

A Smudge Of Red

by *astopperindeath*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: This piece was written for the 2010 sshg_exchange. The prompt was given by drinkingcocoa as an art prompt, but I turned it into a fic prompt: "Severus looks on adoringly as Hermione, scowling, grades parchments with scandalous quantities of red ink."

He's watching her as he always does. His eyes caress her body like a sculptor's hands over clay...for surely, his task is to mold her. He searches for changes in her...at first, subtle. Now, painfully obvious to anyone who knew her before.

He made her responsible for all his teaching duties months ago and now sits in the back of the classroom, watching. He realizes his scrutiny of her person probably borders on obsessive. But, he's also never cared so much about the results of his teaching before. Everyone knows he's always hated teaching, but he's never underestimated the importance of his profession...that without him, even more dunderheads would be let loose in the world with a Potions kit and a wand.

His personal reputation is in shambles since the war, and he isn't about to have people judging him for the quality of his student's work. Despite his nonchalant attitude toward his students, he knows the importance of preparing them, and he'll make sure she's ready to take on the challenge of educating them.

Yet, observing her in the classroom isn't enough. He makes reasons for her to use the private labs in his rooms; it allows him to study her more.

He watches her as she works in his sitting room. She spends more time in his rooms than she does in her own these days, saying it's easier to just work with his books *in situ* than to carry them back to her rooms. He grins, his teeth bared in a grimace that could only be described as snakelike. For that is what he is...a serpent sent to tempt her with his knowledge and power.

And enticed her he has. She's no longer the know-it-all of old, not really. He's bowed her, twisted her into a feminine version of himself, self-confident and acerbic. Yet, he hasn't bent her fully; she's tempered with something uniquely her own. Through all his manipulation, her sense of fairness remains.

He stands in the shadows of his rooms, peering through the doorway, watching her work. Today, she's curled in an armchair, rifling through a stack of parchments: today's exams. He purposely makes examination days difficult for her, piling all of the younger students' exams into one day. He enjoys testing her strength.

She always rises to his challenges.

She moves the parchment aside and shifts in the chair, her body slightly slouched, her feet stretched out before of her. One hand rises to pinch the bridge of her nose, staving off the tension headache settling in before the day even starts. He smiles, realizing how many of his mannerisms she's picked up over the last months, though she would never admit it.

He takes stock of her appearance. He's seen her in all manners of dress, but in the halls and the classroom, her students always see The Apprentice. Her uniform, she calls it: dark gray robes, sturdy heeled boots, hair tightly pulled back from her face.

Severe.

He approves.

They don't speak in the mornings; in fact, they rarely have conversations outside the necessary ones about pedagogy and brewing techniques. She moves softly through his study, quietly requesting a mug of coffee through the Floo. Her caffeine addiction has surely rid her of the need to champion the rights of house-elves. Another change.

They certainly never chitchat. Quite an improvement from when she'd arrived at his office doorstep, demanding he take her on as apprentice and waving under his nose a list of twenty reasons supporting her position. Yes, she's matured greatly.

She leaves without a word, walking through the doorway of his study leading into the stores of the Potions classroom. He listens closely to the roar that signals the opening of the door to the classroom, followed by the deafening silence that falls once they see her. The students fear her nearly as much as they fear him. He's trained her well.

He leaves his chambers through the door leading to the hallway of the dungeons, enjoying the short walk down the corridor and the unnecessary points deductions he leaves in his wake. He approaches the door at the front of the Potions classroom seconds before the period begins and throws it open. He smirks at the reverberation of the jars rattling on the shelves from the force of the door. All of the students flinch; it never gets old. She stares icily at them, daring them to break the silence of the room. They gape back, petrified.

He stalks down the main aisle to the back of the room and sits on a low bench on the far wall. It's a thrilling game he plays, creating tension in the room when there really is no need for it other than the satisfaction of fucking with everyone. A hiss at a student, regardless of whether they've done something wrong, purely in an attempt to break her concentration. An upward-sliding eyebrow gestured towards her, questioning the wording of her lecture.

She's learned to ignore him, even if the students haven't. She's utterly capable of teaching this class on her own; he never would have chosen her as an apprentice if he actually had been worried about her teaching skills. He would never let on that his presence in the classroom was completely superfluous, least of all to her; he remains simply to watch her, to find other ways to improve her.

She was developing a crease on the bridge of her nose from the stress...the same crease that he's worn since his second year as Potions master. Vigilance was the name of the game, and a passive Potions master was as good as a dead Potions master. A mark of honor, that crease. He was the first Potions professor in the history of Hogwarts who hadn't had a student die in his classroom. He may hate his job, but he knows he's damned good at it. And he'd make sure she excelled at it, too.

He never says a word; he doesn't have to. She has this process down to an art. Four periods in a day. Approximately twenty students a period. Eighty essays to grade and potions to check, assuming all the potions make it to the bottle. She will spend hours tonight grading; she will not finish, but she will try.

He won't let her finish.

It's part of their game. He pushes her to her breaking point; she attacks him, taking out her frustration in a verbal sparring match. They may converse about potions and teaching, but their fights are the only time they really *talk*, and he savors it. She's the only staff member, hell, the only person he knows, who can keep up with him mentally.

The game always starts the same way. He watches her grade, scanning her every move from across his desk, watching every comment she makes and waiting for the most perfect of them. The one he would be proud to write himself. The one that would have made a young Longbottom sob. And then, he informs her that her thoughts on the matter are wrong.

She's never wrong.

And how they fight...she, screaming loudly, which leaves her red in the face and shaking. He, never raising his voice, his tone laced with superiority. At the height of her passion, he dismisses her, knowing that simultaneously not finishing her task and losing the argument will drive her mad.

She's so beautiful when she's enraged.

He never tells her how arousing he finds her like this nor that he sees her as his equal now. He certainly does not tell her he'd like nothing more than to take her past the study into his bedchambers and claim her fully.

That would ruin the game.

He groans.

The students look up at him nervously, wondering what they (or she) have done wrong. She clears her throat, bringing their attention back to their examinations. Back to her.

Where it belongs.

The first two periods come and go. He doesn't move; he just watches, proud of her command over the room. Proud of himself for forming her into such a gifted professor.

Because she is. She can command a room with a single look. In a well-worded comment, she can decimate the ego of the most arrogant of Purebloods. And often, she does it without even trying. Far different from the clearly rehearsed speeches of her younger days, full of parroted drivel from a textbook. Now, she is a virtuoso with caustic vocabulary.

During the lunch period, he moves to the stores, making a production of going over some reshelving she had done the day before. Another excuse to keep near her, to watch her during a private moment.

She moves the parchments to the side of her desk, the pile of work glaring at her while she refuses to acknowledge it. She writes a letter, its blistering prose scarring the parchment as the nib of her quill digs in harder than is absolutely necessary. Standing, she moves towards the door to post the letter. She looks up at him and raises an eyebrow. She knows he watches and silently challenges him to follow her.

He continues unnecessarily rearranging the contents of the shelves; of course she'd done it perfectly the first time. She's probably chalking it up to his unfairness, no doubt.

She returns to the classroom several minutes later and doesn't acknowledge him. He glares at her, and she, paying no heed to him, takes her seat behind his desk once again. She orders a plate of sandwiches and eats a few before vanishing the platter. She never offers him any of her lunch; she knows he wouldn't eat anyways. Drinking more coffee, she waits for the students to return.

He returns to the back of the room.

More parchments pile up, more cauldrons bubble over. The rest of the day goes by in a haze of simmering potions and scratching quills. Eventually, the students leave, and he looks at her expectantly. She looks at the clock and realizes it's time for the dinner hour. Scowling, she curses the Headmistress for her "all faculty must be present at dinner no matter what" policy. Her profanity weaves through the air like the finest of tapestries. Another behavior she's learned from him.

The more irritated she gets, the more inspiring their night will be. He escorts her to the Hall, seating her next to him. She's clearly tired from the day, judging from her

drooping eyelids and slightly frowning mouth. She's too weary to even think about eating, yet he keeps ensuring that food piles onto her plate. She pokes at it listlessly, knowing she should eat, but not really having the motivation.

When she feels she's spent enough time at dinner, she glares at the Headmistress before abruptly leaving the table, quitting her colleagues and master at the table. The room falls silent as she passes through the aisle, and the click, click of her heels echoes through the Great Hall as she leaves the room.

Her robes billow. The corner of his mouth twitches, and he wills himself not to smile in front of this entire room. The Headmistress frowns at him, her lips pursed in quiet indignation. She's made it clear repeatedly that she doesn't like his influence over her former prefect.

He doesn't care.

The old cat hasn't any right to complain because his apprentice has become the best professor here. He fully intends to have her replace him entirely next year, not that he's told anybody. He had not expected nor wanted to survive Nagini's bite, but now that he's facing an eternity of living, the last place he wants to be is here. If he's to ensure some semblance of respectable teaching remains at this God-forsaken place after his departure, he will mold her exactly as he deems fit, regardless of what the Headmistress thinks.

Besides, his apprentice's training and performance reflects upon him, and he'll be damned if anyone has anything to say about that after he's gone. He may be an insurmountable asshole, but he's earned his place of respect in academia, if not in the hearts of his students.

When he returns to his study, she's already there, seated at his desk, hunched over a sheaf of parchment. He knows better than to interrupt her on these nights...at first. If he interrupts her too soon, it ruins the fun of the game. Her quill is dripping with disdain; large, red blotches of ink splatter scandalously over the parchment. The carnage is exquisite, and he gloats to see her so vicious. Quite different from the almost anal-retentive copperplate essays she had turned in as a student, but so much more entertaining.

He seats himself across her and leers. He adores her like this. It's a word he never thought he'd use in his life, but adoration is perfect in this situation. She writes something particularly scathing on a test, he assumes so at least from the fervor with which she writes and the angry grin on her face. She mutters under her breath; he catches the words "dunderheads" and "spawn of Neville" through her furious tone, and he shakes his head. No, he doesn't miss grading at all.

Her intensity used to irritate him. When she was younger, her determination to be the best above all her peers and to shove it down their throats in class, regardless of what a little swot it made her out to be, had caused him to come down on her far harder than her peers. Now, that same intensity had morphed into a need to nurture the best in others.

She has become something he never achieved...a true educator...and in that way, she is different enough from him that she will truly thrive here. He enjoyed playing the tyrant because it was fun; she's elevated tyranny to a science, inspiring respect from her students that he would never experience. Because, while she ultimately rules with an iron fist, she never treats one student any differently than the other. Then again, she never had to go into a room of Slytherins bowing and scraping to keep from becoming Nagini's next meal, either, so she's probably a little less biased than he. Still, she's an equal opportunity tyrant, and the students have come to respect her for it.

Lately, he finds himself wondering if she's happy. It's an odd thought for him to have. For so long, she's just been an amusement, a pastime...his last chance to leave something of himself worth remembering at Hogwarts.

She pulls another test towards herself, and he sees a small smile play over her features...a good essay. She lives for these essays; all true educators do. The one that proves that she is able to not only transfer knowledge to a student but also the application of said knowledge. She holds in front of her the only Outstanding essay of the evening. Her reading slows; her quill rests. Her eyes consume the essay, and her face glows with radiant joy. This is why she goes through the hell he puts before her on days like this, for this one, shining example that she's made the right decision in choosing her vocation. After this year, she'll command his dungeons, no longer living through this game they play, and she'll be a far better professor than he could ever hope to be.

He will leave Hogwarts, for better or for worse. But until then, he will spend as much time watching her...from the shadows, from the classroom, from every angle and in every light. She is his creation; he took a perfect Eve, tempted her with his power, and made her human, made her his.

He's been studying her for hours. The stack has dwindled to just a few parchments. She has a smear of red ink on her nose, and he watches it flicker in the firelight. It's eerie that she's so comfortable in his presence, under his scrutiny. As eerie as his ever consuming regard is for her.

She's moved on from the perfect parchment to another, one clearly less titillating. She writes something particularly splotchy, and he pounces, bending over the desk and placing his hands on either side of the parchment. She scowls up at him.

He walks around the table slowly, reading her words aloud. She puts her quill down, daring him to continue, to find fault with her impeccable work...to not let her finish.

The game begins. She tells him why she's right, her voice rising an octave and her face reddening. He sits on the edge of the desk, looming over her, arms crossed, voice pitched low and even. She stands by her decision to berate the student, pointing out that he had used the exact same words on one of her own essays.

He searches for a biting retort, for some other reason to tell her she's wrong, for anything that will extend their interaction as long as possible. At some point, she left the chair and now stands before him, chest heaving, eyes wide, feet planted and hands on hips. Her hair has come loose from her bun, and several tendrils frame her face.

That smudge of red on her nose mocks him, begs him to touch her, to remove it. He resists the urge to lick his thumb and rub it off; she's not a child to be mothered. He raises his wand and casts a Scourgify charm.

She huffs and continues her tirade. A lock of her hair moves in front of one of her eyes. Almost without thinking, and certainly against his will, he raises his hand and tucks the lock behind her ear. Her breathing hitches in response, and her eyes fix upon his.

He slowly moves in closer, expecting her at any moment to scream or hit him or flee. When she does none of these things, he lifts his hand up to cup her cheek before winding his fingers into her bun. Removing the ornate chopstick she's used to hold it together, he watches her hair tumble down. The stick falls to the floor. Snaking his fingers through her hair, he leans in and tentatively kisses her.

She gasps, and her hands slide up his chest and lock behind his neck. She tilts her head and deepens the kiss.

His arms encircle her waist and pull her flush with his body. The kiss is everything he's not allowed himself to contemplate, for fear his game would cease being just that and become courting. He knows he will lose her in just a few months, and he can't bear the thought that as perfect as this kiss is, it means he may lose her sooner.

He pulls back and studies her face, searching for any sign that she's upset, that she thinks this is wrong, that he's completely misread everything, and she's now contemplating a visit to the school governors.

Instead, she smiles. Her hands remain locked behind him, anchoring him in place, and her thumb rubs reassuring arcs against the side of his neck.

Bending, he slips an arm under her knees and lifts, cradling her to his chest. He kisses her again before carrying her to his bedroom.

No, she won't finish her grading tonight. He never lets her finish. But he adores watching her try.

AN: I can't begin to thank clairvoyant enough for serving as my beta and mentor for this story. She had to go through seven (seven!) versions of this story before this one materialized. This story could never have happened without her. Also, thanks to tonksinger for the final beta and the support, especially when she had a story of her own she was wrestling with. And finally, thank you, drinkingcocoa, for forcing me to stretch my writing muscles farther than they ever thought they could.

