

Birthright

by christev

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 1

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Please note the date indicators at the beginning of scenes. Severus and Hermione are operating on two different timelines at first.

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BIRTHRIGHT PART ONE

2001 - September 19

"Happy sodding Birthday to me."

Ignoring the whinge in her voice, Hermione flopped onto the sofa and rummaged in her bag for the Thornton's chocolate bar she'd indulged in on her way home. She flipped through the post, ignoring the bills and adverts and looked at the two meager greeting cards. One from Marina, her best friend and uni flatmate, and of course the thick envelope promising a chatty letter from Grandma Granger. She knew she should call Gran to thank her for the inevitable gift card, but then she'd be sure to ask how work was going, and Hermione didn't think she could face telling her that she'd been let go. Again. And on her birthday, no less.

Couldn't face the same conversation, the same uncomfortable silence. Couldn't bear to hear once again how smart she was, how special she was, how with a bit more focus, a bit more concentration or was it a bit more relaxation she needed this time? She was, after all, bound for great things. Just ask Gran, who had taken up the chorus where Mum had left off.

Hermione jumped at the sound of her mobile phone, then groaned when she saw who was calling. She'd forgotten.

"Hi, Marina."

"Hello, there, birthday girl! How are you? You home yet? We're still on for Bernadino's, right?"

"Oh. Dinner." *Damn.* "Listen, Marina, I know you've driven all the way down here, but today ended up being a total crap day at work, and I just don't feel much like..."

"No, you don't, Hermione Jean Granger. You're not going to sit at home all by yourself on your birthday moping about, no matter how bad your day at work. I'm almost there, so I'll come fetch you. You can tell me all about your shitty day and we'll get just pissed enough to forget the bloody bastards and have a good time in spite of them."

"Marina... it's just. Well, they let me go..."

"Oh, shit. Well that settles it. I'll be there at half past."

Marina Atanasi had been Hermione's best friend since early in their first year at university. Refusing to be put off by Hermione's intense study moods, her sometimes awkward social skills, and her let's face it intimidating intellect, Marina simply accepted her and found her oddities fascinating. The day she witnessed Hermione's child psychology paper burst into flame brought their friendship to a new level. Rather than being frightened away, she was entranced and began researching everything she could find on spontaneous combustion.

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later that night, at The Flying Pig

"So spill was it fire again this time?"

"No. They haven't forgotten that, but the final straw was when the case files for all of Hanrahan's kids somehow got reassigned to Chambers and Parker."

"Oh my god, Hermione, that's brilliant! Hanrahan is such a useless prat, not to mention a total farce of a counselor. He wouldn't recognize compassion if it bit him on the arse."

Hermione grinned in spite of herself.

"True as that may be okay, true as that definitely is he's still a senior case worker, and he was mad as hell at me, even though I swore to him I didn't do it. And of course, Parker has to take his side over mine, not that Parker felt she owed me any slack, not after the microwave thing last month."

"Oh, love, I'm sorry. Leave it to you to get into trouble for some cock-up that would have actually been good for the kids involved."

"Well, possibly. It's not like the other two could have handled the extra load, though, even if Hanrahan is a bullying prick who shouldn't be allowed near children... I almost wish I could have done it on purpose."

"Screw him. And the others, if they can't see what a gem they had in you. They'll never find another trainee who can handle the workload you did. Any thoughts on where you'll go from here?"

Hermione deflated.

"No, none, really. I bought several papers on my way home, but there's no use in asking for a reference letter from them. Thank God I was only with them a few months. I can possibly leave them off my resume and say I've been working on getting my folks' house in order or some such rot. But I might have to look outside child services after this."

"Sodding bastards. Ah, here we are."

Marina took the two shots of tequila their waitress had just delivered and plunked one down in front of Hermione.

"Tomorrow you can start thinking about jobs again. Tonight is for drinking."

Hermione absently picked up her glass, but made no response. Her mind was suddenly far away, thinking about unnamable possibilities. It wasn't the first time she had wondered if she could make those things happen on purpose.

~ ~ ~

several days later

"Ignis."

"*Inflammo... Accendo... Incendo!*"

Nothing happened. She'd expected that; it wasn't like she knew a 'magic word' or anything. Frowning, she stared at the small pile of dried leaves in front of her and concentrated. Closing her eyes, she pictured flames licking the edges of the leaves, hissing and snapping, consuming her tinder, growing ever larger and hotter.

Her body gave an involuntary shudder as the feeling of heated energy built within her, and she felt the power coursing from deep inside through bone, tendon, muscle, and out her fingertips. Her nose twitched in irritation as something tickled around her nostrils. Her eyes flew open to see the leaves were burning! Yes!

"Oh shit! No! Stop! Dammit!"

She jumped to her feet, heart racing, dancing a sort of panicked victory dance as she stomped out the small fire. She had done it! Whatever the reason for this weirdness about her, she would no longer be at its mercy. There *was* a way to control it.

She took a deep breath. Maybe it was finally time to deal with the memories she'd been repressing for too long.

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Parking the car in the drive, Hermione approached her house. Even after five years, it was still hard to believe it was hers. After her parents had died, she'd lived with her Grandma Granger until she completed secondary school, then moved back to her parents' home once she began uni. She'd made few changes since her parents had died, mostly just rearranged some of the downstairs furniture to create a study area for herself. She hadn't tackled the attic at all, not wanting to face the emotional upheaval. But it was time. She took a few steadying breaths, then headed up the stairs to the attic.

She found what she was looking for in the box neatly labeled "Hermione Box 2." She knew Box 1 was mostly baby toys and clothes, saved and stored by her mother for the little brother or sister that never arrived. Box 2 was where her primary school books, projects, awards, and other treasured mementos were kept. She sat down on the dusty attic floor and tore into the tape holding the box closed.

She had to empty the entire box to get to the envelope she had secreted in one of the bottommost books. It was obvious both the envelope and letter that had come in it had once been crumpled and binned, but the stains had been blotted and creases smoothed by shaking eleven-year-old hands before the rescued letter had been hidden from her parents' sight.

Carefully removing it from its envelope, she set the letter on top of the pile of books she'd removed from the box and traced her finger over the embossed coat of arms at the top of the page. She hadn't dared look at the letter in years.

Hermione looked at the prim signature at the bottom, Professor Minerva McGonagall, and wondered about the kind of woman she might be. But it was not this woman with the precise penmanship who had appeared at her door three days after the letter arrived. Turning the letter over, she looked at the words printed neatly in her own eleven-year-old handwriting: Professor Severus Snape, Potions master.

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1991 late July

For once Hermione kept her mouth shut while her parents had guests. This guest not that he was an invited one, more like he'd pushed his way in was unusual in too many ways to count. But the most important way was etched on his face. This was a man who was absolutely no-nonsense in manner, and while he wasn't threatening per se, there was something about him that bespoke power. And for once, Hermione allowed herself to just listen.

"Mr Granger, Mrs Granger, good afternoon." His sneer didn't sound like he thought anything good at all of the day. "You have undoubtedly received the letter sent by the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, informing you of your daughter's acceptance into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Well, yes, but we don't know anything about..."

"Of course you know nothing about Hogwarts. You're Muggles." At their looks of incomprehension, he elaborated, speaking slowly and deliberately, as if he were addressing toddlers. "You are non-magical people. I must caution you both quite severely that this is a matter of utmost secrecy. We wizards and witches normally live our lives set apart and have nothing whatsoever to do with Muggles; however, there are cases of a Muggle marrying into a magical family. In very infrequent instances, two Muggles such as yourselves somehow manage to breed a magical offspring. It may be that one of you had a magical ancestor of whom you were unaware, or perhaps your daughter is simply an anomaly."

Black eyes studied her mother, then her father, both speechless at this point.

"In other words, Mr and Mrs Granger, what I am saying is that your daughter..." he consulted his paper, unnecessarily, she thought, "...Hermione, is a witch. As such, she should receive education to use and control her magic. Who knows what kind of damage she'd cause, the trouble she'd get into otherwise? And Hogwarts is the best school of its kind in Europe, perhaps in all of the world."

Her mum's cheeks pinked in outrage, but her father began to chuckle uneasily.

"All right. We've read the letter, listened to you, now tell us. This one of those crazy surprise programmes with the hidden cameras, right? I say, you've certainly gone to a lot of trouble, costumes and props and all..."

"Mr Granger." The man's harsh voice had not the slightest hint of levity.

"Let me ask you how many times have things, unexplained things, happened around your daughter?" Hermione's hands flew to her suddenly flushed cheeks. How did he know these things about her?

He pulled out a long black stick from somewhere in his coat. "Perhaps you found toys in her cot that you thought you'd secured across the room?" As he talked, he swished the stick in the air and a family picture left its position on the mantle and slowly floated in midair across the room to near where she was seated.

"Odd accidents that seemed to coincide with her wishes? Hmmm?" He made a small gesture and the frame dropped to the floor with a loud crash of breaking glass. She jumped in surprise, her cheeks flaming by now. Her parents both gaped in shock at this offensive treatment of their belongings. She could see her mother struggling to contain herself, held back only by the touch of her father's hand on her arm.

The professor raised one eyebrow as he sneered at all of them. His arms were crossed in front of him, one hand holding that stick, the fingers of the other drumming a silent beat on the opposite sleeve. He waited several moments, assessing them, before swishing the stick another time. The bits of broken glass swirled together and reformed perfectly back in the frame, looking exactly as it had done originally.

"I assure you, I am not in the least crazy, nor do I joke Magic. Is. Real." At each word, he swished his stick (his wand, she realized) in ever broadening circles, and with each swish, a stronger gust of wind blew through the room, ruffling its contents and its inhabitants. Hermione thought she should be frightened by this display, but her heart was racing with exhilaration.

"And whether or not you wish to believe it, your daughter has magical powers. Attending Hogwarts and learning to use those powers is not only the intelligent choice for you to make, it is her birthright. Even Muggles such as yourselves must realize that."

Her parents looked at each other, then back at the man. Her mum's eyes were narrowed, and the pink was infusing her cheeks again. Hermione held her breath. She couldn't believe the man had spoken so disrespectfully to her parents, and she knew that look in her mother's eye. Carolyn rose from her chair and slowly approached the insolent man. Hermione could almost visualize steam rising from her furious mother.

"Listen to me, Mr Snape..."

"Professor Snape."

"Whoever you are. You don't know our daughter. You don't know us. I don't know who has been telling you stories about our Hermione, but I do know this. She's no crazy person. She's no witch. She's a normal girl who happens to have extraordinary intelligence, and she's not going to waste it going to some so-called school we've never heard of, with people we don't know, to learn God only knows what. You can take your letter of acceptance and give it right back to this headmistress and tell her the Grangers said thank you, but no thanks. And another thing. If they truly want to get more students to come to this... this place, they could try using a less condescending recruiter. Good day to you, Professor."

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Hermione was never sure what to think about that man. She'd seen him only once in her life, but he had most certainly made an indelible impression on her.

Reaching back into the envelope, she removed a second piece of paper, which contained only a short, handwritten list. She smiled mistily at the memory of her younger self, a child already brimming with self-importance, fueled by years of praise for her ability to retain and parrot back all her lessons. By then, she had learned to organize her thoughts through list-making. The list in her childish script brought to her mind's eye details from the interview with that mysterious, arrogant man:

Things I know about Professor Severus Snape:

1. tall and skinny
2. dresses in all black clothes (no hat)

3. quite sure of himself and rather unpleasant
4. grew up living as a muggle
5. professor of potions at Hogwarts

Thinking about the meagre information he'd given before everything went pear-shaped, she pulled out her pen and began writing on the opposite side of the paper.

Things I know about Hogwarts:

1. school for witches and wizards
2. very secret
3. somewhere in Great Britain
4. train takes you there from King's Cross Station
5. teaches about magic

She put her pen down and focused her attention back on the letter. Once again she read the impossible words, her experience from that morning confirming the suspicions she'd lived with for ten years. Hogwarts... witches... wizards... a school for children like her. Like she had been. Like she still was? Was it too late?

Hermione reached back into the envelope and pulled out the final item, a coin. At first glance, it could be mistaken for a shilling, but the size and shape weren't quite right. Its raised letters proclaimed it to be a Sickle, whatever that was. Hermione had found it in the couch the day after Professor Snape's visit and had safeguarded it with her rescued Hogwarts letter. She had hidden it away when she was younger, worried that her parents would be angry with her for treasuring it. But now, as she fingered the small silver coin, turning it over and over in her hand, she imagined she felt a tingle of... something... coming from it. Letters could be faked, but this coin was a real, tangible link to a world she supposedly belonged to... and knew almost nothing about.

Hermione repacked the box, keeping out the envelope and its contents, and headed back downstairs, her mind still thinking of that day.

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1991 late July

"No, John, I don't care what he said, what little tricks he had up his sleeves. I'm not shipping our daughter off to strangers. He doesn't even have any proper credentials! And he thought he could come waltzing in here and take our girl?"

"But Carolyn..."

"But nothing. All that talk about magic, and secrecy, hiding them all away. It's ridiculous. It's not natural. Hermione isn't some lunatic, some crazy sorcerer. She's not some freak. She's gifted."

"Remember when she was little? All those things that somehow made their way into her cot? What about that?"

"Telekinesis. Psychokinesis. It's a proven phenomenon."

"Carolyn." His voice lowered to a whisper, not wanting his daughter to overhear. "What about the fires? The disappearing incident?"

"No. She just went through a bad time. You know as well as I do that she's the smartest girl by half in her school, and not only in her year. She's bound for great things, our girl. And we're not letting some bizarre cult followers get hold of her. She's bound for great things."

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Hermione sighed. Great things indeed. Her parents' support was absolute during her public school years, sufficient to cover up the incidents that always seemed to pop up during exams weeks, or before that ill-fated piano recital Mrs Smythe insisted she participate in the one year she'd taken lessons.

"No, Mrs Singer, I'm sure Hermione didn't realize young Kaitlin was near enough the cake for the dress to catch fire on the candles... I'm sorry, Mrs Pennyford, we always are sure to put back all the research books; I can't imagine how that one's been in our house these months... I do apologize, Rev Barnes, that Hermione missed her piece in the Christmas pageant. I really can't understand it. We'd dropped her off in the back room with the rest of the little girls, but suddenly we realized she was sitting right beside us in the audience."

Excuses. Apologies. The same old telekinesis jokes "Ho-ho, sweetie, maybe you could learn to do that spoon bending trick like the chap on the variety show."

Denials. "Darling, you're just high strung." Well, that was true, but being high strung didn't usually mean your research paper spontaneously combusted, or shredded into evenly spaced paper ribbons the night before it was due. Yes, Hermione was smart. Smart enough to always make an extra copy (or two, depending on stress level) of any important assignment during her years at university. One all-night thesis reconstruction, barely good enough to not totally wreck her grade point average, was enough to learn that lesson.

Control. This morning, starting that fire intentionally had been an epiphany. To think all that unrestrained energy could be controlled... she didn't dare carry the thought much further, didn't dare think she could be capable of the things she saw that man do. Hardly dared even think the 'm' word.

~ ~ ~ ~

three weeks later

Hermione snapped her laptop shut in frustration. Every Internet search engine, normally her most reliable coworkers, had failed her. There was not the slightest whisper or rumour of a magical boarding school in Scotland, or anywhere in the UK, for that matter. She had found plenty of McGonagalls, first initial M, but no Minervas, and none that were remotely related to teaching or school administration.

She walked to the kitchen and began heating the water for tea, went back and checked idly in her notes, then walked back to her tea things in the kitchen, and realized she should stop pretending not to pace.

"He wasn't kidding when he said it was secret," she announced to the air.

"But wait. He said he had lived like a whosis... whatever he called us 'non-magical' people."

And his name, Snape, so harsh and off-putting, would likely not yield anywhere near the hundreds of results to rule out that McGonagall had. Pouring her tea, she grabbed

the steaming mug in one hand, a packet of Hobnobs in the other, and went to reboot her laptop.

~ ~ ~ ~

several days later

Current telephone directory searches had proved fruitless. Oh, plenty of Snapes, but all of them with depressingly ordinary first names. Ditto a news search for the past twenty years, which was as far as most online archives went. She knew she'd have to do a bit of footwork to dig further. Not that she didn't like research, but when it held such potentially life-changing implications, her impatience factor rose exponentially.

She had started at the British Library in London, hoping their massive news archive would yield clues to the mysterious Snape. She had an odd moment on her way to the library, as she walked through King's Cross Station. She hadn't been there in ages, but suddenly felt a sense of something not unlike déjà vu. Only instead of the sense that she'd already experienced that moment, it was more like she *should* have experienced something, *should* have seen, *should* have known... some unknowable thing.

Remembering that the professor had said that students could take a train to Hogwarts from King's Cross, Hermione had made a mental note to research that when she had more time.

But the BL had yielded nothing, and her enthusiasm was beginning to flag as she had similar luck at location after location. Entering her fifth regional library, she went directly to the reference desk to get permission to search through the older microfiche files.

"Here's 1970-1979, and this drawer is 1960-1969," the librarian told her, indicating the corresponding file drawers, filled with sheet upon sheet of the tiny images. "If you run into any problems with the machine, come fetch me. It gets a little temperamental now and then."

"No chance any of these have been scanned into searchable files?" Hermione asked weakly.

The librarian gave her a pitying look, shaking her head. "Sorry, dear."

Hermione thanked her, then looked dismally at the contents of the drawers. Experience hard-won at the other libraries she'd visited in the last several weeks told her that the seventies would take hours to get through, and the sixties even longer. Resolutely, she grabbed a handful of the sheets and turned on the viewer.