The Godfather

by Muggline

Snape is asked to be the godfather of a child and Hermione plays a vital part...
DH spoilers, but with some important changes...

The Visit

Chapter 1 of 43

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Being the Godfather

by Marisol

Translated from German into English by Muggline

All fanfiction by Marisol (in German) can be found at

http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

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A/N: I would like to thank my wonderful beta ladyinthecloak. Your patience is admirable!

Chapter 1

The house had appeared shabby and neglected right from the start, but when Harry got nearer, he saw that it was indeed in a much worse state than he had thought at first. There were large crevices in the grey walls, the roof had several holes and the windows were covered in a thick layer of dirt as if they had not been cleaned in a decade. The house on Spinner's End appeared anything but inviting in the dull light of the winter sun, and Harry asked himself for the umpteenth time whether he was about to make a giant mistake.

Nevertheless, he was there, and something deep inside told him to swallow all his reservations and knock before he had a chance to change his mind. He felt that James' firm grip on his hand became even tighter when the door opened after a few moments, revealing the gaunt figure of a man in the doorframe.

If Snape was surprised to be face to face with Harry after eight years, at least he did not give it away. "Potter," he said slowly, scrutinising the young man for quite a while before he finally opened the door just a little bit more. Severus Snape had never been one of those wizards whose appearance would leave a good impression at first glance. Harry remembered him as a tall man with a hooked nose, whose face bore an expression of rejection and disdain most of the time. His looks had not become more pleasing throughout the years. To the contrary, Snape's hair was even longer than it had been; it looked unwashed and limp. It seemed as if his skin had become even more pallid; his hollow cheeks made him look like a ghost with his prominent nose standing out clearly from his face. On the whole, he looked more scruffy than ever in his threadbare black clothes that obviously had not been changed for quite a while. The house's state of neglect reflected its inhabitant's in a perfect way.

"Hello," said Harry in a dull voice, holding his ground against the black eyes that were fixated on him.

"To what do I owe the honour of your visit?" asked Snape in a cool voice and made no move to let him enter.

"May I come in? It is very cold outside," Harry answered, holding the tiny bundle in his left arm even tighter to his body.

Instead of doing what he was obviously expected to do, Snape bent down to look at the little boy who clutched Harry's hand. "And who are you?" he asked calmly.

The child was obviously scared by him, but he did not step back when he lifted his head and answered, "James."

"Naturally," Snape answered, and his thin, pale lips twisted in a humourless smile. "Anything else would have been quite the surprise." Then he straightened while jerkily moving his head towards the inside of the house, revealing a hideous scar on his neck for a split second.

While following him inside, Harry thought back and remembered how Snape had been found by Professor McGonagall. According to her report, he had been lying in the Shrieking Shack, more dead than alive, blank black eyes staring at the ceiling, the gaping wound at his neck crusted with blood. He also remembered the strange mixture of relief and agitation when, some weeks later, word got round that Snape would survive.

"Sit down," Snape said briefly and indicated a worn-out armchair, the original colour of which had probably once been green.

Harry slowly sunk into the armchair and looked around. The room was scantily furnished with three mismatched armchairs, a rickety table on three legs and a bookshelf on the opposite wall, crammed with dusty tomes. The smell was of mould and old dirt, and Harry involuntarily caressed James' head in a soothing movement while softly rocking the sleeping baby with the other hand. This was not a suitable environment for a child. This was not a suitable environment for anyone at all.

"So," Snape said with a drawl, seating himself opposite Harry. "Head of the Auror Office, I have heard?"

"Yes," Harry answered in a calm voice. "This is what I've always wanted to do." He forced himself to ignore Snape's mocking grin.

"And Mr. Weasley is in on it, too still eagerly trying to live in your shadow. It seems he has not managed to claim a leading position for himself."

Are you quite finished? Harry almost exclaimed, but he bit his tongue and took several deep breaths. "Looks like it," he squeezed out. *Nothing has changed,* he thought. *No matter what risks Snape has taken and how wrong my opinion of him has been our mutual dislike is just too strong.*

"Where is your esteemed spouse, if I may ask?"

"Ginny is at home, recovering from the birth. She was quite happy to have the house all to herself, without screaming children."

"I understand," replied Snape, although, in Harry's opinion, he would be the last person on earth to understand the everyday occurrences of family life. There was an unpleasant pause.

"What do you do to spend your time?" he finally asked, breaching the awkward silence between them.

"I brew potions upon request for St. Mungo's and supply some Healers abroad, too," answered Snape briefly and continued after a short break. "However, I do not believe that you are here to discuss my social life. What do you want?"

"I am here to ask if you would be the godfather of my son." Those words, though he had pronounced them loud and clear, suddenly seemed strange to Harry's ears as if somebody else had spoken them, not him.

He had lain awake for several nights and passed all those years that he had spent at Hogwarts in review. In his thoughts, he had not seen the loathed Potions master through the eyes of the quick-tempered teenager that he had been then, but assessed him with the mind of the adult man he was now. Snape had been a bitter man, unfair and sadistic, whose only joy had consisted in the torture of others. But still, there had been something buried deep inside of him. Something that had incited him to protect Harry and to expose himself to the mortal danger that came with his existence as a double agent.

For a split second, Snape's face showed pure amazement while his eyes wandered to the bundle in Harry's arm. But when Harry looked up to him, his stare was as blank as it had ever been.

"And what, pray tell, convinces you that I am the best choice for the position of a godfather?" he asked.

Harry shrugged, looked past Snape and murmured: "When I thought about it, it just felt right. We never had the opportunity to talk about the things that happened back then, during the battle of Hogwarts."

"And I would prefer this to remain so," Snape snapped.

"Listen, what you felt for my mother..."

Snape leapt to his feet, and before Harry even knew what happened, his former teacher had reached the door and pulled it wide open. "Thank you for your visit," he said in an icy voice, "but I am afraid I cannot comply with your request."

"You don't understand..." Harry began he suddenly felt as if he were back in the Potions classroom, despising and fearing Snape's outbursts at the same time.

"Oh, I do understand very well, Potter. To you, my appointment as your son's godfather would mean orchestrating some maudlin kind of reconciliation," he almost spat the word, as if there were something poisonous in his mouth, "which we both know that we do not want. For some strange reason, you are unable to let the past rest. Whatever I did, I did it for your mother. Not for you or anyone else. Only for her. You owe me nothing, Potter. Our ways parted the moment you killed the Dark Lord when I knew that I had fulfilled what I had promised myself and her. And now I would like you to leave."

"Fine!" Harry flung at him while he felt the anger boiling inside. How could he be so wrong and come up with the idea of making Snape a godfather! This atrocious man who hated everyone and everything, himself included. *No,* a little voice inside of him corrected,*he did love Mum. More than anything.* He rushed out of the armchair. The baby, awakened by the hurried movement, made a dissatisfied noise. "Shhh..." Harry murmured in a calming voice and caressed the little head. "James, come here, we'll go home to Mummy." With an eager nod, James got up and followed his father, who was walking towards the door.

While passing Snape, he looked at him contemptuously for the last time and said, "I hope you go on enjoying your life in this stinking hole here and continue drifting away from any kind of civilisation. I thought that we might be able to overcome our mutual dislike and start acting like normal people. It is quite obvious that I have been wrong. Have a nice day!"

Without a word, Snape observed Harry walk along the street with his children until he finally rounded a corner and disappeared from his view.

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Some hours later, after night had already fallen and the soft snowfall made the environment look more romantic than it really was, another person knocked at Snape's door. Nobody had bothered to come to Spinner's End and pay him a visit for years. Mostly, of course, because he carefully avoided any kind of company and bluntly expressed his wish to be disturbed by no one. He rose from his armchair with a bad feeling and went to open the door.

Shivering, with her arms crossed in front of her chest and jumping up and down, Hermione Granger was standing at his doorstep, and her expression became quite strange when he spoke out her name. She looked as if she had wanted the door to open and to stay closed at the same time. "Miss Granger, is this going to be some kind of class reunion everybody knows about but me?" he snarled.

She blew on her hands to warm them and said with an embarrassed smile: "Please, sir, excuse me for disturbing you."

"You do, indeed!" he cut her short and looked over her shoulder.

"I am alone," she reassured him hastily, drawing the right conclusions from his glare. "Sir, it is just that Harry told me what a catastrophe his visit here has been, and I thought..."

"You could meddle and poke your nose into things that are of no concern to you?"

Her lips were pressed together tightly, probably to keep herself from saying things that she would regret later, he presumed, and she stared at him. He almost could not remember the way she had looked when he had last seen her, but he was quite sure that she had hardly resembled the young woman she was now. Her features had lost their youthful naiveté, and there was a certain seriousness in her eyes that had nothing to do with thirst for knowledge but everything to do with the experiences she had made in the war.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked, although he clearly insinuated that he would like nothing less than to be in her company.

"Thank you, yes, I would," she said and slipped past him towards the inside of the house.

"Sir, I will get to the point straight away and not waste your time longer than necessary," she said, taking a seat in the armchair he offered. "Harry would like you to be his son's godfather. I have known him half my life, and I know that Harry has never been good at expressing himself. I think he forgot to tell you that he thinks you are one of the bravest wizards he has ever known and that he admires you for the things you have done over all those years." She swallowed and avoided his gaze with embarrassment when he looked her up and down without a word while his face did not give away one single hint of what he might be thinking. "Harry cannot express these things properly."

"Which is why you have made it your business to do this for him. That was already one of your favourite occupations back in school, Miss Granger. I can see that nothing has changed about that."

Her cheeks flushed bright red when she met his gaze. "Well, someone has got to do it," she answered defiantly. "Be that as it may, sir. To make you the godfather is Harry's way to tell you that. In spite of everything that transpired between you, he values you more than he could verbally express."

"How exceedingly honourable, isn't it," Snape gibed.

The young woman sighed in frustration and ran both hands through her long, curly hair where some snowflakes could still be seen. "He does not do it out of some misunderstood sense of guilt towards you, don't you understand?" she blurted out.

"Mind your tone, Miss Granger," he retorted in a cutting voice. "I am not used to being spoken to like that in my own house."

"I don't believe that anyone speaks to you at all in your own house," she exclaimed before she could hold her tongue. Quickly, she covered her mouth with one hand. "I am sorry, sir, it was not my intention to be rude."

She rose from the armchair, avoiding his icy glare, and said slowly: "I can see, however, when a case is lost. Please excuse my wasting your time for nothing. Nevertheless, I would like to inform you that Harry will now probably ask Neville Longbottom whether he would like to be Albus Severus' godfather."

She paused briefly, as if by coincidence, and was unable to suppress her small smile when she saw him wince.

"Whose?"

"Albus Severus'," she answered with an innocent expression while observing, quite fascinated, how Snape's features changed into a look of utter bewilderment. "That is the name of the baby," she explained patiently." Didn't Harry mention it?"

Having said that, she proceeded towards the door and used his perplexity to play her last trump card: "I think that Lily would have wanted you to put everything aside and become the godfather of this child," she said softly and felt a slight pang of pity when she saw his pained expression upon hearing the name. "Think about it, sir. Please!" she whispered when she opened the door and went outside into the cold winter's night.

The Christening

Chapter 2 of 43

Surprise...!

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

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A/C: Thanks to our wonderful beta, ladyinthecloak, who is extremely patient while I am confusing German and English punctuation as well as American and British spelling over and over again... (I am German, just like Marisol.)

Chapter 2

It was the first of December, a bitter cold but sunny day, and the Potters' house was bustling with activity. While Ginny was busy dressing James in a nice, dark-blue jumper Grandma Weasley had given him, Hermione carefully took the decorations out of Harry's hand and distributed the flowers and garlands all over the room with a flick of her wand.

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry grinned. "I am simply no good at these things. Everything seems to be ready, right?"

Hermione nodded while looking around, and then she said quietly, "I just cannot believe that he did not come."

"It's okay, Hermione Neville has owled that he would be a little late."

"I am not talking about Neville," she answered and took a seat at the beautifully laid table.

Harry, who could not fail to notice that something was wrong, took a seat next to her and asked, "What exactly are you talking about?"

She sighed. "I went to see Snape. The same day you visited him. I tried to talk to him again."

"You have... "

She raised her hand in a silencing gesture and hastily added, "Yes, I told him it would mean very much to you if he became Albus' godfather. You had not even told him the name of the boy." She cast him a reproachful glare.

"Because he wouldn't let me! Hermione, he threw me out as soon as I had said but one word about the battle!"

"Can't you understand that, Harry?" she asked him quietly. "When he gave you these memories, after he had been bitten by Nagini, he thought that he would die. He placed his most personal, intimate secrets in your hands his love for your mother. Moreover, when you faced Voldemort, you hurled them at him, and everybody heard it. Harry, don't you understand what this means for a man like Snape? He never wanted anyone to know about his feelings or why he chose to turn his back on the Death Eaters."

Harry stared at a point on the wall behind her and said nothing.

"You know the things he put at risk," she continued. "He did not only protect you, he protected the whole lot of us. You have been and you still are the walking, talking spitting image of your father, the man Lily decided to be with. Still, he always managed to overcome his hatred for you in times when it really mattered he always made sure that you stayed alive. He always ran the risk of Voldemort looking right through him."

"I know all of this!" Harry interrupted her impatiently. "I know what we all owe him. That is exactly why I wanted him to be Albus' godfather!"

"I wrote him, you know... ," said Hermione. "Over the last few days, I sent him an owl almost every day to make him see the reasons why you want this."

"What was his answer?"

"None at all," she sighed. "I fear that all he wants is to be left alone... "

There was a long pause. They listened to the sounds of Ginny chasing James around the house because he had somehow managed to pour pumpkin juice all over his new jumper.

Slowly, Harry said, "Sometimes, I ask myself... " He felt quite silly, but he knew that Hermione would understand exactly how he felt. "Sometimes, I ask myself... if things had been different then, if Snape had acted differently and ditched his Death Eater pals for my mother... In the memories he gave me, you know I thought that he really mattered to her. He was her friend, the first person to acknowledge her magical abilities and the first person with whom she could talk about them. Maybe she would have fallen in love with him then. Maybe she would not have married Dad, but him. Maybe they would have had a child together. Hermione... sometimes I have this crazy and completely silly notion that I could have been Snape's son... " He blushed after speaking those last words, but Hermione did not laugh.

"Harry, don't you think," she answered quietly, "that he might have had that very same idea on every single day of his life?"

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Apart from Ron, all invited guests for the small ceremony were already there when the small, bubbly man from the Ministry asked, "So, shall we begin?"

Harry and Ginny nodded, smiling and observing Neville, who nervously looked down at the sleeping baby in his arms. The doorbell rang.

"Oh, that must be Ron. Could someone please answer the door?" asked Harry.

Molly stood up and went, looking grim and murmuring in an undertone: "Oh, he's in for it just being late like that... "

"Very well, very well," murmured Mr. Tybbit, when he heard the door slam shut, "so we can start now." He cleared his throat, glanced at a piece of parchment and started reading in a voice he probably considered ceremonial. "Who among those present has agreed to be godfather or godmother to Albus Severus Potter, to protect the boy and to act on behalf of his parents in the case of their demise?"

In the instant where Neville should have said, "That is me," everyone suddenly heard a calm, velvety voice declaring, "That would be me, I am afraid."

Every head turned to see the person who had spoken.

Pale, emaciated and without any visible facial expression, Severus Snape stood and looked at Harry, who stared back in bewilderment. All the other guests did the same, but Hermione was the only one smiling, and surprisingly, it was Neville who talked first, asking, "Erm, Harry, what is happening here?"

Harry kept looking at Snape and said, "Neville, can I talk to you for a moment? I need to explain something to you... "

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Mr. Tybbit was quite confused when Ginny explained the situation to him, but he was prepared to continue the ceremony without further ado. Severus Snape of course the name meant something to him! He had been among the spectators when Snape was acquitted of all charges regarding the murder of Albus Dumbledore, but he had never again heard or seen anything about him.

"Very well, very well. The circumstances have changed somewhat, but since everybody is in the picture, I think we may continue. Mrs. Potter?" he said, gesturing towards the baby with a nod.

"What? Oh, of course," said Ginny. Then she went to Snape, hesitated for a short moment and held out the child for him.

It was the first time ever that Hermione saw her former teacher at a complete loss. Clumsily, he extended his hands, and it became obvious that he had never held a baby in his arms in his whole life. His face held the typical expression of men who have absolutely no clue how to hold such a thing without breaking it.

Albus Severus started making whimpering noises, but Ginny was undaunted and showed Snape what to do. The child calmed down instantly and Hermione suddenly realised that all the people around her were holding their breath just like her.

Molly leaned over and whispered, "Did you know about this?"

Hermione hesitated for a moment, but then she nodded.

"Harry told Arthur and me that Severus had turned him down when he asked him," Molly said, baffled.

"It seems that he has made up his mind," answered Hermione with a mysterious smile and raised her eyes towards Snape again, who stared into Albus Severus' little face with utmost concentration. He did not even look up while answering Mr. Tybbit's questions.

Snape with a baby in his arms it was a sight she never thought she would see. Just like a misplaced piece of a puzzle.

She could not help but giggle when Albus Severus woke up and got hold of Snape's prominent nose with a movement of his tiny little hands. His godfather, however, did not seem to mind at all maybe because he got the first chance to see the baby's eyes, which were a familiar shade of green.

oOoOoOoOo

The subsequent meal started in tense silence, but Molly quickly managed to get the conversation going, and Bill, Fleur and Arthur eagerly joined in. Every now and then, Molly would try to include Snape, whose answers were polite and reserved; but he never took an active part.

Nobody could explain why Ron had not shown up, but they all blamed it on his heavy workload as an Auror, from which he had not been able to disengage. In secret, Hermione was quite glad that he had not come. Since they had split up more than one year before, being unselfconscious around the other was quite difficult for him as well as her, but she did not want to think about that just now.

In the early evening, the Weasleys said good-bye, and Harry, Ginny, Snape and Hermione were the only ones left. "Excuse me, please, I'll just take James to bed," said Ginny and rose from the table, leaving the others in awkward silence.

The ticking of the big grandfather clock in the Potters' sitting room had become quite loud when Harry finally cleared his throat and turned towards Snape. "I... erm... I am glad that you have changed your mind. It means a lot to me that you are my son's godfather now."

Hermione, who knew just how much willpower it had cost her best friend to speak those words, looked at him, unable to hide her pride. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she was in the way, that both men would probably be much more at ease talking if she were not present. "I will go and look what the little one is doing," she murmured and disappeared out of earshot to bend over Albus Severus' cradle in the adjoining room. Thousands of thoughts were on her mind while she observed the sleeping baby and imagined what Harry and Snape might be talking about. The idea that, after all those years of mutual hatred, they might manage to establish some kind of relationship based on respect caused a strange feeling of elation in her stomach.

She reached out to touch the baby's cheek very softly when she suddenly felt the presence of another person in the room. She turned around briskly and saw Snape standing close behind her.

He had been moving with the silent gait of a man who has learnt to feel at ease in the shadows. "I would like to say good-bye to my godson," he said very quietly, very softly.

Hermione stepped aside and watched him take the baby up in his arms. "Don't drop him." The words escaped from her as he clumsily placed the child in the crook of his arm.

"You see right through me, Miss Granger. Of course it was my intention to do just that," he said tauntingly. His black eyes fixed on hers for a moment, but then he turned his attention to the baby and observed him as if he wanted to memorise every detail of his little face. Finally, he put Albus Severus back very carefully and left the room, taking no notice of Hermione.

In the meantime, Ginny had returned to the sitting room and stood on the doorstep next to Harry. She said, "If you do not have any plans for Christmas yet... erm... Severus, we would be glad if you could spend it with us."

Apparently, it was quite difficult for Ginny to use his given name, but Hermione felt that her invitation had been honest.

"Yes," she heard Harry say, "just pop in and look how your godson is coming along." He extended his hand towards Snape, who finally took it.

Snape then nodded to Ginny with a hint of a smile and said in a noncommittal way, "Thank you for the invitation we will keep in contact. I wish you a good night. Please let me know when the boy needs anything." He nodded again, neither unfriendly nor particularly warmly, and finally stepped out into the darkness, ready to Disapparate.

Hermione hastily said good-bye to Harry and Ginny and followed him, taking no notice of her friends' baffled faces.

"Sir, please wait!" she exclaimed.

He turned around and replied, "What is it now, Miss Granger? Is there another child somewhere that you consider in dire need of myself as his or her godfather?"

She shook her head. "Thank you, sir," she said very quietly.

All of a sudden, he took a step forward, startling her and making her take a step backwards. He grabbed her upper arms and said, "I should have known, Miss Granger. When I read that you had opted for a career in Magical Law, I could figure out that your argumentation, your stubbornness and your insufferable way of interfering in other people's business would make you one of the best in your field. Nevertheless, I had not expected to be affected by all of this myself one day. But you did put me right."

He released her just as fast as he had grabbed her, and his face was completely in the dark when he continued. "If I had seen just one more owl from you at my window, I would have strangled it. Sadly enough, I must confess that I had already made up my mind the moment you disappeared from my house. I hope that I will never again find myself in a situation where I have to confront your persistence. It would be detrimental to my self-confidence... "

She heard his voice as if he had spoken through some kind of fog when he mockingly wished her good night.

Then he Disapparated and left her bewildered and dazed, but with a sudden swell of pride.

Happy Holidays?

Chapter 3 of 43

Hermione arrives at the Potters' for the Christmas holidays. She meets Ron.

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A/C: Thanks to our wonderful beta, ladyinthecloak. Her never-ending supply of commas and good advice keeps me going...

Chapter 3

"Are you sure I'm not bothering you?" asked Hermione uncertainly while putting down her big bag in the hall.

"Don't be silly," Ginny answered with a grin, gave her a big hug and said, "You know very well that you are always welcome here. We are happy you are spending the entire holidays with us, Hermione!" Ginny emphasised her point by resolutely manoeuvring her friend towards the kitchen. With a flick of her wand, two mugs of tea landed softly on the table.

"Where is Harry?" asked Hermione with a smile while she took one of the chocolate biscuits Ginny offered. To Hermione, it felt so good to be there, to talk to her best friend and feel welcome to know that she would not have to spend the Christmas holidays alone in her small, cheerless flat in London. Her parents had gone on holiday a week before. Hermione loved them very much, but racing down ski slopes every day for two weeks really was not her cup of tea, and so she had not accompanied them.

"He has gone for a walk with James. I think they said something about building a snowman. Al is sleeping, finally, after keeping us awake for most of the night," Ginny added in a faked irritable tone.

"Al?" Hermione giggled.

Ginny shrugged, but grinned, too, and said, "Well, I thought I'd better get used to calling him Al. When he gets older and I have to tell him off, calling him 'Albus Severus' will certainly sound weird. 'Al, stop it this instant!' short and crisp sounds much more effective, don't you think?"

The two young women started laughing, and Hermione listened to Ginny's report of the youngest family member's progress admittedly none particularly spectacular. With a pang of jealousy, she thought that Ginny really was a wonderful mother, deeply engrossed in her role.

"Talking of Al," she said, hastily pushing those thoughts aside, "have you had any news of his godfather?" Much to her surprise, Ginny nodded.

"We sent him a photograph recently, and we have or rather I have invited him to come over for Christmas. Harry often delegates such tasks to me. Severus actually answered and thanked us for the photograph. He wrote that he did not know whether he could come."

"This is all rather crazy, isn't it?" Hermione said quietly. "I mean, thinking back to when we were at school would you ever have thought that Snape was able to..."

She fell silent, but Ginny seemed to know exactly what she meant. "Able to love?" she completed Hermione's unfinished sentence. "Harry and I have been talking about that very often, you know. I think we have talked about Snape more often than about Voldemort. Of course, he behaves abominably and he is an obnoxious person. However, he has preserved his love for Lily through all these years. I think that this was the only thing that kept him alive. Sometimes I ask myself whether he would've rather died there in the Shrieking Shack, after Nagini's bite."

"That is what I thought," replied Hermione. "You ought to have seen his house, Ginny. So run-down and dirty. And himself! At the christening at least, he had some clean clothes on. But when I visited him..." She shivered with disgust when she thought about Snape's untidy appearance. "To me, it seemed as if there was nothing left for him to make his life worth living."

"He must be very lonely," Ginny added thoughtfully.

"I think he wants this solitude," Hermione replied.

The two women stared into their mugs, each immersed in her own thoughts. They startled when the front door slammed shut, followed by James' cheerful laughter and some muffled curse from Harry, who seemed to have tripped over Hermione's bag.

oOoOoOoOo

"Erm, Hermione...," Harry started and exchanged a hidden glance with his wife while the three friends laid the dinner table together. "I don't know whether Ginny has told you already. Ron will be coming over tonight."

Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin line, carefully placed a plate on the table, forced a smile and said, "That is nice. I look forward to seeing him again." And it was true. A part of her did look forward to meeting Ron and seeing his familiar face. Another part of her was afraid. They had split up more than one year ago, but every time somebody mentioned his name, she felt an unpleasant coldness spreading from her stomach.

She suspected, or at least she could understand, why Ron had not shown up on December first to attend Albus Severus' ceremony. It would have been a painful reminder of the reason for their separation. "Please excuse me," Hermione stammered. "I I will go and freshen up a bit." She avoided Harry and Ginny's concerned gaze and quickly strode to the bathroom. After closing the door, she sank to the floor, wrapped her arms around her legs and placed her head on her knees.

Everything had been so easy. After the defeat of Voldemort, everyone had been finally able to breathe freely, as if his death had taken a huge weight off their souls. Loving Ron and being loved by Ron had been a wonderful experience. They had been carefree and full of life. Starting a career in Magical Law had, for the first time, earned her the appreciation of her brilliant mind that she had always been denied. Of course, she was always the best pupil in her year at Hogwarts, but with the exception of a handful of teachers, nobody had ever made her feel special.

Her colleagues had been astounded at first, sceptical or mildly impressed about her comprehensive knowledge at best. Within the first year, however, their opinion had changed into undisguised admiration and finally even respect. Suddenly, Hermione had been sure where her place in life was. The knowledge that her hunger for knowledge was appreciated had spurred her to great achievements. At the beginning, Ron had been proud of her and acclaimed every promotion and distinction. But after Harry and Ginny's wedding, she had felt that he was somewhat uncomfortable with her career for the first time. "Ron, let's just wait a few more years," she had often said when he had indicated that they should marry, too. "We are both very young and have all the time in the world to marry and have children. I am about to become the youngest member of the Domestic Magical Law Committee in a thousand years."

After James' birth, Ron had told her for the first time that he wished she would cut down on her workload. She had understood his wish to start a family, but she had felt that she was not ready yet.

After that, Ron had expressed his unhappiness ever more clearly while she had kept to her decision to wait a few more years. Ron was an important part of her life. Her job, on the other hand, had put her in a situation where nobody would smile condescendingly about her inexhaustible thirst for knowledge. For the first time in her life, she had been in a situation where people admired her for that.

She had paid the price for her decision on the day when Ron had faced her, with a pained expression on his face and tears in his eyes, saying, "Hermione, I love you. I have loved you since our fourth year at Hogwarts. But I want a family. It is very difficult for me to watch my sister and Harry, who have a baby, while we are not even married yet. I have grown up in a large family. You know that. Of course, there were many quarrels, but I love the ruckus and the feeling that there is always someone about. I miss it. I need it."

"Oh, Ron, why can't we wait just a little bit more," she had said, desperate, while trying to keep him from packing.

"What's in a few years, Hermione? What if you will be the supreme I dunno what judge of anything by then? Can you promise me that you would sacrifice that for a family?"

She had not been able to promise that.

And he had left.

oOoOoOoOo

Ron had hardly changed since the last time she had seen him. She felt the familiar tingle in her stomach when she watched him kiss Ginny on the cheek and pat Harry's shoulder. Of course, the two saw each other at the Ministry every day, but Ron was obviously happy to be there.

When he finally turned to greet her, she tried in vain to suppress her tears. They ran down her cheeks, and Harry and Ginny's discreet retreat did not help either. Ron smiled a very gentle smile when he extended his arms, and she suddenly found herself facing him. The memory of his smell, his touch, had not reached her conscious mind yet, but her body remembered those things, and her arms wrapped around his neck automatically, just like they used to do.

"It is good to see you again, Hermione," he said softly, then he pushed her away a little and kissed her on the forehead.

"Yes," she sniffed, her vision a blur, while he tousled her hair.

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Luckily, the fear that the four of them might spend the evening in some kind of tense silence had not materialised. They talked about recent events almost like they had always done. After James and Albus Severus had been put to bed, they played some rounds of Exploding Snap, but Hermione noticed that Harry and Ginny's yawns became more and more frequent.

"I am sorry, folks," Ginny said with an embarrassed smile, "I fear we have become rather boring since we've become parents..."

"Oh, you don't need to stay up for me. I know that you have had almost no sleep last night because of Al," Hermione said.

Harry and Ginny gave her a relieved smile, and after finishing the game, they said good night and retired to their bedroom.

"The boys grow so fast," she heard Ron's soft voice when they were alone. "Some months ago, James was still unable to walk. Now he runs about as if he had never done anything else."

Hermione nodded, unable to meet his gaze. The Potter children reminded him and Hermione of things that they both could have had. For a moment, the silence enveloped them like a blanket.

"I have done some thinking, Hermione," Ron continued. "I had much time to think about everything that went wrong between us. I must admit that I put the blame for everything on you at first. But if you had accepted my wishes and we had started a family, it would have made you unhappy. You would have denied yourself, and I would not have wanted that. I know how happy your job makes you and how important the recognition is for you," he finished and softly took her hand.

She lifted her head and looked him in the face. He seemed to be very serious, but at the same time, she saw something like tenderness in his features.

"I could not come the other day, you know. It was too much to handle. Harry and Ginny's second child. I hold nothing against you, really. Not any more. Nevertheless, it was a strange feeling. I stayed away because the two did not deserve me to ruin the mood."

"I know what you mean," said Hermione and squeezed his hand.

"Hermione, I would like to tell you something."

Somehow, she knew what was coming, but still, she felt quite numb when she heard him say, "I have been dating someone for quite a while." His smile failed a little and his face turned deep red, but he did not take his hand away.

"Ron, please do not feel guilty for this. Really. I do want you to find somebody who makes you happy. And in case she doesn't, well, you know that I am still quite apt at conjuring those little canaries, don't you?" She emitted a sound that sounded more like a sob than a laugh, although it was both.

Ron held her tightly, and they sat like this for a long time, slowly saying good-bye to the past.

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Ron left the next day. He hugged Hermione once again and whispered, with his face buried in her hair, that she would always be important to him. She returned his words and kissed him on the cheek. After he had left, she still had some hollow feeling in her stomach.

Harry and Ginny seemed to notice that she needed some time to herself, and so they agreed when she suggested taking James outside. She wanted him to show her the snowman that he had built in the garden with his father.

When she saw the enthusiasm of the child, happily romping around in the garden, her eyes filled with tears. "Look, look," he kept shouting, messing about in the snow with his little fists. Although he was still very young, he already showed traces of magic when he suddenly made the snow rise and drizzle back down on himself. It was obvious that he had no clue how he did it, but he laughed aloud and extended his little arms.

Hermione suddenly realised that she was not crying for Ron. She was not sad because he had met someone, but because she, on the other hand, was alone. Harry and Ginny had each other and their children. But she... After Christmas, she would return to her small, uncomfortable, practical flat. Somehow, she already knew that she would feel lonely.

"Maybe," she thought with a wistful smile,*"maybe I would be ready to start a family now."*But she knew that it was too late for her and Ron. Silent tears kept running down her cheeks when she suddenly heard a voice.

"Good day."

She winced.

"You seem to have a strong interest in the Potters' family life, Miss Granger, as you are here quite often," Snape said quizzically.

She jerked around, her face still wet with tears. "Professor Snape," she stammered.

The expression on his face disappeared when he realised that she was crying. "Well, excuse me," he said flatly and turned his gaze from her to James, who continued playing in the snow without a care. It was obvious that he felt embarrassed by her tears.

For a while, they faced each other without a word until Hermione finally managed to say, "Harry and Ginny are inside. Could... could you please tell them that James and I

will come inside soon?" She did not wait for his answer, but turned away.

He hesitated for some moments and stared at her back. He looked at her hands, which fluttered about in the air like butterflies who could not find a place to land. Finally, he turned and walked towards the front door.

Christmas Eve

Chapter 4 of 43

Christmas Eve at the Potters' I

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer:

Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/C: Once more, ladyinthecloak found the time to read and edit this, in spite of her enormous workload as a beta reader. In addition, she even manages to write amazing fics at the same time! Thank you!

4. Chapter 4

Hermione closed her eyes and desperately wished that Snape had not seen her tears. Why on earth did he show up exactly at that moment? A feeling of shame started creeping up her neck and she felt her cheeks burning. She knew that she could not stay in the garden forever; moreover, she started feeling cold. Therefore, she took deep breaths, and then she called James and took him back inside.

"... thought that you would not make it any more..." she heard Ginny's embarrassed voice. "Sit down, please."

Hermione straightened her shoulders and entered the sitting room. She saw Snape handing his travelling cloak to Harry and sitting down on the sofa.

"Ah, Hermione," said Harry when he noticed her. She was incredibly thankful when he gave no indication at all that something was wrong with her, although he must have noticed her tear-stained face. "Could you please help James wash his hands?" he asked, giving her the perfect opportunity to get to the bathroom without attracting Snape's attention.

As soon as she got there, she washed James' hands and then splashed a handful of cold water onto her face. Looking in the mirror, she saw that all traces of her tears had disappeared. She smiled at her reflection and proceeded to the sitting room, followed by James, who kept jumping around her, squawking, "Hungry!"

"You are hungry? Mummy will give you something to eat instantly," Hermione said. She ruffled his black hair and turned to Ginny with a grin. "I suppose you've heard."

Ginny rolled her eyes, nodded in Snape's direction with an apologetic smile and disappeared in the kitchen with her son. "You insatiable little brat," they heard her murmur.

Hermione sat down on the sofa opposite from Snape and asked, "How are you doing, Professor?"

"Very well, thank you," he deadpanned while his hollow face and skinny body belied his words.

Hermione, however, was wary of making any comment about that.

"What about you, Miss Granger?" he asked. For a split second, she thought that she had seen some amused glint in his black eyes.

"Great," she answered, just a touch too hasty.

Silently, she thanked Harry once again when he turned to Snape, asking, "How about some butterbeer?"

Snape nodded.

"You too, Hermione?"

"Yes, thank you." She smiled quietly.

Harry looked very taut and she gave him a soft smile.

"Why aren't you attending one of these Christmas parties which are held every year in your honour?" asked Snape when Harry had filled all their glasses.

Harry grimaced as if he had a very bitter taste in his mouth and said, "I hate all this hullaballoo! All I want is to spend Christmas in peace with my family."

Their former teacher looked him over as if he had never seen him properly before.

A crazy thought suddenly came to Hermione's mind: Probably, Snape had just realised consciously for the first time that, although Harry may be his father's spitting image, this did not mean that he had inevitably inherited all his character flaws. Maybe James Potter senior would have enjoyed all the attention. Harry Potter certainly did not.

"I understand," he said slowly. "These celebrations have certainly become some kind of a bore over the years."

"I can't tell I have never been to one of those." Harry shrugged and took a sip of his beer.

"I have," Hermione piped up. "There were pictures of you everywhere. They had cookies in the shape of your scar and a vast range of drinks that all had names with something 'Potter' in them. Potterwhiskey and such, even mistletoes that loudly squeaked, 'Just imagine Potter would stand in front of you...' whenever somebody would accidentally stand below them..."

Snape and Harry gaped at her.

"It was horrible," she confirmed quickly and silently berated herself for putting her foot in it.

Harry exploded with laughter and she joined in while Snape deigned to slightly lift the corners of his mouth. Hermione was unable to discern whether he was genuinely amused or simply found her explanations quite silly, but Hermione did not care.

"Did I miss something?" asked Ginny, who had just come into the room and looked them all up with an astonished expression.

"Ginny, next year, let's go to one of those Christmas parties that people throw in my honour, okay?" Harry laughed.

"I thought you hate them," she answered, confused. This spurred even more laughter from her husband and Hermione.

"Recently, I read in 'Witch Weekly' that consuming butterbeer in the early afternoon leads to silly behaviour and ridiculousness," she said with a grin and added, "I'll just take James upstairs to his room; it is time for his nap. And Severus..." she added, turning to look at him. "If they continue making such a fuss, please take their drinks away."

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When Ginny came back, she had Albus Severus in her arms. "Look who just woke up," she said quietly. "He and James seem to have things well planned. They never sleep at the same time, keeping their poor parents busy around the clock." Her affectionate and tender tone, however, put this rant well into perspective.

Hermione felt a pang of regret as she thought about the things she could have had.

Ginny kissed the baby's cheek and whispered, "Your godfather is here to see you, Al." With these words, she slowly sat down next to Snape, whose facial expression, as always, did not give away one single thought. Ginny held out the baby for him, and Snape clumsily took him in his arms.

Snape's features, usually carved out of stone, seemed to become very soft for one moment when he looked at Albus Severus and gently said, "He has grown a little, hasn't he?" But he did not seem to expect an answer, at least not from the adults.

After a while, he seemed to gain some confidence with the child. Hermione noticed with a smile that Ginny furtively released a breath, just as if she had held it because she feared that her son might start crying. Actually, the baby seemed to feel quite at ease in Snape's arms he was calm and only moved his arms around a bit.

"I... I bought him a Christmas present," Snape said, with a very unusual hint of embarrassment in his voice. He reached into the bag he had brought and laid down on the floor next to him. With the baby safely ensconced in the crook of his left arm, he used his right arm to produce a carefully wrapped parcel and handed it to Ginny.

Ginny's face took a colour that almost matched her hair, and Harry looked a little flabbergasted when his wife started unwrapping the gift.

"You did not have to give him anything, really," she murmured, just before she choked, "Oh!"

She had revealed an animal fleece, consisting of some white material that looked extremely soft and silky.

"Unicorn fur," whispered Hermione with surprise, but nobody seemed to care. Snape must have paid a small fortune for it. As far as she knew, it was quite difficult to even find someone who made and sold unicorn furs. They were very rare and valuable. The sight of them alone reminded her of the uniqueness of those amazing animals.

"Sir, this is beautiful," Ginny exclaimed obviously forgetting that they already were on a first name basis. Very softly, she stroked the material with her hand, trying hard to compose herself. Finally, she managed to face him. "Thank you," she croaked.

Snape registered it with a nod.

Harry cleared his throat and said in a husky voice, "I really don't know what to say. Thank you, Severus."

"Don't mention it," Snape answered.

To Hermione, it seemed as if he had been worried about the reactions to his gift. Now, he appeared relaxed and almost casual.

"This is for you two," he added after a short period of silence and handed a bulbous bottle of elf-made wine to Harry.

Not a cheap vintage, Hermione thought, *but nothing personal either.*

"Well, Miss Granger, I have nothing for you." He turned to her so suddenly that it startled her. He smirked, reminding her of the fact that she was somehow out of place here. "I did not expect to meet you here, too."

"Oh, I... of course," she stammered, helpless, once again feeling like a schoolgirl, condescendingly belittled by the Potions master.

"Hermione is our guest over the holidays," Harry helped her. "She is almost a family member."

Hermione felt a wave of thankfulness at these words. Yet, she was unable to say a word, and so she only smiled vaguely and jiggled her left foot something she always did when she wanted to appear calm though she was not.

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Hermione had accompanied Ginny to the kitchen under the pretence of helping with the dinner preparations.

"Oh, my god," Ginny softly sighed while peeking though the crack of the door. "Did you see that unicorn fur, Hermione? Do you have any idea how expensive they are?"

"I can imagine," Hermione replied cautiously.

"I feel so mean we only got some shabby old book for him," Ginny whined. "We only bought it just in case I would have wagered that he didn't come at all."

"I really don't believe that he has noticed at all what you gave him," Hermione answered. "He has eyes for Al only. Did you see how he treats him?"

"Yes," said Ginny. "To be honest, I would like my son back at some point. But I do not dare mention it. In some well, I guess 'absurd' would be the wrong term in some strange way it is quite a touching sight. Just look at how he is holding him," she whispered and pulled Hermione's sleeve.

Hermione peeked through the crack in the door, too: The scene they saw was almost intimate. Observing Snape, who held the child and looked down on him in this very uncharacteristic way while talking to Harry, made the hair on their arms stand on end. They asked themselves what else might be hidden behind the mask of icy restraint that he had been wearing all those years they had known him.

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"Have you ever thought about teaching again?" Harry asked after dinner. Snape had eaten with relish, and Hermione knew that she was not the only one to ponder when

he might have had his last good meal. As a whole, the dinner had been quite relaxed, with the exception of a small mishap when James had inadvertently poured his juice all over Snape, making Ginny blush and rise.

"Never mind, it's no problem. Keep your seat, Ginevra," Snape had murmured. Then he had pulled out his wand and Scourgified the mess. However, he had looked quite annoyed for a moment.

Probably, it was quite difficult for him to do anything but ignore the boy, simply because of his name.

In the meantime, both children were asleep. Snape frowned for a second before answering Harry's question, "I have thought about it, yes. But I've never seriously considered it. I am rather content brewing potions on demand."

*Because I can avoid meeting people that way*was the sentence that lingered in the air, unspoken.

"Moreover, I simply could not stand teaching the differences between mandrakes and daisies to another batch of dunderheads. Once in a blue moon, there would be a single student who stands out from the crowd and shows a certain amount of talent, but I would not bet on it. As far as the others are concerned, well, I do not want to expose my nerves to this unnecessary strain."

"In your opinion, who did stand out then?" Harry asked calmly.

"Well, Mr. Blaise Zabini would be an example. I remember him to be very talented," Snape replied.

"You only say that because he was in Slytherin." Harry's smile was supposed to appear relaxed, but Hermione and Ginny knew him well enough to realise that there were first signs of impatience simmering below the surface.

"Oh, no, not at all," Snape defended himself. "I would say the same if he had been in any other House."

"Even in Gryffindor?" Harry asked immediately. Snape waited one second too long before nodding. "Even in Gryffindor."

Ginny seemed to want to say something, but Harry beat her to it. "Is Zabini the only one to impress you or were there other students?" He gave Hermione a quick glance.

She caught herself drumming her fingers on her thighs nervously under the table.

"Well, there was indeed one female student who amazed me, even had me impressed."

"Will you disclose who you mean?" Harry asked with a grin.

For one moment, Hermione cherished the thought that she might hear her own name. A female student that could only be...

"Miss Lovegood."

"LUNA?" three voices asked in unison.

"During a lesson in her first year, a student asked me why it was so difficult to get to see a unicorn. Miss Lovegood put her hand up and told him with deep conviction, 'For the same reason that you do not get to see Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. They simply do not want to be seen by all people, you understand?' Well, that was my first encounter with Miss Lovegood's astonishing... philosophy of life."

For one moment, they all stared at him with open mouths.

"How many points did you deduct from Ravenclaw for this?" Ginny finally blurted out.

Snape's lips twitched in a grimace remotely resembling a smile. It looked as if he had forgotten how to do it years ago and just remembered painstakingly.

"Miss Lovegood impressed me because she clung steadfastly to her beliefs about these things of which she was convinced. Nothing and nobody could sway her. Of course, most I even claim to say all the things she worked out for herself were pure nonsense. But I found it amusing. Over all these years, she has managed to tread along a very thin line between complete insanity and astonishing soundness of judgement about certain things..."

Harry, Ginny and Hermione exchanged irritated glances. "I cannot believe that you just said that," Harry murmured.

"Well, I will indeed deny having said such things, should anyone ever ask me about it," he said casually.

Ginny laughed and Harry could not keep a straight face either.

"But what about Hermione?" asked Harry when they had more or less stomached his explanations.

Snape questioningly raised one eyebrow.

"Well, we were discussing impressive students you have taught over the years," Harry jogged his memory.

Snape turned to her, his black eyes seeming to look daggers at her. "Miss Granger..." he drawled.

For some reason, Hermione could not help but feel that she would not like the things he had to say about her.

Christmas Eve continued

Chapter 5 of 43

Discussions, discussions...

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/C: Considering the weather here in Germany, I'd like to offer some iced coffee with vanilla ice cream (it's called an "Ice Coffee" here) to ladyinthecloak, our tireless beta.

5. Chapter 5

Snape took some seconds before he continued.

"'Impressed' is not quite the correct term, I am afraid. Miss Granger undoubtedly did her homework, but I cannot exactly say that I had noticed her as particularly outstanding in Potions. Or that she even impressed me."

Hermione managed a false smile while she tried to appear calm. "Would you please be so courteous as to enlighten me, Professor Snape, what I ought to have done to 'impress' you? And why I did not, in the end?"

His lips formed an arrogant smile as he said, "It seems to matter a lot to you, so I will: Nature has awarded you with promising prerequisites, Miss Granger. You have a good memory and fast perceptive faculties. You like reading, you read much, and you value knowledge for knowledge's sake. However, there is something you lack. You could probably recite every recipe for any potion that is mentioned in the books by heart, as well as their effects and possible side effects. You would manage to brew most potions from memory without major problems if I would ask you to do so here and now. But, Miss Granger, you do not have any personal attachment to the subject."

"Personal attachment?" Hermione echoed with some acidic quality in her voice.

Harry and Ginny eagerly followed the discussion without joining in. Probably a clever decision, considering the fact that Hermione seemed to steer dangerously close towards impatience and the lack of politeness that came with it.

"Yes, personal attachment," Snape answered coolly. "Let me give you an ex..."

"Well, you never made it easy for anyone to like your classes and, as you say, develop some 'personal attachment," she interrupted him rather sourly. However, she did not drop the charming smile.

"Well, that was not the question, Miss Granger. You wanted to know why you did not impress me. Whether you liked my classes or not is irrelevant. Getting back to my example with your kind permission, of course..." he added mockingly. "Everybody would probably be capable of learning some notes and plonk away on a piano without major mistakes. But only a select few manage to play and create music. You did not manage to play the music, Miss Granger. You certainly understood every tiny detail and the exact order in which certain potions are brewed. You were able to add the precise amount of ingredients, let the brew simmer at the perfect temperature, stir it correctly and do everything right on the basis of the books in which you so like to stick your nose. You did everything mechanically, but your endeavours were not a result of your wish to feel the beauty of the potion and its creation. You wanted to be the best student in the class. No more and no less." He lifted his glass and toasted her.

This overbearing gesture made her drop all restraint. "Wasn't it you who said that brewing potions is an exact art?" she burst out. "I think that I indeed mastered them well enough to get an 'Exceeds Expectations' at least once!" Her cheeks blushed with anger while all the injustices that she had ever experienced from Snape kept passing through her mind like a movie.

"But you did not exceed my expectations, Miss Granger," he replied dryly. "I expected you to brew all the potions according to the manuals and you did. You would have exceeded my expectations if you, for once, had answered a question by not simply repeating the book, but telling me your own thoughts, in your own words. Or if you had brewed a potion which included your own reflections and ideas, to try to expand the shelf life or to improve the taste, for example. You wanted praise for something you would have managed anyway thanks to your exceptional intellect. Unlike most of your classmates," his gaze quickly darted over Harry, "you had no difficulties whatsoever to read instructions correctly and implement them. So why should this merit any praise from my side? In other words: you would never praise a Frenchman for speaking French, would you? Books and hard work are not everything, Miss Granger."

Hermione bit her lower lip to prevent herself from spitting at him. However, she did not even know why the fact that he was not willing to acclaim her performance after all these years afflicted her so. Every other teacher at Hogwarts had been deeply impressed by her enormous knowledge and her characteristic way of never accepting simple solutions. She knew for sure that no other student had spent nearly as much time studying as she had. The only thing she wanted him to do was to admit that she had accumulated more specialist knowledge than all the other students in her year combined. But he seemed determined to deny her any appreciation.

Deep inside her, a small voice spoke up, to her own surprise, and whispered,*These were your own words, once. Do you remember, Hermione? When you crossed the giant chessboard in your first year, you told Harry there are more important things than books and cleverness.*

She ignored the voice, and in her anger although she half-heartedly tried to suppress it she did something very stupid: "I managed to brew Polyjuice Potion in my second year. How many second years you know can say this for themselves, Professor?"

"Hermione!" Harry warned her in a whisper, but she did not care.

"Apart from myself, you mean?" he asked, amused. But before she could even try to answer, he said in a silky smooth voice that undoubtedly told her there was danger ahead, "You have just confirmed a suspicion I had for years, Miss Granger. But to answer your question: The fact that you managed to do this in your second year does indeed merit one hundred points for Gryffindor."

Hermione had been so sure that he would make a snide comment that she had already opened her mouth to defend herself. She closed it in surprise, only to hear him say, "One hundred points to be deduced, naturally," he said with a naughty smile. "Because apart from stealing from my private supplies, you probably lingered in the Restricted Section of the library and sneaked out of your dormitory after curfew to brew the potion in peace so the other students would not notice. You are very lucky that I am not a petty man, Miss Granger. If I were, I would make sure that the House Cup for that year was taken from Gryffindor and awarded to my own House."

Hermione gasped like a fish on dry land. She could not believe that he had really said these things.*Stay calm*, she forced herself, taking some deep, slow breaths.

"Well, Professor it has been a long time since you were able to intimidate me by taking away House Points," she finally managed to say with a superior smile.

"Indeed?" he asked, lifting one eyebrow. "So, pray tell, Miss Granger, why are you still calling me 'Professor'?"

None of them seemed to notice that Harry and Ginny were still present, observing them in amazement.

"Because I have no clue how to address you otherwise. Mr. Snape? Or just 'Snape'? Monsieur Snape, maybe?"

One corner of his mouth twisted into the suggestion of a smile. However, she could not understand what had been so amusing about her question.

"May I ask you something personal?" he said.

His question astonished and angered her, but she did not have the time to voice her annoyance as he continued.

"Why did you pursue a career in Magical Law?"

Of all the questions he might have asked, this was the one she had least expected.

"Well, I am interested in law," she answered promptly.

"You are interested in many things," he wiped her answer off impatiently, "but why Magical Law? What is it that fascinates you so much that you decided to pursue it professionally?"

Hermione hesitated for a moment, and then she slowly started speaking. "Laws are like solid walls. They seem impermeable. The wording is clear, stating, without any doubt, what the law is all about. However, it is the art of my profession to find loopholes within these walls. To manage to overcome these walls somehow and interpret the words in a way that is favourable for the clients with whom I cooperate. You've got to have a feel for it. This is what tempts and fascinates me. Finding these tiny loopholes that allow me to achieve a certain goal.

"Just one example: The word 'less'. It often appears in laws, as in 'less serious cases' or 'lesser crime'. This seems quite simple. But what exactly is 'less'? You would not believe how many levels and possible interpretations this term offers."

Unconsciously, Hermione had revealed much more than she had intended to. It was true, her profession fascinated her, but now she was almost embarrassed that she had digressed so much. She met Snape's gaze, who favoured her with a peculiar expression.

When she thought she would start blushing under the intensity of his gaze, he slowly said: "See, Miss Granger, you **can** do it!"

"What are you talking about, sir?"

"You could not do it in Potions because you lacked personal attachment. You could not play the music. Remember? But in your profession and I am very much prepared to admit it you do. You are in it with a passion. Not only because you want to best your colleagues or have a superior pat you on the shoulder."

He toasted her again.

While she also lifted her glass, too bewildered to say something, hundreds of thoughts kept swirling in her mind. Starting with the question if he had indeed just expressed his appreciation and if he had done so, why it mattered so much to her.

Christmas morning

Chapter 6 of 43

Christmas Eve and the morning after

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Hugs and kisses for ladyinthecloak, who managed to read this in spite of her huge amount of work here at TPP and in real life. You are amazing!

Chapter 6

Hermione took a sip of her wine just to occupy her hands. She felt the others' eyes on herself and wanted to say something witty and funny, something that would avert from her state of perplexity. Yet, she did not know what to say and how.

"Some more pudding, anyone?" Ginny asked cheerfully, but only Harry answered.

"Thank you, no more pudding for me or I will burst."

"Of course," Snape suddenly said as if there had been no break. "I hope that you have at least foregone the annoying habit of writing in this unreadable miniature handwriting in the meantime. As for me, it regularly drove me to distraction."

Hermione almost laughed aloud. He really was unable to do it. He could not praise someone without revising his words in the next second, rubbing their actual or alleged flaws under their noses.

"That's just so typically you," she blurted out. "You have a remarkable capacity to make each compliment sound as if it were censure. Do you remember when Madam Hooch introduced her fledgling husband to Professor McGonagall? It was in our third year, just before the Christmas holidays. You stood nearby and I happened to hear what you said."

"I remember," he said casually. "That fellow was not quite the showpiece, was he?"

"Maybe he was not very attractive," Hermione answered in a cutting tone. Silently, she thought *As if you could arrogate making fun of other people's attractiveness!* Then she said, "You told Madam Hooch, 'Well, he suits you'!"

Snape sneered. "I was under the impression that people wanted me to say what I thought. And I did."

"Indeed? What was your comment about their baby, one year later? Let me think... 'Well, it is obvious what it is supposed to be.' Right?"

Harry choked on his drink. Ginny, who did not even try to suppress her grin, cheeringly patted his back.

"Well, if you would like to know my exact words, Miss Granger, my comment was, 'At least he is healthy!'" he answered, unperturbed.

"Oh, how incredibly tactful," sneered Hermione.

"Cliché, but true," he answered with a shrug. As far as that could be said about him, he seemed to find the discussion quite amusing.

"So we ought to be very happy that you have not called your godson 'imperfect, but basically acceptable,'" Ginny said, grinning.

With a hint of a smile, Snape answered, "The boy is quite presentable."

"Thank you. That was very interesting," Harry added dryly. Ginny burst into laughter and Harry joined in.

Snape turned to Hermione again and said, "Referring to one of your earlier remarks, Miss Granger, you said something was 'typically me'. By using the term 'typically', you imply that you know me. However, you do not. You know only a very small part of me at the most."

"Maybe," Hermione retorted, getting more and more angry. "I only know you as the teacher who please excuse my bluntness had made most of his students' lives hell. I just tried in vain to imagine why you make so little effort to be nice to people. I thought you were..." She fell silent and broke the eye contact. Partly because an unpleasant expression had appeared on his face, partly because she felt that she was about to enter areas she would do better to stay out of.

"You thought that I was really a different person, hiding my personality behind a mask of impoliteness and lack of tact? Is that what you wanted to say? From the moment you knew about my role in the war, you probably thought that I was not the horrible bastard you had met at Hogwarts? Am I right, Miss Granger?"

She stared at him, feeling as if she was caught. Indeed, she had thought that Snape was a man with such complex motivations for his words and deeds that it was merely impossible to figure him out. Yet what seemed most relevant to her was the fact that everything he had done in the last few years had one basic motivation: his love for Lily. Snape's gaze seemed to drill right through her, but she remained silent.

"Well, it seems that I have finally found a question Miss Granger cannot answer," he said very quietly.

oOoOoOoOo

Long after midnight, Hermione tossed and turned restlessly in her bed. For one moment, she considered searching her bag for some Sleeping Draught, but she quickly rejected the idea. She kept thinking about Snape's words earlier that evening. She would not admit it for love nor money, at least not at that moment, but one thought kept stubbornly creeping into her consciousness: Snape had not been entirely wrong in his assessment of her. She never was a person who could handle other people's criticism well. Even less so, when it was worded as hurtful and full of sarcasm as Snape's. He was a man with an extremely sharp power of observation. Maybe he was not entirely wrong about the fact that much of her studying at Hogwarts had been motivated by her will to be the best student.

However, there was one thing Snape had not taken into consideration and she doubted that he had the necessary instinct in this regard. Her characteristic feature of always wanting to know everything and working twice as hard as her fellow students was her attempt to stand her ground in a world that had been completely unknown to her until her eleventh birthday. As a Muggle-born, she had not even dreamt that there might be such a thing as a magical world. There was only one thing she had been able to do: read everything there was to know in books.

Every human being was prone to searching for his or her place in life, pursuing different approaches to reach that goal. It was her approach to respond to all possible insecurities by accumulating comprehensive knowledge about any given subject. At Hogwarts, books and notes had always made her feel in control. Control she desperately needed to find her best possible way in this world.

She sighed and turned over for what felt like the thousandth time. *Pity,* she thought with a grim smile,*there is no book to explain Professor Snape's place in life. Whether he has one at all, or is at least searching for one.*

She did not want to think about Snape. She did not want to think about anything at all. She only wanted to fall into a calm, relaxing sleep without any irritating questions. A very difficult task, since Ginny and Harry had convinced him to stay the night after a lengthy discussion. Hermione assumed that his decision to accept the invitation had been influenced a great deal by the prospect of seeing his godson again in the morning.

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She felt shattered when she opened her eyes and realised, looking at the window, that dawn had just started breaking. Tiredly, she swung her legs out from under the duvet and groped for her wand in the dark. "Lumos," she finally mumbled and grabbed the water bottle on the nightstand, but it was empty. She decided to go to the kitchen to fetch a drink. She got up and padded out of the room barefoot. When she had almost reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard voices and stopped.

.. "...always awake at this time?" she heard Snape's voice.

"Most of the time, yes. He sleeps through the night rather well, but he wakes up very early. I took him out of his bed before he could wake Ginny. She ought to sleep a little longer. She has been quite exhausted lately."

"Always the Gryffindor," Snape said with a hint of sarcasm, but it sounded less spiteful than usual.

"Yes, that's how I am," answered Harry. Judging from the sound of his voice, he had also noticed that Snape's voice lacked the usual harshness. "My typical Gryffindor selflessness and devotion has saved me from Voldemort, but I might just snuff it from exhaustion because I want to ease the burden on my wife a little."

Her heart beating madly, Hermione stayed where she was. She felt uneasy, eavesdropping like that. On the other hand, she could not just stroll into the sitting room. To be honest with herself, she was just too curious to hear what Snape and Harry would be talking about.

"What about you, why are you up so early? Was the bed in the guestroom not..." Harry asked.

"The bed was impeccable," Snape interrupted. "I do not sleep very much."

There was a small pause. Harry cleared his throat and finally said, "Listen, I would like to give you something."

Hermione heard him cross the sitting room and open a drawer with a squeaking noise. She held her breath, suspecting what Harry was up to. Her stomach clenched painfully.

"Here," Harry said quietly. She just could not help it and tiptoed some steps down to peek into the sitting room. Harry saw her at once and his eyes widened, but Snape seemed to not have noticed her. He sat on the sofa, very stiff, holding something in his hands.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance and he signalled with a furtive nod that she should stay where she was, lest any movement should interrupt them.

However, his warning was unnecessary. Snape seemed to see nothing but the photograph Harry had given him. Hermione thought she knew which photograph of Lily it was. He had shown her most pictures of his parents, and she was quite sure that Snape was holding the picture in which Lily had been around seventeen. In this one, she wore dress robes, and her thick red hair fell over her shoulders in soft waves; she laughed about some long forgotten event. Her face expressed pure joie de vivre and some deep, inner kindness that nobody had to teach her. It just had been a part of her.

Hermione swallowed when she saw the expression on Snape's face. He looked at the photograph, no longer aware of anything around him. He was looking into some other world of memory or imagination with an almost rapt expression, as if he would observe some play performed for just one spectator.

"Would you like to take it?" Harry asked hesitatingly. Snape did not answer.

Hermione clutched her hand to her mouth, suddenly realising that Snape's normally expressionless black eyes held glittering tears. She had asked herself how Snape might look when he did not exhibit his mocking, spiteful or bored expression. Now that she saw his tears, she suddenly did not want to know any more. His tears shone like diamonds on his pale cheeks and burned like flames in Hermione's stomach. She could not tell why she was so shocked to see this very personal, vulnerable side of him.

"How was she... Mom. What was Lily like?" Harry asked in a whisper.

Without taking his eyes from the picture, Snape said after what felt like an eternity, "She was radiant. She was the only spark in my world of shadows that nurtured from darkness."

Upon hearing these words, Hermione gasped silently. Suddenly, she remembered all his verbal attacks, his mockery and disdain. None of these things had really bothered her. But these simple words hurt her. They burned parts of her heart and soul. Yet, they were not even for her ears.

While she observed him sitting there, she realised two things. Obviously, the words had not even been for Harry's ears because Snape started as if he had realised that his thoughts had somehow found their way outside and he had not been able to stop them. Moreover, he had been right when he had stated that she did not know him at all.

Very carefully, she took a step backwards. Maybe this hesitating movement finally caught Snape's attention. Maybe it was the exhalation from the breath she had held. She did not know. The only thing she knew was that his head suddenly snapped up and the brows over his black eyes furrowed.

Ending the Holiday Spirit

Chapter 7 of 43

Christmas morning and its aftermath

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Wow, this was fast! Thank you, ladyinthecloak! As we say in Germany: may our eternal gratitude hunt you down wherever you go ;-)

Chapter 7

"I... I did not want to... I'm sorry," Hermione stammered, out of breath. Snape looked at her with such disdain that she felt shivers run down her spine. At once, she felt trapped in a nightmare with no recollection of ever falling asleep.

"Did you enjoy the show, Miss Granger?" he asked with that velvety, soft voice that reminded her of a deep ocean. Seemingly smooth and motionless but with menacing depths lurking beneath the surface.

"No," she squeezed out, "honestly, I didn't. It was not my intention..."

"To eavesdrop?" He approached her with slow strides.

Her instincts told her to retreat, but she forced herself to stay where she was.

"To observe me? Is that so, Miss Granger? Is that your idea of Gryffindor courage, or are you driven by a personal curiosity about my most private concerns? "

"Please, sir, I'm sorry! I just wanted to fetch a glass of water when I heard your and Harry's voice, " she said, her voice trembling.

He was so close now that she could clearly see the moist traces the tears had left on his cheeks. The rapt expression on his face that had been so present just moments ago had now made way for cold contempt.

Her fingers grasped the banisters tightly, and she forced herself to look him in the eye.

"Severus, I am sure that Hermione really did not want to eavesdrop," Harry said calmly.

"Mind your own business," Snape snapped and turned to Hermione once more. "You**will** answer me, Miss Granger," he said soft as silk and made an inviting gesture towards the settee. In some grotesque manner, he looked like a host, eager to comfort his guest.

Hermione almost wished he would scream at her, that he would rage and throw into her face how much he hated her. But he did none of these things, and somehow that made matters even worse. When she did not move, he took one more step towards her, and she backed away involuntarily.

"Well, well, Miss Granger," he said, gloating. "I only asked you a simple question. Isn't answering questions one of your favourite hobbies? You do deceive me. No hand raising? No impatient jumping?"

"I already said that I am sorry, sir," she said quietly. "What else do you want to hear?"

"But I already said that. You heard me, did you not?"

"I don't understand," Hermione started, helplessly looking in Harry's direction.

"Gryffindor courage or personal attachment, Miss Granger. These are only some words. Which one did you not understand?" He looked her up and down in the intense manner that made her feel as if she were a rare but disgusting insect whose reactions he wanted to study.

Hermione took a deep breath, looked into his cold, black eyes and finally said, "Sir, I only came down to get some water from the kitchen when I heard you and Harry speaking. I realised that I could not just barge in, so I stayed where I was. You know the rest. I admit that I was curious. I am very sorry."

He sneered at her. "That does not answer my question and you know it. You can do better, can't you, Miss Granger?"

"Let it be, Severus. She has apologised, and she knows that she has made a mistake." Harry stood next to Snape. For a moment, it seemed as if he wanted to grab Snape's shoulder, but in the end, he just kept standing beside him quietly.

"I already told you to mind your own business," Snape rumbled.

"I do not want any quarrels in my house." Harry's voice was still very quiet and controlled, but Hermione sensed that his calm demeanour belied his feelings.

"And I think that I have a right to know why Miss Granger takes the liberty to eavesdrop on private conversations..." Snape retorted, adding, after a small pause, "... in your house..." The corners of his mouth turned to a malevolent grin when he faced Hermione again. "Well, I will not ask you again to answer my question," he warned, almost whispering.

"I already told you, sir," answered Hermione, avoiding his gaze. "I was curious and I am ashamed about my behaviour. I had no right and all I can say is that I am sorry. I... I admit that the subject of your conversation," her cheeks turned flaming red and her stomach clenched painfully, "made me stop. I did not think what this meant for you, sir. Please forgive me."

The ensuing silence became agonising. She could almost feel Snape's contempt rolling over her in waves.

"I have always been under the impression that you have no respect whatsoever for the privacy of other people. That you would cross any visible or invisible line as long as it serves to satisfy your personal curiosity, to add another point to your list of things you managed to study." His tone was chilling. "I see that my assessment was perfectly correct," he said. Then he turned around and left the room and the house without another word.

oOoOoOoOo

"I am so sorry," Hermione repeated for the umpteenth time. Although Harry assured her that he was okay with it, she felt that he was angry with her.

In the meantime, Ginny was up. Speechless, she listened to what had happened, and said, "I understand you, Hermione. I would have been just as curious as you. It is just I was under the impression that we had established some kind of mutual acceptance with Snape." She sighed and put three steaming mugs of tea in front of them while James jiggled around on his chair. "Yes, I will get your breakfast in an instant," Ginny snapped at him.

This was the very first time that Hermione saw her annoyed about him, and it made her feel even guiltier than before. "Yes, and I screwed it up," she said, while her eyes filled with tears. She knew that building a respectful relationship with Snape meant quite a lot to Harry. Since he knew just how much he owed his former teacher, the thought just had never left him: he wanted to show Snape that he held him in very high regard for his actions and the risks he had taken.

"Oh, Hermione." Ginny stood up, sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. "You cannot undo it now. I really do understand why you stayed there. Snape has always showed us just one side of himself a very unpleasant side. I would have been just as interested in seeing his private face, the things that move him and so on. He will certainly come around. Please don't cry." Ginny gave Harry an unmistakably encouraging glance that Hermione did not notice.

"Yes," he agreed, just a touch too hasty. "We just let some days go by and write him, then. I am sure that he will pretend that nothing has happened."

Ginny nodded and agreed with Harry. The three of them knew that they were just putting it across themselves to make Hermione fell better yet she did not.

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The last bits of snow had already thawed away one week before and the sun, constantly getting warmer, already held a promise of spring. Nevertheless, Spinner's End harboured only few positive feelings, due to the many dilapidated houses as well as the general atmosphere of the area. It was a curious mixture of dreariness and cheerlessness, as if the place had been left and forgotten long time ago.

When Hermione stopped in front of Snape's door, she sensed a very weak smell. It smelled like old, decaying books and something sweet*The smell of wilted lilies* she thought, holding her cloak even tighter around herself. She knocked and waited, her mind repeating the words that she had prepared very carefully.

When he opened and looked at her with his well-known condescending gaze, she swallowed and was about to speak when he interrupted. "What do you want?" he snapped.

"Sir, it's about Harry and Ginny. May I come in?" She tried to make her voice sound friendly and calm.

"No, you may not," he replied, mimicking her particularly friendly tone.

"Sir, I know that you have ignored all the letters that they sent you during the last three months, and I am here to make a suggestion to you," she added quickly.

"Are you?" he drawled. "Once more, you have made it your business to try and sort out other people's affairs unasked. I would like to know why, Miss Granger? Is your own life that uneventful? Or are you following some kind of inner compulsion? I start getting the impression that there are strings attached to you, like to a puppet. Whenever there is something in your peers' lives that you do not like, some superior power forces you to interfere." He gave her a look that clearly showed her his opinion about her and her character, but she would not be put off.

"It is my fault that you are about to break contact with people who are like the siblings I never had. I cannot allow that. Please, sir. At least listen to my suggestion."

"I will give you two minutes," he said coldly. Then he bid her to enter with a small nod.

Hermione followed him without hesitation. She knew that she ought to seize the opportunity while he was prepared to listen to her. "I had no right to see and hear what happened," she started without further ado. "It was not for me, and I know that I have violated your privacy in a way that cannot be justified. I have been feeling guilty every single day since then."

"Poor girl! May I offer you some Cheering Draught?" His voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"I did not want Harry and Ginny to suffer because of my mistake. Nor Albus Severus," Hermione continued quietly. "Being in contact with you means very much to Harry in particular. Please, sir, Obliviate me."

He stared at her as if he was not quite sure that she had indeed said those words. Hermione took advantage of his obvious uncertainty to hastily add, "I will forget everything I saw and heard that morning. Please, sir."

"Well, that would be a very simple solution for all of us, wouldn't it?" he said, dangerously quiet.

"Well yes," she replied, blushing under his gaze.

"Stupid girl," he growled. "Don't you recognise a rhetorical question when you are asked one?"

"What?"

He crossed the distance between them in a few long strides and stood in front of her at an arm's length.

"The fact that you forget it, however, does not change anything about the fact that**I** cannot forget what you saw and heard!"

Suddenly she had not seen it coming at all he grabbed her shoulders and shoved her up against the wall. She gave a terrified gasp when her shoulder blades touched the cold plaster and his fingers clutched her shoulders like a vice.

"Let go of me! You are hurting me!" she begged when he used his body weight to keep her from fleeing his grip. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her cheek. His black eyes bored into hers, and on some deep, mysterious level, she knew what he was up to, although she never had experienced this before. "Please don't,"

she whispered, anguished, and tried to avoid his gaze.

But he held her with so much force that she could not move at all. She perceived his whispered "Legilimens!" through some kind of haze and felt the presence of another mind inside her own. She desperately tried to occlude her thoughts, to drive him out, but she had no practice at all in getting her mind impermeable to others.

Ron lay next to her under the duvet. They were holding each other tight and smiled, now that they had experienced for the first time that there was magic that needed no wand. Magic that came right from inside of them, from their love for each other and the indescribable spell that formed through the union of body and soul. 'I love you,' Ron whispered into her hair and she returned his murmured words.

"How do you like that, Miss Granger, to disclose your most secret, intimate thoughts and feelings, with absolutely no means to prevent it?" Snape whispered in her ear. She wanted to beg him to let her go, but she knew that this was just the beginning...

The Potion Prince's Petty Payback

Chapter 8 of 43

Someone falls into his own trap

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: --,--´ @ (this is supposed to be a single rose for ladyinthecloak, our beta reader)

Chapter 8 - The Potion Prince's Petty Payback

A/N: Sorry for the silly title I just couldn't resist...

"It is over! Lay him down at my feet where he belongs!" Voldemort's cold, hissing voice could be heard over the throng of fighting people while Hagrid slowly lowered Harry's lifeless body to the ground. Somebody let out a piercing cry, a tormented, shrill sound that cut the dusty air like the crack of a whip.

Hermione did not know that she had been the one to cry out. Neither did she remember that she had sunken to her knees with the world blurring before her eyes. Only Harry's body had been cruelly clear and focused then, and she recalled that the view had numbed her soul.

Desperately, she kept fighting to void herself of all emotions and close her mind. But the more she exerted herself, the more she became aware of Snape's presence. He still had her shoulders in a vice grip. She tried to concentrate and think of something insignificant of Crookshanks or the book she had last read. However, it was like trying to catch fog with bare hands.

She stood alone in the primary school yard and observed the girls from her class. Without any doubt, they were talking about Monica's upcoming birthday party. Sure enough, Monica would invite her before the bell rang. She had made a big announcement and said that she wanted to celebrate her ninth birthday with the whole class, after all. Hermione tried to put up a friendly smile when the little group started moving, but the girls passed her by as if she were invisible. She was quite sure she had heard the words 'silly swot'.

Long forgotten thoughts kept swirling through her head, and she knew that Snape saw everything she saw, sensed everything she felt. She wanted to beg him to stop, but she was unable to produce any sound.

She was sitting on Ron's lap while he played with her hair. Giggling, she heard him say, 'I cannot believe that Ginny is pregnant! My little sister... how could that happen?'

She smacked his shoulder playfully and answered with a grin, 'There's this theory about a certain barn owl in the Muggle world, they say it is the stork.'

'You know what I mean,' he answered, also grinning. 'It seems like yesterday that Ginny ran after me and demanded that I should stop pulling her hair. '

Hermione laughed. 'Ron, it WAS yesterday!' He kissed every single one of her fingertips; and she saw this dreamy expression in his eyes the wish to have a child of their own. He said it more and more often.

'Hermione?' he asked softly, 'I have been thinking. What do you think about...'

'Dinner?' she interrupted hastily and jumped off his lap. 'Good idea, I am starving!'

His expression changed and she saw that he was hurt. But it also hurt her that she could not simply take his hand and tell him that she also wanted that. It would have been a lie and therefore she could not.

Hermione whimpered, but she had given up trying to push Snape away. Instead, she tried to remember what she knew of Harry's Occlumency lessons back in fifth year. *Breathe calmly,* she told herself. *Think of clouds... snow... the night sky.* For a small moment she thought that she might succeed, but then she felt Snape's breath on her ear and smelled the unfamiliar scent of his skin.

'I cannot go on like this, Hermione. It breaks me to pieces,' Ron said with a sad voice that broke her heart.

She wanted to tell him that everything was going to be okay, that she would cut down on her job. At the same time she knew that she could not do that. 'Please don't go,' she whispered helplessly, and she kept repeating those words long after he had gone when she was sitting alone on the floor of her flat, with her arms around her knees and tears running down her cheeks in an endless stream.

She perceived Snape's eyes through some kind of mist, only inches away from her face. Black depths, impenetrable like the night.

'I see no difference,' her Memory Snape said with a spiteful grin while her front teeth kept growing longer and longer because of Malfoy's hex.

'When he killed Dumbledore,' Harry said flatly, 'his face showed everything that he had kept hidden from him over all those years: plain hatred.' Harry's hands clenched in fists, his face was contorted with pain, and he stared out of the window at the landscape passing by. The Hogwarts Express made the same continuous, lulling sound that usually calmed them down, but today it filled Hermione's head with an unbearable noise.

'Don't you believe that it might have been his hatred of himself?' she murmured, but Harry did not hear her.

Nagini glided across the floor like a shadow, and before anybody had a chance to react, she leapt up and her fangs had left a gaping wound in Snape's neck. Hermione felt Harry start at her side, and she felt pure horror when she saw Snape sink to the floor.

Snape clutched at Harry's robe while Harry was crouching at his side. Soon, very soon, Snape's heart would beat for the last time and he would drop into eternal silence.

'Oh, Harry, he is so very cute,' she whispered, bending over the newborn baby boy. 'What will you name him?'

Harry softly caressed the cheek of his one-day-old child with one finger. 'Albus Severus,' he said firmly and looked her in the eye. She nodded, fully understanding. 'Snape's and Dumbledore's names combined,' he said. 'To me, this means that they are equal in terms of my respect for them.'

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it. 'I know that, Harry. I am proud of you. And I am sure that Lily would have been proud of the man that you have become.'

The grip around her shoulders relaxed a bit, but Snape did not let her go completely. When she realised that he had retreated from her mind, she took a deep breath as if she were resurfacing after having been pushed under water for quite a while. She gasped for air and Snape was panting, too. A fine layer of sweat was glistening on his pale skin.

"Do you feel better, now that you have done this?" she asked. Her voice was surprisingly calm, contradicting the feelings that were raving inside of her. She did not cry, but she knew that the tears would come later. When she was alone in her flat and the experiences of the day would mercilessly invade her consciousness.

He let her go as if he had burnt his hands on her.

"No. Wrong. How stupid of me. Please excuse my imprecise choice of words. My asking if you feel better would imply that you do indeed feel good sometimes. But you don't, Professor Snape, do you? There is nothing at all that gives you pleasure, except maybe other people's weaknesses."

He backed away several steps and gazed at her with his eyes all screwed up. "Maybe you know now how it feels to disclose your most precious secrets unwillingly, Miss Granger," he said, very quietly.

"Yes, I know. You have violated my mind although I asked you to stop. You could have let me go," she replied.

"And this is different from your opportunity to discreetly pull back when you heard Potter and me talking?" he asked icily.

Hermione darted an angry glance at him. "It is different because I was really sorry about what I did, and I apologised for it. You, on the other hand, are not sorry about your using Legilimency on me. You were right when you said that I expected you to hide your true self behind a mask made of impoliteness and tactlessness. Remember? But now I see that there is nothing indeed to mask at all. I look into your eyes and all I see is emptiness.

"When I eavesdropped on your conversation with Harry, I saw emotion on your face for the very first time. There was pain, sadness and guilt, and so I thought that, hidden from everyone, somewhere deep inside of you, you were still alive, Professor Snape. I thought that, as long as you had such feelings, there might also be some that could make you enjoy your life once more at some point. I thought you were a brave man. But now I realise that you keep clinging to the guilt you are feeling for Lily Potter's death because you are too much of a coward to let go. All other parts of you are dead because you do not allow yourself to feel anything but guilt.

"Yes, Professor, you are a coward: too afraid to either really live or die. You could not forgive me when I asked you for it because you have nothing left that enables forgiveness. Deep down inside, you are a dead man."

She panted as if she had run a marathon, although she had not moved an inch. All those words had slipped from her tongue before she even had the chance to think whether she really could or wanted to say them. She would never have thought that she could find the courage to speak to him like that. However, his breaking into her mind with the sole purpose of returning the like had crushed any respect she had ever had for him.

He stared at her, and she expected him to say something like,*'An impressive analysis of my character, Miss Granger. Maybe you did indeed choose the wrong career because you ought to have studied psychology instead.'* But he said nothing.

When he finally did speak, his words hit her like a blow to the stomach.

"Yes, I am," he said, very silent, not looking at her. "I am nothing, and I am nowhere."

Gone for Good

Chapter 9 of 43

Hermione leaves Spinner's End

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: My heartfelt thanks go to ladyinthecloak, who beta-read this one in record time: you taught me more about English punctuation than any grammar school teacher ever did!

Chapter 9

Hermione heard the blood rushing in her ears while she stared at Snape.

He looked at her, but seemed not to see her at all.

She almost hoped that he would say something. Anything to break the horrific silence that had fallen onto the sitting room like a heavy cloak; but he remained as silent as she did.

Even if Hermione had been able to talk, she would not have known what to say. Every word, no matter how sincere, would have left a bitter taste. Therefore, she did the only thing she was able to do: she took several steps backwards until she reached the door.

He did nothing to stop her somehow, he did not even seem to notice that she was about to go.

She, on the other hand, did not know whether she ought to be relieved or uncomfortable about this. Her stiff fingers pressed the handle down. It squeaked a little, and only then did he notice that she was standing at the door.

His empty gaze followed her as she stepped outside and turned without a word. For some strange reason, she was sure that he would be standing there for quite a while stiff as a statue and just as hollow and lifeless.

oOoOoOoOo

In the weeks that followed, Hermione did what she always did to prevent thinking about things that gave her a headache: She drowned herself in her work as if her life depended on it. After all, it was an effective method to keep her mind off what had happened at Spinner's End. Unfortunately, however, it only helped until the day Ginny visited her at her London flat one evening to tell her that Snape had written them a letter.

"You will not believe it," Ginny said while plopping herself down on the sofa. "He wrote that he had been so busy these last few weeks filling orders for St. Mungo's and for the Apothecaries that he had no time to visit us. But he will come this weekend instead."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "Really?" she asked. She had listened to her inner voice, which had told her not to tell Harry and Ginny about her visit. For once, because she knew that she would never manage to tell them what he had done and what had transpired afterwards, but also because she realised that the relationship between Snape and the Potters would be disturbed beyond repair if they knew what had happened that day.

"Yes, we could hardly believe it. I must admit that I secretly hoped that, eventually, he would act as if nothing had happened. I think he mainly did it for Al. During his last visit, I was under the impression that he cares a little for our baby."

"Speaking of them where are the boys?" Hermione asked to buy herself some time. After all, Ginny knew her well enough to realise that the message had confused her.

"They're with Mom. " Ginny winked. "She insisted on taking the kids so I can relax a little. However, I have not told her that James' behaviour is dreadful today because I forbade him to paint a scar on his forehead to look like Daddy!" She giggled softly and Hermione dutifully managed a crooked grin. "I have done some shopping in Diagon Alley. " Ginny pointed at the shopping bags she had deposited next to her seat. "All the time I have been thinking that it would be great to be able to delve through the shops and buy some things undisturbed, but in the end, most of the things I bought are for the kids." She sighed with a mock irritable voice, but her beaming eyes gave her away.

"I have not been shopping for a long time," Hermione said, lost in thought. "Somehow, I never manage."

"Listen, I wanted to ask you whether you would like to come this weekend, too," Ginny suddenly said.

"Oh, I don't think that is a good idea, Ginny," Hermione threw in hastily. "It would only emphasise this stupid affair again unnecessarily, and you do not want that, do you? I am quite certain that I am the very last person Snape would like to meet. He would definitely not feel at ease in my presence. Just let the dust settle over this."

The redhead worried her lower lip absentmindedly. "You are right," she finally said. "It would not be such a good idea. Sorry, I did not give it too much thought. It's just you have not been at our place for quite a while either. James keeps asking for you."

"Oh, I'm sorry, really. I will come by within the next few days, I promise. I miss the boys, too, but I have too much on my plate in the office at the moment."

"Do you have much work or do you make it for yourself?" Ginny asked, frowning. Then she wiggled her index finger in front of Hermione's face menacingly. "I know you, darling. And I cannot help the feeling that Snape is not the only person who talks his way out of things by using work as an excuse." She grinned.

Hermione managed a fake giggle while she poured some pumpkin juice for her friend. "I do have much work. Do you honestly believe that I would rather spend my time at the office than with you?"

"Well, you have always been quite special in setting your priorities for work and fun. It seems that they are just the same to you most of the time," Ginny replied, unmoved. She stayed a little longer, and Hermione was thankful to change the subject and relax somewhat.

Later, however, when she was alone again, her thoughts kept wandering of their own accord. She thought of that afternoon at Spinner's End, and she tried to fade out Snape's words, but the memory was clear and fresh as if she had heard them yesterday instead of some weeks ago. She did not like the empty and dead sound of his voice which was strange somehow, given the fact that she had blurted out just moments before that she considered him dead inside.

One moment she caught herself wishing that she had not said all those things, in the next moment she thought of how he had forced his way into her mind and what he had seen there. She had a hard time deciding whether she despised him deeply or felt pity for him. Pity, so deep that she sometimes felt like crying. But she did not feel the tears in her throat or in her eyes. She felt them coming from some dark and secret place deep down inside, and she asked herself whether she ought to have said something. Maybe, she thought, her voice would have been like a piece of cloth wiping the dirt off a grimy window, to let a thin but precious ray of sunshine into the darkness that was his life.

oOoOoOoOo

Over the next few weeks, Hermione perfected the art of timing her visits at Harry and Ginny's house to never meet Snape at all costs. At first, she thought that he would visit them only at weekends, which would have made the whole thing quite easy. But sometimes he turned up on weekdays. Luckily, he never came unannounced, and so Hermione managed to find out about his next visit by skilfully leading her conversations with Ginny into that direction. At least, she thought so.

"Okay, what exactly is the matter with you?" Ginny asked her bluntly one day while they had tea in the Potters' kitchen.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"You make a fuss like Mundungus Fletcher. One could think you want to rob us. Every time you want to visit us, you ask these strange questions."

"Strange questions?" echoed Hermione, who held Albus Severus in her arm and caressed his hair.

"Yep, strange questions," Harry confirmed. "You ask whether we are alone or whether we expect someone for dinner, whether we have any plans for the evening just spit it out, Hermione. We will find out anyway. Ginny is a master in getting people to admit things they wanted to keep to themselves, so you'd rather confess voluntarily."

Ginny grinned.

Hermione sighed and gave in. *Subtlety has never been my forte,* she thought and decided to give away some kind of half truth. "It is because of Snape. I don't think it would be good if we ran into each other. It is... erm... When we meet, there's always some fight in the air. I don't want you to put up with this, and to be honest, I do not want to put up with it myself either."

"You mean because of the day you eavesdropped on him? But Hermione, that was months ago! I must admit, one can never know how long he holds his grudges against people. However, I don't think that you have to hide or something."

"I know. But now that you seem to get along quite well again, I do not want to risk anything." At least that last sentence was true. Hermione had been happy to learn that Snape visited them quite often. Ginny had said that he was still somewhat reserved, but never unfriendly, let alone rude. Basically, they had not much to talk about, and it was obvious that his godson was the main reason for Snape's visits.

"I don't think that Severus would hold it against us if you were here by coincidence when he showed up. Not any more. Provided, of course, that you don't hide behind the sofa to eavesdrop." Harry grinned.

Hermione's smile never reached her eyes. She doubted that Harry was right. "Did he come out of his shell towards you?" she asked.

Harry hesitated for a moment, then he nodded. "Well, we do not get philosophic or exchange our views about everything under the sun, but he only utters a spiteful comment about my heroism once every two weeks, and on the whole we get along quite well. His manners are most engaging when Al is around."

"Oh, you ought to see those two together," Ginny threw in with a giggle. "Al always gurgles when Severus takes him and Severus I cannot describe it properly, but he always looks so content. Some days ago, Al was not very well. Severus had him on his arm, and Al threw up the whole porridge I had fed him before all over Severus' robes. I was so embarrassed! But Severus stayed all calm. He put him down on the sofa very carefully, wiped Al's face clean with his bare hand and then Scourgified the whole mess."

"At Al's first birthday you will certainly see how his godfather behaves around him, Hermione." Harry laughed. "This will probably be the only day when you cannot avoid each other."

"But his birthday is months away," Hermione answered in a shock.

"Time flies," Ginny answered with a wink of an eye. Then she added, "And don't you dare chicken out of this. We'd be mortally offended if you don't show up just because you want to avoid meeting Snape."

Hermione shrugged, resigned. Secretly, she was even curious how Snape would behave around her and whether he would reveal that it might have been her words that brought him to seek contact with the Potters again. She did not know that she would see Snape again long before Al's birthday...

oOoOoOoOo

On a rainy day in early June, Hermione caught sight of Severus Snape's face on the last page of a newspaper while she passed by a newsstand on her way to work. She stopped with as much momentum as she had been walking before, causing another wizard, who had been walking behind her, to bump into her. "Sorry," she called out after the angry looking man. Then she rummaged in her cloak pockets for some small change and paid for the newspaper.

It was a paper named "Wulfric's Wonderful Week". Upon reading the title, something flared up in Hermione's memory, but she could not remember it immediately. Only when she looked at Snape's picture and read the name under the respective article, she knew immediately where she knew that magazine from.

Part of the paper's last page was dedicated to a column titled "What has become of...?". Although Hermione had not planned to read the article before her lunch break, her eyes already flew across the lines.

Bitter Medicine or Poisonous Truth?

Many a wizard might have asked what has become of Severus Snape, former teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, former headmaster of said school, and former right hand man of He-Who-May-Be-Named-Again-But-Whose-Name-Most-People-Would-Not-Stain-Their-Mouths-With.

We have asked ourselves what he might be doing. What does this former Death Eater, who has been exonerated by the Ministry of Magic and who always wears a pinched expression as if his underwear were too tight, do for a living? Many people were convinced that he had taken up residence abroad, but Severus Snape is more present than you might have guessed indeed.

Maybe you are just about to drip some medicine into the innocent mouth of your child medicine that has been concocted by none other than this man whose past (or present?) is darker than the darkest night.

Just imagine my horror when I stepped into my trusted apothecary and unintentionally, out of pure coincidence, overheard a conversation during which I learnt that my Sleeping Draught had been brewed by hands that have murdered, tortured and maybe even poisoned in the past. I froze (metaphorically, of course!) and asked myself whether I am the only one who feels some slight, albeit minimal, nausea at the thought that Severus Snape wields the stirring rod, unobserved and alone, back in his little cellar.

Rita Skeeter

Hermione snarled angrily and crumpled the newspaper up. She knew that Rita Skeeter had stopped working for the Daily Prophet at the end of the war. She had not heard anything about her for quite a while until one of her colleagues had told her that Rita wrote for "Wulfric's Wonderful Week" lately, had a column there, libelled people and dragged them through the mud in the usual fashion.

"That rotten old..." puffed Hermione, although she could not have said why the article enraged her so. She knew very well that wizards and witches had divided opinions about Snape. However, no matter what could be said about him and many of those things did not show him in a good light at all she would wager everything she owned that Snape never willingly added anything but the required substances to his brews.

oOoOoOoOo

It was probably the first time ever that Hermione was not the last person to leave the office in the evening. Her colleagues were quite taken aback when, at one minute to five, she said good-bye in a hurry, tucked a crumpled newspaper under her arm, and swept out of the room.

At the entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic, she contemplated for one moment whether she should Apparate, but then she decided to use one of the fireplaces to Floo. She had done this quite often, and James always shouted with joy when she appeared in the Potter's fireplace. One glance at her watch told her that Harry should have finished work, too, and would probably be at home. So she took some Floo powder, resolutely threw it into the fireplace, stepped into the flames and said, "Godric's Hollow, number twenty-four."

She felt the ashes burn inside her lungs when she reached her destination, and she saw Harry and Ginny on the sofa in the sitting room. Waving the newspaper impatiently, she shouted, "Hi, I'm sorry to burst in just like that. Did you read what that silly old cow wrote about Snape?"

Her two friends stared at her in surprise, and Ginny just managed to say, "Oh, Hermione!"

Then Hermione became conscious of another person in the room.

To her left, next to the window so she could not see him from the fireplace, stood Severus Snape with little Albus on his arm. He stared at her, and she stared back.

The newspaper fell from her slackened hand, and she realised that he must have seen her dramatic entrance.

She was sure that he asked himself what this was all about and oh, wouldn't it be fun to explain that...?

Much Ado about Something

Chapter 10 of 43

Reader's Letters

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Although ladyinthecloak can be very fast, the fact that I am posting two chapters in a row may be attributed to my own stupidity. She actually sent me Chapter 9 more than a week ago and I just lost the email... Thanks for sending it again and reminding me!

Chapter 10 Much Ado About Something

"Could you please fill me in on the identity of that 'silly old cow' and the things she writes about me?" Snape said in mirthful irritation. He looked Hermione up and down attentively as she blushed and brushed the ash from her clothes.

"I did not expect to find you here," she murmured abashedly, trying to avoid his question.

"Well, that much is obvious," he answered dryly.

Harry and Ginny were also staring at Hermione in surprise. She frantically thought about anything she could say or do to wriggle out of this embarrassing situation, but she was aware that there was no other way but to tell the truth. So she stooped to pick the newspaper up from the floor, held it out towards Snape and said, "Last page."

He tucked it under one arm, went over to the sofa and carefully laid Albus Severus down on his back before unfolding the newspaper without a word. Harry got up and walked towards Snape, whose expression did not give away one single thought, as always.

"So, please enlighten us, Miss Granger, which part of Rita Skeeter's typically waspish contribution did flare your temper like this?" he finally asked, quite amused, after he had finished reading.

Hermione was astonished to see him obviously relaxed, and for one moment, she asked herself whether they had read the same article.

"May I?" Not even waiting for an answer, Harry grabbed*Wulfric's Wonderful Week* and immersed himself in the column. Hermione knew him well enough to recognise his frown for what it was: annoyance, slowly but surely turning into anger.

"I was upset because Rita Skeeter is a malicious, slandering and deceitful person who drags people through the mud," she stated calmly.

"Would someone please tell me what this is all about?" Ginny interrupted. She looked from one person to another, seeking information.

"Skeeter uses her column to hint at the fact that the Potions Severus sells to the apothecaries contain ingredients that do not belong there," Harry muttered through clenched teeth.

"The spiteful s..." Ginny blurted out. Her usually soft eyes flickered in a rage while she looked from Harry to Snape and finally at Hermione.

"Snake in the grass?" Snape suggested with just a hint of a cynical smile. Ginny grinned, but became earnest once more when Harry handed the paper to her.

"You don't seriously want to tell me that you are surprised by the way Miss Skeeter writes her articles, Miss Granger?" Snape addressed Hermione again.

"No, but..."

"So why does this upset you so?" he interrupted.

"Because I get worked up about the fact that she makes you appear to be a criminal who consciously poisons people!" she burst out.

When he looked at her, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. The intensity of his gaze reminded her of their last encounter when he had penetrated her mind. Although he did not use Legilimency now, she had the strange feeling that he could look right through her. "You you'd never do such thing," she added almost defiantly.

From the corner of her eye, she saw that Harry and Ginny nodded their consent while James grabbed the newspaper and started tearing the pages apart. Nobody bothered to stop his little game.

The corners of Snape's mouth twisted. "Wouldn't I?" he said with the velvety voice that always made the hair at the back of her neck stand on end. "Are you quite sure about that, Miss Granger?"

oOoOoOoOo

"Well, I wish you'd have done it in the case of Rita Skeeter's Sleeping Draught," Harry growled angrily.

Snape went over to an armchair and sat down. "I suspect that this article is just Miss Skeeter's reaction to our last, rather, well, 'hot' encounter," he said casually.

"You met her?" Harry asked, astonished. Hermione and Ginny also stared at him, incapable of believing that Snape had indeed been in contact with the unscrupulous reporter.

"I've not exactly met her. Actually, she waylaid me in my own garden and crept up on me from behind, armed with a scroll of parchment and a quill. She started blathering about a biography."

Hermione could vividly imagine Rita Skeeter cowering in the bushes, avidly observing Snape's house and waiting for him to finally come out, just to accost him and talk him into an interview. Nobody in his or her right mind would do something so extremely stupid, she thought.

"How did you react?" Harry asked curiously.

"I could not help but presume that I was under attack. Having been a spy for many years, prepared to be killed at any moment, I tend to react out of pure instinct when someone comes sneaking up at my back. I just could not help it. I am afraid that Miss Skeeter did not really anticipate that fireball."

"You set her on fire?" Ginny gaped at him.

"Just her hair," Snape answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You didn't," Ginny exclaimed. She tried hard to suppress the enthusiasm in her voice, but she did not quite manage.

"Yes, indeed, I did. As soon as I realised my regrettable mistake, I immediately offered her a special healing draught for burn blisters with a dash of hair growing tonic, but to my surprise, Miss Skeeter seemed in a great hurry to get away." His malicious smile left no doubt as to the intention behind the alleged fireball 'accident'.

"I don't believe it," murmured Harry, and a grin started spreading on his face, "but that explains everything."

Hermione was torn between an almost primitive feeling of Schadenfreude and some dull foreboding that Rita Skeeter had only just begun her retaliation campaign. Like almost nobody else, that woman knew how to find the soft spots of people and put her impeccably manicured fingertips into those wounds until she had their victims exactly where she wanted them to be. *In that case, however, we still have the invaluable knowledge about her being an unregistered Animagus,* she thought grimly.

Upon exchanging quick glances with Harry and Ginny, she saw the expression on their faces and presumed that they were thinking along the same lines. "Don't her hints bother you at all?" Hermione asked hesitatingly. Ever since Snape had read the article, nothing in his demeanour had indicated that he was infuriated in any way.

"It's only one of many," he replied, unmoved. "Whether someone praises me as a secret hero or someone else accuses me of being a murderer without a conscience all these reports have one thing in common: they contain fewer facts than a Quidditch ticket. It does not matter to me which position the newspapers take towards my person I am indifferent to their contributions. With one single exception, I must admit."

"Which one?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Shortly after the end of the war, the Quibbler wrote that I might be the reincarnation of Weedle the Wanderer, the true author of the tales that Beedle the Bard had stolen and sold under his own name. Angry about the plagiarism that he could never prove, Weedle allegedly joined a secret society which followed some mysterious cult. The only known fact about this cult, they said, was that it allowed only people with extremely large facial features into the circle."

"I remember that one." Ginny burst out laughing. "I read it, too! That was by far the most absurd article among all the nonsense the Quibbler has ever published. I would never have counted you among its readers, though."

"Oh, I am not," Snape answered. His lips quirked with the hint of a smile. "They supplied me with one specimen copy. It was addressed to 'Severus Weedle Snape.'"

Harry and Ginny exploded with laughter while Hermione realised with a shock that Snape owned a subtle sense of humour beyond all those layers of self-loathing, indifference and impenetrability.

oOoOoOoOo

The following issue of *Wulfric's Wonderful Week* was sold out one hour after being published, and the wizards and witches working in the printing house had to work extra shifts to refill the stocks.

Ever since Harry had defeated Voldemort more than eight years before, all kinds of newspapers scrambled over interviewing him. In spite of the enormous sums they offered, Harry had refused to talk to them all those years. Every now and then, he could not help but make some very brief statements when pursued by extremely persistent reporters, but in general, no paper published anything but the few things he was grudgingly prepared to say: yes, he perceived the thankfulness of all those who admired him and held him in high regard, and he was happy about that, but he valued his privacy above anything else.

Wulfric's Wonderful Week was no exception, but with Ginny's and Hermione's help he had written a short and well-thought-out reader's letter, which had been printed among many others albeit right on top.

"I haven't found the time to read it yet, I had so much work today," Hermione wailed as soon as she arrived at the Potters' that evening and threw herself on the sofa. Harry and Ginny grinned as she grabbed the open newspaper from the coffee table. "Half a page full of reader's letters?" she gasped, glancing over the respective page.

"Yep," Harry answered. "Loads of rubbish though, but there are some very interesting letters, too."

If you asked me whom I trust implicitly to brew healing potions I accept and take without hesitation, I would name Severus Snape, godfather of my youngest son, Albus Severus. Only few wizards and witches really know and understand how much they owe to this brave man I do. Harry James Potter.

Hermione smiled when she read those words that she already knew.

"Only a few words, but this rag probably owes you the largest circulation one of its issues ever had." Ginny giggled while Harry grinned complacently.

"However, Severus will probably be anything but pleased," Harry pointed out. "He will accuse me of being sloppy and sentimental at his expense. Then he will deduct several thousand points from Gryffindor and draw a face as if he suffered from a violent toothache."

Ginny agreed with her husband, but Hermione did not even listen to her any more. Emendis Getwell, Head of the Department for Magical Injuries at St. Mungo's, had written a very indignant letter.

On behalf of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, I would like to expressly point out that Mr. Severus Snape has been supplying us with medicinal potions for years and we have never had one single complaint about his potions. Each and every one of them has been of outstanding quality. We hold our cooperation with Mr. Snape in very high regard, and we are happy that such a talented Potions master is offering his services to us.

Some anonymous readers also made a point of defending Snape, but there were other, more doubtful letters.

I am glad that Rita Skeeter has uncovered the actions of this former Death Eater. With all due respect for the Ministry's acquittal, I would nevertheless rather refrain from

ingesting anything brewed by Severus Snape. Ginger Gourmetter

"Maybe she should demand that all the bottles she buys from now on bear the inscription '100 % Snape free'," Hermione murmured angrily.

"Good idea, Hermione. You could recommend it to the apothecaries. This might help them to calm their worried customers." Ginny laughed and pointed her finger to another letter.

Recently, I bought some Anti Hiccup Draught. One day later I had a suppurating boil on my right arm. THIS cannot be a coincidence, now that I know who has brewed my medicine. Morgan Muddlinger

"Isn't he one of Mundungus Fletcher's pals?" Ginny asked. "I do not know where he's got his boil from, but it certainly isn't from Snape's potion."

They read the remaining letters together until Harry pointed at one of them and said: "This one steps into the breach for Severus quite determinedly, don't you think?"

Severus Snape certainly is not a sociable person, nor is he nice or polite. There are many known and unknown things one might hold against him. On the other hand, you might say this about everybody else, too. I am not so delusional as to pretend that I know who Severus Snape really is. But there is one thing of which I am absolutely sure: You do not need a clean slate to be a honourable person. Leontes Pearson

"Leontes Pearson? Do you know him?" Ginny said. Harry and Hermione both shook their heads.

"I feel as if I had heard that name somewhere, but I cannot remember the time or the occasion," Harry brooded.

"Maybe they have been in the same year at Hogwarts?" Ginny considered.

"Or he is just a friend," Hermione said after a short period of silence.

oOoOoOoOo

Just like Harry had expected, Snape was rather miffed about his reader's letter. "You should not have done that," he had yelled. But when Harry had argued that as a result, Severus got more orders than ever, he had pondered over some biting reply and finally shut up when he had not been able to think of any. It was true: the apothecaries virtually went head over heels to get Snape's potions. The fact that Harry Potter, hero and shining example for many people, had publicly declared that he trusted Severus Snape and even had made him the godfather of his son said quite a lot.

Ginny suspected that Harry's public declaration of trust meant quite a lot to Severus, in his own special way, even if he did not know how to handle this at least she had told Hermione so.

The weeks passed by and people had almost forgotten about Rita Skeeter's article. Hermione had to admit that the journalist had definitely managed to keep herself in the news, and she strongly suspected that this had been her goal from the beginning. Nevertheless, she was glad that the malicious defamation was not a subject of public discussion any more and Skeeter had obviously lost her desire for revenge.

Every now and then, Hermione met Snape at the Potters' house, but most of the time she just passed him because he arrived as she was leaving or vice versa. They treated each other with restrained politeness, and more than once, Hermione was under the impression that he used these rare opportunities to give her a penetrating look, as if she had something to hide that he wanted to reveal.

oOoOoOoOo

Shortly before Albus Severus' first birthday, Hermione found an envelope with her name on it on her desk. She immediately recognised the spiky, compact writing. Although her brain ruled out every possibility of Snape sending her a letter, her gut feeling told her that he was the sender. When she read the few lines, she went pale:

"Go on, go on. Thou canst not speak too much; I have deserv'd all tongues to talk their bitt'rest." Act 3, Scene 2.

Thousands of things crossed her mind, and she sat down as if she had been stunned. Then one thought shone through her mind as clear as a mountain spring: He was well acquainted with Muggle literature and he knew it. He had probably known right from the start.

A/N: * From Shakespeare, "The Winter's Tale". If you are interested in the original text, go to This Page and search for a unique word, e.g. "bitt'rest". I recommend a quick glance of the list of persons in the play (right at the start, after all the copyright notes and legal disclaimers).

Birthday Party

Chapter 11 of 43

Albus Severus' first birthday party

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

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A/N: Loads of Kinder chocolate go to ladyinthecloak, who returned this at superhuman speed! (And maybe some good coffee to go with it?)

Chapter 11

"Hermione, are you okay?" asked Emilia with a concerned frown. She gave Hermione a searching look, worried because her colleague stared at the parchment in her hands as if she had been petrified.

"I beg your pardon? Oh – yes, thank you, " Hermione answered. Then she hurriedly folded the parchment and put it in her bag. She took several deep breaths and smiled

at Emilia. According to her deep frown, Hermione's colleague was not convinced of her well-being at all.

Of course he is familiar with Muggle literature, Hermione thought in despair. She remembered the moment she had decided to write the reader's letter, knowing very well that it would most probably cause a commotion if she used her real name. As a good friend of Harry Potter, she belonged to a circle of people to whom the media paid constant attention – even now, eight years after Voldemort's downfall. Therefore, she had instinctively opted for a pseudonym. She had doubted that anyone among her circle of friends or acquaintances would guess the real person behind Leontes Pearson. No matter how famous Shakespeare's work might be in the Muggle world, witches and wizards did not normally read Muggle books. At least the people Hermione usually dealt with did not.

When making up the pseudonym, she had chosen a character from one of Shakespeare's works in which her own name was quite prominent. 'Queen Hermione' – her father had lovingly called her when she was a little girl. It had always made her feel very special. In Shakespeare's 'Winter's Tale', King Leontes, Hermione's husband, had accused his pregnant wife of being unfaithful and imprisoned her. He was a man dominated by raging jealousy who saw only those things he wanted to see. *Any resemblance to actual living persons are pure coincidence,* thought Hermione with an ironic smile while she took another deep breath.

Snape's lines, a quotation of Leontes' text, were certain proof that he did not only know the 'Winter's Tale' but had also made the right conclusions about the person behind the reader's letter. Her face flushed in deep red while she imagined Snape reading the newspaper, realising that she had defended him, although not under her real name. She wondered what he might have thought about it. Interestingly enough, she did not know herself why she had been itching to defend him against Rita Skeeter's slander. She tried to make herself believe that she had acted upon her rightful anger about the reporter. Yet, she knew that it had not been her only motivation.

Snape was a nasty man. He was tactless, impolite and unfair, and there was nothing to cover that up. She had a hard time relaxing in his presence, especially since the day he had invaded her mind and read her thoughts like a book. Basically, there was no logical reason why she had felt almost obliged to write this letter to the publishing house. But then she thought of the lost expression on his face and of how his eyes had roamed the whole room to avoid her when he had spoken those words that had numbed her soul: *"I am nothing and I am nowhere."*

Hermione just could not allow him to lose his work – the only thing that represented at least an impression of normality in his life. She tried to imagine his daily routine without the task of brewing potions for apothecaries and hospitals. Maybe, with an exception of those days when he visited the Potters, he would sit on his threadbare sofa day in day out. The empty shell that he was would breathe, sleep and eat, maybe even read a book. But it would not live.

She was strangely concerned at that thought, and she shook her head as if trying to get rid of it that way. Suddenly, her pity reminded her of the times when she had founded S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. Was this the same? Was it her natural urge to meddle without being asked? To take an interest in Snape's life because she could not bear it when he was in danger of being suffocated by the shadows of his past, not even trying to step out in the light?

She nodded, as if she were answering a question. However, in some hidden recess of her soul, she knew that this situation felt completely different from S.P.E.W.

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Albus Severus' first birthday came way too fast, and Hermione saw herself confronted with the usual gift problem. He was less lively and had less of an urge to be active than his elder brother James, whom she had given a magical humming top for his first birthday. She turned the question over in her mind, asked her elder colleagues who had children of their own for advice and finally decided to buy him a cookware set for children that consisted of an apron, a cook's hat and several small pots and pans. Ginny had told her that he loved to watch while she prepared the meals in the kitchen. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, she purchased the hat and apron in the Gryffindor colors red and gold, and she grinned at the thought of his appearance in these items.

Harry had told her that only Ginny's parents, George and of course Snape would be in attendance for dinner. Bill, Fleur, Charlie and Ron had already been there in the early afternoon. Hermione was quite happy about the others' presence because it helped her to avoid talking to Snape without making a bad impression. She would simply involve Molly or George in a lengthy conversation until she could go home with a clear conscience. She sincerely doubted that she would know what to say to him. On the other hand, she did not think that he would mention the incident – if he had had the desire to talk about it, he would have had plenty of opportunities already. But why had he let her know that he had caught her out? Sighing, she forced herself to think of other things and hoped that the evening would not bring any embarrassing surprises.

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When Hermione got there at six p.m., George was already there and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. They had not seen each other for at least six months, and in spite of all the years that had passed, it still felt odd to see George without his twin brother. He was slimmer than Hermione remembered, and although he laughed very often, there was a certain seriousness in his eyes that did not match his former lighthearted personality.

"Listen, guys, I have to tell you something before Mum and Dad show up," he said after Hermione had spun Albus Severus around and given him his parcel. With James' help, Albus immediately started unpacking it, shrieking excitedly.

George looked into the expectant faces and then proclaimed with studied indifference, "I got married last week in Mt. Blistery."

"You did WHAT?" Ginny squealed after one very long second of silence.

Harry and Hermione, too, stared at him as if he had told them that he had donated a kidney to a stranger. Hermione knew that Mt. Blistery was some kind of a magical equivalent to Las Vegas.

"Yep," George answered, grinning. "Lorna and I spontaneously decided to fly to Mt. Blistery and lose a few Galleons. At one casino, I had some kind of a lunatic fit and placed all the gold I had on the 14 – you know, the first of April, our birthday."

Hermione noticed that he talked about "their birthday" – his and Fred's – and she swallowed hard when she realised that there would always be a gap for George; something lost that had once been a part of him.

"So I told Lorna that I would marry her on the spot if the number really won. Well, now we are very rich – and very married." He looked in all those shocked faces and laughed when nobody said a word.

Harry was the first to come to his senses. "Erm, okay, ah – congratulations, mate! Lorna is quite the catch!" He started grinning, too, patted George's shoulder and turned to get a bottle of Firewhiskey so they could toast the newlyweds.

"Oh, yes, she is – albeit not quite as good as I!"

Ginny threw herself into her brother's arms, then she punched his shoulder and snorted reproachfully: "You could have said something, you bastard!"

"Yeah, sorry. Next time I decide to be spontaneous, you will be the first to know!" He tousled Ginny's hair and lovingly poked at her waist.

Hermione also got up and hugged George, laughing. "Obviously, you of all people had to do something so exquisitely stupid! I am happy for you and Lorna."

"Thanks, Hermione," he replied, beaming as if she had paid him the greatest compliment in the world.

Harry put four glasses and the Firewhiskey on the table and poured some for everyone. George cleared his throat, raised his glass and said in a low voice: "To Fred, who cannot be here with us to stand by my side as best man and say that Lorna is making a big mistake because he actually looks much better than I." A shadow seemed to cross his features when he had spoken.

"To Fred," said Hermione, Harry and Ginny simultaneously. Then they clinked their glasses and took in the silence that enveloped the sitting room like a thick blanket.

"Pooh," panted George after throwing down the bronze coloured liquid in one gulp. "I definitely needed a bracer. Mom will go ballistic when she learns how I got married. You will back me up, won't you?"

"You can count on us," Ginny answered and laughed.

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Molly and Arthur arrived almost at the same time as Snape, who greeted everyone with a polite handshake but did not give away with one single gesture whether he liked the company or not. His black eyes rested on Hermione for a moment without any expression, and everyone who did not know him might have thought that they did not know each other at all.

Albus Severus giggled happily when his godfather lifted him up and talked to him in a low voice so nobody else could understand it.

"Oh, Severus, just put him down for a moment. Yes, just put him down and you will see," Ginny said with a mysterious smile.

Snape frowned, but he followed Ginny's request. He held the boy's hands in both of his.

"Let him go," Ginny instructed. Snape gave her a doubtful look, but when she nodded, he hesitatingly let Albus' hands go.

The little boy stood on his chubby, wobbly legs, but then he took two, three clumsy steps. When it seemed as if he would fall, Snape caught him just in time and then looked up with a surprised expression.

"Yesterday," Harry answered his unspoken question. "He held on to the table and then suddenly, he took a few steps. Of course, he fell down immediately, but hey – your godson is about to start walking!" He and Ginny were positively beaming, and Molly was the first to give her grandson a big hug and a loud smack on the cheek.

"Maybe we should have bought him those bladerollers, Molly," Arthur said cheerfully.

"Rollerblades," Harry corrected him automatically, then gave his father-in-law a good-natured pat on the shoulder. "But you'd better wait until he is twenty-seven years old or so. I prefer my child's bones in one piece, you know. And the same applies to my house."

Arthur roared with laughter and Harry joined in.

"I don't know whether this is a reason for laughter," Ginny said, raising her eyebrows. "We have our hands full, running after James and keeping him from mischief. With two small indefatigable boys this is going to be anything but fun." But her eyes sparkled while she lovingly glared at her two sons, who were busy inspecting Albus' gifts.

"Didn't you say you wanted to lose some weight?" George asked while he winked and ducked quickly, avoiding the shoe his sister was throwing in his direction.

Hermione smiled while she observed the Weasleys. Then her eyes darted to Snape, whose face still looked surprised – but it also held an expression that looked a lot like undisguised pride. As if he had felt her gaze, he turned his head in her direction, and she quickly looked away as if she had been caught doing something forbidden.

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Then they had tea, accompanied by some lively discussions. George amused everyone with stories he had experienced at his joke shop. Snape only joined in the conversation when he was asked a direct question, but he did not seem to feel uncomfortable at all. Hermione asked herself what he might have given his godson, but she thought that he would probably wait and give it to him when everybody else had left.

"... and then he made a big mistake by mixing up the puking pastilles and the pretty precocious pills. It was an awful mess. Oh, Professor Snape, while we're at it – I finally have to admit that Fred and I were responsible for all those pupils who were hit with sudden bouts of nausea so they had to leave your classes to be treated at the hospital wing." He sported the mischievous grin that reminded them of the old George – the boy he had been before he had lost his twin and best friend.

"George!" exclaimed Molly, as if her son were still a teenager getting cheeky with his teacher.

"Oh, my, what a surprise," Snape answered ironically. "I was so convinced that those pupils had the misfortune to get the benefit of Hagrid's cooking and then gave, well, the best that they had got in class." His lips quirked when George started laughing.

"But since you started this, I also have to admit something: in your Potions OWL I deducted one point that would have made you actually pass. I deducted it because of unreadable handwriting. I had asked which was the ailment which was best cured by the greentwiddle draught."

"Whooping cough," Hermione exclaimed and blushed when Snape gave her a derisive look.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Unfortunately, Mr. Weasley's handwriting was unreadable, and I was convinced that he had written 'whipping cloth' instead." He put on an act of shrugging regretfully, but George started laughing.

"No offence taken," he said when he had calmed down. "I could have never forgiven myself if I had gotten more OWLs than Fred. What is more – I have become quite the respectable businessman in spite of it, haven't I?"

Molly visibly fought the urge to reprimand her adult son, but before she could say anything, George added hastily, "It seems that the moment has come to make confessions of some kind. Therefore, I would like to tell you something else." He turned around to face his parents.

They looked at him, resigned to their fate, and he told them what Harry, Ginny and Hermione already knew. The words came gushing out of him in such a hurry that they could almost not follow, but Molly had obviously gotten the gist of it.

"Married? In Mont Blistery?" She turned to her husband as if she wanted to ask him what had gone wrong in their upbringing. But Arthur seemed to have overcome his first shock rather quickly. It took quite a while, and Harry and Ginny had to work quite hard on her until Molly finally accepted that her son had gotten married in a completely silly, unplanned move and without any member of the family.

"I would never have wed with all the big fuss that Bill and Fleur had, you know," George said gently. "Neither Fred nor I. I bet he'd be proud of me."

Suddenly tears were streaming down Molly's round cheeks; she tore George to her chest and hugged him. Hermione thought that her thoughts certainly were with her dead son, who had not been able to attend such an important event in the life of his twin brother.

Hermione felt strangely out of place when she felt the Weasleys move closer together. This was too personal and private, and she could not stand sitting next to them any more. Discreetly, she got up from her chair, went over to the children who were playing in a corner and squatted down in front of Albus Severus. "Why don't we try your cook's hat and apron?" she asked in a low voice. She pointed at her gift, and when Albus started to giggle, she put the hat on his head. He squeaked happily and grabbed the strange new headgear with his hands.

From the corner of her eye, she saw that Snape got up slowly and disappeared towards the bathroom. She had no doubt that he felt very uncomfortable in this intimate atmosphere of mourning and loving remembrance.

"Come, Al," she said, lifted him up and took him to the kitchen. James preferred to stay put with the other gifts.

Hermione summoned the small pots and pans with a murmured *"Accio,"* and Albus Severus obviously had much fun stirring them with a wooden spoon.

"You seem to be very sure, Miss Granger," she heard Snape's voice behind her and spun around. He pointed at the hat in the typical Gryffindor colours with a mocking smile.

"Well, all signs seem to show it," she replied. "His parents were both in Gryffindor."

"You know nothing about children." Snape glared at her with an unreadable expression while she asked herself what might have made him follow her to the kitchen.

"You are just the right person to say that, Professor," she snapped.

He approached several steps, unimpressed. "I would bet one hundred Galleons that he will be in Slytherin."

"Oh, I go along and wager one hundred and fifty that he will be a Gryffindor through and through." She raised her chin in a belligerent manner.

Snape observed her and his mouth twitched. "You have used this expression so often, Miss Granger, you ought to get the copyright for it."

She inhaled and prepared for a cutting remark, but then she was quite surprised to hear herself say, "The boy means very much to you, doesn't he?"

Again, his face held the enraptured expression that made her doubt whether he had heard her or whether he was going to answer at all. But then his head turned to face the playing child. She knew that he was not talking to her when he said, "He makes me feel... alive." He spoke the last word in a whisper, as if he were unsure whether it felt all right.

Hermione swallowed and sheepishly looked at her feet. She wanted to say something, but did not know what to say and how. It almost felt like when they had entered Sirius' house and realised that Moody had cast a spell that made their tongues stick to their faces. Only, the barrier now came from inside of her, not from a spell.

"It would be impossible to feel alive unless what has been lost would reappear," she finally said when she found her voice again, suddenly remembering Shakespeare's 'Winter's Tale'. In it, Leontes had realised, full of remorse, what horrible damage he had done by having his pregnant wife incarcerated. He had then said that he would remain without an heir if what had been lost would not reappear. In Snape's case, it was not the heir, but the spark that he had lost in order to have a will to live. It seemed as if he had found it again.

Snape turned towards her, and his gaze held some kind of silent understanding that made any words unnecessary. They both knew that they saw the weak but nonetheless existent similarities to the Winter's Tale, and they also knew that it would be better if they remained silent.

While she watched Snape retreat from the kitchen, Hermione suddenly realised what he had wanted to tell her by writing this quotation of Leontes' part:

"Go on, go on, thou canst not speak too much; I have deserv'd all tongues to talk their bitt'rest."

It was his way of acknowledging her reader's letter and at the same time apologising for everything that had transpired when he had invaded her mind in his house.

Return to Hogwarts

Chapter 12 of 43

Professor McGonagall organises a big event

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: A cauldron full of hot, strong thanks to ladyinthecloak, who gave me another very interesting English lesson with this these colloquial expressions are killing me, especially when I have to distinguish between American and British ones...

Chapter 12

One week before Christmas, Ginny told Hermione that Professor McGonagall, who had been Headmistress of Hogwarts for several years, wanted to introduce a new tradition.

"It seems that she has consulted with many people Mom was one of them and has made the decision: from this year on, the last day before the Christmas Holidays is going to be Alumni Day." Ginny grinned and got comfortable in Hermione's tiny kitchen. "We will probably get an owl from Hogwarts in the next few days. At least I think so Hermione, are you all right?" Ginny noticed that her best friend had turned white as a sheet and gazed at her in shock.

"It's nothing," Hermione quickly reassured her. "It's just... I haven't been to Hogwarts since... you know. Since the battle."

"But wouldn't you be glad to see the school and meet all those people again? To learn what they are doing and what has become of them?" Ginny asked hesitatingly.

"Of course I would," Hermione answered with a thoughtful smile. "I would... I know that I am silly. It's just a strange feeling, you know?"

Ginny nodded, and a shadow passed over her beautiful face. "Do you think I don't remember that my brother died there? Or Remus and Tonks? But you have to see it this way, Hermione: We have many great memories of Hogwarts, too. Don't you think that they will prevail? After all, it is the place where we defeated Voldemort."

"You mean where Harry defeated Voldemort," Hermione corrected her with a smile that suddenly emerged on her face. "We only observed it and were scared to death."

Ginny grinned and shrugged. "Yes, sure, he has. But it sounds cooler when I include us all."

Hermione felt a sudden rush of love for the friend who understood her so well. They had feared and grieved for the same people. In a few months, they had shared more than other people shared in their whole lives. Hermione was thankful to have somebody who understood her thoughts and fears without words.

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Hermione inhaled the ice-cold air deeply while she looked at the snow-covered grounds of Hogwarts that stretched before her like a never ending space.

"It's overwhelming, isn't it?" said Harry while he stared up towards the castle that lay before them as impressive as ever.

Harry, Ginny and Hermione had Apparated together, and for a while, they simply stood and took in the beautiful and familiar view.

"Look, Hagrid's home," exclaimed Ginny and pointed at the smoke that rose into the gray winter sky from the chimney of Hagrid's hut. They started walking together and moments later, Harry knocked on the massive wooden door.

"C'm in," boomed Hagrid's voice from within, and while Harry pushed the handle, Hermione suddenly felt like the little schoolgirl again when she, Ron and Harry would sneak out of the castle to visit the giant gamekeeper. "Merlin's beard," the half-giant exclaimed when he recognised his visitors. "C'mon in, 's freezin' ou'there!"

He crossed the distance with astonishing speed, considering his size, and in the next second he had enveloped Harry in a hug that made him scream. "Ouch, Hagrid, you're killing me," Harry gasped, but his beaming smile reflected Hagrid's happy face.

"Sorry," said the gamekeeper while tears started gleaming in his beetle black eyes. "Should've taken care, got carried away summat, sorry. It's jus' so good ta see you lot again!" He hugged Hermione and Ginny, too. Although he did make an effort to be more gentle with the young women, Hermione felt as if her lungs had been compressed to half their volume when he released her.

"We're happy too, Hagrid," Harry answered for all of them. Of course, they had met Hagrid in Diagon Alley every now and then over the years when he was 'on Hogwarts business', but being there in his hut felt completely different.

While they sat down at the table, Hermione looked around and saw that Hagrid had plastered one of the walls with newspaper cuttings. With a rush of emotion, she realized that these were articles about herself, Harry and Ron as well as the three Chocolate Frog cards of them that had been released in the meantime.

"Oh, Hagrid," she murmured when he noticed her gaze and placed his huge paw on her hand.

"I collect'd all bits 'n pieces 'bout ya, ya know," he muttered with his deep voice. "Wasn't much, ya never do interviews. But when Kingsley made Harry Head of the Aurors' Office, 'twas in the papers. And that you're gonna be the youngest member of tha' Magical Law thing in centuries, too. I'm so proud of all of ya," he said while large tears ran down into his mess of a beard. Hermione met Harry's gaze, and she realised that he was as emotional as she was about the way in which their friend took interest in their lives.

"We brought something for you, Hagrid," Ginny murmured and gave him a large bottle of Firewhiskey. "And here are some photographs of our boys." She handed the photographs of James and Albus Severus to the half giant.

"This one 's gonna be a righ' li'l rascal, I tell ya," Hagrid chortled and pointed to a photograph of James scooting through the picture. "Jus' like you, Harry, summat cheekier maybe." He was all smiles. "An' this wee lad is a credit to both his names, I'm sure." He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, and Hermione speculated that the pictures would soon add to the wall decorations, too. Hagrid loudly blew his nose into his flowery table cloth sized handkerchief and croaked: "Wha'bout a swig of this Firewhiskey here? Guess we all could use some, hey?"

"Hagrid! It's the middle of the afternoon!" Ginny grinned.

"Oh, wouldn't make a good impression if you'd get to the castle a li'l tipsy, would it? But, I'll keep the Whiskey fer later." He winked and they could not help but grin in return. "And now ya better get goin'! Professer McGonnagall's waitin' fer ya! I got to feed me animals and then get dressed up. See ya later!" He said good-bye at the door and Hermione had to stifle a giggle when she thought of Hagrid's horrendous brown hairy suit that he certainly still owned.

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Hogwarts was almost like Hermione remembered it, and she felt a certain humility when she glanced over the Great Hall that was already decorated in all its festive glory. The parts of the castle that had been destroyed in the battle had been reconstructed. But although everything appeared to be the same as before the big battle, there was a different atmosphere. It seemed to her as if the old walls knew what had happened here.

Slowly, Hermione put one foot in front of the other and looked at the stone walls and paintings.

"I am so glad that you could come. I was looking out of my window and saw you coming." When they heard her familiar voice, all three of them turned towards Minerva McGonagall, who was looking at them with a warm smile. Her face was even more wrinkled than it had been, and her hair that she wore in a tight bun as always showed more gray streaks. However, her eyes sparkled and made her look younger than ever.

She started shaking their hands, but ended up heartily hugging each one of her former pupils. "It's great to be back at Hogwarts," Ginny said very quietly. "I had forgotten, or never truly realised, how impressive and somehow grand everything is."

They had a little chat with the headmistress, but after some time, Professor McGonagall made her excuses because she had some work to do. She promised to meet them at the feast in the evening and disappeared, leaving them alone.

"Harry, it was a good idea to come a little earlier. I guess I need the calmness to take the whole atmosphere in," Hermione murmured. She had spent so many happy hours in this castle... When she looked around, she was flooded by memories. She thought of the many meals that she had had here with her classmates, of Dumbledore's speeches at the beginning of each school year, of the owl post in the morning. She remembered the smell of old parchment in the library, the silent knowledge hidden between book covers. She recalled big and small triumphs and defeats. The castle was a part of her happy, carefree youth. But it also meant the loss of any childhood innocence. The innocence that had been taken away by a relentless war that they had won, but at a terrible price. The faces of the dead invaded her memory. Rigid eyes, blankly staring at the ceiling.

Suddenly, it became too much for her. The mixed emotions put her in a dazed state and made her dizzy. "I... well, I guess I would like to go to Hogsmeade and visit Aberforth," she murmured. But Harry and Ginny did not hear her. They stood, hand in hand, and stared towards the location where Harry and Voldemort had faced one another all those years ago. Hermione turned around and left the Great Hall. She ran past students, followed by their surprised gazes, and only when she had reached the open air did she feel free to breathe again.

oOoOoOoOo

The snow lay like powdered sugar on the roofs of the houses in Hogsmeade, which, as Hermione knew, was the only village in Great Britain that was solely inhabited by witches and wizards. Nobody noticed her while she stood here and there to look at the shop windows. She waved at Madam Rosmerta who wiped away the snow from the entrance to her pub, the Three Broomsticks, with a wave of her wand. The innkeeper waved back and invited Hermione to a cup of hot chocolate, but Hermione politely declined. She thought about visiting Aberforth for a moment, but when she looked down towards the Hog's Head, she saw that there was no light behind the dusty windows. Obviously, there was nobody in.

So she walked the streets without haste and felt calmer with every step. She felt that she was ready to go back to the castle now, and while she walked back, she suddenly saw the lonely figure that was standing near the rotten fence and staring up to the Shrieking Shack on a hill just outside the village. She felt as if a cold hand was grabbing and squeezing her intestines while she approached him.

He must have heard the snow crunching beneath her feet, but he did not turn around. Harry had told her that he had also accepted the invitation to come to the alumni feast, but she would not have thought to meet him here.

His pale face was turned towards the Shack, and he did not move, not even when she stood next to him. She opened her mouth, ready to say something, but she remained silent when she saw his profile. She did not know how long he had been standing there; he probably did not know himself. But she felt a strong compulsion to both run away and stay near him.

"Tell me how it was that night," he suddenly said, his voice pleading and barely audible.

She stared unsure whether he had really said the words. "Don't you remember?" she whispered, gasping.

He turned to face her and looked at her with the dead, empty gaze that made her insides cramp. His mask-like face was paler than she had ever seen, and she swallowed when she heard him say, "It is as if it had happened to somebody else, not me. I see everything that happened through some kind of haze or mist. Nothing is clear and sharp. It is just like a dream."

Hermione did not want to remember the night that so many people she loved had paid with their lives. But when she felt his gaze upon her, the words came of their own volition. "We were hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Harry, Ron and I. You were there with Voldemort. You tried to convince him to let you go back to the castle and search for Harry, but he would not hear any of it. He asked you for the Elder Wand. Why it did not work adequately for him. You kept avoiding his questions and tried to convince him that it was better to go looking for Harry. He, however, said that he knew why he was not the true master of the wand."

She felt strangely hollow while she spoke like a puppet on a string, directed by someone else. "Nagini, the snake, was in this enchanted cage. At some point, he said that the wand would not work properly because you were its true master. You... you tried to be evasive, but then he performed some curse, and you were caught in the cage with your head and shoulders."

Her voice started to break while she mentally relived the scenes, and the pain came suddenly and unexpected. "The snake bit you. You collapsed and..." She did not continue, but it was not necessary. His one hand touched his throat where the ugly scar that Nagini's fangs had left was still visible.

He stared at her, long and penetrating. "I wish I could remember," he said after a long silent pause.

"I wish I could forget," she replied. She had not noticed that she was crying until she felt the hot tears on her cheeks, but she did not wipe them away.

He raised his left arm in a sudden movement, and for one mad moment she thought that he was going to hit her. But then he rolled up the sleeve of his cloak and gazed at the Dark Mark that was tattooed into his pale skin. His expression was full of self-loathing when he followed the lines of the snake on his arm with his right index finger. Words were not necessary. She understood. She understood that he felt responsible for all the pain that had been inflicted on all those people. Understood that remorse just was not enough to forgive oneself sometimes. Understood that at times, he wished they had simply left him lying in the Shack.

She did not know what made her do it, but her hand hesitatingly touched his forearm and moved over the area of skin under which she felt something pulsate like a wounded animal in agony. Her fingers fought his goose bumps, maybe they also caused them, she was not sure. He allowed it, maybe because he was too surprised to shake her off, maybe because he was unable to do anything but stare at her as if he were unsure whether this was actually happening.

Alumni Ball

Chapter 13 of 43

Everybody is having fun. Everybody?

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Since ladyinthecloak is enjoying a well deserved holiday, my thanks for beta-ing this chapter go out to Professor M McGonagall. She is an avid reviewer and thankfully rose to the challenge of taming my wild English punctuation (and she gave me some much appreciated hints how to put some things in better words, too). Thanks, Professor! Moreover, I would like to thank notsosaintly for her neverending supply of commas and tense corrections!

Chapter 13

She did not know what made her do it, but her hand hesitatingly touched his forearm and moved over the area of skin under which she felt something pulsate like a wounded animal in agony. Her fingers fought his goose bumps, maybe they also caused them, she was not sure. He allowed it, maybe because he was too surprised to shake her off, maybe because he was unable to do anything but stare at her as if he were unsure whether this was actually happening.

His skin felt cool under her fingers and somewhat unreal. It suddenly reminded her of her first and only visit to Madame Toussaud's in London when she was a little girl. She had marvelled at the wax figures that looked almost as if they were real, as if they were only a wink away from life.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. His voice was surprisingly gentle, and she knew that he did not mean her hand on his arm – at least not only.

Hermione looked up into his pale face that was framed by his black hair as usual. She wanted to say something because she felt that the answer was very simple. But to her astonishment, she found that her mouth opened and closed again without having uttered one single word. Terms like sympathy and compassion swirled around in her mind, but she knew that he did not want to hear them and that she could not say them either. "I don't know," she whispered almost inaudibly while averting her gaze.

He freed his arm from her grip – neither forcibly nor with a jerk – but nevertheless, she felt as if she had done something forbidden.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, not knowing for what she ought to be sorry, but it somehow seemed right to her. "I... I will leave you alone now." When she turned around to go, she heard him say something, and she stopped immediately.

"Some time ago, you said that I was too much of a coward to either really live or die. Do you remember?"

She felt like she moved in slow motion as she turned to look him in the eye. "I was angry when I said that," she blurted. "I did not want to..."

"Yes, you wanted to say just that, Miss Granger," he interrupted her, and she knew that it would make no sense to deny it. But she also knew that he had realized himself how much truth lay in her words.

oOoOoOoOo

Back at the castle, Hermione had some difficulty finding Harry and Ginny because many former students and teachers had arrived in the meantime. She realized that she must have missed McGonagall's welcoming speech, but she could not help it. Here and there, she saw familiar faces and heard voices she knew, but she could not make out her two friends in the throng.

"Hermione, hey!" She spun around and suddenly found herself facing Ron who looked at her with a strangely stiff smile.

"Ron!" Her impulse of hugging him was nipped in the bud when she noticed the young woman next to him who was holding his left hand.

"Hermione, I would like to introduce you to Cecilia," Ron said with unusual formality. He hastily ruffled his hair with his free hand – she knew that he always did this when he wanted to pretend that everything was all right although it was not. He had obviously been afraid of this encounter, and his gaze told Hermione how important the nice and smooth meeting of the two women was to him.

"Oh, hello, Cecilia," said Hermione. She smiled and held out her hand towards the smaller woman. "It's nice to meet you. I am Hermione."

"My pleasure." Cecilia took the outstretched hand, and her smile looked a little tense. There was no doubt that she knew exactly who Hermione was and what kind of relationship they'd had.

There were some embarrassing moments of silence. "Erm, why don't we take a seat?" Ron asked while he looked around the Great Hall. "Look, it's Harry, Ginny and Neville over there!" Relieved, he pointed towards the table where the three friends were seated and started walking towards them without waiting for an answer. Hermione and Cecilia followed him. "Hey, guys," he said when they had reached the table. Then he nodded towards the others and put an arm around his companion, who was looking up at him with an uncertain expression. "This is my girlfriend, Cecilia. I guess I, erm, mentioned her when I was at your house." He looked towards Harry and his sister, his ears flaming red.

"Yeah, once or twice," Ginny smirked and moved aside to make room for the couple. "We have been asking ourselves when we would probably get to see you," she told Cecilia, who shyly returned the smile.

Hermione greeted Neville who was obviously happy to see her. Although she sensed Harry's and Ginny's questioning and concerned gazes, she avoided looking in their direction. She could not deny feeling a pang of regret while observing Ron and his girlfriend. On the other hand, she was relieved that Cecilia seemed to be a reserved but kind young woman. Her ex-boyfriend kept searching her gaze as if he was waiting for a signal that she approved of his choice, so when Hermione thought that nobody was noticing, she nodded slightly in his direction. The fact that another woman had taken her place felt very strange. Ron had told her that he was seeing someone quite a while ago, but Hermione could not deny that it hurt her to see it. She hurt, not because she envied Ron's happiness or because she was still fond of him, but because her own loneliness became ever more clear with it.

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In spite of the agitating experience with Snape in Hogsmeade as well as the encounter with Ron and the new woman by his side, the day turned out to be one of those Hermione would remember fondly in the future. During the festivities, they met many of their former classmates. They learnt that Parvati Patil had become a successful witches' fashion designer in France and that Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas had a pub in London together, which neither Harry or Ron had known about. Neville, who had been teaching Herbology at Hogwarts for quite a while, seemed to be rather popular with the students. None of them would have thought otherwise, but nevertheless, Hermione felt a sudden rush of pride when she saw one of his former students tap him on the shoulder and say, "Thank you very much for helping me so much with the classification of healing roots last year, Professor Longbottom. I would never have made it through that exam without you!"

When Ron and Cecilia moved towards the dance floor, Ginny sat next to her and asked, "How are you, Hermione?"

"Good," Hermione answered without hesitation. "I may not appear that way, but I don't mind. Really." She saw Ron, who spun the dark haired witch around, laughing. Cecilia seemed to idolize him, and Hermione suddenly thought that Ron had remained the same over all those years. In spite of all the recognition he had received from the wizarding world, he would never be able to overcome his insecurities in certain points. Maybe he really needed someone who worshipped him and constantly gave him the confirmation he needed. Maybe Cecilia was exactly the right woman for the task.

"I met Snape back in Hogsmeade," Hermione whispered to Ginny. She had not planned on telling anyone, but now the words were out and Ginny looked at her in surprise. Hermione told her what had happened, although she did not mention that she had touched his arm. She was not sure why she wanted to keep this to herself, and she was not embarrassed by her actions, but for some reason she did not want anyone to know, not even Ginny.

"After all these months that Severus has been visiting us, I must admit that I still do not know him at all. Of course, we do talk and all that. But he would never give away what he thinks or feels. Apart from Al. I am sure that he has grown quite fond of our little one. However, to imagine him standing there, staring at the Shrieking Shack... it gives me the creeps. Oh, Hermione, I feel so very, very sorry for him. I would love to do something to make him less lonely in life, but the only thing I can offer him is a role in Al's life. I guess he does not attach too much importance to Harry's or my friendship. What is more, I simply cannot imagine that he might ever be interested in a woman again. Not after Lily."

"A woman?" Lost in thought, Hermione worried her bottom lip. Strangely enough, the thought of Snape with a female person had never crossed her mind. The picture seemed as out of place as snow in July, but still, Hermione wondered why she found it that outlandish. Maybe, she reasoned, it was because he was a former teacher. Students often had the popular, albeit childish, misconception that their teachers were asexual beings. Hermione had never been able to imagine Professors Flitwick, Sprout or McGonagall as part of a married couple or in a romantic liaison. In Snape's case, it was even more difficult, because every comparison that involved him and even a hint of romanticism seemed to be doomed from the start.

"Well, where would he meet one?" Ginny continued. "There are only three places he frequents on a regular basis: our house, the apothecary when he delivers his potions or takes orders, and his own home."

"Who are you gossiping about again?" Harry, who had been at the bar to get some drinks, sat down next to his wife and grinned.

"We are not gossiping, but merely stating facts," Ginny corrected him and playfully punched his ribs.

"Well, to me it's all the same," he replied dryly. "But while you're at it: what do you think about Cecilia?" He nodded towards the dance floor, where Ron and his girlfriend were swaying to the music.

"I think she's quite nice, but a little shy," Hermione said.

"Which has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she is sitting at a table with the famous Harry Potter and his well-known wife of course. Plus Hermione Granger, also known as the woman who broke Ron's heart, which Cecilia is struggling to mend at the moment. It seems that she's doing quite a good job, don't you think?" Ginny grinned and took Hermione's hand to convey that she had not meant the part about the broken heart.

"At least it explains why we have not seen much of him these last few months," Harry said. "You know what? It doesn't do me good to sit with you girls. I feel I might become a gossipmonger just like you. Maybe I'd better go and sit with the guys." He pointed towards a table where Seamus, Ernie, Dean and Lee Jordan were sitting, looking at Lavender Brown and Susan Bones who were just passing by.

"Just take care – all this serious philosophical talk about 'male subjects' might make your head, or in this case your neck, ache," Ginny answered with a smug grin and dodged a paper ball that Harry threw in her direction. He bent over, kissed her on the mouth and went over to his old friends, who greeted him with beaming smiles.

"So where were we?" Ginny said with an impassive expression as soon as Harry was out of earshot. Hermione giggled.

"We were scrutinizing Ron's girlfriend," she answered.

"Oh, yeah, right. Ron seems to be embarrassed that you two met, but I think he is also glad that it's over."

"There's no need for him to be embarrassed," Hermione stated. "Of course, the situation is a little uncomfortable. But Ron needs to know that I want to see him happy."

"Maybe there will be an opportunity to tell him later," Ginny said.

And indeed, the opportunity came when Cecilia disappeared towards the ladies' room later on. Hermione told Ron that she was glad to see someone by his side who obviously cared a great deal for him.

He hugged her and gave her a peck on the forehead. "Thanks, Hermione," he murmured. "It's very important to me that you say that. I'm sorry that I have not been in touch for months, but I was not sure whether..."

"I know," she interrupted. "You don't need to apologize. I did not keep in touch either. However, it would be nice if we could arrange to meet some day. Like in the old days, you know. You, Harry, me."

Ron nodded, and Hermione swallowed hard at the thought that this very special friendship between them would probably never end. Their connection was like an old door. It might groan and creak at times, but no matter what happened, it would never be closed.

oOoOoOoOo

In the following hours, Hermione talked with Hagrid, Minerva, Padma and Parvati as well as a great number of other former classmates and teachers. They all had interesting stories to tell, and while they remembered all those important and meaningless events that had happened at Hogwarts, Hermione felt flooded by a feeling of gratitude for being here.

All those horrible memories she connected with Hogwarts were consciously pushed away to the very back of her mind – helped a great deal by the alcohol she had consumed. Somehow, she had managed to achieve the perfect balance between lightness and feeling down to earth. She was clearly tipsy, but not so much as to cause any silly behaviour.

"Would you like to dance, Hermione?" Neville held out his hand, and his round face beamed when she nodded.

"Of course, yes," she said and let him guide her to the dance floor.

They were both a little clumsy, Neville even more than she was, and they did not manage to get into the beat, but it was fun and Hermione laughed exuberantly. She did not mind that they were stepping on each other's feet, and when the music ended, she regretted having to stop.

"Thanks, Neville," she gasped. "I have not had so much fun in a long while."

"Neither have I." Neville grinned.

When they got back to their table, she was surprised to see Snape sitting next to Harry. All evening, she had been looking around to see whether she could make him out among all those people. She had finally concluded that he had not come back to the castle. She had asked herself why he had accepted the invitation for the party anyhow . But Ginny had told her that Minerva had talked him into it because she wanted to ask him to come back to Hogwarts and teach.

Neville gave Snape a cool nod before he turned away to sit at another table. Snape returned the greeting in the same way, and Hermione realized with a start how deeply they loathed each other. The prophecy that Harry had told her about all those years ago could have been meant for Neville, too, and Snape had known. He had known that Voldemort could have gone for the Longbottoms and that Lily Potter would have survived. All those years during which Snape had picked on Neville and humiliated him were the result of a desperate wish that Neville had been the one being chased by Voldemort. The realisation struck her like lightning, and she sat down mechanically, aware of the astounded gazes of her peers.

"Everything all right, Hermione?" Harry asked with a frown.

"Oh, yes, I guess I had too much to drink," she murmured.

"You wannna go outside and catch some fresh air with me?" Ginny offered, but Hermione shook her head. "I'll be all right, thanks." She felt Snape's gaze on her, but she was unable to look up.

Hermione heard Harry ask Snape about his conversation with Minerva, and she also noticed many curious faces observing their table. Snape answered in his calm, velvety voice and told them that he had declined the offer to come back and teach. "However, Minerva forced me to promise to think it over once more and let her know about my final decision after Christmas," he added.

"Does that mean that you are not interested in coming back to Hogwarts at all?" Ginny asked.

"Not in the least. It was a mistake to attend this party, too."

"You mean because of all those people who are gawking at us right now?" Harry asked. "You shouldn't care about them, Severus. As far as I'm concerned, I don't give a f...iddler's."

Snape's lips twisted into a hint of a smile. "Language, Potter," he reprimanded. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Yeah, go ahead – c'mon, deduct some more points, maybe it'll give you a taste for teaching again!" Harry grinned, then stood and asked Ginny if she wanted to dance.

Hermione's eyes followed them as they headed for the dance floor. She saw that Ron, who was sitting at another table, obviously wrestled with himself whether he ought to join them or not, but his dislike towards Snape seemed to have gotten the upper hand and he stayed where he was.

"So silent, Miss Granger? Is it the lack of conversationalists or my own personal flair?"

She met his mocking gaze, and it seemed to her that the afternoon's episode had never happened – that she had never stood next to him and told him what had happened that day in the Shrieking Shack."

"Neither," she replied. "Sometimes, even I don't feel like talking."

"Really?"

She was angry about his ironic undertone but did not want to quarrel with him. Maybe this was only his way of dealing with what had occurred earlier, she thought. However, the silence between them became uncomfortable, and Hermione caught herself shifting in her seat.

Just to break the silence, she asked, "Do you dance, sir?" She did not relate the question to herself at all; it had only been the first thing that came to her mind while observing the dancing couples.

"With you? No." He looked at her with an irritated and amused expression, and she cursed internally for having uttered something so stupid.

"That was by far the most charming brush-off I ever got. And it angers me even more because I really had not thought about asking you but merely wanted to say something. Nevertheless, a gentleman would have worded it differently," she hissed.

"On one hand, I am hardly what you might call a gentleman," he replied matter-of-factly. "On the other hand, I observed you with Longbottom, and it seemed to me that I would not do myself a favour if I endangered my feet in such a manner. Please excuse me for being blunt, but as far as I am concerned, you are better off sitting down or even walking. You may have many hidden talents, Miss Granger. However, dancing is not one of them."

"A woman can only dance as good as the leading partner," was her barbed remark. "Neville is a nice guy, but there are many things he just cannot help." She gave him a meaningful gaze. "Dancing is not quite his forte, I guess."

"So you claim that you would be much better with a partner who actually knows what he's doing?" he asked derisively.

"Of course I do!"

Before she even knew what was happening, he had grabbed her hand and hoisted her up. "Prove it!"

A Dance

Chapter 14 of 43

Hermione and Severus dance - in the figurative sense

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Once more, I have to thank Professor M McGonagall for beta reading this chapter.

Chapter 14

Hermione felt her blood rush to her cheeks when Snape's fingers gripped her hand. She wanted to protest, but one glance at his face made her shut her mouth. From the corner of her eye, she saw the heads of the people around them turn in their direction, but Snape did not seem to be bothered.

Still, he held her hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world, striding towards the dance floor with determination. His iron grip never faltered, even when he fought his way through the dancing couples.

Hermione drew a deep breath, steeling herself for the obvious, but to her infinite surprise, Snape stopped behind one of the dancing couples and tapped the young man's shoulder Hermione recognized Roger Davies. Roger's annoyed expression changed to perplexity as soon as he realized who the interloper was.

"Mr. Davies, I am sorry to interrupt, but I want to ask you a favour," Snape said with his trademark fake smile, which immediately indicated to everyone that they'd better obey no matter what the favour might be. "Miss Granger here," he nodded in Hermione's direction, "expressed the desire to be led by a competent partner. You seem to meet the criteria she had in mind quite well, so would you please be so kind as to leave your most charming partner for a moment and dance with Miss Granger instead?"

The "most charming partner" whom Snape had ignored completely before, during and after his speech gazed at them with an irritated expression. "Well, I..." Roger started in an uncertain tone.

Snape let Hermione's hand go and almost shoved her in the young man's direction. "Thank you," he said with a hint of a nod, then gave Hermione one last mocking glance and turned to leave.

"Hermione, are you drunk?" Roger finally asked.

"No, but I wish I were," came her embarrassed reply. Roger had been in her year, but they hardly knew each other. Apart from some meaningless sentences they might have exchanged back at school, they had never had any contact.

He excused himself from his partner, who stormed off the dance floor looking offended, and finally started dancing with Hermione. "What was that all about?" he asked.

I wish I knew myself, she thought while she blushed. "Snape and I had a quarrel that ended in some kind of bet," she finally explained, although she knew that this explained nothing at all.

"With me as the victim?" he asked, half irritated, half amused.

She shrugged helplessly and murmured an apology. She did not need to turn around to realize that Snape was observing every single one of her deplorable dance steps and probably wore his typical mocking glare. She knew that she was not a bad dancer at all. Okay, she knew she was not outstandingly graceful, nor did she have a good sense of rhythm or beat, but she liked moving to music she liked. Now, however, she felt like some stiff puppet that trotted along the dance floor in anything but an elegant manner. "I'm sorry, Roger," she said. Her face burned with embarrassment.

"It's okay," he answered good-naturedly. "I hope you will at least win the bet?"

"I am afraid that I am going to lose it and be awarded the title 'Troll of the evening' on top of it," she whispered.

"Codswallop," he tried to cheer her up. "Just try to relax,"

Hermione nodded and tried to pull herself together. *The evil bastard,* she thought. She should have guessed that nothing but an Imperius curse would have made him dance in the Great Hall of Hogwarts under the scrutiny of former pupils and colleagues, and she was furious that he had managed to make a fool of her once more. The song ended after what felt like an eternity to her. She thanked Roger, whose confused and relieved gaze followed her when she left the dance floor.

She would not give Snape the satisfaction of exposing her to his mockery not for anything in the world. She could imagine very well how he would use his wand to draw a "T" for "Troll" in the air to show her his opinion about her performance and her stupid claim that she could dance as well as the partner who led her. Without one single glance at the area where he was sitting, she stormed off to the other side of the room towards an empty table.

"What was THAT supposed to be?" Ginny suddenly appeared by her side and threw herself on a chair next to Hermione. "For one moment I thought George had spiked my drink, and I was hallucinating that Snape wanted to dance with you."

Under the table, Hermione's hands clenched into fists. "Did you? Well that's what I thought, too!" She told Ginny what had happened and got a gaze that expressed disbelief and only vaguely hidden mirth.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. You know that I don't laugh at you," she giggled when Hermione was finished. "But that's so typically Snape!"

"Yes, I can hardly stop laughing," Hermione hissed through gritted teeth. "I pity him most of the time, but I seem to forget that he is a cruel, evil git!"

"What would have been worse, Hermione: him dancing with you or him pushing you in Roger's arms?"

Hermione thoughtfully worried her bottom lip. "Dunno, maybe the first," she admitted.

"So you should be glad that at least that did not happen," Ginny said with a shrug.

Hermione nodded. Ginny's words were full of logic, and they sounded perfectly reasonable. However, she realized that things were not as easy as they seemed. She ought to be glad that she had not danced with Snape, but she was not. She changed the subject, and after several minutes, she dared to glance in the direction where she presumed Snape to be, but she could not see any black clad figure. Therefore, she immersed herself in a friendly chat with Ginny and Hannah Abbot, determined to get back at him for the "dance incident." Her eyes scanned the crowd for him every now and then, but Snape had obviously left the party.

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Long after midnight, Harry who looked a little worse for wear laid an arm around his wife's waist and suggested that they Apparate home. Many guests had already left, and Hermione started longing for her own bed, too. It had been her first party and her first alcohol in a very long time; obviously, her body could only tolerate this up to a certain point.

They said their good-byes, and Hermione stayed behind to have one last polite chat with Professor Flitwick. He had been standing next to her and seemed astonishingly chirpy considering the late hour. After she had managed to get away from him, she looked around for McGonagall because she wanted to thank her for the invitation and say good-bye, but she could not find her former professor anywhere. "Minerva?"

"Oh, I guess she has gone up to her rooms already," said Neville who had noticed that she was looking for someone.

"Thanks, Neville. It was good to see you again. Please get in touch next time you are in London, okay?"

"I will. Promise!" He agreed with a smile and blushed a little when she gave him a peck on the cheek as she left.

She waved to Ron and Cecilia who were sitting next to Seamus, Dean and Lee and started climbing the stairs towards the headmistress's office. To her astonishment, Professor McGonagall met her half way. "Oh, Professor," she exclaimed, "I was on my way to your office to say good-bye."

"Yes, I would have liked to have been there quite a while ago, but Severus has not finished yet," McGonagall said with a frown. She looked very tired.

"Pardon?" Hermione asked in bewilderment.

"Severus asked me if he could visit my office to talk to Albus. I thought he only wanted to chat a little while, but it seems that they have more to discuss than I thought. In any case, I have been wandering along this corridor for quite a while, waiting for him to leave my office so I can go to bed..."

"Oh, I see," Hermione murmured. So this was why she had been unable to find Snape; he was talking to Dumbledore's portrait. "I was looking for you because I wanted to thank you for hosting this Alumni Feast and say good night. We have all been very pleased to be here again."

McGonagall gave her a friendly smile. "It was my pleasure to meet you all again and see for myself the impressive persons my former pupils have turned into. Although, as far as you are concerned, it did not come as a surprise at all," she added, and Hermione blushed. The opinion of her former Transfiguration professor had always mattered very much to her, and she returned the older woman's spontaneous affectionate hug.

"Get home well, Hermione. Good night." Just when she had said these last words and turned around, Snape emerged.

"Minerva, we have talked much longer than I had intended. I am sorry," he said politely. In spite of his trademark cool posture, Hermione sensed that he was somehow churned up inside, as if talking to Dumbledore had shattered him.

Why did he want to talk to Dumbledore? Hermione thought. Then she turned around quickly and hurried down the stairs. Her memory of how unpleasant he could become when he presumed rightfully or not that someone was eavesdropping on him was still very fresh in her memory. She did not want to run the risk of being suspected of such behaviour, and so she did not hear Professor McGonagall's answer.

She reached the bottom of the stairs. Although she had not dawdled, he had already caught up with her. "Not home yet, Miss Granger?" he asked in a light conversational tone that was very uncharacteristic for him.

"Of course I'm home already," came her spiteful answer. "You're just seeing things."

"Tut, tut," he reprimanded mirthfully. "Sarcasm does not suit you at all."

"Right. That's your domain," she spat at him.

"It seems that you are a little annoyed with me," he noted.

She almost laughed aloud. "I have always admired your power of observation, Professor. I just ask myself why..." She fell silent and bit her tongue.

"What did you ask yourself, Miss Granger?" he probed while he studied her face attentively.

"Why you are like that."

"How am I? Do tell."

She drew a sharp breath. "Indifferent towards everyone who tries to be friendly and integrate you into any kind of social life. Do you find human company insufferable in general, or do you find pleasure in offending other people's sensibilities?"

"No, maybe it's just you that I find insufferable," he replied in a velvety voice.

All blood drained from her face while she stared at him. "Why?"

She had wanted to refrain from asking that question at any cost, but the conversation had somehow gotten out of hand and she could not prevent it. He took one step in her direction, and she instinctively lifted her arms as if to block him. He grasped her wrists at chest height and held them firmly in his pale hands.

"Because you always seem to be in places you should not be." His warm breath touched her face and she shivered, unable to reply. "You are like perfume in the air, Hermione. You linger though you are already gone."

His words did not make much sense, but on some mysterious level of her consciousness, a series of complicated ideas and thoughts started to form. His face was so near she could discern every single small wrinkle around his black eyes.

"And I don't like it," he finished with a hiss and let her go abruptly as if he had burned himself.

Her gaze followed him as his billowing robes disappeared, and her fogged brain slowly formed two realizations. One: he had used her given name for the first time since she could remember. Two: well, she did not really want to think about number two.

Denial

Chapter 15 of 43

Disturbing things happen

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Ladyinthecloak is back! In spite of a heavy workload due to her admin duties and her own writing, she managed to struggle with my commas ("if in doubt, leave them out" I guess my good old teacher spoiled me forever). Thank you!!!

A/N #2: Many people have told me that the title "Being the Godfather" sounded quite weird in English. I have therefore decided to change it into "The Godfather".

Warning: this chapter contains some violent scenes and sexual harassment. The rating is not a joke!

"You are like perfume in the air, Hermione. You linger, though you are already gone." His words did not make much sense, but on some mysterious level of her consciousness, a series of complicated ideas and thoughts started to form. His face was so near she could discern every single small wrinkle around his black eyes. "And I don't like it," he finished with a hiss and let her go abruptly, as if he had burned himself. Her gaze followed him as his billowing robes disappeared, and her fogged brain slowly formed two realisations. One: he had used her given name for the first time since she could remember. Two: well, she did not really want to think about number two.

Chapter 15 - Denial

Hermione stood paralysed on top of the stairs for a moment while she followed Snape's disappearing figure with her eyes. A mess of bizarre thoughts rushed through her head, but one of them gleamed crystal-clear. *I need to know... I need to know,* she kept thinking. Her logic and common sense were against it, but her instinct got the upper hand, and she started walking. She followed him without hesitation.

With uncanny instinct she knew that he had gone down to the dungeons, the place that had been his home for so many years. She took one step after another, now knowing what to expect. She did not like the muffled sound of her steps that sounded eerie in the gradually cooling air. What she liked even less was the prickling feeling of being observed by someone who had learned to melt with the shadows of the walls. Only he caused this feeling in her, and this was the main reason why she did not like it at all.

"You are moving in a dangerous direction." The voice sounded like liquid silk and surrounded her from all directions.

Hermione spun around. She did not know when or how it had happened, but he suddenly stood behind her as if he had been there all the time and she had not noticed. "Wha...?"

"Girls like you have no business in places like this one, Miss Granger," he whispered. He turned her around in one lithe movement and pressed her against the wall. She wanted to give him an acerbic reply, but found herself trying to remember how to breathe instead.

"Girls like you ought to care about the living, not the dead. Run while you can!" His harsh words belied the fact that he held her shoulders in an iron grip she could not flee even if she wanted to.

She looked up to meet his eyes. His gaze was focused on her face, and his eyes, black and inscrutable as ever, observed every breath, every blink. His grip around her shoulders loosened considerably, but her mind was too foggy to realise that this would have been her opportunity to run from him and the mistake she had made. She realised very clearly that it had indeed been a mistake. Death Eater or not, he was a dangerous man a man who played a game in which she could not hold her own because she did not know the rules. "I... I..." She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he only pressed her harder against the wall in response and impeded every movement with his body weight.

"Where do you think you are going, Hermione? You can't just follow me here and then run away. That's impolite. Didn't your parents teach you that?" he murmured with a threatening smile. His warm breath touched her uncovered throat, and she made a last try to escape. But it was to no avail because he was so much stronger than she was physically and magically. "Stupid girl," he murmured and bent his head to let his lips graze over her ear. "It is time for you to learn that every action has its consequences."

Her knees threatened to buckle when she realised that he would not let her go. Somebody shrieked when his hands suddenly let go of her shoulders and grabbed her hips instead. It took her some seconds to realise that it had been her own cry.

Snape pressed one knee between her legs and forced them apart. *This is not happening. It is not true, it is only happening inside my head. Oh god, please no!* The voices inside her head kept chasing one another and tried to get her attention, but the only thing that registered was his fast breathing and his lips that kept whispering words into her ear, repulsing and arousing her at the same time.

She lifted her arms to push him off, but they somehow landed on his shoulders and drew him even nearer.

"Eager, are we?" His mocking tone was supposed to hurt and it did. His hands left her hips and started stroking her sides.

She wanted to yell at him to let go, but her treacherous body did not comply. Instead, it made her want certain things want him. She wanted Snape how did that happen? WHEN did that happen? His scent was strangely intense. She could not say what it reminded her of, but it made her slightly dizzy. Her left hand was buried in his black hair, which felt surprisingly silky between her fingers, and she caught herself arching towards him.

He parted her cloak and whispered soft words that she could not understand. It must have been a spell because the buttons of her blouse suddenly fell to the floor with a soft plopping noise. "Nice," he said, smiling malevolently when he saw her black lacy bra, "but it is in my way."

She felt completely at his mercy, body and soul. How could she have thought that she was in control, that she knew what she was doing?

"Girls like you ought to leave the dead in peace," he grunted while pressing his pelvis against her, which caused an unexpected wave of arousal in her. Hadn't he said that before? Something about the living and the dead? It could not have been more than a minute ago, but her overtaxed mind did not manage to make the connection. "What do you want, Hermione?" he murmured.

"I want... I want..." she gasped, well aware of the inadequacy of her words.

His fingers started drawing mad circles on her heated skin and pushed into the waistband of her trousers. "I am broken," he whispered. His lips did not move, but she could have sworn that his voice was around her, inside her. "It will not take long until you are just as cold and empty as I am. I will destroy you, pull you into my world with no heroes, no joy and no warmth. Do you want that, Hermione?"

Instead of answering, she grabbed his cloak and drew his head down, but he turned it to the side. Her knees buckled like broken matches, but she kept her hold on him as if she were drowning. He was not a man to play games. With him, it would be all or nothing at all.

"Do you want that, Hermione?" He was shouting now, grabbing her upper arms and shaking her so much it hurt. While she was staring into his gleaming eyes, she suddenly realised that she was not at his mercy at all, but his life depended on her.

"Do you want that, Hermione?"

...

"Do you want that?"

...

"Do you want to be a rotten egg? Did you know that a witch spends an average of eleven years of her life sleeping? Eleven years! You could read at least eight thousand books in this time. Do you want to miss the knowledge of eight thousand books?"

The metallic voice of her alarm clock was uncompromising and persistent. Hermione finally gave up and untied the last tendrils of her strange and creepy dream.

She got up with a funny feeling, and as soon as she glanced at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, she realized that she looked alarmingly pale. Just as if she had been ill for quite a while. Something uncomfortably cold crept into her objecting stomach, and she threw up into the sink. She felt old and ill, as if she were a different person. *Oh no!* she thought desperately. *This is not true, oh, please, don't let it be true!*

Yet it was true, she realised. Just like the mystery between two heartbeats. Invisible, inaudible, but still there: she had fallen in love with Severus Snape.

Scales are falling

Chapter 16 of 43

Hermione starts thinking and tries to cope

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Thank you, oh ladyinthecloak, for coping with my inadequate punctuation skills and confusion of time and space once more :-)

Chapter 16 - Scales are falling...

Hermione looked at her reflection in the mirror. It was as if she saw herself for the first time. Her face was white as a sheet and damp strands of hair stuck to her cheek in an unsightly manner. Her cramped fingers let go of the sink, and she took a step backwards as if she were afraid of the person who stared back at her with eyes wide open. As soon as her back touched the wall of her tiny bathroom, she slowly slid down to the floor and slung her arms around her legs.

Her thoughts wandered back to the evening before of their own accord. She remembered meeting Snape by the stairs where he had said those weird words that kept spinning around in her head. *"You are like perfume in the air, Hermione. You linger though you are already gone."*

She had been unable to do anything but numbly look after him when he had hastily gone down the stairs as if he could not get away from her fast enough. Back at her flat, she had been lying awake for a very long time trying to understand the meaning of his words while desperately struggling to get some sleep.

It meant that he had thought about her that she occupied his thoughts more than he was prepared to accept. It meant... well, what did it mean, actually? When she had finally drifted off in the wee hours of the morning and had that disturbing dream, her subconscious had answered questions that she had not wanted to ask in the first place.

Hermione jumped when she remembered the details of the dream that had felt irritatingly real. She was sure that in reality, she would never have followed him or allowed

him to touch her like that, so why was she unable to brush it aside as the nightmare it was?

Maybe, a little voice inside of her said,*because something has changed during the last few months and weeks. Something that you have desperately tried to hide from yourself.*

She passed every single meeting with Snape in review and analysed her behaviour, trying to understand when it had started. There were so many signs... she would have been blind not to realise.

The fast and unnecessary breathing whenever she knew that she would meet him at Harry and Ginny's place.

The nervous trembling of her hands when she felt his penetrating gaze upon herself.

The hollow pressure in the pit of her stomach whenever she saw the deep emptiness and forlornness in his eyes...

It would have been easy to explain all this by the wish to see him discard all the shadows of his past, but this would cover only part of the truth, and she knew it. There was more. It was hidden deep under all those layers that she had built up so thoroughly which had come tumbling down last night. She knew that everything had only been a dream, but she instinctively asked herself how she would have reacted if Snape had indeed come that close.

Slowly, she got up, took her nightgown off and got under the shower where she scrubbed until her skin started burning. It helped to feel clean and fresh again, but the strangely oppressive feeling inside of her remained. Until now, her experience had always been that falling in love was a marvellous feeling. It elated her and made her smile.

Now, however, all she felt was confusion, fear and the urge to hide under the covers after taking a hefty dose of Dreamless Sleep.

oOoOoOoOo

It was the most uneventful Christmas ever.

She had told Harry and Ginny that she could not spend the holidays with them because her parents wanted her to come home. It was true, of course, but in the past, she had always found the time to at least bring the presents for her friends over personally. With a bad conscience, she imagined their surprise upon receiving her parcel via owl post. Originally, she had planned to at least go for a short visit. But at the last moment, she had evaded the task, knowing that she'd most probably meet Snape there.

Her parents were happy to have her in the house for an entire week, and Hermione enjoyed the calm atmosphere, although she felt bad because she knew that she could not avoid the Potters forever. What was more, they knew her better than anybody else, and it would not take long for them to notice that something was wrong with her.

Deep in thought, Hermione looked out of the window and observed her father, who was clearing the snow away from the entrance. It had been a clear, ice-cold day that would have been perfect for ice skating, but Hermione had rather stayed at home, sitting in front of the fireplace and reading.

"Darling?"

Her mother's voice shook Hermione from her thoughts, and she turned around.

Jean smiled at her only daughter and stood next to her. "Do you like the book?"

"Yes, it's great, Mom," Hermione replied and returned the warm smile. She had already read one third of the book, but she could not say what the novel was all about.

"You seem depressed, Hermione," said Jean cautiously. "If you'd like to talk about something..." She sat on the sofa and patted the seat next to her own.

Hermione hesitated, but then she stood up from her armchair, rolled into a foetal position next to her mother and put her head into Jean's lap. When she was a small girl, she had always done this when she had needed her mother's consolation just like she needed it now. She felt her mother's warm hands in her hair.

"Are you still sad because things did not work out right with Ron?" Jean asked calmly.

"No, that's not it. I'm over it," Hermione said.

Jean continued caressing her locks and waited. After what felt like eternity, she heard her daughter whisper, "I... I have developed feelings for someone."

"But that's wonderful, isn't it?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "No, I fear it isn't. It's happened just like that, I did not want it. And I most certainly did not choose it. But nobody asked me, do you understand?"

"Life never asks, darling," Jean replied wisely. "Why does it make you so sad?"

"Because this man is a person you would not choose if you wanted to be happy," Hermione whispered. She did not want to say more, and Jean felt that her daughter needed nothing more than her mother's gentle caresses on her back and the comforting illusion that all would be well somehow, someday.

oOoOoOoOo

For several weeks, Hermione successfully avoided visiting Harry and Ginny by using her work and her search for a new flat as an excuse. However, she realised that this could not go on forever. She was particularly afraid of being alone with Ginny. Her friend had an uncomfortable knack of reading her face like a book.

Ginny probably already had her suspicions. How else could her message to Hermione be explained?

Hermione, I must talk to you. It's urgent! I'd like to meet you at the office when you finish work, if you can find the time. Please don't tell Harry!

Ginny

Hermione said good-bye to her colleagues with an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. When she reached the entrance hall of the Ministry, she already saw Ginny waiting there. When Hermione called her, Ginny spun around and laughed with relief when she saw her friend.

"Oh, I had hoped that you had no plans for today, Hermione," she greeted her. "I don't have much time because I left the boys with George at the store. Would you like to go for some tea somewhere?"

"Of course," croaked Hermione. Ginny looked rather tensed up. Her face was red, and her eyes sparkled as if she knew a secret that nobody else did. They decided to go to the nearest café.

They had hardly sat down when Ginny said, "I know that this is happening rather fast, but I had hoped that I could talk to you as soon as possible. You have made yourself scarce recently."

Hermione felt a pang of guilt and sheepishly looked at her feet. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I know, I'm a lousy friend,"

Ginny shook her head and reached for Hermione's hand. "It's okay. I understand that you need some time for yourself. Everyone needs it every now and then. Let's stop

beating about the bush: I wanted to ask you for a favour."

Hermione nodded in surprise, but she did not manage to say anything. "The thing is could you babysit the boys on Friday evening? Mom and Dad are visiting Charlie in Romania, Ron is busy and George well, you know him." Ginny gave her a bright smile and continued, "I even tried Severus."

Hermione bit her lip.

"I thought that as he is Al's godfather, he could stay with him for a few hours. He had no objections, but then I said that the babysitting would also include James, and he refused." Ginny rolled her eyes. "I asked him whether he could be at our place on Friday at six, but he said that he would only watch Albus, not James."

"He didn't!" Hermione looked surprised.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, indeed, he did. I tend to forget that he obviously likes Al while he has never even really looked at James. He'll never change." She shrugged. "To cut a long story short: it would be great if you could help me out, Hermione." Ginny gave her friend a tense look, but Hermione answered immediately.

"Of course I can babysit those two," she assured. "What are you up to?"

Ginny blushed and smiled a very womanly smile. "I would like to surprise Harry and spend a nice evening with him. We have not spent time as a couple for a very long time, and, what is more, I would like to tell him something."

Her smile deepened and there was a certain gleam in her eyes that seemed to come from a very deep and secret place within her. "I would like to tell him that he is going to be the father of a little girl, soon," she said.

Hermione was speechless. She stared at the redhead and pressed one hand over her mouth. When she finally regained control over her voice, her words were just as confused as her mind.

"Oh, wow, oh my god! Ginny, that's great! I... wow! You're pregnant! Oh, I'm so happy for you! A girl... how...?"

"I just know it. I knew it right from the start." Ginny placed one hand over her womb, which did not show any sign of pregnancy yet. "This is going to be a girl. But as I did not want to be fooled by my instincts, I went to St. Mungo's to have it confirmed. Harry has been hoping for another child for quite a while. He keeps mentioning that the women are sadly under-represented in our family." She giggled, but soon she became earnest. "Her name is going to be Lily. I know, it looks as if I had no say in the names of our children. But I want to name her Lily."

Hermione got up without a word and hugged her friend, who also put her arms around Hermione and held her tight.

oOoOoOoOo

Friday evening at Godric's Hollow...

"Okay, dinner ought to be ready in twenty minutes. James should eat at least one serving, he has hardly eaten anything at lunch. You can put Al to bed at around seven, he usually falls asleep quite fast. James likes it when you..."

"Ginny, I'll manage," Hermione assured her with a grin. "You have been telling me these things three times already."

"I'm sorry, I'm just so nervous. Thank Merlin Severus did not accept. How could I come up with the crazy idea of asking him?"

"Must have been the excitement," Hermione said.

"Probably." Ginny giggled. "How do I look?" She scrutinised her appearance.

"Perfect," Hermione commented. Ginny wore a nice green blouse and a matching skirt. "But you ought to make haste if you want to pick up Harry on time."

"I know I'm gone!" Ginny hurried to the kitchen and gave each of her children a kiss. "Be nice, you two, okay?" The boys nodded eagerly and put their small arms around their mother's throat.

Ginny obviously did not leave them in somebody else's care often, but they knew Hermione and were looking forward to the evening because Hermione had promised to read their favourite book to them and to play with them.

As soon as the door had fallen closed behind Ginny, Hermione looked after the meal, and James proclaimed loudly that he did not like peas. "They are green and round, and they stink," he exclaimed and gave the plate that Hermione had put on the table a distrustful glance.

Albus sat in his highchair and used his spoon to splash his porridge around happily.

"But you always liked peas," Hermione said with a voice she hoped sounded convincing. "Here, try them." She hopefully held out a spoonful for him, but he waved it aside and said, "I want cheese!"

*What on earth have I saddled myself with?*thought Hermione upon checking the fridge which contained all kinds of things, but no cheese.

oOoOoOoOo

After what felt like two hours, Hermione was on the verge of pulling out her wand. James had the loveliest, angelic smile of a harmless child. But as soon as his parents were away, he developed unexpected capabilities to drive Hermione to distraction.

When she heard the doorbell, Hermione almost laughed in relief. But then she remembered that Harry and Ginny would hardly ring their own doorbell. With an uneasy feeling she picked Albus up and went to open the door.

Snape.

His face reflected the blue colour of the moonlight, and his cheekbones cast shadows on his skin. "What are you doing here?" he asked after looking her up and down.

Hermione's stomach churned, and her throat constricted as if she were riding a roller coaster. Her gaze automatically fell to his hands which, in her dream, some time ago, had been buried in her hair, caressed her sides and forced themselves between her thighs.

She knew that she was blushing heavily when she looked over his shoulder into the darkness and said, "I am babysitting the children. Ginny asked me for it."

"Ginevra also asked me for it, and..."

"And you said that you'd watch Albus, but not James, upon which Ginny had the good sense to realise that asking you had been a bloody bad idea in the first place. As you can see, she has found a suitable replacement. So what do you want?"

God, she simply could not handle this. Not the way he pressed his lips together in a fine line, not the way his gaze darted over her face and the way her thoughts started whirling around in a blur inside her head. It was quite out of character for her to be rude or get abusive. Why couldn't he just disappear? Why did he have to turn up now?

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a dark look. "Mind your language, Miss Granger," he said cuttingly. "I came to offer her that I could stay as soon as the boys were asleep. Ginevra did not inform me that she had asked you in the meantime."

"Oh, bad conscience?" She bit her lip to avoid making any snide remarks and said instead, "Be it as it may, I am getting along quite well, and you can calmly go and do whatever you are usually doing on evenings like these." She wanted to sound determined, but her voice was weak and quivering.

In the background, something fell to the ground with a clatter, and James howled in triumph. Albus started thrashing about nervously on her arm.

"Pretending that you are out of your depth would be a compliment, Miss Granger," came his nasty comment. "I must admit that I am not up to date with the latest hair fashion, but I guess that porridge is not a part of it." He gave the splashes of porridge in her hair a pitying look and grinned scornfully.

Albus started crying as if on command. Snape took a step in her direction and extended his hands towards the child who immediately fell silent as soon as he was sitting on his godfather's arm.

"Now let me in. In case you did not notice, it is freezing out here and the boy is cold." He simply pushed Hermione aside with his free hand and entered the house. She could not do anything but resignedly follow him and accept the fact that she would feel the churning feeling in her stomach as long as he was near her.

Babysitting and other Catastrophes

Chapter 17 of 43

Hermione and Snape baby-sit the Potters' children...

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K.Rowling.

A/N: Once again, ladyinthecloak exposed her nerves to my inadequate punctuation skills and stubborn use of hyphens instead of dashes... THANK YOU!!!

Chapter 17 Babysitting and other catastrophes

"You may rest assured that I am getting along quite well on my own." Hermione tried to keep Snape from entering the house, but to no avail.

He stepped past her and put little Albus down on the couch carefully. "You certainly do not, Miss Granger," he said dryly after inspecting the chaos in the sitting room. Then he added, "But I guarantee that I will disappear as soon as my godson is safely sleeping in his bed."

They heard a dull thud from the kitchen, followed by a happy squeal. James had obviously not noticed the new visitor, as he continued drawing pots and pans out from the cupboards and making 'music', as he called it.

Hermione did not like the expression on Snape's face at all when he walked into the kitchen without a word, stood behind the little boy and touched his shoulder. Snape spoke so softly that she could hardly understand him. "You will stop this immediately. Is that clear?"

"Oh, brilliant!" Hermione rolled her eyes and sneered at him. "You want to stop him with a menacing glare and a whisper?" However, to her big surprise, James stopped in the middle of a movement and gave the angrily glaring man an anxious look.

"Good. Now you put everything back where you found it!" The boy obeyed instantly, and Snape turned towards Hermione with open triumph in his eyes. "Did you say something, Miss Granger?"

Hermione knit her brows and said sourly, "I only mentioned that I had completely forgotten the high educational value of your teaching methods. You instill obedience through fear, not respect."

"The former does not prevent the latter." He took one step in her direction and said quietly, "Or do you claim that you did not respect me during your time at Hogwarts?"

Hermione kept her defiant silence and looked past him to the boy who was putting the cooking utensils back into the cupboards and giving Snape a frightened glance every now and then. Snape, on the other hand, did not take further note of him and left the kitchen without a word.

Hermione levitated the remaining pots and pans where they belonged with a wave of her wand and picked James up. He snuggled up to her without protest. "Would you like me to read you a bedtime story in your room?" she asked. He nodded eagerly, probably because he did not like the option of staying in the sitting room with the scary man very much. "I'm taking James to bed," she told Snape, who was sitting on the sofa with a gurgling baby Albus on his lap.

"Please don't dawdle, Miss Granger, my time and patience are limited," he answered.

"So why don't you just go?" she burst out.

"Because, and I am repeating myself, I want to see with my own eyes that my godson is well cared for while you are occupied with his brother. It seems to me that you are incapable of dealing with them both at once," he answered smugly. Oh, he probably savoured seeing her, the insufferable know-it-all, fail miserably in this one particular area.

Hermione swallowed her venomous retort and hurried upstairs, throwing him a furious glance*Basically, he is right* she thought. It was not easy to cope with two children, one of them extremely lively. Even more so because she had no experience with children whatsoever. But she would rather bite her tongue than say that aloud.

When she had reached James' room, she helped him undress and put on his pyjamas, then she put him to bed and started reading from a book of fairy tales until his eyes fluttered shut during the third story and his calm, steady breathing indicated that he had fallen asleep. She observed him for a while, caressed his head and took several deep breaths. Then she felt ready to go back to the sitting room.

Once more, she remembered her anger about Snape's behaviour. Anger was a feeling she could cope with. In fact, she could cope with it much better than with those other feelings that kept fighting their way towards the surface of her conscience, although she kept driving them back.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, she saw that Albus had fallen asleep in Snape's arms; he was studying the baby's face intensively. His face held a strange expression that Hermione had never seen before. It was a mixture of wonderment and could it be tenderness? Where the devil did that come from? As she was observing Snape, she overlooked one of James' toy trucks that were strewn across the floor. She stepped on it and cried out in pain when she twisted her ankle and almost fell to the ground.

"Good Merlin, Miss Granger! I thought I had to deal with only two children here," Snape said with a frown and observed her limping towards the sofa. Albus Severus had winced once because of her cry, but he was still asleep.

"Do you never stumble?" Hermione hissed and screwed up her face in agony when she tried to put some weight on her foot.

"No", he answered calmly. "I usually look where I am going."

Hermione said nothing but sat down and inspected her ankle. When she put her hands around it, it hurt like hell and she inhaled with a hiss when the pain started spreading.

Snape got up slowly to avoid disturbing the sleeping child. Then he walked upstairs and came back alone a few moments later, then stood in front of her.

"I would really like to go now. However, if I left you in your current snivelling state, that would probably make the Potters speculate wildly about the level of my heartlessness," he drawled.

"I am not snivelling!" she answered between clenched teeth. It was, however, not quite true, as her eyes had filled with tears due to the searing pain. He must have noticed.

"Of course not," he scoffed. Then he got ready to kneel down in front of her, but changed his mind and asked, "Can you get to the settee over there?"

Hermione got up and suppressed a painful moan. Snape gripped her upper arm to support her. She wanted to tell him to unhand her at once, but then she thought that this would look quite hysteric. So she accepted his help, but she kept thinking that he only did this to get away as soon as possible.

"Let me have a look at it," he demanded after she had sat down with her legs stretched out along the back of the settee, so he could sit right next to her.

"No," came her reflex answer, although she knew that she was sounding very silly.

"Do as I say, you obstinate thing," he growled impatiently and added with a malicious grin, "I promise I won't hurt you. At least not more than absolutely necessary." Without waiting for her answer he pulled off her shoe and, before she could protest, her sock. "Your feet smell," he commented dryly.

"They don't," she hissed. "And even if they do it's in their nature! I bet yours smell like roses."

He emitted a strange throaty sound, and it took her quite a while to realise that he was laughing. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Miss Granger. I am only trying to relax the mood. But in order to calm your nerves: your feet don't indeed smell."

He brushed over her ankle with a surprisingly tender movement of the thumb, which made her draw breath with a sharp hiss. "Does this hurt?" he asked in surprise.

"N... No," she said. It was true, but she could hardly tell him that it was his touch that triggered this reaction.

He pushed her trouser leg up a little and encircled her ankle with his right hand while he used his left hand to gingerly move her foot in all directions. After examining it like that for quite a while, he turned to her and searchingly looked at her face. She looked away instantly, but she knew that she was blushing.

"Well, I have good and bad news for you, Miss Granger. Which do you want to hear first?

Hermione swallowed. "The bad."

"You are going to die," he said with a serious expression.

"Pardon?"

His mouth twisted in a mocking grin. "I hope you were already aware of the fact that you will die eventually."

Hermione hardly managed not to slap him. "Is this your idea of a joke?" she growled.

"Honestly speaking yes." He applied some more pressure to her foot while answering. "All right. You wanted the bad news first. I am sorry to inform you that the proverbial Gryffindor courage is nothing but a hypocritical legend."

Hermione tried to free her foot from his grasp, but he held it even tighter. "The good thing is: I will not tell anybody what a hypersensitive creature you are."

Hermione gave an exaggeratedly high-pitched laugh. "Oh, you must find this so very amusing."

"Yes, indeed, I do," Snape answered. His black eyes glittered with mirth, and Hermione quickly averted her gaze once again. As if she had not noticed before, she suddenly became aware that she was alone with him, and silence enveloped them like a blanket that kept her from breathing properly. She was unable to concentrate on trivial things in his presence. For one moment, she was almost sure that he could hear the frantic beating of her heart. She should not have these feelings, and she knew it. But they were there nonetheless. It was so inappropriate and silly. Snape was not a man usually connected to thoughts of a loudly thumping heart, a dry mouth and damp palms. But still, she felt all of this and she was embarrassed because she knew that he was observing her. When he finally released her ankle, she almost sighed in relief.

"Please tell me one thing, Miss Granger," he said in a conversational tone that did not rouse any suspicion. He even got up and she thought that he was preparing to leave. "It seems that I have been missing something. Could you please tell me why you keep avoiding my gaze?"

Oh, she should have known better! "Come again?" she murmured. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Oh, please I do recognise Hermione Granger's mock clueless expression when I see it. You seem to forget that I have been a teacher for many years, giving me a sixth sense for people who want to hide something, and please do not hold it against me, Miss Granger you have never been very apt at hiding things. If you blush, look away hastily and stammer meaningless things, it rings all kinds of bells with me."

Oh, my god, he noticed something, she thought and felt a wave of panic wash over her. What was she supposed to do?

"You... you seem to be imagining things," she croaked, silently cursing herself because of the sound of her voice.

He plopped down next to her so fast that she tried to jump up, but he was faster. Grabbing her chin with one hand, he forced her to look at him. "Believe me, Miss Granger: I can be very nasty when I realise that someone is planning things I do not want." His face was mere centimetres from hers. She could make out the creases around his black eyes and a very thin, almost faded scar that went from his left nostril to his ear.

The touch of his hand on her chin was too much, yet not enough at the same time. Her body seemed to act according to its own rules, and she leaned towards him almost imperceptibly until...

"Remember this: I will never, under no circumstances, appear at any victory parties and face hordes of dunderheaded people who want to see me as some kind of hero. I

already told Ginevra when she made the mistake of asking me about it. I am telling you now, Miss Granger. And I will not repeat myself. Do. You. Understand?"

She nodded hastily, much too irritated to say anything.

"Good." He let go of her abruptly and got up.

He misunderstood, she rejoiced silently as soon as her mind was clear enough to understand.*He thought I was planning something for the victory parties. The blasted victory parties!*

Of course: they would be in some weeks, and she thought she could remember Ginny mentioning them at some point. She sighed in relief. At the same time, she realised that her skin seemed to vibrate where he had touched her. It felt as if a swarm of angry bees was hovering next to it...

A/N: so, this is where I leave you. The family is taking a vacation on some Mediterranean beach for the next 3 ½ weeks and I will not update until sometime around Mid-September, I'm afraid...

Havoc

Chapter 18 of 43

Hagrid's 75th work anniversary

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: My heart goes out to ladyinthecloak: she shocked the hell out of me by returning the beta'd file only one day after I had sent it (wow!) AND she did not strangle me (not even virtually) although I had forgotten all finer points about English punctuation somewhere on the Mediterranean coast (must have been the red wine in Spain). Should you ever visit Germany, prepare for a visit and some culinary reward, Madam! Oh, and of course the same applies to notsosaintly who still found so many mistakes it made me blush in embarrassment...

Chapter 18

Snape had almost reached the door when it opened with verve, and Harry entered, closely followed by Ginny. They both smiled a very infectious smile, but Snape just frowned when he saw them.

"Oh, what are you doing here?" Harry asked full of surprise.

Snape glanced at Hermione, who was slowly getting up from the couch, and finally said, "I came because of a misunderstanding. Ginevra," he gave Ginny a short nod, "asked me for a favour some days ago. I wanted to meet her request, but found that my help was no longer needed. Be it as it may please excuse me. Miss Granger can inform you about the details. I would like to take my leave."

His face contorted in a grimace that had a faint resemblance to a smile, but before he could leave, Harry said, "No, please stay!" Snape looked as if he were searching for a polite way to leave anyway, but every argument he might have come up with was nipped in the bud when Harry added, "I am going to be a father again! Ginny and I will be having a daughter!"

He sounded as if they were the first humans ever to be expecting a daughter, and for a very short moment it looked as if he wanted to pat Snape's shoulder. But a moment later, he redirected his hand's movement and made an inviting gesture towards the couch.

Ginny blushed under Snape's gaze, but nevertheless, she smiled the characteristic smile of people who are experiencing some profound inner happiness.

"Well, congratulations," Snape said flatly.

Hermione observed that he was obviously searching for words to express his gladness and good wishes. At the same time, it occurred to her that he had probably never learned how to sincerely congratulate someone. She started at the thought, but when Harry looked at her, she smiled broadly, approached him and gave him a big hug. "I am so happy for you two," she whispered and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Ginny beamed and let her gaze wander over the three of them while she put one hand over her still flat womb for a moment.

"Come on, let's drink to it," Harry said with a grin and did not even wait for their answers. With a wave of his wand, he opened the drinks cabinet and levitated some glasses to the table.

"Hermione, everything all right? Did the boys behave?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered after a moment's hesitation. "We played a little, and they were in bed on time." She observed Snape from the corner of her eyes and almost expected him to add his version of her catastrophic babysitting skills, but to her utter astonishment, he kept silent.

"I'll go and check on them." Ginny smiled when she gave Hermione a thankful glance. Then she went upstairs while Harry disappeared into the kitchen to get some drinks.

"Did you know about it?" Snape asked all of a sudden, eyeing Hermione suspiciously.

"What?"

"Did you know that they were expecting?" he jogged her memory in an impatient tone.

"Oh, I... yes. Ginny told me when she asked me to babysit," she said quietly.

"I understand," he murmured and sat down on the couch, not paying her any attention.

oOoOoOoOo

Harry filled their glasses for the second time only pumpkin juice for Ginny when he placed an arm around her shoulders and softly kissed her temple.

Snape looked away with an uneasy expression. It was quite obvious that he felt embarrassed by this open display of affection. Harry and Ginny usually did not exchange kisses and caresses in front of others, but it seemed that they did not care in this particular situation.

"Well," Hermione cleared her throat, "I am glad that it is going to be a girl. It was about time after two boys." She smiled at her two friends.

Harry raised his glass and proclaimed, "We are very happy, too. Particularly so because we won't need to convince the godmother with lengthy discussions this time." He grinned and winked at Ginny, who laughed when she saw Hermione's bewildered expression.

"No use pretending, Hermione. You can't really be surprised that we would love to have you as Lily's godmother."

Hermione stammered incoherently while she felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

Snape closed his eyes for a short, almost imperceptible moment. When he opened them again, his face was as motionless as ever. However, Hermione could not help but realise that his left hand on the table clenched until his knuckles were white.

"But she... she is not even born yet," Hermione murmured and looked down as if something incredibly fascinating were happening inside her glass.

"Of course," Ginny confirmed. "But after I told Harry the news back at the restaurant while I was waiting for him to converse in coherent sentences again, I already had this image in my mind, you know. You are our best friend, and we cannot imagine anyone else we would rather have as godmother."

"I... thanks." That was all Hermione managed to say, and she was thankful that she managed to hold back her tears.

Snape sat on his chair, stiff and silent, and only after he had emptied his glass, he said to Ginny, "If you need any compounds or potions, please let me know. I guess it would be better for me to go home. It's rather late."

He sounded cold and indifferent. But something in the way he looked from Harry to Ginny and finally shrugged almost imperceptibly told Hermione that he might want to try to say something more meaningful, but did not know how. He seemed as misplaced as a wrong piece in a puzzle, sitting next to cheerful people who were looking forward to a happy event. It broke Hermione's heart to see him shake Harry's and Ginny's hands and walk out of the door as if he knew exactly that his presence was what kept people from expressing their happiness.

oOoOoOoOo

Hermione usually enjoyed spring with all her heart. This time, however, she refrained from her usual practice of taking long walks in the blossoming nature and buried herself in work instead. She rose very early and then did her research, putting in a quota that made her colleagues go pale. She would normally be the last one to leave the office, and when she entered her flat in the evening, she got under the shower, totally knackered, and crawled into her bed to succumb to deep, dreamless sleep.

This walk of life helped her to think about nothing but her work. However, it also made her irritable and unbalanced. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a pale, worn-out woman who looked older than she really was. But the sight did not make her change her 'system,' as she called it.

Nevertheless, she sometimes caught herself thinking about Snape, even if it only fed her stupid crush, angering and frustrating her.

In May, she was torn from her routine when she received a letter from Professor McGonagall. The headmistress told her that she was planning to organise a surprise for Hagrid, who would celebrate his seventy-fifth anniversary as gamekeeper of Hogwarts. Therefore, the professor had sent invitations to all his friends and asked them to come to Hogwarts for the weekend after next to honour the half-giant. Hermione did not need to think twice: she immediately answered that she would be delighted to attend.

On the next day, Harry told her that he and Ginny had also accepted the invitation immediately. She had not thought that she would be looking forward to this event, but she caught herself planning happily what she might get as a gift for Hagrid.

She had no foreboding at all that it would be one of the most horrible days of her life.

oOoOoOoOo

"The boys will come, too?" Hermione asked in surprise when she arrived at the Potters' house where Harry and Ginny were already waiting for her.

"Yes. We thought that we'd like to take them and show them where they will probably go to school." Harry grinned and tousled James's hair. Just like his little brother, James was all dressed up and seemed quite excited.

"Besides, we thought that Hagrid would be glad to see them again," Ginny added before looking around the house once more. "Okay. Read for Apparition?"

Harry was about to nod when something came to his mind at the very last moment. "Hey, stop! I've forgotten our gift upstairs!"

Ginny rolled her eyes, but she smiled when she watched him run upstairs. "What did you buy for him, Hermione?"

Hermione patted her cloak pocket and said, "I've bought him a ticket for this new park in Glasgow where they have the rare exotic animals. And you?"

"We've bought him a set of new, fire-proof gloves made of finest dragon hide," Ginny said. When Harry re-emerged only moments later, they Apparated to the Hogwarts grounds together.

James and Albus stood with open mouths, glancing up at the castle that stood proudly against the afternoon sky. "That's where Mom, Hermione and I went to school," Harry told them.

"Will we go there, too?" James asked in awe.

"Of course you will."

"When?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, it will take a while, James."

"But how long?" James whined.

Ginny bent down and scooped him up. "You need to be patient, darling. Okay?"

He nodded reluctantly and struggled because he wanted to be put down again.

They had agreed with McGonagall that they would visit Hagrid in his hut and then guide him to the Great Hall at five o'clock sharp where everything would be ready for his arrival. They still had to walk quite a bit until they reached his hut. When Harry knocked on the massive door, they heard a booming voice from inside. "C'm in!" Harry

opened the door, and in the next moment, they heard a half startled, half excited "Merlin!"

Hagrid heaved his body out of the armchair with astonishing speed and hurried towards them, beaming with joy. "C'm in, C'm in! Blimey, I can't believe ya finally came up with the idea to visit me! An' ya brought the littl' ones! What a surprise!"

Albus was scared and hid behind his father's legs, but James observed the half-giant curiously and did not back down when Hagrid bowed and tickled him under the chin. "So you're James. Ohoho I've seen your dad and your granddad fool around here at school! Seems like you take after them, eh? James giggled and did not protest when Hagrid lifted him up. He was only inches taller than Hagrid's forearm.

"How come you suddenly pay me a visit? I sure don't wanna complain, on the contrary!" Hagrid laughed and winked at them happily.

"Must there always be a reason to visit an old friend?" Ginny asked with a grin and tried to hug him, but her arms were way too short and did not even come close to reaching around his massive chest.

Albus started warming up to the situation and cautiously peeked around Harry's legs. When he saw that the funny, hairy man was no danger to him, he took some brave, toddling steps forward.

Hagrid chuckled. "Hey, Albus Sev'rus! Would ya like to have a look at me lil' kittens with yer brother?" He pointed at a corner where they could see a basket with four tiny fur balls wiggling around inside.

"Oh, Hagrid, they are sooo sweet! Where did you get those?" Hermione asked.

"Rosmerta gave 'em to me. Her cat had kittens and died shortly afterwards. She has no time ta bring 'em up by hand, so I took 'em." Hagrid laughed when the children hurried towards the kittens and caressed them with their small hands.

"Come, I have sumthin' I wanna show you, too," the half-giant told the adults. His eyes had that special revealing gleam, and Harry and Hermione knew at once that they had to be on their guard. They exchanged concerned glances while they followed him through the door into the garden and froze.

"Ha... Hagrid what is this?" Ginny's voice cracked with horror while she stared at two creatures that were tied to a tree. They looked like very small dragons, but they had fur and their wings were not leathery, but bore black feathers. They were as ugly as sin and snorted angrily when they saw the visitors.

"They're Gordon and Norma," he proclaimed proudly and looked around as if he expected his visitors to clap their thighs in happy excitement. "Aren't they cute?" he chortled.

"Erm..." Ginny said and took an involuntary step backwards.

"Don't worry, Ginny, they're Broflins. They're related to dragons, but they're herbivores. That's why they're not forbidden in England. Useful buggers, they are! Their droppings're used in many potions and salves, did ya know? However, no matter what ya do, never touch their wings. Makes 'em mad." He smiled as if he was itching to do just that. "I feed them these small berries." He pointed to a corner of his vegetable patch where they saw some knee-high bushes with red fruit that looked like cherries.

"But Hagrid!" Hermione exclaimed in shock. "These are Cullus fruit. They are extremely poisonous! One fruit is enough to kill a fully grown man within thirty minutes! Aren't you afraid that students..."

Hagrid shook his head and beamed. "I've got Minerva's explicit permission. That part of the patch is protected by powerful magic wards. Nobody but me can get near."

Hermione grimaced. "I don't know, Hagrid. Cullus fruit contain one of the most potent poisons in the world. Even putting a Bezoar into the mouth of a person who ingested it will only delay the poisoning for some hours, and the patient will die eventually. Brewing the antivenin is so complicated that only very few Potions masters in the world are capable of accomplishing the task!"

"Of course you'd be able to reel that off immediately, Hermione." Hagrid beamed. "Ten points to Gryffindor!"

"Oh, we haven't been students for ages, Hagrid," Harry reminded him, but he smiled, too.

"I know it, you know it, but does the hourglass know it?" Hagrid winked at them and they all laughed with the exception of Hermione. "Listen, Hermione," the gamekeeper said with a sudden serious expression. "I know that you're worried, but you needn't be. Them wards are so strong that even a powerful wizard could not breach them, let alone students. McGonagall made sure of that. She even encouraged me to have them because we need them to prepare salves and that kinda stuff. Jus' relax. I have some dried fruit in a jar on my kitchen cupboard they like 'em best that way. Want me to get the fruit while you make friends with Gordon and Norma?"

They did not like the idea at all, but of course they said nothing because they did not want to hurt their friend's feelings. Hermione felt a nagging uneasiness when Hagrid re-emerged with the boys in tow.

oOoOoOoOo

Convincing Hagrid to follow them up to the castle had been no problem at all. They asked him to show the boys everything worth seeing at Hogwarts, and when they entered the Great Hall, Hermione already feared that they had missed the right moment. Everything was dead silent, but suddenly, the silence was broken by a deafening applause.

At first, Hagrid stood rooted to the spot and blinked into the crowd. Then he looked around uneasily to find out the reason for this kind of welcome, but he did not have to wait for long. Professor McGonagall stood up from her seat in the middle of the teachers' table, hit her glass with her fork and waited until the pupils and guests had stopped clapping. Then she said with a warm smile on her lips, "For seventy-five years, this school has been happy to rely on the services of the best gamekeeper I know. Today, I am very proud to congratulate our esteemed colleague and friend on his anniversary. Please raise your glasses and drink to our dear Rubeus Hagrid, without whom Hogwarts would not be what it is today."

All around the hall, students and guests lifted their glasses and shouted in unison, "To Hagrid!"

Hagrid took several minutes to realise what was happening around him. Then he burst into heart-wrenching sobs. "You... you..." he sniffled and pointed his enormous finger to Hermione, Harry and Ginny. "Need no reason to visit an ol' friend as if! Just you wait!"

Harry laughed and wrapped his arms around Hagrid's stomach. Hagrid finally hugged him until Harry emitted a suffocated squeal.

The well-wishers gathered around them, McGonagall in the lead. She was followed by the other teachers and Hagrid's friends, all of them waving parcels. Hermione doubted that Hagrid was able to see whose hand he was shaking through all those tears, but somehow, it did not matter.

oOoOoOoOo

Ron had come, too. He joined them later, and they sat in the Great Hall for quite a while until Ginny gave her watch a concerned look and announced, "The boys need to go to bed, Harry. Shall we take our leave?"

"Of course, just go, now that things are getting fun," Ron added. But then he said, "Of course you are right. Pregnant women need twice as much sleep, you know!" He poked his sister lovingly and said, looking at James, "Hey, where have you got those cherries from? I want some, too!" Ron scanned all the dishes on the table, but he could not find cherries anywhere.

When Hermione heard his words, she looked up in alarm and felt an icy chill run down to her stomach. The realisation hit her like a flash of lightning and she saw James put a fruit in Albus's mouth, take another out of his pocket and put his hand to his own mouth.

"No!"

Hermione jumped up and hit the fruit out of James's hand. It landed on the floor and rolled under the table.

"Albus, spit it out at once!" Her voice cracked as she shrieked loudly, jumping and diving across the large table between them. She gripped Albus's chin hard and shouted, "Spit it out!"

But Albus had already finished chewing and started crying when she shook him and poked a finger into his mouth. He put up a fierce struggle, but she forced his lips apart and searched his mouth. "Did you swallow it?" she shouted again, shaking him.

"Hermione, what the...?"

"He ate a Cullus fruit! Help! Please!" Tears streaked down her cheeks and when she looked up, Harry's deadly pale face was only inches away from hers.

"What did you say?" he burst out.

"Cullus fruit! Bezoar! Quick!" she stammered helplessly and sunk to the floor next to the crying child. Ginny pushed her aside, and she fell to the floor, but the pain did not register.

"Al!" Ginny said over and over again while she tried to make her son throw up. He was shaking more viciously than anyone Hermione had ever seen.

The other people around them had realised that something terrible must have happened when Harry stormed past them, shoving people and chairs in his way aside. There was a muffled murmuring in the Great Hall, but Hermione did not see nor hear anything. Her insides were like a hard, cramped ball, and she felt as if she was going to faint at any moment.

Albus's skin had started turning blue, and it seemed like hours until Harry, closely followed by McGonagall, returned and kneeled next to his son. His face was wet with tears and his glasses were askew when he pushed the bezoar between the boy's lips.

"Get Severus," he shouted towards Hermione, but she stood like a statue, her mind unable to process the words into pieces of information. Harry leaned towards her and slapped her in the face to get her out of her state of shock. "Hermione, listen! You have to Apparate to Severus now. Do you understand? Right! Now!"

Ginny sobbed, and it seemed to Hermione as if thousands of people were talking to her, but Harry's words were the only ones that got through to her. She stood up, and without a single word, she ran out of the Great Hall, down the stairs and across the grounds towards the gates.

While she ran, she heard someone scream like a wounded animal. Hagrid must have realised that James had probably found the deadly fruit in his kitchen and pocketed them.

oOoOoOoOo

Hermione's lungs were burning when she Apparated to Spinner's End and started banging on Snape's door.

"Open the door!" she shouted. When nothing happened, she simply pressed the handle and ran inside.

If Snape was not home, it would be Albus Severus's death sentence. The thought hit her like a sledge hammer while she ran through the house, shouting Snape's name over and over again.

"Severus!" she screamed while she ran upstairs. He met her before she had reached the first landing.

When she saw him, she cried with relief, and she did not care at all that she must seem to him as if she had gone stark raving mad.

"What?" he said.

"Albus!" Hermione panted and grasped his shoulders, realising that he was naked from the waist up. "Albus! Cullus fruit!" she exclaimed. "Please!" Her tongue seemed unable to compose whole sentences, and in her growing panic she started shaking him, shouting, "Cullus fruit! Albus!" again and again as if these three words would explain everything.

"Where is he?" Snape shouted back at her and started shaking her so hard that her head flew back and forth.

"At Hogwarts," she managed to say.

Seconds later, he gripped her hand and she felt the familiar tight pressure of Apparition.

Hope and Despair

Chapter 19 of 43

the chapter title says it all...

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

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A/N: Once again, ladyinthecloak did a wonderful (and speedy!!!) job it seems that she had pity on you because of the cliffhanger at the end of the previous chapter. AND I learnt that it is perfectly all right for private persons to send chocolate to the USA as a gift. Be prepared! On the other hand, let's not forget notsosaintly, who put the awful mess that were my tenses and prepositions in order (I guess I will never understand those 100 %...)

Chapter 19 Hope and Despair

As Hermione and Snape entered the Hogwarts grounds, Hermione suddenly realised that her former professor's upper body was naked. Why hadn't she seen it before? Her worries about Albus Severus seemed to have banned every other thought from her mind, but as she followed Snape, running breathlessly along the path, her gaze locked on his pale back. The absence of clothing accentuated his gaunt shape, and moreover, it also revealed the fact that somebody must have beaten him up quite enthusiastically. Faded scars covered his whole back in a chaotic, ugly pattern, but Hermione's mind was taken off the thoughts of who might have done this to him when they had finally reached the Great Hall.

Professor McGonagall had obviously made sure that everyone except Harry, Ginny, James and Hagrid left the room. Harry sat on the floor, holding his son's lifeless body in his arms, while Ginny kept caressing the little face and murmuring inaudible words. Hagrid's sobs filled the Hall, but nobody took any notice of him.

"Severus!" Harry shouted in a voice that Hermione had never heard from him before. It sounded desperate and very frail, as if it had been crushed by an invisible weight. "Can you help him? Please, Severus!"

Not wasting a moment, Snape crouched down next to Harry, examining the boy's skin. Albus showed no reaction at all.

"Harry has administered a bezoar," Hermione whispered.

"How long ago?" Snape asked, not looking at anyone. His hands were shaking, and his hair hid the expression on his face, but Hermione was sure that it showed utter devastation the shock everyone in the room, herself included, was feeling.

"Ten minutes at most. Help him, Severus. I beg you!" Harry said. Tears poured down his face as he grabbed the older man's wrist, but Snape freed himself of the grip and reached out for the child.

Ginny was crying helplessly. She looked as if she wanted to shake Snape, but she seemed to have lost all strength because she sank down to the floor next to Albus Severus like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

After what felt like eternity, Snape looked up. When Hermione saw the grief-stricken expression on his usually motionless face, she gasped for breath. "I will do whatever I can," he said in a whisper and turned his head towards McGonagall, who sat in one of the chairs with a serious and scared expression. "Minerva, do you have breadfruit powder and pine devil moth larvae in your Potions lab?"

"I... I don't know," she stammered. "I will wake Lucinda at once and..."

"No time," Snape interrupted her brusquely. "I cannot risk waiting that long." He looked at Harry and Ginny and added, "We have to leave at once. I have everything I need for the antidote in my private stores. Minerva, can you lift the Apparition wards on Hogwarts for a moment?"

"Of course", the headmistress confirmed and stood up immediately, getting her wand from her pocket. She started drawing complicated patterns and murmuring spells.

"I'm so sorry," Hagrid exclaimed desperately and sank to his knees, making the floor under their feet tremble. "Didn't know... Didn't realise..." He buried his bearded face in his huge hands, and Hermione was caught in a wave of pity when she saw him like this. She was searching for words of consolation, but could not think of anything that wouldn't be out of place.

"You can Apparate now," the headmistress said, and in the next moment, Snape holding little Albus on his arm had pulled Harry to his feet. "Help your wife," he demanded brusquely and looked around for Hermione. "Your wand, Hermione," he murmured.

"What?" she asked, irritated. Each word directed at her seemed to travel twice as long as usual until it reached her conscious mind.

"Give me your wand," he demanded impatiently, and this time she understood. Without hesitation, she threw her wand over to him, not knowing what he wanted to do. But she did not really care. "Are you ready?" Snape asked and grabbed Harry's shoulder. "Concentrate now! Understand? Apparate directly to my house!"

Harry nodded, pale and scared, and slung one arm around Ginny, who had James pressed to her chest and seemed to have a hard time keeping upright.

Snape crossed the distance to Hermione in a few large strides and got hold of her elbow. "Do you know how to brew the antidote?" he asked in an urgent tone.

"Theo... theoretically, yes," she whispered. "I have read about it, of course, but..."

"Good," he interrupted and lifted the hand that was holding her wand. When he saw Hagrid, his face which had been full of sorrow and fear just a moment ago turned into a grimace full of hatred. The next second, an ice-blue flash shot out of Hermione's wand at the half-giant. Hagrid flinched, rolled on his side and lay there, whimpering and holding his leg.

Snape turned to the others as if nothing had happened and said calmly, "We will Apparate together on the count of three."

oOoOoOoOo

The atmosphere in Snape's house did nothing to help them develop hope or new courage, but nobody said a word when they stood in his sitting room and he ordered Harry and Ginny to sit.

"I want to be there when you brew the antidote," Harry said at once, but Snape shook his head.

"You'd only be in the way. The potion is very complicated and needs full concentration. I'd rather you look after your wife and son." He nodded curtly towards Ginny, who was observing her son's lifeless body, crying in silence. In a slightly softer voice, Snape added, "Believe me. I will do everything within my power to help him."

With these words, he turned around and looked at Hermione, who had remained standing in the doorframe and was now looking up at him insecurely. "Come, Hermione," he ordered, and she followed immediately.

Her legs felt numb, as if they did not belong to the rest of her body, but somehow she managed to stumble along behind him. He hurried through the dark corridor towards the entrance door in silence and did not turn around. They crossed an overgrown garden and reached some kind of shack, which, Hermione noticed, he used as his laboratory.

"Do you remember the exact order of the ingredients?" he asked.

"I... Yes," she whispered in a daze.

He pointed at the cupboards with one hand and said, "Powders and dried plants are in this cupboard, alphabetically sorted. Ingredients of animal provenience are right next to that one, liquids in the cupboards next to the window." He did not wait for an answer, but pointed her wand in the direction of his house and said, *"Accio, Severus Snape's wand!"* Some moments later, he held his own wand in his hand and gave Hermione's back. "What are you waiting for?" he snapped when she stood rooted to the spot and gave him an uncertain look.

"I... I am afraid," she admitted and slung her arms around her upper body although she was not cold. The potion required utmost precision. One drop too much or too few, one second of hesitation while adding the ingredients at the right moment, and the antidote would not work, but instead accelerate the death of the patient.

Snape strode over to her and clutched her upper arms with his long fingers while he bent down until the tips of their noses almost touched. "You will not make one single mistake," he said, dangerously quiet. "You will prepare everything as it should be, and this brew will be perfect. You will do it because you were one of the most brilliant students Hogwarts has ever taught. I would not even let you near my laboratory if I didn't have absolute confidence in the fact that you know exactly what you have to do. This head of yours," he roughly dabbed at her temple with one finger, "has memorised anything you have ever read about the brewing of this potion, and I trust in your ability to call it all up now, Hermione. Do you understand?"

During his little speech, only one word found its way into Hermione's mind:

Trust.

Snape trusted her to help him save Al's life. Suddenly, she knew that she could do it. That she would not make one single mistake, simply because she couldn't.

She nodded and went to the first cupboard he had indicated without another word. Immediately, she found the breadfruit powder he would need first while he murmured, *"Aguamenti,"* and lit the fire under the cauldron. They worked in complete silence, but every single movement seemed like a thoroughly rehearsed choreography. Beads of perspiration were glistening on Hermione's forehead when they came near the end of the process, but she knew that the worst was yet to come. The potion had to simmer for exactly twelve minutes before the pine devil moth larvae had to be added. They needed to be put exactly in the centre of the cauldron, but without agitating the brew. Precisely at the same time, seven drops of fresh blood were needed. Exactly seven drops. No more, no less.

With astonishingly calm hands, Hermione crushed the larvae while Severus pricked one of his fingers with a needle. They looked at each other, and he nodded almost imperceptibly. Hermione took several deep breaths to calm herself; then she waited until the twelve minutes were over and held the larvae over the middle of the cauldron. Very carefully, she let them glide into the brew. At the same moment, Severus held his hand over the cauldron and let seven drops of light red blood pour into the liquid. Then he took his hand away at the very last moment. The potion hissed and turned a light yellow a sign that they had done everything right until that point.

Hermione dared to emit a sigh of relief and discreetly wiped her sweaty hands on her trousers before she continued crushing clove leaves. Snape murmured incantations in Husanic, a very old and long forgotten language that Hermione could not speak, but which was vital for the brewing of the potion. Meanwhile, he kept stirring complicated patterns with his wand.

The last ingredient needed was curly human hair, but when Snape opened his storage cupboard, all he found was straight blond hair. Hermione had observed him and knew what he was looking for. Without hesitation, she grabbed the knife that lay before her on the worktable, sheared her long, thick braid off, took the elastic out and put her hair into the cauldron. She waited intently and when nothing happened for a while, her insides started cramping again. But then, silvery sparks started spraying from the cauldron and changed colour while in the air.

Snape and Hermione looked at each other. They had done it.

oOoOoOoOo

Silently, just as they had been working on the antidote, they walked through the garden. But when they had almost reached the door, Snape turned to Hermione.

Her feeling of endless relief and euphoria was extinguished at once when she saw Snape's expression.

"I have never heard of a case," he said very quietly, "where the antidote has been administered to such a small child. It counteracts the fruit's deadly poison, yes. But the side-effects are terrible."

"What... What do you mean?" Hermione whispered in a choked voice.

"It causes vomiting and stomach cramps for days. Nosebleeds and unconsciousness may occur," he answered tonelessly. "The boy will lose much fluid during this period if he survives the first night. He is so young... I really don't know if his body has enough strength to cope with this ordeal."

Hermione pressed one hand over her mouth and looked at him with her eyes wide in shock. She had known how the antidote must be brewed, but she had never read about any side-effects.

Snape turned away from her and opened the door. He had hardly taken two steps when Harry ran towards him.

"Do you have the potion?" he exclaimed in despair. "Severus, his skin is blue all over! I...

Snape pushed him aside without a word and hurried into the sitting room where Ginny was rocking Albus Severus in her lap.

Snape sat down next to her and motioned for Hermione to give him the bottle with the antidote while he gently brushed some strands of hair out of the boy's face. Then he put the bottle to the child's lips to pour the contents into his mouth and watched the liquid hiss and steam where it touched Albus Severus's tongue.

"Severus!" Ginny exclaimed in an anguished voice, but Snape put a hand on her shoulder and said, "It's okay. The hissing is a part of the process."

Hermione's heart beat wildly while she watched. The little boy first emitted a horrible rattling noise before he started retching and threw up onto Ginny's lap.

Snape turned towards Harry, who had been paralysed with terror, watching the scene. He said, "Listen. You have to take him to St. Mungo's. He will throw up many times more and he will have stomach cramps. The Healers at St. Mungo's have potions to balance the fluid loss and ease the cramps. I could brew them here, but that would take too long. I will write a note for Healer Emendis. Ask for him and no one else, okay? Give Albus some sips of the antidote once per hour, even if he fights against it."

With a flourish of his wand, he summoned a piece of parchment and a quill and hastily scribbled something. Then he rolled up the parchment and gave it to Harry. "I will take care of James. He will be in good hands with me," he said calmly and gazed at the elder of the Potter boys, who had fallen asleep on the sofa.

"I..." Harry started helplessly, but Snape allowed no discussion. He repeated his instructions once more until Harry finally helped Ginny to her feet and Disapparated with her clutching one of his arms and Albus Severus on the other.

As soon as they had disappeared with a 'plop', Snape sunk down on the sofa and buried his face in his hands. All of a sudden, he seemed exceedingly tired and old, as if a century had passed, not an hour.

Hermione felt a hollow pressure in the area of her stomach when she saw his body start to shake. Without thinking, she took one of his books out of the nearest shelf and Transfigured it into a simple black cloak. Hesitatingly, she went over and draped the cloak around his shoulders.

He did not protest. His skin was covered in an icy layer of perspiration.

"He... he is a tough little fellow," she whispered. "He will make it. For sure! There's more strength in him than you believe."

Snape did not answer, but moved back and forth, almost imperceptibly, just like a panther that had been locked into a cage.

Hermione hesitated; then she softly put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it a little. "He is like you in many ways, you know," she said, pushing the cloak a little higher over his shoulder with trembling hands. Helpless, she let her gaze wander around the sparsely furnished sitting room. With trembling knees, she went towards a cupboard which, at least she hoped, contained something alcoholic. Indeed, she found a dusty bottle of firewhisky and poured some into two glasses she found.

When she turned around again, he had not moved an inch. It seemed as if he had neither heard nor seen her. Not knowing where her courage had come from, she

reached for his cold fingers and put the glass into his hand.

"I, erm... I will take James to bed," she murmured. As she had expected, there was no answer. But when she had scooped up the sleeping child and reached the stairs, she heard him say, "If the boy dies, there will be nothing left."

He hit his fist to his chest, and her heart broke when she suddenly realised the implications of the evening's events. She was completely devastated. Not by the statement, although it was completely out of character for him and exposed his vulnerability. Nor by the way he sat slumped in a heap. But by the realisation that he loved Albus Severus unconditionally and that he would be destroyed if the child did not survive. His godson was probably the only aspect that had given Snape's life meaning. But if he died... Hermione did not dare to think this through to the end.

She found Snape's plain bedroom, put James in bed and tucked him in before she slowly descended the stairs again. The pain that she felt had nothing to do with Albus Severus or the pity she felt for Harry and Ginny. The source of her pain was the man who was sitting on his threadbare sofa, a mere shadow of his former self. His head hung low, his face was covered by his hair, and he stared at his hand that clutched the glass.

Slowly, Hermione sat next to him and put one hand on his back. When he did not protest, she started drawing meaningless little circles with her palm. "Everything will be all right, believe me," she whispered and dared to put her arm around his shoulders. They sat like that for a while. When she moved her hands towards his chest to pull the cloak tighter around him, she felt that the fabric under his chin was wet although he had not taken one sip from his glass.

Waiting

Chapter 20 of 43

Three people condemned to inactivity at Spinner's End...

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: please don't hit me Marisol is a great fan of evil cliffhangers, and it is my duty to stick to the holy mantra of translators worldwide: "add nothing, leave nothing out, keep your thoughts to yourself and if you are unable to so, turn down the job".

Moreover, I have to apologize for a very long wait. True to the line from the old song "you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone" we all became very aware of the amazing work ladyinthecloak usually does when she moved house and was unavailable for a while. As it turned out that she could not manage to beta this due to her many other obligations (keep up the good work, I love reading everything that you have laid your hands on!), Professor M McGonagall was kind enough to step in, and it is thanks to her that this chapter may finally go online. Also, thankyou WriterMerrin for "gamma-reading" this (blast those compound sentences!) all the remaining mistakes are mine and I gladly donate them for the cause of the Greater Good.

So please fasten your seatbelts and join me for a ride...

Chapter 20 Waiting

They sat like that for a while: Hermione had her hand on Snape's shoulder, and they listened to the oppressive silence of the house. Hermione tried to say something anything comforting or encouraging. But before she could even compose a sentence, Snape stood up and took some steps through the room, stopping in front of the fireplace.

"Go to bed," he said curtly, not even turning around.

"But I...," she protested, but he interrupted her.

"You are tired and exhausted. Go to sleep and get some rest," he continued in a somewhat more polite tone, and she could not think of an appropriate answer. She doubted that she would be able to sleep one second but lacked the power to argue with him.

"What about you, Severus?" she asked softly while she got up on tired, shaky legs.

"I will sleep here on the couch," he said. They both knew that it was a lie. He would probably not move an inch, fearing that he might miss a message about his godson whose life now depended on the healers at St. Mungo's.

Hermione slowly went towards the stairs. When she had reached the first step, she turned around once more. "Everything's going to be all right," she said to his back. His shoulders slumped as if they were carrying a weight too heavy for him to bear.

He did not answer.

oOoOoOoOo

His bathroom was just as plain as the rest of the house, but it was fairly clean. She found a fresh towel in the only cabinet that had been crammed into the small room. There was no mirror, so she transfigured a bar of soap into a small pocket mirror and immediately regretted it after looking at herself.

Her eyes were framed by dark shadows, and there was a pinched, tense expression around her mouth that made her look years older than she really was. But the worst thing was what was left of her hair. She had simply sheared it off without care. Now it was short and stood at odd angles in strands of many different lengths. Of course, she did not regret sacrificing her hair for Albus's healing potion at all. But the sight of herself in the mirror made her more sad and anxious than she already was. For one moment, she contemplated regrowing her hair by magic, but then she decided that there were more urgent matters at hand.

After returning the mirror to its original state, she washed at a snail's pace and then slipped stealthily into Snape's bedroom where James was peacefully asleep. Slowly and carefully, so she would not wake him, she crawled under the sheets. She curled herself up next to him with her legs against her chest in an effort to make herself as small as possible.

Unable to fall asleep immediately, her heart went out to Harry and Ginny, who were probably out of their minds with worry at the moment, to little Albus Severus and to

Snape. This last thought made her sadness slip deep down into her stomach, and she thought, "Please, dear God, help us. Make everything all right."

Tears streaked down her cheeks while she kept repeating the thought over and over again.

oOoOoOoOo

Hermione woke with a start when she felt someone poke her in the side. She opened her eyes in shock and saw James's face in front of her. It took her several moments to gather her thoughts and take in her surroundings, but then the events of the previous night came back to her in a flash.

"Where's my mommy?" James asked. His lower lip started trembling suspiciously.

"Oh," Hermione frantically thought of an appropriate answer for the child while she sat up. Finally, she said, "Mommy and Daddy will be back soon, you know. They had to go to St. Mungo's, because..."

"It's because of Al, isn't it?" the boy whispered while a large tear rolled down his cheek.

Hermione pulled him into her arms and caressed his hair. She decided to not tell him a pack of wild lies. They would only confuse him further. "Yes," she said tenderly, "it's because of Al. He's very ill, but he will get better. The Healers at St. Mungo's will give him some medicine and care for him a lot until he is well enough again to play with you."

"Sure?" James asked, sobbing. He lifted his head and looked her in the eyes.

"Sure," she said determinedly and wiped his tears away with her thumb.

"But when?" he asked.

"Soon," she promised. "But you can do something to help Mommy and Daddy."

"What is it?" he asked immediately.

"It would help them very much if you were a good boy so they don't need to worry about you, too. Your mum has told me that you are a big boy and always do as she says when she asks you nicely." He nodded solemnly and looked at her with a serious expression.

"When Mum and Dad come back, I'd like to be able to tell them how well you behaved, you know?"

"Of course!" he agreed.

When she pushed him away a little to get up, he scraped his feet on the floor and said in a whisper, "Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Do... do we have to stay here with this man?" He hesitated a little, but then made up his mind and told her his secret. "I'm afraid of him. He always looks so angry!"

Hermione brushed his hair from his forehead and said, "He can be very frightening, hm?" James nodded.

She smiled. "You are right. He looks quite frightening. But he is not a bad man, and you don't need to be afraid of him. There are people who can't really show when they like somebody, you know?"

He gave her a sheepish look. "Does he like me?" he finally asked in a doubtful voice.

Hermione swallowed, but then she said, "Yes. He also likes your mum and your dad very much, and especially Albus. Albus is his godson, just as you are Uncle Ron's godson. And you are a very special person to Uncle Ron, aren't you?"

"But why can't he show when he likes somebody?" James pressed the subject. It was obvious that he was at a loss and could not understand why Snape was like this. In his short life, he had never experienced rejection or people who were grumpy all of the time, disregarding everyone around them.

Hermione thought very hard how she could wrap up her answer to be understood by a small boy, who had never experienced anything but love and kindness at his parents' house. "Maybe it's because he is afraid of being laughed at or even hurt when he shows it," she said quietly.

She did not know whether James understood. But to her immense relief, he stopped asking and allowed her to help him get dressed.

oOoOoOoOo

With James's small hand clutched tightly in her own, she descended the stairs towards the sitting room. She saw Snape sitting upright on the sofa and felt her heart constrict painfully. When he heard her steps on the stairs, he turned his head towards her. Obviously, he had not slept a second. He still wore the cloak that she had Transfigured for him, and his hollow face was paler than ever.

"Good morning," she said, nervously wiping her free hand on a trouser leg. "No news?" He shook his head.

"Erm... I could make us some breakfast while you freshen up and get changed?" she suggested. "If anyone Apparates, I will be there."

He thought about her suggestion and seemingly could not come up with an objection. So he nodded curtly and said, "You'll find tea and some food in the kitchen."

His voice sounded very hoarse, as if he had not used it for a long time. She turned around to hide the sad expression on her face from him. But she could feel his gaze on her back just before he started climbing the stairs.

"Wanna help?" she asked James, while they proceeded to the kitchen where she started searching Snape's cupboards for food and dishes. He nodded and slowly carried the plates that she had given him. Then he laid the table with utmost care.

She was choked with emotion while observing him. He obviously made an effort to be a good boy, to not drop anything or fool around. At the same time, she thought of his little brother, whose small body was fighting for its life. She blinked and swallowed, but the tears came nevertheless.

oOoOoOoOo

They ate in silence. Hermione knew that it was not due to her cooking when Snape put his half-eaten piece of toast back on his plate and pushed it aside.

"I'm not hungry either," she whispered and clutched her teacup with both hands.

"May I get up, please?" James asked cautiously, looking from Hermione to Snape and back. He had eaten his toast and eggs, and when Hermione nodded, his face lightened up with relief.

"Do you have any books with pictures for James to look at?" Hermione asked Snape. At first, he did not seem to hear her, but then he got up and said, "I'll go and look."

After several minutes, he came back, holding an old, leather-bound tome with yellow pages. Hermione saw that it was an ancient edition of *'The Tales of Beedle the Bard'*, and she was quite astonished that someone like Snape owned such a thing. Snape held the book out for James with a pinched expression, and James looked scared when he finally took it. Snape was about to turn away when James plucked up all his courage and tugged his cloak to make him look down.

"I will not damage the book, sir," James whispered. "I'll turn the pages very carefully."

If Snape was surprised by this statement, at least he did not show it. He only nodded in James's direction and said to Hermione, "I'll Apparate to St. Mungo's." She understood that he simply could not take the uncertainty anymore, as well as the torture of a silent house where he was condemned to inactivity.

She wanted to say that she'd accompany him. Then she remembered James, and she emitted a choked sound that expressed all her fear and despair.

"Come back as soon as you get some news," she pleaded. But she did not know whether he had heard her, because he vanished with a loud bang, leaving her alone with her ever growing sense of panic.

oOoOoOoOo

Hermione knew that he had not been gone for more than an hour, but to her it seemed like eternity. She paced the room nervously and tried to tune out her worst fears. James quietly looked at the pictures in the fairy-tale book and asked her a question every now and then, but she gave only half-hearted answers.

'Albus hasn't survived the night. He must have died,' she thought. In the next moment, she hated herself for producing such terrible thoughts. But no matter how hard she tried to believe in a happy ending, she could not manage. Her throat constricted while the horrible pictures kept repeating before her inner eye like an endless movie.

She felt quite sick, and her hands shook so hard that she dropped her wand. When she finally heard the 'plop' of Apparition, tears welled up in her eyes.

Snape stood in the door, only a few steps away, and she lunged forward with a choked sound. His hair had fallen over his face, and she could not see his expression. All at once, all her feelings came crashing down on her. Hope, fear and sadness made her swoon, and she would have fallen if he had not grabbed her upper arms.

He held her, and when she looked up, she could see the truth about Albus Severus' fate in his eyes...

Relief

Chapter 21 of 43

Good News!

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks (also in the name of our readers) to Prof. M Mc Gonagall, who did an extra night shift to get this through in record time!

Chapter 21

Hermione was not aware that she held her breath until she exhaled with a whoosh.

Severus's hands still clutched her upper arms, and his face held a calm and relaxed expression that she had never seen on him in all those years he looked as if all invisible loads had been taken off his shoulders. In a reflexive movement, she pulled him into her arms and buried her face on his chest. Hermione felt him stiffen and sensed his fingers tear into the skin of her arms in painful tension. She had a fleeting notion that he'd been embraced far too seldom in the past and that there weren't many people who'd touch him willingly, without an ulterior motive, just to touch him. As soon as she realised this, she wanted to make it better, to show him that he mattered enough to someone who simply wanted to hold him. But just when he started to relax in her embrace, she felt a small hand tug at her cloak, and she saw James, who looked at her with a questioning look on his face.

Reluctantly, she let go of Severus and bent down to talk to James. "Albus Severus has improved already," she explained, searching Severus's gaze.

He nodded slightly and said, "He is quite dehydrated, but he is tougher than everyone thought. He... is fighting and strong enough to make the Healers believe in his recovery."

"What's that supposed to mean?" James whispered excitedly.

Hermione smiled. "It means that your brother will be well again, soon," she answered. When James's eyes started beaming, she laughed.

"When will we go and visit him?" James asked and looked up to Hermione and Snape expectantly.

"We don't know yet. But I'm sure that we will go see him soon. Maybe you'd like to play outside for a while now?"

She exchanged a quick glance with Severus, who hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded and told James, "I'll show you which part of the garden you can play in." Then he went towards the door, followed by James. Hermione knew that he would probably forbid the child to play in the area where he had planted the herbs for his potions. Severus talked in his usual gruff demeanour, but even James seemed to feel that he had nothing to fear from the scary man today.

When the door had closed behind James, Severus turned to Hermione. She tried to say something, but the only sound that came from her mouth was a kind of choked sob, and to her own horror, she felt tears running down her cheeks. As if she were surrounded by thick fog, she saw Severus approach her immediately and felt him pat her shoulder awkwardly.

"I'm sorry," she whispered and felt incredibly silly because she ought to laugh or dance around in circles and sing but still she cried like a baby. He didn't say a word but left his hand where it was, and she did not know exactly whether she was imagining his thumb rubbing her shoulder in small soothing circles...

"Take a rest, Hermione," he said. "I will go to bed, too. I am..."

"Very tired, I know," she finished the sentence for him while sniffling a little. "Please don't think I'm snivelling because... it's just because... not for... it's because of my hair!"

"Of course," he said very earnestly, but the corners of his mouth twitched in a very rare hint of a smile that got even bigger when she blushed. They looked at each other in silence for a moment Hermione with her puffy, red eyes and Severus with an unexpected glimmer in the dark depths of his eyes and there was something in the air. Something unspoken that seemed to be almost tangible. Then Severus slowly took his hand down, turned, and went upstairs. Just when Hermione thought that he wouldn't turn around again, he did just that upon reaching the top stair... and drew a face as if she had caught him doing something forbidden.

~~*~*~*

Hermione observed James through the window for a while and watched him play, but although she was determined to stay awake, her eyelids kept closing. *Just for a few minutes,* she thought and gave in to her tiredness, never thinking that the few minutes would turn into several hours. When she opened her eyes again, convinced that she had just dozed off for a little while, one glance out of the window told her that it was already late afternoon. She jumped, and a brown blanket that had not been there before slipped down from her body.

"I was just asking myself whether you had nicked from my private stores again and consumed the Draught of the Sleeping Beauty," she heard Severus say, and when she turned her head, she saw him sitting in front of the fire where he was reading a newspaper. He looked at her with the mocking glare she knew so well, but the tone of his voice told her that he was quite amused.

"Oh," she croaked, "I thought I'd just close my eyes for a few minutes..." She was embarrassed about the fact that he had obviously observed her while she was sleeping. To distract him from her discomfiture, she immediately asked for James.

"He had something to eat about one hour ago, and then he got tired."

"You fed him and took him to bed?" Hermione's eyes widened in surprise.

Severus looked at her as if she were an obtuse child and answered, "Luckily, his motor skills are developed well enough for him to eat unaided and find the way to his bed alone."

"But you cooked for him?" Hermione investigated and tried very hard to suppress a smile.

"Wrong. I cooked dinner for myself. He was lucky, because I made too much so there was enough for him." he corrected, and it seemed to her that it upset him to admit that he had looked after the boy.

"Of course," she said with an earnest expression. She managed to keep the laughter at bay until she had left the room. Upon entering the kitchen, she saw that Severus had not only made enough dinner for himself and James, but obviously for her, too. A plate of roast potatoes was hovering above the table, surrounded by a transparent blue mist that kept the food warm. Something inside of her started fluttering, and she asked herself whether it would be a good idea to go back into the sitting room to thank him. But she decided against it, knowing very well that he would make a petulant dismissive gesture, as if it had never been his intention to take care of others. She smiled silently and felt her stomach ache with hunger. While devouring the roast potatoes she usually did not like very much, she felt as if she had never eaten anything more delicious.

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After her meal, she went back to the sitting room where Severus still sat in the armchair by the fire. Just when she opened her mouth to say something, the fire started crackling unnaturally and the colour changed into some vivid green hue. There was a loud scrunching noise, and then Harry was standing in Severus's sitting room, covered in soot. He coughed loudly, grabbed his wand and murmured, *"Scourgify!"*.

When his glasses were clean, too, he looked from Hermione to Snape and smiled. His cheeks were a little haggard, and his pale face testified to the lack of sleep he had experienced, but when he approached Hermione, there was a new spring in his step.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "How is he? Is there any news, what..."

"Hey," he interrupted, "let me catch my breath, will you?" He hugged her shortly and greeted Snape, who had jumped up from his armchair to stand before him, with a nod. Harry sat down and brushed his fingers through his hair. "After Severus had left," again, he nodded in Snape's direction "Albus's condition neither improved nor worsened. He was still throwing up everything we gave him. But just before I left, he kept something inside for the first time since we took him to St. Mungo's," he stated.

"The Healers have told us that the worst was over, but that his condition would remain very grave if his stomach continued revolting. Of course, he started crying every time someone tried to feed him something, but then Ginny managed to talk him into sipping some pumpkin juice... and he didn't throw it up!" Harry looked from Hermione to Snape and back with a triumphant expression, and the relief made his green eyes shine.

"Can we see him?" Hermione asked full of hope, and to her great relief, Harry nodded. "That's why I'm here. Al has asked for his brother... and for you." He directed these last words at Snape, who tilted his head in surprise. "Yes," Harry assured him. "He wanted to know when his godfather would come to see him."

Snape cleared his throat and said, "Well, I'll go immediately of course."

"Where's James?"

"He's sleeping. Do you want me to wake him?" Hermione offered. She wanted to give Harry an opportunity to have a few words in private with Severus. She felt that Harry wanted to thank his former professor. She knew that she would only disturb them, so she did not even wait for an answer but got upstairs to get James.

When she touched James's shoulder to shake him gently, he turned away reluctantly and made some protesting sounds. But when Hermione caressed his head and said, "Your daddy is here!" he opened his eyes in a flash.

"Where is he?" asked James and sat bolt upright in bed.

"He's downstairs. And do you know what? You can go and see Al now!"

James beamed and jumped out of bed as fast as he could. He was already heading for the door when Hermione caught the hem of his jumper and stopped him, laughing. "Wait! We've got to comb your hair first." James's hair, just like his father's, was quite unruly and kept standing on end. There was practically no way to make it lie flat, but Hermione was determined to at least give it a try. So she dragged the boy to the bathroom and squatted down to comb him, but she gave it up after several fruitless efforts.

James immediately grabbed the hairbrush from her hand and started to attack her hair in return, mimicking her and sighing, "It's much too wild!"

Hermione laughed and wanted to explain that her hair was anything but wild, now that she had cut it in such an ugly fashion. But then she realised that something was different. She Transfigured a bar of soap into a mirror, looked at her reflection and emitted a startled cry. Her hair had regained its original shape and length. She swallowed when she realised that Severus must have done this while she slept.

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When they were walking the corridor towards Albus's room, they met a Healer who started frowning at the sight of the small group who was heading for the door. "I think that this is not a good idea at the moment," he said sharply and planted himself in front of the door. "The boy needs peace and quiet!"

"I guess I can tell quite well what my boy needs," Harry replied coolly and wanted to sneak past the strongly built Healer.

"Mr. Potter, we have an agreement that your son is to be visited by family members only," he explained as calm as possible. "Peace and quiet are of utmost importance for the child now. Visits from strangers..."

"Strangers?" Harry echoed angrily. "This man is his godfather, and Hermione isn't more of a stranger than his grandmother is. In other words: these people are like family. Now would you please stand aside!"

The Healer gave in and trudged down the corridor in a snit. "It seems that there has been a change of shift. This Healer must have had a real bad day so far," Harry murmured as an apology. When he opened the door, Hermione saw Ginny on a chair next to a bed that seemed way too large for Albus's tiny, fragile frame. He was very pale and turned his head towards the door when they entered the room.

"Al... Mom!" cried James and did not know which way to turn first. Ginny pulled him into her lap and kissed him on the forehead before she allowed him to carefully sit on the edge of Albus's bed. Then she stood from the chair and took some steps in their direction. Like Harry, she looked bleary-eyed and tired, but she smiled when she approached Snape and, to everybody's astonishment, pulled him in a tight hug. "I know that you don't want to hear it," she said softly when she let go of him. "But we owe you so much that I'm unable to find the words for it. I will never forget what you've done for us."

Snape looked to the side with an uneasy expression, murmuring something unintelligible, while Ginny stepped backwards and made an inviting gesture in Albus's direction. "You may go and sit with him," she said quietly. "He's happy that you're here... all of you," she added with a sideways glance at Hermione.

"What I said to Severus applies to you, too, Hermione. Thank you for everything... I don't know how I'll ever be able to..." She didn't finish her sentence because Hermione enveloped her in a warm hug and rubbed her back in soothing motions while she tried to suppress her own tears. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw that Severus sat down next to Albus Severus's bed. The boy extended his arms towards Snape, who softly caressed Albus's hair.

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When it was time to say goodbye, the door opened, and Molly, Arthur, Ron and George came in. "What's that Hungarian Horntail doin' outside the door?" asked George and pointed his thumb towards the entrance. "I thought he's gonna rip our heads off because we wanna see our little one here!"

"George, please!" murmured Molly, shaking her head. George grinned but seemed a little tense, and the way he kept running his fingers through his hair revealed the fact that his feelings differed quite a lot from the way he appeared. Molly's face looked tear-stained and much older than Hermione remembered, but when Harry told them about the new situation, they all relaxed visibly. The Weasleys rallied around Albus's bed while Hermione and Snape stayed in the background.

Albus Severus had fallen asleep, and so they kept a whispered conversation in order to not wake him up. "Harry and I will stay with him until he has completely recovered," Ginny said. "Hermione, could you please bring us some fresh clothes tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll be here first thing in the morning," Hermione promised.

"And Mom... could you please take James? I guess we've been quite hard on Severus's hospitality and, particularly, his nerves." She smiled in Severus's direction.

Snape started to make a dismissive gesture, but of course, Molly was immediately prepared to take her grandson home with her. All of a sudden, Hermione's stomach felt hard and heavy. She realised that now, when James would stay with Molly and Arthur, she would not have any excuse to stay with Severus any more. She frantically thought for a reason why Molly ought to change her mind, but the more she thought, the less she found. As if she were in a haze, she saw the Weasleys thank Severus and waved Harry and Ginny goodbye before she turned around and walked towards the door.

"Hermione, wait!" Ron had followed her and embraced her. Then he bent down to kiss her on the forehead. "I know that you've been through a lot," he said softly. "Almost as much as Ginny and Harry."

She lifted her face and smiled at him. Then she returned his embrace, tousled his hair and slapped his chest. "Yes I have. I never thought that one could worry for someone so much..." Ron nodded, and they talked some more when Hermione suddenly realised that they had an observer. Severus stared at them. For one moment, she was quite sure that his eyes had become small slits, but in the next moment, his face had returned to his usual, vacant expression. He passed them on his way to open the door, then gave a small wave and promised the Potters that he would be back the next day.

"I have to go, too, Ron," Hermione said in haste. Before Ron had a chance to answer, she said her good-byes and left the room.

Severus had already gone down the corridor when she called his name, and he stopped.

"I... Severus, I... think I forgot something in your house. Would you mind terribly if I accompanied you to retrieve it?" He looked at her with one of his characteristic, inscrutable gazes, and she prayed that he wouldn't ask her what it was. Of course, she had not forgotten anything in his house, and she asked herself whether he could see right through her when he looked at her searchingly, until he finally nodded. After leaving St. Mungo's, they went to the next Apparition point. In the next second, Hermione felt the familiar sensation of being pressed through a much-too-tight rubber hose.

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"Well?" he asked when they had reached his sitting room and Hermione gave him a very insecure look. "Wasn't it your wish to retrieve something?"

They stood just like they had re-materialised: very close. Suddenly, the air to breathe seemed to have become scarce. "I lied," she whispered, not knowing how the words could have slipped out of her mouth against her will. She felt her cheeks turn red, and her heart started pounding hard and loud, as if it were too large for the chest it was residing in. "I didn't forget anything. It's just... it's... I don't want to be alone. And I didn't know how to ask you whether I could come with you without... being awkward."

She swallowed when he stared at her without a word. "But on second thought, I guess it wasn't such a good idea," she whispered, embarrassed, wishing she could just take her words back. "If you want me to leave, I'll go, of course." She forced herself to withstand his gaze and asked herself whether he could look into her eyes and see the silent hope that he would not reject her.

"Do you want me to go?" she finally asked after long seconds of silence. When he didn't answer, she forced her head into an understanding nod and turned around.

Hermione had almost reached the door when she felt Severus's fingers around her wrist.

Profound Communication

Chapter 22

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Kudos to Prof. M Mc Gonagall she really had a hard time with this one! I promise I will never again translate after midnight ;-)

Chapter 22 Profound Communication

Surprised, Hermione turned around and met his searching gaze. He seemed puzzled and amused, but before he had a chance to ask, she softly said, "The thought of returning to my cold, empty flat with no one to talk about what happened... it's just so depressing to me right now." Severus studied her face attentively, and as usual, she was unable to discern what was going on behind his façade.

But he nodded and made an inviting gesture towards his threadbare sofa. Sitting down, she saw that he had pulled up one of his eyebrows while taking a seat next to her. "I am very surprised," he said slowly, "that you seem to prefer my company to your certainly much more comfortable flat."

"You don't know my place," she said evasively while she felt her cheeks turn pink. How could she possibly explain to him that she didn't care about his house's condition at all as long as she could be with him, knowing that he must have started to see her in a different light?

To her immense relief, he refrained from digging any deeper but asked whether she would like some refreshments. "I haven't had any tea all day long," she said.

He disappeared in the kitchen and returned some moments later, two filled cups floating in the air behind him. When the cups settled themselves smoothly on the ramshackle table, she was quite astonished to see a box of chocolate cakes in their wake. "They're quite good," he assured her, misinterpreting her surprised gaze.

"I know. I am just perplexed to learn that you like chocolate," she replied.

"Well, everyone does," he answered with a frown. "What did you think I'd like? Beetles?"

His taunting tone made her cringe, and she smiled apologetically. They drank their tea in silence for a while until Hermione said, "I am so glad that Albus is over the worst part of it. I simply can't imagine what would have happened if you hadn't managed to finish the antidote on time..."

Lost in his own thoughts and looking towards his cup with unseeing eyes, he stirred his tea. She even thought that he wouldn't answer for a moment, but then she heard him say, almost in a whisper, "It might have been too late without your help."

"I... but I didn't do much," she replied hastily. But her stomach felt as if it were on a roller-coaster ride. She was shocked and fascinated by the impact of his praise.

"You have done some very good work, Hermione," he said calmly. "I am not prone to false flattery, but I do acknowledge a good performance." He lifted his head to look at her, and she blushed under his scrutiny.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper. "I would have done anything to help him. Just thinking about what would have happened if Albus had not survived..." She swallowed hard and started kneading her hands. "Every good, important or meaningful thing that has ever happened in my life is somehow connected to Harry... and to Ginny and Ron, of course. I know that their lives would never have been the same without Albus. And I am so immensely grateful that you made it... that we made it."

This time, he actually didn't answer. However, she felt that she understood what he was thinking. Maybe he was unable to express what his godson meant to him, maybe he didn't want to express it. It didn't matter. She felt that they had never understood each other better than in this moment.

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The teacups were empty, the cookies eaten and everything was said and done. Hermione had no reason to stay, but something deep inside of her stubbornly refused to accept the notion of going home. "May I ask you something?" she said tentatively.

"You may," he replied with a hint of a smile on his lips. "I won't promise to answer, however."

"Why did you choose Potions as a profession?"

He lowered his head a little and thought about it for some seconds. Then he said, "Because I have been fascinated by Potions since I came to Hogwarts as a child. It was something that I could do just as naturally as I could breathe or walk." Every other person would have exuded an air of arrogance or supremacy at this statement. Coming from Severus, it sounded completely natural. Hermione nodded and was surprised to hear him continue. "Indeed, I once pondered working as an Unspeakable at the Department of Mysteries."

Hermione did not even notice her jaw drop when she stared at him. "An Unspeakable? I've read hundreds of books because I wanted to find out what they do, but I haven't found anything!"

"Must be why they're called Unspeakables, right?" he deadpanned.

"It was easier to get information on Horcruxes!" she said. "There's not one magical library in London that I did not search for information about the Department of Mysteries."

"So there are mysteries that one Hermione Granger cannot solve with the help of her precious books," Severus said with his trademark sneer, but there was no spiteful expression in his gaze when he looked at her.

"But what do Unspeakables do? And how did you get the information?" she insisted.

"Well, I could tell you," he drawled. "But I'm afraid I would have to kill you afterwards." She realised that he was pulling her leg and blushed once more. He seemed to have pity on her because he leaned towards her and said, "You know the veil that became the inevitable fate of Sirius Black?" He frowned while speaking the name, but Hermione ignored it and waited for his explanations. "Nobody who goes through the veil will ever return," he stated. "Nobody, except the Unspeakables, knows what is behind this veil and what kind of world lies there. They are the only ones who know the magic that enables them to wander between those worlds... They can go through the veil and return. But nobody knows what they do there and under what circumstances. It's one of the best-kept secrets of the magical world."

Hermione had not realised that she was holding her breath until she let it out with a hiss. "And you applied?" she asked tensely.

He nodded. "However, I don't have the magic needed to be an Unspeakable. This kind of magic cannot be learnt; it is innate. When I applied with the Ministry, they found out during a test. I became a teacher shortly afterwards."

"But why did you want to become an Unspeakable?" she interrogated further. The things she had heard kept whirling around in her mind, and she asked herself how he

might have managed to get this information.

She looked up and saw that his expression was tense and dismissive now. She realised that she had prodded too much into his personal life. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be too curious." In her mind, a realisation slowly dawned. His wish to work as an Unspeakable must have been shortly before he started working at Hogwarts – just after Lily and James had been murdered. *Lily,* she thought, and she smiled sadly when it hit her. This had been the reason for his application – the desperate hope to walk beyond the veil and visit her in the land of the dead.

Hermione did not dare to look him in the eyes. She feared that she might see things she did not want to see, but she also feared that he would be able to discern her own feelings. Lily was the beginning and the end of everything, and Severus's entire being was related to her in one way or another. The thought that his feelings for Harry's mother would always be there under the surface, no matter how much time passed, made her stomach constrict painfully. *So why do you mind?* a little voice inside of her said. *Because you hope that he might develop feelings for you at some point?* The thought wasn't all that new to her. When forced to admit it, she knew that she had already felt it during their embrace after his return from St. Mungo's.

"A Sickle for your thoughts," she heard him say. When she looked up, the dismissive expression had vanished, and he looked at her with a penetrating gaze.

"I could tell you..." she half whispered, "but I'm afraid I would have to kill you afterwards." He laughed, and she realised that this was one of the very few instances when his laughter was neither mocking nor derisive. "Such a shame," she murmured.

"What?"

"It's a pity you don't laugh like this more often." His impenetrable gaze locked on her face, but though she felt the embarrassment turn her ears bright red, she did not look away. "I mean, now that the worst is over, we'd have every reason to laugh, dance and be happy."

"I usually don't dance or laugh," he said softly.

"Nor are you happy," she added and almost regretted it when she saw his eyebrow rise. "It's a shame," she repeated, her voice becoming lower and lower. "I wish you were happy."

"You do?" he asked. "Why?"

"Well... because you aren't," was all that she said. He seemed to think about it for a while. Something wild started fluttering inside of her when his facial expression became very soft for one small, almost imperceptible moment. For the first time ever, it seemed he didn't know what to say.

Her heart leapt excitedly when she pushed all rational thoughts aside and let her actions be guided by her instincts. She leaned towards him and, taking advantage of his stupefaction, gave him a peck on the cheek. She heard the blood rush in her ears, and she felt hot and cold at the same time while she desperately tried to remember how this breathing thing was supposed to be done.

Slowly, very slowly, he lifted his hand and touched his cheek where her lips had touched his skin. "Why did you do that?" His voice conveyed nothing but extreme confusion.

"Because I wanted to," she whispered. She could see that he was flabbergasted. Well, she had surprised herself – and the irrational part of her consciousness told her to go on with it before her common sense had a chance to recover. So she leaned towards him again, and this time her lips did not meet his cheek – but his mouth. He froze, but did not push her away. So she became bolder and pressed her lips more firmly to his. Her hands moved to his shoulders, and then she felt his mouth open very slightly. Whether it was an intuitive reaction or something he wanted to do – she did not care. It was as if she was tasting some fruit she had never seen before. A fruit whose aroma she had been thinking about for a very long time and which turned out to be completely different from her expectations. She was unable to tell whether it tasted good or bad, it was just... different. Not unsavoury, simply different. It made her want to taste more.

Her hands were lying loosely on his shoulders. She expected him to reject her at any moment, but the longer it lasted, the less she doubted. Her doubts vanished entirely when he started kissing her back. They were both a little inept – he even more than she – but the kiss lasted. She asked herself what he might be thinking... whether he really wanted her, if it had simply been a very long time since he'd had a young woman in his arms or whether it was all due to the very special circumstances. Her left hand started moving down his shoulder to his forearm, and when he did not protest, she kept on caressing his arm in slow movements. She started at his elbow and moved her hand upwards until she reached his neck, where she started drawing small circles with her fingers, up and down, over and over again. Severus didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. Then his fingers buried themselves in her hair, and she revelled in the thought that he might have wanted to do this for quite a while...

The Dance

Chapter 23 of 43

Intimate Moments

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Ladyinthecloak is back! Thanks for a very fast beta-reading that enables me to post what I suspect will become your favourite chapter so far...

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Chapter 23 - Intimate Moments

Whether some minutes or several hours had passed, Hermione did not know. Neither did she know when or how her hands had started fumbling on the many buttons on his clothes. Her impatience and persistence were rewarded, however, when she felt the skin of his naked chest under her fingers. But before she could start exploring, his hands grabbed her wrists so tightly that she gasped in pain.

Severus retreated a little and stared at her. He was breathing hard and fast, and his usually impenetrable gaze held an unusual gleam, but he still held Hermione's wrists in a tight grip.

It seemed as if he wanted to ask her something, but whatever it was, he could obviously read the answer on her face. Hermione felt his grip on her wrists loosen and seized the opportunity to put her hands back on his chest.

His skin felt surprisingly smooth under her fingers, and she realised that she was holding her breath while she observed how her fingertips drew slow patterns on his chest.

It's amazing how contradictory feelings can be, she thought. Instead of repulsion at the sight of the many faded scars on his skin, she felt an irresistible urge to touch them. Instead of considering his very pale complexion as unattractive, she thought that nothing else would have suited him.

She vaguely remembered that she had considered his face quite ugly back in school, but now she realised that the sharp angles of his cheekbones and jaws added to some very special kind of attractiveness.

Hermione pushed the cloak off his shoulders and opened the remaining buttons of his frock coat. She had seen his bare torso before, but this time she actually realised that the many layers of clothing he usually wore were hiding a truly handsome body. Maybe "handsome" or "beautiful" in a classical sense was not the term she would have used under normal circumstances, but in the here and now, his flat stomach and the firm flesh under her hands were just that: beautiful.

Their lips met for another kiss that started very slow and tentative. Everything was just too new and strange, it felt much too unreal. Severus' hands in her hair were new, but strangely familiar – probably because she had imagined his hands so many times that she would have been able to draw his slender fingers with her eyes closed. In the past, she had only seen his dextrous hands in a rather innocent context with potions, but suddenly, she realised that she could imagine very different things involving his hands – none of which could be considered innocent.

As if he had read her mind, he started caressing her shoulders. Very slowly, as if he'd expect her to push him away any moment.

Later on, when her normal, rational thinking reactivated, she would probably ask herself what the hell she was doing. But right now, her body played a game of its own and made her encourage Severus shamelessly.

She felt as if his hands were everywhere on her skin. Her cautious motions that had been so tentative and carefully considered just some seconds ago became feverish and rushed.

All of a sudden, she found herself in a horizontal position with Severus right next to her. He kissed her and ran his hands under her jumper, making her gasp enthusiastically.

Like in a haze, she realized that the sofa that had been quite narrow at first had been enlarged without her even noticing. She was far from protesting and wrapped her arms around him.

His body's pressure on hers was almost too much, and when his lips touched the sensitive skin on her throat, she gasped again sharply. He continued his game... and stopped abruptly when Hermione opened her legs, wedging his lower body in between her thighs.

In an instinctive reaction, he pushed his pelvis down hard, and she answered by lifting her hips.

From this moment on, Hermione's powers of reason left her entirely and her desire had the upper hand over the last tiny bits of doubt.

They both groped and pulled at each other's clothes until all barriers had vanished.

Every one of Severus's touches was too much and yet not enough. Hermione was flooded with a deluge of complicated thoughts and feelings while she writhed beneath him and showed him what she wanted. He followed her silent pleas without hesitation.

They both moved rather clumsily and their union did not take long, but even minutes afterwards, the blood kept rushing in Hermione's ears, and she realised that she was still uttering small, sated sounds.

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She could feel his heart beating quickly and steadily beneath her chest, and when her hands caressed his back, he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

It was one of these strange moments that make people somewhat afraid of their own actions, although they won't stop because it feels grand – unreal, irritating and magical, all at once.

Hermione tried to make up words to describe her complicated feelings, but for some reason she preferred the silence of the house that was only disturbed by the sound of their breathing.

They lay on the sofa and did not move. But the silence did not last long, and soon the dance started all over again.

Boldly, Hermione took her time to explore his body this time. She found out that he was more afraid of letting her touch his Dark Mark than the most intimate parts of his body.

She loved the sensation of her hands on his body... His flesh felt like silk-covered metal. She also loved the way he let her touch him – and touched her in return – with more self-confidence than before.

She knew that he wanted to prove to himself and to her that he could do much better than the quick, uncoordinated collision of bodies they had experienced the first time. She wanted to tell him that she liked what he did to her and that she didn't want him to stop – but her mouth could only utter inarticulate sounds.

His eyes were shut, and his facial expression was one of previously unknown softness... and when he opened his eyes to meet hers, something strange happened:

The feelings and thoughts in Hermione's head were not her own any more. She did not know whether he consciously allowed her to enter his thoughts or whether he had lost control. Nevertheless, she dived into his mind and got carried away by the many different sensations that flooded her.

She saw pictures of herself in such quick succession they made her dizzy. In between these snapshots, there were feelings that floated on a diffuse borderline between desire and doubt.

She felt what he felt: There was disbelief that someone like she preferred his company while she had the opportunity to be with people who were younger, more handsome and popular than him.

There was confusion about the fact that he wanted her: *HOW had that happened? WHEN had that happened?*

Was it the moment he realised that she had turned into a woman? Oh, he had eyes, of course. Or was it the moment when he saw her cut her unruly hair without hesitation and throw it in the cauldron?

Or was it today – the evening he felt the softness of her skin and breathed the scent of her hair for the first time?

When was the last time a woman had touched his face and looked at him as if he wasn't repulsive but... interesting, maybe even attractive?

When was the last time he had heard the small, satisfied moans of a woman while he touched her?

She was young, beautiful and brilliant... in every regard... and her determination to get what she wanted was very obvious... Who was he to deny her?

The connection broke as soon as it had been established and made Hermione gasp dazedly.

Her hands caressed his sweat-covered back while their bodies moved in complete harmony, as if an invisible composer was conducting music only they could hear.

Severus murmured something in her ear, and she thought she heard,*You are so beautiful.* These words, spoken in his trademark rough, deep voice, pushed her into sensual overload and made her shake violently while her nails dug into his back.

She had always enjoyed having sex, in a satisfactory, controlled manner, but this was the first time she experienced how it felt to be a passionate woman who acts upon her basic instincts and primal needs.

Her subconscious mind had been in denial about her true wishes for too long. Suddenly, she thought of something she had already realised years earlier when they had learnt the whole truth about Severus.

*A person capable of such passionate hate must be able to love just as passionately...*and he did... albeit just physically.

Suddenly, she rolled them over to be on top. He allowed it and let her take control. His hands caressed her hips and her breasts, and she liked the hungry expression in his eyes, the undisguised adoration in his gaze.

In this moment, Hermione forgot everything except the wonderful pushing and pulling movement of their bodies, which met and separated over and over again... She even forgot herself, just to come back again the next moment. It was heaven and hell combined, and she never ever wanted to leave again.

Relapse

Chapter 24 of 43

a leopard cannot change it's spots

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

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A/N: Once again, it was Professor M McGonagall who had to fight against my lack of punctuation and grammar skills. I'd be lost without you!

A/N from Marisol (she asked me to add this after reading some of the reviews I copied and emailed her): "To all the readers and reviewers: I just can't describe how much your comments and your support mean to me. When Muggline started posting *The Godfather*, I'd never have thought that so many of you would love this fic. I just want to let you know that every single review is highly appreciated. Thank you... Marisol".

Chapter 24 Relapse

When the sound of singing birds from the open window awakened Hermione after a deep and dreamless sleep, it was already late in the morning. Her back and side hurt because of the coil springs that poked her skin through the upholstery of the sofa. This made her realize with a start where she was and why. Immediately, she was wide awake, straightened up and saw that she was alone in the sitting room.

Pictures of the night before flashed before her mind's eye, and she felt a soft blush creep over her naked skin. Single elements of reality were interwoven with dream-like sequences, and everything that had happened in the last few hours felt awkwardly unreal. However, the memories were too graphic to have been a dream. Not only were her burning lips and aching muscles proof of it, but she also felt something deep inside her core that she couldn't describe by any stretch of the imagination because she had never felt this way before. It reminded her of some kind of long-felt thirst that had suddenly been quenched, though she had never realised that she had been thirsty before.

She waited for something like remorse or embarrassment to kick in but it didn't. Hesitatingly, she called Severus's name, but there was no answer. She asked herself when and why he had crept out of their makeshift bed without waking her. Finally, she decided that he probably wasn't used to sleeping next to another person and that he had probably gone to his bedroom because of it.

"Severus?" she asked again. Then she wrapped the threadbare blanket around her body and got up to proceed to the upper floor. She did not know what exactly she would tell him when she saw him, but she had no doubt that the words would come to her as soon as they faced each other. When she reached his bedroom, she peeked inside, but realised that his bed had remained untouched. Slowly, she went downstairs again and proceeded to the kitchen where she found a cup with some remaining coffee inside on the table.

Lost in her thoughts, she sat down. Instantly, a coffee pot came floating to the table and refilled the cup with steaming black liquid before Hermione had a chance to react. It was the kind of coffee that could keep a person awake all night if necessary. Hermione knew the brew very well because she had used it herself as a student whenever she had to prepare for an exam. It was very strong and tasted awful, but it was an excellent help to burn the midnight oil... or to make important decisions that needed to be thought over thoroughly. She swallowed, and for the first time since she had woken, there was an uncomfortable feeling that nagged her and would not go away.

Severus had obviously left the house, and she didn't need to be a Seer to feel that it must have something to do with the previous night. In her mind, she started imagining various scenarios of what he might be thinking right now. But she realised rather quickly that, even after these hours of shared intimacies, she could not tell Severus's thoughts. He was a closed book to her, now more than ever a book that she could hold and look at, but whose contents she did not understand because it was written in a language she had not mastered. She felt a mixture of fear and frustration creep into the pit of her stomach.

For some strange reason, she suddenly thought of the fight between Harry and Voldemort so many years ago. Harry had thrown the truth about Severus and his love for Lily into Voldemort's face. "He desired her," Voldemort had said. "But after her death, he realised that there were other women."

Hermione felt a bout of nausea wash over her.

Was this what was happening right now?

Was she nothing but another woman?

Severus had not given her any hint that he cared about her apart from her physical attractiveness. In a moment of horrible clarity she understood that she could not expect anything more from him. The thought made her angry and sad.

She did not know how long she had been sitting at the kitchen table when she heard the front door open with a small squeak and fall closed again. She stood immediately, crossed the kitchen in some fast strides and pushed the door towards the sitting room open. "Severus, I...," she started, but stopped as soon as she recognised her mistake.

It was not Severus standing in the doorway and staring at her with bulging eyes.

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"Harry...," she gasped. She wrapped the blanket even tighter around her body in a vain attempt to not make it look like what it was.

"I knocked," he said flatly. "I thought he didn't hear me and just came in. I... What are you doing here, Hermione?" He said it in a tone of voice she had never heard before. Very strange and calm. Much too calm.

Harry had never been one to see through other people's behaviour at once, but this situation was much too obvious to be misinterpreted, even for him. The fact that Hermione was in Snape's house at this time of day, wearing nothing but a blanket that was somehow wrapped around her naked body while her clothes were lying next to the sofa it could not be misunderstood.

"I guess you are able to put two and two together," she said quietly. Then she bent to retrieve her clothes with burning cheeks. Her voice trembled when she asked him to turn around while she dressed. Even when she was fully clothed, it did not help to suppress the bitter embarrassment she felt.

Harry started to sit down on the sofa, but changed his mind and sat on the far end of the armrest instead. He looked at her silently.

"Say something," she implored.

The silence between them was uncomfortable. They were only a few steps apart, but to Hermione, it felt as if there were worlds between them.

"When did this start?" he asked, looking at her face as if he saw her for the very first time.

"I don't know," she answered. "I cannot tell exactly when I started seeing Severus through different eyes, but this...," she emphasised the word **this**, which was quite unnecessary, as Harry had already understood.

She paused. "Yesterday evening," she whispered, almost inaudibly. Hermione and Harry had never talked about intimate things, and she felt oppressively embarrassed.

"I didn't choose this, Harry," she said. "Some things just cannot be controlled."

He shook his head and got up slowly. "I just can't believe that you, of all people you, who usually weighs and ponders every decision just... stumbled into something like this."

"Weigh and ponder?" In spite of the embarrassment, Hermione's anger built and slowly crept towards the surface. "Surprise, surprise! My life isn't just an endless string of calculations and logic conclusions, Harry! Guess what I'm human! Just like you! Believe it or not, I actually do have feelings and instincts! They're inside me, and I can't just get rid of them by... weighing and pondering, as you so eloquently put it! Anyway... how dare you condemn me, Harry? You made Severus the godfather of your son, but then he's not good enough for me?"

"But I don't condemn you, Hermione." With a tired gesture, he ran his right hand through his hair. She suddenly saw the deep concern in his eyes.

"It's just... I wanted more for you than this. You deserve someone to make you happy." He came close and took both her hands. "If it were up to me, only the best is good enough for you" he said in an almost whisper, and she felt the tears well up in her eyes. "I value and respect Severus greatly. But if I may ask you something..."

She looked up to him and seemed rather insecure while she tried to blink the tears away.

"Do you think that he can make you happy, just as you hope?"

She thought of Severus's inability to forgive himself, of the pain and the guilt that kept eating at him from the inside. She thought about the fact that he still preferred the shadows over the light, maybe because he did not consider himself worthy enough, and her voice was heavy with sadness when she answered, "I don't know what I'm hoping for, Harry. And I don't know whether he can make me happy... or if he even wants to."

Without a word, Harry pulled her in his arms, and somehow this comforting gesture made things even worse.

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Shortly after Harry had succumbed to her wishes and left her alone, the door opened again. This time, it was indeed Severus who entered the sitting room and regarded her with a frown.

"Where have you been?" she asked flatly. She looked up at him and desperately tried to see behind his usual unapproachable façade.

"In my laboratory," he answered and showed her a small vial with some yellow liquid as if he wanted to prove it.

Of course, she thought. *Once again you prove how well you know him, Hermione.* As it was easier to talk about such meaningless things than about the thoughts that burned her soul, she asked, "What's that?"

"A potion for my personal needs," he answered, and she recognised the first signs of impatience in his voice.

She swallowed heavily, kneaded her hands and began, "Severus, listen, I..."

"Frankly speaking, I am slightly irritated that you are still here, Hermione."

These words surprised and angered her, and she could not come up with a real answer except a soft, "You are?"

"Yes. I thought that you would be gone."

"Do you take it for granted that people run away immediately after spending the night together?"

"Now that you're asking, yes," came his plain answer.

Hermione's guts constricted when she heard these words, and before she could manage to stop herself, she heard herself say, "So why did you make love to me in the first place, Severus?"

"Why?" A thin smile without the faintest trace of humour spread on his face while he made a few steps in her direction.

"Because I am an egoistical man, Hermione. Because, I have to admit, it has been a very long time since I had the opportunity to be with a young, attractive woman and because I am a person who knows when to seize opportunities."

She flinched as if he had clipped her around the ears although he was more than an arm's length away.

"Shocked?" he asked in a pitying voice, interpreting her expression correctly. "Come on... I thought you had enough insight into human nature to know what you were getting into."

Hermione wrapped her arms around her body as if she wanted to protect herself from his verbal assault, but of course she could not avert the pain that his words caused. "So I got myself a quick fuck, yes?" she asked with a trembling voice while all colour suddenly drained from her face.

"Vulgarity doesn't suit you," he answered coldly. He could not know that she usually did not use such language, but he probably did not care. When she did not answer, he shrugged and seized the opportunity to dig in places she desperately tried to protect.

"What's more interesting here: why did you sleep with me, Hermione?"

She looked at his pale face and into the vacant, black eyes that mercilessly bored into her. She searched for something to say and closed her mouth when she realised that it would be better to endure it all in silence.

"Did you think that you had fallen in love with me?" he asked cuttingly and held her chin in a violent grip when she tried to lower her gaze. "Look at me!"

She did not want to, but she lifted her head and met his cold gaze. Something inside of her felt strangely numb, while she desperately fought the tears that threatened to spill.

"Silly girl!" he growled, correctly assuming what her silence was about. "Did you think I would hold your hand like Weasley, take you to theatres and cruise around a lake in the moonlight with you?" He was now grinning disdainfully, and she could not make out whether he was amused about the picture itself or the idea that she might have thought about such things.

"I thought," she said very softly she was surprised that she was able to speak at all while her world was shattering into pieces "I thought that I could be a part of the life that you seem to have started anew."

He even rolled his eyes when he let go of her chin. "Oh please spare us both the embarrassment of this conversation. I don't doubt that it will lead in a direction where you, the bright heroine, have brought light and happiness into my pathetic existence, saving me from my isolation and even from myself."

Hermione's lips trembled, but she did not make any sound while she backed away from him instinctively.

"How unexpected: your brilliant mind does indeed hide some pitiful naivety," he added scornfully and looked her up and down as if she were some insect that suddenly showed new qualities he had not noticed before.

"Could you please enlighten me as to what you find so naïve about me?" Hermione blurted out. She could not have said how her anger had managed to wriggle past her humiliation and embarrassment and crawl to the surface. "Maybe that I thought I had managed to get through to you? Or that I thought I would at least mean enough to you to deserve some kind of respect? What is it, Severus?"

"Your idea of love," he answered irritably. "Your distorted little-girl attitude of what you think you can have with me. You know nothing about me, Hermione. And you know nothing about love."

"Don't I? Oh, please elucidate!" she demanded, shaking with anger.

"I am not a nice man, Hermione. I am not a man who brings you flowers or gives you a back rub when you are exhausted from work. I don't listen to your sorrows because I am too engrossed in my own, and I don't flatter your ego with false compliments. You, on the other hand, are making a mistake when you think you can spot another man behind my supposedly fake façade of spitefulness and lack of tact. I told you before, do you remember? There is no other man. I am exactly what I have been showing you since your days at Hogwarts: the disgraceful, mean bastard. In your idealised view, you think you have found something else inside of me... that's what you think you love." He laughed bitterly and looked over her shoulder at a point only he could see. "Love and I know much better than you is nothing but pain and fire. It burns deep inside of you until it has devoured everything that defines your very self. And in the end, nothing remains."

"In your world, maybe," she whispered.

The pain came in waves. It made her dizzy and took away the air to breathe.

"Right. In my world," he deadpanned. "You see how much my world differs from yours. You are an intelligent woman, Hermione... Stay in your world, and leave me where I am."

The words were spoken very quietly and carefully chosen, but he definitely meant every syllable of it.

Hermione did not know where she found the strength to walk past him towards the door. She did not see anything when she walked outside. It felt as if she had been trapped in some protective glass cocoon that kept everything out, leaving only the hollow feeling in her stomach. She felt as if her soul had been shattered into thousands of pieces and she had lost some of them while putting it back together.

She did not even feel the tears that were streaming down her face while she walked down the street like a blind woman.

And she did not hear the sound of a glass breaking that had been forcefully thrown against the wall of the house she had just left.

Aftermath

Chapter 25 of 43

Hermione experiences what friends are for.

"Hermione?"

The voice was friendly and soft, and before she opened her eyes she felt a hand lightly brush some strands of hair from her face.

"Ginny?" Hermione croaked when she recognised her friend, who was sitting on her bedside. "What are you..."

"I've been worried about you, Hermione. We haven't heard from you in three days," Ginny said, still caressing the dishevelled locks. "Harry told me what happened."

Hermione flinched as if an invisible hand had slapped her cheek. Immediately, she felt the treacherous burning in her eyes. "Oh," was everything she managed to say when she blinked up towards Ginny, who was eyeing her with a concerned expression. On one hand, she wished that Ginny and the rest of the world would simply leave her in peace and without any observers to lick her wounds. On the other hand, it felt strangely calming to know that her best friend was near.

"Listen," Ginny said calmly, but in a voice that allowed no argument. "You will get up now, drag yourself into the shower and make yourself look and smell human again. In the meantime, I will prepare some hot cocoa and tidy up your flat." With a determined gesture, the redhead pulled on the duvet that had shielded Hermione from the world like a fortress in the last few days. Then she grabbed her friend's elbow and forced her to move her feet out of the bed and get up. "Come on, Hermione," she said, "I will not allow this. You won't keep hiding in this cave of yours!"

Any protest would have been in vain, so Hermione just nodded her consent and let herself be pushed towards the bathroom by Ginny. When she became aware of the chaos inside of her flat, she was quite embarrassed, but Ginny just smiled at her encouragingly, unsheathed her wand and had everything in order in no time.

Usually, Hermione did not take the ostrich approach towards her emotional crises, no matter how bad they were, but in this case, hiding under a duvet until the worst pain was over had seemed the easiest thing to do. She knew that this could not be a lasting solution, but since too many confusing things had happened in the last few days and weeks, she felt that she could not face them alone.

From a distance, she heard Ginny murmur some incantations. Her clothes, which had been scattered all over the place, swished as they folded neatly in the air and arranged themselves in the cupboard. The first tentative smile in days sneaked onto Hermione's face when she realised how much her best friend took after Molly. While she silently closed the bathroom door behind her, a fleeting thought crossed her mind: having friends like Ginny made life much more bearable.

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Hesitantly, Hermione stared into the steaming mug of cocoa in her hands and asked herself whether and how she could find the words to tell Ginny what had happened.

"Talk to me," Ginny said.

Hermione shrugged and answered, "I don't know where to begin..."

"Why, at the beginning, for instance!" Ginny suggested and patiently leaned back in her chair.

"I wish I knew when that was," Hermione retorted with a painful smile. "When did respect turn into admiration? Where does pity end and affection start? The edges blend into each other, Ginny, and I have no clue when I started crossing borders. Have you ever experienced this very special moment in the morning when the sun is about to rise? Everything is bathed in a blue light, the horizon is still dark as the sun is not there yet – but in the time you take to blink several times, before you even know what has happened, it is there and everything is bright?"

The redhead nodded silently and sipped her cocoa while observing Hermione.

"I guess it was something similar... I was suspecting something, but denied it. And suddenly I was right in the middle of it, not knowing how I came to having these..." she swallowed hard, "these feelings." In slow, controlled movements, Hermione undid the towel from her moist hair and started brushing her thick curls. It felt much easier to get everything off her chest while her hands were busy.

"I don't know if I told you the whole story of our encounter in Hogsmeade. You know, during the Alumni ball. He looked up to the Shrieking Shack and when he saw me, he asked me to tell him what happened the night Voldemort's snake almost killed him.

"There was this desperate expression in his gaze, as if he'd wish nothing more than we had left him alone to die that night. And I... I wanted to make it better somehow, do you understand? I touched his Dark Mark, and something happened inside of me in that moment... I wanted to take away a part of his pain and guilt because I could not stand seeing him like that. I think that was the moment that triggered my first suspicions..." Her words got lost in the silence, and she fought her tears, although she knew that there was no reason to be ashamed in front of Ginny.

Sniffling, she searched Ginny's gaze. "You must think I've gone completely insane, right?"

"No," Ginny objected immediately. "Certainly not, Hermione." Ginny took Hermione's hand and pressed it for a moment, giving Hermione an encouraging smile. She was burning to ask her questions, but she knew that it would be better to let Hermione just talk first.

"I don't know. From that moment on, I went headlong into the situation I'm in now. I didn't see him from a student's point of view anymore, but with the eyes of a woman. When I was a student, I was afraid of his biting sarcasm and his sharp tongue. Now I find them very attractive. Back then, his habit of sneaking up to people and suddenly appearing out of nowhere got on my nerves. Today, I admire the smoothness of his movements. At school, I used to see nothing but the unrelenting teacher who would give you a hard time for the tiniest of mistakes. Now, I feel captivated by his brilliant mind." She covered her face with both hands, and Ginny could hardly understand the words that followed. "Oh, God, I feel so stupid!"

"You are not stupid," Ginny said appeasingly. She slid closer to place an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I hardly think that anyone can choose their feelings, you know! And I can't believe I am telling you this, but I fully understand why you fell in love with him, Hermione."

Hermione took the hands off her face and gave her friend a doubtful look while Ginny gazed at her with an earnest expression. "I was too blind to see," Ginny continued. "The way you behaved when you met him at our place... it should have made all the alarm bells ring, but somehow the thought seemed too absurd for me to see it for what it was."

Ginny gave Hermione a compassionate pat on the shoulder. "When you and Ron separated, I took a long time to get over it. I had this silly, trashy little girl's dream, you know... you and I and Harry and Ron, two little houses next to one another, a white fence... But somehow I always knew that the main reason for your separation was not the fact that you had different goals in life. Ron and you... you live on different levels, not necessary intellectual ones. Severus and you, on the other hand... you have more in common than I thought. You are both brilliant, and you value knowledge for knowledge's sake. Do you remember, a long time ago, when you two fought because he did not want to acknowledge your performance as a student?"

Hermione nodded. As if she could ever forget...

"It was as if you were throwing a ball between you. First you had the upper hand, than he had, then you... you are on a par. His greater experience is levelled by your creativity. To cut a long story short: you are on the same level."

Hermione was kneading her hands, deep in thought, and remembered how she had written this reader's letter as Leontes Pearson to defend him against Rita Skeeter's defamation. He had seen right through it and answered in his own way. Ginny seemed to be right, but what did it help? He had made unmistakeably clear how he valued her.

"After we... after that night..." Hermione's voice broke. She was embarrassed and looked away. A short glance in Ginny's direction told her that she didn't like thinking about it either. Hermione took a deep breath and continued: "He told me quite clearly that there will be nothing at all between us apart from this... one-time experience. He told me that my idea of being in love was completely absurd and naïve." She did not look Ginny in the eye when she repeated every word Severus had thrown at her, and although she tried very hard, she could not help the tears flowing down her cheeks.

When she finished, Ginny said nothing, but gave her a handkerchief and a hug. Then she murmured soothing words until Hermione calmed down and leaned back, exhausted.

"It's not only the words, but also how he said them... Cold and dismissive, as if I were nothing more than the dirt under his shoes." She hugged herself while thinking of it. The coldness he had exuded had almost been tangible. It had been a stark contrast to the night before when he had shown her a part of himself she had never thought she'd see.

Ginny was lost in thought and stared at the floor. Then, without looking up, she said, "It looks as if he had done his utmost to get rid of you as quickly as possible."

There was a moment of silence in Hermione's small living room. Then she asked desperately, "Oh, Ginny, what am I going to do?"

"What you always do," Ginny said. "You get a grip on yourself, go your way and don't look back."

It sounded so very easy and Hermione wanted to believe that she'd manage. More as a favour to Ginny than out of conviction, she nodded and forced herself to smile. "I have faced worse and kept my chin up," she said. To herself, it sounded as wrong as if she were a ventriloquist's puppet, operated by someone else.

"That's my girl," Ginny confirmed and smiled. Then she hugged Hermione, patted her back and whispered, "You know that Harry and I will always be there for you to pick you up whenever you fall... not that you will need it, of course."

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Steeling herself for anything she might be facing, Ginny shifted her weight from one foot to the other and knocked on the massive wooden door for the umpteenth time. "Come on, I know that you're in," she mumbled impatiently, asking herself whether it would be better to just go home. Harry had no clue where she was, and she had a bit of a bad conscience about lying to him, as she had told him she would be visiting her parents.

In the past few days, she had replayed the conversation with Hermione over and over again in her mind. But no matter how she put it, something about Hermione's story – particularly the way in which Severus had given her the boot – had Ginny wondering. "Severus, just open the bloody..."

The front door was flung open in the middle of her sentence and her hammering fist missed his chest by inches. "What do you want?" he snapped and planted himself in front of her in a menacing pose.

"To talk to you," she answered. Her hand sunk down slowly while she looked him up and down. She had never seen him look so bad and could not help but gape at his dead-pale, emaciated face for a moment.

"No!" he grunted. "I do not wish to be rude, but you should go now!"

"You are **being** rude already," she corrected, lifting her chin belligerently. "Severus, you won't get rid of me! All I want to do is talk to you... You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you anything," he said coldly while his eyes became slits.

She shrugged, but she did not budge. "Okay," she said slowly. "Maybe you don't owe **me**... but you sure owe Hermione."

A Pensieve Memory

Chapter 26 of 43

Ginny spills the beans

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Prof. M McGonagall saved me from the perils of English grammar and punctuation this time and she did so at lightning speed in spite of the holidays and the fact that her children are at home. Please send her some good vibrations as a token of gratitude ;-), also because she saved you from my love for run-on sentences and excess paragraphs.

Chapter 26 A Pensieve Memory

Hermione did not take any interest in the files that were piled high on her desk. She took notes every now and then but couldn't really be bothered with the things she wrote. Of course, she was aware of the curious glances her colleagues stole in her direction. The feeling of being watched bothered her a lot, but nevertheless, she was thankful that nobody pestered her with questions.

She had started working again three days ago, and after one look at her face, no one failed to believe that she had been ill for a few days and still did not feel very well. She needed no mirror to know how terrible she looked, but talking to Ginny had helped her to push her self-pity into the background, keep a stiff upper lip and go on with her life as well as she could manage.

As if the fleeting thought about Ginny had conjured some mysterious magic, there was a knock on the door. The young redhead stood in the office directing some excuses at Hermione's colleagues who were as astonished about Ginny's appearance as she was.

Ginny explained that she did not want to disturb them for long, made some friendly small-talk with the people around her and directed her steps towards Hermione's desk. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," she laughed, leaning on the completely overflowing desk that started swaying under the extra weight.

"Oh I was just thinking about you, and woops, you come breezing in, so I was taken aback somewhat," Hermione explained her puzzled expression and smiled back at her friend.

"I happen to be in town all by myself and wondered whether you might spare some time for me..." Ginny put on an alarmingly innocent face, and Hermione, who had known her for quite a while and did not fall for her tricks at all, gave her a searching look.

"Of course," she finally said with suspicion in her voice and got up from her chair. For some reason, Hermione did not like the look in Ginny's eyes one bit.

"I hope you don't mind if I kidnap Hermione here for a few moments?" Ginny gave Mrs. Bossington, Hermione's superior, her brightest smile, and Mrs. Bossington immediately smiled back and shook her head.

"Okay, tell me what you're up to?" asked Hermione as soon as they had left the room and were out of earshot.

"Why do you think that I have anything in mind?" Ginny blinked innocently, but grinned when she realised that Hermione could not be fooled. "You know me too well," she admitted, shrugged and continued, "I'm going to tell you something if you promise that you won't throw a fit."

"That depends," Hermione answered distrustfully.

"Okay. But before I begin, I need to know whether there's any Pensieve here at the Ministry."

"What on earth do you need a Pensieve for?" Hermione stared at the younger woman in disbelief. A strange feeling of premonition kept invading her.

Ginny smiled and pulled a small vial with what looked like white billows of smoke out of her robes. To Hermione, it looked almost too familiar.

"Because," Ginny said softly, her voice becoming very earnest all of a sudden, "I need to show you something."

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When the two young women opened the doors to the old and empty courtroom, they were greeted by a gush of musty air. They entered and locked the door. The room was filled with the typical stale smell of an enclosed space that has not been aired for a very long time. Hermione pondered doing a complicated air-cleaning spell for a moment, but when Ginny started talking, she immediately forgot about it.

"I went to see Severus," Ginny started directly and held up her hands in an appeasing gesture when Hermione opened her mouth in protest. "I know that I shouldn't have meddled," she said, "but I could not stand by idly and just watch your suffering. Something in the way you described Severus's... well, brush-off, felt quite odd. To be honest, I mainly paid him a visit because I wanted to see with my own eyes that he has indeed used you and then given you the boot as if you were some old scrubber."

"Did you come to a conclusion?" Hermione swallowed, astonished about her capability to form a coherent sentence while her head seemed to be spinning.

"That's exactly what I want to show you," Ginny whispered and headed for the Pensieve, gesturing for Hermione to follow her. She started uncorking the little vial and gave Hermione an encouraging smile.

"Whose memories are these?" Hermione asked unnecessarily.

"Mine. Are you ready?"

"No," came Hermione's truthful answer while Ginny's memories started filling the Pensieve. But she could not help herself and plunged into the wavering mist.

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In the Pensieve, she found herself standing next to Ginny at Severus's front door. Instinctively, she took some stumbling steps backwards when she observed Memory Ginny who started knocking rather determinedly on said door.

"Severus, just open the bloody..."

Memory Ginny had not even finished the sentence when the door flew open, and he was there... pale and gaunt as always, with some dishevelled strands of hair sticking to his head and face in an unpleasant manner and a furious gleam in his eyes. Hermione's body became rigid, and she stared at him with wide open eyes. But in spite of the hurtful words he had thrown at her after their night together, in spite of his cold and harsh treatment of her, she felt a touch of pity for him.

"What do you want?" he barked at Ginny, who flinched almost imperceptibly at his words but would not be put off her plan.

"To talk to you," she answered very calmly.

Severus's body was like a solid wall made of refusal and inapproachability, and his voice could have cut glass when he said, "No! I do not wish to be rude, but you should go now!"

Hermione could not see Ginny because she was staring at the man in front of her. Nevertheless, she admired Ginny's courage when she heard her say coolly, "You are **being** rude already! Severus, you won't get rid of me! All I want to do is talk to you... you owe me that much."

His eyes narrowed and became small slits when he looked down at the young woman facing him. "I don't owe you anything!" He sneered, voluntarily using his height to intimidate her. Hermione knew that gesture all too well... she was used to it like an old sweater.

"Okay," Ginny retorted with a shrug. "Maybe you don't owe me... but you sure owe Hermione."

At these words, Hermione did actually turn around towards "Memory Ginny". Upon seeing her friend's stuck out chin that emphasised the determination that was written all over her face, her folded arms and her rigid posture, a wave of sympathy washed over her. Hermione sensed that it had cost Ginny a lot of willpower to face her son's godfather and talk about a subject that she knew would make him extremely angry.

Severus opened his mouth and closed it again, pressing his lips together in a thin line. Maybe he was astonished by Ginny's tone, which she had never directed at him before, or maybe he considered this whole conversation unworthy of an answer. In fact, he kept silent for so long that it soon felt like an eternity. When he finally spoke, his voice held a note of finality.

"I fear that you are wrong, Ginevra. What is more, I do not know why you think you should meddle in things that do not concern you at all. Except," he drawled and his gaze became disdainful, "to satisfy your silly curiosity and get to know some dirty little details."

"Indeed?" Ginny kept cool. "Well, Severus, neither am I curious nor do I intend to learn any, as you call them, 'details'. And I do agree... I don't have the right to get involved. All I ask myself is this: why did you treat Hermione as if she were dirt under your shoes?"

He said nothing, but kept staring at her from squinted eyes. The way he stood there, almost like a statue, inapproachable and bare of visible emotions, reminded Hermione too clearly of the moment when he had thrown all those hurtful words at her, and her heart constricted tightly and painfully. She did not want to watch any more and would have liked to ask Ginny to leave the memory, but yet she stood silently and dared not blink for fear of missing any reaction in his face.

"I value you and I respect you, Severus. But I guess it comes as no big surprise when I tell you that you are not a nice man. You are moody, unsociable, impolite, and to be

honest, I have not the faintest idea what Hermione might have seen in you. But who am I to judge her?" She shrugged a little but continued, "All I want to know from you is why you were unable to treat her with the same respect she has always shown towards you."

"Maybe you and I have a different notion of respect, Ginevra," he said calmly. Hermione noted the different tone in his voice that sounded less sharp now.

"Do we? Please enlighten me," Ginny demanded. "Until now, I have been blissfully unaware that hurting and insulting somebody can be a form of respect."

"Did you never think, you stubborn little thing, that I might have treated her like that BECAUSE I respect her?" Swift as a predator who intends to give his prey the final blow, he had approached Ginny who took a startled step backwards. For a moment, it seemed as if he would grab her shoulders and shake her vigorously, but then he changed his mind, his shoulders slumping in a gesture that looked incredibly tired.

"You wanted to make damn sure that she would go away and never return," Ginny whispered, and the tremble in her voice was the only indication that she knew what dangerous territory she was entering now. "Why, Severus?"

"As you said before... I am moody, unsociable and impolite. I am not a nice man, Ginevra. I have never been, and I will never be. You know it, your husband knows it, and I bloody well know it, too. It was only a matter of time until Hermione would come to her senses. It was better to make her see up front what she thought she wanted to get herself into."

"Better for her... or better for you?" asked Ginny, who seemed to have thrown all caution to the wind now.

Hermione gave a small shriek when Ginny from the present grabbed her wrist and whispered in her ear, "Watch his face, Hermione..."

"That's it, right? Is it better for you that she left early enough, because you would rather bear it now than at a later point... when you would have gotten involved so much that it would have been even harder for you to see her go?"

Something in his face flinched as if he had been hit, and for a very short moment, his black eyes held a hurt, almost tortured expression. His mask dropped and revealed the man beneath it, a man who looked sad and forlorn. His self-control had only slipped for a split second, but it was enough to make Hermione's heart race.

"That's enough!" he said in an ice-cold tone and stepped back towards the door. It was the gesture of a person who could not bear the thought that somebody had seen his emotional vulnerability.

"Don't you think," Ginny said in a very calm, soothing voice, "that Hermione has seen all your human weaknesses and flaws a long time ago and decided that she could live with them nonetheless?"

He did not answer but stared at a point in the air behind her. Then he went backwards into the house and threw the door shut without another word.

For one moment, Hermione raised her hand to the spot where he had stood just seconds ago, as if she wanted to touch his pale face, but then the scene started dissolving and she found herself standing in the old courtroom with Ginny again.

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"Are you okay?" Ginny asked calmly, after they had been silent for a while.

"I don't know," Hermione whispered with a trembling voice and leaned on one of the benches for the spectators.

"I... I would never have thought that I could ever talk to him like that," Ginny said. "But I think that what I said is right. He did not want you to go, but he thought that you would go anyway, sooner or later. So he imagined that it would be easier for him to frighten you off now than have to watch you disappear from his life later on." She laughed insecurely and touched Hermione's shoulder. "Are you mad because I did it?" she asked hesitatingly.

"No," Hermione said. "I'm rather mad at me because I am letting my foolish, naïve hopes raise their ugly heads again just now although I ought to know better." She swallowed hard and looked Ginny in the eyes. "I would love to talk to him, but I would never demean myself and go to him after everything he said to me."

"And you very well shouldn't," Ginny agreed. "You have enough pride not to do that. But you saw that he looked like shit, Hermione... to me, it was obvious that I hit the bull's eye. If he cares for you as much as I think, and if my last sentence got through to him somehow, **he** will be the one who wants to talk to**you**."

Career Advice

Chapter 27 of 43

It's career advice day for the fifth-years at Hogwarts again, and look who's been asked to help...

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Where would I be without Professor M McGonagall? Some chapters behind, for sure... She had an unexpected day off and what did she do? Well, beta-read this chapter, of course! Kudos to her and her grammar skills!

Chapter 27 Career Advice

Weeks had gone by since Ginny had shown Hermione her memory. Hermione did not really expect that Severus would come and try to talk to her. Nevertheless, she kept flinching on those rare occasions when somebody did knock on her door. However, most visitors were neighbours, and once, to her great astonishment, it was Ron. He stood at her door, insecure and a little embarrassed, until she asked him to come in. Ron said that he had indeed meant what he had said the last time they had met, when he had assured her that he wanted to stay friends. After they had both overcome their initial reserve, the evening turned out rather nice.

To her immense relief, Hermione realized that Ron's company made her feel like she had in the old days when they and Harry had been the golden trio and their friendship had been more important than anything else. For one moment, they even thought about sending Harry a message asking him to come over, too, but they both knew that he

had not left the house for days except in very urgent cases because Ginny was a few days before her due date and could not handle the two boys alone anymore.

"So what about you?" asked Ron, his long legs stretched out in front of him while he was sipping a butterbeer. "Did you meet someone?"

The question threw Hermione completely off track. When she stammered, "I... err... no," she was sure that he had realized how much this question bothered her, but he only said, "Oh, I'm sure you will. Very soon!"

Later in the evening, after he had given her a friendly peck on the cheek and left, she had the now-familiar feeling of emptiness again. Hermione had learnt to deal with the pain in the meantime. The stabbing, pulsating pain had slowly changed and become some kind of dull throb inside of her chest, and she was glad that she managed to fade Severus out of her thoughts most of the time. But every time she was reminded of him, the unfiltered memories came back, and they were accompanied by that silly, naïve hope that he would talk to her.

Maybe, she thought while she was slowly dozing into sleep,*maybe he will come knocking on my door some day...*

She was only fractions of a second away from sleep when she remembered her mother who had some pearls of wisdom for every situation. Hermione did not know why this particular saying her mother's favourite came to her mind just now: *always expect the unexpected!.* Then her eyelids dropped one last time, and she fell into dreamless sleep.

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"I am happy that you could find the time, Miss Granger. The fifth-years are very excited already," said Minerva McGonagall and looked at her former pupil with a warm smile.

Some days ago, Hermione had received a letter from Hogwarts, asking her to tell the fifth-year students about her work. It was career advice week, and while Hermione was having tea with Professor McGonagall in the Headmistress's office, she thought about the time when she had been a fifth-year herself with Harry and Ron and they had gathered information about different professions. Back then, Hermione had not been very keen on pursuing a career in Magical law, but after the war, she had opted for this path without hesitation.

"To be honest, I really don't know what the students might want to hear," Hermione admitted while sipping the hot brew.

"Oh, I am sure that you are going to do very well and manage to interest some of them in the field of Magical law, my dear. Just tell them about the aspects of your work that you like in particular and how you spend your average working day."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. After assuring the Headmistress that Harry would have loved to come to talk about his job as an Auror but had stayed at home out of consideration for Ginny, they went on chatting about school life at Hogwarts. Minerva was just complaining about the alarming rate of decrease of the educational standards when there was a knock on the door and a horribly familiar voice that Hermione had almost forgotten croaked, "Peeves has dismantled the crystal chandeliers on the fifth floor, Headmistress!" Argus Filch, unkempt as ever, hobbled into the room and gave Hermione a dirty and suspicious look.

"For heaven's sake, Filch, not now!" McGonagall answered in an exasperated tone. But the old caretaker answered, "A student girl has been injured. You have to throw him out, Professor. This time, he has gone too..."

With astonishing agility for her age, Minerva rose from her seat, pushed Filch aside and told Hermione, "Please excuse me for a moment. I will be back shortly!" Then she hurried out of the office and left Hermione alone. With a soft smile on her lips, Hermione looked towards the door through which the Headmistress had disappeared. Some things, she thought, would never change at Hogwarts.

Hermione had been looking around a little when she heard a soft voice behind her. "It must be some years since I've seen you in this office!"

She jerked around sharply and started at Albus Dumbledore's portrait. He had been asleep when she arrived, but now he rubbed his eyes merrily and beamed at her. "Professor Dumbledore!" she stammered and got up to approach the wall where his portrait was hung.

"Minerva already told me that you agreed to come," he said in a friendly voice and winked at her. "How are you, Miss Granger?"

"I... I am well, Sir, thank you," whispered Hermione. She had almost reciprocated, but then she remembered that it might be somewhat tactless to ask a dead man after his health.

"I heard that you have done very well in your field, my dear," he said, and she thought she saw a proud twinkle in his blue eyes. Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair and tried to answer, but before she could say something, he continued. "Honestly speaking, anything else would have been a big surprise to me. While you were a student, you already gave proof that you own a brilliant mind and have your heart in the right place."

"I... thanks," whispered Hermione, embarrassed and pleased at the same time. She had not seen Dumbledore's portrait since the night of the victory over Voldemort, and as she looked in his kind and knowing eyes, she suddenly felt the urge to ask him something and blurted out, "Sir? May I ask you something?"

"Of course, my dear," was his friendly answer.

She stared down at her hands and whispered, "If you knew somebody who had a dream, a dearest wish, and you knew that this wish could by no means come true, what advice would you give to that person?"

When she looked up again, she immediately knew what Harry had meant when he said that Dumbledore's eyes looked as if they could see right into people. He looked at her for a while, then he said, "I would like to tell you a little tale about impossibility, Miss Granger: Many years ago, a young American Muggle author had a dream. He wanted to become a writer and publish his work which he was very proud of. Full of confidence, he sent it to a publisher, but he received a devastating answer: The publisher wrote that Mr. Bach had no talent whatsoever, that his story was useless and utter trash.

Downhearted, the young man wanted to give up his dream, but there was this burning spark inside of him that he could not bury. So he sent his work to another publisher and got the same answer. Everyone he asked gave him the advice to give up his dream, but the young man simply couldn't help it; he had to cling to it. 'It's impossible,' people said, 'give it up'. But he kept sending his story to publishers over and over again. He told himself that nothing is impossible if you just believe in it."

"What happened?" asked Hermione breathlessly.

Dumbledore smiled. "The last publisher finally agreed to print the book. Richard Bach sold millions of copies of his story*Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and became a famous author all over the world... not only among Muggles." His last words had been accompanied by a twinkle and he met Hermione's astonished gaze with a warm smile.

"I know *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*!" she exclaimed. "As a child, I loved it so much I nearly read it to shreds!"

"I am not surprised, Miss Granger," he answered calmly. "So I guess you know exactly what I would say to someone who dreams an at least in his or her opinion impossible dream."

Later on, when Hermione strolled along the corridors of Hogwarts, she felt as if a balloon had been inflated inside of her that made her float lightly and elatedly, and she could not help but smile. *No matter what happens,* she thought, *I will never let anyone destroy my firm belief in myself, my confidence and my never-ending supply of patience again. Not even myself.*

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There still was some time before the career advice would start, and so Hermione decided to roam the castle for old times' sake. Wandering around, she took a glimpse into empty classrooms, admired paintings and had a chat with Nearly Headless Nick who had zoomed away into a suit of armour, sending it to the floor with a loud crash when he spotted her. "My dear, who have we here!" he shouted and took her hand it felt as if she had immersed her fingers in iced water.

After that, she visited the library and even managed to get a smile out of the ever grumpy Madam Pince. She realised that most students she met in the corridors would turn around to get a better look at her and whisper behind her back.

"You think it was her?"

"I am sure!"

"D'you think Harry Potter will come, too?"

During her round tour of the castle, she had almost unconsciously led her steps towards the dungeons, and on a spur of the moment, she decided to visit the classroom where she'd always had her Potions classes.

Upon reaching the dungeons, it felt as if time had come to a halt. Hermione could have sworn she heard Harry and Ron whispering behind her, complaining about the fact that they would have to spend full two hours with Snape and the Slytherins.

When she entered the room, the feeling became even stronger. It was as if the overwhelming ticking of time would conjure the memories from days long gone. Hermione's fingertips caressed the workbenches, and she took a look at some of the burn marks on the wooden surfaces, most of which were probably an eternal testimony to Neville's Potions skills. Then she looked up to the blackboard from which she had eagerly copied the ingredients back then. She almost thought she could hear Snape's voice, talking to her in a quiet, velvet-like tone that made the hair on her neck stand on end. It took her quite a while to realise that it was not a memory, but a very real sound. She whirled around.

He stepped out of the shadows, slow and supple, and once more she had the impression that he could melt into them in a rather eerie fashion. To her own surprise, Hermione remained perfectly calm. She had been imagining this meeting for weeks: how she'd be upset, how her heart would beat frantically when she'd meet him again. In spite or maybe because of this anticipation, she was cool as a cucumber.

"Hello, Severus," she said calmly. "I guess Professor McGonagall has asked you to tell the students something about Potions and the possible career paths, like working in an apothecary." Hermione even managed a small smile while she slowly leaned on one of the desks. She noticed that he looked gaunt and a little sick. Severus, on the other hand, observed her from behind his impenetrable mask and nodded silently.

Hermione let her gaze wander through the room and said, "When I came to this school many years ago, without the slightest clue what I would have to deal with, I was afraid of you. All the other teachers liked me. They were happy about every correct answer I could reel off, but you offered me nothing but disdain." In his face, a muscle twitched almost imperceptibly, but he still said nothing.

When Hermione continued, she looked down to her lap. "I did not lose my fear until I realized that Dumbledore trusted you and that you were working for him. You always acted your part impeccably, Severus."

To her great surprise, he approached her in a few slow steps and leaned on the same desk. They stood like this for a while. When he finally spoke, his voice was silent like a breeze. "I cannot remember a time when I did not play a role. I played them for a long time, and I played them so intensively that I lost myself somewhere along the way."

Once more, his words broke her heart, and she would have loved to extend her hand and touch him. However, her instinct told her that he was doing something he probably had never done before and that any interruption would make him stop talking.

"I own one single mirror, a small, stained thing. I only have it because I need to stare at it every now and then to make sure that it's really me, that I still exist. It seems that I always went along the roads others had designed for me, and it does not matter whether their name was Dumbledore or Voldemort. But if you keep walking other people's roads, you inevitably lose your own way, your own self."

His words were void of bitterness or hate, and for one moment, he granted Hermione a glimpse into the utter complexity of his soul. Severus Snape was a lost man. A man who kept trudging in the dark, searching his place in life, not even knowing what it was that he was searching for.

"How can you expect anything from me, Hermione, when I don't know what to expect from myself?" This time, he looked at her. Long and penetrating. When she met his gaze, she noticed a strange flickering in his black eyes.

"But I don't expect anything from you, Severus," she said gently, and realized with astonishment that she really felt it was the truth. "I don't expect anything, and I don't want anything. On the contrary, I am offering you my friendship. You don't have to take it if you don't want to. It's up to you." With these words, she extended her hand towards him.

"Sometimes," she whispered, "a friend can help you to find the way that you've lost."

Family Affairs

Chapter 28 of 43

various family matters are arranged

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: We're almost on opposite sides of the globe, but nevertheless, Professor M McGonagall's family and mine suffered from various instances of typical winter flu, influenza and other niceties last week. I am therefore extremely grateful that she managed to beta this in spite of it all...

Chapter 28 Family Affairs

Stony-faced, Severus gazed at Hermione's outstretched hand. For one very short moment it seemed as if he wanted to back out, but then, after some seconds that seemed to be endless, he took it. He had a firm grip, but he remained stony-faced and did not give away the slightest hint at a thought or feeling. Nevertheless, Hermione was very sure that her offer of friendship had surprised him. If she were honest, she'd have to admit that she surprised herself a little. But for some strange reason, she knew that she had done the right thing.

Severus was not someone who made friends easily, and she was quite sure that he would never overcome his spiteful, cynical and malign tendencies. On the other hand, she knew that he had this other side that she had seen during the salvation of Albus Severus Potter. It seemed as if he was unaware how much he would be prepared to sacrifice for those few people he cared for. Those walls he had erected around himself did block an outsider's view of him, but they also kept him from seeing himself comprehensively, with all the bad and the good sides.

Hermione smiled about the overly profound thoughts that kept spinning inside her mind and said, "Okay, I guess it's time for you to go and scare the hell out of those fifth-years. Just imagine one of them might actually get the idea to pursue Potions professionally!"

The corners of his mouth twitched while he let go of her hand. "Potions is not a subject for dunderheads!" he answered with a shrug.

The students Hermione had to advise were waiting for her on the fifth floor, so she gave him a short nod and left, adding, "Try not to be too hard on them, okay?"

"Nothing could be farther from my mind," was his dry answer, but for one second, his thin lips formed a grin.

Then Hermione left with one last look back. While she ascended the stairs, she reminded herself that it was always better to move on instead of getting stuck in a rut.

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Three weeks passed, and Hermione neither saw nor heard from Severus. The day before, Harry had told her that Severus had agreed to look after Albus and James because Ginny had felt something similar to contractions. However, it had been a false alarm and when the two of them had returned from St. Mungo's only half an hour later, Severus had stayed for dinner after making some fuss first. *"And he didn't even make a face when it was slightly burnt. You know, I cooked it because Ginny's so exhausted all the time."*

Hermione smiled while thinking of the conversation she had had with Harry. She was just imagining Severus valiantly eating burnt chicken while itching to make some snide remark when somebody knocked on the door. Though Hermione didn't look up, she noticed that her colleagues abruptly stopped talking. When she did look up, her surprise knew no bounds: Severus murmured some greeting, looked around for orientation and headed for her desk straightaway. Of all the places she had ever imagined seeing him, she would have never thought that he'd come to her workplace. But Severus crossed the room unerringly with his trademark elegance, either oblivious to the curious gazes of the people around him or ignoring them on purpose.

Hermione could not help but admire his suppleness. Even at Hogwarts, he had always managed to exude a certain supremacy and danger by his presence alone. "Severus," she greeted him when he had reached her desk, "I must admit that I am somewhat surprised to see you here." From the corner of her eye, she saw her colleagues stare at them unashamedly, pricking their ears to get every single word of the conversation.

"Well, the matter is of a professional nature. Is there a place where we can talk... undisturbed?"

"Certainly," she answered. "We can use the conference room. It is not occupied at the moment." She gestured for him to follow her, which he did, causing Hermione's colleagues to look disappointed.

She could not hold it against them: It was common knowledge that Severus Snape rarely made any public appearances, and if he did, he usually ran his errands as fast as possible, successfully avoiding any people who might want to talk to him. Within the wizarding community, he was one of the people at the top of the list of those most speculated and gossiped about ... a fact that had only become worse after Rita Skeeter's article and the reactions to it.

As soon as they had closed the conference room doors behind them and taken a seat, he said, "I am here because I would like to get some legal affairs in order to be executed after my death."

"A last will and testament?" Hermione frowned. "This is not exactly my field of specialisation, Severus, but if that's what you want..."

He looked at her very openly and slowly added, "Of course, I could have called on someone who exclusively deals with inheritances, but I wanted to make sure that my affairs will be handled with utmost discretion."

"Oh, I understand," she replied while her cheeks turned a light shade of pink. To create a distraction, she pulled out her wand, summoned a piece of parchment and a quill and looked at him expectantly.

"As I have no other living relatives, I would like to bequeath my house and all my worldly goods which lie in my Gringotts vault to Albus Severus. My laboratory notes about the development of new potions and healing agents shall go to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries."

Hermione looked up in surprise. "You invented something?"

His lips twisted in an amused smile. "Well I did not reinvent the wheel, but yes: I have been working on some new sleeping draughts, healing salves and the like. I have taken notes of everything I have thoroughly reviewed and locked them in one of the cabinets in my laboratory."

While he talked, Hermione had been scribbling furiously. The fact that he wanted to leave everything he owned to his godson did not surprise her in the least, even though this also meant that he did not consider ever having children of his own. The thought made her frown, but she said nothing. "In case you ... before Albus reaches the legal age..." She searched for the correct, tactful words.

With his trademark caustic smile, Severus supplied, "Bite the dust?"

The corners of her lips formed a grin against her will and she nodded. "Yes. Do you want him to inherit the house if he has not reached the age of majority when you die, or should it be administered by his legal guardian until his 17th birthday?"

"My house in Harry Potter's hands?" His face contorted as if he had a strong toothache, but Hermione knew him well enough to know that he did not mean it. "To be honest, I never thought about it that way, but now that you're asking... no, I want it to be Albus's, regardless of his age at the time."

"All right..." Hermione ran over her notes again and looked up, noticing that he observed her with an intense gaze. "You... well, you will have to tell me the number of your vault, of course. Don't worry," she added when he didn't answer straight away. "I have no intention of robbing you."

"Oh, you have already proven that you are capable of that, and mine isn't even particularly well warded, compared to the Lestranges'."

She wanted to reply, but one look at his face told her that he was pulling her leg. Instead of saying something, she thought how much nicer he was on those very rare occasions when he was in the mood to show his very subtle sense of humour and how much she liked to be with him, at those times. They talked about some further details of his will until Hermione finally said, "I will draw everything up according to your wishes and send you an owl when I'm ready. It will not take very long. All you have to do then is sign the papers."

He nodded and got up, and Hermione felt a pang of regret over the fact that he would leave. "May I ask you something?" she said, rising, too. He nodded and turned to face

her. "Why now? I mean, did anything happen that makes you set up your last will and testament just now?"

"Well, my Healer did not tell me that I have six months left or anything. But I had a very weird dream a few nights ago with Sirius Black in it." He made a face as if the dream had mainly been about cockroaches and other vermin. Hermione understood immediately when she remembered how Sirius had made sure that Harry, his godson, inherited everything he owned.

Severus gave her a piercing look, then added, "I trust you to not even mention my will to anyone."

"Of course," she quickly assured him. They walked towards the door together. When they had reached it, she impulsively said, "It's my lunch break soon, so... if you don't have any other plans, I would be glad if we could have lunch together."

He remained silent, and it seemed as if he was thinking about an appropriate way to let her know that he did not want to spend any more time in her presence. "I think that this is not a good idea," he answered calmly.

She shrugged almost imperceptibly and tried not to show her disappointment.

"Your colleagues will pester you with questions already, and I think that there's been enough gossip about you."

When they walked through the door, her shoulder touched his upper arm, and without further explanations she understood that he had turned her down without giving her a brush-off. His physical nearness and the fact that he wanted to protect her from her colleagues' and the other Ministry workers' annoying curiosity made her blush, but she brushed her embarrassment aside and said, "I'll get in touch as soon as everything's ready. Good bye, Severus."

He gave her a short nod and the hint of a smile, then headed for the exit without another word.

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"Hermione?"

The familiar voice repeated her name two times before she opened her eyes and tried to get her bearings in the dark room. One glance at her wall clock's glowing numbers – one of her mother's gifts – told her that it was almost six a.m. It took quite a while until she realised that the voice was coming from the fireplace in the other room and she got up hurriedly.

"Harry! Something happened?" she asked even before she had reached the fireplace where her friend's head was bobbing in a display of green flames.

"Something's happened indeed," he replied with a broad smile. She understood immediately.

"The baby's here!" she exclaimed and squatted down in front of the fireplace. "Oh my god, when...?"

"This morning, about half past midnight," he answered with a laugh, and she could see the gleam in his eyes even through the blazing flames.

Hermione pressed her hand to her mouth and tried to decide which one of the many questions that kept whirling through her mind ought to be asked first, but even before she had a chance to say anything, Harry blurted out, "Hermione, she's just so beautiful... her tiny fingers and little feet... her soft hair. She's the most beautiful little girl in the world." His pride and love for his newborn daughter poured from every syllable, and Hermione was happy about his and Ginny's bliss with all of her heart. "How's Ginny?" she asked throatily.

"She has fallen asleep just now, she and Lily. The birth wasn't as exhausting as Al's, but of course she's completely knackered. The Healer could not determine yet when they will be able to go home, but since everything is all right, it shouldn't take long."

"Oh, I'm so happy for you, Harry," Hermione said while beaming at her friend."Can I come and visit today after work, or is it too early?"

"Of course you can," he answered with a grin. "Your goddaughter can hardly wait to be in your arms!" Harry told her some more details about Lily, then he said that he'd try to get some sleep, too, and disappeared. When the green flames had abated, Hermione was sure that she would hardly be able to concentrate on her work that day.

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In the evening, upon stepping into Ginny's room at St. Mungo's, she was even more nervous than she had been after James's and Al's births. "Hey," she said calmly while approaching the bed and kissing Ginny on the cheek.

"It's nice of you to come over, Hermione," Ginny answered happily and took the flowers Hermione gave her. Ginny was pale and had deep shadows under her eyes, but nevertheless, she emanated a glow that could not be dampened by any measure of exhaustion.

Hermione hugged and kissed Harry, then slowly approached the cot with the tiny sleeping baby inside. When she observed the little face, an "Ohhh," escaped her. Very carefully, she extended her arm and touched the baby's rosy cheek with her index finger. Lily stirred a little. "May I take her?" she asked, her eyes never leaving her goddaughter.

Harry stood next to her, took Lily out of her cot very slowly and placed her in Hermione's arms. Lily made some little sounds of protest, but fell asleep again when Hermione started softly swaying her. "She's so sweet," Hermione whispered and smiled when the distinctive baby smell reached her nostrils. She loved James and Albus, but in that moment – while she was holding Lily for the first time, knowing that, as her godmother, she would share the responsibility for this little creature's well-being – she knew that she would have a very special, deep relationship with Lily Potter.

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On the third day following Lily's birth, Hermione met Severus at St. Mungo's. She was sitting in the corridor with Lily on her lap. Harry and Ginny needed some time alone with James and Albus because they wanted to explain to them, not for the first time, that they had to be very careful with the baby.

James was crying because he had inadvertently hurt Lily and feared that it would be his fault if she never stopped crying again. In fact, she had calmed down rather quickly in her mother's arms. James and Al were very excited about the birth of their little sister, but just like any small children, they did not really realise why they could not touch and handle a baby just like they wanted to.

Therefore, Hermione was sitting in the corridor, softly rocking little Lily, while Ginny comforted her eldest son, letting him know that she knew very well that hurting the baby had not been his intention. Hermione was softly singing and gazing down at the baby, completely lost in thought, when she suddenly noticed someone standing next to her. She turned her head and saw Severus, observing her.

He approached her silently, looked at the baby and then back at her. "Atrocious," he commented dryly.

"Pardon?" was her irritated reply.

"Your singing," he explained and gave her one of his trademark mocking smiles.

"Well, my goddaughter seems to like it, though," came her sharp remark.

"Must be the lack of alternatives," he answered and sat down next to her.

They remained silent for a moment and looked down on the sleeping child. "I guess I know now how you feel about Al," she said quietly. "It's quite odd. You're not a parent, but still you feel responsible in an indescribable way. I know that I want to do everything to make sure Lily is all right and has everything she needs. I want to play a part in her life that exceeds that of a mere friend of her parents or an aunt." He didn't answer. Of course, his silence could have been an affirmation as well as denial, but somehow she knew that he felt just the same where Albus was concerned. "Do you want to hold her?" she asked and turned around so he could have taken the baby. But he did not move and instead answered in the same calm voice, "Maybe later." They stayed there for quite a while, not saying anything. Then he turned to her with a smile she had never seen on him before and said, "So... Godmother."

She nodded solemnly. "Godfather," she replied and smiled back and felt that, in this moment, they seemed to have a connection on some mysterious level.

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Where are you?

Chapter 29 of 43

Where is Severus Snape?

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Once again, Professor M McGonagall sacrificed parts of her weekend to purge this one of stray commas and weird wording. She rocks!

Chapter 29 Where are you?

With all the excitement that accompanied Lily's birth and her being named the godmother, Hermione did not forget about her promise to Severus. As soon as she found the time, she worked on his will, polishing the wording until everything felt good enough for her.

Some days later, she sent him a copy by owl, but to her utter astonishment, the owl returned shortly before closing time with the letter still attached to its leg, untouched. "Oh, didn't you find him at his home?" asked Hermione. With an absent mind, she caressed the little tawny owl's feathers while it nibbled her fingers affectionately. Hermione decided to send the letter again on the next day, but the next evening the owl returned again with Severus's will still unopened.

"Erm, did Severus contact you lately? It seems that he hasn't been home the last few days," she asked Harry and Ginny on the third evening after the owl had once more returned with the letter. She was sitting in the Potters' living room, holding Lily, while she told them how she had in vain tried to send him some important papers. Just as he had asked, she said nothing about a will and told them that he had asked her for information about a particular case instead.

"Well, don't owls usually find the person a letter is addressed to anywhere, even if said person is not at home?" Ginny asked with a frown.

"Usually, they do," Harry replied thoughtfully. "But there are precautions if you don't want to be found. There's a certain spell..."

"I know, I heard about that one," Hermione interrupted. "I never applied it, though." For a while, they discussed possible explanations why the Ministry owl had not delivered its letter. Then Harry said, "Now that you mention it, Hermione... Severus hasn't been in contact for a week or so. It's nothing out of the ordinary he doesn't call us on a regular basis, nor we him. Who knows, maybe he's got a large order from St. Mungo's and had to go on a trip, or maybe he's visiting someone."

"Now who would he visit?" Ginny asked in a doubtful tone. "He doesn't have anybody!"

They all fell silent for a moment until Ginny seemed to realise that her words sounded quite harsh. "I mean... as far as we know, he isn't in close contact with anyone. At least we don't know about anybody. Of course, this doesn't mean he has no friends..." She fell silent. They all looked in different directions as if they were too embarrassed to voice what they all thought: apart from them, Severus had no one who even came close to being a friend.

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The days went by, and neither Hermione nor the Potters heard anything about Severus. Every single one of Hermione's attempts to reach him was unsuccessful. While she tried to talk herself into believing that there must be a good reason why he had obviously disappeared, the thought that something might have happened made her panic rise. Her rational mind assured her that it was no good losing herself in wild speculations. Her irrational mind, however, kept coming up with all kinds of horrible scenarios of what could have happened to him, a potions accident being one of the more harmless ideas that haunted her.

After a week, she could not stand the uncertainty any more. She Apparated to Spinner's End one evening. Upon approaching his house, she saw no lights. Nevertheless, she went to one of the dusty windows and peeked inside, hoping to get a hint, but she saw nothing suspicious. Fighting the feeling of her own silliness, she knocked at the front door, but just as she expected, nothing moved inside.

More days passed, and panic started to eat her from the inside like some strong acidic solution. Even Harry and Ginny, who had not been worried in the beginning, started thinking on Snape's whereabouts more and more often and asked themselves whether something might indeed have happened to him.

"But where are we supposed to look for him?" Hermione asked for the umpteenth time during her next visit to her friends. Nobody answered.

Then Harry said, "I was at St. Mungo's today and asked whether he's there... had an accident or anything."

"Don't laugh," Hermione answered bitterly. "I did the same thing two days ago. All they said was that his last delivery of potions had been about four weeks prior and that it was not unusual at all, as he had not contracted regular deliveries."

"I don't understand this," Ginny said. "Where could he be?" They kept discussing in circles, and their ideas got more and more abstruse the longer they talked.

"Maybe one of his old Death Eater pals has done something to him. Somebody who has served his sentence at Azkaban and wants revenge now," Harry thought aloud.

"Maybe he has some distant relative he never mentioned to anybody and is visiting just now," Hermione said.

"Or maybe," Ginny said with a frown while she stood up, "I'll get my children to bed now and stop thinking about someone who doesn't even care to inform us when he is away for whatever reasons." She disappeared upstairs, but Hermione knew her well enough to see that Ginny did care, in spite of her anger.

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More than three weeks later, nobody had any life signs from Severus, and with every day that passed, Hermione's nerves wore thinner. She was sure that something had happened to him, and whatever it was, it could not be good. She had made a habit out of browsing through all newspapers she could get hold of in the morning, hoping to find the tiniest hint of his whereabouts, but they disappointed her every day. In the evening after work, she would go straight to his house to check on him, but he was never there.

She knew that she looked like a woman in the middle of a nervous breakdown and she felt like that, too but that didn't keep her from pursuing any possibilities that came to her mind. For days, Hermione had been working on a spell that was supposed to track down people who had put an untraceability spell on themselves. So one evening, while she was standing in Severus's garden as usual, she thought that she had perfected the spell well enough to give it a try.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled out her wand and did some complicated movements, murmuring various incantations. Hoping that the spell might be more powerful when she had something of Severus's at hand, she had searched the Potters' living room and found one long black hair that could only be his. She threw it in the air, aimed at it with her wand and managed to make it glow green before it fell down to the floor. After a while that felt like eternity to her, she had murmured the last part of the incantation and said aloud, "Severus Snape!"

"Yes?" answered a well-known voice right behind her that made her jump.

With his arms crossed in front of his chest, a mocking smile on his lips and his trademark cynical expression in his eyes, he observed her, while she gasped for air and made an awkward movement in his direction, then stopped as though stunned to stare at him as if he were sprouting a second head.

"Quite impressive, I must say. But I must inform you that the untraceability spell cannot be broken by anything. Must be the reason why they call it 'untraceable'."

Several seconds passed without a word. When Hermione found her voice again, she asked him with a calm tone that astonished even herself, "How long have you been standing behind me?"

"Quite a while," he admitted, his mocking smile even growing even broader.

"And? Did you have a good laugh?" she asked bitterly. All the relief about the fact that he was very obviously all right was replaced by boundless anger about the fact that he had scared her so.

"Very," he answered coolly.

Hermione's feet seemed to be lifted off the ground while she covered the distance between them and started pounding her fists on his chest. "How dare you disappear like that, not telling anyone?" she cried. "Don't you realise that Harry, Ginny and I have been worried sick? How can..."

He effortlessly caught both her fists in his right hand, fetched his wand with the other and said, "Silencio!" Hermione's flood of words stopped immediately.

"Well, first of all, in case you hadn't noticed: I am an adult. Even if I weren't, I'm not accountable to Harry or Ginny or you about where I go," he informed her.

She tried to free her hands from his vise grip to continue pummelling him, but it was of no use.

"Moreover, you have to respect the fact that I don't want to be contacted sometimes!"

He loosened his grip a little and said, "I will only lift the spell if you promise that you'll stop shouting, okay?"

Hermione realised that she had no other choice since he was physically and magically stronger than she was, so she nodded angrily and took a deep breath when he lifted the spell.

"Where have you been?" she asked, trying hard to control the volume of her voice.

"Away," he answered, and she knew with unwavering certainty that this was the only answer that she would get. Then he asked, " Could you please explain what this was all about?"

She stared, and before she could get a grip on herself, the words kept gushing out. "I have been worried sick, don't you realise? For almost four weeks, not a soul has had any life sign of you. Nobody knew where you went or why. Anything could have happened... you could have had an accident in your laboratory, you could have accidentally poisoned yourself, or... oh god, who knows."

She tore at her hair, which had been hanging down unkempt for days, but she did not care. She did not care either, that the traces of many sleepless nights could be clearly seen in her face. "I thought... I thought you were dead." Without any warning, her eyes overflowed with tears of anger, pent-up fear and humiliation. "I couldn't bear it! Do you understand? I just couldn't bear it... and there you are, laughing about how incredibly stupid I look in my pathetic attempt to find you. It must have looked very funny, yeah! Oh how very laughable are those people who worry about your disappearing without a trace!"

With a resolute gesture, she wiped the tears from her cheeks, managed to free her hands and took a step back. She wanted to get away, just far away. But while she backed off, she realised that he had not uttered one single word since she had started ranting.

"It was not my intention for anybody... for you to get worried," he whispered. And suddenly she saw the sheepish, astonished look on his face, and she realised that it must have been a very long time since anybody worried about him. If anybody had ever worried about him at all.

She stood and observed him. The tree, under which he stood, put deep shadows on his pale face. He approached her and stood about one arm's length away. "I am not used to giving reports about where I go and why," he said. But there was no sharpness in his voice.

They stood in silence for quite a while. Then Hermione turned around to go. She was too agitated and emotionally exhausted to be in his presence any longer, but when she had taken a few steps she heard him say, very quietly and gently, "Do you know the feeling: you are sure that you aren't hungry at all, but then you smell or taste something... or see something you like, and you realise that you are close to starving?"

These words hit her completely by surprise, crept under her skin and made her stop.

A weird prickle started spreading inside of her. It felt just as her first roller coaster ride, the first time she had been dashing downwards in that little car... only she wasn't screaming on a roller coaster, but standing still and silent, asking herself whether she really had heard those words just now. She whirled around, but all she saw was his billowing robe while he walked to his front door.

Reciprocating

Chapter 30 of 43

Severus gets the chance to reciprocate when Hermione has a hard time

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Professor M Mc Gonagall greatly improved the orthography and punctuation of this chapter: thank you very much!

As a prologue to this chapter (which was posted on the German site a few days before Christmas 2008), Marisol wrote: "Dear readers - this story is finished now. There will be three more chapters and an epilogue, but I haven't had the nerve to post it until now because my mother has been diagnosed with heart problems. Thank you for your understanding. If you want to help me, pray for her improvement.

Merry Christmas to you all, and never forget about the importance of your families."

Chapter 30 Reciprocating

"And... ahem, did you take a holiday?" Harry asked in what was supposed to be a casual tone but failed miserably. He handed Severus a glass of wine and sat down. One week ago, Severus had reappeared after his sudden disappearance, and Hermione had told Harry and Ginny what had transpired in her former teacher's garden.

Hermione was still angry. So angry she had refused to accept Harry's and Ginny's dinner invitation, knowing that Severus would be there, too. Her two friends understood her very well as they had been worried about him, too.

"Yes," came Severus's brief reply, and his gaze made clear that this would be all he was prepared to say on the matter.

The Potters had been surprised about the fact that he had accepted their invitation without further ado. Before they were able to ask him something, however, Albus Severus had monopolised his godfather right from the start. It had taken all of Ginny's remarkable persuasive talent to get her son away from Severus and convince him to go to bed.

"And where were you?"

Severus took a sip of his wine, then slowly placed the glass on the table and looked at Harry. "I was in Ireland," he said calmly. But Harry was not unaware of the pulsating vein in Severus's temple.

"Listen, I don't want to interrogate you," he stated tentatively, but Severus interrupted.

"Then don't!" he said peevishly.

"It's just... We've been worried, that's all. Of course you aren't obligated to inform us about every single step you take, it was just... As I said, we started worrying whether something had happened to you."

Harry knew that Hermione had said something along these lines one week before. Although they would probably never have an amicable relationship, the few weeks that Severus had been away had shown Harry that he really did take an interest in the dour man's life.

"Listen. I know that we'll probably never be the best of friends or anything. And that's all right with me, really. But you are my son's godfather, for goodness sake. And... You do matter to me, okay? You do matter to Ginny, too... and to Hermione. It was quite an unpleasant feeling to picture all kinds of things that could have happened to you to be honest, it put a great strain on us."

If asked, Harry could not have said why he had spoken these thoughts out loud, but for some reason or another, he wanted Severus to know how he thought about him.

When he looked at the other man, hoping that Severus would be able to understand why everyone had been worried about his well-being, something happened. Something Harry had never seen in all the years he had known the solitary man he was facing. Severus looked the other way. It seemed as if, all of a sudden, he had been hit with the realisation that his behaviour had alienated the only people who cared about him.

When Ginny had finally put the children to bed, sat down again and piled a generous portion of turkey and potatoes on her plate, both their relief seemed to be almost tangible. Ginny grinned in Severus's direction. "I'm glad you came for dinner," she said casually and handed him the meat.

"It took ages for Albus to fall asleep. He was so excited about your visit and wanted to come back down again in the worst way. I had to dig deeply in my little box of tricks to get him to sleep and I had to promise him that you will be back soon to play with him. I... I hope that's all right with you?"

"Yes," Severus said without hesitation. "Of course."

They ate without talking, but the silence was not unpleasant at all. It seemed as if they were all caught up in their own thoughts, and when they had some more butterbeer after dinner, it occurred to Harry that Severus seemed to accept and understand for the first time that there were people who appreciated, welcomed and respected him just as he was.

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Severus kept the promise he had given to Ginny and returned the following Sunday. It was a warm, sunny day, and he suggested that he take Al for a walk.

At first, Harry and Ginny were not so sure about it, but the moment they saw their boy put his hand in Severus's with a trusting smile, not turning around to look for them once, they knew they had done the right thing. Albus Severus was a rather shy, reserved child, and it was obvious that he liked being with Severus.

"I think I know why he disappeared all of a sudden and without a word," Ginny said, deep in thought, while she sat down on one of the garden chairs with Lily in her arms.

"Yes? Do tell," asked Harry while he sat down next to her.

"Because of this little one," Ginny said quietly and looked down to the peacefully slumbering baby.

"Because of Lily?"

"Yes. I guess he had to go away for a while. He had to come to terms with the fact that there is a human being named Lily Potter in this world again. Didn't you notice that he has not looked at her once since she's been born?"

"Well, yes," Harry said hesitatingly. "But I don't know... he doesn't care a lot about James either."

"Nevertheless... I think it all relates to this. I can imagine that the situation has brought everything up again."

"Maybe," Harry agreed with his wife. "But I don't think he will ever tell us."

They kept exchanging speculations for a while when they spotted a large eagle owl approaching. It perched down on the back of Harry's chair and let a letter it held in its beak drop into Harry's lap. "Who is it from?" Ginny asked curiously and bent towards her husband to spot the handwriting on the envelope, and just like Harry, she immediately recognised the sender.

"Harry, my father had a traffic accident and has been hospitalised. Things don't look good. Can you please come? I need you. Hermione."

She had scribbled the hospital's address on the back of the envelope.

"Oh my god," whispered Ginny with a frown and took the letter from Harry.

"Can you cope with the children on your own?" Harry asked after he had jumped up.

"Of course. Hurry!"

Harry took off his robes hastily as he knew that they would look quite awkward in a Muggle hospital. He thought about a spot near his destination he could Apparate to and had just disappeared with a loud pop when Severus returned with Albus on his arm.

"Something happened?" he asked when he saw Ginny's pale face.

She handed him Hermione's short missive without a word.

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Harry returned one and a half hours later and ran his fingers through his hair in an exhausted gesture while he plopped down on the sofa next to Ginny. It came as no surprise to him that Severus was still there.

"And?" Ginny blurted out, observing him with a worried glance.

"Hermione's dad got hit by a drunken driver while crossing the street. He is very badly injured, but the doctors say that he's going to make it. However, he will have to stay in hospital for a very long time because he's got many very complicated fractures, and his liver seems to be torn, too. I did not see him myself, but Hermione says that he looks awful. Her mum is in a state of shock."

"Poor Hermione," Ginny whispered and squeezed Harry's hand.

"I was there while she talked to one of the doctors. He said that Mr. Granger was very lucky, but still... If I could only get a hold of this drunken bastard..." He clenched his fist and sighed in frustration. "I'm relieved, however, that his injuries are not life-threatening."

From the corner of his eye, Harry saw that Severus was observing him attentively.

"How's Hermione?" asked Ginny.

Harry shrugged. That was not a direct answer, but they still knew.

"I'll take the kids to the Burrow tomorrow and go visit her at the hospital," Ginny murmured.

"Hermione will stay the night, won't she?"

Harry nodded and looked at Severus, who got up slowly.

He had not said one single word.

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"Everything's going to be all right, Mum," Hermione said and put an arm around her sobbing mother's shoulders.

With all the bandages on his person and the blood-crusted face, Thomas Granger did not look as if he would ever recover from all his injuries, but Hermione trusted the doctors who had assured them over and over again that he would be well again. Three days had passed since the accident, and Hermione's father had been awake every now and then but had never been able to talk to them.

But now he opened his eyes, blinked a few times and croaked, almost inaudibly, "Uncle Larry is in Moldavia, isn't he?"

Hermione's mother stopped sobbing, jumped up and bent down to her husband. "Thomas? Darling, can you hear me?"

"Yes... the light's so very harsh," he murmured. "Oh, and there's Melanie," he said, turning his head towards Hermione.

Melanie was the name of one of her cousins.

"Love, that's our Hermione. Don't you recognise her?" Jean asked anxiously while caressing his forehead.

"But of course..." he agreed with a moan. "Hermione... yes, yes, it's her. But where's Grandma Catherine?"

With panic rising in her chest, Hermione also bowed towards her father. Grandma Catherine had passed away when she was four years old.

"Jean, do you remember that horrid teacher of Hermione's... he was there last night and made me drink something... just like... just like... Australia in winter..." His words slurred more and more until they became a murmur, and his eyes closed again.

Hermione's mother anxiously pressed a button next to his bed, and only seconds later, a nurse appeared. Hermione and Mrs. Granger took turns in telling her what had happened, but the young woman reassured them at once and explained that these confused and incoherent sentences were a side-effect of the high doses of pain killers and perfectly normal. The doctor responsible for the treatment who came shortly afterwards also told them that there was no reason to worry.

The same night, while examining Mr. Granger, the doctors were very surprised to see that his injuries looked much better than they had expected. Later, Hermione was lying in her childhood bed at her parent's house, and things kept turning in her mind. She could not quite get a hold on something, but when she was just about to fall asleep, she remembered the words her father had murmured. Something about a horrid teacher of hers who had come and made him drink something... Suddenly, she was not so sure any more whether everything her father had said had been pure nonsense.

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Two weeks after Mr. Granger's accident, Hermione visited the Potters and was not surprised to meet Severus, who was playing with his godson in the garden.

"Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed. "Great of you to come over! How's your dad? When we visited him on Thursday, he looked quite well." Ginny and Harry both hugged Hermione and were satisfied to see a smile on her pale face.

"He's getting better every day," Hermione answered with a sidelong glance to Severus, who approached slowly.

"To be honest, his quick recovery is almost weird," she added.

"Hello, Hermione," Severus said calmly when he had reached the trio.

He held out his hand, and she took it after a short moment of hesitation.

"Hello, Severus."

"Erm... why don't we go inside? I'll make some tea," said Ginny and looked from one towards the other, but Hermione made a dismissive gesture.

"I don't have much time. I just wanted to inform you that Dad will probably get out of the hospital in about two weeks."

"Hey, that's great! I bet your mum's extremely relieved," Ginny said and hugged Hermione again.

"You can say that again. For the first few days, she didn't sleep a wink, but now she's very confident that all will be well and that there won't be any lasting damage."

She kept talking for a while, but then Hermione looked at her wristwatch and realised that she had to go.

"Erm, Severus, could I have a word, please?" she asked, well aware of her friends' gazes when they discreetly stepped away.

He stood with his usual, inscrutable gaze, but he nodded.

"Can we walk a few steps along the road?" she suggested.

Hermione waved Harry and Ginny good-bye, and as soon as they were out of earshot, she asked him, "What did you give my dad?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, and although he gave a perfect act of surprise, she could not be fooled.

"Under the influence of his medication, Dad murmured something about one of my teachers who was there in the middle of the night and made him drink something. At first, I thought it was nonsense. But when I realised how fast his injuries were healing, I just put two and two together. I had toyed with the idea of getting something from St. Mungo's myself, but I could and would not leave my mother alone."

She expected him to deny everything, but to her utter astonishment, he said, "It was a potion I have developed myself. As you already noticed, it helps to speed up the healing process."

"Why did you do that?" she asked quietly and looked up to him, but he avoided her gaze.

Instead, he shrugged and said, "I don't hold these Muggle doctors in high regard."

The answer was very unsatisfying, and while she itched to ask him more questions, all she managed was a whispered, "Thank you."

They walked next to one another in silence for a little while, and when she felt like she could control her voice again, she said, "It was such a shock, to see him like that. He always seemed so strong and invulnerable to me... and then he was in this bed with all the bandages and hoses, could not speak or move. And my mum... she thought he'd die in her arms. She witnessed the accident, you know."

Her voice faded, and she suddenly felt like a little child lost in the woods.

It was a warm, sunny day, but she started shivering when she finally realised the whole range of what she could have lost in one single moment. She did not know what made her, but she could not resist the urge to tell him about her parents what they liked, what they did in their spare time.

Severus did not interrupt her one single time. But he did not look at her either, and when she had finished, she repeated, "Thank you, Severus."

He acknowledged her words with a small nod, and when he turned his head to meet her eyes, she saw an uncommon expression of gentleness in his eyes.

"How... what were your parents like?" Hermione asked.

He remained silent for quite a while, and when she was sure there wouldn't be an answer, he said, "My father was a very well educated man. A physician."

"Oh," she gasped in surprise.

For some reason, she had always thought that his father had been an unskilled worker at best, who made some money wherever he could.

"Yes, he was an aspiring young scientist with ambitious goals. And then... he met my mother. When he got to know who she was.**what** she was, everything changed. Until then, natural laws had been his world. Every phenomenon he knew could be explained by physical laws. But then he was confronted with something that could not be explained at all. Magic and sorcery were things he could not research with any means he had. It turned the world as he knew it, everything he had ever believed in, upside down. The whole construction and the world he was living in came tumbling to the ground, and there was nothing left but debris. He hated her for it. And he hated me even more because I descended from him, but I was like her just as inexplicable, just as abnormal."

His voice did not give the slightest hint that his childhood must have been a living hell. But it was his neutral tone that made Hermione's heart contract in pain.

"I'm so sorry," she said, almost inaudibly.

"You don't have to be," he answered with a shrug. "I never knew anything else."

She stopped. "I know that you don't want to hear this, Severus, and I know that you probably think I am naïve and childish. But you are a good man and nothing you say or do will ever change my mind."

"Nothing?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Nothing," she confirmed.

"You are indeed very naïve. I have seen things, Hermione. I have done things that..."

"... lie in the past," she interrupted. "I wish you could see yourself through my eyes only once, Severus."

The words had barely escaped her mouth when she made a decision...

Earthquake

Chapter 31 of 43

Hermione makes a very important decision

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Now that she finally managed to teach me the finer points of punctuation in English, poor Professor M McGonagall keeps fighting my cluelessness concerning paragraphs and where to separate them (or not). She is a hero!

Chapter 31 Earthquake

It had to be years ago that Hermione had heard of a certain spell that came to her mind right now. The fact that she had never even tried to use it should have scared her off but strangely enough, it didn't. Quite the contrary: she was absolutely sure that this was her last chance to show Severus exactly how she saw him, so she pulled out her wand and took several deep breaths. Relying on her memory that had never let her down in difficult situations, she concentrated, directed the wand towards her chest and said, not taking her gaze off Severus, *"Sensum Mitto!"*

Immediately, she felt a whirlwind of very strange sensations. It felt as if she'd left the outside world that was made of thoughts and rationality in order to plunge into some kind of inner space that merely consisted of feelings and sentience. Almost invisible at the start, a golden thread started winding from her chest. It curled around the tip of her wand like a ball and started vibrating and growing until it was the size of a small watermelon.

All the while she had been performing her magic, Severus had stared at her with wide open eyes as if he couldn't believe that she was really doing this. It was one of those rare moments when he was unable to hide his thoughts and feelings behind his trademark mask of indifference.

Although Hermione had seen him lose his poise several times already, it was the first time she recognised something in his features that she had never seen on him before: complete and utter shock.

When the golden thread stopped pouring from her chest, Hermione slowly moved her wand towards Severus and watched the golden shimmering ball make its way through his robes and into his chest. Although she knew that she put herself completely at his mercy with this spell, she was not scared one little bit. The spell would disclose her most private feelings to him and even more: it would make him feel the same things she did. Unlike Legilimency, which enabled the caster to read another person's thoughts, the Sensum Mitto spell transmitted one's feelings and made the recipient experience the same sensations with the same intensity... and in the exact order in which the original feelings had developed. Everything related to these emotions fears, hopes and wishes was reflected.

She looked into Severus's face and saw him stare down at his chest. The ball had been completely absorbed, and in the next moment, Severus closed his eyes with an almost painful expression. Hermione knew what he felt right now... after all, they were her feelings for him, accumulating in his heart right now.

It started with a very deep feeling of fear that she had felt as an eleven year old when she had seen him down in his dark dungeons for the first time. Fear was replaced by respect and then complemented by trust later on, nurtured by the fact that Albus Dumbledore had trusted him. Fear, respect, trust... these three feelings were whirling around one another, and then, almost imperceptibly, appreciation and admiration joined the throng. She had admired him for his courage and his determination to risk his own life as soon as she had known his role in the war. Admiration turned into shock and sympathy when she had realised how and under which circumstances Voldemort had tried to kill him. Sympathy turned into sadness at the thought of him lying lifeless in the Shrieking Shack... the unacknowledged hero whose courage had no witnesses except Harry, Ron and herself.

Hermione flinched as she became aware of Severus's ashen face. She suspected that the complexity of the feelings he felt right now might be too much for him, but the spell, once cast, could not be stopped.

With his acceptance of being Albus Severus's godfather, other feelings were added: appreciation and happiness about Harry's respect for him not only for what Severus had done for the whole wizarding world, but also for everything he had done for Harry.

Happiness turned into Hermione's wishes of being respected for her achievements, her hopes that he might see and appreciate how hard she worked to foster her career. The longing for his respect turned into pity when she realised that he was lonely and bitter, hated himself and crawled through life like a ghost, unable to allow himself any happiness or to let the past rest. From pity arose the pressing wish to protect him from himself, to shake everything that tortured him his inner demons out of him. She wanted to be able to wipe the darkness that surrounded him away to make a small, bright light penetrate his life and lighten it up.

Severus's face was contorted in the pain he felt, although he had not even reached the most intense feelings yet, as Hermione knew.

When had she stopped seeing the former teacher and become aware of the man? She didn't know it herself, and the feelings attached to this awareness were vague and incoherent. It must have been a gradual process during which she had realised slowly but surely that she started finding his sharp, cynical comments which had made her wince as a student quite attractive now, along with the smoothness of his movements his long, adept fingers and the black eyes, as deep as mountain lakes.

She had fought it because she knew that it was impossible and also because she feared his reaction, but the more time passed, the less she was able to deny that she had fallen in love with him. It must have happened after she had witnessed him do everything in his power to save his godson. She was in love with him... and to try and do something against it was like trying to convince the moon to stay away at night.

Severus's eyes were still firmly closed, but his left hand, which had been clenched in a fist a moment ago, was now open and pressed to his chest.

The feelings unleashed by their first and only night so far were a mixture of tenderness, passion and overwhelming happiness. Just like any woman, Hermione had dreams, and the yearning for someone to belong to was a very important part of them. To her, this dream of belonging to Severus had been real up to the moment he told her in round terms what she could expect from him nothing. What followed was a piercing feeling of despair, embarrassment and frustration. It burned her from the inside, singeing part of her heart and her soul... until Ginny's intervention which showed her that he had pushed her away to protect himself.

From this moment on, seeing the complexity of his very self was much easier, although she realised that she would never fully understand him. He was a broken man who had had to forgo the most elementary things in life for way too long, like friends who would sacrifice something for him or people in whose presence he could be nothing but himself... and love.

And Hermione she knew it with the same certainty that she knew how to breathe loved him. It had been a long, painful process until she had realised what was the essence of this love: not her wish to be loved back just the same. She had never experienced this kind of love before because, contrarily to Ron, she did not expect anything. She loved him for who he was, with all his flaws and weaknesses. She wanted him to break out of his pointless and hopeless life and find a way to forgive himself even if it meant that she could only be his friend, not his partner.

His shoulders sagged as if the last bit of power had left him. Hermione had no experience in these things, but she could imagine that living through another person's feelings must be a very tiring process.

Slowly, she put her wand down. Her voice trembled when she whispered, "I didn't know any other way to make you understand what I see in you, and why."

Severus stayed silent for a very long time. When he opened his eyes, she was shocked to see tears glistening. One of them ran down his pale cheek, and seeing it made her cringe in pain. "Why did you do that?" he asked in a whisper. His voice sounded weak and choked, as if it were thin ice that could break any moment.

"Because I had to," she answered.

Another tear found its way along his hooked nose and dripped onto his robe. She knew that he had no strength left to wipe it away and that he would have never allowed her to witness his tears under different circumstances.

"Severus," she whispered, "now you know everything. I expect nothing. I demand nothing. On the contrary. All I want is for you to turn the page, open a new chapter and leave the past behind. I want you to be happy. You have atoned for your sins long enough."

"I don't know if I can do that." His voice was so low, she almost couldn't hear it. He turned his head left and right, looked everywhere but at her.

"Of course you can!" she insisted. She took a step forward, grabbed the front of his robes and started shaking him. "You must, do you understand? It destroys you, and it keeps pushing you further down all the time. But I won't let that happen, do you hear me? I will not sit back and watch you slowly turn into a dead and lifeless shell! You experienced what I feel for you... There is someone for whom your happiness is more important than her own! And I'm not the only person who cares for you, Severus... your godson loves you unconditionally. Al sees you as the man who cares about him and loves him. He is too small to understand some things. He is but a child, but children do have an instinct for who they can trust and who is a good person. Please, Severus!"

She let go of his robes and took his haggard face into her hands. "Please stop hurting yourself," she managed to say with great difficulty.

Severus did not move or retreat, and after what seemed like eternity, she heard him say, "Help me... please."

She swallowed hard, blinked to fight back her tears and pulled him into her arms. He allowed it, and she could not help but think that he had never before had anyone who wanted nothing but the best for him and his life. Nobody who had cared about his feelings... nobody to offer a helping hand and help him get back on the way he had lost so long ago.

"I will help you," she promised with a firm voice.

She retreated a little to look him in the face. His eyes were full of fear, exhaustion and sadness... but there was also hope.

Constant Dripping...

Chapter 32 of 43

The calm after the storm brings changes at a snail's pace.

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Professor M McGonagall once more straightened sentences, found typos and rearranged the punctuation for your reading pleasure. Thanks!

A/N II: Thank you so much for the many excited reviews we received after Chapter 31! We have read them all and we are positively thrilled. Once more, we have caught up with the German version of this. I (Muggline) will therefore have to wait until Marisol publishes her next chapter before I can continue. Maybe that's a good thing actually, because a very painful inflammation of the carpal nerve and shoulder joint has prevented me from typing too much recently. In fact, my right arm has been almost paralysed for a few days. Please excuse me for not answering to your reviews as usual, I will catch up as soon as I can. Until then - enjoy this chapter!

Chapter 32 Constant Dripping...

Claiming that, after Hermione's spell that made him see her innermost thoughts and feelings, Severus changed into a warm and open person who radiated a positive view on life would have been much more than exaggeration; it would have been a flat out lie. His biting sarcasm, curtness and his trademark way of intimidating people by his sheer presence could be changed just as little as his shoe size.

He remained an unsociable, withdrawn man. But it could not be denied that there were changes going on. Changes that were only visible to people who had known him for a very long time. He made an effort to accept the Potters' invitations more often than before, and when he declined, he sometimes even told them why. Hermione realised that this was his attempt to not offend the sensibilities of his few social contacts, and she could not help but hope that, one day, he would be ready to accept the fact that they all cared for him. Mainly she.

The changes were most obvious whenever Severus was with his godson. Albus, unlike his elder brother, was a calm, cautious boy who'd rather look at picture books than romp about for hours. But whenever Severus turned up, he dropped everything to get into Severus's arms and play with him in the garden. Severus just had to realise that his affection for the child was clearly visible, and he had given up the attempts to hide it behind a mask like he had done in the months before the "spell incident". There was no other situation where he could be seen smiling as often as when he was spending time with his godson.

"He looks up to you," Hermione said one Sunday afternoon when she joined the two in the Potters' garden. She was carrying Lily, whose wide-opened eyes followed the ball that Severus had zooming through the air with his wand.

"What did you say?" he asked with a faraway look.

"I sometimes observe him when he is with you. Some days ago, I saw him try to imitate your gait, holding his hands crossed behind his back just like you do so very often. He looks up to you," she repeated quietly.

With a thoughtful expression, Severus's gaze followed Al, who kept jumping and tried to catch the ball. "If he only knew who he's admiring," Severus murmured, and for an almost imperceptible moment, an embarrassed expression flew across his face.

"Stop it, Severus," she said calmly.

They silently looked at each other. Even though his face didn't give anything away, she knew that he thought of the Sensum Mitto charm and of her urgent appeal that he should let bygones be bygones and forgive himself. She had promised to help him, and she did whenever she felt that he allowed his self-hatred to gain the upper hand. Like now.

Severus looked at Albus again, who finally managed to catch the ball and came running towards his godfather in triumphant glee. Severus's gaze became soft as soon as it was on the boy. Hermione gave a soft sigh while she shifted Lily onto her other arm and pressed a light kiss onto her soft hair. "This man is just impossible, don't you agree?" she whispered and nestled against her goddaughter's face.

She had not expected that the process would be easy. She had, in fact, anticipated that he would take three steps forward and at least one step back. But still... Although Severus resembled a lake that had been frozen for years, with a very solid and thick layer of ice around his soul, even the thickest layer of ice could not resist the permanent exposure to warming rays of sunlight on its surface. *And,* she thought while she saw little Albus extend his arms towards Severus*it seems that this child's love, that asks for nothing and does not condemn anything about his godfather, has already managed to melt a few holes into the ice.*

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Sometimes, Hermione got the fleeting thought that it would be a good idea to go on a date every now and then. The weeks went by, and although Severus treated her with respect and it seemed as if he enjoyed her company, he did nothing that indicated he had more than feelings of friendship for her. She had forbidden herself to be sad, disappointed or desperate because of it. However, the feeling kept pinching and hurting like a shoe that she'd wear all the time in spite of its constant chafing on the same sore spot. Waiting for Severus to give her any kind of signal that he reciprocated her feelings was like trying to catch fog with bare hands, and she knew it. But that was exactly what she did. It seemed pointless and stupid, but she would feel the same way if she went on a date with a man who meant nothing to her. She didn't lack date opportunities, but the thought of spending the evening with someone, playing the game of new acquaintance, just exhausted her.

And, as often happened, her thoughts flew towards Severus... Every now and then, she had seen him warm up in Harry's and Ginny's presence, just as if he had awakened from a very long nightmare that had held him captive all those years before. Very slowly, the thought that he had to loosen his iron grip on his past if he wanted to lead a resemblance of a normal life seemed to seep into his conscience. He set a very slow pace and moved almost reluctantly.

Old habits die hard, and she knew that sometimes he just had to crawl back into his shell because it was too much for him. These were the situations when they didn't hear or see him for days, but then he would contact them of his own accord.

She never prevented his isolation from society. On one hand, Hermione knew that his occasional retreat just couldn't be helped; on the other hand, she did not consider herself his therapist. She would help him whenever he asked for it, she could encourage him to never give himself up, but she could not relieve him from the decision to forgive himself.

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"And we're at it again," Harry said while he put some sugar in his tea and stirred it with a frustrated expression.

"Hmm?" Hermione said. She and Harry were sitting in her living room waiting for Ron, who had sent them both an owl suggesting a meeting. Hermione had a slight suspicion that he wanted to tell them about an upcoming marriage and was relieved to notice that she would be happy for him, should the suspicion prove correct.

"Severus," Harry said gloomily. "He is hiding somewhere again. Doesn't answer owls and doesn't come by."

Hermione needed a moment to compose herself before she answered. "I thought that he had finally started living," she murmured.

The thought that all the progress she had thought to see him make had seemingly vanished into thin air made her feel strangely weak. "Me, too," Harry answered. "Sometimes I've just had enough, Hermione. If it weren't for Al... he is so very fond of him. But myself, I sometimes think: to hell with him. I'd rather leave him to his own devices. Just let him wallow in his self-pity to his heart's content!"

She nodded wordlessly. Her first impulse was to Apparate to his house, but she pushed the thought from her mind as soon as it started forming. Then she took a sip of her tea, avoiding Harry's gaze. She was exhausted. No matter what happened, she would not visit him and demand an explanation.

Severus was a grown man, capable of making conscious decisions. If he had decided to isolate himself from everything and everyone, she would not be the one to keep him from doing it. Not now, after she had turned her insides out in front of him. This thought ought to have made her sad and angry, but she felt nothing but a very profound emptiness, as if she had failed her life's greatest challenge in spite of giving everything and a little bit more.

The feeling remained, even when Ron appeared shortly afterwards and confirmed her presumption that he would be getting married soon. She hugged him tightly and buried her face in his shoulder, not caring about the fact that he would probably misinterpret her tears.

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Five days after Ron's visit, she was sitting at her desk in her apartment, working through some files she should have finished at the office, when she heard the faint scratching of a beak at the window pane. A tawny owl was fluttering in front of her window, and she jumped up to open it and accept the letter that bore her address in a fine, slightly tilted handwriting. Her heart started to beat wildly when she recognised it, and she tore the envelope open with shaking fingers.

If you can find the time this evening, please come to my house at Spinner's End.

S.

sSsSsSs

Her mind was blank when she Apparated to his garden and took some slow steps towards him. Severus was standing next to a high pile that consisted mainly of books and turned in her direction when he heard the loud popping noise.

"Severus," she uttered, "what...?"

"I am moving away," she said calmly. He had not spoken the words very loudly, but they suddenly rang in her ears like the loud wails of a siren.

"You... are moving away?" she repeated the words, and they sounded irritating coming out of her mouth. He nodded with a small smile on his lips. "You will leave your home?" she whispered.

"It has never been a home," he replied. "It was no home during my childhood, and it certainly isn't now. The only things I associate with this house are darkness and cold. I punished myself by staying here."

"But where will you go?" she asked before she was even sure whether she wanted to hear the answer.

He smiled again, and the movement of his mouth was like a slap in her face.

"I have been looking for something suitable these past weeks, and I think I found something that meets my expectations. The house is not very big and certainly not what most people would consider beautiful. But it has what I need, including a cellar I can use for brewing my potions. It's south of London, actually."

Hermione could do nothing but stare at the items he had obviously sorted out and at him, hoping that her brain, which was rather reliable under normal circumstances, would start processing the information at some point.

"I thought you might want to know it," he said when she remained silent. His black eyes locked on hers and she couldn't help but take a step towards him."You are the only person to know until now."

"I... don't know what to say," she whispered. "I thought..."

"That I was withdrawing again," he completed her sentence.

She nodded.

"Sometimes it seems the easier option," he admitted quietly. "But Albus deserves a godfather who is more than just a shadow of himself. He will grow fast and learn many things. Soon, he will ask himself why I live in a dirty hole like a rat. And why I am like I am. I have a responsibility towards him. And..." He stopped, and Hermione realised that he had been about to say something else, but could not bring himself to do it in the last moment.

The panic she had felt moments ago made way for some fluttering feeling inside of her."Will we see your new house soon?" she asked.

Severus rolled his eyes."Of course not. I only told you about it because I intend to turn it into an impenetrable bunker only I have access to."

She could not help but giggle. It felt silly and girlish, but she just could not help herself. Then she became aware of his things that had started tying themselves up into a huge parcel. She heard Severus murmur something and gasped when the house behind her went up in flames.

He grabbed her elbow and dragged her along a few yards to get them away from the heat of the flames. "Thank you for coming," he said.

"Any time," came her breathless answer.

"I will go now, but I will be in contact soon."

Hermione did not know whether she saw the reflection of the flames in his eyes, but something seemed to flicker there. And she swallowed hard when she realised that this was the wing beat of new life.

Housewarming

Chapter 33 of 43

Housewarming party at Severus's new home

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: I know that many readers thought we had given up on this one, and I am very glad to tell you that we have not. Marisol had quite a rough time with exams and other RL problems, so it took her a while to finish the story. But it is finished! This is the last real chapter; I am translating the Epilogue at the moment, and that is it! Thank you very much for sticking with us through all the long periods of waiting... And a big hug to Professor M McGonagall for betaing this although she has a heavy workload of her own right now!

The Godfather Chapter 33 Housewarming

Hermione was extremely nervous. She fumbled with the sleeves of her robes and glanced at her watch, just to get angry about the fact that only eleven seconds had passed since her last look. "Okay, calm yourself!" she muttered. But only seconds later, she caught herself staring at her wrist again, as if she hoped that the time would, by some miraculous coincidence, go faster if she just looked at the hands of her wristwatch long enough. She was much too early. Severus had invited her and the Potters for seven o'clock, but it was only twenty minutes past six now.

She started pacing on the sidewalk, observing the high hedgerow that protected Severus's new house from unwanted observers, and thought about what she could do. Going back home and driving herself around the bend there was out of the question, just as much as Apparating to Harry and Ginny's house and coming with them. There

was no obvious or logical reason, but she was tense and nervous to the tips of her hair, just as if she were about to sit for an exam she had not revised for.

"Get a grip on yourself!" she hissed, then started laughing when she imagined how a random passerby would probably perceive her as if she had completely lost her marbles, running to and fro whilst talking to herself. Finally, she took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and headed for the small wooden gate that led to a slightly savaged garden.

Just inside the gate, she stood, listening to her wildly beating heart, while she took in the first sight of Serverus's new home. He had not exaggerated it was small and rather unimpressive: four white walls, a roof, a massive door, symmetric windows and no ornaments at all. But nevertheless, while his house in Spinner's End had resembled an emergency accommodation for people who did not expect anything more than a roof over their heads, this one exuded what the other one had been completely lacking: life. The windows were clean, smoke rose from the chimney and there was no garbage or junk to be seen around the house.

Although the grass in the garden was as high as her calves, it did not appear unkempt. On the contrary a perfect lawn, mowed like a British golf court, would have destroyed the overall appearance of this little piece of freedom, topped off by two old wild cherry trees. Hermione smiled a little while she imagined Albus playing here with his siblings. Finally, she pulled herself together, approached the front door, took another deep breath and knocked. After about half a minute, the door opened without a sound, and Severus stood in the doorway.

"Hermione," he said with a light frown. "I did not expect you so early."

As he did not make any move to let her in, she uneasily shifted her weight from one leg to the other.

"Sorry," she said, "shall I come back later?"

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then he said, "I have a visitor. But if you don't mind being present during some long-winded contract negotiations, please do come in." He opened the door a little wider and gestured for her to enter. "I would of course offer to let you wait in the salon or the library to spare you the commercial banter, but since I have neither, and furthermore presume that you would feel quite silly waiting in the bathroom..." Hermione giggled nervously when they reached the end of the corridor, and he opened the door to the right, which led to the sitting room.

As indicated by the outside appearance of the house, the room was sparsely furnished but still cosy. Thinking about it, Hermione found that pictures, vases or any kind of knickknacks would not suit Severus at all. So she nodded involuntarily while she let her gaze wander through the room. To her great relief, he had exchanged his old, worn sofa for a new one, and his bookshelf had been dusted thoroughly, along with the books. When she entered the room, the man inside, who seemed to be a few years younger than Severus, got up and looked her up and down curiously.

"Hermione Granger," she heard Severus say. "Everard Blinkey." She turned around with a questioning look.

"Mr. Blinkey is the purchase manager for potions at St. Mungo's hospital," Severus said curtly. With an almost unnoticeable smile, he added, " And he is about to please don't hold it against me try to lead me up the garden path concerning the prices and conditions, a task that is of course bound to failure."

The dark-haired wizard seemed unmoved by this statement, as he replied calmly, " That's what I've been hired to do." He looked at Hermione and was fast to add, " Not pulling the wool over people's eyes, of course, but the price negotiations." He extended his hand. Hermione took it and shook it with a smile. Sitting down in the armchair he offered, she tried very hard to hide her bout of nervousness.

Mr. Blinkey looked at her a trifle too long, and her knowledge of human nature in general and the public opinion towards herself in particular told her exactly what turned around in his mind. She was sure that he asked himself what she of all people was doing in Severus's house.

In any case, Severus did not show any reaction, whether he was aware of it or not. "Mr. Blinkey, please let me resume: we had reached an agreement about the amount of my new boil curing potion to be supplied, as well as the stomach lining balm and the ointment for ingrown toenails."

"Right," the latter confirmed. "But please let me repeat, Mr. Snape: we just cannot agree to your idea of two hundred galleons. I am sure you already know that we would get the same potions and ointments for one hundred and twenty at Blanchard's in Knockturn Alley."

Severus sneered. "You are not talking about the same Blanchard who turned 230 years last month, are you? About whom the *Prophet* recently wrote that he had made his lips swell to the size of melons by accident because he had added swelling powder instead of sage to his own toothpaste?"

Blinkey blushed somewhat but kept his mouth shut. After a long minute of silence, he finally said, "All right, Mr. Snape. One hundred fifty galleons. This is my last offer!"

"Two hundred," Severus answered calmly.

"One sixty," Blinkey offered.

"Two hundred!"

"One eighty?" Blinkey asked hopefully.

"Mr. Blinkey, I hate to repeat myself: Two hundred or leave it!" Even if Severus had not crossed his arms and looked at him with a hard and unapproachable glare, Hermione would not have dared to contradict if she had been in Blinkey's shoes.

"Well, all right," the man from St. Mungo's finally said through clenched teeth. "Two hundred it is. Always a pleasure to deal with you, Mr. Snape."

Severus's face lightened up to display a superior smile. then he wordlessly handed Blinkey a quill to sign the contract. Blinkey signed, grumbling under his breath. Suddenly, he turned to Hermione. "Tell me, Miss Granger, is there any way to put Mr. Snape off a decision once he has taken it?"

"Oh, well," she stammered, as he had caught her unawares. "I think not, no..."

"Honestly," Severus added coolly, "you just give in too easily. If you had been more persistent, I would have agreed upon 180!"

Speechless, Blinkey stared at Snape, whose content expression reflected the fact that he knew very well how nobody would ever be more persistent than absolutely necessary where he was concerned.

"Now that we have that out of the way..." Calmly, Severus folded his copy of the contract and put it into the inside pocket of his robes. Then he offered Hermione a drink. Her desperate attempt to stifle a grin failed miserably.

"Please don't hold it against him," she told Mr. Blinkey. "His methods are simply irrefutable!"

"Well, Miss Granger, I guess I can't but agree," he replied with a light smile. "May I ask, erm..." he looked between her and Severus and seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Oh, I am a former student," she hastened to inform him.

"Oh, yes, of course." He nodded, but Hermione sensed that this reply would not satisfy his curiosity about her visit in the least.

"I hear you are working in Magical Law?" he asked and leaned towards her in a display of interested attention.

She knew that most wizards and witches were aware of her role during the war and her career, and she was rather embarrassed every time strangers asked her about it.

Severus loudly cleared his throat, but Hermione who hoped that this awkward meeting would end faster when she answered did not react. She gave a brief description of her job, but it became obvious that Mr. Blinkey had not asked out of mere politeness. Instead of finally saying goodbye, he asked her more and more questions.

"Miss Granger, I must admit that I am very happy to finally get to know you personally," he finally added with a broad smile. "Now that I am sitting in front of you... maybe it would be a good idea for my department to have some kind of pre-formulated standard contracts. Do you see any possibility of giving me some advice in this regard? I could visit you at the office, if you don't mind."

She blinked in confusion. What was he up to? Was this an attempt at*flirting*? But before she had a chance to say something, she heard Severus answer, "I am afraid that Miss Granger does not do standard contracts, Mr. Blinkey. That's the apprentices' job, usually." She turned to him. Although his face showed the usual impenetrable mask, she thought that she had seen a very short, angry flicker in his eyes.

"Erm, yes... you are perfectly right," stammered Mr. Blinkey.

"Well,..." Severus got up an unmistakable sign for his guest that he wanted him to leave. Mr. Blinkey understood the broad hint, got up, too, and shook Hermione's hand in farewell, but not without turning around one more time with a regretful glare. Severus accompanied him to the door, and while Hermione listened to the retreating steps, she felt a weird kind of flutter inside her stomach.

If I didn't know better, she thought, *Severus also assumed that this Blinkey guy was flirting with me!*

When Severus returned, he gave her a grim look and, after an awkward moment of silence, handed her a glass of wine.

And if I'm not mistaken, he did not like it one bit for one reason or another!

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"I like your new house," Harry told Severus after dinner.

"Yes, I also think it's great," Ginny confirmed while she held out her glass to Severus so he could pour her some more elf-made wine. "Spinner's End is absolutely no match for this!"

To Hermione's great relief, Harry, Ginny and the children had turned up shortly after Mr. Blinkey had left, and Severus had shown them around the house upon Albus's pleading. But there was not much to show. The sitting room had a small adjoining kitchen. Opposite to the sitting room was the bathroom. The upper floor held a bedroom, one room that Severus seemed to use for his work and some kind of storeroom.

"What I like best about the house," Albus had squealed after the tour, "is the garden!"

Severus had laughed out loud one of the rare events that made his face look so much younger and suggested that his godson should go outside with his brother and play.

"Nothing to boast about," Severus said and shrugged. "But it is enough for me."

Hermione did not need to look at Harry and Ginny to know that her two friends were thinking along the same lines as she did. Severus had finally taken the decisive step to give his life a new direction ... a direction which, they hoped, would lead him away from his bitterness and towards more joy and interest in life. Hermione looked out of the window and observed the boys playing in the garden under the slowly setting sun. She felt a strange calmness, as if a storm that had been raging inside of her had suddenly died down. While she half listened to the conversation, her thoughts kept moving in a very much unwanted direction.

She imagined how it would feel to be together with Severus. To play a role in his life. To be someone he had feelings for. These and similar thoughts had been turning around in her mind very often, and just as often, she had reprimanded herself to stop getting her hopes up.

So she turned away from the window with a sad smile and looked at Severus when she realised that he was intently studying her face. His black eyes were fixed on her, and she felt her mouth go very dry all of a sudden. Just to keep her hands occupied, she grabbed a napkin that was lying on the table in front of her and started unfolding and re-folding it.

"Oh dear," Ginny exclaimed. "I did not realise it was so late!"

"But-" Harry gave his wife a bewildered look, but she cut him short.

"You know how wound up James usually gets when he is not in bed by nine," she insisted and grabbed Harry's elbow.

"You want to go already?" Severus asked, surprised.

"Well, yes... the kids always start whining at this time of day," she said with an excusing smile. "Gets on everybody's nerves. We don't want to impose that on anyone."

With a frown, Severus looked from Lily, who was fast asleep on the couch, to the boys, who were playing peacefully in the garden, but he did not say a word. Ginny got up and dragged Harry with her.

"Severus, thank you for the dinner invitation," she said with an honest smile. "We were very happy about it."

Harry still did not understand what had gotten into his wife, but he agreed, adding, "I am glad that you decided to move. And I certainly hope that this will not be the last invitation."

"Of course not." Severus got up and accompanied the Potters to the door, so Hermione could not help but follow. She had seen right through Ginny's motives, and she felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

When Harry and Ginny had said their goodbyes, Hermione quietly said, "I... I guess I should leave, too, then."

He turned to her, not acknowledging her words at all, and asked, "What the hell was*that* all about?"

She swallowed and avoided looking at him. She could have murmured that she had no clue, but then she whispered self-consciously, "Ginny's perfectly obvious and rather embarrassing attempt at leaving me alone with you. It seems that she thinks that, errr... that I would like that." When he did not answer, she stared at her shoes and said, almost inaudibly, "It... oh god, it's so humiliating. Good night, Severus."

She had hardly turned around to step out of the door when he grabbed her wrist and pulled her back into the corridor. "And?" he asked with a penetrating glance.

"And what?" she replied.

"Would you like that?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione searched his eyes for a hint of what he thought, but as usual, she found nothing.

"To be left alone with me," he rasped.

"I don't know...," she murmured and suddenly realised how close they were standing. She could feel his breath on her face as well as the warmth his body radiated.

"Or would you rather get a visit from Blinkey tomorrow to have an interesting conversation about standard contracts?"

"Oh, no, no... most certainly not!" she exclaimed.

Upon hearing her protest, his features became a little softer, and he hurriedly closed the door behind her, making her feel dizzy although she did nothing but look up at him. She could not believe what was happening. And when he placed his hands on her shoulders in a slow, but completely unexpected movement, she forgot to breathe for several seconds. "Severus," she gasped while her befuddled senses tried to keep up with reality. The next thing she knew was his kiss.

Without really thinking, her arms wrapped around his neck while she opened her lips to reciprocate. The way he used his whole body to press her against the front door had something raw and desperate as if he wanted to prevent even the slightest movement because he feared she might flee as soon as she realised what she was doing. But fleeing was the farthest thing on her mind, which was in a haze, anyway. All she could do was dig her fingers into his shoulders and cling to him while trying to get even closer.

Hermione heard colours, tasted smells and saw sounds while she bade her conscious mind goodbye and gave over to her instincts...

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The cool night air wafted through the open window and cooled the sweat on her naked skin. The room was completely dark; their heavy breathing was the only sound. "Hermione." He spoke to the darkness, his arms still encircling her body.

"Hmm?" She did not dare say anything else because her voice might betray how much she feared his next words.

When he talked, his voice was so soft that she had to try hard to understand everything. "Some days, I will ask you to leave me alone. Sometimes I might snap at you without any reason, and I might even be mean sometimes. I will ask myself why the hell you are doing this to yourself, and I will ask *you* what you are doing with somebody who cannot give you what you deserve."

She held her breath, unable to move.

"I cannot make any promises, Hermione. I can't promise that I will be a good friend to you and listen, nor that I will make any commitments. I am what I am, and for some miraculous reason, you seem to believe that you are prepared to accept all these things. I... the possibility of letting you near me is scaring me out of my wits."

She felt hot tears collect in her eyes, but when she tried to say something, he stopped her. "But not letting you near me scares me just as much ... going back to who I was... before you came and took up the thankless task of assembling the shards of my life."

She buried her head in his shoulder and listened to his frantic heartbeat.

"Can you accept this?" he asked. And for the first time, she heard something akin to uncertainty in his voice his fear that she might get up and go and not turn around.

"Can you accept the fact that I cannot give you anything but my promise that I will try to never hurt you *on purpose*?"

"Yes," she whispered without hesitation. "I can, and I already have."

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The first sunlight of the day crept through the darkness and awoke Hermione. She blinked and finally opened her eyes, taking a few moments to realise where she was. Severus's arm was draped heavily across her hip, and his regular breathing caressed her neck. She stretched a little, but when she started moving to get into a more comfortable position, she felt him pull her nearer.

Hermione smiled when she recognised the gesture for what it was: his instinctive wish to keep her as close as possible.

Epilogue

Chapter 34 of 43

Obviously, this is where the story comes to an end.

This is a story by the great Marisol, a German FF writer whose stories can be found at http://www.harrypotter-xperts.de/fanfiction?author=17037

Translated from German into English by Muggline

Disclaimer: Neither Marisol nor Muggline are making any money out of this. Everything you recognise belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: That's it, folks – the very last chapter of a story that fascinated me right from the start. I am aware that there are flashier and saucier stories galore, but I loved this one exactly because it seemed to stand out in its subtlety and excruciatingly slow pace. I, Muggline, would like to thank Marisol for her wonderful original that has been part of my life for quite a while now, as well as to ladyinthecloak and Professor M McGonagall for their unwavering patience and much appreciated help as beta-readers.

The Godfather – Chapter 34 – Epilogue

The first of September had been unusually warm. Years later, Hermione would still remember that she had worn a t-shirt while sitting across from the open window next to Severus, waiting for the well-known sound of Albus's owl, Vince, arriving. It was near midnight until when the barred owl* finally landed softly on the sill and dropped the letter from his beak to Severus's hand.

They would both bite their tongues before admitting it, but they had waited for its arrival in near painful excitement. The last months and weeks before Albus's first year at Hogwarts had seen a heated debate about whether he would be in Gryffindor or Slytherin.

Of course, all parties involved pretended to not care at all which house he would be in when the boy was present – Harry and Ginny in particular, but as soon as he was not there, they all tried to trump one another with arguments why Al should be in one house or the other.

Severus did not move an inch from his conviction that his godson would be a Slytherin, and deep inside, Hermione also feared that this would be the outcome, even though she hoped that Al would be in Gryffindor. She had spent hours telling him about the common room, the parties they had had after a victory of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, the many advantages of being a Gryffindor.

"Are you ready to finally get the proof that he is in Slytherin?" Severus asked her with a mocking grin.

"Never! Harry Potter's son? You must be kidding!" She made a grab for the letter, but he was faster and ripped it open.

Hermione bent towards him, and they started reading together.

Dear Severus,

I hope Vince will not collapse underway and the letter will reach you very quickly.

I am at Hogwarts now! During the whole train ride, I asked myself which house I might be in. James kept pulling my leg, telling me that I would probably get put into Beakgrunt, which was the fifth house for those nobody else wants, but that was nonsense, of course.

The Great Hall is even larger than you told me! When Professor McGonagall got the Sorting Hat, I almost didn't see anything, there were so many students. And suddenly, it was my turn. Everybody started awkwardly when she called my name, but then I was on the stool in no time and had the hat on my head. I can tell you, it took an eternity to make a decision!

It said (its voice was inside my head!) that I was fussing too much over how I could please everybody and that I was very clever and talented.

Hermione felt a wave of guilt roll over her when she read what the Sorting Hat had said. She had seen how pale Al had been when he had boarded the train, and she suddenly realised how much pressure they had all put on him. The poor boy must have felt sheer panic over the fact that he would disappoint either his parents and her or his beloved godfather, no matter whether he got into Gryffindor or Slytherin.

And then it said that I would be best suited to Ravenclaw! I hope you are not too disappointed that I did not make it into Slytherin. I know how happy you would have been... but to be honest, I am glad I am a Ravenclaw now. Maybe you can find it in you to be happy for me... at least a little bit? I don't want you, Mom, Dad and Hermione to have arguments because of me.

Severus lowered the letter, and in one perfectly synchonised movement, he and Hermione looked up at each other. "Ravenclaw," they both said in unison. In all those months, nobody had ever considered Ravenclaw as an option. Not once. They both resumed reading, flabbergasted.

My schedule says that my first lesson tomorrow morning will be Potions. I can hardly wait to tell the others that you are my godfather! They will certainly look surprised! I bet they don't know half as much about Potions as I do.

Please say hi to Hermione and write back soon.

Again, Severus lowered the letter.

"When you write him," Hermione finally said after a while, "don't forget to tell him that I am very happy for him."

"Ravenclaw," was all Severus said.

She took his hand. "He is a very clever boy, Severus. And he is so sensitive. He must have realised how everybody made a fuss about which house he would be in, and he did not want to disappoint anybody. Neither his parents nor you."

Severus said nothing for quite a while. Then, very softly and doubtfully, "Do you think a Ravenclaw can be the best student in Potions?"

"I think that not even his parents will be as proud as you when he earns glory for the house of Ravenclaw for the first time in many, many years." She grinned.

When Severus did not answer, she got up slowly. "I guess I'd better go home. It's late, and I have to be at work rather early tomorrow."

"Stay," he said, holding her hand. As she always did when he said this, she did not even try to turn him down.

Later, when she woke up to the sound of a quill scratching on parchment, she opened her eyes and saw him sitting on the bed, a candle floating in the air before him. Softly, she touched his shoulder and said, " Be proud of him."

He gave her hand a little squeeze and said, "I have always been, and I always will be."

Then he put the letter aside, blew out the candle and lay down next to her. After a while, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair.

THE END

If you don't know what a barred owl is, you can read about it here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barred_Owl

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Breaking News

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I have a question, can you contact me at a-chiacchio-colonna@m.spheremail.net ? Cheers!

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