

The Black-Eyed Angel

by TeddyRadiator

Hermione cannot seem to stop mourning the death of her husband. But is everything truly as it seems? Who is the Black-Eyed Angel who comes to comfort her?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 8

Hermione cannot seem to stop mourning the death of her husband. But is everything truly as it seems? Who is the Black-Eyed Angel who comes to comfort her?

A/N: This is a bit of a dark one for me. I hope you will bear with me, as I am attempting to archive all my fics here. This is a very early fic, written originally in 2011, but one that is dear to my heart.

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Prologue

Christmas Eve, 2009

She stopped counting the days forty days ago...

She stood on the West Wing Tower, looking out onto a beautiful, wild Christmas Eve in Scotland, wondering if the same stars shone where he was now...

It was cold, so cold that her teeth chattered painfully. So cold that each breath that left her lungs took shape and form, stuttering from her blue lips out into the night like visible whispers. How long had she stood there, waiting, hoping that he would be in their room when she returned?

No, he would not.

He was gone. She had always told herself that losing a husband to another woman would be the worst thing that could happen, because no matter what, he was still in the world, still witness to a failed relationship and the humiliation that went with it.

She was wrong. At this moment, Hermione Snape would have rejoiced if Bellatrix Lestrange herself was shagging him in a cheap hotel in Shepherd's Bush. At least he'd be alive in the world. At least she would know she could see him.

Her thoughts resounded in her head like madness. What in the name of Merlin was she thinking? Bellatrix Lestrange, for fuck's sake! Hermione had always prided herself on her ability to think carefully through a situation. She was wrong. She had failed. She had lost.

The fever had raced through him and he was gone. It had done what the Marauders, the Death Eaters, Lord Voldemort and the gods damned snake had not. It had taken

him away from her. No goodbyes, no farewells, no soft kiss goodnight.

We're so sorry, Mistress Snape. We thought he was getting better. We did everything we could, but the virus was too much for his body to take. The strain was just too much on his heart. We didn't want to wake you, since you'd been awake so long, and since there was nothing you could have done...

The door to the vault had shut him in, and many had remarked upon her strength through her grief. Rita Skeeter had written a glowing, moving report in the *Prophet* of how Mistress Snape had been such a shining example of...

"SHITE!" she screamed out into the night. "It's all shite!" she bellowed, and the grief came crashing down on her like a hammer blow. She raised her arms as if to protect herself from it but it was relentless.

"Oh, Severus, I can't bear it!" she cried, her sobs cutting through the night. "WHY? WHY?" she raged down to the indifferent, mirrored sky on the Black Lake. Her grief was a mad thing, tearing her to pieces, twisting her body into grotesque contortions. She beat her hands on the sides of the tower. Anything to take the place of the vast pain in her heart. "I miss you. I need you," she whispered, tears misting on her cheeks like frost.

She could still feel him against her chest, after their lovemaking, spent and gentle, warm and boy-like and beautiful *will never feel him again* she thought. *I will never see him again*, and her throat threatened to close and she gasped aloud. This grief did not abate. It grew darker and more possessive with each passing day until, on this night, she could no longer stand the pain. She could no longer live with it. Her man, her wizard, gone.

But he was getting better.

"Why couldn't it have been me?" she cried, as she fell to her knees. Why had her heart been taken from her? Why had they spent so long dancing around one another, only to find they could not live without each other?

Why had he come to her, why had he made her love him so, why did he have to leave her like this?

A fucking fever had brought down the great Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts - her lover, her husband, her soul mate, her joy.

But he was getting better!

Each time her mind would push the thought away, only for her heart to drag it back, screaming at her ~~to~~ *to* stare at it, to taunt her with the 'never agains'.

How many times had she come to this place during her first year as a green new professor, just to look out over the Black Lake, to take in the sights and sounds of the night, to assure herself that she deserved to be here, that she was a worthy and gifted witch?

How many nights afterward had she returned to their chambers, shivering, to find him waiting for her, throwing back the bed covers invitingly, smiling as she snuggled up to him to restore warmth into her cold limbs, to feel his arms around her, to breathe in his scent? How many nights had his warmth turned to arousal, his touch to a caress, his body to an instrument for her to play? How many nights had he laughed with her, sung her to sleep, how many mornings had she awakened to his lovemaking, his endearments, "My life, my love, my little one. Touch me and tell me you love me as much as I you."

She would never hear those words again. She would never hear his beautiful voice, which was magic and music and passion and love. Never again.

But he was getting better...

I will never hear his voice again... That was the thought that broke her.

She stood on the West Wing Tower, looking out into the beautiful, wild Christmas Eve in Scotland, wondering if the same stars shone where he was now...

She closed her eyes and opened her arms to the night. "Severus," she whispered, and let go...

One: Christmastide 2004

Chapter 2 of 8

From an old ending comes a new beginning.

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Christmastide, 2004

It was during the winter holidays that Hermione returned to Hogwarts. It was snowing, and Hogwarts was beautiful and grand in the dim, December light on the day she came for her interview. Hermione had been so nervous, when she Apparated onto the grounds she could still feel the nasty pins-and-needles tingle in her wrist the hallmark of a near-splinch.

Walking toward the steps, she'd been greeted by Hagrid in a bear hug so tight, Hermione was left feeling like a Muggle toothpaste tube, squashed in the middle and bunched up at both ends. She wasn't totally sure he'd not rearranged her internal organs, but the sincerity and warmth of his greeting had been heartfelt and appreciated. She admonished herself not to mind if her liver was now where her spleen had been.

In truth, she was terrified of coming face to face with the Headmaster. The last time she had seen him was almost exactly six years before, during his trial, and although he had been as aloof and taciturn as always, he had been quietly courteous to her. During her testimony, he'd watched her carefully, as if listening to an interesting lecture, and afterwards, when the charges had been dropped (she'd never doubted they would be the man was a bloody hero and if they thought she and her friends would take anything less, they didn't really know Hermione Granger all that well), Professor Snape had approached her quietly. Harry had been standing beside her, greeting people, when the tall figure of their former Professor loomed into view.

He held out his hand first to Harry. "I would like to thank you for your testimony, Mr. Potter," he said, formally. "I think it is no exaggeration to say without it the outcome would have been much different."

There was none of his usual contempt, and although his voice was still rather gruff from Nagini's wound, he sounded no more or less than the man they'd always known. A little more remote, perhaps; less emotional. "No doubt I would be looking forward to a long, healthy life in Azkaban had you not come to my defence."

Harry had grasped the hand gratefully, still the idealistic boy he'd been when he'd fought against Snape. "Thank~~y~~ou, sir!" He'd all but wept, still visibly moved by the memory of the Professor and his undying love for Harry's mother. "It would have been unpardonable for anything other than a not-guilty verdict."

"Perhaps," Snape had confessed, pursing his lips thoughtfully. He turned his attention to Hermione. "I also owe you my thanks, Miss Granger." A delicate eyebrow rose. "I had, of course, prior knowledge of your zeal for defending the undefendable."

Hermione had writhed through a blush. She still felt house-elves were not given their due respect, but her S.P.E.W. days were long behind her. She was still teased mercilessly about it. It seemed that even Professor Snape wasn't above a little dig.

Deciding to take the high road, Hermione took the offered hand. "I'm just glad the Wizengamot saw reason, sir." She ducked her head shyly. She hoped he would take her comment at face value, so added, "After all you've been through, you deserve a little happiness, Professor."

She was hard-wired by this time to expect a sneering, caustic retort, and had instinctively steeled herself for it. Instead, Professor Snape had regarded her pensively for several seconds. In a soft voice, he replied, "It is very kind of you to think so, Miss Granger. Now, if you will excuse me."

Then he was ushered into a room for a press conference. Hermione later heard his reinstatement as Headmaster of Hogwarts had been met with controversy, but it had soon died down as returning students found their new Headmaster quiet, fair minded and only a little dour. His former students were stunned. Where was the Severus Snape who had terrorized Hogwarts for the better part of twenty years?

As Hermione approached the castle, Professor McGonagall was waiting on the steps, a broad smile on her weathered face. "Welcome, Hermione!" she cried, embracing the younger woman. "It's been such a long time since I've seen you! What has it been, four, five years?" The older woman beamed.

"Actually, more like six, Professor," Hermione smiled. "I've spent the last four at the Wizarding University at Cambridge, then the previous two in Australia with my parents." The sunny smile faded slightly as Hermione thought of her parents, still struggling against the impact of the war. The re-integration of their memories had not gone smoothly, and left them both with great patches of blank spots. Hermione's guilt over this was always in the back of her mind. Like the promise of clouds on the sunniest days, her failure to fully restore their memories always threatened even the best mood.

Professor McGonagall knew all about the Grangers. At the time, she and the Headmaster had offered to place the services of the school at the young woman's disposal. Hermione had thanked them, but stubbornly declined any outside help. She wanted to do this herself. She had gotten them into this mess, she would get them out. Eventually.

Desperate to change the subject, Hermione interjected, "I must confess, I'm absolutely cringing with nerves about this interview."

McGonagall looked surprised. "Whatever for, dear? You're the most qualified teacher to come out of university in years. Surely you aren't unsure of your abilities?" McGonagall favoured her with a smile. "You never were afraid to display them as a student!"

"Oh, you! Don't remind me!" Hermione laughed. "I know, I know. I was a horrible swot in school!" The women laughed together, then Hermione sobered. "That's why I'm terrified. I wasn't exactly Professor Snape's favourite student."

Professor McGonagall tilted her head quizzically. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Hermione pointedly. "Yes, I remember." Her expression softened. "But he's changed, Hermione. Merlin, we all have." McGonagall smiled at her one-time favourite. "I think you might be surprised at our Headmaster now."

Armed with this rather puzzling statement, Hermione followed the Deputy Headmistress to the Headmaster's Office and waited politely while Professor McGonagall muttered the password ("*Boscobel*") and the stone steps began their march upward. Hermione dutifully stepped on the rising steps, leaving Professor McGonagall below.

"Good luck, dear," the older lady called upward, and Hermione smiled down her thanks.

She'd only been in this room once or twice when Albus Dumbledore was Headmaster, and Hermione found a certain comfort in the fact that the new Headmaster had changed the room very little. The walls were still lined with the portraits of the former Headmasters and mistresses, and every surface seemed to be cluttered with mysterious, whirling, spinning and humming thingamy doodahs. Hermione suppressed a grin. Perhaps the very tenure of becoming Headmaster of Hogwarts imbued one with a love of magical gadgetry.

His back was toward her as she stepped into the room. He had obviously been conversing with the former Heads, and Hermione cleared her throat tactfully to announce her arrival. She needn't have bothered. The unctuous, familiar voice of Phineas Nigellus Black, the Headmaster whose portrait she had hauled around Britain during her mind-blowing seventeenth year, recognized her immediately.

"Well, here's a familiar face, Headmaster. Come closer and let us have a look at you, girl. Hmmph. At least you don't look like a scarecrow anymore."

"Charming to the last, Headmaster Black."

Hermione's heartbeat quickened at the familiar, unmistakable voice of Severus Snape, and, as if on cue, he turned to look at her.

Hermione thought she could be a hundred years old, residing on Mars, and still recognize Severus Snape. He had changed little, and he had changed completely. He was still the same tall, whip-cord thin man with long, blue-black hair and a large hooked nose. He wore his hair longer now, fastened at the nape of his neck with a silver clasp.

He still moved with the same gliding smoothness, but whereas she remembered him as eternally menacing, he was merely quietly graceful. He was still strangely, uniquely homely, yet there was something within him she discovered to be profoundly, austere beautiful. His dignity, his bearing, his *presence*, were as arresting as if he were the handsomest man alive.

His deep brown, almost black eyes, instead of snapping with anger and cruelty, were softer, less tense around the edges. Only the twisting, thin scar on the side of his neck, the remnants of that terrible last night of the war, served as a true reminder of the past.

He stepped forward and extended his hand, in much the same way he'd done at his trial, and when her small hand disappeared in his right hand, his left closed over them both. It was such an unexpected, *personal* gesture, that Hermione faltered, her 'thank you for seeing me' speech dying on her lips.

If he noticed any change, the Headmaster overlooked it. Instead, he looked down at her and from his mouth rolled ~~that~~ voice, the one that had mesmerized her during his opening speech to her first year class, the voice that had made DADA class so seductively enthralling during her sixth year. It was as deep, as silky, and as hypnotic as she remembered and she felt like a student again.

"Hello, Miss Granger. Welcome back to Hogwarts. You had a pleasant journey, I trust. I seem to remember you weren't a fan of Apparition."

And that was it. The moment Hermione remembered. The moment he teased her about for years afterward. In that one moment, taking in his grace, his serenity, his incredible presence, she found she could only manage, "What? Oh. Yes, I did. I do. I mean," she gasped, blushing to the roots of her hair. She took a deep breath and drew the tattered remains of dignity around her. "Thank you, Headmaster. It's lovely to be back."

His lips quirked minutely, and with her hand still captured between his, he leaned forward conspiratorially and said, "Well saved, Miss Granger."

Hermione, stunned, looked up into the face of the man she'd once sworn off as a bad lot, and saw an unmistakable glint of humour in his eyes. She suddenly laughed.

"It was, wasn't it? And to think, I had a lovely speech prepared and all." He gave her a little smile and a reassuring squeeze of her hand, then released it. Hermione felt a slight disappointment at the loss of his touch. His hands were incredibly warm and, well, safe.

"Indeed? Well, perhaps over tea you can give me an encore. Come. Sit," he said, indicating a chair.

To hide her expression, Hermione made a production of unbuttoning her cloak and draping it over the back of the proffered chair.

"Speaking of tea - Winky!"

The little house-elf Hermione remembered from her school days appeared with a sharp 'pop!' She bowed to the Headmaster, and squeaked, "Winky is here, Sir. Is the Headmaster ready for his tea?" The elf looked at Hermione rather nervously, twisting her fingers in her immaculate Hogwarts tea towel. "Is the Headmaster having guests?"

"Yes, please, Winky. Tea and refreshments for myself and Miss Granger, please." The small elf bowed and disappeared with another pop.

"Actually, I say 'Miss Granger'; did I commit a faux pas? Is it now 'Mrs. Weasley'?" he asked, diffidently.

Hermione blanched, and before she could catch herself, she muttered, "Oh please. That was an ex-parrot years ago."

The Headmaster nodded. His expression was unreadable. "Ah. My condolences. Or congratulations, as the case may be."

Hermione laughed. Her expression became wistful. "A bit of both, I suppose, Headmaster." When he tilted his head as a silent request for elaboration, she continued, "I suppose you could say we woke up one day and came to our senses, even though it took us years. We finally realized we were better off as just friends. We didn't want the same things from life, and to be honest, we never did.

"Ron wanted a marriage like his parents'. I don't blame him," she added quickly, lest the Professor think she was sitting in judgment over Molly and Arthur Weasley. "But I just couldn't see myself punching out a load of kids. Not that I don't want children, because I do, but just...not...all...at...once." She blushed again as her impassioned speech ran out of steam. She was babbling again.

"I see." Hermione got the distinct impression the Headmaster saw all too clearly, but as to what he saw, she was at a loss.

For a moment they regarded each other. The Headmaster sat down in his large chair, his long legs stretching out informally, and before she could stop herself, Hermione realized she'd been practically crawling over him with her eyes. The bemusement in his eyes was enough to make her chew on her bottom lip in trepidation.

"I can see the wheels turning from here, Miss Granger. You have questions. You were never one for holding back." His gaze softened somewhat, and his voice became, if possible, even more silkily beguiling. "Why is the most inquisitive student to ever grace our hallowed halls so reticent now?"

Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot. She felt very much under scrutiny. "I-I'm just trying to reconcile the Professor Snape of my youth to the Headmaster I'm speaking with now," she blurted, her Gryffindor bluntness in such contrast to his Slytherin guile he actually laughed. Hermione shook her head.

"See that's what I mean!" She pointed at him for emphasis. "I've known you since I was eleven years old, and this is the first time I've ever heard you laugh!" She sighed, and before she could stop herself, she murmured, "And it's such a *nice* laugh."

She blanched, and thought, *Oh, that's just great, Hermione. You're flirting with your prospective employer. Why don't you just do a strip tease on the tea table and promise him a blow job?* She then thought he might be reading her thoughts. Then she thought of giving him said blow job and blushed even harder.

He shifted restlessly in his chair, and sobered, but his eyes were still bright. "Yes, well, laughter is not something that comes terribly easy to me even now. You should be flattered."

Severus Snape observed this bright, inquisitive little witch with a smirk playing on his lips. What on earth she was going on about? Strip teases? Blow jobs? He hadn't even really intended to intrude into her mind, but she was so open and trusting, her thoughts had all but barged into his mind and starting playing the tambourine. Still, the idea of those sweet little lips on his-

"Oh I am, sir!" she chirped, desperately trying to claw some dignity back into her interview. "Very flattered. I mean, when I think of all you went through..." She faltered. What could she say that hadn't already been said? What could she possibly say that wouldn't stir painful memories for him?

The Headmaster sighed. "Perhaps I didn't have very much to laugh about then, Miss Granger. Being the pawn in a very deadly chess game between two demanding masters didn't give me too much reason for mirth."

"I know, sir. I'm sorry," Hermione said gently, her heart brimming with genuine regret. "It doesn't make me feel any better that we thwarted you at every turn."

She felt that old, familiar shame bloom in her chest, and it felt good to finally say, "I'm so sorry for everything-"

"Stop, Miss Granger. Stop that now." His voice was so emphatic, yet still so soft Hermione looked at him in surprise. He held up a large, slender hand as if to physically halt her. "Those were terrible times and we all of us had to do some hideous things to survive. If those days taught me anything, it is that when we survive we have to learn to move on."

Oh, yes. Those days. He knew all too well the danger of drowning in the sins of the past. He said a silent blessing to the gods that he'd taken Minerva's advice after the war and sought counseling. It had been gruesomely hard, at first, trawling through the painful memories, bringing them to the surface, purging the shame and regret and bitterness from his psyche like a surgeon scapeling away gangrenous flesh. He still felt a twinge of conscience that he'd had to *Obliviate* the earnest older man who'd helped him learn to deal with his own past, but it had been worth it...

He looked at her with eyes that still held the dark shadows of those years. A small voice in his head told him that she could be trusted, that now was the time to purge that last piece of sin from his system. "Shall I tell you a little secret, Miss Granger?"

With a sharp pop Winky reappeared with the tea, and Hermione, still feeling the sharp pang of mentioning the past, immediately rushed to be 'mother'. As she filled the cups and passed one to the Headmaster, he thanked her and took an appreciative sip of tea.

He sniffed. "I hope you don't mind rooibos, Miss Granger. It's a South African tea I've had Winky mix with lemon, ginger and eucalyptus. I have a bit of a cold in my nose, and," he grimaced, as if loath to say it but compelled to, "with this nose, a cold is quite an event."

Hermione gave him a faint chiding look, as if to chastise him for his self-deprecation. Instead of scolding him she decided to put the ball back into his court. "So, what exactly is your secret, Headmaster?" She meant to sound merely interested, but realized she came across as incredibly flirtatious. He cast his dark eyes toward her challengingly.

"Ah yes, my little secret," he purred, almost teasingly. He took another sip of tea, then relaxed back in his chair, his legs stretching toward the fire. He gave her another sideways glance, and for a moment Hermione saw her old professor, his eyebrow on the rise, wry, rueful.

"Actually, as much as I am enjoying this banter, I believe there is the matter of the interview I'm supposed to be conducting," he said, and smoothly guided her into the intricacies of life at Hogwarts and teaching schedules, Hogsmeade weekends and classroom rules. Then their talk seamlessly shifted into other subjects, ranging from an article she'd read in the latest Potions Journal to a concert of classical music they realized they'd both attended two years before.

They talked easily. She was bright, charming and so intelligent he felt his own mind reaching for the whetting stone, sharpening his wits to match hers. There was the delicate thrust and parry of two erudite, learned individuals who took pleasure in being clever. There was a bit of verbal sparring, some comparisons, some showing off. Each enjoyed the other.

Hermione shared a story about Professor Sprout that made him laugh and by the time they'd steered conversation to the controversy of new Transfiguring teaching techniques in the States, Severus knew he would inform all applicants that the Transfiguration teaching post had been filled.

He had not really planned on making his decision so quickly, but the little witch and her open, trusting heart spoke to him. For the first time in a very long time, he found himself enjoying the simple pleasure of engaging in stimulating conversation about subjects that interested him.

All too soon, Severus heard the clock chime, indicating the end of the hour. He rose smoothly. "As much as I have enjoyed our exchange, Miss Granger, I fear my next appointment has arrived and I must take my leave."

"Oh," she said, rising to her feet, brushing crumbs and smoothing her robes. She favoured him with a smile that he felt deep in his chest. It was, he told himself, the smile she gave every prospective employer, but his heart knew differently. *She's looking that way because she enjoyed your company as much as you enjoyed her* his treacherous heart whispered.

"Thank you for a most enjoyable afternoon, Headmaster." She held out her hand, hoping for it to be engulfed again in the large, warm embrace of his. She was not disappointed. She felt a heat in the pit of her stomach, and warned herself, *Oh great, Hermione. Now you're lusting after a man who might become your boss. You really need to get laid very, very soon.*

As she drew her cloak over her shoulders, he moved closer and his hands pulled the top halves of the garment together. With dexterous fingers, he buttoned her cloak. She watched him slip the button into the hole slowly, almost sensuously, his hands lingering for a moment longer than strictly necessary. It was as inexplicably an intimate gesture as if he'd started to undress her. She could smell his cologne, and the heat in her stomach moved decidedly south. It felt alarmingly like desire, and it scared the daylight out of her. His next words didn't help to calm her treacherous thoughts.

"The pleasure has been mine, Miss Granger. I've enjoyed our talk very much." His expression was almost... wistful. "In fact, this afternoon's conversation is probably the best Christmas present I'll receive this year."

Hermione's heart clipped into double time. Was he *flirting* with her? For some reason, Hermione thought he might be telling the truth, not just mouthing the right words for the occasion. *Well, I've just discovered the answer to the age-old question - What do you give to the wizard who has everything? A good conversation. Merlin, I need to get laid before New Years.*

"I enjoyed it very much as well, Headmaster. I hope it will be the first of many." *There. That sounds complimentary without being too pushy*, she thought.

Apparently the Headmaster felt the same. He nodded, "I'm sure we'll be in touch soon. Please give my regards to Messrs. Potter and Weasley."

It took all of Hermione's will not to harrumph. Harry and Ginny were married, with a child and one on the way, in true Weasley fashion. Ron was too busy playing the field and shagging anything with a pulse. For once, could even Severus Snape not remind her that she was no longer part of their lives?

"If I see them, I promise I will," she managed with a somewhat sour, inwardly-turned smile. For a split second, the glow of the afternoon faded, then she remembered herself and smiled back up at him. This smile was genuine. "Good day, Headmaster, and Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, Miss Granger."

He watched her leave, her back straight, her walk graceful, determined. He had lied. He had no other interview that afternoon. He merely realized he was becoming too relaxed, too unguarded, too familiar with her, and if he did actually hire the girl, that wouldn't do. No, that wouldn't do at all. In short, he was enjoying her too much.

It didn't help that he found her physically attractive as well. Before she had arrived he still held the mental picture of her as the gawky, awkward teenaged swot with the unspeakable hair and permanently waving hand in the air. The poised, mature young woman who'd graced his afternoon so pleasantly bore little resemblance to that child.

Hermione had, indeed, blossomed into a lush, curvaceous rose. A rather sexy one at that, he thought with a smile, remembering her somewhat polluted stream of consciousness. Later he would chastise himself for being a perverted, dirty old man, reading her perverted, dirty thoughts. Surely he could be forgiven even for that surely he could forgive himself for it.

He looked down at his tea cup. There were dregs in the bottom in a strange configuration, and as he squinted and tilted his head the shape absurdly reminded him of the head of a chicken. He snorted and rolled his eyes. Cockerels meant new beginnings, or so Sybill Trelawney insisted. He privately thought all dregs in teacups meant you should bloody well clean your teacups.

New beginnings.

There was never any doubt after that point to hire her. Any hesitation before seemed irrelevant. Her enthusiasm, her energy and intelligence were well suited to the job, and her natural bossiness meant she would be able to tackle the rigours of teaching. But she was so young. *Too young for you, you old lech*, he thought. She was, after all, only a few years older than he himself had been when Dumbledore guilted him into taking the Potions position.

And then there was that sad, lonely little smile when he mentioned Potter and Weasley. Severus had done a little spying on his own and found out they'd all but cut her out of their lives. With her parents still struggling, and her only real friends estranged, Hermione needed Hogwarts. It never occurred to Severus to admit he also hired her in the hopes of more juicy, intellectual conversations like the one they'd shared. The fact that so many of her random thoughts centred on her need to have sex had, after all, no bearing in the matter at all.

Minerva was waiting for him at the bottom of the steps when he descended. "How did it go?" she asked, pleasantly, her tone indicating she would only accept one answer. Being the Slytherin he would always be, Severus couldn't resist tormenting her a bit.

He sighed. "It was..." he shrugged slightly, "satisfactory."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed and she huffed indignantly. He laughed shortly. "Honestly, woman, you've known me all my life and you still can't tell when I'm baiting you? You Gryffindors have no bloody sense of humour."

Minerva snorted. "Insult my House all you want, Severus, but you can't deny she's the perfect witch for the job." She crossed her arms imperiously, challenging him to refute her.

Severus sighed. For some reason he didn't feel like sparring with his Deputy today. Too much. "Of course she's the most qualified." He gave her a hard stare, and for some reason McGonagall felt as if she must have done something to feel guilty for.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Minerva, I didn't ride in on the Hogwarts Express this morning. Don't for one moment think you fooled me with that old, 'Oh, Severus, I'm just

getting too old for all these responsibilities. You must arrange for a replacement for the Transfigurations teacher position this January. Perhaps then this old, decrepit witch will be able to perform her more important duties to your impeccable standards'." McGonagall's eyes narrowed at his high-pitched imitation of her voice, Scottish accent and all.

Smirking, he continued, "I did a little digging and found out Miss Granger was graduating this December. That was just all too terribly convenient to be coincidence, my dear Deputy." Severus stepped back and crossed his arms, waiting for the explosion. Honestly, until he returned as Headmaster he never realized Minerva could be so much fun to wind up. He did it on a daily basis and it never failed to delight him.

She spluttered, and huffed, then glared at him, her hands on her hips. "I never called myself 'decrepit', you, you, little scrote!" He was smirking now, and unwillingly, she started laughing, deep belly laughs that dropped the years from her face and reminded him of the Minerva he met when he first arrived at Hogwarts. Except for the horrible time during the war, they had always been friends.

She had all but gone down on her knees to beg forgiveness when she learned the truth. Severus, knowing he needed allies more than enemies, had only been too glad to forgive her. If near-death (not to mention his poor *Obliviated* counselor) had taught him anything, it was to be grateful for what he had, not what he'd lost. That had been the most important, and most difficult lesson. The second most difficult was to forgive himself. The third was to grow up and stop blaming everyone around him for his misfortune. That had taken the longest, but accepting it had brought a serenity to his life that, until now, he'd never felt he'd truly deserved.

He looked around his world. He was alive and healthy. He was respected more than he was feared, and that pleased him. He had friends, and allies. He had just had a lovely conversation with a pretty witch and hadn't made a complete berk of himself. He'd also just wound up Minerva McGonagall with minimum effort and was now laughing with her. It felt good. It all felt good.

Minerva was still laughing. "And never imitate me again, you incorrigible, impertinent Jesse! Your Scottish accent is terrible." She quieted. "So does this mean you'll hire her? You'd do a lot worse, you know, Severus."

"We'll see," he smirked, and moved on, heading toward the Great Hall. Minerva made a sound of aggravation, but there was no real bite to it. She simply stood for a moment, watching the Headmaster of Hogwarts gracefully striding down the hall. If she wasn't mistaken, there was a bit of a spring in his step. Minerva smiled to herself. "We'll see, eh? Satisfactory, indeed. You don't fool me either, Severus."

Two: Christmastide 2009

Chapter 3 of 8

The Black-Eyed Angel desires you for his bride...

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book.

This is a store written way back in 2011, and I knew a little less about writing styles than I do now. I hope you will forgive me for the bouncing POVs.

This chapter contains explicit sexual content.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Christmastide 2009

Severus only sang to her on the cold, dark nights, when the smell of wood smoke mingled with the sharp tang of snow in the air. Winter songs. Songs of frost and fairies, of night journeys and the scent of evergreens in the forests. He would not sing in summer's dark heat, or autumn's red and gold splendor - Hermione's favourite season.

No, it was only in the dark of the Solstice, when he would sit upon their bed and beckon her imperiously to spoon-sit with him. He would draw her against his warmth and place his large hands on her shoulders, pulling the tension from her body and replacing it with first comfort, then desire.

And on those nights, as his hands soothed and renewed her, he would sing the words his mother had taught him as a boy; his lovely, deep baritone reverberating against her back:

"Take my hand, little one, I am the Prince of Pride, the Black-Eyed Angel who watches o'er you desires you for his bride.

I'll wrap you in a cloak of stars, I'll fly you through the night, the Black-Eyed Angel will capture you in his flight.

You are my heart, my life, my soul, my love will shield you from the storm, the Black-Eyed Angel who watches o'er you will keep you safe from harm.

I'll wipe away every tear you cry, your every thought will be my command, You hold the heart of the Black-Eyed Angel in your hand."

It was a song he sang to his mother, when she was ill, or when his father was drunk and mean and the two of them clung to one another for succor. It was a song, he confessed, he'd sung to Lily Potter in their early days, when he had mistook their friendship for courtship. And he sang it to Hermione. She knew it was a privilege, and the song never lost its ability to make her shiver with desire.

He was always grateful that he'd never sung the song to anyone but these three women. It served as a benchmark to him. His mother had been soothed by it. Lily had been amused by it. Only Hermione had been seduced by it, and through their lives together, he understood that the song was itself a spell, an enchantment to bring who was most desired to he who was most desired. The song, Severus came to realize, had not been meant for his mother or for Lily. It had been meant for Hermione, and each time he sang it, he felt the magic stir around them. It was the most intoxicating form of foreplay, and it never failed to deliver.

He sang other songs, but there was other music as well. The gentle crescendo of his body as he moved with her, the swells of their yearning, the legato of his gentleness, coupled with the brio of his passion.

And after the music, would be the love. His touch would change, become languid, his strokes longer, feather-light, his voice silkier, lighter, beguiling. In those moments she was his slave, and she would obey his slightest purr, his most commanding plea. She would do anything for his touch, his beautiful body, his wicked, talented tongue.

"Who do you belong to, pet?" he would murmur, his lips teasing the shell of her ear.

"You, Severus."

"And who am I?"

"My Master." He would laugh, a soft, sensuous, dark chuckle that made her tremble. Long fingers would wind around a nipple, and tease and pluck until she was gasping with desire, pushing back against him.

"Your Master, hmmm? I thought I was your slave." His sinful voice alone was enough to make her wet, and he knew it, the wicked man. His hand would stray, dancing lightly across her belly, making her writhe as it delicately slipped between her thighs. Sometimes she would deliberately keep her legs together to tease him. It never lasted.

"Open for me," he would breathe into her ear, and her thighs would part like water to his entreaty. His fingers, so sure of their task, would find the pearly button of her clitoris unerringly, and as she whimpered his name, he would croon to her, "Never your Master, my goddess. I am your slave. I am a slave to your pleasure." She would be crying out by then, her passion standing on tiptoe, on the brink of her climax, only waiting for his command. "Come for me, my good, good girl...yes, that's it my sweet one...ah yes! Such a good girl..."

And in the night, in the dark, with his hands on her body, coaxing her, sometimes the tears would come. He never questioned them, having shed plenty of his own. He knew she mourned for those she'd lost: her parents, her friends, her innocence, the sweet, aching release of their climax together. Sometimes they would affect him as well, and she would feel his tears on her neck as he panted and gasped his pleasure, already mourning its passing.

He teased her that she would have never passed her exams had he dropped his bullying, cruel exterior and treated her to this sort of instruction. He teased her that he could make her come with his voice alone and she thought he was probably right. He proved them both correct when he did. Slave indeed.

Most of the residents of Hogwarts would have been dumfounded. How could she explain to them her passionate love for the Headmaster? Even Minerva, who had known Severus for most of his life, didn't believe Hermione when she spoke of him singing her to sleep.

The old witch would have thrown a wobbler had Hermione revealed Severus' imitation of Gilderoy Lockhart, which was so buttery and finger-tip perfect Hermione had fallen out of bed with hysterical laughter. Severus threatened to make her perform an Unbreakable Vow to prevent knowledge of said imitation becoming public domain.

People only saw the quiet, sometimes moody, once-greasy bat-of-the-dungeons Headmaster. They did not know the quiet, gentle soul who had loved Lily Potter and let her go with a courageous heart. They did not see the man who was brave enough to try to love again, who took the risk with a former student, and came up trumps.

And now he was gone. No sweet words of passion, spoken to her, no music, no love. She had lost him in this most final of ways. She was lost herself in this most final of ways.

The pandemic was swift and greedy. Draco lost both his parents in the space of two weeks; first Lucius, then the grieving Narcissa, less than a fortnight later. The virus swept through them with chilling efficiency, and everyone whispered it was revenge against the purebloods. Certainly, they seemed the most susceptible.

Then, a few days after the funerals, Severus appeared in the infirmary, shivering, flushed, his joints and muscles aching, his eyes bloodshot and frightened. Hermione made sure he had the best of care, and stayed with him day and night. *He's improving*, they said. *Get some rest, Mistress Snape*, they said. *No doubt he will be better tomorrow*, they said.

We don't know what happened, they said.

Every moment without him was torture. How had she lived for the first twenty-six years without him? He was the rest of her. Of course she could live without him. Why the hell would she want to?

He was getting better.

He was gone forever.

She would be with him soon. She promised herself. She would be with her Black-Eyed Angel soon...

Three: Christmastide 2005

Chapter 4 of 8

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight...

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Christmastide 2005

During her first year at Hogwarts, Hermione felt under more pressure than she'd been since the war. She honestly saw why Professor Snape had been so impatient and frustrated with every student. She was amazed how thick they were.

How smug she'd been, standing and waving to the student body as Headmaster Snape presented her as Hogwarts' latest teaching addition. How naive she'd been that she would be able to mold and inspire these fresh young minds. Now she was just grateful at the end of the day when her first years didn't accidentally turn each other into wooden spoons.

Their apathy, their lack of any attention span longer than two minutes, their insolence, all appalled her. She was afraid to admit her shortcomings to the other professors, afraid they would laugh at her. Perversely, the only one she did admit her shortcomings to was her employer, because she knew that, out of all of them, he wouldn't pet on

her. She had her suspicions that he'd felt the exact same way as a young teacher.

"I think you can see why I was rather...pithy in my teaching methods," he commiserated dryly, one afternoon over tea. Hermione had just given a week's worth of detentions to three second-year Gryffindors who had Transfigured a young Slytherin into an actual snake, only to find themselves unable to turn him back. She had been so angry she couldn't reverse the spell either. Purple with embarrassment, Hermione fetched Professor McGonagall to class to Transfigure poor Mr. Gorvin Potts from a slow worm back to a Slytherin.

"To be honest, Headmaster, I don't know how you showed the restraint you did," Hermione huffed. She sat back with a sigh. "I was so sure I'd be a good teacher, and now I'm not sure I'm cut out for this at all!"

"I really don't think you've given yourself enough time to discover what type of teacher you are, Professor Granger," replied the Headmaster, fighting back a laugh. It was almost like looking in a mirror at this point. Hadn't he stormed into Dumbledore's office during his first teaching year, declaring the same thing?

"I realize that, sir," she said, quietly. "But you and Professor McGonagall have placed so much faith in me and my abilities. I'd hate for you to feel that faith was misplaced."

Severus almost felt sorry for the girl, but he of all people knew that mollycoddling at this point would do more harm than good. "Give it a year, Professor Granger. The first few months of teaching are the hardest, believe me. It still astounds me that, for a man who hated teaching so much, I am now Headmaster of this school. Things...come with time. I have some experience in this. You know, I was the youngest teacher in Hogwarts history," he finished, and Hermione heard something so quietly hidden in those words, she suspected them hidden from the Headmaster himself. It was pride.

Hermione shook her head in amazement. "I know twenty-one years old! I don't know how you did it."

Severus smirked, and took a sip of tea. "Sometimes I don't know myself. You have to remember, I was still a student when many of my older students were first years at Hogwarts. It was very difficult to maintain discipline. Especially," he swallowed, and for a moment he almost said 'from the Gryffindors', but then decided to tell the truth. "From my own house. Familiarity breeds contempt."

Hermione gave him a sideways glance, and he was shocked to see the admiration and sympathy in her eyes. "You didn't get too many good breaks, did you?" she said, rather sadly. "I think you were very brave, especially when you were so afraid."

"What makes you think I was afraid, Professor?" he challenged, and for the first time in their conversations, Hermione thought she might have made a misstep. She decided to play the only fair hand.

"Because I've always been afraid, Headmaster. Afraid of not being good enough. I was Muggle-born, and so many students around me were treating me as inferior. *I had* to show how smart I was, I *had* to know all the answers, I *had* to impress my professors. And eventually, I did. All, that is, except you." She gave him a little shrug, to let him know she didn't hold any grudges.

The Headmaster looked genuinely surprised. "I'm afraid you were one of the many victims of Tom Riddle's war and the part I had to play, Professor Granger. In spite of my actions, I was impressed. Surely you of all people know I couldn't be seen to acknowledge it at the time."

Hermione's reaction was so shocking Severus had to cough in his hand. Hermione jumped upright on her chair, her eyes huge and shining. "You were? Really? I impressed *you*? Oh, wow! Thank you, sir! I really needed to hear that!"

She bestowed upon him the most radiant smile ever leveled at his person. "Oh, that does make me feel ever so much better about myself!" She stood, amber eyes dancing, and for a moment Severus thought she was going to high-five herself. "Thank you for the chat, Headmaster!" She flashed him a grin that was positively delicious. "I think I've got my second wind now!"

With that, she practically bounced down the stone steps. Severus watched her go, his eyes wide and bemused. "Glad to be of service, Professor Granger," he said aloud, softly, and permitted himself a chuckle.

A moment later, Minerva came up the steps, a look of profound amusement on her face. "Well, Headmaster, that was one for the record books."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Professor," Severus replied, smirking at his Deputy.

Minerva laughed. "Hermione Granger just floated down the hall, muttering, 'He was impressed...he was impressed...the girl was grinning like a looney.'" She fixed him with a pointed look. "What was so impressive, pray tell?"

Severus gave his Deputy Headmistress his most innocent look.

The Headmaster had been right, and gradually the lessons began to permeate the skulls of her charges. Hermione fell into a routine of sorts. She taught her lessons, and had dinner in the Great Hall with the other Professors. She was well liked, and her former professors soon accepted her as one of their own. Eventually, she learned to join in their conversations without feeling like an interloper. She chaperoned Hogsmeade weekends, served on special events committees, and spent her spare time in her office grading parchments and overseeing detentions.

Harry and Ron wrote her sporadically, but mostly it was all about what they were doing, who they were doing and why they were doing it. Her activities seemed to hold little interest for them. She supposed she understood this, and she knew they meant well, but it was a bitter blow to read about their activities and know that they really could care less what was happening with her at Hogwarts.

Her most enjoyable times were with the Professors in general, and the Headmaster in particular. As one of several first year teachers, Hermione was expected to meet with him periodically, to assess her progress and that of her students, to nip problems in the bud, and to generally make sure she was not warping any young minds on the way. What would begin as a 'how do you feel classes are progressing, Professor Granger' conversation would often lead to animated and engrossing discussions on common interests, like Potions and Arithmancy.

On nights when she was on patrol duty, she often made her way to the West Wing Tower at the end of her rounds. She would stand and gaze out over the beautiful, stark landscape surrounding Hogwarts. It was on those calm, dark nights she would feel peace stealing over her heart. It was during those quiet, introspective moments that she would feel that sense of belonging, of being on the inside. She was no longer the little Muggle-born girl desperate to prove her worth and her intellect. She was Hermione Granger, War Hero, brightest witch of her age, Transfiguration Mistress at Hogwarts.

In her more honest moments, she allowed herself to think more and more about the Headmaster. For so long, she pushed thoughts of him out of her mind. What had begun as a schoolgirl crush in her fourth year, had blossomed into a full-on infatuation during her sixth year, when he taught DADA class.

She had been devastated at the end of that awful year, and the events that had taken place turned her against him like a spurned lover. She had been so sure of his loyalty to Dumbledore, and when his supposed betrayal had been exposed, she questioned it to the point of obsession. *If I have been so wrong about this*, she thought, *what else have I misunderstood?*

During her long nights after patrol duty, shivering up in the West Wing Tower, she was able to work all these things out in her mind. Once the truth had come to light, it was all much easier to understand, and she wasn't an eighteen-year-old anymore, trying to get over a schoolgirl fascination. She knew more about Dumbledore now, and liked him less. She knew more about Severus Snape now, and liked him even more. Crikey, she knew herself more, and wanted more...something.

She wasn't in love with him, that was certain. Oh, she'd grown terribly fond of him, absolutely. And the dreams she had, the ones that woke her up panting and yearning in

the night, were just that: dreams. And it was true the thought of him made her smile, but she was not in love with him. And even if she was, she couldn't, wouldn't act upon it. The Headmaster would be mortified.

After an hour or so of quiet contemplation, she would wrap her cloak around her, descend the steps, and make her way back to her chambers.

Almost inevitably on those nights the Headmaster would cross her path on his own rounds. He would query her about her day, make a note to read a recommended article she'd seen in the latest Potions Monthly Journal, or make a suggestion for a reference book from the Library. Once he'd satisfied himself that she was done and headed for bed, he would bid her goodnight, and they would part. It never occurred to her to wonder why a Headmaster still made rounds, and only on her duty nights.

Her first year anniversary as a Hogwarts Professor coincided with the Yule Ball, and, having nothing better to do, she had volunteered for chaperone duty, of course. Walking into the Great Hall, she gasped at Professor Flitwick's decorations. He had transformed the entire hall into an ice cave, all white iridescence and frost. It was beautiful, even more so than the Yule Ball she had attended her fourth year with Viktor Krum.

Ah, Viktor. Hermione permitted herself a private smile. He'd been a great kisser and hung like a horse and she'd very nearly lost her virginity to him, but circumstances and too many trips to the spiked punchbowl had laid waste to that plan. She still thought of him fondly, every time she saw a Quidditch advertisement. She may not have technically lost her virginity, but she'd mastered a handy bit of broom handle polishing technique that year.

"Sickle for your thoughts." In the din of the music and excited voices, the Headmaster's head was closer to her ear than she realized and when Hermione turned to face him they almost bumped noses.

"Oh! Sorry, sir!" she gulped, a blush warming her face. "I'm afraid they're not worth that much. Two or three knut's worth, at that."

Headmaster Snape looked down his long nose at her. "Oh, I don't know. That was a very interesting progression of expressions crossing your face, Professor Granger. I find myself...intrigued as to the memories behind them."

She smiled. "Oh, I was thinking of the last Yule Ball here - during the Triwizard Tournament."

"Ah, yes, you were escorted by Mr. Krum. I remember that very well."

Surprised, Hermione blurted, "You remember I came with Viktor? That's amazing," she said, almost to herself. "I didn't think you noticed that sort of thing."

He tilted his head. "Of course I remember." His eyes locked with hers. "You were the belle of the ball, as they say." Her skeptical expression belied her pleasure that he had noticed her that night so long ago. "May I be permitted to say, that you look just as lovely tonight as you did then."

She smiled at his flowery speech, obviously not taken in by his flattery. He admitted to himself that, while he may have laid it on a bit thick, it was no exaggeration that Hermione was still a lovely young woman. Her deep burgundy dress robe hugged her lovely figure, and he permitted himself the pleasure of admiring this lovely witch with her scrumptious curves. Her breasts looked invitingly round and soft, and even hidden in her robes her heart-shaped bottom looked as if each pert little globe would fit sweetly cupped into his hands...

He shook himself out of his lecherous reverie when the energetic music ended and the familiar strains of a ballad filled the air. Looking down at her, Severus said, "Would you honour me with a dance, Professor?"

Wordlessly, Hermione took the offered hand and allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor. They moved together easily, and Hermione felt alarm bells ringing *He is just begging a duty dance. This doesn't mean he wants you to-*

A sure, strong arm slid around her waist, and pulled her closer to him, and in spite of her resolve, Hermione melted against him. It was hard to stand this close to him, and not want to run her hands over him.

His formal dress robes were trimmed in velvet and midnight black fur. They looked so tactile...Hermione inhaled his scent and it was like Amortensia...

This was no boy to flirt and tease with. This was a man, a wizard, a powerful wizard, a powerfully attractive wizard, and she knew she'd only been fooling herself to think she could turn off her feelings for him.

He was so regal, so intensely male that she felt desire blazing up her spine, and a thought zoomed across her subconscious *want you*. She'd felt desire before, but never like this, knee-weakening, bone jarring, knicker-wetting lust she felt for Severus Snape.

For several moments they gazed in each other's eyes in wordless, unsmiling bliss. Hermione shivered under his fiercely intense gaze, and her body responded to him. Suddenly, she realized he was using Legilimency on her. She dropped her eyes, humiliated.

For several moments, Hermione warred with herself as to how to respond. "I wish...I wish you'd asked first," she finally managed, but could not bring herself to move away from him. He, pulled her closer to him, so that they were pressed together from breast to knee.

"I apologise, Professor," he murmured into her hair. His voice was sweetly seductive. "Your thoughts are so open I don't really need to use Legilimency." He pulled briefly away from her and gave her a soft, somewhat uncertain smile. "But I'm a coward, you see." His eyes were intense. "This isn't some game, is it...Hermione?"

Hearing him say her name in such an intimate, sensual way was almost more than she could bear. She blinked slowly, and looked back into his eyes.

"You know it isn't."

They were aware the music had ended, and a more upbeat song replaced the slow ballad. Reluctantly, they pulled apart, and Hermione felt stunned, unsure of exactly what had happened. She looked up into his face, her expression bewildered.

"Sir? What-?"

"Perhaps this is a conversation for another time, Professor?" He looked down at her, a faint line between his brows. "Perhaps later this evening, once the children are abed?"

She stared at him, trying to take in his words, his intentions. "Yes. Yes, of course. Where-?"

"Where you always spend your hours in contemplation, Professor Granger. The West Wing Tower. Shall we say, two o'clock?"

Before she could answer him, he was moving away from her, begging another duty dance with Minerva. She did not see the satisfied smirk on his face as she turned away. She also did not see his surreptitious glance at the hall clock. Two o'clock was four hours away. It would prove to be the longest four hours of her life.

Four: Yule Ball 2005

Chapter 5 of 8

Quid pro quo isn't just for cannibals...

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Yule Ball 2005

Hermione had never resorted to Dutch courage in her entire life, but once she'd discharged her final duties for the evening, she found herself so unnerved, she indulged in a generous shot of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey. It had worked so well she downed another, then wrapped herself in her warmest cloak, and headed for the West Wing Tower.

The Tower was empty when she arrived, and she looked out of the window onto the Black Lake, and tried to calm her thoughts. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, and her body was thrumming in anticipation.

"It is a lovely view, isn't it?"

Hermione turned quickly toward the silken voice, and was surprised to find its owner in the doorway. She had not heard his footsteps coming up the stairs, nor had she so much as sensed his presence. As he walked through the door, he magically locked and warded it carefully.

He stood quietly before her, and Hermione realized he was probably as nervous as she. It was the stiffness in his bearing, the way he was holding himself perfectly still. This was not the louche posture of a man confident in his seduction abilities. This was a man as unsure of himself as a shy fourth-year.

"It's the best view, in my opinion." She turned back to the window, and scooted over slightly in a silent invitation to join her. "I've been coming here forever. I used to sneak up here to study when I was a student."

"I know."

She smiled at him. "Why am I not one whit surprised?" she teased, and the awkwardness between them slipped and slid back and forth. Hermione decided the best defense was a good offense, and since she knew all too well what he thought of Gryffindor subtlety, or lack thereof, she might as well exhibit that, too.

"Do you remember the day I came for an interview, Headmaster?"

"We spent a very enjoyable afternoon, as I recall, Professor. I'm not so far in my dotage as to be so senile as to forget it, I should think."

Hermione smiled wryly at his arcane phrasing, noting the way he gave with one hand and took away with the other. Slytherin to the core. "You were going to tell me a secret, but Winky interrupted you."

There was the slightest of hesitations. "Ah yes, my secret." They were standing side by side, gazing out of the tower window. Hermione didn't dare turn and look at him.

Keenly aware of his warmth beside her, Hermione looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Would you tell me now?"

Again, the hesitation. Then a soft sigh of resignation. "If I tell you my secret, you must tell me yours. Quid pro quo."

Hermione smiled. "I don't really have many secrets, Professor."

"But you do have some, Hemione?" His voice was soft and creamy, and just on the side of teasing. It was making Hermione's heart race and she closed her eyes and tried to master her breathing.

"Alright, Professor."

"I think we can dispense with formality at this point, Hermione." He turned to her and touched her arm. "It would please me for you to call me by my Christian name."

Hermione looked into his eyes, which were black and luminous in the torchlight of the tower. "Alright, Severus." Her words came out husky and slightly breathless, and she found she liked the way his name felt on her tongue. She smiled and said it again, "Severus."

"I like the way you say it," he breathed, and Hermione realized that, for all his elegance, his past, his personality, he was still a man who wanted to be wanted. Without realizing it, her eyes softened, and her lips parted slightly.

"I like saying it," she replied, her voice even more husky than before. *Merlin, I want this man*, she thought. To stem her increasingly lecherous thoughts, she pressed on, "We've agreed, then. Quid pro quo. You tell me your secret," she said, with a teasing smile, "and I'll tell you mine."

He nodded once in assent, then looked her directly in the eye. "I have never told anyone this before, Hermione, and I tell you now as a gift of sorts, to show my sincerity when I say I would like to court you."

"Severus!"

"That is, if you are agreeable," he added hastily, his pride and uncertainty warring with his hope. "That is, if your thoughts tonight were truthful."

To answer him, she simply stepped closer and took his hands in hers. They were large hands, and hers looked like child's hands within. She gave them a reassuring squeeze, then nodded. "I am agreeable, And my thoughts were true. And you don't have to reveal anything to me. I know there are things you can never tell anyone. I'm not one to pry. It doesn't matter. I want the same things you do, regardless."

His answering smile all but took her breath away and she thought, *Uh oh. Remember who you are dealing with, Hermione. This is the consummate Slytherin. He's never going to give more than he gets. Take it slow, or he'll have you jumping through more hoops than a hippogriff at a circus.*

He reversed their grip and held her hands within his. "Right." He took a moment to gather his thoughts. "I gave Harry Potter my memories in the Shrieking Shack the night I almost died. They were about Dumbledore and the Horcruxes," he took a large breath. He looked into her eyes without guile. "And my... relationship with his mother."

Hermione nodded. Those memories had been splashed all over Wizarding Britain in the *Daily Prophet*, on the Wireless, at the trial. Hermione had cringed that his most intimate thoughts had been displayed in lurid detail for all the world to gawk at. It had not been pretty.

She could only imagine how mortifying it must have been for an intensely private man like Severus Snape to have his precious memories of the love of his life, Lily Potter, exposed to the gossip mongers. Rita Skeeter had practically had an orgasm in the courtroom over it.

Snape continued, "I will tell you this. I loved Lily Evans, yes, and she did hurt me when she stopped being my friend," he hesitated, and bit his top lip. "But I never was as madly in love with her as I led Potter to believe."

Hermione was confused. "You mean, all the memories of you weeping over her and declaring your undying love?"

"Were created to spur Harry into action." Severus' expression changed. His anxiety was evident. There was a bitterness in his voice as he continued, "Dumbledore. It was always Albus plotting, scheming, doing what was necessary for the Greater Good.

"He believed if Harry saw me as devoted to the last to his mother's memory, he would believe the rest of the memories and act upon them. And perhaps even defend me when the battle was over. Albus knew there would be casualties of this war, Hermione, and he fully expected me to be one. In fact, he *wanted* me to be one. Albus concluded I would then be a hero and my despicable past would be exonerated." He smiled grimly. "It must have been a bitter blow to the old bastard when I actually survived."

"Gods." Hermione sat down on the flagstone step, shaking her head. "I knew he was manipulative, but I thought he merely used your guilt and remorse to make you do these things."

"I did feel guilt and remorse. I had given Tom Riddle the prophesy I'd overheard. I cared for Lily still how could I not? She had been my only friend at one time. But she was not, as they say, the love of my life. That was the sham."

"But-but your Patronus! It was like Lily's!"

Severus chuckled and sighed. His expression was winsome. "Ah, yes, the oft-mentioned Patronus. Our Patronuses were the same because we taught each other how to cast them. At least, that's the only explanation we were ever able to come up with. Patronuses are strange things. So little is truly known about them."

"So a lot of the memories you gave Harry were " Hermione searched her mind for the right word. "Manufactured? Created for his benefit, so he would have the courage to-"

"To allow himself to be killed to free the last Horcrux. Yes, Hermione. I lied to the boy on Albus' orders so he would let Riddle murder him."

Hermione had never felt so gobsmacked. "How..." She shook her head. "How do you feel about doing that?"

Severus sighed and scratched his earlobe. "At the time, I was just so tired of it all. My life was so hellish, nothing made sense or seemed wrong. My moral compass was so off the scale I hardly knew which end was up. Now..." He pulled at his ear. "Now, it's too late to tell the truth. The lie is so much better all round."

"And the Murauders?"

A shadow passed over his expression, then he straightened his shoulders. It was time to put them to bed as well. "Oh, we hated each other. We were testosterone-fueled teen-aged boys! They were bullies, I was a target. I allowed their bullying to influence my already low self-esteem and I did call Lily a-a Mudblood, and she never forgave me.

"I allowed Lucius to flatter me into thinking the Death Eaters would give me what I needed to feel good about myself. I was too young and too immature to realise I was allowing myself to be used by everyone. I was deeply saddened about Lily's death, but by the time she and James Potter had married and had a baby, being used was a way of life for me and I had moved on."

Hermione could hear the bitterness in his words, and she cursed herself for mentioning secrets. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't mean to bring up such unpleasant memories. Especially on tonight, of all nights."

He studied her carefully, his features dark and sad. "I wanted you to know the truth, Hermione. I've lived such a half-life. Until the night I almost died in the Shack, I was a half a man, always angry, always paying for my sins, always blaming others for making me commit them. Yes, I felt I had to atone for being the one to ultimately betray the Potters, but I didn't do the things I did because I loved Lily too much. If anything, those things happened because I probably didn't love her enough.

"I didn't carry a torch around for Lily Potter all those years. I carried regret. I wanted you to understand the difference."

When he was silent for a few moments, Hermione nodded, and again took his large hand in hers. "I'll never tell anyone. I promise." Her earnest eyes looked fully into Severus', and he knew she would keep this secret for the rest of her life. "You're right. It is a lie for all the right reasons. And you *were* hailed a hero in the end." She ducked her head shyly. "You were always a hero to me."

It was Severus' turn to be gobsmacked. For the past year, he had spent hours talking with this lovely witch about every interesting subject under the sun. They had debated, they had sparred, occasionally they had argued, but she had never said anything like this to him before. He had told himself it was his lonely heart that reached out to her. It had nothing to do with love. It was that same heart that pounded now, and his stomach felt the butterflies of something he'd not felt, not allowed himself to feel, in years.

He took a deep breath to calm himself. No sense in scaring the poor girl half to death. "So there you have it," he said, with a deep sigh of relief. "My real secret. And now that I've voiced it, I feel...years lighter. Thank you, Hermione," he said, and graced her with another of his rare, true smiles, and she felt her breath hitch, and what's more, so did he.

Taking typical Slytherin advantage of the situation, he pressed, "So, now, quid pro quo. I've told you my secret, now you must tell me yours."

Hermione froze, then nodded, a smile of resignation playing about her lips. Severus drew himself to full height and waited. He looked every inch her former Professor, and it made her confession at once easier and more difficult.

Clearing her suddenly dry throat, Hermione rose and turned to face the Tower window. She said, rather primly, "As I said before, I used to come here to study when I was a Prefect."

"Yes, you did," came the reply, in a tone that left the word *and*? unsaid, hanging in the air.

"I used to come up here to daydream, as well."

He rose from the step and moved to stand behind her. She could feel his warmth and her nose caught the enticing scent of him. "Of Mr. Weasley? That was hardly a secret. I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that, Hermione." His voice was like a silken purr, and she would later swear her knickers were moments away from bursting into flames.

She shook her head. "I didn't daydream of Ron." She kept her eyes on the lake as she felt him move closer. "My daydreams were of a more...mature infatuation."

"Indeed? And who, may I ask, was the subject of this...infatuation, Hermione? I confess, I'm curious about the man who was powerful enough to steal your thoughts away from your studies."

Hermione blushed. Damn him, he wasn't going to make this any easier, was he? "Actually, he was one of my professors."

Severus held himself very still. He was close enough to smell the same perfume that had intoxicated him while they were dancing. Damn her, she wasn't going to make this any easier, was she? "And, what, pray tell, was his name?"

For an awful moment, she was tempted to lie and tell him Remus Lupin or Gilderoy Lockhart, but she still couldn't be sure of the fragile nature of his ego, and Hermione was damned if she was going to spoil this moment by screwing things up. She took a big breath and let go.

"You know who." She turned and looked into his onyx eyes. "It was you."

For a moment he stood perfectly still, looking down on her, unblinking. In that moment, Hermione felt her entire body tense. She must have been mad to confess this to him. This was Severus Snape, and Headmaster or no, changed man or not, he was still Severus Snape, who had called her an insufferable know-it-all, ridiculed her teeth, derided her and her friends, and she'd just told him she fancied him. She must be mad.

In that moment, she thought, *Get out, Hermione! Get out and pack your bags and run and never look back!*

She actually had already turned and was on the move when he caught her arms and held her to him. She looked up at him, afraid. He was standing close enough to press against her, and in the quiet of the night he murmured, "When, Hermione? When did you discover this ...infatuation with me?" he smirked, but it carried none of the venom of old. It was a softer, almost seductive version of his trademark sneer.

In the dark, Hermione felt her fear dissipate to be replaced with a little hopeful recklessness. The two firewhiskeys might have given her a little help. Perhaps this wasn't such a lost cause after all.

He pulled her even closer. "Actually, I already know the answer. If I tell you the when, you must tell the why. Agreed?"

She swallowed hard, and nodded, almost forgetting to breathe. He was so close...

"It was during your sixth year. During DADA class."

"Legilimency is very unfair at this point." She said, feeling that little frisson that comes with teasing and being teased.

His arms were around her waist now, pulling her closer, and she rested her hands against his chest. His breath was sweet, with an underlay of the rum punch he'd sampled at the Ball. "I didn't have to use Legilimency, Hermione. I knew." The look of surprise on her face was priceless. Her mouth dropped open.

"Wha- How did you know that?" She tried to step back, but he would not relinquish his strong grip.

He gave her an almost-mischievous smile. "What I never understood was, why?" he said, his voice silvery. He was so close she could feel his warmth, could smell the starch in his shirt, the warm, utterly delicious smell that was distinctly him. He was trembling slightly, and when Hermione looked up at him, she could tell all playfulness was gone. He was looking down on her with an intensity in his midnight eyes that made her body feel at once hot and cold.

Hermione dropped her gaze, needing to marshal her thoughts. The last thing she wanted to do was to sound like a child again. The last thing she wanted was for him to see her as the know-it-all Gryffindor girl, the irritant that she no doubt had been. But that so long ago, and she had outgrown that girl, so she devoutly hoped.

"Why?" she repeated, her voice slightly hoarse, and he found it entrancing. He would have been amused to discover how parallel their thoughts ran at this moment. He too was thinking of the over-eager child who had aggravated him to no end in those dark days. He also was thinking about the man he had been then.

Ravaged by every negative emotion, a tarnished, dented little sphere in the giant pinball machine that had been the Wizarding world at that time. He liked to think he had learned awful, difficult lessons, and rarely made the same mistake twice. He wasn't all that sure he wasn't about to make another one, but he had been a fool for lesser things.

"Come now, Hermione, where is that famous Gryffindor courage? It's a very simple question after all, Hermione," he purred, throwing tonight's caution to the winds. He would be more vigilant tomorrow. Tonight was too full of magic and passion, and dormant feelings of desire he'd long tamped down were rising. He had asked pay court to this lovely, gifted woman and she'd tacitly agreed. Could his pride take another rejection? Would it have to? His smile was a little wolfish, predatory. "Why did you become infatuated with me in DADA class?"

When she hesitated, he reached to catch a curling tendril of her hair and lifted it away from her face. When his fingers left their task they brushed across her soft cheek, and her breathing quickened. "You must indulge me this once, pet. I find incidences of beautiful, intelligent young women claiming attraction to me so rare I must explore your...motives."

He was truly astonished when she looked at him in surprise and pleasure. Of course. How could he forget that for an academic swot like Hermione (or himself, for that matter), the most potent aphrodisiac was praise for their intellect? He also knew his voice was his one, true beauty, and he thought, *She loves so greatly for so little. I could learn to love this little witch as greatly.*

Hermione was stunned. Severus Snape had just called her beautiful and intelligent in the same sentence! And he'd called her 'pet' *Oh shit*. Part of her knew he was flattering her to make her flatter him in return. Part of her didn't give a Thestral's fart. She had wanted him then. She wanted him now.

She smiled. "I remember it well, Severus." She look up into his fathomless eyes, and willed herself not to give in to the impulse to drop her gaze. "You were teaching us offensive dueling, and you and Blaise Zabini gave a demonstration. He was such a show off I remember he tried so hard to get the upper hand."

She smiled in memory, and looking in his eyes she opened herself, invited him in, and he relived that day with her in her mind. Like a Muggle film, he watched the two of them, man and boy, throwing spell after spell at one another. Snape was playing with him and Blaise knew it, but Zabini was determined to show his skills. They dueled, their wands flying, arcing, as graceful as batons, swirling magic around them.

Hermione narrated, "Blaise cast a Stunning Spell, and you seemed to capture it, and right at the last moment you spun around and threw his own magic back at him. You moved like a dancer, all light and magic and grace, and when you finished and won you looked..." Hermione cast around to find the right word. It was a moment she'd treasured, but had never felt the need to give description to.

He saw himself then, as Hermione had remembered it. He looked so exhilarated, as if he was simply enjoying himself and his ability to create magic. He looked happy. She said, "At that moment, I knew I was looking at the real Severus Snape, not our professor, not the Death Eater or Order member." Hermione smiled up at the dark man as he left her thoughts. He had not moved a muscle, but he was still watching her so intently she felt the heat of his gaze.

"I was seeing the man, even more than the wizard. I could see your pride, your enjoyment at your ability to wield your craft like few others. There was arrogance and innocence, and happiness. It was only there for a moment, then you became our professor again. But in that moment, you were the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen."

Hermione swallowed, and she closed her eyes so she could say what needed to be said. "As soon as class was dismissed, I ran to my room. My knickers were ...I was...so wet. I had never felt so aroused in my life. I...I touched myself. I was thinking of you, of that look on your face, while I... masturbated." She took a deep breath. "And when I came, I was...I was whispering your name."

Hermione took a deep breath and waited. She knew she was trembling. She knew there was a distinct possibility that she'd just set herself up for the most derisory humiliation she'd likely ever experience, but she'd said her piece. She opened her eyes.

Black. That was all she saw. Black, black eyes, crowding her line of vision. He was so close now she could see every detail of his face. He was not smiling. He was as

solemn as she'd ever seen him. She had no idea what he would do or say next.

He took a breath, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, and he made a slight noise, a sharp intake of breath.

"My name?" he whispered, each word a soft puff of air against her face. She nodded slightly, and realized how swiftly her heart was pounding, how quickly each breath followed the one before.

"My name?" he repeated, and a slow sensuous smile fleeted across his lips. "I would like to have heard that. My name, on your lips...." His brushed hers softly, almost as if by accident. "When you were in your solitary...ecstasy." He used the word to arouse her, and by the quick gasp from her perfect, sweetly-shaped mouth, he knew he had achieved his purpose.

He was slowly pressing her against the wall of the tower, until she could feel a strong thigh press between hers. "I wonder, Hermione, what it would be like."

Hermione was having such difficulty remaining lucid, she shook her head slightly to clear it. He was seducing her with nothing more than a few whispered words, and once again, he had the upper hand.

"What, Severus? Would *what* be like?" she said, and pressed against his body in a challenge. He smiled again, and she felt his large hand stroke her cheek.

"I wonder what it would be like... to hear you scream my name when you come." Then his mouth was over hers, a devouring, punishing kiss that caused her knees to buckle and her clit to pulsate. He was pushing his long tongue into her mouth, his hands tangled in her hair, and she was pulling him to her frantically. Their bodies were churning against one another's, their mouths battling, harsh and greedy moans rasping from their throats.

She pulled his head away from hers, and looked up at him with such naked desire he felt his erection pulse painfully in his trousers. In a voice laced with lust, she gasped, "Then make me. Make me and find out, Severus Snape."

With a movement so blindly fast it made her dizzy, Hermione felt herself spun around so that she faced the wall. Strong hands grasped her wrists and pushed her hands until they were pressed flat against the stones. Hermione felt the saddle between her thighs grow plump and each heartbeat felt it was coming from her core. She was panting.

A hard, strong body pressed her against the wall. A deep, sinful baritone voice whispered in her ear, "Would you like that, Hermione? Would you like for me to take you here?" A large, warm hand slipped under her arms to gently cup her breasts. Hermione whimpered helplessly as his hands tenderly kneaded her soft flesh, her nipples hardening beneath his palms like buttons. He smiled.

"Would you? Answer me, Hermione," he crooned, and she nodded.

"Yes." Her voice was barely above a whisper, and she pressed her bottom against his pelvis and moaned to find his engorged cock straining against the swell of her buttocks.

He growled and moved his hands to her hips. "Wanton little girl. Are you wet, Hermione? Are you wet for your professor?"

For a moment she thought she might swoon. "Gods, yes," she moaned, her eyes closed to the sensations and the seduction he wove, like a spell. "Please..."

His voice was like a ribbon of silk and smoke, winding around her body, even as his hands pulled her bottom against his crotch. He placed his feet between hers and widened his stance, forcing her legs apart. "And would you let me, Hermione? Would you take off your robe here for me? Would you stand here and take my cock in your tight, wet cunt?"

She moaned and ground against him, her desire almost maddening in its intensity. "Please, Severus...Yes...gods, anything for you..."

He suddenly grasped her and held her still. "Shhh. Shh, little one. Calm." His arms were around her waist, and he burned against her body. She knew in that moment she would do anything for him, and he knew it. "It's alright," he crooned soothingly. "Calm. Shh." The arms that held her to him were caressing and proprietary, and she trembled as he gentled her.

His mouth brushed against her ear, tickling her skin as he spoke, "I want you, witch. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, and that's bloody well saying something. I'm a greedy, selfish man, and I don't share."

"Nooo..." she whimpered.

"Even as much as I want you, I'll not do it here. I care for you too much to take you here up against the wall like a Knockturn Alley whore." He chuckled darkly, and she shivered. "At least, not the first time."

He stepped away from her and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. When he turned her around to face him, he was amazed at the desire he saw in her eyes. Trembling with the effort to maintain control, he placed his fingertips under her chin and lifted her face to his and placed the most tender of kisses on her soft lips. Her arms went around his neck and she rose on tiptoe to deepen the kiss, but he stopped her.

"Will you come with me, Hermione? Will you come to my bed tonight?"

"Oh yes," she breathed, and favoured him with a beautiful smile.

He stepped away from her and held out his hands to her. "Come with me, Hermione. Let me show you how much I want you." He took her hand, and led her from the tower.

Five: Christmas Eve 2009/ Yule Ball 2005

Chapter 6 of 8

In the end, the love we made may not be enough...

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Please note this chapter contains explicit sexual content. You have been warned very sternly. If you aren't of age, here there be dragons. Here, there be lemons. Here, there be lemony dragons. You get the picture.

Christmas Eve 2009

She fell through the night, not caring that she fell free. She felt no fear - only the slicing, vicious, unrelenting grief that never dulled, never lost its razor edge, even as she plummeted downward in the frigid cold of the Scottish night. She tasted his name on her lips; it was the only thing that numbed the pain.

Severus...Husband...Lover...Black-Eyed Angel... She made no noise as she fell through the night. The lake below her looked cold; it also looked kind ...

And then his arms were around her. The impact of colliding with him stole her breath and screamed in terror, and for a moment she fought against him. She turned to find him smiling down at her, his long hair flying out behind him.

"S-Severus?"

He smiled at her almost lazily, and his arms tightened. "Shh. Calm, little one. I'm here. I have you."

Grateful to whatever gods had granted her this moment with him, Hermione wept, and he held her, murmuring sweet words of comfort to her, and she gave into the thrill of this last, best flight.

He was strong, and flying with him was always thrilling, exciting, sexually charged with his personal heat. When he wrapped her in his arms and took her into the air, their flight became another form of making love. Usually, when they landed, they were so adrenaline-fueled and randy, they could barely make it back to their chambers.

Hermione had flown with him so many times before, and although he was ever vigilant, and made every attempt to keep her safe, she never quite lost the pants-wetting fear of falling. As careful as he always was, there had never been a time she was not afraid.

Until tonight.

This vaguely troubled her, but for the life of her she couldn't understand why. She looked at him and breathed in his scent. There was none in the frigid cold air.

He carried her over the Forbidden Forest; they flew over the houses of Hogsmeade. She knew it was him; even with her eyes shut, she knew the familiar feeling of his strong arms around her waist as he flew. It always thrilled her to watch him fly without the use of a broom. It was a drain on his magic, but he loved to fly, and she knew why. He was free when he flew. Free to be the boy forever denied. Free to laugh, to cry, to sing. When she flew with him, he allowed her to see those things in any season, not just in the dark of winter.

She opened her eyes to see her husband. He looked different somehow. He was as dark as the night, and as pale and beautiful as the moonlight. He kissed her as they flew, higher and higher.

"My sweet girl," he crooned, and held her close.

"My black-eyed angel," she wept, blessing the gods for this last flight.

He shook his head and kissed her cheeks. "No tears, my darling girl." Higher they flew, the air so cold she could barely breathe. She began to gasp in the thin and insufficient air.

Still, she held onto him, trusting, loving, knowing he would be there and never let her fall.

"They didn't let me say goodbye," she sobbed, holding him, kissing his cold cheeks.

"Because you don't have to," he rumbled, and higher he climbed. "We will never say goodbye."

"I love you," she answered pitifully, knowing this fantastic flight would end soon.

"I love you, my girl," he said, smiling, and kissed her numb lips softly. "Hold on. I will never let go."

Higher and higher. His arms were strong, and the night was cold. She drifted away...her black eyed angel...She nestled against his neck. "Take us home, Severus."

"I am, my love. We are going home." They swooped closer still to...she didn't care. She cared only for his arms, his flight, his gift.

She closed her eyes and gave in to him....

Christmastide 2005

They left the West Wing Tower and walked the darkened halls in silence. Occasionally, she would lean against him as they walked, and he would place a soft kiss on the top of her head. Her hand never left his as they entered his chambers.

There was a fire blazing in the stone fireplace, its bright, flickering flame giving everything in the room the appearance of being gilded with gold leaf. They both gasped as they walked into his bedroom. The bed looked as big as a barge, and the mahogany posts that sat on each corner were at least ten feet tall and as wide around as a man's waist. Every inch of wood was groaning with ornate, rococo carvings, and the bed itself was covered in a velvet comforter of the deepest midnight blue. A canopy overhead was enchanted like the Great Hall to show the night sky, full of stars and snow.

It was a bed solemnly swearing to be up to no good.

"Well. That's... quite interesting," Severus observed, rather nonplussed. "The castle apparently decides what type of bed the Headmaster will need." He was as bemused as Hermione was impressed. "I will confess, I left a much simpler, much smaller bed this morning."

Hermione grinned. *Looks like the castle had a little idea that Severus might get lucky* Out loud, she answered, "Perhaps it felt that another bed was...more appropriate for tonight."

"Indeed," he said, as mystified as she. He turned and looked at her, and his expression softened. He became serious as he took her in his arms. His kiss was gentle, almost chaste. He took his time, his lips soft, his tongue teasing and maddeningly elusive. Gradually his embrace tightened, and the kiss deepened, his body molding against hers as he slowly suckled against her lips. She drank the soft, whimpering moans from his mouth.

She was not as patient as he; Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled him to her, reaching on tip-toe to battle her mouth with his, their tongues dueling for dominance. Severus growled in his throat as he sensed her ferocity. He grasped her face in his hands and swooped down upon her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. His kiss became a demanding, domineering thing that stole her breath and will.

She ground against him, and his hands slid down her over her ribs and gripped her waist; his arms pulled her against an erection that was so hard, it bruised her pelvis,

and so hot it burned her. He drank of her, his tongue teasing the roof of her mouth. Hermione had never wanted a man so much. She was seconds away from dropping to her knees and begging him to fuck her.

She made a little sweet little mewling sound of need that inflamed his desire, engorging his cock into a raging erection that throbbed almost painfully with each heartbeat. It had been too long; he wouldn't last, but he would make damn sure she enjoyed herself while he recovered. He had wanted her for a long time; if he was perfectly honest with himself, he had wanted her since the day he sat and watched her defend him to the Wizengamot, like a beautiful, young avenging angel.

No one had ever spoken on his behalf, and certainly not with that level of passion or righteousness. Not even Potter had defended him with such fervor.

Afterward, when Severus had taken her hand and she'd told him he deserved happiness, it had taken all his will not to fall to her feet and weep in gratitude. He told himself it was exhaustion, his frame of mind, relief.

He told himself Hermione Granger felt sorry for him, and held him in low esteem. He had left as quickly as he could, before she allowed the pity and revulsion to show, but it never did. All through the press conference that followed he cursed himself as the coward she no doubt thought he was.

And now, this lovely young witch was in his arms, pleading silently for him to make love to her, and he was damned if he would disappoint her. If he had his way, he would ensure she would never want to leave his bed again.

Hermione clung to him, and he gradually pulled his mouth away from hers in a series of slow, delicious kisses that were decadent and languid. She closed her eyes and pressed against him, silently pleading for him to kiss her again.

When he did not respond, she opened her eyes to find him looking down at her, blazing with such intensity, her nipples contracted, and she felt her clitoris pulsate. He was as fierce and as taut as she had ever seen him, dark and demanding, and, as his hands tightened around her arms, his words shocked and excited her.

"Run, little girl," he hissed, and she looked up at him, confused. His grip on her tightened further, almost painfully. "Run now, or stay forever. I told you, I don't share, and I no longer play games. I want you so much I can barely make a fist. But know this: if I take you tonight, you belong to me. I'll never let you go."

Hermione shook her head, and tried to soothe him. "I don't want to go anywhere."

His grip loosened imperceptibly. "Be sure, my little lioness. Once you lie down with me, it wouldn't matter where you go. The deepest valleys, the highest mountains, the largest chasms, the strongest battlements wouldn't keep me away from you. I'll find you and bring you back to me."

Hermione felt tears well in her eyes. How do you tell someone they are threatening you with the very thing you've always wanted? She freed her arms from his iron grasp and cupped his face with her hands.

"I promise you, Severus Snape, you will never have to work that hard to keep me."

His expression changed, and his grip gentled until he was softly kneading her arms. There was a look of sheer want and relief on his face that was heart wrenching, and not for the first time Hermione marveled that, after all this fine man had been through, he still had the capacity to hope, to give love.

Determined to show him exactly how much he meant to her, she reached on tiptoe and kissed him with all the feeling she had for him, past, present and future. He accepted it gratefully and pulled her to him swiftly, returning her kiss with lips that were hungry and as greedy as he'd promised. She heard a feral, growling noise of pleasure and realized it was herself.

She snaked one hand down to his groin and felt his erection return, swift and needy. He groaned into her mouth, teasing his tongue against hers until she squeezed his cock firmly.

He broke from her then, panting, eyes closed. "If you wish me to have any longevity at all, Hermione, you might want to stop doing that." He ventured a small puff of laughter. "It's been longer than I care to confess since..."

"Shh," she whispered, her lips almost touching his. "It doesn't matter. We can take care of that quickly. I can take the edge off. I want to. Let me pamper you tonight."

The sweet, soft sound that escaped him almost made Hermione's heart stop beating. She made a silent vow that she'd do whatever it took to hear that sound coming from Severus Snape again. It was so deliciously, almost innocently erotic, Hermione realized that, for all the things he'd seen and done, he was as fresh and fervent as she'd been when she'd lost her virginity...

"Stand still," she commanded, and he almost laughed again. There wasn't much else he could do at this point without embarrassing himself in a rather spectacular fashion. Hermione quietly removed his beautiful robe, laying it carefully over his chair. She walked around behind him and unclasped his long, silky hair. Freed from its confines, it felt like heaven sliding through her fingers and looked like the soft, black mane of a beautiful horse. Hermione had a sudden vision of it spilling over his pillow as she rode him like one...

She walked around to face him and looked at his body. It was so pale, licked by the firelight, and she could see the fading scars where Nagini had attacked him. His Dark Mark was nothing more than a smudge on his forearm, and she looked up into his face and was surprised at the humiliation she found there.

She put her arm around his waist, and he reluctantly allowed it. "No, you don't, Severus Snape. No shame tonight." Surprised, he looked down at her, and deep within his self-consciousness was the dawning hope that once again made her heart ache for him.

She pressed against his cool flesh, inhaling his scent. With eyes that glowed with arousal, she whispered, "Has no one ever told you how beautiful you are, Severus? Have you any idea how stunning you are?"

He looked down at this lovely woman, his mouth dry, and in that moment he almost launched a patented biting, sarcastic, quintessential Snape remark. It was a knee-jerk reaction, and in the past he wouldn't have hesitated to release the arrow from the bow, but seeing her face, feeling her soft, warm hands sliding over his body, he felt the need to reconsider.

"No, Hermione," he finally replied, his voice dark and warm, his eyes moist. "No one has ever considered me beautiful. Perhaps," he said, gently, lowering his lips to hers, "You're blinded by desire." Her soft tongue snaked out and entered his mouth, and as he sucked on it, his cock strained painfully against her belly.

Hermione broke the kiss and smiled as she nipped his lower lip. "I have perfect vision, Severus. My beautiful Severus..." She placed a soft kiss on his chest, then touched her tongue to each nipple. Her teeth nipped playfully at each pert little bud, and she smiled as he gasped at the sensation. His hands slid along her throat, and caressed her face as he kissed her forehead. He was almost panting, and at that moment, Hermione thought she might die of desire for the man.

She slid down his body, placing kisses on his chest, his flat stomach, his groin. He released her hair from its pins and it tumbled down her back in long, heavy ribbons. He threaded his long fingers around her scalp as she knelt down and removed his footwear. His feet were long and thin, and freed from his black dragon-hide boots, they looked surprisingly vulnerable. She stroked them, then on impulse, she leaned completely down and kissed the top of each foot. They were cool to the touch; as smooth and white as marble.

She ventured a glance upward, unsure of what she would find. He was watching her, rapt, his long hair framing his face. His eyes were huge and so dark the fire reflected in them, flickering red in the light. She smiled up at him, and ran her warm hands over his calves, his strong thighs, enjoying the hint of power in their shape, the cool white of his skin contrasting with the sparse black hairs on his body.

On impulse, she put her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his crotch. His cock was incredibly hot through his black pants, and when her hands slid from

his waist and grasped the waistband of his boxers he swore softly. She could see his hands curling into fists to stop them from trembling.

She smiled. "Shh. Shh, my love. Calm." She lowered his boxers to his feet, and he stepped out of them. Hermione tossed them aside and looked up at his cock for the first time. It was large, uncircumcised and so blood-engorged, it was almost purple. Large veins stood out over its length as it jutted from a thatch of black, wiry pubic hair. He smelled delicious, and Hermione realized her mouth was watering. "Beautiful," she breathed. "You are the most beautiful wizard, Severus."

His scrotum was large and when she gently cupped his sac it felt so heavy and tight she knew he wouldn't last long. Stroking his balls with one hand, she pumped his shaft several times until he was gasping and his hips were thrusting against her hands. She teased him for several seconds, reveling in his beauty, until she could no longer resist and took him almost balls deep into her mouth.

Severus staggered backward for a moment, and cried out, holding onto her as if his knees threatened to buckle. She withdrew him from her mouth and looked up at his face. He was looking down at her, drinking in the sight of her, with a look of stunned pleasure. Hermione licked the tip of his cock, and suckled on it, and he placed his warm hands on either side of her face, and watched as his shaft moved in and out of her lovely, warm mouth.

She looked up as his head tilted slightly. His eyes almost rolled back in his head as they slid closed. His lips were parted; he was completely abandoned to the feeling of her mouth pleasuring him. She'd never seen a man so transported with such intense bliss, and it filled her with a sense of power she'd never before experienced. The knowledge that she was giving *this particular man* this much pleasure was intoxicating. She understood then that Severus Snape would be a very addictive passion. There were so many aspects of him to explore, and she would never tire of him as long as he allowed it.

She released his cock from her mouth, still stroking him firmly. "Do you need to sit down?" she said, sincerely. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt him. He opened his eyes and looked down on her with such bewilderment she almost laughed, but the laughter died in her throat at the look of raw, helpless desire on his face.

"Merlin's balls, witch," he panted. "Don't stop. Please don't stop. I'm so close...oh, fuck, yes..." he moaned helplessly as she obliged him, sucking and licking his cock, stroking his perineum with her fingers. He was, indeed, close to orgasm, and, quickly muttering a lubrication spell she'd learned long ago (*thank you again, Viktor*), Hermione reached beyond his perineum, and teased the skin around his anus very gently.

Severus truly didn't feel it as a separate sensation, so pleasurable was her mouth and her hands on him. He was thrusting into her mouth with abandon, feeling his balls tingling with that familiar, delicious sensation he had denied himself so long... *Sweet Nimue, what is she doing?*

He barely registered the slender finger that gently slid into his rectum and pressed firmly against his prostate. The only thing that made sense to him was his cock and his balls and the delicious feel of this little witch's mouth on him and ...

"Fuck! Yes! Oh...goddess...com... I'm coming! Hermione!" he shouted, and grabbed her head, pulling her to him almost painfully. She held on, feeling his semen hitting the back of her throat like lava. He cried out with every thrust, his voice hot as a tiger's. He had never come as hard as this or for as long as this and he shouted this fact to the room, shouted his pleasure and this painful intensity of feeling, and his possessiveness, as he held her to his body. "Never...let you go...delicious succubus...mine!"

He collapsed against a nearby chair, dazed and exhausted, gasping for breath, for sanity. When he finally gained enough sensibility to open his glazed eyes, he was greeted with the sight of his Transfigurations Mistress, still on her knees, hair disheveled, mouth lusciously swollen, grinning at him.

"When I regain the use of my limbs, witch, you're going to be in trouble," he rumbled, and was rewarded with a breathless laugh. She slowly pulled herself to her feet, kicked off her shoes, and began to remove her robe.

"No." She froze, puzzled.

Severus stood shakily, still doped on the endorphins she'd dumped into his system. "That is my happy task. Patience, pet. You've left me weak as water. I'm not a young man anymore, you know."

In spite of his declaration, he rose and approached her with the lithe grace of a panther, his eyes never leaving hers. He took her in his arms and kissed her into insensibility, reveling in the taste of her mouth, still coated with his essence. No one had ever kissed her like this, with lips that were soft and hot and so demanding. His hands threaded fully into her hair and he tilted her head, angling her mouth against his as his tongue teased and danced with hers. His kisses were powerful and intoxicating, and Hermione clung to him, moaning, more aroused than she thought possible and ready to tear him apart if he didn't make love to her soon. He seemed to understand this.

The spell to remove her clothing was on his lips, but at the last moment he changed his mind. "A package this beautifully wrapped deserves to be unwrapped with equal care," he purred, and she smiled as their lips met.

"Who knew Severus Snape had such a honeyed tongue?" she murmured into his mouth. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled, as his nimble fingers made light work of her buttons.

"I seriously doubt I've demonstrated it in the best light before," he murmured, as his hands moved lower. "I do, however, plan to rectify that very shortly, my girl." He was rewarded with another one of her wicked little grins that made even his sated cock rethink a lie down.

As she stood and allowed him to undress her, she remembered the day of her interview, and the almost liminal moment when he buttoned her cloak. She had thought the gesture to be imminently intimate. It was nothing compared to this slow undressing, and the way he looked at her as he removed her clothing. She had known the man capable of the greatest, most fearsome concentration, but never had she thought all of it would be trained on her. It was an act of love in and of itself.

When the cloak fell to the floor and she was left in her bra and knickers, he gasped in shock at the long scar that ran down the length of her body. It was an old curse scar, and she became self-conscious as she closed her eyes. "At the Department of Mysteries, when we were fifteen. Dolohov cursed me."

"Oh, love. I had no idea." His fingers touched the old wound gently, and, just as she had kissed his feet, he knelt and kissed the scar reverently. He looked up at her with an expression of respect and admiration, and Hermione once again felt near tears. "My beautiful, brave girl." His arms went around her almost worshipfully. In an unconscious imitation of her, he pressed against her and nuzzled against her sweetly scented body.

Blinking back tears, she whispered, "I don't think I ever longed for praise from anyone in school as much as I did from you ." She smiled down at him, kneeling at her feet. "Hearing you call me that is almost more than I can take."

He looked up at her solemnly. "Then I will continue to be sparing. It won't do to have my Transfigurations Mistress unable to perform her duties." He smirked as he rose to his feet. "But for now, I think you'll just have to adjust. Close your eyes, my sweet girl. I rather like surprising you."

Dutifully, she closed her eyes as he walked around her. He smiled as he peeled her knickers from her hips and removed them. A soft sound of pleasure rumbled from him, and Hermione cried out softly as his large hands closed over her bottom. His dark chuckle made her shudder, her lust almost overpowering rational thought.

His voice was like velvet sliding over her body, and his warm hands felt strong and safe. "I've wondered, witch, if this delicious bottom of yours would fit into my hands," he purred, as each pert little globe of her heart-shaped bottom sat as sweetly cupped in his palms as he'd envisioned earlier.

Hermione hummed in pleasure as he squeezed tenderly. Nuzzling her ear, he rumbled, "Mmm, what a delectable morsel you are, Hermione."

His satiny mouth slid over her neck, and he nipped at her shoulder as he unfastened her bra. It joined the rest of her clothes on the chair, and then his large hands were cupping her breasts, his long fingers tweaking and plucking her nipples so knowingly, Hermione growled. It was a sharp, feral sound, as acute and sharp as a whiff of petrol and as inflammatory to Severus' senses. He scratched the top of a nipple with his fingernail, and Hermione felt she would gush onto the floor. The man knew how to tease

a witch into madness.

He pulled her body against him, and slipped a large, warm hand between her thighs. She was whimpering now, pleading with him to touch her. "Oh, yes, my sweet girl. I'll 'take the edge off' for you," he purred softly, and a long finger slipped between her labia and circled her clitoris with such perfect accuracy that her knees buckled and she would have fallen, had he not held her with another strong, encompassing arm.

He crooned in her ear as his talented fingertip played her body. "So wet...perfection...I know, pet, I know...I'll take you there, I promise...are you going to be my good girl and come for me?" His stunning voice was a sexual instrument itself and twinned with his knowing fingers, it made Hermione shudder and mewl with longing.

"Severus...oh, fuck..."

She tensed, his tender ministrations making her keen and shake, and he answered her cries with an appreciative moan of want. Just as she neared the top of this devastating wave, he stepped away from her, removing his hand and letting go so quickly she stumbled forward with a cry of loss.

She turned, to find him licking her moisture from his fingers, an expression of pure lust in his lidded eyes. He regarded her silently, then gestured to his left. "Get on the bed. On your hands and knees, Hermione." He was stern and unsmiling. "Gods, girl, if you want this, lie down for me."

With trembling legs, Hermione walked to the bed, crawling upon the velvet comforter. She had never felt such naked desire, and when she turned and looked over her shoulder at him with a scorching look full of primal lust, he felt his body react and his cock roared to life so quickly it left him dizzy.

He stood at the end of the bed, watching her, their eyes locked. She was panting like a wild animal, and finally she whispered, "Severus, please. Gods, I've waited for you for so long..."

His fierce look of arousal made her moan with anticipation. He took his cock in hand and stroked it, almost absently. When she was almost sure he would drive her mad, simply standing there, looking down at her, touching himself, he moved over her so quickly she gasped in surprise.

"How long, Hermione? How long have you wanted this?" His voice was losing its beguiling silk, taking on a ragged edge that, if anything, excited her further. "Tell me, and I'll give you everything you want."

"Since the moment I met you," she groaned, and she felt the bed behind her shift.

"Wicked little witch," he marveled, his voice sounding so sexy and sinful, Hermione arched her back in frustration. "I should spank you for your inappropriate thoughts, Miss Granger."

For a moment Hermione thought her heart might stop beating. "Oh yes, please," she whispered, feeling the delicious taboo sensation of asking for something so...bad.

She heard his soft intake of breath. "Naughty girl. Does this mean, little one, that you have harboured... detention fantasies?"

She couldn't see him, but she felt his warm hand slide down her back from her shoulder to her bottom and she gave him a shaky, breathless giggle. "What do you think? I'm an arch swot and you're my brooding, dark professor. Of course, I've had deten-"

Smack! The hand that spanked her was not hard but the sound echoed amazingly loudly in the room. Hermione squeaked, as an electric pulse jolted from her cunt up her spine to her already overloaded brain. "Oh gods," she whimpered, and pushed her bottom back toward him, an invitation to continue.

Severus watched her carefully. His heart was pounding and Hermione's reaction when he spanked her gorgeous bottom almost made him come again. He smirked to himself. He'd spent more years than he could count being a good actor for the Order, and the thought of doing it for fun had never crossed his mind...until now.

"Why, Miss Granger, I think you enjoyed being spanked by your professor." His voice could not have sounded more lasciviously wicked had he taken lessons from Lucifer himself.

Her only answer was another little mewl of longing. It really was all she was capable of at that precise moment.

"Well, my girl, we shall see about this," he purred, and began to slap her backside in earnest with the flat of his hand. He didn't spank her, precisely. This was not meant as punishment. Oh, no; his punishment was far more teasing and devastating. He would never dream of hurting her; she was too precious to him. Each tap was more like a bump, or a push that made an obscene, wet, smacking sound. With each tap, his hand became increasingly wet, and Hermione moaned deliriously.

Just as she thought he might allow her to come, he ceased his soft disciplining and she felt the bed shift again as he knelt behind her. A soft puff of air caused her to jump as Severus' stroked her tender bottom and gently pulled apart the cheeks of her bum. Surely, oh not that, not on her-

Oh, fuck. Ohfuckohfuckohfuck-

The sensation of his tongue sliding in and around and over the tiny sphincter was joined with a very softly stroking finger over her clit, and as she babbled out loud, he laughed against the little puckered hole. The vibrations shot up her spine, and her thighs trembled and shook so hard, she almost collapsed onto the mattress.

For several moments he kissed and nipped and stroked until she was once again crying his name and begging for release. Just as she was again at the brink, he stopped, forcing her to calm down again. She growled obscenities and pounded her hands on the mattress in frustration.

"Temper, temper, Miss Granger," he crooned, enjoying the power of giving her pleasure. "Shall I continue?"

"You-you bas-tormenting, incu-SEVERUS!" she wailed, thrusting her bottom against him like the lovely lioness in heat she was.

He affectionately placed a gentle kiss directly on the tiny little pucker, and it quivered so sweetly he kissed it again. She was mewling at him now, and he soothed her with his large hands.

"There, there, little one," he cooed, babying and petting her. "I apologise for tormenting you." He wrapped his arms around her waist and, as if she weighed no more than a child, he gently turned her over onto her back.

Hermione lay before him, arms stretched overhead, eyes tightly closed, her face taut with passion. To Severus, she looked like a pagan sacrifice, beautifully prepared for his ritual. He loomed over her and kissed her, forcing her into the mattress, his tongue stroking against hers, drinking the moans from her, and in that moment, his mind opened to her, and she saw his desire for her. It was so raw and exposed, so fearful and needy, she wanted to weep.

He lowered his mouth to her nipple, and she keened her pleasure into the room. His lips and tongue teased and nipped and sucked, and as he feasted on one peachy, hardened bud, his hand twinned his movements on the other. Hermione threaded her fingers into his dark hair, feverishly kissing his forehead.

He moved lower, leaving a trail of wet, open-mouthed kisses down her belly so hot she was surprised there were no marks to show his passage down to her core. At the apex of her thighs he paused, and his nostrils quivered as he closed his eyes.

"Your scent...I could smell you...in the tower...your arousal. It's like a perfume." He looked down at her mons, and breathed a sigh full of desire and promise. "So lovely. So plump and rosy." He pursed her swollen labia together with his thumbs, then gently pulled them apart, fascinated. "So wet. I've wondered how you taste..."

A long, pointed tongue swiped ever so gently along the cleft of her labia, and Hermione sobbed with pleasure. Severus placed soft, gentle kisses over the outer flesh, then

parted her nether lips. Her clitoris was as red as a ruby and engorged, peaking from beneath its hood of flesh, and he smiled inwardly.

"I think I'm ready to make you come, my pet," he purred, and he felt the beautiful woman beneath him tense. "You are so sweet, and I'm so hungry..." He pushed against the glistening, sweetly scented petals of her cunt so quickly she screamed, and her entire body locked in a rictus of pleasure as he buried his tongue into her dripping folds.

Hermione wailed into the room, her body burning and aching. Severus knew exactly what he was doing and her body recognized him as its perfect master and she knew it would be the best orgasm she had ever experienced.

He sucked her clit into his mouth, between his teeth, and began to flick his tongue over it expertly. Two long fingers slipped into her tight channel and she bucked and writhed against him. A low moan in his throat reverberated through her core, and she felt the orgasm rushing down so quickly, she could only grasp his hair and hold him to his task.

The wave seemed to pull her entire body inward, and then she was gone, flying apart, shattering over and over as she screamed into the room with each pulsing, throbbing spasm of her body. And still he tortured her clit, worrying it with his lips and tongue, his fingers curling inward, seeking and finding the spongy tissue hidden within her and rubbing it relentlessly.

"Stop! Gods, stop, Severus!" she cried, her body thrashing on the bed. "I can't take much more!"

"You'll take everything I give you, little girl," he growled, his voice carnal and unholy with lust, and she did. She was soon blown like a leaf through the gale of her second orgasm, sobbing, tears of release and joy streaming from her eyes, babbling, saying things to him she'd never said to another man in her entire life.

Even as her second orgasm threatened to destroy her sanity, he rose over her and with one swift, sure stroke, he sank his cock into her. His moan of pure bliss answered hers, and he stilled as he felt her tight, sweet passage clench and grasp him. His face held a soft smile of wonder and completion, as he waited for her body to accept him, feeling her stretch and pulse around him.

And then his smile twisted, turned into something like his trademark sneer, of pure lust. In that moment, Hermione knew she was lost to him. He was sexy as sin and he felt like heaven inside her, and if he didn't move soon she would die...

"Severus, please..."

His laughter was wicked. "I do love hearing you beg, pet." He withdrew and plunged into her, making them both cry out with the pleasure of it. "Beg me, Hermione," he growled, his dark eyes blazing with hunger. "Tell me what need, my goddess."

She reached for him, and kissed him fiercely. "Severus, please. Please move....I need you to move...I need you to fuck me." Her words rose to a wail as he withdrew again and slammed into her, pounding into her, vowing to make her scream his name...

He drove into her with hips that bucked and rolled sensuously against hers, watching her face for every nuance of expression. Being inside her felt like being sheathed in the hottest, wettest tightest mouth, and he wanted to give into the pleasure. Warring with his selfishness was the overwhelming desire to please her. She was crying out with each deep, pulsating thrust into her body, and soon he was past caring, giving in to the demands of his body, fusing with her, knowing she was close to coming again and that he alone had the power to make her.

He could feel her body tensing, and increased his rhythm. He reared up over her, and, hooking the backs of her knees over the crook of his arms, began to fuck her in lightning fast strokes, hitting that spot within with each stroke, her pleas and moans and cries like music to him.

He was too rough with her, but she urged him on, and he could feel her pulling away from him inside, like a wave dragging back in the vicious undertow of something so huge it would swallow them both. Panting, keening, Hermione looked up into his eyes and saw his fierce concentration and intensity focused solely on her.

His eyes were black and she was drowning in them, and when he parted his beautiful lips and said, "You know what I want to hear, Hermione. Come for me and give me what I want. Give it to me now, my lovely girl," Hermione felt the tension pull back with the wave and she was let loose as if she had been fired from a cannon. "Good girl," he praised, urging her toward her orgasm. "Yess...that's it, my pet, that's it...be my good girl, Hermione...come for me...such a lovely, good....ah, gods...come for me now!"

She screamed his name, and it sounded like an incantation to invoke a demon.

Over and over she screamed his name, as her body thrashed and throbbed and pulsed through her orgasm. Her cunt was sucking at his cock like a greedy mouth and he popped inside her once, twice, thrice, then froze as his semen shot from him into her waiting, accepting body. He roared his completion, a harsh, desolate, howling sound. It was the sound of a man coming who does not want to come; a man who covets his lover, and in return, wants to be coveted for his prowess.

They shuddered and clung to each other so tightly both were soon struggling to breathe, yet neither wished to relinquish their grip. Finally, when Hermione's passion-drugged mind cleared somewhat, she relaxed and gathered him in her arms, kissing his damp hair.

"Oh, gods, that was... unbelievable. Thank you, Severus, oh thank you," she said, her voice hoarse and shaking. "I-I don't have the words."

Severus found that he, too, was unable to speak. He was gasping for breath, his heart skittering madly in his chest. He'd not had a workout like that in years and he was praying not to die from it. For one thing, he wanted to survive with enough energy to do it again, repeatedly, if possible, and for another, it would be extremely embarrassing to die from sex especially sex this good.

This had transcended the physical act to something almost spiritual. In those last seconds, as they both roared to their completion, he was convinced they had touched something...divine.

He finally settled for collapsing against Hermione's soft, inviting body, and for a long while, he was content to lie against her, feeling her fingertips ghosting over his back. She stroked and petted him, and he shifted until she felt like the most welcoming pillow, and he drifted off, a smile playing about his lips.

For almost an hour, Hermione stroked and soothed him. It was a wonderful feeling; this larger-than-life man, snuggled up to her, his breathing deep and even. His long eyelashes looked like ink strokes against his face, and his long hair lay soft against her skin. He shifted, and made a sweet little boyish sigh of contentment, and it carved into her heart that, of all people in the world, she, Hermione Jean Granger, was the recipient of it. He was warm and fragrant and fit exactly against her body.

She caressed him and held his head to her breast, and welcomed him into her heart.

Later, when he awoke, desperate for the loo and a drink of water, he rose from her body guiltily, until he saw the look in her eyes. Wordlessly, he lowered himself back into her embrace, and kissed her. At that moment, he was sure she was going nowhere. In her eyes, he was the man he'd wanted to be. She was his home.

They made a brief appearance the next day for the Christmas Feast, then returned to his chambers. They did not see the smug looks exchanged by Minerva McGonagall and Madam Hooch, nor the galleons that changed hands. They saw little, in fact, beyond each other.

By the end of the Winter Holidays, they were inseparable both in and out of bed. It was an unspoken thing; being together was just easier than not.

Finally, the night before students were to return for the second term, an agreement had been made. Lying in the massive bed, gasping, sweat-soaked and doped on post-coital backlash, Severus lay warm and sleepy at the breast of his lover. He felt ten years younger and his body was singing with pleasure and exhaustion. He had just placed a kiss of profound gratitude on the side of her lovely, creamy breasts and had smiled at her little purr of contentment.

Reluctantly rising from the soft warm bed that was Hermione, he looked down at her and rasped, "I think you will need to marry me, Hermione. I don't believe I will be able to sleep in this bed unless you are in it."

Looking up into his angular face, his messy hair and pale, alabaster skin, flushed from the orgasm they'd just shared, Hermione had no intention of saying no. She didn't even have to voice it aloud, and he sighed in relief, and nuzzled back into the warm, sweet softness of her welcoming body. It was then he sang to her for the first time, and as his voice rumbled through her, she closed her eyes, as tears of happiness slid into the pillow.

No one really believed that she, little bookwormish Hermione Granger, could breathe new life in the passion of Severus Snape. Her friends had been stunned to find her in his arms. They'd been even more stunned to see them happy together. More than any, Harry Potter seemed the most...concerned.

But, above all, they had been happy. Five years later had seen them both healthy, their relationship strong and planning children. Together they had exorcised the demons of their respective pasts, finding first friendship, then passion, in one another. Each felt completed, ennobled by the other.

They liked one another. They 'got' it, where one another was concerned. The anally retentive swot and the insecure recluse found the missing pieces of the puzzle with each other.

The curious had been quietly, courteously rebuffed. The *Prophet* had been given a tasteful, fifteen minute interview. The paper had entitled the article *The Master Spy and his War Hero Bride: A Tale of Two Lovers On Both Ends Of The War*. They had laughed about it. The two of them had retreated back to Hogwarts, where students and faculty had been speculative, then curious, then accepting, then disinterested.

So determined was he to be a good Headmaster, the article said, *he almost didn't hire Hermione, citing her youth, her inexperience. He himself had not wanted the Headmasters post, but his fellow teachers had been insistent.*

He joked for years afterward that they'd fobbed it on him because no one else wanted it, so they'd stacked the deck with the Board of Governors. The Board, returning from the war with their tails tucked between their legs, told everyone it was the 'noble' decision. They'd not been happy with the article.

"Bugger the article," Severus had grumbled at the following Board meeting. "Replace me. I didn't want the bloody position in the first place." He'd made to stalk out of the room, only to be met with several hands raised in placation. The devil they knew, apparently was better than the devil of having to expend any energy looking for a replacement. Severus had allowed himself a smirk, then turned a haughty face to his Board, sighed with the longsuffering air of a Slytherin martyr, and agreed to remain, on the provision that his marriage to Hermione Granger would no longer be an issue.

It never was again.

Christmas Eve 2009

Severus Snape sat unmoving at the bedside of his wife. She tossed and turned in a delirium of fever, moaning his name, crying pitifully for him. "Don't leave, Severus, please! I can't bear it. Why did you leave?"

He stroked her burning forehead, his face close to hers. "I'm here, my sweet girl. I will never leave you." He turned as he saw a very worried Madam Pomfrey enter the room, a glass vial in her hand.

"This is the latest serum we have, Severus," Poppy said, her eyes frightened and resigned. "If this doesn't work, I'm afraid-" She hesitated, then turned away.

"I'm afraid we'll lose her."

He ignored Poppy. Hermione wasn't going to awake. He didn't deserve for her to wake. He gathered Hermione in his arms and wept for his sweet, lost girl. He had done this. He was to blame.

Six: Christmas 2009

Chapter 7 of 8

The Black-Eyed Angel will not be denied...

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book and enjoying the Christmas holidays.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Christmas, 2009

"This is the latest serum we have, Severus," Poppy Pomfrey said, her eyes frightened and resigned. "If this doesn't work, I'm afraid-" She hesitated, then turned away, her lips trembling.

"I'm afraid we'll lose her."

Severus Snape looked down at his wife, his face stony. His heart was breaking. He was completely helpless. Inwardly, he cursed the gods for finally giving him a chance to love this brave, beautiful woman, only to take her away from him in such a callous manner.

No. For once in your miserable life, stop cursing the gods for something you've done. This is all your doing, Severus Tobias Snape.

His guilt crushed him. It was his fault, of course. He told himself he had only wanted to fly, to take her with him on a night flight around the grounds, to make sure everything was well.

It was a lie. He flew because he loved it, and he loved flying with Hermione. He knew she was afraid, and flying with him was the ultimate gesture of her love and trust for him. When she flew, she was telling him, *I love you. You are worthy. You are trusted. You are whole and safe and not a coward* She never said those things aloud, but the fact that she would go with him, when she was so obviously terrified, made those things perfectly clear to him.

Hermione had been flushed and warm when they returned, and they both thought it was the usual excitement of flying. Two days later, Hermione was coughing constantly and running a fever that left her joints and muscles aching, like the Muggle flu.

Poppy had been livid. "Severus, it's below freezing out there! You may have the constitution of a brass centaur, but Hermione's a woman. And you, young lady," she turned on Hermione like a fighter turning on a fresh opponent, "need to show a little common sense as well! If the Headmaster decided to jump off a bridge, would you follow him?"

"Fuck's sake, Poppy, I'm not a first-year," Severus had grumbled. "I'd never do anything to hurt my wife." He decided to use the only Slytherin tactic available to him and put Poppy on the back foot. Severus was embarrassed and, in spite of his words to the contrary, did feel like a first-year caught doing something stupid.

"I know that! Just... just don't drag her out in this weather for a quick flit around the grounds, you great pillock," Poppy muttered, bundling Hermione under mountains of blankets.

Hermione, too, had looked properly chagrined, and taken the Pepper-up Potion and fever-reducing philter, but it had been too little too late. By the third day, Hermione was lapsing into increasingly higher fevers, deeper coughing and choking episodes, and by the morning of December Twenty-second, she was drowning in her own fluids and unable to breathe without magical respiration.

She had been burning with a fever for most of the past two days, and her body was exhausted and burned out from it. She was thrashing around, delirious, crying out her husband's name over and over almost the entire time. Her face was flushed and dry, her lips chapped and covered with fever blisters.

Her moans and cries were pitiful to hear; Severus could hardly bear it. She wept in her delirium, begging him to return, pleading with him not to leave, praying for him to come back. It was tearing his heart apart, and he spoke to her constantly, reassuring her that he was there, that he would never leave her, that he loved her with all his heart and would never abandon her. In the quiet hours, he would place his face next to hers, and he would sing to her. This calmed her somewhat, but all too soon the fever nightmares and the delirium would return.

Severus sat by her side, never leaving her, even when Poppy ordered him to. "My place is by her side," he had told Poppy grimly. "Hermione needs me more than the bloody school. What if she wakes up and I'm not here? She has nightmares, you know. I know how to soothe her." He had pretended not to see the looks passing between Poppy and Minerva. He held his head high as they whispered of 'devotion' and 'love' and 'bravery'. He burned. They had no right to pry, to sympathise, to try to understand him.

He didn't deserve it after what he'd done.

This was personal. This was between his Hermione and himself and his own crushing knowledge that, if not for him, she wouldn't be dying of this horrific fever.

For hours she had tossed and turned and moaned and called for him. Then suddenly she had calmed, and a look of peace swept across her fever-wracked visage for the first time in almost a week. She smiled in her sleep. Her rasping, dragging breathing had eased, until the room was quiet.

Severus watched her until her face swam in his vision. Poppy entered the room and was shocked at the exhaustion and fear on his face. She recovered and scolded, "Severus, you must take care of yourself. She'll need you when she awakens. How will she feel to wake up only to find you've made yourself ill?"

He ignored it. She wasn't going to waken. He gathered her in his arms and wept for his sweet, lost girl.

-oOo-

Hermione was peaceful, content, safe. She was with her Black-Eyed Angel now.

In the waning night it was cold, and Hermione knew her time with him was at hand. She could sense his sadness.

They stood by the Black Lake, the moon's twin shining on its still surface. They were naked, their hands lazily exploring one another. She was so cold, but she was loath to admit it, lest he leave. She shivered uncontrollably, and his arms could not warm her enough. She buried her face against his neck, needing the soothing scent of him, but in the cold, she could smell nothing.

"I must go soon," he smiled sadly down at her. He was so pale and soft and beautiful. "I will be sorry to go."

Hermione looked up at him in panic, and threw her arms around him. "No! You promised you would never let me go!"

"I won't, my little, little girl."

Hermione gasped when she saw his face. He was crying. It was the sadden countenance she'd ever seen. "I wanted you, but I have been denied. But I will return and take what is mine."

The cloud covered the moon, and its twin disappeared in the lake. The world became dark, colder, and she felt his arms slide from hers. This was the end. This was it.

She tried to hold him. "Not yet, please!" she sobbed. "I'm not ready to let you go! They didn't let me say goodbye! You were getting better!" She wailed her loss and sadness; her grief would never be abated.

Cold lips touched her forehead, and she felt the mighty rush of his wings as they lifted him from the ground. She could see the tears glistening on his face, and knew that he, too, was denied the chance to say goodbye.

-oOo-

Hermione was quiet in his arms, and he rocked her and sang to her, his tears dropping from his nose down onto her gown.

"She loves it when you sing to her."

Severus looked up and gasped in shock. Half hidden in the shadows, a figure stood sentinel. Slowly, he walked into the light. Severus closed his eyes and opened them slowly. He was looking at himself.

The man who stood before him was indeed his doppelganger, if there was such a thing. Severus thought it odd to see his own naked body, shining in the darkened room, his skin pearly and luminescent, his black hair glossy and blue in the light. The wings that rested against the angel's back were like a cormorant's blackly iridescent, and his eyes were like hematite, shining, silvery black.

"It is time for her to come with me. I love her." The angel's voice was Severus' own, but a thousand-fold more beautiful, more melodious. It was sensual, silken.

He was Severus Snape, as perfection, as innocence, as Severus had always wished himself to be. He was indescribably beautiful. And still Severus could form no words to answer. He was as enthralled as Hermione had been, at his own perfect, beautiful incarnation.

The angel smiled at his twin. "Let me take her. She's sleeping and you cannot wake her. She is mine now." Severus heard his own voice, beautiful and augmented. "You

do not deserve her. You are unworthy of her."

Severus' hand shook as he raised his wand. He hissed, "She doesn't belong to you." He clutched the peacefully sleeping woman to him.

His angel smiled at Severus beatifically. "But you summoned me, Severus. You brought me to life." He reached for Hermione. "I have no pain to share with her. No ugliness, no cowardice, no guilt, no evil, no remorse, no sadness. No sins to atone. No scars to hide. No Dark Mark to fade," he smiled, and held out his hands, palms up, revealing a perfect, unblemished forearm. Severus felt a sudden yearning in his heart as he looked at the angel. He was as beautiful as the sun.

The angel gave him a look of pity and understanding. "Give her to me, and she will be cherished and loved with the tenderest of passions. I can take her places you have never been."

Severus felt the pain of his own life and knew his angel told the truth. He looked down into the face of his Hermione, and thought, He's right. What have I ever given her but the leftovers of a badly lived life?. He thought of how she loved him, without condition, without strings, how she had come to him and his bed with desire and acceptance.

Did he covet her? Yes. Did he love her enough to let her go with a free heart? The greedy selfishness that was part of his personality reared its ugly head. "No."

The angel looked amused, but there was a glint of anger behind the perfect beauty. "No? You would deny me?" The angel's smile was replaced by a grimace. "You brought me here, Prince of Pride."

Severus looked at the angel, and his hold on Hermione tightened. "What? What do you mean?"

Suddenly the angel changed. He was still beautiful, but there was a fluttering, a blurring around the lines of his body. "You sang me to life. You sang me to come and take what is yours."

"No!"

The angel's smile grew malicious. "Really? You sang me to your mother. You sang me to Lily. Look where that got them. They belong to me now."

"Severus, I just wanted-" Minerva enter the room and froze, a look of horror and revulsion on her face. "Gods, Severus! What is this?"

The angel ignored her. He was becoming angry. "You cast the spell to summon me, Prince of Pride. Foolish little man, to think you could hold any power over me!"

Minerva gasped. "Severus, how- why have summoned this...this demon?"

Severus also ignored her. He was devastated. His mother had taught him the song.

"The song is a fairy tale. It's a child's nursery rhyme!" Severus' mind reeled in horror. How many times had he sung the song for Hermione, who so loved to hear him sing?

"Is that what Mummy told poor Sevvie?" The angel mocked in a horrible, baby-talking way that was grotesquely obscene, a moue of pity on the perfect face. His brows rushed together in malicious joy. "The spell is to summon me, to capture what you covet most!"

"You foolish mortal!" The angel spat with contempt. "Greedy, covetous, spiteful, cowardly man! You have never deserved the happiness you stole from this lovely woman, and now she's mine." He smiled happily at Severus. "And you, in your vain pride, have given her to me."

"NO!" Severus bellowed, raising his wand, drawing magic to him. He threw everything at it; spells, charms, hexes, curses - nothing affected the angel.

From across the room, Minerva shouted to Severus. "Don't listen to him, Severus! You didn't do this!"

"Didn't he, mortal?" The angel replied, with an ugly laugh. "From the time you were a child, Severus Snape, you wanted what you could never have! Your Muggle father, drunk, useless his blood flows in your veins! Sullen, ungrateful child, chip on your shoulder visible to the naked eye! Trying to keep your mother to yourself, selfish, stupid enough to think you could keep her safe from Tobias Snape!"

The angel's voice was dripping with cold sing-song contempt. "Singing to Mummy to chase the frights away where did it get her? She was only too happy to come to me, to escape YOU!"

Severus felt each word like a hammer blow, and his grip on Hermione loosened. He had been those things as a child; he had no friends, he had been proud of his magical abilities, wanted to show them off to Lily...

The angel read his thoughts. "Ah, yes, the fair Lily! Well, we all know how well you did with her! That's common knowledge all over the Wizarding world, isn't it *Snivellus*?"

To Severus' horror, the angel's countenance changed temporarily into that of Lily, then back. "Singing me to a woman who never loved you! Telling an innocent boy that you loved his mother so much you were willing to die for her! Liar! How could she love you, Severus, when she could have me? You never loved her, Prince of Lies! You only coveted her! If you had loved her purely, perfectly, she wouldn't have died!"

Hermione stirred, and her eyes fluttered open. In her confusion, she saw her husband, well, alive, in all his imperfections. She turned and saw the angel, heard his words, the chilling derision in his voice.

"You weren't even capable of loving those who protected you, were you, Severus?" Now the angel shifted and became Albus Dumbledore, looking down on the man who'd taken his life. "Ah, but you were being so noble, weren't you, Severus? It's easy to be noble when you can kill and justify getting away with it, isn't it?"

Severus lowered his head and wept in shame. "Albus, no!" he sobbed for the only man who had ever tried to love him like a father. Flawed and tunnel-visioned as he was, Albus had loved him, in his own way, and Severus had repaid that love by raising his wand and....

Minerva, her hand to her mouth, cried, "Don't listen to this, Severus. This-whatever it is, is lying to you!"

"Am I? Ask him! Tell your so-called friend, Severus! Tell her the truth! You coveted Lily, but not enough to truly love her! You cared for Albus Dumbledore, but not enough to save him! You played everyone against the other, the Master Spy, the Death Eater, the one who betrayed everything and everyone he touched!"

Sobbing with grief, Severus nodded, and Hermione felt his tears drop on her hand. "It's true. I didn't love Lily enough to save her. I killed Albus! Oh, gods!" His shame warped into him like molten lead, burning and purifying, but he felt too tarnished and worthless to be worth saving.

"Stop this! Tom Riddle killed Lily Potter, Severus, not you!" Minerva cried. "Albus was dying! This-this thing, Severus! He's using your own guilt against you."

The angel roared, "I'm using the truth to take what it mine!" The angel turned toward Minerva. "He sang me to her!" He pointed to Hermione. "I am here to take what he covets most. His vanity, his selfishness, his greed has sung me here. Your arrogance, Severus Snape, has brought me your bride!"

Severus looked down at Hermione, who watched him with confused, exhausted eyes. "Severus," she croaked, hoarsely. She was shaking her head, trying to tell him something.

"I love you," he whispered, brokenly.

"He covets you, my love," the angel said, and once more he was perfection. Hermione looked at the Black-Eyed Angel, and saw the beauty he projected, and shook her

head again. Fear replaced confusion in her eyes.

The angel smiled. Once again, his voice was glossy, velvety. "My beautiful Hermione, my perfection. Come with me and I will give you an eternity of pleasure. Severus can only give you the ragged remains of himself. Look at me, Hermione." The angel's voice was so silky, so seductive, he made everyone in the room, including Severus, shiver in pleasure. "I give you my beauty, my passion, my body for your desire. Come to me, my love." It was wonderful, and truly horrible to witness. Hermione looked at him wordlessly, then back to Severus.

He was no longer looking down at her. Severus was watching the angel in rapt wonder, and something like lust flushed his face, making him look as feverish as Hermione. Still groggy and confused, Hermione looked up at her husband. She was afraid, desperately afraid for him.

Minerva whispered harshly, warningly, "Severus, I don't know what you are seeing, boy, but I'm seeing an abomination. Wh-

"Be quiet, Minerva!" Severus said, and slowly stood to face the angel. "Yes, I see it now, angel. I understand." He was watching the angel with fiery eyes, and the angel smiled as seductively at Severus as he had Hermione.

"You see now, don't you Severus?" he purred. "How could someone so full of love and purity want you, when she will have me for eternity? I am perfection," he smiled, radiating breathtaking beauty. "I am everything you wish to be, aren't I? For once in your life, tell the truth, Severus. Am I not everything -"

"I covet? Yes, Angel, you are everything I want!" Severus rushed forward and wrapped his arms around the angel in an obscene parody of a lover's hold. Realisation dawned, and the angel tried to break free. Panic marred the perfect features.

In a strong, beautiful voice, Severus sang to the angel:

"Take my hand, little one, I am the Prince of Pride, the Black-Eyed Angel who watches o'er you desires you for his bride-"

The angel began to struggle against the beautiful music being sung to him, and Severus willed his heart to desire the angel with all his being. He looked into the hematite eyes of the perfect version of himself, and desired to be him with all his might. They wrestled together in a terrible, beautiful embrace.

"I'll wrap you in a cloak of stars, I'll fly you through the night, the Black-Eyed Angel will capture you in his flight-"

The angel fought him openly now, snarling, its shape shifting. The perfection that Severus wanted so badly was fading into something more incidious, more horrible, an abomination of hideousness. Severus held onto him, eyes closed, singing his love and desire to the angel, to destroy what he coveted most. Absolution, perfection, purity.

"You are my heart, my life, my soul, my love will shield you from the storm, the Black-Eyed Angel who watches o'er you will keep you safe from harm-"

The creature changed. Gone was the Black-Eyed Angel that had tried to take his wife. In Severus' arms was a demon so heinous, the women in the room recoiled in horror. With his eyes shut, Severus only saw the perfect angel, the man he wanted so much to be beautiful, pure, perfect, and sang his longing.

"I'll wipe away every tear you cry, your every thought will be my command, I hold the heart of the Black-Eyed Angel in my hand!"

With a deafening, screaming cry of rage and agony, the creature blew apart in a million particles of light and magic, knocking Severus off his feet, unconscious. He fell to the floor, limp, ghastly white, his eyes open and unseeing.

Hermione cried out, her scream thin and shrill with terror, "Severus! NO!" Feebly she tried to rise, but in her weakness she was unable to rise from her bed. As she reached for her unconscious husband, gasping for breath, the world crashed down upon her and she was gone, her body limp, and at peace.

It was moments later that Severus awoke with a start, moving even as he regained consciousness. Seeing Hermione's limp, prone body, peaceful and cool, his heart constricted. It was for nothing. He had banished this...this Black-Eyed Angel and lost Hermione to him anyway. It was all for nothing.

With a tormented cry he gathered his wife in his arms, apologizing, pleading with her to forgive him.

Minerva had fled when Severus fainted and rushed to find Poppy. As the two older women ran into the room, they were met with a heartbreaking sight: Severus, tenderly holding the broken, peaceful body of his wife, softly singing a song of farewell. Tears poured from his eyes, and he rocked her gently as he sang. His eyes were glazed and out of focus, and Minerva was frightened for him.

Poppy, seeing Mistress Snape cool and pale for the first time in almost a week, all but tore Hermione from Severus' arms. "Leave me with my wife!" he growled, like an animal protecting its young. "Don't touch her you have no right!" Tears poured down his face and he sobbed like a brokenhearted child.

Poppy ran her wand over Hermione's body with a shaking hand. She did it again. And again. She stood up and put her hands over her mouth. Severus held Hermione closer.

"My good girl," he said, rubbing his throat. It felt as if it were bleeding. "My sweet, good girl." He rocked her, his heart breaking, and breaking...and broken.

"Severus," Poppy said, through tears. "Severus." He looked up at her, still rubbing his aching throat. Madam Pomfrey knelt beside the Headmaster, and took her own handkerchief from her pocket. She tenderly wiped the tears from his eyes. "Severus, I need you to let Hermione go."

He lay his still wife on the bed and lay against her cooling breast, as he had lain so many nights after love, hearing her strong and... steady... heartbeat.

He jerked upright, and looked down at his wife.

Epilogue

Chapter 8 of 8

The true Black-Eyed Angel is love.

A/N: I apologise for the epic length of this Epilogue, but it all fit together, and there wasn't a good stopping place. I thank everyone for sticking with the story, and I welcome your thoughts and reviews on this. Happy Valentine's Day. :)

Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and sipping cocoa in his nightshirt right now, reading his favourite book.

This story is dedicated to Sempraseverus, and the real Black-eyed Angel...

Christmas, 2009

Running a shaking hand over her breast, Severus felt it again. The slow, steady, strong heartbeat of his wife. His living, breathing, wife. He looked up at Poppy Pomfrey, not daring to ask.

Poppy was nodding.. "The fever's gone. She's sleeping naturally. The serum worked." She smiled shakily at her friend. "Severus, I think the worst is behind us."

For a moment, Severus looked at her blankly, then took the sleeping woman in his arms, and began to hum and rock her once again.

Rather fearful of Severus' mental state, Poppy repeated, "Severus, did you hear me? Hermione will be all right-"

"I know, Poppy. I heard you."

Severus never took his eyes from his wife's peaceful, sleeping face. He softly stroked her cheek. "I want to be the first person she sees when she wakes." He sniffed and absently took Poppy's proffered handkerchief. He smiled down at Hermione with more tenderness than Poppy had thought possible of Severus Snape. "I want my voice to be the first sound she hears."

Over in the corner, unobserved, Minerva McGonagall anxiously watched the man she'd known almost his entire life. She'd fought with and against him, and stood by him as his Deputy. She'd watched him change from an angry young man into a man who had learned to ask for help, and had used that help to learn to live with his past and grow up to be a better man.

She'd just seen him outsmart a demon and bring his wife back from the bloody dead. Minerva smiled proudly. Cunning little Slytherin oik. She'd probably never hear the end of this.

"My mother was an extremely unhappy woman," Severus began. He was sitting by Hermione's bed. Poppy and Minerva sat across from him on the other side of the bed, and the three women listened raptly.

Severus shook his head. "I honestly don't believe she created the spell deliberately. I think the spell developed through her unhappiness and fear. The song was just a catalyst."

For awhile, no one spoke. Finally, Minerva added, "Severus, I knew your mother. Not well, mind, but I knew her. I cannot honestly believe she would have done anything to harm you. She loved you very much, but as you say, she was a very unhappy woman married to an abusive man.

"I think more than anything, she wanted to keep you safe from Tobias. Perhaps the song was originally meant to protect you from your father, to 'hide' you both from him, but in the chaos of her emotions, the intent became twisted to summon this creature to steal away what the caster loved or wanted the most. In any case, you couldn't have known it was anything more than a lullaby."

Severus shook his head. "No. She would have warned me, if she had known. I opened myself to it. And it fed on my fear and my guilt and my pride."

Hermione placed a thin hand over his, and he looked tenderly down at his wife. She was still pale and drawn, but he could see her strength returning. He found he could rest a little, knowing she would still be there when he woke.

"Severus, I've been thinking about this a lot, and I think it found a way 'in' because I was too weak from the fever to separate fact from delirium."

She looked at him with eyes that were bleak and troubled. "It was all so real. It's as if I'd lived several months during those few days. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had died, and you followed quickly afterward-" A soft sob escaped her. Being so weak, Hermione cursed the fact that she couldn't seem to control her emotions. Everything made her tearful. Severus understood, and clasped her hand almost painfully, to assure her he was indeed alive and well.

Hermione continued, "I just felt so lost without you. The pain of losing you was physical. I couldn't breathe without you." Tears rolled down her sunken cheeks. "When I think of how that... thing used my emotions to turn me inside out, to make me believe you were dead, I...." She stopped, and shook her head. Severus was starting to look at her with grave concern.

She saw his anxiety, and tried to comfort him. She'd worried him enough. Hermione sighed. "Those awful things it said weren't true, Severus. You must understand that."

Severus stroked her hand gently, his thumb drawing slow circles on the top of her wrist. "I do, love. I've even entertained the thought that it was the reason I felt so compelled to take you flying so much. It may have known your health was a little delicate."

Hermione thought of her flight with the 'angel'. "I knew something wasn't quite right when I flew with it. I wasn't afraid, and that bothered me. I was always afraid when I flew with you, even though I knew you wouldn't allow any harm to come to me. And even during the winter, you were always so warm beside me, and it felt so cold, and its scent..."

Everyone looked at her, confused. Colouring slightly, Hermione chanced a quick glance at her husband. "I really like the way Severus smells."

The older women chuckled quietly as Severus looked rather abashed. Hermione smiled at her husband. "It's just that... the angel didn't have a scent. I remember thinking, something's just not quite right. But it had my emotions so stirred up, I couldn't think straight enough to work it out."

Severus pulled at his ear. "I believe that's one of its tools to reel in its victims. I was so wracked with guilt and shame I couldn't see the truth. It was only when it shape-shifted into Albus that I realized it was all a sham."

The women were puzzled. "How so, Severus?" Minerva asked, refilling his whiskey glass. They were finishing their Christmas Day Feast in the Infirmary with Hermione, and Minerva had sneaked in the libation for the three of them. Hermione, still ingesting the powerful cocktail of potions Madam Pomfrey had prescribed, had to content herself with pumpkin juice for the moment.

Severus smiled. "The 'angel' tried to make me believe that I had killed Mother and Lily by singing him to them. Then it changed into Albus, and it knew my feelings for Albus would overwhelm me and it would win." He shook his head. "But I never sang the spell to Albus. It made the mistake of lumping him into the entire sorry mess, and that's when I realized that everything it said was a lie."

Severus looked at his wife, his eyes bleak. "When it taunted me with how inadequate I was and how much better off you'd be without me, I took the chance that I could use its own magic against it."

He took his wife's hand, and kissed it reverently. "The only truth, in the end, was that I truly wanted to be a more perfect man for you."

Christmas Day 2010

Hermione woke with a start, and in that moment, she remembered that she was alone. Her heart stuttered for a moment. Where was her love, her Severus?

She looked up, and saw the familiar ceiling of the Hogwarts Infirmary and moaned slightly. Her body was sore and exhausted. She was irritated and disorientated, and hated the feeling, knowing it was the residual effect of a Dreamless Sleep Draught. She really didn't like being force-fed those things, even if the hand somewhat ruthlessly tipping it down her throat was her husband's.

"H-hello?" she ventured, and looked around in confusion. Then her head cleared completely, and she remembered. It was Christmas Day.

Everyone was celebrating. *Everyone but me*, she thought, rather petulantly. *Totally unfair. Especially when I'm the one they're celebrating.*

Her movements must have tripped a ward, for the recognizable staccato of Poppy Pomfrey's heels clicking on the stone floor increased in volume, and the Healer was suddenly at her side, bustling, already pushing Hermione back down on the bed.

"Mistress Snape, really! You of all people know you are in NO condition to be rambling all over Hogwarts!"

Hermione snorted. "I fail to see how getting out of bed constitutes 'a ramble' Madam Pomfrey," she grumbled, and Poppy bit back a retort. Honestly, the chit was starting to sound more like Severus with each passing day!

"Still, you know you shouldn't be out of bed."

"Where are they?" Hermione had not lived with Severus all those years and not learned how to make her already bossy tone even more imperious. It brooked no nonsense, and when she crossed her arms, Poppy almost laughed at her. She really must remember to tell Severus about Hermione imitating him in an effort to intimidate her.

Madam Pomfrey softened. "'They are in the nursery, Mistress Snape. Asleep, no doubt, as you should be.'"

"I want to see them."

"Just a bit more rest."

"I have every right, Poppy."

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "Very well. But for only a few minutes and then you MUST get some rest." She favoured Hermione with a fond smile. "You have a family to consider now, Hermione. They need you at your healthiest."

Hermione sniffed, tears threatening. Merlin, her hormones were out of whack. On impulse, she gave the older woman a hug.

Severus always said, when all else failed, hug Poppy. "I promise."

Madam Pomfrey patted her back briskly. "Come then. I'll help you. You've just had a magical Caesarian; I won't take any chances of you taking a fall."

Together the two women walked a short way down the Infirmary Hall until they reached a blue door. Above it was marked, "Special Care." Madam Pomfrey turned to Hermione, put a finger to her lips, and quietly opened the door.

Hermione gasped. The room was charmed to look exactly like the nursery they'd created in the Headmaster's chambers. Magically painted rabbits, puppies and kittens gamboled on the walls, and the painted grass swayed in the wind. The sun and moon slowly made their appointed journeys across the walls, and fluffy clouds floated serenely across the ceiling.

On the far wall was a small cot, with a mobile of tiny flying brooms, whizzing around in a slow circle. Just in front of the cot was a rocker, its back to the door. It was occupied by Hermione's husband, rocking their newborn son, and as he moved the chair back and forth with his feet, he sang:

"Sleep my darling, now gently sleep, and mother and father their vigil will keep,

As holly grows beneath winter's snows I'll cloak you in my love fast and deep.

Hush my lovely one, sweet and warm, your father will shield you from cold winter's storm,

The ivy twine, the stars will shine, and I will keep you safe from harm.

Rest my little one, safely rest, your mother holds you secure to her breast;

Like evergreen when in winter seen holds the hatch-ling safe in his nest.

And when, beloved, you're my age grown, and you have little ones of your own,

Protect them with this solemn vow, to watch o'er them as I watch over you now."

Hermione listened as Severus sang, her heart filled to bursting. The infant in his arms was long of limb, black haired and beautiful. From his widow's peak to his arched and delicate brows and long feet, he was the perfect image of his father. Her precious husband, Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, had put this exquisite boy in her belly.

She walked gingerly around to face him, and when Severus looked up and saw her, he jumped up in surprise, waking the baby. Instead of crying, the youngest Snape merely regarded his mother and father so solemnly, Hermione laughed. Two sets of eyes, one black and one deep blue, looked at her, and she thought she might swoon with happiness.

"I thought you were asleep," Severus said, his tone chastening. He gave her a trademark scowl of disapproval. "I thought you were *supposed to be* asleep." He waited until she carefully sat down in the rocker, then placed their infant in her arms.

"I was, but I woke up and Poppy let me come to see my men." Hermione looked down at her newborn son. He was less than one day old, born in the wee hours of Christmas Day, and so beautiful she was already as in love with him as with his father.

"Hello, you," she smiled down at him, and he looked up at her with a faint line between his dark, downy brows. It was Severus' scowl in miniature and Hermione thought it the most precious thing she'd ever seen. "Merlin, he's you made over."

Snape sighed. "I know. I've been sitting here, holding him for the past hour trying to convince myself otherwise. Poor little blighter."

Hermione shot her husband a warning look. "Oh, no you don't, Severus Snape. You know exactly how I feel about that."

The Headmaster of Hogwarts tutted, and crossed his arms haughtily but without rancor. "Hphmm. I'm not the one blinded by love, my girl. I know my face-

"Belongs to the Runner-Up in the Most Sexy Wizard in Britain Contest, according to the readers of *Witch Weekly*." Hermione smirked. "I keep telling you, you should be very proud. After all, you beat out Harry Potter, Bill Weasley and Draco Malfoy."

Severus rolled his eyes. He deadpanned, "Yes, curse Lucius Malfoy. Witches are so shallow nowadays. Take away all that long, blond hair and what have you got? Ears like wingnuts."

"Really?"

"Why do you think he's always worn it so long, pet?" Severus replied, and they shared a laugh as Severus knelt beside the rocker. The baby began to fuss, and Hermione opened her robe and offered him a breast, which he latched onto greedily, making tugging motions and ridiculously loud sucking noises.

Hermione glanced up to find Severus watching his newborn son suckling her rosy nipple. His expression was one of stunned, abject joy. She smiled at him lovingly, and he tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. Her opposite breast oozed a tiny bit of milk, and she shivered as Severus reached out a finger to catch the droplet. He brought the liquid to his lips and licked it from his finger, reveling in the taste of her milk for the first time.

"How does it taste?" she teased, and he flushed slightly. His black eyes appraised her, and they were appreciative and promising.

"Like love, little one." She laughed softly and he leaned forward and kissed her lips tenderly.

"You need rest, Hermione." His lovely voice was like a soft bed, deep and warm and beckoning.

"He'll be full soon." Hermione was loath to leave this cozy room with her husband and son, to return to the cold, indifferent Infirmary ward cot.

"Your parents will be in tomorrow, and you'll want to be bright-eyed for them. They're coming on the train. I think they were ready to risk the Floo Network to get here to see the baby."

Shortly after their marriage, Severus had called in a favour with a Charms Specialist at St. Mungo's. With his help, her parents' memories had been almost completely restored. It had thrilled them to re-discover that, not only did they have a child, but said child was about to give them grandchildren.

Hermione looked up at him. "Have you decided on the name?"

Severus pursed his lips for a moment. "Are you still happy with Cobel?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. "I think it suits him." She yawned suddenly, her jaw creaking. "I suppose I am a little tired." She raised the drowsing infant to her shoulder and began to rub his back gently. A surprisingly loud belch issued from the little mouth, and he settled comfortably in his mother's arms.

"Cobel," Hermione said to him. "This is your birthday, my beautiful boy. You were born on a very special day, and your mother and father love you very much."

Severus leaned over the rocker, and looked down at the woman who'd borne his child earlier that day. She looked absolutely exhausted, and there were dark circles under her eyes and her skin seemed stretched taut over her bones. Poppy had assured him she was fine, but after the previous year's close call, Severus was taking no chances.

He looked down at his lovely son, and in spite of his long-suffering tirade on his family resemblance, Severus thought his child absolutely beautiful. He was terrified of being a bad father, and desperate to be a good one. He often thought of the Black-Eyed Angel, who took that which the singer coveted most, and shivered with fear.

He wanted his love to be pure for his wife, for this child and others, if they were so blessed. He realized he'd been complacent, smug in his new-found self-acceptance. It made him realize how arrested his development had truly been, and how far he had to go. And, as Hermione reminded him on a daily basis, he needed to learn how to not be his own worst enemy, or critic.

Now fatherhood had come along, bringing with it another set of insecurities. Was he ready for it? Everyone, from Arthur Weasley to Lucius Malfoy, had given him loads of advice. Most of it all boiled down to a succinct statement his father-in-law had made when he and Hermione had announced the pregnancy: "Severus, you just have to keep his nappy clean, hold your nerve when he's learning to ride a broom, and forgive him when he does stupid things like putting tuna and sweetcorn sandwiches in the blu-ray player."

Severus had nodded sagely, all the while thinking, *What in the name of fuck is a blue ray and how do you play with it?*

"What was the song you were singing when I arrived? I don't think I've ever heard it before."

Startled out of his reverie, Severus looked almost...embarrassed. Finally, he confessed, "Actually, I made it up. A bit safer than, you know."

Hermione smiled. "It's perfect." She looked down at their son. "He's perfect." She looked up at his father.

"You're perfect."

Christmas Eve 2035

The Great Hall was festooned to look like a winter wonderland at nighttime. The evening light shone a deep midnight blue, a colour that reminded Hermione of the velvet comforter that had covered her marriage bed.

Trees of every shape, from umbrella style to traditionally shaped Christmas trees, lined the edges of the Hall, flocked with snow that magically sifted down on the guests, but never landed. The room was a vision of blue and silver, its inhabitants hushed in anticipation, and Hermione, in her velvet dress robe of deep forest green, waited with the others for the men to arrive.

The door at the rear of the Hall slowly opened, and the Procession of the Men began. Her heart swelled as her tall, dark haired son strode down the aisle towards the front of the Hall. He was dressed in robes of purest white, so that he glowed in the dim light like a beautiful spirit. Hermione was so proud of him she thought she might burst with happiness.

Suddenly, she felt something being pushed into her hand. She turned to her friend, Ginny Potter, who was thrusting a handkerchief into her palm.

"I said you'd need one," Ginny whispered, and they laughed silently through their tears, as only good friends can do.

Cobel Snape, his bearing as proud and sure as his father's, walked to the front of the Hall and faced the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who was equally resplendent in velvet and fur-trimmed dress robes of the richest, deepest black. He stood tall and straight on the dais, looking down on the crowd, and watched the tall, black-haired wizard as he approached the front of the hall.

As Cobel approached the Headmaster, the older man gave the younger a slight nod. "Alright, son?"

Cobel, the spitting image of his father, down to his black eyes, long blue-black hair and hooked nose, smiled and nodded. "Yes, Father, thank you."

As one, Severus Snape and his son, Cobel, turned back to face the audience. The Procession of Men continued as four of Cobel's school chums joined their friend at the front of the Great Hall. The first to arrive was Scorpius Malfoy, Hogwarts' newest Professor of Charms and the wizard responsible for the beautifully decorated Hall; then

Barnabas Longbottom, the son of Neville and Hannah Abbott Longbottom, followed by Al Potter and Hugo Weasley. The four men parted at the front and flanked Cobel, two on either side of the Headmaster.

They made a very handsome picture; six wizards of various ages, all in their prime, looking out solemnly into the crowd. The men wore immaculate dress robes in a maroon colour so dark, it looked black in the soft light.

For a moment, the Hall was silent, and the anticipation grew. Hermione glanced around, and saw it filled to capacity with friends and family. Seated across the room, she saw Scorpius' father, her old nemesis, Draco Malfoy, and his lovely wife. Astoria gave Hermione a happy wave, and Draco gave her a warm nod and a wink. Both had become surprisingly good friends to her and Severus over the years, and Hermione genuinely adored Scorpius, who was the most lovable of jesters, and a good friend to Cobel.

An inveterate prankster, who rivaled the Weasley twins when it came to mischief, Scorpius had been the first to welcome Cobel to the Slytherin table when his name was first called at the Sorting Ceremony. With the famous Malfoy smirk on his lips, Scorpius had patted Cobel on the back and said, "Don't believe everything you hear about us, mate. Some of us Slytherins can actually sit down without disturbing the rod jammed up our arses."

Beside Draco, sat his father and mother, Lucius, and the aging, but still beautiful Narcissa Malfoy. They, too, had become friends after a fashion. Hermione never quite lost the feeling that Lucius thought Severus might have done better in choosing a wife, but they were kind and also loved Cobel, and for that, Hermione could tolerate Lucius' occasional superciliousness. She could still remember how it felt to think they had died of a fever. Seeing them alive and well always gave Hermione a sense of gratitude.

It also gave her a delicious sense of irony that Scorpius had taken Cobel under his wing just as Lucius had done for Severus. Thankfully, their agendas were quite different, but it was good to see that circle close in such positive way.

Hermione glanced to her other side of the room and saw her own parents watching the men closely. Aging, but still healthy, they could have written books on how to be doting grandparents. They thought Cobel was the most wonderful child, and he'd done very little to prove them wrong.

Hermione looked up at her husband, tall and regal and profoundly beautiful to her, standing like an alabaster statue at the front of the Hall. He had aged gracefully and handsomely, his long hair now streaked with white. He had worn a beard for years, and had only just decided to shave it for this occasion. Upon close observation, Hermione thought she might ask him to keep it that way. She loved the planes of his jaw line and the shape of his mouth, and unencumbered by facial hair, their allure appealed to Hermione all over again.

Her gaze shifted to their son, standing tall and quietly proud beside his father. They were so alike, Hermione was often amazed she'd contributed any genes at all to her handsome child. He had inherited both parents' keen intellect and powerful magical footprint, and like his father, he could be moody, snarky and loveable in turns. His singing voice was legendary at Hogwarts. He had indeed inherited the famous Snape nose, but, as with his father, Hermione could find nothing about it that was anything but pleasing. She admittedly spoiled him, but no more than his father did.

Cobel was like his father in countenance and personality, but Severus always said that his son had inherited his mother's sense of justice and compassion, even if he did hide it most of the time beneath a very familiar scowl. Hermione suppressed a grin.

In his white robes, Cobel looked ethereal, otherworldly, and for a moment, Hermione was reminded of the Black-Eyed Angel who had tried to steal her from her husband. Cobel, she decided, was her true Black-Eyed Angel. This Black-Eyed Angel had not been created from fear or envy. He'd been created with love, and, in return, love was what he gave back to everyone.

Hermione was brought back to the present as the Procession of the Maidens began, and the four men who stood with Cobel were soon joined by four lovely women: Rose, Roxanne, Dominique and Lucy Weasley. Rose, Ron's daughter, was a sweet, rather plain girl who reminded Hermione absurdly of her grandmother, Molly Weasley, who sat with their large, extended family just behind Hermione.

Roxanne, George's daughter, was the spitting image of her mother, Angelina, the pretty Quidditch chaser on Harry's team in school. Roxanne was a tall, leggy brunette with olive skin. Scorpius Malfoy was currently courting her.

Dominique and Lucy were the youngest of the quartet, and Hermione saw their fathers, Bill and Percy Weasley, looking on with pride, as their young daughters walked down the aisle with the grace and solemnity of their older cousins. All of the women were dressed in burgundy velvet robes. Their hoods were trimmed in fur, and they carried lush bouquets of dark red roses, from the Hogwarts greenhouses. They arrived at the front of the Hall, and took their place beside each man, save Cobel. Finally, the Procession complete, they turned and faced the audience, their eyes bright and shining.

Beautiful, wild celtic music soared into the air. The Hall door flew open, and the crowd turned as one to greet the newest arrivals. Hermione and Ginny Potter both sighed, along with the crowd, as Harry Potter, grinning like an excited first-year, escorted his youngest child down the aisle. Lily Potter and Cobel Snape were to be married today, this Christmas day.

It had come as no real surprise to either Hermione or Severus when Cobel announced his engagement to Harry and Ginny Potter's vivacious, pretty, red-haired daughter. From the moment he'd met Lily Potter, Cobel was smitten. She was two years older, already a third-year student, but it didn't stop him from seeking her out and introducing himself. The Snape men, Hermione thought wryly, definitely had a thing for Gryffindor gingers.

The supreme irony of it all left Severus speechless, and as the inseparable couple grew up and finished their education, it never occurred to anyone that they would not marry. When Lily was asked by friends why she'd chosen the quiet, taciturn, younger Cobel, her blue eyes would twinkle mischievously as she said her oft-repeated explanation: "I decided to chase him until he caught me." Apparently the Evans girls had a thing for black-haired, black-eyed Slytherins as well.

At first, Severus seemed anxious, and not entirely happy about the union. At the onset, Hermione thought it might just be the physical resemblances of Cobel and Lily Potter to himself and Lily Evans that unnerved him. Hermione soon dismissed this. Severus' reticence had nothing to do with the past; it was all about the couple's future.

Severus had always been a man who measured every step he took, every movement he made, every expression he wore, by how he thought he was perceived by others. By the time he had grown into adulthood, he automatically carried himself as if he were constantly being observed, even when alone. It made him damnably difficult to read, even when he was not trying to be this cryptic.

Hermione frowned. "Is it the age difference, Severus? I've always thought Cobel to be mature for his age."

Severus shook his head. "No. To be honest, I can't really articulate it. Please understand, pet, it's not that I don't approve, it's just..." He frowned into his teacup, and Hermione waited patiently, understanding him enough to know he was too ashamed to admit the real reason why.

When Cobel had first told his father that he had asked Lily Potter to marry him, Severus had all but interrogated him at wandpoint about his feelings for Lily. Did he want children? Were they compatible? Was she good to him? Did they accept one another, warts and all?

Finally, Cobel, who knew his father as well, or even better than his mother, pierced through the pointed questions with one of his own. He and Lily had, after all, grown up on the great stories of the war. "Father, you're asking me if I really love her. If my feelings are sure and sincere. That's what you really need to know, isn't it?"

Severus stiffened, then sighed, his rigid posture relaxing. "Yes, son. *You are* young, but love is no respecter of age. I'm living proof of that," he said, dryly. He sobered. "But I would be remiss in my duties as your father if I didn't make sure your intentions were honorable.

"Like every father in the world worth his wand, I don't want you to make the same mistakes I made in my youth. I loved imperfectly, and it cost Lily's grandmother her life."

He looked at his son with troubled eyes. "Cobel, do you love Lily more than anything in this world? More than yourself, more than your mother or me? Do you love her enough to protect her from the Black-Eyed Angel?"

Cobel looked at his Father, and a soft smile played about his lips. He shook his long black hair out of his face and allowed his Father to occlude into his mind. For several moments neither spoke, only gazed into one another's eyes. Finally Severus gently broke the connection and nodded.

Cobel smiled. "Father, if it means anything to you, Lily is my Hermione Granger." Severus looked at his son with love and respect, and Cobel saw tears shining in his father's eyes. They were rare, and all the more precious for it.

He touched his father's arm. "I promise, you, Father, I will love her as much as you love Mother. And I will make her as happy as you've made Mum."

Severus pulled his nose, and sniffed slightly. They embraced. "Then you have my blessing, son. Now run along and see your mother."

Knowing Severus by now as well as she did, Hermione knew it was her task to pull this from him, to give him permission to admit it. "It's because of that lie you told Harry, isn't it? It still frets you to this day."

Severus looked at his wife solemnly and nodded. "I have to speak with him. Before the wedding. He has to know the truth."

"Yes."

"Headmaster! Come in! It's a pleasure to see you," Harry Potter said, opening his home to his one-time arch-enemy. "How's Hermione? Good! Come to discuss wedding plans? I'm afraid we'll have to wait until Ginny and Lily get back. They've gone to Diagon Alley for a gown fitting, and apparently I'm not allowed to have an opinion one way or the other without at least one of them present." He smiled and escorted Severus into a light and airy front room, overflowing with comfortable chairs and sofas. He poured them tea from a waiting pot.

Severus sat down and took the proffered cup, more to have something to do with his hands than from real thirst. "Actually, Harry, I'm here to discuss something with you." He looked up at the younger man, who was already twenty years older than James had been before he died. "There's something I should have told you a long time ago. It's about your mother and me."

For the better part of three hours, Severus told Harry the entire story of his mother and Severus' real relationship. He told Harry of the deception, and the remorse and the regret of being Dumbledore's stooge throughout it all. Harry listened quietly, asked few questions, and nodded encouragement.

When the story was told, Severus sat, his head bowed, waiting for the retribution that never came. Finally, Harry ran a hand through his thinning hair, and pushed his round glasses back up his nose. "Well, Headmaster, if you feel the need to ask forgiveness, I won't accept it."

"I quite understand, Harry," Severus said, looking into the fire, his expression resigned.

Harry shook his head. "I won't accept it because I don't think you've done anything to ask forgiveness for. You did what you were ordered to do. I've come to understand that Dumbledore did that a lot, with all of us, especially you. It doesn't matter about your feelings for my mother; you did everything you could to try and save my family. Riddle would have found us eventually. I don't blame you, and haven't for a very long time."

Severus' relief was palpable. It showed in his slightly relaxed posture, the relaxing of tension around his dark eyes. "Thank you, Harry," Severus said, guilt and shame warring on his angular, pale face. "All these years, I've told Hermione and myself the lie was a better truth. I was too much of a coward. About so many things."

"Please, sir, don't say that, sir." Harry's face flushed, as he remembered his own harsh words to this man, spoken in anger and pain so long ago. He tried to smooth over the years by saying, "What is it that Hermione always says? The power of a spell is measured by its intent. Everything you did, good or bad, was done with the right intentions."

"With all due respect, Headmaster, you did what was necessary to help Dumbledore win the war. You saved me countless times, even when you didn't like me or my friends. You risked your life on a daily basis for years, spying for the side of the light. You helped defeat the most dangerous threat to our world, and nearly died yourself doing it."

Severus sat as still as stone, and Harry pressed on. "None of those are the actions of a coward, sir. Like Hermione says, it's not cowardly to be afraid; it's how a person reacts to that fear that makes the difference between a coward and a hero."

Severus favoured Harry with a smirk, and it carried within it a trace of pride. "She says a lot of things, doesn't she? My wife is a bossy little witch, but she certainly takes care of those she loves." His expression softened. "She certainly takes care of me. I can't find my wand without her now."

Severus slumped slightly, then pulled himself to his feet. "Thank you for hearing me out, Harry. I wanted to tell you this because I spoke with Cobel."

"I know Cobel loves Lily with all his heart," Harry interjected. He risked putting a sympathetic hand on Severus' shoulder, and was surprised when the older man didn't flinch or insult him. Old habits die hard.

Harry suddenly understood Severus' true worry. "You want to know that Lily loves him as much, don't you? That she loves him...more than my mother loved you."

Severus looked at Harry for a long time, then nodded. "I could not bear to see my son suffer from unrequited love, Harry," Severus admitted quietly, his love and protectiveness for his son clearly written on his features. "I was not as... devoted to your mother as my son is to your daughter. My feelings were hurt, but Cobel would be devastated."

Harry smiled at the older man. "Headmaster, I know this: Every time someone mentions his name, Lily lights up like a Christmas tree. She thinks he's the reason birds sing every morning. And between you and me and the Apparition point, the last person who said anything disparaging about Cobel in Lily's presence almost had his bollocks hexed off, and that was her own uncle."

Severus stiffened. "Who said anything about-"

Harry laughed. "It's okay, Headmaster! Ron was winding her up, calling Cobel her 'boy-toy'. Lily set him right very quickly. Ron still covers his old feller every time somebody mentions Cobel."

Severus and Harry shared a wolfish grin, then Harry nodded. "Cobel's a great man, Headmaster. I know you're proud of him and so you should be." Harry softened. "I'll be very proud to have him as a son-in-law."

Severus stood and offered his hand. "Thank you, Harry. Thank you for giving a foolish old man some peace."

Harry shook his hand warmly. "That's what family is for, Headmaster." He quieted. "I actually have a confession of my own. To be perfectly honest, I'm glad of the lie." He nodded as Severus' eyes widened, and his scowl increased.

"Truly," Harry said, earnestly. For a moment, he was the awkward boy Severus remembered. "It used to bother me, thinking that you were still in love with my mother all this time, but you went ahead and married Hermione."

"Ah," said Severus, understanding at last why Harry had seemed so concerned about their marriage in the early days. "You thought I couldn't possibly love Hermione as

much as your mother, that my loyalties would always be with your mother?"

When Harry nodded, Severus relaxed. "Rest assured, Harry, I love Hermione with all my heart. I lost my heart to her the moment she took the stand to defend me after the war, and it's belonged to her ever since."

Harry nodded, and Severus was surprised to find tears standing in the younger man's eyes. Finally, a smile playing about his lips, Harry said, "After all this time, Severus?"

Severus nodded, and, shaking Harry's hand, they both put the past behind them forever. "Always."

"Friends and family, it is my happy task to preside over this ceremony on this Christmas Day. I thank you for coming to the biggest birthday party I've ever thrown for my son."

There was laughter in the room, and Cobel smiled at his bride-to-be.

Severus sobered as he continued, "Today, Cobel and Lily stand before you to declare their undying love, by joining together in this formal and binding ceremony. They have entered into this bonding with reverence and respect for one another, and I am honoured to preside over this rite for them." Severus caught Hermione's eye in the crowd, and she felt her heart swell with love for him.

Cobel and Lily stepped together, and joined hands. Gazing into one another's eyes, they glowed with beauty, and their magic swirled around them. Cobel began the ceremony, his speaking voice as rich and captivating as his father's.

"There is a sonnet by Shakespeare that says 'Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove... it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken'."

He turned and, still holding his bride's hands, addressed the witnesses. "I know what love is. My parents, Severus and Hermione Snape, show me what love is, every day of their lives. It is my model for the life I will share with Lily. I was brought up in a family in which love, respect and affection were treasured and shared each and every moment of my life."

He turned to Lily, who was visibly moved. "Lily, I will make our lives together a shining example of what love is. No storm will destroy it, nothing outside of us can influence it or cheapen it. Our children will know love each and every day of their lives, just as I have known it. And until the day I step through the veil, you will know what love is, as well."

With streaming eyes, Hermione looked up at her husband, and saw tears standing in Severus' eyes as well. It was not just that they loved each other so much. The true legacy had been that their love had transcended themselves and their past, and had imprinted itself on their son.

She stood on the West Wing Tower, looking out onto a beautiful, wild Christmas Evening in Scotland...

She shivered in the cold, and watched the snow falling, her heart brimming with happiness.

"It is a beautiful view, isn't it?"

Hermione smiled that he could still come upon her unawares, even after all these years. Without looking around, Hermione nodded. "It is. I used to come here as a student." Mischievously, she added. "I would stand here and look out onto the Black Lake and daydream about one of my professors."

"Indeed?" he drawled, and she felt the heat from his body as he moved close to her. Strong, warm arms wrapped around her from behind. A hand gently caressed her breast, and his thumb brushed across a nipple, causing it to swell. Long fingers teased it to an aching peak, plucking it until she gasped with pleasure. "Do tell, Miss Granger. Which lucky professor was the subject of these fantasies?"

Hermione giggled. "My dark, brooding, snarky DADA professor." She squealed as he rewarded her answer with a snarl. He placed a biting, sucking kiss on her neck. "So the rumours about you being a vampire *are* true!" she laughed, as he nuzzled her neck with his large nose.

"I should do worse, vixen," he growled playfully, and she hummed in pleasure, smiling that, even after all this time, he could still turn her into a puddle of lust with a loving caress, a silken purr. "You are a block of ice, little one." Soft kisses trailed across her cheek, and the shiver they produced had nothing to do with the cold.

A warm, silky voice murmured close to her ear, "Cobel and Lily are almost ready to leave for the honeymoon. He wants to say goodbye before they go."

"Of course."

He took her hand and they walked the long hall together. "Knut for your thoughts."

Hermione looked up at him with an expression in mock displeasure. "You've gone cheap on me. You used to offer at least a Sickle."

Severus smirked. "I'll pay you back in trade."

They laughed together. Suddenly Hermione stopped and turned to her husband, and put her arms around his waist. "I was just thinking about the Black-Eyed Angel."

"Merlin forbid." Severus' eyebrow rose in suspicion. "What on earth would make you think of that?"

Hermione pondered it. "It's Christmas. I remember so vividly that Christmas when he tried to take you away from me. Instead of destroying us, he made us stronger. He freed us. He freed you."

Severus nodded. He took her face in his hands, and planted a slow, sensuous kiss on her cold lips. "It's been a long time since we've made a night flight," he whispered. "Perhaps after the children leave we could take to the air and..."

"Shag each other senseless when we return?" His answering smirk made her toes curl in anticipation.

"It would seem the logical conclusion to the evening, Mistress Snape."

Hermione gave Severus a deep kiss, full of love and trust, of promise and passion. He returned it, sweetening it with his soft moans of pleasure, his tongue easing into her mouth with sensual, decadent fire.

Reluctantly, Hermione ended the kiss while reason allowed. "Come, husband. Let's say goodbye to our son, then take me to the stars." She grinned at him tantalizingly. "In every way."

Severus smiled down at his wife of thirty years. She was still as beautiful to him as she had been as an eighteen-year-old, bullying the Wizengamot into accepting his innocence. She was still bossy, but mostly on the subject of badgering him into taking better care of himself. He secretly liked it when she fussed over him, although he pretended not to. Her hair was still as wild and wonderful, though it had a bit of silver within the gold.

She was a little rounder, but he could still cup her soft, pert little bottom in the palms of his hands, and it still made them both shiver when he did.

He still sang to her every night, and his voice still seduced and gentled her. All his songs were his own now. At her suggestion, he had published several, and his Magical Lullabies were on the Wizardboard Top Ten. Hermione was so proud of him. He found he was allowed to be proud of himself.

He burned for her as brightly now as he had the first night she'd gone on her knees before him, to 'take the edge off'. He'd not taken her in the West Wing Tower on that first night, but he had several times since. The last time was just a week before Cobe's wedding, and he'd had to triple the strength of his Silencing Spell to keep her from waking the castle and putting the entire school on high alert.

Hermione was the same, randy little minx she'd been that first night, and he never tired of pleasuring her. Severus still found her scent and taste as potent and intoxicating as Amortentia. He could still make her come when he called her his 'good girl.'

Severus was still, and would always be, a mass of contradiction. Moody and passionate, soft and inflexible, stubborn and generous, romantic and ascerbic. He was the same, sexy wizard who'd talked dirty to her that first night, and she never tired of cradling him to her breast after their love was spent and sleepy.

Severus gathered her in his arms, and pressed her close to his chest. She was his angel. The only angel he would ever need or desire.

And their son, their true Black-Eyed Angel, was downstairs, waiting on them so that he, too, could take flight with his bride.

They walked the darkened halls in silence. Occasionally, she would lean against him as they walked, and he would place a soft kiss on the top of her head. Her hand never left his as they walked back to their life together.

~FIN~