

Second Hand Wand

by irishredlass

Originally written for Machshefa in the SSHG Winter 2008 Echange. Severus survives the war; he does not know how or why, but suspects Miss Granger has something to do with it.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Many thanks to my alpha reader Beffeysue and my beta extraordinaire Lariope.

A ribbon of sunlight ghosted across the barren, dusty room as the sun rose on the horizon, battling its way through the many branches and bushes of the Forbidden Forest. Finally, it filtered across the eyes of the man who lay unconscious on the floor. With a moan, he raised his hands to shield his eyes from the light, soft though it was.

Struggling to an upright position on the dusty floor, his hand met a congealed sticky mass. Looking down, he saw his hand was covered in what appeared to be old blood. Suddenly it all came back to him: Voldemort, Nagini, struggling to release his memories to the son of his enemy, and at last, blessed darkness. His task complete, he had lain down to die.

Then how was it he was alive? It was clear night had passed, but had he survived to live under the thumb of a dark megalomaniac or now to waste away in Azkaban? Neither option appealed to him, and so he gathered what little strength he had and, with the first prayer he had uttered in almost twenty years, Disapparated away.

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Two weeks after the Final Battle, and I still do not have a wand. Hermione fretted to herself as she continued to try wand after wand in Ollivander's. She had been grateful to find out that the wand maker had not been killed, as everyone assumed, but instead had gone into hiding in, of all places, Zurich. Now she was ready to kill him herself. It felt as though she had tried every wand in the bloody shop, and yet, none seemed to fit.

"Miss Granger, I am sorry, but none of my new wands seem to match your magic. It will take weeks to craft a new one designed specifically for you," Mr. Ollivander informed her, giving up. *Only one other time have I had such a difficult to fit client,* he mused, *and then the wand I crafted him only fit for seven years.* With a start, the old man headed to the back room, calling for Hermione to wait just a minute.

Shaking her head, Hermione paced the confined space of the front showroom. It seemed Mr. Ollivander thought it more important to have a large workspace rather than a comfortable environment for his clientele.

"I wonder, I wonder... could it be?" the old man muttered to himself as he came back through, carrying a sturdy mahogany box that appeared aged, but very well cared for.

"I have had this wand for twenty-two years since its previous owner returned it as a trade in when his magic had changed too much to allow the wand to function for him," the wand maker explained as he gently lifted it from its satin resting place inside the mahogany box.

Hermione was intrigued by the box itself, as most all of the other wands were stored in sturdy, functional cardboard boxes. Only the most unique and expensive wands were stored so extravagantly, and those were generally only purchased by collectors.

The wand was mahogany in color as well and appeared to be about the same length as her previous wand, broken under the foot of Bellatrix LeStrange seconds before she had fallen from a curse hurled at her by Ron.

"This wand is a unique combination of dragon heartstring and unicorn hair; oh, was that a feisty, beautiful unicorn," explained Mr. Ollivander as he lovingly caressed the wand. "It is the only one of its type I have ever made, as it is also mahogany...not a typical wood for wand making. Would you care to give it a try?"

Hermione felt the magic tingle in her fingertips when she looked at the wand. She had never had such a powerful reaction in her life. She knew this wand would work and reached out to take it in her hand. Her fingers glowed a soft meadow green when they brushed the soft and strangely supple wood.

"Oh! Marvelous," crowed the eccentric wand maker, and he clapped his hands. "It is definitely a match!"

Seeing how it was a used wand, Mr. Ollivander gave her a bargain and threw in the case for just over fifty Galleons. It was a bargain indeed, and happy with her new purchase, Hermione made her way home to the small flat she had taken not far from Grimmauld Place.

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A tremor reverberated through his body, almost sending him to his knees, as he made his way to the library, the only inhabitable part of the house. He wondered if it were some type of aftereffect of the venom Nagini had released into his system.

It was not a debilitating sensation like the tremors and muscle spasms that would wrack his body after being subjected to the Cruciatus Curse. In many cases, they were almost like caresses of electricity flowing through his body. There was no rhyme or reason to them, and no pattern he could detect. Some days they were mild, and other days, like today, there would be one or two that were almost enough to make his lank hair stand on end.

Oddly, as time passed, he had noticed a strengthening of his own power after such occurrences. No, it definitely could not be an adverse reaction to the venom. This appeared to be just one more puzzle that needed solving right along with how he survived in the first place and why he, Severus Snape, was dreaming of the know-it-all from the golden trio. He felt sure the last two had to be connected...just what had Hermione Granger done to save his worthless hide and why?

He hesitated to do what he knew must be done. From all accounts, read from *The Daily Prophet* to *The Quibbler*, the wizarding world thought him dead, though no body had been found. There was mass speculation on what had happened to his body, and he shuddered as he remembered some of the more heinous theories, such as being captured by Death Eaters and dismembered. One such article gave voice to the speculation that his nose had been seen implanted on another Death Eater who had lost his own in the Final Battle. As if anyone would *choose* to go through life with his proboscis. Nothing could be done for it; he had to contact Minerva McGonagall. He knew she, at least, would ask questions before she hexed.

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Hermione was busy about her new flat...well, new to her. She had been lucky enough to rent the flat above Flourish and Blotts only because the former tenant had perished in the Final Battle. Ron had fallen in the Final Battle, and her parents had been killed in a boating accident two days afterward, and she was of age. She felt intrinsically if she were to cave to Ron's family's desire for her to live at The Burrow, she would wither and die. She knew they loved her and cared about her, but felt if she were to stay there after having lost both Ron and her family, she would never be able to stand on her own. Thankfully, Harry seemed to understand her plight and was supportive in this decision, though he had reminded her she was always welcome at Grimmauld Place. She rather liked the little flat and the knowledge that she was above one of her favorite places in the wizarding world.

Her new wand was performing better than she could ever remember her other wand responding to her command. The vine wand with a core of fairy wing had serviced her well in her youth and training, but lacked the zing that her mahogany wand carried. She found it to be particularly useful in brewing her potions. The charms seemed to absorb into the brew before the incantation finished passing her lips. It was truly extraordinary.

A light tapping at her window interrupted her thoughts as she continued to arrange her own, not insubstantial, library; the wall-to-wall bookshelves that echoed those downstairs were the greatest feature in her new home. Glancing out the window, she recognized one of the Hogwarts owls. *Hmmm... Professor McGonagall is getting the booklist out early...good*, she thought to herself. But it was not the normal school letter; instead it was a summons to the Headmistress' office. Puzzled, Hermione summoned a quill and penned her reply on the same parchment, agreeing to a mid-morning meeting for the next day.

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"Professor McGonagall, I... I am speechless; are you sure you want me as your apprentice?" Hermione stammered.

She had been called to a meeting with the Headmistress just this morning and had had no inkling of what the older witch had wanted. Granted, she had always dreamed of an apprenticeship, but thought she would have to wait until she had completed her NEWTs.

Professor McGonagall smiled at the young woman before her. "Hermione, please, I have told you to call me Minerva, as it is my hope we will soon be colleagues. I know this is a sudden turn of events, but you can take your NEWTs next week, and I have every confidence you will excel to your usual standard. As you know, I am to continue as Headmistress, and I need someone to cover Transfiguration. I had always planned to offer you the opportunity."

Beaming at the Headmistress, Hermione offered her hand. "If you are sure... I would be delighted to have the chance."

"Splendid. Now that business is out of the way, how about a spot of tea?" Minerva offered. With a flick of her wand, a tea service appeared accompanied by scones and an assortment of biscuits.

The two women settled in for a nice chat.

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Severus checked his appearance in the mirror one more time to be sure his robes were straight and turned on the spot, arriving just outside the Shrieking Shack. He had some personal ghosts to exorcise before his meeting with Minerva. His Floo call to her had not gone quite as he had expected. Rather than the shock or anger he had expected to see on her face, it had almost appeared as though she were relieved.

He walked with purpose into the shack he had thought would be his last resting place. It appeared as neglected and derelict as it had when he had last met with the Dark Lord. Now, though, there was a darkened spot on the otherwise dusty floorboards. *My blood... how did I survive after losing so much of my life force?* Severus wondered to himself as he examined the darkened area, which spanned a good meter in circumference. With one last look around, he headed out of the building, not wanting to think any more of that horrid day.

Walking toward the gates, Severus checked his pocket watch, and noting the time was still early, he decided to face another painful part of his past...perhaps the most painful...Albus' tomb. Circumstances being what they had been, he had not been able to be present at the elder wizard's funeral; and to be honest with himself, he doubted he would have attended anyway. He had been furious with Albus; he had forced Snape to kill the one man whom he could call friend and had trusted, but there had been no other way. Had Severus not killed Albus, he would have been dead himself, and Albus would not hear of it.

Minerva had told him to let himself in, as she had not changed the wards, and come up to the Head's office when he arrived. It being summer, there was no one about whom he need be concerned with encountering. Severus laid his hand upon the gate so his magical signature could be recognized and felt the familiar pull of a Portkey behind his navel.

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Hermione had just risen from the armchair by the fireplace to take her leave when she was knocked to the floor by a flailing arm encased in black. "Oomph... what the?"

"Severus! What is the meaning of this?" demanded a startled Minerva as she helped Hermione to her feet.

"Professor Snape... but you're dead; I saw you die... all the blood?" Hermione stammered as she staggered back to the chair.

Severus was looking around in stunned amazement, trying with all his might to maintain his dignity and not look as if he had just tumbled arse over teakettle into the Headmistress' office. He brushed off Minerva's hand of assistance as he righted himself.

All eyes turned at the sound of chuckling coming from the newest addition to the portrait gallery.

Minerva turned her glare from the glowering man to the portrait behind her desk. "Albus, do you care to explain the meaning of this, since you appear to be so amused?" she said, her brogue becoming more intense with each word uttered through clenched teeth.

Eyes twinkling and tears streaming down his face, the portrait Albus attempted to contain his mirth. "It is simple, Minerva; at some point Professor Snape's magical life force must have diminished enough to remove his magical signature from the wards," Portrait Dumbledore explained as he continued to chuckle. "You should have seen your face...and Severus, I have never seen you look so discomfited!"

"Enough!" Minerva shouted as Dumbledore completely lost control and proceeded to howl with mirth. "I will deal with you later." Fixing him with one last steely glare, she turned to the two in her office.

Hermione was still in a state of shock. She had witnessed what she had assumed to be her professor's last moments of life not a month ago and continued to be haunted by those images both awake and sleeping. Of late, her dreams had become even more disconcerting...the worst being just this morning, when she awoke covered in sweat with his silken tones whispering, "I trusted you, and not even you cared to save me..."

The ex-spy was now standing before the fireplace, his back conspicuously turned to the portrait on the wall. Even when he had been Headmaster, he had never looked upon the face of the man he killed. That is why the portrait was behind the desk. The only time Severus had spent in the office was spent on paperwork, and it was easiest to avoid looking at the portrait when it was behind the desk. He still could not bear to face the man he had loved like a father, though it had been on the man's own orders that he was dead.

Taking in the stance of both, Minerva felt it best to get on with business. "Hermione, I will be announcing this at the first summer planning session, but you may as well know now. If he will accept, Professor Snape will be returning to Hogwarts as Potions master."

At this pronouncement, Severus turned to face the older witch, though his face showed none of the shock he felt. He had meant only to ask her assistance in facing the Wizengamot, never dreaming of resuming his post.

Ignoring the younger wizard's reaction, she continued on, "And Severus, you may as well know, Hermione has just agreed to accept a Transfiguration apprenticeship this coming term, so both of you should prepare yourselves for having to deal with each other on a regular basis."

Both witch and wizard nodded their understanding, though nothing could be farther from the truth.

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Hermione returned to her flat with more questions than answers, but happy all the same. She was to report to the castle two weeks before the start of term. Professor McGonagall...no, Minerva; she must learn to think of her as such...wanted her to have time to settle in before the students arrived. Then there was the matter of Professor Snape. She was still in shock from seeing him alive and well in the Headmistress' office. Now that she knew he was alive, it made her wonder even more about the peculiar dreams she had been having.

Due to Minerva having to fulfill the duties of Headmistress, her apprenticeship was going to be greatly accelerated. She would be taking first- through third-years from the beginning, and by the return from Christmas hols, she would have all classes. Normally an apprenticeship would last two years... hers would only be one. Rather than being worried, Hermione was excited for the challenge. Over the winter break, Minerva would be training her to become an Animagus. She wondered what form she would take. Her research had indicated that there were many factors which would contribute to her Animagus form including: her own magical life experience, her intrinsic power as a witch and even, to some extent, the core of her wand.

At this thought, she looked down at the wand held limply in her hand. It was nothing like her old wand, and yet on occasion, it was almost as if it sensed the spell before she herself knew her intent. She wondered, not for the first time, to whom the wand had previously belonged and why it had stopped responding to his or her magic. She could not imagine her old wand failing to respond to her command and knew if it had not been broken in the Final Battle, she would still be using it.

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Hermione had never felt a month fly faster than the one before she was to report to Hogwarts to begin her apprenticeship and new career. She could not get over her good fortune: Voldemort was dead; she had passed her NEWTs with customary acumen, and now she had her future to look forward to. She had never imagined, after losing both Ron and her parents so close together, that she would be looking forward to the future.

Hermione Granger, Transfiguration mistress; it has such a nice ring to it, Hermione thought to herself. She made one final check of her appearance in the mirror. Nerves fluttering in her belly, she adjusted her hair. Still hopeless on the best day, today it was tied back into a low tail down her back, as neat as she could make it. For this, her first day as a Hogwarts apprentice, she had chosen to wear moderately formal robes of a soft navy blue with a crisp white summer weight blouse and pale blue skirt that floated about her calves. The strappy white sandals adorning her feet gave the outfit a carefree feminine touch and boosted her ego.

Severus could not have agreed less with Hermione's euphoric mood. He only wished the summer would meet its end and the term would begin; perhaps then he would find some normalcy to his life. If he had thought being a double agent and putting his life in jeopardy had been a difficult path to follow, he had been mistaken. There were days he actually *wished* for the return of his old life.

Minerva had taken the proverbial bull by the horns upon Severus' return to the living: contacting the Ministry; the Board of Governors; and Merlin help him, *The Daily Prophet* to report his continued existence. Celebrity status was not something he would wish on his worst enemy... though The Boy Who Lived Again already was tormented by the same plague. There were days when he actually empathized with the myopic bane of his existence and wondered if maybe he had been too hard on Potter when he attended Hogwarts, though he would deny this to his dying breath.

Thoughts of dying brought Severus back to his continued mystery. How had he survived in the Shrieking Shack, and what was it that continued to plague his very body? Daily, if with irregular occurrence, he felt the jolts of power rush through his body. He had even gone so far as to consult with Madam Pomfrey for a complete physical.

Though he was underweight, *no news there*, she could find no cause magical or medical for the sudden bursts of power. On the upside, these episodes appeared to be increasing his own strength rather than depleting it as he had feared they might. Though always a powerful wizard, Severus noted now that even the most complex Transfigurations, which had always tended to task his limits, came with ease, and his magic was displaying a calm fluidity to it, rather than the harsh current that used to be its characteristic. Shaking his head to clear it of disturbing thoughts, Severus headed down to the staff room. Today was the day when the senior members of the staff

would welcome the newcomers and apprentices to Hogwarts. He was quite intrigued to see Miss Granger again. *Perhaps I can incite her into giving herself away,* he thought.

"Thank you all for coming in early this term." Minerva brought the meeting to order. "We have much to accomplish before the start of term. I would like to announce, for any who do not already know, that Miss Granger will be joining us as my apprentice in Transfiguration, and Severus has returned to Hogwarts as well to resume his post as Potions master."

There was a flurry of whispered comments about the room. It was apparent, in spite of Minerva's campaigning on his behalf, that not all were pleased to see Severus Snape return to the fold. This was no less than he had expected, given his ill-fated tenure as Headmaster and the irrefutable fact that he was the one to wield the wand responsible for Dumbledore's death, even if the man had ordered the act himself.

It seemed only one other member showed no displeasure at his presence. Miss Granger was sitting there looking at him with a smile upon her face as those about her failed to hide their glowering looks. This action only intensified Snape's opinion of her guilt as he returned the hostile looks bestowed upon him by his former and current colleagues and the meeting continued to flow on.

Hermione had had hopes that Professor Snape would loosen up and become more approachable after the defeat of Voldemort *if the glare he graced me with is to be believed, it appears I am out of luck,* she thought to herself. She mentally shrugged, determined that she would not let the sour man spoil her moment of joy. Moments of joy had been few and far between these last few years.

As the meeting concluded, Minerva asked for a private word with her. "Hermione, if we could take some time to do a brief assessment, then I will know better where to begin with your Animagus training. I notice you have a new wand. We will need to determine your compatibility with it for Animagus Transfiguration," she concluded as the last of the staff made their way out of the lounge.

"Certainly," Hermione replied as she drew her wand from the concealed sleeve of her robe, rubbing its mahogany length almost reverently.

Minerva's eyes narrowed as she took a closer look at the wand her prized pupil presented. Something about the wand seemed familiar to her, but she could not place it.

"You say Mr. Ollivander sold you this wand used?" she queried.

"Yes, is that a problem?" Hermione asked, worry wrinkling her brow. She hoped it would not pose a problem for her training.

"No, no, not at all. It is just the wand seems familiar to me. Did he happen to say who the former owner was?" Minerva hastened to reassure her.

"Honestly, I never thought to ask," Hermione explained. "By the time I found one that would respond to my magic, I was so frustrated. The thought of who may have owned it before did not cross my mind," she finished almost apologetically.

"Hmm... interesting that Ollivander did not mention it. Never mind," the Headmistress continued. "The important thing is how it responds to your command."

Hermione brightened at her mentor's pronouncement. "Oh, it is fabulous! There are times I think this wand knows my mind better than I do!"

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The days and weeks of the new term passed in typical fashion for Hogwarts, the only difference being no one had to fear for their lives at the hands of a megalomaniacal psychopath. That and the young Transfiguration apprentice found herself attempting to avoid the presence of the Potions master. It was not that he had been cruel...or any more so than normal for him...but he seemed to be always seeking her out... at mealtimes, when she went to the library, and even on evening patrols, he seemed to find her and always with the same questions, "What did you do? How did you manage it?" Hermione was at a loss as to what he was talking about. She had done nothing, yet he seemed to believe she was responsible for his being alive. On more than one occasion, she got the impression he was not exactly pleased by the fact that he had survived the war.

Severus, for his part, was convinced the illustrious Miss Granger had somehow managed to save him from the clutches of Voldemort's familiar, Nagini. By all rights and purpose, he should have died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. He remembered clearly feeling the venom course through his blood, slowing the functions of his limbs and respiratory system. He remembered the blackness falling before his eyes, knowing the end was near and then... nothing... until he had awoken alone, the light of the rising sun illuminating the dusty room. Severus had made it a point to seek the young woman out at every opportunity, even changing his customary seat at the High Table so as to attempt to have her slip up and tell him what she had done. It was not that he was ungrateful for his continued existence, but he really had made no plans for a life after the fall of the Dark Lord. He remained at Hogwarts, as he had nowhere else to go unless he wanted to rot away at Spinner's End in the hovel that was his ancestral home.

Hermione continued with her Animagus training under Minerva's watchful eye and had reached the point at which she was almost ready to attempt to hold her form. To this point, all they knew was that her form would be grey in color. Hermione was anxious to see what animal represented her magical core both physically and through her wand. Her Animagus form would be a conglomeration of the two.

On the first day of the winter hols, Minerva decided Hermione was ready to attempt her first sustained transformation. She was almost as nervous as the girl herself. Though practices had gone well, and Hermione was excelling as a teacher, the older witch still had reservations about the new... old wand the young witch used. She had only been using it for a matter of months; thus it was unknown what type of impact it would have on the girl's Animagus form. It concerned the Transfiguration mistress greatly just how dark the mahogany wood was. It was not a well-known fact, but even the wood type of a wand spoke to the soul of the one who wielded it. The only person Minerva knew of who used a wand darker than the one that seemed to leap to Hermione's every command was the Potions master himself, and everyone knew of the scars imbedded deep on the man's soul. In fact, the only wand the older witch had ever seen which surpassed Severus' own wand in darkness was that of the...thank Merlin...deceased Lord Voldemort. Just what had her participation in the war done to the young Gryffindor who always presented such a cheerful façade to the world?

Hearing the woman in question knock on the door, Minerva shook off her reflective mood and prepared a smile of her own as Hermione entered at her command. Hermione's frazzled appearance immediately vanished her mentor's smile, and Minerva looked at her with concern.

"Hermione, what ever has you in such a state?" Minerva asked as she made her way across the room to the visibly distressed young woman.

Raking her hands through hair, which appeared to almost stand on end, Hermione shook her head. "It is Professor Snape! He just won't leave me alone. He has it in his mind I am somehow responsible for his surviving the war." The flustered young woman began to pace. "And I tell you...from his attitude, I don't think he is terribly happy about his continued presence among the living."

Minerva wisely held back the chuckle forming in her breast as she watched her apprentice pace about the room in a fine imitation of the man currently causing her vexation. "I see. I had hoped it would not become necessary, but it appears I may have to have a talk with Severus."

Turning on her mentor, robes flaring in fine *Snape fashion*, Hermione cried, "It was you! But how did you manage it?"

Waving her hand through the air as though to brush off a particularly pesky fly, Minerva replied, "That is a story for another time. Now, I suggest you calm yourself in preparation for today's practice. I want to see if you can hold your form long enough to be identified."

Hermione immediately stilled her wide eyes and took several deep, calming breaths. *She felt as if this were what she had been working toward all of her life.* Nodding her head in readiness, she silently cast the incantation that would enable her to seek her Animagus form.

The air about the young woman turned a ghostly grey and then before the Headmistress stood her apprentice on four paws. She was a beautiful sight to behold.

"Very good, Miss Granger; try to maintain your form while I make a physical examination."

Minerva began to circle the transformed witch from the right front around to the back and then to the left front. When she reached the front and turned to look head on, a soft gasp escaped her lips. There were no truly distinctive markings until one looked at the young woman from the front, but then one could see what appeared to be a tattoo of the Potions master's symbol over her left front flank, almost as though it marked her heart. Just as the older woman moved forward with her hand outstretched to touch the blackened symbol, the air again shimmered, and Hermione stood before her, a young witch once more.

"I did it! I did it!"

Her joy was contagious. "What am I? I meant to have a mirror handy so I could see."

"That is a splendid idea," Professor McGonagall replied. "Why don't you sit and rest for a moment, and I will transfigure the blackboard into a mirror, and then you can see for yourself?"

Tired from the energy expended, Hermione took her mentor's advice and sat down to watch as Minerva prepared the mirror. It would be at least thirty minutes before she could attempt the transformation again, but once she was thoroughly trained, it would not be such a drain on her magical abilities. She conjured a tea service and poured them each a cuppa to enjoy while she rejuvenated her energies.

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Hermione had just completed her third transformation in front of the wall-length blackboard-cum-mirror when Severus Snape stormed into the classroom, stopping dead in his tracks. His eyes focused in on the grey wolf, whose eyes were staring back at him through the mirror it faced, shifting down to the left front flank where, in black relief, there appeared a tattoo of the same symbol tattooed to his own left pectoral muscle... the mark identifying him as a Potions master.

His black eyes flickered to Minerva's, back to the wolf, and back again to Minerva as realization dawned on his stunned features.

The Transfiguration mistress allowed a slight nod of her head to acknowledge what he already surmised. Hermione Granger had managed to become an Animagus, and she wore his mark. What could this mean?

As quickly as he had entered, Severus Snape turned on his heel and was gone, leaving in his wake the swirling of his black robes.

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Moments later, Severus was pacing his sitting room floor as thoughts ran rampant through his mind. Very few witches or wizards became Animagi, and fewer still took the form of the wolf. It would mean for Miss Granger, as for himself, that there was only one mate in life. At this, his mind's eye conjured a picture of red hair and green eyes. He had always thought she was to be his life mate, and with her gone, he would lead a solitary existence. The same could have been said for Miss Granger, since the only boy known to show her interest besides the Bulgarian bungle-head was young Mister Weasley, who had sadly fallen in the Final Battle. So what did it mean that Miss Granger's Animagus form carried his mark?

A knock upon his door startled Severus out of his disquieting thoughts. Opening the door, he found Headmistress McGonagall on the other side in all her tartan glory. Stepping aside, he bowed her in without uttering a word.

"I assume from your abrupt entry earlier you needed to speak with me?" Minerva queried, avoiding the topic she knew was on both of their minds.

Severus quirked his brow at her, sure she would have come straight to the point about the symbol on Miss Granger's Animagus form. "Actually, I sought you out because I was concerned with the repeated instances of magical surge. They had become quite intense this afternoon, but it appears to have dissipated again."

Wrinkling her brow in thought, Minerva felt she was missing something about these surges of power the younger wizard was experiencing, "Have you not been able to discern any pattern to when they occur?"

The Potions master shook his head in the negative. "There is nothing. No particular spell cast or potion made. I had even considered that they might be brought on by particular foods, but I cannot see porridge and kippers causing a magical surge. There is nothing I can find as a common link..."

A pop of Apparition interrupted Severus' train of thought, and both looked down to find Winky, the house-elf, wringing her hands nervously. "Excuse me, Headmistress, ma'am, but Madam Pomfrey has sent Winky to find you. There is something wrong with Miss Granger, and she wishes you to come."

Minerva glanced at Severus in alarm. "She was fine when we completed her Animagus practice. Did Madam Pomfrey say what was ailing her?"

"No, ma'am. Madam Pomfrey only says Winky is to find the Headmistress and send her," Winky replied as she continued to wring her hands.

"Thank you, Winky. Please let Madam Pomfrey know I am on my way." Looking over her shoulder at Professor Snape, Minerva continued, "Severus, perhaps you would join me?"

When the two professors entered the hospital wing, they found an anxious and a completely puzzled matron.

"Poppy, Hermione, what seems to be the problem?" Turning, Minerva directed the rest of her questions to Hermione. "Did you become overly exhausted from the practice this afternoon?"

The young witch shook her head in denial. "No, not at all, but do you remember the marking of my Animagus?" Hermione asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes, of course; it was quite distinctive," Minerva replied, quite confused. Something was certainly upsetting the young witch.

"Well, it stayed," Hermione explained.

"What do you mean, it stayed?" The Headmistress was now completely puzzled.

"The mark...it is still there, though I am not transformed," Hermione elaborated.

Severus, who had been following the conversation from the sides, interjected, "You mean you still bear the tattoo that was present on your left front flank?"

"Yes, only it is on my flesh," Hermione wailed in total panic.

"But how can that be? I have never heard of Animagus markings carrying over into human form," Minerva asked.

Hermione just shook her head. Opening the top two buttons of her blouse, she drew the material aside to reveal the Potions master's symbol, black upon the pristine white flesh of her upper left breast.

All heads turned to the Potions master, as he himself gasped when he saw the mark on her flesh. He had only generically considered *his mark* when he saw it on her Animagus form, but it *was* his mark. The brand matched his down to the initials, which had not been obvious through her fur. He could clearly see the STS that graced his own tattoo.

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"What do you mean, is it your mark she bears?" Minerva asked, panic and confusion coloring her words.

The two professors had departed from the hospital wing when they had determined that, though clearly upset, no harm had truly come to the young apprentice from her Animagus training.

"It is precisely as I have said," Severus replied in a calm manner he did not feel. "The brand she wears is an exact replica of my own." With this statement, the Potions master unfastened the upper portion of his robes, frock coat and dress shirt to reveal his own tattoo.

Minerva gasped when she saw that the mark he wore was indeed identical to the one on Hermione's upper breast...down to the initials. In old style Gaelic script were the letters STS in pale relief against the black cauldron. All Potions masters wore the same tattoo, which was only distinguished by the initials of the individuals who bore it. Severus Tobias Snape was a Potions master and had the insignia to prove it.

"But, how..." Minerva trailed off as comprehension dawned. "You are an Animagus, and if I remember, you are a black wolf."

Severus simply nodded to acknowledge the accuracy of her memory.

"Then that means Hermione has been marked as your life mate. How can that be?" she continued, even more unsettled than she had been before she fully understood what had happened.

"I do not know, woman! It must have something to do with how she saved me in that wretched shack," Severus growled as he prowled the room in imitation of his own Animagus.

Minerva drew a deep breath at his pronouncement. She had hoped to keep her part in his survival a secret, but with these new developments, she knew she had to tell him the truth.

With another deep breath, she blurted it out. "It was not Miss Granger who saved you. I did."

Severus whirled on her, his eyes flashing in anger. "You? But how could you? And why would you?"

Now that the hardest part was over, she wanted to get the rest over with. "Albus and I both suspected Riddle would use Nagini when he discovered your duplicity. I carried a vial of Dittany and antivenin at all times after Albus died."

She became lost in her own memory of that harrowing day:

In her tabby form, she had traversed the school grounds unnoticed, but that did not mean she had not been aware of all she saw. Bodies of friends and foes littered the grounds like the leaves of autumn trees. Most heartbreaking was to see young Ron Weasley fall just moments after Harry had rid the world of Voldemort. It was Rodolphus Lestranger's final parting act. Molly had seen to it that her son had not died in vain, but Minerva had had a goal. Dodging the flailing limbs of the Whomping Willow, she had made her way into the Shrieking Shack before transforming into her human form. There he had lain, blood pooling about his body. She had quickly administered the antivenin and treated the wound with Dittany, but had been unable to stay long and could only pray she had not been too late. When she had been able to return later that night, he was already gone. It was not until Severus himself had contacted her that she had known the success of her mission.

"Why? Severus, because you of all people did not deserve to die...especially not in that manner...after all you had suffered, and I promised Albus. I promised him, if at all possible, I would see you live and return to this school a vindicated man," Minerva explained barely above a whisper. "He wanted you to have a chance to really live, to find happiness."

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"You have got to be bloody kidding me!" Hermione ranted as she paced the Headmistress' office. "First, Ron dies in the war. Then my parents die in a stupid, needless boating accident, days before I am to retrieve them, and now... now you want me to believe I am the life mate of the most hated and feared professor at Hogwarts! I just can't take anymore!" Her last words were muffled both by her hands and the tears that had overcome her as she sank to the floor.

Minerva had feared just such a reaction to the news that she was Severus' mate, which was why she had convinced the man to allow her the privacy to speak with the girl. There had been many casualties to the war for both the dead and the living. Hermione had lost more than most and had been doing an admirable job of rebuilding her life. The older woman's heart broke as she tried to console the weeping witch. *It had only been a matter of time until something pushed her over the edge and she either fell apart or shattered into pieces.*

Severus was not happy with the arrangement. His thought had been to confront the young woman, demanding to know what she had done to bind herself to him. For as much as Minerva tried to convince him that it had been she who had saved him, he still believed Hermione had done something... what, nobody knew. There were the matters of the unexplained dreams and the power surges he had been experiencing.

Minerva had her own theories as to what was causing the intensified magic, but first she needed to get the young witch calmed down enough to talk.

After several more moments of weeping, Hermione dried her eyes and looked at her mentor. "Minerva, I apologize for losing control like that. Could we please begin again?"

"There is no apology needed." The Headmistress smiled at the composed young woman before her. "I believe that was a long time in coming, and you shall be better for it."

Hermione flushed and shook her head. "It was either crying or laughing in your face, and I believe you are speaking the truth to me, so we must find out why you and he believe this to be so. The laughter may come later," she concluded, smiling grimly as she chuckled.

The older woman proceeded to explain Animagus theory in more depth...how not only the witch or wizard's individual magic helps to determine the Animagus form, but the wand itself.

"Now, Hermione, this is not your original wand, and we know not, for sure, who its original owner was or what the experiences of that person did to contribute to the temperament of the wand," Minerva stated. "I have my suspicions, but I would prefer to have confirmation before we continue this conversation."

With this, the Headmistress summoned Winky and asked her to have Professor Snape come to her office. After Winky had left to locate Professor Snape, Minerva turned to her protégé. "Hermione, before Severus gets here, I want to address briefly one thing you said. You described Professor Snape as *the most hated and feared professor at Hogwarts*. Do not feel that you need to give me an answer, but consider this: do you really hate and fear him yourself?"

Moments later, the man was knocking and being granted entrance. His gaze, piercing in its intensity, rested on Miss Granger, as though he could discern the secrets of the universe by penetrating her soul through her eyes.

His presence unsettled Hermione, so she turned to the window in order to gather her thoughts. It would not do to fall apart under his penetrating stare. She could not show any weakness to this man. In the few moments since Minerva had asked her to truly think about Professor Snape, she had done just that.

Did she fear him? The answer simply was no. She respected him and was awed by his dedication to both the war and his trade. His intensity often made him come across

as aloof and superior, but fear him she did not. And how could she hate him? He had saved her life more than once over the years... She was again in awe of him, but she did not hate him either, although she doubted he could say the same.

Severus looked upon the young witch as she looked out the window. He had come to the conclusion that if she were indeed to be his life mate, it would behoove him to attempt some semblance of calm in her presence. It was not likely that she took the news of having him chosen as her life mate well, but he knew he could not risk this one last chance fate had seen fit to give him. He had never imagined he would survive the war and often cursed the world for forcing him to live when so many others... younger, kinder and, in his eyes, more worthy... had perished.

Minerva brought the pair out of their respective thoughts. "I think it best to begin by having you, Hermione, transform once again so we can confirm the mark is indeed what Severus believes it to be."

Hermione took a deep breath to calm her nerves, looking upon her mentor as she could not look at the silent man whose eyes had not left her since entering the room, and drew her wand to silently cast the spell that would transform her into a grey wolf.

A soft gasp broke her concentration before she could begin.

"That wand. Where did you get that wand?" Severus whispered, his eyes riveted upon the mahogany length Hermione held in her hand.

"Mr. Ollivander's."

"Do you recognize the wand?"

Hermione and Minerva spoke at the same time.

A stunned expression graced the Potion master's face. "I believe I do." He held out his hand to Miss Granger. "If I may?"

Warily, Hermione laid her wand across his outstretched palm.

"I never thought to see this wand again. It has been more than twenty years," he mumbled to himself as he examined the wand, almost caressing it in reverence.

He pointed the wand away from the two women in the room and cast a silent *Aguamenti*.

Two things happened at once: a spout of water sprang from the tip of the wand, and Hermione emitted a soft gasp.

The sound drew Severus' eyes back to the woman who was rubbing her arms as if to ward off a chill. "Is there something the matter, Miss Granger?" he drawled silkily as thoughts began to race through his mind and pieces started to fall into place.

Holding the wand out to the surprised young witch, he asked, "Would you mind casting the same charm?"

With a puzzled look upon her face, Hermione took the wand, and she too cast a silent *Aguamenti*, and Severus visibly shuddered.

Minerva, who had been silently watching, now gasped, "It is your wand! Your first one! The one you used as a student. That is why it looked familiar."

Severus tore his eyes from the startled look on Hermione's face and looked upon the equally stunned Headmistress. "Yes, I think I now know why I have been experiencing the surges of energy we discussed."

"What are you talking about? This is not Professor Snape's wand. I bought it from Mr. Ollivander." Hermione stumbled over her words to explain.

"Yes, my dear, you did, but did you not say it was used?" asked Minerva.

Understanding showed on the young woman's face. "But how? Why?"

Severus, feeling it prudent, briefly explained how shortly after he accepted the Dark Mark, his cherished wand had stopped responding to his command. Because he could not afford to purchase a new wand outright, he had made a deal with Mr. Ollivander. He had accepted the custom-made wand back in exchange for a reduced price on another wand. The inclusion of the case had happened because Severus could not bear to look upon it when he no longer had the wand he had lovingly crafted it for. His mother had saved and hoarded money for years to have his wand custom made for him; knowing she would not be able to purchase all of his school things new, she had wanted his wand to be the best. Not just a wand with an acceptable fit, but one made for *him*. As luck would have it, he was fortunate his mother had possessed such foresight as none of Ollivander's pre-made wands had matched him at all. It was the only new thing he had ever had while attending Hogwarts.

"And now I believe the wand is calling to me through your magic, Miss Granger," he concluded.

"But it responds to me..."

He interrupted, "Not for me to claim it as my own, but more of a calling to completion."

Hermione wrinkled her brow in confusion.

"Perhaps this will explain better." With a flick of his wand, Severus transformed into his own Animagus form.

Before the two women stood a solid black wolf, the only color being the slightly lighter shade of his dark brown eyes.

As if drawn of its own accord, Hermione's hand reached out to stroke the proud head of the beautiful animal before her. As she stroked down his back, it seemed the wolf leaned into her touch.

Without conscious thought, Hermione too transformed, and there they stood in the Headmistress' office, black and grey. Heads intertwined as each nuzzled the other, exploring each other's scent and feel.

As a wolf, Hermione nuzzled the neck of Severus Snape. She had not lost her human ability to reason, and yet nothing had ever *felt* so right to her in all of her life.

Severus accepted Hermione's presence in his wolf form more than he would have thought imaginable. Had anyone ever attempted to invade his personal space in his human form, they would have found themselves on the answering side of his wand, but somehow this felt entirely different, and he welcomed her assault as he answered with one of his own.

Minerva cleared her throat. "I think perhaps the two of you need to discuss this in private."

Two pairs of brown eyes turned to her and turned back to each other, and then the wolves exited the office walking shoulder to shoulder perfectly in time with one another.

Finis