

Amor Vincit Omnia

by Hanagasume

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

Part One

Chapter 1 of 7

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Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

A/N - Before you read this, I will need to give you a little background for the story. This was written quite a while before the release of Deathly Hallows, and is therefore AU. It has been set before the final battle, and the story itself will be building towards the battle at the end.

Kudos go to Alliean for beta-ing this for me. And a big hug of thanks must also go to WriterMerrin for her patience with my leftover mistakes.

Part One

There are always different ways to misinterpret situations, but the easiest is to make assumptions from what you see. And what Severus Snape often saw in his Potions classroom at Hogwarts left him with little doubt that this particular generation of wizards were complete and total dunderheads.

Not one of the students in his seventh-year N.E.W.T level Potions class could brew a potion to perfection if their lives depended on it - except for one. And even that lone student, although brilliant - which he admitted grudgingly - would merely be wasted potential if she did not survive the war that was slowly encroaching on their lives.

He glared out at his Potions class and let the glare rest on the face of Ronald Weasley. He hated this boy even more than the Boy-Who-Just-Lived-to-Torment-Him. Sneering, he waved a hand, and wandlessly the instructions for the lesson appeared on the board.

'See that you pay special attention to your cauldrons this lesson,' he drawled. 'I will not accept botched-up work, and you will receive an automatic fail for the day if you even attempt to present me with such.'

Everyone began to make their potions. It was a simple Memory Enhancing Potion, which was fairly tame for their first N.E.W.T. Potions class for the year. No objections, no whining. Just the way he liked it. If he wasn't so brusque with them, there was no doubt in his mind that they would be whining at him to no end, like they did to every other professor.

But, as if it were not enough that he even had to teach teenagers, the very bane of his existence began her daily torture of him. A distinctly feminine-looking, well-manicured hand shot up into the air. He looked straight at Hermione Granger with a piercing glare, but she didn't shrink away as she once had when she was an eleven-year-old child.

Instead, she remained neutral, but just as insistent on gaining his attention.

Severus decided it would be easiest if he just ignored her. Maybe she would go away? But apparently the girl didn't know when to give up. Hermione, determined to get a response, called out 'Professor?' in an exasperated voice. Snape couldn't ignore her now. Blast the determined little witch to no end!

'Yes, Miss Granger?' he answered bluntly.

'Sir, the Memory Enhancing Potion does not have any daisy root in it. It has root of asphodel,' she pointed out, gesturing at the error on the board.

Severus sneered. She actually had the fortitude to wave her hand about in the air, interrupt him when he was busy, and then correct him in front of his entire class? He was positively fuming. How could she go from being the submissive little know-it-all, to a bold, young Gryffindor lioness in one summer? Mentally scolding himself for his internal battle, and for not responding to her earlier, he chose to favor the girl with a look of disdain.

'Thank you for your input, Miss Granger. However, we at Hogwarts do not give out brownie points for being insufferable know-it-alls,' he snarked.

This made the Slytherins chuckle with glee, while Harry-Bloody-Potter and his pet weasel became red with anger on her behalf. Miss Granger, however, seemed unaffected by his insult and only spun around to warn her two friends off making a scene. How was she so resistant to his scorn?

'I do not want to hear any of you for the rest of the lesson!' he barked at the Slytherins, who cringed under his glare.

Thankfully for him, not all of his students were as resilient as Miss Granger. He silently looked over the classroom, wordlessly made the correction to the board, and went back to checking his class plans for the next week. Everything became silent again, which was just how he liked it. That was, of course, until a loud bang erupted through the classroom.

When he looked up, Snape saw that nearly half the class had been thrown backwards off their stools. Ironically, he had actually been waiting for that to happen. It just wasn't Potions without Neville Longbottom fucking something up. Call it a ritual if you would. Cauldron number one for that school year could well and truly be crossed off the list. The question remaining was, just how had he managed it this time?

'Mr. Longbottom, would you care to explain why half of my classroom is now covered in your sorry excuse for a potion?' he asked, just as he began to sense that something was amiss.

'Hermione!' Neville yelled, throwing his potion-covered self to the ground where she was writhing around in pain before she stopped, unconscious.

Snape was there in an instant, bending down to the girl and checking her for a pulse. He found it, but it was significantly weaker than normal. She was covered in a red, painful-looking rash and had become quite pale. He looked up to see that the rest of the students in the class had gathered round.

'What are you all standing there for? Someone go and alert the Matron to ready a bed, you idiots!' he roared. Harry darted out of the room quickly.

He lifted the limp girl into his arms and stood up, making his way out of the classroom. He paused in the doorway and turned back momentarily barking out, 'The rest of you will stay here and clean this mess. When it is spotless, you are dismissed!'

He rushed to the Hospital Wing with Neville close in tow, trying to walk as fast as he could without losing the bumbling idiot. 'Longbottom, what was the last ingredient you added before your cauldron exploded?' he demanded furiously.

'D-dragon scales, sir,' he stammered.

Dragon scales... Dragon scales...? That wasn't even part of the blasted potion. The Granger girl was allergic to dragon scales. He snorted in derision. Only Neville Longbottom could botch a potion and explode a cauldron all over the classroom with the only ingredient that Hermione Granger was allergic to in it. They burst into the hospital wing, and Madame Pomfrey ushered him to the nearest bed that she had prepared. 'What happened, Severus?' she asked frantically.

'A cauldron exploded,' he said, giving Neville a dark look, 'and Miss Granger was exposed to the contents of said cauldron. I am afraid that she is having an allergic reaction to dragon scales.'

Poppy rushed off, but returned mere moments later with a number of potions and salves in her arms. 'Severus, I may need your help. However, you two boys may leave now,' she finished sternly, looking at Harry and Neville.

They left immediately, and Snape was handed a potion. 'Make sure she swallows all of this while I apply the salve,' she commanded softly.

Severus put the vial to her mouth and coaxed her jaw open with his long fingers. He tipped the potion in smoothly and then massaged her neck so that she could swallow. Her swallowing reflexes were not functioning due to her unconsciousness. Once he had finished that, he helped apply the balm to her neck and face and cleaned the potion from her robe.

'Eneverate' Poppy said, pointing her wand at Hermione's chest.

Her eyes flew open, and reflexively, she tried to sit up. Snape braced her down with a hand on each of her shoulders. 'Don't try and get up just yet, Miss Granger. You're weak from your ordeal,' he said quietly.

The Matron did a check, nodded, then left to get Hermione some chocolate. Hermione looked up at Snape fondly. Was she insane? The next thing he heard was her saying something to him.

'I'm sorry, Professor. And thank you,' she said, leaning up and giving him a swift kiss on the cheek.

Snape was so numb with shock he didn't even notice as his feet carried him out of the hospital wing. It had been a long day, and now what he really needed was a shower, a drink, and maybe even some sleep.

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Some things were harder to believe than others, and Severus Snape had found himself the victim of one of the most unbelievable things to occur in his life. Firstly, Hermione Granger had gone out of her way to thank him for doing his duty. And then she had kissed him, even if it was only a peck on the cheek. That kind of thing was inexcusable.

She had become a complete mystery to him lately and never failed in surprising him further with her newfound abilities. Why, just two days before, she had astounded him in the library using wandless magic to levitate a book to herself. Only he, in the entire history of Hogwarts, had ever managed to accomplish full control over his wandless magic by his seventh year. And now, he and Miss-know-it-all-Granger had another thing in common, apart from their brilliance, love for learning, and need to be surrounded by books.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, he stood up and left his office, thundering into his classroom, with his robes billowing behind him dramatically, as was customary. He had a classroom full of bold Gryffindor and sneaky Slytherin fifth-years this period. This lot was okay when they had the sense to keep quiet, which, unfortunately, was not as often as he would have liked. He sat at his desk and waved a hand, the instructions for the lesson appearing on the board.

'Read the board, take notes and write me a six-inch essay on the topic, due next Monday. Use your Potions texts as a reference, or have the sense to go to the library,' he said crisply.

He then settled into his seat. It was finally Friday, and this was thankfully his last class for the first week of the new school year. He was making a good start, leaving out the fact that Longbottom had ritually caused an explosion and nearly killed one of his classmates. The classroom fell into a state of blissful silence for all of five minutes before an irritable Gryffindor student raised a hand into the air in a familiarly annoying fashion. He groaned and closed his eyes.

'Yes, Mr. Jennings?' he asked with just a hint of annoyance.

'Is it true that you saved the Head Girl from dying the other day?' Lincoln Jennings asked innocently.

He knew that this would happen. You do one good deed... 'Yes, Mr. Jennings. I assisted Madame Pomfrey with Miss Granger's recovery. However, she was hardly dying,' he replied curtly.

'Oh!' the boy exclaimed slowly, putting his hand out to accept the Galleon that Justin Brown handed to him from down the bench.

Snape frowned. The stupid boy was being dared to ask the fearsome Potions master a stupid, trivial question about Herm- Miss Granger? How immature...

'Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Jennings. And if you can't keep your trap shut for the rest of the lesson, I shall arrange it so that you and Mr. Filch will have some quality time together this evening,' he threatened in a dangerously low voice. 'And that goes for the rest of you twits as well!'

The boy did not speak up for the remainder of class and even packed his books away in silence when he dismissed them. Snape was then left alone in the empty Potions classroom to brood as he stared at the front row of desks. Nobody else even dared to sit there except for Miss Granger. She was always there, and either early or on time, with perfect results and flawless potions.

How did she manage it all? He assumed that she didn't have the time turner any longer, as she was already eighteen and no further years had been added to her age to indicate that she was a frequent user. She was actually just like he had been when he attended Hogwarts, except, perhaps with a few more friends. She was, however, uncaring of what her peers thought and not very social, but not anti-social. She was even like that to people in her own house, which showed that, unlike him, she did not hold any House prejudices. But she did read an awful lot, like him.

He was a solitary figure and was discovering almost daily that she was just as lone a figure as he was. He felt as if she was fast becoming the first thing he thought about when he wasn't busy. That was, by no means, a good thing. He really didn't like the girl at all. He just felt as though they shared a few things in common. She meant about as much to him as anyone else at Hogwarts. And that was absolutely nothing at all. He snorted aloud. He really needed to stop trying to make comparisons between her behaviour and his.

Giving himself a mental shake for the second time that day, he picked himself out of his seat and went to his chambers. He dropped into one of his chairs just in time to see the green flames and Albus Dumbledore's likeness appear in his fireplace.

'May I come in, Severus?' he asked warmly.

'By all means, Albus,' he said wearily, waving him through and indicating for him to sit. 'Tea?' he offered.

'No, thank you, Severus. I just thought I'd stop by for a little while,' he said kindly.

'What brings you here?' Severus asked directly.

'Ah! Severus, direct as ever,' Albus said with a barely disguised chuckle. Snape gave him a quelling look.

'Well, one of us has to be; the other is obviously trying to run in circles again,' Snape replied haughtily.

'Very well; it concerns the Head Girl and where her study is going,' he said, weighing his words carefully. 'I would also like to thank you for your care of Miss Granger when you helped Poppy the other day.'

'What's this about her study?' he interrupted, sensing that Albus was trying to skirt around the topic again.

Severus didn't have any patience for another one of Albus' manipulative games that afternoon. And he wasn't about to let the old man start. He simply sat there and waited for the Headmaster to give him a straightforward answer.

'Well, I was rather thinking that it might be beneficial to both yourself and Miss Granger if she were to take her N.E.W.Ts now and continue at Hogwarts as your apprentice,' Dumbledore suggested with as much nonchalance as he dared to have around Snape.

Talk about dropping the bomb on a person. Severus felt he might have been hearing things. 'Pardon me, Headmaster, but did you just say "Hermione Granger" and "Potions apprentice" in the same sentence?' he asked.

'Why, yes, I did. Would that be acceptable for you? She is eighteen years old, after all, and fully capable of making her own decisions. And she is more than intelligent enough to complete her N.E.W.Ts and become a competent apprentice for you,' Albus argued smoothly.

Snape knew he had been backed into a corner and there was no way out. The old, manipulative geezer was just too damnably convincing for his own good.

'Why not Minerva?' he asked.

'Because I have discussed this with Miss Granger, and she wishes to pursue a Potions apprenticeship with you, my boy,' Albus replied with a twinkle.

Severus cursed inwardly. He had already had a consultation with the girl, and she, blast the insolent chit, had chosen him as a mentor and master. Damn and Hell!

'Then, you've already decided,' he replied bluntly, which was received with a chuckle from Albus.

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Most people liked to walk about in the morning sun and simply enjoy that brief moment of simplicity and peace it brought, with the dew on the grass or the mist in the air. Each and every molecule was just one fresher, newer thing for a day that would soon be polluted with corrupt toxins and human waste. Severus Snape, unfortunately, was not "most people" and was, therefore, not entirely happy about having to escort Hermione Granger to the Ministry for her N.E.W.Ts through the dew-slick grass of the grounds in the early morning sun.

'Thank you again for escorting me to the Ministry, Professor,' Hermione said brightly, her eyes seemingly filled with their own light.

Severus ignored her radiant glow and contented himself with giving her an ominous look of derision. He wouldn't even be escorting the chit if he didn't have to oversee her blasted Potions N.E.W.T. And he only had to do that because there were no other available Potions masters in the blasted United Kingdom. Personally, he would rather be in his classroom teaching his ungrateful students than leaving them to vegetate under Albus's instruction.

'It's not a problem, Miss Granger, nor was it my choice,' he replied curtly.

But even that didn't seem to dampen her enthusiasm. The girl was simply incorrigible. What could he possibly say that would permanently drive her away? But still, she seemed to be so genuinely interested in his science and instruction. Why?

'Professor Snape, please spare me those condescending looks. I realize that you are only saying those things to discourage me from pursuing this apprenticeship. Why is that, sir?' she asked curiously.

Bugger and blast, but she was intuitive. Nobody - and he would quote that later - NOBODY ever saw through one of his facades. He gave a mental groan and stopped on the pathway.

'Miss Granger, I do not hate you, if that is what you think. However, I do find it extremely hard to believe that you would truly appreciate my company or instruction as your master and colleague. I am a very harsh taskmaster. Would you care to enlighten me on these points?' he asked and answered as honestly as he could.

Hermione nodded and smiled at his logic. He was feeling as insecure about this apprenticeship as she was.

'Professor, I am not scared of you. I do not hate you, and if it makes any difference, I have been defending you to Harry and Ron. Do you understand how hard that is for me? Can you not see that I respect you? I respect your work, and I am grateful for everything you do for us. That is why I have chosen you as my mentor,' she answered. It was as much a truth as she was telling him for now.

Severus could only nod, and then continued the trek away from the castle. They made the rest of their journey to the school gates in silence, and only when they arrived, did he turn to face her.

'Are you able to Apparate yet?' he asked shortly.

'I have my license, but I haven't had much opportunity to practice yet,' she replied, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious because of her lack of skill in that certain magical ability as of yet.

'Come here, then. We shall have to do so in tandem,' he said exasperatedly, extending his arms to her and drawing her as close as was comfortably possible. He didn't want to have to touch her so informally, but the moment called for it. She looked up at him in surprise, but accepted this small intimacy in any case. It was sort of comforting.

They disappeared with a pop and reappeared in the central foyer of the Ministry. She nearly toppled over from feeling dizzy, but was caught roughly by Severus who steadied her on her feet before completely removing his person from hers.

'Come,' he commanded in his classroom voice, beginning to walk off without her once more in the direction of the Ministry's East Wing. Hermione had to admit that he was beginning to become a tad annoying. She almost had to jog to keep up with his long strides. They made it to a door that was almost as impressive as the Great Oak front doors at Hogwarts, except this one was made of mahogany and was built on a smaller scale. Severus opened it and ushered her inside quickly. They were late. He closed the door after letting himself inside. The rest of the exam overseers were there already, waiting for them.

'We apologize for our lateness. We were regrettably detained,' he said formally, but shot a look at Hermione as if to say it was her fault they were late. She was going to talk to him about that silent accusation later, but for now, she would have to remain in her place.

The oldest wizard stepped forward and beckoned Severus to join the rest of the assembled examiners. This left Hermione to stand alone in the middle of the room.

'Miss Hermione Granger, are you ready to begin your testing?' he asked kindly.

Hermione nodded mutely, unable to appropriate the right words to say. She stepped forward and rested her hand over the Ministry N.E.W.T. rules and guidelines book that the older wizard held.

'Please answer my questions with "I do so intend", if that is your true answer,' he said formally. 'Do you intend to follow every rule set by the Ministry in relation to your N.E.W.T. testing?'

'I do so intend.'

'And do you intend to uphold this bond and not cheat nor ignore orders while doing these tests?'

'I do so intend.'

'And do you, Hermione Granger, intend to remain at the Ministry until you have completed all of your exams to the best of your ability?' he asked finally.

'I do so intend,' she replied quietly.

'Wonderful! Now let's get started. What exam would you like to complete first?' he asked with a reassuring smile. Hermione tugged her bottom lip between her teeth in a nervous gesture and felt her stomach squirm in anticipation.

'May I start with Arithmancy? It promises to be the longest one,' she asked, explaining her choice briefly.

A shorter, rounder woman with a cheery face stepped out of the throng of adult witches and wizards. 'Follow me to the next room, dear,' she said, sounding just like motherly Molly Weasley.

Hermione followed, and soon after, she had completed all but one of her exams, feeling, with no doubts, as though she had passed them. This just left her with the Potions examination. She was now beginning to feel that she should not have left this one till last, but was definitely eager to get it done. She followed Snape through to the back room that she had become fairly well acquainted with throughout the day. She looked around and found that this room was an almost exact replica of her Potions classroom at Hogwarts. She looked up at Snape in question.

'It is easier on the mind when one is in a familiar environment,' he said simply, taking a seat at his desk. 'You may begin when you are ready.'

Hermione looked at the ingredients, and it didn't take too long for her to determine the potion that she would have to make from them. She made the Blood Replenishing Potion with ease and did the written tasks while it cooled before bottling a sample and taking it to Snape's desk. She announced her completion before promptly fainting onto the floor. Snape stood from his seat quickly and scooped Hermione up into his arms, as he had only two weeks before, and carried her out of the room. He decided that it would be easier just to take her back to Hogwarts and have her treated by Poppy, and so he left with the passed-out Head Girl and Apparated back to the gates. She was going to feel the bumps from that fall in the morning.

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A/N This is a story that I wrote about two and a half years ago now, so if it's terrible, blame it on my younger self. It is complete, and each part will be posted as it has been beta'd.

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.T.s, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

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Many thanks to Alliean for the alpha read and to sirsevchick for beta-ing this for me.

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Part Two

The windows of the Great Hall clicked open, and the sounds of owls fluttering and swooping in while making soft hooting noises alerted the occupants to the arrival of the morning post. Hermione looked up just in time to see the owl drop a package onto her lap at the table.

Severus saw this from the staff table and couldn't miss the Ministry seal on the massive envelope. This was it. His last day of freedom before the Headmaster pawned off his favorite Head Girl onto him as an apprentice. He groaned as she pulled her N.E.W.T. results out of the envelope, going a little pale. He was officially stuck with her for the next eighteen months now.

Dumbledore, from right next to him, beckoned the girl to the table with a crooked old finger. She approached shyly, obviously, to Snape, not feeling too comfortable with all of the attention she was receiving.

'Miss Granger, would you mind if I read these results aloud?' Albus asked warmly.

Hermione shook her head and handed them over to him. The old man stood and cleared his throat. 'The N.E.W.T. results of one Hermione Jane Granger are as follows; Transfiguration 100; Herbology 98; Astronomy 99; Arithmancy 100; Ancient Runes 100; Muggle Studies 100; Charms 100; Defense against the Dark Arts 100; Potions 110,' he said in an appraising voice.

Hermione smiled shyly at the student body, her peers, as they loudly applauded her achievements. Outwardly, she was as cool and calm as ever, but Severus saw right through that façade and automatically knew that she was really having fits on the inside. And then he stopped thinking about her because the obnoxious Gryffindor table was getting a little out-of-control with their wild cheering.

'Well done, Miss Granger,' Severus remarked dryly, giving her a bored look.

'Yes, but I suppose, Severus my boy, we should be calling her Madame Apprentice now,' Albus chuckled.

'I suppose so,' Snape said, as Hermione blushed as she looked down at her apprenticeship approval.

The cheering did eventually die down, and Hermione managed to escape the Great Hall, despite the large number of newfound admirers. She somehow reached the Head common room and pushed the portrait shut behind her. She turned around, only to find Harry, Ginny and Ron already there, waiting for her with their arms folded across their chests and expectant faces.

'Mione, why didn't you tell us you were taking your N.E.W.T.s early?' Harry asked quietly.

'It's a long story, and not a very interesting one,' she replied.

'We have enough time before WE have to go to class,' Ron accused irritably. 'And while you explain that, you might want to tell us what part Snape has in this?'

'Right,' Hermione sighed, sitting down on one of her couches. It was promising to be a long morning. 'I didn't tell you anything because I didn't want to bother you lot about it.'

'And Snape?' Harry prompted.

'I am going to be staying at Hogwarts as an apprentice. Professor Snape is my master and mentor,' she quipped, putting an emphasis on Snape's title.

'Why Potions, Mione?' Ginny piped, speaking for the first time that morning.

'Because I love Potions; it is one of my favorite subjects. Not to mention it was my best N.E.W.T. result. Besides, the apprentice idea was Professor Dumbledore's,' she added flippantly. 'This brings me to the next point. I will have to spend vacations with Professor Snape as part of my course.'

'What?' all three of them exclaimed loudly.

'Calm down. The apprenticeship only lasts for 18 months before I become a mistress myself, provided I pass my final examinations,' she said, and before they could open their mouths to reply, she spoke again. 'I'm sure that I'll have weekends off and we can all spend time together then.'

'Wow!' Ginny said with a smile.

'But, as of now, I am practically your teacher,' she added, wondering if Ron would get that hint.

'You're mental if you're going to be Snape's apprentice. But if you want to, I suppose I can't argue,' Ron said, trying to claim a hug, and possibly even more.

Hermione put an arm out and stopped him from coming any closer. Apparently, he was as dense as ever. 'Stop it, Ron. I'm part of the Hogwarts faculty now, and we can't see each other like that,' she said calmly, trying to reason with one of her errant best friends.

Ron stepped back rather angrily and looked at her with disgust. 'I can't believe it! You're seriously going to chose Snape over me?' he said incredulously.

'Believe that if you want, but I like to see it as choosing what I want in the hopes that my friends will support me! But if you're going to be such a self-absorbed prat, then yes, I am choosing Professor Snape over you!' Hermione spat acidly. She had already had enough of Ron, and now it was just getting ridiculous. It would have never worked out.

'She's right, Ron. You are being a great prat. It's what she wants, and I think that its great that one of our best friends is smart enough to do something like this,' Harry reasoned thoughtfully.

'Harry's right, Ron,' Ginny said, not to be left out.

Ron looked positively livid.

'I can't believe you two!' he yelled at Ginny and Harry. 'This is mutiny! You're supposed to hate Snape as much as I do! Is this apprenticeship really more important than our friendship?' he asked all three of them. 'If this is the way you three treat a friend, then I'm out!' he roared, before slamming his way through the portrait.

Hermione made to follow him, but Ginny caught her sleeve and stopped her before she could catch up.

'Bad idea, 'Mione. He'll just get upset and do something stupid. He'll come around by himself one day,' Ginny said, knowing her brother all too well.

'True,' Harry added, just as the Head common room portrait swung open once more to admit the Head Boy, with his blonde hair, sharp features and gunmetal gray eyes.

'Draco!' Ginny exclaimed, rushing into the protective safety of her boyfriend's arms.

'What is it, Gin?' he asked tenderly. Hermione laughed inwardly at the sight. She only ever really saw that loving side of him whenever the bright little redhead was around. 'I just passed Ron outside. He seemed really...oh I don't know - murderous, would you say?' he remarked sarcastically.

'I had to let him go,' Hermione answered coolly.

'Bet he loved that,' the Head Boy replied, setting Ginny back on her feet.

'I can't see him now that I'm an apprentice, can I? Besides, it was never going to work out. There just wasn't anything there,' she retorted defensively.

'Exactly, so call him a prat, let him have his tantrum like he always does, and he'll come around eventually when he's done being a moron,' Draco suggested, earning himself a playful swat over the shoulder from Ginny. 'Owww!'

'That's my brother you're talking about,' Ginny intoned.

Hermione sighed, and slumped into the chair. Harry came up from behind her and smiled reassuringly. 'He'll come around, 'Mione,' he said softly.

'Thanks, Harry,' she said, accepting the hug from him.

It was going to be not only a long day, but also a very long year.

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From his seat in the Headmaster's circular office, Severus could see Hermione shifting about in her chair nervously. In just over two hours, Albus would be announcing her apprenticeship to the rest of the school, and she would be taking her place at the Head table beside him.

It looked to him as though she had already had a tough day, and she hadn't even started teaching classes yet *She is probably just tired from having to run from her adoring fan club*, Snape thought with a mental snort. And that's when she began to bob her foot up and down.

'Miss Granger, must you insist on doing that?' he asked, irritation evident in his tone.

'Doing what, sir?' she asked innocently.

'That - with your foot; stop it,' he said, immediately pinning her with his most annoyed glare.

She stopped, if only that action, and began drumming her fingers on the armrest of the chair. Her patience wasn't holding up, and in truth, neither was his. He groaned and made a sour face. Was it ever going to end? This was all such excruciating torture for him.

And then, Dumbledore finally returned to the office. They both let out a sigh of relief, exhaling the breaths that they hadn't even realized they'd held.

'Your new chambers have been arranged for you, Madame Granger, and have been set to accept the password of your choosing when you first arrive,' he said with a charming smile.

'Where are they located?' she asked with mild curiosity.

'Why, they're in the dungeons, right next to Severus's chambers. You will probably find it much easier to be accessible to Severus that way,' he replied with a twinkle.

Hermione nodded.

'All of your belongings have been moved there already. You will find that the rooms have been fully furnished, and that your book collection has been shelved in your private office, your study, and sitting room. I have also taken the liberty of having the rest of your belongings unpacked for you, and your clothes stored. You will find your new apprentice robes among them,' the Headmaster droned on cheerfully.

And sickeningly so, thought Severus, as he watched the old man excite himself into a stupor. Why all of the niceties? He was, after all, just using and manipulating the girl like he did everyone else who showed promise. What need was there to be nice?

'May I go to see my chambers before we have dinner?' she asked softly.

'Severus, would you be so kind?' Albus asked while looking at him with those damned twinkling blue eyes. If they twinkled anymore, he was sure that the Headmaster's head would turn into one of those Muggle disco-ball contraptions.

Severus found that he could only nod, if not because the Headmaster had manipulated him again, then because he just wanted to get away from his twinkling gaze. He stood and began to walk out of the office, assuming Hermione was following him, remembering to curse the Headmaster and his infernal ideas as he walked out.

'Follow me and keep up,' he said curtly, taking long strides and not bothering to slow down for the girl.

Hermione, once more, had been left to practically run after a fast-moving Snape, to keep up with his stride. By the time they reached the portrait of the Gypsy Witch, she was completely out of breath.

'Did you have to walk so fast?' she demanded, feeling positively exhausted. The look he gave her made her feel like cringing, but for her own sake, and to avoid his look of triumph if he knew he had gotten to her, she remained impassive.

'You will have to choose a password,' he said simply.

He watched as her brow furrowed in concentration as she delved into her mind for the right password. He saw the smile that curved her lips, and felt a strange tug around his chest that made him most uncomfortable. He ignored it.

'Belladonna,' she said with an impish grin.

'So be it,' he said, setting her wards and password, trying to fight the sudden urge he had to smile back at her. He managed to keep his mask of neutrality in place.

'Thank you, Professor,' she said before speaking the password and watching the portrait swing forwards. 'I'll see you at dinner.'

He nodded crisply. 'Ensure that you are either early, or at the very least on time. Enter through the staff door henceforth, and you will find your seat at the staff table,' he said quietly, before turning on his heel and striding away purposefully.

Hermione went into her chambers and sighed. She looked around her new, tidy-looking sitting room. It was decorated and furnished with cream and wine colored furniture covers. There was a large, roaring fireplace and bookshelves, as promised, with her books and some new ones apparently for her apprenticeship. She poked her head through a doorway to find a small kitchen, then passed by a study filled with books and a desk, and also saw a sparkling white bathroom with a comfortable looking large tub, before she finally reached the bedroom.

The bed had a cream, wine and silver duvet with white, Egyptian cotton bed sheets beneath it. She admired the beautifully carved four-poster, and thought that the white draperies surrounding it looked rather fetching.

She opened her wardrobe, and it was indeed filled with her clothes. She pulled out the black apprentice robes, which had blue and green stripes of fabric shot across the bottom of one of the sleeves, and shrugged out of her school robes, banishing them to the laundry basket in her bathroom.

Laying her new robe on the bed, she also set out a pleated, grey school skirt and white blouse with it, and found a simple black tie to complete the outfit. She wouldn't be wearing her Gryffindor tie any more.

She went to the bathroom, took a hot shower, and charmed her hair into somewhat of a loose braid before slipping into her skirt and blouse, doing up the tie, and sliding on a pair of elegant but simple, flat black shoes. She donned the robe and fastened it properly at the front, and once she was completely dressed and ready, there were still ten minutes until she would have to be at dinner. She attempted to read in the sitting room for a while but couldn't concentrate, so she decided to head up early.

She went to the staff door and opened it carefully, looking inside to find that all of the staff had already arrived and were chatting amiably. Well, everyone except for Snape, of course. Minerva smiled and beckoned her inside.

'Sit here, Hermione dear,' she said sweetly, indicating the seat just down from her.

Hermione sat so that there was one seat in between her and McGonagall. And, as if on cue, Snape swept into the hall dramatically with his robes billowing behind him. He sat just as the students began to file in.

Dumbledore stood as soon as everyone was seated and silence fell over the hall. 'Before dinner tonight, there is an announcement I would like to make. I would like for you to welcome, Hermione Granger to our staff as the Potions apprentice. You may refer to her as either Madame Granger or Madame Apprentice,' he said, before seating himself again. 'Tuck in,' he said, and dinner appeared at the tables.

Hermione looked to the Gryffindor table to see Harry and Ginny smiling up at her, and just a little further down the table, Ron scowling childishly. She looked next to her, to find that Snape a look of absolute displeasure on his face as he examined his meal. She knew it had nothing to do with the food, and this made her feel awful.

Somehow, she was going to prove to Snape that she was worthy of being his apprentice.

--

Pain came in many different forms, some dull and throbbing, while others were sharp and stinging. But the pain that Severus felt start in his forearm and travel upwards as he sat at breakfast in the Great Hall the morning after Hermione had been introduced as his apprentice was a terrible, burning pain.

He clenched his teeth together and hissed under his breath in shock, grabbing his forearm under the table with his right hand.

'Professor?' Hermione asked from next to him.

'Miss Granger, are you prepared to taking my morning classes?' he asked quietly, so that only she could hear him.

She nodded. 'Where are the class plans?' she asked urgently, looking at him with worried eyes.

'They're in my office on the left corner of my desk. Tell Albus that I will return as soon as I am able,' he gasped, getting up from his chair as normally as possible and rushing through the staff door.

He had to practically run to his room, throw on his Death Eater robes, and run for the exit. Damn that evil git and his poor timing to hell! Voldemort would surely know what time breakfast was in the Great Hall. Grabbing his mask as he went, Severus rushed through the dungeon halls to the hidden side door. He thundered through the door and rushed down to the Forbidden Forest before pulling on his mask and touching his wand to his dark mark to Apparate.

He threw himself onto his knees before the man -- no -- monster in front of him and bowed down low. 'You summoned me, Master?' he asked reverently.

At this point, he brought up his Occlumency shield and emptied all thoughts from his mind except for the ones that seemed to openly praise the Dark Lord.

'Yes, Lucius brought me some very -- interesting news last night,' Voldemort started with a sick smile.

'My Lord?' Severus asked in mock confusion. He knew exactly what Voldemort was talking about.

'He reported that he had been at Hogwarts yesterday evening, to introduce some of the new Ministry recruits to the castle, and managed to catch the old man's speech just before dinner,' he continued, his voice taking up a hint of annoyance. 'Can you guess what he heard there?'

'Yes, my Lord,' Severus said, bowing and keeping his head down this time.

'And what might that be, Severus?' said the cruel voice softly.

Snape closed his eyes and relaxed his body, preparing to take the *Crucio* he would receive as soon as he answered the question. 'He heard Dumbledore announce that I had taken the Mudblood on as my apprentice,' he said in resignation.

'Exactly,' Voldemort hissed, giving Severus a swift kick in the ribs. After hearing the cracking sound that followed, he pointed his wand at Snape then also. 'You have a lot of explaining to do, but first... *Crucio!*'

Severus felt excruciating pain shoot through his body like a bullet piercing metal. He felt like screaming, but clenched his jaw and writhed around on the ground instead. This was far worse than the pain he felt when he was Summoned. Anybody else would have died if they had been exposed to this kind of torture.

And then it ended not long after it had begun. He took several deep breaths, which was hard because of his now broken ribs, and forced himself into a kneeling position in front of Voldemort once more.

'Explain your actions, Severus!' he barked.

Snape took a final, deep breath and plunged in headfirst. 'My Lord, I can not justify Dumbledore's reasons for forcing the Mudblood onto me, but I think she may become beneficial to our cause,' he lied spectacularly.

'Go on.'

'She seems to trust me, and with that trust, and her belief that I, her master and mentor, am always right, I will have her wound around my little finger in no time. She will be useful to extract information from regarding Potter,' he said, spitting out Harry's name in disgust.

Voldemort took a moment to consider this and nodded. 'A good idea, Severus. You shall be rewarded for this, I think,' hissed the snake-like monster. 'Come, there is something else I Summoned you for this morning.'

Snape stood and followed the Dark Lord through some sort of forest to a clearing where there were several other waiting Death Eaters. 'It is now time for us to strike the Muggle family just past this clearing,' he addressed them all with a sickening smile. 'Severus shall have the honor of taking the woman of his choosing first.'

Severus felt like gasping but knew that he shouldn't, so contented himself with simply stiffening. He hadn't been commanded to perform a rape in 18 years, and personally, did not want to. He followed the group, trailing just behind, and waited as a rather brash Death Eater blasted the door of the house off its hinges.

He heard a scream from one of the rooms and heard a crash, followed by a thud. Moments later, all of the occupants of the house had been dragged and lined up in front of the Death Eaters and Voldemort.

'Take your pick, Severus,' he hissed with glee-filled eyes.

Snape wanted to vomit when he saw the joy that this sport brought to the monster. He felt dirty, and he didn't want to touch any of the women before him. There was a young woman of around twenty and next to her; a woman of his age that he guessed was the mother, and her husband, lying dead on the other side of the room.

He had to make a decision quickly. He chose the younger girl. He might just be able to spare her the pain that the other woman would have to endure being raped by all of the rest of the Death Eaters. 'May I have a private room?' he asked Voldemort, who nodded, and he dragged the girl up the stairs, threw her into a room and locked, warded and silenced the room.

'Girl, I do not have a long time and I can tell that you are afraid, but you have a decision to make,' he said, rounding on the sobbing mess on the floor.

The young woman had curly brown hair and bore a startling resemblance to Hermione, though not quite the same, as she was shorter, and less graceful. She nodded and sniffed, shaking a little.

'I have two choices for you. First, I rape you, and allow you to be raped by at least five other men, who will be foul and brutal with you, and leave you to die here in a pool of your own flesh and blood. Or I can kill you now, painlessly, and make it look like I tortured you and raped you to death,' he said calmly, seeing the tears in her eyes and feeling sympathy for her.

She cried for a little and looked up at him again, and with a soft voice, answered, 'Please, just kill me. I don't want to suffer,' pleadingly.

Severus nodded and raised his wand. '*Avada Kedavra*,' he said quietly and watched as the life of the girl slipped out of her eyes.

It took him five minutes to create a messy, bloody scene. He tore the girl's clothes and left shrouds of it laying around the room, all covered in blood. He performed a couple of torture curses on her body, and cut his own arm and covered her with his blood. He performed one last spell to ensure that her maiden-barrier had been broken and her insides torn to shreds.

He left the room after pulling his sleeve over his bleeding arm and went down the stairs to see his "Master". 'It is done. She didn't even survive the torture after I raped the filthy Muggle,' he spat.

'Good. Now just one last task for you, Severus,' he hissed with a wicked grin.

'Anything, my Lord,' he said with a bow.

'Cast the Dark Mark, and then you may leave. We wouldn't want Dumbledore to become worried as to your whereabouts,' he said coldly.

Severus nodded, feeling sick, dirty and angry at himself because of what he had been forced to do, all for the sake of Albus Dumbledore's cause. He pointed his wand at the sky outside, and muttered '*Morsmorde*' before Apparating away from the scene.

He went into his bathroom and took up his knife once more, letting the cold steel slice through the flesh of his wrist. He would cleanse himself of the dirty feeling.

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A/N Okay, well right now I am sure you think that Snape might be a little Emo, and for a while he is in this story, but I can assure you that it does change. Please don't be put off by the events in the beginning.

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

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Many thanks to Alliean for the alpha read and sirsevchick for beta-ing this for me.

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Part Three

Murderer... Snape felt like a murderer. He felt like a cold-blooded killer, with no hopes for redemption. He looked at the *Daily Prophet* and saw the Muggle house that he

had been to just the day before, with the Dark Mark hovering above it. Tearing his eyes away from the moving photograph, he made a fruitless attempt to eat his breakfast. He remembered his conversation with Albus when he had finally returned, sporting a tortured mind, soul, and three broken ribs. He had told the Headmaster everything, letting him see in a Pensieve the memory of killing the girl.

--

'Severus, you couldn't do anything more for her. You did the best that you could, considering the circumstances,' Albus said softly.

'No I didn't, Albus! I should have saved her,' he argued gruffly.

Albus looked at him with appraising eyes, studying him and finally realizing why Severus had been taking this so badly. 'It wasn't her, Severus. She was safe, and by killing that girl, you saved her life. She would have suffered otherwise. You gave her a painless option,' he said quietly.

'What are you talking about, old man?' he snapped defensively. 'I wasn't thinking about anything or anyone when I killed the girl. She was just too young to die.'

Albus nodded, but ignored his defensiveness. He knew that Severus was worried, and it was not about his own hide. He was worried about another certain brilliant mind that was currently teaching a sixth-year mixed Gryffindor and Slytherin class below. 'Severus, I know you, and I won't mention it again after this, but rest assured that she could not be safer anywhere else. Besides, with you as her protector, she will never come to any harm.'

Snape snorted. 'Albus, she is in far more danger with me around,' he said with a derisive air. 'And do not even try to suggest that I care for her. I care for her no more than anyone else in this godforsaken castle.'

Albus chuckled. 'Just don't get all dejected because of this incident. It could have gone far worse,' the Headmaster said reassuringly.

Severus simply nodded and left the round office quietly.

--

Could have gone worse his arse. An innocent girl was dead, and he had killed her. How the hell was he supposed to feel; happy because he put her out of her misery? How could any sane person be pleased with himself for taking another human life? She couldn't have been more than twenty years old.

And what made the whole thing worse was that Dumbledore thought it was just lovely that he escaped barely harmed after murdering an entire Muggle family. Was he bloody insane?

Giving up on trying eating anything, Severus instead picked up his *Prophet* and left the Great Hall.

Hermione watched as Snape left the hall silently, without dramatically thundering through the door or whipping around his robes. Instead, he had simply rigidly opened it and left without a word. He had been extremely quiet since his return from the Dark Lord's Summons the afternoon before, and it was beginning to worry her. It was as if he had become depressed somewhere in between breakfast and lunch.

She knew that there was probably more to it than just showing up somewhere and becoming a dark, brooding mess, but he didn't say anything to her. He wouldn't even look at her in the eye, or at all for that matter.

She sighed and finished off her breakfast quickly and left the Great Hall so that she could finish her last minute preparation for her class of seventh-years first up. She had decided with Snape the night before that she would be teaching the seventh-, fourth- and second-year students, while he took care of the other classes.

She walked into the dungeon classroom and waved her hand over the blackboard, and the instructions appeared. She also set up her demo cauldron at the front desk and began to prepare the base for the potion she was going to make. After it had simmered for a good ten minutes, she added the rest of the ingredients and left it to simmer on the lowest heat once more.

'I take it you are ready to begin teaching today?' asked a cold voice from the door.

Hermione spun around and looked at Snape, who once more had averted his eyes so that he didn't have to see her properly. 'Yes, will you be sitting in on this lesson?' she asked with a small hopeful smile. This might be her chance to prove herself to him.

'Perhaps,' he answered, before turning and walking away.

Hermione exhaled the breath she had taken and looked sadly after him. He seemed so empty and lost, as if the old snarky Professor had deserted him and had turned him into a shell, dirty and broken. Empty. And there was no pleasant, happy person filling that space either. There was nothing.

She went to the desk and flipped through her notes until ten minutes later, when her class finally arrived. She called them in and stood by her cauldron as they took their seats. She saw Harry and Draco sit with each other and spared them a quick smile, and then saw Ron at the back of the classroom, on the opposite side from Harry, scowling.

She sighed sadly. She hadn't meant for any of their friendships to be ruined by this apprenticeship, but it was Ron's own fault for his attitude.

'Today, you will be making a very complex potion, and you will have to be careful. Please come to the front of the classroom, and we shall begin,' she said as nicely as she could.

She saw Snape enter the classroom and take a seat at the back, and felt suddenly self-conscious. The class, however, had surrounded her now and was peering into her cauldron.

'Can anybody tell me what this potion is? As soon as somebody answers, you may all go and start to make the exact same potion yourself,' she said quietly.

Neville's hand, to her surprise, shot up into the air. 'Madame Apprentice, I think that is the Muscle Relaxant Potion,' he said unsurely.

'That is correct, Mr. Longbottom. Ten points to Gryffindor,' she said, smiling at him encouragingly. 'Now that you all know what it is, go search it up in your text books and make it. I want a sample from each pair by the end of the lesson,' she said seriously. 'Mr. Longbottom, you can pair up with Mr. Weasley for this lesson.'

Snape nearly fell out of his chair when she said that. Was she trying to kill Weasley? Maybe she was? He didn't know, and he was going to assume that she was having a disagreement with this particular Weasley, but it didn't bother him if she was.

He watched as she skillfully took charge of the class, and encouraged Longbottom, instead of yelling at him. The result was no explosions and a sample of the potion from everyone by the end of the lesson. He was amazed at how quickly she had taken to teaching. In a few days, he would have to introduce her to his private work, and be forced to hear out her ideas.

'Professor?' said a small, feminine voice near him.

Snape looked up and saw that the classroom was empty. Hermione was on the other side of the room, with an armful of papers.

'Yes, Miss Granger?' he answered reluctantly.

'Could you please help me?' she asked, giving him a pleading look.

And then he saw it all in his mind, the young Muggle girl on the ground, crying, begging him to kill her, a green flash of light, blood, a dead, cold set of brown eyes looking up at him lifelessly.

'No!' he cried, closing his eyes and trying to get it out of his mind.

The images wouldn't go away, and he looked up at Hermione who was looking at him scared. He rushed out of the room and towards his chambers and, upon reaching them, went to the bathroom and threw himself to the cupboards, searching for the blade as the images of the morning before kept flashing through his mind.

He found the knife and drew it along the flesh of his wrists, up his arms, his chest, until he couldn't feel the pain or see the images any more. He felt numb and cold, and before he knew it, he was leaning over the toilet bowl, retching what he had most recently eaten into it.

It had never been like this for him before.

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Sometimes, having a long term memory served as a burden and a pain, as opposed to being a memory bank for those memories that are cherished and wanted. Severus didn't have any of those frivolous and happy memories. All he had was a shady upbringing in a wealthy family, a few terrible pranks played on him at Hogwarts as a student, the unwilling activities performed while he was a loyal Death Eater, the life of a spy, and now, the murder of an innocent girl.

She had still been pure when he had killed her. She had been untouched, untainted, pure and whole flesh that had been corrupted by one well-aimed curse. He was surprised to know that there was even a youth living on the planet that had not succumbed to the lure of the flesh.

But he had witnessed that miracle, and had destroyed it, all in one morning. Severus looked down at his torn flesh. He really did need to find a better outlet than the cutting, but he honestly couldn't help it. He hated wallowing in self-pity, but it seemed to be an activity that he had been engaging in quite frequently of late.

He could see nearly all of the ugly pink scars that he had left, not completely healed, as a reminder of what he had done. He would most likely have at least ten scars for each life he had taken.

Severus couldn't take it any more. He needed to get out of the castle for a while. Being in his room was beginning to send him stir crazy, and it had only been a month since the beginning of term. He felt pathetic. If it hadn't been for that blasted child, he would be the same sadistic bastard that usually resided in his body. Where had that bloody lunatic fled to?

He walked out of his bathroom and grabbed his wand, healing the wounds so that the marks would still remain there. He would need to take a Blood Replenishing Potion before he left. He always lost so much blood when he did it. He drank one down quickly and rolled his white shirt-sleeves to his elbows, and unbuttoned the shirt around his neck. He needed to breathe.

Not really caring if anybody saw him, but doubting that anyone would, Severus left through the side door and walked towards the Forbidden Forest to a spot at the side of the lake that he often sat at to think. He didn't care that the edges of his sleeves were spattered with his own blood. Who was going to see it anyway?

Even Albus didn't know of his cutting problem, and he wasn't about to tell the meddlesome old geezer. He approached his peaceful escape before he heard a muffled sob, followed by a painful groan. There was somebody there. He looked around the tree, to find Hermione Granger, sitting there, arms wrapped around her knees, with tears streaming down her face.

He looked at her with a pained expression. He did not like the girl, no. But he did feel a strange sympathy towards her that was most uncharacteristic of him. Professor Snape could not just *feel* towards any person. But maybe Severus could, just this once.

He stepped from behind the tree and sat down abruptly next to the emotional 19-year-old. She looked at him in mild surprise, the tears still spilling forth from her eyes. She just gaped at him for a moment, taking in his profile roughly.

'Professor... I am sorry, I know I shouldn't be out here, but I ' she stammered helplessly.

'You're not a student any more. You may do what you wish during your free time,' he said bluntly, not bothering to put on the sympathetic act quite yet.

Hermione didn't say anything to him after that. Not because she didn't want to, but simply because she could not find the right words to say. It was then, during her silent scrutiny of him, that she realized that he was not wearing his black frock-coat, or his cumbersome black teaching robes, or any of the other layers between the atmosphere and his skin apart from white shirtsleeves.

She saw the top buttons were undone, and the sleeves had been rolled to his elbows. So this was how Snape dressed on weekends, when nobody else could see him. She had often wondered if he was always so strict with his wardrobe.

And that was when she spotted it. His skin was normally like alabaster; however, that night it was stained with pain. The numerous pink and red scars, which looked to have been fairly deep cuts, marred his wrists and arms. There were honestly too many to count.

'Professor, I... what happened?' she asked, sniffing, but having a pretty good idea that it was not just an accident.

'Are you alright, Miss Granger?' he asked, ignoring her question.

'Yes, I'm fine. Just some friend troubles really. I was just being silly over some trivial and pointless matters,' she replied, waving it off and drying her face. 'What happened to your arms, Professor?'

'Have you ever wondered why it is that I wear so many layers of clothing, Miss Granger?' he asked conversationally, his voice suddenly picking up in tone.

Hermione looked at him feeling thoroughly confused. He truly was just a shell of the man who had once been demanding and harsh, but in the best sense of the words.

'Not really,' she lied. 'But I will listen to you if you tell me why.'

'I have many scars on my person that are not very nice to look upon. I am not a self-conscious fool, but I like my privacy. And scars are some of the things that I would prefer remained private in my life,' he drawled with a hint of his old self. 'Do you understand that?'

She nodded mutely, afraid to speak and drive the man away. She didn't want him to leave. Not when he was like this.

He turned to face her, and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Bringing an arm forwards, he thrust it towards her and allowed her to examine the angry red and pink marks, some were puckered from the deepness of the wound that he had inflicted upon himself.

'You are an emotional one, Miss Granger, and I am going to make the assumption that whenever you are frustrated with a situation, you cry about it,' he stated bluntly. 'Am I correct?'

'How did you know that?'

'Nobody has ever seen my arms or any of my other scars before,' he commented dryly. 'You are the first, and the last. I would prefer if you did not speak of it to anyone. I trust you to keep this private.'

'Of course,' she hurried to assure him.

'I know that you cry when you are frustrated or upset, because I am the same. Except, when I feel that way, I do not cry,' he answered to her earlier question.

Hermione gazed up at him expectantly. 'What do you do?' she asked softly, letting her fingertips trace the scars on one of his arms in wonder.

He extended both arms out to her, and opened his hands, palms up. He was exposed to her, completely and totally. 'I do this,' he answered simply.

She gazed at his arms and saw all of his sorrow and sadness. She swore that she could almost see his drunken father slap his across the face, or beat him senseless. She could see the beatings his mother endured. She could feel the anger at having to kill, and taste the blood.

The hot tears began to sting the corner of her eyes again as she felt a fresh wave of emotion wash over her. Except this time, it was not for herself, or for Ron, or for any of her ruined relationships. It was for the man sitting in front of her, totally exposed, and baring his soul. It was for the courageous man who fought the war and spied for the light. It was for the hurting man, and the empathy she felt in her heart for his pain.

She sighed and shifted, moving forwards to encompass Severus Snape in a tight embrace, for her gratification as much as his. She needed the contact, and she had a feeling he needed it too. To make up for all of the times he had not been touched with a tender hand.

And they both simply sat there, not friends, and not really liking each other, but needing to comfort each other in a way that had no words. They simply held each other and drank comfort and much needed sympathy.

Severus had honestly never felt this cared for in his entire existence.

--

Hermione Granger was a problem. The problem with her was that Severus just didn't know what to think about her any more. She had gone from being a self-important little girl, who lived to boss people around and be the teachers pet in her first year. And in her second year, she had been a troublesome, sneaky thief, whom he never caught because he didn't have any evidence against her, before she became Petrified of course.

In her third year, she had been the annoyingly ambitious girl, with the Time-Turner permanently attached to her hand. That year had proved to be one of his more physically painful experiences with students. He had been blasted with the same hex from Hermione, Potter and Weasley, and thrown against a wall, unconscious.

When her fourth year arrived, she had become a little nicer to look upon. Not the average, typical kind of beauty that once could see just anywhere, but the elegant, inner kind. That was, until he had upset her with his remark about her over-sized teeth being "no different" and she had become a banshee again. And again in her fifth year, she had been an annoying little chit, especially when forming the DA with Potter, and causing general mayhem around the castle.

The year before, in her sixth year, she had been the regular little know-it-all that had constantly peppered him with bothersome questions. And now this year, right now, he didn't know what he thought. He didn't really like her.

Maybe he respected her just that little bit more, because of the way she handled herself as a teacher and apprentice, not even going easy on her friends. He admired her ability to separate personal life from work the way that he did. She had also insisted and made him promise to her that he would go to her if he ever got the urge to cut himself again, and they would talk.

He had made the promise, but he had no idea how to go about keeping that promise. He seldom made promises, and was unpracticed at keeping them; although, he had been more himself since holding her almost one month before.

He could hardly believe that it had been an entire month since he had found her crying beneath his cover of trees by the lake. It had always been his sanctuary, but now it was their shared one.

'Professor Snape, are you here?' called a sweet, feminine voice from just beyond his office door.

Speak of the devil herself. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, while deciding whether he would answer or not. Maybe it would be worth it?

'Yes, Miss Granger, come in,' he answered with impatience.

Hermione poked her head through the opening at his door and slipped into the room, pulling the door firmly shut behind her and dropping a pile of papers onto his desk. She smiled at him, and sat in the chair opposite him.

Unlike Severus, who had been enduring an internal war over his feelings for her and the current identity crisis, Hermione was aware of who she was and knew exactly how she felt about her former Potions professor, and current master. She had hated him, disliked him, become irritated and annoyed with him, grudgingly respected him, respected and defended him, considered him a friend of sorts, and now - - well she liked him more than was appropriate for an apprentice to like her master.

'Afternoon, Professor,' she said cheerfully.

He merely nodded in acknowledgement, and looked at her with indifferent eyes. 'Is there something you wanted to discuss?' he asked curtly.

'Well, actually, there are many things that I have been dying to ask you, but I'm afraid that you'll bite my head off if I actually get around to it,' she answered with a sheepish grin.

He pinned her with the most Snape-like glare she had seen in a long time. She was almost tempted to walk over to him and kiss the scowl off his face, but resisted for the sake of her better judgment. Actually, that was the most normal thing she had seen him do in a long time, and even she was hesitant to remove the signs of his improvement.

'Halloween is in two days,' Hermione commented off-handedly, trying to steer the conversation to something slightly more pleasant.

'Mmmhmm,' Snape mumbled in response, turning his attention to a stack of essays on the corner of his desk. They had to be marked some time, what better time?

'Will you be at Hogwarts for the ball?' she asked conversationally.

He nodded. 'Unfortunately, Albus asked me to be there as a chaperone. He'll do anything to get me to attend such frivolities,' he said with a heavy sigh.

Hermione laughed a little, which earned her a curious look from Severus. The girl was up to something, and he could sense it. He might be suffering, what she liked to call an identity crisis, but he was not that far gone that he couldn't sense subterfuge.

'Okay,' Hermione replied, nodding.

'Miss Granger, is there something that you want? Because I am beginning to think that you may have had ulterior motives to come and coax something out of me,' he asked in exasperation.

Merlin! The girl could be positively irritating. She was running circles and skirting the subject. Just like a doddering old geezer he knew.

Hermione smiled. 'Well, actually, Professor. I was wondering if you would be so kind as to be my escort to the ball. Its masquerade this year, you know?' she asked with all of her Gryffindor boldness before it eluded her.

Snape felt his heart throb its way up his throat and make him feel extremely uncomfortable. He swallowed hard, and looked at Hermione with confusion.

'Did I hear incorrectly, or did you just ask me to attend the ball with you?' he asked, completely dumbfounded. How did the girl always manage to render him so incapable of coherent speech?

'I did exactly that, Professor. And I will be requiring an answer to that,' she added thoughtfully.

Snape gave her a wary look and tried to focus back on marking the essays. He had never been confronted like this by a person in his entire life. 'What exactly would the terms of this escort be?' he asked, not bothering to look at her.

'It's not a date, Professor. It is simply a professor escorting his apprentice to a Halloween ball as a friend and colleague,' she said in confirmation.

'Alright,' Snape answered in resignation, although it sounded a lot like a date to him. What on earth was the girl up to?

'Great! Now we just have to discuss our costumes, because it would look a bit daft if I showed up wearing red on the arm of a man clad in green. We'd look like a Christmas decoration,' she said quickly.

'I only wear black,' he said quietly.

'I've noticed that. Perhaps you could try a different color, just for the night?' she asked in a voice that pouted in itself.

'Or, perhaps, Miss Granger, you will oblige to wear black for me this night, and I may feel obliged to return the favor and wear a different color some other occasion?' he replied back seriously.

Hermione shrugged a little and smiled. 'I think that could be arranged, but only if you let me get your mask for you,' she bargained tactfully.

Severus could see that he was never going to be the winner of this particular argument, and submitted. At least he would be wearing black. He really didn't fancy many other colors, and they only ranged from near-black greens, dark grays, and navy blue. All of the colors were fairly straight forward and simple.

Just how he liked it.

Hermione stood up from her chair and collected the papers she had brought with her from her desk and went to the door, only to turn back at the last moment and smile. 'Thank you for your time, Professor,' she said brightly.

As soon as she had left the office, it went eerie and cold, as if Hermione had just taken the warmth with her. Severus sighed and rested his face in his hands. He was going to have to find a good suit before Friday then.

By then, he might be ready to accept the fact that he was indeed, going to the Halloween Ball with Hermione.

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A/N - Yes, Snape is still going to continue to be emotional for a while longer. The root of his depression is from all of the guilt he feels over murdering innocent people.

Part Four

Chapter 4 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

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Many thanks to Alliean for the preliminary alpha read and to sirsevchick for beta-ing this for me.

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Part Four

Halloween certainly knew how to creep up rather quickly, and no sooner than Hermione Granger had asked Severus to the ball with her, the event itself was right on his heels. He looked into the mirror and sighed in resignation. He was bare from the hips up, with only his formal black slacks and new, polished, black shoes on. He could see the raw scars from his dreadful emotional habit, but was rather pleased that he had not had the urge to cut himself since that night near the Forbidden Forest.

He pulled on a black, silk shirt and buttoned it with practiced ease, securing the cuffs and neatly tucking it into his trousers that were resting on his jutting hipbones. He pulled on his silky, black waistcoat, which had a shimmering silver design of serpents imprinted into it faintly, and buttoned it too before tucking the black, starched front piece in and securing his necktie.

He pulled on the formal outer robe and straightened out. He looked passable at best, and the robe was most likely the only nice-looking thing about him. Muttering to himself, he secured his ridiculous ebony hair with a silk tie at the nape of his neck.

That was going to have to do.

If Hermione was looking for a knight in shining armor, then she was sure to be sorely disappointed. Shaking his head, he left his chamber in the familiar sweeping motion that he had not used in a month. It felt odd trying to act like nothing had happened, yet so natural to act like a self-important bastard.

He walked with long strides to Hermione's chambers and found that the portrait had been left un-warded, smirking at her innocent faith in him and anyone else who should happen to pass and notice the lack of wards. He muttered her password, and the portrait swung forth immediately to admit him into her immaculate sitting room.

'I'll be with you in one moment, Professor,' she said hurriedly, poking her head out from a door to his left and smiling at him before retreating back into the room.

He walked over to the wall lined with bookshelves, and only then noticed just how large a collection she had, not to mention the wall covered with nooks in her office, and the possibility of more in her private study. She was well on her way to having as many as he did.

Of course, that might take her hundreds of years to achieve, as he had a manor house just outside of Scotland that had a huge library, as well as his generous collection in his chambers and workspace. He chose to peruse her books as he waited, and was impressed with her taste in both Muggle and magical literature. Some Muggle fictions included *Jane Austen's Complete Works*, with books like *Pride & Prejudice*, and another, *Sense & Sensibility*. He also found titles such as *Moste Pontente Potions* and *Potente Vivere*, a book dedicated to Potions that enhanced life and exploited death. He continued to look through the books until he heard a soft voice clear her throat.

He spun around and almost gasped at what he saw. Hermione was dressed in the most delightful two-piece robe set. It had a high collar on the outer black robe and was edged with silver thread in an intricate pattern, with the same edging along the elbow-length sleeves. The inner dress was made of the same sheer silk, except it was in slippery silver, and fell to the floor, where the outer robe only went two inches higher than it.

She had her hair swept up in a breathtaking twist, with tendrils of her brown curls tumbling down her neck and framing her face. Her eyes positively twinkled at him. She had not been dressed like that when he had first arrived.

'Professor, you're staring at me,' she said shyly, blushing all the way down her neck and flushing at the exposed tops of her perfectly rounded breasts. Severus definitely felt a stirring in his loins when she flushed like that.

He pulled himself out of his trance and went up to her, taking her hand and pressing a formal kiss to her knuckles. *I do not like her. I do not like her. I do not like her...* seemed to be the only thing that Severus could think.

'You look nice,' he said stiffly. It took a lot for him to give any person a compliment, which meant that it should mean more than if any other person had said it.

And the funny thing was it actually did. Hermione found it hard to breathe when she had first seen him in her chambers. He wasn't conventionally handsome, but to her, he looked dignified and mature. Not like all of the silly little boys she was used to seeing on a daily basis. To her, he was attractive, and with his trim, tall figure in those robes, she would do anything to be able to rip them off him.

'Shall we go then?' she asked a little breathlessly. She hoped he wouldn't notice that he had put her in a state of high arousal to say the very least.

'Let's,' he said simply, holding an arm out for her to tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow, and started towards the exit.

They emerged into the cool of the dungeon hall, and Hermione stopped him. She handed him a silver half-mask, which was guaranteed to cover his entire forehead, cheeks and nose perfectly. She had charmed it so that it would fit the exact proportions of his features. He slipped it on wordlessly and waited for her to put hers on. It was similar, and also fit the proportions of her face, and was in the same silver. It was odd how they had both chosen their own wardrobe, and had ended up choosing a costume that complimented the other perfectly.

When she had fastened it in place, and fastened the two buttons at the front of her dress robes, they emerged from the dungeons arm in arm. They walked into the Great Hall together, only to find that it had already filled with the many students, all wearing masks as tradition dictated. At midnight the removal would commence.

Snape was quite the gentleman the entire night, being extremely chivalrous and making sure that she was comfortable. He collected her drinks for her, pulled out her chair for her, danced wonderfully with her. But the only downside to this gentlemanly Snape was that he hardly spoke more than two words all night.

Hermione decided, as they danced, she would have to say something to him to break the building tension.

'It has been quite a lovely evening, don't you agree?' she asked conversationally.

'Indeed,' he replied stiffly, whirling her around, before pulling her back flush against him as they waltzed, dipped and twirled around the dance floor.

'Aren't you supposed to be doing some sort of chaperoning duty?' she asked, wondering whether or not he had forgotten. His thinning lips told her that he had not forgotten, and that her reminder was unwanted.

'Yes,' he replied tersely.

'May I come with you when you do?' she asked softly.

'Yes,' he answered, but this time with more shock than anything else.

The dance ended, and he led them off the dance floor and out the nearest doors so that they could stroll amongst the gardens, and ensure that no students were performing inappropriate acts outside. They stopped by a series of tall rose bushes, and Snape muttered a charm and waved his hand across, exposing the snogging couple behind them.

'Miss Greengrass, Mr. Zabini. Pray tell why it is that you are out in the cold, while everybody else is enjoying the festivities?' he asked in a very Slytherin manner.

Hermione would have laughed at their situation any other day, but was more acutely aware of what Snape had just done to them. He had been sneaky, cold, and asked questions to force them into answering them honestly. They didn't have an answer for him this time.

'Twenty points from Slytherin and the same for Ravenclaw, Miss Greengrass,' he said shortly, pointing a long finger in the general direction of the castle.

Hermione smiled at this very Snape-like action. They finished his rounds and danced a couple more dances before Hermione yawned softly. He looked down and, seeing that she was beginning to get sleepy, led her off the dance floor. Once they were out of the Great Hall, he picked her up and carried her back to the portrait, and deposited her on her bed, once the blasted thing had admitted him.

Sweet Nimue, portraits could be ruddy annoying. He left Hermione's room, trying to ignore the fact that she was on his mind, when the pain shot through his arm, burning in that most familiar way.

The Dark Lord certainly knew how to pick the times to further his plans.

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The air was stale and sickly in the swamp. It tasted of death and the ugly fate that awaited them as they crouched in waiting. Severus was crouched especially low in his half-kneeling, half-bowing position that was required of him while in the presence of the Dark Lord. He had more recently found himself sitting closest to Voldemort, at his right hand, while Lucius knelt at his right.

They were waiting for the traitor to be led to the centre to grovel before the Dark Lord and beg for forgiveness, before it would be denied, and he would be tortured and killed. It had happened more times than he could count, as Voldemort's follower's faith in him had begun to crumble of late.

What had started out as an almost pleasant Halloween had soon become the bane of his very existence; second only to his pesky apprentice? Perhaps, but she wasn't a threat to him as she slumbered peacefully in her dungeon chambers.

'Ah, finally, the guest of honor has arrived,' Voldemort drawled, ending with a hiss.

Severus looked up just enough to catch sight of the victim for that night. It was Percy Weasley. When had that freckled pain-in-the-arse become a Death Eater? He supposed that it was hard to recognize anyone with the masks on, but he had never figured that the third Weasley boy had a dark side.

'Percy Ignatius Weasley, you are hereby sentenced to torture and death for your betrayal of our Lord, and your deceit,' Lucius Malfoy said deadpan.

Voldemort gave a sharp nod and waved for Severus to move forward. 'Severus, would you do the honors this evening?' he asked, as more of an order.

Severus had no choice but to stand. His feet propelled him up, and he grasped the handle of his wand more firmly, snapping it in the direction of the young Weasley. He was about to cast the only hex that came to mind when he was stopped by an angry, high-pitched voice that sounded out around the dense air of the swamp even.

'*Crucio!*' screamed Bellatrix Lestrange angrily.

Severus fell to the ground in angry, writhing pain. Although it was not as intense as the Dark Lord's, it still made him twitch. He heard, through the blood pounding in his ears, the woman begin her ranting screech.

'You, Severus Snape, are the most undeserving, pathetic, snivelling coward I have ever known. How dare you presume that you can claim my position at the foot of our Lord! How dare you!' she screamed, having a miniature tantrum.

'Enough, Bella,' Voldemort cried out furiously. 'I gave the position to Severus freely. He is faithful, and has proven to be far greater use to me than you ever will!'

Bellatrix reluctantly removed the curse, dropping to her knees on the ground as Severus staggered into a standing position once more.

He brushed off the dust on his robes and stood to full height, still shaking and tensed-up a little, but glaring at Bella all the same. If looks could kill, she would have been six-foot under. 'You question our Lord's decisions, Bella. I thought you knew better than that,' Snape drawled smugly.

'Severus, she is yours to deal with as you please, once you have removed the traitor, but for Merlin's sake, kill the Weasley,' Lucius whined impatiently.

Severus nodded and turned back to the traitor. He hated the Weasleys, and the task should have been easy for him. But as he looked at this Weasley, he thought of Ron Weasley and remembered Hermione. She loved the Weasleys so dearly, like family, and was accepted into their home, because she didn't have one of her own any more. Bellatrix Lestrange was to blame for that.

He raised his wand, however, reluctantly, and sighed inwardly. *Goodbye, Weasley*, was his last, fleeting thought, before he did the unthinkable. *Avada Kedavra!* he cried, feeling hatred boil at what he was being made to do.

The redhead dropped lifelessly to the ground. He was loathing seeing the empty, green eyes staring back up at him with an unfocussed glaze about them. He felt ill, like he had committed yet another terrible wrong.

'Well done, Severus,' his master said cruelly. 'Now, don't you want to punish Bella?'

Snape shook his head. 'With your permission, Master, I will return to Hogwarts and take a muscle relaxant. Her weak *Crucio* has left my nerves on edge,' he drawled.

'Of course, go now my faithful servant. Heal yourself, and I will ensure that Bella is punished for her brash actions towards you,' Voldemort said, with more than a little delight in his red eyes.

Severus Apparated away as soon as he could and appeared at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, feeling his muscles convulse a little from the after-effects of the curse. Bellatrix was not nearly as powerful as the Dark Lord, but it was strong enough to make his muscles ache as if he had been for a long run. He pulled the mask off and headed towards the castle in a moderate amount of discomfort.

He reached the door, that was flung open the moment he reached out for the handle, and he was pulled through forcefully by a frantic-looking Hermione. 'What are you doing, girl?' he hissed.

'What the bloody hell does it look like?' she demanded back angrily, forcing a vial into his hands just as a fresh wave of tremors hit.

He dropped the vial, and she waved a hand to stop it from falling, and summoned it back to her hand by crooking a finger. She took off the stopper and used one hand on his chest to steady him, and pressed the vial to his lips with the other. He drank it only to get away from her sooner, but she didn't relent.

'Where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick!' she asked.

'Do not assume that you can speak to me that way, Miss Granger!' he spat. 'You'll do well to remember just who the master is here!'

'I am not your slave that you can just order around, Snape! I am a human being too, not some ruddy house-elf. Treat me like one,' she said in a low voice, gritting her teeth so to not lose control.

Snape stood there stunned. She had never, in her entire time at Hogwarts, ever called him anything but sir or Professor Snape. The shakes had gone, and he could see the anger in her eyes, as well as the angry flush of her cheeks. He had really gone too far this time. He had not meant to drive away her respect for him.

'My apologies,' he said, dropping the Death Eater mask.

Hermione gasped for the first time as she saw the mask fall to the ground. She knew he had gone there. She knew, from the moment she saw the castle's side door left open, that he had been made to rush off in a hurry.

'What happened this time?' she asked. Last time it had been a Muggle family. There was no way that a Death Eater meeting had gone by without something dreadful happening.

Severus bowed his head and shook it. He couldn't tell her. She would know in the morning when the post arrived anyway. He looked up and saw the fear in her eyes. Why was she always so concerned for him? For everyone else? He pushed his body off the wall and wrapped his arms around her. He needed the comfort this time, more than ever. She simply accepted it, knowing that if she wasn't there, he would be somewhere in his chambers, slowly killing himself in a pool of blood.

He heaved an awful sigh and pulled her as tight as his thick, cumbersome dress robes would allow. Somehow, this contact, this brief intimacy in the parallel space they were in, was the thing he needed the most and lived for. She reached her hands up to the clasp on his Death Eater cloak and released it, letting the robe slip to the floor in an inky pool, and pulled him closer.

'I'm sorry, Miss Granger,' he said quietly, holding her as if she would slip away at any moment.

Hermione pressed fingers to his lips and shushed him. 'Please, don't. You need this, and I do too. Don't apologize for anything,' she soothed softly.

'Miss Granger...'

'Surely you can call me Hermione after this, at least,' she interrupted, letting her hand stroke up the front of his silk waistcoat, feeling the smooth texture.

'Hermione, thank you,' he said quietly.

Hermione could tell by that point that Snape was getting extremely fatigued and had no idea what he was doing. She released him and led him in the direction of his chambers, made him say the password, and laid him to rest on his bed. After making him drink a Dreamless Sleep Potion, she left without another word.

Her sleep was tormented after that...

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The note that had been pinned to the notice board just outside of the Great Hall had come as a relief to many of the staff and students alike. Hermione had been relieved by the note the day it had been posted, but five days after, she felt slightly less pleased by it.

Christmas Break

All students planning on leaving Hogwarts will have until the

17th of December to make the arrangements.

The Hogwarts Express will be leaving from the Hogsmeade Station

At exactly 6:00 pm on the 19th of December.

All students are wished a very Happy Christmas!

As Hermione read the note again, she sighed. It had only been three days since she had walked Harry, Ginny and Draco to Hogsmeade and waved them goodbye. Harry and Ginny were going to spend Christmas at the Burrow with the Weasleys, while Draco headed to spend a week with his mother, and then a week at the Burrow under the guise that he would be going to spend the second week at Hogwarts.

She looked at the globes and the jewels sparkling in the house points counting vases, and sighed. The date that read above it came as a depressing reality to her *23rd of December...* She shook her head. Maybe some time in the library would help to clear her head. She walked in that direction, and just as she reached out to open the door, she felt a hand on her other elbow.

She snapped around defensively, clutching her wand tightly within her robes. It was just Snape. 'Can I help you, Professor?' she asked coolly.

'Yes, I was wondering if you had anything you needed to do in London before we go to Yorkshire,' he asked back just as stiffly.

'Yorkshire?' she asked, cocking her head to the side in a questioning way.

'That is where I live. We will be spending the remainder of the holiday there where I might pursue my Potions research more freely. So I suggest you pack. We'll be stopping in Diagon Alley shortly on the way,' he noted off quickly.

Hermione bristled slightly under his irritated look, and sighed. 'I'll go pack then, shall I?' she asked as more of a statement, turning to walk back in the direction of the dungeons. 'How long do I have?'

'I have made arrangements and packed. You have as long as you need,' he replied absently.

Hermione nodded, fled to her chambers and began to scabble around, throwing books into her bag and neatly tucking as many decent-looking robes as she could into the bag, including some reasonable Muggle clothes. Once she deemed herself ready enough for the trip, she strolled out of the dungeons and found herself in the Entrance Hall within twenty minutes.

'Are you ready to leave now?' Snape whispered silkily beside her ear, his warm breath washing over her neck, causing her flesh to prickle.

'Yes,' she breathed, trying not to sound aroused.

'Excellent, shall we leave then?' he asked smoothly, letting his hand rest on the small of her back and nudging her towards the great oak doors.

Hermione nodded, and tapped her bag with her wand, instantly transforming it into a shoulder bag that she could carry. She slung it over her shoulder and walked towards the door, making sure that she kept up with Snape. Surprisingly, he walked next to her in silence at a pace that was most leisurely for him.

Hermione watched his graceful movements as he walked with long, deft strides, making walking an art of its own. She knew that she had been mad at this man for many things in his past and in the present. But all of those things were forgotten to her, at least for Christmas. There was no use in being mad during the holidays. But she had to ask the question...

'Professor, what happened at the last Death Eater meeting?' she asked quietly, barely above a hiss.

Severus was instantly taken-aback by her question. To his surprise, relief and disgust, Percy Weasley's death had not been on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. He had found out mere hours after that his body had been disposed of carefully, and the Dark Mark had not been cast. He looked at Hermione. Percy had long been distant from his family, which was why nobody had noticed his disappearance. Molly and Arthur had no idea, nor his siblings or Harry-bloody-Potter. Neither did Hermione...

'I cannot tell you, Miss Granger,' he said solemnly.

Hermione prickled immediately. 'Don't give me that routine, Professor. You know perfectly well that I know something dreadful happened. Somebody died, didn't they?' she demanded hotly.

'Yes.'

'Tell me who,' she said curtly.

'You will be disappointed. He was another Death Eater. A traitor who was discovered trying to flee the country,' Severus replied evenly, his voice betraying nothing.

'I want to know,' she said calmly. 'Please.'

Severus cleared his throat uncomfortably. 'Percy Weasley.'

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks and looked up into Snape's mercilessly obsidian eyes. He looked as impassive as ever, voice level, posture stiff. But his eyes were speaking volumes. It was filled with remorse, disgust, hate, fury, and sorrow. She stepped forwards and reached her hand up to his face, cupping his jaw in it and bringing the other to rest on his chest. His body stiffened instantly, but after a long moment, relaxed a little beneath her trembling hands.

'You had to do it, didn't you?' she asked, knowing what the answer was already.

Severus lifted his left hand and rested it over the hand on his chest, and let his right hand cover her hand on his face. He drew them away from him, into his hands, and held them firmly as he kneeled on the ground before her, unguarded, yet unsure.

'Forgive me,' he pleaded as he grasped her hands and looked up into her shining eyes.

'Of course,' she whispered, tugging at his hands to get him to stand. 'Let's leave here now, though.'

He towered before her once more, still holding her small hands in his large hands, and nodded slowly. He released her hands and moved a reasonable distance away before gesturing for them to continue. Hermione walked beside him the whole time, not speaking, but letting his presence and sincere remorse comfort her.

They soon reached the Apparation point, where Hermione felt herself wrapped in Snape's arms in what seemed an almost familiar way, and they disappeared with a pop. They reappeared in the small courtyard outside of the Leaky Cauldron, just before the entrance to Diagon Alley. He didn't let go of her. Instead, he pulled her to him closer, hanging on as if she was the life itself.

Hermione had no objections, and snuggled into his arms, feeling his pain passing through her. She would filter out the bad things, the thoughts of self-inflicted pain, everything. He needed her. He needed her.

'Thank you.' was all that he could say to her.

Hermione wondered if it would always be that way with him, but decided that she didn't want to think about it that way. She would just enjoy the gentle side of Snape for just a little while longer.

It didn't take long for them to gather together all of their outstanding Christmas presents after that, and then Apparate to his house in Yorkshire. Hermione was led to her room by a house-elf and left alone in the large room of his Victorian home. She collapsed onto the bed and closed her eyes.

She had poured out all of her special magic into Snape that day. It was her gift of healing the wounds that not many could. But she knew that she would be there to do that for him as long as he needed her.

With that final thought, she drifted off into a dreamless sleep...

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Please leave a review.

Part Five

Chapter 5 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

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A big hug of thanks goes out to WriterMerrin for her help with this chapter.

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Part Five

Me falit I do not know.. And in all honesty, Severus had absolutely no idea what the hell was wrong with him. He felt like something was tearing him apart every time he even saw her coffee eyes twinkle at him from behind those beautiful brown eyelashes. Every time she accidentally stumbled out of her room into him as he paced the hall outside her door, wondering if he should go talk to her about it.

But he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He was never good at confessing his feelings, but it was harder then, more so than it had been when he hated her. But it was not true that he had hated her. He simply had not known her.

But he knew her now, and she was a bright, beautiful, accomplished witch, who had no doubt begun questioning the reasons for why he would pace in that particular hallway of the house. There were plenty of other halls for him to pace holes through. But the difference was her. She wouldn't be just inside a door beyond those halls. She was behind the antique mahogany door on the second floor landing. The Rose Room, and aptly named because of the décor his mother had made him decorate it in all of those years ago.

He tried to avoid that room if he could help it. But he wouldn't have put her in any other room. She needed the Rose Room. Somehow, that room had chosen her. He hadn't told the house-elf which room to put her in, simply because she would be able to find it herself.

And that was how he came to be standing immediately outside the door of said bedroom, early on the 25th of December. He clasped his hands behind his back. This time, he would actually knock on the door. And that was exactly what he did.

'Come in,' called the sleepy female voice from within.

Severus wasted no time, opening the door and poking his head around to view inside. He was met by something completely unexpected. The room had changed. The curtains were no longer an awful shade of rose pink, but delightful silver. The bedclothes were in cream and rich burgundy, the sheets pure white silk. All signs of pink had been replaced with neutral shades of cream, burgundy-wine, and white.

'I'm sorry about the room changes. I just couldn't stand the pink after I woke up the first morning,' Hermione chirped, interrupting his thoughts as she walked out of her bathroom clad in a white bathrobe, wet curls brushed back from her face and falling in a damp blanket down her back. 'Happy Christmas, Professor.'

'Happy Christmas, Miss Granger,' he replied, bowing slightly.

Hermione smiled and went to the drawers over one side of the room. She fumbled through the top drawer until she seemed to find what she was looking for and pulled out a parcel wrapped in green. She held it towards him. When he didn't take the hint, she walked over to him, thrust it into one of his hands, and closed his fingers around it. 'It's your present, sir,' she breathed out in frustration.

'Oh.'

Hermione sighed and shook her head. She sat down on the edge of the bed, pulled him down to sit on it, and let her hands guide his own. She nudged his fingers into pulling away the silver ribbon that ensured that the rest of the parcel could be opened with ease. The paper fell away not long after that and revealed a small box.

'Open it,' she said softly, rubbing her thumb over the back of his hand.

Severus lifted the lid off the box and gazed into it thoughtfully. His gaze fell onto the smallest of boxes. He would have sworn it was a ring box, if anything. He plucked it out and tried to open it, and when it didn't open, he looked at Hermione with a frown.

'What is this?' he asked hesitantly.

'I can't tell you. All I can say is that it won't open for you until it is ready to. I hope you can be patient?' she answered timidly.

Severus nodded. 'I can wait, but until then, I shall keep it with me always,' he said, slipping it into a pocket of his robes. 'Thank you, Hermione.'

'It was nothing,' she replied, moving into the circle of his arms and shifting so that her legs thrown across his lap and arms around his neck.

Severus was a bit surprised when the young witch perched herself on his lap, but accepted it nonetheless. It was Christmas, after all. People could make *some* sacrifices on the holiday. He raised one of his hands and Summoned her gift from his bedroom wordlessly. A small box landed in his outstretched hand, and he passed it to Hermione.

'Now you will open your gift,' he stated clearly.

Hermione complied after a moment and pressed on when his arms went back around her as he watched. He tightened his hold a little to indicate his impatience and looked at her with a raised eyebrow. She sighed and plucked off the golden ribbon, letting the marble-colored paper fall away to reveal a box. She opened it and found the most beautiful platinum pendant she had ever seen. It was a Celtic cross with a knot overlapping it and a small red jewel in the centre. It was smallish, simple, yet beautiful.

Snape moved one arm off her and took the pendant and simple chain out of the box and, with one graceful hand, magically fastened it around her neck. Hermione looked down at it and smiled.

'Thank you, it's beautiful,' she said breathlessly.

She leaned forward and locked her arms around his neck and pressed a small kiss to his cheek in the same way she had almost four months before. That time he had saved her from an allergy she had no idea she had. And he would probably be saving her for the rest of her life.

Severus was shocked by the kiss at first, but didn't make a big deal out of it this time like he had the last time. It was Christmas, after all. People did out-of-character things on the holidays all of the time. Severus pulled her closer to him in his lap and returned the small intimacy with a brush of his lips across her cheekbone.

'Happy Christmas, Hermione.'

Hermione closed her eyes, rested her dampened tumble of curls against his chest, and let the confines of his arms hold her as close to him as possible.

Severus finally knew what he wanted. He wanted that very moment for the rest of his life. He wanted that stubborn, beautiful witch to be in his arms for as long as he could have her. The pain that he felt in his chest every time that he upset her, or saw her walk away, had not been just any common illness. He had finally fallen in love. She had slowly snuck past the defenses that had been safeguarding his heart for as long as he could remember. And what a beautiful creature she was.

He loved Hermione Jane Granger. The realization was fairly overpowering, but not totally unexpected. One of the reasons why he had been so reluctant to take her on as an apprentice was because he had known how easy it would be for him to fall for her. And he had done so, hard.

'Professor... Severus?' Hermione said softly, rousing him from his thoughts.

Severus looked down at her immediately when she said his name timidly. His eyes were intense when they looked down into hers. Hermione looked back up at him with glistening brown eyes, lips parted slightly, breathing somewhat unevenly. Severus felt a desperate desire just to plunge his tongue between those lips and devour every inch of her delicious mouth. But he fought it.

'How do you feel about breakfast in bed?' he asked softly.

'I think we are going to get along better than I thought,' Hermione said mischievously, smirking up at her professor.

Snape smiled back at her just the slightest little bit and clicked his fingers. An elf appeared and looked at them shyly.

'Please have our breakfast brought up here, Jesse,' he said kindly.

The elf nodded and left the room with a pop. Severus wriggled from beneath the witch and placed her gently back onto the bed. He settled on the bed next to her and leaned against the headboard slightly. Their breakfast arrived not long afterwards, and Severus found he was captivated by the way Hermione ate.

It was going to be a very Happy Christmas indeed...

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4th of January... It had been four days since New Year. It had been pleasant enough in the house since Christmas Day, although one thing had changed since then. Snape had not laid a hand on Hermione since their embrace on Christmas. He was sure that if he had her in his arms again, he wouldn't be able to maintain the self-control that he had.

She had almost completely undone him then, and she would most certainly break through next time. After that, he was almost certain that she wouldn't speak to him ever again. He slipped a hand into the pocket of his robes and clasped the small wrapped gift in his hand. Due to her use of the Time-Turner, it was her 19th birthday that day as opposed to when it was supposed to be. It wasn't common knowledge, but in view of the fact that she was legally older, he knew that Hermione had decided to legally alter her birth certificate to reflect her new birthday. Although he was sure that she would be receiving gifts from her friends, he had something special for her also.

And that was how he found himself pacing the dining room before breakfast that morning as he anticipated her arrival at the breakfast table. When she walked in, his breath caught in his throat. She was positively luminous.

'Good morning, Professor!' she said cheerfully, bestowing a radiant smile on him.

'Happy Birthday, Miss Granger,' he replied, holding out the small gift in his hand and smirking at the shocked look on her face.

'Despite popular belief, I am capable of ridiculous inanities,' he snapped defensively. Hermione smiled at that and took the gift from his hand, letting her fingers caress his palm as she accepted it.

Severus felt the brief contact tingle up his arm. She shouldn't have done that. He then turned to watch dutifully as she peeled off the layer of wrapping paper to reveal a silver-dusted box. She opened the lid to find a platinum bracelet with a Celtic knot-shaped clasp and tightly woven belcher links. It was a similar style to the one on the necklace she wore around her neck.

'Thank you,' she said softly. 'Will you put it on for me, please?'

It was the soft please that undid him. He kneeled on the floor next to her chair, plucked the bracelet out of the box, and with a deft flick of his fingers, had it around her wrist and clasped firmly.

'Do you like it?' he asked quietly.

Hermione turned to him and blushed. She brought a hand to his cheek and caressed it ever so lightly. 'I love it, thank you.'

'Shall we have breakfast then?' he asked, pulling his body off the ground and returning to his seat at the table.

Hermione nodded, and they both ate breakfast in silence, until two owls floated through the window. The snowy-white owl that she had long come to know as Harry's owl, Hedwig, landed gracefully before her and let her stroke the feathers, nipping at her fingers affectionately. The other dark-coloured eagle owl that she had more recently come to know as Artemis, the Malfoy owl, also perched itself beside Hedwig and waited to be petted. She took the notes from both owls, who stayed put.

Apparently, they were going to wait for replies. She opened the one from Hedwig first and was delighted to see a note from Harry attached.

Hermione!

Happy 19th Birthday! Sorry I haven't been able to write sooner, but there's more to do at the Burrow than we thought. How are things going with Professor Snape? I hope he's not being too awful to you. I have some great news to tell you, but you'd better read Ginny and Draco's letter before you start wondering what it is!

Love heaps,

Harry

Hermione dropped that letter and immediately grabbed for the other letter, cracking Draco's Slytherin-green seal and chuckling. Trust Draco to be a Slytherin through and through. And that's when it occurred to her that she had been sitting in a room with a Slytherin the entire morning and had hardly said a word to him since the post had arrived. She looked up to see a curious look in Snape's eyes.

'I'll let you know what Draco has to say once I've read it,' she informed Snape quickly, not wanting him to be left in the dark.

Dear Hermione,

How are things with old Uncle Severus?

Hermione snorted when she read that and looked over at Snape. *Uncle Severus, huh?* She decided to file that away and keep it for another time.

Happy 19th Birthday, you old hag! The first week of the holiday with Mother and Father was painful. How have you been? Good, I hope. If I ever hear that Uncle Sev has been giving you a hard time, I'll make sure he winds up with something up his nose.

Hermione laughed out loud at that and had to cover her mouth with her hand to muffle her giggles. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself before returning her eyes to the parchment.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley said that they would be, and I quote, "delighted if Hermione would come for a visit," unquote. So if my sadistic old godfather will let you, come around to the Burrow today so we can give you your real birthday presents. Send your reply back with Artemis if you can!

Love Always,

Draco and Ginny

Hermione handed the letter over to Severus wordlessly and smirked when she saw his expression as he read the note. Old hag? Uncle Sev? Sadistic old godfather? Severus felt Hermione's lingering gaze on him and felt his resolve crumble at her pouting lips.

'Oh alright, you can go,' he said with an exasperated sigh.

Hermione jumped out of her seat and hugged him around the chest briefly before rushing out of the room and, after five minutes, returning with a note for one of the owls to take. The two owls swooped out of the room, and so did Hermione. Severus waited for fifteen minutes before she returned wearing a pair of Muggle jeans, knee-length chocolate brown snow-boots, a cream-colored cashmere sweater, and a brown scarf around her neck, with her hair pulled back in a loose braid.

Hermione felt exhilarated. She hadn't been able to wear her comfy Muggle clothes in such a long time, and it was good to be in them again.

Seeing how happy she was, Severus felt something like a dead weight drop into the pit of his stomach.

'Go now, and I don't want to see you back here until tomorrow morning,' Severus said, as an uncharacteristically kind gesture.

Hermione's eyes went wide. 'I can stay for the night?' she asked in amazement.

'Yes, now off with you,' he said reluctantly.

Hermione went over to him and gave him a swift kiss on the cheek. 'Thank you so much, Professor. This has really made my day,' she said with a smile.

Severus felt his resolve growing weaker by the second. 'Happy Birthday once more, Miss Granger. Enjoy your stay with the Weasleys, and your break. Because as soon as you get back, we have lessons to plan,' he said with just a hint of mischief in his voice.

Hermione laughed lightly and stepped away, dashing out of the room to grab her things. Severus felt the wards shift as she Apparated out of the house, and sat in his chair for ten minutes before it registered in his mind that Hermione was no longer there. He felt a pang of loss when he realized that she would not be returning to him until the next day.

But he knew that this was making her happy. And after all, that was exactly what he wanted her happiness and would do anything to give that to her in the most discreet way possible.

He sighed and settled back in his seat. It was going to be a long twenty-four hours.

Outside, the snow was swirling around and making the garden look like a winter wonderland. It was near midday when Hermione was settled in the sitting room of the Burrow near the fire with her legs tucked beneath her and a small sad smile playing on her lips. She had been fed a second breakfast at the Burrow by Molly Wesley, who claimed that she was 'far too thin,' and not long after, shovelled lunch in front of her. All the while, Harry, Ginny and Draco were laughing at the forced attentions she was receiving for her birthday.

'Is your stomach full to bursting yet, Hermione?' Draco teased mercilessly.

Hermione threw him a rueful look as Harry and Ginny laughed at his comment. 'Molly sure knows how to force-feed a person,' she said simply.

She turned to look at Harry. 'Now, what was it that you were so eager to tell me in your letter, Harry?' she asked seriously, with a knowing smile on her face. Somehow, she knew Harry was going to tell her about a new girlfriend. It was one of the only things that ever made him perk up like he was then.

'Well, you see, Luna and I sort of got together when she came to the Burrow for a couple of days last week to visit Ginny...' Harry said, trailing his sentence off.

Hermione put a hand on his forearm and smiled. 'It's alright, Harry. I already knew that you had a thing for Luna. It was bound to happen some time,' she said, making the raven-haired boy blush.

'Oh.'

By this point, Ginny and Draco had become absorbed in each other and had moved to the other side of the room where they were snuggled together on the other couch in front of the fire. They were just far enough away to not be able to catch their conversation. Harry was looking at her meaningfully with his mouth quirked in a smile.

'Hermione, is there something you'd like to tell me?' Harry asked seriously.

Hermione sighed. She knew it had been coming. 'I met someone; you don't know him, well at least not like I do. But I have come to like him a lot,' she replied with an air of frustration. 'It's hard to explain exactly what I feel.'

'Say no more, 'Mione,' he said quietly, holding up a hand. 'I've had a pretty good idea that this has been coming for a long time now. Actually, I'm surprised that it's taken this long for you to realize it. I'm happy to accept this if he makes you happy.'

Hermione looked at her best friend of seven years for a moment and smiled. She threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. 'Thank you, Harry. It was going to be hard enough for me to tell you all, but you've made it so much easier,' she whispered.

'It's alright, 'Mione. I figured that he was the one who gave you that necklace and the bracelet?' he asked curiously.

Hermione released Harry and nodded. 'He can be very nice and docile sometimes, but he is still the snarky, taciturn bastard that we all know. But I love him for all of those things anyway. I love him the way he is,' she said, blushing a little at revealing her feelings to someone so openly.

Harry nodded understandingly. 'I know how you feel. I love Luna the way she is, with all of her quirks, and she loves me for me not for my status,' he admitted.

'Oh, Harry!' she exclaimed before enveloping him in a tight hug again.

Harry patted her back tenderly and waited for her to regain her composure. After a moment, Harry spoke up again. 'So does he like you?' he asked carefully.

At that, Hermione gave a great heaving sob and whimpered into his shirt. She felt the tears stinging her eyes. He didn't like her. He even said as much to her last time she had asked. He was just being nice to her because he needed her. He was using her. But she was using him too. It just hurt a lot more to have to think about it.

'No, Harry. I don't really think he likes me that much,' she answered through her tears. She couldn't explain to him anything. He trusted her to keep that between them. 'I think he respects me to an extent, but other than that, I am merely an annoying pest to him.'

'You're not an annoying pest, Hermione,' Harry cooed softly. 'Any guy would be nuts not to fall head over heels for you. The only reason why I never have is because you're like family to me. You're the only family I have.'

'You're the only family I have too!' she cried.

Hermione knew she was being pathetic. More than pathetic actually. She was practically wallowing in the maudlin self-pity. She pulled herself together as quickly as she could and broke away from Harry, brushing the tears away furiously.

She could never be worthy of Snape if she snivelled around like that. 'Sorry about that, Harry, my emotions are just running a little high lately. I don't usually break down like that.' She apologized.

Harry nodded. He agreed with her on that point. Hermione Granger was never emotional in front of her friends or anyone for that matter. Come to think of it, Harry was sure that he hadn't seen her like that since their fourth year after the Yule Ball. Since that night, it was hard to get her to display emotions that well at all. 'Don't worry about it, 'Mione. Just try and perk up. Things will be fine in the end.' Harry hurried to reassure her.

Honestly, Harry really hated seeing his best friend like that. Oddly enough, they had only grown closer since her and Ron's messy break-up four months earlier. Ron had stuck with Dean and Seamus after that and had moved on from Hermione. He was dating a Ravenclaw girl named Daphne Greengrass, but still didn't see fit to apologize to any of them for overreacting and storming off.

Harry knew that all of it was playing on Hermione's nerves because she had always hated the arguments between all of them, especially in their earlier years at Hogwarts. Back then, she had been really emotional about it, but now, she was subtle about her unhappiness.

'Let's leave the love-birds and go for a walk, huh?' Harry suggested. 'Maybe we can find the twins and take them on with a game of Quidditch, hmmm?'

Hermione laughed and nodded, getting out of the seat and following Harry out of the house through the back door. They found the twins over by the garden shed, and all of them grabbed a broom and a Quaffle and headed to the Weasleys' orchard. Hermione and Harry took on Fred and George, and in the end they tied.

Hermione had become confident in her flying abilities more recently and played a very good keeper, as did George, while Harry and Fred chased each other around, trying to knock each other off their brooms and score goals. Finally, when all of them were on the ground, the snow wars began. Hermione built a great fort for her and Harry with a wave of her hand while George and Fred made a fortress that was more like a mountain of snow, and they flung snow balls all over the place.

When they were all shaking, wet and extremely cold, Harry picked up his broom and lifted Hermione's thin frame into his arms and carried her into the house chivalrously. When he deposited her on the floor in the kitchen, he looked at her with deep concern.

'Mione, Mrs. Weasley was right. You are way too thin,' he commented seriously.

'It's just because I get too busy to eat sometimes. If I promise to take care of myself better, will you get off my case?' she asked defensively.

Harry stuck his hand out and shook hers. 'Deal. Now get upstairs and get warm. I'll tell Ginny to get you some dry clothes to wear.'

When she was almost at the stairs Harry called out to her again. 'When will you be going, by the way?' he asked.

'Professor Snape said that he didn't want to see me back at his house until tomorrow morning,' she called down the stairs.

'So the great git does have a soul,' Harry joked, laughing.

Hermione's tinkling laughter floated down the stairs as she mounted them to find Ginny's room and then go for a long, hot shower.

She hummed in contentment. Tomorrow could wait until then...

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A/N Yes, I do realize I got the birthday mixed-up. My apologies, but just run with it anyway.

Part Six

Chapter 6 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

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Kudos go to WriterMerrin for beta-ing this for me.

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Part Six

Of her own initiative entirely, Hermione had slipped quietly into Snape's office in the morning and placed the gift on his desk with a small note attached. She knew it wasn't really necessary, but it would be nice if at least one person acknowledged his birthday. Actually, she rather hoped he would like the crystal-topped, glass Potions vials she had gotten him. The school term had begun a mere two days beforehand, and she and Snape had been back at the castle since the sixth.

She sat at Snape's desk in the dungeon classroom, watching carefully as her seventh-year class brewed quietly. It was the ninth of January, and on top of it all, it was a damned Thursday. What a day to have a birthday! She saw Harry and Draco working with each other quietly, chopping the ingredients with more efficiency than they had ever had while Snape was lurking over their shoulders in his most intimidating fashion.

She tore her eyes away from them and looked to where Ron and Neville were getting along rather well with each other. They had both improved so much. She had even noticed that Ron didn't seem as hostile around her as he had only two months before. It was mad to think that, only two and a half months before, he had hated her.

She pulled her father's old pocket-watch out of her robes and checked the time. There was still a whole hour until she could release them from their last class of the day. She sighed heavily and bent over her fourth-years' essays. So far, they were average, but at least they were passing. At that moment, the door opened and an impassive-looking Snape stood in the doorway, looking at her with cold eyes. Ah! How she had missed those eyes for the last few days. He had been fervently ignoring her wherever he could.

'Professor Snape, can I help you?' she asked him sweetly.

'May I see you in my office, immediately, madam?' he said through gritted teeth.

Hermione blanched. His tone suggested he was not happy at all. She got up from the chair immediately and went towards the door.

'Certainly.' She turned to address the class. 'I will return promptly; continue your work in silence, and do not blow anything up,' she warned seriously.

Before she could leave completely, Harry and Draco both gave her the most fleeting of sympathetic glances. She mouthed a quick 'Thank you' to them both and followed Snape next door.

Once the door was closed and a silencing ward was erected, Snape turned to face her, holding out the gift she had gotten him for his birthday. 'What exactly is the meaning of this, Miss Granger?' he demanded.

Hermione almost laughed out loud. And she was frantically thinking that it was something serious. She looked up at him with a smile.

'That, my dear Professor, is what most like to call a birthday gift,' she answered in an amused tone.

He raised a dark eyebrow at her and made a noise in the back of his throat. 'And what, pray tell, have I ever done for you that has prompted such a gift from you?' he asked stiffly.

'Well, aside from the fact that you unselfishly accepted me as your apprentice, I would say that risking one's neck for the sake of a few undeserving people would certainly do it. You were so kind to me over the Christmas holidays also. But that is not why I gave you the gift,' she said flatly. 'I gave it to you because it's your birthday. I give gifts to my friends on their birthdays.'

Snape looked shocked at her confession. 'Friend?' he asked thoughtfully.

Hermione nodded. 'Of course you are my friend. I respect you, I enjoy our conversations, and I enjoy your company... I think that classifies you as a friend,' she replied.

Severus could only nod as he stood in the presence of the amazing witch in front of him. How did she manage to do it? Every time she would do something else wonderful and amaze him even more, he felt his admiration, his attraction for her only heighten. He knew that the holidays had made him go soft, but now it was becoming more than apparent. It was not a good thing. He couldn't have feelings for her; it was unacceptable.

'Professor, if that is all, I have a class to teach,' she piped, interrupting his thoughts.

He looked at her and gave himself a mental shake. 'Of course, Miss Granger, go teach those insolent delinquents,' he said sarcastically.

She laughed and went to the door, taking down the wards and unlocking it. He watched her leave the room, and then, on impulse, walked out after her and caught her arm.

'Thank you, Miss Granger,' he said quietly, looking into her coffee-colored eyes.

'It was my pleasure, Professor,' she replied, slowly tugging her arm from his hold and slipping back into the classroom.

Severus walked himself back to his office and sat at the desk, examining the beautifully hand-blown glass vials in front of him. Each had a different jewel as part of the stopper, and they glistened quite nicely in the light. He shook his head and left the office. He couldn't just sit there and stare at them for the next hour.

Miss Hermione Granger was proving to be harder to ignore than he had assumed. He had done it so well for six years; what was different this time? Well, she wasn't just some silly little know-it-all, for one. She was a woman. A beautiful, intelligent, accomplished witch that had so much promise. Admittedly, he had accepted that he cared for her the night he had returned from the Death Eater meeting at Halloween.

Severus decided to go to the only place where nobody but Hermione would ever be able to find him. The quiet place by the lake had become her thinking spot as much as his own in the last month. She frequented there even more than he did if it were possible. But he needed the space now.

The gift had been most unexpected, especially from her. It was a beautiful gift, something both nice to look at, as well as being practical. Hermione was very sharp that way, though. She was good at giving gifts because she got something that would both be loved and serve a useful purpose. He had seen the same thing when she bought gifts for her own friends.

'I thought you'd be out here,' a soft voice cut across his thoughts.

Severus turned his head just a little and caught sight of Hermione standing before him with her hand at the clasp of her cloak as she unfastened it and sat next to him. He nodded and faced the lake once more.

'It's been a while since I've sat here with you, Professor,' she commented offhandedly, discarding her robe in a neat pile beside her.

'So it seems.'

'Are you alright?' she asked kindly.

'Miss Granger, why should that concern you?' he asked coldly. 'Wait, don't answer. Is it because I am your so-called friend?'

'Well, yes, if you must know,' she said a little tersely.

Severus heard the change in her tone of voice. It would not be good if he wound her up too much, so he relented. He turned to her, gathered the small witch up into his arms and sighed in contentment. Yes. He liked this girl very much.

'Thank you for the gift, Hermione,' he said quietly.

Hermione was caught a little off-guard by this but relaxed in his arms anyway. She snuggled into his chest and breathed in his spicy, herbal scent, and felt a little breathless just in his arms. 'I'm beginning to enjoy this very much,' she sighed, wondering if he had heard her.

He said nothing, so she assumed he hadn't, and went on just resting in his arms, offering him that small comfort and closing her eyes. Severus let his arms tighten around her a little. He had heard the whispered words and felt a small rush of joy rush through him. She wanted to be there in his arms, unlike any other woman he had ever encountered; she wanted to hold him.

He should have thought about letting her go then, but didn't; he just relaxed as their bodies melted together. 'Thank you, Hermione,' he said quietly.

'I don't mind, Professor,' she replied, wishing she could call him Severus but not wanting to risk losing this closeness. She closed her eyes tighter, trying to fight the tears that were welling up in her eyes at the tenderness this man showed to her sometimes. 'I don't mind at all,' she found herself repeating.

Neither of them spoke after her final words that afternoon...

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10th of January... Severus sighed deeply. The students had already returned to the godforsaken castle for a few days now, and the new school term had well and truly begun. He was wishing that it was still holidays, and was beginning to become a little concerned by the fact that he had not been summoned to yet another Death Eater meeting. It was not that he minded not being there and constantly having hexes fired at him, it was just that it was unusual for the Dark Lord to remain dormant for so long.

He rubbed his left forearm unconsciously as he sat at the staff table, contemplating his breakfast. There was nothing tingling or burning, no intrusions into his mind from some deserted moor, and not one single Death Eater had called for him to attend their Christmas or New Years "celebrations."

Actually, he had been left in peace. He decided then that he would have to see Albus about making up some hooley to feed the Dark Lord at the next meeting so that he remained in good favor with the cruel bastard.

He looked along the table at the Headmaster as he chatted to Professor Sprout on his other side, and saw the general good humor of his colleagues. He turned to the other side and saw that Hermione was engaged in conversation with the DADA professor, Allegra Cole. She had been the longest serving DADA professor at Hogwarts, remaining there for a record of almost two years.

He recalled disliking the woman initially, but eventually warming up to her. She was a good five years younger than he was, and he vaguely remembered her being a Ravenclaw third year while he was in his final year. She was a clever witch, no doubt, but still seemed to lack that certain glowing quality with which a certain other beautiful witch whom he was acquainted radiated.

'Isn't that right, Professor Snape?' a soft purring voice interrupted his thoughts as he stared absently at the students in the Great Hall.

Severus snapped his head around to face Hermione and Allegra, who were now looking at him expectantly. 'Pardon, but I do not believe that I am quite sure as to what I am supposed to be agreeing to,' he apologized formally.

'Never mind, Severus,' Allegra said with a small smile.

Hermione giggled a little and shook her head at him, and Allegra joined her with a seductive laugh. Severus ducked his head a little, before realizing that he had even performed such a self-conscious motion, and sat up stiffly in his chair. He picked up his fork and began attempting to shovel food into his mouth. He lost his appetite quickly and excused himself from the table, forgetting his copy of the *Prophet* and swirling out through the staff door. Hermione watched him leave with mild concern, but was careful to school her face to indifference as Professor Cole glanced out after him too. She looked at her food and quickly finished off her oats and drank her pumpkin juice. She nodded a quick goodbye to Allegra and grabbed two steaming mugs of coffee, putting a stasis on Snape's and walking at a leisurely pace down to Snape's office.

She reached the door and knocked, bumping it open a little more with her hip and walking through it. She deposited the mug of coffee in front of Snape and took the stasis off it before perching herself on the edge of his desk and sipping at her own mug. She saw him scribbling furiously at a piece of parchment and became intrigued.

'What are you working on?' she asked hopefully. Perhaps he would answer her.

'Nothing of great importance,' he answered dismissively. He really didn't want to answer her, so he picked up his notes for Dumbledore and deposited them in one of the drawers of his desk. 'Don't you have a class soon?'

Hermione jumped up from the desk hastily, putting her mug down on his desk.

'Thank you for reminding me!' she called back to him as she hurried to her first lesson.

She bustled past her fifth-years hurriedly, arms piled with their marked essays, and opened the classroom door for them to enter. She handed out their graded papers at the beginning of class and assigned them their potion for the day. She sat out the entire, painstakingly boring lesson and released the students five minutes early from their double period.

Sighing, Hermione walked her way towards Snape's office, hoping that he would have a headache potion handy in his stores, and made her way through the door without thinking to knock. What she saw both shocked her and made the tears prickle in her eyes.

She watched faintly at Allegra Cole who had Snape pinned to his desk, hands in his hair, and her mouth pressed to his, hungrily devouring his lips. She gasped, which made Allegra cease the activity and spin around to look at her, eyes dilated and lips puffy from kissing.

'I'm so sorry...' Hermione stammered, the tears threatening to break from her eyes at any moment. She turned away back toward the door and blinked, letting the tears fall, then ran from the office.

She ran all the way to her chambers and slammed her back against the wall to stabilize herself as she changed the password to Hellebore, then rushed through the opening made by the portrait. She slumped against the wall just inside the portrait hole and sobbed her heart out. She felt her chest ache and constrict, fighting to breathe, wishing that what she had just witnessed had been an illusion.

'It wasn't real. It was not real. That was not real!' she sobbed to herself over and over again.

She balled her fists and beat them against the ground fruitlessly. How could she have been so stupid? What could Snape possibly have seen in her when there was an attractive, older, and obviously more intelligent and intellectually stimulating witch around? She was definitely more curvaceous than she was, and had silky, straight blonde hair. And she was closer to his age.

She cried everything out of her system and didn't budge from the room for nearly an hour, until she heard frantic knocking on the portrait.

'Hermione, let me in! It's Harry!' yelled her best friend through the portrait.

Hermione stood up and wiped her tears off onto a handkerchief, composing herself a little before opening the portrait to him. 'What do you want, Harry?' she asked with a strained voice.

Harry stood there, taking in Hermione's face, red from crying, and saw the tears still falling even though she wasn't making a sound. He held his arms out to her, and she ran straight into them, letting out the most heart-wrenching sob that Harry had ever heard. He gathered her into his arms tightly and just stood there, letting his best friend cry on his shoulder.

He felt every tear, heard every cry, and felt every painful shudder or jerk that her body gave as she cried her heart out. After a while, Harry led her over to her chaise and sat her down, conjuring a box of tissues and settling it next to her. 'Hermione, Professor Snape sent me to look for you. You have missed teaching two classes now, and he was getting worried about you,' he said carefully.

Hermione shot Harry a rueful look. 'He's not worried about me, Harry. He doesn't even like me one iota. All he cares about is me teaching his classes so he can go and have a great snogging session with his blonde tart!' she snapped angrily.

'You know that's not true, Hermione,' Harry said rationally.

'Of course it's bloody true; I saw it with my own, perfectly clear eyes! It couldn't have been clearer to me exactly what he was doing!' she yelled.

Harry looked down at her. Snape had come looking for him while he was in the middle of Charms. He'd had a wild look about him, and his eyes had been fierce. He didn't know why, but Harry just knew that he was sincerely worried about Hermione. And now he knew why.

'Hermione, Professor Snape does not like Professor Cole. He likes you. I saw it when he came to get me. He was nearly out of his mind with worry. He sat at the opposite side of the table from Cole at lunch, and he hasn't spoken to her the whole day,' Harry reasoned.

'I wish that I could believe you, Harry. But I can't get the image of Allegra-fucking-Cole kissing him out of my head. It was right there in front of me,' she said quietly.

Harry knew it was happening. Hermione would get all hysterical, and then she would go quiet, and in the end, she would become like a living statue. Harry looked down at his friend and sighed.

'It will work out in the end, Hermione...'

--

The potion made sharp hissing noises as it bubbled and frothed away. It was only simmering, but it felt like it was boiling over. Severus glanced at it and frowned. That potion had many similar characteristics to what had happened in his office almost three weeks before with Allegra Cole and his Hermione. He growled angrily under his breath at the thought.

That morning in his office had hit him hard, like a brick to the gut, and what made it worse was that Hermione was avoiding him at all costs. He was certain it had everything to do with Professor Cole, but he just couldn't figure out what it could possibly be. After all, he didn't know the mind of a female.

He waved his hand over the flame beneath his cauldron and sighed. The flame reduced, and the potion was simmered quietly. He wouldn't have to hear it, and therefore, would not be reminded of the stupid things he had done. His first mistake was allowing Allegra Cole into his office. His second was offering her something to drink, although he did so with a grudging voice. And the third was letting her pin him against a desk.

He had no idea that such a small witch would be capable of such a feat, and didn't particularly want to hurt a woman. He would not turn into his father. While he was having piteous thoughts, a voice broke through it rudely.

'Professor Snape, may I come in?' Harry asked carefully.

Severus looked up and saw the second most annoying part of his very existence. 'What do you want, Potter?' he asked roughly, trying to ignore him but failing.

'I came to talk to you about things... on a more... personal level,' Harry replied, looking the cold man in the eye hard with his defensive-looking green ones.

Severus sighed inwardly. Here it goes again. 'What?' he barked sharply.

'Professor, I need to ask you what your intentions towards Hermione are. And please don't tell me that it's none of my business, because it is. Hermione is the closest thing to family that I have left. She is my sister in every way except for blood. I am responsible for making sure that she never gets hurt,' Harry said seriously.

Snape snorted at his Gryffindor chivalry. He was going to take care of his sister? Why would he do that? 'Mr. Potter, I assume that everything that is said in this office will remain here, am I correct?' he asked cautiously.

Harry nodded. 'You have my word.'

'Very well then, I shall tell you exactly what happened, and then my feelings towards the incident,' he began effortlessly. 'That morning at breakfast, I noticed that Professor Cole was paying particular notice to me, and I left the meal early feeling quite uneasy...'

Harry nodded and gestured for him to continue.

'... She came down to my office just before I could leave to watch Miss Granger teach. I offered her something to drink, and when I had my back turned, she maneuvered around me and pinned me to the table before kissing me,' he spat out as if it were a bad taste in his mouth.

'I believe you, sir,' Harry said supportively.

'Well, at least you do. However, my final answer to your question is that I really do have strong feelings of admiration, respect and love for Madame Apprentice,' Snape said in a low growl.

Harry looked up at Snape in surprise. He was expecting some strange cover-up story where he was the victim alone to the particular woman's charms, but instead, got a completely truthful, unedited version of events from Snape. He loved Hermione, and that was good enough for him. She needed to be loved.

'I have one final question to you, sir,' Harry continues softly. 'What are your feelings about Professor Cole?'

Severus gave him both a disgusted and annoyed look. 'That woman infuriates me. She has nothing I desire.'

That was good enough for Harry as well. He nodded and walked to the door of the office. 'Thank you for clearing all of this up for me, Professor,' he said. 'Treat her right.'

Harry left swiftly through the door afterwards, leaving Snape alone to contemplate his thoughts. What on earth had driven him to confess his feelings to the boy wonder? He looked at his desk and sneered. He would need to redecorate his office now. Everything in there held only grave memories.

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As he sat in his office, flicking through a Potions journal, Severus heard a knock on the door before Allegra Cole let herself in. She walked over to the desk and sat down on the chair in front of him. He was trapped into civilized conversation now.

'Professor, to what do I owe this honor?' he asked sarcastically.

'I merely wanted to discuss some things with you, Severus,' she said innocently, batting her eyelashes at him seductively.

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'What could you possibly want to discuss with me?' he asked, standing and moving to his cabinet. 'Tea?'

'Yes, that would be lovely,' she answered, standing from the chair and taking a look about the room.

Snape watched from the corner of his eye in silence and studied the witch as she picked up his books, twirled his quill between her fingers, and looked around his ordered office. He made the tea as quickly as he could and took it around to sit on the side that she was on. He spun around, only to be immediately pinned to the desk.

'I came here for you, Severus,' she whispered into his ear before attacking his lips with her own.

Snape kept his mouth firmly shut to her probing tongue and felt a little ill at her attentions. He tried to push her away. And that was when he heard the muffled gasp. His eyes snapped to the door, and Allegra stopped kissing him.

Hermione stammered, 'I I'm so sorry,' before fleeing the room with tears in her eyes.

Severus shoved the blonde witch away roughly, and walked around to the other side of the desk to put distance between them. 'Professor Cole, I would appreciate it very much, if you did not return to my office or my classroom again,' he snapped at her, wiping his mouth with a clean white handkerchief.

Allegra glared at him for a moment. 'Why are you sending me away? I thought that you of all people would be up for some good shagging,' she said suggestively.

Severus looked at her with disgust. 'I am not, nor will I ever be, anybody's shag horse, Professor. Now kindly leave my office, and you would do well to remember to keep your distance from me. I am not a nice man, and I will not hesitate to hurt you next time you attempt something as completely pathetic as that,' he said dismissively.

The angry blonde witch turned on her heels and left the room in a huff.

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Severus thumped his hand on the desk angrily and sighed. That stupid cow had caused him more trouble than she was worth. He now had a completely insufferable Potions Apprentice, her best friend hanging around and asking inane questions, and a pathetic witch lusting after him.

Somehow, he had lost the attention of the only woman in his adult life he had ever had an interest in, gained the trust and support of her friend, and had yet another witch who would most likely seek out her revenge for his rejection of her one day. Everything seemed to be terribly wrong.

He looked up at the second knock on his door that morning and saw his apprentice standing stiffly in the doorway.

'Can I help you, Miss Granger?' he asked softly.

'Yes, actually, I was wondering if you could take my fifth-years today. I have an important meeting with the Headmaster...' she began, but he held up his left hand to silence her.

Just as he was about to speak, he felt a burning sensation rip through his arm, and he grabbed it with his free hand, moaning with the pain. 'Miss Granger, I'm afraid that something has come up, and I must leave immediately. I'm sure Albus will let you reschedule the meeting, but for now, you will be taking my classes also,' he said through gritted teeth.

With that being said, he fled from the castle, wrapped in his Death Eater robes.

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A/N - Just picking up this story because I don't like things to be left incomplete. I have a new fic in the works which will be posted as soon as it has reached completion.

Thanks for reading - this is not my best work by a long shot. Please bear in mind that this was written at least 4 years ago.

Part Seven

Chapter 7 of 7

At the urging of Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape takes on Hermione Granger as his apprentice shortly after the beginning of her Seventh year. After completing her very rushed N.E.W.Ts, ending a relationship, making a friend, gaining an enemy, and battling everything Snape could throw at her, what else is left?

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

Many thanks to WriterMerrin for trying to make this story suitable for the public eye. Anything you dislike about it can be automatically blamed on my 18 year old self.

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Part Seven

This time it was a house. It was a rather large and expensive one that was most likely courtesy of one Lucius Malfoy. The odd thing about it, though, was that Severus couldn't see the Dark Lord anywhere. Lowering his mask from his face, he went directly to his blond former schoolmate and gave him a questioning look.

'Where is our Master, Lucius?' he demanded roughly.

'He couldn't attend. He said he was feeling a bit under the weather today, so he left orders with me to ensure that everyone enjoyed the afternoon,' he said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

'What kind of fun are we talking about, old friend?' he asked curiously.

'Avery and Lestrange have gone to round up some Muggles for us. Entertainments should last us well through the night,' he said carelessly.

Severus cringed inwardly at Malfoy's crude recital of the afternoon activities. He couldn't do it this time. He just couldn't. He looked at Lucius square in his empty silver eyes and frowned. 'I cannot stay here for this, man. I have classes to teach this afternoon. People will begin to wonder where the hell I am. You will have to take part in the festivities without me,' he reasoned.

'Severus, you are under obligation to kill at least one of the Muggles. As soon as Bella and Theodore arrive, you can make your kill and go,' Malfoy drawled.

'I'm afraid that is not acceptable. I have been gone from Hogwarts for almost an hour now; I can not stay away any longer. Now, punish me for neglecting my duty, and send me on my way,' Severus said with an exasperated groan.

'Very well, old friend,' Malfoy said with a sigh. '*Crucio!*'

Severus fell to the ground and felt the pain coursing through him. After a few minutes, someone began to kick him in the ribs, and one even landed a blow to his nose, which broke with a disgusting crunch. He was placed under the spell for a good thirty minutes, and when he was finally released, he coughed out a heap of blood and stood on shaking legs.

His body was shaking and convulsing with pain, yet he stood rigidly all the same and nursed his broken nose in one hand and his broken ribs in the other. He Apparated into the Forbidden Forest and fell to the ground in a messy heap. His body convulsed yet again, and the pain was worse with all of the broken bones. Not many of the other Death Eaters, including Lucius, could ever last through that kind of torture. He was stronger than most of them. He would survive it.

He waited for a moment until the tremors became less intense and frequent, managing to haul himself into a sitting position against a tree. One step at a time... It was probably the worst he had been beaten in quite a long time. He pressed his wand to his nose and muttered a healing charm, feeling it hurt for a brief moment before the blood stopped flowing and the bones and cartilage moved back into their regular position.

Eventually, he managed to stand and stumble his way towards his hidden door, crash through into the castle, and somehow find his office. He threw himself into his chair and summoned an elf.

'What can I do for you, sir?' asked the elf timidly.

'Go to the classroom next door. Summon Madame Apprentice to me, please,' he rasped painfully, straining to breathe under the pain of his broken ribs.

The elf popped out of the room, and he settled down in the chair to find a position that was slightly more comfortable to him than the way that he was. He heard the door open and saw Hermione slip into the room and gasp when she saw his state. She closed the door and put locking and silencing charms on it, and rushed immediately to him. By then, the convulsing had started again and he was shaking in the chair.

Oh, sweet Merlin, what happened?' she asked faintly, tugging the Death Eater robes off him quickly before rushing to the potions cabinet and retrieving the Cruciatus Potion. She yanked the stopper off it roughly and tipped it down his throat, massaging his neck muscles to make him swallow it properly through his spasms.

Snape coughed up a lot of blood after swallowing and slumped into the seat. 'Miss Granger, would you mind terribly if I asked you to heal my broken ribs?' he asked quietly.

'Of course not,' she replied, complying with his request straight away.

Severus watched her as she ran her wand over his chest, and he felt the bones knitting themselves back into place beneath his shirt. He studied her posture and saw that she was rigid with shock, almost, and saw the concern in her eyes. She was still mad at him, no doubt, but somehow, seeing him wounded so badly had an affect on her sensibilities. When she was done, he took her hand in his gently and closed his eyes.

'Thank you, Hermione,' he said quietly.

He pulled her hand up to rest over his chest, right above where his heart was beating furiously. He knew that she could feel his heart pounding beneath her hand. But he wanted her to feel that. He wanted her to know what she did to him. 'Hermione, can you feel that?' he asked in a strangled voice.

'Yes,' she said breathlessly.

'Do you know what it means?' he asked, rubbing small circles over the back of her hand. 'Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?'

'I don't know,' she admitted, letting her other hand travel up his chest to cup his face gently in it. She brushed her thumb across his bloodied cheek, and he heard the soft sob escape her throat. 'Who did this to you?'

'Lucius, among others,' he replied. 'I couldn't fulfill my duties today. I asked to return to Hogwarts. There was going to be a mass Muggle slaughter at this so-called party.'

'Oh Gods, how on earth are you still living?' she asked softly, searching his tired face for an answer.

'Sheer dumb luck,' he replied, imitating what Minerva had once stated to the Gryffindor three after their run-in with the troll in their first year.

Hermione looked at her pocket watch quickly and pulled away from him. 'You need to get some rest, and I have to go back to teaching my class for the next hour. Go to your chambers and take a Dreamless Sleep,' she suggested thoughtfully.

Severus nodded and stood, and suddenly he realized something that he should have known all along. He grabbed Hermione's hand before she could leave, and held her still. 'Hermione, I don't have any feelings for Professor Cole. She tried but I shoved her away and told her never to return. I would never abuse your trust that way,' he said softly.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she nodded and pulled her arm away from him, then went back to her class. Severus, feeling slightly better, did as she said and went to his chambers. He took a hot shower and lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, not bothering with the Dreamless Sleep, and dozed for a while.

About an hour and a half later, he heard the door to his bedroom open, somewhere in his semi-sleeping state, and his eyes flickered open. He thought he might as well wake up; Albus would be expecting a report soon anyway.

He heard the bedroom door open and soon after felt the mattress dip a little on one side and rolled over to see Hermione looking down at him with tear-filled eyes.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said softly, reaching up a hand to brush away the tear that had begun to travel down her cheek.

'I forgive you,' she replied, touching his now-clean cheek with her hand lightly.

'I don't deserve your forgiveness,' he said seriously.

Hermione moved closer and leaned forwards, brushing her lips over his tenderly. He pressed his mouth back against hers more firmly and drew her closer with his arms now around her waist. She moaned softly when his tongue began to trace her lips before it pressed against them, begging entrance.

Severus only pulled back when the need for oxygen became paramount, and they were both panting heavily, lips swollen from their heated kisses. By this point, Hermione was resting on top of him, forehead pressed to his and hands rested on his chest as his arms wrapped around her.

'You won't change your mind about us, will you Severus?' she asked unsurely.

Snape shook his head firmly. 'Not this time.'

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The silvery orb floated in the dark sky above the grounds of Hogwarts. Severus sat with Hermione between his legs, arms wrapped firmly around her petite waist, and chin resting on the crown of her head.

She pressed her back into his chest and rested her head back on his shoulder slightly and hummed in contentment. It had been an extremely tense week after Severus had returned from the Malfoys' celebrations; although, with Hermione around, it all became a little more bearable. Severus and Hermione had come to a compromise and decided it was best if they kept their relationship a secret for the time-being.

'You're shivering, Hermione,' Severus noted softly.

'Hmmm, I'm a bit cold,' she replied sleepily. It was Friday, finally, and she had a perfectly relevant excuse to be so tired. It had been a long week for everyone.

Severus opened his cloak and drew her into it, wrapping both the cloak and his arms back around her and pulling her closer, if it were possible. To anyone who saw them, this would have looked extremely romantic or sweet, but if they were to take a second look, they would probably faint from seeing Professor Snape, of all people, hugging Hermione Granger under the stars.

Severus was not usually an openly demonstrative person, but he felt that he somehow owed Hermione the intimacy for being there for him whenever he was tempted to do something irrational. Besides, he liked to be able to show her how much he cared for her without actually having to say it.

'Better?' he asked quietly.

'Hmmm, yes, much better,' she answered, turning a little in his arms to give him a brief peck on the cheek.

They hadn't been able to spend any spare time together during their first few days as a "couple" because of all of the Potions work they had to catch up on from the time when she had been ignoring him. Fortunately, it didn't take long for them to complete, but at the end of it, both were completely beat.

'I think it would be as appropriate a time as any to let Mr. Potter know about our... changed dynamics,' Severus said offhandedly.

'Why does Harry need to know?' Hermione questioned.

'Because he saw fit to give me the over-protective brother speech on how to treat you, my dear, and because he is aware of both of our feelings regarding... us,' he replied quickly.

Hermione let out a small giggle before promptly beginning to laugh properly, the vibrations buzzing against Snape's chest. 'He did that?' she asked in between gasps and giggles. Severus nodded, and she doubled over with laughter again. 'Imagine, scary Professor Snape being given "the talk" by one of his own students, and Harry Potter, his greatest foe, no less,' she laughed.

'Miss Granger, I would appreciate it if you would cease destroying what little there is left of my pride. You had better not start broadcasting that around the school, or I could become a very difficult man to be around,' he said smarmily.

'Hmmm, and as if you weren't enough of a grump already,' she retorted wittily.

'That'll be enough out of you, Madame,' he said, hugging her around the middle tighter and kissing the top of her head.

'Alright, grumpy, let's go inside,' she said with a cheeky grin.

'Agreed, you'll catch your death in this cold,' he agreed hastily, slipping out from behind her and standing up. 'Coming?' he asked, holding a hand out to her.

Hermione took his hand and allowed him to pull her smoothly from the ground. She slipped her hand into the crook made by his elbow, and together they made their way back to the castle. Once inside, Severus threw his damp cloak onto the chair in his office near the fire to let it dry and went back to his chambers to find Hermione flicking through the books on one of his many shelves.

'Find anything you particularly like?' he asked, coming up behind her and resting a careless hand on her jutting hip.

'Perhaps,' she answered mischievously, spinning around to wrap her arms around Snape, the book lying all but forgotten on the shelf. 'But it is not exactly a book.'

'Is that so?' he asked in a low growling voice. 'Perhaps you would like to enlighten me?' he suggested, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her flush against him.

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed a little, and she took a shaky breath as she felt the thrill of emotions running through her the way that it always did when she was so close to him. 'Well, some would say he was pale and brooding,' she started, kissing one of his cheeks. 'But I like to think of him as mysterious and brilliantly dark,' she continued, brushing a kiss over the other cheek.

'I know that most question his temperament,' she said quietly, kissing one corner of his mouth. 'But I like that. He is always good for spurring on an argument, and I am exhilarated by him.' She then placed a kiss to the other corner of his mouth. 'And of course, he is the only man I have ever truly loved,' she finished, before pressing her lips to his hungrily.

Severus responded in kind, kissing her back with fervor to rival all. His tongue swept into her mouth and tasted every sweet part of it, like a conquering general on a battlefield, taking every advantage and going home victorious.

She moaned, and he pulled away. 'Hermione, we have to stop,' he said breathlessly.

'Stop what, Severus?' she asked, giving him a sultry smile.

'You know very well what. If we don't stop now, I will take you right here on the oriental rug in front of the fire,' he reasoned.

'And that is a bad thing because...' she asked, running her hands over his shoulders.

'Because you are my apprentice and have been left in my care. And because I have done too many terrible things to people in my entire life, and ruining your chances of settling down and having a reasonable marriage is not a mistake I am about to make,' he said firmly.

Hermione sighed and looked up into his obsidian eyes. 'Don't be daft, Severus. You're the only man I ever want to marry,' she replied seriously, emphasizing her point by pressing herself against him closer.

Severus was dumbfounded to say the very least. The woman standing in front of him, looking up at him with expectant brown eyes, the only woman he could ever picture a life with, admitted to wanting him and only him for the rest of her life also. 'You wish me for a husband?' he asked quietly, voice filled with wonder.

'Only you,' she breathed.

'Will you have me, then?' he asked seriously. 'Will you have me as your husband and promise to be my wife?'

'Yes.'

That was all he needed. He kissed her slowly, tenderly, and with all of the love he had in him. That was a kiss of promise. Not only for her, but for him as well. 'Then, I suppose we'd better get organized,' he growled into her ear when he pulled away.

'Organized for what exactly, dear?' she asked, feeling like Molly Weasley for calling him that.

'Well, you just agreed to be my wife, and I will not wait to get married to you. I want you bound to me as soon as possible, which means that we will have to find a person each to stand as witnesses to our marriage. We can ask Dumbledore to perform the private ceremony,' he answered as if the answer were so obvious.

'You want to get married this weekend?' she asked unsurely.

'Yes.'

'Well, I guess I can't argue with that,' she replied with a giggle and hugged Severus close. 'Let's go get ready, then?'

'Exemplary idea, witch,' he replied, stooping to give her a chaste kiss. 'There is much to be done.'

--

The bright green eyes of the young wizard couldn't have looked more like the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore at that very moment. In fact, Severus had only seen the Headmaster just under an hour ago and hadn't quite recovered from that light show, and was now confronted with the twinkling of yet another set of eyes.

'You're serious, aren't you?' Harry Potter asked him, eyes growing to the size of plates.

'Yes, Potter, I am marrying your best friend, and yes, I am asking you to stand as my witness, purely because you are one of the only people aware of our current... situation, and because it would please my Hermione,' he drawled sardonically.

One thing Harry admired about this man was his determination and his steadfast ways, even in the worst of times when he was being an old, sarcastic bastard. 'Well, then I'd better stand for you,' Harry replied with a laugh.

'Thank you,' Snape said with a deep sigh.

'When will I be expected?' he asked the older wizard.

'Tomorrow is Sunday; therefore, I hardly think that it would be appropriate for an early ceremony, so I arranged for it to be in the evening. You will be required in the Headmaster's office at five o'clock sharp. Dress should be formal,' he listed off flatly.

'I'll be there,' Harry said, getting out of the chair in Snape's office and walking out just as Hermione walked in.

'Hello, love,' she said with a cheerful smile. 'What was Harry doing here?'

'I asked him to stand as my witness,' he replied, grabbing her by the hips and tugging her to sit across his lap in the chair behind his desk.

Hermione looked at him in amazement. 'You asked Harry?'

'I thought you might be pleased. However, have you found someone equally as suitable to stand with you?' he asked seriously.

Hermione nodded. 'I just got back from asking Luna Lovegood. And before you ask why I did not tell or ask Ginny, it's because Ron is her brother, and even though we are not on the best of terms, she's his sister, and I don't want her to have to keep secrets from him,' Hermione replied, reasonably pleased with her decision.

'Excellent point, my dear. This is exactly why you are my witch and not some dunderhead's. You're entirely too practical at times,' he said jokingly.

'This coming from Mr. Practicality himself,' she teased back playfully, giving him a tentative kiss on the lips. 'But thank you, and I'm glad you approve.'

'What are you talking about; I hardly had a say in the matter anyway. Although I am glad that you've decided not to share this with the Weasleys or Minerva. Merlin only knows that Minerva would have my head on a platter if she ever found out that I was cavorting about the castle with her prized student,' he said, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Hermione laughed. 'Let's get to bed. It's getting late, and we have a big day tomorrow,' she said with a warm smile.

'Of course, you're right, my witch,' he said, giving her a peck on the cheek and lifting her off his lap.

They both went their separate ways Hermione to her chambers, stomach crawling with anticipation, and Severus to his, mouth twitching into the first genuine smile he had smiled in a very long time.

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Severus flicked open the button at his neck and loosened the ridiculous neck tie, realizing, for the first time, just how stupid and impractical a thing it was. He looked at his polished black shoes and then back to the raven-haired best friend of his wife-to-be. Why was he suddenly nervous about this? Was it always going to be this way when he was waiting for her?

Perhaps it would, but he really didn't mind. As long as he would be seeing her at the end of it, everything would be fine. He straightened himself out and stood still in a very Snape-like manner. He couldn't let down his ruse just because it was his wedding ceremony in just a few short minutes.

'How are you feeling, Professor?' Harry asked evenly.

'How does it look, Potter?' he grumbled back.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off when both men saw their women walking through the door into Dumbledore's office. Hermione was dressed in a simple, cream-colored gown that had no straps or sleeves and fell gracefully to around her knees. It swished a little around the bottom as she moved. Her hair was pulled back in a loose, but tidy knot and was adorned with a few small white roses, and her neck was adorned with the necklace he had bought her, and her wrist with the bracelet. And finally, her heart hand had the platinum engagement ring with the Celtic knot woven over the top of it resting at the base of her finger, waiting for the plain platinum partner to join it on her finger.

Luna was dressed similarly, in a deep wine gown that had spaghetti straps and went just a little above her knees, her straight, blonde hair swept back in a neat braid. She was a good couple of inches shorter than Hermione; although, it wasn't surprising considering that Hermione was tall for a female anyway. The two women provided a beautiful contrast to each other; Hermione with her dark hair and light gown, and Luna with her fair hair and darker gown.

Hermione stood next to Severus, clasped his hand in her own, and turned to face Dumbledore, who had managed to sneak in some time while Severus and Harry had been transfixed on their beautiful partners. The old wizard cleared his throat and smiled warmly at them all.

'Let's begin then, shall we?' he said cheerfully.

Hermione and Severus nodded together and smiled at each other, all of their earlier nervousness replaced with a rush of sheer innocent joy.

'Do you, Hermione Jane Granger, wish to take Severus Tobias Snape as your husband, to love and to hold, in sickness and in health, to honor and cherish until death do you part?' Albus asked seriously.

'I do so wish.'

'And will you, Hermione, promise fidelity to Severus only, for so long as you both shall live? He asked.

'I will.'

'Excellent,' Albus said, and then turned to Severus. 'Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, wish to take Hermione Jane Granger as your wife, to love and to hold, in sickness and in health, to honor and cherish until death do you part?'

'I do so wish.'

'And will you, Severus, promise fidelity to Hermione only, for as long as you both shall live?' he asked.

'I will.'

'Do you have an exchange of rings you would like to perform?' Dumbledore asked, looking at them both.

Hermione nodded, and looked at Severus. 'Do you have that box I gave to you at Christmas?' she asked. He nodded and retrieved it. She took it and whispered to it, and it opened. She plucked a plain platinum band out of it and tucked the box back into his pocket, and quickly slipped the ring onto his finger, blushing slightly. 'Take this ring as a sign of my love and loyalty to you.'

Severus repeated the exchange, and soon, both of them were pronounced as married, and the papers were signed by all there. They both thanked Luna and Harry repeatedly, and Flooed straight to Severus' chambers from Albus's office. They collapsed on the bed together, and two hours later, were lying naked and sated amongst his black silk sheets, holding each other and murmuring sweet nothings to each other.

'I love you, Severus,' Hermione said sleepily.

'And I love you, Madame Snape,' he replied, kissing her on the end of the nose and closing his eyes to get ready for the best sleep in his life.

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A/N Again, please keep in mind that this story is old and has not aged terribly well. It's OOC to the max, and we have done our best to try and fix it up before posting it here at TPP.