

A Treatise On The Healing Properties of Murtlap

by *TeddyRadiator*

Severus Snape returns from the war a shadow of the wizard he was. Hermione Granger returns from the war restless and yearning to taste life in all its flavours. What happens when the proverbial irresistible force meets the immovable object? Told to the tune of Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 7

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Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own these characters, nor do I make any money from them, nor do I own any stock in the manufacture, promotion or distribution of Murtlap Essence.

I need to thank on bended knee and present a bottle of Zinfandel (the proper colour, of course) to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is my Hermione Granger. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. Well, I can, but why would I?

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out..

This story is complete and will be uploaded as quickly as allowed - and thank you to my LJ friends who got inflicted with this in almost drabble fashion. What started as a simply PWP got a little bit out of hand...

Every night my prayers I say,

And get my dinner every day;

And every day that I've been good,

I get an orange after food.

The child that is not clean and neat,

With lots of toys and things to eat,

He is a naughty child, I'm sure--

Or else his dear papa is poor.

XIX, System, A Child's Garden of Verses, RL Stevenson

It started the moment Hermione Granger rounded the corner and saw the young boy weeping. He was a first year Ravenclaw she didn't know by name, a rather weedy, thin boy with robes that looked suspiciously threadbare. He was sitting on a stone bench, holding his hand, and trying not to sniffle.

She felt her anger rise, and for a moment a fantasy popped into her head. It was so sweet and satisfying, and she could picture it clearly... striding into the DADA classroom, grabbing that toad of a woman by her fat little neck and squeezing until her beady eyes bulged...

Her violent thoughts alarmed her. She had a lot of them lately. Her sense of blatant helplessness distressed her as well. In the burgeoning days of Dumbledore's Army, it was easy to picture themselves as the new Order, the scourge of the Death Eaters. Here, faced with her present dreary reality in the halls, Hermione just felt like a silly fifth year with no more power than a midge against Grawp.

But midges can irritate the hell out of a person, Hermione thought grimly.

She walked over to the boy on the bench. He looked up at her, his dark hair falling over his pale, wan face. His soft brown eyes were red-rimmed, his thin cheeks tear-stained. "Professor Umbridge?" she said. It wasn't so much a question as an accusation. He nodded, and the tears began anew.

She sat down beside the boy and took his hand. The awkwardly scrawled, raw words, 'I must be a good boy' were etched on the back of his hand. The edges of the words looked ragged and swollen; Umbridge had made him write it many times. Hermione felt sick. The boy's miserable dark eyes brimmed with tears of pain and humiliation. "I wish I could go home, but..." He lowered his face and his shoulders shook.

Hermione's heart ached. She could not bear to see an animal hurt, a child bullied, a soul in pain. She weighed the consequences of what she knew she had to do, and found them worth it. She knew *he'd* flail her alive if he caught her, but at this point Hermione was a bit past worrying over the loss of House points. In fact, things like that were becoming less and less important to her as the days passed, and with none of the adults stepping in to stop her, Dolores Umbridge's special brand of sadism had become Hogwarts' new disciplinary procedure. Hermione despised the bitch.

Putting a soft hand on the boy's shoulder, she said, "Wait right here. Don't go anywhere, okay? I'll be back in two ticks." With that, she dashed toward the dungeons, praying that dinner would keep him in the Great Hall just that little while longer.

"Ta-da!" she sang cheerily when she returned. The Ravenclaw boy hadn't moved, but he looked relieved at seeing her again. Hermione sat down beside him, and held out her hand. Wordlessly, he laid his small, slim hand in hers. "Murtlap essence," she whispered, anointing the odious wound with the balm. "This will numb the pain and reduce the swelling. In a few minutes, you'll feel as good as new.

"But don't tell anyone," Hermione smiled conspiratorially. "I'll get in trouble, and then you'll be rubbing Murtlap essence *on* my hand."

"Okay. I won't tell," he said, quickly. Shyly, he asked, "You're Hermione Granger, aren't you?"

The young boy looked at her solemnly, with something like reverence and awe in his large, dark eyes. He had long black lashes and olive skin. Hermione thought he'd probably be a real looker when he grew up. She grinned. "Yes, but I hope you won't hold that against me."

He was as solemn as a little judge. "I'm Norton Filcher." He straightened and wiped his nose with the back of his hand, then remembered his manners and held it out to her. Hermione shook the proffered hand with the same gravity as it was offered. He gave her a watery little smile. Something in his impressive dignity broke Hermione's heart a little more, and she drew him into her arms. Her compassion was his undoing; he clung to her like a limpet and cried again. She rocked and soothed him with gentle murmurs and shushes, thinking angrily that he ought to be in his Common Room doing homework and talking about Quidditch, instead of being mutilated by that bitch...

She was holding him when something caught her eye, and she stiffened as she looked up into the eyes of Professor Severus Snape. He was glaring at her and Norton with a combination of fury and something Hermione couldn't quite identify. It could have been contempt or hatred; she wasn't sure. Norton sensed the change and looked up, cowering visibly under their dreaded Potions professor's angry gaze.

Professor Snape silently approached the two students, and Hermione felt the younger boy tremble. She looked down at him and protectively pulled him closer. Then she glanced up at the wizard, daring him to say something, anything.

As he drew near, his black eyes flicked down at the boy's hand, placed so trustingly in Hermione's. She watched him read the message carved into the boy's skin. Finally, he raised his eyes to hers. They were unfathomable. In his glossiest, quietest voice, he drawled, "Miss Granger, there is a small matter of some Murtlap essence that has been... liberated from the potions stores. Without permission. I can only assume you are a secret Slytherin, seeing as you so blatantly lost a rather large amount of points for your own House as well as earned a detention in obtaining said item." Each word fell on her ears like a hammer striking a dulcimer.

Norton shook harder, and Hermione looked from his bowed, dark head, to the bowed, dark head of her Professor. Her anger seethed. "You all of you, are allowing this!" She hissed. "You, and McGonagall, and Flitwick and Sprout and Dumbledore and *all the authority figures* are letting her get away with this!" She raised Norton's hand toward her professor. "Do you think *detention* means anything to me, when the torture of children is sanctioned at Hogwarts? It's not fair!"

Through clenched teeth, he retorted, "It's been my experience that life rarely is, Miss Granger. However, that does not override the fact that you have stolen from the school."

"How dare you stand there and preach to me about theft! This," she said, holding up Norton's injured hand again, "is theft! You are allowing her to steal his self-worth, his confidence, his innocence--"

"That is quite enough, Miss Granger! You are frightening the boy," he replied, his eyes fixed on the joined hands.

Hermione looked at Norton, who pressed against her with a little whimper. She looked back at Snape, mutely pleading *Help us, Professor! You're part of the Order, protect us!* Suddenly she felt a helpless, frustrated exhaustion steal over her, borne of the feeling of being too young to fix this *If I were in your place, Professor, I'd fight this tooth and nail, instead of letting her tell you all what to do. Why are adults always afraid of doing the right thing?*

She slumped. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're all frightened." She tried not to cry. She would not cry in front of Professor Snape!

She lost track of how long the three of them remained frozen in this little tableau. Finally, Snape said in a colourless voice, "Mr. Filcher, return to your House. I will have a word with Professor Flitwick."

Norton looked up at Hermione, and she nodded. "Thank you," he whispered, his dark eyes warm and grateful. She smiled at him, lifting a hand to tuck his messy hair behind his ears.

"You *are* a good boy, Norton. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise," she said, and watched the young Ravenclaw as he slid off the bench and walked away. He turned back twice, as if to make sure she was still there.

Hermione and Snape watched his progress down the hall, and simultaneously turned back to one another. "Miss Granger " Snape began.

"I'm not sorry, sir, for taking the Murtlap. I am sorry I had to steal it from you, though."

"If you had gone through proper channels, Madam Pomfrey would have been only too happy to provide treatment to Mr. Filcher."

Hermione snorted. "Any medical treatment must now be reported to Umbridge for approval. She would have made sure that next time, Norton would not only have to write more lines, but longer sentences." She raised her chin defiantly. "It doesn't pay to go through the 'proper channels' anymore. With all due respect, Professor, I'd rather take my chances and face your wrath, sir."

He looked at her searchingly. He was breathing through his large nose, hard, like a bull. "Sometimes the reasons for our actions aren't easy to ascertain, Miss Granger. Sometimes it only looks as though nothing is being done, when in fact, little vials of Murtlap essence are disappearing at a rate of knots."

Hermione looked at him carefully, trying to decipher his baffling statement. Was he saying that they knew about the D.A.? Was he trying to tell her that the other professors were trying to find ways to circumvent Umbridge's authority?

Before she could reply, he continued, "However, there is the matter of this particular theft. Stealing is a serious crime, Miss Granger "

"So is that," Hermione seethed, and they both knew what she meant.

Professor Snape sighed. In a new, diffident tone, he said, "I have inventoried the stores. It appears I am short one vial of Murtlap essence."

Hermione looked at him. Looked straight into those black, black eyes. "I happen to have one right here if you need it, sir." She held up the vial. "Vial 183, Batch 10. Will this do?"

"Yes, I believe it will do nicely." His large, pale hand reached for it, and it was gone, vanished within the folds of his outer robe like a conjurer's trick. He stared at her for another heartbeat, then spun on his heel and was gone.

He made her serve detention with Hagrid the following Thursday. Two hours. Because he uncharacteristically forgot to assign any tasks to go along with the detention, she and Hagrid made rock cakes. She anonymously left two of them on Professor Snape's desk.

A week later, and Hermione was leading Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest to show her Dumbledore's secret weapon. Hogwarts' most hated Headmistress and her special quills would score no more tender, innocent hands.

When she and Ron ran back into the Shrieking Shack, it was only to retrieve his body. Hermione insisted. Tom Riddle was now dead. Whatever else Professor Snape had done in his life, the memories he'd given Harry in his dying moments had been enough to save Wizarding Britain. It was the least they could do, Hermione said. They would bring a hero's body to rest with dignity and honour.

When they approached his body and found him holding tenuously on to life, Hermione frantically searched Professor Snape's pockets for anything to keep him stable until they could get him to help. She found anti-venom, a bezoar and a special Blood Replenishing Potion that she assumed he'd created especially for a situation like this. She and Ron treated him as best they could, and he survived being transported to the Infirmary.

While Hermione eased Professor Snape out of his outer robe to help prepare him for treatment, a small vial fell out of his pocket and rolled across the floor. Hermione hurried to retrieve it. She frowned. Murtlap essence. Vial 183, Batch 10. It was a year out of date and obviously useless. Hermione was muzzy and exhausted from the battle, but she was *compos mentis* enough to remember the healing properties of Murtlap, and that vial in particular.

She sat by his side for days, assisting Madam Pomfrey and the Healers by checking his vital signs and making sure he was comfortable. From time to time, she would look at the little bottle of expired Murtlap and wonder. As Professor Snape shuddered and whimpered through nightmare after nightmare, she moistened his lips with ice cubes and soothed him. In his delirium, he would grasp her hand in a crushing grip and hold it for hours. It was while she sat with him, looking at his pale, slender hand clasped trustingly in hers, that she thought about another hand. *I must be a good boy...*

She found Norton in the Infirmary. Brave little Norton, cut down by a Death Eater in the final, desperate moments of the battle. Hermione felt another burden added to her already wounded heart: Norton, who would always be a good little boy, never again having the chance to be otherwise. In the nights when exhaustion and trauma made her waking moments surreal and dream-like, Hermione grieved over the young Ravenclaw.

Holding the hand of Severus Snape, looking at the vial of Murtlap, Hermione did not have an inkling why he had carried it into what he thought would be his final moments on earth. Beyond the obvious symbolism, she didn't want to guess any further. At least, she didn't then and there, not with his hand tucked securely in hers.

When the fever finally broke and he regained consciousness, she got out of his sight as quickly as possible. He would hate knowing that, in his greatest moment of weakness, he'd held onto her like a frightened child. He had to heal now, for the war trials would be coming up soon. Hermione also had decisions to make; her world felt like she was permanently caught in a Portkey trip, being constantly sucked through a giant straw until she didn't know who she was, why she was there, where she was going and what she would do when she arrived.

She furtively attended his trial, tucked away in the back, listening, embarrassed for him as his past and his secrets were laid bare to Wizarding Britain. A parade of the just and the unjust passed through the courtroom, declaring Severus Snape's vices and his virtues. Through it all, he sat like a statue. And when he was at last acquitted, there was none of the sneering defiance so reminiscent of the Professor Snape of her youth, nor was there any profound show of relief at being a free man. He merely rose, shook Harry's hand, then the Minister's, and left the courtroom, silently sweeping past the screaming newshounds and photographers.

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 7

Cocked his shining eye and said: "Ain't you 'shamed, you sleepy-head!"

I need to thank on bended knee and present a bottle of Zinfandel (the proper colour, of course) to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is my Hermione Granger. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. Well, I can, but why would I?

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out.

When the grass was closely mown,

Walking on the lawn alone,

In the turf a hole I found,

And hid a soldier underground.

Under grass alone he lies,

Looking up with leaden eyes,

Scarlet coat and pointed gun,

To the stars and to the sun.

I shall find him, never fear,

I shall find my grenadier;

But for all that's gone and come,

I shall find my soldier dumb.

Not a word will he disclose,

Not a word of all he knows.

I must lay him on the shelf,

And make up the tale myself.

Excerpt from V. The Dumb Soldier, A Child's Garden of Verses, RL Stevenson

It took another year for the school to be restored to the point that classes could resume. During that time, Hermione got engaged to Ron, but soon broke it off (the engagement, not certain bits of Ron, although she was tempted, after catching him in a rather compromising position with his former flame, Lavender Brown, and a third, unnamed partner). Then she Portkeyed to Australia to retrieve her parents, and decided to return to Hogwarts to finish her NEWTs.

She also discovered sex, which she found to be great fun. Fun had been in rather short supply for the last two years of her life; she was ready to make up for a little lost time. She blissfully lost her virginity to an older man, a travel agent she met while helping her parents to arrange their move back to the UK.

She justified her attraction to him by concluding that he was a good teacher and very skilled sexually. And, being Hermione Granger, she wasn't satisfied until she became as good at it as he was. That he had dark hair and brown eyes and rather pale skin did not strike her as being of any significance. Any resemblance to any known person alive, dead or otherwise, was merely coincidental, as they said in the Muggle cinema. She ended the affair shortly before she returned to England; he was lovely, but his voice got on her nerves. It lacked... character.

She followed him up with brief affairs with a couple of British Muggles, and a few one-night stands and summer flings. The war had taught her a valuable lesson: it was better to charge full steam ahead with conviction than to hesitate with caution.

She approached sex in the same fearless, methodical way she approached any academic pursuit: research, instruction, application. She would be the first to admit that her zealous and assertive attitude scared away just as many men as it attracted, but, as always, Hermione remained true to herself. She was *not* being a slut, she reminded herself; she was practicing for when the right man came along. When that happened, if she had the wits to recognise him, she would know exactly what to do to keep him. She was sure of it.

The idea of having sex with Severus Snape came up during Ginny's hen night party. After hitting the Wizarding nightclubs and stuffing Muggle fivers in the g-strings of the strippers in a club in Soho, they ended up back at the Burrow, playing a card game called Speak The Truth. Players drew a card, and if they told the truth, they got a chocolate button. Lies caused the card to spray a rather unpleasant scent all over the hands of the deceiver. The trick was to pass the card quickly to the next player, lest you were caught in the lie. It became a game of hot potato, and if the liar was caught with her own card, she had to give up all her chocolate buttons.

Padma Patel, Hermione's old roommate's twin from Ravenclaw, had just been caught in a spectacular lie involving her sexual proclivities, a live chicken and lime marmalade. It was a little hard to concentrate, what with the pretty Indian girl covered in fishy-smelling oil, and the elf-made wine flowing so freely. Hermione was having a bit of a hard time keeping up amidst the laughter, the fishy aroma and the idea of lime marmalade smeared on Terry Boot's twig and berries.

A quick Scourgify soon sorted out Padma's lie, and her sister Pavarti pulled the next card from the deck. She cleared her throat dramatically, and read aloud, "If you could have sex with anyone, alive or dead, who would it be?" She went for the safe and obvious. "Lucius Malfoy, no brainer."

Her twin's eyes grew wide and she smiled and nodded enthusiastically, wafting the aroma of cod around the room. "I love older men! I'll bet he's an animal in bed," said Padma, rolling her dark eyes to the heavens. She took the card. "But Blaise Zabini is really the one for me." She tossed the card to Ginny.

Ginny was thoughtful. "I would have loved to have done it with Regulus Black. I've seen photos of him." She sighed wistfully. "He was gorgeous, all black hair and dark eyes and mysterious, brooding Slytherin sexuality."

Hermione smiled when the card reached her, thinking of another mysterious, brooding Slytherin. With plenty of Dutch courage to sustain her, she ventured, "I've always fancied a go with Professor Snape." She tossed the card to Luna, waiting for the chorus of "Eeeeeewwsss!" but it never came.

Ginny nodded sagely. "Yeah, I can see that. Even after last year. He was a bastard, but he did have a gorgeous voice."

"I always loved his eyes," Luna Lovegood added dreamily. "He had a way of looking at you, like there was something going on that might be fun to discover."

"And you know what they say about men with big noses and hands? Merlin, I'll bet he could lay wand for hours," Ginny moaned rapaciously, crunching on an ice cube. They all looked at her for a moment, then burst into huge scoops of drunken guffaws.

Hermione laughed. "Lay wand? Do you kiss Harry with that mouth?" She sobered slightly. "Yes, well, we all know I have a better chance shagging Regulus Black than Professor Snape. He can't stand me."

"Why?" Padma asked.

"Oh, let's see," Hermione said, with a pally but false smile. She ticked off the reasons on her fingers. "I've only set fire to his robes, knocked him unconscious, stolen from him, spied on him and cost him his Order of Merlin in my third year."

"Oh, Hermione," Pavarti laughed, "surely you don't believe he still holds a grudge after all this time? I mean, the man's a war hero, and there's been a lot of water under the bridge since then."

"Hate is merely the opposite passion of love," Luna replied, her lilting voice serene and confident. "Sometimes we tell ourselves we hate someone because we're too afraid to admit how much we love them."

Hermione smiled warmly at Luna, suddenly attaching new significance to the expired bottle of Murtlap essence from Professor Snape's pocket.

Going back to school to finish her NEWTs had been a mistake. Hermione realised it within two weeks of returning.

As much as she loved Hogwarts and learning, Hermione found herself increasingly bored, listless and frustrated. Every one of her teachers treated her like she was some sort of holy relic and practically couldn't be bothered to attempt to teach her anything. As far as they were concerned, she already knew everything she needed to know.

All of her peers were gone; not one Gryffindor from her year had returned. Harry, Ron and the rest of her class had accepted the Ministry's honorary degrees and proceeded with their lives. But when asked why in Merlin's name she wanted to return to school, Hermione stated emphatically that she wanted to finish what she started.

And this was partly true. She loved academics; she loved the feeling of being clever and discovering a new way of using a plant or finding a better method of performing a charm, a more efficient shortcut to transfiguration. She loved the simple joy of reading something complex and understanding it, and she loved imparting her wisdom as well. When she was a youngster, it invariably led to being called names like bookworm, brains, and the infamous know-it-all, but as an adult, it made her an instructor, and she seriously considered applying for a position in the field of education.

And there was a second, no less compelling reason to return to Hogwarts: she wanted to keep an eye *on* him. Something in her wanted to make sure he not only survived, but that he *lived*. She knew from experience the former was surprisingly easy, but the latter could be so much more difficult.

He seemed so lost, so *unthere*. He was not the same teacher who bullied his students into a pulp, but Hermione missed even that. At least he used to take some perverse pleasure in debasement and intimidation; this Severus Snape no longer took pleasure in anything. He was no longer three-dimensional, like a figure cut from negative space.

And the teachers all seemed tired. The past two years had been hellishly hard on them as well. They frankly weren't up to the job of trying to find new and more difficult ways to challenge the intellect of Hogwarts' currently most famous pupil. They wanted time to regroup, and all of them tended to let things slide with her, and treated her like a valued and much loved pet.

Well, almost every one of them. Professor Snape, who had (so gossip intimated) reluctantly returned as the Potions professor, treated her like a piece of wood. He looked straight through her, and when she tried to participate in class, he blatantly ignored her. Sometimes, she felt like a ghost in his class. He simply would not acknowledge her presence at all.

She could not understand why he insisted on treating her like she was a non-entity, until the day he suggested they experiment using varying ratios of St. John's Wort to Valerian instead of Silverleaf pod, in the making of the garden-variety Calming Draught.

"But, Professor," she began, her voice low and insistent, "if you balanced the St. John's Wort with valerian properly, it is cheaper to produce, but wouldn't the uneven results you inevitably obtain be more cost prohibitive in the long run?"

Professor Snape had looked at her for exactly seven seconds. She counted them. He then turned to his class and announced, "Experimentation is the catalyst for greatness. It is one thing to think you have all the answers, but it is another to realise that, while your theories are sound, they are meaningless, unless you are willing to risk your reputation, perhaps even your life on them."

"A potioneer who is afraid to experiment will soon stagnate. If he is content to rest on his laurels he can earn modest success. Even a dilettante can impress his customers if he convinces them he is impressive. From there, he will rapidly enter the realm of charlatan in the eyes of his peers." He paused, looking over her left shoulder. "Rather like taking your N.E.W.T.s in every subject because you know your professors will pass you because of your reputation, not your true ability."

He turned away, and Hermione face burned.

She realised that he truly believed that granting her the oxygen of acknowledgement would mean he would be forced to treat her with the same unproductive regard as her other teachers. And perhaps that she wanted and expected him to, as well. As much as it dismayed her, Hermione was convinced of it. She had heard of cutting one's nose off to spite one's face, but she'd never known anyone to cut off another person's nose because that person was seen as not deserving of it.

It also occurred to Hermione in more self-assured moments that he might simply be afraid. Afraid that if he acknowledged her, he'd have to acknowledge that she helped to save his life, and he would have to start living again. She felt better for having figured out his disregard for her, but merely understanding Severus Snape was not necessarily helpful in getting him to understand himself.

She remembered so well the day they became lovers. It was the day Professor Snape cut his finger. Right at the end of class, demonstrating a cut-tear-curl technique for extracting seed pods from the Sorshalrose plant, the knife slipped and sliced deeply into his finger. Hissing, more irritated than injured, he dismissed the class five minutes early and stalked back to his desk. He produced a snow-white handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the injured finger; it soon grew dappled with his blood.

Hermione was astonished at how bright and vibrant it was, next to his drab, colourless form. He had seemed so bloodless of late she marvelled he could spare this much over a simple cut. Honestly, he was starting to look like Professor Binns. His lectures no longer held their biting edge, and sometimes Hermione would leave his class feeling as washed out and grey as he. It was like attending class taught by a sleepwalker.

The students acted spooked, derailed by it. The cut itself was the only anomaly in his class since the beginning of term. It seemed as if the cut had leached the colour from the walls, pulling it all down into his bleeding hand. It was the only bright spot in the room. No one could take their eyes off it.

As the rest of the class finally snapped out of their blood-induced trance and filed out of the room, Professor Snape remained sat at his desk, morosely staring at his hand. At the moment Hermione approached him, drawn like a shark to the blood, he raised the makeshift tourniquet from his finger, grimaced, and pressed it against the wound again.

Gingerly, as if afraid of spooking him, she offered, "I have some Essence of Dittany, sir." She dug in her beaded bag and produced the small vial that practically lived in her hand during her eighteenth year; the year she, Harry and Ron were on the run for their lives. She reached for his hand. "Here, let me—"

"That will be quite unnecessary, Miss Granger. I do not require a nursemaid," he snapped. He lifted the handkerchief, looked at his hand with a faint look of distaste, and re-applied pressure to the wound. He shifted in his chair, turning his body slightly away from her.

She grinned. "Well, at least you're speaking to me!" She sat her bag on his desk. Without asking permission, she took hold of his hand. The cut was short, only about an inch long, but very deep, and was still bleeding profusely. "Hold still."

He looked at her in shock. "What in the bloody hell do you think you're doing, Granger? I said, leave it!" He yanked his hand away from hers, and drops of blood flew in every direction. One landed on his face, just above his lip. Two landed on her shirt: one on her collar, the other just above her right nipple. The bright red spots bloomed on the white fabric, and for a second or two, they both stared at them in mute fascination. The droplets fairly screamed in the sepia-toned room, especially the one on Snape's face.

For a moment, they merely stared at one another. In his eyes, she could see the ghost of Norton, fearful and abused. Beyond that was Severus Snape, resentful for still being alive, bewildered at still being alive, afraid of still being alive.

Hermione shook her head. She held out her hands in supplication. "Stop. Just, stop, please." She took the handkerchief from his still, pale fingers, and wiped the blood from his face. When he did not protest, she picked up the vial of Dittany. He was still as stone as she cradled his hand in her palm, and gently applied the healing essence to his bleeding finger.

As she worked, something like a smirk touched the corners of his mouth. She was glad to see it; even sneering at her was preferable to the emotionless wizard who had walked out of his trial as a free man. His mouth twitched, and he murmured, "What, no Murtlap, Miss Granger?"

Her eyes met his, and she smiled as she reached into her bag again. From its depths, she produced a little bottle. Vial 183, Batch 10.

He took the little bottle, which looked like a capsule in his hands. He absently tossed it back and forth from one hand to the other. An expression crossed his features, one Hermione could not describe. Finally he murmured, "I wondered whatever happened to it." His dark eyes met hers. Almost against his will, he said, "Madam Pomfrey told me you saved my life. I don't know whether to thank you or curse you for it."

Running on pure instinct and desire, Hermione leaned forward toward his lips. "Thank me first."

As she closed the distance between them, Severus' eyes grew wide. He leaned back in his chair as far as he could without tipping over. His breathing quickened. And still he kept silent. It seemed to take her a month to reach his mouth.

As Hermione's lips touched his, he gasped and whispered fearfully, "*Oh, gods, fuck,*" against her lips, then drew the words into his with his next breath, along with her tongue.

It was not a kiss of any great finesse; it was fueled by anger and passion, and he pulled her into his arms and grasped her head and opened her mouth to his with a growling moan that made Hermione's groin burst into flames. He sucked her tongue almost painfully, greedily, and tangled his hands in her hair.

"Damn you," he growled, between his hard, bruising kisses, and she tasted blood. "Damn you," he purred against her mouth, sliding his tongue along hers, and he tasted divine. "Damn you," he whimpered, slowing the kiss down to a sensuous dance of tongues and teeth, slanting her head until he was drinking from her mouth, moaning low, teasing and nipping at her soft lips in slow, measured caresses, gently biting her bottom lip, then soothing it with his velvety tongue.

Sometime between the first and second 'Damn yous' Hermione climbed/was pulled into his lap, straddling his hips, surging against him. And as they gradually separated, Hermione saw the raw, helpless surrender in his eyes and she understood. She could break this man with a single gesture. She could make this man with a single caress.

He refused to meet her eyes. Staring fixedly at the feathered edge of the blood spot on her breast, he cleared his throat. His voice sounded like tyres crunching on gravel. "Well, brava, Miss Granger. How marvelous for you. You've proven I'm human. The delight with which you've taken advantage of this situation is most un-Gryffindor." He fixed her with one of his flat, smirking glares. "I'm beginning to think there's a little Slytherin in you."

Curling her lip, Hermione leaned closer and placed her hands on his shoulders. "I think I'd prefer," she growled, as she ground down on his crotch, "~~bit~~ of Slytherin in me, sir."

It was as if everything up to this point had been little more than a hair tickling his face in his sleep. His lidded eyes first widened in shock, then closed tightly. He took a deep breath. It filled his lungs and sounded as if he hadn't taken one like it since right before the final battle.

And then and then, as he opened his eyes, he thrummed to life like a Harley kicked over by a Doc Marten-booted Hell's Angel *Fucking hell*, Hermione thought. She'd been so wrong about all the colours of the rainbow coalescing in his blood. They were here, now, in his blazing, black, salacious eyes. Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and stand in fear and trembling.

Severus Snape was fucking *awake*.

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 7

Well, now that you have my attention...

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I need to thank on bended knee and present a bottle of Zinfandel (the proper colour, of course) to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is my Hermione Granger. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. Well, I can, but why would I?

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out..

"Up!" they cry, "the day is come

On the smiling valleys:

We have beat the morning drum;

Playmate, join your allies!"

Garden Days, 1. Night and Day - A Child's Garden of Verses - RL Stevenson

"I take it back." He managed to purr and grimace at the same time. "No Slytherin worth her wand would be that blunt." His voice was brittle, but there was an underlying sweetness, as if it pleased him. He snaked his arms under her skirt and pulled her closer. "Now, Miss Subtle-as-a-Hippogriff, if you are attempting to seduce me, I feel compelled to tell you I don't like games."

"I'm not playing," Hermione retorted through gritted teeth. Really, his erection felt as if she were attempting to ride a wool-draped broom.

Severus narrowed his eyes and leaned closer. His voice was slightly uneven, like an orchestra tuning up for a symphony. "Then enlighten me, Miss Granger. Why is Hogwarts' most illustrious student straddling me with the wettest set of knickers I've ever encountered?"

"I - I'm trying to understand you." Hermione was relieved to hear her own voice sounded steady and in control. His long fingers were sliding under the leg bands of her knickers and drawing light little circles over her flesh, making her squirm.

"Ever thirsting for knowledge," he drawled. "Ask your questions, Miss Granger. I'm hardly in a position to deny you." He pulled her closer until her belly brushed against his chest. His eyes were spitefully bright. "I'm also under no obligation to answer."

Breathing hard against him, she caressed his face and quietly asked, "Alright. First question. How long has it been since ...?"

He leaned against her palm, breathing hard. The bright, malicious joy left his eyes. Her question had been a shot in the dark, but it must have landed true. "Since before you came to Hogwarts. The first time," he replied, shame and irony mixed in equal draughts.

Hermione nodded, recollecting the look in his eyes when he'd watched her comfort Norton, how he held onto her hand in his post-battle delirium, how he kissed her with more pent-up passion than any man should have to carry.

She put her arms around him and held him close, and waited, until finally, hesitantly, he returned her embrace. "Do you still want to curse me?" she asked, and he pulled away from her and looked into her eyes searchingly. "Because if you do, at least wait until we rectify that situation." She smiled and leaned forward and kissed his cool forehead. "Actually, I think you and I could be very good for one another."

He regarded her for a moment. With a slight stretch, he placed his hand almost carelessly on her bottom and pinched it, making her hiss. "Doing what, pray tell, Miss Granger? I have not, even in my youth, been into students, literally or figuratively. And I haven't indulged in casual sex since, well, since I was your age."

She gave him a look she fucking well hoped he recognised - it was his signature raised eyebrow/smirk combination. She had practiced it often enough in the bathroom mirror. "I can't imagine anything casual about having sex with you, Severus Snape. Case in point..."

She leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his jaw. There was the slightest tremour in his body as she moved to his ear, and his breath caught as she licked against his throat. He smelled lovely, and even as she slid her fingers through his less-than-clean hair, she could feel his hands tightening around her waist, pulling her down on his erection. How could something that unyielding be flesh?

"I have a few short months before my exams," she whispered into his ear. She sat back, and looked carefully into his unreadable eyes. "Why do you think I came back, Severus Snape? For the N.E.W.T.s?" She rolled her eyes. "I've studied until it all feels like so much cotton wool in my head. I'm not eleven. I can live with myself not being first in class. After the last year, maybe those things just aren't enough anymore."

"I somehow doubt your grades will suffer because of it, Miss Granger. I'm much more interested in why you seem so determined to bring me up to date."

She toyed with the buttons on his waistcoat. "I think you and I can rediscover how to live again."

He opened his mouth, and closed it again. An anguished look passed over his face. "And what, exactly, am I supposed to live for, Miss Granger?"

Suddenly Hermione was tired of the playful banter. He was stalling, pure and simple. "If you don't know the answer to that by now, I'd suggest asking him," she looked pointedly down at his crotch and back up to his troubled eyes. "He certainly knows what's worth living for. Happiness. Pleasure, joy." She cast about her mind frantically, trying to engage him. She'd awoken the sleeping giant; she'd be damned if she blew her chance and he just yawned, rolled over and went back to sleep again.

"I really didn't think I'd survive that night," she began, and they both knew what she meant. "We've both had our close brushes with death. Let's have a close brush with life!"

His breath caught, as if snagged on her words. His hands caressed her thighs, back and forth, from hip to knee, as if rubbing some sort of balm into her skin. He looked down at her parted legs, and pulled up her skirt until he could see her white knickers. With something like wonder in his beautiful, silken voice, he said, "I missed you, Hermione Granger. I told myself I didn't, but today seems to be a day of admitting truths. Yes, I think I have things to teach you." He actually gave her a half-smile. "Things you won't need on your N.E.W.T.s."

His well-honed self-disgust reared its head again. "Though I honestly can't say you're getting much of a bargain in me."

Hermione waited until he pooled the courage to raise his dark eyes to hers. "I beg to differ." Silently, she removed her tie and unbuttoned her blouse. He watched her intently, his breathing growing more rapid as she opened her blouse and pointed to a little clasp nestled in the cleavage of her bra. She smiled at him. "I bought this especially for you," she said. His eyes widened, and his eyebrows shot to his hairline. A wicked little sneer played about his lips.

There was something of the old, snarky drawl in his lovely voice when he replied, "Well, I can't say I'm not flattered, but red simply isn't my colour."

Hermione laughed, and felt his cock twitch against her crotch. "I bought it for you, because I wanted you to remove it. That's why it snaps in the front. Of course, if you're feeling particularly alpha male, you're more than welcome to rip it to shreds."

"That could be arranged." His hands were steady as he unclasped the small button-like closure of the bra, and he peeled the cups away from her breasts. His breath left him as he looked at her. "Fuck me, you have pretty tits," he murmured, with a laugh that could only be described as filthy. Her knickers got just that little bit wetter. He looked like a starving man being given his first real meal. "You're so lovely," he said, simply. His eyes grew cool. "And I'm... I'm not." He looked at her searchingly a faint, impatient annoyance in his eyes. "Is this really what you want, Hermione? Fire and lust and desperation?"

Hermione could not bear to see his uncertainty. "I want your fire, your lust, your desperation," she replied, her face solemn. She stroked his hair, brushing it away from his large, dark eyes. "I've wanted this for a long time."

He looked at her small, peachy nipples, and licked his pale lips. "I, too, have..." he hesitated, and spat, "Merlin, witch, I've thought of you so many times since the night you stole the Murtlap from me. I saw you steal it, you know. Did you honestly think you could walk into my stores, bold as brass, and I wouldn't know about it?"

To his secret delight, she blushed. "I wasn't really thinking along those lines at the time."

Severus nodded. "I followed you back to the boy and watched you. How you petted and held him. He was looking at you as if you were an angel, and all I could think was how much I... I wanted to be him. How much I wanted to be held and comforted and healed, and what a pitiful excuse of a man I was that I could watch a neglected, abused boy and actually envy him.

"And I was hard, too. Not because of the boy," he added hastily, "lest you think me even more of a degenerate, but because for the first time in my life, I realised how erotic the idea of being comforted could be."

He cupped her breasts in his warm, large hands, and slid his thumbs over her nipples, watching her eyes grow dark and heavy-lidded. "The night of the battle, walking to the Shack, I kept thinking, 'I should have taken her that night, while I had the chance. I'm going to die being envious of that Filcher boy'."

What he didn't tell her was that he'd gone to her the night she and Potter and the others had returned from that foolish Children's Crusade to the Department of Mysteries to save Sirius Black's worthless hide. They'd brought her to the Hogwarts Infirmary, weak from blood loss and Dolohov's cursework, and in the dark hours of the morning, he'd gone to her. She was propped up on pillows, drugged and frighteningly still. The white sheets had more colour than her face.

Furtively looking around like a thief, Severus had gingerly sat by the bed and put his arms around her. She was warm and smelled milky and sweaty and slightly metallic, and he was only a bit ashamed of the erection his embrace produced.

There was a movement in the room and he quickly drew away and aimed his wand toward it, only to find Norton Filcher tiptoeing into the room, his dark eyes huge and frightened.

"Mr. Filcher, I am sure your Head of House has explained that you are not allowed to wander the castle at night." The boy had nodded, but not before Severus saw the instinctive flinch, the doubtful wariness of his eyes. This boy had been struck before; this boy was no stranger to an adult's fists.

"Will she be okay, Professor?" he sniffed, blinking back tears. Soft hearted. It would cause him nothing but trouble. Severus knew that for a fact as well.

He knew he should reprimand the boy, but the presence of the girl between them called them both like a siren, and he couldn't chastise the boy for doing nothing more or less than he was doing. Severus Snape was many things, but hypocrite wasn't one of them.

"I have reason to believe she will recover, Mr. Filcher. I trust I don't have to remind you that this matter should be kept confidential." The faint reproachful look in Norton's dark eyes made Severus feel rather foolish. Of course he would say nothing; a boy like this kept his secrets. Severus' jaw clenched. Against his better judgment, he said, "Miss Granger is cold, Mr. Filcher. I'm sure if you sat on the other side of the bed, she would appreciate your warmth."

Without hesitation, the boy sat beside the girl and took her hand. Hours later, just as dawn was breaking, Severus escorted Norton back to the Ravenclaw Common Room. He extracted no promise of silence from the boy; none was needed. He knew this boy too well. He had been this boy, and served as another reminder of the compassion of one Hermione Granger.

Sitting astride Severus Snape's lap, Hermione had half-expected him to ravish her exposed breasts upon revealing them, but he merely gazed at them with a mixture of longing innocence and knowing anticipation. Softly, hypnotically, he stroked her sides, his fingertips brushing the underside of her breasts, unveiling new erogenous zones Hermione never knew she owned. If possible, her nipples tightened even more, and the combination of his whispering touches and her own crinkling flesh made it hard to concentrate.

As he watched her grow increasingly restless, he chewed on the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. Quietly, as if the thought had just occurred to him, he said, "I've lost count of the nights I've lain in bed, wishing I had. Taken you, that is. I have a thousand times, in my dreams."

He gave her a look she felt down in her already-soaked knickers. "Come here, Hermione," he purred, and pulled her mouth to his in a slow, suckling kiss.

For a moment, she felt as if her entire body resided in her mouth, being pleased by the sweet and merciless tongue of Severus Snape. Humming his appreciation, he sensuously cupped her breasts in his large, pale hands. He squeezed them slowly, making her whimper. He pulled away from her kiss and drawled, "I can see you've applied yourself to the art of kissing. That is a very promising talent. There is also the not inconsiderable matter of these luscious tits." He smirked and kneaded them together lewdly. "Merlin, Hermione Granger, I'm glad I never saw you naked before. I would have locked you away in my dungeon and told everyone Tom Riddle had kidnapped you."

The shock Hermione felt must have been reflected in her face; when Severus looked up at her he paused for a second, then laughed, really laughed. It was the most amazing laugh she had ever heard. It was musical and low and so fucking sexy she found herself wishing he *had* locked her away. It had dirty, sinister tones, and bright notes of mirth, and the all but forgotten shimmer of boyishness in it. Oh, he could do a lot of damage with that laugh. It was a laugh that made a good girl want to sin very badly.

And he still had her breasts cradled in his large hands.

His laughter gradually spent itself, and he looked up at her with an almost charming little smile. *Uh oh*, she thought. *I think I may be officially out of my league here.*

"Oh, Hermione, I'm going to have to spend some of my study hours thinking up new ways to stun that expression back on your face. You know, you're right." His expression softened. "Maybe coming back to life isn't as painful as I anticipated." He bit his bottom lip, and his eyes swept down to her breasts and back up to meet hers. "I'm thinking I may stop talking about your gorgeous tits and start playing with them." He jiggled them a bit, making her blush again. "They are astonishingly fun to play with."

He caught her tender nipples between his thumb and forefinger and gave them the gentlest of squeezes, then rolled them with equal delicacy. She almost swooned. She took a deep, excited breath. "Why tell me? Why not just do it?" He could hear the shaking desire in her voice. Merlin, a deaf man could have heard it.

He looked up at her with the full battery of those large, liquid eyes. Solemnly, he said, "Because I feel compelled to warn you: when I stop playing with these sweet little tits and start sucking them, I may never stop."

Panting with arousal, Hermione bit her lip and, working on intuition, gently took his head in her hands. "Let's just test your theory about eroticism and comfort," she murmured, and gently guided his mouth to her nipple with a low croon. She shivered as she felt his warm breath ghost over her sensitive flesh. She whispered, "There you go. All for you." When he hesitated, she moaned, "Oh, do it, Severus, do it..."

Finally, his mouth plunged over her nipple, ravenous, greedy, utterly absorbed in his own pleasure. His hands spasmed and squeezed against her breasts, and he nipped and bit and sucked, *hard*, moaning, scouring over the tight areola with his wicked tongue, before returning to his soft suckling. Hermione's eyes rolled back as his hot mouth engulfed her flesh. Shuddering in pleasure, she moaned brokenly, "That's it, oh, fuck yes, that's it..."

With each word, he became more urgent. He cradled her nipple in the curl of his tongue as his lips pursed over the flesh and milked it; his teeth chewed her and he grasped her breast with both hands, as if holding a bottle, leaving no inch of it untouched, unworshipped. He pressed biting kisses of boundless gratitude on the soft mound, marking her, soothing her with his lips and tongue.

She pulled him away, and he released her with a soft hiss of disappointment until she guided him to the other. With a moan of sheer bliss, he latched on again, rubbing his

hands over her body, his nails scoring long, tingling ribbons of sensation down her back. She looked down at him and marveled at his indecently long lashes, like black inkstrokes against his pale skin. There was a faint line between his arched and almost delicately shaped brows, as if he was concentrating, even as he took his pleasure and comfort.

Hermione was only dimly aware when he stiffened; he sucked at her nipple almost painfully as gave a startled shudder, and cried out against her skin. He had ejaculated in his pants. Gradually, the madness that had overtaken them both lessened, and he looked down at his lap with a mixture of shame and relief that moved her.

Something like his well-trained mask slid back in place, and his familiar sneer reasserted itself. "As I said, not much of a package." He looked mortified and disgusted with himself. His voice was brittle. "This should no doubt make an entertaining tale for your fellow Gryffindors," he drawled, refusing to meet her eyes.

Hermione stroked his cheek. "Actually, I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did." She performed a quick cleansing spell. "You've gone too long without human contact, love. I want you to get used to pleasure again. You've had far too little of it in your life in contrast to what you deserve." She leaned over and kissed his lips, swollen and rosy from sucking at her breasts. He returned the kiss slowly.

Against his mouth, she purred, "Besides, do you not realise how flattering it is as a woman to make a man come like that? Why not spoil yourself a little with a witch smart enough and horny enough to keep you amongst the living for a few more depraved years?"

He shook his head. "But why me?" he demanded, still reluctant to leave his armour of defensive insecurity behind.

She placed a tender, perfect kiss on his lips. To his surprise, tears filled her eyes. "Because I'm enthralled with you, Severus Snape." She picked up the vial of Murtlap, which, in their frenzy, had fallen into her lap. She held it up to his large nose. "Besides, you owe me, remember? A thousand times, you said."

Part Four

Chapter 4 of 7

And does it not seem hard to you...

This chapter contains explicit sexual content.

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I need to thank on bended knee and present a bottle of Zinfandel (the proper colour, of course) to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is my Hermione Granger. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. Well, I can, but why would I?

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out..

Oh, and, by the way, this chapter contains explicit sexual content.

And does it not seem hard to you,

When all the sky is clear and blue,

And I should like so much to play,

To have to go to bed by day?

Bed in Summer, A Child's Garden of Verses RL Stevenson

He led her into his bed chambers. At first, had been a bitter demotion from the plush surroundings of the Headmaster's massive barge of a bed to this smaller one, but as the days wore on, and his indifference and war-trauma burn-out set in his heart like an anvil, he stopped caring so much about how far he had fallen.

Now, he felt a momentary squeamishness. What was he doing? He was the worst sort of shabby little pervert, with nefarious plans toward fucking his student. Toward his brilliant, sexy, troublesome, perfect student. Oh, Merlin. All the feelings of unrequited love, guilt, anger and envy over Lily unravelled from his head like a puff of smoke.

Lily might have jilted the fuck out of him, but he had a feeling this randy little witch was going to fuck the jilt out of him. He examined that feeling for a moment. Yes, he was, in fact, perfectly happy with that. She had already shifted a lot of things back into perspective.

No sooner had she entered the room than he locked and warded the door within an inch of his life. She drew near to him, and with a soft, knowing smile, she began to undress him. She undid each button with slow, secretive pleasure, as if she'd given the act a lot of thought on more than one occasion.

He was breathing hard as she removed his white linen shirt, and she smiled at his pale, slim torso. It was scarred, but that seemed no more important to her than their age or their status. She pressed against him lovingly. "You're beautiful. Do you know, Severus?"

"No, I'm not." His voice sounded sullen to his own ears. "There is no need to patronise me. I know what I look like."

Hermione just shook her head and gave him a look of infinite patience. "No, this is no time to feel insecure. I like what I see. I want to see more." She planted soft kisses over his chest, her breath whispering across his skin, and he thought for a moment he might hyperventilate.

He fumbled at his belt buckle, but Hermione playfully pushed his hands away, scolding, "Oh, no; this is my treat. I've wanted this. Don't deny me." She smiled up at him. "I'm enjoying this. I want you to enjoy it as well."

He closed his eyes. "To be perfectly honest, I can't tell you what my present emotion is. I'm fairly sure it's positive, but we're so out of the realm of my experiences right now I might as well be classified as another species."

He was babbling, and he felt like an idiot. Where was the brilliant, urbane wizard who'd engaged in such frothy conversation with the young witch sitting atop his ball-bursting erection not ten minutes ago? He was gone. Why? He gazed down at Hermione. Why shouldn't he enjoy himself with this pert little witch? She was crazy about him; he'd obsessed over her. And what, really, was worth ruining that? His insecurity? Fuck that.

She continued to undress him as if he were some sort of present to open. She knelt, and as she slid his trousers and his underclothes from his slim hips, she looked up at him with wonder, like beholding a god ready for worship. She gently removed his boots; when he lifted his foot, he placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned on it to keep his balance. She felt surprisingly solid. He felt appallingly dizzy; women did not touch him like this, nor did they look up at him with such longing and desire.

He was trembling as she gently stroked his calves and thighs. Warm, soft hands moved over his arse and gave it a playful squeeze, and when she grinned up at him and announced, "I bet I could bounce a Sickle off your bottom, Severus," his old feller opened a sleepy eye and decided to have a stretch and look around.

To his astonishment, she leaned down and kissed his feet. He gasped and closed his eyes. Watching her obvious adoration of his body would send him tumbling over the edge too soon, even after coming in his trousers like a fourth-year Hufflepuff at a Yule Ball. He had never recovered from an orgasm this quickly, except, perhaps, when he was her age. He cringed a little at the thought.

Now she rose back on her knees and took his foolishly bobbing cock in her hand. He hissed; it didn't matter that he'd just ejaculated shortly before, the feel of her soft hand closing over his rapidly inflating prick made his legs feel weak and he thought for a moment he needed to sit down. She moved to cup his balls in her hands, as if holding a prize, and looked at his cock with eyes that were dark with arousal and warm with adoration.

She smiled affectionately. "I think you're beautiful. Come here, sweet baby," she crooned, and pushed toward him until he penetrated her mouth in one long, exquisitely slow stroke. He made a gasping, strangled sound. She grasped the base of his shaft, moving his cock in and out of her mouth very slowly, gently, drawing out the pleasure. His heart was beating hard and heavy, and he could feel it pound in his shaft against the inside of her mouth as she painted him with her warm wet tongue. It felt like his entire body was melting in a pool of lava.

"Oh Merlin," he moaned, shuddering. He was torn between wanting to thrust in her hot wet mouth, and desperately trying to hold on for as yet unannounced delights. She took pity on him and kept her slow, sensuous pace, swirling her tongue over the head as she pulled away, licking the tip, bathing it with long languid strokes, savouring each lick as if sampling an exquisite morsel to be slowly enjoyed.

As she pulled back, she placed tender kisses on the head of his cock, calling him filthy things no woman had ever called him. The crippling pleasure intensified until he was moaning with each breath and holding onto her hair hard enough to hurt. He wanted to tell her it was indecent to be able to suck dick this well, but he could not clear his mind of this endorphin-soaked bliss long enough to form the words. Her head rolled sensuously against his crotch with each inward stroke, and her nose tickled his pubic hair.

Very gently she caressed his perineum, until she insinuated her hand fully between his legs. With a silent charm, she lubricated her first two fingers, and gently encircled the tight bud of his rectum. With one fluid motion, she inserted her fingers into his waiting hole and began to suck him harder, even as she finger fucked him.

He was thrusting in her mouth with abandon now, holding on tightly to her hair. He could feel a deep, melting sensation blooming in his groin, tightening his balls and saturating his body with unspeakable pleasure, and he grabbed her head and babbled, "Oh, suck it, girl, oh, gods, I'm going to come in your mouth... make me come - make me come -"

His words were lost in a tidal wave of sensation that robbed him of breath, sight and hearing, and he howled his release into the room. Hermione moaned ecstatically as he spurted into her mouth. He cried out her name, and she could feel his legs trembling. She removed her fingers from his body and cleaned them with a quick spell, holding him around the waist with her free hand.

"Oh, fuck me, that was incredible," he moaned, stumbling back until he was sitting on his bed, breathless, flushed and dazed. He collapsed back, fighting tears.

With a stunned, troubled look on her face, Hermione moved onto the bed and took him in her arms. Deftly, she leaned over him and offered him her breast, and he latched on, whimpering, sucking her nipple, wetting her skin with his tears. He stroked his deflating cock with one hand, as if soothing it. Gradually, he calmed, and the fierce hold on her breast relaxed, and he put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest and kissed her forehead hard.

As he came down from the dangerously addictive high she'd given him, she wiped the tears from his face and kissed him, easing her tongue into his mouth. He could taste his own salty, bitter flavour, and held her against his mouth for a long time. "You taste good, don't you?" she whispered huskily, and he nodded. He did taste good in her mouth.

For a while, they were silent, lying sprawled on his bed like exhausted cats, all tangled arms and legs. Finally, when enough blood flowed back into his brain to re-engage his thinking processes, Severus cleared his throat. In a surprisingly normal voice, he announced, "While I'm reveling in your desire to give me a new lease on life, not to mention recovering from the best blow job I have ever received, I feel I need to redress the balance. And although sucking those delicious little nipples has no doubt been mutually beneficial, I cannot help but think that I've been a monster of selfishness."

Hermione giggled, a sound which he found rather pleasing. "That's amazingly erudite for someone who's just received the best blow job of his life."

"Indeed. I'm rather pleased with myself."

"So it really was the best one you've ever had?"

"Don't trawl for compliments. I already told you it was. And I'll have you know I've experienced professionals." His eyes, large and black like lozenges, slid languidly over her body, and he peered into her face. "I'm almost afraid to ask where you learned to do that so well."

Her smile was both pleased and secretive. "I'll do you a deal. I won't ask about your 'professionals,' and you don't ask about my 'instructor.' Isn't it enough we have one another now?"

He raised his head from the bed and looked at her. "I will concur. Deal." He tucked one arm behind his head with a contented sigh. He caressed her back and she cuddled up to him softly, making him hum.

"You are quite a kitten. A dirty little pussy, make no mistake. I'll bet you're dripping wet right now."

Hermione pressed against him. "Very." She smiled, lightly running her fingers over the trail of hairs that rose above his groin. "I've had wet knickers since I kissed you."

"Indeed. Never fear. I did promise to redress the balance, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes. Where were we?"

"It's quite simple, pet. I have a sudden, almost irresistible urge to hear you howling my name in the throes of passion." He rolled over until they were facing one another on the bed. Stroking her cheek, he purred, "So, tell me what you want. Do you want me to lick you or fuck you?"

Part Five

Chapter 5 of 7

Does this answer your question?

Please note that this chapter contains explicit sexual content

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I need to thank on bended knee and present a bottle of Zinfandel (the proper colour, of course) to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is my Hermione Granger. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. Well, I can, but why would I?

And special thanks to reviewer vze57t9j, who gave me such a cool review that I had to include her remark in this chapter. Thank you for inspiring me!

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out..

As first they move a little slow,

But still the faster on they go,

And still beside me close I keep

Until we reach the town of Sleep.

IV, Young Night-Thought, A Child's Garden of Verses RL Stevenson

He looked deeply into her eyes. Hermione was staggered at the pure fire she saw in his gaze. He was such a curious mix of power and vulnerability. And he was a flirt, and a tease to boot.

Suddenly he rose from the bed, pulling her to her feet. "I want to remove the rest of your clothing," he said, his voice glazed with the lust. "Then I want you to get on your hands and knees, like a good little girl, and let me take you from behind. But most of all, I want some recovery time. I'm not a machine, pet."

She gave him a lazy, canary-eating smile. "I'll try not to break you."

He gathered her in his arms, and pressed his forehead to hers. She was warm, and a little flushed from their exertions. He kissed her, tasting her sweat on his lips. "Your welfare is touching. I thought you only desired me for my body."

She gave him another one of her Mona Lisa smiles, then took a step back and started unbuttoning her skirt. He stopped her. "No. It's my turn." She looked at him with a mixture of passion and assent as he quickly removed the rest of her school uniform, trying not to think about the connotations of undressing a student. Instead, he distracted himself by placing soft, biting kisses on her lovely, silken throat. He found that to be a most satisfactory diversion. He unfastened her shoes and peeled her socks down smooth, shapely calves, planting kisses along the way.

Her knickers were drawn down next, and as he knelt, he placed a kiss on the soft nest of honey-coloured curls between her thighs. The scent from her was truly delicious. He'd heard of the smell of sex making one's mouth water, but it had never happened to him, until now, and he took another deep, appreciative sniff. She made a sweet, mewling plea, and he chuckled and gave her little mound another kiss before pushing himself to his feet.

Sometime between undressing him and sucking his brains out the slit of his cock, she had removed her shirt and bra, and when he cupped her lovely breasts, so full and creamy and rich in his hands, he had a sudden vision of her nipples dripping milk over his pale fingers, and a little black-haired baby suckling one nourishing teat, and his own mouth laving the other.

Silently, he turned her around and led her toward his bed. She crawled upon it, and he stood behind her, simply drinking in the sight of this stunning beauty, who had changed his life in thirty short minutes. It made him dizzy, as if he was in some Muggle movie played on fast-forward.

Hermione was poised, ready for him. He hesitated, and she moaned, "Please, Severus, love, please do it now! I need you... don't tease me anymore -" She arched her back with a soft, purring stretch that showed off her lovely bottom to perfection. He shook his head, wanting to accept this so badly, wanting the gods to smile on him this one time. He could gladly accept the shit he'd been force-fed his first forty years, if only this wasn't some sort of sick, twisted joke.

"Why me, Hermione Granger?" he asked, looking down at the delicious little witch waiting for him on his bed. "You have glorious breasts and an arse most men would kill for. Your minge smells like candy and I'm going to go out on a limb and wager it tastes the same. You could have any wizard your choose." He stroked her lovely arse, hating himself for asking a question that practically set him up to fall. Exasperatedly, he asked, "You certainly have my attention. Now you want my affection as well. Why? Why do you want *me* so much?"

Hermione turned and looked at him over her shoulder like a girl in a porn mag. The apology was already on his lips when she rolled over, hopped off the bed and stood by him. Looking up into his eyes, she said, "Do you want the list?"

Severus dropped his eyes. "It would be... helpful," he replied, refusing to meet her eyes.

Hermione took one of his hands in hers, and together they studied them. His was long, slim, with slender fingers and myriad scars from countless nicks and burns and battles with uncooperative ingredients. Hers was warm, feminine, elegant; it was the colour of cream and softer than anything he'd ever touched. "I love your hands," she murmured, raising his to her lips, pressing a kiss against the tip of each finger. "You can tell so much by a man's hands." She lowered his hand until it nestled in the crook of her thighs. He slipped his long fingers between her silken labia. She was slick and wet and needy, and he moved his hand until he found her clit, hard and stiff and hot, and he rubbed against it teasingly. She leaned against him and closed her eyes.

"Is that it? Just my hands?" he asked, and she smiled at the insouciant tone of his voice. "Any other body parts you've considered?" She shifted to allow him better access, and he pushed her back down on the bed, so that her legs dangled over the side. "Do spread your legs, Hermione. How am I to fit my shoulders between your lovely thighs if you have them clamped together so tightly?" He sank to the floor and crouched between her soft thighs, placing kisses against the firm, smooth flesh as he traveled toward his teasing fingers. He could hear her soft, hopeful whimper, and between kisses he said, "Keep your focus, pet. What else?" He licked the seam of her cunt and raised his head with a jolt. "Circe's girdle, you do taste as sweet as candy. I definitely regret not locking you away now."

Hermione gasped and giggled, shaking as his wicked tongue curled and danced around her folds. She made a little growling noise. "I'm sure I could have forced myself to make the sacrifice if this is what you had in mind."

He laughed his nasty, orgasm-inducing laugh. "Indeed. Think of how good you would have been for my anxiety. Bend your knees, darling. I want to get a little deeper. Where was I? Oh, yes, I would definitely have benefited from this in the last few days before Tom Riddle decided to rearrange my larynx."

She giggled and gave a little squeal. "Are we bad to be talking so glibly about those days like this, Severus?"

"I think this is the only sane reaction to those days, don't you?"

Hermione stilled, so much that Severus paused, and lifted his gaze above the apex of her thighs. She looked like a right little reprobate, and Severus felt his heart flip dangerously in his chest.

She took a handful of his greasy hair in her fist, and cooed huskily, "You want to know why I want you so much, Severus Snape? You excite me. You're the smartest wizard I know, and you don't make me dumb down. You make me think, you make me crazy, you make me want to make you smile."

"You make me want to suck your cock at every available opportunity just to hear the sound you make when you come." She used his hair to pull him back up to face her. He let her. "You smell like Amortensia, you have the nastiest laugh in Wizarding Britain, and I could look into your eyes for the rest of my life and never get bored of what I saw."

She placed a soft kiss on his large nose. "And most of all, you make me want to crawl into your pocket and stay there forever."

Severus paused, looking up at her. She met his gaze, her eyes glassy and her cheeks pink. Suddenly, all of Severus' questions didn't matter one damn bit. She had already given the only real answer he'd ever wanted. "Are you in love with me, Hermione Granger?"

"If I say yes, will you please shut up and finish eating me out? I'm on fire."

He blinked. "I will take it under serious consideration." He grinned. He couldn't help it. Here he was, wet from forehead to chin with the juices of a witch half his age, feeling like he'd been born yesterday and could live forever. Why not lie here between her lovely thighs for the rest of his life, gurning like an idiot and making her scream like a banshee? "Well? I'm waiting, Hermione."

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "Yes, you great pillock. I love you." Her eyes grew soft. "You bring out the worst in me, Severus Snape. And I bring out the best in you. And you don't believe it, but I seriously believe you're actually worth the trouble. Do you love me?"

Severus felt something large and heavy crack in his heart and fall away, allowing him to breathe again. It might have been a Horcrux, forged in the fires of Lily's rejection, burned within and caught in the blister bubble of Dumbledore's death. It might have been etched there by the jagged edge of one of his father's broken gin bottles, or stained by the ink of his Dark Mark. Whatever it was, it had been weakening steadily under the pressure of his undeniable desire for her. Now it was gone, and he couldn't remember why he had held onto it so tightly in the first damn place.

The realisation that she meant what she said made him smile, and sent his libido into overdrive. Without warning, he pushed himself back down to the apex of her thighs and plundered her red, wet cunt, tearing a sound from her throat that made him lightheaded. He flicked his tongue over her sweet smelling folds, and she shuddered and began to undulate against him.

He did everything he'd ever done or ever wanted to do to a woman, and when he plunged his tongue into her tight passage and rubbed his nose against the little pearly button, she seemed to gather inwardly, as if preparing to take flight. Her clit was as stiff as one of her little nipples and he suckled it the same way. His long fingers pumped in and out of her tight, tight cunt while he performed the charm to ease the way into her tiny fundament. She yielded to him like fruit ripe for the taking, and he moaned into her, sending vibrations through his body as well as hers.

"Severus, oh, gods, yes," she babbled, clearly almost gone.

"I told you what I wanted, witch," he growled, outside himself with desire. "Do it for me!"

She gasped, and he felt her body tense so much she actually lifted from the bed, and her lovely pulsing, clenching pussy clamped down on his fingers, and he sucked her clit into his mouth again and flicked it hard with his rasping tongue. Her thighs clamped against his shoulders. "Oh, yes, Severus, don't stop, don't, please!" She grabbed his hair and surged upward, into his waiting mouth, screaming his name with each breath, with each pulse of that beautiful little nub of flesh thumping like a heartbeat against his tongue. It was amazing; he'd never actually felt a woman orgasm.

"That's my girl," he said, his voice gentle, as he tried to hold the pleasure within her. "What a good girl, to come so hard for me." He placed a gentle kiss on her clit, and watched as her tight passage quivered open and closed, like a tiny, gasping mouth. All the breath left his body. "Oh, you sweet little succubus," he marveled.

Even as her legs splayed apart with blissful relaxation, he climbed over her like the richest, most sumptuous of coverings, all velvet and silk and darkness, and as he slid up her body, he entered her as naturally as if she'd been designed for him. "Does this answer your question?" he whispered in her ear. "Does this answer your question?" He kissed the words into her mouth, and withdrew from almost entirely. With a triumphant roar, he drove into her as hard as he could, and proceeded to fuck the words directly into her body. *Does. This. Answer. Your. Question. Witch?*

They moved together as one, their bodies tangled, until they were fighting to reach the bottom of the other, each trying to beat the ecstasy into one another, moving like lightning, fast and electric, their cries like harmony, like incantations. Hermione's body, primed by what felt like a lifetime, enveloped his in a pulsing, clutching vise that made her scream his name again, scream it like she truly wanted to shatter the glass in the windows, shatter all the fear and pain and desperation he'd felt since the night he found her comforting another black-haired boy and jealously wanted it to be him...

He cried out in counterpoint as his orgasm pulled him inside out, flooding his rigid body and mind with so much pleasure he knew he'd never survive it. He cried out her name, and sprayed his seed into her, praying for it to find purchase, wanting to make her pregnant, wanting to etch a new Dark Mark on her skin, piss on her if he had to; anything to mark his territory, to keep her in his bed until he died...

He was heavy as he collapsed against her body, and they both struggled to breathe. "Does that answer your question, Hermione Granger?"

"Yes," she said, moaning feverishly, kissing him, crawling all over him. "Yes!"

He kissed her passionately. "Mine," he said, his voice hoarse from shouting. "You have given yourself to me, Hermione. You're mine now. I'm a selfish, possessive man, and now you belong to me. Mine. Say it!"

"I'm yours," she breathed, holding him close, delirious. "I'm all yours-"

"No!" he said, pulling away from her, leaving her bewildered and exhausted. "I already know that! Mine. Say it," he pleaded. His eyes were enormous and nakedly vulnerable. "Claim me."

Hermione pulled him down to her breast, and his mouth was soft as comforting to her as her flesh was to him. "You're mine," she breathed into his black, tangled hair. "You gave yourself to me. You belong to me now, Severus. You're mine."

He nodded, and rolled off her, pulling her into his arms. "Thank the gods."

Part Six

Chapter 6 of 7

Now that I have it, I might as well make the most of it...

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A Severus Snape-shaped bar of dark chocolate to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is the Queen of Awesome. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you. And don't believe what I said in the last five introductions I really can't do it without you.

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out...

Last, to the chamber where I lie

My fearful footsteps patter nigh,

And come out from the cold and gloom

Into my warm and cheerful room.

There, safe arrived, we turn about

To keep the coming shadows out,

And close the happy door at last

On all the perils that we past.

- In Port, A Child's Garden of Verses, RL Stevenson

Each day that followed, Hermione remained after Potions class, stroking Severus, kissing him, allowing him to play with her. He pinched and sucked her nipples so voraciously they literally became raw. He made her a special salve to heal them, insisting on applying it himself.

He dominated her nights as well. After curfew she would slip into his bed chambers and proceed to rearrange his psyche. Sometimes it would be dawn before they collapsed in quivering, sweat-soaked, sated, silly-grinning exhaustion. And if they were both making up for lost time, well, for fuck's sake, that's what Strengthening Potions were for.

He asked permission to shave her snatch; she allowed him. He examined her, sliding his fingers into every orifice, licking, tasting every inch of her. He made her urinate while he watched. She bathed him, and he reciprocated. He did whatever she asked, as long as she returned the favor.

She blindfolded him and inserted toys into his anus. She tied him up and tormented him with feathers and vibrators and paddles, and encouraged him to do the same to her. She gave him delicious back massages. She rubbed his feet, his temples, his hands. They rimmed, spanked, and talked dirty to one another. They masturbated together. His head spun each night with the debauchery she bestowed upon him. Playing these games with Hermione Granger left him feeling like he was permanently hopped up on Lust Potion.

The nightmares that had haunted him for months faded, and he slept like a baby. He discovered that he looked forward to each new day, and whatever strange, twisted perversion she planned for him. He began planning perversions of his own.

He was still touchy; in the mornings they spent together he was as prickly as a bear waking from hibernation, and his pre-coffee conversations mostly consisted of grunts, farts and glowers. Woe betide if Hermione was too heavy-handed with the Marmite, or worse, stinted and didn't catch all the corners of his buttered toast. In the early days his old insecurities kept him suspicious and petty, and more than once he gave poor Sebastian Thomas detention for smiling at Hermione the wrong way.

Catch him on a bad day and you'd be scrubbing cauldrons that had shit baked onto them since Grindelwald was a boy. Interrupt him in the middle of an important brewing procedure and you might as well swallow a bezoar now, because no matter the potion, at the end of class you would be charged with drinking poor Sebastian's results, whose potions always looked and smelled like Screw vomit.

Afterward, when the doors closed behind them, he was always slightly contrite, and Hermione often wondered if he acted this way solely out of jealousy or pique, or because he knew he'd receive a very harsh spanking at the end of the day from it. Personally, she didn't know who enjoyed those more; her, for the lovely red handprints left on his white, curvy, rock-hard bum, or him, for the blinding blowjob he always received afterward as reward for accepting his punishment. She had her suspicions.

Catch him on a good day, though...

In class, his students never knew what hit them. Instead of blowing in like a hurricane at the beginning of each lesson, he was waiting for them, ushering them in. "Hurryp! This is complex and difficult potion to make amazingly elegant and subtle. The results are indescribable - but you won't get through the entire process if you don't stop mucking about and get brewing! Come on - it's not going to brew itself! Look at this, just look at the delicate colour. Remarkable!"

He was a like a crackling bonfire, hissing, snapping, vital and incandescent with energy. He stopped haranguing and started driving. He did not so much berate as nag. Potions class became a fuel-injected, turbo-charged ride that left his students breathless and over-stimulated and *interested*. Students walked out of his class reeling with the possibilities of what you could do, if you only had the balls to risk the attempt. They poured out of Severus' classroom jacked up and sweaty and satisfied, looking, as one student described, in need of a fag.

Other professors soon complained; students coming to their classes straight from Potions were excited and distracted, keyed up and impossible to engage. It was difficult to regain their focus; they tended to doodle potion-making directions rather than class work instructions. After twenty-odd years of teaching, Severus Snape had learned to

inspire.

Visions of grandeur were forged in his Potions classes, along with the belief that passion could make miracles occur, one bubbling cauldronful at a time. One day, he heard a Hufflepuff announce that 'Professor Snape might be a right bastard at times, but you can't deny he has mojo.' It had been every bit as satisfying as hearing the words, "We won the war." Perhaps, when all was said and done, even more so.

It was after midnight. They had decided to sneak up to the West Wing Tower for a little mile-high pleasure, but had only made it as far as the base when their passions overtook them. Severus had Hermione pinned to the wall, one hand down her blouse, one hand up her skirt, when he heard the unmistakable sound of a throat discreetly being cleared. They turned to see the Headmistress staring at them as if she'd just ingested a thistle.

Hermione gasped and turned her head away, appalled at being caught *in flagrante*. Severus pulled his hand out of her bra and put it around her waist and held her close. She was shaking. "Shhh," he soothed. "It's alright, love. Don't be afraid." Some perverse imp whispered in his ear, and he slowly removed his hand from Hermione's knickers and licked his fingers, his eyes locked challengingly on his Headmistress'.

McGonagall, seething, announced quietly, "Professor Snape, breakfast. My office. Eight o'clock, sharp." She then shook her head, and turned around and walked away, her button-downs clicking a disapproving tattoo on the stone floor.

"Oh, no," Hermione said, her voice desolate. "I've gotten you sacked."

Severus thought about it. "I've already fled Hogwarts under a much bigger, uglier cloud than Minerva McGonagall. She doesn't scare me nearly so much. Oh, she'll chew my arse to a bloody rag and wail about debauching her Gryffindor Princess and threaten to bust my balls, and I'll sit and take it. I'll survive," he finished, his voice soothing with reassurance. He was vaguely worried, though. Minerva could, if he peeved her enough, expel Hermione. But Severus didn't think that would happen, either. They crept meekly back to the dungeons and settled on trying to distract one another there. After awhile, they didn't need to try.

The next morning found Severus seated opposite Minerva, breakfast plates piled high. Minerva was a big one for breakfast. As she poured coffee for them both, she announced, "I have only one thing to say to you, Severus. Well, two, actually: Disillusion and Notice-me-not charms." She set down her knife and fork. "Really, boy, what were you thinking?"

Severus almost dropped his toast. "Well, neither of those things, obviously."

The Headmistress snorted and picked up her utensils again. "Obviously." As she cut into her black pudding, she added, "This isn't some sort of weird Slytherin vengeance, is it, Severus? You're not simply toying with that girl to set her up for a fall, are you?"

Severus had a sudden vision of being tied to his bed the previous evening while Hermione striped his backside with a flogger, and smiled. "No," he said simply. "I can honestly say that Houses have very little to do with this. As for the matter of toys, well—"

"Good goblin nobblies, Severus, I don't want to hear this!"

He shrugged as he tucked into his tomatoes. "Shouldn't have asked then." His voice softened. "But no, Minerva, to answer your question, this isn't some game. We are quite serious about one another."

"Good. I don't want this affair

"It's not an affair, Minerva. I love the girl."

McGonagall paused, her fork raised halfway to her mouth. She coloured slightly. "Well, that's wonderful. I'm glad, Severus, truly. And she loves you as well? I just don't want this to end badly and have you moping around like some angst-ridden character in a Leonard Cohen song."

"Hermione tells me she loves me, and I believe her. And I'm quite fond of Leonard Cohen, actually."

"You would be," she retorted, and smiled. "You two make perfect sense, you know. She misses mothering the boys, and you need someone to mother you. Don't attempt to argue with your mouth full," she added as he began to splutter. "You know I'm right."

Severus took a large gulp of coffee. He wasn't about to delve further into a discussion about *that*. "Listen, Minerva, what happened last night was"

"I don't quite know what happened last night," she interrupted blithely, cutting her scone. "You know how it is in this old castle. One stumbles upon many things one doesn't expect to see. Things one can't explain."

She fixed a baleful eye on him. Pointing at him with her knife, she cautioned, "But I would suspect that *if* more than one were to see something in the night, then one would be expected to launch an investigation regarding those unexplained things."

"Well, one wouldn't want that, would one?" Severus said, hoping she didn't notice the faint bead of sweat running down his temple.

"Oh, no, one wouldn't, dear boy," she replied serenely, buttering her scone. "Besides, you've got your own room, for Merlin's sake. If you're going to go about with your hand up the girl's skirt, do it there!"

Severus honestly didn't know what to say. Minerva had just blessed his relationship with Hermione, and turned a blind eye to their indiscretion. He felt a little strange, as if he might be coming down with something.

Minerva looked up at him and scoffed. "You Slytherins. You always think you're so sodding clever. Both you and Hermione returned to this school looking like bloodless, cardboard cut-outs of your former selves. I lost sleep over you two, you know, worrying about you."

"Then one morning you both breeze into the Great Hall, all dewy-eyed and blushing, like two newborn vampires after a night out on the tiles. Suddenly you have enough energy for ten wizards. Hermione's grades are soaring past all expectations, and that is saying a lot. Your class grades improve by 150 percent and students are referring to you as 'cool.' I'm not stupid, Severus. I can spot a wizard with a steady diet of good sex from a mile off." Her voice grew warmer. "And I'm not so old that I don't remember how it felt to love someone, and have them love me in return."

Severus turned to the woman who'd been part of his life since he was eleven years old. They'd been rivals, drinking buddies, employer, employee, confidantes, enemies and friends. He would not cry, even if he had to squirt alum in his eyes. "I'm... happy, Minerva."

She smiled her private smile. "And that's why I'm treating you to breakfast instead of a bollocking." She continued briskly, "Now, finish up your juice and go tell Hermione that I've given her permission to roger you senseless." He rose, dropping his napkin in his plate. He could not leave soon enough. As he reached the door, he heard Minerva call out as an afterthought, "And for Circe's sake, let the girl out of bed long enough to make good grades on her N.E.W.T.s."

That afternoon, when class ended, Hermione approached him as always, after locking and warding the doors. He was sitting in his chair behind his desk, his large, blazingly hard cock in his hand, languidly stroking himself, his dark eyes so full of sin Hermione's knickers almost spontaneously combusted.

"You know, there's just something about you sitting there fully dressed, playing with yourself that is unbearably erotic."

He smirked. "Once again, Miss Granger, you're starting with the obvious." Her eyes narrowed.

She saw his smirk and raised him an eyebrow. "In that case, let me start with the not quite so obvious." With a flick of her wand, she spelled her tie loose, and her shirt unbuttoned. With her eyes locked onto his, she unfastened the front clasp of her bra, pulled it away, and cupped her breasts, as if offering them to him.

His eyes grew huge. "Sweet fucking Nimue," he breathed. She had rouged her nipples. They were bright crimson red, and looked positively lethal. He reached for her and pulled her down onto his lap.

They always started making love this way, as if paying homage to the first time they came together. "What was that again about stating the obvious?" she said.

His eyes roamed greedily over her bright red nipples. "Who gives a fuck, Granger? Are you wet?"

"Are you Slytherin?"

He suddenly lifted her onto his desk, pushing her legs apart. Instead of allowing her to undress, he used his wand to cut a slit in her knickers. Seeing her glistening pussy lips peeking from the slit short-circuited his thought processes, and he rose from his desk, abandoning all thoughts of unnecessary procedures like foreplay. As he punched through the hole he'd made, she clutched his robe and mewled, a sound that caused him to pulse inside her.

"I want to make my little lioness roar," he moaned in her ear, thrusting into her hard, loving the feel of her tight cunt gobbling up his cock like a hot, hungry mouth. "And I want my sweet little pussy to purr. Can you purr for me, my nasty little girl?" he growled, his raging cock hitting every good, soft, silky part of her.

Not surprisingly, after five or six good thrusts, Hermione found she could do both.

Graduation Day, and Hogwarts was celebrating with a ball. So far they had managed to stand together with Minerva for most of the night, and even held hands. There had been a few raised eyebrows, and the Hogwarts tomtoms had kicked in early, so by the time the dance was in full swing, almost everyone, down to the drunkest Ravenclaw, had heard that Professor Snape and Hermione Granger were 'doing it.'

About halfway through the evening, Severus approached her from the far side of the room, where he'd been cornered by the Minister for InterMagical Bi-Partisanships, or some such bullshit. As Severus reached for her hand, almost on cue, the band struck up an Elvis Presley song. Looking into Severus' huge, bedroom eyes as he pulled her into his arms, Hermione knew that Galleons had changed hands.

Wise men say only fools rush in

But I can't help falling in love with you

Shall I stay

Would it be a sin

For I can't help falling in love with you.

Like a river flows surely to the sea

Darling so it goes

Some things are meant to be

Take my hand

Take my whole life too

For I can't help falling in love with you

As they moved to the music, and the rest of the room watched, Severus said, "Have I told you how beautiful you are tonight?"

Hermione nuzzled against his shoulder. "About a million times. You haven't filled your quota yet, but it's still early."

He pulled her closer. "Students are watching us. Good heavens! Sebastian Thomas has just caught my eye and given me a thumbs up! What the devil is he on about?"

She looked up at his scowling face. "They're happy for you. They're trying to tell you what a lucky sod you are to have landed a prize catch like me."

"Should I return the gesture?"

She laughed. "No. You should get down on your knee and propose."

"With these knees? Keep dreaming, Granger. I'd never get back up. Sorely lacking in the dignity befitting my station."

"Ah, well," she said, pretending to pout. "I suppose it was too much to ask."

He looked down at her, and Hermione knew he took her words as a bit of a challenge. He raised his chin defiantly and stepped back. With an elaborate swish and wave of his wand, bright lights sparked over the entire Great Hall, causing shouts of surprise and squeals of delight. They blasted all over the room, whizzing like fireworks, until they rushed together and wrote themselves across the ceiling in blazing, six-foot high words, "*I promise to be a good boy. Please marry me.*"

Hermione read the words at least ten times, and turned to Severus. He looked as unsure as she'd ever seen him. She felt a grin spreading across her face like a beam of sunlight. With a wave of her own wand, she unraveled the words, then rewrote them. "*Vial 183, Batch 10.*"

She turned back to him with a trembling smile. Wordlessly, he held out his hand, and when she took it without a second's hesitation, the lights fell from the ceiling in a shower of sparks, and the room applauded.

Epilogue

I've been a good boy...

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A Severus Snape-shaped bar of dark chocolate to the world's greatest beta, stgulik, who is the Queen of Awesome. Thank you, Jules. I literally cannot do this without you.

And a huge thanks to the TPP readers, who have been so lovely and kind in your comments about this story.

As always, for DahlraMuse, who woke me one morning with the full story in my head and wouldn't let me rest until I'd typed it out...

For the long nights you lay awake

And watched for my unworthy sake:

For your most comfortable hand

That led me through the uneven land:

My second Mother, my first Wife,

The angel of my infant life--

From the sick child, now well and old,

Take, nurse, the little book you hold!

And grant it, Heaven, that all who read

May find as dear a nurse at need,

And every child who lists my rhyme,

In the bright, fireside, nursery clime,

May hear it in as kind a voice

As made my childish days rejoice!

To Alison Cunningham, From Her Boy, A Child's Garden of Verses, RL Stevenson

Two black heads rested at her breast, and Hermione shivered with the unspeakable pleasure of feeling the two mouths at her nipples. She kissed the downy black widow's peak of her month-old son, who tugged at her teat just as greedily as his father, nestled at her other breast. Her arms encircled both father and son tenderly, and Hermione smiled that she now had two babies, and not just the one she called husband.

Severus knew he was a lucky man, and he could live with that. He knew others whispered that she was too good for him, but he honestly didn't give a fuck. As Hermione was so often fond of saying, Severus Snape didn't give a fuck better than anyone else she knew.

He meant it when he told Minerva he loved Hermione. He had learned to live again because of her; she had been the one to bring him back to life and given it purpose when he was convinced there was no point in living. She challenged him, respected and adored him. He had been waiting all his life for her; he just hadn't known it until she told him so.

He felt the stirrings of his body each and every time she touched him. Even when she became pregnant, he was insatiable. Especially so, with her irresistible breasts so ripe and lush. Drinking her mother's milk for the first time had been the most erotic moment of his life, and as he so often said, considering their marriage, that was quite a boast. When she nursed, he would watch the bluish-hued milk oozing from her tender and bursting nipples, and salivate.

Ten years after Hermione Granger returned to Hogwarts to finish her education and to kick start Severus Snape back amongst the living, the two of them still burned like fiendfyre for one another. It often amazed Hermione, watching her husband as he stalked his way through his day as the newly-reinstated Headmaster, all bustling, kinetic energy and imposing, benevolent tyranny, that he was hers. He was a good father, which surprised no one but himself, and at fifty, he was, in Hermione's opinion, a sexy beast.

He still held the ability to reduce her to a sodden mess of a witch with a passing caress of his fingertips against hers as he strode by. If they were going in opposite directions, he would flick his dark eyes to hers, and flare his nostrils. That was usually enough to make her wobbly enough to dash to his study during her free hour and bend over his desk. "You really are the horniest little tart I've ever encountered," he would purr affectionately, obligingly opening his trousers. "I have to take Strengthening Potions now, you know," he added, thrusting hard, a satisfied sneer on his face.

Of course she knew. As Hogwarts' Potions mistress, she brewed them.

She often wondered what the rest of the faculty would say if they knew what he did to her beneath the tablecloth during dinner in the Great Hall. Probably the same thing they'd think if they knew the depraved acts they performed behind the velvet curtains of the massive Headmaster's bed. Or in his study. Or on top of the Astronomy Tower...

The little black-haired girl was their third (and last - Hermione and Severus were both adamant about that), and the one who resembled him most. Hermione often joked that Severus had merely spit in a cauldron one day and brewed Erin, so much alike were they. They resembled one another scarily, uncannily, right down to the large nose, which he vowed he would have 'fixed' when she was old enough to decide what sort of nose she wanted.

It amused and touched their friends and colleagues to see the precocious little girl walking beside her tall father, his steps solicitously shortened to enable her to keep up, her hand holding firmly to his, tyrannising him in the same bossy, gregarious way as her mother. Her two older brothers adored her, of course, and Hermione tried very hard not to laugh when Erin's scowl matched her father's so much it was like looking into a mirror.

And towering over them all, Severus Snape, husband of Hermione Snape, hero, headmaster, father; he watched over his family with a sense of wonder.

He had lived, he often told his children, two lives. The first one ended one night in the Shrieking Shack, when he had accepted his humiliating death as a fitting tribute to the parody of life he'd led up to that point.

The second had begun when his wife sat on his lap and woke him from his deep death sleep, splashing him with the cold, hard reality of the possibility of leaving his old life behind and embracing a new one.

It became a story they told the children over and over, a bedtime story of sorts. Erin would always start. "Papa, why did you get two lives when everyone else only gets one?"

Drawing her onto his lap, Severus would answer the same way each time. "Because I ballsed up the first one so badly, the gods decided I needed to come back and do a better job of it."

"But Papa," Erin would always ask - she loved this part of the story - "how did the gods bring you back?"

"Why, your mum did it. She brought me back with a bottle of Murtlap essence, poppet."

"But isn't Murtlap only used for healing cuts and such?" Young Toby would pipe up. Their middle child loved Potions. "How would it be strong enough to bring you back to life?"

Severus would look at Hermione carefully, and she would give him a flushed smile of promise. "It was a special vial, you see. Completely unique." He would look up at his desk, to the small glass casing which held the little empty bottle. "See, children? Vial 183, Batch 10."

"What made it so special?" Toby asked. He loved this story as well. It was the preferred bedtime story of his children years later.

Severus pretended to ponder. "I think because your mum put a miracle in it."

"What did the miracle do?" Erin always asked at this point.

It was their clever, sweet first-born who always answered. "Mum loved Dad enough to help the gods bring him back to life, and Daddy loved Mum enough to not balls this one up. And to show the gods he meant business, they had us. We're the miracles, Erry."

Severus had such clever children.

They lost their first-born two years before Severus' one hundred and sixtieth birthday, of nothing more than old age. It nearly killed Severus. He could still remember that sweet little black-haired baby, suckling beside him at Hermione's breasts. Norton, they had called him, a sweet boy with his dad's black eyes and his mother's soft heart.

Losing Norton had been the beginning of the end for Severus. He no longer had a younger wizard's ability to deal with such hammer blows to the heart. Losing Lily had been terrible, taking Dumbledore's life had been horrific, but he had been younger and stronger then.

That had been his first life, and anger and selfishness had sustained him through those tragedies. The heart of his second life had never been toughened by despair and grief and bitterness. It had always been softer, and more vulnerable, and losing his boy scored through him with more vicious damage than Nagini's bite.

He turned, as always, to the comfort of his sweet wife. He suckled against her empty nipple, and remembering his sweet little lost boy, he wept until he was cleaned out, and could accept and move on. Gradually they recovered, but never stopped mourning. *You are not meant to outlive your children* Hermione told him. *The best you can do is keep them alive in your heart, and they will live forever there.* His wise, perfect wife, Hermione Granger Snape.

He was old now, older than any of his friends, older than he had a right to be; older, even, than Albus Dumbledore had been on that fateful night so long ago... Severus had outlived them all. His hair was white, and his face still lean and saturnine, his eyes still as dark and mesmerising as they had been when he was a young wizard - angry, bitter, jealous, envious; hopeful, determined, inspiring - loved.

He was frail now, and his days were short. He didn't mind. He'd lived more than he'd ever hoped, than he'd ever deserved, and he wasn't afraid of death. He and that old fellow had already shaken hands once, and Severus knew he'd be seeing him again soon. He felt complete, and satisfied, and whole, and had been for as long as he'd lived his second life.

Hermione was old now, as well, but still soft and plump and sweet in all the right places for him. She too, was frail. But she was still beautiful, and at night, as he lay against her gentle breast, he could still recall the heady, sweet moment when he took her soft, love-ripened flesh in his mouth and it had healed him, as soothing and as full of the promise of renewal as the essence in Vial 183, Batch 10.

He dreamed, and in his last dreams he was Norton, lying soft and peaceful in her arms, a good boy first, last, and forever.

I woke before the morning, I was happy all the day,

I never said an ugly word, but smiled and stuck to play.

And now at last the sun is going down behind the wood,

And I am very happy, for I know that I've been good.

- A Good Boy, A Child's Garden of Verses, RL Stevenson

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