

Snape's Dream

by Blue Phoenix

Something odd indeed has happened in the life of Severus Snape. He is a happy, engaged man about to start a new life. Things are, for the first time in his life, perfect.

Or are they? What would happen if Severus Snape found out that his dream existence was nothing but a figment of his imagination? Would he chase after happiness?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

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Chapter 1

Severus walked up the hallway from his quarters. His robes were billowing impressively behind him. A few stray students scampered out of his way before snickering behind their hands, desperately trying to hide any sound from the dour man, normally so very eager to deduct house points for minor offences such as breathing too loudly. What then, would snickering result in?

Severus continued past the students, happily oblivious that he had passed anyone at all. In fact, if ten students had lined up along the corridor and pointed at him while laughing outright, they might have escaped his notice.

Severus turned a corner, not at all minding the three students behind him, shoulders sagging from relief while they exchanged puzzled looks. They wondered if the world had gone mad. The Bat of the Dungeons himself, striding up the corridors in billowing robes, now that was a normal sight, but not so the rose *rose!* he wore in his buttonhole, nor the fact that they could have sworn, one and all, that the man was humming. *Humming!* Fair enough, he didn't seem to be humming something cool like the latest Weird Sisters song or some Muggle tune. The melody was unknown to the students, but it was the act itself that had them snickering. Severus Snape humming! Someone surely must have slipped the Potions master a potion in his morning tea!

Severus stopped himself from humming his favourite Grieg tune while walking into the Entrance Hall. How long had he been humming that one? No matter. He was happy. He, Severus Tobias Snape, was happy. Not content, relaxed, pleased or comfortable, but happy. If he was entirely honest with himself, he couldn't remember the last time this had happened. Certainly the last few months had been blissful ones, but before that ... perhaps once or twice in his childhood? Surely, even a miserable child such as he would have been glad occasionally?

Throwing the front doors wide open, he treated the outdoors with a very rare sight indeed. Severus smiled. He didn't sneer or twist one corner of his mouth up in slight amusement; he grinned like a fool, like a Gryffindor wearing his heart on his sleeve. The smile revealed crooked but startlingly clean teeth. A little off-white, perhaps, but then he was a man who liked his tea and a dark chocolate or three.

As he stretched his arms over his head before he rolled his head experimentally from side to side, he drew startled eyes from inside the castle. The rumour that *Snape*, Professor Snape, Severus Snape, The Snaky Git, The Bat of the Dungeons himself had gone mad, soon ran like wildfire through the student body. He had been heard humming; seen looking ... relaxed! Yes, honestly relaxed! Thankfully, none of them had seen him smile; the unfortunate student bringing such tidings would no doubt have been carted off to the Hospital Wing for a thorough check-up.

In the mean time, Severus had determined that for the first time in many years, he didn't have a stiff neck. In fact, he was at ease. Smiling again, this time more normally, he looked out over the grounds.

It was his last day here. There would undoubtedly be occasions to come back, but he felt he could tolerate returning, as long as he didn't have to teach the dunderheads passing for students at this school. Sometimes at night, after one too many glasses of Firewhisky, he would idly wonder if the Giant Squid was more intelligent than a particularly dim-witted first-year. Usually his contemplations ended in favour of the Giant Squid, but now there would be no more need of such ideas. He was free to live the life he wanted, to be happy, to marry.

The insane 'I'm-happy-and-I-know-it' smile graced his features again. It clashed horribly with his stern features and the wrinkles proclaiming him to be a Sour Man, capital letter and all. But then again, Severus was Happy, capital letter and all.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the chilly air of the summer morning. Clean, fresh, and smelling slightly of wood and dewy grass. Severus couldn't remember the last time he'd simply breathed in and enjoyed the scent of summer morning.

Resuming his humming, he folded his hands behind his back and very nearly chuckled. The sounds of deep shock emitting from the open castle doors behind him had finally reached him.

"I swear! He *hummed*!" one indignant voice insisted. "Honestly! We all heard it!"

Opening his eyes again to the pale blue of the sky contrasted against the dark green of the grass and forest, Severus sighed, not unhappily or impatiently; he simply breathed out and relaxed. When was the last time he'd simply looked at something and let his mind enjoy the pure, natural beauty of what his eyes took in?

He stopped humming to clear his throat a little. Well, at least that he could remember. Quite recently, he'd indulged in just looking, though not at a scenery like this, to be honest. It was in fact, a memory rather unsuited for this spot, with a herd of students right behind him. Still, he was at ease enough to let himself see the lovely brown eyes of his beloved, his betrothed, his future wife. To see her mass of curly wild hair, the dip of her neck, the way her belly, rounded slightly, gave way to

Clearing his throat again, he shifted slightly. Thoughts like that belonged in the privacy of his their home.

"Hermione Snape Granger," he breathed experimentally. Yes, it sounded nice. "Wife." That sounded even nicer. "My love." It was quite easy, really, at least when she wasn't around. He should would manage to slip it in tonight. He'd helped defeat the Dark Lord damn it Voldemort, for crying out loud. He'd survived being a spy for most of his life. He should be brave enough to call the woman he loved 'my love' to her face. It was decided, he would say it.

He took another step into the beautiful morning so full of promises, so full of ... love.

And then his world turned into swirling, grey mist.

Silence. His head was pounding as if he'd been hit over the head with one of the largest, and heaviest, cauldrons he possessed. His neck was stiff; impossible to move at all.

Blast. What had happened? He'd let his guard down one time around that mob of dunderheaded students, and one of them had managed to injure him. Somehow. On his wedding day. Blast and hell!

Opening his eyes, he confirmed that based on the feel of the mattress beneath him, the smell of disinfectant and the odd hush never found anywhere else in the castle, he was in the Hospital Wing. Sitting up, he swore as his head hurt even worse. What had the dunderheads done to him? His eyes crossed and seemed to gloss over. Odd.

"He's awake!"

Severus couldn't determine who had screamed. For one, the shrill sound seemed to drill into his skull, setting his hair on end and removing most of his ability to reason properly. Additionally, his vision was suddenly obscured by someone hugging him closely.

While Severus tolerated, encouraged, welcomed, even hoped for such attentions from Hermione, he did know for a fact that this wasn't her. He knew precisely the feel and scent of her. Plus, he was still a deeply private and reserved man. No one except said Hermione hugged him. Ever.

Still he lifted a hand and patted the woman for it was a woman, he could hear that from the scream on her back. He was relaxed today. Happy. It was nice to hear someone being so ecstatic at him simply being awake. That hadn't happened before. Well ... there was that one time with Hermione when he'd been tempted into tasting her while she slept, but that didn't really count. She hadn't been happy to find him awake, per se, more at his choice of morning activity.

"We were so, so worried, Severus!" The woman stood again, and he could hear now, when she wasn't screaming, that it was Minerva. He could see it too, although she did look haggard and tired.

"How long have I been passed out?" he asked; practicality first.

"It's been nearly two weeks," she replied shakily, sinking into a chair next to his bed.

"TWO WEEKS!" he shouted, causing his own head to produce pinpricks of pain behind his eyelids. Fine, shouting had been a bad idea. He steadied himself, breathing calmly so as to expel the wave of nausea hitting him. "How's Hermione?" he demanded, looking around, "Where is she?" Why wasn't she here? A man's fiancée should be here, preferably kissing him silly, when said man woke up from a two-week coma.

"Er " Minerva looked at him as if she was deeply concerned for his well-being. " Miss Granger is fine, Severus. She and the boys left for Grimmauld Place over a week ago. Cuts and bruises. Obviously they're deeply shaken. We all are."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. Whatever else Minerva McGonagall was annoying, bossy and too fond of the ruddy little dunderheads, among other things she wasn't stupid. She had never displayed signs of insanity. But this made no sense at all. None.

"Grimmauld Place?" he asked. Why on earth would his Hermione be at Grimmauld Place?

"I forget that you don't know anything," she said, looking ashamed of herself. "Let me call on Poppy to check up on you, and then I'll tell you everything. We won, of course. He's dead."

"Who?" Severus replied evenly. When would the woman get around to Flooing, Owling or somehow summoning Hermione? He would have done it himself, but his first attempt at sitting up had made him too weak for movement.

"Who?" Minerva repeated, sounding utterly dumbfounded. "WHO?" Now her voice seemed to have taken on a slightly hysteric tinge.

"Yes, who?" he repeated calmly. "It's obvious that I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Er well yes." She patted the slightly untidy bun on her head, seeming confused. "Well, Voldemort, of course. Can't you ... can't you remember?" She turned, "Poppy!" she called, less loudly than before, but still loud enough to make him wince.

Severus frowned while watching the two witches converse in low voices next to his bed. He got the gist of the topic, as they discussed whether or not he'd suffered memory loss, or if his memory had been otherwise tampered with. Poppy occasionally ran her wand over him and muttered to herself.

He tried to remember what he could. As far as he knew, there was no gap in his memory. Last fall, after the horrendous bit about orchestrating the 'murder' of Albus, Severus had returned to Hogwarts as Headmaster. In the spring, Potter had managed to kill Voldemort for good, this time then Potter, the ghostly Weasley boy and Hermione had debated returning to school. Instead, Weasley and Potter had gone into the Ministry, no doubt solely because of their fame.

He ... tolerated the two imbeciles. Barely. Mainly, because Hermione got all cross if he didn't. Her hair would seem to bristle slightly, going even bushier than normal. Then, her voice would go up until it reached an unattractive level, and she'd plant her hands firmly at her sides, elbows sticking out to let him know she was Displeased, capital letter. A displeased Hermione meant that Severus would go to bed frustrated, or that he would need to take a shower and wank. More importantly, a displeased Hermione meant that he, impossible as it seemed, even to him, started feeling guilty. He'd hurt her. The two idiots were and would always remain dunderheads, but Hermione liked them. She also liked that bushy half-Kneazle called Crookshanks. If he could tolerate the cat, he could tolerate the two dunderheads. They, after all, didn't share his living space or leave ginger hairs on his pillow. Severus had grouped her two friends with the cat Beings That Had to Be Tolerated. After that, he found that refraining from hexing them went better. He didn't, needless to say, share the fact that he grouped her friends and her familiar with Hermione. She needn't know that.

After the summer, Hermione had taken some classes at Hogwarts while she worked part-time in Hogsmeade. She wasn't a student; she simply came by three days a week, and she lived in the village. Severus had been forced to stay behind to teach Potions again for some reason it seemed near impossible to find a tolerable candidate for that position he'd bet it was simply because everyone else was too smart to take the damnable post.

One way or another, he had bumped into her often when going into the village. It helped, of course, that she worked at the new bookstore. He liked his books, Hermione liked her books. The first ... discussion ... about the early edition of Brage versus the slightly later edition of Humphrey had lead to several other discussions about books. Somehow she'd wormed her way into asking him out to lunch. He still had no idea how that had happened. They'd been in the middle of discussing some obscure Potions text and she'd just slipped in that she was hungry. Wouldn't it be better to continue talking over a meal? Even the spy Severus hadn't realised it had been a date until she'd beamed up at him afterwards, taking his arm warmly in between her hands and told him blushing slightly as she did that she'd had a wonderful time and wouldn't be opposed to repeating it.

It had taken him a full month before he'd worked up his courage to ask her out, properly this time. Even though she'd said she enjoyed herself, that hardly meant she'd want to go on a date with her old professor, he told himself. Then he had argued back; the girl had said that she found his company amusing. She had pointed out that she'd like to eat and talk with him again. A second time, his stubborn side had kicked in. Hermione Granger was not yet twenty. She would have no interest romantically in a man twice her age and ugly to boot. Sure, Severus was smart, but witches didn't want to kiss, hug, or shag 'smart'. They wanted 'handsome yet brainless'. By this time, he'd backed himself into a corner. He always did, when it came to women. The only difference this time was that he had decided to give Hermione the benefit of the doubt. It was the first time he'd done that, for anyone.

Miraculously, her reply had been to stare at him while her mouth dropped open, which made him believe he'd made a horrendous mistake. He smiled slightly, remembering backing into a bookshelf in his hurry to retreat with at least some dignity intact. But then she'd squealed like someone silly and he'd found himself with his first armful of Hermione. After a second, a very embarrassed, blushing Hermione, who stuttered that she'd love to go out with him while letting him go and studying the bookshelves behind him intently. Severus, however, had found that his heart speed up and his belly swooped when holding her. Holding a young, intelligent woman. A very soft, young, intelligent woman. Deliciously soft. Temptingly soft. Contrary to her fear of crowding him, it had been the perfect response.

"Severus?"

He blinked and returned to reality. Poppy and Minerva had turned to him and looked expectantly down at him.

"What's the last you can remember?" Poppy asked.

"Standing outside the front doors," he replied, "It was my last day. And of course I know Voldiesnort is dead. He's been dead for ages. But why the heck isn't Hermione here?"

The two ladies exchanged glances. Then Minerva patted his arm.

"Rest, Severus," she said gently. "I'm so happy you're awake, at last. I'll be back to visit you tomorrow."

He stared after her. "Hermione is fine, isn't she?" he asked the nurse. What was all this about?

"Oh, yes," Poppy replied, far too brightly for his taste, "Now, Severus ... sometimes, during a coma, a wizard or a witch, for that matter dreams. And those dreams are not in any way or shape discernable from real memories. Your brain registers them as truth. In a few days, you'll feel better and adjust to the real world again."

"Real world?" he sneered. There was no way in hell his brain could have ... *imagined* the last year of his life. Severus didn't have that good of an imagination. Being hated and scorned, maybe. Tossed into Azkaban or killed ... those kinds of pictures could have been produced by his nasty brain, not a relationship with a lovely witch half his age.

"Real world," Poppy replied firmly. "Now, you're going to take this potion without fuss. And then you'll rest *Rest*, mind you while I explain to you what's happened over the last month or so."

It was dark outside by the time Poppy was done explaining. She left Severus to himself, and he stared idly into the roof while trying to make sense of it all. Apparently he had aided in the murder of Albus. That much was true. He had also been Headmaster for a year, all the while pretending to be a loyal Death Eater. Nothing new there, either. Potter had killed Voldemort, so that one, too, was a real memory, not his imagination.

But there the reality stopped resembling his recollection of events. Voldemort had died only two weeks ago. Hermione hadn't yet decided what to do next, and neither had any of the others. Severus had nearly died from a bite by Nagini. He wasn't engaged to Hermione, nor had he ever touched her, despite having clear memories of the two of them tumbling eagerly into bed. She had never cried while looking down into his bewildered, scared face after he had asked her to marry him. Yet, inexplicably, Severus could have sworn he didn't know, before she'd laughing and crying explained it to him, that a woman sometimes cried because she was happy, mad as that seemed.

He would somehow have to get used to calling her 'Miss Granger' again. Miss Granger indeed! One didn't call a woman one had pleased with one's tongue by her last name. *A student one had dreamed about pleasuring with one's tongue, like a lecherous old man* his mind taunted. Severus really was a fair man; he might snipe at others, be snide and downright nasty, but then he treated himself in the same way.

From the corner of his eyes trickled a tear, unhindered, unnoticed. If anyone had asked, he would have sworn it was just fatigue. He was tearing, not crying. Severus Snape didn't cry. But the truth of it was that his heart broke. *I love her!* he stubbornly thought. *I love her!*

A/N: First of all, I hope you like my new story! I have written quite a few chapters already.

Secondly, for those who have read my two one-shots with SS/HG, this is meant to be the beginning.

Lastly, thanks to Annie, who took the time to beta this.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 7

Reality just isn't a dream.

Chapter 2

Severus paused in the small, dingy square outside Grimmauld Place. Minerva had explained to him that Hermione Miss Granger was the one who had saved his life. Two weeks had passed, and he'd been discharged by Poppy last night. After retrieving his old robes, Severus had prepared to go see Hermione. Miss Granger. Just to see her. Thank her. Try to woo her, foolish as that was. But he had been Happy in his dream, capital letter. He'd never even been happy, with or without a capital letter, before.

He had paused now, because for the first time in two weeks, he realised that it had all been a dream. A good dream, but a dream none the less. His Hermione might look like the real Hermione Miss Granger but she wasn't her. The real Hermi Miss Granger was likely to be the same insufferable, hand-waving know-it-all he could remember from classes. There was no reason at all to pursue her. He would be better off just turning around and never seeing her again. He'd have the recollection of *his* Hermione to keep him content. Or at least he could wank to it.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he paced in the square, drawing curious glances from passing Muggles. Unknown to Severus, several of them looked around, wondering if someone was shooting a scene for a vampire film. No cameras could be seen. It seemed the man with deathly pale skin had dressed up in black robes just for the fun of it. Odd. They shook their heads and moved on.

Severus turned away from the house, then he turned back. Straightening up a little, he breathed deeply. He would go over, knock at the door and say 'thank you' to the girl. Nothing bad would come of that. If he could tolerate her company for the few minutes he planned on staying, he would seek out her company again. The worst that could happen was that she'd turn out to be horrible, or she'd slam the door in his face. In that case, he had the memories of *his* Hermione to comfort himself with. If all went well, he could be happy in real life too.

This wasn't a line of reasoning that would have occurred to Severus Snape just a few weeks ago, but then, he hadn't dreamed a whole life with a lovely witch just a few weeks ago. He hadn't survived the fall of a dark wizard ruining most of his life a few weeks ago. Severus knew how to be patient. He knew how to observe others and coldly calculate the best way to influence them. He knew how to bide his time and plan an event to the letter. He knew how to leave behind all shelter and brave everything for a cause. It was Hermione *his* Hermione who had told him that those qualities were very adaptable. In fact, they were excellent for wooing a witch. Now he would use them to capture Miss Granger, if she was worth having.

A slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he crossed to the door and knocked firmly.

Mrs Weasley opened the door and gaped. Severus Snape was outside her door. Strictly speaking, the house belonged to Harry, of course, but while the Burrow was being rebuilt, they all lived here. She thought of them all as her responsibility. Severus Snape was outside her door.

"Mr Snape!" she blurted. She'd tried to call him 'Severus' while he was in the Order, but he was such an uptight man. It seemed more natural to use his last name.

"Molly," he acknowledged, her name sounding awkward on his lips.

"Severus," she corrected herself. Here she had a hero on her doorstep. A sour, snide hero, but that was hardly important. She should be nice to him. "I'm pleased to see you've recovered. We were worried for a while. When Minerva sent word that you were awake again ..." She let the sentence fall. They had been happy, all of them. It was simply hard to actually celebrate the stiff man.

"Thank you," he replied, unusually polite for him. "I heard about Fred. I'm very sorry."

Molly gaped like a fish, her mouth opening and closing several times. She clutched at the door handle, her brain unable to believe that Snape could be ... civil. Polite.

"I'm here to see Miss Granger," he continued when it became obvious that Molly was unable to speak.

This time her mouth closed with a snap. Her eyes bulged a little as she looked at him. "Well ..." She moved out of his way, motioning for him to come inside. Severus Snape here to talk to Hermione. Well, well. She wondered if he had come to thank her for saving his life. Or if he'd come to chastise her for saving his life. Either way if he wanted to see Hermione he could.

"Children?"

The word was perhaps not the most correct in a room where most of the 'children' in question were over seventeen. Ron scoffed silently at the word. Ginny openly rolled her eyes and grabbed Harry by the shoulders, kissing him until the boy blushed like a tomato. The smirk she afterwards aimed at her mother's back told Severus that she was feisty. More feisty than Ron by far. Not that it was a feat.

Over by the table Hermione Miss Granger had spread out a copy of the *Prophet* and was reading it while twirling a lock of her hair between her fingers. Severus swallowed the urge to step up behind her and bend down to kiss the nape of her neck. Nuzzle her neck. *His* Hermione had liked that.

"Professor Snape would like a word with Hermione," Molly declared, making five heads snap up. Ten eyes stared at the doorway, barely able to make out Severus in the dim hallway. He wore black for several reasons, blending in with the shadows was just one of them. Ginny just looked mildly puzzled; she shifted slightly where she sat on Harry's lap. Harry looked torn between embarrassment and respect, a rather new sentiment for Severus to be met with. George looked sad. Just sad. Ron looked ... well, Severus had never been able to see anything but stupidity on *his* face. He looked stupid: mouth open and staring. Severus found himself wondering how Molly and Arthur could have produced six seemingly intelligent children and one idiot. And why Hermio Miss Granger had to be friends with the stupid son.

Fred and George, while presenting him with a headache more often than not, were undeniably smart. He had perused their products and found several new items of value. He would never have admitted it, but he was impressed. Of course, his favourite item was a figment of his imagination: The Voldiesnort. A new line of party-decoration shaped roughly like Voldemort and doing a variety of actions ranging from an embarrassing to a crude nature. Severus would never have let himself be seen dead near one

of the ludicrous things, but he did have to hide a chuckle every time he saw one.

Miss Granger herself just looked expectantly up at him. She seemed puzzled but not alarmed.

"I'm glad to see you're better, Professor," she said. The voice was undeniably the same, just like his Hermione. The words were not. His Hermione would never call him 'Professor'.

"Thank you," he said, his voice barely over a whisper, "I'm glad to see no lasting harm has come to you. There were enough losses."

She looked surprised.

"I merely wanted to thank you for saving my life," he forged on.

This time she blushed. "Oh. It ... I ... anyone would have done that," she babbled.

"Still. Thank you. I owe you my life, it seems." He gauged her reaction. The blushing might be good. And at least she didn't seem to be afraid of him, or worse, repulsed.

"We were just about to eat lunch. Why don't you join us, Severus?" Molly asked.

He was about to decline. He had really only come to see if Miss Granger might have any potential for turning into his Hermione. It seemed she did. So now his plan had been to leave. But then Her Miss Granger smiled. Not at him, she just smiled and he found himself thanking Molly politely, saying that it had, indeed, been a while since breakfast. If it would be agreeable he would like to eat with them. It stunned him as much as it did the rest of them. Not the politeness. Did they imagine he *sneered* at Voldemort and the rest of the Death Eaters? Sniped? Of course he knew how to be civil! He merely couldn't be bothered, most of the time. But now he had a cause. It was like a mission, really. Mission: *his* Hermione.

After a while of being angry with himself for not sticking to his plan, Severus decided that staying for lunch might be a good thing. Now he could breach subjects he would have had, had dreamt, at least of discussing with *his* Hermione. If Miss Granger turned out a disappointment, he'd be saved a second visit. Time-saving, really. Practical.

"Well, in the first edition by Brage, it says that you should add a little flick," Severus said without batting an eyelash. He had slipped more difficult subjects into a conversation unnoticed. It wasn't hard. At all.

"Really?" Molly asked, clearly interested, "And what are the effects?"

She was, however, the only one paying attention. George stared at his food as if it was a heap of week-old rubbish. Ron stuffed his mouth at an impossible speed and seemed to be gulping it down more like a snake than a human. Severus firmly looked elsewhere, disgusted. One didn't woo a woman by offending her idiotic friend, so he kept silent. Ginny had snuck her hand into Harry's lap and smiled deviously while playing with the poor bloke's assets. Severus hid a smirk. The girl clearly knew what she wanted and how to get it. Potter didn't stand a chance.

Hermione was, in his fantasy, supposed to have piped up by now. Best give her some time. He gave a detailed explanation, including the part he had argued discussed with his Hermione. Still nothing.

"Miss Granger?" he prompted, "Do you think he's right?" This was the time where she'd start telling him that Elianor Humphrey had claimed Brage was a sloppy researcher, and rightly so. Hermione had been right, to his great annoyance. He hated being wrong, but she'd also been a worthy partner in their discussion. *That* he had liked.

"Er" She looked startled, "I can't say, Professor. I've never tried to change the spell, and while I've heard of Brage, obviously, I've never read anything by him." She turned a little pink, probably because he had asked a question she didn't know the answer to. It would be a first in her recollection but she stood her ground regardless.

"I see," he said, trying to hide his disappointment. Hermione Granger might very well spend most of her time with her nose buried in some book, but she was still only nineteen. He could hardly expect her to be as widely read as he was. *And perhaps, I might actually like to introduce her to new topics, new books* his new-found, sloppily romantic side suggested, the side desperately yearning to be happy again.

Molly started cleaning the table, and Severus prepared to leave. There was only so much company he could expose himself to in one day, even for a cause. He would come back. While not exactly like his Hermione, Miss Granger reminded him enough of his fantasy that he wanted more. She certainly looked a lot like his Hermione, a little slimmer, but she'd been on the run for months. In time, she'd gain more weight, more roundness over her hips, surely? A rounded, soft belly rather than the flat one revealed by her too-tight sweater over jeans.

"Thank you for the meal, Molly," he said smoothly. Polite. If Miss Granger continued to live with the Weasleys, he wanted to make sure that he was welcome. Beings That Had To Be Endured, as simple as that. He had endured Voldemort. Anyone was better than that nutcase.

"Oh, you're welcome, Severus," Molly replied warmly. She no longer slipped up and wanted to call him 'Snape'. She had decided that Severus had probably just been sour before because he had been under constant stress. And who could blame the poor man? To live as a spy for decades! No wonder he had been tightly wound. Now that the war was over he'd relax. Already Molly was starting to sort through female acquaintances to find a suitable witch for him. The man was positively pleasant now. He deserved to be loved. Maybe Mrs Teal would do? She was very nice, divorced from that drunken husband of hers. But she already had three children. Severus Snape didn't really strike Molly as the sort of man who'd like to have three children about, whether he now seemed nice or not. Someone without children then ... hmm.

She could indulge in these musings for so long because Severus himself was staring, horrified, at what was going on next to the table. It wasn't Ginny darting furtive glances at her mother while she insistently tugged Harry off up the stairs towards a more private location that horrified him. Miss Weasley could shag Potter into the next century if she wanted. He was no longer their professor, thankfully, and could mind his own business.

No, what horrified Severus Snape enough that he remained frozen for what seemed like hours was the sight of Miss Granger Hermione kissing her idiotic friend. Hermione Granger kissing Ron Weasley. It made Severus nauseous. He also wanted to grab the girl by her arm and haul her off with him. Once in private, he'd yell at her until she saw sense and then proceed to show her what a real man was like. Not that little whelp. Maybe he'd spank her too. That was one thing *his* Hermione hadn't agreed to. Now that he knew she had been a figment of his imagination, that struck him as odd. Why, if he had imagined her, would she refuse something he liked? Why would she be annoyingly bossy, obstinate and prone to sulking? And why the heck had his brain seen fit to toss in her two annoying friends? What good was a fantasy if it wasn't perfect?

"Good day," he managed stiffly before hurrying out.

The sight of Hermio Miss Granger kissing Ron IdiotBoy Weasley was burned into his mind. She most certainly would not do *for* his Hermione. Absolutely not! His brain had clearly still been addled from his coma, his ability to reason muddled by the snake venom. Now he could see clearly, and Hermione Granger most certainly wasn't worthy of him at all. The memory of her might be good for an occasional wank, but that was it.

Having determined this, he Apparated to his dingy home in Spinner's End, firm in his resolve to avoid other people for awhile, and to find himself a new job. He did not want to teach dunderheads again. Ever.

"Hell no," he muttered sourly, sinking into a well-used old chair. It squeaked as he put all his weight on it and his bum sank further down than what was comfortable. He would fix it come tomorrow. Right now he would pour himself some Firewhisky and mope think oh, what the heck. Mope.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 7

Summer is ending, and Severus is not a happy man.

Chapter 3

"Severus, please?" Minerva pleaded, "I know how much you hate teaching. Believe me; I've endured your grouching about it for nearly twenty years, after all! I wouldn't ask if I had another candidate."

Severus let out a non-comital grunt. It was the last week in August, and he'd spent his summer wisely. He'd sold the dump going for a home in Spinner's End. Because of some insane idea from a Muggle man in a very ugly grey suit, he'd even got a nice sum for it, something about 'development'. Severus had, true to his role as a 'loyal' Death Eater, not kept up to date on Muggle society. He knew nothing of the way things worked. But he didn't complain about earning enough on the sale to buy a small cottage with extensive grounds in a very remote area of Wales. It didn't matter to him where it was. What mattered was that it was far enough away from everything to leave him in peace. In fact, Minerva was his first visitor in three weeks.

"School starts Monday, Severus. I simply can't have the Potions position unfilled. Please? I've already secured Mrs Rosewood for next year, but she can't start before then."

He grunted again. "And why, pray, can't she start before? No employer would demand that much of a warning."

"She's pregnant," Minerva replied heavily, "Even you can't expect her to teach with an infant strapped to her back."

This time Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn't, indeed, and that annoyed him. He already felt his resolve of Not Teaching Ever Again dissolving. It wasn't like he had found another job that he liked. He had toyed with the idea of starting up a potions company, but he lacked funding. His only choice would be to start up by taking orders and producing the potions one by one in his small lab, a tedious way to do it.

"And no one else, I bet, was stupid enough to agree to teaching Potions to dunderheads," he drawled, just to have it said. This was just like in his dream.

"You can put it like that, if it makes you happier." She sounded exasperated. "The fact is that no one is competent for the job."

He sipped his tea in silence. Minerva helped herself to a slice of the cake she had brought herself and then sliced and conjured a plate for it. She knew him well enough to know Severus Snape didn't have cake in case someone stopped by for tea.

"So, how's your idea for a potions business coming along?" she asked at last.

"Oh, fine," he snapped, "I'll do it, but just for one year, mind you! One year!"

She tried to hide a smile. She'd never been very good at hiding anything, and so she failed dismally. "Thank you." The warmth in her voice, if he was honest, made him feel good, not that he would ever have admitted that to her.

"As long as I can continue with my projects in my private time," he demanded. He could use the school lab to brew his potions. That way he need only worry about ingredients, and it would be a nice side-income.

"Of course," she enthused. Severus felt sure the woman would have said the same if he'd asked to bring his pet dragon along.

"Who will I be teaching? Who's in sixth- and seventh-years' Potions?" Better to start out prepared; there were plenty of idiots in those classes.

Minerva poured herself a second cup of tea, rattling off the names of students in sixth-year Potions while Severus filed them away in his usual two folders for students, 'Dunderheads' and 'Tolerable'. As usual there were few in the 'Tolerable' group, just two, and one of them under doubt.

"Horrible, as usual," he drawled. "Seventh year, then?"

Minerva cast him a cross look. She never liked to hear him speak the truth about her precious students.

"If I wasn't desperate " she replied, her grouchiness not reaching past the surface, "Ah, well. I didn't expect you to become sociable any more than I expected you to grow a second head, Severus." She looked at him rather fondly, though.

"Seventh year now ... those I trust you can remember. Plus, some of the older students are coming back. Mr Longbottom decided to come back. Mr Potter"

"Hold it!" Severus snapped, putting his cup down with a bang. "Longbottom?" Not in Potions. That boy was a health hazard. He'd nearly blown up himself and, more importantly, Severus, on several occasions. The boy was competent enough, certainly more so than Ron Bloody Weasley, but not near a cauldron.

"Not to Potions, of course. Miss Granger and Mr Potter, however, took that class."

He swallowed. "Miss Granger is returning?" he asked, trying to sound casual, "And Mr Potter?" Why, if he'd be forced back to teach Potions, just like in his dream, didn't the ... better parts of his dream come true? While he was used to being alone, Severus wouldn't have objected to the company of an intelligent, pretty, young woman, especially one so fond of spending time in bed as *his* Hermione. Seeing a hope, after all, he processed the information. Miss Granger and Mr Potter would be coming back to Hogwarts. Did that mean he was free of the Weasley Idiot? And, even more important, that Miss Granger would be away from her idiotic *boyfriend*.

"Yes, and Mr Weasley, but he's dropping Potions, so you don't have to worry about him." Minerva seemed to know he would loathe teaching the Weasley Idiot.

"At least that means one less imbecile," he drawled, "Are the four of them still jumping each other like rabid teenagers and shagging at every available opportunity?"

"Severus!" Minerva actually jumped in her chair. "How can you say things like that?"

He smirked. Did his accurate description of her precious little Gryffindors shock her Victorian morals? "If I'm going back to teaching, that means I'll be responsible for the hormone-crazed little devils. I prefer to be forewarned."

"Well, if you're referring to Mr Potter and Miss Weasley, then they are indeed a couple,' she replied, her voice a stern tone of disapproval.

"They better be, the way those two were sneaking off to rut. Let's hope she manages to leave school before they start sprouting little Potters." He shuddered at the mere idea. The only bright side was that he'd not be forced to teach those Potters. Hah!

"Honestly, Severus!" Minerva berated. "I'd almost think you've become worse over the summer!"

"Thank you,' he replied, inclining his head. "And Miss Granger and the youngest Weasley boy?"

"I believe they are dating, yes." Ever the diplomat. Severus narrowed his eyes; she was still with the idiot, then.

To be entirely honest and Severus rarely was entirely honest, even to himself he couldn't just let his hope of a happy future go, not that he hadn't tried. He had spent most of his summer trying to remind himself that Miss Granger was not and would never become *his* Hermione. She hadn't read the right books, she didn't argue with him, and worst of all she had lowered herself to dating Ron Bloody Weasley, The Idiot. The Freckle-Faced Rubbish Disposal. The Boy Who Could Swallow Half an Ox Without Chewing. It had been a long summer. Severus had wanked to many glorious memories of *his* Hermione. He had invented roughly a thousand snide, rude or plain nasty nicknames for Ron Weasley.

If he had been the type to play darts, he would have obtained a full body picture of the boy, bull's-eye conveniently placed just below the belt. Alas, Severus Snape didn't play darts. He had contemplated using the boy for spell-practice instead; five points for hexing off his knee, ten for taking out an eye, twenty for making him an eunuch. Just the idea of Weasley made him nauseous, the actual sight would put him off his lunch. Tempting as the idea of hexing him was, Severus refrained, telling himself that he was an adult. He would behave maturely. Or, if Weasley ever touched Herm Miss Granger in front of him again, he'd hex the boy's buttocks so badly that he couldn't sit again until he was a grandfather, if ever. He had been a Death Eater, for crying out loud. There had to be permanent hexes out there, something nasty that Poppy couldn't mend.

It was the first of September. Severus had fortified himself with a tumbler of Firewhisky for breakfast. Not a thing he normally indulged in, but a castle soon to be filled with dunderheads required a drink. Especially a castle soon to be filled with dunderheads and Miss Granger.

Over the last week, he had mulled it over. He could try to be nice to her. Woo her. He had no illusions about his own appearances, but he still didn't think Ron Bloody Weasley could have something to offer a woman that Severus couldn't. What would that be? Looks? The red-haired boy was freckled beyond belief. He had *red* hair! Red hair was, in Severus' opinion, far worse than oily hair prone to looking greasy. Intelligence? Hah! Magical abilities? Unlikely. Few could beat Severus there. As any young man, Weasley would hardly be able to grant a woman true pleasure. Fumbling, he was sure, was Weasley's best in bed. The only thing, in fact, that Ron Weasley had and Severus Snape didn't have was youth. And Miss Granger, of course. For now.

Severus was back in the game. He would not sit around and watch Hermione Miss Granger ruin her life with The Idiot, nor would he sit around and be tortured by the sight of her kissing him. While she was in the castle, he was determined to behave nicely to her. The rest of the dunderheads could rot for all he cared.

Walking up from his old quarters in the dungeons, he made sure his robes billowed behind him. Students ought to be intimidated; it kept them from making trouble in his classes. After a summer of not billowing, he needed the practice. Striding across the Entrance Hall and into the Great Hall well before the carriages would arrive, he settled into his old chair and focused on looking intimidating. He schooled his expression into a neutral one, lifted one eyebrow in mocking question, and then sneered disdainfully. Satisfied that his repertoire wasn't rusty, he folded his arms across his chest and waited for the dunderheads to pour in and start scrambling for their seats, bringing with them meowing familiars and bad table manners.

When the first students entered the Great Hall, they were stunned at how normal it all looked. There were the four House tables and the High table. The teachers were much the same as before the war. To their great disappointment, even Professor Snape was back, sneering like always. He might be a war hero to their parents, but to the students of Hogwarts he was still a mean, point-deducting bat.

The evening progressed as normal. The first-years were sorted into their houses; the meal was eaten among loud talking. Severus spent his time categorising them all out in his head: 'dunderhead', 'likely catastrophe near a cauldron'. He only made notes to the negative. Any students passed over without comment fell into his 'tolerable' category. Since he started with the Slytherins, he didn't reach Her Miss Granger until dessert had been served. Her face was prettily blushed from the wind outside followed by the warmth inside; Potter next to her, then Miss Weasley, sitting so close she was nearly on his lap. Across the table sat Ron Weasley, stuffing his mouth with pudding like a pig.

Severus sneered and looked away. At least he didn't have Weasley in his Potions class. While the opportunity would have been perfect to 'accidentally' poison him, Severus didn't fancy spending time in Azkaban.

Nobody looked at Snape for too long a time at once. If he caught someone staring, he was rumoured to turn nasty. Points would go flying even before they'd had their first classes, or detentions earned and spent sorting out disgusting, slimy things down in the draughty dungeons. If anyone *had* looked at him they might have noticed that one corner of his mouth twitched slightly as Hermione Granger rose to leave. It wasn't a smile Severus Snape never smiled but it was definitely a positive expression. If they had kept on looking, they might have noticed the narrowing of his eyes that followed, the sneer on his lips, even the way he flexed his hands as if he wanted to strangle someone. If said observer had followed his gaze, they would have seen Ron Weasley casually drape his arm over Hermione Granger's shoulders.

Still the happy couple, then. Severus would have to plan this very thoroughly.

Thank you all for the lovely reviews! I feel sort of nervous about posting this, as I know just where it's going, and fear it might not live up to your expectations. However, tell me what you think; I love reviews! Right now I'm writing away on chapter seven, so there's plenty of story left to post! :)

Also, thanks to Annie who makes this readable!

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 7

The Potions Master makes an effort.

Chapter 4

"Oh, please, Ron," Hermione whispered, effectively wriggling free from under his arm as they exited the Great Hall. It was obvious that Ron had forgotten to shower for a while. In fact, the entire relationship with Ron was starting to go stale.

At night she would dream of a eloquent man to cuddle. Someone not smelling of old socks. Someone who ate with a minimum of decorum. She had always told herself that teenage boys ate a lot. It was just a simple fact. Ron was a lovely person, and he wouldn't always be a teenage boy. Sooner or later, he would stop stuffing his face in that disgusting way. But he would never cuddle up over by the fire with a nice book. A Quidditch magazine, maybe. While that had seemed acceptable a few months ago, it didn't seem acceptable now.

There was just the tiny fact that ... well ... no one/se liked her. She knew it was ridiculous, but part of her worried about ending up alone. Having always been told she was bushy-haired and plain, she knew she wasn't as pretty as Lavender or Parvati. Being plain and too fond of books wasn't a good combination. Part of her argued that she should hold onto what she had. The other part argued not to settle.

"What's got into her?" Ron asked Harry, low enough that he didn't think she could hear.

Harry just shrugged, his attention on Ginny.

"Maybe it's her period?" Ron muttered to himself, still low enough that he believed Hermione couldn't hear. Sadly for him, Hermione's hearing was excellent. She huffed and stalked off up the stairs. Honestly! Boys!

Severus didn't have the seventh-year's Potions class until Wednesday. He terrorised two sets of first-years on Monday, both for a double period; a class of third-years and the sixth-year class on Tuesday. Wednesday morning he warmed up by terrifying one of the second-year classes for a double period. By the time lunch came around, everyone in the castle knew that Professor Snape was the same grouchy, snarky git he always had been, not that anyone had truly believed he'd be anything else.

"I'm so glad I dropped The Bat's class!" Ron said around a chicken leg. "I don't envy you two double Potions after lunch!"

"Be quiet, Ron," Hermione snapped. "And it's Professor Snape, not The Bat."

Ron just rolled his eyes and helped himself to a third chicken leg.

"Have you already forgotten how nice he was when he dropped by before the summer?" she asked. "I've never seen him that relaxed."

This earned her a snort from Ron. "Yeah, I'll bet his head was still spinning from the coma, though. He's not been by since, you know." He heaped a second pile of mashed potatoes onto his plate.

"He did thank her for saving his life," Harry objected. "Sure, he's still strict and rather harsh, but he's a hero."

Ron made a noise that might have been a negative, but his mouth was just too full of mashed potatoes and chicken to tell for sure.

They rose from the table Ron now clutching his fifth chicken leg and a cupcake.

"You're going to get fat, Ron, if you continue to eat that much," Hermione informed him as they left the Great Hall, her voice a little snappy. They were still dating, but she found it harder and harder not to be downright nasty to him, especially when exposed to his atrocious table manners.

"Calm down, Hermione," Ron said, Vanishing the chicken bone. "I'll walk it off just getting to class in this huge castle. Besides, I'm hungry! It's not like we can all survive on what you eat."

Hermione huffed. "What I eat, Ronald, is normal helpings."

"Well, you could do with eating more. We all lost weight during last year, and you're all skinny."

Hermione gaped at him. "I'm not 'all skinny', Ron! I don't know why I even talk to you!" She turned away and hurried down towards the dungeons in a temper.

"What did I say now?" Ron asked Harry. "Girls like to be told they're skinny, right?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Slim, yes. Pretty, yes. Skinny hell no. It's like telling her she's all skin and bones, mate. You're in trouble." He followed Hermione, wishing Ginny took Potions. He liked the classes he shared with her best. Even if he couldn't sit with her, he could at least look at her.

"How was I to know?" Ron muttered to the now empty Entrance Hall. "This wasn't in my book."

Perturbed by the idea that there might be more a lot more to making a girl like someone than what was in his book, he headed outdoors to relax. Dating Hermione wasn't by far as much fun as it had been, being her friend, especially since she'd refused point blank to sleep with him. She'd said she wanted to wait until they had a 'solid relationship'. He had no idea what that meant. They'd been friends for seven years, right? Wasn't that solid? What was the point in being her boyfriend if it was like being her friend, just with added bossing and a very rare snog? A very rare snog indeed. She hadn't even pecked him on the cheek since they'd returned to Hogwarts.

"I'm behaving myself, too," he said to himself. "No groping, that was in my book. I tell her she looks pretty. Maybe I should try the flower trick?"

Pleased by this idea he headed towards the lake. When a girl for some reason was upset, you should give her flowers. He was on a budget, so he'd pick them himself. But the book had clearly stated that it was the thought, not the price, that mattered. There. He'd give her flowers and she'd forget she was angry. Probably, she'd even snog him properly.

Whistling off-tune, he picked the nearest flower. He wasn't too sure, but it looked like a daisy.

Meanwhile, in the dungeons, Severus had just treated the seventh-years to his customary bang of the dungeon door. Then he had glared at them all. Except Herm Miss Granger.

"Welcome back," he said, not pleasantly, but not nastily either. "Several of you " here he looked pointedly at Potter " have been admitted to this class by Professor Slughorn. You'll find that my standards are harder to meet. Fail to do so " A flick of his wand made the instructions for the potion they'd be brewing appear on the blackboard behind him. " at your own risk. Instructions on the blackboard as usual. I expect you to finish the base of this today, the rest of it in class tomorrow."

He felt pleased with that one: A warning, a sting at Potter, and he'd been perfectly nice to Miss Granger. Sitting down behind his desk, he pulled out his order catalogue from *Potioneer's Finest Ingredients* and started making a list of things he'd need to buy in order to start making his first potions. Not even the most inept of them could mess up their brew during the first half hour, and he had no essays to correct yet.

"Sorry, Professor Snape?"

The voice made his head snap up. Not because he was angry and about to descend on the poor, unsuspecting student with his usual sneer, but because it was Hermi

Miss Granger's voice.

"Yes?" He lifted an eyebrow questioningly.

"Er it says to slice the dandelion root diagonally in my book, but you've written to finely dice them," she stated. She seemed unnerved by his lack of sneer.

He lifted his eyebrow further. He might well want her to like him, but even she couldn't question his ability to write instructions correctly without making him cross.

"I just wondered what sort of difference it makes. How does dicing improve the potion compared to slicing?"

Ah. Now this was much better. He allowed himself a smirk. "Dicing, Miss Granger, makes the potion slightly more long-lasting. While the potion made with sliced roots is potent for barely a week after completion, this version lasts for ten days. That may not seem like a lot of difference to you; it means substantial less work for the witch forced to use it."

"What's it for, anyway?" Lovegood asked dreamily. The girl looked like a dolt with her radish earrings and a necklace with what looked like a ... wasp? But she was sorted under 'tolerable' in his two lists. She never exploded a cauldron or ruined a brew, even though it looked like she had her head in the clouds.

"It's a fertility potion, used by witches when they're attempting to get pregnant."

Half the class blushed, like he'd talked about sex. Merlin. Each and every one of them would probably, some day, want a child. A third of them would use this brew to speed up the process.

Miss Granger, however, didn't blush. She had raised her hand.

"Yes?" he prompted.

"Well. It's not very strong, is it? None of these ingredients are very potent. I mean ..." she trailed off, looking uncertain.

Severus inclined his head slightly. "Indeed. It's not a strong potion. Helpful when trying to conceive, but not meant to counter infertility in any way."

"Is there any potion that can?" she asked.

Potter shifted on his feet next to her, rather pink. Honestly, was he or was he not a man? Facing Voldemort went just fine, but talking about pregnancy made him blush?

"Not entirely, of course, but there is a potion that works in most cases. It's nearly as complex as the Wolfsbane Potion, so you will not be brewing it in this class. We will, however, learn how to brew a contraceptive potion. Much more relevant to the lot of you!"

He heard a splutter, but couldn't identify the source.

"Back to brewing!" Severus demanded, pleased with today's work. Shocking dunderheads was nearly as much fun as intimidating them.

When the double period ended, Severus had them all turn in a sample and store their half-brewed potions on the shelves in the back of the room. Then he hesitated a brief moment, writing out homework on the blackboard behind him. It had been a peaceful hour and a half. No near-catastrophes, no Weasley, and Miss Granger's face blushed prettily from working over the fumes. He hesitated now because he wanted to ask Miss Granger a favour. It was all a part of his plan. Asking for help didn't come naturally to him, whether it was a step in his scheme to become happy or not.

"Miss Granger, a word after class, if you please," he said at last. He used the same voice he always used. A bit too stern, as he wasn't at all displeased with her work, but he had said it so many times that his brain seemed to have archived the words with the tone of voice. It came without thinking.

As expected, when told by Professor Snape to wait behind, she looked confused and not a little anxious.

"Was there a problem with my potion, sir?" she asked after Potter had walked out, looking sorry for her.

"No," Severus assured her. "Your potion was, as usual, nearly perfect."

Now she looked gobsmacked. "Er thank you. Then why "

"I wanted to ask you a favour," he stated. "As you might or might not know, my father was a Muggle. Spending the last twenty years pretending to be a Death Eater meant I've had no contact what so ever with the Muggle world. I would, however, like to be more up-to-date on the non-magic society." He cringed slightly over the 'last twenty years' part. It might be true, but he hadn't meant to remind her of just how old he was. Well. No matter. At this point, he was merely trying to befriend her, anyway.

"Oh," she replied. "And ... I'm sorry, but I don't see how I can help. The Muggle Studies professor can, surely, tell you about Muggles. Or point you towards a few books on the subject."

"I don't want to hear about dishwashers and electricity. I know about government structures and family life," he told her. "I did grow up as a Muggle, mostly. And I'm *not* that old, to not remember electricity."

"I didn't oh!" Her eyes went wide as she realised he'd made a joke. Professor Snape could joke. Who'd have known? "Then ~~what~~ do you want to know, sir?"

"I want to know about modern society. This summer I found myself tossed into it. I need to know what a cell-phone and an internet is."

"The internet."

"What?"

"It's *the* internet, not an. But I can get you some books on the subject. Modern life, then? Developments in technology over the last twenty years?"

He inclined his head. That would be perfect. Then he recalled that he was trying to win her regards. "That would be perfect," he said out loud. It felt unnatural to voice a positive opinion for once. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she replied. She even smiled slightly at him. Then she looked at her watch. "I have to go! I'm already late."

"I'll inform Professor Vector that I kept you behind," Severus said calmly. "Off you go." The constant need to be on time had been there in his dream, too. It had annoyed him then and it annoyed him now. "And, Miss Granger?"

She had already reached the door, but now she turned and looked expectantly at him.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone."

"Of course." She nodded once and turned again.

He watched her hips sway as she left. It would seem she hadn't gained much weight over the summer. Maybe she was naturally slim? He really couldn't recall what she'd looked like back in her sixth year. He could learn to like slim. While he'd always before preferred rounded hips and a soft shape, he could already picture the slimmer version of her doing the things *his* Hermione did in his fantasies. Yes, the boyish shapes she seemed to possess would do nicely. He wasn't too worried about her looks. While *his* Hermione had been beautiful he hadn't fallen in love with her looks. It was her mind that had ensnared him. Her personality had made him happy to be ensnared. The fact that she was pretty was simply a nice bonus.

By the time dinner came around, Hermione was already making a mental list of books and magazines for Professor Snape. She dug out a piece of parchment as soon as she sat down at the table, noting it all down before she could forget any of them. Thus occupied, she barely even noticed Ron's offer of a rather messy bouquet of flowers. A vague 'thank you, Ron,' was all he got in return for his efforts.

Ron, who had hoped to be forgiven for the mistake of calling her skinny, was relieved to find that she didn't snipe at him. But he had also hoped for a kiss, and that seemed less forthcoming.

"You're welcome," he replied gloomily, trying to ignore Ginny openly laughing at him. She was pointing at the flowers he'd picked and snorting into her plate.

Finally he could no longer take it. "What?" he snapped, glaring at her.

"Daisies and clovers? It's like the ones you brought home for mum when you were six!" Succumbing to a fresh wave of mirth, she clung to Harry and laughed until she had to clutch her side and gasp for air. Ron scowled at her, but she didn't notice, then he scowled at Harry, who just shrugged. Finally, he turned to Hermione and tried to see if she was offended rather than pleased. Girls were so complex! Flowers, but it had to be the right type. Why hadn't the book mentioned what type of flowers a girl liked? By now, Ron was starting to think that maybe his book couldn't provide all the answers he would need. It was something of a letdown. He'd trusted his book. They seemed to work just fine for Hermione.

Luckily, Hermione seemed just fine with her flowers. For the first time since they'd arrived at Hogwarts, she didn't tell him to shut his mouth while chewing. Didn't she know just how difficult that was to remember? The table was filled with all sorts of delicious things, and he was tempted into refilling his mouth while he chewed. It was practical. She didn't tell him not to speak with his mouth full of food, either. That one was near impossible. The others insisted on talking at the table. As his mouth was always filled with food meals were for eating, after all he *had* to speak with his mouth full, or he'd never get a word in.

"Maybe a newspaper," Hermione muttered to herself. "Or a technical magazine. I'll ask Dad." She chewed on her bottom lip without realising it, even though she had promised herself to stop that habit immediately. A grown woman didn't chew her lip.

Up at the High Table, Severus observed the scene with distaste. He didn't know what Miss Weasley found amusing. All he saw was Ron Idiot Weasley stuffing his mouth full of food like he always did, Miss Granger bending over something or another, like *she* always did, and a bouquet of flowers. It made him scowl darkly. His plan assumed that Weasley acted like the clumsy idiot he surely was. Giving a girl flowers wasn't something a clumsy boy would remember.

If Severus had been close enough to see the type of flowers in question, he might have relaxed. He might have assumed that daisies and clovers meant something special to the two of them, but he wasn't close enough to see anything of the sort. So he decided that he would need to watch this new development very carefully. After all, his happiness depended on it.

A man less single-minded than Severus Snape might have supposed that it wasn't Miss Granger per se who had made him happy in his dream. Maybe it was simply having a woman to love and who loved him back. But Severus never considered this fact. His subconscious had chosen Miss Granger, and so Miss Granger was the one he wanted. Much like when he was a teenager and had set his heart on Lily Evans, he now placed all his efforts on getting Miss Granger to like him. Miss Granger liked to help people; she liked to find information, so he had required her help to seek information. Simple. While she looked for what he wanted, she would inevitably think of him. She would contemplate how nice he had been to her, how he had thanked her politely and complimented her potion-making abilities.

Hopefully she would pay less attention to his crooked, yellow teeth. Severus ran his tongue over them as he thought about it. He knew from Minerva's incessant babble that Miss Granger's parents were dentists. It was just like in his dream, where *his* Hermione had bullied him into taking a thorough teeth-cleansing potion; one that had him puffing mint-scented smoke from the corners of his mouth for a full 24 hours afterwards, but that had also left his teeth startlingly clean, nearly white. While Severus scoffed at people obsessed with their looks, he supposed that checking into it wouldn't hurt. Since the Weasley Idiot managed to bring her flowers, he needed to up the effort. Clean teeth it was. He'd look up the potions first thing tomorrow. Tonight he had orders for potions ingredients to place.

Already, he had received two orders for a hair re-growth potion and one for a monthly subscription to the Wolfsbane potion. For a man who had no patience for fussing over one's look, he completely sympathised with the wizards in want of a hair re-growth potion. A man needed his hair in order to look manly. If Severus himself hadn't been blessed with hair that stayed where it was meant to stay, neither thinning at the top nor fleeing from his forehead until half his head was hairless, he would have used a hair re-growth potion. To the average student at Hogwarts, that would probably have come as a huge shock. How could a man who let his hair become so greasy actually be fond of said hair? The oiliness didn't bother Severus. He observed the necessities of cleanliness and showered every second day, ignoring the fact that his hair could have used a daily scrub.

Occupied as he was with plans for the immediate future, Severus missed Hermione leaving the Great Hall without her flowers. He also missed Ron scowling at said flowers before he Vanished them.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 7

What was it they said about a wizard's nose?

Chapter 5

During the next weeks, Severus kept busy. In classes, he would cram as much correcting of essays as he could manage, deducting house points left, right and centre from anyone disturbing his concentration by being incompetent. If someone blew up or melted a cauldron, they'd earn themselves a detention scrubbing the Potions classroom or pickling lacewing flies. The only change from the pre-war Professor Snape was that he now dollied out detentions in odd bouts. In fact, had Minerva not chosen to look

the other way she needed a Potions master she might have commented on his tendency to bestow detentions for the slightest of offences when there was a lot of scrubbing, pickling or chopping to be done.

After making sure the dunderhead in detention did all the preparing of ingredients needed for classes, Severus would settle behind his desk and correct more essays. These were given less frequently this year, to the great relief of his students. When done with the tedious task of correcting sloppy essays, bestowing each with fewer sharp comments about stupidity and incompetence in spiky red script in order to save time, he would read the orders trickling in by owl and sort out his schedule for brewing in a colour-coded day planner he had bought in Hogsmeade after remembering that *his* Hermione had given him one of these in his dream. It looked ridiculous, but it worked very nicely.

By now, he had several potions brewing, ensuring that a steady trickle of extra income joined his teacher's salary. In addition to what he earned on renting out his cottage in Wales, by the end of June it should provide him the funds to start up his own, albeit small, company.

He had contemplated simply selling the cottage. While he didn't know a great deal about the real Miss Granger, he was willing to bet she wouldn't want to live in a cottage in the middle of nowhere. In the end, however, he had decided to let it be. His plan might yet fail. In that case, he would need his cottage again.

Miss Granger had, true to form, brought him a long list of publications to study. He did read them, too. His claim of wanting to know about modern Muggle life hadn't been untrue. Admittedly, he could have found the information he wanted himself. It would have cost him a little more time and effort, but not have been at all difficult. As it was, his plan had progressed nicely. To his surprise, Miss Granger had arrived with her list in the very next Potions class, and after a bit of hesitation, she'd asked about the book by Brage. It seemed the library didn't hold a copy, and she couldn't afford her own text of the over-priced volume.

He had readily lent her his book, supplying her also with the tome by Humphrey for comparison. After that, she'd stayed behind a few minutes after every class, just to ask him questions about Brage or answer his own about cell phones or internet or building development.

By the second week in October, he had started asking her questions about medications, and she had directed him to a monthly journal on the subject. Aside from the fact that Muggles seemed oddly eager to put the most poisonous compounds into their drugs, he found one or two ideas highly appealing. He was even toying with the idea of somehow condensing his potions to make pills. It would make storage and distribution so much more convenient. A glass of round tablets was by far easier to carry around in one's pocket in case of emergency than a vial of potion, especially when he considered the fact that most grown wizards and witches were dunderheads and couldn't properly shrink or place an unbreakable charm on said vial. He had taught them, after all, so he knew just how incompetent they were.

He had also brewed and dosed out to himself a mild teeth cleansing potion. The result was that his teeth were now the off-white colour of weak tea. When wooing a dentists' daughter, he would have to mind his dental hygiene.

Hermione was still dating Ron. At least, in theory she was still dating Ron. In reality, the two of them were constantly bickering, fighting and quarrelling. The closest they'd been to each other physically over the last two weeks had been when Hermione had whacked him on the shoulder for being an insensitive git. Ron sported a bruise for four days afterwards, but his male pride prevented him from complaining about it.

The only reason Hermione was still with Ron was her hope that it would get better. She'd always been one to fight for lost causes. Most others with a minimum ability to reason would have seen that she and Ron were a lost cause best abandoned. But while Hermione was smarter than most, she was also one to hope for what seemed impossible to the rest of the world. While Ron wasn't the man of her dreams, he was still just a boy. When he wasn't being an insensitive git, he was really ... just annoying. But he had to grow up, right? Then hopefully it would get better. She loved him, after all. As a friend, admittedly, but she'd read that relationships based on a strong friendship were likely to last. As far as passion went ... a few kisses with Viktor and a bit of snogging with Ron had yet to reveal any of the electrifying attraction found in the romance novels Lavender read. So Hermione filed it away along with Divination: silly, wishful thinking with no base in reality.

The end of October promised a trip into Hogsmeade, followed by the Halloween feast. Ron had secured himself a date with Hermione and was feeling rather smug. As they walked hand in hand behind Harry and Ginny, he was even too pleased to notice Ginny's hand sneaking under Harry's coat to caress her lover's back. He had long since stopped protesting. The last time he'd objected to Ginny snogging or groping Harry in front of him, he'd walked wobbly for three days due to the hex she threw at him for meddling in her business. She had made it clear that if he intruded again he'd be lucky to walk at all.

So Ron kept his eyes on Hermione, hoping she'd agree to kiss him once they were seated at a table in the Leaky Cauldron with their bottles of Butterbeer in front of them. He'd made sure to follow his book to the letter today, starting by complimenting her hair. It looked as bushy as it always did, of course, but she'd smiled when he told her it looked nice.

Walking along in silence through the cold October wind, Ron pondered the peculiarity of girls. There was Lavender, who had smothered him completely. Before her, he'd never known a guy could actually be snogged too much. So it had been rather nice that Hermione gave him space, at first. Yet, a kiss every fourth day or so wasn't much better than being accosted every time he entered the same room as his girl. Therefore, he now wondered if there couldn't be something in between: a girl who wanted to kiss him, but wasn't obsessed with the idea. Not that he wanted to break up with Hermione; she was much too scary when angered.

They reached the pub and got their Butterbeers. Ron steered Hermione to a corner away from the one where Ginny was groping Harry under the table. He grinned to himself when she let him hold her hand while she talked animatedly about some old potions text or another. After twenty solid minutes of nodding while not understanding a word, just to make her happy, he kissed her in sheer desperation of getting her to shut up. To his surprise, it worked for once.

Late that same night, Hermione sat with a group of giggling girls in her dormitory. She really wanted to get some sleep before tomorrow. There was homework to be done. No one else seemed to mind though, and while she could have put a silencing charm on her four-poster bed and gone to sleep, she would just feel left out come tomorrow.

"I'm telling you," Lavender said. "It's absolutely horrible being back this year. No handsome boys at all!" It was no secret that she fancied a Ravenclaw boy named Zacharias, who everyone else knew fancied boys. His lack of response to her heavy flirting made the girl sulky at best.

"I wouldn't say that," Ginny replied mischievously. "I'm quite pleased with the selection."

Lavender pouted and returned her attention to the magazine Parvati was reading, while Ginny compared notes with a friend regarding fellatio. It filled Hermione's head with highly unwelcome pictures of Ginny doing the things mentioned to Harry, so she turned in desperation to Parvati, hoping to get distracted. It was either that or starting to hum loudly to herself. She did *not* want to picture Harry like that.

"What are you reading?" she asked, trying to ignore the two girls now talking about the taste of semen.

"Just an article," Parvati replied. "It's rubbish, I'm sure. Some witch claiming a wizard's nose tells you the size of his penis."

Hermione snorted disdainfully. Honestly! There was absolutely no scientific background for claiming things like that. It was just as silly as the one claiming a man with big feet also had a big dick.

"You can't be sure it's not true," Lavender objected. "Not that I really know any men with big noses." She stared vacantly ahead, clearly cataloguing the wizards of Hogwarts by their noses.

"It has to be codswallop," Ginny chimed in. "Just imagine the size of Snape's thing if it was true!" She and her friend fell over each other, laughing about the idea.

"He'd have witches swarming all over him, never mind his greasy hair!" Parvati added, laughing with the other two.

"Lining up for a go with his giant cock!" Ginny said. "Mind you, he *has* been getting one or two offers since the end of the war "

The four girls started laughing again, leaving Hermione scowling at them. She couldn't believe the disrespect they showed by speculating about Professor Snape like that! No one would think in such a way about any other teacher! Of course, that was probably because the rest were positively ancient. Snape wasn't really that old. He seemed ancient, at times, but he was really the same age as Remus and Sirius. Hermione's brain quickly added it up as him being thirty-eight, thus nineteen years older than her. It struck her as peculiar that the serious, menacing professor was the same age as the fun-loving, childish Sirius Black had been. Not that Snape was menacing any more. He could be nearly pleasant, at times. She actually liked talking to him.

"What's got your attention, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "Imagining Snape?" She burst into laughter again at the look of shock on Hermione's face.

"Of course not!" Hermione protested. She shuddered at the mere idea.

Professor Snape might be nice company, but he was still very old and ... not very handsome, was he? Hermione contemplated this. Her choice in men was hardly better. Viktor, while famous, had been weirdly clumsy when not on a broom. His body had seemed out of proportion with itself. Ron wasn't by any standard a handsome boy, either. He had flaming red hair that he kept a little too long, so that it always looked like he'd just got out of bed. Freckles all over ... well, everywhere Hermione had seen. He was clumsy, mostly. He ate with his mouth open. But still ... he was strangely adorable. At least he had been.

So who was she to say that Professor Snape was bad looking? He probably looked just fine to a witch his own age. There certainly was no podgy beer belly. His hair wasn't balding or greying. As for anything below the belt ... Hermione found the notion of her Professor having a sex life very icky. Not because he was unappealing. Lots of ugly people were happily married, after all. She found that notion deeply comforting. Not everything depended on looks; there was proof of it to see daily. No, the idea of Professor Snape having any sort of love life at all was simply icky because he was Professor Snape. It never had occurred to her that the man was well, a man. He had to take a leak, like any other man. *Hmm ... did those many-buttoned clothes afford easy access?* He got horny, like any other man. Well, like most men, anyway, there were those few who

She mused to herself for several minutes about what she'd read in the book about sexual habits. Sometimes she feared that *she* might have a low sex drive. Ron never made her feel anything at all, and she'd never felt that dizzying infatuation that Lavender seemed to feel for a new boy every two months. The same one that Ginny had felt for Harry for years.

Of course, Snape might like men. But then she remembered that he'd been in love with Harry's mother, so he must like women, unless he liked both, obviously. At this point in her speculations she stopped herself, deeply mortified at her own brain's inability to stay away from a riddle. If Professor Snape had known what she'd been thinking about, he'd probably have her in detention until after graduation!

By the time the other girls were ready for bed, Hermione was curled up under her duvet. She had contemplated reading, but for once, she wasn't in the mood. Her head was still spinning with the notion that Professor Snape was a man. She wondered idly if he dated. He was single, after all. Did he have girlfriends? The idea made her have to cover her mouth to stifle a giggle. Did he go to bars? Did he flirt? She buried her face in the duvet to muffle the sound of her laughter. A picture of Professor Snape in his billowing cloak, holding out an umbrella-drink to a witch in skimpy robes while he wagged his eyebrows had plastered itself to her eyelids. Highly unlikely. She would be willing to bet that the man was horrible at flirting.

At the very same time, Severus sat in his favourite chair by the fireplace, a glass of Firewhisky forgotten on the table beside him, while he stared into the flames. He was feeling particularly disheartened tonight. Hermi Miss Granger had been flaunting her love for Idiot Weasley for everyone to see at Hogsmeade. Severus might have successfully befriended her, but he was twice her age, for Merlin's sake! He was her professor. The moral dilemma didn't bother Severus. He was more than willing to date his own student if it was what would make his life better than the misery it currently was. What bothered him was that not once, in nearly twenty years of teaching, had any of the girls looked his way. When he had been a young professor, they could still remember the awkward student Severus, and later ... later there had been the bitter bat of the dungeons. While the real Miss Granger was an exceptional girl, she had never given him any hint that she saw him as anything but a teacher and hesitant friend.

Admittedly, he had received a few ... propositions after his name had been cleared. The first time he'd received a letter from a witch he'd never even met before, stating her wish to make his life complete (her words, not his), he'd assumed it was someone poking fun at him and tossed the letter into the fireplace. The second time, he had snorted disdainfully and incinerated it. But they kept coming; what he could only assume to be insane witches, stating their desire to spend their life with him, or at the very least, to warm his bed for a while. He wasn't tempted. Nothing was worse than a clingy witch, sure she could better his life by changing his habits. Well, to be entirely honest, the idea of a witch warming his bed was tempting, just not tempting enough for him to risk the comfort of his lifestyle.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 7

An urge to hug Professor Snape occurs.

Chapter 6

It was a beautiful day in late November when the halting relationship between Ron and Hermione finally drew its last breath. Had Ron not been so afraid of confrontations, and Hermione not so fond of lost causes, they might have ended it amicably.

As it was, they ended it with a shouting match in the Gryffindor Common Room, loud enough to ensure that a very gossipy third-year could tell her rumor-mongering, Ravenclaw friend that Ron Weasley yes, *the* Ron Weasley, Harry Potter's friend had shouted at Hermione Granger that she was a cold-hearted bookworm. Then Hermione had shouted something back, but the words had unfortunately been impossible to hear because she'd hit him with some hex or another at the same time. A very impressive hex, too. Ron's nose had gone red, and he'd started sprouting multi-coloured antlers.

While Hermione fumed in her dormitory, muttering under her breath about knowing Ron to have the emotional range of a teaspoon, Ron was in the Hospital Wing, cursing loudly. Hermione hadn't hit him with a hex; it had been a charm used for Christmas decorations and it had been very easily fixed, despite having never been tried on a human subject before. That didn't change the fact that Ron had been forced to pass half the school before he'd got rid of the red nose and colour-changing antlers. It made him feel scorned, ridiculed and silly, on top of already feeling unwanted by Hermione's lack of attention. He was in a very bad mood indeed.

A full two hours passed before Severus heard about the incident at his Sunday lunch in the Great Hall. At first he smirked, leaning back in his chair while picturing Ronald Weasley to himself, red nosed and with antlers. He sipped his tea, trying not to chuckle at this picture. It wouldn't do for Professor Snape to chuckle in front of the students. He liked them to be afraid of him, thank you very much: it made keeping order in class so much easier.

As he put down his cup, he heard Minerva and Filius discussing Hermione's charm work. Severus allowed himself a brief moment of pride on Hermione's behalf. He knew he had no right to it, but he didn't much care. She'd broken off with her boyfriend, and his goal looked attainable again. Severus was going to be a happy man. The real Miss Granger showed great promise in being just as desirable as *his* Hermione had been: powerful, intelligent, and passionate. He cleared his throat as his brain came up with memories of just how passionate *his* Hermione had been. This was neither the time nor place. He could wank to the idea of her in his shower later like he normally did on Sundays.

This was the time to move forward with his plan to seduce Herm damnation! Miss Granger. While she had been in a relationship, he hadn't dared approach her. It could have backfired in a thousand ways. Now he needed to make a move before some other young imbecile noticed how damn sexy she looked.

"Are you feeling alright, Severus?" Minerva's voice roused him from his thoughts.

"What?" he snapped, annoyed at being distracted from thinking about his plan. Well, about Miss Granger's hips really, but why be so fastidious?

"You look a little ... flushed," Minerva stated uncomfortably. "there's been a bout of flu amongst the students. Maybe you've caught a bug?" she sounded incredulous, and with good reason. Severus hadn't been ill since he was fourteen. He'd been injured often enough, but never ill. For Severus to have caught the flu would be as normal as him trooping up for breakfast dressed in a red shirt.

Severus stared at her. Now that she mentioned it, his cheeks did feel warm. "Draatted dunderheads," he grumbled. "This is exactly why I didn't want to go back to teaching." *Keep your perverted fantasies in the privacy of your chambers, you dolt,* he berated himself. He was nearly forty, for Merlin's sake. There was no excuse for him to start acting like a blasted hormonal teenager again.

He ate the remainder of his lunch in a hurry, determined to return to his chambers and not to leave them again until breakfast on Monday. Maybe an early shower would be in order too. It would not be a cold one, either. Severus happened to believe in indulging himself. No one else would, after all.

There was something decidedly odd going on, Severus had determined by dinnertime on Monday. During his last Potions class, he'd caught two sixth-year Slytherin girls looking speculatively at him. And when he had finally lost his patience with their giggling and given them a detention, they had both laughed so hard they could hardly stand, until he had told them to meet up at Filch's office. To his satisfaction they had both looked decidedly glum after that. A student giggling at detention given by their sour Potions professor wasn't normal. Not at all. It had continued while he walked up to dinner: two seventh-year Hufflepuff girls had been whispering behind their hands as he walked past, both blushing furiously.

He lingered in the shadows outside the Great Hall, determined to find the answer to this strange behaviour among the older girls in the castle. It was nothing new to have students whispering about him, casting furtive glances at the bat of the dungeons. But the giggling and the blushing ... now that was new. Severus didn't like it.

"Well, it was in *Witch Weekly*," he could hear one say to another.

Severus scoffed at this. That sad excuse for a magazine contained even more rubbish than the Quibbler, impossible as that seemed.

Unfortunately, though, neither reading nor gossiping about the publication was against school rules, so he couldn't deduct house points. This fact made him even more sour, and he kept listening, hoping to find an excuse to give someone, *anyone*, a detention. He had potions ingredients that needed grinding.

"Really? Well, just imagine if it's actually, you know, *true*!" the other replied, then they both giggled like the dunderheads they were.

Severus shifted his weight, wishing they'd just get to the point, rather than chatting away like fools.

"Do you think it is? True?" More laughter.

Severus took a deep breath, trying not to grind his teeth. It gave him a headache, and he was already in a foul enough mood as it was.

"Well, who knows? Those black, billowing robes could hide *anything*, if you know what I mean "

"Anything! If it's true, they'd be hiding something huge!" The snickering had reached hysteric proportions.

"By the size of his nose, he'd be hung like a bloody Hippogriff!"

Severus blinked, then he performed an ear-cleansing charm, just to be sure he wasn't imagining things. They were talking about his ... well, his ... assets? Slightly dumbfounded, he walked into the Great Hall, sinking into the seat beside Minerva. He absentmindedly heaped green beans and mashed potatoes onto his plate, reaching for the pork chops. Since when did admittedly stupid, yet undeniably pretty girls of seventeen consider what was hiding under his robes? He frowned at his plate. Did Hermio Miss Granger too, contemplate his assets? This development worried him. While it might be a good thing to have her thinking about him as a man, rather than as a teacher, it wasn't good at all to have her thinking he was 'hung like a bloody Hippogriff'. Especially since he wasn't. He stabbed his beans as if wishing to murder them.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione turned to see Professor Snape walking towards her. He looked as tall and foreboding as always in that billowing cloak of his, but she smiled at him anyway. He had been very nice to her over the last months. Not to anyone else, just her. At first, this fact had baffled her, but now she thought it might be because she'd saved his life. He might be a prickly man, but he was very honourable.

"I " He hesitated, his fingers fiddling with a book he held.

It stunned Hermione. Professor Snape didn't fiddle or hesitate! He was always commanding and self-assured.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked, more to break the silence than anything else. Professor Snape fiddling! Who'd believe her if she told them?

"Professor McGonagall informed me that you've ended your liaison with Mr. Weasley," he stated.

Hermione couldn't stop herself from grinning at him. It wasn't because he took an interest in her life, it was the tone he'd used when saying 'Mr. Weasley', like the Weasley in question was as desirable as termites, or dry rot. Right now, with Ron's immature behaviour for something that was really his fault well, both of their faults, to be honest, but mostly his! Snape's attitude was very welcome. Ron should just accept that she had every right to be angry when he accused her of being cold. It was hardly her fault that the charm somehow had worked on his person. If he couldn't even get over the embarrassment of being seen with antlers for ten minutes, he really was just an immature ass. An immature ass who no longer spoke to her, just like Ron always chose to act. Boys!

"I have, sir," she said out loud, curious as to what Professor Snape wanted. He'd never, in all their brief conversations, asked about her private life.

"And not on amiable terms," he continued, "I must say, I'm impressed with the foolish wand-waving involved from your side." His face, as usual, revealed little sign of amusement. But she knew him better now, and could discern a slight twitch of his lips, as if he was trying not to smile.

"Thank you. I know you're not easily impressed," she replied. Then she wondered why she hadn't told him that it had been unintentional. But she was sure there was no need to defend her actions to Professor Snape.

"Indeed." He inclined his head slightly.

By now, Hermione was ready to burst with curiosity. While Snape was friendly these days, he had never stopped her in the hallway before. Admittedly, it was a deserted hallway, but still ...

Severus wished, for the first time in his life, that he had some of that Gryffindor ability to blurt out his quandary. How hard could it be to ask the girl to accompany him over Christmas break? He had made a detailed, credible excuse, like the Slytherin he was. Cringing internally at his lack of courage, he breathed in deeply, determined to say what he'd stopped her to say.

"Miss Granger, I have a favour to ask of you." She likes to help! he told his revolted *pride* *l's for the best, you old loner*.

"The matter stands thus: Over the last years, I have worked on an improvement of the Wolfsbane Potion." So far it was all true. If forced to lie, always use as much truth as possible.

"Really?" Her face lit up beautifully in her enthusiasm. He could see that she wanted to heap him with questions, but she'd gained more self-control over the last year, and settled for squirming slightly with impatience.

"Really." He smirked at her. It should have been a smile, he knew, but Severus didn't smile. If the girl decided that she wanted him, she'd have to take the whole package. He was perfectly willing to whiten his teeth for her. The same generosity would not be extended to his acerbic personality.

"I have, however, reached a stage in my testing where I find myself unable to brew on my own. In short, I'm in need of an assistant." This was also true, but now came the half-truth.

"Also, I find that my teaching duties prevent me from focusing fully on my brewing. Therefore, I had hoped to use the weeks of the Christmas break to implement my new ideas." He was a master at multi-tasking. After teaching for so many years, he was sure he could teach in his sleep. He had successfully pretended to be a Death Eater, kept Potter from getting himself killed and kept up a full-time teaching position, simultaneously. He sure as hell could brew in-between classes.

"If you agree to be my assistant, you would of course, be free to leave at the end of each day. However, my private lab is in my cottage in Wales. It's not easily reached by Apparation. Therefore, I'm obliged to offer you the spare room for the duration."

As expected, she gaped at him.

"Er you want me to stay at your house? In Wales?" she asked, sounding incredulous.

He inclined his head slightly. In Wales, she'd be safely away from any dunderheaded boys likely to flirt with who was to become *his* Hermione Miss Granger. Oh, blast!

"I'll leave you to decide, Miss Granger. Tell me of your decision after next Potions class." He smirked at her again before turning to leave, pleased with the progress of his plan.

Hermione stood staring after Professor Snape, feeling a strange and very inappropriate desire to run after him and hug him closely. The world, surely, had gone mad? Since when did Professor Snape invite students to spend the holidays with him? Admittedly, he had seemed very reluctant, and it was for his research. She knew, after getting to know him a little better, that he actually liked brewing potions. He hated teaching the subject, but he was fond enough of brewing to plan on starting up his own potions company come summer.

Plus, they did get along, sort of. At least ... he presented interesting conversation. Yet for him to tolerate her company for over three weeks was very strange. But it was also a highly welcome invitation. Her parents still lived in Australia, and her application for a Portkey had been buried in paperwork. Originally, her plan had been to join Harry and the Weasleys at the newly rebuilt Burrow, but with Ron in a snit, that wasn't an option. She could just imagine him giving her a cold shoulder for the entire holiday, while Mrs. Weasley offered her a frosty 'Merry Christmas'. The only option that had been left to her, before Professor Snape's invitation, had been to visit her relatives. The choice had stood between her father's brother, Charles, who had recently remarried for the third time, to his secretary, once again; or her mother's sister Agatha, who had five children under the age of ten, all seemingly always high on sugar; or lastly, her Grandma Jane, who still talked to Hermione as if she was five years old and insisted she went to bed before nine. Compared to them, Christmas with Snape seemed like the perfect holiday. But then again, a holiday with the Giant Squid would have seemed quite nice by now.

She hardly needed the two days until next Potions class to decide. There was no doubt in her mind Christmas would be spent with Professor Snape.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 7

Off to Wales

Chapter 7

"Have you lost your marbles, Severus Snape?" Minerva's voice was alarmingly shrill. It did nothing to help Severus' budding headache.

"Inviting a student to stay with you, *alone* I will add, for the Christmas holiday?" She sank back down into her chair. "What were you thinking? Consider the rumours, Severus!"

"I was thinking about my research into the field of potions against lycanthropy, Minerva. Rumours are hardly anything I concern myself with," he made sure to use his most suffering voice. Gryffindors were easy to manipulate: of course he knew there would be rumours - if anyone found out.

He had been extraordinarily pleased when Herm - Miss Granger - accepted his proposal, even if it had been expected. She never had been one to refuse an offer to learn something new, and he had offered her a part in researching a new potion. It was like dangling sweets in front of, well, Weasley, for one. Easy. Of course, it wouldn't have been so easy if not for the fact that Miss Granger resembled *his* Hermione on this point.

"Yes, admirable, of course, but ... why a student? *A female* student! Imagine what people would say!" Minerva shook her head in exasperation, as if he was one of her constantly misbehaving students.

"You forget that I have taught her myself. I know she's up to my standards," he sneered, "besides, as you reminded me when I found Potter and Miss Weasley in a compromising position on the Astronomy Tower, she is of age." He hadn't really wanted to expel Potter as he had now resigned himself to tolerating the boy. Potter was a friend of Hermione. One Potter had ruined his hopes for the future; he would be damned if he let his less than friendly feelings for this one ruin his chances with Hermione. Getting a girl's best friend expelled had never done wonders for any suitor.

"Besides, they need not know." He leaned back in his chair, waiting for her to take the bait.

"Severus! Everything that happens in this castle is known within minutes - it's like the walls themselves have ears!"

"Thanks to the gossiping, meddling paintings," Severus informed her curtly, "you merely have to say that Miss Granger is going to spend her Christmas break working with a tutor on an advanced project due to her impressive scholarly accomplishments."

"Well, but -" It seemed Minerva realised that this was the simple truth, "-I'm still responsible for her! It's hardly advisable to send a young woman alone to Wales with her teacher!"

Severus smirked. "What do you think I'm going to do to her, Minerva? Seduce her? Lure the bookish Miss Granger into spending the holiday in my bed, exploring the positions of the Kama Sutra?" Now, there was an idea ...

"Really, Severus!" Minerva was pink right up to her hat brim. She looked so shocked that Severus had trouble not chuckling. People never seemed to understand his sense of humour, but that was half the fun.

"Then what's the problem?" he drawled. Only Gryffindors lied outright. He had told Minerva just about the truth, yet she would never believe him. Not that he planned to explore the Kama Sutra with Her - Miss - Oh, blast! Now he didn't even know what to call the girl! He could, however, wank to the fantasy of them exploring it.

"Oh, well of course I know you'd never ... take liberties," Minerva informed him. "I'm merely concerned about propriety!"

"This isn't the sixteenth century, Minerva. If the girl could spend a year camping with two teenage boys, I'm sure she'll survive three weeks in my company. Or do you perhaps wish me to inform Miss Granger that you found the idea improper? She seemed set on helping -"

He saw Minerva pale, no doubt imagining the lecture on women's rights she would get if Hermione heard she'd been denied something because she was a girl. "No, no," she said hastily. "We'll tell people it's an ... extracurricular project."

Severus rose, inclining his head slightly at his colleague. He had things to plan. Miss - oh, damnation! Hermione - was to spend three weeks with him in Wales. Three weeks was quite some time, but not nearly sufficient to make a young woman fall in love with her acerbic old bat of a teacher. He gritted his teeth, determined not to start thinking negatively again. Severus knew full well he was not handsome by any definition of the word. He merely had to get Hermione to see something else in him; and not his foul mood and bitter persona, either. As usual when he started thinking like this, he reminded himself that Hermione had seen something in Ron Weasley. He might not think too highly about his own appeal to women, but Severus felt damned sure that he could beat Weasley.

He would have to get her a present, of course. One didn't invite a girl - woman - over for Christmas without getting her a present. But the choice of gift didn't offer much of a challenge. It would, given their current relationship, or lack of it, have to be something relatively impersonal. In addition, when he considered what Hermione liked, it would have to be a book. No lacy lingerie. Shame, that.

He reached his quarters, hastily taking down his wards to enter. He was determined to pursue that last picture of his Hermione wearing lacy black panties, garters and a bra trimmed in Gryffindor red. She would stand on all four in his bed, then turn her head and smile at him. "I'm all yours, Severus," she would whisper seductively. His rational brain recognised this for the tacky fantasy it was. His cock luckily didn't mind this fact.

Hermione jumped up from her seat next to Harry in the Great Hall. She had tried, and failed, not to let herself be affected by Ron's expression during breakfast. He was wearing what she had dubbed 'The Royal Sulk'. He did it well, too. His bottom lip stuck out ever so slightly, and his eyes were narrowed accusingly at her, as if she'd just declared that her favourite hobby was House-elf baiting. If she glanced his way for too long he would rub the side of his head, as if still in pain from the ruddy antlers. When Madam Pomfrey had assured her that the damnable things had been easy to remove, she had opened her mouth, twice, to inform Ron, that sulking prat, that he was more of a whiner than Draco Malfoy. It was even the truth. But the idea of the row that would follow had made her stay silent. She didn't have time for rows today, when she had been informed curtly by Professor Snape to be at his office door at eight-thirty, sharp. Despite his ... friendliness, out of lack of a better word, he could at times, well, most of the time, be rather intimidating. She didn't want to start the holiday by angering him. While Ron sulking was horrible, she shuddered to think what three weeks with a less-than-pleased Snape would be like.

So she hugged Harry goodbye, wished Ginny a merry Christmas and turned her nose up resolutely at Ron's cold look before she left the Great Hall. Best not be late. Besides, it had been a rather frosty breakfast.

Severus stopped himself, for the second time, from pacing back and forth in his office. He was waiting for Miss - oh blast and damnation! - Hermione to enter so that they could leave by Floo to a desolate inn in Wales. He was too paranoid to connect his cottage to the network. Minerva had informed him that the war was over and that such foolishness was no longer needed, but Severus preferred cautious over dead and kept to his ways. You never knew when a lunatic might decide to stumble by and try to kill you, or when one's friends might decide to visit while one were shagging on the hearthrug, for that matter. He shuddered at the thought of that one time when he had found Lucius and Narcissa trying out a more daring technique on the table in the foyer.

It might have been said that he was nervous, but Severus would never admit this fact even to himself. He was simply eager to be far away from all the idiotic students, thank you very much. Not that this changed the fact that he was, once again, pacing restlessly while staring at the clock across from his desk.

"You're a grown man!" he told himself. He rarely spoke aloud, but he found it helpful on desperate occasions. It seemed to be one of the side effects of living alone for too long. "Stop trampling around like a spooked Hippogriff." This didn't help. It only made him wince as he remembered the blasted rumours about him and a certain part of said Hippogriff's anatomy. Blast, too. At least he hadn't, so far, caught Miss Granger staring speculatively at his crotch in class. He had, however, caught a third-year girl at it, just the day before. A third-year! She was too bloody young to be interested in things like that. At least she ought to have been!

"Dunderheads," he muttered, just to calm down a little.

"Professor?"

He looked up to see Hermione waiting somewhat uncertainly at the door.

"Enter," he snapped, taken aback by her sudden appearance. Then, remembering that he was supposed to be nice to her, he added, "I hope you're ready to leave?" in what might have been described as a friendly tone, at least considered his persona.

"Thank you," she replied, chewing on her bottom lip in that annoying fashion she had. His Hermione certainly never had done anything half as silly. It made him want to snatch her up and snog - kiss, not snog, he didn't snog like a dratted hormonal Hufflepuff - her senseless.

"Er - Professor? Are you okay?"

"Most excellent," he assured her. "Nothing is better suited to lifting the spirits than three dunderhead-free weeks."

She chuckled softly. "Well, I guess I should thank you for the compliment. That means I'm not a dunderhead, then?"

He inclined his head. "It might," he allowed. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Yes, please! Three weeks without Ron sounds wonderful!"

Severus actually bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from grinning rather wolfishly. So Weasley was most definitely out of the picture, then. Excellent.

Nodding towards the bowl of Floo Powder sitting on his mantelpiece, he winced slightly at the ornate silver object that he only kept out in the open because he knew it would annoy the giver no end to see it used for something as commonplace as Floo Powder.

"Galbraith's Inn," he told her as she grabbed a handful to toss it into the fireplace, reciting his instruction carefully.

He watched her twirl away in a flash of green, briefly allowing himself to wonder if this Hermione would follow directions in bed, too. His Hermione most certainly hadn't. Stubborn witch. There might be good things to doing it all over again. If she only wanted him, that was. With a set expression he followed, determined to use all his considerable brainpower to make her fall for him.

When he arrived in the dusty, boarded-up, old inn, he found her peering curiously around the room. Only now did he really take in that she was still wearing her school robes, the woollen cloak drawn tight about her to keep out the icy wind blowing in through a broken window.

"I trust you brought warmer clothes," he said, his voice still carrying a hint of that old sneering tone. He could curse himself to pieces, but that tone was so ingrained in him, it would take a while to disappear. And he did try to avoid using it around her. It would no doubt lead her to think he was disdainful, maybe even mocking. But Severus was honestly worried at the idea of her getting cold on the semi-long hike through the snow to his cottage.

"Yes, of course. You did warn me that it was in the mountains and that there would be quite a bit of snow. But I thought we were Apparating there?"

"I'm a spy, Miss Granger. You'd hardly expect my home to be easily reachable, would you? There's a anti-apparition barrier stretching about a mile from my cottage." He smirked, reminding himself to be friendlier. Damned his acerbic persona.

Hermione shivered in the icy draught coming in through the window. She hastily slipped out of her school robes, happy to have on sturdy Muggle woollens under. Then she pulled her duffel coat and thick sheepskin boots out of her little bag, shrugging into them. It would all be a lot more convenient if she could transfigure her school robes into something warmer, but on the other side ... the idea of what could be the consequences if students could transfigure their robes - not to mention the robes of others - into something else wasn't appealing. She remembered that story in *Hogwarts, A History* about the two fighting Slytherins in the eighteenth century. One had ended up completely nude in the Great Hall; his clothes transfigured into sand, and he was the lucky one. The other had ended up in a Muggle dress from the period. They'd had to spell him out of the corset. So maybe changing clothes wasn't such a bother.

"Better."

She looked up to see Snape smirking at her. He looked like he approved, odd as that was for him. Besides, he no longer wore the billowing black robes she'd never seen him without. Now he had on a thick Muggle parka, looking very out of fashion, but also very ... normal. Nearly relaxed. Well, at least not very tense. This was still Snape.

"Should we be on our way, then?"

Snape held out his hand, and for a moment Hermione just stared at it, completely baffled. Then she snapped out of it. They were Apparating together; she had merely assumed that he would grab her arm or something. So she put her hand in his, surprised again to find his fingers warm against hers. He had what her mother called the hands of a pianist: long supple fingers with only a few rough patches.

"Hold on tight." He tucked her arm over his, linking fingers with her. Then he turned on the spot, taking her along for an Apparition so seamless, so perfect, she had to smile. They appeared again standing in a wooden area, so quietly the little bird chirruping on a branch nearby kept on singing, undisturbed. Powerful wizard indeed. She could already guess that these weeks may reveal many secrets about the man behind Professor Snape.

"We're going up that hill," he told her, letting go of her hand to point up a narrow track winding through the trees.

Hermione looked around, appreciating the beauty of it. Yes, it was remote and hidden away, but what else could be expected of this man? He had made two appearances between his release from the Hospital Wing and the start of term: his visit to her at Grimmauld Place and a brief stop at the Ministry Ceremony, where he'd looked like he very much wanted to Crucio the Minister for giving him the Order of Merlin, First Class.

She looked up the path again only to see him trudge on, already quite a bit ahead of her. Hurrying to catch up, she was astonished again when he turned to her, waiting for her to catch up without so much as a sneer or disparaging comment.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. It's so beautiful here, I lost myself a little."

He inclined his head. "I didn't want to disturb you."

Well, there was a surprise. Snape could be civil? He seemed so ... human.

"Miss Granger ... we are no longer at Hogwarts. We'll be working closely and living closely for weeks. It would be far more practical for you to use my given name."

"Er -" She swallowed, trying to find her bearing around this new Snape. They had been friendly over the last term, of course, but he'd never stepped out of his role as her teacher. "-Of course, Severus."

"Good."

"If you call me Hermione," she blurted, wanting to be rid of the infernal 'Miss Granger'. It made her feel ... like a little girl.

"Gladly, Hermione."

With that they entered a clearing in the woods, looking down a slight slope to what must surely be the cosiest little cottage Hermione had ever seen.

