neon pink-topped head popped around the corner of Shacklebolt's cubby and thrust a stack of paperwork in Hermione's hand.

"Be a love, would you, and -- Wotcher, Hermione!"

"Tonks! Haven't seen you about," Hermione said, and handed over the papers to Shacklebolt. "Been years, hasn't it?"

"Rather. Tell the big oaf that his bleeding report on Sinjun Jarvey'll be a day or two more, would you?"

"Tonks, he's right --"

"She's not speaking to me," Shacklebolt mumbled. "Sulky cow. I'd be hurt if it weren't so *peaceful* without her yammering all the time."

Tonks shot him a furious look, and then stepped into the cubby and whispered in Hermione's ear, "The bloody stretch-marks *still* haven't gone on their own. Don't think I'll ever be the same." And she flounced off back to her desk, at the other end of the room.

"She... ?"

"Say hullo to your husband for me, then," Shacklebolt said loudly.

*Severus knows all about it, in other words.*

"Right," Hermione said weakly. "Well, ta for being... civil, over the whole thing."

Shacklebolt muttered a good-bye and returned to his paperwork, and Hermione left the Ministry feeling vastly bemused.

*Tonks impersonated a pregnant woman? Pregnant with triplets?*

...Ewwwwwwwwww. *I'd feel a sulky cow about that, too. I don't think the men realise the lengths they're asking us to go to, sometimes.*

Shaking her head at the absolute cluelessness of men, she apparated home to pack for her Hogwarts week-end.
Chapter 16: Wherein Snape begins to suspect that espionage is a young man's game, and that he's lost his touch.

Hogwarts
The week of January 23rd - 27th

While he knew he'd done his best to prepare Hermione for what might await her at the Ministry -- short of spending the entire week-end training her in resistance to interrogation, something that would have inevitably backfired if she were subjected to Legilimency -- Snape couldn't help but worry.

One slip on her part, one hint that she knows something was up....

He wasn't used to having a junior, so to speak, an agent under him directly in the line of fire, whilst he sat back and waited for reports. He had some inkling now of how Dumbledore might have felt, and began to appreciate the old coot's skill and ability to handle the pressure.

It didn't help, either, that he liked having this particular agent under him. Literally under him. It wasn't done to engage in liaisons with one's co-workers and subordinates.... One kept the demarcations quite clear, to maintain only a dispassionate interest in the well-being of a colleague. It was always best to pigeon-hole things -- and people -- in safe, discrete little boxes, and to keep them neatly classified and inviolate. It should have worked quite nicely, actually, had Hermione solicited his help with the problem directly instead of proposing, or had he forbid her to continue mucking about with it after he'd caught her out -- though the gods only knew how he'd have been able to see that she did, short of locking her in his rooms, bound and gagged.

But Hermione was not just his wife, a sexual and legal convenience: she was his colleague as well. The lines were now hopelessly blurred where she was concerned, and he didn't know how he could begin to re-establish them. He was so distracted Monday morning after she'd left, worrying over her, that he'd nearly missed Phoebus Whortleberry adding dragon's blood to a Soothing potion, an act that would have produced highly toxic fumes.

He was greatly relieved, then, when Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped into his office during his free period: as the man's wand wasn't out, he assumed he had good news.

"Afternoon, Snape," the man said.

"Ah. Official business, I take it?"

"Right. Let's dispense with the formalities, shall we? I reckon your version of the week-end will match your wife's pretty closely, correct?"

"Yes," Snape said, and drew a piece of parchment from the bottom of a stack of essays. "And in the interest of not wasting time for us both, I wrote it out for you earlier today."
Shacklebolt's mouth quirked, and he took the parchment and quickly scanned it.

"Thought it might match up. I need to trouble you, though, for any receipts you picked up while away....."

Snape made a great show of impatience with wiping his quill clean.

"In my rooms," he said tersely, rising from his stool, and Shacklebolt followed him through the side door and into the sitting-room, waiting silently while Snape scrabbled in his desk for all the bits he'd flung there Sunday.

"She did well?" Snape asked softly.

"Very. And my junior was too stupid to check whether the Veritaserum was still good, so as far as Bretchgirdle's concerned, she passed with flying colours. No question of Imperius or Legilimency, not given her Ministry classification and alibi."

"Good," he said, and handed over the receipts.

"And this," Shacklebolt replied, handing off a packet in return, "should prove interesting. What we acquired Saturday."

"Ah...."

"It's already been leaked to the press -- parts of it, at any rate. Some of the more... specific information was withheld. Don't want to act prematurely."

"Right. Thanks," Snape said, wishing desperately that the bloody man would leave so he could read the damned thing. "What was the problem, by the way?"

"Corcoran came in Sunday and discovered it missing. He never does that, blast him -- we thought we had an extra day to muddy things up a bit. Snape, is this as bad as it sounds? Not that I've read that damned thing, but Arthur swore a blue streak when he did."

"Yes, it's quite bad. They're... ready to act, apparently, they have everything lined up. It's a question of fooling people into participating."

"I see. Shall I say something to Arthur?"

Snape shifted uneasily, and said, "As you think best. I don't believe there's much he can do at this point but keep an eye on Corcoran and Fudge. Though if either of you see much traffic between them and St. Mungo's, I would appreciate knowing."

"Shall do," Shacklebolt said, and headed for the main door to Snape's rooms. Oh, and...." he added thoughtfully, hand on the door-knob.

"Yes?"
"The knickers? Nice detail. Embarrassed the hell out of that miserable old sod Bretchgirdle, and flustered her just enough to make the story plausible and not too pat..."

"Thanks," Snape said sourly as Shacklebolt stepped out of the room.

"...although I have to tell you, mate, I don't think green's her colour." Shacklebolt took off down the corridor at a slow lope, practically daring Snape to hex his back. (He badly wanted to, but managed to stop himself.)

He certainly wasn't going to admit to Shacklebolt that the knickers had not been intended to be either detail or diversion, though he wished now that he'd thought of it at the time: he'd rather hoped Hermione would take the hint and give him the pleasure of removing them himself at some point during the coming week-end.

*****

He settled down later that evening (having restrained his earlier impatience and curiosity) with a small glass of something to fortify himself, and set to reading the papers within the packet: they proved to be memos between Corcoran and Fudge, and while the first several were vague, they became more and more specific as time went on and they became more confident that they might pull it off.

23rd November, 2006
To: C. Fudge, MfM
From: D. Corcoran

Regarding your memo of Thursday last, including your concerns over the projected birthrates and the ICW's likely unfavourable reaction:

I've been thinking on this quite a bit, actually, and I've come to the conclusion that we've been attacking it from the wrong angle -- rather timidly, in fact. And a visit the other night from an old mate of mine put a bit of a flea in my ear.

We've faced this before, you see, only not with wizards. It's elves. They couldn't be produced as a viable commodity for a long time, until Greenaway hit upon a method. And my mate thought such a thing might actually be possible with wizards as well -- any human, really -- at least in theory, and without resorting to any of the currently restricted or forbidden potions or spells.

It's quite a revolutionary idea, actually, and the problem is that certain elements within the government and the public wouldn't see it the right way (you know how they are). But it's become obvious to me that the current 'persuasive' methods aren't working worth a damn, no matter what G. says. (Frankly, I don't think they ever will. Sometimes you lead the horse with a carrot, sometimes by the bridle, and sometimes you have to take the whip to its obstinate arse, begging your pardon, sir.)

At any rate, it's a thought, if all else fails. Probably not worth pursuing, given the Wiz.'s decision to do things by the book. Just thought I'd throw it on the table.
25th November, 2006
To: D. Corcoran
From: Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic

Corcoran, I confess that I'm greatly frustrated with the attitude of the Wiz., particularly when it comes to dealing with the ICW and with the rebellious element on the Home Front. I think I could be persuaded to look at other options, no matter how 'revolutionary.' Anything is worth taking a look at, you know; there's no law against investigating possibilities.

I should need a great deal more information, however. And with the understanding that this is purely an exploration of one possible avenue, with no commitment as yet.

Is your friend available to discuss the historical problem a bit further?

C.F.

28th November, 2006
To: C.F.
Fr: D.C.

Monday 1st Dec., 8pm. I've secured a private dining-room at Fortescue's.

D.C.

c: file

3rd December, 2006
To: D. Corcoran
From: Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic

Well, I have to say it's quite an interesting solution, Dennis. I'm very impressed with Debdale's grasp of the historical problem and its potential for solving our present difficulties.

It is, as you've noted, a rather daring step. Furthermore, I should need the further proof that D. hinted at. If he is able to provide this within a reasonable period, I would be amenable to providing him with funds and resources for further research. I should feel better having the process very
strictly laid out, however, so we may evaluate as it proceeds, and call a halt to it if we hit any stumbling-blocks or the results are disappointing.

Be a good lad and see to that bit of it, won't you?

C.F.

**

Snape's hand paused before setting that last aside.

Debdale.... Merlin's balls, I'd never thought to see his name again. Where's the bastard been hiding? Who the bloody hell didn't have the sense to kill him when they had the chance? And how does Corcoran know him?

8th December, 2006
To: C.F.
Fr: D.C.

PHASE 1: Discovery. Modern analysis of Greenaway's potion, breaking into constituent parts, and determination of any substances actively harmful to humans. Testing of various like substances for substitutions.

Est. time frame: Dec. 20, 2006 - February 1, 2007
Est. resources: G45,900 (includes laboratory assistant).

PHASE 2: Preliminary testing. Separate substances to be tested upon human subjects for toxicity (primarily) and favourable reactions (secondarily). If results are favourable, further testing of the substances in total (that is, in its first full version).

Est. time frame: February 5 - March 1, 2007
Est. resources: G38,500, and access to subjects via the Medical Testing Laboratory at Azkaban.

PHASE 3: Formulation. Based on preliminary testing, D. will develop the potion into its beta (and hopefully, final) version.

Est. time frame: March 10 - March 31, 2007
Est. resources: G24,000.

PHASE 4: Clinical trials. Beta version of potion to be administered to test subjects, which will then be observed for a) appropriate physiological reaction and b) satisfactory outcome (i.e., increase in pregnancy as compared to that rate in the general population).

Est. time frame: April 5 - July 5, 2007
Est. resources: G40,000.
PHASE 5: Production. This will preferably be done by an outside manufacturer, as producing the necessary quantity of solution would be too time-consuming and costly to do in a research laboratory.

PHASE 6: Implementation. D. indicates it would be feasible -- and indeed helpful -- to accomplish this through St. Mungo's.

TOTAL EST. EXPENDITURE: G148,400.
15% OVERRUIN CUSHION: G 22,260.

GRAND TOTAL: G170,660.*

*Phases 1- 4 only. Phase 5 cost will depend greatly upon the contractor responsible. Phase 6 should cost very little in comparison, viz., transportation and possible publicity/enforcement costs.

Well, that's the bones of it. There are some concerns, of course, that may lead to delays (or, conversely, if D. hits upon an easy solution or spectacular results, a speeding-up):

- Access to necessary substances. Some called for in the original potion are rather rare, and he's concerned about that.
- While he is satisfied that he will have enough test subjects available initially, he is worried about having appropriate numbers for the Clinical Trials (Phase 4). There are, regrettably, far fewer female subjects (any, let alone of of child-bearing age, of course) in Az. than male. (He is factoring in a 10 - 15% acceptable loss from failures during Phase 2.) While he can of course utilise redundant females for the toxicity portion of Phase 2, he must be willing to potentially sacrifice fertile subjects in the secondary part of that Phase, or there will be no reliable data on which to base the beta version of the potion.

So that's that -- please look over it at your leisure, and let me know how you want to proceed. D. is quite excited, and would love to get cracking on it. I know he was pleased with your reaction to his little demonstration.

D.C.

c: file

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The glass shattered in Snape's hand and sliced it open; he dropped the papers with a curse and hurried to the bath, the blood running quite freely down his wrist and soaking his cuff.

How generous of Debdale, to admit the utility of 'redundant' females, he thought, grim, as he held his hand under the cold tap and let the water wash away the worst of the blood. Not to mention 10 - 15% acceptable loss....
Debdale had not been directly associated with the Death Eaters, but he hadn't gone out of his way to avoid them, either: Snape knew of at least two instances in which he'd been asked to produce a potion for the Dark Lord -- during the first war -- and he'd done it willingly and to Voldemort's complete satisfaction. Snape had spoken to one of his former assistants once, long after Debdale had disappeared, and even after all that time the man had gone pale and said, "He's not right, that one. I mean, really not right. There's something missing, there, something not quite human, 'f you know what I mean.... Or rather, he's the only human, and everyone else is no better than flobberworms. Didn't dare eat or drink about him, for you never knew 'f he might test something nasty on you."

Snape could well believe it. It was very similar to the Death Eater attitude toward Muggles. The only difference between them that he could see was that Debdale masked his indifference toward human life with the excuse of scientific inquiry, while the others excused their more selective indifference with a twisted version of the Pureblood philosophy.

"I'll wager he was over the moon to finally have free run of Azkaban. That must be why he gave Fudge such a low bid on the job.... Sweet Fucking Merlin, but Fudge got it cheaply -- assuming Debdale didn't pad it out along the way with overruns."

"They have to know Debdale's reputation. They must -- I'm certain he was implicated in the trials. And they don't bloody care...."

When the bleeding finally slowed and Snape was certain he hadn't any glass in the wound, he doused it with an anti-sepsis, wrapped the hand, and returned to the documents.

11th December, 2006
To: D. Corcoran
From: Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic

Dennis:

It looks promising, very promising. And yes, the demonstration was quite persuasive. Wherever did he find wild elves? I thought they'd died out in nature. (Vicious little beasts in their natural state -- it would probably be no loss if they were extinct.)

I believe we should proceed with Phase 1; please inform D., and see to it that he's allowed to draw on the funds I've provided -- Gringotts' head clerk should give you access to Vault 937. Don't set D. loose on it, of course.

We shall not, however, make any rash decisions no matter how effective the procedure proves. The people do have a way of surprising one, you know, and the numbers may improve drastically before July. (We'll certainly know by then, won't we? You've the conference coming up at that month's end, so I assume you'll have all the latest figures tallied by mid-month.) In the meanwhile, we should proceed with the other voluntary measures. I don't want us set back on that front if this goes south.

It behoves us to make certain there isn't a breath of this in the media, of course -- Merlin only knows what the rags would make of it. I think, too, that it ought be kept from certain subordinates
in your department. (I think you know to whom I refer.) If a trained monkey had applied for that position we should have done better to hire it....

Keep me current on D.'s progress.

C.F.

27th January, 2007
To: C.F.
Fr: D.C.

Well, sir, Debdale's done it -- ahead of schedule! He's ready to begin Phase 2 as soon as his equipment can be got to Azkaban. Shall let you know as soon as I hear anything.

D.C.

c: file

10th March, 2007
To: C.F.
Fr: D.C.

Sir,

Slight setback. D. feels perhaps a slight over formulation; he lost more male subjects than anticipated, but feels that can be easily adjusted. (Not due to toxicity, apparently, but to the, erm, randier portion of the solution.) I've enclosed the latest budget details.

In other news, I've hit a bit of a snag with G. Asked her to prepare a report to back up your upcoming presentation to the Wiz., and she seems to have cottoned on to the purpose.... Trotted out all the civil liberties nonsense. I shall deal with her, of course, but as you've stated on occasion, she's terribly tenacious.

No matter -- sure it shall all go right in the end!

D.C.

c: file

12th March, 2007
To: D. Corcoran
From: Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic
I do hope D. doesn't run out of subjects. What a pity, to have come this far, have promising results, and be stymied.... I suppose they can be got somewhere else, however. Must use the imagination!

In re: G.: in my considerable experience, the more a body has to do, the less time they have to meddle in things which are not their concern. Perhaps that's the wisest course to pursue for now. The ICW might possibly be persuaded to take her off our hands, however, given good enough reason. Stay on the look-out for an opportunity, there.

I think perhaps I might toddle up to A. for Phase 4 -- be sure I know when D. is ready to begin with that, will you?

C.F.

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1st June, 2007
To: D. Corcoran
From: Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic

Dennis --

My boy, I wish you'd been there. Miraculous, utterly miraculous. I can hardly believe he's done it without any of the usual restricted bits. In fact, I shouldn't believe it had I not seen it with my own eyes.

I think, in short, that our little problem is solved.

I don't wish you to think you alone have carried the burden of this.... I had a little talk with an old school chum of mine -- he's CO at Mangel & Mortars, now, good old Bingey. Company's been a bit strapped recently -- all these new, trendy upstarts competing with them, it's taken a good chunk out of their profits. He was quite interested in an opportunity to sign a government contract: I don't think we should have a bit of trouble as regards the necessary secrecy clauses. (I only spoke in generalities, of course, told him it was a therapy. To be frank, though, he was far more interested in the financial end than the human factor.)

I'll set up a meeting with him for sometime next week, I think, and I should like you and D. there (if you can drag him away from his laboratory, of course).

On the other hand, the way the schedule's been pushed forward, it puts us in a bit of a bind with the other voluntary measures. What say you to moving that up a bit? I dare say the ICW's reaction at the conference would be excuse enough. I'm a bit worried about the 'voluntary' aspect though, and I have considered your remarks about leading with the bridle.... I don't think we're ready for the whip, not quite yet. But perhaps it's time to really consider mandatory exams and testing. Or do you think we should give it some time? After the lottery's in place, perhaps? Do let me know after our meeting tomorrow.

C.F.
3rd June, 2007
To: C.F.
Fr: D.C.

Sir,

So sorry to have missed you after the meeting -- called home by the wife on an emergency with our youngest.

I do think we want to proceed with caution on the voluntary measures -- better to wait on the new project than jump into it, particularly with certain people about here. (You're quite right about keeping her busy, by the way. Works like a charm most of the time.)

I would advise the Mixed-Marriage mandate for shortly after the conference, and when that doesn't show good results (and we both know it shan't), then we can proceed to the lottery at the first of the year for unmarrieds, and the potion for non-producers shortly thereafter. If there are few takers, we can always propose re-assignment -- that should put a fire under a few bums. (Begging your pardon, sir.)

Timing would be terrific that way. Plenty of pregnancies to announce at next year's conference, and plenty of time after that to deal with any unpleasantness or failures before the next.

D.C.

c: file

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The memos ran out there, but Snape could easily reconstruct what had happened from then on. Fudge and Corcoran had met with Binglewort, and had come to an agreement; a contract had been drawn up, and plans to make massive quantities of the potion; Corcoran would already have had the mandatory mixed marriage legislation ready to go even before he'd skived off the conference and sent Hermione in to face the ICW wolves alone, damn the man. (They must have expected her to fail miserably.)

Bloody good thing she'd got concessions from the ICW, or she should have been out on her ear in July.

Of course, that might have been a good thing in the long run, at least for her. No more Ministry, no obligation to remain in Britain, no temptation to put herself in such peril.... No need for her to be a bloody fool and to propose marriage, a false one no less, to a man of his age and temperament....

He shoved the thought away, and concentrated on the questions raised by the memos.
Where was Debdale working, when not at the Azkaban laboratory? Where is he living and working now? Where the hell did he find Greenaway's potion, and how did he adapt it so quickly?

...Ahead of schedule, my arse. The bastard planned it that way, it was a tight schedule to begin with, so he must have done. He saw the advantage, he worked on it beforehand, and he deliberately slipped the story to Corcoran. That's what I should have done to impress them, at any rate.

And the bloody assistant. Who would be stupid or desperate enough to work with Debdale?

That was an avenue worth exploring, with the potential to get some information -- if the damned fool was still alive. Snape was certain it would be a younger man (or woman), for anyone who'd reached their majority about the time he had, and probably up to a decade younger, would steer clear of someone as notorious as Debdale. No-one who'd worked with Bluett would work with the man, certainly -- Bluett, like Dumbledore, had a very accurate sense of his apprentices' characters, and should have dismissed anyone he felt capable of such unethical behaviour. He very nearly had Snape. (Probably should have done, without Dumbledore's recommendation.)

Although Dumbledore was wrong on occasion. Bluett might have been as well....

No, it was probably one of his own students of the past ten years -- someone who'd managed NEWT-level Potions but wasn't bright or skilled enough to work on their own, really only good for scut work.... If it were a Briton at all, that is. Debdale might have picked them up anywhere, really.

Yes, the assistant's identity is definitely worth exploring.

He mulled over these questions for a very long time, and finally gave up and went to bed, oddly satisfied. As disgusting as Fudge and Corcoran's callous and self-congratulatory back-pattings were, the memos did tie all the disparate threads together: Greenaway to Debdale, Debdale to Corcoran and Fudge, a mysterious potion with a 'randy' aspect, the Azkaban trials, Fudge to M&M -- 'good old Bingeys,' indeed -- and, finally, a potential connection to St. Mungo's....

Snape grudgingly admitted that Hermione's instinct had, in this instance, been correct. And he was bloody grateful that he'd kept her out of this particular mischief, even as his unease with her continued employment at the Ministry increased.

He didn't give her good odds to stay on much past the implementation of the potion.

*****

Friday evening
6:48 pm

He was unprepared for the classroom door to bang open: he started, flung the mop-handle away from him, and fumbled for his wand with clumsy, glove-clad fingers.

He snarled when he recognised the intruder.
"Have you seen these?" Hermione demanded, pulling a sheaf of newspapers from her bag and waving them at him.

"What?"

Only then did she notice the shattered glass and twisted bits of cauldron that littered the room, and the horrid red streak along one wall that most people would guess -- correctly -- was blood. (Snape hadn't had the heart to address that yet, and now, given the look of horror on her face, he wished he'd got it over with first thing.)

"What the bloody hell happened? And why are you cleaning up that way?"

"Deduce it yourself," he muttered, and picked up the mop-handle.

"Explosion, certainly, but.... A NEWT-level class? Must have been, for this much damage."

"Of course. Or have you forgot everything else, along with Advanced Theoretic Arithmancy?" (He knew he sounded particularly vicious, but after the day he'd had, he really couldn't be bothered to care.)

Hermione reddened, took a deep breath, and then surprised him by letting it out slowly and without retaliating: she observed the room some more, and then said, "The Propulsive Potion. It has an extremely unstable catalyst if mishandled."

"And what is the catalyst?"

"Fire lizard bile. Which is why you're mucking it out manually, because Fire lizard bile continues to react poorly when exposed to further magic, and becomes very corrosive."

"Quite. Full marks but with a two-point deduction for asking a stupid question with a self-evident answer," he muttered, eyes on the still-bubbling puddle of acid-green ooze on the floor.

"Who was hurt?"

"You'll appreciate this -- Caldwell."

"Why should I appreciate it? You think... ...hell, I don't remember her name -- the girl caused it?"

"No, not directly, she's not in Advanced Potions. I wouldn't put it past one of her friends, however. I haven't had time to investigate who's responsible."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"Yes, enough for St. Mungo's rather than the Infirmary --"

An overly-aggressive swipe of the mop sent a spot of the ooze flying: it landed on his left boot and began to eat through the leather.
"-- oh, fucking --" he blurted out.

"Hold on, I'll --"

"No, just stay there. These are a loss anyway, and your legs might as well be bare," he ordered; and he took more care with the mop until the puddle was nothing more than a smear across the floor. Hermione waited quietly until he looked up: she'd taken herself off to the far corner of the classroom, and sensibly tucked her tight-clad legs up behind a desk.

"Caldwell went flying," he explained tersely. "Hit the wall before I could stop him, and cracked his skull open. This spattered all over too, of course, and then half of the idiots lost their heads and tried to charm it off while I was busy with him..."

"So it went from mildly corrosive to vastly more so," Hermione concluded. "Will he be all right?"

"Eventually. He's probably out for several weeks. The others simply have acid burns. Bloody hell," he said tiredly, and shoved the mop and pail into a corner. "All these years, and I've never had to send a student St. Mungo's. Not even the worst of the dunderheads."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Indirectly, yes. Inattention, not anticipating some kind of retaliation. It almost certainly had to be someone from Slytherin, as well -- they were clustered together. That's worrying," he admitted, stripping off the dragon hide gloves and swiping at his forehead. "Even at the worst times the House have never turned on themselves."

"Why now?"

"It's been a bloody free-for-all lately. Lack of self-discipline, general stupidity.... I don't know. The idiots are so inarticulate I can't get a rational explanation out of them or the prefects," he said, and eyed the mop and pail warily as they fizzled away in the corner. "At any rate, no time to read the papers earlier, and certainly not after this. What's the bloody problem now?"

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him, and then went still and shoved the papers back in her bag.

"Never mind at the moment, it can wait," she said. "Dinner's already half-over in the Hall. Let's ask the elves to bring something to your rooms, and we'll talk it over later."

"It will take me another hour to clean this muck up. Go ahead."

"Leave it, Severus," she said brusquely, and shrugged when he stared at her. "It'll still be here in the morning, and be less reactive by then. I'll help -- it's not like I've anything better to do. And you'll feel better with dinner in you now."

Under other circumstances, her bossy-boots manner would have brought out the worst in him: but he reckoned the ooze had nearly eaten through the boot-leather by now, and would then commence on his sock and toe (the latter of which he rather hoped to keep intact). And, all in all, it was a
sensible idea. The bloody stuff would have lost a great deal of its potency by morning, providing Peeves didn't arse around with it.

"Bluett would have my hide," he muttered in a last-ditch effort to assert himself.

"Well, he's not here, is he? I suppose he always made you clean up his messes," Hermione said, and the scathing tone with which she voiced her opinion of Bluett -- an opinion which was entirely accurate, damn the wretched old man's bones -- surprised Snape enough that he only just suppressed a laugh, and managed a snort instead. "And last I'd heard, this was your classroom, not his," she added. "Let it go for now, Severus."

For the first -- and, he hoped, the last -- time in his life, Severus Snape wondered if perhaps women were the more practical and sensible sex. Even, possibly, when the woman in question was an annoying know-it-all who was both many years his junior, and his wife. (He refused to include "logical" on the list -- that was far too revolutionary an idea.)

"Fine," he granted ungraciously at long last, and slouched toward the classroom door, tossing his gloves on one of the desks. "But you'll regret it tomorrow. That the bloody stuff's harder to shift than troll mucus once it's set."

*****

Things did look a bit brighter when one was wearing another pair of boots (second-best, but free of nasty corrosives) and had a decent piece of beef on one's plate. Snape hadn't realised how hungry he was, having forgone lunch by choice and dinner by necessity, until he was well into the meal: it helped, too, that Hermione hadn't peppered him with questions, added extraneous commentary, or sulked about his bad temper, but had got on with her own meal and left him in peace.

"Shacklebolt said you did well on Monday," he finally noted when the silence went on too long even for him.

"Mightn't have, if his idiot junior had actually given me Veritaserum.... What was that muck, Severus? I assume he got it from you."

"No, the Ministry uses its own supplies, and one can't easily smuggle things in. I might have told him once that it degrades over time. I suppose he's laid down a good vintage."

"Well, it was awful, it turned the milk in the tea."

"Would do at any rate a few weeks after it's decanted -- any self-respecting brewer or auror knows that. But did you learn anything?"

"From the interrogation? Nothing, other than not to lose track of you while shopping. It's what Harrison said to me when I got home that was most interesting," she rattled off, so fast he didn't have time to decipher that odd bit in the middle. "He said there'd been an increase in aurors' raids on ordinary peoples' homes. Possibly for illicit potions, though he didn't know the particulars --"
"Hang on, what was Harrison doing at your flat?"

"Nothing at the time. Sunday they'd answered the alarm when the aurors broke the ward and searched the flat, and reset it when they left."

"Bloody -- you might have told me! They didn't find anything, obviously...."

"Haven't had a chance to tell you, have I? And Shacklebolt did find things, but he didn't take them. Unlike...."

"What? Who?"

"Never mind," she muttered, and stabbed at her rarebit. "Anyway, I don't think that's a good sign. The increase in raids and arrests, I mean."

"They've been doing it for months," Snape said dismissively. "At least to the black-marketeers. They're simply widening the net."

"How do you know that?"

"Bluett told me of a raid in Knockturn Alley in December. The aurors made arrests, and Weasley's department confiscated a batch of Muggle French letters, I think it was."

She choked a bit, and hastily put her napkin to her mouth: while that seemed suspiciously like a juvenile reaction, she quickly composed herself, and Snape settled for a glare at her as he freshened her water-glass.

"I got everything sorted out," she explained after she'd taken a long sip of water. "The contraceptive's in a better place, and I got the stuff to François that I needed to. The Ministry document copies.... Those were a bother, so I sent paper copies to François as well, and my computer geek has the hard drive."

"If you might care to translate that last, it would be appreciated," Snape said dryly.

"What? Oh. The hard drive is where the computer stores all the information. A computer geek is... well, nerd won't help. Erm, like that Ravenclaw in my Form, what was his name.... Bailey. The one with thick glasses who could bore you to tears with the minutiae of the Goblin Wars and do practically any charm straight off, but who was hopeless at everything else... especially with girls and not falling over his own feet."

"Ah, now I understand. The Intellectuals' equivalent of a Gryffindor Quidditch idiot."

She didn't appreciate that. In fact, judging by the look on her face, Snape reckoned he had blown any chance of easily finding out whether she was wearing the silk knickers.

*Oh, wake up, man -- you know bloody well she's not. You don't have the energy to do anything about it in any case. Best to change the subject.*
"I bloody well hope that --"

"-- that my faith in François isn't misplaced, I know, I know. I'm sure Corcoran got a reprimand from Fudge, and the department's warded-up tighter than a drum, and other than that, nothing.... Don't you want to know what they asked me in the interrogation?"

"Why? You're here, and Shacklebolt told me you did well. I don't need a blow-by-blow account."

Hermione stared at him in frank astonishment: then she shook her head as if to clear it, and started her own questions.

"All right, I know they sent Tonks in, and I know she got something. I'm willing to wager Shacklebolt brought it with him."

"Correct."

"...Well?"

"Memos between Fudge and Corcoran, dating from the inception of the potions idea. Corcoran's a bloody fool, he kept file copies of everything."

Hermione snorted. "Probably thinks it'll be written up in the history books, and wants documentation to prove he's responsible."

"I imagine so. Except that he's not, not really. Neither one of them actually came up with the idea."

"Who did, then?"

"A very nasty character whose name I shan't tell you, I think. The less you know of specifics --"

"All right, all right, go on," she shot back irritably, and pushed her plate away from her.

"He planted the idea of Greenaway's potion in Corcoran's mind, and he's the researcher responsible for developing it for human use."

"Must be good."

"Brilliant technician and theorist, utterly lacking in morals and ethics -- an incredibly bad combination. You are not to muck about trying to --"

"I won't, Severus. If it eats at me that badly, I'll try to pry it out of you instead, all right?"

That was surprising, never mind that there was no bloody way he'd ever tell her.

"The memos are vague at first, and then it's obvious that they're talking about the testing. They hint about implementation, but aren't that specific -- I suppose they're leaving the mechanics up to the brewer, M and M, and St. Mungo's. And they do prove the connections between all the organisations and individuals. But not, however," he added, watching her closely, "enough to put a
stop to everything now. They are useful to prove complicity after the fact, not to derail anything beforehand."

She was clearly disappointed: it was just as he'd thought, then, and she was hoping to blow the conspiracy wide open before they'd got to implementation.

"May I see them?"

"Already out of my hands," he lied. "I couldn't be certain the aurors wouldn't be in, not if they didn't accept our alibi. I can retrieve the memos before they're needed, but it's tricky."

"Oh. Damn," she said.

He hadn't been certain at first why he felt such a strong need to keep the memos from Hermione: he'd excused it at first as not wanting her to see Debdale's name, and then gave up the pretence and admitted that it was the oblique references to her, instead. He didn't think that she could maintain her composure around Corcoran, not after reading that -- it was one thing to suspect that people despised you, and another to know they were sniggering about you behind your back; and he doubted that she could brush aside the thought that a trained monkey should have been preferable to herself, no matter how idiotic and hyperbolic a statement it was.

"What were you trying to shove in my face earlier?" he asked.

"Oh, right. Hang on," Hermione muttered, rose and retrieved her handbag, and pulled the papers from it and handed them over. "*The Prophet* first -- that's the official version."

Snape scanned the front-page article, snorting at Corcoran's ridiculous spin on the lottery, and then went on to *The Quibbler*: he couldn't help but whistle midway through, in admiration of the attack. Lovegood had, for once, managed to write a cogent and entirely reasonable summation.

"He's in for it."

"Already done. Arrested this afternoon, and everyone at the paper suspended."

"I wondered if that was the best decision...."

"What, the article?"

"No. Well, that too. Certain parties slipped some of the info from the memos to the media.... *The Prophet* didn't bite, obviously, but Lovegood couldn't resist hinting that he knows something. And now, as you suspected would happen, that's one less voice to get the important information out when it's *really* needed."

Hermione looked absolutely miserable. "I'd really hoped they might risk it, by now. They turned around in short order about Harry, after the attack on the Ministry."
"There were too many visible signs, then. You can't ignore hundreds of thousands of Galleons of damage done to a public building. You certainly can't ignore packs of unkeepered Dementors roaming about," he said, worried at a bit of beef stuck between his teeth, and then absently began picking at it with a fork-tine. "Fudge caved first, and then--"

"Don't do that," Hermione said.

"What?"

"Use your fork to.... Hang on," she muttered, pulled a hair-pin from her bun, transfigured it into a wooden tooth-pick, and pushed it over toward him. "Use this. You'll chip your teeth if you do that."

"Too late," he shot back, highly embarrassed at being caught indulging in such an admittedly disgusting habit.

"You'll chip them more."

He snatched up the tooth-pick, tossed the fork onto his plate, and said, "Happy?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Fudge couldn't continue to deny it, so *The Prophet's* editor felt safe enough doing an about-face," he said, defiantly picking away at the stuck bit. "He knows upon which side his bread is buttered."

Looking utterly demoralised, Hermione rose, wandered over to the window, boosted herself up onto the sill, and stared outside; Snape, finished with extracting the beef-shred, snapped his fingers for the sweet to replace the remains of their entrée.

No matter how disgusted a dentists' daughter might be with his habits, he doubted her melancholy had much to do with that.

"It's trifle," he wheedled. "The one thing they do excellently, even in winter. I don't know where they find fresh fruit this time of year."

"Don't want any," she mumbled.

*Oh, well. Suppose I'll have to finish both, then -- pity to waste it. Thought I bloody well wish she'd eat properly....*  

"How can you stand it?" she finally asked after several minutes. "How can you accept that we have to see this bloody mess through to its actual administering, knowing that people are going to be injured by it?"

"Because it's my job. That's what you were getting, when you had to bring me in," he said calmly, and fished a bland but acceptable raspberry out of the custard so he could savour it alone. "I don't flatter myself that you *wanted* my help, but that's what you've got."
"That's not --"  

"Someone has to be dispassionate and keep an eye on the larger picture, and it's me. The only difference between Dumbledore and myself, at the moment," he noted, "is I lack that disgusting twinkle in the eye, and I refuse to sugar-coat the whole business."

"I wasn't judging you," she said, surprising him yet again that evening with meekness. "I'm quite serious. I don't know how you stand it."

He thought about that for a while, and then scooped up a bit of ladyfinger and said, "Because I must. It's the only way to keep us safe and prove the case conclusively. I don't have a better explanation than that, and I don't think it requires another."

He glanced up and found her staring earnestly at him; then she nodded slowly, turned again to the window, propped her chin in her hands, and stared out at the superabundant blanket of snow that nearly reached the bottom of the sill.

Neither of them were in the mood for further intercourse -- of either kind -- by the time they went to bed.

*****

Saturday, January 28th

"Cripes," Hermione said from hands and knees on the classroom floor, obviously disgusted. "You're right, it's worse than dried troll-mucus."

"Told you," Snape muttered back, and concentrated on scrubbing every trace of blood off the wall.

"However will you have class on Monday? Won't it still react?"

"Shouldn't, not with the pail of muck out of here and the rest diluted. I believe it's time," he said grimly, "to remove that particular concoction from the curriculum. Wizard Rail shall have to train its own bloody brewers to make it properly."

"Oh, Severus, surely not. The Propulsive Potion was one of the more interesting bits of the Advanced class...."

It took a moment for that to register: and when it did, he slowly turned and quirked an eyebrow upward. It took her a moment to realise he was glaring.

"What?" she asked, indignant, and then it dawned on her. "Oh, for pity's -- I don't mean it that way. I said it was one of the more interesting bits. I didn't say it was the only one. There were plenty."

He snorted, and went back to scrubbing. "I can't trust them at all any longer," he said. "An accident is one thing, that's going to happen eventually. A deliberate tainting in an Advanced class? Much as I'd like to think it's just this lot, I can't. The whole crop is infected with slovenliness and malice, and
it won't disappear when the one Form goes. Not for a very long time, not with the current situation."

"Shame," she murmured. "Couldn't you be more... selective? Not that you aren't anyway...."

"I was. In your Form? Fifteen students from four Houses. This one? Nine. Nine of them, and one of them managed to distract me long enough to nearly kill Caldwell.... Blast it, I've got to track down who did it. Today."

"Won't be hard with only eight, will it?"

"Bloody well will. Three Slytherins in the lot, they've had twelve hours to gird up for questioning, and they'll stick to one story. It might take all day.... I don't suppose you'd care to watch the office for me, would you?"

"Why would you want -- Oh. You actually trust me to answer any questions while you're busy with that?"

"If you don't remember straight off, you'll know where to look it up."

"I suppose," she said.

Something in her tone gave him pause: he turned and stared at her, and found her sitting back on her heels, damp hair stringing about her flushed face, and looking far more doubtful than he could remember since her Third year.

What the bloody hell.... Oh. Blast it.

"I was not entirely serious yesterday, you know."

"About what?"

"About Arithmancy and the rest."

"Oh, I didn't.... I've certainly forgot more of Potions than of that."

"What I mean to say is --"

"I know what you mean, I figured that out yesterday, given your mood. Although you usually mean exactly what you say. I'm just thinking about the other bits. I don't know how to proceed next, that's all."

"I don't believe you can. I have one line of inquiry --"

Which I need to address this week-end as well, damn it --

"-- and given the situation at the Ministry, you'd best stay quiet and keep out of Corcoran's way."
"Yes, Severus," she muttered, bent, and scrubbed at a few square inches of floor she must have done three times over.

Snape wondered why, for once, he wasn't terribly pleased when she promised to behave herself, and why he felt so unaccountably guilty for what he'd said yesterday, whether she'd taken it to heart or not.

*****

Finding out who had bolloxed up Caldwell's cauldron was easier by far than Snape had anticipated. That might have been enough of a shock, but for the fact that the perpetrator simply wasn't who he'd suspected. He'd even begun with this particular student first, thinking to weed out the unlikely ones quickly.

"Yes, sir," Roger DeVries admitted and stifled the hiccough of a sob, not bothering to lie. "I did it."

"For Merlin's sake, DeVries, why? You might have killed him!"

"He'd been talking about what Bingham had done to him, got him chucked off the team and you narked at him and everything, and how he was going to get back at her. And I knew he was serious. So me a-...I wanted to let him know I wouldn't stand for it."

"You and who, DeVries?" Snape demanded. "Stop bawling. You're sixteen years old, not a baby."

"I swore I wouldn't.... Warwick, sir," DeVries admitted.

McGonagall snorted -- Warwick was one of hers, and she obviously thought the idea of malfeasance from him absurd -- and Snape shot her a withering glance.

"And why were you colluding with a Gryffindor against another member of you House?"

"Bingham's Warwick's cousin, sir. The whole family's fashed about the snake business. It's not the first time Caldwell's bullied her."

"It was the first incident against Bingham that anyone bothered to tell me about. Why did neither of you bother to come to Headmistress or me?"

"Because he was just talking about it, first of all. And second, he was bragging about how he was going to pull it off so no-one would guess it was him."

"How?"

"Don't know -- he wasn't stupid, just a braggart," DeVries said, swiping at his unbandaged eye and sitting up straighter in his chair, trying to behave like a man. "We didn't mean to hurt him that badly, sir, honestly. We must've miscalculated the dose."
"Thank you," Snape said savagely. "I shouldn't have known that, as you managed to destroy all the evidence. So Warwick distracted me with that asinine problem, and you slipped an extra portion of the catalyst into Caldwell's potion."

"Yes."

"Was there anyone else involved?"

"No, sir. I mean, Portnoy knew right before that something was going on, because I told her to step further down the table and turn her back. But she didn't know what I was about to do."

"So, DeVries," McGonagall asked softly, "you knew it might not work as you expected?"

"No, I just didn't want her to see or for people to think she --"

"DeVries...." Snape warned.

The young man wilted.

"All right, yes, I... I knew it might be a bigger pop than we expected...."

_Bloody hell -- he knew it, and he did it anyway.... Second-highest marks, exemplary record, and he's buggered it all to hell._

Snape wanted to lay into the boy so badly that he turned on his heel, strode to a window, and gripped the sill tightly so he shouldn't be tempted to shake the fool's head off.

"... Professor Snape's always warned us how reactive that stuff is, Ma'am," DeVries explained earnestly to McGonagall behind Snape's back. "It wasn't carelessness on his part."

"You needn't defend Professor Snape's competence, DeVries," McGonagall retorted with maximum tartness. "I'm well aware that he's exceptionally careful. And it makes it rather worse for you, I'm afraid. You _knew_, and you went ahead with your little vigilante action instead of doing something _sensible_, like going to your Head."

_Of course his Head hasn't been around a great deal, _Snape thought with a twinge of guilt. _Off mucking about at the bloody seashore and not keeping regular office hours...._

"I'll be sent down, won't I?" DeVries said.

"Your victim's in St. Mungo's, and four others beside yourself sport acid-burns, DeVries," Snape shot over his shoulder. "What do _you_ think?"

"I should be surprised if that's the end of it," McGonagall added. "Caldwell's parents may well insist on pressing charges."

"Oh, bloody.... Beg pardon, Ma'am," DeVries whispered. "Not that I don't deserve it, but.... Warwick really doesn't. He didn't actually do it."
"That's not your judgement to make, I'm afraid," McGonagall said. "Professor Snape, are you satisfied with DeVries's explanation?"

Snape nodded, eyes on the lake, unwilling to look at DeVries' stricken, earnest face again.

"Very well. Back to your dormitory, I think, and I require you not to speak of this to anyone. We shall call you when we've decided for certain."

Snape heard DeVries' chair-legs brush against the thick Turkish carpet, and the quiet snick of the door-latch as he left McGonagall's office.

"Very well done, Severus," McGonagall said softly.

"What the bloody hell for?" he muttered.

"Not going into a frothing rage. I expected accusations of his smirching your record."

"Smirching be damned. Not that he hasn't. And yours, not that Warwick will get any blame --"

"I admit that I wouldn't have believed it, but there is a family tie. They're exceptionally clannish, the Warwicks. We shall have to send both of them down, of course, so you needn't be snide. Don't look so surprised," she added when Snape finally turned back. "They hatched the plot between them, no matter who tainted the cauldron. And they're not really mine any longer, you know, not this lot. I shall have a damned hard time convincing Olivia that it's necessary. Probably ought lay down the law with her -- she's nearly as protective as I was."

"Not possible," Snape muttered.

"I hate to do it, though...."

"Oh, really. If it were only DeVries --"

"I shall take points from you if you don't smooth down your hackles, young man.... You do realise," she said, staring him down over her glasses rims, "that they're nearly of age? I can still protect them from this ridiculous lottery business while they're here, but once they're home, that's it. Not a single thing I can do to keep them clear of it."

"Ah. My apologies," Snape said, and turned back to the window.

"Which is not to say there's anything you can do either, Severus, not with the other business to deal with."

"Could take a chance. We might be able to rouse enough outrage.... My... partner is certainly willing to risk it."
"Your partner," McGonagall reminded him gently, "is rather younger, and doesn't quite realise how much she has to lose, I think. And, being a Gryffindor, she has that terribly reckless streak that we prefer to call bravery."

He had to snort at that: it was the first implicit criticism he'd ever heard McGonagall utter of her own House, even if it was meant as a tweak at himself.

"Odd, isn't it," McGonagall mused, "that when we're younger, we never think about how much we can lose, only what we can gain.... At any rate, Severus, you must follow your plan. DeVries and Warwick have made their own ill-considered beds and shall have to lie in them."

"And what about all the rest? Hermione has a valid point about that -- don't think she's let me lead her about by the nose, far from it, she's still adamant about quick action. And she has a bloody point. It's not just the lottery business, it's.... Well, there's a lot more at stake than a cohabitation scheme."

"If the rest are so stupid not to see what's coming or too cowed to do anything about it, then they deserve what they get. No government can be trusted entirely. Fudge has proven that before, and everyone was too lazy to do a thing about him."

"And what would he have done?" Snape asked, and nodded to the wall across from McGonagall's desk, where Albus Dumbledore snoozed within his portrait-frame.

"About Fudge, if he'd survived?"

"No, about allowing half the bloody population to stay in harm's way."

"You know very well, Severus, that he felt some losses were inevitable," McGonagall said. "The only time I knew him to falter was the business with Potter."

"Precisely when he shouldn't have done."

"I won't comment on that, but it's a good reason why you mustn't. You have no excuse to, with his example before you."

Dumbledore's portrait cracked its eyes open, shot a sleepy and reproachful glance at McGonagall, and then looked at Snape quite sadly before its lids nodded and it dropped back off.

"Doesn't talk much, does it?" Snape said critically.

"No, it doesn't. I don't think he imbued it with much of himself at all -- too tired of dispensing advice for far too long while he was alive. Go on, Severus," she dismissed him. "Hermione's about, isn't she? I shall deal with Olivia and Warwick, and then I must speak with Caldwell's parents. Perhaps I can persuade them not to press charges, as he'll recover -- and seeing as how I might be obliged to investigate and report his harassments.... That could get him sent down as well, at the very least. I must say," she added under her breath, "that I'm rather glad he got his comeuppance, although I wish the lads had done something a bit less spectacular."
Hermione was dealing with a student when Snape found her, in his office: he motioned for both of them to continue when they stopped, and peered over Hermione's shoulder to observe what they were hashing out. It was all quite in order, and he murmured, "Carry on. Don't let her keep you after the dinner gong, Williams -- she'll teach you the rest of the Term's curriculum, if you let her."

Williams gaped at him; Hermione probably glared, but Snape didn't hang about long enough to notice or care -- he was far too busy.

He was off, once again, to The Hog's Head.

Identifying Debdale's assistant was not, alas, as easy as it had been to locate Forsythe. Discreet letters to several colleagues, both domestic and foreign, had turned up nothing earlier in the week: no-one had an assistant who'd defected to another post, moved away, or been sacked within the last two years. Even Bluett hadn't any idea.

There were only two options, Snape felt: canvass every bloody second-rate Advanced Potions student of the last fifteen years -- the thought of which made him nauseous, frankly, as he'd hoped to see the back of most of them for good and all -- or to approach Phileas Hare (which was equally nausea-making though in a quite different way, but had the advantage of being a one-time trial). Hare was a nasty character, a second cousin of both Borgin and Burke, and had absolutely none of their better qualities, such as they were.

He settled on Hare, threw some powder in the floo, and instructed it, "Asphodel and Wormwood.... Knockturn Alley."

A few seconds later the flame flared up, and Snape poked his head through.

"Hang on," a gravelly voice commanded off to the right of the floo, which didn't face straight on into the shop. "With a coostomer."

Snape had plenty of time to observe the odd little niche of the room that faced the floo. It hadn't changed much: Snape fancied he recognised many of the jars on the upper shelves. They hadn't been touched for years judging by the dust on them, other than a quick charm to refresh the colours and scents of the ingredients. (Far be it for Hare to waste a blessed grain of ingredient, even if the resulting potion was weak and ineffective.)

That was the one thing that could be said for Julius Snape, that he'd never sold a client an inferior product, even if he'd charged commensurate to its illegality. Hare had no such scruples, and he must have made a packet in the years since he'd bought the place at a bargain price: even the hardened denizens of Knockturn Alley hadn't wanted to deal with the possibility of Julius Snape's shade hanging about, but Hare hadn't given a damn, and hadn't even bothered to change the name of the shop.
"You?" he hissed. "Why, bless, me, you're the last person Ah expected to see.... You haven't changed a whit since you poked about here last."

Snape bit the inside of his cheek. "Last" had been just after his Hogwarts Leaving when, impelled by some misguided urge to come to terms with what had happened in the disgusting little shop, he'd returned and stood outside in the lane staring through the fly-specked window. Hare had recognised him then: he'd known Julius Snape, and seen him in his son. Anything Snape had required from Asphodel and Wormwood since then (once he'd been in a position to afford it) had been ordered by owl-post.

"Ah woonder what the high-and-mighty Hogwarts Potions Master could want from me?" Hare continued with a leer. (That was quite unpleasant. The state of Hare's teeth made even Snape cringe.)

"Information," Snape managed stiffly.

"Didn't think it were my stores, oh, no, we've been very quiet-like lately, haven't we? Keepin' our cauldron clean, are we?"

The Snape part of 'we' was very close to attempting a hexing over the floo. "Lately' was over fifteen years ago, if you recall. I want information."

"That'll cost you, that will," Hare said, and nodded sagely. "Givin' out information's more like to get a body killed that anythin' else --"

The shop-bell jangled: Hare whipped out of Snape's view again, and barked, "Closed -- come back tomorrer."

Snape heard the unfortunate client argue, "But the sign says --"

"Don't care what bloody sign says, we're closed!" Hare bellowed, and Snape heard the skittering of feet across the gritty floor, a more frantic jangle of the bell, and a door-slam.

"Now, as I was sayin'," Hare continued, his head coming back into view, "information will cost you something as a basis, and if I really don't like the question, a little something more. For the basis, say, a few gallons of Slug Repellent."

Snape had suspected it would be that. Hare would be eager to exploit the illicit contraceptives market, though for far less compassionate reasons than Bluett.

"Not possible," he said. "Restricted and tracked, you know that. I can't jigger the inventory this term --"
"Ohhhhh. What a pity. Best go ask old Figgity, then, if you can find 'im. He's closed shop and done a runner since Cruikbeak got thrown in the clink."

" -- I do, however, have one and one-half flasks each of Fire lizard bile and of Erumpent fluid, both fresh, which I can allow to leave the premises." Bloody idiots won't need it now, I'm serious about pulling that potion.... Though McGonagall will throttle me if she finds out if I used school supplies for this. "Both quite pricey as I'm sure you know. Some of your more... anarchistic clients might find them useful, don't you think?"

Hare chewed at the ends of his ragged moustache, decided that yes, some of them would, and nodded. "Done. Send it on by termorrer, gentlemen's agreement. Ask away."

"A rather nasty character recently began working in England again -- might well have ordered from you, for all I know."

"Can't confirm that. Con-fie-dentiality, you know."

"That's not the question -- I know who he is. He acquired an assistant somewhere along the way, and I want to know who."

"How t' blooody hell should Ah know? Ah don't extend credit, so no bloody names."

"Rather odd ingredients," Snape noted. "Nadder-skin, for one. Surely you'd remember anyone who asked for that, or picked it up."

Hare scratched at a wart on his chin and nodded. "Fat little bastard, think's he's better'n an ordinary apothecary. He's not -- sold him third-rate billywig stingers at full price, he didn't notice nor bat an eye."

"No name, of course."

"Course. Ah reckon he might've been one of yours five, six years back, though."

"Did he take delivery personally, or have it sent on?"

"You think Ah keep that much Nadder-skin in stock? Naw. Gave him what Ah had, promised delivery when rest came in. Stupid sod never bothered to check shipment against bill, 'cause Ah shorted him and haven't heard a word since."

"And where was it delivered?" Snape asked, trying to remain neutral-faced: he badly wanted that information.

"Ahhhh, now, that'll cost you more," Hare said slyly.

Of course. And it would have to be something very unusual or precious.... The one thing Snape had left to offer -- besides Slug-Repellent or a tiny vial of unicorn blood, which he certainly wasn't
going to waste on Hare -- was very unusual indeed, but Hare mightn't care to go to the trouble of making it pay. He'd likely have to sell it to Ollivander.

"I have," he said, thoughtful, "precisely three full strands of a centaur's tail."

Hare's expression sharpened. "Bloody.... Where'd you get that?"

"Never mind," Snape said.

"Root and all?"

"Root and all," Snape confirmed, and declined to add that the strands were quite old and that the root was consequently not very potent.

"Done. Hang on, let me find the shipment bill...."

Hare left the floo: Snape heard him rummaging about in his books, and then the ugly old bastard hove back into view. "Cane Hill, Valley Road, Coulsdon. 'S an old Muggle building -- had to send the shipment in at night."

"Thank you," Snape said. "I'll send the things on tomorrow."

He terminated the connection immediately, unwilling to waste further niceties on Hare.

Unpleasant as it had been, it was worth the effort. He should have to consult his student records, but he thought he knew who the fat little bastard was: and if Hare wasn't lying through his teeth, Cane Hill in Coulsdon was very likely where Debdale had set up shop, at least for the early phase of his project.

*Good thing I kept the centaur hair. Odd, how those little bits and bobs come in handy years later,* Snape thought, and massaged his knee. (It was a bloody bad day to have walked to Hogsmeade: it had snowed that morning.)

He'd nearly thrown the hairs away at the time, but some thrifty impulse had made him carefully unwind them from the cuff-buttons of his ruined trousers, and to wrap and store them, nearly a week after the accident. Merlin knew he hadn't needed a souvenir, for he was still in a great deal of pain despite Poppy Pomfrey's best efforts: one didn't need an aide-memoir of a bloody heavy centaur smashing one's leg to bits, or of the struggle to get out from under him.

Snape stopped downstairs at the bar for a nip of Firewhisky to fortify himself for the trudge home, and was charitable enough to start off with a silent toast to the memory of Firenze.

*****

*Sunday, January 29th*
Sunday started quite... peacefully. An early-morning, invigorating shag of his sleep-grumbly but not entirely unwilling or unresponsive wife was a good start: she'd already fallen asleep when he'd got back to the castle, and his leg was aching abominably, so he'd put that bit off until he'd had a good rest himself. (She didn't sound as enthusiastic as in their last encounter, but what little she did manage certainly sounded much more sincere, for which he was grateful. Even if it was less exciting, it gave him a very good idea of how they were progressing on the sexual tutelage front.)

Perhaps persuading her to allow me one of the more interesting positions soon isn't too terribly optimistic, after all....

Hermione was apparently determined to be a slug that week-end, for she fell back to sleep almost immediately. She stayed that way even when he tried to wake her for breakfast, muzzily swatting at his hands and mumbling for him to go 'way; so he did, and demolished most of both their breakfasts himself before deferring his morning bath in the interest of sending off the items he'd promised Hare post-haste.

Then he detoured to the Bursar's poky little office to check the student rolls.

The Bursar was a convenient fiction of Snape's own devising, the type of personage that the Headmistress and Deputy Head could invoke to stymie the more sickle-pinching Governors -- as in, 'I'm afraid the Bursar is most insistent that the Scholars' programme requires another three thousand this year'. McGonagall had insisted that it wouldn't work, and then nearly given away the game by gaping in astonishment when the bloody Governors had caved in without seeming to notice that Hogwarts had never before possessed a Bursar; and later, in private, she'd actually congratulated Snape for 'such a nice bit of Slytherin guile.' (It was, and she'd seemed sincere, so he'd not bothered to sneer at the backhanded compliment. She didn't have the least difficulty invoking the Bursar herself, either, at the next possible opportunity.)

An automated quill system fulfilled the role in actuality as nothing more than a book-keeper, so Snape had no fussy, self-important bean-counting idiot to quibble with over pulling past years' records.

'Fat little bastard'.... Shall I assume stockiness gone to seed? I shall. The mid-teen growth spurt usually knocks the puppy fat out of most of the boys by Seventh Year. 'Stupid sod', unfortunately, covers any number of the numbskulls....

He found the most likely suspect in 2000's crop.

*Petherbridge, damn his eyes. The idiot savant of Potions.*

That wasn't quite fair to the garden-variety idiot savant, though. Petherbridge could rattle off the constituents of any potion as quickly as Hermione ever had -- faster, in many instances -- but, unlike Hermione, he'd been almost incapable of remembering what he was supposed to bloody well do with them. He could remember individual properties, but not how ingredients would react in combination; he could recall any number of trivial facts about who had discovered what use or developed a specific potion, but he almost invariably transposed double-digit measurements, and actually melted more cauldrons than Longbottom. (But then Longbottom's forte had
been explosion, not melting.) He'd only just eked out a pass by making exceptionally high marks on the written exam, but the practical.... Snape had wagered that not even a third-rate apothecary would have Petherbridge on its wage-list for long.

Easy, then, for Debdale to pick him up somewhere along the line -- a discreet inquiry to an employment agency, one all too willing to shove an unemployable client his way. Petherbridge was certainly fine for the dirty work -- mucking out the equipment, arranging for supplies, even for consulting on substitutions -- but Snape thought he'd probably proved hopeless to Debdale when it came to actually brewing. (That in itself wasn't good for either Snape or Petherbridge. Debdale had probably disposed of him as soon as possible, especially if he'd mucked things up.)

*That might bear looking into, any murders or missing wizards reports.... Ask Shacklebolt.*

As for Cane Hill, Coulsdon, he should have to go himself. It was doubtful Debdale had left anything behind, and even less chance that he was actually lodging there, but there might be *some* clues lying about.

*Bloody hell.... Another slog through unfamiliar territory on time I don't have.*

It should have to be done, though, in the interest of being thorough. And there wasn't much other headway he could make.

*But I needn't do it today. In fact, I should like to get another good shag in before lunch,* he thought as he warded up the Bursar's office and began to return to his rooms. *I'm feeling much more chipper this morning, for some reason.*

He was briefly distracted by a little note that came whizzing down the corridor after him -- McGonagall's supposedly-brilliant idea of borrowing Ministry methods, which on the whole was preferable to an embarrassing, strident Sonorous of, 'Professor Snape will report to the Headmistress's office, please' -- which informed him that Caldwell's parents had not elected to press charges, and that both DeVries and Warwick would be returning home that evening, sent down for good: and then he continued onward, hoping to catch Hermione still abed. (Perhaps even still asleep. He rather enjoyed waking her nicely: she was often grumpy, but not prickly or particularly reluctant, by the time she realised what he was about. Grumpy was significantly better than reluctant, as far as Snape was concerned.)

It wasn't to be, however. He noticed the letter on the side-table immediately he walked through the door and set his wand down beside it; and he read the note as he wandered further into the sitting-room, unbuttoning one-handed as he walked.

*S -- in Library. Hope to check in on Marsters as well. Shall see you at lunch, assume Great Hall. H.*

*Blast.... Ah, well. I suppose a bath first, then lunch, and the shag for afters.*

He had his frock-coat half off before he realised he wasn't entirely alone in the room: a prickling at the back of his neck tipped him off. He paused and listened carefully, and heard a muted hissing somewhere between that of a cornered cat and a tea-kettle about to blow.
Fuck. You fool, you never put your wand down until you've checked everything --

"It's true," someone growled from the corner behind him. "It is. And you is to blame."

He couldn't immediately place the voice: it was familiar, but distorted and not human at all. It was coming from the darkest corner of the sitting-room, from beneath the portrait of the ninth Head of Slytherin House -- the one behind which Snape had installed a wall safe, and where he'd stashed important bits like Firenze's hair, his own most personal documents, and, contrary to what he'd told Hermione --

-- the bloody memos. Of all the gods-damned luck. I know I warded the bloody thing back up --

"You is all to blame, you is," the nasty, rage-filled voice continued. "And you is going to pay, you is."

He risked a glance over his shoulder, and winced. Crouched in the corner was Pinky -- bow askew and its ribbon-ends shredded, the memos scattered about her on the floor, and one of them crumpled in her spatulate fingers: her huge eyes were wide with rage, and she looked feral and dangerous.

Strike that, she has gone feral. Bloody hell, I though the little beasts were illiterate.... My bloody luck, they sent me one who can not only break my wards, but read as well.

Snape was not, technically, Pinky's master. While Minerva McGonagall was Headmistress and was considered the master, the Deputy Head was not: they obeyed him, as they did all the other faculty and staff, at her order. But an Elf which had gone off its head (and Snape was willing to wager Pinky had) was quite likely to do serious damage to anyone it did not directly answer to.

"What's true, Pinky?" he asked calmly, staring her down and trying to ignore that her free hand was rising slowly, forefinger poised to send something -- probably a very nasty Elf-hex -- his way.

"The stories," she said, voice gravelly.

"What stories, you silly creature?"

"Don't," she spat at him, forefinger jerking up to aim directly at his heart. "Professor s-- You isn't to treat Pinky like she's a stupid Elf, because she's not."

"Very well, then, what stories, Pinky?" he said quickly to mollify the mad little thing.

"The ones they tells in the kitchens late at night. How Elves is free once until a bad wizard caged us. How we is bred to make more servants for wizards --"

Snape tried to work his wrists free of his sleeves -- no point in Accio-ing for his wand with his hands tied up -- and she shrieked, " -- You isn't to move!"

He froze.
"Is it true?" she demanded. "This Green-way, he's the bad wizard."

"He was, yes."

"And he is doing this to sell us."

"It doesn't say that, Pinky."

"Yes it do," she said, glaring at him. "'Commodity.' Pinky knows that means something to sell."

That was quite ridiculous to hear from an Elf -- though true -- and Snape couldn't restrain a snort. "How in Merlin's name would you --"

"Dobby taught Pinky to read from The Prophet. Even the Financial section."

_Oh, for fuck's sake. If I live to get my hands on that idiot troublemaker...._

Perhaps Pinky wasn't that far gone yet: perhaps setting her straight on who was boss was the best course -- not obviously, of course, but it could be done more persuasively....

"Pinky," he began carefully, "I don't think you understand the... context of that information. And as you deliberately broke my ward and read that without permission -- and I assume you've done that with many of my things -- you owe it to me to sit down and listen to exactly what it --"

"Pinky isn't owing you anything," she snarled, and took a shaky step toward him, balling the memo up in her fingers even more. "You and other wizards is owing Pinky a great deal. And Dobby and the others. And Pinky is going to make you pay."

She took another step toward him, the air crackling about her with suppressed Elf-magic, and Snape had a few seconds to think through his obituary.

_Severus Snape, aged 48, Hogwarts Potions Master. Survived the Death Eaters, Albus Dumbledore, Harry Bloody Potter, the last battle of the Second War, Crushing by Centaur, and a much-younger know-it-all wife. Killed without his wand and in shirt-sleeves by a mad House-Elf...._

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Chapter 17: Wherein S.P.E.W. finally pays off, and Hermione hits the motherlode.

_Hogwarts_
_Sunday, January 29th_

Marsters was doing far better than the last time Hermione had quizzed him: he was able to work through the Third Operation with very little difficulty, and much more speedily. She was quite impressed to find that he'd tutored another student who was having trouble with it, and she spent
considerably longer with both of them than she'd anticipated -- and worked her hair back into quite a snarl in the process, having shoved it out of the way several times in the course of the tutorial. A touch-up was definitely in order before lunch, and she hurried back to Severus' rooms.

_Funny, I never thought I'd have the patience to teach. I don't mind it, really. Although I wonder if I should, doing it every day.... It's a thought, I suppose, if Corcoran chucks me out of the Ministry._

She was a few feet away from Severus' door when she realised the rooms were occupied: a shrill but muffled voice reached her, and she slowed.

_Certainly didn't sound like Severus.... Couldn't be McGonagall reading him the riot act over something, could it? No, her voice can be piercing, but it's much lower. Who on earth could he have in there?_

She nestled up to the door and pressed her ear to the crack at the hinged side, trying to pick up more of the conversation.

"And he... sell...."

Definitely female, but very odd.

"It doesn't...."

That was Severus, certainly. _But who's the bloody woman? ...Oh, my God, don't tell me his mother's come to visit --_

"Yes it do. Commodity. Pinky --"

_Oh, for pity's sake, it's that blasted elf._

She decided to cheat, pulled her wand, and worked another of the neat little charms Bill Weasley had shown her: he'd taught it to the twins as well, and they'd based their Extendable Ears on it.

"Dobby taught Pinky to read from The Prophet. Even the Financial section."

_Good Lord, she's mucked about with his books and he's about to hex her silly._

"Pinky, I don't think you understand the... context of that information."

_Hang on, he sounds... reasonable. Too reasonable, for him. And a bit too delicate._

"And as you deliberately broke my ward and read that without permission -- and I assume you've done that with many of my things -- you owe it to me to sit down and listen to exactly what it --"

"Pinky isn't owing you anything."

_Holy shit -- she's confronting him about something. That's wrong, very wrong --_
She fumbled with her wand, fingers clumsy in her haste, and directed a Silencing Charm at each of the hinges and the latch.

"You and other wizards is owing Pinky a great deal. And Dobby and the others."

Another charm to disable the ward alarm -- Severus wouldn't be happy to learn she knew that one, but he'd better not snarl under the circumstances -- and Hermione eased the door open, hoping that Pinky wouldn't see her in the entry-niche immediately. She kept her wand hidden behind her back.

"And Pinky is going to make you pay," she clearly heard the Elf growl, even before she saw Severus standing directly before her in front of the fireplace, wandless, arms caught in his coat.

Oh, cripes. She's going to hurt him.

"Pinky," Severus cautioned, not giving the least sign that he knew Hermione was there, "how is that going to help? You'll be in a great deal of trouble."

"Help?" Pinky shrieked. "Help? How many Elves is hurt by Green-way? How many by wizards? Pinky doesn't care what happens to Pinky, Pinky is needing to hurt back. And you is always so mean to Pinky anyway, and nasty-snarly to all the Elves, and Pinky is wanting a bit of her own back!"

That was quite enough of that: Hermione gently cleared her throat and stepped into the archway, and flinched when a hex hit the corner of the entry, blasted a hole in the wall, and sent plaster-dust airborne.

"It's only Madam Snape, Pinky," she managed through coughing, and squinted in pain: she'd got a good blast of grit in the near eye, and it hurt like hell. "Why do you want to hurt Professor Snape?"

"Go away," the Elf growled. "Pinky isn't wanting to hurt Madam Snape. Not yet. But Pinky will if Madam Snape tries to stop her. Go away."

"I can't, Pinky," Hermione said. "I need to sit down a moment, I can't see terribly well...." She sidled back over to the mouth of the niche, crouched down to elf eye-level, and cupped her hand over her eye, which was now tearing up. "What's the matter, Pinky?"

"Get out of here," Severus ordered her under his breath. "Get McGonagall."

"Quiet," Hermione shot back without looking at him, just as Pinky gave a snarl and whipped her finger back in his direction.

"The stories is true," Pinky wailed, eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. "The stories is true, he says so. And then he says they isn't and thinks Pinky is stupid and will believe him, the nasty-snarly old wiz-
"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Pinky, he's nasty-snarly to everyone," Hermione said evenly. "He treats you and the others the same as he treats us. It's when he's nice that you have to wonder if he's lying."
"Thank you," Severus said. (She was sure he was glaring at her, and she was rather glad she couldn't see him, as she was watching Pinky carefully with her good eye.)

"Not at all, perfectly accurate. Anyway, Pinky, what stories, and why are you about to hex him?"

"Bad Green-way and the elves," Pinky sobbed.

"Green-way?" Hermione asked, trying to puzzle it out.


"Oh, that. How did she --?"

"Fudge and Corcoran's memos."

"Oh, cripes. Well, Pinky, I'm afraid it is true."

Pinky drew herself up to her full height, glared at Severus, and said, "You is fibbing to Pinky."

"I did not --"

"You is saying it didn't mean selling elves."

"Did he say that?" Hermione asked the elf. "That was naughty of him --"

"Don't help me any more, will you?" Severus growled.

"-- but I think you've frightened him rather badly, Pinky, and you really haven't given him a chance to explain."

"But if the stories is true --"

"He's quite right about one thing, Pinky. There are things you don't understand about the situation, and you might regret hurting Professor Snape when you do know."

Pinky hesitated: then her ears flattened down against the back of her head, and she stared suspiciously at Hermione through narrowed eyes.

"You is his wife," she hissed. "You is lying to Pinky, too, to help him."

"Wand?" Severus muttered, rather desperately; and Hermione said, "I don't think it's necessary," hoping rather desperately herself that it wouldn't be, even as she gripped it more tightly behind her back. "What else has Dobby taught you, Pinky?"

"What is Dobby to do with this?"

"Has Dobby told you about Harry Potter?"
"Yes."

"And about Harry's Weezy?"

"Yes."

"What about Hermione?"

The elf, now thoroughly confused, said, "Miss Hermione?"

"Yes. Harry Potter's friend Miss Hermione. The one who knitted hats for all the elves. The one who wanted to free them."

"Dobby is saying Miss Hermione is loopy," Pinky said matter-of-factly.

"For once I agree," Severus muttered. "And how you think that will help is beyond me...."

"Thank Dobby for me, would you, Pinky?" Hermione said wryly. "Considering his eccentricities, I'll take it as a compliment."

"Madam Snape is --?"

"-- is Harry Potter's loopy friend Miss Hermione, yes," Hermione said, snuffled, and carefully patted about her eye-socket with the hem of her jumper. (Bloody hell, if I don't get this cleaned out soon....) "Pinky, it's true that I'm... fond of Professor Snape, however nasty-snarly he is, and I certainly don't want you to hurt him, but I've always thought that what's been done to the elves is terrible. And I always wanted very much to help them, but I never found a way that really worked. So you see, I'm not going to lie to you about what happened. I'll tell you whatever you want to know if I have the answer. I'd just like you to calm down for a moment and listen to what Professor Snape and I have to say before you decide to hurt anyone."

Pinky stared her down for a moment, and then said, "Green-way hurt the elves, so he could sell them."

"Yes, that's true. He developed a potion to make them breed when they didn't want to."

"And wizards is buying elves and making them work ever since."

"Yes, that's true, too -- some wizards. Not all. Not all of them think it's right."

Slight fib there, the only one I know who gives a damn is me....

"And all the elves in the wild is gone. Or nearly gone."

"That I don't know.... Severus?" she asked, voice clotted: her eye was tearing up and stinging so badly that she could hardly concentrate.

"I don't.... Pinky, would you let my w-- Would you let Miss Hermione go rinse her eye, please."
"No, you isn't playing tricks on Pinky," the elf said instantly. "Tell Pinky about the wild elves."

"I shall, you little.... I shall, but I can tell Miss Hermione is in a great deal of pain, and her eye may be damaged if she doesn't flush it clean. Would you please allow her to do so, or let me bring some water from the bath?"

Both eyes were streaming tears now: Hermione couldn't see a blessed thing, and neither Severus nor Pinky were talking. Then Pinky said, "You isn't to move, or someone is going to be hurt," before Hermione heard her shuffle across the room. When she'd reached Hermione she tapped her under the chin, said, "You is to keep your head up and eye open for me, Miss Hermione," and waited until Hermione held the lids open; then she snapped a glass of water into existence, and gently dripped it from her fingertip onto Hermione's eye until most of the grit had gone.

"Thank you," Hermione heard Severus say, voice strained, as Pinky patted Hermione's cheek dry with the edge of her tea-towel. "Now, your answer. As you read in the documents, Minister Fudge seemed to think wild elves are extinct. Apparently they're not."

"So there is more elves?" Pinky asked. "Ones that is wild, not like us?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of them. I suppose I could make inquiries, but in all likelihood that would put them in danger."

"Oh," Pinky said, ears drooping.

"Did you understand the rest of the papers, Pinky?" Hermione asked.

"They is about a potion. And espear-- espear-- "

"Experiments. Right. It's nearly the same potion Greenaway used on your ancestors, except Minister Fudge wants it used on wizards. We're not breeding well at the moment either, you see, and he's going to force us."

"So?" Pinky said, and sniffed disdainfully.

"So Professor Snape and I found out about all this only a little while ago, about Greenaway. Even I didn't know how the elves had been captured and bred, and I'd studied everything I could lay my hands on. What happened simply hasn't been written about at all, so most people don't know."

"And stopping Minister Fudge," Severus said, "will mean everyone has to read about it, Pinky. Not only what he plans to do to wizards, but how it was done to elves. But we have to have the evidence to have him arrested, first. What you read today is part of that evidence."

Pinky gazed at Severus quite sceptically, and then looked to Hermione for confirmation.

"He isn't fibbing, Pinky, it's true." He's making bloody well certain you hear the thing most advantageous to you, Pinky, but he's not fibbing. "The whole thing will be published in the papers if we're able to prove it. But we're the only two that have the whole story so far, and I don't think I
can prove it by myself if you... put him out of action. Does that make sense? Do you see why hurting him isn't going to help you, and may hurt all the elves?"

"Yes," Pinky whimpered. "Pinky understands now."

"It isn't really fair, anyway -- he's not responsible for what Greenaway did, he hasn't made that potion, and as far as I know he's never owned an elf in his life. Have you, Severus?" she asked, glancing up at him.

"No."

"But he is always nasty to Pinky," the elf said darkly. "Always calling Pinky nasty names and throwing things at Pinky's head."

"And I've already told him it's not nice or right to do that, and he's promised me --" Or he will, by God, promise me -- "-- that he won't throw things any more. I can't guarantee he won't still call names, he's a terrible one for calling names, especially if you go rooting among his personal things, because he's a very private person. Can the two of you promise to behave better toward each other?"

Pinky looked doubtful, but nodded: Severus looked as though he were about to spit nails, but managed a sullen "Very well."

"Good. I shall hold both of you to it. Pinky, can I have that, please?" Hermione said of the paper the elf had stuffed in the waist-band of her tea-towel. "It's important evidence, I'm afraid."

Pinky pulled it free and carefully smoothed it out before handing it to Hermione.

"What in bloody blue blazes is going on here?" McGonagall demanded from the open doorway.

Hermione started, lost her balance, fell on her hip with a thud, and all three of them said simultaneously, "Nothing."

"I doubt that. Middle of luncheon, the castle tells me it's been damaged, I have to leave the table, and what do I find? A chunk out of the plaster, my Potions Master looking quite ridiculous with his coat half-off, his wife looking as though she's cried her eyes out, and a very guilty-looking House-Elf."

Pinky attempted defiance, and then wilted. "Pinky didn't mean to cause such trouble, Headmistress," she whimpered. "Pinky is reading something terrible, and is losing her temper -- Ohhhhh!" she wailed, curled up in a ball on the floor, and blubbered as she banged her head against the stones.

"Merlin's balls --"

"Pinky, stop that immed-- ... Really, Severus, I hope you don't use that language in front of the children. ...Pinky, stop that at once. Is everyone all right?"
"Yes," Hermione said. "No harm done."

"Bloody well was," Severus accused. "The little sneak broke into my --"

"Severus!"

"...Pinky broke into my safe and read some highly sensitive documents which she had best not blab to the rest of the elves. Or anyone else, for that matter."

"Did she? How enterprising, Pinky. Quite wrong, but enterprising," McGonagall said severely, stepped into the room, took Hermione's chin in her hand, and stared critically at the damage. "I should have Poppy look at that right away," she advised. "Is Pinky responsible for this too?"

"Yes," Severus said.


"I see. Pinky, you and I need to have a talk. To my office, if you please."

Pinky -- still prone on the floor -- looked mournfully up at Hermione, mouthed "Pinky is sorry, Miss Hermione," and popped out of the room.

"I'll have that seen to tomorrow, Severus," McGonagall said, staring over her glasses-rims at the hole in the wall. "Which one of you was she aiming for?"

"Me, but I'd startled her," Hermione volunteered.

"Minerva, you can't possibly keep that bloody creature about -- she might have killed Hermione, or that bloody hole might have been in my chest --"

"I'll give her a good dressing-down, Severus," McGonagall said calmly, and moved to the door. "They will get fashed over things and go off their heads every once in a while, but I shall put her right."

"How much did you hear?" Severus demanded.

"Enough to know you've been chucking things at the scouts," McGonagall said, and fixed him with a glare. "Not done, young man. I shall have to dock your salary if it happens again. See to that eye, Hermione."

And she left, smartly closing the door behind her.

*****

Severus stared after McGonagall, absolute outrage purpling his face; and then he seemed to realise that he must indeed look ridiculous, and began to wrestle himself out of his coat-sleeves.
"Bloody little beast threatens to --" he wrenched his left arm free, "disembowel me --" (right arm free, then, and coat balled up in a bunch) "-- and all bloody Minerva McGonagall can say is --"

"She's got you pegged, young man," Hermione said, trying not to giggle as he hurled the coat to the floor. "Does she always call you that when she's --"

"Yes," he snarled as he whipped around to face her. "Where's your bloody wand?"

"Right here," she said, held it up, and ill-advisedly asked, "Where's yours?"

He went even more purple (if it were possible), and bellowed, "Why didn't you bloody use it?"

"Would if I'd had to," she said, dropped the document, and started to scrub at the irritated eye with her hand.

"Don't do that, you stupid --"

He stopped himself, swore again, and then strode over to her, pulled her to her feet, and dragged her through the inner door and into his office: the lamp-wicks popped into flame as they passed, automatically.

Oh, wow. How did he do that? He didn't even bother to wave at them --

"Next time," he muttered midway across the room, "don't bother trying to sort it out, just shoot."

"I couldn't, not to Pinky, not until I was sure I couldn't get her to.... Where are we going?"

"Classroom. Safety station," he said, barging through the connecting door, into the classroom, and hauling her over to the basin.

"Oh. It's really much better --"

"Filthy little creatures, you've probably got more muck in it now than before. Flush it out," he commanded, and left her to deal with the eye-cup and saline while he pottered around at the nearest worktable.

"You fibbed to me, too," she said, voice bouncing back at her from the well of the basin.

"I what?"

"You fibbed to me too. You said you hadn't got the memos any longer."

"No, I said they were out of my hands, and they were -- in the safe."

"Bastard," she muttered, and winced as the cold saline hit her inflamed eye. "They were in the safe in the same bloody room we were sitting in at the time."

"Granted. I never said it was actually dangerous to get them, just inconvenient."
"Lazy bastard."

"Hermione," he said, raising his voice over the chink of bottles and flasks as he blended whatever-it-was, "the one thing I cannot be accused of is illegitimacy. If you must call me names -- and I'll point out that this is a case of the pot calling the cauldron black, since you object to me calling that despicable creature anything descriptive -- be more accurate."

She had to snort at that, and finally came up with "Phrase-parsing pettifogger."

"Thank you, much more appropriate.... Are you done? On the stool, here."

He thrust a towel in her hands, and guided her over to the stool; and when she'd patted her face dry he checked the eye for damage, reached for the phial of potion he'd concocted and an eye-dropper, and carefully squeezed a few drops of potion into her eye.

Everything went blurry for a moment.

"What is it?" Hermione asked. "I didn't see what you used."


"Ah. Fawkes?"

"Yes. Just about the last of it. Blink again."

She did: the oily haze cleared, and with it went the horrid sandy feeling under the eyelid and the heat of the irritation.

"Better? It looks so."

"Yes, thank you."

"Now," he said grimly, setting the phial and dropper on the table-top, and boxing her in with an arm to either side, "the next bloody time I tell you to get the hell out and go for help, I expect you to do precisely --"

Oh, bloody.... Streaking the eyes....

".... Hermione?"

"And with the juice of this they'll streak your eyes...." she said, and chewed at her bottom lip.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"The riddle, Flaherty's riddle. 'And with the juice of this they'll streak your eyes, and make you full of hateful fantasies.' D'you suppose that's how the potion is delivered?"
"Hermione, how the devil do you expect me to know? The damned documents didn't say a thing about it."

"But aren't there philtres that are --"

"Not love philtres, no. Ingestion is preferred, as it's less suspicious to slip it in someone's drink than hold them down and dump muck in their eyes," he said dryly, and moved back to his work area to clear away the mess he'd made. "I believe there are all manner of silly folk-tales about bathing one's eyes in morning dew to encourage visions of one's true love, but all that's likely to achieve it a nasty case of ringworm. I imagine it's possible, but what does it matter?"

"It doesn't, I'm just curious about it. It doesn't make much sense in terms of a genetic therapy, is what I mean. At least I don't think so.... Damn, I ought to read up on that."

"What possible difference can it make?"

"Because it's a hole in their story. Genetic therapy, well and good, but if it isn't delivered in a proven, effective way.... Well, people should question that, don't you think? A quack therapy's worse than none. They'll baulk."

He snorted. "The average witch or wizard won't know that. Judging by the stupidity of the questions I heard asked at the conference, four-fifths of the healers can't understand the damned genetics procedures either."

"It might be a good challenging-point, if you know what I mean. If we need to stall for time. God knows I have plenty of time for research, since I'm forbidden to do much else."

"Bully for you," Severus muttered, and took the dirtied implements over to the washing-up basin. "Some of us have to traipse about only the gods know where."

"What do you mean?"

"The researcher hired an assistant," Severus said, not bothering to turn, intent on his washing: Hermione wandered over to the basin to hear him better, and absent-mindedly pulled a clean rag from the shelf. "The assistant is, I think, a nasty little beggar who Left in 2000. And he was stupid enough to have some supplies -- the Nadder-skin, as it happens -- delivered to a specific location, rather than taking custody of it himself."

"And you think that's where they worked on the potion?" Hermione asked, and took the first clean instrument from him and polished it dry.

"Possibly. It might also be a dropping-off point, and everything was moved elsewhere. Shan't know unless I go to check it out."

"This was all in the memos?"
"Of course not," he muttered, and handed her another instrument. "Deduction and some judicious 
questions to the source of the Nadder-skin."

"Well, where is it?"

He shot her a suspicious glance.

"No, I'm not going to run off and spoil your fun. But I'll come along, if you like."

"Not a good idea, I think --" 

"Severus, be reasonable. If they've already got the stuff at Mangel and Mortars, they've probably 
abandoned the original site, don't you think? And isn't it a good idea to have someone watching 
your back?"

"Only if they're willing to shoot instead of talk," he said bluntly.

"Oh, come on. It's an entirely different matter. You'dve been angry with me if I had, because 
McGonagall probably would have docked you for the cost of an elf!"

"Would've been worth it."

"Severus!"

He shot her another sidelong glance: for a split second she had the distinct impression that he was 
deliberately goading her, and then he grunted and said, "Cane Hill, Coulsdon. Wherever the bloody 
hell that it."

"Coulsdon's South London, or at least it's a stop on one of the lines. Near the Downs, I think. Don't 
know what or where Cane Hill is, though it sounds awfully familiar...."

"I hadn't planned to wait until the week-end, not if McGonagall would give me leave," he said, 
handing off the beaker in which he'd mixed the solution. "I can't afford the time but I'm tired of 
wasting my free days, and if they haven't already cleared everything away they shall as they get 
closer to implementation, to destroy any evidence."

"She obviously knows something about it --"

"Generalities."

"-- so I shouldn't think she'd object. Give me a day or two to learn what I can about the area, and 
then we'll go in," Hermione wheedled, and took the cleaned equipment back to its proper work-
table. "I should think night-time would be better, anyway, if you're not certain it's deserted."

He didn't answer: and when she'd done pottering about with the glassware she turned to gauge his 
reaction. He was thinking about it, staring into her eyes in a quite assessing manner as he dried his
hands, but his eyes kept dipping downward to the vicinity of her chin: she fancied he was vacillating. (That was astonishing -- he wasn't usually indecisive about anything.

"Do I have dirt on my face, or what?" she asked, uncomfortable with his stare.

"Come here," he commanded softly, and she crossed back to him, at the sink-basin; he wet the corner of the towel and wiped away some smudges of plaster-dust from her face before tossing the towel aside, and then said, "The next time I tell you to shoot, you do."

"Severus, it was Pinky --"

"And next time it might well be someone you recognise from school, someone who would have no trouble at all in harming either of us, I can assure you. If it's a single person a stun is perfectly acceptable, but not if there's more. You don't have the luxury of leaving loose ends about, it's not one of Flitwick's bloody civilised duels."

"But --"

"It's my responsibility," he said, voice tight. "If it helps, you're following an order, and the responsibility is mine."

"It doesn't help," Hermione said. "I've always thought that a shit excuse, frankly."

His eyebrows shot up at that, and then he wryly conceded, "Didn't think it would work with you, but I had to try. I'm quite serious, Hermione. I need to be able to trust you to do this. You must assume that people are dangerous from the first."

"I shall," she assured him. "I just thought Pinky could be calmed down, that's all. I know there's a difference."

"Fine. Learn what you can -- maps, identification," he said, his gaze dropping again to her chin. *(No, it's my mouth. Damn it, what is he --?)* "It's a Muggle building, abandoned, I should think. When you have decent information, we'll investigate it."

"Good --"

He reached for her and swiftly bent to nip at her lower lip -- it was tender, where she'd chewed at it earlier -- and when she jumped in surprise, he pulled her closer, snuggling her quite firmly against his pelvis.

*Oh, good God, he's ready for action.... Again?*

"Stress tends to do that," he muttered against her jaw, and his fingers traced a deliberate path from her lower back down to her bum. "To me, at least. Thought you'd sussed that out by now."

He punctuated that last with a subtle thrust of his hips that she couldn't avoid, given how tightly he was pressing her against him.
"But we're missing lunch --"

_Brilliant come-back, Hermione. And the odds of that working are..._

"Not mucking about with lunch in this condition, thank you, I'm quite uncomfortable."

...Nil.

"Consider it a detention for disobeying a direct order," he said, pushed away from the basin, and began hauling her back toward his rooms.

"It wasn't a direct --"

"As direct as I could afford to be in front of a crazy house-elf, and you knew bloody well what I was telling you to do," he said as they crossed the office. "It was understood, and you ignored me anyway. So now, loopy Miss Hermione, you is going to pay."

_What in the bloody.... He sounds practically giddy._

"Severus, stop being ridiculous -- And I've left my wand in the classroom --"

"Too late for that," he said, muttered a charm, and Hermione heard all the outer door-wards snap into place. "Day's a total waste now, I might as well enjoy something about it. I'd intended to catch you before lunch, anyway."

Well, that was it, then: Severus Snape hated being thwarted and had been at least twice today -- by not having her quite conveniently still in bed, and by that stupid, stupid elf. It was a lost cause.

_Just give up complaining for a bad job, Hermione, there's no point in making him even more frustrated. Besides, he must be terribly embarrassed with being caught without his wand -- you shouldn't have teased him about that -- and I suppose he needs to assert himself. What is it about the average male, that they can't take a bit of humiliation and just get on with it? We have to...._

_I hope I can keep him from ripping the hooks off my bra again._

She did manage to avoid the destruction of a very decent bra; and her acquiescence seemed to calm him down enough that his single-minded passion abated a bit, and eventually included some rather generous gestures on his part solely for her benefit.

*****

Lunch had been totally forgot in the midst of everything. Severus had fallen into a doze afterwards, but woke whenever she tried to sneak out of the bed and held her back; and rather than protest (which always seemed to make him more assertive and commanding), she'd given up and lain quiet for what seemed like hours, tolerant if not comfortable with his arm thrown across her waist, until he'd staggered off to the bath for a soak in the tub. He really _had_ staggered, the bad knee apparently playing up, and she'd felt a pang of remorse for forgetting about what might help that.
She desperately wanted another bath herself, for he'd worked himself into quite a sweat and consequently she smelt strongly of well-exercised Snape, but she certainly wasn't going to snuggle in the bathtub with him: as far as Hermione was concerned some things were, and always should be, terra incognita when Severus Snape was involved. (She supposed she ought to be grateful that he always closed the door, whether he was having a pee or simply a bath. Her mum had confided once that she'd known the honeymoon was over when Dad had wandered into the bath early one morning -- quite sleepy -- neglected to close the door to the old-fashioned water-closet, had a long and distressingly tuneful session on the toilet, and had been totally unconcerned and unselfconscious about it.)

She dressed in Saturday's clothes and went out to the sitting-room to read while she waited for him to vacate the bath.

"I suppose," he said later from the bedroom door, tying his neck-cloth, "that you've had a good look at the bloody memos now."

She glanced up from the book she'd Summoned from the Library (Magical Sites of the British Isles), and said, "No. On your desk. Back in chronological order."

That threw him a bit: his hands stilled, and then he stiffly offered, "Might as well, if you like. If something happens to me, you ought to know what's in them."

"So tell me," she said, and shrugged. "The name of the brewer's really the important thing, isn't it?"

"Yes. Debdale. He wasn't directly affiliated with the Death Eaters, so his name never came up during the first trials. Avoid him at all costs."

"Very well," Hermione said, and buried her nose back in her book. "I don't see Cane Hill or Coulsdon in here at all, so you're right -- it's a Muggle building. I'll see what I can pull up on the Internet tomorrow."

"The what?"

"Internet. It's a... oh, hell, it's like a vast electronic library, in a way. You reach it through the computer."

"Ah." Neck-cloth tied, he retrieved the memos from his desk, stuffed them back in the safe, and muttered a rather complicated ward-charm before swinging a portrait of a surly-looking Slytherin back over it.

"I've warded it so you may get into it -- once," he informed her. "If something should happen. Only the things on top."

"Right," she said. "That'll do. I don't imagine I shall have to."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he went back to the bedroom for his coat.
But if I ever have the chance to hex Fudge, Hermione thought, I know precisely what I'll do. I wonder what kind of monkey would look best in that awful, gaudy waistcoat he always wears?

*****

After she'd had her own bath they managed dinner in the Great Hall, enduring Sprout's giggles at their sole appearance that day; and afterwards Severus took himself off to the corner of the sitting-room to do marking. She left him alone to it, knowing he was far behind, and went to bed before he did.

But not to sleep. She'd read the dates on the memos, of course, and frankly wanted to kill both Fudge and Corcoran.

This is bloody ridiculous. All of it. Why on earth did I ever think I could pull this off? They've been planning this for years. They've far too much to lose now than just a few thousand Galleons' fine to the ICW, and I've only been pottering around playing at being a spy for six months, doing nothing at all useful to date. Here we are, going to all this trouble for people who can't be bothered to fight for themselves, and we're likely to pay for it dearly....

Severus came to bed about eleven after a detour to the bath to brush his teeth, and Hermione resigned herself to another round of sex. (He sometimes did her the courtesy of brushing beforehand, but never did when he didn't intend to impose on her.) He surprised her, though: he merely slipped under the covers and lay quiet, on his back, and made no move to touch her. She thought after a while that he'd dropped off: but after the third time she'd shifted gingerly, unable to sleep, he quietly asked, "What is it?"

She sorted through the jumble of her thoughts and then admitted, "Perhaps we ought give up on it all."

"What do you mean, give up on it all?"

"Let everyone else bugger themselves. Stop risking our necks. Be good little citizens, shut up and keep our heads down, and do what we ought."

"What," he said, rolling onto his side to face her, "precisely do you mean by that last?"

"Maybe," she said slowly, "we ought to try. Unless you really can't stand the thought, and you want to take your chances with someone else. Make arrangements before the lottery kicks in."

For once he seemed lost for words: and then he managed a strangled, "Try to conceive a child?"

"Yes. What else would we try for, a Crumple-Horned Snorkack? You're right, chances are it won't happen straight off. If we wait too long October will be here, and they'll reassign us. I've come to the conclusion that I'd rather stick with you, but I'm not the only one whose future needs consideration."
"Now you bother to ask what I want.... Better the demon you know than the one you don't, is that it? Don't try to convince me that you were serious with that blasted elf. Used to me, yes. Fond? No."

"Not exactly. About the demon thing, I mean, I'm not going to dignify the rest of it with a response. It's just that.... We mayn't exactly suit, but we can co-exist well enough, when we really try. And no matter how uncomfortable it is at times, I know you're trying to... to respect me, within certain parameters, no matter how much you went on at first about Pureblood traditions and all that rot. I appreciate that, I do, though I haven't said it before. And I don't fancy the idea of changing hippogriffs in mid-air, and ending up with someone who won't appreciate me for something other than a... a brood mare. Or a brood sow, more likely."

"Hermione, you aren't serious about this. About a child."

"You were."

"That was before I found out what you were mucking about with.... We've gone too far, and now DeLaine has documentation that proves we had evidence -- do you think the ICW would hold us blameless, when it all comes out in a year or two? When they start to question why the birth- and death-rates are up, and the children produced still have deficiencies? You can't be serious about bringing a child into this. We might both wind up in Azkaban or worse, and then where would the poor little bugger be?"

"Safe as houses, because I don't think François would implicate us," she said firmly.

"You don't know that --"

"No, I don't, but I do know that we can say we were only gathering the information for him. Make him the prime mover -- he'd like that -- and give him all the credit. And the responsibility. He's not the one facing imminent danger, after all."

"This from a woman who thinks avoiding personal responsibility is practically criminal."

"I'm not," she said, angry. "I'm not avoiding the responsibility. I've got the information to someone trustworthy, someone who isn't subject to the reprisals and danger that we are."

"You're tired," Severus said bluntly. "You're tired, and you're frightened -- not that I'm complaining about that, if it makes you more cautious -- and you're not feeling up to the task at the moment because you're giving too much credence to the opinions of bloody idiots like Fudge and Corcoran."

"What?"

"You read the damned memos, Hermione. And you're allowing their idiocy to colour your better judgement."

"Did you ward those things somehow?"
"No, I simply know that there is no way in Hades an intensely curious female would sort through a mass of papers and not look at anything besides the dates."

"Bloody --"

"I'd already decided it was short-sighted to withhold them given something might happen to me -- damn that elf -- and I was going to give them to you.... By the way, whatever you do don't try to dig up information on Debdale, it will send up too many red flags.... As Fudge's stupid comment hadn't seemed to have bothered you, I didn't press the issue."

"You're slipping. I lied to you outright."

"I allowed you to as it simply wasn't worth concealing them any longer. If you'd put them back in the safe, that would have been another matter -- other papers to tempt you. I should have quizzed you more."

"All right, fine. You trust me, at least to a point. And it's been hard-won, and I don't want to go through that all over again with a total stranger, do you?"

"No, but I don't want to have a child for safety's sake, either, not in the circumstances."

"Nor do I. But I think you were right about our chances. It would likely be healthy and intelligent, and between the two of us we could manage. I'm sure I'd grow fond of it, most mothers do --"

"Don't listen to that," Severus warned her. "Don't. Where are you in your cycle?"

"What?"

"Your menstrual cycle, where are you? About..." he stopped a moment, silent, and then added, "...about three weeks in? Or have you already --?"

"Three, I think -- it's not always that exact, anyway. Why?"

"The biological factor. Nature's little joke on the Reasoning Animal. Add hormones -- whether from ovulation or premenstrual -- to the fright, and your instincts are telling you that everything would be all right, you'd manage, everything would be a bit difficult but lovely in the end."

"That's ridiculous. How you can make such a sweeping statement is beyond --"

"No, it isn't, and I have years of teaching to and working with women to prove it. There are times when you have to be especially on guard against your impulses, Hermione, and for you -- for many women -- those are two. For me, it's when I'm angry or tired. I know myself far too well to imagine that everything would be 'all right,' or that a child will make a damned bit of difference to us personally."
"I've not said it would, I've just said we could manage," she argued, adamantly ignoring the rather horrific thought of a child not mattering to one 'personally,' or that that was, in fact, precisely the miserable option she was considering.

"Do you think that would be the end of it, even if we could?" Severus asked her, voice low. "One child, and we're clear? Five children, you said that woman had. You're quite right that she's done enough for the Wizarding World, and yet they took her away for protecting the ones she has by trying not to have any more. Do you think, having produced one healthy child -- if we should -- that they'd leave us alone?"

No, they probably shouldn't. She knew that: she'd been uneasy with the implications of that since the moment Harrison had told her.

**Bloody.... Why does he always have to be right?**

Immensely frustrated, she couldn't be bothered to control her misery any longer, and she started to cry -- horrifying, that, crying in front of Severus: it was weak of her, and it proved him right on the stupid hormonal point (damn him), and she knew he couldn't stand snivelling under any circumstances.

"Oh, Merlin's balls. Stop that," he commanded in disgust, and flopped back onto his back; and then after a moment he raised his hand and said, "Accio handkerchief." One shot from his dresser-drawer and into his hand, and he rolled back over and carefully groped for her face. "Stop," he said more gently. "It's not worth tearing yourself up about. It's the way things are, and I refuse to make the situation worse by giving in to the pressure of it. If you wish a divorce so you can try with someone else, I'll agree to it -- although I suspect you'll see reason in the morning."

"I don't want to try with someone else," she said through sniffles, took the hanky from him, and blew.

"In fact you don't want to try at all, not when you're in your right mind. Nor should you, it's a bloody bad reason to bring a child into the world. I should be kicked for having made that a condition. In my own defence, however, the situation appeared quite different at the time."

She considered that through the last of her snuffles, and then said, "I shouldn't have expected that from you."

"What?"

"Such an about-face. You've never impressed me as the type to change your mind easily."

"I didn't say it was easy. The situation required a re-evaluation, and I've done. If we hadn't the information we have now, we shouldn't be having this particular conversation, I assure you -- I'd probably be doing my damndest to get you in the club."

"That's not all there was to it, though. You were trying to make me feel as guilty as possible in October, weren't you?"
"Of course. Rather over-did it, I think -- you have a stronger sense of guilt than the average Gryffindor. No, I think we ought stick together and see this through, and then assess the whole bloody mess afterwards when things settle down. Agreed?"

"Yes," she said, and balled the hanky tightly in her fist. "But what if it drags out past October, and they --?"

"I bloody well don't intend to let it go that long. But if it should... You'll have to go off the potion in September and I'll have to control myself. Or ask Weasley to pass on some of those French letters he impounded, since wizarding ones can't be had now," Severus mused.

Hermione stifled a despairing snort.

"You don't think I'll give up unless I've exhausted all possible avenues, do you?" Severus said mildly. "No matter how wretched the whole business is, there are advantages I'm quite enjoying."

"Yes, you've made that clear."

"And if we both pass their tests, then we plead the usual -- bad timing -- and you'll have to move up here for appearance's sake. Try to get some sleep," he advised, and rolled back over to his side of the bed. "It won't look better in the morning, but you'll feel more up to dealing with it."

He fell asleep almost instantly -- or at least she thought he did, as it could well be that he was tired of dealing with an hysterical female, and ignoring her -- and despite her mind's attempts to keep returning to the issue, she eventually slept herself.

*****

Severus was back in uncommunicative mode next morning, grunting non-committally when Hermione tried to make conversation over breakfast; and so she finished up, rose from the table, and said, "I'll floo you when I have something on Cane Hill, all right?"

"Mmmmm hm." 

"And you'll let me know that you've got the time off to come down."

"Mmmmm hm." 

"Right, then, I'm off."

"Mmmmm," he grunted again, still intent on The Prophet.  

Oh, for pity's sake, she thought as she finally retrieved her wand from the classroom, it's always two steps forward, one step back with him.... What is it, that he can't bear a little real intimacy and shuts everything down again?
When she returned to Severus' rooms she pulled on her coat and boots, grabbed her bag, and -- just to be totally obnoxious -- she crossed back to the table, bent over his ear, whispered, "Have a good day and don't throw anything at anyone," and kissed his temple before rushing for the door. (The kiss wasn't horrid at all. He'd actually washed his hair that morning.)

She heard the clatter of his fork as it dropped from his hand to the plate, and could practically feel his eyes boring into the back of her head as she closed the door.

*****

London
Monday, January 30th

Work was immensely boring that day as there were no reports due for the next month, so Hermione had plenty of time to feel stupid for being so emotional and irrational the previous evening. The one good bit was that she didn't run into Corcoran at all: Severus was probably right about that, too, and she'd have trouble dealing with the man without letting her contempt show, at the moment. (Or even worse, he'd lay into her over something and she'd lose it and start bawling like a baby again.)

Once home, and after checking the flat for anything amiss, she fixed a light supper and relaxed in front of the telly; and when she'd closed the curtains after full dark, she powered up the computer and logged on.

Right. Cane Hill, Coulsdon.... What if it's a subdivision, or something? Or doesn't merit notice? Let's be more specific.... Abandoned. It's worth a shot.

She plugged the terms into the search engine, clicked, and then puzzled over the page titles that scrolled down the screen.

_Urban Adventurers_? What in the world is.... Well, hell, Hermione, just pick it and find out.

She did, scrolled down the page for any mention of Cane Hill, found it under the heading "Absolutely Rollicking Good Explorations," and clicked -- and then sat back, surprised, when the top of the next page loaded as a huge image file with "Blazing Inferno Engulfs Cane Hill" as the header.

_Holy --_

She grabbed for the mouse and scrolled the image up, reading the slightly-blurred text.

_A suspected arsonist struck at the abandoned site of the former Cane Hill Hospital on Monday last. Responding to the call at 10 pm, over 100 fire-fighters and fifteen engines from Greater London were called to the site on Brighton Road west of Coulsdon._

_The fire continued out of control until 3am, but crews were still damping down the coals and performing safety checks almost seven hours later, causing massive delays for those returning to_
work after the Bank Holiday. Traffic was halted on secondary roads, and greatly slowed on the A23....

That's where I remember it from! Mum wrote about being stuck in some awful jam for hours....

Under the image was an index: she clicked the first page listed, and started looking for the really useful bits.

It was an incredible site, actually. "Underground Bob" -- that was the site owner's moniker -- had masses of photographs of Cane Hill, and -- most astonishingly -- ground plans of the entire area and of many of the wards, which she promptly downloaded and printed.

Holy.... No, that deserves something else, something more appropriate.... Merlin's fucking balls. At least, that's what Severus will say. Should say. To think all this is just sitting here....

Underground Bob had done much more, though. He'd annotated his jaunts about Cane Hill, noting which buildings were merely derelict and which absolutely dangerous to enter. It would take days to go through the whole thing, so Hermione decided to cut to the chase and clicked on the email icon at the bottom of the screen.

More than one way to skin a cat, she thought as she typed up her message. And more than one way to bugger around in strange territory.

She sent the email and turned the computer off, hoped for the best, curled up in bed with the maps she'd downloaded, and studied.

*****

Tuesday, January 31st

She thought to check her email before she went to work, and nearly whooped when she heard the tinny, unfamiliar ping that announced she had mail.

Crookshanks101,

Good luck's all I can say. The place is an utter disaster now, it's been mucked with so much. I'm not able to take you in -- new baby, and the wife's put a moratorium on my more potentially dangerous hobbies. I know a bloke who's still crazy enough to go in, though. He's utterly mad but he knows the place better than anyone except me, and I think he's been in pretty recently. Shall I pass along your number, have him ring you up?

Bob

That would be YES.
She sent a reply, shut everything down, and rushed off to work, where she tried to floo Severus just before luncheon; he eventually appeared at the floo, sounding grumpy and looking quite tired and thunderous.

"Yes?"

"Severus, I --"

*Oh, bloody hell. Cover story.*

"-- I, erm, bought one of those Muggle test kits that I was telling you about."

"*What* kits? The gong's rung, and I have a bloody mess to clean up here before I --"

"The, erm, ovulation ones. The ones that say when it's your best time to guh- get pregnant." (That was an outright lie: she was actually due for her period in a day or two, but any listeners wouldn't know that. Or they'd *better* not.) "I think the next few days would be a very good time to try."

Severus' face cleared, the severe line between his brows disappearing. "I suppose I ought to go down, rather than have you travelling?"

"Yes, I think that might help. Would you? If you can get leave."

"Tonight's probably too soon, but tomorrow evening is possible. I'll just check with McGonagall. If you don't hear from me, I'm on my way."

"Good. Thank you, Severus --"

"Thank me tomorrow night," he said with a glint in his eyes. "And don't worry over it so, Hermione. It will happen if we're patient."

He broke the connection before she had a chance to get back at him for the 'thank me tomorrow night' business; but she couldn't be bothered to be too irked with him.

*His jaw's going to drop when he sees all the stuff I found. Not to mention having a guide.... Oh, damn. He mayn't care for that at all.*

*Well, it's that or muck around in dangerous buildings and get ourselves killed the old-fashioned Muggle way -- by accident. I suppose we can always cast Soporare on the poor sod when we actually reach a likely building.*

Quite satisfied with herself, she worked through the rest of the afternoon in very good humour; and she hardly noticed when Corcoran passed her in the corridor and shot her an appraising and speculative look, and actually bothered to wish her a good afternoon.

*****
"Hurry up," Snape barked at the rattled Third Years, and sneered just a bit when Marsters jumped and nearly upended a beaker. Snape was running late -- or rather, the idiots were: McGonagall had given him leave to go to London the minute the day's classes were over, which was now. He didn't mind admitting to himself that he was impatient to leave....

Anxious, rather. No need for impatience, is there? It wasn't as if he were impatient to be traipsing about hunting a potentially dangerous former student and his exceedingly dangerous minder.

Or impatient to see Hermione, for that matter.

So, anxious, and more than a bit excited because Hermione had seemed so excited herself.

She must have found something extraordinarily good and useful, to have been so chipper over the floo -- what a contrast to the doldrums of Sunday night.... I'll admit she alarmed me, between that uncustomary meekness and the talk of giving up the investigation.

Perhaps she's simply as tired as I of all this mucking about, and no longer willing to put herself at risk. Understandable -- gods only know how often I've felt that over the years. It's a tempting thought, to chuck the whole bloody problem and worry only about ourselves.

All the blasted idiots had cleared from the classroom, now, except for Marsters, who was slowly polishing the damned beaker dry. Far too slowly.

"Why the delay, Marsters?" he growled. "I distinctly recall telling you there would be no advance on the pocket-money, if that's what you're angling for."

"No, sir," Marsters said a bit unsteadily. "I only wuh- wondered if.... I wondered if Muh - Madam Snape would be visiting in a fortnight."

Why in Hades --?

"I don't see," Snape said deliberately, "why that should be your business at all."

The boy's face reddened.

"Wanted to... sh- show her something, that's all," he mumbled. "Duh- didn't muh- mean to pruh- pry."

Careful. She'll snap your head off if she thinks you've set the boy back, blast her.
"Oh. Your progress with the Third Arithmantic Operation, I assume.... She should be here, I believe."

_Had bloody well better be, considering how many times I've gone off Grounds during Term for her._

"Good," Marsters said quietly, placed the beaker amongst the cleaned instruments, and slipped from the room with a "Thank you, sir."

*What the bloody hell was that about?*

In the end, though, the motivations of one challenged Third Year were beneath Snape's dignity to take much notice of; and so he made a final check of classroom, office, and his private rooms, and then strode off to the gates and Apparated to London.

*****

_Hermione's flat_  
6:43 pm

Fortunately he popped into the hallway, just inside the front door, and froze when he heard a startled male voice with a thick Scots burr saying, "Wha' was that?"

_Bloody.... Who the hell does she have in there?_

After a pause Hermione muttered, "Popped a fuse, perhaps? The porch-light does that occasionally -- the wiring's a bit wonky. I'll just go check."

"Oh, I'm grrreht wi' fuses and electricity -- I'll have a wee look for ye --"

"No, no, quite all right, I'm used to it, thanks."

Hermione scrambled out to the hall, grabbed her handbag off the table, and shoved Snape toward the front door with her elbow while she rummaged in the bag.

*_Pop outside._ she mouthed, and glared at him. _Use the key._ And she shoved her key-ring into his hand.

*_Who the bloody hell is --*

*_Later. Muggle clothes,_" she shot back, and busied herself with opening the cupboard and making noise, shoving things about.

Snape ill-temperedly dropped the ward and popped out to the mews; glamoured himself a more Muggle-ish style of dress; walked to the front door, fumbling with the unfamiliar keys until he found the right one; and let himself in over the murmur of voices. He wasn't pleased with what he saw: Hermione was head-and-shoulders in the cupboard fumbling with something, and her male visitor was hanging back at the entrance to the sitting-room, admiring what must be a nice view of her arse.
"Thought I haird another one goe. Are ye sairtain --" the earnest and obviously randy Muggle bastard -- who rather looked like a miniature version of Hagrid, with slightly less hair -- was saying.

He stopped dead when he got a good look at Snape's face.

Hermione backed out of the cupboard and stuck her head around the door.

"Steven!"

**Damnation. What the bloody hell's wrong with my own bloody name?**

"Steven, this is Kiltman --"

"Kiltman?" Snape muttered involuntarily, and managed not to demand of Hermione, **And you think 'Severus' is odd?**

"Rory," the Muggle admitted sheepishly. "Kiltman's just my handle for exploring, my mates gave it me."

"And this is my husband, Steven. Rory's going to help us get in," she brightly informed Snape, and gave him a 'Don't look at me like that, I'll explain later' look.

**Wonderful. Bloody brilliant. My Obliviate's never been the best.... Well, I suppose we'll find out just how far out of practise I am tonight.**

Rory looked quite embarrassed, knowing he'd been caught ogling another man's wife's bum, but he gamely held out his hand for a shake.

"Guid to meet ye. Hermione's bin tellin' me aboot yer cousin -- wha' shitty luck. Are you sairtain ye want tae tackle him alone, though? Cane Hill's a dangerous place to deal wi' someone a wee bit, erm, unbalanced."

Snape chose the only sensible option available: when faced with a backstory that one didn't have details for, one kept one's cakehole shut.

"Steven's the only one he'll respond to," Hermione said quickly, and tugged Snape's coat from his shoulders. "He's always very calm with Steven. He'd be quite upset with strangers, especially medical workers or police. If we can't find him or coax him out, we'll notify the authorities then."

"All right," Rory said, shaking his head. "I'm not goin' to guarantee yer safety, not at night -- it's bad enough in the daytime. Ye'll have tae watch yer step."

"Let's go have a look, shall we?" Hermione said, and ushered them both into the sitting-room. "Steven's been out of town, and I haven't even had a chance to tell him about the place."
Snape managed a glare at her while Rory's back was turned, and took his place on the settee, in front of the low table that the man had strewn with maps -- quite an impressive spread of maps, actually: Snape was surprised and gratified, and grudgingly admitted to himself that the Know-It-All had outdone herself this time.

"Amazed ye haven't heard of Cane Hill," Rory was nattering on. (He was, apparently, not the average dour Scot, much to Snape's displeasure. He hated chatterers.) "It's bin in the news every six months for the last decade, until recently."

"Moved away when I was young," Snape muttered. "Don't have much memory of London, actually."

"We met in Scotland," Hermione volunteered. "Long-distance for now, until Steven, erm, finds work down here."

*Don't make the story so bloody complicated, girl....*

"*Oh. But yoor cousin's from London?*

"His parents stayed here," Hermione said quickly. "But they both died a couple of years ago, and he's been on his own since. He was treated at Cane Hill when he was a teenager --"

*Treated?*

"-- and when we saw the Coulsdon mark on the post-card, we thought perhaps he'd gone back there. We couldn't find him registered at any shelters, so it's worth a try."

"Huh. He'll be living rough if he's thair -- the electricity's bin off for a long time," Rory said, and pulled a scale map out from under the stack. "Won't bore you wi' the history, Steve --" (Snape winced) "-- except that the place's bin closed since ninety-one. First trip I made was in ought-three, my last trip in ought-six -- got run in by Security, finally," he admitted cheerfully, "which is why I'll get you on the grounds, but dinna dare go wi' ye. They charge you wi' suspected arson now, ye see -- I dinna want *that* on my record. We'll go down the A-twenty-three," he said, and illustrated on the map with a grubby fore-finger, "and we'll conveniently have car trouble and have tae pull off *here*, ontae Portnall's Road. Ye'll have tae cut across this field, and ye'll run up against a bluidy great security fence just after ye join up wi' the footpath."

He scabbed for another map in smaller scale, and spread it diagonally across the table so Hermione and Snape could see it properly: a sprawling mass of buildings seemed to radiate, horseshoe-fashion, from a central block. It seemed faintly familiar to Snape, though he'd never heard of the place and couldn't imagine why it should seem so.

"That's about where ye'll come through the fence," Rory said, marking a spot on the perimetre with his finger. "At least my mate says so, he was in a few months ago. They may have sealed it up by now, in which case ye're probably not goin' tae make it in...."
However, Snape wasn't paying attention to Rory: he was reading the legend at top centre of the
map, which declared that the place had been built in 1883....

London County Asylum
CANE HILL

Asylum? A lunatic asy-? Oh... ...bloody...

Nothing in his past experience of doing unsavoury jobs and mucking about in nasty places had
quite prepared him for this. His excuse of the press of the war for not visiting Mother -- and the
myriad reasons he'd come up with since its end -- were not strictly accurate. He hated the institution
in Nottinghamshire, true, but not solely because it was inconvenient for travel, and difficult to see
her in that state....

...fucking...

He knew it was likely that he had inherited more than his father's looks and vicious nature. In the
back of his mind he was well aware that what he'd got from Mother might be that same, high-strung
temperament that had made her incapable of dealing with Julius Snape's abuses without going
completely and irretrievably mad; that he might, in fact, end up in the madhouse himself someday,
though one would think if the war hadn't done it, nothing could.

...hell.

*****

Hermione didn't know, obviously. She couldn't, or he didn't imagine she'd have sprung this on him
-- not for the sake of concealing any illicit knowledge: that Gryffindor sense of honour would have
led her to 'fess up. She didn't notice his unease at the moment, either. She was avidly listening to
the bloody Scotsman.

"...sending ye in the back way, because wha' little bluidy security they have's up by the main access
road. They used tae be in the Admin Building, but then they moved out and the place got torched
right awhey --" 

"So which buildings," Hermione interrupted, "are absolute non-starters?"

"Main Hall's gone, one of the first," Rory said, and crossed it off the map with an odd, smelly pen
that Hermione handed over to him. "And the Admin block's gone too, not that he'd risk being seen
from the main road -- that went in bits and pieces. A bluidy shame, because that was one of the
better-presairved. My mate says the facade's crumbling on its own, now. The Laundry and service
areas are flattened -- so, really, the whole of the central services buildings except the chapel are out.
A lot of the corridors close tae them are either gone as well, or too dangerous tae go intae."

"How dangerous?"
"How aboot no floors?" Rory said, bushy eyebrows rising. "It's always dicey -- like walking on a trampoline, some of them -- but the floors often go before the roofs themselves. That's why the bluidy powers that be have given up on the place. It's too damned dangerous tae send fire-fighters in, so they just spray the outside down and hope for the best."

"Why bother to do even that?" Hermione said, and Snape suppressed a grimace at the tangent: he wanted this over with.

"Listed as Grade Two landmarks," Rory explained. "They have tae give the appearance of giving a damn, but the place is a huge white elephant as it couldn't be flattened outright. Thaire've been plans for re-use, but they always fell through -- housing, a business park, a medium-security mental unit -- that one rrreally got the Nimbys' knickers in a twist --"

"Nimbys?" Snape muttered involuntarily.

"The 'Not in my back yard' lot," Rory said. "It was meant tae be a rehab centre for sex offenders. Anywhey, the wrangling went on for so long and the strictures against demolition are so tight that all the developers gave up. Easier tae let the bluidy arsonists do their job first, and then bulldoze the mess and start over with new-built. Thair's not a single undamaged building left."

"Well, where should we look, then?" Hermione said. "If Security's out front, I don't imagine he's in one of those wards, east or west."

"Dinna think so, they'd investigate any lights or movement. Rrrossetti's in pretty good shape, though, and if he stayed on the north side they might not see...."

Hermione stabbed her finger at a building up at the front and explained to Snape, "Each building has at least two floors, and they're named for famous Victorians -- each floor is its own ward. Rossetti is...."

"It's ground floor, yes," Rory confirmed.

"While Ruskin ward is the first floor."

"And thair's a lot of buildings in the back that he probably wouldn't attempt. They were shut down aither, and as the footpath runs pretty close tae them, they got vandalised first.... Nurses' housing is gone, no floors at all on any story," Rory said, and crossed it out. "Kings, Hill, Hogarth, and Johnson are bluidy messes, and I'd be surprised if the walls are still standing. Liggett and Lettsom went up in the last big arson attack.... I've haird York's a mess, but never bin myself. Mapother's pretty sheltered, though, and ye can't see it at all from the front or the footpath. All these," he continued, madly x-ing buildings off the map, "are lost causes. So are these outbuildings."

"What about this?" Snape asked, and pointed to one that the man had skipped over.

Rory hesitated. "That's Vincent-Vanbrugh. Johnny -- that's my mate -- dinna go in there tae see what was left. We never liked to, generally. Difficult tae get in as it's on an embankment, and the
first and second stories were torched a while ago. For a long time everyone thought the floors on
the ground had gone too, and then we found they *hadn't*... and odd things happen in that building."

"How odd, precisely?" Snape asked sharply.

"Oh, just.... It's more than just the usual funny sounds and things. It's *crrreepy, rrreally* creepy." He blurted out a nervous giggle. "I mean, we're not the most *unimaginative* bunch, especially where Cane Hill is consairned. Some people claim they've photographed weird orbs and streaky things in the chapel, for instance. We're always jumpy, listening for Security or the homeless whackos that.... Sorry, but some of them *are* pretty wild, you see.... Vincent-Vanbrugh's just bluidy scairy, and the few people who've managed tae get in have got hurt, so most of us steer clear. I dinna think anyone's tackled that building for years, now."

Hermione shot a none-too-subtle glance at Snape, which he refused to return.

"And this one?" Snape asked, of a little outbuilding toward the back of the property.

"That's, erm.... *Oh*, right. That's the Gatehouse and Mortuary, I think. *That's* a good possibility even though it's near the footpath, because it's overgrown but still sound, at least when I toured it. Amazing considering that it hadn't been heated for years and years, but then it was built tae withstand damp and cold better, I suppose. The nature of the place."

"So," Hermione murmured, "our best bets are Mapother, Rossetti, the Mortuary, York, and if *we must*, Vincent-Vanbrugh."

"Lovely," Snape muttered. "All over the blasted site."

"Right. Though I really wish ye wouldn't go intae Vincent, as we've no idea what shape it's in and I don't have the a map for that. If one of ye goes through the floor.... Well, it won't be pretty. We're talking calling Emergency Services tae shovel up the bits, I think."

"All right," Hermione said, and turned to Snape. "Do you think that's enough to be getting on with?"

*Enough to be saying sod it, certainly....*

"It will have to do," he said, and added as a fillip to the backstory, "I don't imagine he'll hide if he recognises my voice, at any rate."

Hermione rummaged among the papers, and came up with ground plans for the buildings they'd judged best as Rory rubbed his hands together and said, "*Oh-keh. Ye dinna need anything but stout boots and warm, dark jackets, then, because I've got the full kit.*"

Snape glanced uncertainly at his boots, and Hermione muttered, "I got you a pair of steel-toed hikers, actually -- come on, I've got to get mine, too," and she stood and led him to the bedroom as Rory busied himself with cleaning up the rest of the maps.
"Why in bloody hell --" Snape hissed once they were safely in the bedroom, with the door closed.

"Because I'm not bloody Apparating into a bloody mess like that, the bloody train line doesn't run as late as we'll likely be, and I don't have a bloody car," she snapped back. "I don't even have a bloody operator's licence. I'm giving him a hundred pounds to get us there and to borrow his equipment, and I'm to take a few pictures for him. It's not like he's going in there with us."

"Fine," Snape muttered. "Where are the bloody boots?"

She picked up her wand from the bedside table and held out her other hand.

"Oh no. Do you know how much these cost?" Snape said indignantly.

"Not nearly as much as my Italian pumps, I'm sure," she shot back. "And my Transfiguration won't stick. Hand them over."

*****

The boots Hermione transfigured were, Snape was certain, the ugliest things on the face of the planet. (They even beat the awful Italian shoes she'd tried on in Brighton, and he was certain she'd made them deliberately ghastly, just to get back at him.) He tried to ignore that she'd seen a hole at the big toe of his left sock: the elves had refused to do mending for him this week. Pinky obviously hadn't kept her mouth shut about some things, damn her pop-eyes.

"A mad cousin?" he muttered as he tied up the laces. (Blast it, I haven't had to wear lace-ups since I was in short trousers.) "Was it really necessary to --"

"Homeless, not necessarily mad. Neither of us matches the profile of the average urban explorer, apparently," Hermione said, intent on lacing up her own boots. "I doubted he'd buy idle curiosity. Can you think of something better?"

He couldn't, so kept his mouth shut.

"Thought not. My money's on Vincent-Vanbrugh," she continued. "Eerie reputation, and all that."

"Not necessarily."

"You don't think it could be anti-Muggle warding?"

"Likely is," he said, wincing as he bent over his bad knee for the boot-laces. "But more probably they've taken advantage of the building's reputation and inaccessibility, rather than the reverse. They'd only have set up shop in December 2006, and your impressionable friend out there seems to think it's gone on longer than that."

"He's not my.... Bad reputation, so stabilise the ground floor, set anti-Muggle wards, and Bob's your uncle."
"Possibly... I never had an uncle, much less one named 'Bob' -- what's that got to do with anything? ...I should think they'd need far more space than a single ward, however, for the experimentation."

Boots adequately tied, Hermione paused to pull back her hair with some sort of springy band; and then they joined Rory in the entryway, pulled on their coats, and left the house.

Snape was not impressed by their mode of transport. He'd never liked the idea of internal combustion engines to begin with, and this particular vehicle looked as though it had gone several rounds against Weasley's Anglia in the depths of the Forest.... He pulled Hermione closer as Rory cheerfully and obliviously hopped inside and leant over to unlock the battered passenger door.

"What in the hell is --"

"A vintage Morris Mini," Hermione hissed. "And beggars can't be choosers. If you make a fuss, I'll make you cram into the back."

"Cramming" was apt, since Hermione, slim as she was, could barely squeeze into the gear-littered rear seat (while Snape would ordinarily appreciate the view and admitted to himself that Rory had good reason for the ogling, he wasn't in the mood tonight); his knees nearly reached his chin when he folded himself into the front seat; and Rory, who was rather chunky-torsoed and mostly legs, literally had a knee on either side of the wheel that poked into the passenger compartment.

"Belt doesn't work, I'm afraid," Rory said to Snape, and tried to start the blasted thing no less than three times; after many sputters and coughs it finally caught, and the car lurched into the open road. "S'okeh, I'll get ye thair in one piece. Kit's back wi' ye, Hermione," he added in a roar over the labouring of the engine. "Might want tae try out the goggles -- they're a lot of fun, and I think ye'll need them tonight more than the torches."

"Right," she yelled back, and Snape could hear her scrabbling about.

_Goggles?_

She giggled, and Snape craned his head over his shoulder to look: she had some monstrous contraption over her eyes, and was obviously enjoying the experience.

"They help you see in low-light conditions," she explained. "But everything's green. Including you."

"Ye've got high-powered torches, the goggles -- thair's even a little collapsible ladder, but I dinna ken that ye'll want tae muck about wi' that," Rory shouted over the whine of Morris Mini's engine. "If the building's in that bad a shape, I doubt he's in thair. Clipboard for maps, and I chucked in a disposable camera for the snaps -- just be sairtain you don't flash where it can be seen by Security."

"Gotcha," Hermione said.
"If ye find yerself on a **rrreally** bouncy floor, find the joists and stick tae them. Otherwise ye're liable tae find the fast way down tae the next floor."

Snape was only listening with half an ear, and didn't bother to reply: his eyes were glued to the road, and his hands to the panel in front of him. Rory"s driving was a match for Ernie Prang's (even if the rate of speed couldn't compare), and nearly everything else on the road was larger than Morris Mini: he expected at any moment to find the front of another vehicle squarely in his lap.

Rory swerved onto a larger artery, and then took a ramp labelled "A23": thankfully, some of the road congestion cleared and Snape could breathe more easily... for a moment. Once Rory had a straighter trajectory, he hunched over the wheel and Morris Mini sped up alarmingly. So did the engine-noise.

"You didn't," Hermione accused from the back, quite disorienting Snape, who couldn't figure out which of them she was addressing.

"Did!" Rory shouted back and grinned madly, his barbarian warrior heritage clearly visible on his face (at least as far as Snape was concerned): a lust for blood was simply transmuted into a lust for speed. "Cooper engine in a plain Mini body. Body's a sixty-one, and engine's a sixty-eight -- wee bit of a squeeze, but wi' creative welding we got it in. She doesna' look like much but goes like a **rrrocket**!

**Oh, Merlin's bloody balls and beard I'm going to die splattered across some bloody Muggle road --**

"**Cool,**" Hermione said cheerfully -- no, **enthusiastically:** Snape wriggled round and glared at her, and found she still had the blasted goggles on.

She shrugged. "I really like Minis," she hollared. "I just don't have a licence."

The situation had reached such surreal proportions -- the crazed Scotsman next to him driving a super-powered bit of exploding tin down an exceedingly hard-looking roadway, and Hermione behind him looking like nothing so much as a strange amphibian-human hybrid -- that Snape turned back around to face the road, settled in the seat as best he could, braced his arms against the far-too-close front panel, closed his eyes, and mentally promised the shades of Albus Dumbledore and Merlin that he would, really **would**, give up his second nightly whisky if only he came through the ride alive.

That kept him preoccupied until the nausea hit, at which time he cursed them both and pulled the bargain off the table.

*****

"**Rrright, here we goe,**" Rory muttered after a while, Snape forced himself to open his eyes, and watched as Rory fussed with the knobs in front of him: the engine sputtered and the car bucked -- **not** good for the nausea -- and Rory fiddled with the knob some more. The car continued to jerk, and Rory swerved toward an exit off the roadway.
"Imagine that," Rory said. "Car trouble at this time o' night, and near bluidy Coulsdon."

Hermione giggled; Snape bit the inside of his cheek to keep from spewing what was left of his luncheon across Morris Mini's interior, in appreciation of Rory's wit.

Some more fiddling, and the ride evened out for a bit, but then the bloody man mucked about with the knob again, and the bucking re-commenced.

"Must we?" Snape muttered through clenched teeth.

"Afraid so," Rory said cheerfully. "Built-up neighbourhood, north side of the road -- I want evidence that the engine sounded bad, if someone should ask. Won't be long."

He was being truthful, thankfully, for after another minute and another tweak of the knob, Morris Mini produced an absolutely appalling death-rattle, died, and Rory -- with much cursing about a lack of 'power steering' -- wrenched the wheel over and guided the damned thing to the verge, near a thicket of dense undergrowth.

"All right," he said. "Here's the plan. I'll stay two hours, which should be enough time tae see if yer cousin's thair, and if the bluidy constabulary find me I'll say I'm waiting for a mate tae come pick me up as it's dead. But I can only stall so long before they get suspicious. I'll have tae fix her and drive off if they do. I'll cruise by on the next hour, but if ye dinna pop out of the woods straight off I won't risk stopping. Agreed?"

"Got it," Hermione said.

"I'll call yer place in the morning, and if ye haven't made it back by then I'll make an anonymous call tae Security tae check on the areas ye're looking at. God help ye if ye need them, though.... And ye'll have tae reimburse me for any lost kit," he added.

"No, that's fine," Hermione said. "Ready, Steven?"

"Gods, yes," Snape muttered, pried open the door, squeezed himself out, and staggered as his stomach and legs re-found their bearings.

Hermione clambered out after him, ducked her head back in, and handed equipment to him -- another pair of the ridiculous goggles, and a metal cylinder; Rory unwrapped himself from the interior, unlatched the engine compartment, and proceeded to fiddle with the engine in what Snape considered a quite unconvincing manner.

"Guid luck," Rory said, and Hermione muttered "Ta. Come on, Se- Steven," and headed off into the undergrowth. Snape followed, legs slightly unsteady; when they were safely away from the road Hermione stopped and said, "All right, time to put on the goggles --"

"No."
She ripped her own headgear off, glared at him in the weak moonlight, and said, "We can't use the torches or a Lumos until we're in a building, we'll be seen crossing the grounds."

"The day I have to wear some ridiculous Muggle contraption to --"

"You're going to stumble about and slow us down at best, and wrench your knee at worst. Do you really want to risk that? Besides, it'll leave your wand free for hexing. You can clip the torch to your belt-loop, and that will leave the other hand free as well."

Well, put like that, no, he didn't want to blow his knee out again, and yes, having his wand free of Lumos might be good idea after all.

"How do you --?" he muttered.

"Give it here and bend down," she said more patiently, and when he did, she pulled the goggles over his head and adjusted the strap so it fit snugly. "Close your eyes for a moment, I'm going to turn them on," she whispered: when he'd done, he heard a click and the faint hum of Muggle electronics.

"Any hexes will shut the damned thing down," he said.

"Not necessarily -- at least not any you cast. Open your eyes slowly, get used to the light."

He cracked his lids, and found Hermione still close to him -- looking strangely anxious -- bathed in a nasty green light that, while it certainly did reveal a great deal more than his night-vision could, reminded him uncomfortably of the colour of the Killing Curse.

"All right?" she said. "Not too bright?"

"No, it's fine."

"Good. Let's go, then."

"You've got the bloody maps," he said. "You lead for now."

She pulled her goggles back over her head, glanced at the clipboard, and headed south-west through the brush.

He hated to admit it, but the damned goggles were impressive. The greenish cast took some getting used to, but he could see the ground quite clearly even under the trees, and any obstructions were easily noted and skirted.

*Should have thought to brew the Hawk-Eye Potion. Well, I should have if I'd had two bloody months for the resting period....*

Hermione slowed ahead of him, halted, and waited until he caught up with her.
"We've got to cross the meadow, so head for that patch of brush on the far side. It's nearly eight-thirty," she whispered. "Rory's mate said Security walks that part of the footpath about then, so we'll have to wait until they pass, and then we can join the path ourselves."

"Right."

She darted out into the meadow, taking advantage of any cover available.

_Bloody.... I'd no idea she could run that fast...._

He _couldn't_, of course. Even if he were younger he'd be hard-pressed to keep up with her, and he certainly couldn't with a dickey leg.

_Little show-off. Look at that feint -- totally unnecessary. She thinks it's a bloody game._

He went more slowly, crouching and relying on stealth rather than speed, and eventually reached the brush-pile atop an embankment where she'd been waiting for him, on her stomach, for nearly three minutes.

"All right?" she asked.

"Of course," he snapped back as he flopped down beside her, immensely irritated, and tried to catch his breath.

She seemed to stare at him through the blasted goggles -- one couldn't _really_ tell, of course, but he imagined she was as she didn't turn away -- and then her attention wandered to the footpath at the bottom of the embankment.

"If they don't walk this section soon, we'll have to chance it," she murmured.

They waited for a very long ten minutes before a light glimmered at the curve of the path, to their left.

"Here we go," she said, and burrowed face-down as close to the ground as she could get -- and then started when a dog barked, and grabbed at Snape's arm.

"_Oh, cripes,"_ she mouthed. "_Dog._"

"_Brilliant deduction,"_ he mouthed back.

"_No, no -- security dog. Watchdog._"

Oh. Damn.

_Bloody.... What would --? Blast it, I can't remember...._
He shook her hand from his arm (she'd nearly bruised him, he was sure), and dredged up an obnoxious old trick that had worked beautifully in Third Year until Sirius Black had cottoned onto it.

"Stop your nose," he mouthed as the pool of light -- and the jingling of dog-harness -- grew closer.

"What?"

"Stop your nose," he mouthed through a snarl, and reached over with his free hand to tweak what little of her nose peeked out from beneath the goggles. (She slapped his hand away immediately and jumped at the noise of that, but got the idea and pinched her nostrils together.)

The guard and dog were close enough now that they could hear them faintly, the dog straining at its harness and whuffing excitedly: the guard -- who was apparently a bit dim, and not expecting trespassers -- chivvied out loud, "Whoa, Bosco, don't tear my arm off, lad.... Rabbits again, is it?" (Bosco snuffled and gave a more threatening bark, loosely translatable as "No, Thicko, it's two-legs and they're on my turf.")

Snape pinched his nostrils closed with his free hand, pointed his wand skyward, and muttered, "Felix Feotidus."

It was pure luck, he reckoned, that it worked so well: he'd always had a target for that particular bit of mischief, and had never worried much about subtlety because, at the time, excess had never been enough. But the wind was right, and the charm worked just enough to alarm the guard.

"Blimey -- no, Bosco -- Bosco, NO! 'S a bloody polecat, you stupid git...."

Bosco barked quite excitedly once again, and they heard the snap of the lead and jingle of the harness as the guard pulled back on it. "Come on, idiot," the guard muttered, and hurried his steps, dragging along the reluctant dog (who must be quite confused, judging by his whimpers: whatever it was hadn't smelt of polecat before.) Snape peered through the undergrowth as man and dog went off down the path, and then nudged Hermione, who let out her breath in a great whoosh -- and then she inhaled and gagged.

"My God --" she wheezed, and coughed into her sleeve.

"Worked, didn't it?" Snape muttered back.

"Yes, but.... Oh, never mind. Let's go."

They crawled over the edge of the embankment and slid down it, and trotted off down the path in the opposite direction to the guard and Bosco, with the forbidding, iron-barred fence on their right.

"Rory's not going to want us back in the Mini," Hermione said.

"It will wear off by then, damn it, stop whinging. Where's the hole in the bloody fence?"
It took another five minutes' searching to find it: not a proper hole at all, but a section where an
enterprising explorer had managed to break the welds on two of the bars, and to rather cunningly
bolt them back on the inside of the top rail so they swung free at the bottom.

"Good Lord, someone took a lot of time with that," Hermione said.

"Good on them -- get in."

Hermione squeezed through pretty easily, but it was a close shave for Snape. (One too many
sausages, he decided. Or ten or twenty. He really ought do something about that before he got too
sluggish and needed his trousers let out. Again.)

Once through, he asked her, "Right, what's closest?" and tried to ignore that he'd ripped a hole in
said trousers in the scuffle.

"Mortuary. It should be about thirty yards dead ahead. ...Sorry. No pun intended."

"Never mind levity, get going!"

She took off like a coney, damn her, head bent low to scan the ground and to skirt several piles of
rubble (and one rather nasty hole in the ground, the remains of one of the smaller outbuildings);
Snape followed more cautiously, eyes searching the grounds in front of them and to each side, wary
of the security guard or of any ambushes. They met up again, finally, at a tremendous pile of brush
that wouldn't have been amiss in the Forbidden Forest.

"Lost us, haven't you." he muttered.

"No, it's here. I mean, this is it, beneath all the vegetation," she whispered. "We're at the corner of
the Gatehouse. The only door to the Mortuary's around the corner. Once in the first room, there's
another to the right."

"Stay behind me, and don't follow me into a room until I tell you it's safe," he said, and slipped
around the corner, wand at the ready.

While the Gatehouse walls and rampant undergrowth gave some cover from any lurkers shooting
through the windows, Snape was uncomfortable at being so exposed: so he stayed as close as
possible to the wall until he'd reached the Mortuary door. There was no noise at all from inside --
quite easy to determine, as the closest windows had lost most of their panes -- and he could detect
only a fresh, standard anti-Muggle ward (a badly-executed one, at that). The door was padlocked
shut, but that was easily solved with a charm which was quite illegal for anyone but an auror to
practise, and then Snape sidled into the first chilly room of the Mortuary: it seemed several degrees
cooler than the outside air.

No moonlight came through the dead, tangled vines that blocked the windows-frames, none at all....
Hermione poked him in the back, and he swatted at her with his free hand to get her to bugger off.
(She was already disobeying, damn it. He'd have to teach her a lesson about that, sharpish. Or as
soon as they got out of this bloody mess.) He took a tentative step further into the room, found the floor sound under the rubbish that littered it, and took another noiseless pace.

There was something odd, *very* odd about the place. It was certainly felt as dank and nasty as any derelict building Snape had ever been in -- and those were several, given the Dark Lord's propensity for choosing rather nasty, abandoned gathering-sites -- but it was also *different*. Snape closed his eyes, reached up and fumbled with the goggles to shut off their annoying, electric hum, and simply waited for the place to... well, to *tell* him something. Some sound, or creak, or the whisper of panicked breathing from anyone other than Hermione (who seemed to be doing rather well with hers, actually)....

He caught it, then, a faint and tantalising mixture of scent and feeling, damped down by the weight of darkness but just palpable to heightened senses. It felt as though someone *had* been here recently -- or, to be more precise, something had *lived* here recently -- but they were gone. And a familiar, faintly cloying smell drifted from the room that lay to the right, its wide door, one-quarter open, hanging drunkenly by one hinge.

"*Lumos,*" he muttered, and shoved the goggles up his forehead with his free hand the better to see the mess along the floor. Hermione squeaked a protest, and he muttered over his shoulder, "Don't worry, he's not here. Even if he *is*, we needn't worry."

"But.... It's not that, you've nearly blinded me. Look, use the torch and keep your wand free," she said, stumbled over to him, unclipped the torch from his belt, and showed him how to switch it on. "Keep it away from the windows, you don't want the guard to see any light. What in the world do you mean, we needn't --"

"What was this room?" he interrupted her, and extinguished his Lumos.

Hermione rummaged with the papers on her clipboard and said, "Chapel of Rest... erm, a viewing-room, more or less. For laying-out and viewing the, erm, deceased. Next one's the mortuary proper, the preparation room."

*Embalming room, she means. Odd, how she's suddenly gone euphemistic.*

He shone the torch to his right and picked his way through the debris that littered the path; and then he dragged the warped door open and cautiously peered into the adjoining room, found it empty of life or the once-living, and stepped inside.

It was as lavishly strewn with smashed and plundered objects as the Chapel of Rest was, and the vines and ivy had encroached through broken window-panes looking for purchase along the tiled walls, as if Nature intended to reclaim the place for Her own.

Unfortunately, someone on the side of death had staked a stronger claim. The smell was heavier here: there wasn't a doubt in Snape's mind as to what it was, but he couldn't find the *source.*

"*Ewwww,*" Hermione said from the doorway.
"I thought I told you to --"

"What's that on the tables? It's glowing rather strangely in these things."

Snape flicked his torch at the two enamelled embalming-tables, which looked as though they were sprouting green fuzz, and muttered truthfully, "Mould. Or slime, I suppose. Could be luminescent fungi." (He neglected to point out the nasty, brownish stains at the low end of both tables or the discarded instruments tossed into a corner basin, and decided not to worry over their significance until he had further evidence.) Another flick of the torch revealed two small openings on the south side of the room.

"What are those?"

Hermione snuffled a bit, muttered something about "Stinks," -- she hadn't caught on, not yet, which told Snape quite a bit about her lack of certain experiences -- and added "Storage and workers'... cupboards, I think it says."

A quick glance proved the map right: the first room he checked was a washing-up station, and the second contained two utilitarian workmen's cupboards, one with India-rubber boots still neatly placed in front of it, as if the mortician were due to come in to work in a few hours' time. The cupboard doors were gaping wide, and there was nothing at all of interest in them.

"And the last room?" Snape said of a wider door at the far end of the room: it was intact, and was padlocked shut.

"It, ah, doesn't say," Hermione muttered.

"Stay here," Snape commanded, neatly charmed the padlock open, took a deep breath of relatively unpolluted air, flung the door open, and stepped inside.

Hermione was quite right: it stank, and this room was the source of it. Against the longer wall was a series of five cupboards, and rather deep ones judging by how far they jutted into the room.

There was nothing for it but to open one, so, trusting the floors, Snape strode over, shoved his wand up his sleeve, wrestled with the latch, and flung the door open as he covered his nose and mouth with his other arm; he staggered a bit as the stench hit him, and then he retrieved the torch from that hand and shone the light into the cavity.

What lay within was not, however, precisely what he'd expected.

*Sweet fucking Merlin.... Please, please don't tell me that was a child. Don't let them have killed a child....*

The cupboard, lined with three horizontal trays on rolling assembly, was far too cramped to tell for certain -- especially as he could only see the corpse's feet, or what there was left of them -- so he grabbed at a scrap of cloth from the floor, reached for the bar at the end of the tray, and hauled the whole thing out.
He should have laughed in relief had it not been such a pathetic sight: judging by the skull, it must be what was left of an elf, in a rather advanced state of decomposition.

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Hermione had not been prescient enough to shield her face, and had been foolish enough to follow him in: but he hadn't quite realised she had a clear view of the mangled remains until she gagged and managed a choked, "Oh -- oh, God," and stumbled back into the Embalming Room. He could hear her being quite violently sick as he pulled the other two trays from the cupboard to examine the remains.

Well, serves her right, he thought. That'll teach her to moderate her curiosity....

He stayed as long as his stomach could bear it, verifying that the other cupboards were fully occupied, and trying to determine what might have been done to the poor little sods.

Too badly gone to tell.... Mummified, so probably quite old -- good evidence there as it didn't rot first, they must have kept things cool for a while.... Adult skeleton, with additional jumble of -- an infant, that was an infant, no way to tell if it was a stillbirth or not, so the adult probably female.... Male, standard dissection from the torso upward, significant mutilation in the genital area.... Female, pregnant, belly opened, remains of foetus intact....

When he'd finished the grisly enumeration he retreated to the Embalming Room, closed the door and re-locked the padlock, and threw a stench-dampening charm at the Cold Store.

Hermione was still heaving, bent over the nearest embalming-table, adding to the stink of the place: Snape detoured to the only accessible window -- which, perversely, still had glass in its lowest pane -- knocked the glass out with a well-placed elbow, and sucked in a lungful of fresh air. When Hermione seemed to have settled down a bit he reached for her, pried her hands from the edge of the table, pulled her over to the window, and held her steady while she took huge, juddering breaths.

"Had a good dinner, didn't you?" he muttered. "Prime error when going on a mission."

"Sod... ...off," Hermione managed to gasp, and ripped off her goggles, the better to press her face to the window-frame. "Should've... ...warned me... ..if you'd thought...."

He hadn't thought to find this, actually, and so rather than snapping back he simply held her tighter, moving one hand upward to rub at her arm in what he hoped was a soothing manner. (He wasn't about to apologise, but he probably owed her a bit of, of... of comfort. She might be able to see the Thestrals, but she'd obviously never seen -- nor smelt -- what happened after death.)

"How many?" Hermione managed after a bit.

"Seventeen. Fifteen trays, actually, but two are... shared. And I think there were at least two pregnant females as well."
He felt her diaphragm lurch at that, but she fought and controlled it.

*Good girl.*

"So they're still here, then," she said dully. "They're still here and using the facility, and dumping their failures here. Perhaps we ought to call in Shacklebolt --"

"No. What could he do? There are no laws that I know of regulating abuse of wild elves. And I highly doubt that 'they' are still here -- rather, Debdale isn't. I think Petherbridge likely is."

"How do you --"

"Debdale is almost certainly overseeing work at Mangel and Mortars, for one. And two, he's a finicky sort, I've heard -- everything ship-shape, tidied up, and properly disposed-of, even after he causes the most disgusting messes. Three...." He hesitated, not quite knowing how to put it without sending her into another fit of retching, and then simply plunged into it. "Three, some of the rubbish here doesn't seem to be general, but medical waste. Things you wouldn't find except in a *working* medical area, and that the Muggles should have cleaned up before they abandoned the site.... Unfortunately, you've, ah, contaminated some of the evidence, there."

Hermione glanced over at the embalming table, and squinted hard -- there was a faint green glow from the goggles in her free hand, but not enough to see *well*: so Snape obligingly pointed the torch at the surface, and she noted the stains and muck mixed with her bile, hiccupped, and twisted in his arm to bury her face against his coat-front.

"They didn't use this as mere storage, Hermione, and certainly not as a mortuary," he said, flicked off the torch, and pulled her a little closer to him. "Debdale and Petherbridge used the place as a *morgue*. And I'm going to guess that Petherbridge is on his own and, given the muck and the... the damage I saw on those bodies, that he's gone mad. If he wasn't already."

"But that state of -- I know I'm not an expert, but that state of decomposition.... It could have been *months* ago."

"They're not all that far gone, there are one or two quite... fresh. It's cold in here, true, but not enough, and there aren't any cooling charms on the cupboards. Debdale would *never* have allowed any of his work areas to degrade and risk contamination, never, not even a place like this. So, given that the anti-Muggle wards were recently set, Petherbridge still has enough sense to protect the premises, but he's not doing the mucking-out any longer. And he's given in to some rather nasty impulses."

"How badly --"

"Don't ask," Snape said flatly. "It goes beyond a reasonable post-mortem dissection. Let's leave it at that."

She was silent for a very long time, and then said decisively, "Well, that's that, then. We have to check all the buildings that are in the least stable."
"What?"

"If there are... If there are some that are only recently dead, it stands to reason that there might still be some living, right?"

Bloody hell....

"Hermione, we did not come here to rescue elves --"

"I can't leave until I know," she said, stubborn, and balled up her fist in his coat-front. "I just can't. Besides, if we find and catch him and leave them here, they'll starve."

"All the Histories say they were nasty, vicious little sods in their untamed state, they didn't even understand human speech --"

"That doesn't matter. We can't just leave them to starve in... well, wherever he has them."

"You're willing to risk an elf-hexing, when we have far more important things to --"

"Yes," she insisted, and thumped at his chest as she began snivelling. "Yes, yes I am. Or everything I said to Pinky was a lie, and she has every right to start hexing wizards left, right, and centre --"

Oh, for fuck's sake.... Put your foot down, man.

Except you can't. You knew she tended to act like some bloody noble Gryffindor when you married her. It's not her fault that you don't have the balls to tell her no.

It was rather convenient to give in, at any rate. What Petherbridge had done to those elves was truly disgusting: and, judging by the terror and pain frozen on the dead little faces that were still intact, the bastard hadn't always waited until they were completely dead, either.

"We make certain he's not in the building first," Snape said, trying to keep some control of the situation. "And if he's got alarm-wards on them, we don't set them free until we've disabled him. Agreed?"

She nodded and buried her face into the front of his coat again.

"Get hold of yourself, then. We're going to have to hurry -- and I won't compromise on our safety, Hermione, I'm warning you."

She nodded once more, pushed away from him and turned back to the window, and took in more fresh air for a precious minute: and then she said, voice hard, "All right. Where do you want to start?"

"What's closer?"

"York, I think."
"There, then."

Hermione pulled her goggles back on before marching smartly toward the door, stumbling over an evil-looking piece of embalming equipment in the process.

"Hold up," Snape muttered. "If you go barging in willy-nilly --"

"I'm not," she said, turning back at the doorway. "I'm..... ...I'm just so angry I could... spit. And I'm damned well warding the place against any intrusions so he and Debdale can't destroy all this, so shift your arse. We've got work to do."

He should have been outraged at that -- at Hermione Granger, his subordinate, protégé, and bloody wife ordering him to move -- but all he could muster up was bemusement.

She's bloody resilient in some situations, he thought. How terribly sad, that Dumbledore and the rest never gave her a chance to prove it.

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Despite her tearing rage -- and after casting an impressive ward over all possible entrances to the Mortuary -- Hermione proved to be as cautious as he could like, guiding him across the yards and along the outer corridors quite prudently, until they'd reached a building she deemed the right one.

"All right. Two choices: we Levitate up to the first floor -- that's Zachary -- or we pull off the plywood here," she whispered of the boarded-up windows.

Snape glanced upward, noting the gaping, frameless window-openings above them, and shuddered.

"You send me first," he granted. "I need to be able to deflect and shoot. Once I've secured the room, I'll bring you. If, ah, you feel up to Levitating someone my size."

Now's your chance, my dear. Of course you're not in my Will yet, you know....

Hermione -- still, unnervingly, in the damned goggles (he hated not being able to see her eyes and judge her reactions) -- cocked her head, shrugged in a most unreassuring manner, and promptly pointed her wand at him and cast Leviosa -- quite nicely, too; none of the bobbles or hesitation he remembered from being subjected to it as a guinea-pig for his partner in Flitwick's class. He rose steadily, passing the tops of the ground-floor window frames and the band of tile-work that separated the ground- and first-floor levels. She slowed his ascent as he reached the first floor, and thoughtfully steered him to the blank wall between two openings so he shouldn't be a total sitting-duck.

Well, that proves I'm still useful, at least for the moment.

She wriggled him nearer the window a bit at a time, until he motioned her to stop and hold him stationary; and then he risked shining the torch in, found the room empty -- though the door to the corridor was gaping wide -- switched off the torch and re-clipped it at his waist, and pulled himself
over the sill. (Another tight squeeze, damn it -- the first-floor windows weren't nearly as generous as the ground-floor, and Snape preferred not to consider why: he doubted it was purely a design choice.)

Once inside he risked charming a temporary barrier at the doorway, so he shouldn't be ambushed, and reciprocated Hermione's Levitation (not quite as well as she, blast it, but not badly), and then helped her pull herself through the frame.

"Careful," he whispered. "The floor's spongey."

"Right.... Ewwwww, what a mess," she said, getting a good look at the room, and then scraping some muck from the bottom of her shoe. "I think the pigeons have come home to roost. Literally. And look at that wallpaper, it's peeling away and growing things --"

"For Merlin's sake, stop fussing over.... Where's the bloody plan?"

"Hang on a moment.... Damn, there's only the ground floor. But if they're set up the same, there should be a stairwell just outside to the left."

Snape swore softly. "So we've no idea how many bloody rooms on this floor?"

"Well, the wards should be identical. We're probably in the Day Room. There are some smaller rooms... cubicles, I guess, or cells, across and down the corridor. Shall we split up and go from the middle, or --"

"No. We go eastward first, you watch my back. Make certain this floor is clear before we go downstairs."

"All right," she said, and crept across the room after him across the shaky floors. "Best stay on the joists, as Rory said. Erm, those are --"

"I know what bloody joists are, Hermione, I'm not ignorant." "Just trying to help," she muttered as he dropped the barrier.

In the end, though, making certain the floor was clear was an easy task: just past the loos and six of the cells, the floor had caved in, opening up a gaping hole leading twelve feet straight down. Even the thresholds of some of the nearest cells had begun to sag downward toward the collapse.

"You don't think he'd Levitate over there, do you?" Hermione whispered. "The plan says it's just the baths and a kitchen."

"Not likely, not given the state of the floors. Turn back, let's check the cells."

The cells on Zachary had their Muggle locks firmly in place, and no key was in plain view: and a survey with the torch through the disturbing little windows in each door proved that they were empty.
"Next floor," Snape whispered over his shoulder, and cautiously edged down the corridor.

The *reason* for the lack of life was clear when they reached the stairs: half the run had disintegrated, leaving the choice of quite a jump down to the landing, or of more Levitation. (They chose Levitation, of course, although Snape had serious doubts about their ability to continue like that all evening. They'd both drop from exhaustion at this rate.)

Snape crept down the lower twist in the stair first, wand ready, and mentally cursed the bloody useless goggles. There was no light at all on York's ground floor with the windows boarded securely, so there was nothing for it but to switch the damned torch back on and edge down the long hallway (it truncated abruptly, blocked by the debris from the floor above), trying to avoid the trash on the floor and to negotiate blind corners.

"He's not here," Hermione muttered, voice sulky.

"Shut *up*," Snape hissed.

"Well, he's *not*. You shone the light all the way down, and you were a perfect target. Why wouldn't he have fired or Apparated out directly?"

"We are dealing with a potential madman here, you know --"

"We must have made loads of noise, anyway, given the floor upstairs. Give over, we're wasting time --"

Snape committed the grave error -- at least, it *might* be -- in spinning to face her, stepping in until they were nearly nose-to-nose, and muttering, "I told you that safety came first. If you can't accept that, leave now."

She opened her mouth to retort, and stilled as a high-pitched whine sounded from the further end of the corridor. Snape froze himself, and slowly turned to listen more intently -- and then they heard it again.

"Oh, hell," Hermione said hopelessly. "They're down here."

"Some of them, at any rate. Come along," he said, and inched his way down the corridor, past what must have been the Sisters' station, across the Day Room, into the corridor, and toward the first cell, into which he shone the torch.

It certainly *was* an elf inside, though one would be hard-pressed to identify it as such when compared to the average Hogwarts elf. It was smaller than usual, though he couldn't tell whether from malnutrition -- for it *was* starving, he could clearly see its ribs -- or whether wild elves were smaller overall; the wretched, shivering thing was huddled in a corner of the cell, naked, without so much as a blanket or scrap of cloth against the cold, and its waste covered the floor. As it had smeared its own excrement well up the walls, Snape reckoned it had lost any wits it once had. It squealed when the light struck it, snarled, and then curled itself into a ball.
"How is it --"

"Don't bother looking," Snape said grimly. "You don't wish to see, really. In fact.... Go back to the Day Room and get one of the windows open. If you really want to do this, that's the only way I can think to get them out without blowing out the cell windows -- and that will make far too much noise. The bloody things are barred."

"But --"

"Hermione, the bloody ward on this door is meant to cancel out their magic. As long as they're in there we're safe, but as soon as they pass the door, they're likely to attack. They're wild creatures, Hermione, not tame House-Elves. I'm going to open each door and loose them one at a time, and we'll have to herd them toward the open window and deflect anything they throw at us at the same time. I'd rather you be at the other end of the Day Room, because if one charges in this direction, I'm quicker with hexes. Understood?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Pick the largest window you can, one that will let in moonlight so they can see it's an escape. Let me know when you're done."

Hermione returned to the Day Room: he could hear her muttering to herself first, and then the more melodious phrasing of an incantation followed by the faint protest of nails being forced from boards and window-frames. He busied himself with surveying the inhabitants of the other five cells, and had only partly done when he saw a weak light filtering across the Day Room floor and she called softly, "I've finished. You can send the first."

"Good. Go stand behind that wretched station, there -- that will give you some cover."

He waited until she'd done his bidding, cast his barrier-spell at the stairwell end of the corridor -- just what they'd need, one of the little sods escaping upstairs and then attacking them later -- cautiously cracked the first cell door open, and waited.

And waited.

"What --"

"Shhhh," he commanded, and sighed as a scuffling at the door told him the bloody little beast had been ready to poke its head out, but had now retreated.

*Nothing for it -- got to get it moving.*

He cast Serpensortia into the room, choosing a harmless snake as the spell's avatar.

On later reflection, that was a mistake: the elf, incapable of reason, shrieked in terror (which set its neighbours to shrieking as well), shot out of the cell and turned the wrong way, bounced off Snape's shins, and lunged to snap -- only a quick deflection saved Snape from a nasty bite -- before
the elf bounded off on all fours toward the Day Room, hissed at Hermione, and fled toward the moonlight.

"It's off. One down," Hermione whispered.

_Wonderful. Merlin only knows how many to go, in however many buildings._

"Why wasn't it walking upright?" Hermione added.

"They don't, apparently," Snape muttered. "I suppose that's a function of domestication."

"Oh."

Snape opened the next cell and its prisoner didn't waste a second, tearing off like Rory the Mad Scotsman's Morris Mini: it didn't even bother to snarl or hiss. The next prisoner was a bit odd. An elderly male (well, as they were all naked it was fairly obvious, and this specimen had rather impressive testicles that had succumbed to gravity) sauntered out, stared at Snape in frank appraisal, found him not worthy of bothering with, and coolly walked into the Day Room.

"He's out. I think, judging by his expression," Hermione called softly across the room, "that _that_ was the Severus Snape of elves."

If he'd thought Hermione could see him clearly, Snape would have bothered to sneer.

The next two elves took a fair bit of coaxing, but eventually scuttled off with only token snaps and snarls. The last, however, refused to come out, and Snape only saw why when he risked a glance around the door and shone his torch in: a female who -- judging from the muck on the floor -- had only recently given birth. He thought at first that she was too weak to even notice him, and then he realised when he cautiously approached her that her eyes were milky: she'd been blinded at some point, though he couldn't tell if it was intentional. Clutched in her spindly arms was an infant, dead (and for some time), which she was still feebly trying to nurse although her teats were dry.

_Blast. She's going to die, and I don't have a bloody thing with me to let her go easily --_

"Oh God," Hermione muttered behind his shoulder.

"Did I or did I _not_ tell you not to leave the station?"

"No, you didn't, and I got concerned.... She's not in good shape, is she?"

"No," he said, and coughed a bit from the stink of the dead baby. _And bloody hell, here it comes -- 'Oh, we have to get her to Hogwarts straightaway, Severus, I shan't be able to live with myself if we don't --'_

But Hermione was silent for a long time, and then she said tentatively, "I know it's not fair to ask this of you, but could you... could you put her down, please?"
"What?"

"Well, she won't survive in the wild like that, will she? And I'd guess she's about to go anyway, if her breathing's any indication. I'd do it myself, but I don't think I can. Harry told me that Bellatrix Black said you have to want to kill. Have the proper intent. And I... I've never had to cast that, you see, and I don't think I can, even if I don't want her to be in pain any longer...."

Yes, Severus, you are still useful. Useful for the dirty jobs, the things no-one else can bear to do, the things no-one else wants to smirch their conscience with....

He shoved his outrage aside. She didn't mean it that way: she was simply being realistic, as he had been when he'd told her he was quicker with hexes. He couldn't fault her for that.

"I really wouldn't ask," she added quietly. "But we can't leave her like that, really we can't. It's a kindness, and it's the least we can do given what they've done to her."

That had been his thought precisely. "Go outside and shut the door," he said heavily. "It'll light up the whole building if you don't. And don't look through the bloody window."

She shuffled back to the corridor, and he heard the thud of the heavy latch; he stood, took several careful paces back (avoiding the shit and rotting afterbirth), levelled his wand at the poor creature, and whispered a sincere and extremely effective "Avada Kedavra."

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Hermione had retreated back to the Sisters' station when he left the hellish little cell, her wand at the ready -- at least she was being alert, and not indulging in any snivelling or sentimentality -- and she said, "Thank you."

"Don't," he said, voice sharper than he'd intended. "Don't belabour it, let's just.... We need to get going. Where next?"

"Vincent-Vanbrugh's closest, but Rory's probably right and we ought leave it as a last resort.... Mapother's the only building on the west. Rossetti's this side, toward the front. We can't go through the corridor system, though, because that's the end that the first floor's fallen into. We'll have to cross the yards."

"Rossetti, then," he said, and strode over to the open window. Hermione followed, waiting quietly while he clambered through the frame and dropped a few feet to ground-level, wincing as it jarred both knee and hip. It was probably only his imagination -- or the unevenness of the ground below the window -- but he fancied that Hermione held his shoulder a bit longer and more tightly than was strictly necessary, when he helped her with the drop.

"This way," she muttered, and led him southward across the yard and an overgrown garden, up to a low brick retaining wall: she handed off the clipboard to him, jumped and scrambled up it with enviable agility, and dropped down on the other side.
Bloody hell. And she doesn't even exercise, as far as I know....

It took him rather longer, unfortunately, and necessitated tossing over all the kit first, and earned him scraped palms and a second trouser-tear. (But it was better than another Levitation.)

"That's it, over there," Hermione whispered, and pointed to the distant bulk of a building to the south. "It's awfully exposed."

"Walk along the corridor wall, then," he told her as he adjusted the bloody goggles back over his head.

"I don't see any lights in the building," Hermione said doubtfully.

"Doesn't mean he's not there, just that he may have blocked the windows. Debdale should have knocked some security measures into him."

They began the long hike along the exterior of the services corridor, taking advantage of the moments when the moon was cloud-covered to put on some speed, and going stealthy when it peeped out again; and after an excruciating ten minutes, they'd reached the north wall of Rossetti-Ruskin.

"It's a bisected ward -- the main corridor separates the Day Room from the cells. But how do we get in? We don't dare go to the front, Security might see us," Hermione whispered.

Bloody shame your friend Potter got his cloak back from me....

"We don't, yet. First floor's out as all those windows are still intact, and trying to open them will make too much noise.... Stay here." He sidled along the north side of the building, toward the tiny, barred windows that he now recognised as cell windows, stopping under each and listening for any sound. He was near the end of the cell block when a glimmer of light sparked in the night-vision goggles, and he froze and back-tracked a half-pace.

They'd been careless with the painting -- from the streakiness it must be paint, rather than fabric or a charm that would have to be renewed often -- and Snape nestled closer to the building, ducked under the sill, and cast a sound-enhancing charm that he reckoned would have delighted Harry Bloody Potter \textit{et al}, especially those incorrigible Weasley twins. He heard nothing but heavy, panicked breathing for a moment, and then a human, male yelp.

"Damn you, you... ...little beast, hold --"

An Elphine squeal nearly split Snape's eardrum, and then another, more pained, human yelp.

" -- bloody fucking animal, you ne- ... learn, I'm... ...teach you once and for all --"

Something hit the interior wall with a \textit{thud}, quite close to Snape, and he jumped. He couldn't recognise the voice as Petherbridge's after so many years, but at this point it hardly mattered: what \textit{did} was that the person was involved in quite a struggle with one of the creatures. (It had to be...
Petherbridge, then. He couldn't imagine Debdale soiling his hands by actually tussling with one of them.) He crept away from the window and hurried back to Hermione.

"He's in one of the last cells," he told her under his breath. "A bit preoccupied. We'll have to risk Apparating inside -- into the Day Room, on the other side of the corridor. We secure the Day Room, then we cross the corridor and stay still until we're certain he hasn't heard us."

"What's he --"

"I don't know, but it doesn't sound good. No matter what you see, Hermione, bear in mind that we want him alive. He can't tell us anything if one of us loses our head and kills him. Understand?"

"Yes. Not that I could."

"Given the right circumstances, you could -- don't underestimate yourself. Have you had a chance to practise Apparition by map?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Nothing for it, then.... Look at the map," he said, training his torch on her clipboard, "and concentrate on that room. Be sure to feel the space around you. On three. Ready?"

She nodded, Snape counted, and on "Three," they popped into the Day Room of Rossetti Ward.

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There was artificial lighting in the Day Room that dazzled Snape's eyes for a moment, before they adjusted and he was able to see the room through the eerie green cast of the goggles.

Contrary to expectations, Debdale and Petherbridge had elected to use Rossetti despite its proximity to the front of the property: the southern windows were heavily masked with dark fabric, and they'd set up quite a laboratory in the Day Room. The floor seemed rather more stable than Nightingale had, so Snape supposed they'd opted for safety; and they'd swept any muck over into a corner, leaving a relatively clear path around the tables and to the corridor.

Hermione hadn't been so lucky as he, having Apparated quite close to one of the tables -- he heard her stifle a moan, and saw her grab at her hip where the table-edge had gouged into it.

"All right?" he mouthed. He couldn't see her eyes, of course, but her lips were twisted into a grimace.

She managed a nod, and then jerked as a high-pitched shriek came from down the corridor, followed by a laugh.

Good, he hasn't heard us.
Snape motioned for Hermione to go to the north-eastern end of the Day Room, and he negotiated the warren of tables and free-standing apparatus to take position at the north-western side; and then with a motion to her to stay put he stepped across the main corridor. He stayed as close to the wall as he could and moved into the north end of Rossetti, toward the open cell and the weak candlelight from within it that stained the threshold.

"Like to see you get out of that, now. What shall it be tonight, I wonder? No match for me at duelling, no, with that puny untrained magic of yours --"

Good gods, he's planning on torturing the poor thing. Really torturing it, Snape thought, and halted as a floorboard creaked under his toe.

"-- no good for breeding -- D'you know how you drove him mad with that, you the only one he couldn't get to.... Well, no, you wouldn't, you witless little cretin. Got me in the shitter, you did, he kept blaming it on me, said I cocked it up...."

The cell door was hanging open, and Snape was nearly at it, now.

"I reckon you owe me for that, a lot. You're why he did this to me, you know."

Petherbridge giggled, the sound bouncing back toward the corridor off the cell walls, and Snape guessed that his back was to the door. He risked a look inside.

It was Petherbridge, all right: he recognised the whitish hair, nearly as blond as Malfoy's, and the silhouette of a prominent cow-lick bang at the top of Petherbridge's head. But there was something odd about him as well: even from behind Snape could tell that his clothes hung off his shoulders and hips, and he stood with a curious, hunch-backed stance. He couldn't see the elf as Petherbridge was blocking the view.

"I think," Petherbridge was saying, and giggled again, "that I deserve a special treat tonight, before I'm.... before I'm not in a position to appreciate it any longer. I spent months watching you little bastards fucking away, and he'd never let me go off to do anything about it. Or do anything about it here, either. But he's not my master any more. And you're going to learn who's yours."

Petherbridge began to fumble with something in front of him, and Snape decided it must be his trousers-buttons.

Merlin's balls and beard, if Hermione sees anything at all like that, he's a dead man.

"I shouldn't," he said flatly, and trained both torch and wand at Petherbridge's back.

Petherbridge froze, and then giggled nervously. "I know that voice," he said, his high-pitched, strained voice grating on Snape's nerves. "I know that voice, I do. McGonagall let Hogwarts' pet Potions Master out of his cage, did she?"

"Let's save some time, shall we? Greasy git, miserable bastard, Death Eater, bane of your existence.... Are there any others? No? No further bon mots from the expansive Hufflepuff wit?
How disappointing, such lack of originality. If you're done trying to goad me, Petherbridge, raise your hands -- slowly -- and keep them up."

"You won't like what you see," Petherbridge said, and slowly raised his left hand only: Snape trained the torch on it, and noted that it was dripping blood from a bite-wound.

At least the creature got a few bites in. He'll be feeling poorly in a moment, given the toxin in.... Hang on. There's something odd about his hand....

It was more than odd, it was obscene. Petherbridge's hand looked like that of a wizard who'd got stuck halfway through an Animagus transformation: it was elongated and misshapen, the fingers terminating in spatulate ends.

"Needn't worry about that getting infected, it won't matter. He's turned me, you see," Petherbridge said, and giggled. "The bastard wouldn't kill me outright, he turned me somehow. Came back a few weeks ago, knocked me out, fed me some awful muck that he brewed up in secret, and cast a bloody hex. It's not all at once, mind you, it's been a slow and painful process.... I'm about half-gone, I think. Having trouble reasoning properly, most of the time --"

He turned his head to stare over his shoulder, and the full horror of it hit Snape. Petherbridge looked only vaguely human, now, the shaggy hair concealing ears that had begun to point: his nose had grown longer as well, his skin thicker and more wrinkled -- he looked more like a wizard of one hundred -- and the single eye that Snape could see had grown bulbous and had begun to jut out of the socket. His back had warped and twisted, and he seemed to have shrunk from his Seventh-Year height: the loose clothing was not just from under-feeding, then, but an actual, physical transformation from man to elf.

"For Merlin's sake, Petherbridge --"

"He said," Petherbridge gasped, "that as I wanted to bugger them, I might as well be one. And he's warded me here, so I can't leave. Left supplies and my wand, to see if I'd be a coward and draw it out or do the brave thing and end it quick.... I couldn't," he added in a sob. "I haven't the guts to end it. He said he'd come back to clear everything up and maybe he'd put me out of my misery then, but he hasn't, he hasn't, the lying bastard --"

"If it can be done, it can be undone -- if you come along quietly, and now. Show me your other hand, Petherbridge, before I have to do something drastic."

"Too late, too late!" Petherbridge sang, his voice cracking. "He said it's his own potion, not in any books, and no second-rate schoolmaster will crack it before I'm gone --"

Snape stiffened.

"Oh, that's got you, 'second-rate,' hasn't it?" Petherbridge said, and grinned. "No matter. Only thing for it is to let it happen, and p'raps the bloody ward won't recognise me and I can get out --"

"Petherbridge, shut up, put up the other hand, and turn slowly!"
Snape heard Hermione move into the main corridor, and sent her the mental message to *get the bloody hell back*.

"Can't. Can't get the other arm up above my shoulder, now, it's buggered. I'll go really slowly, though, if it'll make you happy," Petherbridge said obligingly, and began to shuffle painfully about to face Snape.

Snape rather wished Petherbridge hadn't, and that he'd just stunned the madman outright: he barely looked human any longer. He also had a good look at the elf as Petherbridge lurched to the side: it was chained to the wall, limbs spread. This particular specimen had gone through quite a beating, and the expression on its face could only be interpreted as absolute terror, any defiance gone.

"'Course, p'raps you *could* do something," Petherbridge wheezed when he'd turned round fully, his wand arm twisted up nearly to his breast-bone. "P'raps you *aren't* the washed-up, glorified apothecary we always reckoned."

Complete attention, self-control or lack of it, a moment's hesitation -- these were among the things upon which good or bad outcomes hinged, Snape knew well: it still didn't prepare him for the surge of rage that led him to spit "Shut up and step away from the --" instead of Binding the bastard immediately.... Petherbridge took full advantage of it by dropping his wand arm, flicking the wand backward with a neat twist of the wrist, and loosing the manacles that bound the elf to the wall; the terrified creature dropped to the ground and streaked for the doorway -- and for Snape. Given the choice between taking his wand off Petherbridge, or casting a deflection to.... Well, there *wasn't* a choice: Petherbridge would almost certainly hex Snape's bollocks off the moment he dropped his wand.

Snape side-stepped to avoid the frightened elf, put himself off-balance, and consequently was unprepared for the creature to swerve and hit him directly in the knees with astonishing force, sending him backward to crash into the nearest wall and knocking his head against the damnably-intact plaster.

*So that's what they mean by seeing stars....*

Wand, torch, and goggles went flying in either direction as Snape hit the floor, and as the elf scuttled off toward the main corridor: in a matter of seconds Petherbridge was bent over him, breath foul, his twisted, nearly inhuman face blessedly shadowed and unreadable. His dug his wand into Snape's breast-bone through the flimsy layers of Muggle coat and shirt.

"Who'd have thought it?" Petherbridge said wonderingly. "All those stories the bloody Slytherins would tell, boasting about what a brilliant hexer you are, how brave you were during the war.... All lies, aren't they?" A gob of Petherbridge's saliva struck Snape's cheek, and he flinched: Petherbridge giggled, and then continued in that eerie sing-song, "*Must* be, if I can kill you. Or.... No, *that's* it. You're past your prime, old man. Glory days over.... Should have left it to a younger man, so stupid, meddling in what doesn't concern you."

He bent even lower, his foetid breath making Snape gag. "D'you remember what you called me after my OWLs? ' Barely adequate mediocrity.' Bloody shame, it *is*, that the barely adequate
mediocrity's going to rid everyone of you, and no-one will ever know who to thank." He stepped back a pace, painfully drew himself up to his full, now-stunted height, and crowed, "Avad--"

"Expelliarmus!" someone -- well, by a process of elimination, Hermione, though Snape's stunned brain didn't recognise the coldness in her voice -- cast; Petherbridge's already-bulging eyes popped as his wand went sailing down the room toward her. He belatedly decided not to waste further time, for with a snarl he dropped to all fours like the animal he was becoming and bounded off after the elf, neatly avoiding Hermione's otherwise respectable "Incarcerous!", which hit the door-frame at what had been Petherbridge's chest-level and collapsed onto the floor in a tangles mass of ropes instead.

Everything in Snape's field of vision went fuzzy for a few seconds, but cleared again when a sadistic bastard administered two sharp slaps to his face.

"Severus?" he heard Hermione ask, voice panicked. "Severus, are you all right?"

Stop hitting me, you bint of a -- Oh, she sounds worried. How thoughtful....

"Took you long enough," he muttered, and passed out for good.

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Chapter 19: Wherein Hermione gets a few licks in (get your minds out the gutter) and proves her mettle; and Severus does a fair impression of Bill the Cat™.

Rossetti Ward, Cane Hill Mental Hospital
Night of February 1st - morning of February 2nd

'Took you long enough'? 'Took you long enough'?! Of all the self-centred, ungrateful, nasty pricks on the face of the --

Hermione squatted next to Severus and smacked him once or twice more -- not entirely to see if that alone would bring him round again -- and then cast Ennervate upon him.

"Wha-- " he muttered, and then perked up. "Where is he?"

"He ran off down the main corridor, north-east --"

"Where's my wand?"

"Here," she said, and shoved it into his hand.

"Why didn't you kill the son of a bitch instead of --"
"Because you told me not to!" she said, voice loud with indignation, and wasn't the least sorry when 
Severus winced: she shone her torch at his chest and pushed her goggles up, the better to glare at 
him. "Bloody hell, Severus -- 'Be ready to shoot, not talk.' 'Don't kill him, we need him.'
'Why didn't you kill him?' I can't read your bloody mind!"

"Point taken," Severus muttered, and rubbed the back of his head.

"And while we're on the subject, why does 'Be ready to shoot, not talk' apply to me and not 
to you?" she accused. Severus tried to push himself away from the wall, started to retort, and 
grimaced instead. "Stay put, he's not a threat --"

"Bloody well is --"

"-- at the moment, as I've got his wand too, damn it."

"Oh. You're certain he went down the corridor, and not into the --"

"Yes, Severus, he took a sharp left, just like the elf. Why the hell did he go off on all fours?"

"You didn't see him clearly, did you?" Severus asked warily.

"Not well, no. Your torch was out by the time he stepped into the room, and he streaked by me so 
fast I couldn't get a bead on him."

"Debdale's transformed him. Or rather, he's in the midst of transforming, into an elf."

*Oh, holy.... Cripes.*

"How bad is it? I've heard stories, of course --"

"Bad," Severus said flatly, and cautiously sat upright. "Petherbridge reckons he's about half-gone, 
and I'd concur. And they're not stories, it's just highly unusual for anyone to know how to do it -- 
they excised the ritual from all known grimoires around 1700, due to abuse. Not that that stopped 
Wilberforce Norris."

"Well it *would* be an abuse, wouldn't.... Mrs Norris!"

"Exactly. They never *did* find him, or the grimoire he consulted."

"But why?"

"Because she and Filch were total fools and.... Later," Severus said impatiently, and drew his legs 
under himself. "We've got to track Petherbridge down, capture him, and get him to record his 
testimony before he fully turns. With bloody Veritaserum if necessary, though I don't know if it 
will work, given his condition."

"But isn't there anything you can do?" Hermione asked as she stood, and reached down to help him 
up. "I heard you say --"
"I lied," he said with a grunt as Hermione hauled him to his feet. "I doubt that Debdale's left his notes lying about -- though we'll have to check before we leave -- and without the ritual and the potion receipt, there's no bloody way we can save Petherbridge in time. The first problem we'll have, after subduing him, is how to get him out of here. You'll have to break the ward that's holding him in."

"Oh, shit."

"Where's.... Gets better and better, doesn't it? Do you understand how dangerous Debdale is, now? ...where's the bloody torch?"

"Got it," Hermione muttered, and retrieved it from where it had rolled: something behind the nearest cell door snuffled and squealed in alarm, and scurried away. "Oh, cripes --"

"What?"

"The rest of the cells...."

"Later, after we track him down."

"But --"

"Later, Hermione," Severus commanded, and took a few experimental steps across the room, wavering slightly. "Without him we have no bloody witness to the experimentation."

"Fine," Hermione sulked. "But if he's limited to the buildings that join up with this corridor, then --"

"Then we still have five or six rather dangerous buildings to track him down in, haven't we?"

*Shit. I hate it when he's sensible.*

"Right," she said, took a step forward, and jumped back when something crunched under her boot....

In the light of her torch, she saw that she'd stepped on Severus' goggles.

"Oh, shit."

"Already broken when they fell off," he said, and motioned impatiently for her to give him his torch. "I heard them go. Don't worry about it."

*Bloody well will, I've no idea what they cost....*

There was nothing for it, though, but to hand off the torch, watch as Severus cast his Barrier spell at either side of the Rossetti doors to prevent Petherbridge from sneaking past or behind them, and to follow him down the main corridor, into the heart of the decaying eastern wards of Cane Hill.
Shaftesbury-Salter was, theoretically and at first glance, an easy ward to control: unlike Rossetti, it spurred off the main corridor in one direction instead of being bisected. Unfortunately, it was also bloody long and cold: several of the windows had been shattered by vandals, and a chill wind whipped through the ward. She and Severus split and took opposite sides of the ground floor, wands at the ready as they peered into each side room, around blind corners, and negotiated abandoned equipment, beds, and what seemed an immense number of pigeon-carcasses.

They met back up at the end with no evidence that Petherbridge had ducked in. The only thing they found, in fact (besides the pigeon skeletons), were cells with dead elves in them.

"Cripes," Hermione muttered, and mentally told her stomach to behave: it was threatening another revolt from the thought of the starved little bodies in the cells. (Pigeon-bone crunching underfoot didn't help, either.) "Upstairs?"

"Don't think so," Severus said. "The stairwell was on my side, and the whole run's totally gone, landing and all. That's bloody impossible."

"Shall we risk going on, then?"

"Yes. We'll Barrier the entrance," he muttered, and trudged back over the sagging floor toward the corridor. (Hermione was more than a bit concerned for him: between the knock on the head and all the spells he was casting, he was looking very, very tired.)

Turner, when she paused to look at the map, was a much shorter ward, bisected by the main corridor as Rossetti had been: but when they reached its entrances, they found both firmly boarded-up all the way to the ceiling, with yellow caution tape plastered across the plywood.

Severus cursed.

"Well, he doesn't have his wand," Hermione reasoned. "And this is Muggle work, so it's been here a while, probably before they got here. Would Debdale have bothered to ward its perimetre, or just the corridor?"

"Let's hope the corridor. Next?"

"Vincent-Vanbrugh. It's another long one, not to mention the one Rory warned us off."

Severus sighed, shone his torch up at the ceiling -- which was developing a nasty sag, the further along they went -- and headed toward Vincent-Vanbrugh. Blessedly, however, the entrance to that building was also was boarded and taped, though someone had done a bad job of it with scraps of ply that didn't reach the uneven ceiling, and only barely covered the doors proper.

"Right," Severus said grimly after testing that the nailing was sound. "Next?"

"Zachary-Unwin, to the right, very small. It's little more than a Day Room and a few offices."
Severus stumbled off toward it, and she hurried after him.

Zachary-Unwin would be it, apparently: the ceiling of the main corridor had actually fallen in on one side, forcing Severus to stoop. Just past the doorway, moreover, the corridor had caved in completely. Some wit had spray-painted "Abandon hope all ye who enter here. Fuck you security," on the wall next to the cave-in.

"Let me see the bloody plan," Severus whispered, and cursed when he saw how open and unprotected the entrance was to Zachary-Unwin. "You stay at the main door while I check the rooms on the left. Then enter -- stay to your right -- and we'll advance on the main room."

She nodded, and covered Severus as he darted around the corner of the entrance and paused at the first room; finding that empty, he made for the second room, cleared it, nodded to her to enter, and cast a Barrier at the entrance once she'd stepped in. They cautiously made their way into the huge open room at the very end, sidling around the accumulated muck that blocked their paths.

The problem was, Petherbridge wasn't there. Nor was he on the first floor. Severus indulged in loud and creative cursing as they edged their way down the crumbling staircase back to the ground floor.

"Could he have got out one of the windows in Shaftesbury?" Hermione asked. "I thought you said he --"

"He said so. Unless he's wrong, and the ward doesn't recognise him now," Severus theorised. "He's neither fish nor fowl at the moment. But one would think there's enough of him left to prevent that."

"Then he must have got through some of the boarding, that's all. So must have that stupid elf that he loosed on you -- I haven't seen it, have you?"

"No. But if the boarding is old work, why should Debdale have bothered? Why extend the barrier to wards when he could simply block the corridor? It's a bloody big area to cover as it is."

"Only one way to tell what the bastard managed," Hermione said grumpily, marched through the muck on the floor, and cleared a table in the corner that looked on the verge of collapse. Oddly, the muck was artwork, probably that of the patients judging by the childish techniques and occasionally morbid subjects; then she spread out the full site-map and pulled off her goggles.

"How can you --"

"Not going to be fun," she muttered. "And I've never tried it on the fly without the proper equations, so it mayn't work. Give me a moment -- hold the torch so we can see the map, will you?" she added as she scrabbled about on the floor for something with which to write. (All she could come up with was a crayon, but that would do; it was one of the few things that wasn't covered with the disgusting slime that was busily propagating about Cane Hill.)

She carefully aligned the map to the compass-points -- Rory had provided a compass, so she didn't need to invoke Point Me -- and, after a moment's hard thinking she scrawled the necessary runes on
the map, pointed her wand at it, and gingerly reached out her left hand for the mould-infested wall. "And before proceeding, may I just say, ewwwww," she muttered: Severus, damn him, snorted. (He would. He wasn't the one having to stick his fingers in a decade's worth of primordial, plaster-fed ooze.)

She winced as her fingers touched the wall, shook herself out of her squick, and chanted in proper Arithmantic Latin as she tapped her wand on the appropriate runes, "I command you by the north and south, the east and west, to reveal those things unseen that bind and enclose, that fetter and imprison."

It took a moment, out of practise as she was, for the spell to take: but a ghostly outline of the eastern wards began to flicker on the map, and then, spurred by her growing confidence, took hold and shone a bright blue.

"Very nice," Severus murmured. "Your work, I mean. No gaps in the ward, so where's he gone? We're right on Turner --"

_Hang on -- there's something else there, too...._

The entire ward didn't want to reveal itself. _That_ wasn't unusual, given the purpose of a ward in the first place, but Hermione had a sense of something murkier, something more malevolent lurking beneath it.

"-- but wrong on Vincent-Vanbrugh -- that's included. Where's the bastard gone? Can you locate him with something?"

_No, Severus, I can't.... Oh, cripes -- Debdale's used Dark Arts and an Obscuring Charm.... This is going to hurt._

She couldn't stop to tell Severus about the problem: if Debdale had been _really_ nasty, he'd included a fail-safe that would redouble the ward's effectiveness each time it was tampered with. (She didn't want to think about what he'd had to do to accomplish that.)

She'd always hated this particular procedure. You never knew how well it would speak to you: it was a bit like Legilimency and Divination combined, with the intent of the Caster interpreted in images -- not always concrete ones, but often abstract visual and aural images that had to be interpreted like bloody Trelawney's prophecies. Sometimes they had meaning for the Arithmancer, and sometimes they made absolutely no sense whatever. She'd felt quite cheated and indignant when Hawking had taught her this: Arithmancy was supposed to be precise, the most scientific of the Magical Arts, but this spell was inexact, inelegant, and prone to errors in interpretation.

But it was also useful, and the quickest way to find out what was going on; working out the proper equations could take an entire bloody hour. There wasn't anything for it but to get it over with _now._

"Hermione?" she heard Severus say, quite sharply. "Hermione, what are you --"
She shook her head, pressed her fingers more deeply into the slime, chanted, "Show me the true intent of your maker," and bit back a cry when a shock ran from her fingertips, up her arm, and raced to the back of her skull.

Everything went black before her: she couldn't see Severus or the map.

Her brain was totally focussed on the images taking shape in her mind.

*****

_Darkness._

_Cold, breath steaming in the air._

_A whisper rapidly becoming louder and clearer; the urge to duck as something flutters past her ear, something too large to be a bat --_

_A bird, that's it, it's a bird --_

The moment she thought it, the image formed in her mind, the elements isolated from any location she could recognise.

_The pigeon struts along the outer sill of a window, beady eyes curious and acquisitive, beak peck peck peck peck peck peck peck peck peck peck._

_pecking randomly at the panes until it finds one empty of glass. It wedges itself into the gap, struggles in, and flutters to the floor with a rustle of wings._

_The vision blacked out again._

_Fluttering -- a thump --_

-- and scratching --

-- and more fluttering --

_Damn it, show me, don't play stupid games...._

_A bird -- perhaps the same, perhaps not -- thin, feathers rent, its face about the beak blood-streaked and oozing pus, beats itself against a window --_

-- an empty window, the crumbling mullions letting in the sun with no refraction or glare --
The bird drops to the floor, exhausted, onto a pile of bones and tattered feathers --

*****

Hermione wrenched her hand away from the wall and groped for the table.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

Good God, he sounds... panicked, she thought through the stabbing pain in her head.

"Just let me... rest for a moment," she muttered, and buried her face in her hands: she'd dropped her wand at some point, and hoped it hadn't fallen in a puddle of muck.

"What have you bloody done?" Severus demanded.

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

Well, that's that, then -- bloody well hope I can get us out of it, or we're fucked --

She heard Severus curse as he stumbled over something, and then he was at her side of the table: he grabbed her, pulled her upright, and shook her, his fingers digging into her shoulders -- and then he stopped when her knees began to buckle and he had to support her instead.

"What did you see?"

"I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry, Severus, we should have stopped before to check," she gabbled.

"What? What the bloody hell is -- Merlin's balls, Hermione, what did you do? I was about to pull you off the bloody wall --"

She couldn't see his eyes, but he looked absolutely furious nonetheless, the torch-light picking out only the sharp line of cheekbone, the curved knife's edge of his nose, and the very clear down-turn of thinly-pressed lips.

Pity, that, they're one of his nicer features when he's not scowling. Or enraged....

"I ordered the ward to reveal Debdale's true intent --"

"I know that, I've got actual Latin, unlike most of your idiot classmates' blasted dog-Latin. I didn't know it could be done."

"The spell gives you images of the intent behind the ward. It's not just a barrier to keep Petherbridge in," she admitted miserably. "It's a catch-all. A trap. At least I think it is, if I'm interpreting the bloody images properly. Anything that goes in can't get out, including us."

He froze.
"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Would you like to speculate?" she shot back. "For once they were fairly straightforward. A pigeon getting in through an open window, a pigeon, unable to get back out. That must have been what happened to the poor buggers in Shaftesbury, all those bones.... So he can't have got out whether he's half-elf or not, because nothing can."

Severus cursed again, and his hands tightened on her waist. (She must really have been out of it for a moment: she hadn't even been aware that he'd shifted his hands.)

"I said I was sorry --" she said, and coughed, tasting the tang of copper and the sharp, unpleasant bite of sulphur, an after-effect of testing the ward.

"Shut up for a moment and let me think, would you?" he muttered with a sharp glance -- and then he looked at her more closely, reached for the torch, and shone it at her face.

"Severus --"

"Hold still," he said, dropped the torch to the table, and rooted in his coat-pocket until he dredged up a handkerchief. "You've got the beginnings of a nose-bleed."

She was, and hadn't noticed: when she swiped at her upper lip, the back of her hand was smeared faintly with bright, arterial blood. She fumbled for the hanky, and he impatiently held it up to her face himself. "Does that always happen?"

"No," she said, and managed to take the hanky from him with an unsteady hand. "Then again I haven't done it often, and never on such a nasty piece of work."

"Sit down for a.... Here," he said, and before she'd realised his intent, he'd boosted her up to the tabletop -- which, thankfully, didn't collapse -- and stepped away, looking about the room intently.

"What are you --"

"Nothing," he said; he noticed a battered chair in one corner -- one of those awful institutional ones, all chrome tubing and hard plastic -- ploughed through assorted muck to reach it, and picked it up; and then, rather than bringing it back to her as she'd thought he would, he hefted it in both hands, found its balance and weight to his liking, and heaved it at the nearest window with a grunt and "Merlin's bloodyfucking bollocks and beard --"

It was far less effective than he probably hoped: it bounced harmlessly off the window frame with a shower of orange sparks and clattered to the floor. He stood in profile to her, and she could see him breathing heavily from the exertion.

After a moment's shock, she said wryly, "Well, we may not know where he is, but he certainly knows where we are now."
"Fuck Petherbridge," he bellowed. "Better yet, fuck Debdale. Preferably with a very long, very hot poker."

"I should have checked, Severus, and I am sorry --" she said quietly.

"What the bloody hell for?" he said irritably, and glared at her. "The bloody Mortuary was fine. So was the other damned building. We simply didn't think to check for a Dark Arts spell -- that's what it must be, you know, given that you're bleeding --"

"Yes, I know."

"And I ought to have suspected something along those lines. I'm the experienced one in this type of idiocy, not you. I'm not angry with you. It's going to hold us up a bit, that's all."

"If I can break it at all. It's not as simple as the usual ward, or even one against another individual -- and I have no idea how long it will take even if I can. If he used a blood sacrifice, we're really in a jam --"

"You can," he said brusquely, and waved one hand dismissively as if she were being an idiot. "You will, it will just.... But you can't before we find him, or he'll --"

"He'll get out too, yes. Why," she asked cautiously, "are you so certain I can do it?"

"Don't be stupid."

"No, why?"

"Do you have any idea how absolutely insufferably Vector behaved when you apprenticed with whoever it was?" Severus shot back with a glare. "Even McGonagall wanted to hex her senseless. And none of us could tell her to put a bloody cork in it, because we knew the boasting was justified."

Hermione felt as though he'd pole-axed her. Bloody hell.... He really does think I'm good.

_Bloody hell.... He really does think I'm good._

"You'll break the ward, Hermione, I'm just... I'm simply.... You could bloody well give yourself an aneurysm trying, if nosebleed is what comes from simply challenging it. And from now on," he added grimly as he stomped over to her, "never, ever do something like that without warning me beforehand."

"I couldn't, Severus, I didn't know if he'd put a doubling or trebling booster on it, I didn't know if I'd get a second easy chance --"

"Well, has he?" he demanded, boxing her in with his arms and leaning down to her.

"I don't know. I suppose I'll find out when I start to break it."
"Wonderful. And I don't suppose there's any way I can help so you don't over-extend yourself."

"Not unless you want me to go the easy route and use you as a sacrifice, no."

"Very funny. I suppose that's what passes for humour among Arith- ...Are you telling me your mentor taught you how to perform a blood-sacrifice ritual?"

"No, I'm telling you I read a very nasty book that described it in graphic detail. Which is more than I'd ever tell her, because she'd have throttled me and burnt my apprenticeship papers."

"As well she should. Merlin's balls, Hermione, I suppose you were the one who filched Throckmorton's *Dark Potions for Dark Wizards* from the Restricted Section."

"No, that was Malfoy. Someone, erm, *liberated* it from under his mattress, and I made certain it got back to the stacks."

"Not before skimming it, I'd wager."

"Might've done."

He snorted and muttered, "I told Pince it hadn't been mis-shelved.... Nevertheless, you are never again to do something this drastic without warning me, understood?"

"Yes. Unless you've been knocked silly by a rampaging elf and can't be consulted."

He didn't care for that caveat at all. "I'm serious."

"I know. But if you're not available, you're going to have to trust my judgement."

He didn't like that, either; but instead of haranguing her, he grabbed for the torch again and said tersely of the nosebleed, "Has it stopped?"

"Think so," she said, and peeled the handkerchief away to check: it wasn't *too* terribly bad, though she wanted to gag from the taste of blood in her throat. "My hand hurts like hell, but that's to be expected. It feels a bit like getting an electrical shock.... Not that you know what that's like."

Severus took her left hand in his free one, and examined her fingers in the torch-light. "You'd be surprised," he muttered. "Bluett had me dissect some sort of sea-eel for him once -- *live* -- and the bastard didn't warn me to wear gloves." The pads of her fingers were red and swollen, and she felt the tell-tale ache of impending blisters. "Burn-Healing Paste, later," he added. "Don't have it in the kit tonight, as the dunderheads have been going through it at a tremendous rate."

"All right. What do we do now?" she said.

"Backtrack. He's here somewhere, we simply have to find a way to flush him out," Severus said absently as he took the handkerchief from her and stuffed it back in his coat-pocket. "Are you steady on your feet, do you think?"
"Head still aches, but I don't feel dizzy any longer," she admitted, and managed to keep her composure when he quite gently helped her down from the table; she turned to gather up the site-map to cover her embarrassment.

"He won't have gone far since I Barriered all the entrances," Severus said as he bent to retrieve her wand for her. "We'll disable the bastard, and then we can concentrate on getting out.... Do you still have his wand?"

"Yes," she said, mystified, and pulled it from the inner pocket of her jacket: Severus exchanged it for her own.

"I won't have him manage an unwanded Accio," he said grimly, took the wand from her and balanced it half-over the edge of the table, and pressed all his weight on the ends until it snapped in two with a spurt of sickly, purple sparks. "His testimony will have to be enough without Prior Incantato," he added as he threw the bits of the wand across the room.

*****

The explanation to Petherbridge's disappearance was blindingly obvious once they'd backtracked to Vincent-Vanbrugh -- at least to Hermione.

"Oh, bloody --"

"What?" Severus asked sharply.

"Look. A transom," she said, and pointed above the door: a sizeable window ran the length of Vincent-Vanbrugh's entrance. "Why didn't we think of that when we were here before?"

"Because neither of us can reach it, and if we can't, how could he, wandless? We're still thinking of him as human," Severus said, shining the torch on a scrape in the plaster to the left of the plywood. "He's not any more, not really. The little bastards are quite agile, so he scrambled up and squeezed through. Difficult in his present condition, but obviously not impossible...."

"How can we be sure he didn't just pop in there? What if he pops out?"

"We can't be certain. I rather doubt it, though. McGonagall lectured me once about how long it takes to train them to Scout properly, especially in Apparition, so I suppose it's not something he may have taught himself. He's still dangerous," he reminded her. "If he can move like an elf, we can't be certain he hasn't begun to develop enough elf-magic to do damage."

"Right. Shoot first, talk.... Wait. What are effective on them, short of the Killing Curse?"

"Not bloody much. A single Stun won't do it, it will take several."

"Well, I'm not going in through the transom, then," Hermione grumbled, pointed her wand at the boarding, and began pulling nails, which popped out with petulant rapidity. Severus worked on the other side, and in short order they had the boarding ready to come down.
"Right," Severus said, supporting his side of the ply. "This time, we do the perimeter together. I check each corner and offset room, and you watch the area around and behind us."

"Got it."

"I'm sliding this piece your way so neither of us has to step across unprotected. Wait until I'm next to you to pull yours aside."

She waited until Severus had dragged his bit of plywood over and his shoulder nearly touched hers, and then tugged at her heavy, unwilling bit until, with an awful scrape, it jerked free and the entrance was clear; and then Severus surprised her by nearly plastering her against the corridor wall and bending to whisper in her ear, "For Merlin's sake, if he knocks me out, get out of there. Barricade yourself in one of the other buildings, break the bloody ward, and go to Weasley's -- he can send Shacklebolt to find me."

*Or to clean up the mess of what's left* was the logical, unspoken alternative.

Hermione had no intention of letting happen, but Severus didn't give her time to debate it: with a squeeze of her elbow he shifted past her and sidled around the gaping, door-less entry to Vincent-Vanbrugh.

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There was a damned good reason Rory and his lot hadn't been in Vincent-Vanbrugh for years. The rot was so firmly entrenched in Vanbrugh that the floor had ceased being springy, and Hermione had the uncomfortable feeling that her boots were sinking *into* the boards. Severus was quite sensibly sticking as close to the wall as possible, halted dead before they'd got two yards into the room, and cast another Barrier at the entrance before he spoke.

"Come closer and shine your torch about the perimeter," he whispered, training his at the far side of the room; and when she nestled up to him and the beam of light from her torch met with his, they slowly swept the room with light.

The fire Rory had told them of had indeed done damage, *significant* damage. The far end of the ward -- for it was another long one -- was blocked with debris, collapse from the first (and, presumably, second) floors; the walls nearest the collapse were streaked with rivulets of mould, as if it had taken liquid form and been poured down the walls from above. (And it probably *had*, in one sense, from fire-fighting and subsequent rain through the ruined roof.)

"Good gods," Severus muttered. "The worst yet...."

"It's the boarding-up, mostly," Hermione said. "Rory told me before you got there that all the boarding-up traps the moisture inside. That's why the wards with open windows are actually in *better* shape, because of the air-circulation."

"You'd think there'd be plenty, without a roof upstairs."
"Too much water all at once, I should think.... Good Lord."

On their side of the room, and quite inconveniently blocking their path, was the remains of something poking up out of the floorboards; and after a moment's puzzling at it, Hermione said, "It's a piano. And it's nearly gone through the floor!"

"Some of the joists must still be sound, or it would have gone clean through. Wonderful. Won't support a piano any longer -- let's hope it can support us," Severus muttered, flicked his torch back to the path in front of them, and began to edge along the wall once more.

The south-west side of Vanbrugh proved empty of everything; even the usual hospital debris had been cleared, presumably well before the fire (with the exception of the baths and toilets, very near the entry, most of which were filled with a more disgusting mixture of slime and stagnant water than Hermione ever hoped to see for the rest of her life; Polyjuice Potion couldn't begin to compete with the noxious smell). She didn't see the usual signs of ingress -- the graffiti, ripping-apart of furniture, and wanton vandalism that they'd noted in the other buildings.

The stairwells up to Vincent and down to the cellars were just past the loo.

"Oh, cripes. Would he have gone up or down, do you think?"

"Have to check both." Severus took the precaution of casting a Barrier at both of sets of stairs, and he and Hermione ventured deeper into the ward. They had a nasty moment near the piano when Severus stepped too heavily and one foot began to go though the floor with a dull, sodden crunch, but he quickly shifted his weight backward and wrenched it free.

"Bloody -- back the other way," he said grimly, and carefully backed away from the area. "You take the lead for now, and I'll watch. We'll have to check those two rooms later."

It was unnerving, being in the lead: Hermione became acutely aware of sweat forming on her upper lip and the back of her neck, and shivered when it chilled.

Bloody.... And he's been taking the point nearly all night, cool as a cucumber to all appearances....

She gratefully relinquished the lead as soon as they'd reached their starting-point, and they inched along the other side of the ward; while there were cells in the dormitory area, they were thankfully empty of elves -- but there was plenty of muck and equipment for Petherbridge to hide behind here. Many of the beds and mattresses were still in place, and sprouting various growths; one of the armoires still contained clothing -- patients' clothing, presumably -- and the ward was all the more eerie for it. It was as if the patients and nurses had stepped outside for a walk in the garden, and forgot to come back in for twenty years.

It took nearly a half-hour to make certain the cells were clear and that the debris that blocked the end of the ward, cutting off the East Day Room, was truly impassible, and then to negotiate the rotten floor to the other side of the room to check the two remaining offices.

"Nothing," Severus reported, cautiously backing out of the last room.
"Upstairs, then?"

"Yes, but.... Half a moment -- I don't fancy being attacked from above while trying to negotiate that stair. With any luck he's nearly pissing his trousers by now, so this should startle him," Severus said, testing the hinges of the office door: and then he motioned her back to more stable flooring, and swung the door with all his might into the jamb.

It certainly worked: the door struck its frame, banged, and rebounded off; the hinges tore loose of the rotting wood, and the door fell to the floor with a whump and raised a cloud of mould-infested dust.

"Jesus, Severus --"

"Hush."

They heard a scuttling on the floor above them, headed toward the east end of Vincent Ward.

"Too big to be anything but a very large mammal," Severus noted smugly.

"Fine," Hermione hissed indignantly. "But did you have to --" sneeze "-- stir up all the muck?"

"Stop whinging. At least you have goggles on," Severus shot back, blinking away the grit, and sneezed himself. "Let's go, before he decides to sneak back."

They made an indirect path around the sinking piano back to the stairwell; Severus lowered the Barrier and carefully tested each tread before putting his weight upon it.

"Nasty one. Mind the gap," he whispered over his shoulder at one point, and waited two steps above until Hermione had safely skipped the wonky step; they slowly reached the top and huddled behind the turning of the wall, surveying what was, properly speaking, First Vincent Ward.

It seemed incredible that anything that utterly decayed should still be standing. The plaster had long ago given up the struggle and had begun to fall in chunks from its lath, particularly from the ceiling; the hall not five yards ahead of them was streaked with soot, and the skeletal joists above were well-charred. Broken roof-slate lay splintered further along the hall, and the remains of a chimney-stack had fallen in through the fire-eaten floor above, crushing anything in the office below and spilling out of its door. And it was all overlaid with a thick fuzz: the slime and mould that blanketed much of the place seemed to have progressed to actual moss, at least in the places where the snow from the last, light fall of a few days ago had melted enough to see it.

And down at the end of the corridor they had an unobstructed view of the back wall of Vincent-Vanbrugh, across a void of some twenty or twenty-five feet: the entire fabric of the east side of the first and second floors had either gone up in smoke, or down to Vanbrugh.

"Cripes," Hermione breathed.

"If it can hold him, it can hold us," Severus murmured. "I think."
"Oh, wonderful."

"More cells on that side, as below?"

"Think so," Hermione muttered, and flipped through the clipboard to the plans. "Yes, it's just like it. He's got to be in one of them -- you can see where the collapse has taken one off at the end.... At least I hope he is. I don't want to see what the second floor's like."

"Right. I'd rather not go down there either, frankly," Severus muttered to her. "Best try the direct approach first. Petherbridge!" he bellowed. "Enough is enough. If you come now, quietly, and give testimony, the Wizengamot may take pity on you and forgo further punishment."

There was a moment of silence in which the only sound was the creaking of the beams above them, and Severus' voice bouncing back off the wall at the end of the ward; and then Petherbridge laughed before he addressed Severus' challenge.

"Like hell they will. How many kinds of fool do you take me for, Snape?" he howled, the sound echoing and garbling his words, making it impossible to pin-point in which cell he was hiding. "You're not working for the bloody Wizengamot. Even if you were, I answer to a higher authority - -"

"Debdale?" Severus called out coldly. "The man who's turned your into a creature? Do you really think you owe him any loyalty whatsoever?"

"Oh, it's bigger than that. You've no idea, have you?" Petherbridge shot back.

"He knows about Fudge," Hermione whispered. "Fudge must have come here for the initial trials."

Severus motioned her to be still. "If I'm that far off the mark, Petherbridge, tell me. Better yet, come along with us, record your testimony, and then we can work on reversing the transforma-"

"I told you, it won't work!" Petherbridge cried in a shrill, anguished wail. "It won't. And even if it does --"

"-- Fudge will see that you're killed?" Severus cannily finished for him. "We know Fudge is involved, Petherbridge. We've no intention of taking you to the Ministry. It's the ICW we'll be reporting to."

Petherbridge went silent, and then ventured, "You're not going through the Ministry?"

"No. The matter will bypass the Ministry and Fudge entirely."

"Really." Petherbridge went silent again for a while, peered about the corner of the cell door, and giggled madly. "We always said you were nutters, Snape, but I think that proves it."
Now, look here, Hermione mentally growled, and gripped her wand more tightly. She wanted to hex Petherbridge, quite badly: but there wasn't enough of him in view at which to throw anything remotely satisfying.

"I suspect my companion doesn't share that view," Severus said dryly. "She has the proof to send Fudge and his co-conspirator to Azkaban. Your testimony, while not entirely necessary, would be helpful. And I'm asking you to find the courage to give it."

"Absolutely no reason to trust you, no, no reason at all," Petherbridge muttered indistinctly, and shook his head so violently that his shaggy hair fell into his eyes. "Always lorded it over us, you did, always took out your petty little prejudices on us --"

"Damn it, Petherbridge, this matter is larger than some bloody schoolboy grudge against his teacher," Severus said, voice strained and impatient. "The welfare of Wizarding Britain is what we're talking about --"

Careful, Severus -- don't dismiss his feelings, please don't.... For God's sake, apologise -- grovel, if you must --

"Its future, you mean," Petherbridge interjected, and nodded wisely. "Quite right, quite right, undoubtedly. But you see, I think we have very different ideas about what that should be."

"It's the difference between right and wrong, man. Between forcing people to become what you think they should be, and what they want -- surely you can see that, given your position."

Petherbridge withdrew his head from the doorway and stepped back -- the joists creaked at that, and Hermione sucked in a panicked breath: Severus called out a strained, "Petherbridge?"

"Yes, yes, I can see that, in a way," Petherbridge's voice reached them, equally strained. "I think I'll... I'll come out, if you promise not to shoot."

"I don't think I can trust you after that nice trick with the elf."

"No, no, those are the terms. Give your wand to her, if you like -- Tricky of you, she was, I didn't know there was anyone else until she shot at me!"

Don't do it, Severus --

"All right," Severus said, and calmly handed his wand back to her. "She has my wand, she's behind me, and she won't shoot unless I tell her to. I've only got the torch -- the light -- so you can see the path over to us. We're on equal footing now, Petherbridge."

Petherbridge giggled again. "No, no, we never were. Never will be." Then he slowly shuffled from the cell, both hands held up. "No ropes, now, I can't... ...can't abide the feel of my own body anymore."
Hermione had a good look at him now, as she peered around Severus' arm, and wished she hadn't. The transformation Debdale had wrought on Petherbridge was horrific: nothing remained of the pudding-faced lower-former that she vaguely remembered being Sorted. Petherbridge's body was collapsing in on itself, just as the building around them was collapsing into its footprint; his skin had begun to take on the greenish cast of an elf's; even his eyes, which still remained a vague, human muddy-brown, were bulging from their sockets, as if his face has been permanently frozen in terror.

The joists creaked again, and something shifted in the debris behind him.

"Good man.... Come along, then, and we shan't have to disable you," Severus said softly.

"The problem is, you see," Petherbridge said conversationally, his words still oddly slurred, "that I've had a better offer."

Severus' shoulders stiffened, and then he said, "What the bloody hell do you --"

"If I turn on them now they'll find a way to get me, even if you stop the project. And I really think I'd rather not, anyway. There's this expression, you see -- don't suppose you know it.... Well, you wouldn't, would you?" Petherbridge said, giggled, and stumbled backward a bit. "You a strict Pureblood, no Muggle nonsense at all --"

"Petherbridge, we're --"

"'Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven.' Some trashy Muggle writer, or someone, I don't know. My grandmum was always going on about him. Anyway, the mediocrity decided he'd rather rule in hell."

"-- we're running out of time, and you're making me regret my promise," Severus said. "Every moment you delay is one less moment to work on the antidote. Now, come --"

"You won't stop them, you see. You can't. And I don't want you to. They promised me, you understand. Debdale and Fudge promised me that when it's done, when they write about it, that I'll be in the books alongside them. As a minor footnote, no doubt -- oh, no doubt," Petherbridge said, and grinned, revealing to Hermione the reason for his odd speech: his teeth were having a bad time of the re-arrangement of his body, and had begun to crowd each other out in his jaw. "But it's that or risk worse than this. And if I stick to them, I'll be credited for having a hand in the project that will save our way of life."

"As an accomplice in the greatest violation of personal rights in the history of Wizarding, you mean," Hermione blurted out, unable to restrain her indignation despite her pity for his condition.

"Oooo, so she speaks? I think I recognise that voice, too. Bossy, impatient.... The great Harry Potter's Prefect friend? Well, you should know all about being a minor footnote, unlike him," Petherbridge said, and jerked his head in Severus' direction. "You'll understand. I've decided that a minor footnote is better than none at all. He didn't get even that much in all the write-ups, did he?"
Surprisingly, Severus didn't rise to the bait this time: he simply said, "The satisfaction you'll receive for doing the right things -- whether they're written about or spoken of, or not -- will far outweigh the glory of any mention you'll get from them, Petherbridge. You shall have to take my word for that."

"Says the man who always angled for the Order of Merlin and never got it," Petherbridge gloated -- and then he took a deliberate step backward, toward the gaping hole in the floor of the ward. "'Better to rule in hell...."

"Petherbridge --"

"Stop now," Hermione shouted, shoved Severus' wand into her back pocket (Oh, poor Professor Flitwick would be so disappointed in me!), and ducked under his arm to get off a better shot.

Petherbridge took another step backward: the floor under him groaned and cracked, and then gave way.

For a split second Petherbridge panicked: his arms windmilled in a desperate attempt to regain his balance, and he grabbed at an electrical conduit that ran along the wall next to him.

Hermione had to take her only chance.

"Hominem --"

-- and then Petherbridge found his resolve, smiled, let go of the conduit, spread his arms wide, and allowed himself to fall backward into the void.

" -- Levi- ...Damn it all to hell!"

They heard the crash of Petherbridge hitting the debris on Vanbrugh, and then an ominous, nasty groaning and splitting of joists that could no longer take the shock of a body falling from a height. Down!" Severus shouted, and snatched his wand from her pocket when she did turned; and they bolted down the rotting stairs as fast as possible under the circumstances. But it was too late: halfway down the stairwell they heard the jumble of debris in Vanbrugh give way, and Petherbridge's howl as the whole lot continued its descent into the cellar.

"Stay on this floor," Severus panted behind her as they reached ground level. "I'll go down and try to reach him."

Hermione skidded to a halt at the base of the stairs and managed a panicked, "Be careful," to him before he dropped the Barrier and practically flung himself down the cellar-stairs; and then she picked her way along the more solid side of the ward toward the East Day Room -- or what once had been -- and pulled her jacket up over her mouth and nose to block the dirt and mould-spores that the collapse had raised. The debris had shifted, opening up gaps in the blockage, and she was able to squeeze through: but it was too dangerous to try to shift the lot, as it might well come down on Petherbridge. She managed to get close to the edge of the hole and peered down into it, one arm
firmly twined around a ceiling-rafter that was more or less securely wedged into the muck, looking for Petherbridge.

*Oh, God, he's dead. He has to be....*

Petherbridge hadn't been lucky enough to fall on a flat surface. Hermione couldn't see exactly *what* it was he'd fallen on, actually, but his body had given way and the thing, whatever it was, hadn't: a spiky bit of metal pierced his ribcage from back to front, on his right side, and he hung suspended above the rest of the debris that now littered the cellar floor. His limbs twitched, but his eyes were wide and staring skyward, and blood dribbled from his mouth.

*Oh, bloody hell.*

"Severus!" she yelled. "It's no use, I think he's --"

She heard Severus say *something*, badly muffled by distance and the floor between them -- probably "Almost there," -- and then she nearly shrieked when Petherbridge's body convulsed and his eyelids fluttered, and he began keening; an odd whistling accompanied every agonised breath he took.

*Good God.... I can't Levitate him, he'll bleed out. And it must have punctured his lung, no possible way it hasn't. I've no blasted idea how to deal with that.... We'll have to leave the bloody spike in there and cut the whole thing free.*

"Stay still," she ordered him. "We can get you out, but it will take some doing. Hang on until Se-- until Professor Snape gets there --"

Petherbridge forced his head up to meet her eyes, and grimaced. "Don't... ...bother," he said, and gave her a twisted, grotesque grin -- it was horribly reminiscent of poor Neville's, the one time he'd regained consciousness in the Infirmary -- and choked up more blood. "Not... worth the trouble."

"Yes, it bloody well *is*, Petherbridge --"

She heard a *thump* down below, and a curse from Severus, followed by a loud, "I'm all right --"

"-- you need to hang on until we can get you to St. Mungo's."

"Dont... ...want anyone to... ...see me like this," he managed. "Bloke's got to... ...have some pride, you know...."

Something stirred in the back of his eyes -- Hermione desperately wished she was a Legilimens, at the moment, to understand precisely what he was thinking -- and then he said craftily, "Course... ...doesn't matter to you.... You'll use me... ...either way, dead or... ...alive.... Can't have that."

He turned his face to the pile of rotted beams and lathing next to him, and stretched out his arm: it obviously hurt tremendously, for he shrieked, and then he closed his eyes and wordlessly cast a spell.
Most Fire-Spells were gold or red in colour -- at least, those Hermione had perfected; but this was unlike any Hermione had seen, a bright blue that arced from Petherbridge's finger-tips straight to the kindling about him. It sparked a fire that quite unnaturally took to the sodden wood and caught immediately, and with an intensity that scorched the near side of Hermione's face.

"Jesus -- Severus, get out of there!" she yelled, and threw her arm over her face as Petherbridge began to shriek.

"What --" she heard Severus bellow over the sound of the flames.

"Fire, he's started a fire -- get out of there, now!"

Severus didn't answer: she had no way of knowing whether he was being sensible or putting himself in more danger, so she edged back over to the edge of the hole and cast a Dousing Spell at the fire. But the flames behaved perversely, seemingly feeding on the water instead of dampening down; and then a gust of wind funneled down the carcass of Vincent-Vanbrugh and whipped the flames about, and sent tendrils of fire licking at the far side of the wall -- the side Petherbridge was trapped at. His shrieks grew louder, interspersed with babbling curses and pleas.

"Oh, God -- don't leave me here, don't, I didn't mean to do it -- Help me, oh, God, you bitch, help me, damn you, don't leave me here --"

His clothes caught fire and he lost the power of speech, screaming incoherently instead.

There was nothing Hermione could do but watch. Another Dousing might well cause even more trouble, judging by her first effort.

"Stop it, Petherbridge!" she screamed at him. "You started it, you can stop it, damn you! I don't know what you did!"

But he was past any reasoning at all, incapable of doing anything but writhing in agony on the spike as his flesh began to char and his hair caught: Hermione got a good whiff of burning flesh and backed away, gagging. She stumbled over a pile of brick and nearly slid into the hole, and grabbed for the beam she'd clung to before.

"Jesus Christ, girl, get a grip on yourself. Put him out of his misery, at least -- you can manage it, you have to for decency's sake --

Someone grabbed the back of her jacket and pulled her over the pile, into the relative safety of the corridor.

"On your feet, now," Severus yelled in her ear, over Petherbridge's hoarse screams. "Nothing we can do for him now, it's Elf-fire."

"But --"

"I'm not wasting any more energy on him, damn it, we need to save ourselves. Move."
She clambered to her feet with his help, beginning to cough as smoke -- which had been billowing up the chimney of the bare brick walls of the East Day Room -- began to filter down the corridor as well: and they stumbled down the corridor and across the West Day Room, all worries of the soundness of the floor disregarded. As they passed the stairwell a little body -- the elf that had escaped from Petherbridge -- shot past them, squealing in terror, and beat itself against Severus' Barrier spell at the main corridor before he had a chance to drop it.

"Oh, bloody --"

"It's the only one," he said through his coughing, and dropped the Barrier: the elf shot through and hung a left, headed back toward Rossetti.

"I couldn't put the fire out, I tried --"

"Their magic is completely different to ours, McGonagall says," Severus managed as he dragged her through the entrance. "Nothing you could do."

No, she supposed not. But there was something she could do now.

"Hang on," she said, and planted her feet, hauling backward on his hand. "I need your help."

"Damn it, Hermione, we can't --"

"I'm going to set a back-fire," she yelled at him. "It will buy us a few minutes. I need you to be sure it goes north, not toward Rossetti."

He didn't look happy with the idea -- he looked uncertain under all the soot and dirt on his face, actually, along with immensely enraged -- but he nodded and stepped back, and waited while she cast a thin line of ordinary, controlled fire at the walls and ceiling, and then cast his own spell to send a breeze northward. They held their position until the back-fire had taken hold and was creeping toward the Vanbrugh entrance, and then Severus grabbed for her again and pulled her along after him, back to Rossetti.

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"Bloody hell," he cursed when they'd reached the relatively clean air in Rossetti, and collapsed against the wall and indulged in a coughing fit. "Best get cracking on the ward."

"No shit, Severus," she muttered disrespectfully, coughed, and trotted over to one of the laboratory tables. "Find me a bloody pen or pencil, would you?"

She swept the table clear of all the equipment that littered it, ignoring the shattering of the glassware, and spread the site map across it; Severus hunted up a quill and bottle of ink from one of the other tables and delivered them to her.

"What can I do?" he murmured.
"Nothing for the moment, it's all equations at first."

"Call when you need me, then. I'm sorting through the muck for evidence."

He limped off to one of the other tables and began pawing though the detritus, muttering to himself as he threw useless things off the table or stuffed interesting ones into his pockets.

Oh, God. Professor Hawking, we're going to see just how much I've retained....

She scribbled out the appropriate runes, and then set to working out the physical equations she needed.

Find the area, in square yards, of the area warded....

(He cheated, using a measuring charm calibrated to the scale of the map, praying that it was accurate: a quick check of the dimensions of Rossetti's Day Room in comparison to the map seemed to prove it was.)

Wards were very odd things, generally. They could be made immensely strong, but they all had one inherent weakness: unlike a fence which could be breached at one point and still stand firm elsewhere, if you could determine the weak point in a ward, attack it, and create a hole, then the whole enclosure would drop. She'd done it before to Hawking's satisfaction, as an exercise; she could very well break into her own flat, no matter how wonderful Mr Harrison, Junior, thought his product.

Determine the strength of the ward in relation to the constants of Universal Magical Resistance and the Third Arithmantic Operation, squared, viz., $(A \times R) = \frac{M^F}{O3^2}$.

(Area times Resistance is equal to Magical Force divided by the Third Operation, squared. Not too terribly difficult: any Arithmancy student worth their salt could parrot off the Resistance and Operation formulae in their sleep.)

The question was how strong Debdale had managed to make this ward, whether she could find the weak point in time, and whether she had the wherewithal to breach it without resorting to some very nasty means. In this instance, she would solve for $M^F$... and then the really difficult part of the process would commence.

"...everything out, but Petherbridge was a fool --"

"What?" she muttered, intent on the equation.

"I said, Debdale cleared everything out, but Petherbridge.... Oh. Never mind, I beg your pardon," Severus said.

"No, say it now, I won't be able to hear you during the next bit," she said, still scribbling away, and coughed: when she glanced up, she noticed a haze of smoke drifting down the corridor from the east.
"Ahhh, Petherbridge made his own notes. Probably intended to sell the process to the other low-producing countries. Erm, is there anything I can...?"

"No."

A squeal from the other side of the ward -- the area with cells -- split the air, and something banged against one of the doors.

"Oh, balls. They've smelt the smoke," Severus muttered.

"Yes, then. Get them out, and keep them on that side until I get this bloody thing down."

"Right," Severus said, and limped across the room to the main corridor.

Another minute's work and Hermione had solved the equation. It looked right, but then they often did: and she couldn't spare the time to check the figures, as the haze was growing more dense out in the corridor. (She could only faintly make out Severus in the other block, opening the doors and dodging the terrified elves.)

_Right, then. Let's get this over with._

One hand on the wall again, wand in the other and trained on the map: she closed her eyes this time and sent a tendril of magic slithering along the warded walls (always an unnerving exercise, because in your mind's eye it was as if you were slipping along on the tendril at high speed, very disorienting and nausea-making), testing the probable weak points -- doors, windows, fire-escapes, chimneys.... Pushing with a force equal, but not yet greater, than the magical force that had created the ward in the first place, seeking any place where it gave or bowed.

And she found it, ironically, at the east end of Vanbrugh, where Petherbridge's fall had weakened the physical fabric of the building. Perhaps Debdale hadn't been careful with the spell placed there, fearing to venture that far in himself; perhaps he'd got careless, assuming Petherbridge wouldn't be stupid enough to trespass that deeply into the rotting building.

It didn't matter. It was enough. Or it would be, if she could summon enough force to breach the weak point.

_No time like the present...._

She focussed all her attention on the weak point, and muttered the equation-laden incantation that directed all her power to that spot, pushing harder and harder against the resistance.... And it pushed back.

_He did put a booster on it, damn him...._

*****
She only became aware of herself again when a coughing fit broke the rhythm of her chant, and with a jerk and a thump she was solidly back in Rossetti Ward, bent over the table, unable to breathe properly. The room was filling with smoke: between that and the tearing-up of her eyes, she couldn't see across the room any longer, much less across the corridor to the cell block -- though she could hear the weak squeals of the trapped elves quite clearly.

And the bloody ward was still up. She stopped to cough again, the acrid, stinging smoke clinging to the back of her throat.

"God damn it --"

Someone pulled her off her feet, and she landed hard on her hip and coughed out a another curse. The air was marginally fresher here, though, and she lay with her face to the floorboards, gasping.

"Just breathe for a moment," Severus rasped in her ear, his voice oddly muffled, and he struggled with something with his free hand.

"I can't..."

She had to stop for another coughing fit, and then confessed.

"I can't do it, Severus, not under these.... I couldn't even double-check the --"

"Yes, you can. You've been out for a while, and I looked at your first measurements," he muttered in her ear, his voice going clearer. "They're fine. The advanced stuff's beyond me, but the basis is correct." His hands moved in front of her face, and he tied the handkerchief -- damp, now, though where he'd found water she couldn't guess -- over her mouth and nose. "Take a moment, focus, and try --" he paused to cough. "Try again."

He seemed so absolutely confident in her, not at all like his usual, bullying self in Potions class, or like his super-critical analyses of her investigative technique (or lack thereof).

She was breathing more freely now with the handkerchief masking the worst of the smoke. She leaned back against him, struggled to her feet, groped for the edge of the table, and tried to shut out the cries of the suffocating elves and Severus' hacking coughs.

'You can. You will.' No, she wasn't hallucinating: he'd said that earlier, and been not at all uncertain about it. And if Severus Snape, of all people, was willing to express such confidence in her, who was she to be a cowardly ninny and doubt herself?

Focus, idiot. You haven't come this far just to be undone by a bit of smoke and some distractions.... Bloody hell, he sounds awful....

She could barely see the map in front of her, and fumbled about for the goggles and put them back on to keep the smoke from her eyes.

And then she started again.
She later couldn't say how long it had taken to breach the ward, but it couldn't have been *too* terribly long. It was long enough, however, for the fire to jump the break and advance perilously close, for the next time she fell back into awareness, shook herself out of a stupor, and ripped off the now-useless goggles -- her magic had well and truly fried them -- the glow from flames licking along the main corridor were throwing a fierce, bright light that pierced the pall of smoke.

Severus made no sound. Neither did the elves in the cell-block.

She retched and doubled over -- the handkerchief simply wasn't enough protection any longer -- and then pulled herself upright and staggered over toward the other block. She nearly fell over Petherbridge's intended victim: the poor thing had hidden itself in the Day Room and stayed there after they entered, and must have crawled out after Severus had returned to her side of the room. It pressed its wrinkled little face to a crack beneath a window-sill, and didn't even bother to run from Hermione.

*Oh, cripes. How do I get them all out without creating a massive problem? If I open a window....*

Nothing for it, though. She ignored the elf and concentrated on the others instead, after a cautious peek around the doorway.

The fire had just reached the entrance of Salter-Shaftesbury.

Another back-fire wouldn't buy them enough time to matter -- even if she had the energy and breath to waste on it -- so she dropped Severus' Barrier instead, and concentrated on popping out one of the boarded-up windows nearest the four or five elves passed out on the cell-block floor.

She didn't have to do more, as it happened: the conscious elf shot past her across the corridor, jabbered at its compatriots and poked them on the forehead, and shrieked at them when they roused themselves until they each made their groggy way to the open window and hauled themselves out.

*Oh, my God, how interesting -- they have a language. And a society, and they're absolutely sentient and capable of altruistic.... Oh, shut it, Hermione, don't waste time, get your arse out. Severus.... Bloody hell, where is he?*

As she'd feared, the fire freshened with the gusts of fresh air that now filtered into the corridor: the flames leapt across Salter's entry and took hold on the floor of the corridor, heading straight for Rossetti. She could hear sirens in the distance: bloody Security had done its job for once, and the grounds would be crawling with the fire-fighters in minutes.

She hoped the elves had the sense to hide in the woods. Only Merlin knew what the more sensational Muggle Press would make of them: they'd had a field day for the last fifty years with sightings of the Southwestern American Elf. (*Aliens, indeed.*)
Hermione stumbled back to her work-corner, coughing all the way, and fumbled about on the floor until she felt something hard and bony. (It was attached to something rather long that terminated in a boot. She'd got hold of his knee, apparently.)

*Oh, thank God -- Wait, he's not moving.*

She struck a Lumos, and then wished she hadn't: Severus was slack-jawed, and his eyes had rolled back in their sockets.

She did the only thing she could think of: threw herself on top of his body, wrapped her arms about him, and, incapable of forming a coherent word, simply *thought* of some place -- *any* place -- safe, and Apparated them out with a *bang*.

****

Wherever she'd Apparated them, it was snowy.

*Note to self: in future, avoid burning buildings.*

She wasted a precious minute gagging up blood and some truly awful-looking black stuff over Severus' shoulder before she was able to drag herself off him and to suck in pure, excruciatingly cold air; then she was able to worry about *him*.

Namely, the fact that he wasn't breathing at all.

*Oh, damnation* --

For one horrid moment she thought she'd have to try CPR (not a thrilling idea, given his usual dental hygiene or that he was likely to hack up much worse stuff than she had -- but she'd do it if she *must*, for him), but a forceful Ennervate seemed to do just as well: he inhaled, choked, and she had to roll him on his side and pound at his back so he shouldn't suffocate himself. Only when he'd begun to get some air in his lungs, in between upchucks of very nasty-looking stuff indeed, could she be bothered with where she'd landed them...

... a few feet from the Hogwarts gates.

*Who'd have thought it. The worst things in my life happened here, and it's the place I go for safety....*

Walking proved problematic. Her knees didn't want to cooperate with either feet or brain; and she couldn't seem to control her shivering, either. (A perfectly serviceable London-winter jacket was useless at Hogwarts.)

*No bloody way I'll make it up that blasted drive.... Wait. What did McGonagall say? Something about the castle telling her things...?*
She crawled to the edge of the wood, clutched at a fallen tree limb, and dragged it -- and herself -- through the snow and to the gates, and bashed at them as hard as she could manage in between coughing fits.

She wasn't, however, expecting the response she got. Within a minute or two -- after she'd given up on the gates, and dragged herself back to Severus to check on him -- she heard the pop of an Apparition, and glanced up to find Dobby staring at the pair of them.

Oh, for God's sake --

"Miss Herminey?"

"Go...." She had to clear her throat. "Get Madam Pomfrey, Dobby, quick. Professor Snape is --"

Dobby bounded over, grabbed for her hand and dug his fingers into Severus' shoulder, and, before she knew what the elf intended, he'd Apparated them straight to the Infirmary.

*****

"I don't need that muck, woman!"

"I'm the best judge of that at the moment, I'm afraid," Pomfrey shot back in her best no-nonsense voice, "unless you're trying for a lovely case of pneumonia. I'll warn you now, Severus, that if you don't take this and do become ill, I won't be at all sympathetic."

"You never are, you har-- acccccchem -- harpy." (The insult was rather spoiled by Severus' need to upchuck more of the soot that was clogging his lungs -- not to mention by the basin he was clutching to his chest to catch said upchucks, which were alarmingly frequent.)

"Hermione's taken hers and got it all over with. Why can't you be sensible, as she is?"

"That," he said, jabbing an accusing finger toward Hermione, "is the -- urk -- acccccchem -- least sensible person on the bloody face of the earth."

"Oh, Severus, would you just belt up and take it?" Hermione moaned, and resisted the urge to cover her face with her hands: Pomfrey had slathered the scorched side of her face with Burn-Healing Paste. "Get it out all at once, you'll feel better."

"Mind your own bloody -- aaaacck -- business."

"She'd quit if you only take the damned stuff. It's not that bad, and she'll give you chocolate afterwards --"

"Ah. He's in a temper, therefore he's not at death's door," McGonagall announced from the Infirmary entry.
"It's the usual," Pomfrey informed McGonagall with a long-suffering look, phial of medicine in hand. "Acting as though I'm trying to poison him."

"Take it, Severus," McGonagall ordered.

"I don't need the damned --"

"I shall pinch your nose closed if you don't take it this instant, young man."

Severus let loose with a shocking string of oaths and nasty names: Hermione was certain she heard "cow," "bint" -- and, most awfully, "cunt," although as that last came in the midst of one of his choking fits, she couldn't be absolutely sure -- directed at females in general and McGonagall in particular.

"Now," McGonagall said calmly, totally unperturbed.

Severus glared, snatched the phial from Pomfrey, downed the admittedly noxious potion, and promptly gagged and hawked up more gunk.

"There we go," Pomfrey crooned. "He'll be fine, now." (Severus managed to hold in the goo long enough to glare at her.)

"Very good," McGonagall said to him, and muttered to Hermione -- who was still in shock at the language he'd used to the Headmistress, for pity's sake, epithets he hadn't dared use with Hermione herself -- "Don't look so horrified, he'll apologise later. He always does."

"Doesn't to me," Hermione muttered back, all too clearly remembering Severus' New Year's Eve performance.

"You haven't given him seven years' worth of detentions yet. Be patient and creative, and you'll have him behaving properly toward you. Or at least bothering to say he's sorry, even if it's long after the fact."

Hermione seriously doubted whether she was patient or creative enough to accomplish that.

*****

"What a royal bloody cock-up," Severus muttered, and took another swig of head-ache potion. He was huddled in his wing-chair, and seemed, to Hermione, oddly fragile.

"Don't remind me," Hermione shot back. "How am I going to explain losing the equipment to -- Oh, cripes, Rory!"

"He's undoubtedly fine," Severus said. "'S been in bed for hours by now."

"I'm sure he is. It's my bloody bank-account that's going to hurt."

"Ahhhh. You finally admit the disadvantage of that ridiculous Muggle gadgetry?"
"It was useful. Until we stomped on it."

"You stomped on it."

"Fine, whatever you say, He-Who-Attracts-Stampeding-Elves... Oh, hell, I'm going to have to go home straightaway -- he'll be ringing the flat to see if we're all right."

"Stay here," Severus said: he seemed oblivious to the insult, intent on rubbing at his smoke-reddened eyes. "Get a few hours' sleep, and then pop down."

"But he'll --"

"You need to sleep. After a bath -- your face is still bloody. I'll wake you at six."

"But --"

"Hermione..." He checked himself, took a breath, and began again. "Hermione, you look like... pardon me, but you look like utter shit. You need to sleep, or you'll keel over tomorrow. Please, trust me on this."

"All right," she muttered, dragged herself off the sofa, and staggered on her way toward the bedchamber.

"And don't forget to apply more Burn-Healing Paste," he called after her. "There's a pot of it in the medicine --"

She closed the bedchamber door before he could finish and collapsed against it.

_Merlin's big, flaming, hairy balls, but we managed to bollocks that up beautifully. Petherbridge dead, all the evidence gone but what Severus could snatch, and I nearly got both of us killed._

The little clock on the bedchamber mantelpiece chimed the half-hour, and Hermione turned her face toward it, head lolling in utter exhaustion.

_One-thirty. Christ, we were there a little over three hours. Three hours, that's all it took to destroy a good chunk of our supporting evidence._

In the end, though, crying over spilt milk wasn't in Hermione's nature -- with one or two notable exceptions, the _most_ notable of which was sprawled out in a wing-chair in the sitting-room: so she dragged herself into the bath, ran a tub full of water, scrubbed all the blood, soot, and assorted muck from her body and hair, and then -- not having left any clothing in Severus' rooms -- she had to resort to stealing a nightshirt from his dresser.

She'd just cracked the door to tell him the bath was available when she realised he was otherwise engaged.

" -- Dobby tells Pinky that Miss Herminey and Professor Sir are hurt --"
"That's not important at the moment, Pinky," Severus said.

Hermione glued herself to the sliver of the open door. She could see Pinky standing on the hearth-rug, twisting her hands together, earnest, ugly little face screwed up with concern: of Severus, she could only see his boots and a long length of leg splayed out toward the fire, trousers rather the worse for wear.

"Can you leave the Gounds?" Severus continued.

"Oh, we isn't supposed to, Professor Sir --"

"I didn't ask if you were supposed to, I asked if you could."

"Yes, Professor Sir, but we gets in a great deal of trouble."

"Don't worry about that, I shall tell Headmistress I asked you to."

There was a rustle of papers, a flash of white in the corner of Hermione's vision, and she saw Pinky stand on tip-toe and peer at what Severus held.

"This is a... it's like the Infirmary, but much larger, with many buildings. It's south of London. Do you know where that is?"

"London is the big town -- Dobby is going to to London a long time ago, he is telling Pinky so.... But Pinky isn't knowing where it is. Can Professor Sir show Pinky?"

Severus sighed; the site-map -- for that's what it must be -- crumpled in his lap, and Hermione saw him raise a filthy hand and point to one of the bookshelves. "Fetch the atlas, there -- No, no, the green-bound book nearest the mantel," he said more sharply as Pinky bounded off in the wrong direction. "Yes, that one. Bring it here."

Pinky dragged the book from the shelf, clasped it very carefully to her chest, brought it back to him, and gently placed it on his knee.

"London is south," Severus said softly -- trying to be patient, Hermione could tell -- as he paged through the front of the book, and then turned it so Pinky could see: Pinky's ears perked up and forward, and she watched earnestly as he pointed out the features. "Edinburgh is closest to Hogwarts, and that's here. London --"

Pinky's eyes followed Severus' finger all the way down the map of the island.

"-- is here. The heart of it is north of the big river that meets the sea, but where you'd go is south of that." He turned a few pages, and then pointed again. "That is just about where I'm sending you. The place -- Cane Hill is what it's called -- is very large."

"Why is Professor Sir sending Pinky there?"
"Because there may be wild elves trapped in the buildings there. Miss Hermione and I freed some of them, but there may be more we couldn't find."

Pinky squealed, and clapped her hands over her mouth when Severus cautioned her with an upraised hand.

"You must be very careful because the buildings aren't safe. The elves may be warded in cells, and you mustn't step inside with them, or you might be trapped.... You're excellent at breaking wards, blast you, so work at them from the outside." (Pinky preened a bit at that.) "And you should wait until after dark tonight because there's been a fire, and Muggles will be all over the place until it's out."

"Oh, thank you, Professor Sir, oh, yes, Pinky is being very careful, Pinky is asking Dobby to be going with her --"

"Very well, very well --"

"-- so Dobby and Pinky is being safe together --"

"Yes, yes, that's fine, blast it, now just.... Here, take the map to Dobby and show him.... You're dismissed."

"Yes, Professor Sir," Pinky babbled, and dropped an awkward little curtsey. "Pinky is thanking Professor Sir so much!" She managed to pop out of the room before Severus chucked the atlas at her, but only after he produced an audible snarl.

Hermione crept across the bedchamber, slipped under the covers, and conclusively bolloxed all hope of actually getting sleep by thinking.

He's a bastard. First, last, and always, he's a nasty, demanding bastard.

And he's also the kind of man who'll risk himself to rescue elves, and to send someone else in when he can't finish the job. Although I wonder what percentage of his psyche is actually hoping Pinky doesn't make it back.... Oh, come on, Hermione, that's not fair -- of course he isn't. If only because McGonagall would give him hell for it.

There's what he said to Petherbridge, too... that doing the right thing was more satisfying than fame. Does he really think that, I wonder? Or was that another lie to win Petherbridge over? He certainly lusted after the Order of Merlin the year Sirius Black escaped. Or at least he seemed to.

She felt unaccountably ashamed of her own award. Not that she'd got the Order of Merlin, no, not even Third Class: all she'd rated was a special citation. But that was more than Severus Snape, former Death Eater and Chief Intelligence-gatherer for the Order of the Phoenix, had got. And he'd certainly deserved recognition, no matter how nasty and self-centred. No doubt about it: he could be personally vicious to the point of taking advantage of her naivete -- and of enjoying it -- but he had a curious habit of doing the right thing in the long run, even if his methods weren't always above reproach.
Oh, ...balls. The more I try to figure the bloody man out, the more confused I am....

She hadn't figured him out by the time she fell asleep; but it didn't take a great deal of deduction the next morning to pinpoint who'd put more Burn-Healing Paste on her face as she slept, since she'd forgot to do it after her bath.

*****

Chapter 20: Wherein Snape begins to question his priorities, his methods, and nearly everything else.

Thursday, February 2
Hogwarts

Snape cast a longing look at the whiskey-decanter, and regretfully decided that perhaps a glass wasn't the best idea. He knew perfectly well that the head-ache potion wouldn't interfere with his enjoyment of the spirit, but the muck Pomfrey and McGonagall had forced on him was another matter: with his luck he'd break out in boils or some other horrendous -- and visible -- ailment.

*Wouldn't the two harridans just love that. 'My, Severus, whatever would break you out in particoloured spots?' Meddling bitches.*

*Although perhaps I *did* react a bit unreasonably.... No, no I *didn't*, blast it. My lungs and throat feel like one great, bloody, throbbing haemorrhoid. I've enough of those already.*

The most major pain in Snape arse, however, was at least safely tucked up in bed at the moment, and not behaving like a clucking hen (which was more than he could ever say for the other two). Hermione seemed to have learnt her lesson after those first attempts to smother him. Not that she'd *stopped*: he often caught her glancing his way and making awkward excuses to stop for a rest, or for a totally unnecessary tea-break. But at least she was attempting subtlety.

*Pomfrey and McGonagall never do, the bossy old.... Ought to apologise anyway. Only politic. Merlin's balls, a man makes a mistake by apologising once, once, and they lord it over him for the rest of his bloody life.*

If he never heard another woman say the dreaded words "I told you so," or "I forgive you," ever, he would die a very, very happy man. Or at least content.

He heaved himself out of his chair -- the stink of smoke and mould in his clothing and hair was beginning to get to him -- and limped to the bedchamber, meaning to lock himself in the bath for a long, hot soak. He decided to check on Hermione first, lit the candle on the bedside table, and bent over her.

*Oh, damnation. Look at that, the blistering isn't going down -- silly chit forgot the paste....*
That required a laboured trip to the bath. (Alarming, really, how tired he was simply from crossing the room.) He washed his hands, retrieved the paste, and returned to the bedside: and then he warmed the ointment between his palms until it was creamy, and carefully smoothed it over the side of her face. She was so deeply asleep that she didn't even wake -- worn out, he assumed, from breaking Debdale's blasted ward.

It wasn't until he'd wiped his hands clean of grease -- on the coverlet, as he'd forgot to bring a towel -- that he noticed she was wearing one of his night-shirts.

*Why, that bloody little sneak.... She pillaged my things. Of all the cheek --*

He stopped for a moment and reconsidered. She didn't have any of *her* things here, after all.

*And she looks...*

She'd fed the fire before retiring, and the room was more than usually warm (and certainly warmer than her freezing bedchamber in that awful flat): she'd not pulled the covers up to her chin, for once. He noticed the way her neck sloped down into the collar of the night-shirt, the hollow at the base of her throat, the gentle swell of one breast, glimpsed through the gap between buttons....

And while that was usually enough to prompt Snape's libido to put ideas in his head, all he could seem to think at the moment was *very... pretty.*

*Very innocent.*

The thought wasn't at all lustful or libidinous: all he could seem to do was stare rather stupidly at the sleeping woman, and study her the way some might a piece of sculpture -- the way he *had* studied her as sculpture, once, bent over her Infirmary-bed: holding his breath as Pomfrey dropped the Restorative Draught onto Hermione's lips until they flushed with colour, became soft and pliant, and he could ease them open so that Pomfrey could administer the Draught properly.

*I don't believe anyone ever told her how close we came to losing her that time. Merlin's balls, we didn't tell Dumbledore how close we came....*

But here she was, curled up in his bed, alive and warm. And she was pretty, even with a badly-reddened face. She'd filled out a bit since they'd married: sympathetic eating, he imagined, since she'd cooked for him so often in December.

He could still see traces of the bright, irritating child she'd been, in her unconscious face. It was very difficult *not* to, in fact, just as difficult as it had been not to see her as a lovely example of prime breeding material that day in Whitemarsh.... And there was still a part of Snape that was greatly intrigued with the idea of getting children on a powerful, healthy witch, simply to observe the potential improvements in the line.

*Would it be so terrible, really? You were spot on about any children being intelligent and healthy, after all -- surely they'd be so....*
He also recognised that this was a far-from-laudable goal. Not as bad as *some*, but he wasn't certain that, being placed in the position of having an excuse, he wouldn't give in and take advantage of it against his better nature (what there was of it). Having the justification was far too tempting: he'd got himself in loads of trouble the first time he'd given in, and look where that had led -- to becoming a Death Eater.

*Fuck Pureblood ideals. It's the children that are important, isn't it? Not the blood. That's been pretty thoroughly debunked, no matter what they say. No, it's having children that one can raise to be not only bright and gifted, but useful, principled people, special in their own right. Good people. And happy, if one can manage it.*

That was the sticking-point. *If one can manage it.*

He'd have to help raise the sprog, that was clear now. Simply throwing money at the problem wouldn't really be the right thing to do -- that was the easy way out: and it wasn't fair to Hermione, either, to make her shoulder the responsibility alone.

*You'd be a terrible father, though. Not enough patience, no matter the circumstance -- you shouldn't have as great a hormonal or emotional attachment to the child... ...or children... as she. She's not the most patient person in the world either, for that matter....*

*I do worry a bit about... well, about her stability. The nightmares, the, the... what did Pomfrey call it? Survivor's guilt, yes.... And Pomfrey's right, Hermione is more fragile than she appears. I think her idealism and youth are the only things keeping her going at this point. How much longer can that last? And can she really keep going if the bloody business goes poorly, after admitting failure? She never took failure well as a student. I don't believe she's changed at all in that.*

*Not that she'd be a horrid parent, I don't think, just that the stress would make it far harder for her. She'd certainly approach child-rearing intelligently, but I somehow doubt that that's enough. 'Managing,' that's how she put it. Not that she wouldn't grow fond of it. I probably should too, I imagine, if it were agreeable and I were around it enough.*

*But one child is a relatively simple matter. Or should be. Several....*

As he'd reasoned with Hermione, he had no doubt that the Ministry would continue to push for more births once a couple had proven they could produce healthy children: and he didn't want that for the girl, not now. Perhaps it was ridiculously sentimental of him, but he didn't want to see Hermione's intellect and energy eaten up by endless rounds of pregnancy -- and he reckoned that it should, if the Ministry had its way.

*No, best put the thought out of mind. Wait, and see what happens when we're shut of all this business -- if we ever are. Plenty of time then to decide how to proceed. To see if there's a workable compromise.*

He cautiously pulled a stray curl out of the paste on Hermione's cheek, tucked it back behind her ear, and took himself off to the bath; and he only went to bed when he was thoroughly clean and his mind was as exhausted as his body.
Thursday morning, later

The paste had done wonders by the time Snape woke Hermione at six, although she grumbled about having to wash her hair again -- he'd not been very careful about avoiding her hairline, judging healing more important lest Corcoran make a connection between Hermione and the fire -- but he let the whinging pass, for once: she deserved a bit of whinging, given the jam she'd got them out of the night before.

And was that ever bloody stupid. Should have thought of a trap. Getting careless, old man....

He chivvied her into having a cup of tea and some toast before she popped off.

"Best use quite a bit of that muck you females use on your faces, today," he said, attempting diplomacy (and failing: she didn't quite glare at him, but it was a near thing). "You're pinker on one side than the other."

"I had noticed," she said dryly. "But thanks for the reminder. Are you certain you're all right? You look pale. Er. Than usual."

"I'm fine," he muttered. "Hurts like hell to breathe, but otherwise all right."

"If you'd taken the potion straightaway, you'd have coughed less.... You are going to apologise to Headmistress and Madam Pomfrey, aren't you?" she said, brow furrowed. "You said some really nasty things to them last night."

"Apologise for what? Forcing me to hack up a lung?"

"Severus --"

"Yes, I'll apologise," he muttered. Damnation. Took her a lot of arm-twisting to get you to cave in, didn't it?

"Good. I'll see you Fri-- Well, if I'm not totally knackered I'll be here Friday night, all right? And if I am, Saturday morning. Acceptable?"

"Yeeessss... Aren't you...."

"What?"

"Well, aren't you due?"

"For what?" she asked, staring at him blankly.

"Your menses."
"Already here, two days in. Pomfrey got me sorted with supplies while you were busy puking soot."

He tossed his toast onto his plate, not bothering to conceal his disgust with her terminology.

"Doesn't matter, I can still help you with marking, or something. Unless you'd rather I stay away?"

"No," he admitted. "No, that's fine."

_Besides, two days, this is three, Friday four.... Potential for Sunday. I think. How long does she usually...? Unless I can persuade her to try for a shared bath. Even if not, she'll catch me up on the marking._

"Right, then. I'll probably see you tomorrow night." She startled him by kissing his cheek -- again, as she had the last time she'd left -- on her way out the door.

He didn't get back to his toast. He was too busy thinking through the last five minutes' conversation.

_Bloody hell. Menstruating, and went through that mess last night without a single complaint or me noticing. Well, that rather shoots to hell the old wizards' tale about witches being unable to utilise all their magic when they're bleeding. Not that I ever took that seriously._

_I rather wish I'd been conscious to see her break that damned ward. What I did see was impressive. And she's out of practise now. What could she do if she were an active practitioner?_

Snape decided that he had married a very powerful witch indeed. It was a pity she'd hobbled herself for the time being, but the potential was still there, obviously.

Then he hauled himself off his arse, bad leg protesting, took a Strengthening Tonic to get himself through the day's classes, and cursed himself as a weak fool for having to do so.

_*****_

_That evening -- having yet again successfully kept the dunderheads from blowing themselves up -- he sat down to sort through the evidence from Cane Hill. And it was very good evidence, indeed._

_Petherbridge had copied nearly everything he could get his hands on, apparently -- any notes Debdale had allowed him to see or take down, though he obviously hadn't allowed direct access to formulae -- but he'd figured those out nonetheless. (He would, given that encyclopaedic memory of his. Snape allowed himself a chuckle at Debdale's probable rage when he'd discovered that all Petherbridge was good for was rattling off errata.)_

_The missing element was there: Nadder-skin was clearly identified, as were the other ingredients. With that and the final receipts -- which he could, perhaps, persuade Forsythe to filch from Mangel & Mortars -- the chain would be complete. The link between the experimentation and the proposed treatment, and therefore Fudge and Corcoran's involvement, would be complete._
Mightn't have to wait for them to start, after all -- good. That would please Hermione no end. I should check on Forsythe, the sooner the better.

I wonder what Bluett would make of this.... Perhaps I ought pop down this week-end, stop at the Club on my way to Hermione's flat. He'll find it terribly interesting....

On the other hand, what could the old bugger do with it? The more people had the information, the more dangerous it was for everyone. And he'd taken quite enough time away from his Common Room as it was. And it was still Hermione's turn to visit, so why should he put himself to the extra trouble?

Sloth won the argument.

I'd best put these somewhere else, however. I don't trust my own safe, not since that bloody elf broke into in.

He gathered together Petherbridge's notes and the memos between Fudge and Corcoran, wrapped them in a packet; and -- still being in a disgracefully lazy mood -- waited until his free period the next afternoon to visit Headmistress.

*****

Friday, February 3rd

"You're looking much better, Severus," McGonagall observed when he entered, and promptly returned to whatever-it-was she was scribbling upon. (Snape hoped he never had to take over: the Head seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time filling out paperwork.) "Hermione's well?"

"Still a bit pink on the one side, but much better," he said, and limped over to the chair in front of McGonagall's desk. "She recovered far faster than I."

"Well, she would, wouldn't she? Even a few years can make a difference in speed of healing. You shall have to tell me what happened," she ploughed on, not giving him a chance to become indignant, "someday when it's safer."

"I shall. It will suffice to say that there was a trap, and she got us out of it."

"Arithmancy?" McGonagall asked, glancing up at him, eyes bright.

"Of course. It was quite impressive, what I saw."

"Pity you can't tell Olivia," McGonagall murmured, and focussed on her paperwork again.

"No it isn't. She'd start crowing all over again, and I should have to remind you daily how Faculty Hexing is bad on Staff morale, and how hard it is to find Arithmancers willing to teach the horde."
"True. Might have to anyway, however," McGonagall thought aloud: for a moment he wasn't certain whether she meant hexing Vector, or finding another teacher. "I think she's stepping out with someone."

"Please, Minerva, no gossip --"

"Of course it's not. The Deputy Head has a say in new hires, that's what I'm getting at. Perfectly above-board speculation."

"Oh, that's different. Is she? Trying to beat the bloody lottery?"

"No, I don't think so. But she'd hinted before that she mightn't want to teach and raise a family at the same time."

"Oh."

Snape had that sinking feeling: the one that warned him he'd stepped into something sticky and uncomfortable.

"And if she does resign or take sabbatical, there should be an opening, of course." McGonagall's eyes took on a positively Dumbledorean twinkle. "I don't suppose Hermione --?"

"You should have to ask her," Snape said stiffly. "None of my business."

"Oh, of course, Severus, it isn't as though you'd have any say in the matter whatsoever. Or any particular reason to like the idea --"

"If you are quite through attempting to mock me, you.... Oh, blast it."

"Yes?"

"I was reminded yesterday that I'm meant to apologise for calling you and Poppy all manner of terrible things."

"Well, get whatever you were about to say in now, then -- you'll only have to apologise once, for the whole lot."

Snape glared at her. He hated that about McGonagall. She might be an old spinster, but decades of teaching had taught her to predict the foibles and tendencies of people -- especially males -- pretty accurately.

"I was in a great deal of pain --"

"And you weren't fully aware of what you were saying, of course --"

"-- and I wasn't fully.... Are you going to let me apologise my own way, or not?"

"Go ahead."
"And I undoubtedly took out a great deal of frustration on the two of you that I shouldn't have done. I'm sorry."

"Thank you. You ought simply write that on slips, carry them with you, and hand them out. That's what you always say."

Glaring at the sly old witch wasn't going to do a damned bit of good: she was obviously intent on making him feel as badly as she could for as long as possible. Best to let her think the jab had glanced off, so he changed the subject.

"I'm assuming that the Head's safe is far more secure than mine. No elf break-ins, for example? No known Auror infiltrations?"

"Absolutely none. The ward is tied in to the castle, somehow -- no-one's even found it, much less got in. It's safer than a Gringotts vault."

"Would you take these in hand, then?" he asked, and placed the packet on the edge of her desk. "Since that bloody elf got into them, I don't want to keep them in my rooms."

"Of course, Severus," she said. "Is there, erm, anyone to whom I may give them if you aren't... available?"

Now, that he'd always liked about McGonagall. No fluttering over the possibilities of nastiness: a straightforward, pragmatic acknowledgement of the possibility, and a determination of the best course in the event.

"Hermione. Weasley, I expect. There's a colleague of Hermione's, a Fro-- a Frenchman, DeLaine. He might or might not be safe to hand them over to. The ICW, if you must."

"Very well," she said matter-of-factly, took up the packet, tucked it away in her desk-drawer, and returned to her paperwork.

"Thank you. I'll.... You're busy, I expect I'll see you at dinner," he muttered, rose, and headed for the door.

But not quickly enough. She stopped him with his hand on the door-knob.

"Severus? Do you have any idea where Pinky is?"

*Oh, blast.*

"Why on earth should I?" he asked, turning slowly to face her. "Is elf-tracking a Deputy Head duty you neglected to tell me of?"

She stared at him over her glasses-rims. That was never a good sign.

"You sent her, and Dobby, to London."
"And?" he asked smoothly, totally side-stepping the issue of exceeding his authority by sending Hogwarts scout-staff off-Grounds. "I saw Dobby mucking about in the Dungeon-corridor this morning." (That was a lie. Dobby had, in fact, popped into Snape's rooms to return the Cane Hill map, and had popped out so quickly that Snape hadn't a chance to ask about the mission.) "Didn't she return with him?"

"No, she didn't. And she's sent her tea-towel back -- fairly obvious that she won't be with us any longer. She's skived off."

Oh, fuck. I suppose I'm about to find out exactly how much a trained scout costs.... Wait. She quit?

"They can't do that.... Can they?"

"That one could, apparently."

"I... sent them to the site we were at, to make certain there were no more wild elves trapped there."

"Wild elves --?"

"Yes, they still exist. They'd been experimented on. I suppose you're going to dock my salary?"

"Not necessarily. That rather depends on your next answer. What do you imagine Pinky's doing now?"

"Running about the Farthing Downs with a pack of wild elves, though whether she's civilising them or they're naturalising her is anyone's guess. I suppose she's enjoying herself, or she shouldn't have sent in her towel."

"Oh, good, I should hate to think she's miserable. No docking, then. That's all, Severus."

He was so relieved not to get a ticking-off that he didn't even mind the summary dismissal.

And thank Merlin the little beast didn't bring the wild ones back here.... Oh, hell. I wonder which beastly little punter the others will foist on me now.

*****

Friday late afternoon proved a shock. Snape returned to his rooms to wash up before dinner, and found Hermione already there: she was curled up on the settee, and looked a bit stunned.

"What in bloody --? You've been sacked, haven't you," he blurted, unable to censor his first thought. Did they figure out --? No, she'd be in custody.

"No," Hermione said, a queer edge to her voice. "No, Corcoran called me in this morning, and gave me some cock-and-bull story about how he'd reconsidered our last 'discussion' -- the bloody flaming row we had, he meant -- and he'd talked it through with his wife, and she'd made him see
how unfair he'd been. That, ah, you and I were doing our best under the circumstances to do our duty, and it wasn't considerate of him to be so demanding. And he sent me home from work early."

"What?"

"Actually, he said I was looking peaky, to leave at one o' clock and 'Go spend a few extra hours with your husband, and rest up.' Though he choked on 'husband.'"

Snape wandered over to the settee and sat on the near end.

"Do you think he suspects you of anything?"

"I imagine so, though I can't think what. Couldn't be Cane Hill -- he was out Thursday morning, and I'd slathered on loads of make-up, so you wouldn't have seen anything at all amiss."

"He's up to something."

"I know. I booby-trapped my office before I left -- can't do any warding except for approved Ministry procedure, but I made certain things would be mis-placed, you know what I mean -- and I did the same at the flat."

"Do you have anything there that --?"

"No, no, I sent it all to Francois."

"And I gave Minerva everything I had here for safe-keeping."

"What did you find?"

"Petherbridge took notes on nearly everything, behind Debdale's back -- he even refers to Debdale by name. He'd managed to figure out all the ingredients as well, and the proportions and brewing procedure. So we not only have confirmation that the potion's the same, we also have a trail of evidence that links Debdale to the potion, Fudge and Corcoran to Debdale...."

"Oh, good show. Did he mention Fudge?"

"No. 'A very important personage indeed,' I think he hinted. Boastful beggar."

"Ah." Hermione reached down for the bag she'd propped up against the settee, pulled a newspaper from it, and spread it open so Snape could see the front page. "We made the Muggle national news," she said.

The lower half of the page contained a garish colour photograph of a building afire: the article's headline read CANE HILL GONE IN A BLAZE OF GLORY.

"Merlin's balls," Snape muttered, squinted at the small print, and lapsed back into the cushions in disgust. "Totally gone?"
"Everything between Zachary-Unwin and Pugh-Paxton. Everywhere we went off the main corridor, in other words, including the laboratory."

"Damnation. I think. Perhaps it's best...."

"They said there were periodic outbreaks of fire all day yesterday, too, which seemed odd. One or two's not unusual."

"Petherbridge's fire would have created an Ashwinder. Yours too, in all likelihood."

"Oh, for God's -- I hadn't thought of that. What if they find any eggs?"

"They won't, they never think them anything but embers. They'll burn themselves out eventually."

"Ah. The more frightening thing is, the reporter interviewed Security. He said he thought he saw children fleeing the buildings, so they're looking for juvenile arsonists...."

"Oh, bloody hell."

"Right. Good thing we Apparated out -- the brigade must have been closer than I thought."

"What did the mad Scot have to say?"

She snorted, and made a sour face. "That I owe him two hundred quid for the kit."

"No, about the fire."

"Oh. I told him we startled your cousin and he tipped over a paraffin heater, but we got him out all right."

"You don't think he'll turn us in, do you?"

"Can't. I paid him the two hundred in cash last night, and then I Obliviated him."

"Merlin's fu-- When did you learn how to do that? That's not on the bloody curriculum."

"Hawking had an unfortunate incident that required it. I picked it up from her."

"Oh." He shifted a bit uneasily. Not certain I trust her quite that much....

"I hope to God they don't find Petherbridge's body," she muttered as she stuffed the newspaper back into her bag. "Or what's left of it."

"Might be best," Snape mused. "There's their arsonist -- some homeless wretch. More or less true, after all. Merlin only knows what's left after elf-fire, though."

The conversation lagged for a moment, but -- contrary to usual -- Snape didn't feel in the least awkward. In fact, he felt rather the opposite: Hermione had lit the fire, the sitting-room was nicely
warm, the settee far more comfortable than he remembered it being. He guessed Hermione had applied her scent with a liberal hand that morning, for he could smell it all the way down at the other end of the settee....

Pleasant.

It was pleasant, although Snape didn't have his usual urge to grapple with her, for once. And he wasn't certain which alarmed him more: feeling pleasant -- perhaps even content -- or not feeling like snogging Hermione to speechlessness.

"Pinky's apparently stayed with them," he said abruptly. "I, erm, sent her and Dobby back down to find any still on the site."

"Why? I mean, why would she stay? And how?"

"I've no idea. According to McGonagall she sent her tea-towel back," he explained with a shrug.

"Good Lord.... Oh, that reminds me," Hermione said, sitting bolt upright, "I wish you'd seen what the little beggars... well, one of the little beggars did, while you were unconscious, I mean. It was the elf that Petherbridge had been, erm, torturing, and --"

Ah, now we're back in familiar Know-It-All territory. Not that I miss it, but it's good to see her more animated than she has been.... But it's still bloody annoying.

He arranged himself more comfortably in the cushions --

"-- it was still conscious. Had been hiding in the bloody lab and we'd both missed it, apparently. Anyway, it ran across to the cell-block when I dropped your Barrier--"

-- shut his ears to most of what Hermione was saying --

"-- and it started casting spells at the others to wake them. Most extraordinary thing I've ever seen.... Well, except for Buckbeak, but.... They have a language of their own, Severus, and --"

-- and tried not to let his eyes glaze over as he watched her expression and her bright eyes, nodding occasionally so it shouldn't appear as if he were doing precisely what he was, until Hermione's speculative rampage through potential wild-elf culture was cut short by the dinner-gong.

*****

Saturday was quiet -- too quiet. He hadn't felt up to taking advantage of Hermione's proximity Friday night: that was understandable, as he still felt more or less like shit from the Cane Hill excursion. Hermione seemed content to help him with his marking, scribbling away quietly in a corner of his office. She did a good job of it -- too good, in some instances, writing hints in the margins as to where the idiots had gone wrong, and often citing by chapter and verse where to find the answers. (Snape had always reckoned the lazy little bastards ought have to find the answers
themselves.) The only interruption was Marsters, whom she prudently took next door to the Potions classroom to do their tutoring, so he shouldn't have to bear the prattle.

He began to be concerned that evening, however, when his body told him in no uncertain terms that there would not be any jiggery-pokery, so to speak, that night either. (He began to suspect Hermione had slipped saltpetre in his breakfast, and wasted a half-hour in the ingredients-cupboard inventorying the blasted stuff to the very last grain. No luck: it was all there.)

So the problem was with him. He didn't seem able to simply reach for her, any longer: he felt suddenly and strangely reserved about what had always been a straightforward, healthy activity, as if it would be a great breech of etiquette to initiate something that was, after all, his right.

A bit more sleep and late Sunday-morning grogginess, however, proved that the Little Wizard's lack of interest was an aberration. That terrible inhibition was nowhere to be found when he woke tucked up behind her and with his face buried in the great, messy pile of her hair, which she hadn't tied back before bed.

Actually, he was grateful for the delay. While never exciting, morning-sex had its own allure and advantages: a marginally-awake Hermione was an unusually quiescent and biddable Hermione. He didn't have to work nearly as hard to persuade her as when she was fully awake, and the sleepy little moans of protest that escaped her could almost be construed as appreciation.

Almost.

He dozed for a while afterwards. Well, to be honest, he fell asleep until well after one o'clock, and only really wakened again when something fluttered against the scar on his temple: he reached up to push whatever it was away, and found he'd captured Hermione's fingers.

Bloody hell, what --?

He forced his eyes open, and saw her gazing at him.

"I never did hear how this happened," she said.

"Malfoy," he muttered, closed his eyes, and let go of her fingers. "Just before we reached the inner sanctum."

"Draco? But you were supposed to still be fighting on their side then --"

"Yes, well, it rather gives the game away when you hex the bollocks off one of your presumed allies because he's about to throw the Killing Curse at The Boy Who Lived." He rolled over on his back to escape her scrutiny and did his best to ignore the dead silence in the room; but he thought better of it after a moment, realising how she might have taken his words.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't intend to be cruel, that's simply the way I've always thought of him," he admitted.
"I know," she said absently. "I've got better at interpreting your voice. That was wry, not malicious."

They were silent for a while, and he thought he'd negotiated that potential sink-hole quite successfully: and then Hermione began to think aloud.

"So that was twice, then.... No, three. I suppose I should include the Quidditch match First Year."

He started, and then rolled to face her.

"What are you talking about?"

"The Quidditch match? The one where some idiot set your cloak afire --"

"I know that, and I sussed out long ago who was responsible, thank you very much," he muttered. (That was a lie. He'd begun to suspect in Whitemarsh, and Wednesday's Adventures With Fire had confirmed it.) "You know what I'm asking, Hermione. Don't prevaricate."

"You watched his back at the last battle. At the Quidditch match. And at Godric's Hollow."

He stared at her for a moment, deciding which way to play this not-so-amusing game, and chose -- of course -- prevarication. (He didn't deny it was a good tactic: he simply wasn't going to let her get away with it.)

"Don't be stupid. And how could you possibly make that deduction?"

"Second Year, just before Yule Break -- well, I didn't put it together then, but.... We'd gone to Hogsmeade and overheard Fudge and McGonagall and some of the other staff talking about that night --"

"Get to the point."

"I am. Hagrid said he was the first there, after the attack. Sirius Black got there next, though Hagrid assumed he'd been hanging about after doing all the mischief and destroying the house. But Hagrid found Harry alive and well in the ruins."

"So? It's an acknowledged fact that childrens' magic can protect them from danger."

"Oh, I know -- it happened to Neville all the time, apparently. But this was an infant and the entire collapse of a bloody house, Severus. This wasn't a simple spontaneous Apparition to a safe spot, or bouncing off the pavement, or anything like that. I have trouble believing it was Lily Potter's last spell, either -- you'd think anything Voldemort had thrown at him would have dissipated that pretty fast."

"Simply because it's beyond your ability to grasp doesn't mean --"
"I think someone took him out of that house and then put him back after the collapse. Someone who didn't want to be seen, or couldn't afford to be seen taking him somewhere safer. Someone who was probably in the group of Death Eaters who attacked the house in the first place. And I doubt that it was Lucius Malfoy or Bellatrix Black."

"Bollocks," Snape muttered, and rolled onto his back again.

"Well it wasn't Pettigrew, was it? Was he even with the group that night? Did you know he'd betrayed the Potters, at that point? You couldn't have known then, Severus. I know you hated Black, but I can't see you keeping silent about something that big. You'd have told Dumbledore, at the least. And that night, at the Shrieking Shack, before we... accidentally knocked you out, you had no idea."

He remained silent.

"Severus," she said, wriggling over to face him, "they're both dead and gone, now, Harry and he. It doesn't.... There's no-one you have to hide it from any longer."

"No," he finally admitted, voice hoarse. "It wasn't Pettigrew."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he hissed: and then he rubbed at his forehead with one hand and groped for hers with the other, in as much of an apology as he could manage. "It was a memory I couldn't afford to keep, you see. I didn't know at the time that Voldemort had fled, and I couldn't risk him seeing it if he'd recovered. Dumbledore had the keeping of the memory all those years, and I only got it back after he was killed."

"So...."

"So I could sense there was a blank there, something terribly important. And I could never understand why, when I despised that boy so, I felt I had to protect him. Not just as an Order member, not just because of the bloody Prophecy...."

Hermione was quiet for a very long time, and then said, "Yes, I can see how that would colour your attitude. Feeling responsible for him, but being unable to explain it. You don't like unquantifiable things, especially emotions."

There wasn't a thing he could say in rebuttal to that: it was true.

"I didn't think," she added, "that it was just the celebrity."

"That was enough," Snape muttered. "I admit to making certain assumptions that weren't accurate. I didn't discover otherwise until I tried to teach him Occlumancy. Eventually I dragged the whole story out of McGonagall."
Hermione neglected to point out that the knowledge hadn't changed his behaviour toward the boy in the least -- probably a charitable act on her part, for which Snape was enraged.... On the other hand, he didn't feel in the least like having his nose rubbed in it, so he ought be grateful. He wasn't particularly proud of some of the things he'd said to and of the Potter boy.

*If only he hadn't been such a disrespectful, smart-mouthed little sod*....

"Does it matter to you in the least that he usually tried to do his best?" Hermione asked.

He snorted. "*That* is a matter of opinion -- remember, you're speaking to the person who wasn't able to pound Occlumancy into his stubborn skull, and I know damned well he was perfectly capable of learning it. The only time the boy did his best was on the Quidditch Pitch, and that last day."

"And that, of course, was *Gryffindor bravado*," Hermione said frostily.

"No," Snape said slowly. "No, courage. He did not fight wisely, Hermione -- the blasted boy managed to avoid doing a single damned thing by the book -- the playbook *you* wrote. Finnegan wasn't the only one who ignored the plan. But," he grudgingly added, "he fought bravely."

When Hermione finally spoke, her voice sounded a bit queer. "Thank you for that."

"What the bloody hell for?" Snape asked, astonished. "Is your personal sense of honour so tied to his reputation that --"

"*No*, of course not. But I've felt caught in the middle, somehow, between the two of you. Between my friend the dead boy and the man who hated him."

"Didn't hate him. *Despised* him. Or his behaviour, rather."

Hermione snuffled a bit, and said, "There were moments I wanted to hex him silly, too. But they passed. Usually."

*Oh, for.... Don't let her start bawling about Harry Bloody Potter*....

But she settled down after a few more snuffles -- no outright tears, thank Merlin -- and Snape felt it was time to steer the conversation back where it belonged: firstly, away from the damned Potters; secondly, to *himself*, especially as the Little Wizard has perked up considerably despite the distressing conversation. That was a very good sign indeed, the Little Wizard wanting to make up for lost opportunities....

"You do realise," he confided, stealthily reaching for her so his fingers could describe lazy circles on her shoulder and down her arm, "that Attempted Bodily Harm to Faculty is a grave offence? Expulsion is the usual punishment."

"Really."

"Absolutely."
"I suppose there's no statute of limitations?"

"Technically, yes, but as I have the malefactor in my grasp, as it were --"

"What do you propose I do, sort through your flobberworm vat? What shall it be, sir, by weight, length, circumference, or sex?"

"No, I was thinking more along the lines of.... Twit, you know they're hermaphrodites."

"Just testing."

"No, I was thinking of two more tangible punishments, actually,"

"Go ahead," she said with a sigh.

(That wasn't particularly encouraging, but at least she wasn't objecting.... And perhaps he could turn the whole, nasty conversation to his advantage. Presumably she didn't feel quite so antagonistic toward him, now that she knew what he'd done for the damned boy.)

"First, you badly singed one of a pair of perfectly serviceable boots, not to mention a heavy winter cloak."

"All right, fine, give me the tailor and bootmaker's names...."

"And the trousers, but I shall give those a pass."

He hesitated, fingers halting. There was something else.... Something he wanted rather badly, but the asking of which put him at a terrible disadvantage.

Shouldn't, you really shouldn't, old man.... You're opening yourself up to a great deal of ridicule.

But he mightn't get such a good chance again. And really, the worst she could do was say no, and they'd continue as they were.

Deal with that if it happens. Don't think it shall, though.... She's very kindly-disposed, at the moment, and she's been doing that kissing-business the last two visits.

"And second...."

"What? Go on."

He took a deep breath, fixed his eyes on her pillow -- he didn't seem to be able to look at her directly -- and admitted, "I want you to touch me."

He knew he'd miscalculated when she went still, not even breathing.

"You did at Whitemarsh," he quickly continued, trying to salvage something from the mis-step, something that would persuade her. "You.... And while I realise that was for that idiot's benefit, I...."
What I mean to say is, it isn't just then. Sometimes you forget that you don't want to, and it's rather pleasant."

"Touch you?"

"Yes," he said. "You do, sometimes, not just... to brace yourself, but as if you might really want to. An *embrace,*" he added quickly, realising she might think he meant more specific and lewd instructions he'd tried to give her in the past. (He wouldn't turn *that* down, certainly, but it wasn't what he'd intended.)

"You're asking me," she said slowly, "to make up for setting you alight when I was eleven years old by *holding* you, when --"

"Yes. Juh- just the once, if that's all you can bear, as if you meant it," he managed, and stared at her, unable to avoid her eyes any longer.

She was appalled. It showed, quite clearly, on her face: he rolled away with a muttered, "Forget it," before he could stop himself.

*You fool. You stupid, stupid fool, why couldn't you keep your mouth shut and your juvenile desires to yourself?*

"No, Severus, it's pathetic. I don't mean *you,*" she said, "or that you.... Bloody hell, why bother to pretend? Why bother with me?"

*Because it's not *enough* any longer, damn it --*

"I'm nothing but a bloody nuisance. I've been rotten to you, even after I accepted the bargain. And I thought you wanted to keep this part of things purely... business-like."

*That's it, you've lost any vestige of self-respect. I can just hear her now, crowing about how I begged her --*

"It's not that it would be hard to do, not really, but I.... I don't want us to strike bargains any longer, do you see? You told me once that we'd been dishonest with each other, and you were right, and I don't want to go on like that, trying to negotiate something that... that ought to be given *freely.*"

"I said," he muttered, "to forget it. Forget I asked."

"I *can't,* it's obviously important to you. It's.... It's a.... Bloody hell, I never thought I'd say this, but you've always been very careful of me like that, when you could have chosen to be quite brutal. I only mean that I won't make it some kind of horrid *trade,* that's all. I *can* touch you," she said, and he felt her shift on the mattress: her hand -- warm, trembling slightly -- touched his shoulder-blade, and he flinched. After a skittish jerk backward she tried again, her touch more sure. "I'll try to do better. But not in *exchange* for anything, do you see?"
For once in his life he kept his tongue under control, and managed not to lash out -- although that meant he couldn't respond at all.

Hermione finally gave up, pulled her hand away, and flopped onto her back.

"Why is it," she muttered, "that even when I try my damnedest to do the right thing and with the right intent, I still manage to bugger everything all to hell?"

Snape concurred entirely, on both their parts.

*****

He did the cowardly thing, in the end: pulled the figurative tattered remains of his pride about himself, rose, locked himself in the bath, dressed, and took off without another word to Hermione, for a visit to the Hog's Head.

Might as well mix business with pleasure somewhere. Not that you deserve it, you bloody idiot.

He did his best to not be angry at her as he slogged through the snow toward Hogsmeade.

She was quite right, of course. It was supposed to be purely business between them, in bed. He couldn't quite make out why it infuriated him so now, when it hadn't before....

Perhaps because everything else has become business, too. Because I'm bloody tired of being back in the thick of it, and I need more distraction.... More real distraction.

That was only part of it, though, if he were absolutely truthful with himself. Everything he'd ever really wanted in life, from top marks in Form to the DADA position, had been stymied: by bloody Potter and Black, with their easy, careless mastery of their studies -- and their deliberate lording-over of their besting him; by Dumbledore, who had steadfastly, and sometimes airily, denied him DADA. 'For your own good, Severus.' Even bloody McGonagall had taken the same stance....

He'd talked rubbish to Petherbridge about "doing right" being more satisfying than any reward, knowing as he'd said it that it was a lie. He'd never got proper recognition for any of his work, and it stung badly, no matter how many times he reminded himself that the good opinion of fools was worthless....

Voldemort, keeping him out of the Inner Circle until the numbers had been too low to deny him -- he'd only got in because of Regulus Black's unfortunate "accident," really.... Fucking Horace Parkinson, a smug smile twisting his mouth, saying, "You really won't do better, you know. It's your way back in, old man, it's really for the best."

Well, he had done better than Pansy Bloody Parkinson, even if not by Horace's standards. At least in terms of potential.
And now he'd probably fucked that to hell and back as well, because he'd been a sentimental fool. She'd said yes, eventually, but she didn't mean it. She was only throwing sops to a dog because she feared its bite.

*You deserve more consideration from her than you've ever got. You went along with the bloody marriage to protect her, you put in the bloody ward on the flat, you've kept her from being discovered three or four times over. If she can't be bothered to show some appreciation -- the kind of appreciation I want, on my terms....*

He stopped dead in the middle of the road, scuffed viciously at the snow, and decided he was tired of other people knowing what was best for him; sick of hopes that were invariably dashed; and, above all, disgusted by that perverse part of himself that continued to wish for more than anyone seemed willing to give him.

****

Aberforth Dumbledore seemed to know something was off the moment Snape walked into the door: he plunked down a whisky in front of him, and then bellowed, "Closing!" and growled at anyone who complained that he'd skipped final orders -- and at the more perceptive ones who pointed out that it was, after all, only four in the afternoon.

"Need the floo?" he asked Snape when the last, drunken hag staggered out the door.

"Yes."

"Go on up, the staff's off today," Aberforth said with a jerk of the head toward the stair.

Snape -- whisky firmly in hand -- went up to the first floor, locked himself in the room, flamed for Forsythe, and forgot all about the whisky when there was no response to his call after two minutes.

"Can this bloody thing do actual floos?" he yelled downstairs.

"Two Galleons," Aberforth barked.

"Bloody highway robbery!"

"Harder to jigger the trace on those," Aberforth argued earnestly, poking his head around the end of the bannister. "Have to really bollocks-up the whole system."

*Highly unlikely.*

"Put it on my bloody account," Snape snarled, locked himself back in, and searched in vain for the stash of floo-powder.

The bloody old coot had hidden it.
By the time Snape wrestled the door back open and stalked downstairs, Aberforth was waiting for him behind the bar, arms folded across his chest; he smiled until Snape plunked down cold, hard cash onto the sticky bar, and only then gave Snape barely enough powder for a trip to and from.

Snape took his time trudging back up the stairs, at every tread wishing damnation on the last living Dumbledore; then, once more securely locked into the room, he tossed the powder into the floo, drew his wand, and launched himself into the flames and to Forsythe's bed-sit.

*****

At first glance it looked as though Forsythe had done a runner (and a very hurried one at that): drawers were pulled out of the bureau, books and papers were scattered every-which-way, the bedclothes dragged from the mattress and left in a wrinkled, stained pile at the foot of the bed.

But the mattress had been slit open. The spines of Forsythe's few books had been broken, the covers bent backward, and one with a particularly thick binding had been split at the edge, its endpapers slashed through, as though the searcher were looking for hidden papers. Even the wireless's scarred mahogany case had been shattered, and the delicate receiving-crystal knocked from its spindle and smashed.

Snape sat on the room's only chair, ignored the creaking of its sagging cane seat, and buried his head in his hands.

Bloody hell. Another one gone. And I warned him, I told him to lie low for a while.

It was only a matter of time, then, before they got Forsythe to crack. Forsythe would lead them to him, and from him to Hermione--

Should have checked on him before -- bloody hell, man, why didn't you? You knew full well he'd take off on his own given a chance, but you pissed about and didn't give him a second thought until today--

"I'm warning you," a quavering female piped from the hall, "I've got my frying-pan, and I'm a dead shot. You just pop on out, now, and don't give me no trouble."

Snape sat upright, pulled his wand, and quietly lied, "I'm a friend. He was to meet me yesterday, and I got worried when he didn't show."

"Well, you can see he's not here, so get along with you."

"Is he all right, do you know? This doesn't look as though he, ah, simply stepped out."

There wasn't a reply for a long time, and then came the hesitant question, "It's just you, then? No-one else?"

"No, I'm alone."
The door creaked as someone inched it open and a frying-pan floated in, suspended above the wand of Quavery-Voice: Snape could barely see one red-rimmed, beady eye staring at him from the crack between door and frame, a shock of pure-white hair, and the heavily liver-spotted hand that held the wand.

"A friend, you said?" Quavery-Voice asked.

"Acquaintance. We'd worked on a project together, and were to do so again. As I said, he never showed. Were you harmed when they came? Did they find him here?"

Quavery-Voice stared at him a bit longer, and then shuffled into the room, shook back the cuff of her dressing-gown, and displayed terrible, livid bruises on the wrist of her free hand.

"Three days ago," she admitted. "Pushed their way in. One of 'em held me downstairs while the other two come up."

"You're his landlady?"

"Right."

"And they took him with them?"

"No," she scoffed. "He'd been feeling poorly, took off last week sometime. To his mum's, he said, but he told me when he took the room that she'd passed."

Oh, thank Merlin. The bastard's just hidden out, then, and not captured....

"Lying sod. He said," the old lady continued indignantly, the frying-pan wavering in mid-air, "that if he weren't back by yesterday, his week's rent was in the biscuit-jar there -- but it ain't."

"Ah. They probably nicked it, then," Snape said to soothe her, and poked at the cracked jar on the top of the bureau. "Can't put anything past thugs like that. What did they look like?"

"Ohhhh, I don't know," she muttered. "Perfessional, like. Not like the bookie's mates that come round when Bosey's behind on paying up. Didn't hear them call each other by name, either, so don't ask."

"I won't, then. Why didn't you cosh them one? That's a fearsome-looking weapon," Snape said, voice dry.

"I was doing my morning fry-up, and it was off-duty," she shot back. "My hex aim's not good anymore, but with this I can wallop off a chicken's head at fifty paces."

That was doubtful, but one didn't argue with elderly witches wielding frying-pans.

"Did Ambrose ever mention any brothers or sisters?" Snape asked. "Any special friends?"
"Not that I recall," she said, and looked up at the cracked ceiling with a show of innocence. "Course, my memory's not that good anymore. And I'm *that* upset about the rent, I can't string two thoughts together."

_Damnation, but it's turning into an expensive evening...._

Snape suppressed a grimace, fished about in his pockets, and dropped a Galleon in the biscuit-jar -- probably twice the rent that the old slag could actually get for such a flea-bit room, but if it jogged her memory, it was worth it.

"Ah, now I think I remember.... Jarvey, that were one. Ain't mentioned him for a while, though. --"

Well, he wouldn't. Jarvey was the former business-partner Forsythe had dosed with the Potions equivalent of the Imperius Curse. Given Jarvey's reputation, it was a wonder Forsythe was still alive.

"-- and there were some slut down at The Potted Puffskein, but that went south. Jealous type, our Bosey."

_Bloody hell._

"Any other places he knocked about?" Snape asked wearily, knowing the answer in advance.

"Noooo. Here, work, the pub, Dartmoor -- long as his bookie was paid up, of course.... No, our Bosey was a quiet bloke. Give him a good fry-up and as much whisky as he wanted, and he was happy as a lark."

That was doubtful, too, but no point debating it.

"Thank you," Snape said, eyeing the frying-pan as he rose very, very slowly. "I don't suppose you'd, ah, allow me to look for any evidence where he might be? An address-book, or something like it?"

"Oh, couldn't do that. He might be back, you know," Quavery Voice said. "He'd be that upset if I had to tell him. 'Course, I wouldn't *have* to tell him...."

She glanced at the biscuit-jar again, but this time Snape didn't fall for it. Chances were that the thugs had found anything of interest -- if Forsythe had been stupid enough to leave it behind.

"Wouldn't want to put you in that position. I'll just be off, then --"

"Oh, you can't floo from that," she said matter-of-factly. "I blocked it. Our Bosey got himself in a bit of trouble with illegal hookups -- has a bit of an eye for ladies, you know, likes to peek -- so it's inbound only."
The day, Snape decided as he grumpily Apparated back to Hogsmeade from Quavery Voice's overgrown back garden, was only getting worse and worse -- and he had no intention of spending the rest of it with Hermione.

*****

Aberforth refused to refund him his Galleon for the rest of the floo powder, but took it out in trade, pouring him a quite illegal after-hours whisky. (Except that it wasn't, of course. But Aberforth was showing an unusual amount of courtesy, considering, and hadn't re-opened.)

"I don't suppose," Snape asked him, "that anything's arrived for a 'Steven,' has it?"

"No," the old codger said. "I'd have told you."

"Oh.... Did I tell you of that?"

"Must have done, musn't you?"

Snape glared at him. "You're doing that thing, aren't you? Your bloody brother warned me you would."

"Divination doesn't work that way, you dolt -- you left me a note upstairs last visit. No, no packages for a Steven."

"Bloody hell."

"I ought track you down right away if it comes, eh?"

"If you would. Please."

"Shall do. Want to get whatever else it is off your chest, do you?"

"I just did," Snape said sullenly.

"I mean about the other thing. Home.... Yes, now I'm doing it --"

"I don't wish," Snape said through gritted teeth, "to speak of it. But thanks," he added grudgingly.

"Right," Aberforth said gruffly, refilled Snape's glass and slid the bottle next to it, set about cleaning up the bar, and ignored him.

Snape quietly set about becoming as blotto as was possible to be, and yet still be able to walk to Hogwarts.

*****
Filch and Mrs Norris caught him just past curfew, stumbling down the corridor toward his rooms: Mrs Norris gave a disapproving twitch of her tail and a raspy, grating mewl, and Filch's upper lip curled in disdain. No self-respecting Faculty should be seen on premises in such a condition.

He ignored them both, and managed to slip into the sitting-room without banging the door.

The fire had burnt down to embers, and the rest of the room was dark; only after Snape lit the lamp did he notice that Hermione's coat still hung next to the door, and her handbag still lay on the table. She'd stayed, then, and was probably already in bed, asleep: he'd *rather* hoped that she'd left, especially as he had to piss so badly that he had no choice but to stagger through the bedchamber for the loo. (He did, very quietly, navigating the room by memory, and sat on the toilet so he shouldn't have to turn on the light or risk tipsy aim.) He thought he'd accomplished everything quite successfully, in fact, until he started back for the sitting-room.

"Everything all right?" Hermione said, nothing more, in the dark, than a sleepy voice drifting from the pile of covers on the bed.

He froze. "Yes. Why shouldn't it be?"

"You were upset when you left."

*Why, yes, yes I was, and am, and would you be surprised to know it's you that's done it? Just as you've managed for the past four bloody months?*

"It's nothing," he managed. "A contact I hoped would be helpful, and won't be. He's disappeared, in fact."

"Oh, damn. Anything I --"

"No, no, don't think so."

"Oh. Your dinner's on the table still, if you need it -- I, erm, put a warming charm on it," she said, and he could hear her yawn.

"Yes, I'll...."

"Are you coming to bed soon? You sound tired."

It was kindly meant, Snape knew, but it poured salt in the wound.

"Later," he muttered. "Marking to finish." He slipped through the door into the sitting-room, and quietly pulled the latch to.

He didn't do marking, though. (There wasn't any: they'd finished it all yesterday, to his relief.) Nor did he eat more than a few bites of lukewarm roast beef, abandoning it when his stomach threatened to sour.
He wound up on the settee with a tumbler of Tittifer's Tummy Tonic in hand, and calmed down enough to attempt rational thought. It should have been over the problem of Forsythe, and where the bleeder had got to: but he kept returning to the problem of Hermione, instead.

She did not turn you down. She merely said she wouldn't make it part of the bargain, that's all.... Not part of the business arrangement. You're wrong, utterly wrong, to say she isn't giving you your due. She has, recently, and she's tried to do more. Is trying.

Be honest, man. It's your fault for trying to change the agreement. You got your bargain from the start. You made it, you set the terms, and she's followed them as best she could. Sometimes exceeded them.... She hasn't needed to try to make you comfortable, whether you care for it or not. Merlin knows she didn't have to save your skin the other night.

And she did try, earlier. She did. And then she jumped out of her skin when she touched you. Can you blame her, really? How... how difficult has it been for her, these months, to give you your due, on top of all the other demands on her?

A thought from several weeks ago rose, unbidden, and he forced himself to think of it: Caldwell and his harassment of the Bingham girl. At the time Snape had excused his own actions with Hermione on the grounds that it was business, of course it was, it was entirely different....

But isn't it very nearly the same? Unwanted attentions, foisted on an unwilling girl --

His stomach lurched: he forced himself to stop thinking for a moment, and stared at the weak glow of the remains of the fire until he felt more himself.

But what Caldwell did was illegal. He had no right at all to demand attention of a girl with no ties to him but wizardry. Marriage is legal, it's expected that a wife should submit....

Just as his mother had had to submit to his father, no matter how tired or ill; no matter that she hadn't recovered from her latest miscarriage, or that Julius Snape hurt her often, probably deliberately. Snape hadn't realised it at the time, of course: he hadn't yet learnt what went on between men and women. Nor had he actually witnessed the more intimate details. He'd only the memory of huddling in bed with the thin pillow pressed over his ears, trying to ignore his mother's crying.

He could now, at forty years' distance and experience of human nature, pretty accurately reconstruct what must have happened in the privacy of his parents' bedchamber.

At least I haven't sunk that low. At least I've tried to make it as pleasant as possible for Hermione....

In the end, though, he had to concede that while what Julius Snape had demanded of his wife was perfectly legal, it wasn't in the least right. And there was only one logical conclusion to be drawn from that....

Neither is what I've done to Hermione.
While that hadn't been of the least concern to him at first, everything had changed.

*I've changed. I... I can't seem to see her as a, a... a thing, a possession. As simply a female. She's unique. She doesn't fit into my tidy little cubbyholes any longer.... And I don't want her to. The novelty of the situation's worn off, that feeling of power for having her whenever I want has faded. It's not enough.*

You just **had** to have more, didn't you, you greedy bastard? Wanted what everyone else seems to expect as a matter of course.

Ought to apologise. Really, **really** ought to apologise, now, before I sober up and find my self-respect again....

The tumbler dropped from his hand, unheeded, and shattered on the hearth; Snape staggered to his feet and stumbled to the bedchamber door, carefully cracked it open, and stared, in the faint light that shone in from the sitting-room, at the woman in the far side of his bed. She was curled up in her usual protective little ball, fast asleep now; but she was facing him, and the covers on his side were pointedly turned down in invitation.

She'd never done that, never, and somehow that made it all worse, his previous actions all the more shameful.

He was utterly unable to cross the room to wake her. He knew he owed her an apology, as inadequate as it would be; but the shame of realising he was little better than his father, guilty of the same crime in a lesser degree, had him frozen to that spot just inside the doorway.

*And how much of this is really the drink?* the most cynical, self-serving portion of his mind reasoned. *If you say it now, it can't be undone. Can't be taken back. You know you've let slip far too much when you've been drinking.... Better to wait until your head's clear, man -- say it then, without risking any snivelling. You may owe it her, but you don't need to give her any more ammunition. Any more excuses to leave you now....*

He declined Hermione's unspoken invitation, backed out of the room, and spent the rest of the night on the settee.

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**Chapter 21: Wherein Hermione treads the thin line between apology and capitulation -- and the line between freedom and confinement, as well.**

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**Monday, February 6th**

Severus was back to his usual self the next morning: not his manner of the past month, the Snape whose vicious wit had taken a decidedly sparring (albeit still caustic) tone, but the overly-snappish
one whose barbs were meant to wound deeply. Hermione was hard-pressed not to snap back, but she managed: she tried, very carefully, not to inflict more damage than she had last night, and to get through breakfast and to her departure without antagonising him further. (It amounted to keeping her mouth shut after his first three nasty replies to her questions, and a determined effort to finish her breakfast as though nothing was wrong.)

"I won't see you to the gates," he finally muttered. "I've preparations for my first class." He threw his napkin on the table and made for the office, shutting the door with a bang.

Hermione sat for a long time at the table, staring out the window, trying to sort through everything. He'd been subdued when he'd returned from... well, from wherever he'd got to: but it wasn't a good sign that he'd slept in the sitting-room. (There had been times in the past when she'd longed that he would, but last night wasn't one of them.)

She couldn't quite figure out his hostility, although she could see that he might have taken her counter-offer as a slight -- as a blow to his ego, which was, she knew, considerable.

*He must have brooded over what happened between us after he got back. Oh, why the bloody hell can't the man understand? I thought I was very logical about the whole thing. It wasn't as though I laughed at him, or told him there was no bloody way I'd hold him. 'Touch me,' that's how he put it - well, damn it, I have. I've touched him quite a bit, actually, just not... then. During sex.*

*Come off it, Hermione. You have to think like he does. Or as near as you can get, with what you know of him.*

*Right. Firstly, he took a big risk. He admitted he wanted it simply because it felt nice.... When have you ever heard him admit that he likes something because it's nice or pleasant? Food, that's about it, and that's relatively unimportant, something he could go to a restaurant or the Club for if he wanted it. Not as though it would kill him if I didn't feed him properly....

....Ohhhhh. He's not dependent on me for feeding. But he is for sex, so.... Wait a moment, do you believe for one minute that he couldn't get it elsewhere? Not for free, he couldn't. Ewwww, don't think about that option.... Get back to the point.*

*In fact, sex is about all he's dependent on me for. He can take or leave my company. He doesn't appreciate me trying to nurse him....*

She remembered for a moment that first awful coupling, and the surprise she'd felt when she saw him for the first time as vulnerable and unguarded.

*He was giving me a great deal of power, asking me to hold him. Good Lord, he was practically stuttering, and the man never does.*

*Secondly, perhaps he needed to think of it as a trade. Needed it to be part of the bargain, or a re-negotiation. Would have given him a nice little victory, that, to offset the risk. Cripes, you might have just done it, and then gone ahead and done it the next time.... Would it have killed you to keep*
your bloody mouth shut, for once, and been the one to give a little? Lord knows he's compromised on everything else, far more than you have.

I wonder if I might be able to bollocks up my life -- and his -- more if I actually tried.

She finally gave up trying to figure out Snape's convoluted ego and stunted emotions, and settled for scribbling a note that she left on the side-table.

Severus,

I didn't intend to offend or hurt you, and I'm sorry that I did. I'm just not used to I'm just bloody awful at relationships and being sensitive, and that's all there is to it.

Please flame me later tonight. I'll rig the Aga to take it, somehow.

Hermione

She gathered up her things, trudged out to the gates, and Apparated home: but although she stayed up until nearly midnight after a very tiring day at work, Severus didn't contact her. He didn't even answer her own floo-call when she tried to flame him to let him know that she hadn't found anything disturbed at the office.

Clearly, they couldn't go on this way. It was far too dangerous, given the circumstances -- they needed to stick together and keep talking, even if it meant she had to set aside her reservations and treat him as though she... as though she cared for him -- in bed, as well as elsewhere -- no matter how awfully they'd begun.

Something should have to be done.

*****

Tuesday, February 7th

It was likely a futile mission -- a futile gesture -- but she felt she needed to try; so Hermione risked taking a very long lunch on the Tuesday as she would have to make a couple of stops before visiting Diagon Alley.

She was briefly distracted at the chemist's by one of the seamier tabloids -- the headline read ALIENS DID IN CANE HILL! -- and wasted a pound and ten minutes for the privilege of reading the rag.

Francis Wilton of Rickman Hill Road, Chipstead, claims to know the identity of the Cane Hill arsonist.

'It's a they, actually,' the octogenarian informed this reporter in an exclusive interview yesterday. 'Saw them come running out of the woods
when the buildings burnt, twenty or so of them. It's not kids, like they think.'

Wilton says the perpetrators were about one metre tall, with dark, bulging eyes, oddly-shaped heads, and disproportionately long fingers.

'They were green, or definitely greenish -- one of them ran right under a street lamp, and I got a good look. Didn't see antennae,' Wilton stated, staring earnestly through his Coke-bottle glasses. 'Could have had them pulled in, of course, if they weren't communicating with the Mother Ship.'

Wilton, a retired Etymologist, is something of a local celebrity when it comes to aliens, having filed a 1991 report of a crop-circle in the meadow adjoining his property. (This was later found to be a practical joke on the part of neighbourhood teens, having him on.)

But the neighbours' disbelief doesn't discourage Wilton at all.

'I've always said there was something funny about that place,' his said. 'That bunker on the other side, near the relief road? I think the government studies them there, secret-like. Shouldn't be surprised if there was a break-out last week.'

Government authorities have denied any secret experimentation at the now-abandoned WWII-era bunker Wilton refers to, but this reporter notes that several calls to MI5 were not returned.

ET, ring the NHS Trust and own up! You've been a very naughty boy, playing with matches!

Hermione snorted in disgust, stuffed the ridiculous waste of a tree in a rubbish-bin, continued to the grotty little shop-front that was her second stop, and knocked on the door. She wasn't ignorant of the fact that she was flouting a massive social taboo; but she decided the sanctity and dignity of the traditional male bolt-hole would survive intact, if a bit battered.

The peep-hole shot open and the doorkeeper growled, "No solicitations."

"Smithers, I need help," Hermione hissed.

The peep-hole slammed shut.

Shit.

She pounded on the door this time, and the peep-hole slid open.

"No solici-- "
"I come bearing flobberworms and dragon's blood," she gabbled, and Smithers' single visible eye glared at her suspiciously.

"You, Madam, are not a member."

"It's Madam Snape, Smithers, and I'm in a real bind. Is there any way...?"

The eye stared for another split second, and then the peep-hole snapped shut; the bolts on the door snapped open, and then the door, and she stepped into the entry of the Guild of Potions Masters' Club.

"This really isn't done, Madam Snape -- he's not in residence, at any rate," Smithers said wearily.

"Yes, yes, I know that. Both, rather. Look, I need some information, and you might well have it...."

Smithers eyed her warily; listened; and then talked.

The humiliation of having to confess to him was only heightened by giggling from the direction of the Library: Hermione might have discounted it save for the little pile of scone-crumbs she saw on the polished floor when she peered over Smithers' shoulder, and the mischievous wave that old Bluett gave her from an upper-story window as she walked away from the Club, bound for Diagon Alley.

*****

It was, in the end, a very expensive apology. Severus might have the fashion sense of a Nineteenth-Century High Church vicar, but it was an exorbitant anachronism even by Wizarding standards.

_Thank God I hadn't had to fork over the money when I was eleven.... Mum and Dad would have had a fit, assuming I wasn't sent down to begin with._

*****

Wednesday, February 8th
Evening

No word from Severus, by note or floo-call. He had to have got the bloody things by then: Hermione had paid extra to have Express Owls deliver the damned things to Hogwarts.

_Bloody, stubborn men._

*****

Thursday, February 9th
Afternoon

Motivated by an impending migraine and a horrid crick in her neck, Hermione took lunch outside the Ministry. (The canteen food was awful, at any rate.)
Severus must be rubbing off on me....

Fortescue's sounded quite surprisingly appealing, so she went there through the Ministry floo -- and then regretted it once there when they tucked her in the dingiest corner, ignored her for several long minutes, and left her feeling generally out of place. It had never bothered her before, as a book had always provided sufficient company: but reading matter didn't seem enough now, surrounded as she was by couples and the occasional, solitary shopper with enough packages to indicate that they were buying for two or more.

Good Lord, Hermione. Is it just because you're worried about Severus, or is this some kind of sea-change? You've never felt badly about being alone before.

She sipped her water as she waited for her meal, and mentally catalogued the other patrons.

Grandmotherly type by the front window, there -- package from Whacker's Wizz-Bangs. Grandson, then, probably a birthday as it's past Christmas.... Stern-looking gent with a pretty, young thing -- daughter? Yes, daughter, there's a resemblance. And she's flashing a ring at him, and he's smiling -- newly-engaged, then. I wonder if they're Pureblood?

...Pregnant -- very pregnant woman, mid-thirties? My God, she looks about to pop. Packages from Madame Malkin's. Baby clothes, or maternity? ...Don't you dare start thinking on baby booties, Hermione.... You're in enough trouble as it is.

The chime above the door jangled, Hermione glanced at the new arrivals, and then did a double-take.

Oi -- is that Dean? I thought he'd moved to Liverpool....

It was Dean Thomas, in the company of a young man she didn't recognise: they chatted together as they were ushered to seats across the room from her.

The waiter brought her meal, and she was distracted from further speculation for a while. But Dean and his friend were still there, in the middle eating their own meals, when Hermione had settled her bill: so she detoured over to their table on her way to the door.

" -- so I said to him, you may want a rise in profits, but if you try to get it from the consumer in this climate, you're in for a big shock," Dean was saying earnestly, "and he's damned well not pulling it from my commissions, I can tell you --"

His companion cleared his throat and stared pointedly at Hermione; Dean looked over his shoulder, started, and smiled.

"Hullo, Dean."

"Hermione! It's been ages, hasn't it -- how are you?"

"Fine, Dean, fine --"
Patrick, this is Hermione, Form-mate of mine from Hogwarts."

Patrick smiled a greeting

"Hullo, Patrick. How are you, Dean? I thought you were living up north."

"Oh, great -- and I am, I'm in town for a sales meeting. Business doing well, despite everything. If you ever need a good deal on a wireless," he said, pulled a business card from his jacket pocket (quite an expensive and trendy suit, Hermione noted), and handed it over, "give me a call, would you? I can get it for you wholesale. Say, how's Weasley doing?"

"I wouldn't know," Hermione said calmly. "Ron and I don't speak any longer, haven't for years. I hear he's awfully narked that I married someone he doesn't approve of."

"Oh, bugger," Dean said, and grinned weakly. "Sorry. Last I'd heard, he was going to ask you, and what with the ring and all...."

"No, he married Laura Madley. They're a good match. Three kids so far. You?"

"Two. And I'm Regional Manager for the company now, nice semi-detached in the Wizarding neighbourhood, the whole bit. Well, probably better off without Ron, aren't you? Told him he shouldn't have gone to the Cannons. I bet he makes sod-all," Dean said carelessly. "My Gertie doesn't have to work, and I can tell you this isn't the easiest business to make a Galleon at."

Hermione took an instant dislike to the new and improved Dean. Not that she'd ever liked him much anyway, but it was asking a bit much, to expect her to listen to him run Ron down -- him with his flashy suit and salesman's raffish, well-fed grin....

And I know just how to wipe that off his smug, self-satisfied face.

"So, who's the lucky wizard? Do I know him?" Dean continued, oblivious.

She smiled as sweetly as possible. "Oh, yes, you do. It's Severus Snape."

Patrick suddenly found his Boeuf Alderton of great interest -- he'd heard of Severus, then; Dean's eyes glazed over, the idiotic grin froze on his face, and he stuttered, "Snuh- Snape?"

"Professor Snape, yes. Since October. And you know, Dean," Hermione whispered, bending closer to his ear, "it's been very educational."

"Educational?"

"Oh, my, yes. For example, that wager you had with Ron all those years ago, you remember that?"

"No --"

"The one about male Slytherin anatomy."
"Oh, that one," Dean giggled, and made a suspicious, two-fingered gesture to Patrick. (Patrick seemed to understand it entirely too well. The hemipene theory must be widely-held among non-Slytherin males, or at least among the more credulous and stupid ones.)

"Right. Well, in the interest of fairness, you ought take it from an authority... me... that you're wrong. Not that I've more than the one example or I'm complaining, mind you, but you don't get much more Slytherin than Severus, and he's a fine figure of a man. If you get my drift." She straightened, tucked Dean's card into her handbag, and added, "I should clear that wager off the books if I were you before it accrues any more interest, Dean, and before Ron finds out you know and comes looking for you. He could use it about now."

"Sure," Dean said, voice faint, and pushed his plate away from him. (He looked nearly as green as Ron had.) "Yeah, I'll... I'll look him up on the way home."

"Good! I'll pass your card along to him through Arthur, just in case you get held up and can't make it this trip. Very nice to meet you, Patrick --"

Patrick gave her a surreptitious wink behind Dean's back: he too must think Dean a total berk.

"Don't suppose I'll see you about, so take care, Dean," Hermione said lightly, and left Fortescue's without another look at the arse.

She didn't particularly want to go back to work, but the head-ache wasn't bad enough to warrant going home, not considering the pile of medical reports she needed to sift through; but she could dawdle a bit, and so made for the Leaky Cauldron. She'd take the Tube line closest to the Ministry, and then walk the rest of the way.

If truth be told she was worried about Severus, and wanted the time in the crisp, fresh air to think it through. To think him through. He still hadn't called, and she wasn't certain that she'd be welcome at Hogwarts next evening.... Well, that her presence would be tolerated. Nothing for it, though.

*If he hasn't taken the hint, I'll just have to do my best to be patient. I don't suppose he'll have come round. If there's anything worse than Gryffindor pouting, it's Slytherin.... Oh, Lord. What if he sleeps out on the settee again? He'll be unbearable all week-end.*

She stopped at the newsagent's close to Flourish and Blotts, bought *The Prophet*, and absent-mindedly stuffed it into her handbag before heading out into Muggle London.

...*Well, I'll just have to make it clear that I don't expect him to. Maybe I ought dig out those silk knickers he bought in Whitemarsh.... Getting him to notice them would be a bit of a job, of course, but.... Oh, cripes, Hermione, how the hell would you go about seducing Severus Snape, especially as he knows you don't exactly appreciate the whole business? He might have asked you to pretend interest in one little bit of the act, but it's utterly unbelievable that you'd actually start something --* 

She stopped in her tracks on the Tube platform, feeling very queer, suddenly, and thought about that.
Since when would you even remotely entertain the thought of seducing Severus to get him out of a foul mood? Or to apologise, for that matter? For any reason, up to and including preventing the end of the world?

He certainly didn't deserve her taking an interest, not after beastly way he'd blackmailed her into a sexual relationship she didn't want. But on the other hand, she couldn't really continue to see him as a hide-bound, Pureblood alpha male with Neanderthalic social and sexual views, much as she'd like to. (At any rate, that was probably an insult to Neanderthals.)

A business-man talking at high speed and volume pushed past her irritably; she stepped back to the wall to wait for her train, boarded it when it arrived, and settled into the anonymity of the back-corner seat where she could think in peace, lulled by the swaying of the carriage. (She missed that, the twice-yearly ritual of riding the Express: that few hours' respite between the world she'd grown up in, and the one to which she so strongly felt she belonged.)

Severus Snape was, she thought, caught between two beliefs: the first, brought up in the kind of home where the man was master of all, where the woman was not much more than the conduit for the master's children and pleasure. (An attitude very like that illustrated by that wretched statue that still stood in the Ministry Atrium, with the witch and other magical creatures gazing adoringly at the wizard.) And then there was the Severus Snape who, despite his caution and gloom-and-doom predictions, had let her take the lead in a great deal of the investigation. Who hadn't the slightest interest in interrogating her over her foray into the Auror's Department, because she was there in his rooms, after all, and had obviously done well....

Who had told her -- told her, not bullied her into seeing his point of view, for once -- that she shouldn't doubt herself and her skill, and had told her this despite earlier threats to treat her as a traditional Pureblood wife; who had done a total turnabout on that earlier declaration, in fact. He might have done so because it was expedient -- because he didn't really have a choice, given the circumstances: but she thought not. If he was truly committed to the older ideals, he'd have forbidden her to continue the investigation in the first place.

So, he really didn't deserve to be branded a total Pureblood chauvinist, no matter how antiquated his view of marriage or how traditional his ideas of male sexual dominance.... Well, on the former, at least, his actions belied his earlier words. He was certainly a believer in the latter.

He doesn't deserve to be hurt, though -- even when it's because he can't get it though his thick skull that it's the rationale I object to, not him per se. I think quite enough people have trampled on his feelings over the years.

The train slowed and halted at her station; she rose, pushed through the crowds on the carriage and platform, and made her way out to the street.

I bloody well wish I'd handled it a bit better, that's all. And if he won't take the things as sufficient apology, I'll just have to find another way to get through to him. Short of attempting a probably-laughable seduction.
The call-box operator took a bit longer than usual, but didn't chivvy her, so Hermione took no notice of the delay; and she was still so deep in thoughts of Severus that she didn't see the group of Aurors hanging about the Arrivals floo until they caught up with her at the lifts and surrounded her.

"Hermione Snape?" a grim-faced, older Auror demanded.

"Yes."

"Wand, please."

"Bloody hell, I thought we settled this --" Hermione shot back.

"Wand, Madam Snape, now. Don't make me Stun you -- you'll regret it."

She should have been frightened: she was certainly embarrassed, for all the people hanging about the Atrium were staring. As it was, she could barely manage to hold her tongue for her anger, so she pulled her wand from her purse and shoved it at him.

"There," she said nastily. "I hope you're prepared for a Board of Inquiry. Shacklebolt had all that cleared up --"

"This has nothing to do with Shacklebolt's investigation," the senior Auror said, gripped her elbow quite tightly, and pushed her toward the lift. "Or rather, it does incidentally, which is why you're dealing with me."

Oh, bloody hell --

The other aurors crowded into the lift after them, and they ascended to Level Two in silence. None of them would look at her: she didn't recognise any of them.

Oh, shit. This is bad. This is worse than the first time.... I hope Shacklebolt's all right.

The group escorted her to the same Interrogation room, relieved her of her coat and handbag, and left her to stew for a very long time: after nearly an hour the door opened. She knew she was in far deeper trouble than she'd assumed when it turned out to be Bretchgridle, accompanied by the senior Auror who'd taken her wand.

"Well, well. Somehow I'm not surprised to see you again, Madam Snape," he said smoothly as he seated himself.

"I thought," Hermione said, "that we'd cleared this up last time. Auror Shacklebolt told me there were no difficulties."

"Auror Shacklebolt is quite good at his job, but occasionally he has... lapses which we feel prudent to investigate further. And this is one. Before we proceed, there's something we require of you -- something not very nice, I'm afraid, but which might clear this up definitively. This," he said, and slid an official form and a quill across the table toward her, "requires your signature before we
proceed further." His eyes glittered. "And before you raise any further objections, I should tell you that a refusal shall be taken as an indication of guilt."

Hermione glared at him, picked up the form, and scanned it.

*Release to Perform Medical Examination*

**Subject:** Hermione Jane Granger Snape  
**Extent of Examination:** gynaecological examination and blood analysis  
**Purpose:** 1) to rule out illegal use of a regulated contraceptive potion.  
2) to determine probable fertility to rule out inadvertent non-compliance with current British Wizarding Law regarding the acquisition and use of restricted potions. 3) to determine biological suitability of current marital partner and legality of marriage.

I, the aforementioned Hermione Jane Granger Snape, do hereby give my full and free permission for the examination in question, to be performed by an accredited Healer, for the purposes given above....

Hermione was, as Seamus Finnegan would have said were he still alive, gobsmacked. And then absolutely enraged.

"How *dare* you," she hissed at Bretchgridle. "This is a massive violation of my privacy and my rights as a citizen."

"I'm afraid not," Bretchgridle said coolly.

"There are no grounds whatsoever to accuse me of this, damn it. We've only been married for a few months --"

"'This'? This isn't a simple matter of lack of pregnancy. And we have grounds. As to your 'rights'.... I'm afraid we hold our Ministry employees to a rather higher standard than the rest of the population. I have here," Bretchgridle continued impassively, and pulled out a release that Hermione vaguely remembered, "a document signed by you at the beginning of your employment - - one which gives the Ministry the right not only to perform an exhaustive search of your past to determine your suitability for employment in the first place, but to periodically check your current status and compliance with Ministry regulations and Wizarding laws. By whatever means necessary." He smiled, his lips a thin, bloodless gash. "That covers, I think, physical examinations and searches of your home. Do you really want to draw this out any further? This isn't," he explained, leaning on the table and taking a very conversational tone, "simply a matter of sacking you if you refuse to comply. This is potentially a criminal matter. And, as such, I can *order* that it be done. The difference is that if you agree and are able to answer my questions satisfactorily, you'll walk out today with your job and life intact. If not, I'm afraid you will be incarcerated until your... compliance with the law is assured. And you shan't have a job to return to, if or when your innocence is proven."

*Oh, fuck.... What on earth is the bastard talking about?*
"It would help," she said, trying to keep her voice calm -- she didn't want the son of a bitch to think she was desperate -- "if I knew what you're accusing me of, to begin with."

"I don't have to tell you that. No, really, I don't -- This," he said, tapping the Ministry release, "covers that, I'm sure you're intelligent enough to realise. Now, Madam Snape, will you sign that authorisation, or not?"

In the end, there was nothing else she could do but sign: he wasn't giving her enough wiggle-room to talk herself out of whatever-it-was, and she knew damned well they wouldn't allow her to contact Severus.

_Should have thought of this eventuality when you signed that bloody employment form, idiot_, she thought as she savagely scribbled her signature on the release -- but only after pointedly and defiantly crossing out 'full and free permission' and substituting 'permission under duress.'

"Thank you," Bretchgridle said primly, not at all concerned with the alteration. "Robinson, if you would witness that, and then escort Madam Snape to the Infirmary?"

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The nurse (a very cold and unsympathetic one) had already drawn Hermione's blood, and sent it to St. Mungo's for testing -- a marginally nicer procedure than the Muggle method; and then the nurse had tartly informed her to remove her skirt and underthings, and to ready herself for the examination proper. (Unfortunately, Wizarding gynaecological exams were apparently like Muggle ones in every respect, judging by the table and stirrups. Hermione hadn't any idea that the Ministry Infirmary had ever had exam rooms like this, and wondered if it were a recent innovation, added specially for people accused of dodging the new laws.)

So there she was, flat on her back, when a weedy, male Healer entered with the nurse, muttered some nicety to cover the awkwardness of the situation, pulled a speculum out of a drawer, and bent to his work, revealing an extensive and unattractive comb-over.

Hermione shut her eyes and tried to ignore what he was doing.

_What in bloody hell could they have.... It can't just be that I'm not pregnant. Can't be. They've found something, but what?_

--- **Ow** -- _Why the bloody hell can't they warm those things? They're just as bad as Muggle doctors...._

She scrabbled about mentally for something to distract herself from the humiliation of it all, blinked away the tears that had accumulated at the corners of her eyes, and bit at the inside of her cheek to force herself to concentrate.

_What's the persistence rate of the potion in the blood? Thank God I didn't take any yet this week.... Haven't since the weekend before, since I was due for --_
A nasty little pinch jolted her out of her thoughts, and she yelped.

"Easy," the weedy Healer muttered. "If you'd only relax...."

Right, you try relaxing with a bit of cold metal shoved up your... ...all right, substitute your arse, you little --

"Really, such a fuss," the nurse sniped. "You're making it very difficult for him."

"Would you do me the great favour," Hermione said deliberately, raising her head and glaring at the woman, "of shutting the bloody hell up, you dried-up, toffee-nosed, manky cow?"

"Why, I never --"

"You should. You should hear it every day, from every poor sod that has to put up with your stupid, cruel, idiotic mouth, and then perhaps you'd --"

"Ladies," the weed said, not even bothering to disengage peering through the speculum. "Doris, be a good girl, take a chair, and keep your comments to yourself. Madam, erm, --"

"Snape."

"-- Madam Snape, do try to relax," he murmured as Doris huffed her way over to a chair in the corner. "It's unfortunate that we have to put you through it, but there it is."

Given that -- that he recognised how awful this was, even if the bloody cow didn't -- Hermione did try: but she wasn't very successful. The discomfort and embarrassment had her as tightly wound as a clock-spring. It still felt like a violation, very like...

...very like.... But at least Severus tried to do something constructive to help me, damn it. Even if it was as much for his own pleasure as for my comfort....

The speculum was withdrawn, and the Healer prodded at Hermione's belly with his fingers for a while, and poked his wand at the area about her ovaries, muttering an incantation unfamiliar to her; and then, satisfied with whatever the charm had told him, he bothered to actually look her in the face for the first time.

"For what it's worth, Madam Snape, you're in the best of reproductive health."

"Fine. May I have some privacy to --"

"Ahhh, we're not quite done. Next bit's terrible, I'm afraid," he said, his face reddening all the way up to the wisps of hair straggling across his sweaty forehead. "Not part of the usual examination, but they require it. Some people will go to great lengths to avoid pregnancy. Without foregoing intercourse. If you understand me."
It took Hermione a moment to sort through precisely what he meant (Severus, even at his randiest, had never had the stones to suggest something *that* extreme); and once she did work it out, the Healer had the decency to send for a Soothing Solution to calm her before he finished the examination.

*****

Someone had left a pot of tea in the examination room when Hermione was returned to it, but she didn't dare pour herself a cup, mindful of the Veritaserum experience last time. (She felt she'd prefer something rather stronger, at any rate. The Soothing Solution had taken the edge off her panic, discomfort, and humiliation, but not by much.) Bretchgirdle left her alone for a long time once again, but eventually swept into the room. He seemed annoyed.

Hermione decided that going on the offensive was the best course. "Now that you have your blasted proof --"

"I'm afraid we don't," Bretchgirdle said, opening Hermione's file and flipping through the pages of the Healer's report. "The results for the blood test won't be back until tomorrow morning, unfortunately.... *This*, admittedly, looks above-board. 'Fertility proven, ability to carry to term assumed,' Healer Wentworth says.... Evidence of fairly recent intercourse," he added, pursing his lips with a moue of disgust. "And no evidence of the more distasteful methods of avoiding conception."

Hermione felt her cheeks begin to burn. "Then I'm free to go home, am I? You've kept me here so long there's no point in going back to work."

"You shan't in any case -- you're suspended pending the results of the inquiry."

"*Home*, then. There's no objection to *that*, I assume."

"As the blood test has a direct bearing on the inquiry, that's not an option."

"*What*?! What do you propose I do, sit in this bloody room all --"

"Of course not." Bretchgirdle smiled. "We shall provide accommodation here."

"Keep me in custody, you mean."

"Precisely. This is a serious criminal matter, as I said.... Tea?"

"No."

"It's perfectly acceptable tea, I assure you. We have no need to use Veritaserum, given the analysis. Blood will out, as they say." He smiled again, poured them each a cup, and sipped at his own to prove its harmlessness. (Hermione refused to give in, even when her stomach rumbled.) "There is one other matter we can clear up tonight, however," Bretchgirdle continued. "Why did Priori Incantatem reveal that you'd been breaking wards quite recently?"
**Shit. Is that what all this is about, not the bloody pregnancy?**

"Because I have."

"Where, and under what circumstances?"

"My flat. People forget their passwords all the time, you know."

"Do they? And do they go to the trouble of breaking into their own homes, rather than calling a wardsmith?"

"When they're competent Arithmancers, yes, they do. Break the ward themselves, I mean. I'm not going to apologise for having a lapse of memory. And I wasn't aware it was a crime to break the ward on one's own home."

"It's not. And it's an impressive feat, Madam Snape -- when we tried to enter this morning, we found it far more difficult to gain entrance than the first time."

**Oh, for fuck's sake.... Severus must have had Harrison strengthen the ward. Damn it, now they think I've something to hide....**

"Returning to your flat is not acceptable in any case because it's been sealed until this is resolved to our satisfaction.... And, as we're waiting for the blood test," Bretchgirdle said impassively, closing her file, "and as I have an early dinner engagement, I think we should leave the matter here for this evening."

"But --"

"Robinson will escort you to your room," Bretchgirdle continued. "You'll be provided a meal, of course -- we're not savages. We can't manage a nightgown, but your handbag will be returned to you. Not your wand, needless to say." He stood, tapped the edge of the file on the table to settle the contents, and gave Hermione yet another of those thin, intensely unpleasant smiles. "I shall see you tomorrow as soon as the test results are in.... Have a restful evening, Madam Snape," he added, his intent obviously just the opposite.

He left the room before Hermione could manage an expletive-free objection.

*****

Robinson took her -- at wand-point -- to her "room." It was little better than a cell, with a spartan bed, a single chair, a table, and a light overhead with no means to turn it off. Her handbag had already been placed on the chair-seat, its jumbled contents spilling out over the top.

There was no toilet, bath, or even a basin of water with which to wash up.

"Meal in an hour," Robinson told her. "You'll have a chance to use the loo after that, and then lights out."
"Look, I was expecting my husband to call tonight, and he'll worry if I --"

"No calls," the auror said firmly. "Not without express permission of Mr Bretchgirdle."

*God damn it.*

She marched into the cell (she refused to think of it as a *room*) head held high, and managed to keep a semblance of control and dignity until Robinson shut the door: it closed with a solid, authoritative *thud*. She waited until she heard him move down the corridor, and then eased herself down onto the bed and curled up on one hip, wrapping her arms about herself. She knew she was probably being watched, but at the moment she couldn't be bothered to care.

*Oh, bloody hell. So, which is it? Is it really the pregnancy issue, or not? Why did that bastard ask about the ward-breaking, then? Why didn't he ask about the other spells?*

She tried to reconstruct exactly what she'd done at Cane Hill. The ward-breaking -- other than the power required to break Debdale's nasty work -- was above-board, nothing out of the ordinary there.... The fire charm wasn't unusual, either, and could be explained away as lighting one's sitting-room fire. (Except for the intensity, but she could claim difficulty getting the kindling to catch.... Severus' fire, then, as the Hogwarts fires used wood, and hers was unusable in any case.)

*Binding spell's a bit difficult to explain away, though.... Well.... So Severus likes to play a bit rough, that's it.*

She gave a despairing little snort.

*No, that won't work, no-one would believe he'd be anything but the instigator in that kind of game. Funny, that's *another* thing he's never suggested.*

The Leviosa was also problematic, but then the shelving in Severus' storeroom was rather high.... Assuming they didn't ask *him* if she'd needed to help him with that.

She rolled onto her back, trying to make a casual survey of the ceiling to locate the Sneakoscope that was undoubtedly trained on her, and winced at the stickiness not *quite* between her thighs.

*Get busy. Do *something*. They'll be bringing dinner soon -- not that you dare eat it -- and you don't want them to catch you acting as though you're guilty.*

She heaved herself off the bed, rummaged in her handbag for a comb, and tidied herself as best she could without a mirror; and then she settled into the uncomfortable chair and tried to read *The Prophet*.

Most of the content was quite stupid -- the usual, for *The Prophet*: thinly-veiled adverts for Kwickspell and Little Wizard Insta-Gro; cautiously-worded singles ads in the Personals column; a disgustingly saccharine column by Rita Skeeter extolling the virtues of the Ministry's Marriage On Approval scheme ("It's worked for Harold and me -- *deliriously* happy. And to think we'd never have met if it hadn't been for the scheme!"). Hermione snorted.
Only way that nasty bitch would have got married. Poor Harold, whoever he is. Ought to send him a hint about her Animagus form, and a can of bug-repellent --

There was something very interesting under the Agony Aunt column, though. Hermione squinted in the harsh light and read the fine print crammed into the text box.

**RUMOUR OF NEW THERAPY**
**HEALERS OPTIMISTIC**

*St. Mungo's, London*

Healer Ascel Pius, Chief Healer at St. Mungo's, has issued a statement in response to recent rumours that the Ministry's Research Division has developed a genetic therapy to treat the high incidence of birth defects, including squibbishness, among the population.

'I cannot make a comprehensive statement at this time,' Pius says, 'but the Ministry has authorised me to say that they have indeed been working on a biomagical therapy to treat unfortunate couples unable to produce healthy offspring or who have as yet proven infertile. Preliminary trials have been quite encouraging, and St. Mungo's is preparing to begin limited treatments in the population.'

Pius goes on to say that the new treatment -- combining the latest Magimedical methods and rather tricky Muggle genetic innovations -- should be of particular interest to Pureblood families who have been unable to produce viable offspring, but he is hesitant to promise total success.

'Early days yet. Only careful observation of the families treated will prove its effectiveness, but based on the research trials, we're quite hopeful.'

Wilbert Card, Spokesperson for the Minister for Magic, declined to make a statement at press time, but indicates that Readers should expect a full and official statement by the end of next week.

'Ministry researchers are quite excited,' Card states. 'The treatment should make a stunning difference in the lives of the affected members of the population.'

The Prophet will, of course, be following this story in detail as soon as the official statement is released.

*****

Holy shit. Is it that, then? They're ready to start clinical trials in the population.... Get me out of the way now, before any of the new figures and reports start coming in?
It was masterful tactic, really. Start the rumour-mill going with an obscure little article; get people talking about it; put the pressure on with the bloody lottery. Most likely there would be hints of re-assignment, soon -- that would make the Purebloods nervous as hell, make them more likely to volunteer for treatments after some initial reports of success....

...Oh, Severus, please read the bloody paper tonight, please. Try to call. Get over the bloody sulks and do it, and get worried....

Dinner, when it came, was the least-appetising thing Hermione had ever seen: terribly-stewed tea, an overcooked bit of sub-par beef (already cut up, so she shouldn't have a knife), sodden bits of carrot, and a bland custard swimming in a sea of burnt-sugar syrup.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry," Hermione muttered when Robinson dumped it on the table.

He smirked, deliberately took a bite of each thing, and sipped from the cup of tea to wash it all down.

"Ask me something," he said.

"Come off it, Robinson, I'm not in the mood for parlour-games --"

"Go on, ask, see if I lie or not. We can't have you thinking we're trying to starve you."

"Fine. What team do you support?"

"Chudley Cannons."

"Very funny."

"Right. It's the Harpies, actually."

"For the play, or for the low-cut uniforms?"

"Both. Lovely thing, to see Jones's tits hanging out when she dives for the snitch.... I'll be back in half an hour to collect that lot, then you get your loo visit."

"Right," Hermione said, and after Robinson left the cell she added in a mutter, "you dirty old bugger. Disgraceful, practically Moody's age...."

She picked at the carrots and custard, avoiding the dead cow (Severus was right -- she did prefer pork to beef, as cows looked far too soulful for her taste), and, after Robinson returned, took most of her time in the loo, at the grotty little basin, scrubbing away the stickiness left by that disgusting examination off herself. Robinson took her back to the cell, and gave her ten minutes to straighten up and get in bed before he turned out the light.
At least they're not trying sleep deprivation, she thought as she struggled under the thin blanket to pull off her clothes. (She bloody well wasn't going to undress in full view of any watchers.)

Then again, they didn't have to try. She lay sleepless for a very long time -- she didn't know how long, as it was pitch-black and she couldn't check her wristwatch -- shifting restlessly, unable to stop worrying about what they'd found or what they suspected, and hoping against hope that Severus would find out about her arrest and do something before it was too late.

*****

Friday, February 10th

Breakfast was a nasty Continental affair, composed of weak coffee and a stale scone; after she'd dressed in her rumpled clothing, Hermione picked at the scone and pretended to sip at the coffee -- though she barely wetted her lips with it -- while she sorted through her priorities.

Avoid Veritaserum at all costs. If he goes back to the warding issue, that will open up the Cane Hill business and why we went there. We'll lose the whole bloody war in one go, if that comes out.... Better to lose one or two battles, even if it means a sacking. Or... or a few months in Azkaban.

I could always pull out the row with Corcoran, if necessary, if I find out he's behind this. I can sacrifice the orb if it comes down to his word against mine, or to prove a grudge on his part.

...Bloody hell, I wish I could have called Severus. I don't want him or François dragged into this, I want them well clear of it. As long as they're free, there's a chance something can still be done....

It was well past eleven by the time Robinson collected her, let her make another trip to the loo, and then escorted her to the Interrogation Room. Bretchgirdle was waiting for them, a valise sitting on the floor next to the table. He dismissed Robinson with a nod.

"Well?" Hermione demanded before she'd even taken her seat. "What did your test prove?"

Bretchgirdle's lips twisted with annoyance. "No trace of contraceptive in the blood."

"Thank God. And that's the last time I take something without checking on its persistence in my system."

"Then this has been all for nothing. I'm free to go, am I?" Hermione shot back triumphantly. "You can be certain that as soon as I've had a proper bath, I'll be filing a complaint with --"

"Not -- so -- soon, Madam Snape," Bretchgirdle interrupted. "And you may want to reconsider threatening me. You're in quite enough trouble as it is."

"That," Hermione said, nodding to the report from St. Mungo's, "proves that my husband and I are guilty of nothing more than rotten timing. Understandable, given that we live on opposite ends of the Isles. I expect summer shall show results. You said the damned examination would be definitive --"
"I wasn't entirely truthful with that statement, I'm afraid -- and I doubt summer will find you enciente. I doubt that highly. Would you care to explain," Bretchgirdle asked as he reached into his valise, "why we found this at your flat?"

He withdrew a shampoo-bottle and placed it in the centre of the table: the bottle in which Hermione had stashed the contraceptive potion.

Oh, shit. Bloody hell, girl, think fast. And remember, he hasn't told you what it is --

"You deny that it's yours?" Bretchgirdle said. "Never seen it, I suppose."

"The bottle is certainly the brand I use, but there must be thousands like it at Muggle shops. The colour certainly doesn't look right for the shampoo, though -- what is it?"

"You know very well what it is, Madam Snape."

"No, I don't know. Anyone might have emptied it and filled it with something incriminating."

Bretchgirdle leaned across the table, voice low. "Stop, think, and answer me very carefully," he said, eyes glittering. "I've given you a great deal of leeway given your position with the Ministry and the fact that you were put to a deal of trouble last month, and so I've not resorted to Veritaserum this round. You're trying my patience very badly, however, and I have no options left. This was found yesterday morning in your home -- your bath, to be specific -- by an Auror of unimpeachable reputation. It was documented in situ before anyone touched it."

"Anyone at all might have placed it in my flat."

"Shall I remind you how formidably warded you home is? The documentation is, in fact, what gave it away. In our first visit to your flat, everything was inventoried. This," he said, and tapped at the bottle with a nicotine-stained forefinger, "was certainly there, but its contents appeared different in colour and consistency. Ferrars -- for it was Ferrars the first time, along with Shacklebolt -- may lack many of the skills we value in an Auror" he said, leaning back in his chair and smiling, "but he excels at paperwork and minutiae. If anyone tampered with it, Madam Snape, it was not a member of MLE."

"You can't prove that, actually, and there are any number of reasons Ferrars or someone else might be persuaded to --"

"Aurors are bound against tainting evidence. There are quite visible traces left on their persons for attempting such a subversion, and I can assure you that neither Ferrars nor Robinson show them."

Well, that was a dead end. They'd go round on that point all day, assuming Bretchgirdle didn't lose it and order a hefty dose of Veritaserum.

Time for a change of tactic.
"Shall I assume," Hermione said, "given the ridiculous measures that were taken yesterday, that you think this is a contraceptive?"

"I don't think, Madam Snape, I know. It's been analysed. It is not a hair-wash, it is contraceptive."

"Then why the bloody hell," Hermione said, enraged, "was it necessary to put me through that horrid examination yesterday, if you're so bloody certain? You've made up your mind, obviously, I've already been tried and found guilty as far as you're concerned --"

"Not at all. It's also a question," Bretchgirdle said, "of your truthfulness overall, frankly. Here is my dilemma.... I have you, a Ministry employee in a Class 3-A Civil position with a high classification ranking. Evidence indicates that you have broken one law -- illegal possession of a restricted substance -- and that you may be subverting the very goal that your department and the Ministry as a whole are working toward. My job is, in part, to determine how much you are willing to lie to me, because that has grave ramifications for your continued employment. While Veritaserum is an excellent tool overall, after the fact, it doesn't give us a very accurate picture of how... deceptive a person may be in future. Their propensity, if you like. And, of course, there are methods for getting round it, though we don't care to advertise that. I'm fairly certain you're aware of them, as intelligent as you are.

"I am convinced that this bottle, with its present contents, was found at your flat -- and as you are the only occupant, there can be no quibbling over whose it is. My next question to you is why this potion was in your possession," Bretchgirdle said, giving Hermione another of those nasty, thin-lipped smiles, "and if you find it at all significant, as I do, that your husband is a potions brewer."

Hermione did her damnedest not to gape at the man or give anything away, but she couldn't be certain if she was succeeding or not: her heart had begun to race, and the queasiness she'd felt all morning threatened to become outright nausea. It was one thing when she was the only one implicated, but if they were trying to pin this on Severus, as well....

_Bloody hell. He knows he's got me, too, look at the bastard smile...._  

Mum and Dad's advice to leave the Wizarding World was, in retrospect, looking like a very good idea.

_What a pity I didn't listen then, before it was too late._

*****

Chapter 22: Wherein Snape fears he may lose several things that are very important indeed.

_Blast it._
Snape dumped out the stinking remains of a ruined potion and scrubbed at the burnt mess on the bottom of the cauldron, not bothering to charm it off. He needed the activity to rid himself of excess frustration with life in general. And with himself.

_Years since I've mucked this up. Even the Dark Lord never distracted me to this extent...._

Hermione, however, distracted him sufficiently... ...or rather, how badly he'd handled everything _with_ Hermione distracted him to the point of making him incompetent.

It was a sobering experience, to find you'd committed errors you'd sworn you would avoid -- especially as you'd committed more than your fair share of them to begin with, and you hadn't realised how deeply entrenched were the attitudes that made you lapse. It was very tempting to fall back on the old belief that it was somehow "in the blood." But that was the easy way out, and Snape reckoned that he'd used that excuse far too often in the past.

His behaviour toward Hermione also implied that he was every bit as horrid a person as his father; and although he couldn't deny that he'd been acting so, Snape liked to believe he was capable of better. It was all well and good to choose such behaviour _deliberately_, but when one wasn't even aware....

_Should have apologised when I first thought to, or at the least before she left. Merlin's balls, but I'm a coward._

Here he was, a 47 year-old, mature, self-admittedly solitary and acid-tongued wizard, desperately in lust and possibly -- although he wasn't certain, never having experienced it before -- actually caring for his wife. Annoying, barely half his age, intelligent, meddlesome, Muggleborn wife, all those things that he had classified her as individually, but had never been able to accept from her in totality, along with some admirable traits that he'd never noticed before.

He wanted, he realised, to make Hermione care for him -- not _love_ him, he wasn't capable of flattering himself to that extent, but at the least to _care_ for him, if not want him -- and he knew it was hopeless. He'd put paid to it from the very first with his need to get his own back, and with his determination to hold her folly over her head rather than treating her with any real consideration or respect. (He couldn't deny that he respected her _now_. It was bloody disgusting that it had taken her _tour de force_ at Cane Hill to make him realise that he should and that he did -- and even then, he'd been unable to say it in a reasonable and straightforward fashion.) Worse yet, he'd wanted revenge for things that weren't her doing or fault.

He knew it was very likely that he'd bolloxed any chance that she would ever accept him.

Hermione, he was quite certain, did not care in the least for him. He assumed that her tough, stubborn mind had decided that he shouldn't have any part of her but her body. That hadn't been a bother at first: he hadn't remotely wanted more of her, then.

_Too late now. Far, far too late. She might be my legal wife but she'll never be my lover, even in the most carnal sense -- I've probably scarred her past her ability to respond honestly. She might bear me children, but we'll never be partners, not after this bloody mess is dispensed with._ Even with...
Minerva's coy little proposal that she join the staff.... Teaching idiots won't be enough to keep us bound together, not if she has any self-respect whatever.

No matter that she sometimes fussed over him, bothered to make conversation and cook for him: she was trying to be decent, to make amends for her early, horrid mistake. She was making the best of a bad job. And no matter how hard he tried in future -- consideration, gentleness insofar as he was capable, an outright declaration of regret and interest in something better (assuming he could manage it, and he didn't think he could) -- he knew he couldn't breach that wall that he himself had helped build. She was too tough, too tenacious, too mistrusting of him (with reason, he was now willing to admit). She would always assume it was Slytherin guile at work. It was what he was famed for, after all.

Snape was accustomed to being an interloper -- he'd been an awkwardness and inconvenience from the start, born to a mother who'd realised she'd made a terrible decision, and to a father who'd apparently only spawned to prove he could as some sort of bizarre badge of male honour.

Hermione as well has decided I'm an awkwardness. Something to be tolerated because one must, to put up a brave front for in the face of idiots like the Weasleys.

How... odd. He'd always assumed that caring for someone -- he was willing to admit to caring, at least, though he hadn't the slightest belief in ridiculous concepts like love -- was unequivocally weak: but at the moment he felt quite distinctly that the lack of caring for a worthy person was just as bad. (That ridiculous feeling should probably pass soon, though. At least, he hoped it did. He'd got through nearly half a century without such adolescent whinging and neediness, and he could bloody well get over it now.) Given the circumstances, he couldn't blame Hermione for seeing him as unworthy. It was his own bloody fault for failing to see her properly from the first, and for trying to change the rules of the game halfway in.

Snape hated hopeless situations. In hindsight, and with a great deal of regret and rage, he decided it might have been better to take the moral high ground and decline her offer in the first place: and, if he hadn't, to have stifled that greedy impulse that had urged him to beg for more than she was willing -- was able -- to grant him.

*****

Wednesday, late afternoon

The boxes landed squarely in the middle of the Staff Room tea-table, utterly smashing a pile of meringues. McGonagall let loose with a string of vulgarities in Scots (she assumed the rest of them didn't understand, but they'd figured the naughtier bits out years ago), and ended it with, "Who let those birds in here?"

"I must have left the door open," Vector apologised.

Sprout -- closest to the tea-nibbles, as usual -- picked up one of the parcels, brushed away the crushed meringue from the delivery-label, and chirped, "Why, it's for Severus."
Snape's head -- formerly bowed over the most recent issue of Potions Today -- jerked upward: he discovered that every last one of the nosy biddies were staring at him.

"All supplies should be delivered to one's classroom --" McGonagall began to lay into him.

"Yes, I know," he snapped back. "I haven't ordered any supplies."

"No, it's from Pegeuse-Wiggelrheum," Sprout said, scrubbing at the rest of the label and then sucking the sugar from her finger. "That's a cobbler's, isn't it?"

It bloody well was. It was Snape's cobbler, in fact.

Bloody hell. How did she find out?

"And personal deliveries should be made to --"

"I know," Snape said through gritted teeth to cut McGonagall off. "I didn't order from them, either - -"

Dead silence fell over the room. Snape could see the light dawn, more or less instantaneously, in six female brains; but only Hooch was bold enough to say "Best open it straight off, Severus. She might have got the colour wrong, my Douglas always did."

Vector sniggered, thought better of it, and sank down in her seat to avoid Snape's glare.

Merlin's bloody balls.... Why, as I'm surrounded by such an excess of female hormones, hasn't my cock shrivelled and fallen off? Only bloody male on staff besides Filch and Hagrid, and they hardly count anyway.... If Minerva thinks I'll tolerate adding Hermione to the Mob, she's barmy.

Against his better judgement he set aside the journal, rose and crossed to the tea-table, and took the smallest parcel from Sprout. "Must be inexperienced birds. I'll have a word with the tradesman," he muttered as he ripped the paper from the parcel (slowly, so as not to give a false impression of excitement) and opened the box....

In it were boots -- beautifully polished, gleaming black leather boots, nestled in tissue. They certainly looked right: sure enough, the label on the inside assured him they had been formed to his latest measurement, and included Peguese-Wiggelrheum's patented Water-Off and Corn-Eez charms.

"Oh, look -- she guessed right on the colour," Hooch snarked. "Good on her, I always thought she was a smart girl."

That was quite enough; he bloody well wasn't going to open the other two parcels in light of such commentary. Better for them to speculate behind his back than risk losing his temper in public with Hoochbitch (as he often thought of her) in public. (He also thought Douglas Hooch was a fortunate bastard to have got himself killed in the First War, thereby saving himself from a lifetime of said
Hoochbitch; but he knew McGonagall would tear a strip from his hide if he ever dared say that aloud to anyone.

"I'll just get these out of the way," he murmured as he picked up all the parcels. He beat a retreat from the room, ignoring the whispers and a clearly audible and exasperated "Oh, do shut up and leave the poor man alone, Pomona," from Pomfrey.

Once safely in his rooms, the situation only worsened. Hermione had done him one better: the second parcel contained a pair of wool trousers, with the tailor's note that he should return them if necessary at no charge for a replacement, as he hadn't been in to be re-measured recently. (True, he hadn't -- he'd been bullying the elves into charming his trousers a bit larger, as needed.)

And damn Hermione for making such an accurate observation and contingency.

The largest box, however, was what took his breath away and very nearly made him forgive her presumptuousness with the trousers: it contained a thick cloak of super-fine wool, far better than the one a certain buck-toothed hellion had destroyed. It was finer, in fact, than either he possessed now. As he lifted the cloak from the box a packet dropped out of its folds and fell to the floor, and after pulling the India-rubber band from about the lot, he read the scribbled little note Hermione had included.

Severus,

These should in no way be considered a bribe in re: retroactive sending-down - - I know damn well you can't do that. They aren't meant to substitute for anything else, either. Please consider them an apology for a long-past misjudgement. (In all fairness, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption for an eleven year-old given the circumstantial evidence, but it was the wrong one in any case.)

The heat packs -- the bits in the cello-wrap -- are sort of like hot-water bottles, except that as they act by a chemical reaction they'll work fine at Hogwarts. They'll also last much longer than a warming charm, and can wrap about your knee so you can use them during the day. Let me know if they work well, and I'll bring more up with me.

I'll assume I'm welcome Friday evening unless I hear otherwise.

H.

Bloody hell. She apologised. Not quite for the other night.... Well, she'd already done, you were doing your best to ignore that -- but it's an apology nonetheless.

It was a quite handsome apology, in fact, and one which must have cost her dearly. He knew how much the boots and trousers cost; and he'd lusted after a cloak that fine for some time, always putting off the purchase as a luxury. And then there was the matter of what it must have cost her in pride. For Know-It-All, Never-Wrong Granger to have caved in even to -- or
perhaps especially to -- something he'd meant only half-heartedly, and had included only to cover the importance of what he really wanted.... It was very nearly astonishing.

Does this mean she's.... Is she going to compromise on the other matter, then? Wait, she said it's not a 'substitute' -- blast it, why can't the woman come out and say what she means?

...Suppose I'll find out this week-end, shan't I? If I feel up to it.

For the time being he shoved the boxes of boots and trousers in the very back of the wardrobe, where he shouldn't be influenced by seeing them. If they were intended to mollify and distract him, he wanted nothing to do with them; and if they weren't.... Well, then he would take a certain satisfaction in wearing them, even if the bloody waistband of the trousers pinched. The 'heat packs,' as Hermione called them -- of which he was more than a little wary -- he tossed into the top drawer of the bureau with mingled fascination and disdain.

The cloak was another matter entirely. It was far too nice to stuff back into its box, so he hung it, quite carefully, at the far left side of the wardrobe behind his second-best cloak. He took a moment to admire the silver clasp at its throat -- a stylised serpent -- before he straightened the other things back into order to hide it, and closed the wardrobe.

That clasp must have given her fits. But she did it anyway.

Should I call her and let her know everything arrived safely? ...No. I want time to think this through, and she said she'd assume she was welcome, at any rate. And I'd like to see in what mood she arrives -- anxious? Angry? Biddable?

He declined to return to the Staff Room for the rest of tea, as someone (probably Hooch) would no doubt continue to goad him; by dinner-time the incident should have blown over enough to be tolerable, and so it proved. While he was well aware of the curious glances the Mob threw his way throughout the meal -- Imagine! Severus got presents! -- he quite pointedly ignored them.

*****

Thursday, February 9th
Night

The alarm on the floo rang again; Snape's nib slipped and skittered across the parchment, and he threw it down with a curse. The blasted floo had been ringing all evening, every half-hour, and he'd done his best to ignore it -- even going so far as to move back into his office -- but he could still hear the damned thing. It had quite got on his nerves.

Hermione, of course. Blast it, can't she take a hint?

Anxious to see if he'd got the things, he supposed. He couldn't imagine anything else: it was so close to her visit that she wouldn't call otherwise.

The alarm rang again, and he twitched. She wasn't giving up, damn her.
Does seem a bit extreme, even for her, though.... Perhaps I'd best answer.

He ignored the ink seeping into the parchment -- it was a rotten essay, anyway, and it deserved to be obliterated -- and stomped back into the sitting-room, tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace, and glared into the flames.

He was a bit surprised when his caller proved to be Fred Weasley. Or George, he's never been able to tell the two apart, damn their troublemaking eyes.

" 'Lo, Professor --"

"What, Weasley."

"It's Hermione. Or we think it is, we think she's in trouble --"

"What do you mean?" he snapped, instantly alert.

"We've got Ears in -- Well, never mind, let's just say we can tap into audio surveillance at the Ministry. I thought I heard Hermione on and off today, but not where she's supposed to be. Dad asked me to listen out for her after last time --"

"Get to the point, Weasley."

"She was on Level Two all afternoon, near as I can tell. That's MLE and Auror's HQ. Dad said her office has been closed all afternoon, and they were sealing it the last time he went down to check."

Bloody hell.

"I haven't heard her speak for a while, so I sent Fred over to her flat to see if she's home, and she's not. In fact, they've got a Ministry seal on the flat as well. We're convinced they've arrested her."

"Have you asked Shacklebolt about it?"

"On holiday. I expect that might be why they moved now, since he doesn't tolerate the dirty tricks some of the others pull. We're afraid they might be getting a bit suspicious of him, too, so --"

"Enough," Snape ordered. "Keep listening. I'll be in town as soon as I can clear out here, and I'll check with you then."

"Right," George managed just before Snape cut the connection.

He grabbed for the floo powder again, nearly dropping the tin in his haste, and tried to call Hermione's flat. There was no response. When he attempted to floo in, risky as it was given Aga's unsuitability, he met with a resistance that shoved him backwards and left him sprawled on the hearth.

Blast it. She could have rigged it for a full floo, easily. Either she unhooked the connection or they blocked it.
He didn't bother to drag himself up from the hearth, but sat, elbows propped on his damned aching knees, thinking through the problem.  

What the bloody hell did they take her in for? Was it the business at the asylum, or something else? And if it was for the bloody mess in Coulsdon, why aren't the bloody Aurors beating down my door?  

No, it was unlikely it was Cane Hill, then, if she'd been on Level Two all afternoon and they still hadn't come for him. That didn't mean they wouldn't be sending Aurors for him later, however, if she should let something slip.  

He debated the pros and cons of the situation. If he were innocent, he shouldn't know a thing about Hermione's arrest until notified: they would expect to find him exactly where he was, here at Hogwarts. And on the other hand, Hermione was very likely locked up in a bloody MLE cell, unable to contact him or anyone else of any ability to help her. He rather worried about that: they could easily mislead her and trick a confession out of her if she thought he was in custody as well.  

And it might help her keep her resolve, if she knew he was still free and all right.  

Slytherin philosophy and general common sense dictated that he ought choose the former course: stay put, wait until notified through proper channels, and behave suitably outraged when told his wife had been arrested. Protect his own skin first and foremost, and hope that they weren't subjecting Hermione to anything too terrible....  

After a long minute's mental struggle, Snape decided Slytherin philosophy and common sense could go hang.  

*****  

He'd hoped to find McGonagall alone, but when he barged into her office he found her in conference with Vector; they both looked shocked by the rudeness of his entry.  

"Spit it out, Severus," McGonagall said immediately. "Olivia knows how to hold her tongue."  

"Hermione is in trouble, and I need to get to London -- now. They might be sending someone after me as well, and I don't fancy being taken. I'll deal with it on my own terms."  

"Oh, not Hermione.... " Vector whispered.  

"What do you need?" McGonagall asked crisply.  

"If you would, contact this DeLaine fellow, ah, François, with the French Ministry. Tell him Hermione is in custody, and it's time to turn in the bloody documents."  

"Do you know what they've charged her with? Isn't it a little premature to send the things in?"
"No, I don't, and no. I'm done mucking about with all this," he shot back, pacing along the edge of the carpet. "It's not worth it, whatever the reason they're holding her. I'm going to the Ministry tomorrow to find out why they've arrested her, and to get her released if I can."

"Oh, Severus, you do care for --" Vector blurted out, and abruptly shut up, red-faced, when he glared at her.

_So much for knowing how to hold her tongue._

"As for the things you've got," he added to McGonagall, "get them to DeLaine through whatever channel he suggests -- _not_ the ICW Consulate or a normal owl-post, though."

"I can help with that," Vector volunteered quietly. "I've a friend who works near the French Ministry. He can pop over here and then make a delivery."

"And we're to stall anyone looking for you, of course," McGonagall said as he turned to leave. "Very well, Severus.... _Wait._"

"For Merlin's sake, Minerva --"

"No, no, this might prove useful," she insisted, rose from her chair, and rummaged in one of the bookshelves until she found a thick, quarto-sized book. "Take this with you, and skim through if you have a chance before you go in. It's just a thought."

"With luck, I shan't be gone long," he muttered as he took the book from her, not bothering to check the title. "But if DeLaine gets anywhere with the documents, it might be a week or more."

McGonagall understood precisely what he meant -- _Perhaps it will be a very long time indeed before I return, if ever_ -- and nodded; and Snape left her office and took the back stairs (the sensible, non-movable one that only the staff knew of) down to the Dungeons, intending only to clear away the muck from his desk, snatch his cloak, and get the hell out before any Aurors might show up.

He hesitated just before leaving, though, his hand poised above his cloak.

_Mightn't be able to actually speak with her, and certainly not in private. Even if I can get in the same room I can't risk Legilimency, she won't be expecting that.... Damn it, should have foreseen that as an option and trained her._

(Relatively subtle one-way communication between a subject and Legilimens _was_ possible -- _just_ possible, in a very vague way -- _but_ only if they had practised. And chances were that, given the circumstances, Hermione's instinct as a natural Occlumens would be to block _any_ attempts to read her, even Snape's.)

_Probably especially yours. What a fool. You should have flooed her last night -- that might have solved half of that problem._
There must be *some* way, though, to send her a signal that he didn't intend to abandon her, or leave her to deal with the trouble on her own. Something quite visible and obvious to Hermione, but not to any other observer....

*Something like a fine cloak with a silver clasp.*

It wasn't the best of signals, but it would have to do.

Snape Reduced McGonagall's book, stuffed it into one of his pockets, pulled the new cloak from the wardrobe and donned it, and left the castle.

He refused to entertain the notion that he might be leaving Hogwarts for the last time.

*****

He Apparated to London near one of the alternate entrances to the Club, and cautiously knocked and waited for Smithers.

"No solicitations," Smithers said through the peep-hole.

"I come bearing flobberworms and dragon's scale," Snape shot back, modifying the phrase slightly: Smithers' eye widened, and he unbolted and opened the door with indecorous speed so Snape could enter without delay.

"Trouble, sir?" Smithers murmured.

"Possibly. Aurors may come looking for me."

"I haven't seen Professor Snape for months, sir, since December, I believe. There's roast lamb still available from the kitchen -- shall I bring it to your room?"

"Didn't think you'd seen him about, and yes, lamb would be fine. Is Bluett in?"

"Yes, sir, but...."

"What is it, Smithers?" Snape asked rather more sharply than he'd intended.

"He's failing, sir," Smithers said quietly. "He's been overdoing it in the laboratory, I think. Working round the clock, sometimes. His memory's going -- not on the potions, for I've been, erm, checking his work for him at his request, but otherwise.... I haven't been able to persuade him to rest. You know how he gets."

"Yes, yes I do.... I shan't bother him, then," Snape said; Smithers nodded and left for the kitchens, and Snape took himself up the long stairway to the dormitory.

He took the opportunity, before Smithers brought his meal, to floo George Weasley.

"Anything else?" he demanded.
Weasley, forehead wrinkled with worry and fatigue, shook his head. "Not a thing. We can hear what goes on in the corridors, but not many of the rooms. I figure they're holding her over in a cell by now. Fred's camping out across the street from the flat in case anyone shows up to rummage through her things."

"Right. I'll get an early start tomorrow and pop by there before I go to the Ministry."

Snape terminated the call, picked at the excellent lamb Smithers brought (he couldn't seem to muster up much appetite), and then, with nothing else to occupy him before he was sleepy, he decided to page through the book McGonagall had foisted upon him.

It was, as it happened, an interesting -- if not absolutely inspired -- choice on McGonagall's part.

Criminal Statutes
Laws
and Judicial Regulations
Enacted by the
Wizard's Council and
Wizengamot
932 - 1957

The gilding of "1957" was much brighter; it was a self-updating book in which new Judicial code was added as it was passed, until the charmed binding could take no more. It was a risky gambit, then: anything useful he found in the code might have been overturned or re-written since 1957.... But it was the only thing he had to work with, at the moment.

Page 58 was most instructive, and sparked the beginning of a game-plan in Snape's mind. He knew the general principle involved, in a vague sort of way, but had never investigated the specifics of it -- he'd never thought he would need recourse to it.... Paragraph Two of the ruling on Nigellus v. Wiz., 1736 was even better. He was in the middle of reading a more recent challenge to the law when someone tapped at the door and then entered without waiting for permission. (It was Bluett, of course. No-one else would dare flout the privacy rules and bother Snape in his room.)

"Anything I can help with, Severus?" Bluett asked.

Snape glanced up at the old man and paused, biting his tongue against the shocked, rhetorical question that had almost escaped him. Bluett had always been one of those odd ducks who looked ancient from the first day you met them, but the old man had definitely gone downhill since Snape's last visit: his hands, their skin thin and prone to injury, had become discoloured with bruises; his eyes had sunk into their sockets, and he seemed palpably less substantial and robust.

"No," Snape muttered. "Thank you, but no. Get some sleep, you've got Smithers terribly worried."

"Right, then," Bluett said, turned, and shuffled toward the hallway -- until he noticed Snape's cloak on the hook next to the door. "Oh, my. So that's what she was after. Smithers wouldn't say."

"She came here? And how the bloody hell would you know she'd got that for me?"
"Of course she came here -- quite smart of her to think of asking Smithers," Bluett said, and ran a trembling finger along the clasp. "And of course she bought it, Severus. You'd never have spent hard-earned cash on something that extravagant. Sterling, very pretty. That's a woman's touch, that is." He ran a grubby hand along a fold of the wool and murmured, "Very nice gift, very nice of her indeed, Severus," and tottered out of the room.

Several minutes passed before Snape could get back to Criminal Statutes, as he listened intently for Bluett's safe arrival in his room and settling into bed; and he wasted one or two more minutes in wondering over Bluett's very nice of her indeed.

It was. It was a quite nice gesture, actually, and contained none of the implied (or occasionally explicit) twitting that Dumbledore's gifts had. While McGonagall was prone to gift-giving at Yuletide, hers were invariably practical and never 'extravagant.' But Hermione being nice? She said it was for the Quidditch incident.... Well, she would, wouldn't she? That's what you claimed it was for. Payment of a debt.

That's quite an over-payment, actually. Enough to not really be for that, just a convenient excuse.

What an odd idea -- that Hermione should do something nice for him, and for no actual reason at all. He couldn't quite wrap his mind about it, or shut off the engrained Slytherin sense that insisted she must have an ulterior motive.

In the end, he dismissed mere nicety as highly unlikely; and, mindful that he shouldn't ever find out if he couldn't get her out of the mess she'd got into, he put the thought out of his head and re-applied himself to his reading.

*****

Friday, February 10th

He was up very early next morning, drank the strong tea that Smithers had waiting for him, glamoured more Mugglish clothing, and Apparated close to Hermione's street; and then he walked through the alleys -- grabbing a day-old newspaper from a rubbish-bin along the way -- to Hermione's flat, and down the pavement to a bus-stop several doors down and across the road.

The bus-stop was already occupied, though a Muggle shouldn't be able to tell: but Snape could detect a faint shimmer, a sort of disruption in the air, that signalled an Invisibility cloak in use. (Few wizards could sense them, but then few were willing to do what one had to to acquire the skill.) Snape hoped the watcher was Fred Weasley, but the man was being an idiot and didn't bother to reveal himself -- so Snape stretched his leg and just managed to give the man a sharp kick in the shin.

"Owww," Weasley muttered as Snape unfolded the newspaper to conceal his part of the conversation. "Blimey, that hurt."

"Stop being an ass and tell me what's happening," Snape muttered.
"I got here five-ish last evening. Flat was already sealed, and no visitors since. Whatever they wanted, they've already taken it."

"Blast. No movement at all? They might have flooed in, she'd said last week-end that she was going to try to connect the cook-stove to the network."

"No, and no lights inside, either. I stuck one of our Ears up at the kitchen window before I nipped out front, and there's been no sound at all. Any point in freezing my goolies any longer? The one that hasn't already dropped off, I mean."

"No, no, you've done enough," Snape granted, secretly thinking that anything that would control the constantly-expanding Weasley family -- including the freezing-off of goolies -- couldn't be all bad. "However.... Your brother has the keeping of something very important, something Hermione gave him recently. It should be taken to McGonagall as quickly as possible. Tell him that for me."

"Right, no problem.... Wait, Ron? I thought they weren't --"

"Don't think, Weasley, it's always got you in trouble."

"Right."

"Sometimes vastly entertaining trouble, but now isn't the time."

Weasley muttered something under his breath, added a more audible "Good luck," and slunk off to the nearest mews to Apparate out. Snape made a great show of folding his paper, looked for the bus, checked his non-existent wristwatch, and headed for the main road at a brisk pace before ducking into an alleyway and doing the same.

*****

Gaining access to the Ministry Atrium was no problem at all, which told Snape that Hermione's trouble didn't involve him: the Aurors should have otherwise swarmed him the second he stepped off the callbox-lift like Diricawls on a Billywig. How to get to Level Two was no simple matter, but he'd spent some time thinking of the best approach.

He went straight for the security-desk.

"Wand, please --" the guard began.

"Not visiting the administrative offices, I want to speak to an Auror," Snape said in an undertone. "I need to file a Missing Persons report."

"I'm sure it's important, sir," said the guard -- a fat-bellied retired Auror, no doubt, who hadn't quite made his pension but was no longer fit for active duty -- "but rules is rules --"

"The person in question, Ambrose Forsythe," Snape said urgently, "was an associate of Sinjun Jarvey's, and I've good reason to think Jarvey's offed him. I need to see an Auror now."
The guard's eyes widened. (Using the ridiculous lingo favoured by the Aurors always seemed to work, and Jarvey must still be on the Ten Most Wanted list.) The man scutched for a speaking-tube, whistled into it, waited for a response, and then mumbled "Information on Jarvey -- send 'im up?" and held the tube to his ear. The response was positive and forceful, for the guard winced; and then, after replacing the speaking-tube in its holder, he hauled his arse out of his chair and waddled toward the lifts with Snape in tow.

"This'll take you straight to Two," he said as he twisted a key on the panel of the first available lift. "You can leave your wand with the lieutenant on duty."

"Thanks," Snape said, stepped inside, and rode the lift up -- keeping his hands clearly visible, so he shouldn't be shot on sight. (It was a good thing he did: the poncey type waiting for him when the lift opened had his own wand drawn.)

"Wand, please," was the inevitable demand from the ponce, and Snape reluctantly handed it over. "Right. This way, have a seat, sir. I'm Ferrars. I understand you have information on Sinjun Jarvey?" he asked as he slipped Snape's wand into a desk-drawer.

This was going to be interesting. Ferrars was young enough to have been a former student of Snape's, but he wasn't: Snape recognised neither face nor name -- and Ferrars certainly should have recognised him. One of those odd ones, then, whose parents had schooled him privately, or who'd been sent to Beauxbatons instead of Hogwarts....

"No, actually," Snape said of the Jarvey matter, and declined to take the offered chair. "I'd rather hoped you would have information for me."

Ferrars froze, half-seated, glared at Snape, and stood. "Making a false report is a serious offence, I hope you realise that."

"I've done no such thing. As I told the congenital idiot downstairs, Ambrose Forsythe, a former associate of Jarvey's, is missing, and Jarvey has good reason to wish him dead. I'd be quite surprised if he isn't responsible, in fact, and that's all I know. What I do claim," Snape said, leaning on the desk's edge and fixing Ferrars to the spot with his eyes, "is that my wife is being held by MLE and that no-one has bothered to inform me of the fact. I demand to know why she's being detained, and that I be allowed to see her."

"Impossible," Ferrars said, and threw in a smirk for good measure. "So sorry."

"I'll remind you -- no, inform you, since you seem ignorant of the Statutes -- that, according to the Third Judicial Act of 1037, accusing a woman is the same as accusing her husband or father, since they are the same entity under the Law. A husband -- or father -- therefore has the right to be present at her questioning."

"Preposterous. You expect me to believe some dusty old tradition even exists, much less has validity today?"
"Tradition codified as Law in 1037," Snape said coolly, pulled McGonagall's book from beneath his arm, and flipped it open to the relevant pages as he spoke. "Challenged and upheld in 1736, and challenged and upheld -- again -- in 1941."

"That's bloody ancient. Surely it's been overturned since... 1957," Ferrars said with another smirk and a nod to the title of the book.

"Look it up in yours then, if you think there's a more recent precedent," Snape said of the massive, dusty book on the corner of Ferrars' desk. "I suppose you're going to tell me you think that's just a bloody good paper-weight. Or do you consider yourself an expert on every decision of the Wizengamot?"

Ferrars actually sneered at that, brushed the dust from the book, hefted it over so he could consult the index, and then seemed flummoxed by the arcane method of cross-reference.

"Try Pennywort versus Wizengamot, 1941," Snape suggested dryly. "If it's at the top of its list, it's the most recent challenge. You'll find Nigellus versus Wizengamot and Aethelred the Obnoxious versus Wizard Council, indented underneath it."

Ferrars found the right page, his finger skimmed each list, and halted under the heading *Pennywort vs. Wiz., 1941, pg 1089.*

"Bloody...." he muttered, and slapped the pages toward the back fly-leaf to get to the ruling: Snape was amused that the idiot moved his lips as he read, and stumbled over the more difficult legal terms. (Or he should have been amused, were the situation not so grave.)

"Well?"

"It.... I shall have to consult my superior on this," the pompous git said, trying to stall.

"I'm afraid there's no question of that. It's the law, it's never been repealed, and I'm demanding my right to it as a Pureblood, adult male. Unless you wish me to file a charge against you for subverting the law, of course. Take me to her, *now.*"

"Fine," Ferrars shot back peevishly as he slammed the book shut. (All that was missing was a flounce and a toss of the head.) "Her name?"

*Bloody hell, how many women do they have in custody?*

"Snape. Hermione Snape."

Ferrars froze again, and then gave a rather queer smile. "Very well. I shall have to keep your wand for the time being, you understand."

"Acceptable."
"And she's a previous *appointment*, so you'll have to wait your turn to see her. But I can manage to let you hear what's going on," the git said, as if he were doing Snape a great favour rather than observing the law.

Ferrars led him down a shabby corridor and into a dark little room with a window set into one wall: the room on the other side was bare, dingy, and white-washed, and contained only a table and two chairs, one occupied by a man with his back to the window. Ferrars left Snape and presently stepped into the other room, crossed to the table, and whispered to the man, who turned to the window and smiled quite grimly; then he turned back to Ferrars and nodded. Ferrars left the room, and the man continued paging through a thick file, utterly ignoring Snape.

He waited for rather a long time, becoming more and more impatient, and almost jumped from his skin when the door to the observation room opened and Corcoran swaggered in.

"Never expected to see you on *this* side of the wall," Corcoran said.

Snape couldn't clearly see Corcoran's face in the darkness, but then he didn't need to: the man's voice carried all the loathing and self-satisfaction required to communicate his meaning.

"Would you care to tell me why I wasn't informed that my wife was detained yesterday?" he shot back.

"It's *their* job to tell you. I believe an owl was sent as soon as they brought her in. Must have been delayed."

That was a lie: an owl would have found him at the Club, even if it had missed him at Hogwarts.

"How *did* you hear, then?" Corcoran asked. "If you didn't get the owl?"

"I tried to reach her last night and couldn't," Snape said. "It's not like her, to be out late. And when I popped by this morning, imagine my surprise at finding I'd been sealed out of my own home."

"Her home, surely. Perhaps she'd changed the ward to block you."

"*Ours.* And she wouldn't."

"I believe," Corcoran said, stepping closer so that Snape could make out the smile on the man's pock-marked face, "that you don't know Granger nearly as well as you think."

Snape was ready to retort, but the door to the other room opened, Hermione was escorted in, and he had to steel himself against reacting and giving Corcoran the satisfaction of seeing his shock.

* Bloody hell. *

She looked terrible. Not as though she'd been knocked about; but she'd not slept well, her face was pallid, and her hair was an utter mess. Worse still were her eyes and expression. She was angry, yes, and defiant -- but she also seemed wounded. *Fragile.* Snape wasn't used to seeing her that way;
nor was he ready for the fear that seemed to grip his guts at the sight of her, or the anger that made him clench his teeth so hard that his jaw ached.

"She had a decent room, and dinner and breakfast," Corcoran volunteered. "Hasn't been mistreated, before you start throwing accusations about."

"What did your test prove?" Hermione said as she moved to the free chair.

She seemed oblivious to the window, so Snape deduced that it was glamoured on her side. He wasn't so certain now that she hadn't been mistreated in some way, either: she moved stiffly, sat cautiously, and wrapped her arms about herself as if she were very cold.

There was no system in place to amplify the sound from the white room, and Snape had to listen carefully.

"No trace of contraceptive in the blood," her interrogator said.

Oh, damn. Good to a point, I think, but....

"Then this has been all for nothing. I'm free to go, am I?" she flung back at the man. "You can be certain that as soon as I've had a proper bath, I'll be filing a complaint with --"

Careful, my dear, keep your temper -- not that I blame you --

"Not so soon, Madam Snape. You may want to reconsider threatening me. You're in quite enough trouble as it is."

"Watch this," Corcoran whispered. "Bretchgirdle's a master at this sort of thing."

"Shut up," Snape muttered.

"That proves my husband and I are guilty of nothing more than rotten timing. Understandable, given that we live on opposite ends of the Isles. I expect summer shall show results. You said the damned examination would be definitive --"

"I wasn't entirely truthful with that statement, I'm afraid," the man -- Bretchgirdle -- interrupted her. "And I doubt summer will find you enciente. I doubt that highly. Would you care to explain why we found this at your flat?" He bent below Snape's line of sight, straightened, and placed a bottle on the table. It looked perfectly innocent to Snape: one of many of the ridiculous Muggle products that Hermione used (usually in vain) to control her hair.

Except the colour of the liquid in the bottle looked quite familiar. (It looked as though it were just ready to go off, as well, but that was a minor quibble at this point.)

Oh, damn. Damn, double-damn, and blast. No wonder they didn't come for me directly, then, they're going to bully her into a confession first.
"You deny that it's yours? Never seen it?"

"The bottle is certainly the brand I use, but there must be thousands like it at Muggle shops. The colour certainly doesn't look right -- what is it?"

"You know very well what it is, Madam Snape."

"No, I don't know. Anyone might have emptied it and filled it with something incriminating."

**Quite right, but I suspect immaterial if the bastard knows his job.**

"Stop, think, and answer me very carefully," Bretchgirdle said. "I've given you a great deal of leeway given your position with the Ministry and the fact that you were put to a some trouble last month, and so I've not resorted to Veritaserum this round. You're trying my patience very badly, however --"

"This is how he usually gets them," Corcoran confided. "Catch them in a little lie, and the whole house of cards goes snap. Told you, you don't know her at all, really --"

Snape had had enough: he rounded on Corcoran, shoved him against the back wall, and pinned him with one arm across the chest while the fingers of his other hand pressed in on the man's Adam's apple.

"Shut up now," he said urgently, voice low, "or you'll be making a trip to St. Mungo's."

"Ooo kent assult a Minstry offishul --" Corcoran tried to croak, and scrabbled for his wand: Snape shoved his bad knee against the man's groin just enough to make him freeze.

"Can't? I am. You're trying to distract me from my legal right to listen to my wife's interrogation," Snape hissed, "just like that filthy little sneak Ferrars, and I won't have it. Shut up, or better yet, leave. Because if you don't, and if you press charges against me for this, my solicitor will be forwarding a very interesting orb of one of my wife's memories to whichever department will do your pitiful career the most damage."

Corcoran's eyes bulged in outrage.

"Understand?"

"Yuss."

Snape released him: Corcoran staggered away from the wall, gave Snape the filthiest glare imaginable, and left the observation room. Snape turned back to the window, cursing at the thought of how much of the interrogation he might have missed.

"-- anyone tampered with it, Madam Snape, it was not a member of MLE."

"You can't, actually --" Hermione objected.
"Aurors are bound against tainting evidence. There are visible traces left on their persons for attempting such a subversion. I can assure you that neither of the persons involved do."

Not a productive avenue, Hermione, try something else. Damn, I wish I could see Bretchgirdle's eyes --

"Shall I assume, given the ridiculous measures that were taken yesterday, that you think this is a contraceptive?"

What did they do to her, damn it? What measures?

"I don't think, Madam Snape, I know. It's been analysed. It is not a hair-wash, it is contraceptive."

Right. I see where this is going.

Bretchgirdle had pushed Hermione too far: Snape recognised the beginnings of a rather glorious tantrum on her part, and much as he deplored her lack of control, he couldn't quite blame her.

"Then why the bloody hell," Hermione spat at the wretched man, "was it necessary to put me through that horrid examination yesterday --"

Oh, bloody.... A physical exam, probably a.... Shit. Poor girl. Predictable action on their part, though.

"

"-- if you're so bloody certain? You've made up your mind, I've already been tried and found guilty as far as you're concerned --"

"It's also a question," Bretchgirdle interrupted her, "of your truthfulness overall. Here is my dilemma.... I have you, a Ministry employee in a Class 3-A Civil position. Evidence indicates that you have broken one law -- illegal possession of a restricted substance -- and that you may be subverting the very goal that your department and the Ministry as a whole are working toward."

Damnation. But at least it's that and not the investigation, not yet.

"My job is to determine how much you are willing to lie to me, because that has grave ramifications for your continued employment. While Veritaserum is an excellent tool overall...."

Bretchgirdle was off on a long-winded intimidation tactic, so Snape blocked him out for a moment.

They found the contraceptive, they've examined her and done a blood test... which was negative, thankfully. I wonder when she.... How can I best turn this to my advantage? Detained without my knowledge, examined without my knowledge -- no, without my permission, so.... That's an extreme angle for even the most dedicated Pureblood, but might do. I ought be able to get her released on my recognizance based on the premise of the rulings and the threat of that....

Bretchgirdle was winding up to what was, Snape was certain, going to be a rather nasty conclusion, so he pulled himself back to the interrogation.
"-- there can be no quibbling over whose it is. My next question to you is why this potion was in your possession," Bretchgirdle said, "and if you find it significant, as I do, that your husband is a potions brewer."

Hermione seemed unprepared for that; her eyes widened in shock. Snape had foreseen the logical conclusion to Bretchgirdle's train of thought, and, aware that he himself might be observed, reacted with nothing more than a raised eyebrow.

What stunned him was Hermione's response. After a long pause and a deep breath, she said, quite steadily, "Severus didn't brew that."

It was the literal truth, of course: he hadn't brewed the potion, Bluett had. But he'd provided it to Hermione, which amounted to the same thing. It would have been far easier for Hermione to admit the truth -- that he had provided it and demanded that she take it -- and would have lessened the repercussions for her considerably. He'd prefer taking the consequences, as it happened, than have Bluett arrested: it would probably kill the old man.

Whether Hermione had her full wits about her and could keep Bluett out of it was the question of the moment.

"No?" Bretchgirdle asked, voice laced with sarcasm.

"No. He doesn't know anything about it. The fact of the matter is, I've not used it for weeks. I intended to pour it down the drain, but I'd completely forgot about it."

"You expect me to believe that your husband, with easy access to the necessary ingredients --"

Hermione shrugged. "It's not a question of your belief, it's what I know he hasn't done. He keeps excellent records of the school stock -- and I know that he's required to be especially careful with restricted ingredients -- so if you doubt his innocence, perhaps you should check them."

"Then who supplied you with the potion, Madam Snape? You are not named on any of the apothecaries' Approved lists."

"Ah," Hermione said, pouncing on his admission, "so there are women who receive special treatment while the rest of us go without? Women like, oh, Mrs Corcoran, perhaps? Mrs Bretchgirdle?"

**Be careful, Hermione --**

"That's neither here nor there, Madam Snape," Bretchgirdle snapped. (She'd touched a nerve: Snape saw the blood rise up the back of Bretchgirdle's spindly neck, and assumed that the man's face was reddening.) "Who supplied you with it?"

"I took NEWT-Level potions," Hermione said, feigning indignation rather nicely in Snape's estimation. "I'm perfectly capable of brewing a Class 1 substance." (Then again, knowing Hermione's pride in her accomplishments, it probably wasn't feigned at all.)
"And how did you acquire the ingredients?"

"I bought them before they were restricted, as I was afraid something exactly like this would happen. I collected the herbal ingredients as needed, when it became obvious I was among the class discriminated against."

"And you did this with your husband’s knowledge and consent."

"No. I didn’t wish to involve him at all."

"Why?"

"Because he... he made it quite clear that one reason he wished to marry was to have children. Healthy children. And he felt his chances were better with me."

"So, despite your statements to Auror Shacklebolt in this very room last month, you’ve been deliberately lying to your husband about trying to become pregnant?"

"No. Yes. I...."

"Why?"

Hermione sighed and stared at her hands as they rested on the table: Snape caught the flash of her wedding-band as she nervously fiddled at it with her thumb. "It’s a difficult situation," she said softly; Snape had to strain even harder to hear her. "We thought we should suit, but .... It was odd, meeting each other again quite by chance and recognising that there’s potential there, but having had an entirely different sort of relationship in the past. The whole student-teacher business, not to mention the age gap. I wanted to put off getting pregnant until we’d had time to be together for a while, that’s all. It would give us a chance to be certain of each other before we added a child to the equation, so we could find other partners if we were totally unsuited. And after Whitemarsh, I felt more strongly we could make it work. So I wasn’t lying about it, I was just... deferring becoming pregnant, for a while."

"I don’t believe that, Madam Snape. Why store the potion in this kind of container? You were deliberately hiding it in plain sight -- after hiding it quite well from the first search, apparently."

"I almost did pitch it out at once after that, but I wasn’t quite sure. I thought if I put it where I could see it every day, I shouldn’t be tempted to put off the decision much longer. And it wasn’t something I could change my mind about, after it was gone -- I wanted to be absolutely certain."

"And all that time, your husband was under the impression that you were as committed to having a child as he?"

Snape’s hackles rose: he knew the question was intended not to gain more information from Hermione, but to needle him. Bretchgirdle hadn’t forgot for one moment that he was observing them.
"Yes," Hermione said frankly, raising her head; Snape had the uncomfortable feeling that she somehow knew he was on the other side of the glamoured glass. "Yes, he wasn't bothered at all by the potential difficulties. It's the cultural thing, you see, or at least I think it is. With such a conservative upbringing as his, marriage is more an alliance -- a business arrangement -- than an emotional bond to him. Not that we've ever discussed it, but that's the impression I've got. Friendship and love may come afterwards, but they're not the reason you marry.... I suppose wanted proof that we could find those, eventually, before we complicated matters. I'm afraid my ethics don't extend to raising a child alone, depriving it of its father, if living together isn't pleasant."

Snape was amazed at how easily she lied. More than that, he was astounded that she'd managed it on the spot -- and simply to protect him.

"So," Bretchgirdle said. "Let's... sum it all up, shall we? You were in illegal possession of a Restricted potion."

"Yes."

"You lied to me to avoid the legal consequences of possessing and taking it when you knew full well it was restricted."

"Yes."

"In fact, you brewed it -- or you claim to have done -- after it was re-classified as Restricted, did you not."

"Yes."

"And you lied to your husband about your willingness to comply with the spirit of the law, of which you were fully aware due to your position in the Ministry."

**Sucks-boo to you too, Bretchgirdle. If you think that's doing much good.... Actually, it could, I think. Use it, man....**

"No. I never intended to evade the spirit of the law or to lie to him. Merely to avoid conception until we were more comfortable with each other."

"But you deceived him nonetheless."

"Yes."

"I really wish I could believe you, Madam Snape, but your truthfulness questionable."

Hermione considered that for a moment, and then shocked Snape by replying, "I've admitted I'm guilty of the initial charge. To several others, in fact -- something I didn't have to do of my free will. If you're in doubt, Mr Bretchgirdle, Legilimency is an option. It saves you the trouble of fetching the Veritaserum."
Bretchgirdle's neck went ever-so-slightly red again. "As there is no practising Legilimens on staff...."

Oh, thank bloody Merlin.... A very nice, though reckless, observation, Hermione. Not as sharp of fang as he'd like people to think, is he?

"Would you agree to a dose?"

"I think not," Hermione said. "You subjected me to it last time, I believe. I'm well aware one shouldn't ingest it on a regular basis. And I don't believe I've given you cause to resort to it now, in the end."

"Very well. So noted -- and your refusal shall be taken into account at your trial," Bretchgirdle said as he scribbled in Hermione's file; then he closed it and rose. "If you'll just wait here, Madam Snape.... I need to consult with someone before we proceed any further."

Oh, lovely. He's going to expect quite a show....

Well, we shall just have to give it him. I only hope she catches on to the game -- if he lets me see her.

Snape settled his features into a suitably grim mask.

Bretchgirdle left the white room, and in a few seconds cracked open the observation room door and beckoned to Snape: he stepped from the room and followed the interrogator down the corridor, into a plush office, and closed the door behind him.

"Very enlightening, wouldn't you say?" Bretchgirdle asked him dryly as he took a chair behind the desk. "I do hope you understand that she's in a great deal of trouble. You should, as a brewer.... Or should I say, as a brewer who's been charged with providing Restricted potions in the past?"

Ahhhh, very unsubtle tactic. Two can play that one -- what will put him off-balance?

"Ancient history, charge dismissed, and immaterial in any case as you've no grounds to accuse me in this matter. Or is it your intent to arrest me despite lack of evidence?"

"Of course not. The thought of bringing you in this morning had crossed my mind, given the results of the potions analysis, but as your wife has ruled you out, truthfully or not...."

"She is being truthful, as it happens. I didn't brew that. As to her testimony.... I found her confession almost as illuminating as the fact that you -- who should know better -- neglected to inform me immediately that she had been taken into custody," Snape said, trying to keep his voice level. "Not done, Bretchgirdle, as you damn well know."

"Paaaah -- no-one pays attention to that old chestnut. No man in his right mind would, as the ladies will ruffle their feathers about it in this day and age."
"I don't give a damn about what others think," he snarled at the bastard. "Nor do I care what my wife thinks at the moment, or about her bloody pride. It was my right to be present before you asked her a single question yesterday -- last month, for that matter -- and you denied me that right. I overlooked it last time, but I shan't now. Moreover, I take it that she was forced to undergo some wretched physical examination --"

"She consented --"

"It wasn't her place to consent, it was mine. She is my ward, her body is my property, and my property has been violated."

"I rather think," Bretchgirdle said, "that the greatest violation here was not instigated by MLE. How many opportunities to conceive a child," he added with a mocking smile, "has she denied you by lying about this?"

"That is a matter between Hermione and me. And I'll remind you that as disobedience and breaking a law are classified under the old code as a crime against the husband first and foremost, her punishment and the duty of imposing it falls to me, not you or the Wizengamot."

"Impossible," Bretchgirdle said sharply. "This is a felony, Snape, not a misdemeanour --"

"The precedents make no distinction. It has always been a Pureblood husband's prerogative to discipline a ward for any degree of crime or misbehaviour, and only when he has waived that right does the Wizengamot have the authority to do so in his stead. Simply because most men are too lily-livered and hen-pecked to accept their responsibility does not mean I am."

"The Wizengamot shall, I'm sure, be more than willing to review the rulings. It's high time they were overturned given the changes in our society. It's the Twenty-First Century, after all."

"I doubt they'll overturn them," Snape said, and managed a smile, "They have good reason not to, in fact. Fudge has made it clear that he expects a return to traditional family values, with this... mandatory marriage business. And what is the most essential element of that tradition, if not the role of the husband as master of his home and his charges?"

"Come now, Snape. You can't expect me to believe you think that has anything whatever to do with your wife's crime, or that Minister Fudge will tolerate that view."

"It certainly does, and I do. I'm willing," Snape said carefully, "to accept my own culpability in allowing Hermione too much freedom. It was a miscalculation, as her sensibilities are obviously far too liberal. So, I imagine, are many of our younger witches'. I believe Fudge is canny enough to realise that unless men may administer justice and punishment in their own homes, the whole experiment will be a failure as more witches, like Hermione, revolt."

"That's not my problem," Bretchgirdle countered. "I'm upholding a recent law which clearly states the Wizengamot-approved penalty for her crime."
"And in the process you're breaking an ancient law with stronger precedents. Moreover, I have grave doubts as to why you felt compelled to investigate her in the first place."

Bretchgirdle looked distinctly peeved at that.

_Aha._

"What on earth would make you violate the privacy of my home twice?" he asked Bretchgirdle.

"She's a Ministry employee, Snape, we've every right to search her home if there's due cause."

"Once might be justifiable. But twice in two months?"

Bretchgirdle's lips thinned.

_So, someone ordered him to do it. One guess as to whom._

"I take it Corcoran requested it for one reason or another. True?" Snape said, hoping that the guess was accurate. If it was, he might have the right incentive to persuade Bretchgirdle to drop all this.

"That's none of your --"

"It bloody well is. I understand the reason for the first search, as one of the department offices had been burgled, correct? But Hermione was cleared in that matter. The only reason I can imagine for a second search is a personal vendetta on Corcoran's part. It's no secret that he doesn't respect her, and he despises me."

"I doubt Corcoran would jeopardise his position merely to make your wife's life difficult, Snape --"

"You're wrong. He wants Hermione out of the way. She insists upon accuracy and challenges him when he demands that she change factual, scientifically-based conclusions to suit his agenda. In short, he's tried to bully her into lying in official reports. Not two months ago he threatened to have her sacked for her refusal to do so.

_Not quite for that, but then Bretchgirdle doesn't know._

Bretchgirdle sat up a bit straighter in his chair. "Does she have any proof of this?" he asked.

"She recorded the whole incident in an orb, yes." Snape paused a moment for effect, and added, "I believe she confronted him with examples of his less-than-professional behaviour. He didn't, or couldn't, refute her charges, to my knowledge."

"She blackmailed him, in other words."

"No, she merely responded to an unreasonable threat with a reasonable statement of things she might be forced to reveal about the workings of the department, if asked. Especially about the workings of its director. Not quite the same thing as blackmail."
"Take the bait, damn you."

Bretchgirdle hesitated, and then abandoned any appearance at either nonchalance or finding further fault with Hermione. "I might be interested in seeing the contents of the orb."

"Mmmmm. Corcoran always overstepped his authority and threw his weight about, even at school. Nothing I've seen or heard of him since I married Hermione has led me to change that opinion."

"Mr Corcoran," Bretchgirdle said slowly, "seems to think the Aurors are at his beck and call, and he doesn't care to go through proper channels. I've had to intervene on several occasions on the Director's behalf, and I've had quite enough. So, yes, any information that might... put him in his place would be welcome."

"I don't know where the orb is, actually," Snape lied, and only then seated himself, resting his elbows on Bretchgirdle's desk. "But I might be able to persuade her to turn it over to you. Assuming that I'm allowed to see her as soon as possible, and that you and I can reach an agreement on the matter of the charge against her."

While Bretchgirdle appeared more than a little revolted at the idea of bargaining with a former Death Eater, he also seemed intrigued.

He must really hate Corcoran's guts. Good.

"Dropping the charge is out of the question, given that she's confessed," Bretchgirdle said carefully. "I can't allow her to go scot-free."

"The charge must be dropped, but she needn't get off easily. An acknowledgement that someone -- say, that git Ferrars -- overstepped his bounds and instigated a search on bad information should take the burden of responsibility from you. You're simply redressing an error made by one of the Aurors involved, being generous to someone who's served the Ministry well despite one slip-up, and you're respecting the old traditions and law. I shall... persuade Hermione to turn in her notice immediately -- and the orb -- and move her away from London, permanently. I know her well enough to know that's a far more impressive punishment than imprisonment."

"And Corcoran --"

"Corcoran thinks he's got what he wants, if not in such spectacular fashion as he'd hoped. You have time to investigate any irregularities without him suspecting. I shouldn't be surprised if he acts the fool and gives you more evidence, with Hermione out of the way. He'll be quite smug and full of himself, I imagine."

That seemed to clinch it for Bretchgirdle -- almost.

"This might be construed as bribery, you realise," he said, trying to stare Snape down.
"Nonsense. It's a mutually-beneficial arrangement. At the very least, Corcoran has his hands full defending himself and has no time to meddle in your department. And I still have access to my wife, in whom I've invested a great deal of time and money. I want that investment back, Bretchgirdle. She's intelligent and healthy, and despite her faults I want her better qualities in the Snape bloodline."

Bretchgirdle watched him carefully for a long moment; then he slowly stretched his arm across the desk to shake on the deal, and called for a secretary to draw up the necessary papers.

*****

Hermione was still sitting at the table when Snape entered the white room, and was fidgeting with the cuff of her sleeve: she glanced up at him, stilled, and her face went paler.

"Severus," was all she said. She looked even worse at close range, the strain of the last twenty-four hours drawing her skin tight over her cheekbones and about her eyes.

Snape didn't answer her right away, but began to prowl around the perimeter of the room.

"Who told you I was --"

"No-one," he snapped back at her. "No-one bothered to tell me. I only found out last night that something was wrong when I stopped by the flat and couldn't get in."

She seemed perplexed at that. "But I wasn't expecting you to --"

"It's not a crime for a man to visit his wife at any time he chooses," he interrupted. "Of course, you might have got the impression that it was because I made the error of coddling you and pandering to your delicate sensibilities." He stopped at the end of the table and leant against it. "I can assure you, that is about to change."

She hadn't caught on, yet: he saw only confusion and anger in her eyes.

_Damn it, look at the bloody cloak. Put two and two together, girl -- we're being watched._

She wasn't observing anything at all but his face: she seemed fixed on his eyes, so he deliberately broke the gaze, moved to the other side of the table, unclasped the cloak and took it from his shoulders, and tossed it across the back of the free chair.

The silver serpent glinted in the harsh light of the single lamp above the table, and the flash of it caught her eye.

_That's it. Make the connection. Unless, of course, you think I'm such a vindictive churl as to wear that to hurt you...._  

Her eyes widened for a moment: Snape hoped he was blocking her reaction from Bretchgirdle, who he was certain was watching from the other room.
"How much did you hear?" she asked, composing her face into a suitably guilty expression.

*Good girl. We're not out of the woods yet, though, stay on your toes.*

"All of it. Every bloody word of it -- except for one very important bit, Hermione." He took a deep breath. "When did you decide to lie to me?"

"I.... It wasn't a *decision*, Severus, it --"

"*When*, Hermione?" he bellowed as he leaned across the table toward her.

She jerked backward in her seat, and looked as though she might be sick -- she wasn't pretending, he could tell, and wished he didn't need to put her through this: but he knew Bretchgirdle would pull the offer off the table in an instant if he weren't convinced, so he allowed his frustration with the whole bloody mess to come to the fore.

"It was before we even married, wasn't it?" he snarled at her. "You never intended to be a proper wife, did you?"

"No, it *wasn't,*" she managed, and she brushed a fleck of his spittle off her cheek. "No, I... I got frightened after Quh- Queerditch, that's all. We'd rushed into it. When I realised I hadn't got pregnant then, I thought if we just had a bit of time...."

"You *planned* for it, Hermione. You stored up the ingredients. You *intended* to do this from the very first -- if not to me, then some other stupid bugger."

"No. I only got them because I was afraid I might be forced to marry someone who'd treat me badly, who might treat a child badly.... You know how I feel about that, Severus, I can't bear the thought of putting a child that position."

"And I'm one of those, am I?"

"*No,*" she said, face going red -- she was getting angry, now, and he didn't necessarily want that: better for her to act submissively, given his purpose. "No, I don't think that. You're a better man than most people... ...than *I* gave you credit for. I wanted to give us time *alone*, to do this properly."

"Without discussing it with me?"

"You were so adamantly about observing the new laws, I knew you'd... you'd set aside personal considerations. You always have, when it comes to rules. And by God, Severus, neither one of us deserves that," she said earnestly. "We deserve to know we can get along even if we don't love each other. We deserve to know that we *want* a child together --"

"One of us *does --*" Snape interrupted in a vain attempt to derail her tirade.

"The bloody Ministry won't raise it -- we will. The Ministry won't fret over it and love it to distraction -- or grieve for it if something horrid happens -- we will --"
He resorted to bellowing again. "We should have done. What you seem totally unaware of is that it was not your place to make that decision -- it was mine. I chose not to defer having a child, and by defying me, you have not only lied to me, but stolen from me."

She seemed stunned by that, her jaw gaping for a moment. "I have not."

"You've denied me the child we might have made, by now. It amounts to the same thing."

"How on earth can you say that? It's a child, Severus, a human being, not a thing!"

He pulled McGonagall's book from the inner pocket of the cloak, flipped it open to the first marker, and pushed it across the table to her. "Read the bloody law, Hermione. Husband and wife are one being under the law, and the husband is the acknowledged head. The wife is his ward, just as his children are. When she disobeys him or breaks laws, he is responsible, and therefore she has damaged his reputation and honour. Since she can do him that harm, he has the right to constrain and discipline her in any way he sees fit."

"Absolutely ridiculous. I'd never -- I haven't --"

"She is also the vessel for his children -- that is her purpose for existing. And by making your body inhospitable to life, you've stolen from me."

She scanned the first ruling quickly, started to protest, and then flipped to the next ruling, her face going paler with every passing minute.

"This is barbaric," she said flatly as she finished reading the third ruling.

"It's the law. You shouldn't be surprised by it -- it's based on the same principles as your Muggle law."

"Muggle law doesn't treat women like -- like --"

"Like children? I daresay it did once. Could again, for all I know -- laws can be changed. The difference is, we never struck those principles and laws from the books, but simply left decisions on the freedoms allowed wives up to the individual man. In binding yourself to me, you've made yourself subordinate to this law, and to me should I choose to exercise it -- and I am."

He pushed himself away from the table, paced about the room again, and sought for the next, best strategy. Hermione was silent, not arguing any longer: that was a good sign. She might follow his lead, if he were careful. He probably ought be more rough and demanding with her, for Bretchgirdle's benefit, but he couldn't bear to: she looked as though she might shatter to bits if he pushed her much beyond raising his voice.

"I don't blame you solely," he admitted, voice raspy from shouting, and stopped to clear his throat. "I should have made everything absolutely clear from the start, given you more guidance. I thought a woman of your intelligence would understand that in marrying me -- in marrying a Pureblood -- you would, eventually, have to accept my values. I thought you had, so I didn't ask you to give up
your job. I thought it would be a bloody waste to require that of you, when you could continue to be of use to the Ministry until we had a child. And I thought giving up the work before then would be a blow to you."

"That was very kind of you, Severus," she said softly behind him, surprising him. "Some men wouldn't have bothered to be that considerate."

"Then why in bloody hell did you deceive me?" he asked, turning to face her. "If you knew I was being more tolerant than most, why did you take advantage?"

"I didn't intend to. I just didn't see it that way. I didn't realise you did, you seemed so reasonable about everything."

"Meaning that I'm not being reasonable now?"

"Legally, I suppose -- if these bloody laws still stand."

"They do. Legally is, quite frankly, all that matters."

"No, no it isn't --"

He glared at her, and crossed his arms over his chest: she sighed, pulled her hands from the table and into her lap, and stared down at them.

"I haven't taken the bloody potion for weeks. I... I shouldn't have in the first place, not without speaking with you about it, I understand that now."

"You understood it then, Hermione, or you wouldn't have concealed it. Not only have you defied me and rebelled against the foremost reason for our marriage, you've defied the Ministry. You've betrayed everything that every right-thinking witch and wizard should be working toward. I should have thought you of all people would understand how dependent we are upon --"

"I do. I didn't intend to take it forever, I just...."

She seemed at a loss for words.

"I'm willing to consider this an aberration from your usual intelligent behaviour, given your youth," Snape said, deciding it was time to lay down the ultimatum. "What I need to know is whether you are going to behave properly now. If not," he added more softly, and pinched at the bridge of his nose to ease the sharp ache between his eyes, "or if I think you're apt to lie to me again in future, I will walk out that door and leave you to Bretchgirdle."

"I don't think you have a choice in the --"

"It's not your job to think about the matter overall," he shot back. "It's mine, just as is the blame for your misbehaviour. You've broken a law. Bretchgirdle would have me believe that prosecuting the Illegal Substances charge supersedes my rights to you under the older law."
"That's that, then," Hermione said. "I'm off your hands, am I?"

"Not necessarily. I don't think the new law has precedence over my rights, and I am willing to take the case before the Wizengamot, if I must -- if you are prepared to do as I say."

The look of astonishment on her face was most unflattering to Snape, even if she was play-acting, but he ignored the implied insult.

"If -- if I have been able to persuade Bretchgirdle to drop the charge," he continued, "there are going to be changes, Hermione. Quite drastic ones. First and foremost, you will be handing in your resignation and moving to Hogwarts."

"My resign -- Bloody hell, Severus, there's no need for me to leave the Ministry simply because --"

"Even if I thought it wise to allow you to continue -- and I don't -- you don't have a job to go back to. It's impossible. Bretchgirdle is doing me a favour in allowing you to resign, rather than seeing that you're sacked. Furthermore, I want you where I can keep an eye on you. You might as well put the flat up for sale. You won't be returning to it."

"You're going to forbid me to --"

"I'm insisting that we live together properly? Yes, as I should have done from the start."

"I suppose I'm not to eat or drink anything outside your presence, am I?" she shot back at him with a glower.

"I truly hope you won't make it necessary, but I shall require that if I have to. You've given me more than enough reason to distrust you, don't you think? I could always turn you over to Bretchgirdle if you don't agree," he added coolly. "I'm sure a divorce is permissible under the circumstances if you prefer Azkaban. I shan't be waiting for your release, you understand."

He watched her struggling with it for a moment -- amazing, that she would fight it so, even when it was nothing more than a scene for Bretchgirdle's benefit... But then perhaps she didn't think it was. 'You always mean what you say...'. It was possible she felt he was actually going to require more than just the appearance of it all, but that couldn't be helped at the moment.

"Right," she said finally, thankfully looking more miserable than sullen. "Yes, I agree."

"You'll obey me in all things from now on."

"Yes."

"No more mucking about with a 'career,' no more avoiding pregnancy."

"Yes."
"And you'll be returning with me to Hogwarts, and sell the bloody flat. I won't have you running off to hide whenever you wish to sulk."

She gave him a pained look. "Severus, that flat's all I have, I invested most of my inheritance in it -- and it won't bring as much as I've put into it, not this early on. I won't have a damned thing of my own if --"

"Not negotiable. And technically it's my property to dispose of, as you didn't have it signed over to a Trust before we married. As there are Muggle legalities involved, I'm perfectly willing to ward it against you and let it sit there and rot until your bank takes possession, if I must -- and then you shall have nothing at all out of it."

Her face went red again; but instead of arguing, she bent her head and muttered, "Yes. All right."

"Good. There is one other thing," he added, and hoped Corcoran hadn't slipped back into the observation room, or that Bretchgirdle had run him off if he had. "You have a... record of a conversation with someone. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Bretchgirdle is quite interested in that. It's one of the conditions of having the charge against you dropped, that you turn it over to him."

Hermione glanced up at him, and then snorted. "With pleasure, actually. He's welcome to it as I shan't need it any longer."

"Good."

A light flickered on in the observation room, startling both of them: Bretchgirdle was behind the glass. He gave Snape a curt nod, and then shut off the light.

"Oh, bloody --" Hermione blurted out.

"How long have you been here?" Snape muttered to stop her from saying anything incriminating; he crossed to the free chair and collapsed in it.

"They arrested me yesterday, when I returned from lunch," she said. "Severus --"

"And?"

_Stay in the moment, girl, we're still in danger until we walk out the bloody door._

"And what?" she said impatiently.

"They examined you, correct? And what did the Healer say?" he prodded.

"Oh," she said, and nodded a weary acknowledgement. "Perfectly healthy."
"Able to bear children?"

"To conceive, certainly, and no reason why I couldn't carry to term as far as he can tell."

"I see. So, four months' effort wasted."

"I didn't think so," she murmured. "I wouldn't say that at all."

"When the whole bloody point was to do what's needed, it is."

"Is it really so awful," Hermione asked, "that I hoped we'd be able to have more than merely what's necessary?"

"It is if one is looking at the situation as a rational adult," Snape said. "I'm disappointed in you, Hermione. I thought you were far more logical than your idiotic, love-silly peers."

She coloured up again, and picked at a rough spot on the table. "Yes, well, I discovered things about you that I wouldn't have anticipated, too. Oddly enough, I've been more pleasantly surprised than anything else. Until today."

*That* was a shock. He'd expected her to go along with the thread of the conversation, perhaps even to rail at him and the rules he'd laid down: but she seemed absolutely sincere. He didn't know how to respond to it.

Bretchgirdle saved him the trouble, stepping into the white room with an older auror in tow, and with papers and a quill in hand.

"This is highly unusual, you understand," he said to Hermione. "I'm only doing this because I'm willing to concede that your husband may have a point regarding the old law. Moreover, Ferrars overstepped his authority with a second search, and I wish to avoid a prolonged inquiry on the part of the Wizengamot."

"That, and you want Corcoran's head on a platter," Hermione muttered. "Not that I blame you."

"This," Bretchgirdle continued, placing a document before her, "is your resignation from the Ministry. I require your signature on that before we proceed further."

Hermione took the quill from him and scribbled her signature: Bretchgirdle then smiled grimly, turned the paper and quill over to Snape, and said, "As her legal guardian, I suppose you ought sign as well."

Snape did so, ignoring Hermione's outraged huff, and gave paper and quill over to Robinson, who witnessed the signatures.

"Thank you. *This,*" Bretchgirdle said, showing her another paper, "officially drops the charge, and states that you are being remanded into your husband's custody. It also states that you -- or he,}
rather, as it's his choice -- will take no action against the Aurors' Service, MLE, or the Ministry in reprisal for the unfortunate -- but totally lawful, I will add -- measures that were taken yesterday."

"Strike out 'lawful' if it's in there, Hermione," Snape murmured. "Direct contradiction of the precedents, as I didn't give permission."

Bretchgirdle smirked at him, as if to say 'Can't fault me for trying,' but didn't object when Hermione crossed out the offending word and signed. Snape signed it himself, acknowledging that he was taking sole responsibility for her future actions, and Bretchgirdle also signed before dismissing Robinson from the room and handing over Hermione's ticket-of-leave to Snape.

"Now," he said, "I understand there's an orb. I should prefer to retrieve it myself, if you don't mind."

"In the hall cupboard, at the flat," Hermione said dully. "There's a box of Christmas ornaments, it's in there. And good luck with the bastard."

"And the password to release the memory?"

"'I sincerely hope the rotten sod gets his,'" Hermione said, and glanced up at Bretchgirdle when he coughed. "No, I'm quite serious, that's it. The whole phrase."

"Very well. I'll caution you now not to return there for your possessions until tomorrow. I do apologise for any inconvenience, Professor Snape," Bretchgirdle said smoothly. "I would warn you, however, that any further mischief on Madam Snape's part will earn her prosecution, regardless of the old law."

"Won't be necessary," Snape said, staring at Hermione. "Any further difficulties and I'll be happy to turn her over, in any case."

"Good-day, then," Bretchgirdle said with a smile. "Robinson will have Madam Snape's effects and both your wands waiting for you at the lift -- I should prefer that you have the keeping of her wand until you are outside the Ministry, however," he added, and then he left the room.

Hermione propped her elbows on the table and cradled her head in trembling hands.

"It's for the best," Snape said quietly, wishing that she would look him in the face to catch the rest of the message: I couldn't think of any other way, my dear. I'd be damned if I gave you up to the Ministry without a bloody good fight.

"It's disgraceful. Disgusting," she moaned.

'Your behaviour? I quite agree."

"The bloody law. The wife a ward, in the eyes of the law? How much more... archaic can you get?"
"Different, you mean then," Snape corrected her, and idly added as he retrieved McGonagall's book and tucked the release paper into it, "I always thought it a shameful omission, not teaching Muggleborns fully about our society. I blame Dumbledore. So anxious that we accept you that he shoved your culture down our throats, and didn't require you to learn anything of ours beyond old Binns's boring histories.... No matter now, it's too late. Time to go, then," he said, rose, and pulled the cloak from the chair-back. "I've wasted half a day's classes because of this idiocy, and I shan't waste more."

Hermione scrubbed at her face -- she'd been weeping a bit, Snape noted -- and stood unsteadily, swaying.

"When did you last eat?" he asked her sharply. "They told me you'd been properly fed."

"Last night, really. I couldn't manage much this morning."

"Fool," he muttered, and pulled his handkerchief from his coat-pocket. "You'll have to wait until we reach Hogwarts, I'm not in the mood to spend money at a restaurant." He stepped around the end of the table to her, and tried to blot at her eyes -- but she batted his hand away: he was obliged to grab for her wrist, yank her in to his body, and stare her down.

"Don't push me, Hermione," he warned her. "I've been quite reasonable, but you're trying my patience. You will give me the respect I'm due, or you'll regret it."

That shocked her nicely, and kept her mouth shut long enough for him to stoop down to her ear and whisper, "Just a few minutes more. Once we're out of here you can go to pieces as much as you like." He pulled back enough to look her in the eye; she nodded, mute, and allowed him to tidy her face to his satisfaction. "I realise submission and meekness don't come naturally to you," he added dryly as he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket, "but I believe it's past time you acquire them. Come along."

He steered her, with his hand firmly at her lower back, out of the white room and down the corridor to the lifts where Robinson waited for them: the Auror turned both wands over to Snape, Hermione's belongings to her, and then joined them in the lift.

"Mr Bretchgirdle said to remind you, Madam Snape, that there'll be no visits to your residence until tomorrow," Robinson lectured her (much to Snape's annoyance) as the lift descended.

"I doubt we'll bother," he coolly informed the man as Hermione struggled into her coat and muttered, "I know, I know," under her breath. "I shall likely send a few of Hogwarts' elves to pack it all up."

"Wouldn't that be mis-use of school property?" Robinson jibed. "I should try to keep my nose clean if I were you, Snape,"

"That is entirely up to the Headmistress," Snape corrected him. "And given the choice between more of a waste of my time, or sending a few surplus elves...."
The lift-doors began to open and Snape shooed Hermione out before him, hoping to shake Robinson off before he hexed the man. Thankfully, Robinson was distracted by a commotion at the security-desk, and fell behind them as they started across the Atrium....

In fact, there were rather a lot of people clustered about the desk arguing with the fat security-guard, and the most vociferous and official-looking man among them was brandishing a warrant in the idiot's face. Robinson stepped into the fray; the warrant-flashing official turned to argue with him instead, and let the parchment roll up with a snap. Snape caught sight of a badge on the breast of the man's cloak: a staff and orb, encompassed by a globe --

-- the ICW crest. Balls. Of all the bloody moments for the cavalry to have arrived....

He hadn't anticipated that DeLaine -- or the ICW -- would act this quickly: given the ponderous rate at which most organisations moved, he'd expected a full twenty-four hours to call DeLaine off or to present themselves to the ICW, rather than being dragged about like common criminals. (While he was perfectly happy with that possibility had he been unable to extricate Hermione himself, he should have preferred that Corcoran -- and, therefore, Fudge -- had no inkling whatsoever that they were in ICW hands.)

Too late, you fool. Should have listened to Minerva, but you panicked --

"Best put your cloak on now," Hermione said softly at his elbow. "You'll be even more cross if you catch --"

"Keep walking," Snape muttered.

Forget invoking Minerva's fireplace and flooing to Hogwarts, then, they'll trace it immediately. Dumbledore will probably have the one at Hog's Head blocked, and ditto in any case. Outside, then, through the lift, and Apparate to --

"Severus --"

"Keep walking," he hissed, and clutched her elbow, pulling her away from the long line at the Departures floos. "Eyes front, look casual, and don't stop."

-- Apparate to Hogsmea-- No, that's the next place they'll check, and we'll never get into Rosmerta's unseen. We could go to that bloody shack, then we might use the tunnel --

"Oi! You there, Snape -- halt!" Robinson yelled after them.

They were quite close to the call-box lift, now, and Snape steered Hermione in front of him, ready to lunge for it and push her in before him, if necessary --

Someone grasped Snape's shoulder and stopped him in mid-stride, jerking Hermione's elbow free of his hand: she slid a bit on the polished marble floor, turned, and stared at Snape as a coterie of grim-faced, grey-cloaked ICW Enforcers surrounded them.
"Zeveruz Znape?" the most senior Enforcer demanded with an annoying, Teutonic buzz on the sibilants.

"What of it?"

"Und Hermiown Grancher Znape?"

"Hermione," she snapped at the man, and all but rolled her eyes.

"You bose under arrest by order off zeh ICW are," the Enforcer said. "Vee haff off your vands need."

Of all the gods-damned.... I wonder how large a fire McGonagall lit under DeLaine's arse to get this response.

Snape withdrew both wands from his coat-sleeve and handed them over to the senior man, as one of the others took Hermione's things from her; and he was none too pleased to suffer the indignity of having his wrists -- and Hermione's -- bound, in front of all the gawkers in the Atrium.

"Well, well," Robinson crowed behind him. "It appears you've got bigger problems than a piddling little felony by your witch, Snape."

The pity of the whole bloody incident was that the Enforcers didn't give Snape time, before they marched him and Hermione from the Atrium and out to the street, to spit in the bleeder's eye.

*****

Liechtenstein had never been high on Snape's list of Must-See Places (it ranked somewhere above the Dark Lord's boudoir and a bit below Whitemarsh, actually), and what little he saw of it now didn't change his opinion.

As the principality was too small in area to contain any purely Wizard villages or neighbourhoods, the ICW, with more than usual ingenuity and considerable stress on the Teutonic commitment to expediency, had managed not only to spatially shoe-horn all Wizarding buildings and pathways in the entire principality amongst the Muggle bits, but to temporally compress wizarding Time when one was on the pavements -- so that a wizard could travel from one end of the principality to the other in a few minutes, as Apparition was strictly regulated due to security issues. This was a remarkable feat of Arithmantic engineering, true; but it was also intensely disorienting, being Apparated to Vaduz and marched from the only legal Apparition point to Balzers -- the seat of the ICW -- through what appeared to be purely Muggle streets (and sometimes through Muggle Liechtensteiners), as if one were embarking on the pedestrian version of a Knight Bus ride.

Hermione's probably delirious with fascination, working out the equations in her head at this very moment, Snape thought nastily as they whizzed up the foothills of a small mountain -- and then, after a glance at her, he felt ashamed of himself: she looked more ill than intrigued with the experience.
"All right?" he muttered.

"Too much like flying," she murmured back. "Makes my eyes go wonky. I always hated this type of --" She stopped abruptly and held her breath.

Snape hoped she'd puke on the Enforcer's boots, not his.

Everything returned to normal once they reached Gutenberg Castle, however: an older, more Hogwarts-y magic had been used here, to pry out nooks and crannies from the Muggle building and the bedrock below it. They were taken to the highest point in the castle -- a subtly but well-warded suite of rooms at the top of a narrow, winding stair -- where their bonds were removed, and where Hermione's handbag and Snape's coat-pockets were thoroughly searched before the Enforcers stepped away from them.

"You vill today rest," the senior man informed them as the other Enforcers filed out. "Vee vill the vands keep. You vill your Counzel tomorrow meet. Zeh ...hearing, ja? vill zeh day after meet. Underzantan?"

"Ja," Snape said sourly, knowing full well that sarcasm was wasted on the Germanic mind.

The Enforcer stood at attention, clicked his heels in a ridiculously Ruritanian manner, wheeled about, and marched from the room, closing and barring the door definitively behind him.

*****

Neither of them moved or spoke for a very long time. Hermione seemed frozen with shock, and Snape felt not much better: he finally shook himself out of his daze and asked her the question that had been on his lips since they'd stepped from the lift and he'd seen the Enforcers.

"Hermione," he started quite calmly -- amazing, that was, considering that he suspected he was on the verge of hysteria -- "why, out of all bloody bureaucratic France, did you have to pick the one bloody Frog who is actually efficient?"

Hermione stared at him blankly for a moment: then the tenor of the question must have wormed its way into her consciousness. She gaped at him (obviously outraged), turned smartly, took off across the room away from him, and with a slam of the door shut herself into what he assumed was the bath.

It's a valid question. What the bloody hell is her problem?

Snape dropped his cloak on the floor and flung himself into the nearest chair -- the horrendously knobby and ugly four-poster being too far across the room to bother himself with limping over to -- and tried to calm the shrill little voice in his head that was telling him they'd gone directly from the frying-pan and into the fire.

*****
Chapter 23: Wherein Hermione badly wants her wand for a nasty purpose, brings Severus and a very kind barrister up to speed, and gives us a boatload of exposition for which there wasn't room before.

Friday, February 10th
Late afternoon

The room was relatively spare by hotel standards, but ridiculously luxurious by those of a Ministry cell. Hermione took in the wide four-poster and its thick hangings, the narrow windows and heavy, carved furniture, and (wonder of wonders) a full bath in the next room, and did her best to ignore the Enforcer who was rattling off instructions to Severus. (She processed the room visually, at least: a good portion of her brain was still busy shrieking Oh my God, he actually came after me. He didn't leave me stuck there.)

...Well, he wouldn't just leave her there, of course. There was too great a risk that she'd implicate him in something far more serious than a bit of contraceptive-brewing. Not surprising that he'd sprung her, really, even if she hadn't had the foggiest notion how he'd do it.

Lovely way he chose, by the way. And ironic, given how we started....

That's not fair, Hermione. He didn't have to come to town -- he might have stayed at Hogwarts until they sent for him. That would have been the sensible thing to do, for a Slytherin. For anyone.

She heard the Enforcer leave, and sighed in relief: she thought she would scream if she had to spend another minute in the company of law enforcement, no matter that it was the ICW and not the Ministry....

Wait a moment. Why did the ICW...? Bloody hell. I didn't call François, so who --?

Severus cleared his throat.

"Hermione," he said, voice level, "why, out of all bloody bureaucratic France, did you have to pick the one bloody Frog who is actually efficient?"

The accusation -- for there was no doubt by the time Severus had finished that it was -- knocked her for a loop.

Why, you bastard. You called him, you must have done. And you dare to blame me....

As she didn't have her wand, couldn't hex Severus senseless without it, and wasn't at all certain that she could verbally rip him a new one without bursting into tears, she took the only exit available -- the bath: she gave him a nasty glare as she slammed the door, and relished the bewilderment she saw in his face.
He's bolloxed. Can't wait until he needs a pee and he has to beg me to let him in -- should be soon....

Unfortunately -- as she discovered when she scrabbled at the latch -- the bloody door didn't have a lock on it.

*Damned Ger- Oh, fuck, I'm starting to sound like him again. Damned ICW security.*

She cleared an ugly, thick-legged little table of towels and bath salts, dragged it over to the door, jammed it under the latch, dropped her handbag, and turned the taps in the tub on full.

*Oh, look how high we are,* she thought as she looked out the window, savagely stripping off coat and clothes as she did and tossing them on a severe little chair. *I wonder if I have the strength to push him out....* No. *They've got the window nailed shut, of course, how cautious of them -- only damned thing that can get in or out is the draught.*

*Oh, well. With my luck he's an illegal Animagus anyway. Probably a bloody bat to boot.*

*****

She'd calmed -- a bit -- after a thorough scrub to remove the general grime and the phantom sense of stickiness between her legs; but even though she'd been in the bath for a good half-hour, she couldn't seem to pull herself from it. (She excused it as not wanting to get back into her days-old clothes, but that wasn't true. She didn't want to face Severus, and that was all there was to it. Moreover, she still felt unaccountably dirty.) So there she stayed in the tub, listening to the sounds that filtered through the thick door -- she occasionally heard movement and talking, and she doubted Severus was talking to himself -- and ran more hot water to warm the bath whenever her teeth began to chatter. (Their prison might be more comfortable than most, but, judging by the lack of a fireplace in the room, the bath wasn't meant to be lounged about in.)

*He didn't mean it to be accusing, you know he didn't. Well, all right, he did, but he was terrified of exactly this situation, so can you blame him? Right, he was terrified of it, and he was the one to resort to it. So much for thinking he only wanted to minimise damage, then -- he was frightened for me.*

*So why did he have to act like such an utter pillock just now?*

...*Because he always does. It's who he is. Stop expecting him to be perfect, Hermione -- he's not a bloody knight in shining armour. He's a fallible, fucked-up human being like me, who's trying to do the best he can with what he's got. Trying to be decent, just as I am, and neither one of us can seem to manage it to the others' satisfaction. Or our own.*

*Oh, sod it -- why can't I accept that he'll usually do the right thing, even if he can't manage to be nice about it at the same time?*

She got the crying over with then, muffling it in the bath-sponge, so she shouldn't do it in front of him later.
After another half-hour, Severus tapped at the door.

"Hermione?"

*Go away.*

"Hermione? They've brought an early dinner, and you need to eat."

_Ought to be sensible and go out. He sounds more reasonable at the moment.... Sod it. Don't feel like eating, don't want to deal with him, with any of it --*

"Hermione, you've been in there for... ages," he called in his no-nonsense voice. "If you've managed to drown yourself and left me stuck with this bloody mess alone, by Merlin I'll... I'll --"

He didn't seem to know *what* he'd do to her cold, dead body, and she snorted at his helplessness.

"Hermione?"

"Go away, Severus, I'll be out in a while."

"I bloody well *won't* --"

She heard him try the latch and swear when he realised that she'd blocked the door: he shoved against it until he dislodged the table. It toppled to the floor, and he pushed the door wide enough to peer around it.

"Are you all right?" he demanded.

"Fine," Hermione muttered, and drew her knees up to cover her breasts. "They'll probably charge us for that if you've broken it, you know."

"I don't give a damn. And you're not fine," Severus shot back as stepped into the room and righted the table, staring at her exposed, deeply-pink arms critically all the while. "You've been scrubbing yourself raw. Not the mark of an ordered mind, that."

He didn't look particularly "ordered" either: he'd shed his coat and pulled his neckcloth loose, and his hair was mussed. (Well, more mussed than usual.) Hermione bit her tongue rather than counter-attack, and instead defended herself with, "Didn't get a bath last night, that's all. I feel filthy."

Severus sidled further into the room and stood, eyes fixed to her face, and leant back against the far wall. "Ah. The... examination, yesterday...."

*Oh, belt up, damn it, I didn't mean that....*

"Horrid, was it?" His face was neutral, voice matter-of-fact: Hermione supposed his reaction could be far worse in the long run. He might be narked over the fact that another man had touched her, for instance -- she didn't think he'd take that kindly, Healer or no.
"No worse than it usually is," she said, and shivered. "I can now state conclusively that Healers aren't any better at it than the average Muggle gynaecologist. Not that I've been to a lot of them. His cow of an assistant was harder to put up with."

"Are you certain?" he asked. "They didn't harm you or mistreat you?"

"No, Severus. It was just uncomfortable, that's all. Very... thorough."

"How thorough?" he asked, voice sharp.

"I really don't want to t-- ...I take it that they want to make certain people aren't avoiding pregnancy by... by --"

"Resorting to buggery?" he rapped out.

"Exactly."

"Lovely," he muttered. "To be expected, I suppose -- that they'd make that assumption, I mean. No wonder you're.... Are you certain you're all right?"

"Yes, Severus. Physically, at least."

"Did they warn you beforehand?"

_Bloody hell, why is it so important that he.... Oh, give over. He's upset for you, miracle of miracles. Show some appreciation. Remember how badly you missed him last night?_

"No," she admitted. "They had me sign a release, of course, but it wasn't spelled out in that much detail. The Healer was quite apologetic about the whole thing."

"Still, it was done against your will."

"Yes, and no, that didn't help matters. But I didn't have much choice. I was fairly certain Bretchgirdle would have ordered it done even without my cooperation. Was it stupid of me to give in?"

"No. No sense in putting yourself in a situation where you might have been harmed. Harmed _more_. Where you might not have had _any_ control," Severus said. "Although I bloody well wish you'd known about the law. That might have stalled them for a bit."

"Well, I _didn't_ know about the bloody law." _And if I had, I would have packed my bags and gone Muggle long before now._

"I said I _wish_ you had. No reason you _should_ have," he said. "One of our less laudable ones, more honoured in the.... I do hope you realised I didn't intend to --"

"Yes, I managed to figure that out. Though I probably shouldn't have two months ago."
Severus' eyebrows shot upward.

"It was very... in keeping with your behaviour in October," she explained quietly. "I know you a bit better now. I was serious about being pleasantly surprised."

Still staring at her, Severus shifted his weight to his bad leg, started to say, "I'm...." He stopped himself; and then, shifting back to the other leg, he folded his arms across his chest and stared out the window.

_Bloody hell, what's the matter with him? True, I've been acting like an idiot for the last hour, but it's not like they tortured me. It was highly unpleasant, that's all...._

Severus seemed unusually and unduly concerned about it, however, to the point that he couldn't manage to finish a sentence.

_It's as though he wants to apologise, but can't bring himself to do it.... Well, that or I've really embarrassed him with saying I like some things about him. I don't see why, you'd think he would be pleased by that._

"You really ought to come out," Severus muttered at last, pushing himself away from the wall. "No wand, so I can't keep the bloody food warm."

_No, don't go --_

For the life of her, Hermione couldn't decide why it was so urgent that he stay -- it wasn't as though they were getting anything productive done, with her shivering in the tub and Severus staring moodily out the window: but it _was_ important to her, and so she grasped at the first excuse that came to hand.

"Severus --"

He turned at the door, expression weary.

"I can't reach between my shoulders," she lied, and offered him the sponge.

He didn't respond immediately, but stared at her for a moment --

_Oh, cripes. Totally appalled. I suppose I've transgressed the bounds of decency, since we've always avoided seeing each other in the --_

-- and then he began, deliberately and purposefully, to roll up his right shirt-cuff. It wasn't a particularly reassuring gesture: she'd seen him employ that -- and a similar grim look -- in class, before plunging his hand into a vat of fermented frogs' brains.

_Erm, perhaps this wasn't that great an idea._
Unaware of her pentimento, he slowly walked to the tub, pulled the chair over and cleared it of her clothes before sitting, took the sponge from her, dipped it, and started -- quite delicately -- to run it across her back. Hermione hated to admit it, but it felt blissful against her knotted muscles: she leaned forward to make it easier for him -- and to protect her modesty -- and rested her forehead against her knees.

"Where've you hidden the soap?" he muttered.

She fished about for it under the water, and handed it back to him.

"How did you know they'd arrested me?" she asked when he'd returned to scrubbing (more vigorously, now). "Did they tell you?"

He snorted. "Not bloody likely. George Weasley called last night and said they thought you'd been. I left for London as soon as I could."

"And that's when you called François?"

"No. I... I told McGonagall to, and to get the rest of the documents to him. I'd no idea it would play out as fast as it did, unfortunately."

Bloody hell -- he panicked. So, Hermione, how many other women can say Severus Snape loses his head over them? Even if it's, ah, not quite in the way one usually means it?

"Hah. So it's not so much a matter of French efficiency as McGonagall's."

"All right, yes, I should have foreseen that," he growled, and pulled the mass of damp hair away from her neck so he could scrub that as well. (Despite her unease with him seeing her nude, it still felt bloody wonderful. There was something to be said for being pampered a bit, even if Severus was the only and unlikely one available to do it.) "But I... wasn't confident that I should be able to have you freed."

"But if you knew about the law --"

"I didn't. That, too, was McGonagall's idea, indirectly. That is, I knew the law existed once, but I didn't know the specifics and that it hadn't been struck down. She made certain I left Hogwarts with the book and told me to do my schoolwork before morning."

"And being a good student, you did."

"Did you ever dare ignore an assignment from McGonagall?" he countered.

"Absolutely not."

"There you are, then." He took a moment to dip the sponge. "She's lived rather longer than either of us. It's foolish to ignore her suggestions."
"I thought you felt she's a meddlesome old biddy."

"She is, and you feel the same, don't deny it. That doesn't mean she doesn't give eminently sensible advice. On occasion."

"Did she tell you to wear the cloak?"

The sponge slowed in its soothing circuit of her back. "No. I suspected that if I were able to see you, we'd be watched. It was the only thing I could think of to signal you."

"Oh. It worked."

"Eventually. It took you a bloody long time to notice." He remembered himself, and the sponge began moving briskly over her skin again.

"Well, it would. You looked furious with me, and I was tired. So," she said quickly to interrupt the inevitable commentary on her poor observation skills, "what will they do with us, do you think?"

"According to that pompous git -- if I understood his mangled English properly -- we're to meet with our counsel tomorrow."

"Are we? I mean, the ICW allows representation?"

"Apparently."

"Oh. They do that deliberately, you know. He probably speaks proper English better than either of us."

"What?"

"What's his name. The mangled English, keeping the German sentence-structure."

"If you know the bloody language, then why --"

"As little of it as possible, I hate it, it's very inefficient -- forces you to listen to the whole, convoluted sentence, puts you in your place."

He snorted. "And you think I'm prejudiced...." He wrung the sponge out, stood, and glanced uncertainly at the pile of clothes. "Shall I ask if they'd clean those? There are dressing-gowns in the wardrobe.... I should have thought to bring you one, actually.... But no fresh clothing, of course."

"Yes, please."

He bent to pick up the pile, knee cracking, and then limped from the bathroom.

Well, that turned out well. I think. At least he's talking to me, and not sulking any longer....
Such as the sulking was. Hermione was beginning to suspect that what she'd always thought of as his "uncommunicative" mood wasn't so much the sulks as it was a loss for words -- surprise, or unease with a particular emotion....

*And God knows he's horrid at expressing those. At least, those that don't involve anger or disgust.*

*But does that matter, particularly?* she thought as she ducked under the water's surface for a final rinse. *It would make things immensely less complicated if he could say things outright.... But isn't it his actions that count most?*

She surfaced, gasping, and pushed her hair out of her eyes before reaching for a towel.

*Right. What he does. Like taking advantage of your idiocy and your body.*

*And then there's taking his responsibility to and for you seriously enough to put himself at the mercy of people he fears. That takes loads more courage than spitting out some sentiment that he might or might not really mean, I think....*

She knew she would never truly understand the enigma that was Severus Snape; but she suspected she was beginning to crack the code, and might be able to learn it sufficiently well to manage as long as she needed.

*Or as long as I want.*

Despite the nastiness of the entire situation in which they'd landed, she was glad of that.

*****

The food *was* cold by the time she wandered out of the bath, but at least her bathrobe wasn't: Severus had thrown it across a chair by the fire, and it was comfortably toasty.

"Not much here to your taste," he muttered as she slipped into a chair at the table and sipped at the glass of wine he'd already poured for her. "One of those horrid noodle and beef concoctions. And cabbage."

"Spaetzle," Hermione identified the meat dish, ladling a portion onto her plate. "I'd guess the sauce is too spicy for you?"

"Probably. I shall be up most of the night," he said, expression morose. "But the wine is unobjectionable."

The wine probably wouldn't help his dickey tummy either, but Hermione again bit her tongue. He deserved to salvage *something* enjoyable out of the experience, even if he paid for it with a sleepless night.

"I suppose," she said between bites, "you might want to know why we're here in the first place?"
Severus grunted.

"I'm guilty -- presumably -- of falsifying Ministry reports to the ICW," she said. "Increasing the reported birthrate of normal children and minimising the figures on still- and squib-births. Not cricket, I'm afraid -- they take the reports seriously, so it's an international offence, not only one against the Ministry."

"Isn't that what Corcoran directed you to do anyway?" Severus murmured, eyes still fixed on his plate.

"Yes, and I never did, so I should be able to wiggle out of it. I knew he was changing many of the reports before he signed and sent them off, so I had them -- and copies of them -- date- and time-stamped before they went to his office. Moreover, the originals are charmed to reveal any jiggering that he did with the figures, so --"

"And you think he wouldn't have noticed that?"

"It's not a standard encryption, it's... well, it's something Fred and George and I worked up, a very neat and sneaky little trick. He didn't catch it, because the figures that appeared in the ICW's last two annual reports are different to what they should --"

"This charm," Severus interrupted her, bothering to glance up and looking marginally more interested, "I don't imagine you've considered protecting your part in it?"

"Thirty-three percent share in a legal patent. Assuming the boys don't determine it's more profitable to leave it, erm, unacknowledged, for nefarious purposes -- then my share drops to fifteen percent, as I'm a silent and protected partner and they'll be taking on the risk of exposure entirely."

He snorted. "I thought they'd gone legitimate except where the Ministry was concerned."

"They have, mostly. I think they just like to keep their hands in sneaky business for the thrill of it. Anyway, the accurate copies are among the things I sent to François. I've sent him all my drafts and the statistics from St. Mungo's to back those up with, too, and to compare with the originals...."

She paused, not really wanting to go on to the next bit: she anticipated a truly awful tantrum on Severus' part. (At the moment his attention had wavered, and he seemed more interested in pushing the spaetzle about his plate than what she was saying.)

"Don't you want to know?" she prodded him. "I mean, you're going to be accused of something, so --"

"What did you do?" he said warily. "What horrific bloody conspiracy did you involve me in?"

"You gave me the idea, actually. You've sold illegal potions to an undercover member of the FAS. Very illegal ones -- Liquid Imperius and Eternal Sleep."

His eyebrows shot up. "How, when and where am I supposed to have done this?"
"In Calais, January fifteenth -- that would be a Monday -- at about eleven o'clock in the morning, and in the Muggle part of the town, no less. It was definitely you, they made a precise visual identification."

"You know bloody well I --."

"Um, this is the part you'll really hate," she admitted, and shot him an apologetic look.

His brows knitted, and then he glanced upward, eyes wide. "Hermione --"

"You got a bit careless on New Year's Eve, when you... when you were distracted. I found a hair in the bath-tub the next day...."

His cheeks flushed, and he looked ready to lay into her: she steeled herself for an explosion -- one that never came, for he bit his lips and held it in. (He looked more likely to implode. She didn't see that often.)

"Who brewed it?" he finally managed.

"Fr-- sssomebody whose French wife quite coincidentally went across to visit her family that week."

"Is there any mischief those two don't indulge in, much less involve their families with?" Severus asked her, face sour.

"Of course -- they wouldn't actually brew those potions. Unctuous Unction and a sleeping draught were all they were, totally harmless, so when the evidence is tested the ICW will find they've only got you for intent to sell. And for, erm, adulteration or false advertising or something since they were fiddled with to look as though they were proper. And there may be one or two French Substance laws you broke along the way, but, uh...."

"Merlin's bloody...." Severus muttered, propped his elbow onto the table-top, and covered his eyes with his hand.

"It was only the one dose of Polyjuice, and Patrice -- Fred's wife -- did it herself, so you needn't worry. I really think she's trustworthy if Fred married her."

He was silent for a very long time, and then his shoulders began to shake.

Oh, damn. Jesus Christ, Hermione, you've made Severus Snape cry. He's already depressed, and now you've done something so horrendous that he'll never forgive you....

"Let me --" (snort) "-- let me try to understand this," he finally said, hand still clamped over his eyes. "I'm supposed to have sold two quite illegal potions -- but not really, as they weren't as effective as they ought to have been -- in Calais --"

"Yes."
" -- on a Monday morning --"

"Right --"

"-- during Term-time, in fact during Third Period when I was almost certainly --" (snort) "-- teaching Wit-Sharpening Potion to a room full of Fourth-Year dunderheads --"

"Yes, right --"

"-- when there is no bloody way I could Apparate there, being restricted, and could not possibly have got there by broom -- broom-governor or no -- as there wasn't enough time to fly to Calais and be back in the ten-minute break between classes. And the same with flooing, presumably, as the trans-Channel connections are restricted and I should have been stopped on the British side."

"Exactly. Very careless of the FAS -- they lost you before they could make an arrest, and they didn't bother to check your alibi before turning the paperwork over to the ICW. And I suspect it sat in someone's Incomings box for a very long time before it was sent on, in any case."

"Thought it through with both hands for a fortnight, did you?"

"Not really. Working in a bureaucracy tends to give one ideas along those sorts of lines.... Are you [laughing] at me?"

Severus snorted again -- more a mixture of snort and chortle, actually -- groped for his napkin, wiped at his eyes, and finally sat upright again. "Of course not," he said, after taking a deep breath: he kept his eyes downcast, though, as if looking directly at her might set him off again. "No, I've absolutely no reason to laugh at what amounts to an air-tight alibi. Although the word 'overkill' springs to mind."

"Severus --"

"I'm not complaining. I'm damned grateful, however, that you didn't acquire such skill while still at school -- there would be a great many more unexplained events."

"Really? How about...."

"What?"

"No, never mind. You're probably still in a frothing rage about that one."

"Black's escape? A Time-Turner."

"McGonagall tattled --"

"No, she did not. That was Albus Bloody Dumbledore giving me a taste of my own medicine by dropping hints -- 'suggesting that so-and-so are able to be in two places at once', indeed. I thought of two possibilities, and as I didn't think you'd muck about with Polyjuice quite so soon again...."
"You checked the ingredients stores to be certain, didn't you?"

"Bloody right I did, straight away. And to be fair, it took me a few days longer to accept the alternate explanation."

Hermione fumed over that for a moment, and tried to ignore that Severus seemed unable to keep his lips from quirking upward.

"Anyway," she finally said, "you should be in the clear in short order. My case will drag out rather longer, I'm afraid."

"Ours, once they find out how deeply involved we are in the real matter. So they have your drafts, they can pull the originals from their own archive.... McGonagall will have sent DeLaine the Mangel and Mortars contract, the Azkaban data, and memos last night, as well as my notes from Bluett's consult and the more interesting bits from Cane Hill."

"Right, and he's already got my copies of the Ministry documents and.... Oh, bloody hell," she whimpered, disgusted with herself, and tossed down her fork: it pinged off the edge of her plate and landed on the floor.

"What?" Severus said as he bent to retrieve the fork and wiped it clean with his napkin.

"Ron. Flaherty's letter, the stuff we found at Arden --"

"On its way," he assured her. "Fred was watching your flat this morning, and I told him to have Weasley get it to McGonagall."

"Thank God. At least one of us was thinking clearly."

"I wouldn't say that," he muttered as he handed her the fork. "There will be a delay, but it will get here eventually."

She almost said something to reassure him -- he seemed on the verge of back-sliding into self-recrimination for losing his composure and setting the arrest in motion -- but she knew it wouldn't help in the least, not with him. The only thing that might help would be making a persuasive argument in front of the judges and getting them cleared....

So she just have to make certain that she did.

They finished their meal in silence, Severus rising once to request that the guard replenish the fire, and a second time to let him know they'd finished their meal and the remains might be removed.

It was only then, after the guard left, that she remembered the article in the *Prophet*.

"Oh, cripes," she said, and scurried for her handbag, still in the bath.

"What --" Severus called after her, halting halfway down in one of the chairs by the fire.
"No, no, nothing's wrong. Did you see yesterday's paper?" she shouted over her shoulder.

"No."

"There's a very interesting bit," she said as she left the bath and brought the paper over to him, flipping through to the right page. "I think it's the real reason they arrested me."

She folded the paper in quarters, handed it to him, and leaned against the chair-arm, pointing the article out for him: he squinted at it and held the paper at arms' length, and then grunted as he skimmed the text.

"Possible," he admitted. "I think it more likely that they meant you to be an example, though. If they really thought you were involved in spying on them...."

"I'm not sure they weren't, actually. Bretchgirdle asked about the spells I'd cast recently -- they did a Priori on my wand. I'd figured out innocent explanations for everything except the Obliviate...."

"So they might have intended to charge you with something minor first, and keep the other secret? Also possible. If Fudge heard about Cane Hill, he should have got suspicious. I doubt we'll ever know for certain, now."

"Ah." She let her hand drop to his shoulder, and kept it there despite the subtle flinch of muscles under her fingers; and then she suggested, as casually as she could manage, "It's been a bloody long day for both of us, and we'll need to be on our toes tomorrow. Are you coming to bed?"

He started to speak, paused, and then said, "I think I'd like to read the whole paper through. Best give the wretched food --"

"-- time to settle, right. Promise me you won't try to sleep in the chair, will you? I don't want you uncomfortable and grumpy on top of everything else."

He snorted, muttered "No, I'll be sensible," unfolded the paper, and turned back to the front page.

"Good. 'Night, then," she said quietly, bent to kiss his temple (ignoring the faint greasiness of his hair and the acrid smell of potions in it), and made for the bed, not bothering to remove her damp robe. She was determined, though, to make sure he followed through on the promise: so she fought sleep as long as she could, even seeking out the lumpiest part of the mattress when she became too drowsy.

"Is the light bothering you?" Severus softly asked from across the room, after a particularly vicious tussle she had with the bed-clothes. "Pull the hangings closed."

"No," she lied. "Can't quite shut my brain down, that's all. And it's too cold over here, with just me," she added to try to guilt him into turning in. "The fire's not doing much, but it's something."

He didn't answer, but continued to read; and after a while Hermione couldn't resist any longer, and fell asleep.
Saturday, February 11th

When she woke, curled up in her usual, uncomfortable ball, she discovered that Severus had kept his promise: he'd closed the bed-hangings when he'd joined her, and they were snugly cocooned, their body heat conserved in the covers and hangings. It didn't hurt at all, either, that he had curled up behind her, and the blast-furnace that was his metabolism had warmed her back: and while spooning usually embarrassed her -- for it almost always meant he intended a morning shag -- he'd made no attempt to shuck her out of her robe, so she relaxed.

*Sex isn't an entirely disgusting prospect, actually. Here we are, stuck in a bloody prison with only each other for comfort and support....*

If she were entirely honest with herself, something familiar -- even sex with Severus -- would be welcome, and not in the least embarrassing. What *was* embarrassing, and more than a little surprising, was that Severus was already awake, and was smoothing her fringe back from her eyes: he stopped when he saw that she'd wakened.

"The guard knocked a few minutes ago," he whispered. "He brought your clothing. Breakfast in half-an-hour, and our barrister... or whatever they call him... will be here at nine o'clock."

"Right," she mumbled. "The bath's all yours for now. I don't think I've the skin to spare after yesterday."

He paused for a moment, managed a pained, rusty chuckle -- Hermione rather wished she could see his face for a moment, as she suspected he'd smiled as well -- and dragged himself out of his side of the bed and through the bed-curtains. She rolled to her back and watched him before the snow-reflected light in the room dazzled her eyes: she noted the ungraceful, shuffling little dance he performed as he unwisely put weight on his bad knee first, and the way he shivered and his scrawny, nude flanks clenched in the chill of the room, before he carefully pulled the curtains closed and stumbled toward the bath, leaving her alone in the warm, dark nest of the bed.

*Poor man. He's got to be terribly uncomfortable, in this cold --*

She stopped in mid-thought, puzzled, and stared through the gloom up at the canopy, piecing out the pattern woven into the fabric as her eyes re-adjusted to the darkness.

It was all thoroughly confusing, this see-saw of her feelings toward Severus. She hated how they'd begun; she hated herself for the way she'd trod rough-shod over his feelings, and the way he'd taken advantage of her idiocy. Nothing in the intervening months made either of those wrongs *right*, not even their work on a common goal, and yet --

*Hard to dismiss him as purely nasty and self-serving now, isn't it? Impossible to, in fact.... Well, let's not overstate this. You can feel sympathy for his physical discomfort without going overboard and making excuses for him, or making him out to be better than he is.*
**But he's certainly far better than you anticipated, and so is living with him -- at least, now that you've realised there's more to it than simply making amends. And I think that's due as much to how he's changed as to you.**

No, two wrongs didn't make a right, but considerable good might still be discovered from an experience -- if one could be bothered to dig for it.

She'd wondered, once, if they might salvage something useful and rewarding from the whole bloody mess when it was all said and done: and she thought she had her answer now. They _could_ continue -- not as they were, perhaps: but now they'd got through the nastiness, and now that she thought she'd discovered the key to Severus' mind and behaviour, a marriage with him -- something like a _real_ marriage -- wasn't such an outlandish idea as everyone seemed to think. (Not the romantic kind, certainly, but then she'd always known Romance was highly over-rated.)

It wasn't as though either of them had anyone else clamouring for their attention and company, after all. She hadn't seen any evidence that anyone gave a damn about Severus, not as a partner and companion, and she _knew_ she hadn't anyone: Ron would have been it, and she'd passed that chance up quite willingly.

_I don't love Severus either, though.... But I certainly care for him in a very different way than I do Ron. Caring, respect.... Sex is still a thorny issue, but half the problem with that is my bloody pride. That I can fix, eventually. But the other half.... Well, we'll just have to see, won't we? Who's to say I'd feel any more... fulfilled with someone else?_

There was always the question of what _Severus_ wanted, of course. Hermione didn't imagine he'd give up the more tangible pleasures of having her about quite so easily as he'd threatened, but she wasn't going to make the same mistake and assume his willingness again. She'd just have to think of a way to bring the idea up with him, and in a way he'd find attractive and beneficial in the long term.

She stretched, yawned, and then laughed at herself.

_Getting ahead of yourself as usual, my girl. Maybe you'd better wait until you're out of this situation first, before you go plotting out the rest of your life. You _ought_ to be worrying about what your Counsel will say...._

She decided to brave the cold, as breakfast would be arriving soon: so she crawled out of bed, raced for her clothing -- the guard had lit the fire and put the clothes on one of the chairs by it, and that side of the room was far warmer -- dressed, made up the bed, and scanned the pages of the _Prophet_ that she'd missed before....

Severus had beat her to the crossword, damn it. But he'd been stumped toward the end, because he'd bolloxed Twenty Across -- _Cupid's arrow_ -- for which he'd answered "bolt."

She smiled as she scrabbled for the pencil he'd left on the table, and marked over his mistake, in heavy strokes, "_love_"; the remaining, partially-completed words scrambled amongst themselves, filled in the missing bits, and a tinny little trumpet heralded success.
That was a good enough sign for Hermione, whether she'd always despised Divination or not. There was something to look forward to at the end of their troubles; and while a life with Severus didn't promise to be the easiest path, she sensed that it might be very satisfying in its own way.

Well, it is love, of a sort, just not a very conventional kind. Never could turn down a challenge, could you? There will undoubtedly be times you'll regret it.... But I don't think it will ever be boring.

The guard announced himself, brought in the breakfast-tray, and left with a courteous nod to Hermione; she hid the Prophet under the chair-cushion, knocked on the bathroom door, and called, "Severus? Breakfast." He mumbled a response, and she returned to the table and poured herself a cup of coffee -- and then stopped and wrapped the pot in her napkin as well as she could, as there was apparently no such thing as a coffee-cosy.

He'll hate having coffee instead of tea, she thought, but at least it'll still be warm....

The bathroom door opened eventually, and Severus -- damp hair clinging limply to his face and head -- took his place across the table from her, and managed a weary sneer at the sight of the coffee-pot before giving in and pouring a cup: Hermione hastily lifted her own to her lips to cover a smile that she knew bloody well wouldn't be appreciated.

She looked forward to seeing that familiar sneer across the breakfast table on a more regular basis.

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Their counsel -- a distinguished, older wizard with only a faint hint of an accent, who introduced himself as Wilhelm Schell -- called shortly after the breakfast-things had been cleared; he laid a parchment and Dicta-Quill for note-taking on the table, drew up a chair, and got down to business.

"So," he said, and adjusted his pince-nez, "we have quite a pair of problems, here --"

"Before we proceed," Severus interrupted, and crossed his arms over his chest, "I'd like a clarification. Are you here as a representative of the ICW, or are you here to defend us?"

Schell's brows shot upward, and then he smiled and nodded his head. "I understand completely. The Wizengamot does not allow the Defendant counsel, correct?"

Severus nodded.

"The ICW procedure is quite different.... Perhaps I should explain more fully?"

"Please," Hermione murmured.

"The Confederation itself is a larger body, as you know, with two seats granted to each member-nation. The judicial panel which will hear your preliminary hearings, on the other hand, is comprised of only five judges. Each is elected to a three-year term, with alternates in reserve to allow for recusal -- so, for example, while Bertha Snodgrass is currently on the Judicial Council,"
he said, "she is prohibited from judging the merits of the charges against you. She will, however, be allowed to sit in on the hearings, as one of your representatives."

"That doesn't answer my question," Severus said, voice sharp: Hermione very nearly reached for his arm to calm him, thought better of it, and kept her hands to herself.

"I'm getting there, Professor Snape," Schell said patiently. "I hoped to make two things clear -- firstly, that these are preliminary hearings. Defendants are not brought before the larger body for trial unless it is determined that the charges have merit, or if the Defendant admits guilt. Secondly, that you need not fear any prejudice, either way, from the British seats -- nor from the ICW, as Defendants' Counsel is drawn from a pool of independent... barristers, I believe Muggle English call them?"

"Right," Hermione said, and added under her breath, "a far more civilised system than ours, as far as I'm concerned."

Severus' fingers twitched on the chair-arm: Schell smiled again. "I believe the ICW has encouraged reform in the Wizengamot for several decades, but alas, it's fallen on deaf ears. And before you ask," he added to forestall Severus' next, inevitable question, "Defendants' Counsel are paid from a portion of the national dues submitted to the ICW -- not directly, but through a well-respected firm of Swiss solicitors. It's far less than we make in private practise, of course, but then we regard it as part of our civic duty. I was chosen because of my fluency in your language... but if I might boast, I have an enviable record. Now, is there anything else at all --? No? Good," he said when Severus gave a grudging shake of his head, and he pulled a stack of papers from his satchel. "It appears that the lesser of the charges are those against Professor Snape, namely that you are accused of selling illegal potions across national boundaries --"

Severus gave an impatient snort.

Oh, bloody.... Let's just cut to the chase.

"That isn't why we're here, actually," Hermione blurted out.

"Hermione --" Severus muttered.

"No, Severus, there's no need to muck about with these, really," she said. "Herr Schell is in a far better position to know how to proceed if we tell him everything up-front. Severus wasn't in Calais that day, he was teaching at Hogwarts," she explained to Schell, whose eyebrows had shot up again. "It's a spurious charge. I arranged the whole business, start to finish, by sending in a... a doppelgänger, if you like."

Schell's lips quirked upward. "May I?" he asked delicately of the Dicta-Quill, and Hermione nodded (much to Severus' disgust). "How, and to what end?"

"By Polyjuice, and done by a person I'd rather not involve at the moment. I did so because he's on the Ministry's Flight Risk list," she said, raising her voice a bit over the scribbling of the quill. "I needed a way to get him out of Britain, one which wouldn't have the aurors chasing after us, not to
mention giving him -- both of us -- protection from Ministry reprisal. So I manufactured a reason for his arrest."

"You feel you're in danger of reprisal?"

"We will be. We've some charges of our own to make with the ICW, against two highly-placed people in the Ministry."

"I'd speculate, then, that the charges against you," Schell said, flipping through his papers and finding the Hermione's arrest warrant, "namely, falsification of ICW required reports, are also false?"

"Yes and no. The damned things have been mucked about with, but by Dennis Corcoran, not me. And I've the documents to back that up. Or will have, rather, when --"

Severus suddenly cleared his throat and kicked her shin under the table.

"-- Ow --"

Schell gave Severus a reproachful glance. "She'll have to tell me eventually, you know, or I won't be able to defend her capably -- and I shall have to do that before any claims you make are taken seriously. Your case seems straightforward, given that you presumably have witnesses to your actual whereabouts --"

"Quite right. But we've absolutely no proof but your word that your allegiance is to us," Severus said, voice taut. "And I should prefer not to implicate anyone else before we're certain of you."

Schell looked irritated, and then shrugged. "For what it's worth, it's not necessary for me to disclose that information -- although it would be helpful to demonstrate what we call the 'chain of evidence.' I can make an educated guess, however," he added, and flipped through another document attached to Hermione's warrant. "François DeLaine, perhaps?"

"Right," Hermione said promptly, and ignored Severus' groan. "He's only given the ICW the documents that support the charges?"

"I believe so," Schell said, and ran a gnarled finger down what appeared to be an evidentiary list. "No, nothing extraneous here. DeLaine, DeLaine.... Has he a cousin in Austria, a prosecutor? I think I've argued a case against a DeLaine."

"I really don't know."

"I shall have to inquire," Schell said absently, and nodded to the quill, which quickly underlined the statement and dotted it with a pulsing, urgent little exclamation mark. "That might expedite matters if your DeLaine is being cautious. So, our first course of action is to investigate your husband's alibi, and to acquire the documents from DeLaine that prove you are not responsible for the falsification."
"I should think so, if that's what it takes to get the other matter heard."

"Ah, yes," Schell said, removed his pince-nez, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "I admit, I'm intensely curious as to what might require such drastic measures on your part."

*Oh, cripes. Here we go....*

There was nothing for it, though, but to get it all out -- never mind that she'd have to go through the bloody litany all over again before the ICW Judiciary. Assuming, that is, if she were lucky and Schell got them cleared of the charges.

"Best start at the beginning, hadn't I?" she said lightly. "In late 2001 I was appointed to my... former position, ICW Consultant for Wizarding Populations, Britain. It seemed straightforward at the time. The statistics were just beginning to show a significant problem with the health of the population -- with squib births and birth-defects, specifically -- but the trend wasn't initially terribly alarming. It wasn't yet proven that it was a genetic problem, rather than environmental."

Severus shifted in his chair, and she risked a glance at him: he actually looked *interested*, and was giving her all his attention.

*Oh, right -- I've never told him this bit, have I?*

"By mid-2003, however, it became clear -- to me, at least, and to two researchers at St. Mungo's and one at the Ministry itself -- that it *was* a genetic problem. The ICW came to the same conclusion independently at about the same time, and that's when most nations began to investigate the genetic implications and research potential solutions. There would be a long fallow period while everyone caught up on the field, of course, and in which some more social fixes would have to be resorted to -- but the general consensus among my fellow consultants was that we'd see progress within five years, as most of the governments involved admitted that Muggle research and technology had far outstripped us in that area, and that they ought bend enough to take advantage of it."

She paused and took a deep breath before launching into the most galling part of the story. "The British Ministry, however.... Well, you know recent history, and I'd be surprised if the ostrich-head-in-the-sand attitude that let *that* happen isn't notorious on the Continent. General British prejudice against all things Muggle isn't as isolated as one would like to think, particularly when it involves spending a great deal of money, and admitting that there are things Muggles are more adept at than any wizard can accomplish with magic alone.

"When the researchers and I made recommendations about the course we felt the Ministry ought to take, our reports were sent back with instructions to 'tone down the language.' They felt the problem could be solved through 'less extreme and wholly magical measures.' We simply couldn't seem to make them understand that this was not a matter of morals or turpitude or preference, but a real, biological crisis that couldn't be solved with current medimagical means. We said, look, we have what amounts to an epidemic among our children -- something that requires an immediate medical response for which we're not equipped, at the moment -- and they wouldn't hear of it. We were all flying off the broom-handle, and so, frankly, was the ICW, and it wasn't our job to pander..."
to the ICW. When we insisted that the statistics bore out our conclusions and that magic alone was wholly inadequate to dealing with the problem, we were reprimanded and punished."

"How?" Schell asked softly.

"The researchers at St. Mungo's were demoted -- those would be Harold Featherpenny and Gerald Hoskins. They're in separate areas, now. Featherpenny is on the evaluations board for new Healers, and Hoskins does the round of apothecaries, testing the efficacy of potions. The Ministry man, Lakewood... I never did find out what happened to him, he simply disappeared. As he was the most vociferous of us, I imagine they couldn't shut him up that easily."

"And you?" Schell prodded.

"I was put on probation," she admitted quietly. "As a bean-counter I was the least of Fudge and Corcoran's worries and -- though they didn't say as much -- it would have been a bugger to explain to the ICW why they were sacking me outright, since it's a mandated position. I was told in no uncertain terms that I was being given special 'consideration,' as they imagined my stridency was due to bad nerves left over from the war, and they felt it would be a pity to let go of someone who'd served the population so well in that. It was also implied -- not by Fudge, of course, but by Corcoran -- that I'd be turned out without any recourse to what little pension I'd acquired, and that I should find it very difficult to get another job in the Wizarding World. Anywhere, because rumours will fly, you know. People might get the idea that I was mentally unstable, or a huge troublemaker."

That great, leaden lump of a statement kept them silent for a moment before Severus noted, "Not like you, to take something like that lying down."

She smiled. "I didn't. I wrote four bloody resignations over two weeks, and binned all of them before I calmed down. But the more I thought about it, the less it made sense to walk away from the problem.... Well, all right -- it made a good deal of sense for me personally, or would have if anyone were hiring higher-level Arithmancers. But I decided to stay and watch because I felt it possible that Corcoran -- I wasn't convinced then that Fudge was as deeply involved -- would do something harmful to the population, something even worse than ignoring the problem.

"We weren't a careless or stupid lot, not at all. All three researchers were bloody good at their jobs, and what I know of Genetics -- what I made it my business to know, after the initial results were questioned -- convinced me that they, and I, were right, especially as the other Consultants told me their governments came to very much the same conclusions. So the problem was with Minister Fudge and with Corcoran. It wasn't too wild a speculation as it was totally in character with their previous behaviour to ignore and discount anything they found threatening or distasteful.

"Instead of sucking it up and putting the time and money into concrete and effective research and potential therapies, they piddled about. The budget for the Public Relations department -- the Propaganda Department, really -- trebled overnight. All that muck, the slogans and the 're-education' efforts that they started after the war," she said with a glance to Severus, not bothering to disguise the malice and disgust in her voice, "that was their big plan, only more so. I think they hoped everything would turn itself around on its own. But it didn't, and then the ICW started taking a more active role in overseeing progress, and it hit the government where it hurt most -- in the
pocket-book. They couldn't very well go back to the research, as that would mean admitting they were wrong. That's when Corcoran began mucking about with the statistics in the reports, in September of 2005, to make things seem better than they are and to lower the fines."

"And last year they passed the Mixed-Marriage laws, correct?" Schell murmured.

"Right. I'd very much like to know why the ICW hasn't objected to those, by the by."

"Sovereignty issues in general, I should think. If it does not violate the Statute of Secrecy in any way, the ICW tends to take a hands-off approach. They might suggest, but they won't impose something which doesn't affect all the nations."

"They don't meddle with each nation's penal system, for example," Severus added in a low rumble. "That's why the bloody Dementors are still used."

"Yes, exactly," Schell agreed with him.

"In any case, it's been getting worse," Hermione said. "They've resorted to detaining individuals they feel will flee the country, as that will, supposedly, deplete desirable traits in the genetic pool. They've greatly restricted access to contraceptives, and punished people who try to get round the laws. They've got a lottery scheme going to pair people up whether they like it or not. And then, last December, we -- Severus and I -- discovered quite by accident that they've been developing a potion to coerce people into having children."

Schell perked up immediately. "A potion? Along the lines of a Lust potion?"

Hermione glanced at Severus, turning the narrative over to him.

"Not quite that simple," Severus said. "There may be -- for we haven't seen it in practise yet, only the data from the trials -- a significant aphrodisic component, one with nasty side-effects, particularly for males. There is also a potential fertility-boosting component, although that ingredient hasn't been tested for effectiveness in wizards.... Or rather, tested in valid clinical trials."

"We think," Hermione said as she rose, pulled the Prophet from under her cushion, and turned to the article, "that they're getting ready to use it on the population. The Ministry had me arrested two days ago -- that's why DeLaine sent on the information for the false charges -- and it's possible that Fudge and Corcoran wanted me out of the way before news of this became widespread."

Schell took the paper from her and held the pince-nez before his eyes, scanning the article as Severus told him, "That's the story they're giving to the recipients, that it's a valid therapy which will cure the genetic deficiencies. In fact, all it appears to do is compel copulation with a view to increasing the birth rate, which will, of course, result in an increase in healthy births --"

"And of defects as well," Schell said, "which is a good reason to rid themselves of your wife, as she would continue to insist on accuracy, and probably make the connection between the new therapy and the defects -- even without knowledge of the illicit potion." He lowered both paper and pince-nez, looked at Hermione, and added, "What is puzzling to me... granting that I have yet to see your
evidence... is that this is so 
unnecessary. Why could they not accept the scientific methods? All the 
other member nations have. Do they hate Muggles that much?"

"I don't think it's hate," Hermione said slowly. "I don't think they feel anything nearly as strong as 
that toward Muggles. More of a pigheaded self-sufficiency. Hubris. And I know they resent the 
ICW for requiring compliance."

"It's the Isolationists they hate," Severus grumbled. "Corcoran certainly does. From what I've seen 
of his writings I'd say that as far as he's concerned, Pureblood intermarriage is the entire reason for 
the defects. He in particular seems behind the anti-Pureblood acts. It's a case of having a good 
opportunity to finally get the Isolationists under control as much as it is the Muggle issue."

"May I keep this?" Schell asked Hermione of the newspaper. "I should like to hold it as evidence of 
their intent -- assuming this therapy is indeed a fraud. Not that I doubt you," he added at Severus' 
displeasure. "Just that I need to keep an open mind until I've seen the other documents."

"Yes, keep it if it helps," Hermione said.

"Now, let me just look back through...." Schell mused, flipping through the transcript that the 
Dicta-Quill had produced. "You said.... You said you discovered about this plan by accident?" he 
finally asked, glancing at them in turn. "How did that happen?"

"A man named Martin Flaherty -- an executive with Mangel and Mortars, a potions manufactory -- 
became aware of the real nature of the potion," Severus explained. "He had access to the 
government contract for production of the substance and to an ingredients list. He hid duplicates of 
these and a letter leading to their location, and then...."

"It was very like the scenarios that I used to frame Severus," Hermione chimed in. "He travelled to 
Calais, intending to get a key to the hiding-place to someone who could expose the whole business 
-- but he couldn't before he was apprehended, as he was on the Flight list. We're... we're fairly 
certain that he deliberately set himself up to be killed, as a protest or for the publicity value."

"Suicide, actually," Severus interjected. "He had to act on it before he was able to get the key to his 
contact. A source in the FAS forwarded it to DeLaine, and he to Hermione."

"Those documents... aren't with DeLaine at the moment," Hermione admitted softly. "They're on 
their way, though."

"There are also notes from the laboratory where the potion was demonstrated to Fudge," Severus 
said.

"Is the laboratory still --"

"No, it was destroyed, unfortunately. But we have the names of the brewer and his assistant, and 
confirmation from their notes that it is the potion Flaherty meant."

Schell leaned back in his chair, looking more than a little stunned.
"Is it any use at all, or have we been chasing our tails for the last five months?" Severus pressed him. "What violations are present here, assuming the ICW didn't approve it in the first place?"

"There's no international law that directly applies, although my clerk might find something when he works through your statement," Schell said, thoughtfully twirling the tip of his beard about his forefinger; Hermione saw, out of the corner of her eye, Severus' hand clench on the chair-arm so tightly that his knuckles whitened, and she fancied she could hear a faint crack from the chair-frame. "However, there are statutes on the ethical treatment of member-nations' citizens, and foremost among these is freedom from magically-induced influence. It was enacted to restrict government use of all behaviour-modifying spells, like your Imperius, on the population.... It was meant to address things like potential voting fraud, of course, but the statute is very broadly worded. There's room for interpretation."

"And you think the Judiciary might feel it applies here?"

"I would," Schell said bluntly. "If they're not informing their patients what the potion actually does, then it's the same principle, and it's being used to benefit the government, not the population. But then, I'm not one of the justices," he added with a rueful smile. "I shall simply have to make the strongest case I can for you."

"And if you can't?" Severus challenged him.

"If I can't, then your case will be dismissed. There might be minor charges levied for making nuisances of yourselves, but I doubt that would go much beyond censures and a significant fine. The real problem for you would be your Ministry. They would probably file for extradition," Schell admitted, brows furrowed, "and I very much doubt if you'd wish to go back under those circumstances, would you? But extradition we can fight, as well.... Why don't we wait until I've seen the evidence before brooding over the worst-case scenario?" he suggested to Severus, smiling gently. "There is no point in worrying over that yet. In fact," he added with a glance at the transcript, "I think you'll have a longer... holiday than you anticipated, given the amount of material I'll have to examine."

Hermione imagined Severus was near aneurysm by now.

"Let me just.... Cornelius Fudge is Minister for Magic, of course," Schell muttered, and the Dicta-Quill scribbled away. "And Corcoran --?"

"Dennis Corcoran, Head of Wizarding Resources."

"Very good. I think," he said as the Dicta-Quill cleared itself away at a snap of his fingers, "that this will do for now. I shall apply immediately to reschedule your hearing -- a few days at least, until I have time to acquire the documents from DeLaine. In the meantime, I will supply you both with parchments and quills, and I would like you to write everything out in full -- anything at all that might be helpful with both matters -- as precisely as you can. And I'll see if I can't manage some other materials to occupy yourselves with for the duration."
"Change of clothing?" Hermione said under her breath, trying very hard not to sound as though she were whinging.

"I shall do my best," Schell said courteously as he stood. "For the time being, please calm yourselves, and try to stay in good spirits, yes? I will keep you informed of all developments."

Hermione saw him to the door, thanked him, and waited while the guard let him out.

By the time she turned back to the room, Severus -- who'd obdurately remained in his seat, and refused to say another word to Schell -- had risen without a sound, and was just shutting the bathroom door considerably more forcefully than the situation warranted.

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Needless to say, Severus behaved like a total, surly git for the rest of the day. She didn't blame him for being bored: they had absolutely nothing to do but sit about and glare at each other, although he would frequently break the routine by pacing the room and staring out the window at the mountains behind the castle.

Erm, perhaps I want to reconsider a lifetime commitment, here. It's one thing when he has classes, but when he has nothing at all to do on his hands? Excruciating.

A note and package came from Schell, just before dinner -- the package had been searched, of course, but everything seemed to be there, as he'd included an inventory.

Hearing rescheduled for Wednesday. I beg pardon for the reading material, but on such short notice,... I have also got permission for you to exercise in the courtyard -- separately, unfortunately, but that is better than nothing. More clothing to follow.

Schell

In the package were the promised parchment and quills, two nightshirts, toothbrushes and a jar of toothpaste, nicer soap and hair-wash than the ICW provided (but no antiperspirant, damn it -- Severus seemed to do without, but she wasn't used to doing so), and a few motley books, including a reprint of Artemis Nigellus' 17th-Century magnum opus Priscilla: a Witchly Lass and Her Randy Muggle Paramours; a thick edition of Shakespeare (in English); and Hesse (in the original).

Hermione hoped Priscilla wouldn't give Severus ideas. Parvati and Lavender had found some rather shocking things in it, especially in the very graphic illustrations.

"Bloody hell," Severus muttered in disgust, and tossed the Shakespeare on the table. (Priscilla, thankfully, followed it.) "Would've been happy never to see that hack again. What kind of tripe does the man think I would appreciate?"

"Oh, would you just.... Bear with it?" Hermione shot back, ending the statement with far less exasperation and more gentleness than she felt. "Schell's doing his best. We gave him quite a shock,"
after all. He thought it was a simple, straightforward matter, and we dumped a great snarly mess in his lap."

That earned her a glare; and then Severus snubbed Shakespeare -- and her -- in favour of quill and parchment, and spent the rest of the evening scrawling out his version of the investigation, while Hermione (who couldn't quite bear to think through everything again so soon, even though she knew she had a great deal more to write) curled up with Hesse, and struggled through the god-damned German as best she could.

*****

Hermione had mellowed a bit toward Severus by bed-time. All her frustration had been focussed on Hesse; and she'd taken pains to remind herself, often, that Severus probably had his friend Kingsley foremost in his mind, and feared going the same way despite Schell's assurances.

*What is it they say, anyway? 'Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean no-one's out to get me.'... All right, my girl. Your job is to be patient and do your best to keep him calm. And cheerful.... Well, that's impossible. How about optimistic?*

*No, still a stretch. Let's keep it at 'calm.' And pleasant. That's a tall enough order as it is.*

Severus shifted beside her, stretching out his bad leg, and muffled a grunt in his pillow before flopping onto his back.

*Aha. I'll bet his knee's aching again.... Got him where I want him.*

She wriggled closer, insinuated her torso against his, and burrowed her face against his shoulder: he tensed for a moment and then said, in a voice nearly as glacial as the air outside the bed-curtains, "I don't think that's a good idea as you aren't on the potion."

"Mmmm, I don't think it is either, and that's not what I meant," she mumbled. "I'm freezing." She cuddled her feet up against his to prove it, and caught a patch of bare shin.

"Merlin's bloody --"

"Look, you've got socks on, so you're much better off than I. You don't want me catching cold, do you? You're sure to get it, and we've no Pepper-Up. Or enough handkerchiefs."

He wrestled with that for a moment -- she could feel his jaw working, the muscles clenching as he bit back a retort -- and then he sighed and gave up, struggled to free his arm from between them, and after an awkward tussle, he slipped his arm about her shoulders and pulled her a little closer, muttering something about 'bloody inadequate fires.'

He meant 'bloody inadequate Liechtenstein fires,' she knew: he couldn't possibly mean his libido was dampened, not after all the demonstrations she'd had in the last two months. She rather hoped he'd give in, or forget his very sensible reason later, in the midst of his usual morning sleepiness and arousal.
Not like I'm at the most fertile part of my cycle, anyway. Might be worth the risk, to make him feel better.

She dropped off once she was thoroughly warm, with the steady, even beat of Severus' heart in her ear.

*****

Chapter 24: Wherein Snape indulges in stereotypic male insecurities; fears he has a rival of sorts for Hermione's affections (though why the bloody hell he should care, he can't decide); and he and Hermione face the ICW Judiciary.

Gutenberg Castle, the Courtyard
Tuesday, February 14th, 3:25 pm

The ICW security guard discreetly coughed into his gloved fist, the by-now familiar signal that Snape's second (and last) twenty minutes of daily exercise were over.

Snape glared at him, shoved his fists more firmly under his oxters, and rebelliously started another circuit of the barren courtyard. The gesture was ruined when he slipped -- he'd worn down quite a groove in the last two days, and sections had got icy -- but he recovered despite the damned knee, and ignored the fact that the bastard of a guard was probably sniggering at him.

Serves you right for putting your dignity in jeopardy -- what little there is left of it. No-one your age should act like a pigheaded idiot.

He knew he was behaving like a total berk (toward everyone, even Hermione), but he couldn't quite seem to control himself. He chafed at the inactivity (walking about the bloody courtyard didn't count, as it was totally pointless and mind-numbing); his stomach churned at the heavily-spiced sauces the Germanic types seemed to think essential to the honour and sanctity of their national haute cuisine, if one could bear to lower oneself to dignifying it as such; and, worst of all, Hermione was acting in a relentlessly patient and suspiciously affectionate manner. (Not that she'd gone overboard and done anything astonishing on the sexual front -- far from it -- but in the past two days she'd started to seize the odd and pointless opportunity to touch him: brushing fluff from the shoulder of his frock-coat or straightening his neck-cloth, for examples; and she'd taken to watching the level of coffee in his cup and topping it off the second he'd sipped any at all. Distinctly strange behaviour, even for a Gryffindor.)

I'm bloody glad she hasn't made any sexual overtures, actually. I don't feel much of anything at the moment.
In fact, the little wizard had yet to manifest any interest at all since they'd been abducted to Liechtenstein. He should have been disturbed at this had it not been utterly foolhardy to engage in sex: but he didn't imagine it would last long, given that they were sharing a bed and he seemed to find himself wrapped about her every morning, whether he wanted to be or not....

Well, should occasion arise, he should simply have to sequester himself in the bath (more than he already was doing, at any rate) and re-acquaint his good right hand with the little wizard --

*Cock, damn it, cock. When in Merlin's name did you start thinking of your cock in such disgustingly coy terms?*

-- and take care of the problem himself. He wasn't about to impose on Hermione, certainly not to initiate her into Greek love -- *absolutely* not after what she'd been through with that bloody examination, which had obviously disgusted her. (That was a last resort, in any case. They were two quite different experiences, both pleasant and/or mind-shattering in their separate ways insofar as he could recall of his sole experiment in buggery, but it had never made sense to Snape to use a woman the way one would a man. He might change his mind on that score someday, given a willing and adventuresome partner, but Hermione wasn't that person.)

Of course, if Hermione volunteered to coax him into the proper state for *oral* pleasure, that was another matter entirely....

*Not bloody likely.*

He put all thoughts of sex out of his mind. It wasn't so terribly difficult, as the mental image of Hermione's lips about his cock stirred not the faintest flicker of interest from his libido.

*And that's a bloody sad thing, when the thought of even an inept and inexperienced sucking-off doesn't encourage a man.*

It was worse than sad, it was *alarming.* But then, it must be the frigid air putting a damper on everything: even the heavy wool of the gift-cloak couldn't keep out the cold.

At least, he hoped that was all there was to it.

*What if it isn't?*

He hurriedly shifted his focus to Schell.

The bloody man hadn't sent them one blasted word about the status of their cases. He'd provided marginally better reading material, true (which Snape had already torn through), and managed acceptable clothing, if not the style Snape preferred -- had even demanded (albeit politely) their manuscripts on the investigation: but he hadn't bothered to send word on what the hell was going on, much less visit them again.
Damn. Damn, double-damn, and blast. If the bleeder's going to use our own words against us and
dares step into the same room with me again, I'll murder him with my bare hands, guards,
shackles, or no.

When he'd expressed more or less the same sentiment to Hermione yesterday, she'd seemed
annoyed with him, gave him a patronising 'Oh no, you won't,' look, and then smiled in a way that
could only be interpreted as indulgent, damn her.

There was something to be said for being known as a Death Eater proper, and not merely "former-
in-a-good-cause." People took you a damn sight more seriously when they thought you weren't
averse to casting the odd Killing Curse.

You'd think Schell could be bothered to see us sometime before the bloody hearing, at least. Or let
us know if it's been delayed further.

The guard coughed once again, far more overtly, as Snape rounded the final turn in the courtyard;
and rather than subject himself to the indignity of having a wand levelled at him, he ascended the
steps and (despite the shooting pain it caused him) viciously stomped his feet far too close to the
man's, in hopes of spattering the ridiculous bear-skin boots with grey slush.

******

Hermione was curled up by the fire when he was 'escorted' back into their room, and was -- yet
again -- combing out her blasted hair. She claimed she'd lost several of her hair-pins, and had to
work through it frequently to keep it free of rats' nests as it wouldn't stay in its knot. The last time
she'd gone through the time-wasting procedure he'd suggested, not unreasonably, that one of the
guards would likely be willing to dock it for her.

She'd reacted as though he'd demanded she cut off a hand instead.

Didn't mean it that way, damn it. I rather like it long and loose. It's just far more sensible to
shorten it if it's such a bloody nuisance.

"Still well below freezing?" she asked after the door was barred behind him.

"How should I know?" he shot back. "I haven't a bloody thermometer on my watch-chain, have I?"

She tensed, shrugged, and wriggled back round to stare at the fire, still combing away.

Damn it, man. Get hold of your temper. She was simply trying to make conversation -- never mind
that it was inane conversation.

He hung his cloak beside the door, noted flecks of slush on the hem, and went to fetch a wet flannel
to clean it.
"Yes, it's still bloody cold," he muttered after he'd returned from the bath, and blotted at the stains. "Well below freezing if... my knee is a decent indicator. And it usually is. Certainly colder than Hogwarts."

"Mmmm. Did you have a chance to try the heat-packs, before --?" she asked, voice soft.

"No," he admitted. "No time." (He managed not to express his general distrust of the blasted things, or that he now wished he had got round to them. No point in regrets now, though, as Schell would undoubtedly be horrified to have to shop for Muggle items, though he seemed to have access to Muggle literature.)

That in itself is odd.... Six or seven books he's sent, and only two wizarding books among them. Coincidental, or are they keeping us isolated from anything at all that would give us ideas?

Tired, knee aching, he had little choice but to take the other chair next to the fire, and to try to lose himself in the bloody Shakespeare.

"Schell will stop by at five," Hermione murmured.

He glanced up, and found her working at a snarl at the end of one lock. "Hasn't actually forgot about us, then?"

"Severus --"

"When did he deign to inform you of that?"

"While you were out," she said, and began to pull the comb through the full length of hair again, the snarl sorted. "He sent round a note. Other than that, it was a very peaceful forty minutes...."

Without you here was the unspoken end to that statement: he might have been insulted had he not already admitted to himself that he was behaving badly. It was one of her gentler jabs, in any case, and she hadn't resorted to them much in the past few days, so he let it pass.

"How fortunate we are that he hasn't forgot about us after all," he muttered.

The soft whisper of comb gliding through hair halted for a moment, and then resumed. "I wish you'd tell me why you're so mistrustful of him."

"I wish," Snape retorted, and gave up on the Muggle hack, tossing the book to the floor, "you'd tell me why you're not."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" she said, not looking at him. "He needs to know the truth about everything to help us."

"And if he's not loyal to us," Snape noted, watching the long, even strokes she made, and the way the light caught at the occasional strand of blonde amongst the brown locks, "then he has more than enough to damn us."
"Not without falsifying our evidence, and only if the ICW knew of and approved the potion," she reminded him. "I understand why you're worried and frustrated, I truly do, Severus. I just think we haven't a reason to mistrust him, not yet."

She was right in particular: Schell didn't seem shifty. He needn't have provided them with comfort items, for example, at least not after he'd got their accounts of the whole bloody mess. But Snape had always worked on the assumption that it was nearly suicidal to trust people in general, until given a very good reason indeed to do so.

That number of the Trusted Elect could be counted on one hand: McGonagall, certainly, and Arthur Weasley; Filch could be depended on to fulfil his duties as best he could, and to keep his mouth shut; Shacklebolt had proven his worth more than once; Alastor Moody, while overly paranoid even by Snape's standards, and although they were not on the best terms, could be counted on to take care of business without Snape fearing a betrayal.

Hagrid could not keep his gigantic blabbermouth shut to save his (or anyone else's) life, and so was disqualified. And Dumbledore....

No. Trusted in the one or two large things, but not in the aggregate. Not in the smaller, everyday bits.

Where Hermione fit into that scale, Snape was no longer certain. He had felt sure of her earlier, but that little trick with the Polyjuice.... His primary objection to it was that she'd lifted his hair (careless of him to leave it about, true) and must have hidden it from him before finding a use. That is was a use ultimately beneficial to him was sheer luck.

She should have warned me beforehand, he thought, mesmerised by her rhythmic combing. She should have known I wouldn't care for the tactic. She could have found another way.

Just as he could have found another way to free her from the Ministry, and one that wouldn't have landed them precisely where they were.

Blast. Would think of that, wouldn't you?

No, he supposed she'd done the best she could at the time, and with very few options. There was no sense in dredging that up and brooding over it now. And it had been a marvellously sneaky tactic, in the main.

She might have made a decent Slytherin, had she been Pureblood and more ambitious.

(Not that there weren't Muggleborn Slytherins -- including the most egregious example -- but as late as Snape's school-days, Slytherin House hadn't been particularly congenial to them.)

Merlin's balls, but she's holding up much better than I. Not her fault that I'm going all to pieces. She did very well in that bloody interrogation room, and she's very composed with the whole thing now.... I suppose I've taught her some useful things, haven't I? Impossible to make a Slytherin from
a Gryffindor, but I've drilled a good bit into her brain. She could accomplish a great deal with what she's learned, assuming we ever leave this damned --

"Whatever are you thinking about?" she asked, jolting him out of his brown study.

"Nothing at all."

"Liar," she said mildly, laid the comb on the chair-arm, and commenced the complicated weaving and folding that knotting up her hair always entailed. "You looked immensely proud of yourself, just now. What are you plotting?"

"Why should I be plotting anything? I believe you're the one who's done the majority of that recently," he said acidly: and then he reached over and plucked the comb from the chair-arm, pulled every bit of the combings from its teeth, and pointedly tossed them into the fire.

Rather than taking offence, Hermione merely smiled, her elbows above her ears as she wrestled the knot into place and pinned it. (The position did rather lovely things to her breasts, though he couldn't seem to take more than an academic interest in them at the moment.)

Why she should smile he couldn't guess: but he had the nasty feeling that she somehow knew precisely what he'd been thinking.

That didn't please him in the least.

*****

Schell appeared both exhausted and exuberant when he showed up, promptly at five o' clock. (Just as the annoying cuckoo-clock on the far wall hooted, in fact. Snape was determined that his last act in ICW custody would be to smash the damned thing to bits.)

"My clerk delivered the papers to the justices this afternoon," he explained as he took the straight-backed chair. "They will review them in the morning before the hearing."

"Just the charges, or the entire affair?" Hermione asked him.

"The entire affair, as the faked charges should be taken in the context of the whole. They have abstracts of your written testimony, and I will provide them with the actual transcripts if they request them."

"Do you think that likely?" Snape muttered. "Have they the authority to proceed on a totally different matter?"

"They do, and they may -- it will depend on their opinion of the strength of your evidence. Speaking of which.... I haven't yet received one part of it."

"Which?" Hermione asked, suddenly alert.
"The information from, er, Flaherty? The initial evidence that led to your investigation."

"Oh, damn."

"It should have got to DeLaine by now," Snape said, the hair at the back of his neck prickling.

"It hasn't, yet. I spoke to him earlier this afternoon, and he says he's received nothing else from your Professor McGonagall since her first delivery."

Snape cursed, added a "Bloody Weasleys," to cap it off, and tried to ignore the wounded look on Hermione's face.

"It's not absolutely vital for tomorrow," Schell hastened to assure him. "It will be for the other matter, but I'm sure we'll be able to track it down. It will undoubtedly take a few days to summon the necessary witnesses even if the justices do get straight on with it. I think... you should count on staying in Liechtenstein longer than perhaps you hoped."

"Merlin's bloody, fu--"

"It's to be expected, don't you think?" Hermione interrupted him before he could finish the unfortunate phrase. (Schell didn't seem concerned by it. Snape reckoned the man had heard far worse.) "We can't exactly pop back over there right away. We haven't the right identity papers and travel permissions, so we'll have to muck about getting those, assuming...."

She stopped and bit her lip.

"Assuming what?" Snape prodded her.

"Assuming the charges stick to Fudge and Corcoran," she admitted slowly. "If they don't, I can't imagine we'll be welcomed back, shall we? Even if we're thick enough to try."

Oh.... Balls.

He hadn't thought of that. He hadn't, and he should have done. The immediacy of the other problems had quite driven the possibility of involuntary exile from his mind.

"I shouldn't dwell on that," Schell said. "From the evidence you've presented, I think you have a very strong case."

"If the Wizengamot divorces itself from Fudge and calls for a new Minister, yes," Snape muttered. "If not.... There's no bloody law that says Britain has to remain in the Confederation, is there? Fudge could persuade them to tell the ICW to sod off."

"No, there's no law. But I hardly think a secession is likely to happen, do you? Law or no, the ICW can make it very unpleasant for dissenting governments. The economic sanctions alone could bankrupt Britain, with the member-nations' cooperation. If worse comes to worst," Schell added, disgracefully cheerful, "France has very liberal Immigration policies now. Skilled and intelligent
people such as yourselves, willing to do your part to help with the population problem.... I can't imagine you wouldn't be welcome."

Right. Bloody Gaspard's been at Beauxbatons forever, and even when he croaks he'll probably do a Binns and shut down that avenue. Who'll hire me other than them? Assuming I could stand to work for that monstrosity of a headmistress. Hermione should be all right, as really good Arithmancers are hard to find.

But that didn't cover the problem of willingness to 'help with the population problem,' Merlin help them. Snape wasn't about to condemn himself to raising spawn for the sake of political asylum any more than he was to assuage the Ministry.

"Let's cross that bridge if we come to it," Hermione said firmly. "In the meantime, what can we do to prepare for the hearing?"

"I have copies of your written testimonies here," Schell said, and drew two red-ribboned bundles of parchment from his valise. "I would go over them tonight, to refresh your memories. Other than that, I'm afraid there's not much to do but get a good night's sleep."

As if that's bloody likely, now.

"The hearing itself is fairly straightforward," Schell continued. "I've requested that Professor Snape's case be considered first. You'll be asked to identify yourself, and for your plea to the charge. Then I will present the evidence -- largely depositions from all those who dealt with you at Hogwarts on the morning in question -- and I will ask you certain questions to clarify. I'll ask Madam Snape to admit that she engineered the business, and why. Then the justices will cross-examine you, and with any luck, they will dismiss the charges against you immediately."

"Is that likely?" Hermione asked him. "And won't the French be allowed to cross-examine him as well?"

"Not in this case. You were quite canny, Madam Snape -- whether you intended it or not -- in having the transaction occur on Muggle territory. As such it's a violation of the Statute of Secrecy, and that trumps any charges the French might wish to bring against him. You, on the other hand...."

"My case is going to take a bloody long time, on both counts."

"I imagine so. And given that it is so intimately involved with the other matter, I suspect you will... be expected to remain here, in ICW custody. Otherwise I might be able to have you released on your own recognizance. You'd still have to remain in Liechtenstein of course, but not here in Gutenberg unless you wished. Which, come to think of it," Schell added slowly, "isn't necessarily a bad idea, in any case. You feared reprisals, didn't you?"

"That's hardly likely," Hermione objected, and glanced uncertainly at Snape.
"That depends upon how deeply your Auror Service is in the Minister's pocket," Schell countered. "Fairly extreme political... er, harassments are not unknown, although I don't believe any government has ever had the temerity to attempt them in Liechtenstein."

"Assassination, you mean -- call it what it is," Snape barked out. "No, it's not beyond imagining, but I think it unlikely. We have some allies among the Aurors, one of whom has a strong grudge against Corcoran -- though I can't guess his attitude toward Fudge."

"Good, good. I shouldn't take an ICW offer of protection lightly, however. Not until we know for certain how your government will react. Any other questions or concerns?"

"What if the charges stand?" Snape asked, determined to worm the worst out of Schell.

"Then," the man said cautiously, "you'll be detained indefinitely until the justices decide whether to sentence you to the full punishment. In your case, as the transaction occurred between two wizards, it could bring a penalty of two years' imprisonment at the ICW security facility in Vaduz. It's far less onerous than your Azkaban -- there are no Dementors, for example -- though you should not be allowed to practise any magic at all. In Madam Snape's case, however...."

"Yes?" Snape prodded, voice sharp.

"Her case is less clear. If the justices are convinced that she was not responsible for the misrepresentations in the reports, she will not be subject to ICW punishment. They may feel obliged, however, to turn her over to Britain for further prosecution."

"What?"

"She has, of her own admission, stolen highly-classified Ministry documents. It's a matter of convincing the panel that she was entirely justified in doing so, as it was absolutely necessary to prove the conspiracy and to demonstrate the potential harm to the population -- which is precisely what I intend to do," Schell said. "If I am successful and they agree that Minister Fudge and Dennis Corcoran are potentially guilty of gross misconduct toward and imperilment of the citizenry, they may well take her good intent into account."

Hermione didn't seem alarmed by the possibility, as Snape was: her expression remained calm.

"You're saying that my wife's freedom -- bloody hell, her life, given what they'll subject her to in Azkaban -- is dependent on the goodwill of five bloody people?"

"Their goodwill and good sense, yes," Schell admitted. "There are precedents that I intend to bring to their attention, of course. Albus Dumbledore... Hogwarts' last headmaster, yes? ...is a very good example indeed. He was charged with violating the Statute of Secrecy during the Grindelwald war - - collusion with the British Muggle government, informing them of some of Grindelwald's plans -- and cleared of it, over the objections of the British Minister for Magic. So there is a precedent for leniency when the intent of the accused is to prevent harm to the population, whether it is Muggle or Wizard."
"One thing at a time, Severus," Hermione murmured. "It probably won't come to that. I'd thought it all through and assessed the risk, really, I had."

"Hermione, you cannot tell me that you're not concer--"

She wasn't, though. Or rather, she was calm about it in a way that wasn't entirely natural: she really had anticipated that she might be sent back to Britain, and she'd made peace with the idea long before now.

It hit him then like the Express at full speed. She'd done it this way deliberately, turning in every bit of evidence from the start -- even the bits that would get her into immense trouble when the potion hadn't been administered to the public yet -- not knowing that they should have to put the plan in action earlier than intended, but in the event that they were able.

Directly against my orders, damn it. Damn, damn, damn her and her recklessness --

"You knew this was possible, didn't you?" he accused. "You knew you might be turned back over to them, and you went ahead anyway even after I told you I wasn't about to allow --"

"As the only other option was to let them dose people with that filth, yes," she said firmly, not bothering to avoid an argument before Schell, and not in the least apologetic. "I'm only one person, Severus, and it would be five years in Azkaban at most. Compared to the damage they'll do to scores of innocent men and women, it's worth the risk."

Right. Five bloody years in Azkaban, sucked hopeless by Dementors, and probably given special "attention" to boot if Fudge avoids prosecution.

He very nearly reached across the table to throttle her, and only prevented himself by wrapping his fingers about the chair-arms instead.

"It can't be helped now," Schell said quietly. "Frankly, I don't intend make it an easy decision for them -- that's why I wanted the cases presented in full context. I've even gone so far as to engage Wolfgang Blücher to testify about the feasibility of the potion, based on the notes you provided."

That was decent news, at least. Blücher was Bluett's equal in Potions, if not Bluett's better (but then he hadn't mucked about with Alchemy at the same time, as the old man always had). Snape shouldn't mind meeting the man, actually -- he'd never done, and had a sneaking admiration for him, given the translations he'd read of Blücher's journal articles.

"I've also prepared requests for warrants to seize the potion... or what you think may be the potion... from St. Mungo's and Mangel and Mortars," Schell added. "With any luck, the Enforcers will make the raids at the same time Fudge and Corcoran receive their summons, and Blücher will have time to analyse it. Assuming the justices proceed with charges against those two, of course."
'Assuming', 'luck', 'possibility'.... Snape wanted to beat his head against the hardest object to hand. Nothing was certain in life, true; and he ought be grateful that Schell was being cautious and forthright, rather than taking the piss and telling them everything would be fine. He simply wasn't used to handing his fate over to someone else, and he was even less thrilled that Hermione's, more tenuous than his own at the moment, was left to the persuasive argument of a man who hadn't proven himself (at least to Snape's satisfaction, as none of the guards would speak with him of Schell's reputation).

"And other documents at Mangel and Mortars?" he asked the man. "The receipt itself should be in the third-level vault, unless my contact was --"

"I spotted that in your account, and yes," Schell said, "that's one of the warrants. I've drawn up a document for a subpoena for Forsythe as well -- if we can locate him."

Hermione had gone very quiet and withdrawn. Snape hoped she stayed that way: he might be able to restrain himself from laying into her for her recklessness if he could ignore, just for an hour or two, that she existed.

"Well, I think that's all, then," Schell said. "Except...."

"What now?" Snape asked.

"Oh, nothing at all bad, quite nice, in fact. I received a parcel for you from Professor McGonagall. The guards have had to search it, of course -- they should be done by now -- and I just want to be certain they get it to you tonight. I'll see you tomorrow at one o' clock, at the court," he said, smiling as he rose and gathered up his valise.

"Thank you, Herr Schell," Hermione said, rousing herself. "We realise this is a rather larger project than you'd thought --"

"Yes, it is, but my dear lady, it's not something you should fret over," Schell said courteously. "I'm... appalled by the situation. Ethics don't allow me to say I approve of some of the steps you've taken, but I certainly understand why you felt them necessary. You needn't worry, either, that your cases are a hardship or that they haven't my full attention."

"I didn't assume otherwise," Hermione murmured as Schell bent over her hand.

"But perhaps your husband has?" Schell asked her, shooting a good-natured look of challenge at Snape.

Bloody fool. But quite correct....

Schell smiled at Snape's undisguised sneer. "He's very protective of you, isn't he? That's as it should be. Let's see, sir," he added to Snape as he shuffled toward the door, "whether the guards have finished -- and whether they've left the comestibles intact. What, may I ask, are 'CobbleNobbles'?"
Wonderful, the man thinks he's a wit. Add a twinkle and he might be Dumbledore's cousin—...Ye gods, Minerva sent CobbleNobles? She only breaks those out when she's going to ask you to do something awful and she expects you to fuss....

Bloody hell, she must think we're doomed.

Snape followed him to the door, waited until one of the guards opened it and let Schell pass, and then pushed through himself, ignoring the wand pointed at his throat.

"Nein, nein, das ist schon in Ordnung," Schell assured the man. "Wir brauchen einen Moment unter vier Augen, um uns zu beraten. Sind Sie fertig?"

Oh, bloody hell. And no wand to cast the translation charm.... Should have practised that one wandless. What the hell are they babbling about?

"Ja," the other guard said. "Nix versteckt, aber hierbei sind wir uns nicht so sicher." He glanced at Snape, and covertly showed Schell a copy of The Prophet, pointing to a particular article.

Ah. Oh. Must be something in there about us. Come on, man, prise it out of him.

Schell skimmed it, shrugged, and said, "Es spielt keine Rolle für ihre Anhörung. Ich persönlich würde es durchlassen, aber wenn Sie nicht sicher sind, sollten Sie es vom Aufseher genehmigen lassen."

The guard looked doubtfully at Snape, shrugged himself, and then handed parcel and paper to Snape and returned to his post at the top of the stairs; Schell shooed the other man off a few paces.

"Right," Snape said. "What do you think her chances are, truthfully?"

"I can't possibly quantify them," Schell said gravely. "It's foolhardy to do so, Professor Snape, I think you know that. For what it's worth, however, I feel confident that I can persuade the majority to consider the circumstances. Two of the five justices are moderates, one liberal, one very conservative. I anticipate the most trouble from him, and frankly I would counsel you to govern your temper in his court. He has rather an over-inflated opinion of himself, and unlike me is quick to take offence at any perceived disrespect -- no matter that it would come from concern for your wife."

"And the fifth?" Snape pressed him, refusing to apologise. (One was unnecessary in any case, as Schell seemed willing to attribute his testiness to a noble motive)

"Unknown to me," Schell admitted. "He is one of the alternates, and I've never argued a case before him. I'm rather grateful for the substitution, actually -- Snodgrass has always impressed me as an advocate of Minister Fudge, so we may well be better off."

Thank Merlin for small blessings.

"But if they extradite her --"
"I can appeal an extradition, perhaps delay long enough to see that she can be kept here as a material witness against Fudge and Corcoran in the other matter. After that, all will depend on the state of affairs in Britain." He shrugged, and added in an undertone, "Siquidem remittatur et atque fortunam adversam exspectes, multum potest fieri inter hunc et Londinium, quippe. Non suadeam aut adjuvem conatum fugae, sed noviores res facti sunt."

Snape puzzled through that as quickly as he could -- for his Latin wasn't nearly as comprehensive as he'd led Hermione to believe -- and worked out that Schell had said, in effect, 'Eh, she might always go astray between here and London if it doesn't go well. Not that I could help, mind you, but....'

*The sly old bugger.*

Snape's previously non-existent respect for Schell inched upward.

"Ego percipio," he muttered, and nodded.

"It's dreadful, simply dreadful," Schell added severely, switching back to English. "I've seldom seen -- in the Wizarding World, at least -- such reckless disregard for the rights of the citizenry."

"That lot bloody well better as well," Snape said as he turned back to the door.

Schell opened it for him, and added in a whisper, "Good evening, then. Do see that she rests tonight, will you? With any luck, she'll have to answer rather a lot of questions tomorrow."

"I shall," Snape said, managing to keep a distinct note of 'What the bloody hell do you think we'd get about, locked up in here?' out of his voice.

The door was barred behind him, and Snape was once again alone with Hermione: his annoying, bright, foolish, disobedient wife, whom he wanted simultaneously to shake until her teeth rattled loose in her head, and....

*Well, no, actually. I just want to shake her silly. Sillier, rather.*

He settled for dumping the parcel on the table, rummaging through it for the bits pertaining to himself, blatantly hogging all the copies of *The Prophet*, and ignoring her. The tactic worked for a whole five minutes until she asked, "Anything interesting?"

"Not -- yet," he shot back, not bothering to look up from McGonagall's letter. "Let me finish, will you?"

She didn't answer; but after a moment he heard her shift in her chair, and she pulled the parcel over and began to sort through it.

He indulged in another five minutes' sulking, and then -- as she hadn't interrupted again, save for the rustling of paper and a crunch or two (she'd found the CobbleNobbles, he presumed) -- he decided to reward her restraint. "McGonagall says she hopes all the things have arrived."
No answer from her for a moment, and then she said, "And what does she mean by that?"

"All the evidence, of course."

"Well, that's not good, is it? It hasn't. Arrived, I mean."

"At least she sent it off, so unless it's been lost.... Bloody Vector and her bloody friend, should have guessed."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Ah. Anything else?"

"Hooch hasn't let the buggers blow the classroom to bits."

"I'm sure that's difficult to manage."

He tried to glare at that, and found he couldn't quite manage it: his earlier anger with her seemed to have ebbed somewhat. (Well, what could you expect from a Gryffindor but reckless disregard for their own well-being? He ought to be used to that by now.) He settled for "You've no idea how difficult," tossed the letter to the table as Minerva hadn't included any other helpful information, and started on Friday last's *Prophet.*

Odd, that he felt much calmer about the whole bloody mess now (save for Hermione's idiocy). It was Schell's attitude, he supposed -- not that the bloody man would *help* with a more lawless method of keeping Hermione safe, but that he didn't rule it out as an option; and Snape felt better knowing exactly what the procedure should be tomorrow, and that there was an Appeals process in the event that everything went south.

*Hermione's right -- it is a more civilised process over here. I don't recall being told that there was any recourse.... Well, I wouldn't, would I? Barely understood a bloody word anyone said to me at the time.*

*I wonder why Kingsley's case went so badly wrong. Perhaps I didn't have the entire story....*

Hermione left him in peace for another three minutes, and then the CobbleNobbles came whizzing across the table toward him and nearly shot off the edge.

"I'll trade you Saturday's *Prophet* for three biscuits," she wheedled as he stopped the packet before it fell to the floor.

"No deal," he murmured, and peered around the edge of the paper. "In future, do *not* give away your major bargaining-point until you've actually got the concession in hand." And just to drive the point home he deposited the packet in his lap, shoved one of the disgusting biscuits into his mouth,
and returned to reading Page Three. He heard the beginnings of a protest — quickly strangled — and then a disgusted mutter as she pawed through the parcel once more.

_That'll learn you_, he thought sagely as he chewed away, and marvelled a bit at the sea-change in his emotions. He didn't feel in the least like strangling Hermione at the moment: if anything, he felt -- besides smug -- very nearly flirtatious, if not in quite what he supposed was the conventional way. He'd never had much patience with people who played hard-to-get, and always felt the tactic beneath him unless there were significant stakes and one-upmanship involved; but this situation was actually enjoyable.

Then again, there _was_ one-upmanship involved: proving to Hermione that he didn't approve at all of what she'd done, but couldn't be bothered to lose his temper about it, or behave as though he was unduly concerned for her... even if he was, and even if he wanted an apology without having to rage for it.

_How the mighty have fallen. Angling for attention and an apology from Hermione.... You're too bloody bored, old man._

He took pity on her eventually, flicked Friday's _Prophet_ across the table with what he hoped was a magnanimous expression on his face, and picked up Saturday's, the one the guard had had reservations about.

There _was_ something of interest in the bloody paper, after all: a tiny snippet in one corner of Page Two, with the header 'Ministry Employee Missing After Arrest.'

"Listen," he said, sitting upright. "'Unnamed sources at the Ministry have leaked information to this reporter regarding the disappearance of Hermione Snape, Consultant for Wizarding Populations --' Good gods, I wonder whose arm they twisted to get it published? ' -- who has not been seen since the afternoon of Thursday last. The sources claim Madam Snape did not return to her office on the Third Level after luncheon, and that her flat in a Muggle neighbourhood has been sealed by order of MLE.' The Weasleys are their source, no doubt."

He waited for a response, but none came: so he resorted to lowering the paper to gauge her reaction.

She was totally oblivious to him, still curled in a ball in the chair, with a drab night-gown -- one of Minerva's extras, judging by the tartan (he had, unfortunately, a passing and totally innocent acquaintance with Minerva's taste in such things) -- and was staring at a bit of parchment in her hand.

"What?" he barked out, irritated with her inattention, and only then noticed that her eyes and nose had gone pink.

"Nothing," she said, and snuffled, and clumsily shifted her bum from the chair and made for the bath, dropping both gown and letter in her haste.

_What the bloody --? How on earth could Minerva had stepped in it so badly?_
He waited until Hermione had closed the door to the bath, dove for the letter, and examined it.

It wasn't from Minerva at all: it wasn't even a proper letter, but a clumsy, hand-drawn and -coloured little valentine, of all things, complete with hearts and flowers, from Marsters, Snape saw when he checked the inner page.

Why, that cheeky little sod. How dare he send such saccharine dreck to Hermio-- to his schoolmaster's wife?

The disgusting little verse awkwardly calligraphed on the heart -- which had been altered, if the roughness of the parchment and re-painted red of the heart was any indicator -- was even worse than the gesture as a whole:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue.
All Gryffindors are brave,
But not nearly so much as you.

Oh, for fuck's sake. No wonder she's blubbering, with a sentiment like that.

The stupid boy hadn't been content to leave it at that, though: he'd scribbled a note on the inside.

Dear Madam Snape,

I meant to give you this this weekend, but you weren't here. I wasn't going to tell you who it was from, but Headmistress said you'd guess anyway and I might want to let you know some things.

We don't know much, but Headmistress said you and Professor Snape have gone away to do something very important and dangerous. Bingham says her dad says it's something to do with the forced marrriages, he thinks. So I thought I'd let you know we're all thinking about you and we hope your alright.

T. Marsters

PS please tell Professor Snape that I haven't spent much, and not to worry if your not back by quarter day. I know your the one behind it, tho, he told me. Thanks ever so.

PPS please tell Professor Snape that the Slytherins are really chuffed about what he's doing. Their boasting so much we want to hex them.

So that's why the little bleeder wanted to know if she'd be at Hogwarts every week-end. What a disgusting display of....
On the other hand, the boy's got possibilities. He's got unusually good taste in women for a crushing little bastard, even if it is presumptuous of him. And he had the sense to ask Minerva where we were, apparently.

He heard water running in the bathroom basin, put the valentine back precisely as she'd dropped it, and returned to the paper and the interesting article before she returned and caught him snooping.

The Auror's Service has confirmed that Madam Snape (nee Granger) was taken into custody on Thursday, but declined to divulge the charge, saying only that she was remanded to her husband's custody and released on Friday afternoon.

"Minerva being a sentimental twit, I presume?" he asked Hermione has she tottered back to her chair.

"No," she muttered. "Marsters, actually. And he wasn't a twit, he's concerned about us, that's all. I think it's sweet."

"Ah."

She would, wouldn't she? Blast it.

A Ministry employee since 2001, Madam Snape is responsible for liaising between the Ministry and the ICW in Populations reportage; her direct superior, Dennis Corcoran, was unavailable to comment on her specific responsibilities or why she might have been charged.

Ahhh, Bretchgridle moved fast. Only reason I can think of, that the bleeder wouldn't be crowing about someone else's misfortune....

"He says the Slytherins are acting like real pillocks about the whole business, they're so excited," Hermione added with a sniff as she tidied up the letter and night-gown.

"Well, they would," he said idly, ignoring egregious Gryffindor hyperbole: there was nothing at all wrong with boasting a bit. "Matter of House pride."

"D'you want to see it?" she offered.

He lowered the paper, and squinted at the nasty little valentine as she held it out for him. "Scansion's deplorable," he noted, refused to take it, and went back to the paper.

"Severus, he's all of thirteen or so. You're just narked that he appreciates Gryffindors."

Narked that he appreciates this particular one, I'll grant you.
Even he had to admit that it was peevish to be jealous of such a pitiful specimen as Marsters. He should worry about such a juvenile attitude, he supposed, but, tired of the introspection to which he'd already subjected himself that day, he went back to the article instead.

> What has alarmed sources most is that neither Madam Snape nor her husband, Professor Severus Snape of Hogwarts School, are currently accounted for. Inquiries with Headmistress Minerva McGonagall prove that Professor Snape left for the Ministry on Friday to investigate his wife’s arrest, and has neither returned nor sent the Headmistress communication regarding their whereabouts, a situation she claims is quite unusual for him.

> The Editor concludes that Madam Snape and her husband may be two more victims in a rash of unexplained abductions of Ministry employees dating back to the 2005 disappearance of William Lakewood --

"Merlin's balls," he muttered involuntarily.

"What?"

"Didn't you say that Ministry researcher's name was Lakewood?"

"Yes, why?"

"He's disappeared, all right -- literally. At least according to the writer of this."

"Are you joking?" Hermione said, bolted from her chair, and bent over his shoulder to read.

> -- and including Francis Makepeace, Cherry Reed, John Teddington, and Frederick Carlyle. Documents leaked to The Prophet indicate that the above persons were subjected to investigation or arrest by the Internal Affairs Division of MLE prior to their disappearance, as was Hermione Snape. An investigation of their specific cases, and of the Internal Affairs Division, MLE, is clearly called for.

"Oh, God," Hermione whispered.

"Did you know any of --"

"Teddington, he was Lakewood's assistant. I don't recognise the others."

"Bloody hell," Snape said, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, catching a whiff of warm sweet almond from Hermione's skin -- and just managed to stop himself from groping for her hand where it rested on the chair-arm, as she'd propped her weight on it. "They didn't have the sense to shut up and keep their heads down as you did, did they?"
"Lakewood didn't," she said. "He was livid, as I told Schell, and didn't mind who knew. I suppose Teddington asked too many questions after he disappeared. Do you think we ought to show this to Schell tommor--"

"He's seen it, the guard showed it to him before they let me have it. He's probably already putting out inquiries, I imagine."

"Oh." Snape felt her body shift, felt her eyes light on him, and her voice went a bit queer as she asked, "You've done an about-face on him, I think. Why?"

"Because he didn't bother trying to feed me tripe about the consequences," Snape muttered. "And because he dropped the silly-arse, excruciatingly polite Continental routine when we stepped outside."

_Not to mention that he didn't rule out a bit of skulduggery if things go badly. That is someone who's looking out for one's best interests._

"Told you to behave yourself tomorrow, didn't he?" Hermione asked.

He grunted, and Hermione stifled a snort.

"What about me?" she added softly. "Am I forgiven yet, or are you going to stay monosyllabic all night?"

No, she bloody well _wasn't_ forgiven: he felt it would take a very long time, and a favourable outcome, to get to that point; but on the other hand, it wouldn't do a damned bit of good to make her feel badly all evening. (Moreover, she'd guessed what had ticked him off so badly, even if she wasn't apologising, and had implicitly agreed that he had a _right_ to be upset.) He decided that a lecture on recklessness and disobedience could wait: the hearing would not, and she needed to be fresh for that.

He split the difference, wordlessly handing her back the biscuit-packet.

"That could be taken both ways, you know," she said, voice wry as she took it from him, stood, and moved back to her chair. "These are _awful_ -- they're even more sugary than Kimberleys. What does McGonagall see in them?"

"Could be worse," he muttered, ignoring whatever the hell 'Kimberleys' were. "Might have sent haggis. She adores it, and thinks everyone else should as well."

After four and a half days of German cuisine, though, he rather thought he had a better appreciation for good, plain Scots cookery -- oats, sheeps' stomachs, and all.

Hermione seemed content with his offer of truce: she settled down with the biscuits and worked through each newspaper after he'd finished them, and -- contrary to his expectations -- she allowed him a quiet dinner, undisturbed by nattering or game plans. (There wasn't much to plot, in any case:
walk in, tell the truth, hope bloody Schell knew what he was about and got them off with slaps on the wrist. Nothing to it, as long as he kept his temper.)

After dinner they both reviewed their testimony in silence until bed-time, and then took turns in the bath: he last, what with the need to sit up for a while to let the damned dinner settle.

He didn't join Hermione in their bed until she'd been asleep long enough to begin dreaming. She must have been for some time, in fact, as he was deep in the so-called erotica of Nigellus' *Priscilla* (he wasn't about to let Hermione know he read such trash -- and ineffectual trash, at that, as it didn't do a thing to rouse his interest), and her whimpers had got quite loud by the time he noticed.

*Oh, blast. Back to that, are we? She hasn't had one of those for at least a month. So her damned serenity all day's been a bloody front, then -- I should have guessed.*

He knew from experience that she would end up sobbing quite loudly, without ever waking herself up -- how she managed *that* he couldn't imagine as *he* always jolted awake in a terror-stricken sweat, and he envied her the deepness of her sleep -- and so he sighed, shoved *Priscilla* back to the bottom of the reading-pile, heaved himself out of the chair, and slipped into his side of the bed, carefully spooning up behind her. It had worked twice or thrice before, simply making contact between their bodies -- *cuddling*, he supposed some would call it, and sneered at the thought... or at least it worked until she would wake and realise how close he was to her. He couldn't tell why it worked, but only knew that it did, and as she badly needed a restful sleep tonight....

He reached about her waist and spread his hand against her belly, just under her ribs, and settled himself into the pillow -- *her* pillow, as he was too far over for his -- and tried to ignore the tickle of her hair against his nose, and that she'd used the almond soap again, and that the little wizard -- his *cock*, damn it -- appreciated the way she smelled, and was finally, at the worst possible moment, threatening a resurrection. (He'd have to investigate this odd connection between his nose and cock someday, he really would. Vector's scent was pleasant as well, but had never seemed to prick his interest in the way Hermione's did.)

Hermione stirred a bit, and wriggled back into his body -- not good for certain bits of his anatomy, under the circumstances -- but her whimpers eventually slacked off.

*Thank Merlin. Last thing I need is her frazzled, tomorrow.*

She fell into a more regular pattern of breathing and her limbs relaxed without him having to murmur any nonsensical idiocy about everything being 'all right,' and that she was 'safe.' Because she wasn't, really: and he was loathe to tell her that kind of lie, even if she shouldn't consciously remember it in the morning. He couldn't quite bring himself to move away from her, either, to allow himself a more comfortable sleep; and the last thing he remembered thinking clearly, before he dropped off with a crick already well-established in his neck and with his cock at half-mast, was *Oh my silly, stupid little girl, why couldn't you leave well enough alone? Wasn't the war enough, that you had to add this to your... to both our burdens?*
It didn't occur to him that there was no bite in the sentiment and name-calling: only pity, and an immense amount of regret.

*****

Wednesday, February 15th

Snape required another bath first thing the next morning. He elected for hot, to counteract the pain in his neck (not to mention the pain in his arm, which had gone quite dead from being snuggled up under his head half the night): cold might have been a better choice for other reasons, but on the whole he decided he'd put up with acting like a hormonal little wanker and give his glands an outing under his own power -- and so he soaped up and did what had to be done.

Hermione had, in point of fact, twisted in his arms in the middle of the night, and when he woke he'd found her twined about him, one leg thrown over his hip. She was still fast asleep; and while he hadn't before had any compunctions about taking an invitation even if she were unconscious of it, he'd seemed unable to bring himself to wriggling lower in the bed to do so, even if he intended to make certain that she was just as satisfied as he.

Strange, very, very strange. Not as though you don't have a.... Well, no. Back to legality versus rightness once again. Damned conscience.

(Or he would have thought that, had he not been intent on trying to convince himself that his hand and a bloody bar of soap were suitable substitutes for Hermione. They weren't, and his body tried to tell him as much, but he did what he'd done all his life in practically everything, and made do.)

What he did stop to think about, sinking further down into the water after a surprisingly disappointing and paltry ejaculation (considering how long it had been since his last), was whether he would ever again be able to touch Hermione properly, without feeling that disgusting sense of guilt.

He doubted it. He doubted it very, very much, even as he knew (now with proof, thankfully) that the guilt wouldn't interfere too terribly much with his... functioning.

Decency and shame are highly over-rated, really. Especially when they interfere with a bloke's sex life. Yet another thing Dumbledore fucked me over in.

He could live with shame and guilt, if need be. He'd done terrible things while a Death Eater, and come to peace with the necessity of them: he could do the same now, assuming there would be the opportunity after today. He could ignore his conscience, blithely go whither his cock led him, and
try to make it up to Hermione in other ways.... Except he didn't appreciate that approach, either. He was willing to admit that his body, like many mens', had a mind of its own: he was not willing to admit that it deserved supremacy over his mind, or over that blasted conscience. He wasn't some rutting animal without control of himself, after all.

He wasn't capable, in short, of justifying his earlier errors by excusing his behaviour with biological desires -- not needs, but desires. And what a bloody shame that was, that he'd done so from the first and laid himself open to this guilt and regret now, especially as --

Especially as you rather like her after all this mucking about, as insane as that sounds. And that in other circumstances....

There wasn't any point in going down that road. What was done, was done. Never mind that Hermione seemed to be warming to him (finally): he suspected it had come too late. (It never came too late in the pornographic drivel with which he sometimes amused himself: the female always, with varying degrees of protest, gave in at long last and submitted -- in a quite unconvincing manner, true, but still -- to the male, who unilaterally accepted credit for mastering and "enlightening" her.)

Odd. He didn't feel in the least the master of the situation, or of Hermione -- at least, not any longer. Which just went to show that Snape was entirely correct: all those bloody scribblers, whether romantic idiots or the most blatant smutmongers, didn't know one fucking thing about how people really felt and acted, and catered to the worst impulses of human nature without a single thought as to the consequences that real people had to bear.

He should have to think over the consequences for him and Hermione later -- much later, when they were out of all this, and when he wasn't sitting in a tub of rapidly-cooling water with the evidence of his lack of control floating amid the soap-scum.

Feeling much worse than he had before he'd relieved himself, he clambered out of the tub, dressed himself all the way to his frock-coat, and joined Hermione for breakfast.

"Are you all right?" she asked as he seated himself at the table.

"Fine," he muttered, and unfurled his napkin. "Why do you ask?"

"You woke me, when you got up -- you seemed rather stiff as you walked to the bath."

He ignored the potential for mockery in the statement -- she hadn't meant it that way, after all, she was still too innocent to play that sort of word-game -- and instead murmured something about sleeping wrong, and his back-muscles being sore.

"Oh. I hope you feel better," she said levelly as she poured him a cup of coffee. "I don't imagine the chairs in the court will be very comfortable."

Her solicitousness made him feel all the worse.
They were sent for just after eleven o'clock, and marched to a courtroom several levels below their tower: the bailiff (for lack of the appropriate German word, not that Snape cared) consulted with their guards, and Hermione was abruptly escorted off to an anteroom while he was ushered into the court proper.

The justices were seated on a high dais at the far end of the room, and looked to a man -- even the sole woman looked like a man -- like the most dried-up, sour specimens of wizard-kind ever produced. (Snodgrass, the British representative who'd been recused, was over in one corner, and glowered at Snape as though he were personally responsible for her temporary demotion.... Then again, he was.)

Schell stood at a table near the front, in a ridiculous robe and wig which did nothing at all to demean his dignity, and nodded a greeting as Snape took the Defendant's box.

"This court is in session," the eldest justice (judging by the length of his beard) proclaimed, and raked Snape with a jaundiced eye as the Dicta-Quill in the corner began to race across parchment. "Herr Schell informs us that your German is not... as we could wish, and so we've cast a translation charm."

It nearly killed Snape to say it, but he managed a "Thank you," through clenched teeth.

"Your name and nationality?"

"Severus Snape. British."

"Your occupation -- and," the old coot added disdainfully, "classification."

"Potions Master, Hogwarts School. Wizard First-Class, Magister First, Magus Second and Three-Quarters."

That shocked the bastard, though Snape wasn't certain whether it was because he knew the old system and knew precisely how he ranked, or that a lowly schoolmaster had nearly attained Mage First-Class. (Why he hadn't yet was a tale for another day, damn Dumbledore's rheumy old eyes.) He ought to have given the secret sign as well: that really would have put the old fart's knickers in a twist, thinking Snape might be a member of the Cognoscenti.... Though, in truth, the Cognoscenti was nothing more than a glorified club consisting of Mages and Mage-Elects, and Snape had declined to undergo any initiation which involved prancing about bare-arsed in nothing but a pair of Lapland reindeer antlers. (Snape knew there would be a good use for the sign someday, and so he'd winkled it out of Dumbledore -- though it had taken a disgraceful amount of whisky to do it; he just wasn't sure it was worth wasting on the bastard up on the dais, so he refrained.)

"The charge against you," the Elder said (once he'd regained his composure), "is Violation of the Statute of Secrecy, to wit, the sale of Illegal Potions upon Muggle soil. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Snape said coolly.
"You understand the severity of the charge, sir? It could only be worse if it were a transaction between wizard and Muggle."

I could hardly not realise that, arsehole. It's what you charged Kingsley with, isn't it?

"I'm aware of that," was all he said.

"Very well. Since this is the most serious charge and any ancillary charges hinge upon your guilt in this matter, we will dispose of this first. Especially," the Elder said with a glare at Schell, "as we discovered the case in totality to be rather more tangled than was originally represented to us."

Schell smiled, a particularly beatific and innocent one: Snape had the sudden impression that he'd found a harmless-looking -- but deadly -- viper in the midst of a rock-garden, and thanked Merlin that the viper was on his side.

"I do beg the court's pardon," Schell apologised, innocence turned to contriteness. "The evidence of the wider matter only came into my hands on Monday."

Hah. You knew Saturday. All right, I'll admit that he's a cagey old coot as well....

The Elder snorted, waved a hand, and stated his unconscious agreement with Snape with a "Go on, you old reprobate."

Schell smoothed the lapels of his robes, regained his gravitas, and turned to Snape. "Professor Snape, where were you on the morning of Monday, January Fifteenth of this year?"

"Where I've been nearly every Monday in January for the last seventeen years -- teaching a Potions-classroom full of idiots at Hogwarts."

Snodgrass huffed at that, and scribbled in a little notebook she pulled from her pocket: that would be winging its way to the Board of Governors faster than you could say 'Merlin's hairy arse.'

"Are you certain, sir?" one of the other justices asked Snape.

"Quite, and for all day. I breakfasted in the Great Hall from Seven to Seven-forty, prepared for class until Eight, taught the First-Years from Eight to Eight-Fifty --"

"Should we even bother to go through all this?" the female justice interrupted wearily. "You know he," she said with a jab of her wart-laden chin at Schell, "always has his hoops covered."

"We all read the briefs," a violently red-headed and -bearded justice added. "I vote we get on with it."

"Hand over the evidence, Willi," the Elder said waspishly -- after glaring at his juniors -- and "Willi" motioned to his clerk, who nipped around the table and deposited a huge stack of parchments on the edge of the dais. The youngest justice -- the red-headed man -- fetched them and passed them out among the other justices: each stack was nearly five inches thick.
"What are the blasted things?" the elder grumbled, staring short-sightedly at the topmost document.

"Depositions from the staff and students at Hogwarts, accounting for Professor Snape's whereabouts on the morning of the fifteenth -- the entire morning, and until his free period at about three o'clock," Schell added smugly. "I think you will agree with me that it is impossible for Professor Snape to have left Hogwarts and arrived in Calais in less than one minute, and the FAS report claims that the transaction and further observation of the perpetrator took up another thirty minutes. Not enough time for him to have returned without his absence being noticed, particularly - -"

"He might have left breakfast early," the red-headed man shot at Schell.

"-- As I was about to say, particularly as there is only one hour's difference between Hogwarts and Calais. Very good try, Raymonde."

"Apparition?" the Elder shot at Schell.

"He's restricted, unable to leave the boundaries of Britain under his own power. His absence would have been noted, even with aid -- and yes, I've had the British Overseas Apparition logs checked," Schell said rapidly, to cut off the Elder's next accusation, and his clerk trotted forward to deposit the proof on the dais.

"The period between classes?" Warty-Chin asked sharply.

"Accounted for, by students held back to clean up their messes."

*And thank Merlin there are more than enough of those, the messy little bleeders.*

"Time-Turner?" a nondescript, dark-skinned wizard with more hair than flesh asked.

"All British Time-Turners are issued by the Ministry, none are missing, and no-one at Hogwarts currently has access. Or had at the time, either."

(Schell's clerk was getting quite a work-out -- at each point, he had to pull the relevant documents and run them up to the dais. Snape could see a sheen of sweat already beading the young wizard's brow.)

"Woden's hairy pelt, then why did the FAS think he was in Calais?" the Elder bellowed.

"Because to all appearances he was. *Polyjuice*, sir, polyjuice."

"You're saying he was set up?"

"Precisely, sir."

"Why?"
"To get him out of Britain, of course," Schell said, astonished, as if it should be self-evident. (Snape wasn't certain whether he wanted to smack the old liar or... no, he wanted to smack him: the lovable old coot routine grew old quickly. He preferred Schell's Quaint Old Gentleman incarnation of the past week-end.) "He is a material witness in the larger matter -- which I will relate to you in due course -- and, as his government would not allow him to leave the country, the perpetrator... the planner, rather, arranged it so he should appear to be breaking an ICW law. The Enforcers arrest him, remove him from British soil -- and problem solved."

"Is this true, sir?" the Elder barked at Snape. "Was this done with your consent?"

"I believe it to be true, but I knew nothing at all about it until I was in ICW custody," Snape barked back.

"And if we asked you to prove that assertion under Veritaserum, your answer would be the same?"

"Yes," Snape said, sincerely hoping they wouldn't require it. (Not that they were likely to stumble over anything awful.... No, on second thought, they might. He'd committed so many malfeasances that he'd forgot more than he could remember unaided.)

"And I suppose you have a witness who can confirm this?" the Elder continued, staring at Schell.

"Why, I do. The person who planned it, actually. With your permission, sir?"

The Elder waved his hand as if to swat at a gnat: Schell sent his clerk trotting out of the court to fetch Hermione, presently came back with Hermione and her guard in tow, and escorted her to the Witness-stand.

"Name and nationality!" the Elder shouted.

Hermione jumped a bit, regained her composure, and said, "Hermione Granger Snape. British."

"A relation, eh?"

"Yes, wife."

"Occupation and classification?"

"Populations Consu-- ...Former Populations Consultant, Wizarding Resources, the British Ministry." She stopped there, confused with the second part of the question. Snape could tell the admission of former hurt her: her cheeks flushed, and she held her clenched fists at her side (probably to keep from twiddling with the bits of hair already escaping their knot).

"And...?" the Elder prodded her, looking pleased with her confusion.

"Witch First-Class, Magistra First, easily, and Magus... I should think Second," Snape supplied. "Owing to her youth, primarily, otherwise I should say Two-and-a-Half. She wouldn't know the old system, it's no longer used in Britain -- as I'm sure you know."
"And what qualifies you to --"

"I was her teacher for seven years," Snape shot back. "I fought beside her in the second war against the Dark... against Voldemort. We have been married for three... four months, now, and I have seen enough demonstrations of her skill and power to be confident in the assessment."

The Elder harrumphed, and nodded to Schell to get on with it.

"Madam Snape, can you tell us why the FAS might have the mistaken impression that your husband was in Calais on the morning of January Fifteenth?" Schell asked her.

"Possibly because I arranged that they should think he was," she replied.

The Elder snorted at that: Schell ignored him, and continued. "Was he aware of your, erm, machinations?"

"No, not at all. I quite deliberately didn't tell him of the measures taken."

"And those were --?"

"The delivery of totally legal and harmless potions -- though they were not represented as such -- by someone impersonating him."

"By Polyjuice?"

"Yes."

"Which would have been easy for you to provide, as you had easy access to the, ah, necessary material."

"Yes. A strand of hair, to be precise."

"Who," the Elder demanded, "impersonated your husband?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, lying rather brilliantly. "It was arranged by letters delivered through anonymous drops. Amazing, what you can accomplish with enough money."

(Snape wished she hadn't lied, the Weasleys be damned. If they got Veritaserum down her gullet, it would be yet another charge against her.)

"Oskar," Schell said plaintively, "she is my witness, you know. May I continue?"

'Oskar' sneered at 'Willi,' who smiled back; and then he subsided back in his chair, muttering, and nodded at Schell to go ahead.

"Madam Snape, it seems a... very elaborate plan," Schell said earnestly, his attention back to Hermione. "Would you tell the court why you felt it necessary?"
"Because we needed -- or rather, we should need, at some point -- to get out of Britain. I am still allowed to travel... or was... but Severus was not. I wasn't about to leave him behind under any circumstances, so I came up with the plan for a trumped-up charge and set it in motion," Hermione said calmly.

'I wasn't about to leave him behind under any circumstances.'

Snape gripped the box's rail more tightly.

"Any particular reason," Warty-Chin interrupted, "that he wasn't arrested immediately?"

Hermione shrugged. "You'd have to ask the FAS. My husband would say that it's French inefficiency, of course, but I can't speculate."

(The red-headed justice seemed offended by that: probably a bloody Frog, Snape guessed.)

"Thank you," Schell said serenely. "That's all for now, Madam Snape. Bailiff, if you would take her back to --"

"Hang on a moment --" the Elder blustered. "She hasn't said why they needed to --"

"All in good time, Oskar," Schell sang under his breath. "The matter at hand is Professor Snape's guilt or innocence in regard to the charge, not the reason for Madam Snape's little deception. Agreed?"

The Elder glowered at Schell again: Schell remained stock-still, staring him down, until the Elder gave in. "Fine," the Elder muttered. "I'm warning you, Willi -- this had better be good. You've mounted some odd defences before, but this takes the Sacher-torte--"

"Thank you. I assure you, it will become clear. Eventually. Bailiff?"

The bailiff escorted Hermione from the Witness-stand: Snape tried to catch her eye as she passed, but she kept her face resolutely forward, her expression calm.

"So," Schell said, pacing back and forth behind his table once the doors had closed behind her, "I have provided you with evidence -- copious evidence -- that Professor Snape was nowhere near Calais on the morning of January Fifteenth, but at Hogwarts School, in front of no less that two witnesses at any one time, and often in the presence of hundreds. You have evidence that he could not have nipped off to Calais by Apparition or Time-Turner, and Broom-Flight is automatically ruled out as there are governors on all British brooms -- and, again, we must rule that out by virtue of the timeframe in any case. You have the testimony of the person responsible for arranging for a double -- a doppelgänger in the true sense -- who admits that it was done without his knowledge and permission."

"She's his wife, Willi," the Elder argued. "Of course she's going to work like the dickens to get him off."
(Snape appreciated that the translation charm did a nice job of colloquialisms; he did not appreciate the unintentional double-entendres. Or perhaps he was becoming too much a randy old man, reading into everything....)

"Take the evidence as a whole, and the conclusion is inescapable. I shall ask you to be patient a while longer, and you'll see why Madam Snape had excellent reasons for acting as she did, and without Professor Snape's participation. The Defense rests, and I call," Schell added, drawing himself up to his full height, "for a judgement from the panel."

**Bloody fucking hell. Do you mean, you despicable, shameless... lawyer, that that's all there is to it?**

That was all, apparently. The Elder justice stared at Snape with suspicious, beady eyes, and then glared at Schell: and then he dispersed the translation charm with a wave of his hand, and the panel debated Snape's fate amongst themselves in very fast, very garbled German. They resembled nothing so much as a murder of ancient crows, in their black robes and caps -- a murder of crows hunched about a metaphoric gibbet; and the harsh consonants of the language did absolutely nothing to dispel the image.

(Snodgrass still sat in the corner, scribbling away. Snape imagined the Board of Governors were going to get a blow-by-blow account of the whole mucky mess.)

**Farewell job, livelihood, pension -- Shit, farewell home --**

The Elder eventually drew himself upright, re-spelled the translation charm, and snapped, "The prisoner is found innocent, and the case is dismissed. Happy, Willi?"

**Bloody hell.**

"Of course, Oskar," Schell said brightly. "On to the next?"

"We want a cocoa break," the Elder muttered, obviously sulking and making no effort whatever to conceal it. "Re-convene in twenty minutes."

The justices rose and made for a side-room, and presently Snape, Schell, and the clerk were the only occupants of the court.

It took a great deal of conscious effort for Snape to pry his fingers from the box-rail.

"That's it, then," Schell said. "You're free to go, Professor Snape."

**Would be if my bloody legs could work.**

"Is that it?" Snape demanded as he stepped down -- carefully -- from the box. "You expect that bunch of half-mad, senile sods to deal with Hermione fairly?"

"They did you," Schell said, and his clerk sniggered and turned away at Snape's glare.
"Schell --"

"This was just the... the curtain-raiser? It was a very calm proceeding, in fact," Schell continued, stuffing his notes on Snape's case into his valise. "When Oskar is feeling frisky and Kitty argues a point too far with him, he's been known to pull a boot off and pound it on the table to get her to shut up."

"That fool bellowed at my wife purely to intimidate her."

"Of course he did, Professor, Oskar always does when he wants to see how straightforward and honest a witness is, whether they're on guard or concealing things. He didn't bother with you because he decided from the first that you are of a more... shifty character."

Snape wanted to rip the twinkle out of Schell's eyes and shove it down the man's throat.

"They barely looked at the evidence. They hardly examined me --"

"They didn't need to, it was all in the brief. Moreover, Oskar and I have known each other for a very, very long time," Schell said, turning his full attention back to Snape. "He knows that I do not represent clients in whom I have no confidence of innocence, and I know he'll pick holes in any argument that I'm careless with -- that is our understanding of each other, and we trust each other insofar as the law allows us. No, they aren't lacking in humour and eccentricities, Professor Snape... except for Snodgrass, she has, as you British say, a broomstick up her bum? But they take their job very seriously nonetheless."

Snape leaned back against the table and gripped the edge of it, feeling splinters of rougher wood on the underside tease his fingers, threatening to tear even that hard-callused skin. (He had to do something with his hands, or they might find their way to someone's throat.)

"They organise their day this way, from the least serious charges to the most," Schell said kindly, all levity gone. "I think you'll find that they give Madam Snape's case the consideration it deserves. The best thing you can do is wait in the anteroom, and --"

"No. No, I bloody well will not be out of the room when she has to face those -- those --"

"You're a witness, Professor, and it's not customary for witnesses to --"

"I'm also implicated in the other matter, and I have an interest in seeing that they understand how important it is," Snape hissed. "And I don't care what it customary. If it isn't disallowed outright, I will be in this court in fifteen minutes' time."

Schell sighed, seemed to consider his options -- throwing Snape out, or begging the indulgence of the court -- and apparently decided that of the two, begging "Oskar's" indulgence was the less injurious to his health.

"Tell me this. Will it help her to have you here, or harm her?" Schell quietly asked him.
"What do you mean?" Snape demanded.

"Will having you in the court set her at ease, or put her more on edge?" Schell said, face grave. "I have no doubt that you care for your wife, Professor Snape, I can see that, even if you demonstrate it in a very... unusual way. But I have also noted that it's a bit of an adversarial relationship, as well -- nothing wrong with that in commonplace matters, I'm not suggesting that. But will it put her under more strain than if she were on her own, dealing with only them?"

Bloody hell, how dare he make such an accusation? He talks as though I browbeat Hermione, as though she mightn't feel.... As if I'd distract her, or she might fear --

Snape struggled with the thought for a moment, and then admitted, the words tasting bitter as wormwood, "I don't know."

"I'll have Karl ask her then, shall I?" Schell said; and he crossed to his clerk (who had, sensibly, removed himself to the other side of the courtroom), whispered to him, and sent him out, bound to ask Hermione if she wanted Snape's presence or not.

Wanted him, or not.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose tight, hoping that might prevent the explosion of frustrated temper he felt building somewhere behind his eyes.

Schell left him in peace for a moment; and then after some determined rummaging through his valise, he pulled out a flask and nudged Snape's elbow. "Some refreshment? If Oskar must have his eleveses cocoa -- and he must, you don't want to see what he's like without it -- no reason we can't."

"No," Snape muttered, and added a belated "Thank you."

"Pity," Schell said as he uncapped the flask. "My healer won't let me have coffee any longer. It's Earl Grey...."

Indeed it was; the heady scent of bergamot wafted over to Snape, soothing in its familiarity.

"On second thought...." he murmured, and turned to find Schell, hand outstretched, already offering him a cup; he took it and sipped, and let the tea seep down his gullet to soothe the icy knot forming in his chest.

"I didn't intend to give offence."

"I shouldn't have taken any," Snape said after a deep breath. "I can't quite seem to...."

"Accept that anyone other than you might have her best interests foremost? Be best able to protect her? I don't know any husband of my acquaintance who doesn't feel the same," Schell retorted good-naturedly.
"And they're justified in feeling so, I would imagine -- in most circumstances. On their home ground. But this isn't mine," Snape said, examining the courtroom (anything to avoid meeting Schell's wise, understanding eyes). "No potion I brew can save her if they find her guilty. No advice I give will matter -- not in this situation, at any rate. Nothing at all that I can do to... help her," he muttered, staring down into the cup of tea, "not any longer."

"Quite right. Not any longer. Your job is done, you see. You've kept her safe all this time -- not a small thing, judging by the evidence, for which you have my admiration -- and now it's my turn. Which is not to say you don't have a job to do now," Schell suggested delicately, and sipped at his tea. "Primarily by keeping your temper, as much for her benefit as for Oskar's. If she is worrying about your reactions, distracted by what you might be thinking, then I won't be able to do my best by and for her. I need her total attention on my questions, on the way I ask them, and on answering me as completely as she can."

"I understand."

"I thought you should, once you could see the difficulty." Schell poured Snape another cup of tea, and added, "For what it's worth, she impresses me as a very bright young woman, Professor Snape. She is honest -- in the main," he added with a sly smile, "and presents herself very forthrightly. I truly doubt that we shall have much trouble shifting Oskar's attention to the real criminals."

*I bloody well hope so.*

Karl the clerk returned to the courtroom, and informed them both, in rather worse English than Schell's, "Madam Snape prefers that her husband remain. Unless he otherwise wishes."

"Good, thank you very much, Karl. You told her the verdict in Professor Snape's case, and that it would only be a few more minutes' wait?"

"Yes, Magister."

"*Very* good.... Drink up, Professor Snape, Oskar will be most displeased if he catches us imbibing."

Snape raised his tea-cup to his lips, and nearly dropped it when the courtroom doors banged open. It took him a moment to recognise the man underneath the layers of muffler: what should have been a shock of red hair was almost completely white with frost.

"Bloody hell, Weasley -- You'd damned well better have --"

"Sorry," Ron Weasley muttered as he stumbled toward the Defence-table, shedding flakes of ice and water-droplets every step of the way as he unwound the muffler. "I was out of town, and Laura didn't know what McGonagall was talking about."

"You've very nearly destroyed Hermione's testimony for lack of evidence, I hope you realise that."

Weasley stopped dead and glared at Snape. "I left home at one o'clock this morning, less than ten minutes after I got back the *first* time -- bugger, I didn't know there was anyplace bloody colder..."
than bloody *Hogwarts*. Flew all morning through the grottiest bloody weather.... You owe me an overhaul on my broom, you ungrateful git, I'm sure the stabiliser's bolloxed from all the ice --"

"Who --?" Schell tried to interject.

"*Where is it,* Weasley?"

Weasley fumbled at his coat-clasps with numb fingers.

"Which is this, Frederik or George?" Schell whispered, tugging at Snape's coat-sleeve.

"*Neither.* Even *they* wouldn't cut something this important this finely."

"I *told* you --" Weasley retorted through chattering teeth. "And I'm Ron. Ronald."

"*Oh,* and you have Flaherty's documents? *Goody,*" Schell said, and hopped about, unable to contain his anticipation. "Karl, quickly, come -- I shall need you to do a transla-scription for me before the panel comes back in --"

Weasley finally got his blasted coat open, fiddled with a knotted rope that held whatever-it-was to his chest, and withdrew a soggy, stuffed pink rabbit. One ear looked as though a garden-gnome had been chewing at it.

Snape, Schell, and Karl all stared at Weasley: he stared back, the ridiculous toy clenched in his hand, and then shrugged and said, "It's what she *gave* me. Threatened to hex me silly if I mucked about with it, so I didn't try to undo the transfiguration."

*Oh, bloody.... And how long has it been? Four or five weeks? What if we can't spell it back? Even Hermione can't be that good.*

*Oh, shit.*

"She's transfigured it," he managed to tell Schell. "It's... it *was* all of Flaherty's original notes, and documents from Mangel and Mortars."

"Actually," Schell said thoughtfully, and delicately plucked the rabbit away from Weasley, "I think it will be far more impressive *this* way."

*What the bloody hell does the old coot mean?*

Schell giggled -- not chuckled, but *giggled* -- and handed the toy to Karl. "Put it in the valise, Karl, and let's get the tea-things cleared away too."

"Is that --?" Weasley said faintly. "*Blimey,* I feel like an ice-cube."

Schell smiled and handed Weasley the flask, and the man gulped what was left of the tea straight from it: Karl took it from him with a smile and a nod when he was finished, and took Schell and
Snape's cups as well, and burrowed into Schell's valise -- it must be a bottomless one -- to stow cups, flask, and rabbit out of sight.

"Am I allowed to stay?" Weasley whined. "I don't know what the hell it's all about. And if Hermione's in that much trouble I bloody well want to --"

"I should prefer that you do stay, even if not in the courtroom," Schell said, rapidly flipping through his notes and scribbling marginalia. "I may need you to testify that the... documents have been in your possession all this time."

_Wonderful. No, Snape, go away, you might distract her, but Ronald Bloody Weasley --_

"Right-o, no problem," Weasley said (damn him), and struggled out of his sodden coat.

The anteroom-door banged open, and the justices trudged back in. (Oskar must have enjoyed his cocoa: there were stains of it in his beard.)

"Ready, Willi?" he barked at Schell.

"Almost, Oskar.... Karl, would you fetch Madam Snape, please?"

Karl scurried for the corridor.

"And who is that dribbling water on my floor?" Oskar bellowed. (Weasley nearly jumped out of his frost-bit skin.)

"Ronald Weasley, Oskar," Schell said in his most soothing voice. "He has flown a very long way in very bad weather to be certain that we have important evidence."

"Well, let him go dribble somewhere else --"

"I may need him to testify, firstly. And secondly, he is a British wizarding citizen in good standing who has every right to observe the proceedings, with your permission."

(Snodgrass, hunched over in the corner of the dais, scribbled Weasley's name down in her blasted notebook for posterity -- though Snape was pleased that she glared at Weasley every bit as nastily as she had Snape himself.)

"Fine," Oskar admitted grudgingly. "But you do the mopping-up, not the bailiff. You there, Snape -- your case has been dismissed. Bugger off."

"Ah, Oskar --"

"First Defendant I've ever seen who wanted to loaf about afterwards --"

"As you noted before, Oskar, the next case is his wife's," Schell said quickly. "I am asking you for permission to allow him to remain. I may need him to testify as well, in any case -- and I know you'll have to delay your siesta if I'm having to bring witnesses in and out all the time."
Snape detected impatience in Schell's voice, and snorted inwardly: so much for counselling patience and even-temper.

"Are you threatening me, Willi?" Oskar said, eyes narrowed.

"Oh, of course not, Oskar. What sort of man would I be, to deny you your well-earned nap? But it's an unfortunate truth that we shall probably overshoot one o'clock if we can't get through all this expeditiously."

Oskar considered that, and then grudgingly allowed, "He can stay, then. But, sir," he added, and fixed Snape with a glare, "no interruptions."

Snape nodded.

"Right. Let's get going, then," Oskar said, and plopped down in one of the chairs on the dais: the other justices followed suit.

Schell turned his back to the dais and shooed Snape and Weasley to one of the benches behind him.

"I'm not joking, I really hauled arse to get here," Weasley muttered to Snape under his breath as they sat. "The boss sent me out of town last Wednesday. Didn't even know she'd been arrested. Fred flamed McGonagall when he couldn't reach me --"

"Fine," Snape muttered back, drew his boots away from the expanding puddle under Weasley's wet ones, and tried to ignore the smell of wet, steaming wool and overheated, sweaty Weasley. "Stop dripping on me. And shut up."

"-- but I was totally incommunicado, even Laura didn't know where I was. Look, Snape, you know I wouldn't do anything to put 'Mione in danger --"

Pounding from the dais startled both of them: they looked up and found Oskar staring at them, hand poised above table, and boot in hand. "Silence in the court," he hissed, "or I'll have you both removed."

They both sat up straight, chastened; Schell murmured something about "Beg the court's pardon," turned to them, leant across the rail that separated the Defence-table from the benches, and whispered, with a pained expression, "Please don't make him take the boot off again. He wears his lucky socks to hearings. Hasn't washed them in a decade."

Judging from the other justices' rush to pull their handkerchiefs out and cover their noses, Schell wasn't exaggerating at all.

"Blimey," Weasley muttered, and peered at Snape through wet, straggling hair. "And I thought Wood was bad, him wearing his stinky lucky pants to every game."
Snape risked kicking the idiot in the shin, and gained the satisfaction of a stifled whimper in response. (Oskar didn't notice, thankfully: he was wedging his noxious toes back into his boot, much to the relief of the other justices.)

The courtroom doors opened behind them; Schell turned back to the dais as Hermione was led in and toward the box. Snape felt marginally better when she gave a sidelong glance at him as she passed, face grave --

-- and then felt immensely worse when she noticed Weasley. Her eyes widened, and she smiled: Weasley, damn him, grinned back, and he made a wiggly little two-fingered gesture that it took Snape a moment to translate as *rabbit* rather than *sod off*.

*Merlin damn* that careless, impudent little fuckwit.... *If he gets us thrown out, I'll rip a hole in him where none belongs, and Molly Weasley can do what she likes to me later* --

"For the record," Oskar intoned as Hermione entered the box, "name and nationality again."

"Hermione Granger Snape, British," she said, voice clear and strong.

"Populations Consultant, British Ministry, correct?"

"Former," she corrected him. "Currently unemployed."

"Right. You're charged with Falsification of ICW-mandated reports. Your plea?"

"Not guilty," she said confidently.

Oskar snorted. "Your Counsel had us pull the documents in question from our archives, Madam Snape. In fact," he added, and pointed to a stack of parchments on the table, "we have them all here. We've compared them to the raw data -- data that was acquired at considerable expense and at short notice, by the by -- and there is no doubt that the documents provided to the ICW are not accurate to the point of deliberate misrepresentation. How do you think that happened?"

"Because while I compiled the data and wrote the drafts of the reports, mine was *not* the final hand laid to them," she shot back. "They were submitted to my... former superior, Dennis Corcoran, who approved and signed off on them before they were forwarded to the ICW. In every instance -- every single one, sir -- my drafts were returned, with demands that the facts be changed to give a more favourable slant to the Ministry's progress with the populations problem. And in every instance, rather than allow those reports to go through in a totally corrupted form, I charmed them to *seem* to reflect Mr Corcoran's wishes. It was the only way I could find to fulfil my duties to both the ICW and the Ministry -- and to myself."

Warty-Chin -- *Kitty* -- leaned forward, and asked, "Are you telling us that the changes made to the *accurate* figures can be revealed in the original documents?"

"Yes, Ma'am. It requires the use of a new charm. The incantation is 'Scrabble-Me,' and the wand-work is *this* --"
She demonstrated the wave; Oskar watched her through narrowed, suspicious eyes, and then shoved the parchments down the table to the hairy little Indian justice. "You try it, Mohatmas, you're the expert in charms."

The Indian man rose -- there wasn't much difference in his sitting and standing height -- cleared his throat, and politely asked, "If you would demonstrate once more?"

Hermione did, watched as he copied her movement, and said, "Yes, that's it, and 'Scrabble-Me.' Give it a go."

The Indian pulled his wand and did: he must have done properly, though Snape couldn't see the figures shift, for the other justices -- saving only Oskar -- bolted from their seats and clustered around the Indian, watching the parchments intently.

"Very pretty," Oskar said, face sour. "However, Madam Snape, that only proves that you intentionally misled your superior as to the contents."

"If I might, Oskar?" Schell asked softly.

"Go ahead," Oskar muttered.

"I am submitting into evidence," Schell said for the benefit of the Dicta-Quill, "Madam Snape's early drafts of the reports. They should contain the accurate data, as well as Dennis Corcoran's notes to Madam Snape -- then Granger -- to change specific facts.... Take them up, please Karl."

"Forgery?" the red-headed justice suggested.

"He's already requested samples of Corcoran's writing from the archives," Oskar grumbled. "I don't suppose she's tampered with these in any way?"

The Indian justice pulled the drafts over, spelled 'Scrabble-Me' as well as other more traditional charms, and said definitively, "No. These are unaltered. Where are the samples?"

Warty-Chin scrabbled in the stack of parchments in front of her, and the justices each examined Corcoran's originals and Hermione's drafts, comparing them in silence; Oskar did so last, his eyebrows shooting up, and then he said, "Vote?"

"Not forged," Red-Hair admitted.

"Not," Warty-Chin said as the Indian nodded agreement.

"I think not," the fifth, mousey little justice -- so nondescript and quiet that he'd never even spoken up before -- said hesitantly. "But then you know I'm hopeless with things like this, just hopeless, Oskar, and I could be wr--"

"Yes, yes, Yuri, we all know how you hate to come down on either side of an issue. I would say it's definitely Corcoran's hand," Oskar said impatiently.
Snape glanced at Schell's back, and just caught the infinitesimal relaxing of the man's shoulders -- and the way he stood just a tad straighter, and how the fingers of his left hand, at his side, unclenched....

Merlin's.... That's it. That's the worst bit, what he must have feared they wouldn't get through.... He knows, now, that he can get her clear of it.

"This does not," Oskar continued, staring Hermione down, "excuse your actions, girl. You had a responsibility to the ICW to ensure that these reports were accurate -- and yet you concealed the malfeasance, which amounts to Conspiracy in the same charge. Why on earth didn't you simply turn Corcoran in to the ICW? Why the damned sneaky tactics?"

Hermione looked down at her hands, resting on the rail, and didn't answer.

Hermione.... Wake up damn it, Hermione -- Schell, get going, ask her to elaborate --

Schell didn't, though: he stood, respectful, and waited along with everyone else.

"Well?" Oskar demanded. "Or shall I take it that you don't have a good reason?"

"I feel it a very good reason," Hermione said quietly. "I became aware that there was a plan to... to dupe a good portion of the citizenry into accepting something injurious to them. Something dangerous to them. I didn't think that turning Corcoran in -- or trying to -- would change that plan, only delay it, and in the meantime I would have been.... Dealt with. Dismissed or otherwise removed. And then whoever took my position mightn't care or be bothered to watch, so...." She shrugged. "Better to leave myself open to censure and punishment by this court rather than risk that."

Oskar eyed her, and then glanced at Schell. "I take it," he wearily asked the Counsel, "that this -- whatever it is -- is the 'larger matter' you kept beating me about the head with in your brief?"

"Yes, sir," Schell admitted.

Oskar leaned forward in his chair. "Twenty blasted times you used the phrase 'larger matter,' Willi. I've only known you to do that once, before now."

"I don't use it frivolously," Schell replied. "And I think it's important that you consider Madam Snape's actions in the light of this particular matter."

"I know you don't throw those words about," Oskar said, nodded, and stared down at his gnarled fingers: he seemed diminished, suddenly, all irascibility gone, nothing more than a very old, and very tired, wizard. "This is going to go far past one o' clock, I can tell. Damn it," he murmured. "And, that being the case.... I propose that we table the charge against Madam Snape for the time being, break for luncheon... and for my nap, which I suspect I'm going to badly need... and reconvene at two o'clock to consider Willi's 'larger matter.' Agreed?"

"Agreed," the other justices chorused (with the exception of Yuri, who muttered, "Oh, balls,").
"Good. Enjoy your meal, Madam Snape.... I think, Willi, that I must direct that she lunch alone -- except for you, Counsel -- for the time being. The two gentlemen are free to do as they like."

"Thank you, Oskar," Schell said softly, and stood as Oskar heaved himself out of his chair and exited by the anteroom door, followed by the other justices. (Snodgrass had fallen asleep, and no-one bothered to wake her. Snape hoped she drooled her notes illegible.)

"Was that all right?" Hermione asked Schell as the bailiff handed her down from the box and began to walk her briskly toward the doors.

"Perfection, Madam Snape. Try not to worry over the recess," Schell replied.

Snape tried to speak to her as the bloody Bailiff rushed her past: tried to say anything, something encouraging, even to spit out her name; but he felt as though he'd swallowed a Two-Ton Toffee, or that his tongue had twisted itself into a knot.


She smiled at the blasted man -- sincere and warm, true, but it didn't quite reach her eyes, which remained worried: and all Snape could do was watch as the bailiff marched her out of the doors.

When he turned back to the front of the court, he found Weasley quizzing Schell.

" -- did he mean, all that about 'once before now'?"

"We never speak of it any longer, Oskar and I," Schell quietly told the obnoxious prat. "It happened a very long time ago, and it was... quite unpleasant."

"Blimey. Of course, if I knew what all the pother was in this instance --"

"Shut up, Weasley," Snape interrupted. "I'm certain Herr Schell needs his luncheon too. You'll hear it all in a few hours, anyway."

"Just so," Schell said, rapidly shoving papers in his valise. "And I think I shall keep Madam Snape company and go over some things with her.... So I will see the two of you when the court reconvenes. Karl, would you see that lunch is brought to Witness Room B for Professor Snape and Mr Weasley?"

Karl darted for the doors, beckoning them to follow him: Weasley, who was (as Snape remembered) never one to turn down anything remotely edible, grabbed his coat and shot off after him.

Snape himself followed rather more slowly. He did not want to dine with Weasley.

It wasn't that he felt badly that Hermione had been happy to see the lout: that was understandable. They'd been thick as thieves (sometime literally were thieves together) all through their years at Hogwarts; even when the Potter boy had acted the ungrateful fool -- for it had been obvious even to
Snape that he had -- those two had stuck by each other, and by their prattish friend. It was natural that she would be pleased that Weasley was there. (She should certainly be astonished and grateful that he'd shifted his lazy arse and got Flaherty's documents here at last.)

No, the problem was that Snape wasn't certain he would be able to keep from choking the idiot senseless before luncheon was over with.

*If the blasted German food doesn't give me indigestion, listening to Weasley's blather certainly will.*

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**Chapter 25: Wherein Hermione pulls it off; attempts to do the right thing; and finds her attempt politely rebuffed, much to her confusion.**

*Defendant's Anteroom, Gutenberg Castle*
*Wednesday, February 15th*

Well, *that* went better than expected. At least they set aside considering the charge for now.

Hermione collapsed into the sofa -- the ICW didn't attempt to make prisoners feel like criminals, not in the way the Ministry did, apparently -- and rubbed at her aching forehead.

*What an odd bunch of justices they are, though. I feel like Alice -- I half-expect the senior one to shriek 'Off with her head' at any moment. Wish I had I chance to speak to the Indian one, he's talented. Took us days to perfect the wand-work on the Scrabble charm....*

*The senior one went a bit queer there at the end, though. I wonder what Schell meant with the 'larger matter' business? There's a history there between them. I wish I knew what it was.*

On the whole, though, Hermione was *most* puzzled with Severus' behaviour. She'd expected him to insist on remaining in the courtroom: had steeled herself to having to ignore his reactions.

*Quite surprising, really, that he bothered to ask -- and that he behaved himself.*

Equally puzzling was the way he'd looked on her way out of the court: that awkward, strained set to his shoulders, and the way his eyes had gone dark and unreadable. She'd expected something from him -- a stern command to stay on her toes, or a nod of conditional approval, or... Well, she didn't know what, but he was seldom at a loss for words these days when it came to advice.

Seeing Ron was, frankly, a delight. He looked as though he'd been flying all night -- probably *had* done -- and as though he were knackered and ready to keel over. She hoped Severus had the decency to see that he ate a good lunch: she imagined he would, if only to keep Ron from pestering him with questions.
A soft tap came at the door, and then it opened and Herr Schell shuffled through it.

"They'll bring lunch in a few moments," he told her. "I thought perhaps we might go over a few loose ends during it, once they're gone?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "Are Severus and Ron --"

"Yes, they're on their way to theirs. Your poor Mr Weasley looks quite exhausted, I do hope he'll be able to keep his eyes open. Oskar won't be pleased if he drops off."

"Severus will see that he doesn't," Hermione murmured with a twinge of regret for the likely state of Ron's toes and ribs by the hearing's end. "You needn't have sent the clerk to ask if he might stay, by the way. I'd assumed he'd want to."

"What Professor Snape wanted... and what is best for you in the circumstances, is not necessarily the same thing," Schell said carefully. "I believe he understands that now."

"Whatever did you say to him? You must've done."

Schell merely smiled and drew out his notes.

"I don't mind, really, and it's only fair. He's almost as much riding on the outcome as I have, after all. Of course he'd want to stay, to make certain I don't bollocks it up."

Schell's hands slowed; his eyebrows furrowed and he glanced at her uncertainly, and almost spoke; and then he shook his head and burrowed back into his valise.

_How odd...._

"What is it?" she asked him.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head again, and smiled as he pulled out a flask and cups. "Would you like something other than coffee with your lunch? I have --"

"Oh, no thank you, no tea. I had far too much coffee this morning, I shall be climbing the walls soon."


_If you're going to put it that way...._

"Yes, please," she said, and took the cup from him; he poured for her, and chuckled at her when the scent -- rich, dark, with just a hint of sweetness -- hit her nostrils, and her eyes closed reflexively in appreciation.

"No fair," she murmured, wrapping her fingers about the cup for its warmth. "You're quite a good judge of everyone's weaknesses, aren't you?"
"Very good, yes," he said as he poured himself a cup. "I've rather a lot of practise."

"And you have grandchildren and you spoil them something awful."

"Great-grandchildren, and of course. What else are they for, if not the pleasure of spoiling them?"

Hermione settled back into the cushions and sipped at the cocoa. (He was right: it was the best she'd ever had. Not even Pomfrey's high-quality medichocolate came close.)

Another knock came at the door, and Schell bid them enter -- the lunch, probably, for Hermione heard the clatter of cart-wheels on the stone floor, though she didn't bother to open her eyes until the deliverer had gone.

"Right, then," she said, setting the cup aside and reaching for her plate. "What do we need to go over?"

"This, primarily," Schell said, reached back into his valise, and pulled out a grotty-looking stuffed rabbit. "This is our... ace in the hole, do you call it?"

It took her a moment to place it: thoughts of rabbits and holes instantly brought Alice back to mind.

"Oh, cripes. I'd forgot what I'd done to it."

At least Ron took me at my word....

"I imagine Mohatmas will set it to rights," Schell said. "He's the best Charms practitioner alive, and he's quite good with Transfigurations, too."

Something nigged at the back of Hermione's brain. "He looks familiar, but I can't quite place him."

Schell frowned. "I believe he has family in Britain. Perhaps you went to school with his nieces or nephews."

That was it: the Patils had always gone on about their grand-uncle Hatma, and he'd visited once during a Quidditch-weekend. "Good Lord, will that be a problem?"

"You did?"

"We shared a dorm room. Well, one of the girls and I."

"What a small world. No, it won't be a problem," Schell said decisively as he tucked into the chicken on his plate. "He's an Indian national, not British. He probably isn't aware of any connection, and it's his responsibility, not ours, to disclose it in any case if he is. Now, remind me -- what exactly does this little beauty contain?"

"Flaherty's initial letter -- the one he put in the Left Luggage drop at St Pancras," Hermione said, enumerating carefully. "He talks about why he took the step of fleeing to Calais and deliberately putting himself in harm's way, the kind of documentation he'd found that led to his decision, and
included the poetry that led us to Arden. Then there's the stuff we found at Arden -- the actual documents, contracts between the Ministry and Mangel and Mortars, the data from clinical trials at Azkaban, and notes that indicated how he imagined the product was to be dispensed to the population.

"Good," Schell muttered savagely around a mouthful of chicken. "That's the last bit I needed to complete the chain."

"You think they wouldn't have taken me seriously, without it?"

"They should have, I think, but might have dismissed the possibility of charging the Minister for lack of evidence. I need to prove that Fudge and Corcoran planned this long ago, and in the event that they destroy the documents on their end before the ICW can get hold of them. Moreover, this is further proof that Fudge and Corcoran -- or one of them, at any rate -- have caused the death of at least one person even before the dissemination of the potion, whether they intended to or not. More than Flaherty alone, actually."

"Oh, you did follow up on Lakewood and Teddington --"

"Yes. Habeas corpus is a remarkable instrument, really -- I've got the writs ready in case they go to full trial for your, so I'll just give them to the assigned Prosecutor if they proceed against Fudge and Corcoran instead. I'm asking for all the French and British documents on Flaherty's death, as well. I hope to keep Fudge and Corcoran busy for quite some time, explaining all this."

"You've got it all covered," Hermione murmured. "Don't know why Severus is so worried."

"I've been doing this a very long time, Madam Snape, and I'm used to playing all the possible scenarios out in my head and making plans for all contingencies. And he can't have known that about me, while I know something about him."

"How on earth --?"

"I... recall Dumbledore speaking of him once or twice," Schell said, looking up from his lunch rather guiltily. "And what with Hogwarts and what little I know of the war.... Yes, I knew Dumbledore. Quite the most enjoyable Supreme Mugwump I've ever dealt with. He spoke of a remarkable young man he'd engaged to teach, one who was quite good at winking out information on certain matters -- but who couldn't quite grasp the whole picture."

"Really," Hermione said, fascinated, and dropped her fork to her plate, the better to prop her chin in her hands. "What else did he say?"

Schell hesitated, and then said, "I don't suppose it's anything you, as his wife, haven't already divined.... That while the boy had some admirable qualities, and had an innate sense of honour, Dumbledore feared that the man was flawed and should never... How was it that he put it? 'Should never quite be a whole human being.' Too deeply affected by things that happened in his past. He didn't elaborate beyond that, and I didn't pry."
"Doesn't matter," Hermione murmured, and went back to her meal. "I know what Dumbledore meant. The 'things,' I mean. Though I shouldn't want Severus to know that I know some of them. He didn't exactly tell me."

"I wouldn't tell him we'd spoke of him, in any case, so you needn't worry. He does seem the type to guard his secrets -- and yours -- quite jealously."

That's the understatement of the year. And I'm sure that, kind as you are, you won't understand if I tell you how Dumbledore contributed to those flaws and wounds, for good and ill....

She wondered, though, if she could find a way to tell Severus that Dumbledore had cared for him. Probably wasted breath: Severus had made up his mind about Dumbledore for good and all, and if she told him this, she'd have to admit to knowing about the trial for Patricide.

I can just see that. 'Severus, you know, he really did care for you and worry over you -- no matter that he bolloxed-up a good deal for you -- and, by the by, I know he defended you when you coshed your dad with a mortar, so you needn't worry over hiding that from me any longer.... How's your mum and when do I get to meet her?'

No. Only if he were immensely drunk, physically incapacitated, and she'd been able to hide his wand where he shouldn't find it for several months.

"Anyway, what do you think they'll start with?" she asked Schell.

"I hope to lead off with how you became aware of the problems in the Ministry. Going over your manuscript, more or less."

"Oh, cripes."

"Won't be that difficult -- I can assure you that Oskar is forgoing his nap, and is skimming the transla-scription as we speak. Then we'll introduce Flaherty's evidence just at the point you received it, pick up with your narrative from that point, and so on. Do it all chronologically, provided I can keep Oskar on track. He does tend to tangent a lot once he starts to make all the connections."

They finished their meals in companionable silence, and Schell chivvied her into putting her feet up and having another cup of cocoa: she'd nearly dropped off by the time he gently shook her fully awake and told her it was quarter-two, and asked should she like to freshen up?

She would indeed, and spent the next ten minutes doing just that and marvelling that she felt far calmer than she remembered being in a long time. (She suspected Schell's cocoa was very potent.)

And then the guard escorted her back to the courtroom.
First off, Severus hadn't done Ron any physical damage over luncheon (none that she could see, at any rate). That was a definite plus. Ron was pushing his luck, though, and kept leaning over to whisper in Severus' ear while she went through the boring preliminaries of name and nationality yet again with the justices. (It was probably a Very Good Thing Severus still hadn't his wand back.)

"She's all yours, Willi," Oskar said when they'd done -- still blunt, but seeming rather more focussed and intent than he had in the morning session, "Proceed as you will."

"Thank you," Schell said, and turned to her. "Madam Snape, would you please tell the Court how you came to be employed at the British Ministry, and precisely what your position entailed?"

And she started the story all over from the beginning, only glossing over her marriage to Severus as she couldn't see why that was relevant: neither Schell nor the senior justice pressed her on that point, thankfully.

Quite surprisingly -- given his earlier behaviour -- Oskar kept his bulbous nose out of most of the questioning, allowing her to speak freely and Schell to lead her where he wanted with his few questions; the justice interrupted only occasionally for clarification that she suspected was necessary due to the vagaries of the translation charm. It was astonishingly easy, in the main. Schell was very, very good at what he did: he seemed content to let her tell the story in her own way, and most of his questions, she realised, were intended to highlight bits that should become important later -- to make certain Oskar made those connections easily, no doubt. If she listened to Schell's words and phrasing very carefully, she found she could sense where, and in the manner, he wanted her to go.

She'd quite forgot that Severus and Ron were in the courtroom until the incident with the rabbit. Oskar wasn't at all pleased when Karl trotted it up to the dais, and it took a great deal of persuasion on Schell's part to calm him down.

"-- sort of game are you playing at, Willi?"

"I assure you, Oskar, it's not a game. It was the only way Madam Snape could find to keep the evidence safe."

"I can vouch that it --" she heard Ron say quite loudly, and turned just in time to see Severus grasp Ron's jacket-sleeve and jerk him back down on their bench. (He must've trod on Ron's foot, too, even though he continued to stare gravely at the justices: a look of exquisite agony crossed Ron's face for no apparent reason at all after his bum hit the bench.)

"What was that?" Oskar growled, half-crouched with a hand on his left boot. (Hermione had no idea why; but she'd given up trying to figure out the odd bugger some time ago.)

Schell turned back to the dais -- he'd whipped round to glare at Ron -- and said apologetically, "I was going to call Mr Weasley in any case, Oskar. He's had the keeping of the evidence since...."
"-- and I should like you to hear how she represented it to him, and for him to confirm that it hasn't been meddled with."

"Right, get on with it," Oskar said as he straightened. (The other justices sighed as one. More oddness: she'd have to ask Severus about them later, as she must have missed something important.) "Into the Witness-stand, Weasel."

Schell turned and nodded to Ron, and Ron stood and marched up to the Witness-box muttering "Weasley."

"Mr Weasley, the... object came into your possession on January second of this year, then?"

"Right. Hermione visited my parent's home in Ottery-St-Catchpole, and gave it to me."

"And what did she tell you it actually was?"

"She didn't. She handed it over in just the form you see now. I mean, I knew it was something else and that she'd transfigured it -- she did it in front of me, though it was still in her bag so I never got a good look at it."

"Did you discuss what it actually was?"

"No, but I guessed it had something to do with the Marriage Laws -- the new British Marriage Laws -- and she told me to bugger off and mind my business. Begging the Court's pardon," Ron added hastily.

"So you thought it was to do with the Laws only?"

"Yeah, sort of. I mean, we talked a lot about why she'd married Sn- Professor Snape, 'cause we'd all been kind of knocked silly by that."

Hermione felt her ears beginning to burn, and had to restrain herself from looking at Severus. She could guess his reaction, at any rate.

"But we also talked earlier about why she needed me to keep it, and she'd said she was in trouble with the Ministry -- or potentially in trouble -- and needed it kept safe," Ron continued. "Said it was terribly important, for everyone as well as for her. I figured out later that it had to be something bigger than just the Marriage Law business."

"So you conspired with Madam Snape to hide documents from the British Ministry?" Oskar rumbled from the dais.

"Well.... Yeah," Ron said defiantly. "She's my friend, known her since we started at Hogwarts, and I knew she'd have a bloody good reason for doing something like that. I know the Ministry too, you see. Don't trust them further than I could chuck them. And while I didn't know what it was, I hadn't any reason to think they were government documents, not the way you're implying. Still don't."
"Proceed," Oskar said with a glower.

"And where has the bunny been since that conversation on January second?" Schell asked, all seriousness.

"We went home to Chudleigh next day, and it's been on the back of a shelf in the garden-shed ever since."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes. I keep the shed warded, 'cause our kids are too young to be mucking about with the hedge-shears and stuff. I don't believe anyone's been in there since I put it in, and I only dug it out at about one this morning. I didn't even tell my wife where and what it was, otherwise Mr Schell would have had it before today."

"Anything else, Oskar?" Schell asked the justice, who shook his head. "Good. Thank you, Mr Weasley."

Ron loped his way back to the bench and plopped back down next to Severus -- who shifted several inches in the other direction.

"Justice Patil, would you care to attempt a re-transfiguration?" Schell suggested.

"Not really," the man said, eyeing the rabbit warily. "It's been too long for my taste. What I would suggest is that the Court grants Madam Snape the use of her wand for a moment. It works far better if the original transfigurationist reverses it."

There was an inevitable delay -- which Oskar didn't appreciate -- while the bailiff fetched Hermione's wand and waited with his own wand drawn on her while she changed the rabbit back to oilcloth-wrapped box; then her wand was whisked away, and she was returned to the Defendant's box while the justices poured over Flaherty's papers. (They spelled away the translation charm while they examined them, but Hermione caught bits of exasperated, and sometimes rather blue, German, particularly from Oskar.)

"This doesn't," Oskar said once he'd re-instated the translation charm, staring at Schell, "prove anything except that this Flaherty was a snoop, a thief, and very possibly unhinged."

"We have independent evidence that corroborates Flaherty's version of things," Schell said softly. "Quite a lot, in fact. Then there's the matter of what happened to Flaherty, and the cover-up of his death. We can move on to that if you like, Oskar, or we can continue with Madam Snape's testimony and get to it in due course...."

Oskar grumpily decided that 'in due course' might be best, and the hearing continued much as it had before the Incident of the Rabbit.

By the time they'd got through everything -- including a sworn, written statement from François DeLaine (who wasn't required to attend), testimony from Severus regarding the potion, and a report
from that Blücher fellow which not only confirmed, but supplemented, Severus' findings -- it was nearly six o'clock: Hermione was exhausted, and didn't know whether she wanted sleep, food, or the loo more. She couldn't tell whether she'd defended herself -- and Severus -- well, at all: she'd been so focussed on every moment, every nuance of Schell's questions, and in trying to remember everything properly and fully, that it all seemed like a blur and that she'd been in the box forever.

"We're going out to discuss this," Oskar said when Schell had summed everything up and called for a judgement. "All of you stay put.... Erm, Bailiff, you can let the Defendant down, let her take a seat. And bring them some coffee, or something -- Oh, forget it, here it is," he added moodily and snapped his fingers, and a full coffee-set appeared on the Defence-table. "I suspect this will take a while, so at ease."

Well, whatever else you can say about the ICW, they're hospitable to a fault. Or at least they like to push their coffee at you in hopes of getting you addicted.

The bailiff let her out of the box as the justices exited, and left to guard the doors from the outside; and Hermione was alone with Schell and his clerk, and Severus and Ron. (Ron seemed rather disappointed when, rather than wedging herself past Severus and sitting between them, she simply collapsed on Severus' end of the bench.)

"Bloody hell, 'Mione," he muttered, leaning forward to see around Severus, "why didn't you tell me? This is.... It's --"

"Because she didn't want you implicated, you idiot," Severus hissed. (It was much what Hermione was thinking, although she wagered she could have managed it more politely.) "Merlin's balls, half your family is in it one way or the other, and she didn't want you dragged off as well if it came to the worst --"

She couldn't reach Severus' near arm -- it was rather firmly plastered across her back, his fingers digging into her hip -- and so she lay a hand on his knee to calm him, leaned toward Ron, and said, "He's right, actually. It wasn't that I didn't trust you, you prat."

"What do you mean, half the family's --"

"If you'd gone to work a sensible job at the Ministry with your father, you'd know," Severus shot back, more smugly than Hermione thought necessary.

"All right, stop it, both of you," Hermione snarled, tired of the nonsense from both of them. "I'm knackered, I want this bloody well over with, and I don't have the energy to put up with you two going at it hammer-and-tongs."

"My thoughts exactly," Schell said brightly, and promptly handed her a cup of coffee, heavily creamed. "You've all done very well, and there's no point in hashing out whose feelings are hurt and why at the moment. You'll have time for that later."

"You think they'll acquit, then?" Severus said as he took a cup from Schell's clerk.
"I think we've a very good chance. Oskar's only taken his boot off the once, and that's a very good sign."

*What the* --?

"However, even with an acquittal.... Well, as I've said before, I think you'll be living in Liechtenstein for a while," Schell said. "The Prosecutor will want you to hand, I'm sure."

Severus snorted.

"A very beautiful country it is," Karl the clerk gravely told Severus as he handed Ron a coffee. "The skiing is terrific. And my cousin a boarding-house in Vaduz owns, she's a wonderful cook --"

"Not now, Karl," Schell muttered under his breath. "And her cooking's mediocre, but never mind -- family loyalty is a wonderful thing."

"You won't be working the case?" Hermione asked Schell.

"No, I only do Defence. The Prosecutor will undoubtedly consult with me, however -- I've done half his work for him already, what with the subpoenas and writs. You shan't have to start all over again."

"Bloody hell, you mean they'll actually try to prosecute Fudge and --?" Ron asked Schell, eyes wide.

"I hope so. They've a lot to answer for."

Ron gave a whoop, and Severus nearly pushed Hermione off the end of the bench to avoid the coffee that slopped over the edge of Ron's saucer.

:"That's it, then," Ron said, and took a huge gulp of what was left of his coffee.

"What *do* you mean, you oaf?" Severus said.

"Two things can get a serving Minister for Magic knocked down -- a vote of no-confidence from the Wizengamot, or a successful prosecution by the ICW," Ron explained.

"Theoretically a criminal charge by the Wizengamot would as well," Schell interjected.

"Right, like *that's* ever happened or is likely to. But *this*..... That's it, the bugger's out."

"*If*," Schell gently reminded him, "it is successful. If Fudge isn't able to wriggle out of it."

"Blast," Ron muttered, crestfallen. "He'd bloody good at that."

"Perhaps. But Professor and Madam Snape were quite careful to gather enough evidence. As I said, I hope it will do."
They all went quiet for a while, working at their coffees; and then Ron leaned forward to peer at her again, grinned, and said, "I was right, wasn't I?"

"About *what*, Ron?" She wasn't in the mood to put up with Ron's mood swings now: the only good thing about them was they seldom lasted too terribly long, unlike Severus'.

"About *him*," Ron said, and jerked his head toward Severus. "Kept you out of a lot of trouble, didn't he?"

Severus' back went very stiff and he pulled his arm from about her, ostensibly to hold his cup and saucer more firmly.

"Yes, Ron, he.... Oh, bloody hell, he's right *here*. Why can't you just thank him and be done with it?"

"I would, but he said some really nasty things to me at lunch and I'm not speaking to him."

"You *are* speaking to him when it suits you, and you probably deserved whatever he said."

"He did," Severus interjected. "He --"

"I know he must've done, Severus, that's not the point, and you don't have to tattle. I'm sure you gave as good as you got, in any case."

*Christ, I feel like the shuttle-cock in a game of insane-asylum badminton.*

"Right, then," Ron said decisively, and stared straight forward. "Thanks for keeping her safe for me. For us."

"I didn't do it for *you* --" Severus hissed, stopped himself, and buried his face in his coffee-cup.

"No, you did it for her, but it's nearly the same thing. So thanks anyway."

Severus refused to -- or couldn't -- answer: but his shoulders relaxed a bit, and when he brought the coffee-cup down from his lips his elbow brushed against Hermione's, and he didn't pull away.

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It took the panel nearly two hours to reach a judgement, during which time everyone in the courtroom made trips to the loo. Schell broke out his cocoa-flask, and they all partook of it -- all except Severus, who gave Schell and the flask a suspicious look, and politely declined: and then the bailiff came back in and told them they were going back in session, and that Hermione should take the Defendant's box again.

Oskar looked quite grim when he took his seat.

"The verdict of the panel is unanimous," he said after drawing the hood of his robe up over his black cap. "Madam Snape is free to leave this Court."
Oh, cripes --

There was a strangled exhalation from the benches, and then a muted "Whoop!" from Ron -- which meant Severus must have been the one holding his breath.

"Wait, Oskar," Schell demanded. "She's cleared, but what of her innocence?"

"Surely you jest, Willi," Oskar said sourly. "Don't stretch it. She's guilty of the charge, all right. So is Professor Snape, for that matter, as an Accessory. But we find her actions justified, and we decline to take further steps against her. Neither do we feel it necessary to remand her into British custody, as there are reasons we wish her to remain in ours, or at least to remain in Liechtenstein for the time being, until such time as the Confederation grants her full travel privileges --"

"Then you're going to recommend proceedings against --"

"Yes, Willi -- what do you take us for? The evidence may be unusual, but it's compelling. She can have her wand back -- so can he -- but they're to remain within our territory, and their whereabouts known to me. If they flee, it's on your head. Court is adjourned," Oskar added in a bawl, and the justices rose and staggered out of the courtroom.

Ron didn't even let her get out of the Defendant's box, but shot up the steps and hugged her breathless.

"Ron -- urk --"

"I knew it," he muttered in her ear, and squeezed so tightly that he nearly cracked her ribs.
"I knew it. Bloody hell, 'Mione, do you know what this means?"

"I'm going to need to tape my ribcage, is what it means --"

"All the stupidity's going to end, that's what --"

"Not necessarily, Mr Weasley," Severus said from the foot of the box. "None of us can predict who will replace Fudge, or their opinion of the situation."

"You can't," Ron said, grinning. (Hermione was certain he was keeping his arms about her just to put Severus' nose out of joint -- and it was working, despite Severus' strange lapse into good manners: his face was growing more thunderous by the second.) "Just because I don't work with Dad doesn't mean we don't talk politics."

Schell interrupted his conversation with the bailiff and shuffled over. "You're welcome to stay in the tower tonight, Madam Snape -- indeed, I would recommend it -- and we can get you sorted with better lodging tomorrow."

"Can I stay here?" Ron asked.
"No, sir, you cannot. And furthermore," Schell added sternly, waggling a finger at him, "you are going to turn around and fly home first thing tomorrow morning. You are not to open your mouth about anything that occurred in this courtroom. In fact, you were never here for any length of time. You flew in, delivered the package -- you have no idea what it was, it was a personal favour for Headmistress McGonagall, so make certain she knows that when you return -- and since you weren't allowed to stay to observe you found lodging and slept all afternoon and evening, as you were exhausted."

"But my dad will want to --"

"Nobody and not one word, Mr Weasley. You don't even tell Headmistress McGonagall. Not even your wife. The success of the prosecution's case will depend largely on the element of surprise -- on seizure of further evidence, in short -- which will be totally spoilt if the dispositions of Professor and Madam Snape's cases leak."

"Right," Ron muttered. "Uh, I don't suppose they take Galleons at lodgings here, do they? And not many, at that? I didn't stop to worry about cash."

"I suppose, under the circumstances, you might come home with --" Schell began, and then stopped himself, sizing Ron up: and then he shook his head and raised his voice. "Karl, once you're done clearing away, would you take Mr Weasley to your cousin's? I'm sure he'd be comfortable there. We'll just... start an account with her."

"Yes, Magister," Karl said, finishing up his tidying.

"Damn, and I wanted to tell you --" Ron said earnestly to Hermione.

"No, you don't, Mr Weasley -- off with you," Schell said, barely beating Severus to it. "She's tired. And thank you," he added more gently as Ron sulkily let loose of Hermione and stomped down the stairs. "I'm aware that you put yourself at considerable risk to get the documents here, and I appreciate that a great deal. Have a good rest before your flight, and be safe."

Ron sighed, and took Schell's hand for a shake; eyed Severus, and elected for a polite nod in lieu of physical contact; and gave Hermione one parting shot before he gave up entirely. "You owe me, 'Mione."

Her jaw dropped. "I like that. Whatever happened to --"

"You owe Lee, rather. A big, pink rabbit. She bawled for hours and hours when I took it away, and a few days later," he said over his shoulder as he retrieved his coat from the bench, "she saw a real one in the garden and asked for it."

"Of course I was going to get her something to.... Ron, she asked for it?"

"Yeah," he said, not bothering to turn back to her as he strode for the door. "Asked for it, and threw another fit when I wouldn't let her at it. And now," he said, finally glancing back at her as he stepped through the doors, "she won't bloody well shut up. It's lovely!"
Hermione stared after him as the doors closed, and heard Schell sigh.

"What a nice young man," he said to Severus, "but I just knew he would talk my ear off if I took him home. I do hope I didn't seem impolite, but I need my sleep tonight."

"You did the right thing. No shame in trying to preserve your sanity," Severus muttered back.

"Ah, well. He'll like Berthe's cooking, no matter how badly she burns the roast."

Severus snorted.

Funny thing -- she could hear Severus and Schell nattering away about Ron, and was vaguely aware that they weren't being altogether complimentary toward him: she should have cared about that, but she couldn't quite find the energy to object.

She couldn't find the energy to do anything but keep herself standing upright, actually.

"Why, by the way, didn't the justice simply render a Not Guilty verdict, as with me?" she heard Severus ask Schell. "I'm not terribly pleased that any record she now has will reflect that."

"Oh, quite right, I've been lobbying them to consider changing that for years. They don't go for any of that 'Not guilty by reason of,' I'm afraid -- if you've done it, you've done it, and they may consider your intent and the circumstances justified or not -- but you still did it, do you see? I suppose the verdict is closest to... well, I can't think of a wizarding one, but I believe Scottish Muggles have one of 'Not proven,' which comes closest."

"Blast. How will that affect her future? Employability, things like that?"

Damn it, I'm right here -- will the two of you stop talking as if I'm... On the other hand, I feel quite odd. Note to self: the next time someone offers me a flask marked 'Drink Me,' avoid it like the plague....

"Not at all -- there won't be a record per se to begin with, not as the matter was settled in the preliminary hearing and the charge dismissed.... Is she quite all right?"

"Hermione? Hermio-- Oh, bloody hell."

There was creaking on the stairs below her, and then Severus was before her, turning her face up to his with a warm hand under her chin.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

"Tired," she managed.

"Schell, would you ask them to send dinner up to the tower?" Severus asked the man, his eyes never leaving Hermione's. "I think I'd best get her upstairs."

"Goodness yes, I'll ask them to send it up as soon as possible," Schell said, his voice worried.
"'M all right, really --"

"Come along," Severus ordered, and guided her slowly down the stairs, his hands on her elbows to keep her steady.

"Should I send for a healer?" Schell asked as he hurried over to gather up his valise and cloak.

"No.... I don't know. I think she's simply exhausted, but --"

"I'll tell the Warden she might need attention later, then, and that the guards should fetch one if necessary --"

"Don't need a healer," Hermione said, and glared at Severus, two steps below her on the stair: he started to retort, looked away and calmed himself, and looked back up and her and said, "Probably not. But it's sensible to be certain we can get you one immediately, if one's needed. Agreed?"

Well, damn. There he goes, being reasonable again.

"Fine," she muttered.

"Get some sleep," Schell said, voice anxious, when Severus had got her all the way out of the box, and the old man juggled his valise to the other arm and squeezed her shoulder. "I shall see how late I can set your meeting with the Prosecutor."

*****

Gutenberg was not a particularly large castle, but it might as well have been as immense as Hogwarts: the corridors seemed much longer on the way back to their rooms than they had a mere seven hours ago, and the twisty little stair up their tower was interminable. They had to stop midway up when she got a bad case of the shakes.

"Just.... Stay still and vertical, will you?" Severus muttered, propping her up against the baluster. "I can't carry you the rest of the way, damn it, my.... You're a healthily-built girl."

Right, she thought, and suppressed an hysterical giggle. You're afraid your knee will give out. And it probably should, poor man....

When the worst of it had passed they inched their way upward; and once the guard had opened the door for them and closed it behind them, Severus did take the risky -- and unprecedented -- step of swinging her up into his arms and staggering over to the bed.

"Don't, Severus, you'll -- "

"Shut up," he muttered. "You're not that plump, and I can manage level ground."

Liar. I'm not plump at all.... Oh, let him have his excuse.
He dumped her on the bed and disappeared for a bit, with the observation, "They've put our wands on the table," and returned with a cool, wet flannel for her forehead and a shawl to wrap about her shoulders.

"Stupid," she murmured. "Don't know why.... Don't mean to be a nuisance."

"Nerves," he said tersely as he pulled her shoes off and stuffed several pillows under her calves. "Nerves, and too much caffeine, I expect. Should have anticipated it. Stay put until dinner arrives."

He plunked the flannel over her forehead and eyes and left her again, and she heard him rummaging about the room, refreshing the fire -- with his wand, as she caught his murmur of satisfaction at having it back in his hand again. She didn't much care to be in the dark, and wanted to sit up and watch him: but her arms felt as boneless as the rest of her, and she was incapable of moving the flannel out of the way.

"D'you think we ought go to Karl's cousin's?" she hazarded, grasping at anything to keep him talking.

"Why not?" he shot back from across the room. "Though if there's anything worse than German cookery, it's bad German cookery."

"Well, there is that. No, I really thought we might be safer in Muggle lodging, actually. They mightn't think to look for us there."

"Stay at an unwarded Muggle place, and have to conceal our wands and everything else? No, thank you," he retorted. "I've had my fill of subterfuge and hiding what I am. I'd rather stay here than go through that."

"But --"

Something clattered to the floor on the other side of the room, and she heard him stride over and felt the mattress dip at either side of her head as he bent over her.

"Hermione," he said in that slow, measured voice that meant, she knew, that he was trying very hard indeed to keep his temper, "we are not entirely out of danger. Moreover, you're not in any condition at the moment to make decisions. Trust me to make the arrangements and try to sleep for a little while, or I shall put you to sleep."

"You wouldn't --"

"I would. It's that, or I shall call a healer and ask for Draught of the Living Death for you --"

He paused, and the mattress dipped again as he sat beside her; and then he delicately brushed the dampened fringe away from her forehead.

"You did very well today," he whispered. "You've earned a rest -- take it. The Prosecutor will need to see you quite a lot in the next few days, I imagine."
"That won't be that difficult --"

"It shall, you're already bloody tired of going over it all. Having to re-live it. Take my word on that, it's not easy -- and there's still a great deal riding on your future performance." He bent closer to her ear, his breath tickling, and added, "Now go -- to -- sleep."

"Bully," she muttered.

"I'll take that, for once. Pity you're forcing me to behave as such, I don't much feel like having to."

*Why, of all the Slytherin-ish, guilt-tripping....*

*Oh, hell. He probably felt the same about you on New Year's Eve.*

He waited a moment to make certain she was going to shut up and do as he commanded, she supposed: and then he rose from the bed and moved across the room and back, and she felt him lay something over her and snug it up around her shoulders. (It smelt like him, but was far too long to be his frock-coat: his cloak, then, she guessed.)

"I'll wake you when the meal's here," he said, and then drew the bed-curtains.

She *did* doze, despite the jittery, itchy feeling in her brain; she woke fully once, when the silly cuckoo-clock on the other side of the room began to squall seven o'clock. Severus cursed, and then she heard a fizzle and the dying wail of the clock's mechanism.

"What is this strange propensity for killing clocks?" she murmured.

"It was an annoying little bastard," he grumbled. "And you're *not* sleeping."

"Was, a bit. Can I get up now?"

"Wait for dinner."

*Of all the -- Cripes.*

She *did* drop back off, though, sooner and more deeply than she thought possible, comforted by the thought that if Severus was back to his old, irritable, annoyance-destroying self, then something like true normality couldn't be far ahead after all.

*****

He woke her after dinner had been put on the table -- she'd slept though the noise of its arrival -- and got her settled before tucking into his own meal. He seemed to have got a bit of his own composure back, for he didn't fuss over her nearly as much: nor did he seem willing to talk. (He kept an eye on her, though. She caught him watching her intently once or twice, noting how much she was or wasn't eating, and how deftly she was managing her fork and knife.)
"What," she asked much later, curled up on the deep sill at the window, "shall we do if we can't go back?"

"Damned if I know," he muttered, intent on the book before him. "You'll be all right, I'm sure."

He was reading *Priscilla*, damn it, but then she couldn't fault him for resorting to it: he'd been through everything else, even the Shakespeare. She doubted he'd pick up anything new from the silly thing anyway, not given some of his suggestions in December -- and not that she had to worry about that until they had access to contraceptive potion again.

She leaned her forehead against the frost-etched windowpane, stared at the moonlit mountain behind the tower, and considered that she *should* have to worry about that soon. She couldn't imagine that Liechtenstein apothecaries wouldn't stock contraceptive: she'd be greatly surprised if Severus didn't find a shop and purchase some at the first opportunity.

Except that he had been very restrained, recently, his perusal of *Priscilla* notwithstanding. She wasn't entirely certain that it was just the lack of potion, either.

*Funny, he really hasn't asked for anything shocking since early January or so. Well, except for that time he wanted me to... Ewwwwww. No, still not ready to go that far, even if he's fresh out of the bath. I think I should have to love someone a great deal to offer that.*

*I might manage something along the line of touching it, though. Works nicely with what he wanted a couple of weeks ago. And he's said it's quite sensitive....*

*I wonder if I could make him... shiver? Make him go as funny as he sometimes can me, even without... well, without having him inside me? Not that I particularly mind that any longer, it's not nearly as disgusting as it was at first. Quite interesting, really, how he loses control at the end -- was from the beginning, I remember thinking that. I can see how you might enjoy sharing your body that way, sort of, of... taking him in. Accepting him.*

*Can't be managed now, though, unless he lets me touch him. Shows me what he likes. I imagine he's got some definite preferences, given how long he's been alone....*

She tucked the thought away as a bit too dangerous to explore, for the time being: no sense in starting something they couldn't see through to what Severus probably thought of as its natural conclusion. She couldn't see him giving her that kind of power even if he didn't, either -- of allowing her to bring him to climax by hand (or to try to, given how clumsy she'd undoubtedly be at first). There was almost always a *quid pro quo* on his part, seeing that *she* climaxed -- even though she didn't want it, damn him -- but sex invariably ended with him in the dominant position. She couldn't imagine him giving her that kind of control.

Not that she'd given him any choice, as she'd refused to participate much.

*Come to think of it, some of the illustrations in the book really aren't that shocking, or at least I imagine not if one is interested at all in the act itself. I really ought attempt one or two of them. Can't expect him to settle for only Option A or B for the rest of our lives.*
The rest of their lives -- wherever they should end up living them.

"I mean, should you really mind France that much if we had to go there?" she asked, shaking herself out of her thoughts. "If it's just the language-barrier --" "N'est pas la langue," he growled rapidly. "C'est la peuplade. Tous pédés qui pètent plus haut de son cul."

His accent was acceptable -- barely -- but his vocabulary left something to be desired.

_Basics, but gutter basics. Where'd he pick those up?_

"Are not," she argued, well aware that his intention was to shock her into shutting up.

"C'est ça. Les femmes aussi -- une grande bande des gouines."

_Hah. I'll fix him...._

"Some pseudo-intellectual French brewer -- homosexual or not -- ripped apart a journal article of yours once, didn't they?" she asked.

Spot on: he glared at her and refused to confirm or deny it, and wouldn't speak to her until well past bed-time -- and only then to tell her to stop hogging the covers, and that he wasn't about to let her warm her feet on his again -- _ever._

*****

_Thursday, February 16th_

Thursday morning was spent in packing up the few pitiful belongings they'd acquired while in custody, and in preparing to meet with the Prosecutor.

The man, when they met him, was rather younger than Schell, and far more shark-like; he was also less gentle, grilling Hermione over points in her testimony, and giving both of them grief about a few things in their manuscripts. (Severus was right: it was intensely wearing on the nerves to go through it all once again.) It was to be expected though, she supposed: the Prosecutor had a lot on his plate. One didn't shoulder the responsibility of bringing criminal charges against a prominent government official every day (and a foreign one, at that). Schell was there, blessedly, to act as a translator over the stickier bits -- and, incidentally, to keep her focussed, and Severus' temper under control, which was no mean feat.

Hermione decided that no matter how atrocious his bill ended up being, it was worth it for the last reason alone.

*****

Later that afternoon Severus deemed Karl's cousin Berthe's house in Vaduz unworthy.
"Too many exterior doors," he snapped after a tromp through the place. "Between that and the food...."

(Berthe, a podgy young hausfrau with the beginnings of a moustache, knew just enough English to pick up on that, and bristled.)

"Right," Schell said, and glance at Hermione with a long-suffering sigh. "There's another option, but it's more expensive. You'll have to hire a cook and furnishings."

"We'll manage," Hermione said, though she didn't know how as she had no way as yet to make arrangements with her bank or Gringott's: she'd changed what little Muggle cash she had in her handbag to Swiss francs when they'd reached Vaduz, but those wouldn't go far.

Schell led them -- sped them, rather -- to Schellenberg, and to a small timber-framed house on the outskirts of the village: it looked like a German version of the Shrieking Shack, though on a smaller scale.

"Haven't been here in a while," he said as he unwarded the lock and fumbled with the latch. "Far fewer doors, Professor Snape, but I lose track of it as the Muggles keep moving it. It's almost as bad as having one of our Unplottable charms on it in reverse."

"It's not a wizard structure, then?" Hermione said, watching Severus out of the corner of her eye.

"It was until the witch-burnings in the 1660s. The family that owned it from 1518 to then got it back eventually, but by then they'd assimilated. They throw off a Muggleborn every long once in a while, though, one who appreciates the place." Schell grunted as he pushed at the sticky door, and staggered when it finally gave and opened fully. "I... have access to it -- it's not used for anything any longer, but it's protected under Muggle restrictions -- so you should be safe here."

He ushered them in, and they walked through the small, empty, low-ceilinged rooms: Severus, after checking the few, tiny windows throughout the first and second floors, finally returned to the main room and nodded to Schell.

"Good," Schell said, obviously relieved to have them sorted. "I'll... have the owner re-instate the anti-Muggle wards, and I'll ask Karl to bring by some furniture. Shall we go back to Gutenberg? I'm sure they wouldn't mind too terribly if you --"

"No," Severus said quite abruptly. "No, Hermione's a fine Transfigurationist -- we can make do for a day or two, thank you."

Poor Schell looked utterly bewildered; Hermione took pity on him, drew his arm through hers, and walked him to the door, saying, "It's not a problem, is it? If we stay tonight, before making the proper arrangements with the owner?"

"Oh, no, no -- Good evening, Professor, I'm sure I'll see you in a day or two --"

Severus grunted.
"-- it's just that I had the impression that your husband likes his creature-comforts," Schell explained as they stepped outside.

"He does, but he likes his privacy more," Hermione said in an undertone. "He's, erm.... I think he's quite relieved to be out of ICW custody, actually. He had a friend whose case went badly. Quite badly."

"Oh, I see. I thought perhaps it was part of his general, ah, testiness."

"That too," Hermione said wryly. "It's not that he doesn't appreciate everything you've done, it's just that he's too preoccupied to observe the niceties."

"Good. Good that he's preoccupied with the lay of the land, that is. I really wouldn't have brought you here if I thought he were the type to become careless."

"Don't worry, he's paranoid enough for all three of us. I am worried about.... Well, where is the grocer's about here? I can't transfigure a decent meal."

"There's a Muggle one back in the village just off the square, you can't miss it. You've no pots or pans yet, though."

"We'll just have to picnic on the floor. Serves him right."

"You've enough money?"

"For the time being.... Thank you so much, Herr Schell. We can't begin to --"

"No," Schell corrected her gently. "Firstly, it's Willi -- you're no longer my clients. Secondly, this is... partly in payment of a very old debt, not that I shouldn't have worried over you just as much. And thirdly," he said, drawing his cloak about himself more tightly, "get inside before you catch a chill. The woodshed is outside the back door, and it should be full."

"Thank you anyway," she said, and stood on tip-toe to give the old man a kiss to each cheek. (He went even pinker in the cheeks than the cold had already done to him.) "Oh, the lease --?"

"Taken care of already," he said with a vague wave of his hand as he walked away from her. "I'll have Karl see to cook and furniture tomorrow." He stepped outside the gate, warded it, and sped away back toward Gutenberg; and Hermione let herself back in to the little house to confront the very irritable viper she suspected was waiting for her.

"Woodshed's out back," she called over her shoulder as she warded the door.

"Found it," Severus shouted back.

Indeed, when she walked into the main room, she found he'd already started a fire and was busy blocking any light from escaping the windows.
"What about the fire?"

"Smokeless," he grunted. "You're not the only one who knows some useful fire-charms."

*Well, I guess that put me in my place, didn't it?*

"You didn't even give him time to discuss the lease-terms with us," she said, trying to keep as much reproach out of her voice as possible. "Or to see if the owner minds if we doss down for the night before it's signed for."

"He doesn't need to speak to the owner. And I'm willing to wager," Severus said grimly, "that the hire for the house itself will be nil, providing we don't burn it down." (He snorted at that, as if it were a private joke.)

"*What?*"

He looked at her quite sharply. "You *are* off your game, Hermione. Wilhelm Schell takes us to *Schellenberg*, has no difficulty at all with a difficult ward, a ward for a house which he has no little acquaintance with since he knows the Muggles have moved it several times...?"

"Oh, *blast.*"

"Right."

"I thought he lived in Gutenberg."

"Probably does, to be near the Court. And since the family home was co-opted centuries ago by the Muggles, and he can't count on always having access to it...."

"Good God, are you telling me he's --"

"One of the Muggleborns in the family, yes, I should think so. A family largely killed off in the bloody persecutions."

"*Cripes.*"

"It gets worse," Severus said, and jerked his head toward the staircase. "Go look at the right-hand window in the larger room."

Hermione climbed the little stair, entered the larger of the two rooms, and squinted at the panes in the dying afternoon sun. She couldn't see anything for a while; and then, by running her fingers over the glass, she found a rough spot, breathed on it to bring up a haze of frost, and made out a faint *AD '44* scratched into the lower-right pane.

"Oh, for *Christ's* sake --"

Severus, below in the main room, heard her and barked out a laugh of agreement.
"He uses it as a safe house," she said as she trudged back down the stair. "When he can, at least. I wonder what he and Dumbledore were up to?"

"Grindelwald, judging by the date. Merlin's hairy arse," Severus said, gloomy, "the bastard's been dead a decade, and I still can't get shut of him."

"Oh, Severus, you.... Never mind," she said, pulling on her gloves and making for the front door.

"Where are you going?"

"To the grocer's, unless you want to go to bed without any dinner at all."

"You are not going by yourself."

"I am. They're not going to be looking for a lone female in Muggle clothing, particularly since she'll be passing herself off as French. One female and one broody, definitely not-really-Muggle male who can't manage decent German or polite French will be noticed, so stay put."

She didn't wait for either sneer or further argument, but skived off directly: and she was more than a little relieved when Severus didn't follow.

*****

Her pocket-money just covered bread, cheese, cold meat, a bottle of wine, and a few candles.

It did not extend to Muggle condoms at the chemist's, which were her only option since Schellenberg didn't have to a wizarding quarter.

*****

Quite surprisingly, Severus didn't grumble at the spareness or simplicity of their dinner. Apart from a certain thin-lipped tension that disappeared shortly after she returned unharmed, in fact, he seemed to go out of his way to be agreeable, having lugged in sufficient logs to feed the fire overnight and for her to transfigure a bed-frame.

"Don't bother with table and chairs," he commanded before she even attempted it. "Swept the floor while you were out."

My, aren't we domestic? ...Enough, Hermione. He's trying to be pleasant.

"Not," he added, "that I don't suspect you intend to make me eat off the floor anyway, given your mood."

"It isn't my mood that's the problem. The poor man thinks you hate his guts, and after all he's done for us...."

"Bollocks," Severus muttered, pushed her down by the shoulders to sit -- on his cloak -- in front of the fire, and handed her his pocket-knife. "He'll get over it, even if he does."
Well, stranger things had happened. She'd got used to Severus, after all.

"When do you think they'll serve Fudge the writs?" she asked, sawing at the bread-loaf.

"No idea, but the sooner the better," Severus said as he charmed the cork out of the wine-bottle. "Glasses --? Oh, never mind," he added, and took a swig before allowing it to breath. "Next day or two, I should think. Provided they keep that bitch Snodgrass from flapping her mouth and tipping him off."

"Snodgrass? The recused one?"

"Right. Sat in the corner and scribbled through the first two sessions -- didn't you see her?" He plucked a slice of bread from her hand, and improvised a toasting-fork from the poker.

"Not really, no. I was a bit preoccupied," she said, and cut thick slices from the cheese-wedge.

"Hah. She disappeared after their cocoa-break. I assume that terror of a senior justice barred her from hearing your testimony."

Once the cheese was managed, Hermione bent to unlace her boots -- no sense risking singeing them before the generous fire Severus had built -- and the act reminded her of a question. "Oh, what was that business with the senior justice's boots?"

"Your friend Weasley nearly got us thrown out, is what it was --"

Severus launched into the tale of the senior justice's boot and smelly socks; and by the time he'd finished -- including a descriptive flourish with the poker, which nearly landed the bread in the fire -- Hermione was sniggering at the whole thing. (Severus wasn't a particularly good storyteller, but it was quite ridiculous enough a situation on its own.)

Boots shucked and safely stowed away from the fire, she lay flat on the floor, heedless of any muck that worked it way into her hair, still chortling.

"Glad you find it amusing," Severus said. "I'd have brained Weasley to shut him up, if necessary, and I didn't want to. Far too many witnesses."

"No you wouldn't. You'd have stepped on his toes even more," she retorted, and turned her head to watch his work.

"Caught that, did you?" he said, and and tried -- unsuccessfully -- to turn the bread on the poker without burning his fingers.

"Yes --"

He fumbled the bread, and the first slice went untoasted-side down on the floorboards. "Bloody hell -- you might have bothered to transfigure this for me."
"Pick it up, quick --"

"What?"

"Five second rule, it's still good!"

"I will not," he said, and deposited the ruined slice in the flames. "Disgusting. I suppose you got that habit from Potter and Weasley."

"No, they always went to ten seconds. Unless the item in question was something from Honeyduke's, in which case all time limits were null."

"I can just... imagine," he muttered, and reached for another slice of bread. "You'd best hope this one doesn't go the way of the first."

"Hang on," she said, trying very hard not to laugh at him -- as much for his bloody-minded insistence on dropping hints and his inability to ask for help, as for his reaction to the boys' grubby ways -- as she reached for her wand. "You might have done it yourself, you know. I walked back to the village to get the dinner -- churlish of you to expect me to transfigure everything for you, too."

"And then be twitted about getting Schell's property stuck? No thank you."

"Nonsense," she said as she changed it. "You're only shaping a form here, not altering material. You're perfectly capable of that."

Poker sorted into toasting-fork, Hermione lay back down, wiggled her toes -- really warm for the first time that day -- and let him concentrate on making the perfect piece of toast (in other words, to let him sulk in silence for a while).

If anyone had told me, six months ago, that I should be stuck in a poky little house in the middle of nowhere with Severus Snape... with Severus Snape, and only using my wand to transfigure inanimate objects, not hexing him -- I'd have laughed in their face.

And it was strange, too, that as little as two months ago she'd have been guarded and suspicious of him: constantly vigilant -- as Moody might say -- to avoid any overture, to strike back at him for even the most remotely nasty comment. It was almost alarming, actually, or might be if she were at all concerned any longer about keeping him at a distance: but she felt none of those things any longer.

Comfortable. Might go so far as to say content.

Cripes, haven't felt that for a long time. It feels nice.

Not that there still weren't plenty of things to be worried over, though.

"I'm serious -- what do we do now?" she asked him softly, and wriggled sideways to watch his face.
He stared into the fire, intent on the toast. "We wait. The bludger's out of our hands and on the ICW's end of the pitch -- not much we can do." He pulled the fork toward him, deftly turned the toast, and returned it to the fire.

"France if we can't return?"

"I suppose," he muttered. "I don't fancy America, frankly, and that's the only other option I can think of."

"What do you think out chances to go back home?"

"I've no bloody idea, Hermione -- ask Weasley, since he seems to know so much about politics."

"He was only saying that to get up your nose, you know, to get back for whatever you said to him over lunch -- well, saying that and hanging onto me so."

"Are you ready for yours?" Severus asked abruptly, ignoring her interpretation of what he must see as Ron's trespass on his territory.

"Huh?"

"Your toast. This is almost done."

"Oh, right. Yes."

She propped herself on her elbows, and watched as Severus gravely examined the toast, plucked it from the fork, and considerately put it on a clean handkerchief before handing it to her. (It was rather perfect toast. He had a knack with the old-fashioned method: she'd always managed to burn it to a crisp when she'd tried.)

"You might've got mustard to go with the meat," he sniped as she reached for a slice of cheese.

"Might've, but I didn't have enough money. You're lucky I decided on the meat in the first place rather than condoms."

It was a good thing he hadn't got to another slice of bread yet, for the fork clattered to the floor.

"I didn't think you'd appreciate them, precisely, but they were the only option available," she explained earnestly when he glared at her; she lay back down, and cuddled the toast on her belly to give the cheese time to melt just a bit. "Surprised when I saw those. It's a largely Catholic area. For the tourists, I suppose."

"I'm perfectly capable of controlling myself until... it's no longer necessary," he murmured, passed the wine-bottle over to her, and set to toasting his own bread.

_Hah. We'll see how long _that _lasts._
It was a quiet evening other than that -- not that Hermione minded, given the tumult of the last week, and given that Severus hadn't anything to preoccupy himself with other than snarking at her. After a lazy postprandial doze she transfigured a bed-frame from raw wood, and bed-clothes from their extra clothes, while Severus cleaned up the dinner-leavings.

She gave him the small victory of dictating that the bed should be in the main room for the time being, near the fire: it was only sensible, after all, as there were no fireplaces above and it was damned cold, with the odd gust of freezing wind coming through the ancient joins of the house. (Someone had, in an excess of historic-restoration zeal, stripped the house back to its original, uninsulated and unplastered state. They'd ripped out the WC as well, and Hermione wasn't particularly thrilled at her first experience with a real privy -- but if this was as far as roughing it went, she'd do her best to be a good sport. If Severus didn't seem to mind and took it in stride, then so could she.)

He caved on his new No-Cold-Feet rule in short order. It was too bloody cold not to snuggle, even for him.

*****

Friday, February 17th

Hiding out in the wilds of Liechtenstein was boring as hell, and Hermione sincerely wished she never had to do anything like it again.

They weren't required back at Gutenberg for another day, so the only disturbance was the arrival of a few pieces of good furniture (including a feather-mattress and tons of thick coverlets, bless Schell's heart), and Karl's introduction of the fat, little old witch from the Swiss side of the mountains who was to cook for them. (She took one look at the fireplace -- the only thing capable of heating the house, let alone serving as a cooking area -- sniffed disdainfully, and informed Hermione that she would be cooking each meal at home and popping over the mountain to serve it to them. It was just as well, as having someone else about would probably drive Severus mad.)

And then there was the owl.

It was McGonagall's personal owl: it should not, by rights, have been able to find them through the wards Severus had insisted she set to obscure them from most wizards' searching -- but it did. Once Hermione got her hands on the letter it carried (Severus had cursed on reading it, crumpled it, and thrown it at the fire and missed), she learned that McGonagall was not happy with Severus for neglecting to inform her that all was well; that no, the Weasley boy hadn't told her, precisely, he hadn't intended to, but he couldn't help but grin like an idiot when she'd asked; and that she was, nevertheless, sending on more biscuits, reading material, and clean underthings, despite Severus' bloody-minded inability to communicate with people who were worried about them, and he should count himself lucky that his headmistress was inclined toward generosity.

The post-script was the best part, though: that Severus should quit cursing and shut up immediately about her raiding his bureau for clean pants, because they weren't anything she hadn't seen before. Hermione wasn't certain if McGonagall meant that generally or specifically, but -- judging by the
However disgusted Severus was with McGonagall, it didn't stop him from eating half the biscuits at one go, or from selfishly commandeering all the reading material until he'd finished each bit.

*****

Saturday, February 18th

They were summoned to Gutenberg on the Saturday by Karl. (Clerking for a wizarding barrister must really be much like an old-fashioned apprenticeship: Karl seemed run off his feet constantly, and it wasn't even Schell's case any longer. It was a lucky thing Karl seemed a good-natured, outgoing type of fellow, Severus' slander of his cousin's cooking notwithstanding.)

The Prosecutor -- whom Severus absolutely loathed, and for whom he made no attempt to conceal his loathing, as he had with Schell -- briskly took them through a few of the more intricate problems of the case (for the third or fourth time), and then shut his brief and ordered them, "You I will on Monday morning have need."

"What time?" Hermione asked (quickly, to cover the grinding of Severus' teeth at the man's arrogant tone).

"Nine. All day you here will be."

"Fudge has been served, then?" Severus asked. "Is it a hearing or a full trial?"

The young ass stared down his nose at Severus (he was much taller, and had a nose at least as large), and stated, "You of that information have no need."

Hermione could practically see the steam coming from Severus' ears. "Mightn't it be better," she said in German, "to have us know what we're walking into? We know what to expect from a hearing now, but full trial procedure is totally unknown to us. We assume it's a very different system than the British one -- not that you would know of it."

The ass considered her point, and then -- ignoring Severus, and making no attempt to speak English for his benefit -- said, "I do know of it, actually. It's used as an example of a very poor system in our textbooks. Monday's proceeding will initially be a hearing, but the full Court will be standing by to prosecute directly, so as to avoid any attempt at flight."

"So Fudge will be represented by Defence, and we won't know if a full trial will proceed until later?"

"Yes, in a manner of speaking. Unfortunately for him, or fortunately for us, Minister Fudge has taken a quite short-sighted view and declined representation for the hearing. It's being prepared for..."
him nonetheless in the event we go to full trial, but it isn't a particularly wise move. I am confident we will go ahead after the hearing."

Severus fidgeted, no doubt feeling peeved at being left out of the conversation, but Hermione ignored him for the time being.

"Surely he must realise how serious the charges are?"

"Apparently not. Or he feels his status will protect him. Either way, it's to our advantage -- I do not need to reveal the exact contents of your evidence until the hearing itself, so both he -- and, eventually, his Defence -- will be off-balance at its specificity."

"And the justices...?"

"The five that I believe heard your cases. A full trial will be heard by a panel of twelve. Needless to say, it could draw itself out for several days, and I shall need you here until the Defence and I call for a judgement."

"I see. Thank you."

The Prosecutor rose, collected his briefs, and left them with a very formal "Auf Wiedersehn."

"Right," Severus said through clenched teeth. "Do I rate a translation?"

"Yes, you.... Give me a moment to tell you, would you? Fudge has been charged, but he's declined representation for his hearing -- and while he knows the kinds of evidence that will be brought in, he doesn't know the specifics --"

"Arrogant sod."

"Says the.... Oh, never mind. If the justices rule against him -- the same five, by the way -- it'll go straight to a full trial, before a panel of twelve. He's got Defence working for him there, and it might take several days, so we'll have to plan on being here every day until they sum it all up."

"Blast."

"Oh, I don't know. Nice change from poor, poky little Schellenberg -- at least we can do some shopping afterwards."

"No, we can't. I didn't arrange for --"

"I did, while you were in the apothecary." (He'd used her last few francs buying the Liechtenstein equivalent of Tittifer's Tummy Tonic when they'd reached Gutenberg that morning: lucky thing the wizarding tradespeople took Muggle cash as well as their own.) "And I've already asked Karl where the wizard's bookshop is, so you needn't grumble about that. Don't get any ideas about going hog-wild and buying everything in the shop, though -- I'm not made of money. And the exchange rate's rotten."
"It would be," he said, and sneered.

Oh, for God's sake. Is there anything foreign he can tolerate? This doesn't bode well for France, not at all.

"We've missed lunch -- d'you want to find someplace for tea? We could stop in Vaduz, there are more options there."

"No," he said, words clipped. "I'd just as soon get the bloody hell out of here and back to... the other place."

So they did.

*****

Severus continued to behave sullenly, refusing to speak at all on the way back to Schellenberg: and when they reached the little house he muttered something about needing air, and took off around the side of it before Hermione could persuade him (or his stomach, rather) that it was too close to dinner-time for a long stroll.

She trotted to the back room and watched through the window, squinting through the wavy, distorting glass, as Severus trudged up the path that wound its hair-pin way up the side of the mountain: she found her breath hitching each time he stumbled, until he finally stopped at a dead-fall tree and fashioned himself a staff to help support that blasted knee -- and then she cursed when he kept going further and further along the path until he disappeared around the side of the mountain.

Bloody hell.... He'd bloody well better not fall into a crevasse, the stubborn, bad-tempered... sullen git. I don't understand it, really. We're practically at the end of it all, and he's acting as though it's got to bemore of a nuisance than the reverse.

She debated following him, and discarded the idea. He wanted solitude: apparently even she was too much to bear at the moment.

Or... he hasn't had any privacy, and the walls here are so thin. Maybe to, ah, relieve himself? I haven't heard any funny noises or caught him staying a long time in the loo for a while....

No, far too cold. He'd probably freeze it off.

Damn. I really wish he wouldn't take off like this.

She did her best not to worry -- although when the cook arrived before Severus returned, she nearly put on her coat and went out to search for him: but he turned up (limping badly, and trembling from the cold or from suppressed pain) just as the old woman was ladling stew into their bowls. Whatever it was that had possessed him, he'd walked it off: he was silent (not unusual), and practically oozed misery and and a distinct air of resignation (very unusual).
Pointless to try to make him talk. Whatever it is, I'll have to let him get round to it himself -- if he ever does.

He certainly wasn't ready to talk through dinner, but ate silently (she managed not to pester him), and excused himself early to go over -- for the third time -- one of the journals McGonagall had sent on. Hermione went directly to bed (upstairs, now, Severus having rather ingeniously rigged a temporary fireplace with Hermione's help) after the old witch had cleared away and left.

It was a very long time before Severus joined her.

*****

Of all the things Hermione might have expected, it wasn't what happened in their bed Friday night: and of the two astonishing things that occurred there, it was Severus' actions that surprised her most.

She could tell by his breathing that he wasn't anywhere near to falling asleep and was, in all likelihood, a million miles away in terms of his thoughts -- but she knew how she could get him to return to earth (or at least to this little corner of Liechtenstein). There was something to be said for a sexually-satisfied Severus, after all, other than letting him work off excess frustration. It certainly relaxed him. He often fell right asleep, or, conversely, let down his guard long enough for her to prise some kind of agreement or understanding from him.

Terribly manipulative of me, I suppose. Except that I don't want anything from him, only to... to make him feel better, if I can. Or at least less depressed.

It's now or never, Hermione. Time to put up or shut up.

He was used to her snuggling up against him by now: she suspected that he'd begun to welcome it, in fact (whether that was due to the cold or not), as he'd made no further attempts to put her off, verbally or otherwise. Judging by his reaction tonight, though, he wasn't used to her hand -- usually chastely resting on his ribcage, between them -- to wander further over, and then begin to creep lower.

She made it as far as his belly, and felt the muscles beneath the slight, inactive-wizard podge he'd acquired over the winter clench under her fingers; and then he fumbled for her hand and stilled her progress.

"What do you think you're doing?" he whispered, voice hoarse.

Oh, cripes, here we go. Bloody hell -- why, of all times, is he going to argue with me now?

"I understand if you're not willing to talk about... whatever it is," she said. "If you're not, there's not much I can do to... to help you with it. But I might be able to help you feel better about something."

He thought that through for a moment, and then asked -- rather grimly, and still in that hoarse rasp - - "I've been a good boy and deserve a pat on the head, you mean."
"No, Severus, I.... Besides, I've been told by someone who should know that patting and poking a bloke's bits isn't the done thing. Wasn't what I had in mind."

"Hermione --"

Christ, he passed up a suggestive comment. He really is in a bad way.

"Yes, you've behaved well, within your own snarky parameters," she interrupted him, stumbling over the explanation. (How, after all, could she explain it adequately when she hadn't really thought it through, but only felt it?) "No, this isn't a reward. I just think it's time I started treating you properly, and it's all I can do since we can't --"

"You needn't," he said bluntly. "In fact, I'd prefer you didn't." And he drew her hand back up to the middle of his chest and held it there.

Oh, for.... Right. I've had it.

"I'm confused, then," she said, struggling to pull away from him, and wincing when he squeezed her fingers to keep her there. "I really don't know what you want from me, Severus. All I've heard for the past two months is how badly I'm treating you, how you want me to touch you -- how you'd like to try other things, if you meant all the bloody hints seriously --"

"Hermione --"

"-- and when I finally make peace with my own idiocy and I want to do something for you -- want to, Severus -- you shoot me down. Why is that?" she demanded, propped herself on one elbow, and yanked her hand away from him. "Because I don't have permission, because I took it on myself to make the first move? What have I done, in the last two weeks, that's upset you so badly? What have I done wrong?"

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, for a long time: and then he said, very quietly, "No, Hermione. You haven't done anything wrong. And --"

"What, then?"

"-- and... It's not taking matters into your own hands... so to speak," he added wryly. "The gesture is appreciated."

"But clumsy. Off-puttingly so?"

"Merlin's balls, I don't think that's possible," he muttered, and fell silent again.

Then why won't you tell me what the bloody hell is wrong, you bastard? ...Oh, cripes. Maybe he's.... Well, I've heard that can start happening to middle-aged wizards.... Christ, there's no graceful way to askthat.
There was a way to check, of course: she tried to sneak her thigh toward his groin on the pretext of wriggling a bit closer, and had just enough time to discover that his penis had responded to her overture -- a bit. She'd certainly known him to proceed on less reaction than she currently felt.

"Stop," he commanded -- softly, and not entirely whole-heartedly, she thought -- but definitely; and he rolled to face her, pushing her thigh away, though he left his hand on it. "I've been thinking, is all, about what we should do afterwards. And I've.... In the best-case scenario, if we do go back home and the laws are changed, we shouldn't have to remain together."

_Holy.... Is he saying he wants to chuck everything? Why on earth --?

"Are you telling me that --"

"I'm not telling you anything. I'm suggesting that we've been in a very highly-charged, stressful situation, and that it's natural that we should turn to each other -- that's as it should be, I suspect," he said, "and I'm not blaming you -- or myself -- for wanting to. But I'm also looking ahead to a time when things might go back to normalcy, and when you might regret feeling so... generous."

"Bollocks." (She certainly regretted it now, though. She hadn't expected to be rejected.)

"Do you remember discussing something like this?" he suggested. "The hormones, the stress --?"

"I'm not saying I want a baby, Severus. I wasn't aware I could get pregnant just by touching it -- are Slytherins that virile?"

"I know that you don't want.... ...Don't try to be witty. It's never attractive when Gryffindors attempt it, it comes across as merely shirty. The principle is the same. It's a long-term... commitment when one may not be required, and when it may not be what either of us wants."

She processed that for a moment, and then hazarded, "You wouldn't wish to continue?"

"Immaterial at this point. What is pertinent is that it wasn't part of the agreement. We didn't account for the fact that we might be clear of the bloody laws someday. So," he added slowly, "I think a re-negotiation is in order, at the very least, and now is not the time to do that, when we're preoccupied with where and how we'll live. While there's nothing in the agreement to preclude relations until we... re-define the situation, I'd rather not indulge until a decision is made."

She stared at him, trying very hard to let go of her anger and tension: and then she asked "Where, in all this mess, did you acquire this very un-Slytherin conscience? Because I'll admit it -- I didn't notice at all when it happened."

"It's not 'un-Slytherin',' he corrected her, and grimaced. "Although a case could be made that an inability to ignore it is. And if you ever repeat that, I shall have to press charges for Slander."

"I wouldn't. Nobody asks about that, anyway -- only whether the lot of you have forked penises."

"At any rate, I.... Good gods, is that old chestnut still about? And to whom have you blabbed?"
"It is, and I didn't tell Ron if that's what's worrying you. Not that he didn't ask, but I told him to sod off."

"Ah. Good. I should have had to kill him if you had."

"Severus --"

"House honour and Slytherin mystique, and all that."

"Severus.... Oh, for God's sake, you didn't take what he said that wrongly, did you?"

"What?"

"About keeping me safe, about his being right about you. As though it were all his idea in the first place. Because it wasn't."

"I never imagined that it was --"

"You went all prickly at that point."

"-- I wouldn't be so stupid as to give a Weasley that much credit. ...All right, I might give Arthur credit for enough guile for that -- or just possibly Fred and George -- but certainly not Ronald," he said, making it clear where he felt Ron fell on the Slytherin Scale of Guile. "No, I'm afraid I've always laid the credit for the idea squarely at your door. I knew you were perfectly capable of it."

"Thank you. I think."

"My point is, I don't... I can't feel confident that we'll make a rational choice then if we don't acknowledge that the necessity to decide exists now, and I don't feel... right, going on as we have while that's in the back of my mind. While I appreciate that you... want to make me feel better, the only thing that will accomplish that, frankly, is seeing us safely settled and certain that we want to continue together. After that, however, should we... After that," he added with a brush of his thumb against her thigh, through her gown, his voice low, "I can assure you I wouldn't object."

Hermione didn't think she had ever heard anything quite that.... It wasn't arousing, exactly; or to put it more precisely, it wasn't in the least sexually arousing, just as the brush of his hand over her skin didn't turn her on, not in the way she thought it might if they'd done all this properly.

It was more of a mental stimulation -- that perhaps, just perhaps, Severus should want her for herself, above anyone else and without the bloody Ministry dictating that they should choose someone; that he might be willing to 're-negotiate', as he put it, a more natural and mutual relationship, and in spite of his vested interest in keeping her about for his own pleasure.

She respected him more than most men -- or had learned to, rather. She certainly respected him, particularly, far more than she had when they'd begun, despite -- or perhaps because of -- everything.
They worked together well, after all: their minds certainly meshed once they were able to get through the sticky business of learning each others' likely reactions and adjusting accordingly. (Or at least she was able to: he seemed less apt to make concessions for her than she for him, but there were precedents.)

And he was giving her a choice. For possibly the first time ever, he was laying the problem out fully and forthrightly (never mind that she'd had to drag it out of him), and he was acknowledging that she had a right to choose -- without argument, without bullying, and without any consequence -- whether to continue her life with or without him, of her own free will.

That was arousing.

"You realise," he said, and caressed her thigh again, "that this is possibly the first time in history a Slytherin has ever turned down such an attractive offer --"

"Oh, stuff it," she muttered. "This has nothing to do with Slytherin and Gryffindor, nothing at all. It never has, no matter that we've blamed the House whenever it suits us."

"Quite right. It has to do with you and me. Far more important than the House."

"Right," she said, and tried to sort through her feelings. "I ought to be very narked with you, you know. It wasn't easy to work myself up to that."

"I expect so."

"Very insulted."

"That you shouldn't be. I've demonstrated my appreciation for your charms quite comprehensively. Which should also tell you --"

"-- how strongly you feel about your point, yes. Given what a randy bugger you are, it certainly does."

"I am no more or less 'randy' than any other --"

"I'll take your word for it." She thought again for a moment, and then said, "Well, if you're willing to sacrifice your enjoyment for another week or two so I needn't feel stupid if we choose not to go on, the least I can do is stop acting like an insecure twit."

"Insecure, perhaps. Twittish, no."

"Thank you."

"Stubborn, infuriating, disobedient, certainly --"

"Stop while you're ahead and still in my good graces, will you?"

"Very well. You didn't let me get to the good bits, though."
"I wasn't aware I had any, as far as you're concerned."

"A few. Now you'll have to wait until I'm in the right frame of mind again to tell you," he said, and rolled back over on his back. "The bloody walk's knackered me."

Why, you....

Hermione suspected -- given how tight-lipped he was with compliments -- that it would probably be a very long time indeed before he was once again 'in the right frame of mind.' It couldn't be helped, though: she was still rather stunned by everything else he'd said, and probably shouldn't push her luck with him tonight. She had quite enough to think about as it was, anyway.

*If he complimented me now, my hair would probably go white from the shock.*

"Lie down, Hermione," Severus murmured. "You needn't stare. No Polyjuice involved. I'm not going to turn into anyone different to who I am."

She wasn't quite certain of that -- something kept niggling at the back of her brain, something very churlish and faintly prejudiced: but she dismissed it as more insecurity on her part, wriggled over and snuggled back close to his side anyway, and kept her hands to herself until she fell asleep.

**Chapter 26: Wherein Snape makes a hard decision (but tries to convince himself that he'll like the consequences), and Fudge gets his.**

The mountain behind the house, Schellenberg
Saturday, February 18th

The mountain, when Snape had breached the tree-line, was bloody cold -- bloody fucking cold, and he knew he'd pay for his walk with a badly stiffened knee -- but at the moment he didn't give a damn. He needed, just for a moment, to be away from the situation: to be away from Hermione, because trying to think about the problem while constantly in her presence had his guts twisted into knots.

He finally gave up climbing any higher, brushed the snow from a rock out-cropping, sat, and stared out over the valley and the village below, searching for an appropriate person to blame.

*Right. That's when it started -- in the courtroom. That's when I started feeling like a fucking old idiot.*

It was the bloody barrister who'd done it. Another wise, intent, far-seeing old bastard who'd sowed the seeds of discontent in exactly the kind of soil in which they would flourish (much as Dumbledore had all those years ago to persuade an impressionable idiot that he would find more glory with the Order than with the Dark Lord). Snape should have known Schell was cut from the
same cloth from the second the old man had made that dubiously-witty comment to Hermione about Snape's mistrust.

'Your job is done, you see.'

It was true. Schell had hit the nail on the head precisely -- even if he hadn't been aware of the exact situation, and even though he probably hadn't intended it that way. Snape's job -- protecting Hermione -- was very nearly done, and after they'd settled somewhere he wouldn't have one, either with her or, for that matter, one for himself.

Things might actually work out far better than exile, of course. They might be able to return to Britain, to their normal lives... well, he should: Hermione would have to find other work, but she was young and bright and she wouldn't have a moment's difficulty. No, she would be all right, of course, wherever they ended up: there were more than academic avenues open to her, but he was bolloxed unless he could return to Hogwarts. No Continental in their right mind would hire him.

*What a bloody lark that would be -- me at loose ends, while Hermione works her arse off to support us both. She might well try it, too -- some sense of obligation, of debt.*

*It was bad enough having to ask her for pocket-money for the bloody tonic today -- just imagine having to ask for everything else.*

She might wish to go on together anyway, he supposed -- she'd warmed to him in the last several weeks, he thought, and frowned, not able to pin down precisely when or how that had happened -- but he didn't care for the idea of being beholden to Hermione (he would be) or having to work at being congenial if she were the main provider (he ought to).

*I suppose one could think of marriage as a job. It's every bit as much a bloody bother.*

To be married properly, he now realised -- and it was a shock that he gave a damn enough about properly now to even consider it -- one had to think of it as a job, always remembering the potential pitfalls and treacherous shoals of the other's feelings. And that was in the best of circumstances: it would be even more of a bad job if Hermione had more power than he. Moreover, and far, far worse, a relationship with Hermione would always be a fraught and tumultuous one given their natures, even without the idiocy and espionage that had dogged them the last few months.

It was best to be truthful about his ability to deal with all those potential future difficulties, and the projection wasn't good. Snape didn't have the energy to deal with that kind of emotional upheaval any longer, and he'd never had the patience. Hermione didn't either, in his estimation: she was simply too stubborn to admit failure and give up should the chance arise, especially as she'd apparently made some adjustments -- or got used to him, as the case might be.

*The thought of having to constantly pick my way through an emotional entanglement with someone simply because they've got used to me -- because of their tenacity and fear of failing at anything....*
Slytherins -- the sensible ones like himself, at any rate -- were much more pragmatic about failure than the average Gryffindor, and he certainly far more than Hermione. The Law of Diminishing Returns figured rather prominently in his assessment of potential success or failure.

*It isn't worth all the work and nuisance, really. Not for something as straightforward as sex, something I can purchase if I want it. I suppose if I really wanted sprogs it might be worth it.*

But I don't.

What he wanted to do most, in fact, was to put the entire thing behind him, wash his hands of Hermione, of any reminders of his weakness and of some of his more brutal behaviour (for which he was now thoroughly ashamed of himself).

No. No, I'll never be rid of that shame, never be able to ignore it or pretend the nastiness didn't happen. I don't believe all that rot about "forgiveness," either, even if she does. Once something's been that badly bolloxed, you can't go back and make it right.

He preferred solitude if it came down to a choice between that and the shame, no matter how pleasant aspects of his experience with Hermione were, or how comfortable certain rituals had become. He could foresee far too many bad times -- even if they were able to return home -- and he wasn't at all sure that he could continue to treat her decently through those inevitable rough patches. In fact, he knew he couldn't, even though he cared for her far more now than he had initially. Sooner or later he'd do to her something else he'd regret, something that would prove absolutely that he was the kind of person he despised.

*No degree of caring for someone is worth risking that, losing one's self-respect. And it's better for her, too, to keep her out of harm's way by my hands.*

There was the tricky problem of how to manage it gracefully, of course, and when, and he hadn't any idea how to approach it. He was only certain that now wasn't the time.

A nasty wind whipped round the side of the mountain, blasting an icy spray of fine snow crystals directly in his face, and he ducked his head between his shoulders to ride it out.

*Bloody.... No wonder they had trouble with trolls. Only fucking things that could manage to live comfortably here.*

Right, then. See Fudge's trial through, and see where we end up. Then tackle the issue.

He could surely manage that, couldn't he? Keep her focussed on the present, but manage to keep his ethics intact, keep from hurting her physically. He supposed she'd feel more than a little hurt, rejected perhaps, but it couldn't be helped if she wouldn't see the reasonableness of ending the farce.

Damn. I suppose I oughtn't fuck her any more, really. Pity.
That shouldn't be difficult, though, given that she never initiated anything. Keep his hands and cock to himself, do his best to behave decently to her, and reason her through a parting of the ways when the time was right.

*Oh, come on, man -- she'll get suspicious once you've got access to contraceptive. She looked at you as though you were barmy when you passed it up at the apothecary's, not to mention those condoms she almost bought....*

*That* had been distinctly odd. He'd been shocked silly for a moment at her admission, and then almost laid into her for choosing liverwurst over a good (and long overdue) fuck. Lucky thing she had, though: between that annoying sense of fairness and his regrettable recognition that yes, damn it, he'd become attached to her, sex was probably the worst thing he could indulge in. No point in risking any further...

*...What was it that ridiculous text she lent me called it? "Bonding?"*

Well, whatever they called it, it needed to stop. He'd just have to sidle round sex if she brought it up... somehow. He wouldn't blame her for being suspicious -- he would be too, considering how important sex had been to him hitherto -- so he'd have to find a damned good pretext.

*You'll have to think on your feet, respond to whatever she throws at you -- if she does. Perhaps she'll be docile about it. I haven't heard any complaints about not touching her, after all, just her assumption that I'd want to start up again at the first opportunity. 

*Ridiculous to worry over it. Why would she complain? There've been no repeats of Whitemarsh -- that was all an act. Just a bit of a thaw. Proof enough that I don't do a bloody thing for the girl, really. 

He caught a flash of red out of the corner of his eye -- that cronish old cook in her crimson shawl had invoked the stupid Liechtenstein speed-walking charm, shot from the Swiss border down the mountain, and was headed for the house with their dinner -- and he sighed and stood, groaning when his knee refused to straighten at first.

*Well, that takes care of tonight, at least -- bloody thing'll swell up so much I won't want to put any weight on it.*

He ignored the little voice in his head that pointed out, quite reasonably, that there were options that didn't involve putting weight on his knee if only he could persuade Hermione to try them; shook the ice-crystals from his hair and cloak; took up the blasted staff once more; and stumped his way back to the house.

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*Saturday, February 18th*

11:30 pm
Snape couldn't quite remember ever being as shocked as when Hermione's hand drifted across his chest and continued southward. (The Potter boy speaking Parseltongue was a close second, but there really was no other good comparison.) He let her hand wander for another moment, intrigued with the possibility and wanting to see exactly how far she would go, and then remembered his earlier resolution and stopped her.

*Thank Merlin I finally had the sense to listen to my instincts and look at the problem properly. Stupidly careless of you, man, you should never, ever put off thinking about things that eat at you that way....*

He hadn't expected her to argue about it, either (so much for deciding that it was a ridiculous possibility), but in the long run, it was a happy accident. He'd been able to introduce the topic foremost in his mind.... (...All right, foremost in his mind was the thought that he should have shut his gob and let her have her way -- it would have been her fault and not his doing at all -- but it wouldn't have been worth it, really.) In any event, he'd been able to avoid both lying outright and saying too much. There was no sense in upsetting her by telling her the full truth, anyway, not with another week or so of muck to get through.

And there was always the faint possibility that he would change his mind, given the right persuasion and benefits....

*Given what she just tried to do, it might be distressingly easy for her to persuade me. Thank Merlin she didn't burrow her head under the covers. I'd have been a goner in more ways than one.*

*...Blast. She might be right -- I may well be a randy old bastard, at that.*

He stretched in the bed, trying to keep the damned knee from locking up totally, and basked in a totally-warranted feeling of accomplishment.

*Not so badly out-of-practise as you feared, are you? Followed all the rules of engagement: told enough of the truth to be convincing; didn't admit you've decided one way or the other; found opportunity to praise the opponent so as to foster a sense of security in them -- not that she hadn't attempted something praiseworthy, but it was certainly counter-productive for your purposes; reassured the opponent of your steadfastness... ...gave the opponent something they want, or that they think they want.*

*That's been the major bone of contention in the whole bloody mess, after all, hasn't it? That I didn't give her a reasonable choice in going through with it?*

He still didn't intend to, of course, unless she came up with some very convincing arguments indeed for him to remain shackled to her.

On the other hand, in the best-case scenario she might agree that it was all bolloxed, and there shouldn't be a need for any further quibbling -- that was rather a nice option, he thought: he shouldn't have to hurt her any more than he already had, and they could part amicably. (He couldn't see them ever being friends, precisely, but an ally one could count on in some future difficulty -- an
ally he shouldn't have to work at via blackmail or bribery -- wasn't something to be sneezed at, even if one couldn't quite imagine the circumstances in which one would need them.)

No, you've every reason to be proud of the way you handled it, I think, even if you've practically cut off your cock to spite your balls.

Snape had the nasty feeling, as he tucked Hermione a bit closer to him (for the warmth, of course), that the next two weeks or so were going to be very, very uncomfortable, her agreement to abstain notwithstanding.

Too bad the apothecary didn't have any saltpetre in stock. It would have made everything much less painful.

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Gutenberg Castle
Monday, February 20th

Right. Hate the ICW, hate Liechtenstein, hate the bloody fucking Prosecutor, and I hate being bored.

The waiting was excruciating. They'd dutifully presented themselves at Gutenberg Castle at quarter-nine on Monday, Hermione craning her neck upward, peering at their late, erstwhile "quarters" -- presumably in hopes of catching Fudge desperately hanging out the window -- until she skidded on a patch of ice, and Snape grabbed her elbow and pulled her forward.

"Give the surprise away, why don't you?" he'd muttered.

"Well it hardly matters now," she shot back, jerking her elbow away -- and then she slipped her arm though the crook of his. He doubted the she did it for surer footing alone: she squeezed his forearm in what he took to be thanks for saving her from a fall on her arse, and then relaxed and let her hand rest there rather than clutching at him.

Oh, damn. Note: restrain self from further chivalrous gestures.

It was now, however, going nine-thirty, they'd been sequestered in one of the Witness-Rooms for forty-five minutes, had heard absolutely nothing from the bloody silent guards (Snape suspected they might have been zombies save for their healthy skin tone), and he had absolutely nothing with which to occupy himself. The inactivity was all well and good for Hermione: she'd wheedled yarn and knitting-needles out of the nasty old cook, and was busy massacring something or other. The misbegotten product, which might be a muffler, looked exceedingly nubby and knotty, and Snape hoped it gave whoever it was intended for a rash -- until he considered that Bloody hell, she might be making it for me.

The thought of Hermione as a Molly-Weasley-in-training was not a comforting one. In fact, it was absolutely frightening.
The door scraped open, Snape whirled to see who the intruder was, and relaxed when it proved to be Schell.

"What's going on?" he rapped out at the old man before Schell could even say hello.

"Oh, I've no idea," Schell said. "Not my case and I'm not a British citizen, so not allowed in. But," he added, his expression going very sly, "Fudge was late. Very late, so they've only just started. Oskar is not pleased, to put it mildly."

"Late? But how --" Hermione blurted out, and then her face went red, and she dropped several stitches. "You mean they didn't have him in custody before?"

"No. Diplomatic courtesy, I believe, to allow him to present himself to the Court, rather than under guard."

"Merlin's bloody balls," she sputtered. "Of all the.... What if he'd scarpered?"

"Too arrogant, I should think. I wouldn't worry about him being given much more courtesy," Schell soothed her, obviously amused by her choice of words. "Especially given Oskar's mood.... I shall be allowed to observe from the gallery in the full trial, so I will tell you later the things you miss today." And with a polite nod, he nipped out of the room.

"Bloody hell. How do you like that?" she muttered, awkwardly wrestling the dropped stitches back in. "We're hauled off like common criminals, while he --"

"What do you expect?" Snape said.

He said it cautiously. McGonagall had forced some wretched Muggle book on him once during one of his convalescences, in which a demented woman knitted while the French nobility had their heads lopped off -- not that he minded the lopping-off of Frog heads, royal or otherwise -- and at the moment, Hermione reminded him of no-one so much as that disgusting character.

_Come to think of it, didn't the woman weave information into the knitting? Ingenious, actually. I wonder if Molly Weasley's tried that?_

He shook himself out of his fascination with the idea and added, "It's one of the privileges of Power. We are -- or were -- common criminals, while he isn't yet. I thought the whole point of our fiasco was to be dragged off at short notice."

"It was," Hermione muttered, head bent over her work again. "Doesn't make it fair."

He agreed, but there was not point in telling her that her fit of sulks was unreasonable. If she hadn't learned by now that rightness and fairness had nothing whatever to do with Life, another lecture from him wasn't going to help.

"And you realise," she added, jabbing the needles quite viciously through the yarn, "he said he'd tell us what we miss of the full trial. So we can't see or hear any of that, either."
Oh, for.... Merlin's bloody balls, indeed.

*****

It was two hours before one of them was called to testify -- and it was Hermione, not Snape. He nearly cracked a molar from grinding his teeth when the Bailiff told her to leave her wand and escorted her off; cursed himself for not insisting that they stop at the bookseller's before the day's proceedings; and, deciding unconsciousness was better than dying of ennui, he threw himself onto the settee for a nap. (It didn't work: he'd got too much sleep the night before.)

The only thing in the room to muck about with was Hermione's knitting.

He resisted that temptation mightily, but eventually he couldn't take it any longer ("it" being either the boredom or the thought that he might have to wear such a wretched piece of knitting, as he wasn't certain which was worse), and so he pulled his wand and practised a few elementary knot-tightening charms on the bloody thing. (It was a vast improvement. Why Hermione insisted on knitting manually when there were perfectly good Auto-Knitting charms that wouldn't go nubby, he couldn't imagine.) The guard, alerted to the use of magic, poked his head in the door and ill-advisedly sniggered when he saw what Snape was about: Snape produced his long-disused, particularly-for-Potter glare, and the guard retreated post-haste.

He only abandoned the knitting when luncheon was served, and was, in fact, considering filching Hermione's dessert when the guard escorted her in.

"Well?" he demanded before the door had closed behind her.

"Took me through the whole bloody thing all over again," she grumbled.

"No, no, how does Fudge look?"

"Stunned at first," she said as she sat at the table and spread her napkin. "I don't know whether he thought I was still in Ministry hands or in custody here, but he didn't expect to see me. Then he looked angry as hell, and he kept muttering to his barrister to interrupt my testimony, and the man kept shutting him up." She took a bite of her meal, grimaced, picked up her wand, and cast a warming charm at the food.

"And?"

"And," she mumbled about a mouthful of food, "they've broken for lunch, and the Defence has their turn at me afterwards...."

Her eyes drifted over to the settee, she noted the higgledy-piggledy pile of yarn and needles, and her face went red.

"What did you do to my --"

"What --? Not one bloody thing."
"You mucked it up!"

"I certainly did not. I just smoothed out the nubby bits. Stop fussing --"

"What damned charm did you use?" she demanded.

He told her: she winced. Then she got angry -- nearly as enraged as she'd been at Cane Hill in the Mortuary, he thought.

"That," she said, stabbing with her fork toward the ridiculous pile, "is my --" (stab) "-- project. Mine," (stab). "If you're bored, get your own bloody project and keep your paws off mine."

"I was trying to help," he said defensively. (He felt stupidly guilty about it, as though he were a Third Year caught with his hand down a girl's knickers -- not that he'd ever been, as he'd never had the opportunity. His powers of persuasion hadn't been nearly as good as his hexing skills, then.)

"Don't. It'll all have to be unravelled and started over, now. We," she said as she attacked the food on her plate, "are definitely stopping at the bookseller's on the way back to Schellenberg -- if they're still open when we're done -- and you're getting the thickest and most abstruse thing I can lay hands on to keep you from mucking with my things."

_Bloody hell, you'd think I purposely trod on her damned cat --_

He tried to snarl back, but it wasn't an effective attempt. He knew he was in the wrong: he should have had better sense than to mess about with such pointless, womanish idiocy, no matter how bored he'd been.

"Fine," he muttered -- though he couldn't quite bring himself to apologise. "If you're going back in there, though, the least you could do is cast a scrying-glass so I can see what's going on."

"No."

"Look, there's the water-carafe, and there's a perfectly good marble-topped table --"

"Cast it yourself," she said firmly.

"Can't." (He did snarl, this time.) "Divination is not my field."

"It's not my field, either," she said. "Besides, if the guards catch you, who knows what will happen?"

"Hermione, I am not going to sit here for another bloody two hours and.... You can't do it at all, can you."

"No. I dropped Divination Third Year, well before Scrying."

"Granger the Swot dropped Divination?"
In retrospect, perhaps chortling after that statement wasn't a good idea: judging by Hermione's reaction, he'd slighted her honour. Badly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked, voice unnaturally calm.

*Oh, shit. Trapped. Bloody hell, why is she so snappish? Is she getting ready to bleed, or is it simply the stress of testifying?*

"Nothing," he said, striving for nonchalance. (That is, stalling as he tried desperately to reconstruct the timetable for Hermione's menses. Even the bravest bloke sounded retreat in the face of female hormonal rage: if they didn't, they were either exceedingly stupid or had a death-wish.) "I didn't take Divination beyond Fourth Year, myself. Nothing wrong with that."

"Oh, there is, or you wouldn't have laughed. Why wouldn't you know, anyway? It's in my record."

*Deputy Heads have to look at the whole transcript. Bloody overworked Potions Masters who don't give a damn except for your Potions marks don't."

"Ah. But I take it you think dropping is a blot on my record, nonetheless."

"Theoretically, yes." (Hedging was definitely warranted, in this situation.) "Why did you?"

"Because it's a piss-poor discipline based on chicanery instead of Natural Science," she retorted, abandoning her entree and wading into a huge piece of cake instead. "And because that manky cow Trelawney was an old fraud -- in the main -- and I hated her guts."

"In that case, I agree with you entirely and the dropping was justified," he said, relieved to have got out of that mess. "Hating her guts is a bit extreme, though. Even I felt she was more to be pitied. Why on earth should you hate her?"

Hermione glanced up at him, expression sour. "I believe the phrase she used was, 'old maid as dry as your books.' Or some similar drivel. At least that prediction's been resoundingly debunked."

*In a manner of speaking, given the extraordinary circumstances....*

(That was unkind, even for Snape -- especially if she were every-so-slightly unbalanced, at the moment -- and he mentally chastised himself.)

"You're just going to have to deal with it," Hermione said. "The boredom, I mean."

"Will," he muttered. "Shall I... undo the charms?" he asked of the knitting. (Appeasement seemed in order.)

"No," she said, scraping the last bits of chocolate icing from her plate, and then savagely sucking the fork-tines clean. (He had to try very hard not to conflate the image.) "I'll need something to keep me busy when you go in."
Snape fervently hoped that the Defence would make short work of Hermione, and he'd be called soon: having something else to concentrate on might help him feel marginally less hen-pecked, and stop him from wondering how close Hermione had been to hexing him.

*****

2:45 pm

He finally got his crack at Fudge later that day (thank Merlin). The guard brought Hermione back to the Witness-Room, directed Snape to leave his wand behind, and guided him to a different courtroom entirely: far larger than the Hearing-Room, it contained a second-tier gallery for observers -- and it was packed with people.

Bloody hell, I wish she'd warned me.

Fudge's trial seemed very popular and sensational indeed, though you wouldn't have known it from the media. Liechtenstein had no wizarding newspaper, only a weekly circular which was only available at the bookseller's -- and as they hadn't been, yet....

Schell, wedged onto one of the benches in the gallery, caught Snape's eye as he was escorted in, and gave him a solemn nod. The justices -- the five who had presided at their hearing had been joined by another seven -- were, again, seated up front on another dais, at a rather longer table (but they still looked like crows).

Fudge himself was in the pillory, leaning down toward his barrister and whispering frantically; but his head shot upward when the bailiff bawled out "The Court Zeveruz Znape calls!"

Hermione was right: Fudge was immensely shocked to see Snape. His reaction a moment or two later, though, was quite different: rather than seeming angered, a slow, confident smile creased his fat, well-fed face, and he bent down to whisper in his barrister's ear again.

That smile was a mistake, for it told Snape exactly the tactic Fudge was advising his barrister to take.

Right, go ahead and rake muck, you self-righteous bastard. See how far it gets you.

Snape stepped into the Witness-box, and steeled himself to keep both temper and wits.

"Your name, nationality, and occupation, please?" the arse of a Prosecutor rapped out.

"Severus Snape, British. Potions Master at Hogwarts School."

"When, sir, did you become aware of certain criminal actions on the part of Cornelius Fudge?"

"I became aware of a conspiracy," Snape said carefully, "on Christmas Eve of last year. The full scope of matter and Minister Fudge's possible involvement did not become clear to me until December twenty-seventh, and his involvement proven toward --"
"Objection," the Defence interjected at a hiss from Fudge.

"Overruled," the Chief Justice -- not Oskar, for good or ill -- testily informed the Defence. "I've told you three times, now, Odo -- we're not idiots, we know it's the witness's opinion. Save your objections for the Prosecutor's questions. You should've said before."

The Defence nodded; Fudge glared at the justice.

*Hah. You can dish it out, but not take it, can you?*

"Continue, Professor Snape," the Prosecutor prodded Snape.

"-- proven to *my* satisfaction toward the end of January, the twenty-third, I believe," Snape continued as calmly as possible. He knew damn well that the bloody Defence hadn't objected to the question because that wasn't the point: trying to throw Snape off his stride was.

His testimony continued in this vein for a remarkably long time, with him wading through the events at the Prosecutor's bidding (with frequent objections from the Defence, and occasional rewording of the questions); but they eventually got through it all, and the Prosecutor called for a new piece of evidence to be introduced.

"I would like you," the Prosecutor asked Snape, "to give us the details of the alleged potion once again, if you please."

*Bloody....*

The tangent looked likely to prove interesting, though: two burly guards were wrestling a crate through the courtroom doors -- a crate with the distinctive *M&Ms* logo branded into the side. (Fudge momentarily lost control, and his eyes bulged when he saw it, too.)

"Objection," the Defence said in a supremely bored manner. "The witness is a schoolmaster, for pity's sake. Is he really qualified to testify as to this supposedly dangerous potion? Any half-witted wizard with a decent amount of magical skill and the sense to follow a receipt closely can teach brewing from a text."

*Someone's going to be missing two important bits of their anatomy if I catch them in a dark alleyway.*

"Not every brewer can extrapolate the likely effectiveness of an untried potion, true," the Prosecutor drawled back. "As it happens, Professor Snape is qualified, and I want his understanding of the potential dangers of this potion recognised."

The Chief Justice stared at Snape. "Suppose you tell us what your qualifications are, then."

"I apprenticed with Master Horatio Bluett, receiving High Distinction on my journeyman's project," Snape said evenly. "For the record, Bluett's projects were Class C potions, not B. He held his apprentices to a higher standard than the norm."
Bluett's name held a certain caché even on the Continent, as Snape knew well, for the observers in the gallery murmured, and the Chief Justice's eyebrows shot up toward his receding hairline.

"Overruled," the Chief Justice grunted at the Defence. "Continue."

"The potion, as hinted at by Flaherty and further detailed in Petherbridge's notes -- as best I can recall without my journal," Snape said slowly, "is compounded from a standard medicinal Grade-B base of glycerine and saline. The two constituent potions are added separately, with the aphrodisiac potion being mixed with the base first, in the following order: two ounces of finely-ground Nadder-Skin, allowed first to steep into the base for two minutes, and then stirred in until fully dissolved and incorporated..."

It was rather more detail than the Prosecutor had intended, apparently, for his lips thinned -- but he let Snape go on through "... the potion is to rest for three hours, at which point it is ready to be decanted. At least, that is to the best of my recollection of the receipt. You understand, I've never brewed it myself."

"But it should, theoretically, work as postulated?" the Prosecutor asked.

"Theoretically, yes. The application of Nadder-Skin to aphrodisiacs for human use isn't proven in any published literature, but the clinical trials performed in Azkaban seem to bear out its effectiveness. Distressingly so, in fact -- as I believe Minister Fudge can attest. If asked under oath or Veritaserum, of course."

Fudge glowered at him.

"I will now submit," the Prosecutor said, "a report by Wolfgang Blücher of the Swiss Institute of Alchemy and Potions, which confirms Professor Snape's speculations on the potion's effects as not only possible, but highly probable." His apprentice/runner bounded up to the panel, distributing the report among the justices. "Moreover, we were so fortunate as to seize samples of a substance recently shipped from Mangel and Mortars and being stored at St. Mungo's Hospital, London -- given the willingness of this court to issue the proper documents -- " he added hastily, as the Defence shot out of his chair to object, "-- on advice that this might be that self-same potion, and that substance I now present to this Court as evidence --"

"Objection!" the Defence bawled. "We've no way of telling whether the crate's been tampered with --"

"The crate was still nailed tight when it was retrieved, and the proper evidentiary wards and seals were placed upon it for transport," the Prosecutor continued smoothly. "Both were unbroken when the crate arrived in Vaduz on Saturday morning. It was opened in the presence of Justice Meyer, in accordance with standard procedures, and after the contents were examined and a sample obtained, it was resealed."

Fudge went a bit green about the gills at that.
"Zat so, Oskar?" the Chief Justice asked Meyer, and Oskar nodded and grunted an affirmative. "Right. Overruled. Sampling implies you've had it analysed, I take it?"

"Just so," the Prosecutor said, and smirked at the Defence as his apprentice ran the new reports up to the dais. "By both Blücher's laboratory and that of the Académie d'Alchimie et Philtres. This substance -- which was, as I said, stored at St. Mungo's, ready to be administered -- contains the same ingredients found in the receipts left by the apprentice Petherbridge."

Oh, fucking hell. 'Ready to be administered.'

The Chief Justice had to pound with his gavel to still the noise from the gallery. (It was a good thing he was distracted: he, and the others, seemed to have forgot about Snape entirely. He wasn't about to object for once, since he badly wanted this side of the story.)

"And it's been tested for effectiveness?" the Chief Justice demanded.

"Ah, regrettably, no. Both organisations are understandably reluctant to test given the potential side-effects, which may have irreversible consequences. They will endeavour to do so should the Court require it of them, and given suitable substitute test subjects. We have, however," the Prosecutor noted, "Debdale's own reports on the clinical trials he performed at the British penal institution at Azkaban, which were found in the effects of Dennis Corcoran."

At his nod, his apprentice trotted up to the dais with the evidence: the justices passed around the ragged little document, and their reactions varied from a judgemental tutting to mouth-gaping outrage.

Fudge's Defence looked as though he'd like to vomit when he got a look at the report, but like all semi-competent defence barristers, he recovered quickly.

"As of Friday afternoon the operation at Mangel and Mortars was raided, the personnel barred from the premises, and the facility sealed," the Prosecution continued. "Reports from the Enforcers and specialists sent in indicate production of the substance on a massive scale, given the size of the population. Moreover, the originals of the documents that Martin Flaherty copied, and the receipt for the potion -- minus the proprietary ingredient, Nadder-Skin, which is listed as 'secret' and provided by the Ministry -- are now in ICW hands."

The Defence now looked as though he needed to vomit. Fudge didn't look much better.

"And has any of it been given to the population?" Oskar demanded.

"No, despite considerable interest in the population caused, we think, by leaked reports in the media of a 'wondrous' genetic treatment," the Prosecutor said. "Oddly enough, St. Mungo's Chief Healer Pius -- while perfectly willing to begin treatment, according to his statement -- had a bit of a mutiny on his hands when it came to the stuff. His subordinates refused to administer it, and apparently he doesn't care to treat patients himself, so it had not yet been inflicted upon the citizenry."
Bless you, Bluett. Put two and two together and warned your nephew, didn't you? At least I shan't have that on my conscience.

"It's quite ingenious," the Prosecutor continued, nodding to the guards, who broke the seal and wrestled the lid of the crate open. "The 'treatment' consists of nothing more than eye-drops." He reached in, brushed wisps of excelsior-packing aside, and pulled from its individual nest a fat little bottle, a parchment, and a brochure from the crate. "The first dose was to be administered at St. Mungo's by a healer, and the patient -- both of them, as married couples were to be treated together -- sent home with the remainder, with instructions to continue the application for two weeks. Presumably this allows the potion to build up in their systems gradually, so as not to worry them with sudden onset of the... desired effects. The instructions to the healers point this out, in fact, though it's a note for them to caution the patients not to expect immediate results. The brochure sent home with the patients themselves," he added, and walked the bottle and documents up to the dais himself, "characterise the substance as a genetic treatment which will, if properly used, repair any damage to the patient's DNA -- that would be, the genetic building-blocks which govern heredity -- and prevent any defect or malformation occurring in future offspring."

"And would it do any such thing to the Dee... ...the whaju-thingies?" the Chief Justice asked, staring at the bottle as if it were the deadliest phial of Eternal Sleep.

"No, certainly not. Muggles are on the verge of developing such technologies, but none to date are entirely successful, and none involve anything so simplistic as eye-drops. This potion is purely magical, according to all the expert testimony, and it works only on the libido and biochemistry of the patients. It would have no effect on the genetic structure of either patients or of any offspring produced. That, and the new strictures against contraceptives, merely serve the purpose of boosting the birth-rate in British wizards, with reckless disregard for the health of offspring and the female in question. The male as well, if the Azkaban trial is accurate."

The Chief Justice got a very nasty look in his eye: the Prosecutor smiled, and the Defence.... The Defence looked only just this side of committing hara-kiri. Fudge glared at the Justices, defiant.

"Right," the Chief Justice barked. "It's near five. We're breaking now --"

Oh, shit.

"-- and re-convening at nine tomorrow, when we've had time to go through all this -- Yes, I know, Prosecutor, you've not done with the witness, he'll be back. Court adjourned for the day."

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It was fair to say that Snape was enraged by the time the guard got him back to the Witness-Room.

"What?" Hermione said, and started when he slammed the door behind him.

"Held over until tomorrow," he muttered, grabbed his wand and shoved it up his sleeve, and wrapped his cloak about himself. "Come along, I'm not in a mood to discuss it here."
Hermione shoved her knitting into her hand-bag, grabbed her coat, and trotted out of the castle after him.

"What's got you so --"

"Not here," he hissed, and pulled her along behind him.

"Don't tell me they pulled all that Death-Eater rot on you."

"Not yet, but they will. Bloody inefficient system, if you ask me --"

"Severus --"

"-- although I did learn quite a bit about what's been going on, but still --"

"Severus --"

"What?" he bellowed, and stopped dead in his tracks -- except they didn't: they kept gliding along on the damned Liechtenstein invisible conveyor-belt pavement.

"We're going in the wrong direction," she whispered. "And I can't change it, no matter how hard I think about it."

Blood hell, they were going in precisely the opposite direction as they should -- and Snape couldn't change their course, either. He pulled his wand and hid it in a fold of his cloak, pushed Hermione behind him, and braced himself as they approached a tidy little house and walled garden at top speed. They seemed likely to plough squarely into the wall, but at the last millisecond the gate slammed open and a side-door gaped wide.

Snape blinked when they ground to a halt in a neat, warm kitchen, and with a fat little woman, sauce-streaked ladle in hand, ready to cosh in his head. (He seemed destined to be bashed about by old ladies with kitchen-utensils: another thing he should have to investigate someday, along with his nose-cock connection.)

"Apologies," Schell's voice came from an interior door. "Telling what happens in court before a verdict's given isn't exactly done, so I didn't want you seen here and I couldn't give you any warning."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Marta, don't be silly -- put that down, you're dripping sauce on the floor," Schell added to his cook as he stepped into the room. "You two come along to the dining-room, and we'll talk while Marta finishes our dinner."

They followed the old man in to the next room -- comfortably messy in that particularly bachelor-scholar way, with legal texts and parchments strewn across the far end of the table, the sideboard, the extra chairs, and the phantom smell of many evenings' fragrant briar-pipes -- and Schell took
Hermione's coat from her and flung it over the nearest stack of books before seating her, and gesturing Snape to another chair.

"Well, that was instructive, wasn't it?" he asked Snape brightly. "My word, Rutger's thorough, isn't he? Bit of a snob, but then he had perfect marks on his apprenticeship. Damned difficult to attain the ICW Bar now, so many nationalities' code to take into account. It was much simpler in my day."

"Could have got through twice the testimony if he hadn't mucked about so with the potion," Snape grumbled as he tossed aside his cloak and sat. "Pure showmanship."

"But you wouldn't have heard any of the details, then," Schell said sagely. (Blast him.) "It's for the best, believe me. The wheels of ICW justice -- and of its Prosecutors -- grind exceeding slow, but exceeding fine. You'll be done with it all by noon tomorrow, I should think."

"I wish," Hermione said plaintively, "that someone would tell me what happened before and after I was in."

"First off," Schell said, and nipped over to the sideboard to pour each of them a glass of wine, "Fudge was very indignant to be charged and brought to full trial. He claimed to know nothing of it -- any of it, except for the legally-legislated bits -- and blustered about it being Dennis Corcoran's purview, and if they'd questions they ought to ask him." He returned to the table, distributed the wineglasses, and sat before continuing. "It was then pointed out to him that as Corcoran himself wasn't available to testify --"

"He's not?" Hermione blurted out.

"No. Seems he's in MLE custody under investigation for something-or-other, and the head man there, ah --"

"Bretchgirdle," Snape supplied, sipped at Schell's excellent wine, and congratulated himself for bolloxing-up Corcoran's life royally.

"-- yes, Bretchgirdle -- refused to honour the extradition request. They've sent a writ in response, of course, but the justices weren't kindly disposed enough to delay beginning the trial -- Fudge mucked that up himself anyway, I suspect, as he acted so arrogantly this morning. The Defence wouldn't want a dual trial in any case, as Fudge wouldn't be able to blame Corcoran after all. At any rate, Oskar pointed out to him that he is responsible for the actions of his subordinates, and then Rutger introduced the memos between them straight off, so his complicity's been proven despite his protests. He met and discussed the situation with his Defence for a half-hour -- his choice, he might have had all day, if he'd wished -- but he barged on into it, presumably thinking he could explain away the evidence."

"Bloody hell," Hermione muttered.

"So, all that bit -- the conspiracy angle -- was presented even before Madam Snape entered the court this morning. She did beautifully under examination and the Defence's cross -- thank you,
Professor Snape, for that document dropping the MLE's charges against her, by the way, that came in very handy -- and you know the rest."

"He does, I don't," Hermione objected, even as Snape muttered "No, I don't --"

But they were both staring at Snape expectantly, so he sighed, told his headache to go away, and launched into the important bit -- the details of the potion. Their dinner of stew and new-made bread was cooling by the time he'd done: a pity, because Marta's cooking smelt far better than the Swiss crone's.

"Cripes," Hermione said when he'd finished, her eyes wide. "So they were that close to giving people the damned stuff --"

"Correct," he said, and bit back a grudging admission that perhaps she'd not been so hasty to act after all.

"All that remains for you, then," Schell told Snape gravely, "is to finish out whatever Rutger wants of you, and hold your own against the Defence. That won't be easy, I'm afraid. I did see that look Fudge gave you when you entered the court, and they'll have all night to come up the maximum possible nastiness."

"Nothing I haven't had to face before," Snape muttered, and pushed his stew about the bowl.

"Have you heard anything from London?" Hermione asked Schell. "We haven't got any news from McGonagall lately."

"I imagine they don't know anything yet," Schell said. "Not out of the ordinary for a head of government to be called at short notice to the ICW. It won't even have reached our local circular -- tomorrow, perhaps."

"What," Snape asked Schell as the old man dug into his meal, "do you think Fudge's tactic will be? Damned hard to explain away the potion."

"Yes, I think your testimony and the potion evidence has nicely blocked that avenue for him," Schell said between spoonfuls of stew. "I imagine they'll try to blacken your character. They tried to paint Madam Snape in a bad light, and claimed she'd manufactured much of the documentary evidence, but Oskar and Rutger -- bless them -- had all of it definitively verified by three different experts over the week-end, so that's a moot point as well. They will, of course," he added gravely to Snape, "bring up your association with Voldemort."

"Such as it was."

"Does Fudge know anything?"

"Yes," Snape said, ripping apart a warm, fragrant rye roll and slathering it with butter. (His appetite hadn't been quashed for long, and he appreciated the excellence of Liechtenstein's dairy products if nothing else.) "He saw the Dark Mark in..."
"1995," Hermione quickly supplied.

"Yes. He knew before, of course, he could hardly not -- I'd been implicated during the trials in 1982, but Dumbledore vouched for me in court. I'm sure Fudge will conveniently forget that, however."

"Do you have any proof of that?" Schell asked intently. "Anything other than witnesses?"

Snape shrugged. "He gave me some document or other at the time in case of future difficulties, but it's in my Gringott's vault. Can't be got at now."

"Hmmm. Perhaps something else can be managed, if necessary," Schell murmured, and ducked his head back toward his stew-bowl.

*What an odd statement.... What does the bloody man mean?*

Snape stared at Schell for a moment, mystified and suspicious, and then glanced at Hermione -- but she was working away at her own stew quite assiduously, and seemed not at all interested in Schell's words.

No doubt about it: for all his seeming benignity, Schell made Snape very, very nervous.

"You didn't tell me," Snape said to Hermione, more to distract Schell from himself than anything else, "what you had to do after luncheon."

"More of the same," she said as she scraped the last of the beefy sauce from the bottom of her bowl. "In the earlier session they went straight to Flaherty's documents and everything afterwards. Fudge's barrister tried to shake me with the MLE charges, of course, make me out to want the downfall of the entire government out of vengeance, the silly bugger, but the justices weren't impressed with that."

"Why didn't they ask about the ICW reports?"

"Rutger will if he gets Corcoran extradited," Schell told him. "The Defence might still, I suppose, if they're absolutely desperate, but I think not. There is, as you noted, that reference to 'TM' in Corcoran's hand, which *does* possibly implicate Fudge. Personally, I think they're better off not having Corcoran testify in any way -- but it should be quite interesting," he added, patting at his lips and beard with his napkin, "to see how soon Corcoran betrays Fudge. If Fudge tries to pin the responsibility on him solely, he undoubtedly will."

As interesting an insight as that would be into the twisted motivations and psychology of those two morally bankrupt individuals, Snape wished someone would simply pull out the bloody Veritaserum and have done with it.

Dessert, when it came, was an incredibly rich apple torte and tiny glasses of a complementary wine, and for a few, brief minutes Snape was -- despite his best efforts -- compelled to set aside his worries over tomorrow and enjoy a simple, decadent pleasure like any other normal human being.
The bookseller's was closed by the time they left Schell's home and reached Vaduz, however, so Snape had something to grouse about after all: and he had even more when Hermione insisted that they stop at a Muggle chemist's.

"Hermione, we had this discussion already --" he muttered under his breath.

"Not those. I need girl things," she hissed back, and sprinted across the road to the chemist's, leaving him in the dark, Uplottable alley to work himself into a right state of impatience. (He couldn't quite, though. Once he'd worked out what "girl things" were, he had a smug moment of satisfaction at his own perspicacity that quite made the wait worth it.)

On the whole, the barrister for the Defence was fortunate Hermione had had to leave her wand in the Witness-Room -- though it might have been worth it had Snape been able to see his face when Hermione lost it and hexed him to kingdom come.

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Tuesday, February 21st

The Court re-convened at nine precisely, with Snape back in the Witness-box. The gallery was, if anything, even more tightly packed: the justices looked grumpy and sleepless; the Defence looked exhausted; and Fudge alternated between looking likely to spit nails at any second, and gleefully smug. The Prosecution was the only one of the lot who seemed well-rested and confident: Snape himself, despite a decent night's sleep, felt as if his nerve-endings had been sandpapered.

"We left off yesterday," the Prosecution began, "with your expert testimony as to the probable effects of the potion later produced in court. Can you tell us, sir, if you saw any demonstrations of the potion itself?"

"Not anything that would be considered clinically valid," Snape said cautiously. "And not in the detail provided by the Azkaban trial."

"Not anything that would be considered clinically valid," Snape said cautiously. "And not in the detail provided by the Azkaban trial."

"Yes, that has already been admitted as evidence. Could you tell us what you did see?"

"I saw, first-hand, the after-effects produced in the initial test subjects -- wild elves -- at Debdale's laboratory facility at Cane Hill, Coulsdon."

"Please describe that venture."

"My wife and I infiltrated the facility on... February first, I believe. We entered what was once the Mortuary, and I discovered evidence of Debdale and Petherbridge's forensic examinations of some of the subjects. There were seventeen corpses in all in the Cold Store -- two of pregnant females which had not yet given birth, and several others which were most likely females who had given birth shortly before their deaths. Some appeared to have been alive when dissection was performed."
"And was that all?"

"By no means. Debdale had abandoned the facility himself some time prior to this, leaving Petherbridge behind, and Petherbridge had got... lazy. We were unable to investigate that area further, but I am certain there must be evidence on the grounds of burials --"

"Speculation," the Defence said half-heartedly. (He seemed rather demoralised. He must have realised yesterday that he'd got a pig in a poke with this case.)

"Sustained," the justice grunted.

The Prosecutor nodded to Snape to continue.

"In the laboratory ward itself there were seven... no, six elves, still living. One infant had already died, and its mother was in extremis," Snape said, neglecting to admit to the mercy-killing. "There were another ten or twelve, all told, on one of the other wards, all dead. There may have been more, but we were forced to flee the place before a thorough search could be made. I... sent agents in to check for more survivors the next day, and they may have found more."

"And would you say the experimentation on the subjects had been successful?"

"Judging firstly from Petherbridge's notes, yes. He also verbally confirmed that of all the females they had imprisoned, only one had not become impregnated."

"So would you say that of the... twenty-five or so females that were the test subjects, only one failed to reproduce under the influence of the potion?"

"Of the twenty-five or so that I verified with my own eyes, definitely --"

"Thank you," the Prosecutor said quickly. (Probably to avoid the Defence giving another damned objection, damn it.) "You've provided us with Petherbridge's notes, of course. Why could not Petherbridge testify here today? That was one of your stated purposes for the Cane Hill visit, was it not?"

What the bloody hell.... How will that help?

"The man's dead," Snape admitted. "We had him cornered, and he leaped from a height rather than allow himself to be captured."

"Why might that have been?" the Prosecutor asked, and quickly added, "Fear of the consequences?"

"Objectio --"

"Yes, yes, withdrawn. Professor Snape?" the Prosecutor said blandly.

Ah. He wants something more than just that.
"He did state that he was worried the Defendant would exact revenge," Snape said. "On the other hand, he said he'd been promised 'a place in the history books' as incentive. But foremost," he added, and glanced over at Fudge as casually as he could, "His master Debdale, whom he had served more or less diligently, dosed him with a potion and with a Dark Transfiguration. He had been warded into the facility with no hope of escape, and was slowly being metamorphosed into an elf."

The blood drained from Fudge's face.

_That's right, you fat, self-satisfied buggerer. That's the kind of monster you were dealing with, that you've hoped to expose thousands of people to. How many glasses of port did you have with Debdale, I wonder, and never stop to consider he might easily have poisoned you? Might still turn on you if he can reach you?_

Snape couldn't ensure Fudge would be imprisoned, but he could make damned certain the bastard had nightmares for the rest of his life.

"'Promised a place in the history books', indeed -- very interesting, those were his actual words? Do you have any knowledge," the Prosecutor asked, "of any visits by Minister Fudge to the laboratory at Cane Hill?"

"Petherbridge claimed --"

"Hearsay!"

"-- in his written notes -- if I might finish -- that the laboratory had been visited on December sixth of 2006 by an 'august personage,' if I recall rightly."

"Overruled," said the Chief Justice.

"Come now, 'august personage,' really --" the Defence whined.

"The Defence may spare his knees," the Prosecutor muttered to prevent another rise and objection, as he returned to his table and pulled a parchment from a file. "Petherbridge did indeed state that in a journal entry of December seventh of that year, which has already been submitted into evidence. Let me quote two passages from other documents entered collectively as Exhibit A, firstly: 'D. is quite excited, and would love to get cracking on it. I know he was pleased with your reaction to his little demonstration.' That from Dennis Corcoran to Cornelius Fudge in a memo dated December eighth, 2006.

"And secondly, 'It looks promising, very promising. And yes, the demonstration was quite persuasive. Wherever did he find wild elves?' That," the Prosecutor said distinctly, and turned to face the Defence-table, "from Cornelius Fudge to Dennis Corcoran, December eleventh, 2006. Now," he added thoughtfully, "how many researchers of a surname beginning in 'D' might be conducting experiments with wild elves at the same time that Minister Fudge alludes to viewing a 'demonstration' with such creatures?"
"Whu- why, there could be --" the Defence stuttered.

"Really, a 'D' which happens to stand for Debdale, as Corcoran later slips and reveals in a memo of January twenty-seventh, 2007? The same Debdale referred to by name, explicitly, in Petherbridge's journal, and who was doing experimentation with wild elves at precisely the same time? I suppose you'd have us believe there are two Debdales doing exactly the same research, sir. Are they merely cousins, or is one the other's evil twin?"

The gallery tittered, and the Defence's face turned much the same purple shade as Fudge's. The Chief Justice wasn't particularly impressed, however: he brought the Prosecution over to the dais with a crook of his finger, bent down, and muttered, "I think you've exceeded your sarcasm quota with that one alone, boy."

"I do beg the Court's pardon," the Prosecutor said earnestly. (He wasn't at all contrite, really, and Snape didn't blame him. He'd been thinking more or less the same thing. 'Oskar' did too, apparently, for he sniggered throughout the exchange. Snape decided that he liked the old coot after all.)

"500 wanc fine, pay the Bailiff after the session. And try to behave. Odo's not a challenging subject -- like hexing squid in a barrel, really."

"I shall endeavour to restrain myself," the arse said, bowed politely, and headed back for his table: he only thought to glance at Snape after he'd flung the tails of his robes up to seat himself (Poncey, melodramatic git, that one), and said, "I'm done with the witness."

-- Oh, shit, here it comes --

The Defence was out of his chair like a shot. "Professor Snape," he bawled, "do you bear the Defendant any ill will?"

"How, precisely, do you mean?" Snape said carefully.

"Why, how difficult can the question be?" the Defence asked in apparent astonishment. (He was a far worse actor that the Prosecution, as it happened.) "Do - you - bear - Minister - Fudge --"

"I understand that," he snapped back at the idiot. "I'm asking you to qualify it before the present situation. At present I'm highly unlikely to be kindly disposed toward someone attempting to poison half my fellow-citizens."

"Objec --! ...Oh, damn," the Defence muttered. "Not supposed to do that now, am I?"

"No, Odo," the Chief Justice said wearily as the gallery tittered, and he was forced to pound his gavel for order. "Have a sip of water and calm down a bit."

Snape glanced at the Prosecutor, who was calmly sucking away at the end of his quill -- and the bloody man looked back at him, eyes sparkling with laughter, and winked.
Merlin's balls, he did all that leading purposely, to get the idiot wound up.... All right, he's still an arse -- but a devious one.

I do hope Fudge is beginning to realise how badly he's fucked.

"All right, let's try that again, then," the Defence said, far less inflated and blustery after a quick drink and a blotting of his forehead. "Have you had, in the past, any reason to bear Minister Fudge ill will?"

"He wilfully ignored the return of Voldemort," Snape said coolly. "Denied it outright, in fact, in the face of compelling evidence. He thereby imperilled more people than was necessary, particularly many Hogwarts stude --"

"No, I mean something rather more personal," the Defence interrupted.

"Such as?"

"Such as," the Defence said slowly, darting a shifty glance at the Prosecution, "the... non-awarding of, erm, certain honours?"

"The Order of Merlin and the Sirius Black business? It was later explained to me that I misunderstood the offer, though it seemed a straightforward enough promise," Snape said, and smiled at the idiot. "I thought it was contingent upon Black's capture only, not upon a successful hand-over to the Dementors. Pity as it wasn't my fault that Black escaped, but it couldn't be helped."

(Lies, all lies. It still rankled, deeply.)

"Are you certain there's nothing else?" the Defence wheedled. "Nothing at all you hold against him?"

"I can't imagine anything, no."

"Would you say that Minister Fudge has -- not that he has used, but has," the Defence added slyly, "-- the power to reveal you as a Death Eater?"

(That was a sensational statement. The Chief Justice had to pound his gavel once again.)

Well, there was nothing for it: best face it head-on.

"As a former Death Eater, certainly."

"Former? Is there really that great a difference?"

"My actions should be taken in context," Snape said once the furore had died down. "To say that at one time, as an impressionable and ill-informed youth, I supported the Death Eaters' goals is accurate --"
"Answer the question, sir, it's a simple yes or no --"

"Badgering," the Prosecution interjected, idly cleaning beneath his fingernails with his quill-nib, not even bothering to look up. "Extenuating circumstances require something more than a simple yes or no...."

The Chief Justice peered suspiciously at Snape, and then grudgingly said, "I'll sustain. Give the witness some leeway, Odo."

"Forced, I suppose, as some of your friends claimed," Odo muttered.

"Not in the sense you mean. In fact, I became a spy for the Order of the Phoenix before I sought entrance into the higher levels of the Death Eater ranks," Snape said, "and that was the only reason I continued my association with the Death Eaters -- to further the goals of the Order. It was a ruse for the purpose of information-gathering."

"Did you commit crimes while posing as a Death Eater?"

"Yes."

"Harassments?"

"Yes."

"Hexings?"

"Yes."

"Torture?"

"Within limits, yes."

Snape's opinion of the Prosecutor was rapidly souring: the bloody man was more intent on his manicure than on the grilling Snape was getting.

_Bloody hell, man --_

"Murder?"

"Did I _kill_? In skirmishes, I'm quite certain. I was never placed in a position of executing anyone, thankfully."

"Rapes?"

"No."

"And you felt your actions justified?"
"Necessary," Snape hissed. "To obtain information for the Order and to protect the resistance."

"This 'Order' -- not a recognised government agency, true?"

"Quite true."

"Actually, nothing more than a band of malcontents and rabble-rousers who made trouble for the Ministry, was it not? Vigilantes?"

"No," Snape said sharply, and literally bit the tip of his tongue to keep from cursing. After a quick regroup, he said more calmly, "The Order resisted Voldemort in the first war, and was instrumental in defeating him in the second."

"Yet you were not among those listed for honours after the more recent war, were you?" the Defence said. "Your name was not even published as an Order member, was it, in enumerations from either the first or second war?"

"Of what bloody use," Snape asked wearily, "is a spy whose identity is acknowledged publicly?"

"So we have no evidence whatever," the Defence said, "that your involvement in the Death Eaters benefited anyone at all other than yourself and your master Voldemort, including this 'Order.'"

"The Defendant has evidence," Snape said. "He himself must have heard testimony exonerating me at the first trials, in 1982."

Fudge managed innocence and bewilderment -- at least, until he couldn't quite hold back a triumphant smirk.

"For the record, my client denies any such knowledge," the Defence said. "Moreover, you were implicated on the word of another acknowledged Death Eater, one Karkaroff --"

"Objection," the Prosecution murmured. "Hearsay."

"He testified in court --"

"Do you have a transcript to submit into evidence?"

"Erm, no."

"Do you have the witness here?"

"... No, of course not, the man's missing and presumed dead --"

"Then the objection remains," the Prosecutor said, yawned, and peered up at the Chief Justice, who nodded.

The Defence foundered for a bit, glared at Snape, and then demanded, "You do not deny that you were a Death Eater."
"No."

"Fine. I'm done with him."

*Until your bloody summation, I'm sure. Then 'character assassination' won't begin to describe it.*

"Cross?" the Chief Justice asked the Prosecutor, who nodded.

"So you don't deny that you acted within the Death Eater ranks on behalf of the Order of the Phoenix?" he asked Snape.

"No."

"Were you aware that you had been implicated by Karkaroff?"

"Yes, of course. I was informed at the time."

"By whom?"

"By Albus Dumbledore."

The gallery whispered at that, and the Prosecutor sat upright, pretended genuflection on his cuticles discarded. "Albus Dumbledore? Not the late *Supreme Mugwump* Dumbledore, by any chance?"

"Yes, the same."

*For Merlin's sake, don't go into the whole litany -- Conqueror of Grindelwald, Friend to Orphans, Widows, Muggles, and sherbet lemon makers, etcetera, etcetera --*

"Why would he inform you of Karkaroff's testimony?"

"Because Dumbledore himself refuted the accusation and vouched for my service in front of the entire Wizengamot. Including Cornelius Fudge, although he wasn't yet Minister."

"And who asked for your... participation as a spy within the Death Eaters?"

"Albus Dumbledore, as head of the Order."

"Thank you, sir," the Prosecutor said courteously, and lapsed back into his chair. "I'm quite finished with the witness, Chief Justice."

*Thank Merlin's bloody balls.*

The bailiff escorted Snape from the court (he ignored the whispers from the gallery as he passed beneath it), and one of the other guards stepped beside him outside the doors to walk him back to the Witness-Room.
Right. 'No honour among thieves' obviously applies to fucking politicians as well. Not that I didn't know that already --

The guard stopped dead at the top of the stairs, flinging an arm across Snape's chest to halt him.

"What do you think you're --" Snape hissed, and the guard nodded down over the baluster, where the great doors of the entry were just closing behind a coterie of Enforcers. They were hustling along a staggering prisoner, who shivered in a cloak altogether too thin for a Liechtenstein winter: the man looked about him, and then up, and his eyes met Snape's.

It was Dennis Corcoran.

Bloody hell.

Corcoran hadn't got the nice treatment Fudge had: whether he'd been deemed dangerous or he'd tried to make a run for it, the Enforcers had gone so far as to shackle him, which explained his awkward gait. Snape was also pleased to note that he had several days' growth of beard-stubble and that he looked terrified nearly bloodless, his acne-scars standing stark against the pallor of his skin.

Good. First Bretchgirdle got to him, and now this.

Corcoran seemed to remember himself: he shuffled to a stop, causing the Enforcers behind him to nearly run him over; and after a second's bewilderment he snarled at Snape and made a very rude gesture, the last bastion of the inarticulate and powerless.

Snape merely smiled back, and took great satisfaction when one of the Enforcers spat out a command and pushed Corcoran forward.

Well, this should put Hermione in a better mood. It certainly has me.

...Oh, bloody hell. I suppose we'll have to testify at his trial as well. Mer-lin's bloo-dy fu-cking balls and beard....

"You will excuse me," the guard apologised (in that peculiar Teutonic way that was more a command than anything else). "The rules precedence to Arrivals give."

"For the chance to see that, mein Herr," Snape said as he watched the Enforcers march Corcoran away, "you could impugn my birth and accuse me of being half-troll, and I'd only laugh."

The guard looked at Snape rather strangely, though whether it was because he didn't understand, or because the idea of Snape laughing was distinctly odd, Snape neither knew nor cared.

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Hermione's mood was greatly improved when he told her of Corcoran's arrest, but she expressed it rather differently than Snape was accustomed to her doing: she swore a long, triumphant, and creative blue streak, and stole several of his favourite phrases in the process.
(He wasn't certain that was a good thing. Not only was she used to him, she was now beginning to sound like him. He might prefer his own company, but he wasn't so narcissistic as to wish to live with a copy of himself, either.)

Fudge's trial was not concluded by the end of the day.

They elected to stop at the bookseller's in Vaduz rather than imposing on Schell again, and sent a polite note ahead to decline and thank him: they made their stop, and returned to Schellenberg for a quiet evening in what passed for home. (It was quiet, as it happened: Snape had been forced to drag Hermione away from the bookseller's along with a heavy parcel of new-bought books, one of which she kept her nose tucked into all evening. She had far more interest in the lot than he, as most of the blasted stuff was in German.)

He should, Snape thought to himself late that night in bed, really consider this a sort of twisted holiday. It was very much like that week-end they'd spent in Whitemarsh, in some respects -- no work, per se: no mucking about with the dunderheads (he quite appreciated that), but with the advantage of no stupid walks around a vapid holiday-scape filled with over-priced, substandard food and trashy tourist gee-gaws.

_**No sex, either, but you did that to yourself. Ah, well.**_

He winced a bit, and tried to stretch his arm -- the one under Hermione's head -- enough to keep the circulation going, without waking her. (Not that it was bloody likely, since she still slept like the dead.)

*I certainly won't miss this. The clingingess, I mean. I don't blame her for trying to stay warm, but it's hell on a bloke's limbs._

He suspected he'd miss her scent, though. Not that cologne she used, no -- it was pleasant, but it wasn't what she really smelled like: not the almond of her skin when just from the bath, and the citrus and hint of salt when she was a bit overheated. He rather missed it now, actually, because uppermost at the moment was the muskiness of her blood, which he hadn't had to endure much to this point. (Not that Hermione wasn't fastidious, but his sense of smell was acute.)

He'd thought that would bother him more: he'd seen and smelt enough blood through the years to be thoroughly disgusted and unmoved by it. This was different, though. It was, after all, natural -- Hermione's body purging itself, as it must, of the stuff that otherwise should have helped make and nourish a child.

_Rather an astounding system, when you think of it, the way the female body adjusts every bloody month. She's every bit as subject to the moon as Lupin is, in a way -- it's a wonder they don't all go barking mad, with what their body chemistry is doing to them._

(He was glad, now, that he hadn't suggested a good fuck in the bath all those weeks ago. It was probably a very messy proposition for relatively little satisfaction, especially as she'd whinge about it. Not that he could blame her for that, either: she had seemed rather uncomfortable for the last two days, in contrast to last time when he hadn't noticed any discomfort for her at all.)
If she's like most witches, she'll be fertile a bit longer than the average Muggle. She's... bloody hell, how old is she? Twenty-six or -seven? Another twenty-five years, easily.

More than enough time for her to find some fool and have sprogs, if she wanted. (Assuming Trelawney really was wrong with her idiotic old maid statement, and Snape knew damned well she was, his earlier sniping notwithstanding.)

No, it was better to dodge all that. Twenty-odd years more of a woman's menses, and what, thirteen times a year or so? There were days he could barely stand Hermione when she was level-headed: her mood swings in the past half-week had nearly driven him mad, and he'd often needed to duck out to the woodshed, supposedly to charm kindling, rather than biting her head off as she'd done him.

There was quite a pile of kindling in the woodshed now, as testament to his forbearance and sense of self-preservation.

It would almost be worth it to get her pregnant for the peace.... No, no, it wouldn't, idiot. Imagine what that does to a woman.

He shuddered delicately, and put that thought out of mind; and with it he finally laid to rest the still faintly-tantalising idea of the kind of child they might have made together had they been forced to that extreme, and went to sleep.

*****

Wednesday, February 22nd

Neither of them were called to Gutenberg the next day -- surprising, but in a way, welcome (at least it was to Snape). Hermione grumbled about it, but to Snape's mind, it was a good omen: he imagined they'd got round to deposing Corcoran, and, very likely, Corcoran's Defence had let slip that Fudge had blamed him. While there were undoubtedly very interesting things being bandied about the Court, Snape would just as soon miss them if it meant staying out of Gutenberg Castle.

McGonagall finally got round to sending another package, and it included Tuesday's edition of The Prophet. (Hermione got to it first, damn her.)

"Cripes!" she shrieked, and Snape nearly slopped very hot coffee on his lap.

"Don't scr- What is it?"

"Look, look --" she babbled, and he barely had time to set down his coffee-cup before she launched herself out of her chair, around the table, and to his side.

Fudge had made front-page news, and not in a good way.
"Gutenberg, Liechtenstein, Monday February 20th. Prophet journalist Humphrey Humphries, special correspondent with the ICW, owls in an astounding report on Monday's events in the ICW Courts --" Hermione began to gabble.

"I can read," Snape muttered, and grabbed the near side of the paper to adjust it to a decent reading-distance: Hermione draped her free arm over the back of his chair and bent over his shoulder so they could read together.

-- directly involving Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge, who has been placed under arrest and charged with crimes against British wizarding citizens.

Evidence presented before the full ICW Judiciary seems to indicate that Minister Fudge conspired with Wizarding Resources Director Dennis Corcoran to defraud British wizards in a particularly heinous manner: by tricking them into a medical treatment which effectively compels them to procreate.

While Our Reporter is barred by ICW restrictions from revealing specific details of the matter until a verdict has been reached, he was given leave to say that the treatment, while represented as beneficial, in fact puts all parties at great risk and blatantly ignores the very problem is claims to cure -- that of birth defects such as squibbishness, malformations, and other early-term defects leading to a high incidence of stillbirths.

Through an interpreter, ICW Prosecutor Rutger Wittgenstein said, 'We have seldom seen a case of such reckless and breathtaking disregard for the well-being of a nation's citizens, and such a dangerous attempt to compel their cooperation by fraudulent means. A Judiciary Sub-Panel determined that Minister Fudge and Dennis Corcoran should be prosecuted under Section 497 of the ICW's Code of Wizarding Governmental Conduct, which prohibits the use of Imperius and other coercive measures against member-nations' citizens. I intend to prove beyond doubt that this is precisely what Fudge and Corcoran's actions involved.'

A successful prosecution could earn Fudge and Corcoran Life terms in the ICW Penal Facility in Vaduz. It is not clear at this time whether the Ministry could pursue charges of its own against the two if their guilt is proven, as there is no precedent in Wizengamot history.
No Wizengamot member was available at press time for comment, but a statement issued at six o'clock this morning by the Department of Press Relations states that Minister Fudge has been 'unavoidably detained on the Continent,' and that Senior Interrogator Willie Biggles has been appointed Acting Minister.

The Prophet will be following events in Liechtenstein very closely, and will issue special editions as necessary throughout the week.

**PROPHET EDITOR URGES CAUTION**
Citizens Should Beware New Medical Treatments
The Prophet Offices, London.

Owing to evidence presented at the trial of Minister Fudge (see ICW Arrests Fudge, above), this Editor urges all wizards and witches to avoid any treatments at St. Mungo's or any other facility which are represented as 'genetic' treatments or cures for the time being, until further is known of the allegations and treatment effectiveness. At the present time, Chief Healer Pius has declined to make a statement regarding one such treatment, which The Prophet briefly mentioned on February 9th....

"Notice how quickly they turned on him?" Snape murmured. "Just two weeks ago they were towing the Party line and whetting public appetite for the scheme, and now they're distancing themselves --"

"In the long run," Hermione muttered back, scanning the rest of the article, "scandals sell a hell of a lot more papers than Party loyalty.... Oh, thank God," she added, threw her arms about Snape's neck, and managed, somehow, not to land *quite* on his bad knee when she plopped into his lap.

**Uh.... Ahhhhh, I don't think.... Oh, damnation.**

There was nothing for it, really, but to drop the paper and put his arms about her: she was likely to slide down on top of his bloody knee, otherwise, and Merlin knew he didn't want *that*.

She was mumbling something into his coat-front, and he had to lower his head and listen very carefully to pick out the words, "Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank --"

"What the bloody hell *for?*"

"Couldn't have done it without you."

*No, of course you couldn't* was the obvious response: but all Snape could manage was a delicate clearing of his throat and the caution, "There isn't a verdict yet, you know."

"Even if he's cut loose, his plan's bolloxed," Hermione said more distinctly, and loosened her stranglehold on Snape's neck. "And if the media's after him now and gets the population riled, he's
going to have a hell of a time convincing the Wizengamot he should stay in office. Worth whatever happens, as far as I'm concerned -- I don't particularly care if we can go back or not, now,"

Snape did. It was, on the whole, a good thing that she couldn't see his face. And then, just when he thought things couldn't get any more awkward, Hermione shuddered, drew in a shaky breath, and started to cry.

Oh, bloody fucking hell --

He couldn't very well push her off him now: the next best course of action seemed to be locating his handkerchief for her, and keeping his damned mouth shut until she'd bawled herself dry -- so he did.

All in all, I suppose she's entitled to a bit of a breakdown. Better for her than keeping it in, as she has everything else....

It was a very long time before Hermione cried herself out, and not before the old cook shuffled into the room to clear the table, glaring at Snape every bit as nastily as if he'd driven Hermione to it.

*****

Thursday, February 23rd

They were in Vaduz, piddling about in what passed for the Wizarding quarter (bored with staying at the house, as there nothing at all to do, and not much money to do it with but sight-seeing after all), when they heard the verdicts -- or, rather, Hermione heard the newsboy's shrill harangue, froze in her tracks and clutched Snape's arm more tightly, and then pulled free of him and darted across the street to the bookseller's.

"Hermio --" Oh, bloody hell. Thank Merlin there aren't any sleds or carriages about.

He joined her at a marginally more sedate pace, reaching her just as she shoved a few wancs at the newsboy and snatched the circular from him.

"Well?"

"Give me a moment, I've got to translate," she muttered, and pushed a straggling, snow-flecked lock of hair behind her ear. "Fudge is... 'Minister Fudge is found Guilty of violation of Section 497 --' Cripes! '-- and it is the verdict of the Court that, due to the...' hell, it must be something like 'egregious' -- '-- nature of the crime, is sentenced to Life imprisonment --' Oh, Severus --"

"What about Corcoran?" Snape asked quickly, to prevent her from flinging herself at him in a distressingly public place.

"Hang on, they go on about Fudge quite a bit.... 'Dennis Corcoran, former Human Resour-- ' Former? When the bloody hell did that happen?"
"Hermione --"

Out of the corner of his eye Snape saw Schell poke his head out of the doorway of a café: he'd obviously seen Hermione's race across the street.

"'Dennis Corcoran, etcetera, who was also charged under Section 497, is likewise declared Guilty, and sentenced to thirty years....' ...Bloody hell, why did the bastard get a lesser sentence?"

"Because," Schell called to them, "he... how do you put it? Sang like a canary?"

"Back-stabbed," Snape informed him, at the same time Hermione turned, flashed a brilliant smile at Schell, and called back "Grassed."

Schell laughed, and beckoned them into the café; and they entered and sat at his table near the steamed-up windows, and accepted the ubiquitous coffee that he offered them.

"When?" Snape demanded. And thank Merlin we won't have to testify again....

"Late Tuesday, actually -- it took until last night to sort through his statement and make certain everything was in order."

"The Prosecutor told him Fudge blamed him?"

"No, his Defence did, and counselled a full confession in exchange for a lighter sentence."

"A plea-bargain -- should have guessed," Hermione said. "Is there a chance they might be able to appeal?"

"Not in Corcoran's case, since he confessed. Fudge stuck it out to the last, so it's possible that he might demand one -- assuming he could persuade a barrister to take it on, and I think that unlikely. The evidence is simply too strong to refute, in the main."

"Extradition?" Snape muttered.

"That would depend on how badly the Wizengamot wants to take it on, I imagine. There's something to be said for leaving well enough alone," Schell said, eyes sparkling. "There might be unfortunate questions asked about Wizengamot knowledge of the whole matter, after all."

"Cripes, hadn't thought of that," Hermione said. (Snape had, but kept his mouth shut.) "Some of them were part of the Flaherty inquest, but Lord knows if they were involved in the rest."

"Perhaps the MLE will begin an internal investigation? I don't have anything to tell you of the rest of Fudge's trial, really. It was all wrapped up very simply, given Corcoran's statement, and the justices weren't impressed with Fudge's excuse --"

"Which was?"
"For the good of the population. Rutger very aptly pointed out that the potion certainly wouldn't do them any good -- it would only make Fudge and the government look better to the ICW, and moreover that the government wasn't necessarily the best judge of what is best for individual citizens. So," Schell said, and waved over the waiter and the dessert-tray, "what do you think the two of you will do now?"

There was an awkward pause in which Snape held his breath, until Hermione admitted, "Don't know, yet. I suppose we ought to contact Bretchgirdle and... cripes, I don't even know what Department would issue us the proper papers to return. If we want to -- I'm not certain we do."

"On this end you apply to the Court for your permission to leave," Schell told them, and picked out a custard, thickly overlaid with whipped cream. "That supersedes anything required by Customs, and will give you clearance to travel through the member countries between here and there...."

They left Vaduz for Schellenberg quite, quite late and sugar-sated to the gills, after promising to return to Schell's home for a farewell dinner. (Snape had no intention of doing any such thing, of course -- though he imagined Hermione would insist -- but he couldn't really behave so churlishly to Schell's face, given the man's usefulness.)

Waiting for them, on the table in the main room of the house, was a rather thick and nasty-looking envelope: it jiggled and twitched when Snape lit the lamps in the room, just to be certain he'd noticed it.

He pulled his wand and observed it for a moment.

"I should have told Gerta to stay home tonight," Hermione called from the entry-way as she hung up her coat. "That cake's spoiled my appetite for --"

"Stay back there, would you?" Snape ordered. "I don't like the look of --"

She wasn't paying the least attention to him, for she wandered into the room anyway, a scrap of parchment in her hands. " -- Oh, wait, she's left a note -- 'Something came while you were out. Dinner in basket on table, I'm not staying here with that thing --'" She noticed the envelope, and stopped. "Oh. Cripes. It's a Howler, isn't it."

"Yes," Snape said, and the envelope writhed about some more.

"From who?"

"Won't know until I bloody open it, will I?"

"Well, you'd better hurry, it looks like it's about to blow --"

It was and it did, spewing bits of shredded envelope into the air.

"Severus Snape --"
It was, unmistakably, McGonagall.

"-- I'll grant that you have terrible handwriting, but that is not an excuse not to let me know how you and Hermione are doing --"

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "You just had to exclude her from the ward, didn't you?"

"Don't be unreasonable, Severus, you wouldn't have got the paper or your biscuits if I had."

"-- and I would greatly appreciate knowing when my Potions instructor will be back to work, as one of your students mucked something up and Hooch is in the Infirmary with itchy purple spots -- " the Howler continued to scold.

"How the bloody hell do you expect us to get back?" he bellowed at it, and glared at Hermione when she giggled at him.

"They've just said on the Wireless that Fudge is out of it, so there's no excuse for you to put off returning as soon as possible. I would suggest that bringing a supply of Swiss chocolate for Hooch would be a very nice gesture." And the Howler spit out two parchments with such force that they hit the ceiling and fell to the floor halfway across the room, as the envelope itself deflated.

Snape hissed out a frustrated "Incendio," at the damned thing to relieve his frustration, and the envelope burst into flame. (The napkin covering the dinner-basket caught as well, unfortunately, and he had to dart over to smother it before the whole basket went up.)

"She's really very fond of you, you know," Hermione said matter-of-factly after the envelope had crumpled to ash.

"No, she's not," Snape grumbled as he stomped over to collect the parchments. "You're perfectly capable of writing to her, but she didn't shriek at you."

"Of course not. I'm just a former student, but you're her snarky, bad-tempered little boy who she worries over. All parents act like that."

Snape stopped in mid-reach and glared at Hermione again. "Of all the misfortunes I've endured, being even remotely related to Minerva McGonagall is not one, thank Merlin."

Hermione just smiled at him, damn her, and wandered over to empty the dinner-basket. "What's in the parchments?"

He broke the seal on the one marked with his name, opened and read it, and nearly dropped it in his surprise. "Apparition clearance from Calais to London."

"What?"

"And, erm, a temporary travel visa, valid immediately. I presume the other one is yours."
Hermione trotted over and looked at the documents. "Bloody hell. I wonder how she got them so quickly.... Do you think we dare? I mean, do you think someone will be out to get us, if we --"

"McGonagall mustn't think so. I suppose she's spoken to Weasley and Shacklebolt, got the lie of the land. I'd prefer to know we have full Immunity before we set foot on British soil, frankly."

"So would I. But I don't suppose it would hurt to go to Calais straight away," Hermione said thoughtfully. "And we could always stop in Paris and ask François to make inquiries for us. We ought to thank him in person, at any rate."

Oh, Merlin's balls.

On the other hand, DeLaine might be useful should they feel unsafe, and have to stay in France....

"Drop a note to Schell tomorrow morning," Snape told her. "Tell him we'll be in Gutenberg for the day to get the Court's permission to leave, and we'll start out for Paris the next day.... Unless that's too soon for you."

"No," she said. "No, I think I'd like to get this settled as well," she said, and gently prised her visa and Apparition pass from his fingers.

It was a bloody shame that Snape didn't feel up to asking her precisely what she meant by "this," because he badly wanted to know exactly what she was thinking.

*****

Friday, February 24th

There were many niggling loose ends to tie up, of course: they ought to have given themselves a few days to deal with it all; but Hermione's money was running low, so it was best to act quickly.

Justice Meyer himself signed off on their release, with nothing more than a grunted acknowledgement of their presence, and then they were free to go wherever they liked.

There was luncheon at Schell's house -- pleasant overall, though while Hermione was in the loo, Snape had to undergo the indignity of leaving the old man with a verbal IOU for his services. (He was right about Schell, though: the man got very cagey when the subject of the rent on the house came up, and merely told him the rate for the hire of the furnishings, which were added to the IOU.) He did his best not to scowl when he saw the bill, and confined himself to a mental Bloody lawyers. It would make a nice dent in his savings -- nearly three months' salary -- but Snape was well aware that of the two, he was in the better position to afford it: Hermione should have to be very careful until she found another job.

He suppressed a twinge of guilt at the thought of cutting her loose in that condition, but it couldn't be helped.

She'll manage, somehow.
They packed up their things that evening; and early next morning, after deciding they weren't up to Apparating all the way, they carefully warded the little house and set out for Geneva, to catch a Muggle train to Paris as there was no Wizarding train service on the Continent.

*****

Saturday, February 25th

The less said about Paris, the better, as far as Snape was concerned. He'd been before, once or twice, for what McGonagall insisted were "professional development opportunities," and hated it: if the Frogs were unilaterally snobbish and self-absorbed, Paris was the epicentre and epitome of those qualities. He quickly quashed any effort on Hermione's part to do any walking about the city.

The one bright moment was a hurried conversation with Shacklebolt, made from DeLaine's office on a secure flue.

"Wondered if I'd hear from you two," Shacklebolt said gravely, seemingly unsurprised when he answered the call. "Professor McGonagall chivvied me into walking through those visas as soon as we heard."

"She didn't bother to tell us in which direction the wind is blowing," Snape shot back. "I'm bloody well not going through with this if we're to be picked up the moment we return."

"Why would you be?" Shacklebolt said calmly. "Madam Snape was cleared on the MLE charges, so why should you worry?"

"Shacklebolt --"

The man looked about, leaned closer to the fire, and said, "No-one here has any knowledge whatever -- the ICW doesn't release the names of anyone testifying. They know you were picked up by the Enforcers, of course, but as long as you've got your clearance from them, there should be no problems."

"Are you certain?" Hermione asked him.

"Bretchgirdle suspects, I think, but he's too chuffed with having Corcoran out of the way to give a damn. And with the rumours flying about at the moment, I don't think you'll need to fear anything in future."

"What do you mean by that?" Snape demanded.

Shacklebolt smiled. "Come home and see. I'll have the MLE seal lifted from Hermione's flat by the time you're here."

"Blast it, man, this is serious --"
"I am. Got to go -- we've finally laid hands on Jarvey, and now the ICW's insisting we look for some bloke named Debdale." And the bloody man cut the connection and blinked out.

"Merlin's bloody fucking balls and beard --"

"Trouble?" DeLaine asked innocently. (Bloody Frog. He'd been there the whole time and heard everything.)

"Apparently not," Hermione told him as Snape continued cursing. "Shacklebolt's quite sensible, no matter the impression Severus is giving you."

"Oh, good."

"Debdale's still on the loose, though," Snape added. "Not the most heartening information."

"You don't think he'd try to retaliate, do you? He doesn't even know we were involved."

"Hell, no, he probably skived off as soon as the Enforcers turned up at Mangle and Mortars. He's in Central America or someplace, by now."

"Then he's not our problem," Hermione said firmly. "And I, for one, want my own home and bed as soon as possible, so we might as well get on with it."

*****

Hermione didn't get her own home and bed, as it happened: there'd been a cold snap in London, the flat's electric fires had been turned off, and the pipes had frozen and burst.

*****

The Club, London
Saturday, 9:40 pm

"Cripes," Hermione moaned, head buried in her arms. "Why can't anything be simple and straightforward?"

Snape often wondered that himself. "How much," he asked, cautiously, "will it cost to have it repaired?" He'd no idea what Muggle plumbers charged.

"Thousands," she said. "At least it will if I have to spring for new floors. And I will. And for having the cellar pumped out. And replacing anything electric that's ruined." (No-one in the flats above had noticed the sound of running water, unfortunately.) "No bloody way I can afford it all."

"Ah. Well," he ventured, trying to be optimistic for once, "at least you'll have it all properly plumbed now."

She didn't appreciate that: she lifted her head, gave him a withering look, curled up even deeper in the chair, and plopped her head back onto her arms.
Snape murmured something about ordering dinner from Smithers -- he'd smuggled Hermione into his room as the flat was uninhabitable, no members were in residence at the Club to object, and they didn't feel like facing McGonagall late at night -- and slipped out of the room and went downstairs.

"Does your, erm, guest require anything in the way of nightwear?" Smithers asked when Snape had found him in the Lounge, clearing away after a pair of noisy and exceptionally blotto apothecaries. "I might, ah, liberate something from the ladies' club. I know the door-keeper."

"No, no, she's fine. Dinner would be acceptable, though -- something light is fine, given the hour."

"Of course, Professor Snape."

"Have you heard anything of Bluett?" Snape asked.

Smithers shook his head. "No, sir. His nephew has promised to contact me should there be any improvement," he said, and glanced upward, eyes tired and worried, at the members' plaque above the fireplace: Snape looked at it as well.

Bluett's name, normally as brightly polished and gleaming as Snape's and the other living members', now flickered beneath a layer of tarnish that none of Smithers' efforts could remove.

"Damn," Snape said softly. "I'll be returning to Hogwarts tomorrow morning. Let me know if you hear anything."

"Of course, sir," Smithers said quietly, gathering up his cleaning-kit and the apothecaries' mess.

"Oh, and, ah.... Do you know any plumbers, Smithers?"

"Plumbers, sir?"

"Plumbers. Preferably very good ones who can do an entire flat in short order and see to repairing any other damages while they're at it. Without costing me an arm and leg, as well."

"I can make inquiries. I've a cousin in the Building trade," Smithers said. "Perhaps he knows someone."

"Very good," Snape said, took the pencil Smithers offered him, and scribbled Hermione's address and his password for the ward on the man's cuff. "Have them send the bill to me."

"Right, sir. Dinner should be no more than a half-hour."

Snape lost no time in going back upstairs: he had a risky mission to accomplish, and he needed it done before Smithers brought up their meal.

"Missed dinner, haven't we?" Hermione asked when he entered his room.
Even without seeing her face -- for she was in the wing-chair by the fire, its back to the door -- Snape could tell she'd been crying while he was out: her voice was thick, and as he walked to the fireplace he caught her swiping at her eyes.

*Good, she's off-balance. This should be fairly easy. Thank Merlin the Club is shielded....*

Before Hermione had a chance to notice that his wand was in his hand, he pointed it at her and commanded, "*Obliviate.*"

It almost didn't work: even off her guard she was still quick, and there was a split second before the spell caught her in which she sat bolt upright, shock and outrage flashing in her eyes -- but it held.

Snape laid his wand on the side-table and leaned over her, propping himself on either chair-arm.

"Hermione, we came directly to the Club from the Apparition point tonight," he said.

"Nuh- noooo," she said, fighting the spell.

"You're mistaken -- we *did*. You wanted to go to the flat, but understood that I was concerned for Bluett, and so you agreed to come here. Isn't that right?" he said, staring intently into her eyes and challenging her to cede her will to his.

She fought it for a very long time -- *Bloody hell, I don't remember her having this much resistance when we trained her lot* -- but eventually she sighed and whispered "Yes."

Snape shuddered at the tingle of power that sent racing up his spine.

"You have no need to go to the flat for a few days. You'll come with me to Hogwarts -- it's safer if we're together until we're certain there will be no reprisals -- and you'll go without fussing."

"Yes."

"And when you *do* return to the flat, you'll find nothing at all out of the ordinary. Everything will appear just as it was the last time you left it. Aga will be its usual cantankerous self, but for some reason the plumbing will behave, and you'll decide that it's just bloody luck and not worry about it."

"Yes, Severus."

Another little jolt of power made Snape's nerve-ends twitch.

*All right, perhaps Dumbledore was right to fight me on DADA.... Bloody hell, it feels good.*

"And you'll remember nothing of *this,*" he added. "You fell asleep while I was downstairs, and you're just waking."

"Yes, Severus."
Snape passed his hand over her forehead and then down over her eyes: she obediently closed them and sagged backward, and he caught her by the shoulders and eased her the rest of the way down into the chair.

He ought to feel guilty, but he didn't.

*It's in a good cause, damn it. She can't afford it, and she won't take money from me without a fuss in the best of circumstances. Certainly won't after I.... And I bloody well don't want her at Hogwarts because she has to sell.*

*No, it's worth the investment and the risk.*

She moaned a bit, and began to wake; Snape tucked one of the ever-wayward strands of hair behind her ear, and that was enough to wake her fully.

"Dinner will be up in a few minutes," he volunteered. "I suggest an early bed if you're this tired."

"Right," she muttered, looking puzzled, and wiped away the lingering moisture from her cheeks.

"I think," he said as he moved away from her, "that you'd best come up north with me for now, until we have a chance to see what's happening."

"All right," she said.

She was quiet the rest of the evening -- although he caught her staring at him once or twice over their dinner, as if she'd forgot something very important about him -- and when they went to bed, she didn't cuddle up to him as she had in Liechtenstein.

*Good. Perhaps that... sense of mistrust will make all this easier.*

*****

**Sunday, February 26th**

Much as Snape hated showing a Gryffindor one of the many Slytherin secret passages into the Castle, it was better than dealing with the uproar their return would cause if they walked through the front door. It was *also* too much to ask that McGonagall leave them in peace, and Snape knew it, but at least the nosy auld bitch brought all the issues of *The Prophet* that they'd missed, and interesting information as well.

"*I shouldn't* tell you, really -- your own fault for taking so long to return --"

He held his tongue, but Hermione surprised him with a quiet, but vehement, "Oh, *please* don't tease him, Headmistress. He's understandably worried about our legal status, and wasn't about to rush back."
McGonagall's eyebrows shot upward, and Snape could practically see her swallow down a tart
response; but then she merely smoothed down her robe-fronts, and said, "Riots."

"Riots?"

"About the potion, I believe. Not at St. Mungo's, that's far too exposed, but at the Ministry. They're
demanding full disclosure."

"And are they getting it?" Snape asked.

"Not yet. Biggles is acting the fool -- he would, he was a Form or two behind me, so I know --
saying it must have been an error in the manufacture."

He snorted. That was precisely what he'd expected.

"But the people aren't buying it, with good reason -- the ICW's been issuing statements for The
Prophet that say the contrary, and the editor's been printing them -- and now everyone's in such a
state that they're demanding Biggles be removed as well."

"Good try," Hermione muttered, "but who's the next most senior Interrogator?"

"That's the thing -- they're calling for a Minister from outside the Wizengamot, who shan't be
allowed a seat. Something about ensuring that the Judiciary and administration have a harder time
getting in each others'... pockets."

Snape had the distinct impression that McGonagall meant an altogether different variety of clothing
than pockets. As a consequence, he missed the major point -- but Hermione didn't: she fumbled her
tea-cup, and yelped when hot tea sloshed over the edge and burned her fingers. "They're asking
for government reform?"

"Yes, exactly. Waste of time, if you ask me," McGonagall said, and sniffed. "A nasty enough
individual can find a way to boll-...to muck up any system, but I imagine it will keep everyone on
their best behaviour for a while, at least."

"And the bloody laws?" Snape growled.

"Oh, there've been calls to have those struck off, of course, but Biggles won't do it -- says an Acting
Minister doesn't have the authority. Which is another good reason to have him sacked, if you ask
me."

Bloody hell. I'd no idea that all this would have such repercussions....

"You'll see all the rest in the paper, so I'll let the two of you get some rest. I don't suppose,"
McGonagall said, and peered hopefully at Snape over her glasses-rims, "that you'd be up to
teaching tomorrow?"
"If I must," he said with a grunt, and pulled his feet back and out of Hermione's way when she suddenly darted up from the settee and raced for their baggage.

"Good. Hooch needs bed-rest for the spots to go away, and she hasn't been getting it," McGonagall said as she rose. "And if you can find anything that might help with that...."

Snape nodded.

"Here's, erm...." Hermione muttered as she escorted McGonagall to the door, and handed her a package.

"My word, did he actually --?"

"No, of course not. But if you'd say it was from both of us...."

"Much as it pains me to lie, for you I shall," McGonagall told her, and gave Snape a reproving look over her shoulder before she left them.

"You didn't," he said to Hermione.

"Of course I did, Severus. Geneva's best chocolate," she shot back as she returned to the settee, grabbed for one of the papers, and curled up to read. "She covered for you, didn't she?"

"It's an occupational hazard," he muttered. "Shouldn't be any stupid gestures involved."

"For her, falling off a broom or getting a bludger to the head is an occupational hazard," Hermione said, radiating sanctimony. "Being potions-hexed is above and beyond the call of duty."

*Just a few more days. Please, Merlin, let me hold on for just a few more days*, was the only thing Snape could think for the rest of the evening,

*****

In the end, he was too busy catching the students up to be much-afflicted with Hermione's presence. She stayed out of his way when he wasn't in the classroom: Monday she went so far as to do an adequate job of setting the ingredients store right (damn Hooch for being a disorganised wench), and he assumed she checked up on that little bleeder Marsters, but other than that she stayed put in his rooms.

He also noticed that she spent a great deal of time looking at the Employment listings in *The Prophet*, for which small mercy he was grateful.

"I think," she said on the Wednesday night, when they'd gone to bed, "that I'd best go back to town tomorrow."

"Really," he muttered. "You aren't worried about the Ministry?"
"I'm not, no. I've got my MLE ticket-of-leave, after all. And I want to get cracking on applying for jobs."

"Ah."

"I need to check the flat, anyway -- I'm not comfortable leaving it empty, what with the weather they had down there while we were away."

Thank Merlin the plumber's bill had arrived earlier that day: everything had been tidied up. The cost of managing it had quite ruined Snape's lunch, though.

"So," Hermione said, and wriggled round to face him, "there's really.... There's really just the two of us to sort out, isn't there?"

*Oh, damn.*

"Are you ready to make a decision?" he asked quietly.

"No, not really. I feel very much at sixes-and-sevens, at the moment. I think you're right, and it's too important a choice to make while discombobulated."

He'd said no such thing, actually; he'd said once they were *settled*, and to all intents and purposes they were, now. But he let it pass.

"Then we wait until we're... calmer," he speculated. "Until we're certain of our minds."

"Right," Hermione said. "Suppose I.... Well, what say you that I stay in town over the week-end and next week, and come back up the week-end after? That should give us plenty of time to get back into some sort of normal routine."

"Excellent idea," he murmured. "You'll floo me if you have any difficulties with anyone, of course?"

"Yes, I will.... And I'll... I'll stop by an apothecary's just in case, all right? Good night, Severus," she whispered, and caressed his shoulder before turning and tucking herself back under the covers.

He was in an exceptionally foul mood next day in class: he hadn't got a wink of sleep, and was confused even more by the fact that he'd both *wanted* Hermione to leave, and was rather sorry to see her go.

*****

*Monday, March 9th

Evening*
Right. Hooch's bolloxing of classes sorted -- finally -- check. No sign of trouble from the Ministry --
check. No bloody sign of Forsythe, either.... Damn. I'll have to put feelers out after him, I suppose -
- don't want the bastard loose and thinking he can blackmail me....

Snape jotted a quick note to a former acquaintance who was quite good at tracking people and
things, and sent it off.

Shacklebolt said they'd caught Jarvey, though, perhaps Jarvey solved the problem for me. Forsythe
sorted -- for the time being, until disposition known --check.

Bluett, bless the blasted old man's memory, had on March 6th quietly gone off to wherever it was
that old Potions Brewers and Alchemists went when they'd brewed their last, so Snape had no
further worries there, either. (There was a thick and ominous-looking package which Smithers had
sent on, something Bluett had left to Snape, and which he hadn't had the guts to open yet. Snape
suspected he knew the contents, anyway: Bluett, like Dumbledore, would have made an effort to
tweak Snape's conscience, and he didn't wish to deal with that at the moment. It could wait.)

Which just left the problem of Hermione.

She mentioned stopping at the apothecary before coming back up. Which means she hasn't ruled
out continuing. May even be planning to.

Damn.

She might have changed her mind since then, of course. She might have found work by now and
begun to feel more independent, or even realised that he'd Obliviated her and got narked at him --
he'd be surprised if she hadn't, although she'd seemed comfortable enough with him before she left
-- but he suspected she'd made her mind up well before they'd left Schellenberg.

He was, in other words, saddled with a wife he didn't want. Or at least one he didn't want under
these circumstances, not any longer.

I ought to put the problem before her. I ought to be honest with her, tell her why I don't want to go
on....

But that gave her more ammunition against him. Moreover, there was every chance that she'd fall
to pieces again. She wasn't made of stone; he knew that well, despite her ability to pull everything
together and soldier on when the situation was grave enough. He didn't think this one was, and he
really didn't fancy having to hold her hand through it all. It wasn't in his nature, and what little
compassion he possessed had already been stretched to its utmost limits.

If I can give her something else to focus on, though -- some other good, solid Gryffindor trait that I
can exploit, that will distract her....

Yes, there was another option. He'd sent a feeler out on it Saturday last, and the resultant
 correspondence he'd received this morning had been encouraging. Fudge and the bloody Ministry
hadn't closed all the loopholes. They wouldn't have wanted to close this particular one, in any case -
- it was too advantageous for their purposes, just as it might prove for Snape's. It involved some unpleasantness, if he knew Hermione well (and he did); it would be momentarily excruciating, but minor in the long term.

*And it'll be a good test. If she has an entirely different reaction to what I expect, well.... I'll have to decide on the fly.*

He didn't think she would act differently than he hoped, though. She was still prone to anger before tears or rational thought, still so damned prickly when she thought her honour was in danger of being smirched -- not that he blamed her, that was one Gryffindor trait he understood well -- that he expected her to behave precisely as predicted.

*Fine, then. Barring some compelling argument and evidence on her part, it's settled. I simply have to make it absolutely clear to her....*

He drew over a fresh piece of parchment and began a terse letter full of instructions, bound for London.

*****

*Hogwarts*

*Saturday, March 12th*

He was deep in the middle of the Sevenths' NEWT-preparatory essays (very few, in his estimation, were going to do a decent job of it), when his office door quietly opened and shut. Perhaps it was that -- that soft *click*, rather than the expected slam -- that threw him off: it took him a moment longer than it should to bite back a vicious comment on entry without leave, to place the cadence of the footsteps, and to ask instead, without glancing up, "I assume all was well at the flat?"

Hermione stopped halfway across the room. "You didn't hex my electric fires and the water-heater last you were in, did you?"

She didn't *sound* horribly upset; he had to work on the assumption that she hadn't remembered the Obliviate, then -- and that she hadn't got wind of the plan, either.

"No," he answered truthfully. "Why should I?"

"Sheer bloody-minded bastardry, that's why."

He *did* look up at her then, and realised that while she was doing quite well at controlling her voice, her expression said it all.

*Merlin's balls, she's got it. And she's about to kill me.*

She marched the rest of the way over to his desk, and slapped a parchment down next to his hand. "What the bloody hell is this? she demanded.
He resisted the urge to bark back at her, plucked the parchment from the desk, and opened and scanned it. "Exactly what it appears," he said coolly. "A writ for a legal separation and dissolution of our marriage. Rather faster than I anticipated -- I haven't got my copy yet." He dropped the parchment to his desk and picked up his quill to continue marking.

"You know damned well what I mean," she snapped. "You didn't talk to me about this, and you should have had the decency --"

"Decency? Decency isn't required, it's simply the Law."

"How the bloody hell could they grant you a divorce without telling me beforehand?"

"Separation. I regret to say that the divorce won't be final for a year unless you choose to file a writ against me, in which case the decree is effective in six months," he murmured, intent on the essay in front of him. "I don't need your consent, it simply takes longer -- unfair, but true. I might have filed against you for the contraceptive charge and your supposed deception and got an immediate decree, but that would be taking undue advantage, wouldn't it? And I've no desire to ruin your reputation to the extent that would do."

"I thought we'd --" she began, and then clamped her lips shut and began to pace the room.

"Decided to wait until we were calmer? I did, and I am. Reached an understanding? Of sorts. That doesn't mean it's acceptable to continue as we are. Unless, of course, you're saying that you secretly enjoyed the arrangement. That's entirely different," he said, giving up on the essay and staring her down. "I shouldn't mind going on if that's the case, though I should warn you that I would not tolerate any idiocy about a family. And I would expect much more enthusiasm when bedding you, in future. Granted, your little overture in Liechtenstein was... interesting, but hardly acceptable by my standards."

Hermione's face went red. "It that what this is about? Sex?"

"It's certainly part of it, and I really don't see why you're complaining. We're no longer preoccupied with dangerous events. There is no longer a need for the deception. I'm bored with having an unwilling or, at best, tolerant sexual partner," he said reasonably. "It's obvious that you don't appreciate sex, that the marriage isn't what either of us wants, and that it never will be."

"I've tried Severus -- I'm trying. I thought you understood what I... that night in Schellenberg, that I was trying to --"

"Trying and failing, considering that you admitted you had to work yourself up to it. I accept that you can't stand me --"

"That's not true --"

"-- and I haven't the least interest in trying to change your mind. There is simply no reason for either of us to be miserable, and I would like to get on with my life. Without impediment."
"Impediment? Is that what I am? Is it just me, or would..."

He could practically see the thought forming in her mind; see ingrained prejudices taking over, and he willed her to give in to them.

"Parkinson," she finally said. "If the laws are struck down, you'll be free to marry a Pureblood -- if you're not stuck with me."

"Whether I intend to remarry or not is none of your business," he murmured. "Although, frankly, given that my consent is no longer effectively coerced, it's a much more attractive prospect. And if my options are no longer limited, as you say."

That did it, good and proper: the blood drained from her face. "You can't stand it, can you?" she asked. "You still can't stand that I'm a Muggleborn, for all your comments about my skill. And you certainly don't want to have a child polluted with Muggle blood, no matter what you said last year."

"I don't want children, full stop," he said bluntly. "Neither do you as far as I can tell, and certainly not mine, in any case, which rather makes that accusation moot. I'm afraid the problem has far more to do with your suitability and congeniality -- or lack thereof."

She glared at him.

"Perhaps you'd best admit," he said dryly, "that you're more upset that I beat you to it than anything else. You'll have a very hard time convincing me that you actually want to continue."

"Right," she said, voice cold. "Right, I'll just bugger off, then, and leave you alone."

"If you're unable to behave like an adult, civil human being, yes, I suppose you should."

"You'll have a cheque for the bloody warding on the flat as soon as I can manage it," she said.

"That's not nece--"

"Yes it is. I will not be indebted to you. And for Schell's work as well, or at least for half of it."

Thank Merlin I Obliviated her on the plumbing -- she'd be destitute.

He shrugged. "As you will. I thought I'd be generous and not mention it, but since you're intent on beggarring yourself.... The warding came to six hundred, and your half of Schell's is... Merlin's balls, I don't know the exchange rate. Say a thousand." (He fibbed: with the additions he'd had Harrison throw in, the warding was nearly twice that -- but she wouldn't know, as he'd told Harrison not to disclose it. Schell's payment owed was, unfortunately, accurate.)

He picked up the writ between fore- and middle-finger, and held it out to her; she lunged for it, snatching it out of his grasp -- and stood there, watching him, as he returned to his marking.
"What is it really, Severus?" she asked. "That I bolloxed it from the first? That I haven't thanked you enough, somehow, or in the right way, for everything else?"

*That* was surprising: he hadn't expected that she'd anticipate an ulterior motive -- beyond the Pureblood one, not that it was true. (Neither was the accusation of not wanting to defile his bloodline, and that one stung far more: the only reason he tolerated it was that it served the purpose admirably.)

*It reflects rather badly on her that she managed that one.... Oh, Merlin's balls, man, you wanted her enraged, and you've got it -- quit blaming her for doing precisely what you want.*

"At least you agree that it was bolloxed from Day One. But my cooperation with...?" he murmured. "No, unless I was mishearing things in Schellenberg, I believe you thanked me quite adequately."

She stood by the desk for a moment longer, unnerving him: and then she turned and walked briskly for the door, and Snape pulled the last ace from his metaphoric hand of cards.

"Miss Granger?" he commanded, waited until she'd turned, and glanced upward to find her glaring at him.

"*Well?*"

"You do realise," he said conversationally, "that you still have nightmares? Perhaps you don't, as you sleep so soundly."

"Not your problem, is it?" she shot back. "I won't be disturbing you any longer."

"No, but it's alarming when someone still, after a decade, shrieks in their sleep. Not that you haven't cause, I saw Longbottom before they removed him from the field."

"And your point is *what*, exactly?" she demanded.

"My *point*, you stupid girl, is that you needn't continue to live with that. What was the name of that... counsellor you said you'd seen? The one who discovered your Occlumancy --"

"Tallchief."

"Perhaps it's time to go back to him. There's absolutely no reason for you, for *anyone*, to bear that heavy and unnecessary a burden, particularly after what you've been through the past few years. I'm suggesting -- and it's only a suggestion -- that you've done more than enough for others, and it's time for a well-earned rest."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, and then said, "*Anyone* doesn't include you, of course."

"Some of us," he said distinctly, "are capable of dealing with it in constructive ways. You are not. Take it as you will, or not at all -- you're quite right, it's no longer a matter of concern to me."
She stared at him soberly for a moment, and then, without so much as a good-bye, she turned and left, closing the office door as quietly as when she'd entered it.

Well, that went better, in the long run, than I expected. And she proved me right yet again -- Gryffindor outrage is so easy to manipulate.

She gave in rather easily. I imagine it'll be a relief, once she calms down.

True, she would probably go straight home and bawl her eyes out -- possibly after breaking a few things -- but they would be tears of anger and frustration, not true pain, and that was fine with Snape. Anger was a much more constructive and useful emotion than pain, if it could be mastered: and he thought Hermione would do some interesting things with hers.

Pity, though, that I was too cowardly to really reason with her.

He should have preferred a truce, armed or otherwise, so as to be able to keep an eye on her occasionally and from afar: he was too honest to deny that he still felt responsible for her safety. And she was, after all, one of the very few of his students in whom he had any pride or interest whatever: he would have liked to see her fulfil her potential. (He was certain now that she would.)

Can't be helped. I suppose McGonagall or Vector will blab enough for me to know how she is, anyway.

All in all, Snape was thankful to close the book on yet another unpleasant, albeit brief, episode in a life filled with them, and he returned to the blasted essays determined to finish them off that evening.

He chose to interpret the tremor in his writing-hand as relief at having the mess with Hermione over, and only began to doubt his confidence when it shook so badly that he had to give up marking and go to bed.

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Chapter 27: Wherein we discover how it all turned out -- for the near term.

To hell with him. To hell with Severus Bloody Snape.

Hermione decided that while she'd like nothing better than to make him squirm for the entire year mandated by law, there was no point in punishing herself. (God only knew what the bastard would do if the Ministry kept the bloody laws on the books, and he failed to find some other poor, idiot female to take advantage of.) So she filed a counter-writ, prepared to wait out the six months before she was a free woman once more, owled Snape a cheque for sixteen hundred Galleons (promptly cashed, she noted) and did her damnedest to ignore that he still existed.

This was all very good in theory. Unfortunately, in practise it wasn't nearly so easy.
She could not let it drop. It niggled at her on a daily basis that Snape should have the arrogance to apply for a divorce without so much as a single word or comment beforehand, after that bloody tripe he'd fed her that night in Schellenberg, and for the reasons he'd given. (Even if she suspected he wasn't being truthful about those reasons, or at least all of them.)

Damn it, I went out of my way to be nice to the bastard. At least, toward the end. And to think I actually made allowances for him.... That I was going to try, really try, to be nhu-nice to him in bed....

She got on with her life quite effectively, however; there was no point in letting him ruin the rest of it. As far as work went, she took her time making a decision. (She hardly had a choice: Arithmancers weren't generally in great demand, unless one wanted to work for Harrison Wards and Booby-Traps, or the Ministry, and the latter was obviously out.) She didn't have to rush as the flat was nearly paid for -- God bless her grandparents and the inheritance -- and she didn't need much to get on with, not with some creative adaptation to her lifestyle. It was a while before she could afford to replace the appliances that had been mysteriously damaged while she was in Liechtenstein; she broke down and used magic for what she could, and only then began to realise how much she'd missed using it on a daily basis.

She decided, in the end, to study Law -- Civil Law, since there was absolutely no call for Criminal law in Britain, the Wizengamot having that avenue blocked. She found a partnership willing to take her on despite her lack of experience, and began a whole new apprenticeship as a clerk, with a view to becoming a solicitor herself. The partners -- Arbuthnot, Marley, and Patterson, three ancient old men who looked likely to pop their clogs any day (Marley already had, in fact) -- were intrigued rather than appalled with the idea of a female clerk and apprentice, and at first treated her like an oddity, a child to be coddled. But that wore off when they realised that she pulled her weight and managed their research and briefs quite nicely, and that she could throw together a respectable tea (even if she squandered the petty cash on nicer-quality biscuits).

Those were the positive measures she took to rebuild her life. She also took her fair share of negative ones.

Molly Weasley's pot-holders and tea-cosy made a rather pitiful fire in the back-garden, and every bloody sausage Hermione had left in the deep-freeze joined them when she decided to renew her commitment to a meat-free diet. (Every dog in the neighbourhood came calling that night, lured by the smell.) She was tempted to throw the heating-pad on the flames as well, but settled for putting its cover through the wash. Her wedding-ring was the last to go into the fire, an admittedly childish gesture; but then it wasn't worth much, not even the trouble of taking round to a pawnbroker's. (She was rather ashamed of herself when, poking through the remains of the fire next day, she found the warped remnants of the ring -- pathetic, really, that such a small fire had twisted even low-karat gold. Only then did she begin to wonder how cheap of her it had seemed, and whether Snape had noticed and been insulted.)

Snape's letters nearly went up with everything else, but common-sense prevailed there, and she later shoved them into her tiny vault at Gringott's in the event she needed legal ammunition someday. And while Ron, who dragged her up to Chudleigh at the first opportunity to hear the
whole story, frequently nagged at her to get out and meet some blokes, she refused to do it: she finally resorted to telling him he was definitely Molly's son given his attempts at match-making (which shut him up nicely).

She didn't want to "meet some blokes." She suspected that if things got serious -- and it was a big if -- then she'd have to confront the issue of sex and her potential reaction to it. She wasn't ready to do that. Speaking with Tallchief about the war was one thing; admitting she was afraid that she might have been turned off sex was another, his good sense and trustworthiness notwithstanding. In any case, early on her bank account couldn't have stood the strain.

She kept an eye on the Prophet, telling herself that she wanted to keep abreast of what the Ministry was doing with the bloody genetics problem. Remington, the new Minister for Magic -- not a Ministry man at all, but a former member of the Hogsmeade Council -- appeared to be handling it quite well, actually. He'd rescinded the damned marriage laws first thing, and had established a research division into Muggle genetics -- especially assisted fertilisation. It was early days to be able to tell if it would do much good, but it was certainly a more sensible and compassionate approach.

Well, it's promising. But if there's the slightest hint of a backslide, I'm taking the hell off.

She also scanned the marriage announcements, every day. She fully expected to see Snape's name attached to some Pureblood's the moment their decree was final: it probably would be Vector, she thought. That would be like him. Olivia was certainly intelligent enough for him, she was Pureblood, she was already at Hogwarts -- sex on demand, and separate but conveniently close quarters -- and as far as Hermione knew, the idiot who'd jilted Vector had never made a re-appearance. And eventually she did see Vector's name, and nearly a year later, a birth announcement, for which she dutifully sent congratulations.

But neither event involved Snape.

At some point she decided she was taking an unhealthy interest in her ex-husband's activities, even something as relatively innocent as scanning the paper; and, admittedly, she still had nightmares in which she'd find herself back in the Hogwarts Infirmary, cradling Neville's gauze-wrapped hand in hers, trying desperately to see something of her old friend in the swollen, charred face that lay motionless on the pillow.

She decided in the end to take Snape's last bit of advice, and to return to Bill Tallchief.

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The Cross-Cultural Institute
May 4th, 2009

"It's no use," she told Tallchief after a particularly frustrating session. "I'm a bloody mess, always will be, and that's that."

"At least you admit it, now," Tallchief said. "That's half the battle."
"Thanks."

"It's true. And you have let go of a lot of the early stuff. Realising you had no control over the way the war played out, for example. It's not just what happens to you, Hermione, it's how you --"

"-- choose to deal with it, I know," she muttered.

"In both ways, intellectually and emotionally. And accepting that sometimes, even when you do your best, things just aren't going to work."

She sat, silent, processing that.

"Yeah, that too," Tallchief finally said.

"What?"

"You know. What happened last year."

"Oh. That was just political idiocy --"

"Hermione, I'm not talking about that and you know it."

"All right, all right. I suppose you saw the announcements?"

"Nope, I never read the paper -- it doesn't tell you anything about the human race that you don't already know it's capable of. I saw you running errands in Diagon Alley one day -- into that tailor's at the far end -- and I noticed the ring. Next time you show up here, over a year later," he said, waving at the interior of the medicine lodge (conjured into one of the lecture halls of the Cross-Cultural Institute), "poof -- no ring."

"That simple?"

"Would it be more impressive if I said the Great Spirit sent Raven to tell me? It's not true, though."

"Next time I ever feel mad enough to try this," Hermione muttered, shooting Tallchief a glare, "I'm checking the counsellor's smart-mouth rating, first."

"Smart-ass, Hermione, smart-ass. Stop changing the subject."

"I hate failure, that's all."

"And?"

"And I...."

She drew her knees up to her chest, and clasped her arms about them.
"And," she said, taking a deep breath, "I did it for the wrong reasons. Not the usual way, not.... I didn't convince myself I was in love, I mean, or.... My reasons were very selfish. And very cruel. And he knew, but he went along with it anyway."

"This was because of the marriage laws?"

"Right. But I didn't intend to follow though on it, it was just a stop-gap. He was a right bastard about it, but it forced me to confront some things about myself that I didn't like, things I've been trying to change since. And then we got mixed up in the mess with the Ministry and the ICW, and everything... well, it didn't change, exactly, not the, the... the way we'd agreed to handle the situation. But the context did. I'd begun to understand him a bit better, you see, why he is the way he is, and I started to... appreciate the investment, I guess you could say."

"To see him as a human being?" Tallchief suggested.

"Yes. Yes, I think that's a good way to put it, unfortunately. There was a history there, you see, he'd been one of my teachers at school, and we'd all thought him a tremendous git. He is a tremendous git. But he was also very brave, apparently always has been, even as a child. Even if I hadn't known that before we'd married, I figured it out last year. And he took a horrendous risk to help me."

"So what went wrong?"

"I don't know. We got through all that, there was the call for the new election, some of the laws were repealed, and.... and I suppose," she said slowly, "that I'd hoped we'd be able to continue on a more equal footing. We'd worked well together -- on the problem, I mean, eventually. And I'd got used to his ways. But he simply called it all off. Filed for the separation and divorce without even telling me first."

"Wow. Body-blow to the ego."

She glared at Tallchief, and he grinned back unrepentantly. "Well, you said there wasn't love involved, but getting dumped isn't easy any way it happens. You didn't learn to love him, did you?"

"No, but I certainly respected him a hell of a lot more, by the end. I thought perhaps he'd learned to respect me. Apparently not. He was... really quite nasty in the reasons he gave me. Very old-school Pureblood reasons."

Tallchief thought about it for a very long moment, and then said, "Huh."

"I'm paying you how much per hour, and all you can say is 'huh'?"

"Well, what do you expect? You know him better than I do."

"I thought I did. I'd learned.... I'd learned more about his past than I ever let on. It wasn't pretty, but it explained a lot. He might have been a very decent person, if.... He was quite instrumental in Voldemort's defeat -- both of them -- and he sacrificed a great deal to do that, over the years."
"Badly screwed-up, hmmm?"

"That's fair to say. Nightmares almost as bad as mine, post-traumatic stress, the whole nine yards. Hard to tell with him -- he's very adept at covering it, had to be to survive -- but things leaked out. It doesn't make any sense," she blurted out. "He was simply awful at times, no possible way you could call him nice. And very selfish. But he tried, in his own way. Considering how he might have been, I think he did try. And I was looking forward to seeing if... if things would be different, without all the political nastiness hanging over our heads. But he didn't give it a chance."

Tallchief digested that for a while. "It's entirely possible," he said slowly, "to dislike someone's behaviour, but to care about them anyway. Not necessarily love them, but to care about them. You think that's a reasonable statement?"

"Yes. Yes, I think it is."

"You think that's the case here? For you?"

"Probably," she said.

Tallchief laughed.

"All right, yes," she said admitted. "Yes, I think I do. Did. And it's utterly ridiculous, because it was all so wrong."

"No, it's not ridiculous. It's one human being discovering worth in another without all the messy complications of Eros. What a Hindu might call recognizing the Divine in another."

"How would you put it? Religiously, I mean?"

"Very like that. Understanding that we're all children of the Father and Mother, and respecting that. Finding the similarities, the common ground, seeing ourselves in the other, and respecting the differences."

"Don't give me the old 'walking a mile in --"

"Naw, I wouldn't do that to you. I only trot that out for the ones who come here hoping for the Noble Savage routine. Not that it's not true...."

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway -- it's over. I just wish he'd talked to me about it, first. I'd... I'd got used to him acting a bit more reasonably than that, and what he said really hurt."

"I think you probably listened too hard to the words," Tallchief said gravely.

"Of course I did."

"You can't always leave it at that, Hermione. You say he was really screwed up -- don't snort, it's a layman's term for a valid psychological condition.... Would you say he was a proud man too?"
"Christ, yes."

"And he went to a lot of trouble to help you through a rough time, seemed to try to be decent about the whole thing, and then sent you away?"

"Yes."

"Well, people deal with things in odd ways, Hermione. First possibility, it sounds like he might have been afraid you'd hurt him first. A lot of people don't deal with that gracefully, and they do everything they can to protect themselves, including making the first strike. Saving face, as the Japanese say."

"You're mixing your cultural metaphors quite badly, today."

"Hey, I'm a multi-culturalist, I go with the best metaphor I can find. What do you think?"

"Possible. Very like him, actually. Though I don't think he cared enough to be hurt. Cared enough for me, I mean, not about his pride."

"Or... He might have thought he was doing you a favour."

"How?"

"You said 'the way we agreed to handle the situation.' Were you really happy with that?"

"No. No, not at all, and I didn't make a secret of it. But I got used to it. It might have been acceptable if we'd worked at it."

"Maybe he didn't like it either."

"Oh yes he did. It was very much to his advantage."

"Thanks -- that was exactly my point."

She glared at him and muttered, "Sneaky bastard."

"That's my job. Look, he knew you weren't happy with the status quo. And just maybe he let you go, rather than sending you away. That's a hard thing for anyone to do, but for a proud person? Excruciating. And if you put the two of those together... Maybe he felt he needed to let you go, but he found a way to do it that protected himself as well."

Hermione thought about it a while, and then shook her head.

"I still can't figure it out. I don't think it's possible."

Tallchief laughed. "You're looking at it like an intellectual puzzle, Hermione -- you always do -- and emotions don't work that way. I can't think of anything more logical than that, not unless you drag him in here so I can pick his psyche apart."
"Not bloody likely. And if anyone needs it...."

She could almost feel her eyes glaze over as it hit her.

"Hermione?"

"He.... Ah, you know, I probably shouldn't have come back, if it weren't for something he'd said. I'd told him about you -- about the Occlumancy, pretty early on -- and the last thing he said to me was, there wasn't a need for me to keep struggling with all the baggage. The... Harry and Neville, and everything, and perhaps I ought to see you again. 'Time for a well-earned rest.'" She glanced back at Tallchief, uncertain. "I took it as an insult, of course, and implied that he could use help as well. But I think, now, that he was really serious."

"Did he respond to your comment?"

"Yes. Sod off, more or less, very politely phrased. He won't.... He's not the type to admit to any weakness, and the last man on earth to actually talk to anyone about himself."

"And yet," Tallchief said softly, "perhaps he wasn't willing to see you go through it the way he has, or as long as he has, so he gave you a nudge. I think he gave you the best advice he was able to, considering, and in the only way he knew how. And if that doesn't prove some kind of respect and caring, Hermione, I don't know what does."

"Maybe," she said, and stared at the rough wattle wall of the lodge.

"You can't change him, his decision, or the circumstances," Tallchief gently reminded her. "But you can try to make peace with it, and open yourself to the things it can teach you."

"Find my centre?" she said, smiling wryly.

"Yup. Find the Central Point."

"That's damned hard, Bill."

"So is finding an available Muggle taxi near Trafalgar Square, but it's do-able occasionally."

Well, that shattered her melancholy nicely: she couldn't help but laugh.

"Okay, out, you," Tallchief said amiably. "I've got a load of paperwork to finish before I head home."

"Oh, Christ, Bill," she said in shock, glancing at her watch, "fifteen minutes over -- you should have stopped me."

"No, I'm glad I didn't. Prying stuff out of you is absolute hell -- I've gotta take the advantage when I see it."

"You're going back this weekend?" she said, rising.
"Yeah, my granddad asked me to come back for a ceremony. I get to put up with him complaining about my newfangled techniques -- he's never forgiven me for going off to college. And Psychology? Forget it. It'll be fun, though -- he's quite a character, and he knows what he's doing, even if he is an irascible old coot. Old-school, like you say."

"Do people really come to you for the 'Noble Savage routine'?" Hermione asked, brushing off her skirt.

"Oh, yeah. You'd be amazed. Very ethnocentric attitude. I tell most of them to get lost, the ones that are just into the novelty. Once in a while there's one who's really interested, and them.... They get the whole package, if they can accept the basic premise."

"You never tried it with me."

"You're a sceptic. You can accept stuff intellectually, but I saw your eyes cross the first time I mentioned the Great Spirit, so.... Doesn't matter, different paths. I just have to put it in terms you can accept."

"Why all this, then?" Hermione said of the lodge.

"For me, mostly. It's what I grew up with, and it keeps me grounded. Reminds me where I'm from, and who I am. Speaking of which...."

Hermione stood dutifully still while Tallchief lit a smudge and wafted the fragrant sage-smoke around her; and then he carefully set it in a burner, and shooed her out with an arm around her shoulders.

"Call me when you need to talk again," he said.

"I will. Thanks."

She exited the lecture-hall, and made her way out to the threshold that let into Trafalgar Square: there were, indeed, no taxis to be had, and she smiled. (Bill Tallchief was no ordinary wizard, that was certain: a full-blooded Native American, he seemed to revel in busy London Muggle life. 'Imagine a reservation four times the size of Greater London,' he'd said to her once, 'and now populate it with less than a tenth of the people. That's home, to me -- but I like to be around people."

Hermione wondered if she could persuade Tallchief to take her to the reservation, some time. She thought she wouldn't mind the solitude at all.

*****

*The offices of Arbuthnot, Marley & Patterson, Solicitors
July 31st, 2009*
"I say, Miss Granger --?" Arbuthnot called out to the corridor after her one afternoon, when she returned from lunch. "Would you be so kind as to step into the Conference room?"

Oh, bloody -- What now? There weren't any clients scheduled for today.

(There seldom were. Of the three Wizarding solicitors' firms in London, Arbuthnot, Marley, and Patterson was the least prestigious and busy.)

She pushed her way through the door, and dropped her packages on the side-table.

"Come along, have a seat, my dear," Arbuthnot chivvied her while he poured her a cup of tea; and as he was busy with that, Hermione checked to make certain everything was all right. Nothing seemed amiss: no clients foaming at the mouth about something-or-other; Patterson was sprawled on the sofa, totally preoccupied with his third nap of the day; Marley floated in the corner, looking over a brief she'd left for him that morning, and scowling so much that the handkerchief about his jaw was working loose; and Arbuthnot was his usual fussy, old-maidish self.

"We had a very interesting letter from Minister Remington's office last week," Arbuthnot said as he handed her the cuppa, and then daintily settled himself in the ancient chair at the head of the table. "It seems he's lobbying for an overhaul of the Judicial system, to something more along the lines of the ICW's."

Hermione snorted. "They won't care for that."

"Oh, fighting like cats and dogs is nothing compared to it, I understand. He's concentrating on Criminal procedures at the moment, which is why he's asked for a survey of past cases that demonstrate the need for changes -- for a more transparent system, if you like." (Marley shot Arbuthnot a dirty look. They weren't the most amiable of friends, and Marley took offence at anything that might be a jab at his non-corporeal state.) "He's asking the solicitor's firms to do the preliminary work, and we," Arbuthnot stressed, smiling and displaying the distressing gap between his front two teeth, "are to look at the problem of Defendant Representation. Or lack of it, rather."

Hah. You mean I'm to do it.... Wait, Defendant Representation?

"Because of my experience, no doubt," Hermione shot back, more amused than offended.

She'd been quite forthcoming with the partners before her hiring: they knew more about what had happened in Liechtenstein than anyone in Britain, save her and Snape.

"Just so. We, erm, lobbied for that particular matter with you in mind, in fact. If we can write up a good, thorough survey," Arbuthnot said, wriggling in anticipation, "-- and by that I mean a good, thorough survey, not that our recommendations must be adopted -- we are prepared to consider it your journeyman's... erm, journeyman's project. And.... Oh, for Merlin's sake, Jacob, let me tell her."

Marley glowered at him, tried to speak, and then gave up; with a nod, he tightened the handkerchief about his head, with much clanking of his chains.
"Good. And we would be honoured to offer you a junior partnership. You're under no obligation to accept, of course," Arbuthnot added hastily. "You'd be free to go elsewhere, though we'd be sorry to lose you -- and we can't pay much more at present. But, ah, let's face facts -- we need new blood. Marley can't argue a case in court, and Patterson's practically useless, given his nap requirements."

Patterson let loose with a snore just then, underscoring Arbuthnot's point.

"We'd be very happy to have you aboard, my dear, and perhaps someday you could buy into full partner. Probably shall, quite soon, if Remington's proposals are adopted."

**Damn right I would. Opens up the field to Criminal Law, and I can see more clients in two days than this lot see in a whole month....**

It was a very tempting offer. Not that Hermione wouldn't do the survey anyway: it was her job, and she'd been waiting for the chance to get her journeyman's papers, and nearly despaired as there'd been nothing meaty enough to prove herself with. But that and junior partner to boot -- because it would be a good, thorough survey, Hermione didn't do things by half-measures....

Remington's proposal would likely fail, though. He didn't have the support of the Wizengamot majority. She thought it was probably an exercise in futility, in the long run.

"Let me think about it tonight," she said cautiously. (She'd learned that, at least, out of the Ministry muck: not to rush in headlong.) "It's a tall order, and I'd like to consider how best to approach it. What resources are available?"

"Remington hopes to get us access to the Wizengamot's archives," Arbuthnot said. "Smashing, if he does -- not likely, but possible, and we should know in a day or two. I'd suggest beginning with interviews of people who've been brought before the Wizengamot -- the ones found innocent, of course. And if you can find them."

**Rules out Harry's case, damn it, if they don't allow access.**

"I'll have an answer for you tomorrow -- on the partnership, I mean," she said. "Of course I'll do the survey for you."

"Smashing! Here, have a -- Oh dear, oh dear me, you've gone and bought those expensive ones again, haven't you? Never mind, have a biscuit," Arbuthnot said, and pushed the plate over to her. "You just wait and see how long that continues, when it's coming out of your share of the partnership's profits."

Oh, you'd be surprised, Hermione thought as she picked out a nice, chocolate-drenched biscuit. Arbuthnot, my man, there will be some changes around here if you bring me aboard....

*****
She accepted the challenge, and spent the next two days in her poky little office, wrestling with the assignment and staring out the window and into the quad, where a tiny reflecting pool attracted more birds and assorted wildlife than one saw anywhere but in Muggle London's parks.

She tried, very hard, not to think of Snape, but that proved impossible. His case was a prime example of the problem; he was still living, so even if she couldn't consult his file, she could wrangle an interview and deposition -- provided she could get him to cooperate without outright blackmail.

Remington solved the problem for her, though, on the third day. In the face of the soliciting firms' petitions, and *The Prophet*'s blistering editorials on behalf of the public -- who were all too eager to do anything possible to put limits on the Wizengamot, given the mess it had helped Fudge create -- the Wizengamot caved and announced that it would allow the firms access to the archive.

Hermione got halfway through a five-foot parchment of jotted notes of the particulars of Snape's childhood trial before her hand slowed, the quill sputtering and blotting as her confidence ebbed.

_No. You can't do this to him, not without giving him fair warning. You need to put it to him, first. He might even surprise you and actually cooperate, if you ask nicely and give a good argument.... _

_Cripes, he's really going to want to throttle me with his bare hands -- but not as much as if I go ahead without asking leave._

She gave herself a few more minutes to think it through: and then she set aside her notes, pulled out a sheet of the firm's letterhead, thought better of that, drew out a sheet of plain parchment instead, and started writing.

*August 4, 2009*

*Severus,*

*I shouldn't ordinarily bother you, as you made your feelings so clear. But a matter has come up which is potentially quite important, and as it might involve you I feel that I need to let you know about it. Ask your permission, actually.*

*I've been studying Law, you see. Civil, mostly, since there isn't much call for Criminal Law. But it seems the Minister has decided to overhaul the Criminal Justice system, and he's asked many of the practices -- including the one with which I'm apprenticing -- to submit briefs and arguments for things to include in the restructuring. Precedent-setting cases, or cases which demonstrate a lack in the current system that needs to be addressed.*

*That's where you come in, indirectly. And I'm afraid I'd better make a confession before I go any further...*
... I know about the trial, you see, the one when you were a child. No, I didn't go looking for it -- I stumbled across it when I was searching for Flaherty's file. (All right, I was snooping about for Rupert Skellington's file as well, and yours was mis-filed. I swear to you, I'm being absolutely honest about this, I did not intentionally look for yours.)

Don't chuck this away yet, please. Please hear me out.

I should have put it away immediately, but of course I didn't. I read the whole bloody thing. You have every right to be angry about that, and all I can do is apologise for being nosy. I understand what a terrible breach of your privacy that was, and I am sorry.

That being said.... From what I remember of the case, the hearing demonstrates the need for both full and proper submission of evidence, and for guaranteed Counsel other than whatever Interrogator takes it on at the last second. Certainly for juveniles brought before the Wizengamot, if not adults as well. And I'd like to submit it as an example of the need for those kind of standards and regulations.

I don't bring this up to upset you in any way, though I assume it probably shall, and I apologise for that too. It's just that it's such a clear case in terms of the need for these changes. It could make a very useful and compelling argument, and help a lot of people in the long run if we're successful.

I would do everything I can to preserve your privacy, of course, but there's a real chance that if the argument is accepted and codified, the case would have to be cited by name. I will try to find other cases where the Defendant is no longer living and privacy concerns aren't foremost. But I can't honestly promise you that if I'm not successful with that, or if the other examples aren't as clear or compelling, I shan't try to use yours anyway.

I should much prefer to have your permission, though.

If I don't hear from you within a few weeks, I'll assume a no. And I will call myself all variety of unreasonable names on your behalf, so you needn't trouble.

H. Granger
Arbuthnot, Marley, & Patterson, Solicitors
305 Diagon Alley

Snape tossed the parchment on the table, stared out across the sea, tried to ignore the fact that his heart rate had risen alarmingly, and that the muscle itself was attempting a fandango in his chest.

Bloody fucking hell. She knew. She found out, rather. And she has the gall to ask if she can use it....
The parchment fluttered and lifted on the breeze; he automatically slapped it down with his hand, and then set his whisky-glass on it to secure it.

_Thought I'd put all that muck behind me, after Mother died. Sweet Merlin...._

He'd really deluded himself on that score.

He'd thought he'd wrapped it all up quite nicely, actually. His mother had died of a massive stroke barely six months after he'd last seen her; he'd promptly informed McGonagall that he would be retiring --preferably immediately, but by no means would he stay past Yule whether she had a replacement or not, and he should be cashing in his pension in its entirety if she would be so kind as to arrange it. (She had, amid voluble and frequent complaints, and had then nearly bawled like a First Year the day he'd left the castle for the last time.) He'd managed not to hex her throughout the prolonged and disgustingly sentimental leave-taking, or to make a fool of himself until he was well past the gates; and he'd grudgingly admitted to himself that he _was_ rather fond of the snoopy old bitch, and would miss her fussing. A bit. For a few hours, perhaps. (It had taken several months, as it happened, and required a determined effort to make his replies to her frequent letters short and to the point.)

He'd got that cottage: not in Dieppe (prices had risen alarmingly in southern France, and the tourist traffic as well) but off the Brittany coast, on a fortuitously uninhabited island near the mouth of the Channel. (It was terrible for his knee, but he had no problem whatsoever medicating himself into a stupor, not when he'd so little with which to occupy himself.) He'd spent the next few months not doing much of anything but staring out over the slate-grey winter sea and consuming what had become an alarming amount of whisky on a daily basis: when that proved an exceptionally boring method of killing oneself by slow degrees, he'd pulled out the Alchemy text Bluett had left him and begun to slog through it, determined to prove the old bastard wrong about his suitability as an Alchemist.

The natives on nearby Ouessant left him alone, he ignored them unless it was absolutely necessary to do otherwise (which mainly entailed hexing any trespassers), and he'd thought he'd reached some kind of acceptable compromise to the great, mucky mess that was Existence.

_And now this._

It appeared that some things could never be laid to rest, not matter how hard one tried.

He nearly ripped the parchment to shreds to send the bits of it floating out to sea, and then thought better of it. The problem wasn't going to go away: if he didn't make a decision himself, Hermione _would_. He could, at the very least, think about his options for filing some kind of restraining order on the woman, on grounds of her mucking with his privacy. (Or he _thought_ he might be able to -- he wasn't at all certain that such laws existed. Perhaps he ought to write his solicitor.)

He took the parchment inside and laid it on his desk, and decided to give himself a few days to think about it. Preferably three long and leisurely days, and without doubt alcoholically well-lubricated.
Snape's Study
Three days later


A decision was the only thing missing. And he thought, after re-reading said bloody letter again with bleary eyes, that it deserved a more logical and reasonable consideration than he'd been willing to give it in the last seventy-two hours.

Yes, she poked about where she shouldn't. And she's admitted that. And apologised profusely, that in itself a bloody wonder.

Why did she never throw it in my face? She got into the Wizengamot's files sometime in... January, I think. Toward the end. She never said a word, and I didn't have the faintest clue. Her behaviour didn't change in the least.... Well, it did. Just not in the way I'm assuming it should have done. She didn't seem to pity me....

Immaterial. What's pressing now is why she thinks it would be so bloody helpful.

Unfortunately, that required considerable dredging of his memory to think back on the experience itself -- precisely what he'd been avoiding for the last three days.

Four hours later

Whisky didn't help much in the current situation. He was feeling far more sober than he had at any time in the last three days, even though he'd had another two over-large glasses in the course of his ruminations.

What's worst, I think, is that sense of... of injustice. Of knowing I had to do it, of not having another option, and knowing they didn't care, most of them. Dumbledore and Moody and that woman Interrogator excepted, the one who blubbered so when she saw the pictures. Didn't have the words for it then, of course, it all got mixed up with anger, but....

Injustice was the precise point. And Hermione -- who had, apparently, decided to do something useful with her life after all -- was concerned with preventing that in future as best she could.

It was a laudable goal. He just wished it didn't involve him.

Bloody hell.

The situation was, perhaps, a bit more bearable than it might be, he supposed. If he were still teaching, still at Hogwarts -- still in bloody Britain -- he'd inevitably hear about it, or have some
blasted parents screaming at the Board of Governors to have him sacked, if there was publicity. And there would be if Hermione was successful, no matter how she tried to keep him out of it: someone would remember the particulars of the case -- that a boy had killed his father -- and connect it with the murder of Julius Snape. Someone would grass, and the whole blasted cycle of rumour-refutation would begin all over again. He'd had quite enough of that at the Bertie Botts Home: he'd lived in terror for years that one of those bastards would show up at Hogwarts, spill everything, and make his life even more difficult than Potter and Co. had done.

He shouldn't have to worry about that now, though. No one knew where the Hades he was but McGonagall; judging by the time it had taken Hermione's letter to reach him, she didn't. He assumed she'd sent the letter to Hogwarts, and that McGonagall had sent it on -- a necessary precaution, warding himself against automatic owl-delivery, to ensure his privacy. (He briefly wondered what kind of comment and speculation the letter had excited in the Faculty Common Room: they'd all behaved as though shocked and been terribly solicitous about the divorce -- until they'd discovered that he had been the one who'd requested it. He'd got the silent treatment from everyone but Pomfrey for several months afterwards, though McGonagall had eventually forgiven him.)

There wasn't really a terribly good reason to refuse Hermione's request, after all, other than his own bloody-mindedness; and while he still raged that she had the stones to require it of him, he grudgingly returned to the fact that it might be useful in preventing such idiocy in future. He couldn't, in good conscience, wish that experience on anyone else.

Snape damned his conscience before finally giving in. (Life had been so much simpler, really, when as a Death Eater you could tell your conscience to fuck off by virtue of a higher purpose....)

He snapped his fingers for the House-Elf, a wizened little specimen who did him the great courtesy of never actually speaking to him directly or indulging in any of that servile, irritating behaviour that characterised the entire species.

"Fetch the owl, Puck," he said when it popped into the room, and after it popped out he wearily drew a sheet of parchment over, reached for his quill, dipped it, and began to write.

**Miss Granger,**

*Use the bloody case as you like, it's immaterial to me. I shall not, however, be bothered with any additional idiocy such as giving testimony or issuing statements, I'm far too busy. What is in the file will have to do. I will note that I appreciate any efforts you make in terms of my privacy.*

*I am no longer at Hogwarts, and I do not require reports as to your progress with the business. It is of absolutely no interest to me. I should prefer not to have further communication on the matter, or any other.*

*Frankly, I'm only giving you my permission because I know you'll do it anyway. I can't imagine you've changed that much in two bloody years.*
He resisted the urge to congratulate her on her apprenticeship or to make foolish inquiries about her health, although he was more than a bit interested in whether she'd got herself sorted out. She'd seemed to take his hint rather the wrong way, at the time...

*She hasn't remarried, apparently, or she has and insisted on taking back her maiden name. I wonder which?*

He'd half-expected her to storm out of the dungeons and find the first available "decent" male, just to spite him. That had certainly been his *intent*, to send her off to the arms of some nonentity who was unmistakably solid, stable, and healthy in body and mind. He'd rather imagined such a man would bore Hermione to tears, and might not really appreciate her intelligence and tenacity properly; but someone like that, of unobjectionable character and irrefutable decency, would certainly be better for her in the long run than *he* should have been.

He was not, after all, such a fool as to think two terribly-damaged people could do anything but continue to harm each other, no matter how badly they might wish to behave otherwise.

But the owl flew in from its perch in the pantry just then, and he shoved aside any nigling impulse to express an interest in her which she might misconstrue, simply scrawling *S. Snape* at the bottom of the parchment, folding and sealing it, and fixing it to the bird's leg.

"Hermione Granger, at Arbuthnot, Marley, and Patterson, Diagon Alley," he instructed it, and it hooted an acknowledgement and took off when he opened the sash for it.

He very nearly threw her letter in the rubbish, dismissed that knowing there'd be a temptation to dig it out, and decided to burn it and have done with it; but something stopped him before the charm was half out of his mouth, and he carefully folded it and tucked it into the back of his now rarely-consulted Culpeper instead. He shouldn't likely run across it, there.

*Some bloody good should come out of the mess,* he thought, and tried to embrace the cold comfort of a gesture that *might* -- if it came to fruition -- help some poor sod that he would never know, and that he shouldn't *want* to know in any case.

It was pointless to return to the alchemical experiment that waited in the laboratory: he should have to start over, anyway, as he'd mucked about with this ridiculous distraction far too long. So he spent the rest of the day on the veranda, wrapped in a warm cloak with a sterling clasp, staring out at the angry, grey-green sea.

*****

*Perdition catch my soul,*
*But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,*
*Chaos is come again.*

Othello, Act III, scene 3

*Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*
His fingertips strike the linen of the sheet, beating out a rhythm he does not recognise, and knows he should: regimented, disciplined, and annoying in its regularity, like the dripping of a leaky tap that one can never fully stop. A vague sense of un-rightness plagues him as well; he cannot place where he is, or why, but that is much less a matter of concern than the blasted, implacable movement of his fingers, which he cannot still except with extreme concentration.

He doesn't think he ought to stop. The fate of the world might well depend on his mindless repetition -- he is convinced that the earth will stop spinning on its axis were he to wilfully stop the tapping. He doesn't much care about that on his own account; would cease if he could; but then he remembers that there are -- or were -- others than himself in the universe, and allows that it would be selfish to stop merely for his own sake, much as he'd like oblivion.

So he continues.

"Oh, lawks -- 'E's done it again, Matron."

"Has he?" A rustle of starched apron against skirts, the sharp click of heels against stone draws nearer to his bed, and a sigh. "So he has, the... poor beggar. Wrap them up again, Dorrie, and have the orderly help you change the linens."

"But, Matron, he'll just do it all over ag-"

"I'll not have any patient of mine with sheets in that state, my girl. See to it."

Inarticulate grumbles from the higher, younger voice, and he spares her an uncharitable but justified Bitch, wishing he could manage to say it aloud. "Don't see why we can't keep 'im sedated," the Bitch mutters. "'E goes through more sheets than any of the others."

"Because the healer says not," comes the swift, reproving answer. "He does no harm to anyone but himself, any road. You just do as your told."

Hard-Heels leaves the room, and he is alone with the sulky little Bitch who, none too gently, interrupts the tapping to bind his fingers -- too tightly -- as she struggles and curses him for trying to keep the rhythm going; and then she stomps off, he presumes to find the orderly.

He hates how they speak over his head, as if he weren't there at all. He is there. The fact that he can't be bothered to acknowledge them doesn't mean he's lost either wits or tongue.
At least, he thinks not. He could speak, if he wished; if he really tried.

But it doesn't seem worth the effort.

tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

*****

He's lost track of time -- fallen asleep, probably -- and his gut clenches immediately as he wakes: he panics for a moment before he remembers the rhythm and picks it up again, painfully, his bound fingers tingling and clumsy. He can't seem to flex them properly at the knuckle, and that is unnerving -- something important, that flexing, though he can't remember precisely why.

It's a long time before someone bothers him again. Hard-Heels enters with a quick tattoo of steps across the room, stops at his side, and tsks when she sees his awkward efforts. "Stupid little cow. Dressed them too tightly, hasn't she, sir?"

The bindings are loosed, and for one blissful moment he stretches his cramped fingers before the blood begins to rush back into them; and then he moans from the prickly-pain.

"I'll have a word with that Dorrie, I will," Hard-Heels mutters as she takes his hand and flexes it at the wrist, and works the fingers back-and-forth. (For all her sharpness, this one is gentler; she is patient, and waits for each slow tap against her palm before she intrudes to bend that particular digit, until the blood flow is back to normal.) "She'll never make Sister, don't you worry. I don't care how short-staffed we are, that's no excuse to hire bad help and then promote them."

Odd, that he should find someone so like-minded (though he can't seem to recall what abysmal staff he's had to put up with, he's certain he has): it almost makes up for being at Hard-Heels's mercy.

"At least she managed nice, clean sheets for you. I can't abide my people lying about in dirty linens, I really can't."

He can feel Hard-Heels smearing goo of some sort on his finger-ends, and more bandaging -- much better, he can bend them at the knuckle now -- and then she lays his hand back down on the counterpane, and stays with him while he begins the rhythm again.

tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

"I wish," Hard-Heels says, her voice gone soft and a bit odd, "that I knew why you do that."

So does he.

*****

Days have passed: earlier there was afternoon sun streaming through the window and across the foot of his bed, and then another, later day, with cool morning light dappling the ceiling. He knows the passage of time only because of these moments of sight.
It always seems to be one or the other -- sight or sound -- but never the two together: only the rasp of the bed-linen, the stickiness at his finger-ends that catches and pulls at the fabric fibres, is ever concurrent with either, and that is short-lived; that's when they bind his hand. These, apart from an occasional, searing pain in his gut, are the only senses left to remind him that he still exists, though he wouldn't dignifying it by calling it being.

The light is across the foot of the bed again, now, and something stirs in his memory. Something about that shaft of light... Not golden like this, no, but a sickly, dustmote-laden greyish-white, as it always was then and there in the Memory-place, reaching weakly across chipped and yellowed --

He gropes for the memory, catches it and duthches it tight, and he sees it through the eyes of a child and, for the first time, with frightening clarity.

*****

Keys, she called them. They made him think of nothing so much as a monster's teeth, as grotesque as the grinning, stuffed crocodile that hung above the counter in the shop below; but while the crocodile smiled incessantly, frozen forever, this behemoth gaped its jaw only when Mum was in a particular mood, when she bade it. It was, invariably, when his father stepped away from the shop for an afternoon.

She pulled a chain and key from about her neck, unlocked the monster's jaw, and sat before it, running her fingers over the ivory. It was old, that piano: squat, scarred, wonky-legged, and with a tinny sound that couldn't possibly be Quality; but his mum loved it, even when she winced at the sound. "Your granddad bought it for me," she confided to him once, very early on. "I began to learn when I wasn't much older than you." She played a timid string of notes, one right after the other, and then pulled her work-roughened hands away from the keys, tucked them into her lap, and stared at her cracked and blistered fingers.

The piano didn't seem to vicious and brooding now, not with Mum there to master it. He crept closer and dared to poke one of the keys, and jumped when the piano pinged out a high-pitched squeal.

"Gently," Mum chided, but she was trying very hard not to smile: he could tell, because the corner of her mouth tucked in the way it did when she was pleased with him. "Try again, but gently, and keep your finger on the key. Keep it pressed down."

He did, and marveled at how long the sound echoed through the flat -- but nothing else happened.

That seemed fairly useless. Most things did something: the broom in the shop could be charmed to sweep automatically (or had, until it had broken), and his father was always muttering about self-cleaning cauldrons and auto-grind pestles. Even the Diagon Alley busker's hurdy-gurdy was useful -- it blew coloured confetti into the air when it was cranked, and every once in a while it spat out a brass ring as well: if you were lucky and caught it, the hurdy-gurdy man would give you a sweet. (The boy had got very good at catching that ring, very quickly -- he didn't get sweets otherwise.)

"Is that all it does?" he asked his mum, of the piano.
Mum's eyebrows went up. "All it does? It doesn't do anything, the player does. *You* make the music." She was smiling at him outright, now -- he couldn't remember that happening often -- and she added, "It's not practical, of course, that's why your.... It's beauty for beauty's sake, that's all."

Her smile faded, and she glanced down at her hands, in her lap, where her fingers had twisted together: and he decided that he wanted, very badly, to see her smile again. "How does it work?" he asked.

She glanced at him sidelong through the untidy muddle of hair about her eyes, and her smile crept back. "You press the keys down in certain combinations, and it makes the music," she said.

"Show me."

"Don't think I'm up to a good demonstration just now," she whispered. "It's been...." She took a deep breath. "Let's make a bargain. I'll teach you a bit, and then perhaps I'll try to play. But," she added, "you mustn't tell your father. He doesn't approve." She slid to one end of the bench, and patted the space beside her: he clambered up with her, directly in front of the monster's mouth.

"Right. Now, there's a pattern to it. This," she said, and pressed a key midway in the long line, "is what we call middle C. It's important to remember that, that one in particular. It's how you find you way about the others and with printed music."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"Well, it's... it's near the lid-lock, for one, though it isn't always on all pianos. And all Cs have two black keys -- only two, not three -- above them. The next white key is D...." And she went up the line, playing each note as she told him its letter, until they were back to "C." It sounded different this time, higher, and yet the same.

"That's stupid," he blurted out once she'd stopped and looked at him. "They're not in order." (He knew his ABCs quite well, thank you very much, and had for a long time.)

"No, but it's the accepted way," his mum retorted. "I don't know why, but there it is."

"How're you supposed to remember where to jump back to A?"

"With practise. In the meanwhile," Mum said, "there are little tricks that help. The fourth note above C is what?"

"F," he said, after a moment's hesitation and a hasty counting of the keys.

"Right. And the white keys up from that, in thirds -- that's every other key -- spell out 'face.'"

At her unspoken urging, he fumbled at the keyboard and picked out a clumsy F - A - C - E.

"Yes, that's it. And the others are E - G - B - D - F," she said as she struck the notes. "'Every Good Boy Deserves Favour.' And then you're back to F."
He repeated her words and action, and received a rare and welcome "Good," for his efforts, and a tentative squeeze of his shoulder.

She played for him for a while, then, with many fumblings and mis-struck notes, judging from her own displeasure with it: but it fascinated him, the way she managed to coax some loveliness from the wretched old piano. It lasted too short a time as far as he was concerned, though it mustn't have been: they only remembered the danger at the last moment, when the shop-door below shut with a bang, its bell jangling out a belated warning. Quick as a flash, Mum pulled the lid back down and locked it, and pushed him over to the corner where his primer waited; and by the time his father had climbed the crooked little stair, Mum was on her knees at the hearth scrubbing away at the coal-smut, and he had his nose buried in his book.

He wasn't memorising the stupid doggerel that filled the primer, though. He silently chanted F-A-C-E and E-G-B-D-F.

*Every Good Boy Deserves Favour.* He rather liked that. He sensed -- hoped -- that it was true.

****

"Any other incidents worth noting in his chart?"

*Blast. That bloody quack again.*

"Well...."

Ah, Hard-Heels is there as well -- and she was at least *attempting* to protect his privacy. His fingers and their task were none of the idiot healer's business, after all.

"Judging by the bandaging, more with the fingers, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid so. There's nothing else, thankfully, none of the thrashing about that he did earlier --"

"No, no, there wouldn't be -- the Detoxifying Potion is doing an admirable job on the rest of the symptoms."

*Bloody hell, what has the Quack dosed me with?*

"It does seem a pity that we can't give him a bit of sedation, sir. If only his fingers had time to heal properly --"

"No, no, it's out of the question, I'm afraid. It might interact with the Potion, and cleansing his system is of primary importance right now. Not to mention the potential for addiction to the sedative itself." The Quack pauses, and then adds doubtfully, "Although I'm not certain this business with the fingers isn't a form of tremens -- perhaps there's been permanent damage."
"No," Hard-Heels quickly interjects. "No, I don't think it is. I've been watching him, you see, and there's a pattern to it. I can't quite seem to put my finger on it, but there's something he's doing, or thinks he's doing --"

He fights a moment of panic, fearing that Hard-Heels has found him out.

"You must never, ever practise when you're alone, dear, when I'm not with you to listen down below. If your father walked in --"

She hadn't had to tell him how awful a thing that could be: he didn't need a great deal of imagination to guess. He'd lived through similar incidents more times than he could remember.

"Well, he was a potions-maker," the Quack says, disinterest foremost in his voice. "Something repetitive like chopping and sorting, I suppose."

_Not a potions-maker, you fool, a Potions.... A...._

"Just keep an eye on him, then, and keep them bandaged --"

_Damn it --_

"-- and with any luck the toxins will be out of his system soon, and he'll wake. We might manage very small doses of sedative then."

"Yes, sir," Hard Heels murmurs, and he hears the measured thud of a very large man, treading lightly, moving away and out of the room. Hard Heels bends over him -- he can smell the faint verbena scent she uses -- and fusses with the coverlet. "That man," she mutters under her breath, "has all the warmth and sensitivity of a stick-insect. Only he's fatter."

She's said this, he knows, for his benefit -- whether she knows he can hear it or not -- and he hopes to Merlin that the amusement and gratitude he feels for her _sub rosa_ commiseration doesn't show on his face.

*****

The day he picked out a faltering but largely accurate tune on the piano was one of the few red-letter days of his brief life to date. It had taken a ridiculously long time, given that his practise was limited to an hour or two, once a week; but he managed after a fashion, doing it by ear, as his mum deemed it too risky to write it out for him. The parchment would be missed eventually, and in any case it cost too dear to destroy after every lesson.

"I can't teach you to read music, not without a bit of paper," Mum said, "but you're bright, you'll pick that up quickly enough if you like, later. At least you'll have good technique."

Whatever that was.
He dutifully practised his scales for her whenever the chance arose, at first impatient to get through it so she would play for him; and then he applied himself with more precision, anxious to please her. (She always seemed more relaxed and willing to play for him longer if he made an effort.) And the more he improved, the more she did as well: stiff fingers loosened, moved more quickly and surely, and every long once in a while she played a passage with such exactitude and confidence that he could hardly believe it was his timid, mousey mum coaxing such sounds from the instrument. It still played out of true, still jangled, as Mum couldn't risk discovery by having it tuned; but he began to sense what it ought to sound like.

And on the day he managed that simple tune, she'd put her arm about his shoulders and given him a good, strong squidge -- she didn't do that often, Father thought it silly and weak -- and whispered, "Very good, very, very good. What a good boy I have...."

Well, perhaps Father was right: he felt distinctly silly and embarrassed at the overt praise -- and rather proud of himself.

If being a good boy got you this kind of favour, he'd have to try even harder. He liked it.

tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

*****

" -- don't mean to be rude. It's just that --"

*Oh, fucking hell. The Quack. What now, more cod-liver oil? More of those useless bloody smelling-salts?*

"-- I didn't think you to be quite so, erm, young. Because he's, ah, not, is he? Erm, what I mean to say is --"

*I expect he'll try Skrewt-bile bougies to 'wake me up' next. Shitting my bedclothes is supposed to shame me into consciousness, I suppose --"

"-- what with your, erm, formidable reputation as Minister's Counsel, I expected someone rather older."

"I don't see why you should have any expectations of me at all," a low, cool -- and female -- voice responds to Quack.

The woman's voice is familiar, somehow: it prickles at his nerves, and makes the hair on his arms and at the back of his neck stand on end, as if the temperature in the room has suddenly dropped.

"I, erm.... Well." Quack stops himself and takes a deep breath, apparently unnerved by the woman's reaction. "We really didn't know what else to do, you see. He's been through the full treatment, and we haven't had the expected response. Most patients have roused themselves well before now --"

"Suppose you tell me what exactly is wrong in the first place."
"Well, it's.... Surely you know. I mean, for a man to get in this state, he must have, erm, certain habits of longstanding dura--"

"I haven't seen him for many years, as it happens. I would hazard a guess," the Woman -- he started thinking of her in the capital -- says, her voice now positively icy, "that it's liver failure, judging by the jaundice. Although I shouldn't have to point out to you that there are several Alchemical and Potions reactions that can cause similar symptoms. You did actually draw blood and test him for alcohol poisoning, didn't you? I should hate to think you've treated him incorrectly. God only knows what kind of damage could have been done, and it would certainly explain his unresponsiveness."

He hears a muffled snort from the far end of the room -- Hard-Heels, he guesses: she must have crept in behind Quack and the Woman, and she appreciates the Woman's assessment of Quack every bit as much as he does. He gives them both full marks for being the perceptive female specimens they undoubtedly are.

"Wha--? I.... Of course we did the appropriate blood-work," Quack huffs. "Standard procedure. He had more alcohol than red blood cells left in his bloodstream."

"Biochemically improbable, I'm sure," the Woman shoots back. "I really don't see why you think I can help. As I said, I haven't seen him in years, and he made it clear that he liked it that way."

_If you ever spoke to me the way you do him, I imagine I had good reason --_

He senses that isn't quite true, though. Not the bit about liking it that way, at least. _Needing_ it that way, perhaps....

"There's no one else left to ask, you see," Quack objects. "The authorities searched his house for any contacts at all, and the only personal letters they found were from a Professor McGonagall, and she's --"

"Yes, I know. He's not a soul in the world to look after him, so of course some brilliant sod pokes about the Marriage Registry and floos me up."

_"I'd no intention of asking you to --"_

A discreet cough from Hard-Heels's corner of the room interrupts what promised to become a lovely row. He's disappointed at that: the prospect certainly livened-up the place.

Quack continues more calmly, "I... simply _wondered_ if you could shed any light on why he's not responding, that's all. Every damned test we run shows he ought to be out of the coma. His pupils are reactive, he produces involuntary responses to stimuli...."

The three of them are silent for a while, and then the Woman says, "The only explanation I have is that he always was a stubborn bastard, who insisted on doing things in his own way and at his own time. Sheer bloody-mindedness, in other words. He'll probably wake up when he's damned good and ready to, and not before -- if ever."
"Oh, come now, people don't will themselves into dying."

"You think so? If anyone could manage it, he could. Not that the man I knew would choose that course, but it has been more than a decade. People change."

"Well, I, erm... I just hoped perhaps you knew of any medical condition in his family that might, erm, contribute to the difficulty."

"No, I don't. If he had any family left by the time we married, he never saw fit to introduce me to them."

"Ah. Well. I'm sorry to have bothered you, then, especially for what turns out to be a straightforward case. Of course I don't expect you to take responsibility for him, especially as he's wilfully got himself in such a stupid muddle."

He cringes inwardly -- not because it wasn't true, but because there nearly is a noticable dip in the room temperature the instant the words leave Quack's mouth.

"This man," the Woman says, voice very soft -- and after a significant pause which he instinctively recognizes as a tactic to produce maximum nastiness, and of which he wholly approves -- "performed honourable service in both wars against Voldemort. I'll wager he's seen more carnage and misery than you'll ever be able to imagine. That in itself deserves respect, even if you're incapable of feeling it for all your patients on principle."

He wishes he could see, at the moment: it would take a far tougher man than Quack not to quail under such a withering assessment.

"Erm... I've, erm, other patients to attend to. Matron will show you out," Quack mutters, and lumbers out of the room without his usual attempt to disguise the heaviness of his tread.

Hard-Heels clears her throat. "This way, madam --"

"I'd like to stay for a while, actually," the Woman says. "If that's permitted, of course."

"Oh. We don't have, ah, unrelated persons in the Critical Ward normally, but I've no objection."

"Thank you."

A scrape of chair-legs over to his right; a rustle of fabric and the creak of the leather seat as the Woman settles herself. The breeze her movement produces wafts another scent his way -- tantalising; something more than simply familiar, something that prickles at his brain's pleasure-centres. (Not at those of desire: he is incapable of responding that way, now, the alcohol having taken care of that problem quite a long time ago.)

"He's actually a decent clinician," Hard-Heels says softly. "He just makes an utter balls-up of dealing with conscious patients and their relatives."
"Which is, no doubt, why he deals with cases like these," the Woman says, voice laced with amusement.

"Right. He has a point, however," Hard-Heels continues, moving closer -- perhaps emboldened by the Woman's change of tone. "He just asked the wrong question in this case."

"Ah. What is the right one?"

"I agree with you on the stubbornness, as it happens -- but he's preoccupied with something...."

*Oh, bloody hell. Why can't they have the decency to talk about me behind my back, like normal people?*

"He moves his fingers, you see. It's not twitches, it's too deliberate for that -- there's a pattern to it. The healer thought perhaps it was the Potions work, but I don't think so."

"How?"

"Like this --"

A pause, in which Hard-Heels presumably demonstrates.

"No, that wouldn't be it. I should know, I saw him work often enough."

"I can't quite place it, but perhaps you can. If you stay long enough, I'm sure he'll do it."

"Yes, I'll stay this afternoon," the Woman murmurs. "I cleared my schedule for the day, as I didn't know what to expect."

"Good. May I get you anything, or --"

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm sure you're very busy."

"I'll check in on you later, then."

Hard-Heels makes for the door, her steps confident and business-like, and she closes it with a soft *snick* of the latch.

"Well," the Woman says softly, after a long pause, "you've gone and got yourself in a nice pickle this time, haven't you? Literally."

His mind is confused by her proximity and his reaction to her, and another strange flash of isolated memories -- of a hillside; of this woman, slender legs trouser-clad; of the odd juxtaposition of *pickle* and *troll mucus* -- distracts him so that it takes him a moment to realise she's just twitted him for being an alcoholic idiot.

It would almost be worth the effort of waking to produce a sneer.
He would never know what possessed his mum to buy the music-book, or how she'd managed it under his father's nose. She hadn't warned the boy: she'd simply returned from her shopping one day, casually put the basket of greens on the scarred work-table in the corner, and then waited until they heard a customer enter the shop. Then she'd dumped the vegetables on the table, snatched something from the bottom of the basket, and run to his room; he followed, and arrived just in time to see her slip something underneath the thin mattress on his bed. She didn't say a word: only laid a cautioning finger against her lips, hurried back out to the main room of the flat, and began scrubbing the dinner-turnips.

It was another week before his father left long enough for her to unearth the book.

"Scales first," she said firmly, and only allowed him to open the book once he'd done his repetitions perfectly. And then --

It was odd and wonderful to see those squiggles on the page, dancing along the lines and spaces, and to realise that despite the seeming chaos that they really meant order; to accept, as Mum told him, that by applying himself to the discipline of the straight and narrow, he could learn to play something lovely, if only he followed the rules and applied himself. And how nice it was when Mum showed him how those interminable scales and exercises he'd practised had a place: how F-A-C-E fooled you by starting on spaces and then hopped onto lines, and E-G-B-D-F flowed on, never seeming quite complete, always begging for a satisfying end....

That one was still his favourite, a mantra that he practised every night in his bed, fingers seeking out their proper placement on his rough, much-mended counterpane: *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*.

*tap - tap - tap - tap - tap*

"There -- you see?" Hard-Heels suddenly whispers.

"Yes," the Woman whispers back. "He's done it off and on, all afternoon."

*Oh, Merlin's bloody balls. Bad enough to have females popping in and out all the time, but to realise they're actually spying on a man when he's unaware of them....*

"Do you --?"

"No, not yet," the Woman says. "But you're right, it's something I ought to recognise."

He isn't being quite truthful with himself about the spying: he feels it rather nice that she's stayed, actually. Especially after he got a look at her.
He'd regained his sight at some point, quite briefly, this afternoon: he managed to turn his head just enough to see the Woman out of the corner of his eye. She didn't notice him, thankfully -- her head was bent over a book, something he was oddly unsurprised by, and she was totally absorbed in it. *Not bad,* was his first thought -- and it was true. Not a *conventional* kind of beauty, certainly: her nose was a trifle too long for feminine prettiness, and her hair pulled into an untidy knot at the back of her neck. Her eyes, though, those were *quite* fine any way you looked at them: they were lovely, but sharp and intense as well, unquestionably intelligent, and the look in them signaled clearly that she wanted badly to argue with the book's author.

What *quite* surprised him was her youth. She couldn't be more than forty -- a well-preserved forty, at that -- and he was.... Well, damn him if he could remember how old he was. And she'd implied they were married. Or had been at least a decade ago, if memory of her earlier words served.

*Robbed the cradle somewhere along the line, old man. Who'd have ever imagined that?*

Of course, an adder's tongue apparently came with the intelligence and attractive package, but one couldn't have *everything.* It was probably why they'd divorced.

"He's moved, hasn't he?" Hard-Heels suddenly notes, jerking him back to the present.

"Yes," the Woman says distantly. "Sneaky bugger didn't think I noticed. Not that I can tell if he actually saw or recognised me, but his eyes were open."

"Thought so," Hard-Heels said, voice intensely smug. "I knew we just needed to give him a little more time."

"Waiting out his sulks always was the best tactic," the Woman counsels her. "You'll see. After he wakes fully, you'll wish he were still comatose. He's most agreeable when unconscious."

*Why, that bloody bitch* --

"Don't think he liked that," Hard-Heels observes with a chuckle.

"No, they never care to have their flaws pointed out, do they? This one particularly." The Woman is silent for a moment, and then adds, "Never liked having his *virtues* made much of either, oddly enough."

*Hmmmmph.*

They both fall silent for a while, and he has the uncomfortable feeling that they're staring at him, waiting for a response.

"Well," Hard-Heels finally says, "What I came to tell you was that Visitor's Hours are over, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I'm *terribly* sorry --"
A scrape of chair legs, and another hint of the Woman's scent as she stoops to gather her things together.

"No, I'm glad you stayed," Hard-Heels says. "He hasn't had a single visitor, you know."

"He cut everyone off in the end, so he wouldn't, would he? Even sent Professor McGonagall's letters back unopened. I doubt he even heard when she died, as he didn't show at the memorial service. I can't imagine him missing that by choice, only by ignorance."

Oh, blast. He couldn't understand why this McGonagall person should be so important to him, but he felt intensely guilty nonetheless.

"You're quite fond of him, aren't you?" the Woman suddenly asks.

"Yes, I am, rather --"

Oh, damn. Just what he needs, Hard-Heels mooning over him --

"-- unlike him, I recognised the name, you see, from the war and that business with the Ministry."

"Ah. And probably mine as well, then."

_The Ministry? Merlin's balls, whatever did we get up to?_

"Yes, but I didn't want to put you on the spot."

"Wouldn't have done. Or at least, I'm used to it now, ever since Fred Weasley wrote that _awful_ book about the whole mess...."

(He isn't sure why, but the Woman's conjunction of _Fred Weasley_ and _awful_ seems entirely appropriate.)

"What is it?" Hard-Heels says, voice going sharp and anxious.

"Oh... nothing, really," the Woman says. "It's the beard, I think. In fifteen years, I don't believe I ever once saw him other than clean-shaven."

"Is it an improvement?" Hard-Heels asks. (He wants to smack her for the sly tease in her voice.)

"Just different, that's all. He looks like an entirely different person. Well, I'm off," the Woman says, her voice fading as she and Hard-Heels move toward the door: he strains to hear the last bit -- the last bit of her that he shall probably ever hear, given what she's said to Quack. "You _will_ let me know if there's improvement or --"

The door closes behind them, leaving him alone with relief and regret for company.

_Must've cared for her once, I suppose. I wonder if she cared for me? Certainly doesn't now, given what she said -- I must have bolloxed it up badly._
It's inevitable that he should have done, in fact. He may have no memory of himself, of this woman, or of his behaviour toward her, but the Memory has reminded him all too well of what he is from: he doubts he has managed to be a much better man than that.

Ah, well. Utterly pointless to worry about it now. A pity visit, and she shan't be back, I'm sure. Kind of her to stay the afternoon, though.

And with that, he ceases to torture himself with pointless speculation, and returns to the most important matter at hand.

tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

*****

Hard-Heels visits him the next day -- or the day after, he isn't certain which -- and commits the ultimate and dangerous indignity upon him of a shave.

And a hair-cut.

"There," she says, voice unnaturally bright as she brushes the wisps of cut hair away from his neck -- his now-naked and far too itchy neck. "Perhaps that'll set her more at ease when she comes back. You look far more human now."

He doubts that -- that the Woman will return, rather. He hasn't an opinion on his appearance.

And given the choice between a daily dose of Hard-Heels wielding a straight razor or of Quack's Skrewt-bile bougies, he thinks he'd prefer the purge.

*****

The boy never learned how his father sussed them out, but the man later reasoned that it was an unfortunate coincidence: something as mundane as the absence of dust on the piano, or an overly-enthusiastic sforzando on his mother's part that leaked through the thin walls and window-frame, overheard by his returning father.

It was quite neatly and cruelly managed. They'd been allowed to go out for an afternoon; this in itself was unusual, but not unknown -- they were often sent away when his father had special "guests" who wished to be certain their transactions were absolutely private. The boy's first inkling that something was amiss was when his mum stopped dead in the shop-door (he bumped into her bum, unable to stop in time); and then her basket and parcels slipped from her hands and to the floor. He peeked round her waist, and saw two labourers Levitating the piano down the stair.

"What do they think they're doing?!" he blurted out, far too loudly.

Mum shushed him, but it was too late: his father had sharp ears, and within seconds stepped from behind the curtain that separated the storeroom from the shop.
"Ted Edgerton's girls want one," he drawled, staring Mum down and smirking at her. "Got more than it's worth from him. It's not like you play any longer, is it? And I can't stand the sound of it even if you did. Only good for collecting dust," he said as he moved behind the counter, "and we've enough of that."

His mum didn't say a word: only stood and watched the yobs trying to bull her piano down to the shop. They were unskilled, more used to doing things the Muggle way, and bunged-up both instrument and stairwell badly before his father gave them the rough side of his tongue. At last they had it past the stair, and began floating it toward the door: but his mum didn't move when they reached her.

"I'm paying them by the quarter-hour," his father said in an undertone. "And Ted's already handed over the cash. I suggest you move. Now."

For one horrid moment the boy thought she would disobey; thought she might object, or tell the workmen that his father had no right to sell what was hers. He knew what would happen then: his father didn't like to be contradicted at any time, much less in front of anyone.

But Mum's head drooped, and she slowly bent down to gather up her parcels; and then she slipped through the gap between the piano and the display shelves, and crept up the stair without a backward glance. The boy stayed outside, watching as the oafs floated the piano -- its case now badly scarred -- onto a cart, and dumped it so heavily that its strings protested with a discordant *twang*: then they strapped it down and pulled the cart away, the piano-lid flapping with every bump over the cobbles.

His father, he guessed, had jimmed the lock to prove to his chum that it could be played.

*****

tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

He opens his eyes and squints at the sunlight streaming through the window. It's a Seeing day, and he's a little disappointed at that: it's almost always impossible to re-enter the Memory on the days he can see -- some strange quirk of his synapses, he supposes, or something to do with the potions they've poured down his gullet.

Odd, that the Memory should be so important to him. He sensed from the first that it couldn't turn out well, but he's compelled to see it through to the end. He reasons that when you have no memories whatsoever, even the bad ones might be precious; might hold some clue or key to how one ended up at the present. He wants to know that very badly, now that it's clear he won't be allowed to slip away.

His disappointment at losing the elusive Memory is tempered, though, when he finds he has a visitor: seated in a chair near the foot of the bed, mussed hair glowing with a nimbus of sunlight, is a woman. It takes a moment's squinting to realise it is the Woman.
Bloody hell.... She came back. She actually came back. And her wand's not pointed at me, which is a good thing, I suppose.

He debates playing dead to the world once more, but he's left it a moment too late: she's seen that he's conscious. He stills his tapping fingers with a great effort of will.

"Hullo," she says, voice soft. "Are you ready to stay awake for a while, now, or would you still like to pretend that I'm not here?"

Damn it, I can't be that transparent. Can I?

He's not certain what to say to her, other than to return the salutation -- but all that comes out is a dry croak: the Woman rises and moves to the head of the bed, and he hears the chink of glass on glass; and then her cool hand is supporting his neck, and the glass is at his lips. He mucks it up, of course -- he seems to have lost the knack of swallowing voluntarily -- and much of the water spills down his chin, soaking the ridiculous gown they've dressed him in. He chokes and growls, and with a matter-of-fact "Never mind," the Woman takes the glass away, fetches a flannel, and pats away at the mess.

"Matron will be very pleased that you're finally awake," she says as she finishes cleaning him up and draws her chair nearer to his head. "Shirty as well as it's her day off and she's missed it, but pleased."

She opens a book, begins to read silently, and utterly ignores him.

Of all the.... It's not a bloody library. Why the hell is she here, if not to --?

Two can play at that game.

He tries to give her his back, and only succeeds in tangling his legs in the sheets.

"You needn't fuss," the Woman says, and reaches over to twitch the sheets right. "I'm not going to sit here and chatter, but I'll keep you company and prevent that idiot from dosing you with salts and driving you mad. If it's conversation you want, though, you'll have to start it yourself." She buries her nose back in her book.

Why, you.... Fine.

He tries to keep himself amused -- and ignoring her -- by counting the pock-marks in the plastered wall before him, but it takes more concentration than it ought, and his fingers resume their beat. He stops as soon as he can: but her damned observant eyes have noticed, of course.

"Matron's very curious about that," the Woman notes, marks her place with a forefinger, and leans a little closer to confide, "I shan't tell her what it is if you don't wish me to, though."

What? Has she --? No, she couldn't possibly have guessed. It's a bluff.
On the other hand, she seems to know far more of him than he does of himself, if there's any credence at all in her caustic remarks to Matron.

_I wouldn't have told anyone that, would I? Far too personal... ...no, too trivial. I barely remembered it before now, at any rate._

No, she _must_ be bluffing, but it's an intriguing proposition -- to find out how much she _does_ know, without giving himself away. He still fights the impulse to ask, and the break in concentration gives his fingers leave to begin tapping again....

He gives in to the impulse, with the sinking feeling that an inability to resist temptation has been one of his significant, life-long failings.

"What do you mean?" he manages to rasp out.

The words don't seem right: for a moment he thinks he's forgot the sound of his own voice, and then he realises that he's slurred the words as badly as if he were drunk. She notices too, and leans forward, brow furrowed.

"Hmmm?" Her expression clears. _"Oh. I don't suppose I ever told you... ...well, I wouldn't have done, you weren't even remotely interested in my childhood. My mum had aspirations of me being a flautist, as my granddad was a famous one. My teacher insisted that I take Piano as well --"

_Oh, fuck --_

"-- so I should learn Theory properly and be able to work with accompanists intelligently. I hated it, being stuck behind the piano practising it, too, when I could be reading a book -- great waste of time, I thought --"

_Say something, anything, just distract her from --_

"And the flute?" he interrupts, the words still shamefully slurred.

"Hmmm? Oh, I didn't mind that so much, at least until my adult teeth came in and I had to give it up anyway. At any rate, that's how I recognised it." She reaches over, lays her hand over his bandaged one (he jerks at the contact, but she ignores that), and gently taps it out with him. _"Every - Good - Boy - Deserves - Favour. I shouldn't have guessed except that you do FACE occasionally as well."

_Damnation._

"Shan't tell her," the Woman says as she pulls her hand away. _"Wouldn't make any sense to her, anyway."

It does to the Woman, apparently -- he wishes he knew _why_ -- but she returns to her book without enlightening him.
He decides not to let her off so easily -- besides, it's quite enfuriating that she's so quick to return to her blasted book: the least she could do is entertain him a bit. Moreover, he... he quite likes the sound of her voice when she keeps it pitched low.

"What - about - the - flute?" he tries, doing his best to speak more clearly. (It's still terrible, but there's an improvement.)

She glances over at him, expression suddenly wary and sharp. "You don't see why my teeth have anything to do with it?"

"No."

"You don't remember what my teeth used to be like?"

_Ahhhhhh, damn. Walked right into that one, I have...._ Not trusting his voice, he shakes his head.

"In fact," she says slowly, and lays her book aside, "you don't remember anything about me at all, do you?"

"Married," he tries desperately to derail her. "Were."

"Yes, but I've said that in your hearing -- don't think I don't know you might have been conscious. Do you remember my name?"

She has him there: all he can do is shake his head, and screw tight his eyelids against the humiliating prickle of salt-water.

"It doesn't matter now," she says. "It's to be expected, given what your body's been through. Ought to be looked into, though. As far as the flute and my teeth.... Well, an overbite's not a great impediment, but a massive one is, especially when one is a bit clumsy. Giving it up was less painful than continuing to chip my teeth on it."

She returns to her book; he forebears any mental complaints about that, as he isn't in the mood to attempt more conversation (not with her continually getting the better of him, and with his alarming inability to speak clearly).

And so they sit together silently through an interminable afternoon, he staring at the ceiling and trying to control the bloody _tap - tap - tap_ (though there's no point, now that she's caught him out), and she reading, occasionally helping him drink a time or two; and then he slips off into a Memory-less doze. When he wakes, much later in the evening, she's gone.

He's not certain which is greater: his relief that the bloody perceptive Woman has seen fit to leave him alone, or his loneliness now that she has.
His father never mentioned the piano again. He had no need to: he was a master at the art of making others suffer in silence, and a dedicated hedonist in his enjoyment of their suffering.

The boy and his mum crept about the flat for the next fortnight, waiting for the inevitable retribution. Mum was not allowed to re-arrange their few bits of furnitures, but made to stare at the yellowed oblong on the wall where the piano once stood; the boy was set to preparing even more potions ingredients, and the most caustic, so that his fingers were soon as red and raw as his mother's.

Late one night in bed, back and buttocks still stinging from a particularly nasty caning earned for not chopping wormwood finely enough, the boy clenched his hands tight to prevent himself from doing his nightly finger-exercise, recalling his father's parting shot: "If it's the last thing I do, I'll teach you to put your hands to better use."

Every good boy deserves favour....

*It's not true*, he thought, and shifted to his other hip to ease the pain of a bleeding wound that the cane had ripped open at his waist. *It's a lie*. Or rather, he decided, every good boy might *deserve* favour -- but only the *lucky* ones got it.

He began to suspect that he was not one of the lucky ones.

* **** *

It's morning, and he's wide awake bright and early, musing over the last bit of the Memory. He's been kept too busy for the last few days to think through it: since he woke fully he's been poked and prodded, and been made to perform tricks like a dancing dog, until last night he snarled out a garbled curse at Hard-Heels -- *Matron* -- and she left the room in a huff. (He suspects he may have actually made Matron cry, but she got a bit of her own back with a defiant "She's right, I prefer you comatose," on her way out, so he decides they are even and at pax.)

He hasn't been able to return to the Memory since it left off at the beating. It's not the end of the story, he's certain: it's merely a fragment of a whole, one he finds himself anxious to explore. He imagines, though, that experience proved the boy's suspicion right time and time again, until childish hope was overwhelmed by bitterness and cynicism: they seem to come naturally to him. Honestly acquired, as it were.

But surely --

Surely there must have been some good. I must have done some good, or at least I hope so....

*She seems too sensible to have married an ogre, doesn't she? Unless I was even worse than I fear, and tricked her.... No, she wouldn't have come back. Would've washed her hands of me after that first visit.*
No, the man must have discovered -- or re-discovered -- the satisfaction of discipline and of choosing to do right, somewhere along the line: must have realised that reward lies not in the recognition, but in the doing -- in the journey; that a good act, no matter how badly it works out at first, might eventually be fulfilling.

So intent is he on his thoughts that he doesn't notice the Woman's arrived until she's pulling the chair over to his bed.

"Right, then," she says, and props her elbows on his mattress. (He wishes she wouldn't: it implies an intimacy that he's unable to reciprocate -- although if she keeps wearing that blasted enticing perfume, it might not be terribly hard to give in to.) "First off, you're a rotten beggar for tearing into Matron yesterday -- don't think I haven't had an earful about that --"

Oh, bloody.... Hasn't bothered to visit for three days, and ticks me off first thing --

"Had - enough," he slurs out in his own defence.

"I'm sure, but they're trying to help. And they think they've sussed out the problem. You've had a stroke --"

"Stroke?" (Whatever it is, it sounds awful.)

"Cerebral aneurysm, bleeding in the brain."

Oh, for fuck's sake -- only elderly wizards ever.... How do I know that?

"What they're going to do is get you on your feet once you're a bit better-fed, and see how well or poorly your motor-skills are faring. Matron and I suspect they're not too bad, not with, ah, your hand coordination being all right, but --"

"How long?" he demands.

She seems surprised by that, and then, with a long-suffering sigh, stares up at the ceiling. "A week or so to build up your strength, I suppose, and then a more thorough assessment, and then physical therapy for as long as it takes to help. Perhaps several months or --"

"Fuck - that," he says, fighting a rising panic. Merlin's balls, if he's stuck here for another month or more at the mercy of Matron and Quack, somebody will die -- and it won't be he. (He isn't certain how he'd go about accomplishing mayhem or manslaughter in his condition, but he'd do his damndest to find a way.)

The Woman isn't impressed: she glares back at him and drawls, "Amazing. You seem to get the nasty bits out perfectly clearly."

He nearly calls her something very nasty indeed, only just stops himself, and sneers at her instead.
"Let me think on it," she says, sighing. "We might be able to arrange out-patient therapy, though they won't like that." She glances at him doubtfully and adds, "Or perhaps not. Matron may be happy to see the back of you."

It takes him a full minute-and-a-half to spit the words out so that she can understand him, but he eventually succeeds in telling her that the joy would be entirely mutual.

*****

The solution to the problem -- when the Woman finally condescends to tell him, a week later -- is not only unexpected, but entirely unacceptable as well. Worse still, she's deceptive enough to try to sneak it past him under the guise of good news (or as good as it gets, at this point).

"Less damage than they feared," she says of his latest blasted physical assessment (and the less said of that the better), her tone brisk and the news without preamble. "No impairment on the right side, and only mild to moderate impairment on the left. They want you to work at walking and balance, as your left foot drags a bit. Your speech seems to be the most badly affected, but that will improve if you practise it. And then there's the memory problem --"

"Fine," he grunts. "When - do - I - go - home?"

"Well," she says, "you realise you'll have to stay in London for the therapy. We've found you lodging --"

"Bollocks. Elf --" (he's fairly certain he has one of longstanding) "-- will - pop - me -- over --"

"It's not possible," the Woman insists. "Out of the question. Besides, the more often you come to therapy, the sooner you'll --"

"Not - staying - in - London," he bellows, and founders about for a frustrating moment before he's able to remember the specifics. "PUCK - Puck - will - take - care --"

"Puck's dead."

He's not entirely certain that he's heard her correctly, until the look of horror and embarassment on her face convinces him otherwise. "I'm sorry," she stammers. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to tell you that way. I know you must have been fond of him."

_Puck... dead? Oh, sweet Merlin -- How --? Did I --?_

He really _does_ begin to panic then, scrabbling at the neck of his gown: he can't seem to get enough air.

"Oh, _no_," the Woman says quickly, and reaches for his hands and stills them. "No, no, it wasn't anything you did or didn't do, _really_. He was positively _ancient_, Severus. Surely you knew that?"
It's not so much the reassurance that stills him as it is the shock of her calling him by name: she's never done, not in all these weeks. While he knows the name must be his, and while it doesn't seem altogether odd to hear her say it, it doesn't feel as though it really belongs to him.

"Just... calm down and I'll tell you everything we know," she says. "I should've done before, but I knew it would upset you terribly."

"How?" he croaks. And how are you so bloody certain that I'm not responsible?

"Old age, that's all. The authorities think that's why you nearly died, because he wasn't about to watch after you." She hesitates, gently pries his fingers away from his gown, and guides his hands back to his lap before taking a deep breath and continuing. "We aren't sure which came first, his dying or your stroke, but by the time you needed to... bury the body, you weren't really in any condition to do a proper job of it -- but you did your best," she adds hastily. "The authorities sent me a full report. They could tell that you... couldn't quite manage to dig the grave very deeply, that's all, and you didn't do it with magic, which leads them to think you were already... impaired, but I'm not totally convinced of that. He'd been very carefully dressed and arranged, so that's how I know you were fond of him. But without him there to care for you.... Well, you just couldn't -- or wouldn't -- manage for yourself."

"Alcohol?" he manages to ask bitterly.

"That's what they can't suss out. Either you fell while drunk and struck you head, inducing the bleedout, or it simply happened on its own and you continued to drink. We'll likely never know, unless you remember. And the hospital has no family history for you, so they don't know if you've a genetic tendency for early stroke. It's a rare trait for wizards, but it happens, and alcohol would have exacerbated it."

Bloody hell. Can't even drink myself to death properly. And I suppose they've dosed me with an aversion potion, so it's pointless to try that again, deliberately or not.

"So," The Woman says carefully, "you can't go back to your cottage, not yet, not until you re-certify in Apparation and we're certain you can manage on your own. I wouldn't mind taking you back-and-forth, but I can't clear my schedule to that extent. Besides," she mutters a bit defiantly, "I'd worry about you too much --"

Oh, damnation -- I think I know where this is headed --

" --so you really ought to stay in London."

"Lodging -- where?" he demands immediately. (No sense in putting it off any longer: his nerves can't take the strain.)

"My flat," she offers weakly.

On second thought, putting it off might have been better.
"No - bloody - way," he says definitively.

"Severus, it's rather nicer than when you were there last -- and larger, as I've bought the flat above - - and I gave up being stubborn and magicked it up a bit --"

"No - charity," he bellows.

At first she's shocked: and then she recovers and he sees just how quickly -- and frighteningly -- she can lose her temper.

**Oh, damn -- Major miscalculation --**

"It's not charity," she hisses. "Or pity, before you think of *that*. And if you ever use that word again, I'll -- I'll -- ...If it makes you feel better, you can pay for the bloody room and board, but you **are** coming to my home, and you'll **stay** there until you've bloody well recovered as much as you can."

She looks as though she wants to throttle him with her bare hands; in fact, he's certain she wants to, until she lapses back in her chair, covers her eyes with one hand, and scrubs at them. When she drops her hand, he loses the heart to continue to defy her -- *much*: she looks tired, very nearly the forty he's estimated for her age, and he realises that while she hasn't been visiting him a great deal over the past weeks, she's been burning the candle at both ends; that worrying over him -- as she's apparently done, despite his assumption -- hasn't helped at all.

"Cottage - empty," he attempts in a last effort to save face. "Not - secure --"

"Yes, it is. They said they'd done, but I didn't trust them," she admits. "So I.... I'm sorry, but I popped over there and set everything right, packed a few of your things, and then I warded it up myself. No one's getting in there but you or me. *And,*" she adds with a disapproving look, "I even refreshed that nasty little Anti-Muggle hex you set on the beach. Really, Severus -- instantaneous oozing pustules? Couldn't you just *frighten* them off and leave it at that?"

He doesn't remember setting that particular hexing ward, but he doesn't understand her quibble with the principle in any case. Every schoolboy would agree that oozing pustules were more effective, and far more fun -- for the hexer, at least -- than a mere fright.

It's a moot point, however. As matters stand, he can't speak a spell properly; he mightn't be able to use his wand properly, either -- they haven't let him try. And if he can't even move about well enough to manage things Muggle-fashion --

*Damn. Can't fend for myself, any way you look at it. Probably fall again, break a bloody leg, and die a slow death of starvation....*

There's nothing for it but to give in, really. If Puck were there to look out for him, he should manage: but he admits that it's quite impossible.
"It mightn't be that awful," the Woman says, voice soft and ever-so-faintly wheedling. "I've more room now, and I brought some of your books and things back. I couldn't manage your equipment, not in the same trip, but if you like I can fetch some of it and set up a laboratory. Assuming," she adds hastily, "that you promise not to blow up the house."

_Hah. As if I would. Or could, in this state._

"Fine," he mutters, eyes downcast, fixed on his hands. He's able to control the tapping much better, now, but his fingers still tremble with the effort to stay quiet.

_Probably should blow something up, I suppose. Assuming I remember how to do any bloody experiments in the first place._

"Did - I - have - any - thing - in - the...." he attempts, unable to remember the proper name, and looks at her.

She's still watching him carefully, her face pale and pinched. "In the furnace? Afraid so -- it had quite spoiled. A pity, because it looked promising."

_Damnation--_

"How--?"

"Not gold," she says, and then smiles. "But definitely much finer than base metal. You got quite far along with it, I think -- but then I never studied Alchemy, so I can't be certain."

_Double-damn and blast._

"I brought your working journal," she says, and curls up in the chair -- quite inappropriately for a woman her age, but it seems to suit her -- "so you'll have plenty to occupy yourself with." And then she opens her satchel, pulls out a thick sheaf of foolscap, and begins to read, making notes in the margins as she goes.

_How... maddening. Was she always such a bloody bookworm? Sharp tongue, horrendous temper, never pays attention to a man.... No wonder I preferred solitude._

_I'll wager she's a bloody bad cook, too. Oh, joy._

"Needn't - stay," he says, managing to sound, even to his own ears, every bit as sulky and sullen as he feels. "Not - if - so - bloody - busy."

"I am, as it happens," she mutters back, not bothering to look at him, "but this is extra work, unfortunately, and on deadline. My publisher will be quite unhappy if I don't have an edited proof for him soon."

_Merlin's balls, she's a scribbler. How bloody worse can this--_
Wait. Didn't that bastard of a Quack say she was Minister's... Counsel? Whatever that is, but it sounds lawyer-ly. Perhaps she writes trash on the side.

"What - is - it?" he asks, purely to be tiresome.

"The title alone will bore you to tears," she warns him, still focussed on the manuscript, and then rattles off, "A History of Wizarding Judicial Bodies, Procedures and Precedents, with Precis of the Newest Changes to Code. Or as I like to call it, The Big Bloody Doorstop Fred Weasley Dared Me to Write." She looks over at him, then. "I had no idea any publisher would be idiot enough to take it seriously. And one did, for a bloody big advance. So until the damned thing's in print my spare time isn't spare, and what's worse is that I owe Fred Arithmancy tutoring for his eldest, who's absolutely thick at it."

Oh, damn. Serious work. I.... Damn. I should keep my blasted mouth shut. Or at least not jump to conclusions.... Working, presumably, and writing seriously, and visiting -- not to mention looking after the cottage....

He feels every bit as ashamed as he reckons he ought to.

"Not - ungrateful - for - help," he stutters. "Just...."

"Too independent by half?" she says softly, and glances up at him. "You always were, so I expected it."

"You - shouldn't - have - to," he insists, desperate to make his position clear. "Your - home. Impose... Imposit --"

"No, it's not. Not in the way you mean."

And how do you bloody know what I mean?

She must read the question in his eyes, because her lips quirk upward and she says, "You're thinking something along the lines of 'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in'. Right?"

Damn. He hates that she can read him so easily -- it's spot-on.

Or perhaps she's a Legerd--... Legi--.... Oh, sod my fucking memory.

"Acc - urate," he grudgingly admits.

"Not my words -- some American poetry that a friend lent me, once. And I think it's bollocks, by the way. It's less having to take you in, and more wanting to," she murmurs, and looks back down at her papers: her pale cheeks begin to flush a delicate pink. "It's just me, so you're not putting anyone else out. You needn't feel badly about it."

That blush interests him greatly.
What the bloody hell went on between us? You'd think she's looking forward to having me about. Not certain I like the implications of that. Could be very bad, indeed.

Or quite good....

There is only one way to find out, though. And whatever motivates the Woman --

Really must remember her name. Or suss is out. I wonder if Matron would --? No, I'd never hear the end of it. Think of another way, and avoid calling her anything until then --

-- he'll certainly be more comfortable in her home than in hospital. The food could hardly be worse, no matter how bad a cook she might be.

"Thank - you," he manages.

She smiles rather absently but doesn't otherwise respond, intent on making a note.

At least she's quiet, when I don't push her into a fury. It mightn't be so bad after all.

*****

By the time Quack authorises his release a fortnight later, he's decided that even the seventh level of Hell would do for lodging. The Woman's flat isn't that, by any means: it's actually quite nice. He has a sense of deja-vu about the place --

Well, you would, wouldn't you? Certainly you've been here before, she said as much --

-- but it's also terribly strange. He navigates easily enough (or as easily as he can given the damned cane he must use) as the lie of the rooms is, if not precisely familiar, then comfortable...

...three paces from front door to sitting-room; six more down the hall to kitchen- and dining-room, on the left; two paces across to the... the bedchamber -- blast, that's awkward, I hope she doesn't expect to share --

...but the character of the place has altered, he decides at last. There's nothing particularly remarkable about it: soft, warm colours, nothing frou-frou or disgustingly precious; but this aspect of it feels totally alien, although he's at a loss to explain how he knows she's made changes.

"I already put your things in the dresser," she calls down the hall after him. "That's the spare bedroom, now --"

Oh, thank Merlin --

"-- so you needn't worry that I had to move things about."

He stumps into the bedchamber (that damned left foot still drags) and peers into the adjacent room, discovering the loo. And bath.
Oh, dear --

"All yours," she says, popping her head through the bedroom door: she startles him, and he wavers on his feet for a moment. "I turned the flat above into a private suite, more or less -- my own bath and workroom, even. Razor and strop are in the medicine cabinet, and I picked up some other toiletries for you --"

(If he felt like an imposition before, he now feels an absolute burden. She's gone to a great deal of trouble for him.)

"-- and your books and things are in the sitting-room...." She stops in mid-chatter, looks very embarrassed indeed, and says, "I haven't had time to go to the grocer's yet. Will you, ah, be all right if I pop round now?"

Oh, for.... I'm an invalid, damn it, not a child....

"How much... trouble... could I possibly get into?" he asks carefully.

"Don't ask that question," she retorts. "You've set several memorable precedents in the past." She turns and trots down the hall before he can snap back, and sings back at him, "Shan't be more than an hour," before he hears the crack of an Apparition.

*Why, that insolent bi-- ...that person who knows a hell of a lot more about me than I do, at present. Damn.*

*****

He only has an hour at most and he moves bloody slowly, so he has to choose his targets wisely. His discoveries include:

an alarming amount of Muggle literature on the sitting-room bookshelves, much of it frivolous, and a great deal of entirely practical Wizarding literature;  
a box of photographs, the pictures stuffed in higgledy-piggledy with no names written on them, dating back to the Woman's schooldays (he guesses, as the frequently-appearing female has an horrendous overbite). He feels an instinctive loathing for some of the students pictured (and one in particular), and thinks he ought to recognize some of the places in the background;  
a *framed* photograph on the wall, of the Woman and two rather ethnic types in strange costume and standing in a desert landscape;  
and, finally, the motherlode. After cursing the absence of any personal documents, he thinks to check the flyleaf of the books.

*Hermione. Hermione Granger.*
What an odd name.

He tests it out loud, hoping the exercise will stimulate some memories, but it doesn't. It does, however, roll off his tongue a little more smoothly than he might expect, given its unusual character.

Finally I've got an edge on her. Should I spring it on her at once, I wonder, or --? No, she'll guess I looked, she's too sharp. Keep it in reserve, then, for a strategic moment....

He glances at the clock on the mantel: his search here has only taken ten minutes in all, and he weighs the risk of the next phase of his investigation.

I oughtn't, really. She's been very kind, and....

Oh, sod it.

Curiosity is obviously another of his failings.

What the hell. Nothing ventured --

It takes him another ten minutes to drag his blasted carcass up the stair to her "private suite".

*****

Once there and through the door of the suite -- simply one large, airy room, really, arranged in logical areas -- he has to collapse in a chair to catch his breath. (Another waste of five minutes, but he thinks it will be worth it -- no point in keeling over, although chances are he'd wind up dead and not bloody care when she discovered him.) When ready, he bypasses the work area at the north end of the room -- she's far too orderly to mix business and personal matters, he suspects -- and heads straight for her bureau. (Women are so predictable, always hiding sensitive information amongst their lingerie... ...though how he he's determined this, he isn't sure.)

Hermione Granger is, at least in this sense, a typical woman. Beneath her night-dresses he finds several bundles of letters -- some quite old, in awkward, adolescent scrawls from Ron and Harry (and judging by his reaction to that last, that's the nasty little bleeder whose pictures he loathed so), and many from Mum and Dad, and a notice of some sort declaring itself to be In Memory of Emily Granger. Another stack is postmarked AZ, U.S. -- the two ethnic gentlemen and their photo suddenly make sense; and he feels a pang of jealousy, because the younger one was rather a handsome devil. (They don't appear to be love-letters, though. It's disgraceful, how relieved he is by that.)

The third stack is in some ways the most instructive: these are from various Weasleys, often stuffed with photographs of an absolutely alarming number of red-headed children. (Among them is one of a bawling baby -- quite an active little sod, squirming about -- captioned "Fred's first, at last!", and he wonders if this is the poor little blighter who will be inflicted with Hermione Granger's tutoring.)
The Weasleys have *tonnes* of children, it seems, but she hasn't put any of the photos out, although she's kept them quite carefully.

*Interesting. She doesn't have photos of her schoolfriends on the walls, but she's bundled their letters with her parents*. The Indian gentleman is in a class of his own, though not a romantic association, apparently, and these Weasleys *ad nauseum* take up a whole third of the drawer.... She's fond of them, but not enough to feel they're... family.

There's one significant omission: not a bloody thing from himself.

*Damn it, women are supposed to be sentimental about things like.... Oh, fuck. She's probably destroyed them. Which means it wasn't an amicable parting.*

*Or that I didn't set much store in writing letters. Or notes. Or....* 

*Damn it, something's not right, here. I imagine that even the most unromantic sod manages a card on anniversaries.*

Were it not for the sensitivity of his finger-tips -- and thank Merlin he's left with *that*, at least -- he would miss the faint rasp of parchment against the side of his little finger as he puts the bundles back. But he doesn't, and pulls it forth, and sidles back over to the chair to sit and read it.

**Miss Granger,**

*Use the bloody case as you like, it's immaterial to me. I shall not, however, be bothered with any additional idiocy such as giving testimony or issuing statements, I'm far too busy. What is in the file will have to do. I will note that I appreciate any efforts you make in terms of my privacy.*

*I am no longer at Hogwarts, and I do not require reports as to your progress with the business. It is of absolutely no interest to me. I should prefer not to have further communication on the matter, or any other....*

*****

He loses track of time, puzzling over his letter. The references to *Hogwarts* (which rings a bell, but isn't immediately placeable), and to *testimony* and a *file* are rather alarming -- but not nearly as much as the overall tone. He's tempted to conclude that it was written before their marriage, but the dates don't add up: they've been divorced for a bit over a decade, apparently, and he's *certain* he hasn't lived on the island quite that long.

There *are* several inescapable conclusions, however.
These are not the words of a lover. Merlin's balls, they're not even the words of the most conservative husband. Or ex-husband, for that matter. It's one stranger replying to another. A rather pesky, impertinent stranger, whom the writer claims to know well nevertheless.

The letter tells him nothing at all about Hermione Granger, but a great deal indeed about the kind of man he was in the not-so-distant past: callous, cruel, wishing to have nothing to do with someone who must have been an important part of his life. It disquiets him so much that he can only sit with trembling hands and stare at the parchment's end, where a scrawled and angry Severus Snape confronts him with irrefutable evidence of his past misdeeds -- whether he can remember them or not.

*****

He's so rushed to get back downstairs by the time he pulls himself together -- in fact, it's been over an hour since she left -- that he nearly misses the note tacked to the back of the suite's door.

S --

For God's sake, take your time. I won't have you breaking your neck on the stairs: the carpeting is new, and it'll be hell to get any bloodstains out.

H.

Oh.... Merlin's bloody balls and beard.

*****

He most certainly does not take his time, and twists that bloody left ankle on the way down: but when she -- Hermione -- returns from the grocer's, he's safely tucked up in the spare bedroom with a book (not one with her name on the fly-leaf, though by now he's conceded that she'll catch him out on that eventually).

"Sorry, the shop was packed," she says, poking her head around the doorjamb. "I hope you made yourself comfortable."

"Borrowed this," he mutters back, and nods at the book. "Haven't felt like moving about much."

"Really?" (She doesn't seem to believe him. Damn.) "So you've been reading all this time?"

"Yes," he retorts, not daring to look her in the face. (And thank Merlin she phrased it that way: it's strictly true that he's been reading, after all -- just not this book.)

"Hmmmm," she comments, staring at him with an insultingly speculative expression. "Well, you needn't feel that you have to stay in your room all the time. Except for the kitchen, this floor's yours alone." She disappears from his view, and calls over her shoulder as she moves down the hall, "Dinner should be ready in an hour, I think."
He hopes to Merlin that the swelling in his bloody ankle goes down by then. And if he wasn't certain before, he is now: it's going to be a very uncomfortable stay.

*****

Another fortnight passes before he feels comfortable prying any further information out of her. It's not been wasted time, as he's observed her carefully in what little interactions they have -- meals and Apparition to his therapy, mostly. (He hates the therapy. The physical bits leave him wrung out and exhausted, and the speech therapy is so very frustrating and taxing on his concentration that he's good for nothing afterwards.)

Hermione is exceptionally quiet and reserved: she leaves for her job -- at the Ministry of Magic, she once admitted to him with a grimace -- quite early in the morning, and returns promptly every night (on his therapy-free days, at least); she makes him his dinner, and then excuses herself to her suite. He can hear her moving about up there occasionally, and once in a while he catches a muffled expletive as she finds something in her manuscript which displeases her.

Other than that, she leaves him alone to amuse himself with the few of his own books and the many of hers, a situation which irritates him more and more as the days pass.

She's serious about the bloody conversation, isn't she?

Well, if it's all up to him, then....

He decides to winkle things out of her in bits and pieces, and to try to patch together something like a whole from those.

*****

"How was I found?" he asks one Saturday morning.

She stops her dusting of the sitting-room baseboards -- and yes, he's taken the time to appreciate the sight of her on her knees with her bum in the air, though it's more of an intellectual exercise than anything else as his penis hasn't responded in the least to stimuli -- and leans back on her heels, and says, "The supplies delivery to the island."

"Ah. Missed me meeting them, I suppose."

"No, they missed Puck," she says, and starts polishing the baseboard again. "He always hid out near the quay to watch the boat come in."

Why should they be delivered by --?

"Boat?" he asks, feeling a bit queasy.

"Yes, a Muggle supply-boat from Ouessant. Usual method, out among the Channel Islands."
For fuck's sake, I let the bloody Elf be seen by Muggles?

He sputters a bit, trying to find a way to phrase that a bit more tactfully, and she glances up at him and elaborates.

"No, it wasn't a problem -- he always bundled up, and the boatmen never got a good look. They apparently decided," she adds, scrubbing at a sticky bit of something on the wood, "that the island's owner was a misogynistic midget."

"But --"

"You picked your island well. The Ouessant Harbormaster is a squib. Supplies were Apparated to his house, and he saw that they were taken by ship to your island. When the boatmen said they hadn't seen the resident and that the last delivery hadn't been picked up, he flooed the nearest Wizarding authority."

"Ah."

"I think he must be the only human being you had contact with for years, Severus, and that only by Owl."

He's about to question her further on that -- surely that's an error, he couldn't have been that much a hermit -- when the oddity of what she's doing strikes him.

"Why are you scrubbing that when a charm would be easier?"

"That charm never seems to do as good as job as me," she says, swiping at her forehead with her forearm. "Besides, it works off quite a bit of frustration, and it keeps my hand in. I've given in to Magic mostly, but not entirely."

It takes him a few days to work out the implications of that --

--- bloody hell, she's Muggleborn ---

--- and another two to decide on logical grounds that it doesn't make a damned bit of difference.

*****

Supremely bored with the reading material available, and as he's not yet ready to tackle his laboratory journal, he watches her prepare a meal -- and he suddenly knows with certainty how they began.

"Ah."

She glances at him sidelong, her fingers stilling for a moment, before she parrots "Ah?" and returns to chopping broccoli.

"That's where we met. And how."
She give him another sidelong glance, transfers the vegetables to a saucepan, and says absolutely nothing, damn her.

"I taught you Potions," he states. "At your school I should think... Hogwarts, yes? ...not as an apprentice, since Law is your field now."

"And how did you deduce that?" she asks, avoiding his eyes.

"I taught you to use a knife in that manner, no-one else."

She shrugs and explains, "Some things stick with one, I suppose."

He has a vague sense that there's a jab in her response, but ignores it in favour of pursuing more urgent information: moreover, she's confirmed a great, missing chunk of his past -- a teacher of Potions at this Hogwarts place.

"So.... Was I a paedophile, or you a deluded, crushing student?"

"Neither," she retorts with a glare. "I was well past my majority when we married, thank you very much. With no carrying-on before then."

Well, that's one niggling matter laid to rest, and worth the effort -- even though she refuses to enlighten him any further, and answers him in sulky monosyllables for the rest of the evening.

*****

Several days later, over a very simple but nice meal of bangers and mash, he makes another attempt along the same lines. "Which of us was idiotic enough to ask for the divorce?"

"You," she readily admits. "And before you bother to ask, I still haven't the faintest idea why. You didn't ask for it, you just got it."

He reflects on that a moment, says, "It doesn't surprise me," and returns to his food.

He doesn't notice how still and icy a silence has fallen over the room until she huffs out a protesting "How dare --"

Oh, damn, didn't mean --

"My idiocy," he explains through a mouthful of mash. "I've no idea what you did to -- or didn't do -- to set it off, but I mean my idiocy. Not exactly a gentleman, was I?"

He risks a look at her, and finds her expression rapidly changing from indignation to dumbfounded astonishment.

Hah -- finally got her. And without tipping my hand on her name, either. Amazing.
What's even more amazing, even to himself, is that he actually means the sentiment about his former self's idiocy.

*****

It's rather strange to realise, but since he's been living in Hermione's home, damp, grey Spring has changed to mild London Summer: he finds that he likes sitting in Hermione's little garden in the single lopsided chair, and soaking up as much sun as possible. (It's another therapy, he convinces himself. He's picked up a nasty case of arthritis in one knee and hip somewhere along the line, and the warmth is very soothing.) On this particular day he stays outside long past her return home, and she brings him a drink after she's changed from her office attire.

It looks suspiciously like a mixed drink.

_Hmmmph. Perhaps I'm wearing on her, and she wants me to shoot my liver to hell after all._

"What's in it?" he asks her, staring at the lime-wedge floating amongst the ice.

"Gin and tonic," she says. _"Without the gin."_

"Oh."

She shrugs. _"Didn't expect the apple to be worm-free, did you?"

"It never is," he says, sighing, and takes a sip -- and then amends, _"It seldom is."_

She watches him speculatively, and then turns on her heel and putters among the flowering herbs she's planted along the fence.

_Seldom_, he decides as he watches her, is an important qualifier.

After all, one little worm doesn't make the entire apple rotten. You simply have to be more selective about the parts you choose to enjoy.

*****

In midsummer, he finally feels up to reading through his journal. He's prepared for it rather heavily, revising with an old Alchemy text -- some stupid sod named _Bluett_ has scribbled all over the damned thing, though he admits that many of the notes make a great deal of sense -- and now thinks he can follow what he was trying to do, even if he can't duplicate it.

What he eventually understands of it astonishes him.

_Bloody.... I was close. I was damned close._

It isn't that he had a great _deal_ of success: far from it. The journal -- quite thick, its cover and his writing smeared and spattered with the residue of many a failed experiment -- is a catalogue of stunning and sometimes catastrophic failures.
But toward the end, there....

Toward the end he'd made progress, and quickly. It seems as if something inside him had suddenly given way, like the bursting of a dam; the unlocking of a long-forgotten door with a new-found key.

If I could only get my blasted wand back in hand, I'd.... Well, still have to re-learn a great deal, but the speech has improved to the point that speaking the spells should be no problem....

It's a tantalising thought. He reaches over for the Alchemy text to check a few points which are still a bit hazy, and --

Hold on a moment. Think this through.

It's entirely possible that he could go back to his old life, whatever it was: the therapy is helping, if far more slowly than he would like.

But do I want to?

He stares at journal under his right hand, where his fingers still gently tap out Every - Good - Boy - Deserves - Favour on therapy-days, when he's most tired. Yes, he's come a long way -- not only with the bloody therapy but, apparently, with the Alchemy (and therefore his soul's improvement) - - but he suspects he has a much longer leg of the journey yet to come. He is neither optimistic nor deluded enough to believe that one breakthrough will be the end of the hard work, not by a long chalk.

It's a lovely exercise, but what use is it when you're stuck out in the middle of nowhere, with no-one? Easy to improve yourself when there's no distraction -- no standard by which to judge yourself.

Damn. You've been doing the bloody experiment without a control, you idiot.

More to the point, he -- or his former self -- shut out all human contact for absolutely no reason at all. No sensible reason, at any rate.

Well, the nowhere isn't an impediment, is it? There's Apparation, after all. Except you couldn't be bothered with it before, could you. So bloody intent on your solitude that you couldn't pop over to the Harbormaster's and save the man a great deal of trouble....

He might very well end up just the same, he thinks, since he's so effectively alienated any past associates. Especially if he doesn't make a very hard effort to --

-- be sociable, he admits to himself with a wince. To be with people -- for the no-one part is the more important part of the equation; the how can be sorted out later.

The problem is, he doesn't give a bloody damn about anyone else, except one. He's grown accustomed to her in the last couple of --
--four--

-- four months, and he suspects he should... ...well, miss her. It's rather comfortable, the way that they've got on together (he often wonders what possessed him to leave), and as she's got no-one, either....

Yes, perhaps it's time to give up on his absolute hermitage. Perhaps it's time to rejoin the living. Time to face the challenge and responsibility of caring for someone.

Because he does, he grudgingly admits. He cares for Hermione. He could hardly not, given all that she's done for him, but he's willing to concede fondness for her as well.

There's the little matter of his relative uselessness, of course. But --

*Merlin knows she needs someone to chivvy her about eating and sleeping properly, someone to care for her that way, at least. Or as much as one decrepit, disabled wizard without any practical job or resources can do.*

And perhaps -- just perhaps -- someday she might let me care for her in other ways, as well. I think it's possible, isn't it? Intelligent, attractive -- lovely, in fact, when she's not too tired -- relatively quiet.... Damn fine cook, not that that should matter, but still....

It's an attractive proposition -- to him, at least. He suspects she might have some very good reasons for feeling otherwise, her generosity toward him notwithstanding.

*Shall have to watch and sound her out a bit, I think.*

He sets aside the text and journal with remarkably little regret, and resolves to try to be a Very Good Boy indeed.

*****

Midsummer falters, then fails and limps into Autumn; and he too limps into a semblance of functionality, once his wand is back in his hand. To everyone's surprise he shows competence with his magic, remembering many spells and charms instinctively, although his conscious memory is still very much the same blank as before. (Blank, that is, except for the memories he's accumulated since Spring, and of the Memory, and the information he's winkled out of, and about, Hermione.)

To his great disappointment, his campaign of wooing-by-stealth has not been successful. The blasted woman seems intent on leaving him alone, and hasn't responded to his subtle gestures -- even after the bloody manuscript was completed and sent off, with much nail-biting and gnashing of teeth on her part.

This failure is probably his fault. In the end, he took the coward's way out: he hinted -- not all at once, mind you, but bit by bit. After that day of revelation he began to use her name, frequently (she didn't seem surprised); he brushed his fingers against hers as she handed him his tea (she neither flinched nor prolonged the contact, damn it all); he offered her his arm when, freed from the
manuscript, she took him on an outing to Diagon Alley (she took his arm, but did not... cuddle); he made a not-entirely successful attempt at magicking the sitting-room clean for her, once he'd been allowed to practice elementary charms (which earned him thanks and a bemused shake if her head, but no overwhelming gratitude). A last, rather desperate mention of how much he was looking forward to his Apparation test so he could return to the cottage merited encouragement from her -- and nothing more.

Damn and blast.

He feels he has two options left, now that his testing-date is fast approaching: brazen it out and admit he'd prefer to stay with her --

-- out of the question, then you **will** be imposing --

-- or let her know that he wouldn't be averse to... company. Perhaps even companionship.

That, he decides, is probably the best option. Best to leave any further overtures up to her, after seeing to it (carefully) that she understands he'd like something more than a distant relationship.

He knows this a long shot. He's certainly no prize now, if he ever was: twenty-odd years older than she, crippled, practically no memory of some rather important things, and -- once he bothers to check the looking-glass in the bath -- no top specimen in the Looks department either, his gut paunchy with inactivity, his face lined, dour, and beetle-browed, his close-cropped, silver-shot hair going white at the temples.

*Not to mention the bloody useless lump of clay between your legs. She's still young, man. Don't you think she'd appreciate being properly cared-for?*

*Unless she already is. No reason why she shouldn't have a bloke on the side.... Damnation.*

Well, there's nothing to be done about *that*, and there's time enough to think about performance issues later. At the moment, he needs to get the quaffle on the right bloody side of the pitch before he can worry about how to get it through the hoop. (He has, needless to say, invested some of his recovery time in re-discovering Quidditch, and finds the game an apt simile for life -- though he wonders if all wizards find the terminology as suggestive as he does.)

*****

The island is, indisputably, *his*. The magic that surrounds and protects it resonates in his mind and stirs at his sense of pleasure, like a familiar, satisfying taste in his mouth: and for the first time in nearly a year he feels absolutely safe and very nearly whole, lack of memory or no. He can feel the tang of another's magic here, too -- Hermione's -- but he's oddly unconcerned by it.

"Stopped by recently, haven't you?" he asks her, voice gruff.

"Of course," she retorts, and leans against the retaining wall at the top of the stairs, the sea-wind whipping her hair into her eyes. "Just to clear away the dust and dirt. And to reset that damned
ward on the beach -- though I canceled the pustules." When he shoots her an inquisitive glance, she adds, "It's awful, Severus, and it serves you right if you don't remember the hex. If you want it there, you'll have to look it up."

"And what did you replace it with?"

"A purely visual one -- nice, nasty hull-bashing rocks."

He reckons that will do -- for now. "Sufficient," he allows, stumps over to the front door, drops his valise, pulls his wand, and prepares for the moment of truth....

The ward recognises him and drops itself.

\textit{Thank bloody Merlin.}

He opens the door, picks up his valise, enters, and is halfway into the low-ceilinged front room when he realises Hermione hasn't followed; and in something of a temper he limps back to the door and pokes his head out to stare at her. "Are you coming in or not?"

"Can't," she says, very quiet: he can barely make out her words over the wind. "I reset that to exclude me after last time, so you shouldn't have to."

\textit{Well. So much for subtlety.}

He draws his wand, fumbles over the words for a moment, and then successfully changes the damned ward. "Now you can," he says, and adds in deliberate challenge, "if you like." And he turns and stumbles back inside, leaving the door open -- and leaving Hermione to decide for herself whether to follow him or not.

He isn't aware that he's holding his breath until, at the sound of the door closing and Hermione's steps behind him, he lets it out in a great sigh.

*****

"Much of it had gone off," she says from the door of the laboratory as he stares at the gaps in the jars and bottles. "I had to dispose of the more reactive things."

"Doesn't matter," he murmurs. "I won't be attempting anything soon."

"I made an inventory -- it's there on the worktable," she says. "All you need do is send it on, when you're ready."

"And the furnace contents?"

"There, on the bottom shelf, in the box."
He goes over to it, pulls it free, and prises open the flaps: it contains a smooth cabouchon of metal, a bit rusty with the salt-air that permeates and spoils everything in the cottage without constant attendance and many repelling spells.

Rust. Rust, on something that was a lump of lead....

"It was a lot more impressive-looking in February," Hermione says, and he can hear a smile in her voice. (If he didn't know her as well as he does, he'd think it pride.) "Don't let its appearance now fool you."

"I shan't," he whispers, and tucks the evidence of his failure -- and success -- away, and limps off to the kitchen to make them some tea: the cottage is nearly as chilly inside as it is outside, and Hermione's nose looks suspiciously red and ripe for a cold.

*****

"Puck is out there," she says, and nods out the kitchen window, toward a huge rock on the promontory.

"What, under that great bloody thing?" he asks.

"Yes. They'd... Well, they'd left the landscaping mucked up, so I straightened it out and moved the rock a bit further over on top of the grave."

"Probably what I'd intended, I suppose."

"Oh, I know it was -- you could tell someone had tried to move it, and they wouldn't have done."

"But that means I could still do ma--"

"Right -- which is why I think," she says, and glances at him apologetically, "that you didn't have the stroke until later, after you'd tried to move it. You must have been, erm --"

"Drunken, go ahead, say it --"

"All right, drunk when you buried him, and then tried to move that damned thing -- I don't know how you managed, it just about killed me -- and fallen and hit your head out there. Rain would have washed away any blood, as it was weeks before they found you."

"Logical," he mutters, oddly unconcerned with the matter-of-fact admission of drunkenness. "I must have given up and dragged myself in here, and collapsed."

"Yes. The symptoms of internal bleeding wouldn't have shown immediately, you'd simply have felt terribly stunned at first. Besides," she adds, and helps herself to more tea, "I can't imagine that Puck wouldn't have Owled for a healer -- whether you liked it or not -- if he realised you were that ill."
They sit silent for a while, contemplating the mute testimony to one aged, dedicated and, no doubt, long-suffering elf, and then Hermione cautiously offers, "You could hire another one, you know. There's no need for you to do without help."

"How would I find one useful enough?" he retorts. "He was an unusual specimen, and he could read and write. He kept my accoint-book for me."

"I know, I glanced at it," she admits to brazen nosiness, and adds, "I know of another elf who can read and write, actually...."

"And where would I find this paragon?"

"Um, probably still running loose south of London with the natives. But I somehow doubt," Hermione adds, and glances up at him slyly, "that you and Pinky would get along."

Enfuriating, how she can manage to twit him with knowledge he ought to have. But to be fair, she doesn't do it often: she's more apt to be annoyingly closed-mouthed, refusing to tell him about his former self and his past, much as he'd like to know.

He supposes that as much as it annoys him, he owes her a bit of leeway on the twitting, after all she's done for him.

*****

"So, which is it to be?" she asks, voice brisk, as the shadows lengthen toward evening. "Your choice. Weekly owls or floo-calls -- I'll have the connection made, as it's for my peace of mind -- or fortnightly visits? And do you intend to hex me on sight if you force me into resorting to the latter?"

Floo-calls would be most sensible, of course, and far easier on her. Unfortunately, he doesn't feel like being sensible: he feels like being totally selfish, just this once.

Better to have her about here, and perhaps she'll become accustomed to it....

"Fortnightly," he mutters. "No hexing, no matter what state I'm in."

Good gods, was I really capable of doing something like that, or is she joking?

"Damn," she says after a moment's obvious surprise. "I was afraid of that. You can get into a great deal of trouble in a fortnight."

"Shan't. Not intentionally, at least."
"One never intends to, it just happens...." Her voice trails off, and then she perks up and says, "I think I saw an owl out in that stand of beech, by the way -- I assume it's trained. If you're nice and cajole it a bit, it might return to you."

"Shall, I suppose, but --"

"I stocked you up on owl treats," she says as she rises from the table, anticipating his objection. "Rabbit-flavour, as most of them seem to adore that."

Damn. He feels intensely guilty about his selfishness now: she's stocked him up on everything in the kitchen, most of it disgustingly healthy. He knows better, though, than to offer repayment: she got very red in the face and indignant the few times he tried to make her accept his money.

"Well," she continues as she dons her coat, and before he can spit out a thank you, "I'd best get back. I have an early start tomorrow."

"Right," he mutters, and stumbles to his feet, and follows her to the front door. "Are you --"

"No, don't come out without your cloak," she says, turning on him, and absent-mindedly plucks a bit of cobweb from the pullover she'd chivvied him into that morning. "Damn, I thought I'd got them all.... Two weeks, then, on the Saturday. If you need anything before then, I trust you'll find a way to let me know."

She steps outside where the wind is beginning to whip a light rain into the north-facing windows, and simply walks away from him until she Apparates out with a no-nonsense crack.

_Damn and blast. Double damn and blast...._

He closes the door and wanders back into the middle of the front room, staring at the familiar/unfamiliar furnishings: spare, threadbare, remarkably clean -- she must have taken a great deal of time to straighten up for him, one day when he thought she was at work....

He can hear the rain spattering against the window-panes, and the wind beginning to pick up, whistling round the corners of the cottage. He's in for a fairly good storm tonight, he can tell.

The cottage isn't that large, really. The front room -- what anyone else would call a sitting-room -- is about the size of Hermione's, the kitchen and bedchamber even smaller than hers (and what was Puck's room is nearly the size of his own); the laboratory is really the largest of the rooms, practically cavernous by comparison with the others.

It might as well be the largest of mansions, at the moment, and he the only occupant. He doesn't much like the feel of the cottage, now that she's gone.

Unremembered but longstanding habit takes him over to the far cabinet, which he opens and peers inside. This is _one_ thing she hasn't bothered with, he knows immediately. Amongst the litter of empty bottles stands a lonely decanter of whisky, with barely two fingers' width left in the bottom. And it _is_ tempting: any aversion potion they dosed him with has worn off well before now....
He knows, suddenly, why she's behaved so indifferently all this time: why she left him alone in London, why she warded herself out of the cottage, why she didn't respond to his overtures (because she's far too perceptive to have missed them, his lack of courage or no). She's giving him what she thinks he wants -- or what past experience has proven to her that Severus Snape wanted.

You've always insisted on your solitude, apparently: she's given you that. She's giving you the chance to take up where you left off -- even drinking yourself into oblivion, if you like, though she's not going to help -- and to stay independent, if you wish. She's giving you the choice, without cutting you absolutely loose and abandoning you.

But I don't want that any longer --

Well, he can hardly expect her to read his mind, can he? And if he couldn't manage to twist his tongue around the words Stay, please before she left....

It's inherently unfair to expect her to stay, of course. She has her life and her work, and Merlin knows he must have put her through hell the first time.

But she came in. She stayed, until she had to go. And she promised to come back -- even if it's only to be certain I haven't managed to kill myself yet....

As long as she returned, there was a chance -- a chance to find the courage to say something; a chance to prove to her that, while he might not be whole and undamaged in body, the man he was becoming now wanted her in his life on whatever terms she would agree to.

It's a tiny hope, but enough to be going on with.

He closes the cabinet, and stands stock-still, staring out the window, and then with a start and a curse he realises he's managed to bollox-up something quite important. He grabs his cloak, detours to the kitchen for supplies, and limps out the back door into the now-steady rain, making for the stand of beech on the far side of his island.

*****

September... ...whatever the hell it is. Should have subscribed to the paper before returning.

Hermione,

With what I assume is my usual ineptitude, I managed to let you leave before I had the chance to get up the guts to thank you for everything you've done. Contrary to the old wives' tale, it is possible for the cameleopard to change its spots, so please accept my gratitude, belated though it is.

And you were right, it must be my owl, though it took two hours to coax the sulky bastard out of the trees. He's back on his perch, and I'd swear
to Merlin that the little shit is laughing at my every sneeze. I hope he contracts pneumonia, taking this to you.

Until Saturday, a fortnight's time --

Severus

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