

Labour of Love

by *TeddyRadiator*

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

A PWP that ran off with the plot. Written for my 'Teddypeeps' on LiveJournal. This story is a simple PWP, I promise. I just took a little longer to get there than usual.

This story is dedicated to Potions Mistress Extraordinaire, Beffeysue: angel, benefactor, and above all, friend in need. I wish each of these words were diamonds, Beffe; I would place them as a carpet beneath your feet, and hope they were worthy for you to walk upon them. Bless you.

Thank you to my golden beta, Stgulik, who is my rock, and to my Muse, Dahlra, who knows.

Anti-Litigation Charm: None of the characters belong to me. They belong to JK Rowling, who let my entire reason for reading the Harry Potter series bleed to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I'm building a better world.

My name is Severus Tobias Snape. I will not bore you with my credentials. If you know me, you already know them. If you don't, they wouldn't mean that much to you. I will say this: I am a Potions Master, meaning I have studied and been awarded my degree by the Wizarding World Potions Consortium. A more pompous, sleazy bunch of belly-crawling, arse-licking, shirt-lifting wizards you are unlikely to meet, but in spite of all that, my Mastership is ironclad and undisputed. You must understand this to understand the incredible turn my life has taken since the Battle of Hogwarts.

Much has been written about me. Some of it is actually true. Yes, I was Hogwarts' most despised professor, cum Headmaster. And then I died in a flurry of Dark jealousy over a bloody wand, and vengeance - in the form of a venomous serpent.

Only, not.

Life can be sodding inconvenient at times. This you must also know, to understand the aforementioned incredible turn of my life.

I am the son of a witch from an old, Pureblood family, and a Muggle, a Mancunian millrat whose face and figure is so strongly reflected in my own that for years I avoided a mirror as if it were an assassin. Apparently I was conceived during a knee-trembling Mayday fling, and my late pater thought he was doing the 'right thing' in keeping his offspring from being called a bastard by marrying Mum. She adored him; fuck knows why. Compared to him, I am a right little ray of sunshine.

My mother once told me that, as a child, I was a gentle, sensitive boy with a tender heart. I cried at sad songs or stories, and I laughed at lot as well. And in spite of my earlier statement, I remember love and affection from both parents - right up until I started displaying magic. Then my father's fear-fueled fists tried to beat it out of me. His hardest blows could not dislodge the magic from the foundation of my soul; they could, however, obliterate trust and hope from it.

Now that I am approaching the age he was when he died, I understand him a little better. I don't hate him, not anymore. I do loathe that he didn't have the guts or the confidence to embrace his wife's 'special abilities,' and not to drink himself into a shameful stupor over them. I don't drink nearly as much as people think; I saw what it did to Da, and life has given me little enough control over things as it is.

Hogwarts could have given me back the acceptance and love I'd lost, had circumstances and timing not been against me. And so I turned from love to something that could be called anti-love. I have always looked at the world in contrasts: Muggle father, Magical mother. Gryffindor Lily, Slytherin me. Light and dark. Love and hate. The magical world taught me that there are only shades of grey, but I could not seem to find myself among them, nor any of them within me.

Why did I become a Death Eater? So many have asked. Do you want to know the real, true reason? I joined Tom Riddle's jolly little pirate band for no more profound reason than I just wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be liked. I knew I wasn't handsome; hell, I wasn't even good-looking enough to be called ugly. I was an arrogant misfit, a pride-filled outcast, and so I cast my lot with the greatest Misfit of them all.

The last words that Lily Evans ever said to me was, "I pity you, Sev. After all you've done, no one will ever want you." I believed her, and the outcome of a few unsatisfying trysts and several indifferent one-night stands revealed no evidence to the contrary. I set out to prove her wrong, but in the end, I was still alone.

And so I made my mistakes and my atonements, and nothing assuaged the feeling that I'd been cheated. Where was my happy ending? Where was my love? I had been selfish, I'll admit; I wanted what I'd been denied, so I coveted and locked my hopes away. I occasionally dragged them out and counted them; hoarding them like a miser his gold. I had saved up my dreams but who was there to spend them on?

Why was I born for nothing more than a life of ridicule and disdain and disappointment, even after I'd cultivated my manners and my bearing and my personality? Why was nothing ever going to be enough for me?

And so, as I grew into an adult, death and destruction and chaos reigned, and I knew nothing more than petty misery and anger. It defined me; it deformed me and marred my features far more than my scimitar of a nose or my crooked, jack-o'-lantern teeth. Anger and envy scored into my soul until I was a scarred vessel fit to hold nothing more than bitterness, regrets and remorse. And yet I wanted to do the right thing. I just didn't know what that was.

Then I had to go to war. I was groomed by the greatest wizard of our time to be the spy, the scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb, and I accepted it. I certainly wasn't getting any better offers elsewhere. Dumbledore kept me out of Azkaban; he also kept me on a tight lead that chafed and choked, and I wore it, because he reminded me every single day of my miserable life that I deserved it. And I believed him. It was only when he sent a boy to do a man's job that I finally lost faith in the great wizard. I knew then I'd been duped; by Albus, by Tom Riddle, by Lily, by me.

I watched impotently as children fought a battle that grown wizards would not even admit existed. And out of the ashes, one of its greatest warriors emerged as scarred and battered and angry and confused as I had been. And I bore witness this as well.

People talk about survivor's guilt; I had survivor's anger. I had survivor's ennui. I was given a reprieve at life, and at first I took it with contempt and loathing. I had hated life so much that prolonging it seemed heinous - enough to truthfully consider taking it myself for the better part of my slow recovery. That was during the two years following the war, when all I could do was lie in a hospital bed, near-paralytic, while mistrustful and resentful mediwitches and wizards wiped my arse, tutted and shook their heads over the fact that I stubbornly refused to die. Fuck knows, I gave it my best shot.

I was furious for having outlived my usefulness, but lying in a hospital bed without the energy to move soon meant that even anger was too strenuous a task for me. Day after day, with little more to do than stare at the ceiling, I began to think about my parents again. Purged of the guilt and bitterness I'd carried around in tribute to Lily, I was afforded the luxury of remembering what it felt like to be the loved and loving little boy my mother swore I once was. And slowly, he began to superimpose upon me.

Shortly after, my recovery rate improved, and soon I was wiping my own bottom, and the ability to be able to shave myself took on the significance of a successful scaling of Mount Everest. My strength and magic soon returned, and if I said little or reacted even less, it was not because of any indifference on my part. I was whole again, and this started to mean something to me.

One day, while looking at my reflection as I shaved, I saw my father - or rather, the father he would have been, had he the capacity for acceptance and love when it came to him. I saw him without the caul of hatred that hung like a gauze over my memory all those years, and the truth of my life struck me with such force I'm surprised it didn't shatter the mirror.

I was no longer under any obligation to be the man I was. I could be the man I wanted to become. I just wasn't sure who he was, either. I knew I still had the ability, the capacity to love again. For a long time, I had stopped believing it was necessary. I had, as you know, lived without it for a long time.

Now, watching the weeping man in the mirror, I no longer hated him. I wanted him to find love. I wanted him to start over.

I just wasn't sure it was possible. I've not been the luckiest wizard in the world in that respect. But I knew one thing about me. When necessary, I was capable of great concentration and great accomplishment. With a little luck on my side, I'd find what I was searching for, or die trying in hope.

This was this state of affairs in which I found myself as Hermione Granger's Master. In every meaning of that word. I say it with pride and with a sense of awe. I am not the Master of her life through power and fear and coercion, through dark sex games and lies and deception. I have no more 'power' over her than a raindrop has over the direction of an ocean wave. But each day, she bows to me, and each day, I accept her submission, because it's what she wants me to be. The gentle Master of her life.

Hermione will tell you herself that it was not something that happened overnight, nor was it easy. During her first six years at Hogwarts, she was not one of my favourite students on many levels. But I did enjoy pushing her, and she always responded not by pushing back, as my Slytherins were wont to do, nor by stalking off in martyred or bewildered bad grace like either the Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs, but with sheer Gryffindor stubborn pig-headedness.

She had ever been a good mental punching bag, and I used her shamelessly throughout her childhood to alleviate some of my own resentment. I told myself I was doing her a favour. She was as big an outcast as I; obviously from a good backbone-of-England family, loved and cherished in her Muggle world. She would need a thick skin to survive the Wizarding world's prejudices, especially mine.

I had never had an apprentice, and never wanted one. But as the old song goes, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need.

It sometimes amazes me that, to be the Master, one is first and foremost the slave.

Chapter One – Accepting

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Thank you all for your encouragement and kind comments for my story. As I have stated, this is a little PWP with legs, and will take us on a journey of UST and fulfillment.

Thank you for Befveysue, to whom this story is dedicated. And to Dahlra, who is always Master to my Apprentice.

Usual Disclaimer applies, which is a polite way of saying I can't be arsed to copy and paste it for this chapter.

"There are rules, Miss Granger," he began softly, without preamble.

Hermione had been waiting for him to speak, but still jumped at the sound of his voice. His statement sounded suspiciously as if he was offering her the apprenticeship she'd requested. Here he was, mentioning rules and he hadn't actually made her an offer yet. Already expecting things of her; oh yes, Severus Snape was still good at expecting.

Regardless, Hermione nodded tersely. Any other witch or wizard probably wouldn't have noticed her immediate and instinctive stiffening at the words, but it was obvious that this particular wizard saw everything quite clearly. Hermione wished she could say the same about herself. Sitting opposite him, observing him closely, she wondered why he seemed so different from the man she remembered from her youth. He's changed, Hermione thought. We've both changed.

She'd heard through the grapevine that the dour wizard seemed different since returning to Hogwarts; that he had mellowed, but not all that much. He was still disinclined to suffer fools, but reports were that he was quieter, less volatile. And if he was perhaps not as biased toward Slytherins now that he no longer needed to be, he was still very protective of them, and not the most jovial man to deal with.

Hermione didn't necessarily think of that as a bad thing. Professor Slughorn had been the epitome of the jolly, unctuous magister, but the thought of apprenticing with him made her want to vomit. At least with Snape she would actually have something to show for her apprenticeship other than a lifetime obligation to provide him with his favourite candy that is, if he stopped cutting her to ribbons long enough to actually oversee her work.

As a student, Hermione had respected him, perhaps, perversely, because he had hurt her so. She had secretly dreamed and hoped that he was and had always been Dumbledore's man, even when she and the boys had been on their demented little road trip. Had she not returned to the Shrieking Shack shortly after Tom Riddle's demise, no one would have known that Hogwarts' former Headmaster was still suspended between life and death by a strand so delicate and tenuous that it was hard to find a pulse. They both knew very well that Hermione was the reason he was alive.

Harry had spent the following year getting Snape exonerated and recognised for his efforts as a spy and a double-agent. These days, while the two men would never send one another Christmas cards, they could at least stand to be in the same room without hexing one another. Just. It was difficult for Harry, who had hated Snape on sight, to reconcile the vulnerable, ragged boy who loved his mum with the wizard whose treatment of Harry and his friend sometimes rode the ragged edge of abuse. Hermione remembered ruefully how Harry called Snape the "Prince of Un" unattractive, unkempt, unpleasant, unlikeable, unkind. She always felt indignant on Snape's behalf for that. Unfair.

Even Hermione had to admit Snape had certainly known how to sow hostility and harvest fear with his very presence, and even after they'd learned the truth about him, Hermione still had trouble finding anything remotely charitable to say about his physical appearance.

Until today. It was as if Harry's scales had fallen from her eyes. Or perhaps it was merely that she was a woman now, seeing him with the eyes of maturity instead of her childish recollections.

He regarded her with his thousand-yard stare as she pondered his opening volley. "Yes, well," Hermione said, stalling. Her emotions about everything else were so jumbled; she could no more put into words her feelings for her former professor than she could untangle Crookshanks' favourite ball of yarn. They were as mangled as the skin around the scar he bore as a souvenir of that final night of the battle.

Now the two of them seemed to be having some sort of staring contest, but Hermione couldn't ascertain why or the results of the outcome, so she took the opportunity to really look at him. He tilted his head slightly, as if to say, Go ahead, Granger. Take a good long look, because you're going to see a lot of me in the next seven years...

He looked healthier than she ever remembered him, which was amazing, considering his long and painful recuperation from the battle. He was still lean and vulpine. His hair was long and rather stringy, and his nose certainly hadn't shrunk any. He still brought to her mind a giant bird of prey, dark and intense and menacing. Struggling to meet him on the level of an adult, Hermione noticed that he had a way of holding himself completely still as he waited to elaborate about these rules of his. He regarded her quietly, as if willing himself to be calm. Hermione noticed his deep, even breathing, and she envied that.

Hermione also noticed that his long, slender hands and dark eyes were incredibly expressive, and while his skin was pale, it was not the dungeon pallour he'd exhibited in her youth. His face, though lined with years of worry and stress, was curiously translucent, and more porcelain than sallow.

He definitely seemed less grumpy and impatient than she remembered. His thin lips were no longer curled into his trademark sneer, at least while addressing her. He watched her levelly as they sat across his desk from one another, and he took a deep breath and calmly let it out slowly, his expression as carefully neutral as a stranger's.

"While I seem to recall your youthful penchant for disregarding rules, I think you will find these are a bit easier to swallow." At the word 'swallow' she had obeyed him reflexively, as if he'd given her a command. This both amused and disturbed Hermione in equal measure, and she stifled a sudden urge to laugh at her bizarre reaction.

His voice was still vintage Snape; the same purling, expressive instrument she'd remembered from that first-year speech so long ago. He could make the most insignificant potions recipe into a sonnet; the most mundane lecture became a symphony. Every word and incantation had a weight and a beauty in the deep timbre of his voice. It could cut like a diamond, it could soothe like a lullaby. It had colour and flavour and scent to it.

It also, Hermione noted with adult insight, held the barest trace of a Northern accent, which she'd never noticed as a child. That gave it its lilt, its ability to calm as well as to instill fear. It was a lovely instrument, and easily his finest asset. If she were perfectly honest with herself, there were moments of her sixth-year DADA class when an occasional utterance from Professor Snape nudged at her burgeoning sexual awareness rather disconcertingly.

More than once she'd walked out of his class feeling strangely stirred and flushed by his pronunciation of the word 'penetrate.'

Hermione dragged herself from this rather odd reverie. Concentrate, Hermione. Rules. What rules, Professor, do you plan to inflict on me for the next seven years? She mentally gave herself a shake, waiting for the one rule that would send her blood pressure through the roof and the hexes flying. She waited for his tone to change to derision and jeering Slytherin superiority. In other words, she waited for Snape, and herself, to revert to type.

Shortly after the war, Hermione gradually became aware that nothing she said or did seemed to prevent the continuing rising tide of volatile anger that sparked from within. From almost the moment the dust settled over Hogwarts, her temper had been an out-of-control, frightening monster with teeth as sharp as Bellatrix's blade. Hermione had always been known for having a fiery temperament, but this was beyond the pale. Her short fuse disappeared into the nitro, and anything and everything set her off with little warning and no provocation. In the space of the next year, she had offended and alienated almost every person she knew, and she was powerless to stop herself.

Her temper had been a point of conversation since the end of the war. Being unable to retrieve her parents' memories was the catalyst. When the experts confirmed her fears that the Memory Charm she had devised to keep them safe had simply embedded itself permanently into their minds, Hermione returned from Australia seething with repressed rage. She walked around feeling like she had the word "failure" magically carved into her forehead. She had spent too much time in the wilderness with Harry and Ron; she had forgotten how to deal with the mundane-ness of life, and it all pissed her off.

Returning from Australia was also the beginning of the end of her crumbling relationship with Ron. What had started as a noble sacrifice to keep her parents safe and a careless snog and confession of love ended up as colossal failures falling from her hands like sands through an hourglass. Now she had a slim chance to do something positive, and she didn't want to make the same mistakes with Professor Snape.

On the advice of Remus Lupin, her one remaining confidante, she had come to Snape to ask for an apprenticeship, but deep down she was afraid. Afraid he'd say no (the likeliest of outcomes); afraid he'd say yes, and then she'd actually have to do it without losing her rag in front of him. She remembered all too clearly his penchant for provocation.

Worst of all was the fear that, once he realised just how short her fuse really was, he would gleefully use it to set her off like a Roman candle at any and every available opportunity. Something told her he was preparing to light just such a match with these 'rules.' She'd just have to learn to control herself.

She sat back and waited for the red mist to descend with his next smirking comment. Instead, his voice remained calm and mellow, with an underlying crispness that kept him from mumbling. "As my apprentice, you will live here within the castle. Your quarters will be near mine and your assistance will be required at my discretion."

Hermione nodded. She had expected as much, and she shifted, readying herself again for the snark to bleed into his next words.

"Further, I shall ask that you and I refer to one another by our titles, as befitting our relationship to one another. I shall be Master Snape, and you are Apprentice Granger." His voice was still quiet and lilting, almost tender. "I understand that you will need time away from your duties, and I do not expect that you will either abuse my trust nor take advantage of my leniency. Time away will be granted at my discretion. I trust you will not find me unreasonable." The barest hint of his old smirk teased the corner of his mouth, but he remained positively placid.

"We will take meals together. We will synchronise our waking and sleeping hours together. At first, I will be more inclined for you to remain cloistered within your apprenticeship, but as the time passes, you will be given more free time and freedom in general, along with the option to teach the second- and third-year Potions classes."

When she didn't speak, he looked at her, narrowing his eyes. "You're uncharacteristically reticent, Miss Granger. Are the arrangements not to your liking?"

Somewhat taken aback, Hermione replied, rather stiffly, "I was under the impression that my liking had little to do with the Master/Apprentice relationship, sir. Hence you are the Master and I the Apprentice."

Snape made a little conciliatory shrug. "It would seem pointless to proceed if you found it untenable, Miss Granger. You have already stated the objectives you are hoping to accomplish, as have I. At the end of the seven years, you wish to be a Potions mistress, and I wish to retire from teaching in order to take up research and development. Those are the long-term goals. I'm trying to ascertain the acceptability of our more short-term arrangements. It goes without saying that you would be expected to display deference for my position for this arrangement to succeed."

Hermione bit back a retort. In a very Un-Snapeish manner, he was quite delicately referring to her current state of affairs. As she met his rather impassive gaze, she thought he might just be her last hope to get something right.

He returned her sullen look with a mixture of intrigue and puzzlement, and finally concluded, "I am merely asking a simple question, Miss Granger: Are you prepared to do what I ask you, when I ask you, without question, for the next seven years?"

Now she felt her hackles rise. "And just what would you ask me to do that I might find objectionable, Master Snape?" She deliberately emphasised the word 'Master', but to her surprise he opened his eyes rather wide and made an elegant, dismissive waving motion with his slender hand.

"Oh, the usual. Scrubbing the lab floor with your toothbrush, daily beatings with Filch, horsehair robes. It's a standard contract."

Hermione's expression must have been exactly what he was expecting, and Snape smirked fully this time. With something that might have passed for a chuckle, he continued, "I truthfully do not foresee placing any unconscionable demands upon your person, Miss Granger. It is merely the tradition of an Apprenticeship to look upon one's Master as the fount from which all blessings and disciplines flow."

She grew very still, and something within seemed to both push and pull at her at once. Master Snape, she thought. He would be my Master. The frustration and lack of control she constantly felt could be pushed onto him. She wouldn't be constantly fighting herself. Perhaps.

As he sat there, patiently waiting for her to comment, Hermione thought, *I don't have to keep blindly stumbling alone in the dark, hoping to find the light switch and the answers. Someone else can drive awhile. Do I want that? And if I don't, why does it sound so tempting?*

Snape watched her carefully as the true implications of their impending commitment played across her face. As if finding what he sought there, he continued. "Like it or not, you and I will live cheek to jowl almost every day, having taken what is tantamount to holy orders. It has been noted more than once that the binding of Master to Apprentice resembles nothing more or less than a handfasting, except instead of a year and a day, we are committing to one another for seven years."

He looked at her, and for the first time since the interview began, he seemed tense, and his eyes bore into hers. He leaned forward, his expression quietly intense, as if he was truly addressing her as an adult for the first time. Caught in his black, uncompromising gaze, Hermione felt as nakedly vulnerable as she'd ever been. She thought she ought to look away, but wasn't able to look away from those steady, obsidian eyes.

Then, in a voice that washed over her like watercolours bleeding one into another, causing goosebumps to form on her arms, he said, "I am prepared to bond with you and become your Master. The real question is whether or not you are ready to accept being my Apprentice for the next seven years, Hermione."

Chapter Two - Binding

Chapter 3 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Thank you for all the lovely comments! I'm really glad you are enjoying the fic. I apologise for being so untimely in replying to responses. My email account was automatically sending all my TPP alerts to Spam, so I didn't know I was receiving any reviews. I was starting to think you didn't like the fic at all! :P

Thanks to Beffeysue, for her love and support. This story is for you. Stgulik the queen of betas - I love you so much.

It's also for all you wonderful readers who constantly encourage me and make me smile. Thank you, thank you!!

The usual disclaimer still applies. I still don't own these characters. Darn it... :)

A year after my official pardon and recovery, I screwed my courage to the sticking place, turned up in Minerva's office and, while pointedly ignoring Dumbledore's portrait, asked for my old Potions job back. Minerva, puzzled but relieved, was able to stop mentally hexing Slughorn for bailing on her, and happily offered me the position with a pay raise and a side order of remorse-ridden tenderness.

Contrary to what many think about my stubborn pride, I found her constant attempt to atone for her behaviour during the last year of the war to be a balm to my healing self-confidence. If she made said attempt by giving me more money and remembering to stock my favourite chocolate biscuits for our afternoon tea together, who was I to say nay? She had once been a friend; I was not going to bite the hand that esteemed me.

If Minerva was surprised that I had returned to Hogwarts, she was nearly poleaxed when Hermione Granger showed up nine months later begging me to take her on as an apprentice. For several years afterward, Minerva regularly dined on the story; she'd already had the consolation/commiseration tea and biscuits ready for the surely-to-be disappointed Miss Granger when said young lady came skipping up the stairs, exclaiming, "He said yes! He said yes!"

I tried to start with the basics, based on my own apprenticeship, but to be perfectly honest, those days are lost in a wash of fear, anguish and retribution. To keep an eye on me after I cravenly begged him for my life and Lily's protection, Dumbledore had placed me on what was essentially a fast-track apprenticeship with him to become a Potions master. The school needed one, and he needed me close so he could keep an eye on me. I was adept enough, having concocted several rather unspeakable potions for Tom Riddle in his early days.

What little I do remember is filtered through a sandpaper haze of resentment and awkwardness, compounded by distaste for Albus and his less-than-subtle hints on extending my apprenticeship to another level of partnership entirely. To say I was repulsed is an understatement. Aside from being completely certain I was a heterosexual wizard, I was determined to make it the only control over my life he would never have. Broken-hearted or not, sex with Albus Dumbledore was the last thing I wanted, and I frequently told him so. It was the only 'No' he would take for an answer. I guess I should've been grateful for that, at least.

As far as most Masters are concerned, Albus included, an apprentice is basically an unpaid slave to boss around for the requisite number of years until receiving their own degree. I had been a glorious exception; I'd only apprenticed three and a bit years before becoming the youngest Potions master in the school's history. I confess I took great pleasure in telling Hermione this as she signed the next seven years of her life away. I thought it would give her confidence in my abilities to be a proper Master; it only served to make me look rather petty and smug.

There had been stipulations, of course. Hermione hadn't expected me, the Arch-Slytherin of all Slytherins, not to have my own agenda. Shortly before our binding ceremony as Master and apprentice, I sat her down and calmly stated The Rules. At that point, I was pretty much making them up as I went.

Looking across the desk at Hermione was more than a little surreal to me. I remembered so well the first time she'd sat in this very classroom. I had crashed through the door and proceeded to enthrall them with the speech I still make to all first years. Her eleven year-old self watched me with a thrill of fear and awe, and had tried so hard to earn, if not my liking, at least my respect.

It had taken her three years to get it through her skull that, no matter what she did, no matter how hard she worked or how much she tried to please me, my regard would never, could never be given. Knowing her as I do, it must have hurt to realise that, no matter what she did, I would never like her. She was insufferable then, that much is true. What the other teachers saw as budding genius, I saw as strutting arrogance. I was holding up my mirror to her, pretending not to notice that we were so much alike I was tarring her with my own brush.

Now, a woman faced me. Gone was her girlish, almost painful desire to be liked. One got the feeling that Hermione had emerged from the war as a take-me-or-leave-me kind of woman. I liked the sharp intelligence shining restlessly from her amber eyes.

She was thinner now; those aforementioned eyes looked a bit too large and haggard in her heart-shaped face. It was surrounded by a riotous mass of curling hair which had always looked like Devil's Snare in her youth. Time and cosmetics had marginally tamed it, but the hair of a powerfully magical being is ever capricious and ever more tempestuous than its owner. I can say without conceit that I am a supremely magical being, and one has to look only as far as my own unconscionable locks to attest to this. The phrase 'go where ye list' could well have been attributed to magical hair such as ours.

And so she appeared at my door, asking for an apprenticeship. She was seething with bitterness so familiar it sickened me. During the entire interview I could almost see resentment and anger bubbling under her skin. Lupin told me she'd had a ferocious falling out with Weasley and had even checked herself into St. Mungo's, in case her uncontrolled anger was somehow curse-related. I performed my own tests surreptitiously. I could not rule out the possibility that she'd been cursed during the battle, but I found nothing but her own restless distress. She practically vibrated with it.

I suspected that, when the anger beneath her skin roiled uncontrollably, she often lashed out, probably alone - like a safety valve preventing a complete explosion. I understood. I used to blast rose bushes when my own suppressed fury got the better of me. Poor Pomona! I spent many a summer holiday replanting her ornamental flora during my tenure as a professor here.

The latest reports, however, were worrisome. Oh, I'd heard that Hermione had gained a vicious temper since the war, but I was not terribly surprised. I remember all too well watching her boss and bully Potter and Weasley around Hogwarts when she was nothing more than one of Minerva's little cubs. Not even fourteen, but as tough and uncompromising as her house's mascot.

I don't deny feeling a rather resentful debt to her. I had only just gotten control over my own life; why would I want to take charge of another's, especially one so aggressive and unstable? But what if I didn't? What would she do without some sort of guidance? Could I truly make a difference - and more importantly, did I want to?

When Lupin originally encouraged me to apprentice her, of course I balked. I had never wanted an apprentice. To me, taking on an apprentice held all the attraction of a seven-year punishment for breaking a mirror one never particularly liked in the first place. Lupin hinted that he feared Hermione might start self-harming, and in his words, 'she'd been inflicted with enough scars.' I began to feel a sense of obligation I wasn't sure I wanted to accept, but I know myself enough to know that, first and foremost, I answer duty when it calls me. Both a strength and a weakness of my character, I feel. But where was she to go, now that she had pushed away everyone who had ever cared about her? I lay awake the night before our Master/apprentice bonding, and thought about my own alienation with the world, and shivered.

I won't say I changed overnight; that would be trite and unrealistic. But I did change. Watching the sure-footed witch, grown misshapen into this stunted, repressed, angry woman, broke something in me that I no longer saw necessary to repair. I knew I could not 'fix' her, as Lupin so charmingly suggested. But I could guide her. I could show her how to fix herself. I wanted to. I wanted her to want me to. And so I bonded to her, as Master and apprentice, for seven years. Gods, what had I gotten myself into?

She was not merely a woman; she was *womanly* now, and I found I appreciated her physically as well as intellectually. This should have sent alarm bells careening through my head, but I was still seeing her as a former student. It was only later that all these factors merged together, but by then, I was leading her from the consecrated circle of our bonding ceremony.

Minerva presided over the bonding ceremony, looking as proud of the soon-to-be Master and apprentice as if she'd hatched them from her own eggs. Hermione stood on

the outside of the ceremonial circle, watching Snape as he started the purification ritual. It was a long ceremony that required two days of prior fasting. Hermione was exhausted before it even began. She'd not slept at all the night before, questioning herself over and over if she was truly doing the right thing. By the time the ritual started, she was trembling.

He stood before Professor McGonagall, tall, dignified and proud, in a long black cossack-style robe of fine, elf-spun silk. In the natural light it had a dull sheen to it that made it look deep grey in one play of the light, and stark black in the next. Floor-length panels of blackest velvet were set beneath the arms and the same velvet cuffed the long drop sleeves. A high nehru-style collar, also velvet trimmed, was the only outward concession to his vanity, as it hid the worst of the scarring from sight.

Velvet buttons marched down the front of the robe in precise three-inch intervals; buttons marched down each leg and down from elbow to wrist on the tunic beneath the robe. Silken tassels dropped from the back of the hooded cowl that sat loosely at the crown of his head, and smaller but matching tassels weighed down each end of the almost foot-wide sash belt that girded his slender waist.

His black hair spilled over his shoulders and glistened in the sunlight like a cormorant's wing, and his dragon-hide boots looked soft and quality-made. Contrasting all this darkness, his pale face and hands shone starkly from the confines of his robe. He looked like a figure out of time, at once foreboding and alluring. His expression was calm, almost zen-like, and Hermione knew that he was in a type of trance. It was a trance she would experience herself later in the bonding ritual.

After he had been anointed by purified water, Snape dried his hands on a pure white muslin, then turned and formally called to her in a voice so softly mesmeric she obeyed him before having any conscious thought to do so. He held out his hand; she took it and stepped into the consecrated circle. His eyes briefly flickered over her for the first time that day.

Hermione's robe was also new, a deep crimson silk garment with flared sleeves and a cowed hood encrusted with garnets. It was a heavy, beautiful robe she knew she would never wear again. But when her Master glanced at her from head to toe, he nodded, quietly approving. Perhaps for the first time, Hermione felt worthy, as if his acknowledgement was a validation of her abilities. If the look meant anything else, she wasn't sure she wanted to explore it.

At the correct moment, his hands spooned beneath her palms, and he raised them both to be magically entwined in the cords of bonding. While his hands were steady, Hermione could feel her arm trembling with the effort to keep them in place. At that point, Master Snape turned to her and said formally, "It is my task to lift you up, Apprentice. In this and all other matters, you will rely on my strength to hold you true."

The words were formal and stilted, but there was a depth to his hypnotic tones that made Hermione oddly emotional. She relaxed the muscles of her arms, and as if already keeping a promise, Master Snape held her arm so steadily no one noticed that she had actually let him take over.

Later, she knelt at his feet to show the ritualistic Subjugation to the Master's Will. When Snape symbolically helped her to her feet to show his Promise of Support, and led the apprentice from the circle into their new life together, Hermione clung to her new Master tightly.

At the end of the day, to her eternal regret, Hermione was left with only a dim recollection of the exact wording and meaning of most of the ceremony. Looking back, all she could truly remember was the dancing tassels on Snape's belt, and his dark eyes gazing calmly into hers as he recited the Pledge of the Master, and the feel of his strong arms holding hers steady and even. The rest of the ceremony seemed, if not strictly a waste of time, rather more than she could deal with at that point.

She was as beautiful as a goddess to me that day. Oh, she looked as tired as I felt, and had no doubt got as little sleep as I. But I can still see her in those crimson robes, her feet bare to represent her humility to her Master. When I raised my hands to bind hers to mine, I was afraid she would feel them shaking. Her hands, clasped over mine, were warm, and she gave me a tiny, weary smile as we were magically bound together. I could barely look at her for fear that I would collapse at her feet in fear. She looked powerful and regal, and I felt like a fraud in my spectacular robes.

When we knelt to take our vows, I looked into her amber eyes and promised to be the perfect Master, and she answered the promise to be the most attentive and humble apprentice. I meant my vow. I wanted to be perfect. As we walked from the circle, I felt as if I was the one leaning on *her* for support, but she never made mention of it.

Chapter Three - Beginnings

Chapter 4 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Thank you for all the lovely comments! I'm really glad you are enjoying the fic!

Thanks to Beffeysue, for her love and support. This story is for you. Stgulik the queen of betas - I love you so much.

It's also for all you wonderful readers who constantly encourage me and make me smile. Thank you, thank you!!

The usual disclaimer still applies. I still don't own these characters. Darn it! :)

The first six months were exhausting. We were together almost twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Both of us were grimly on our best behaviour, gingerly trekking through the sticky and uncomfortable path of trying to get to know one another without resorting to hexing. Gradually, the edges smoothed, and we stopped trying to be proper around one another and merely got on with it. Meal times stopped being the tense, indigestion-inducing ordeals of walking on eggshells around certain subjects, and became the focal point for heated debates, refreshing conversations, and occasional laughter. I do laugh, you know. It has to be pretty fucking funny, but I do laugh.

As Apprentice Granger focused on her studies and the projects she wanted to implement, her mind grew sharper, less brittle, and she started expounding on theories that impressed and challenged (and occasionally terrified) me. We started talking to one another, instead of toward one another. When she stopped trying to impress me or placate me, she started to intrigue me.

It was during those fervent exchanges, those passionate debates, those heartfelt confessions of self-doubt we both experienced that I found myself truly relaxing into the role of Master. More than that, I found I could do the right thing. I could guide her into the tricky waters of becoming a certified Potions Master herself one the Consortium would kill to get their hands on. I could mold her into a better, more personable version of me if I gave Hermione Granger what I had contracted to give. All of me.

It has been said by those whose opinions I respect that, while the gods did not bother to smile on me in regards to physical beauty, I was gifted with a lovely voice. I have learned to use it; I have trained it to be beautiful for me. Even as a student Hermione exhibited a tendency to respond to it almost unconsciously. She was one of those students (usually female - I'm not stupid) whom I found literally 'hanging on my every word.' With a little practice, I discovered now that the merest deviation in tone or volume could steer her in the direction of my choosing in an almost Pavlovian fashion. And while that gave me a sense of confidence, I never sought to use it for any deliberate coercion on my part. I was simply entertained by the thought that I could train Hermione with my voice alone.

By now, my foolish heart is surely as transparent as glass to the most obtuse of observers. Of course I was falling in love with her. Hearing her call me 'Master' made my heart stutter in my chest. I gazed at her when she was unaware. I wrote idiotic notes on my texts: *Hermione, you are as beautiful, as perfect as the sun to me. You look at me with eyes as clean as fresh as the dawn, and I am reborn in your gaze.*

Gods, the mere thought of the woman turned me into some mooning swain, scribbling cringe-worthy poetry about her like a deranged fifth-year Ravenclaw. The closet Romantic within craved to do something utterly foolish every time she entered the room, like battle a dragon or defend her honour or kiss the tops of her grubby trainers. How did people survive, I thought, allowing the heart full sway?

The overwhelming realisation of my own feelings both exhilarated and terrified me, so I did what I always do when I'm afraid: I hid. As time passed, I stopped overseeing her, and left her alone, even though my heart would swell each morning when she walked into the lab. I yearned to tell her how I felt, but how could I? Have you not seen me? I know what I look like. No one has to tell me, but I've heard it all the nicknames, the jokes. Once they enraged and hurt me. Now they just bore me. No, that is a lie. They still hurt. It hurt even more to realise Hermione still saw me as the man I was, not the man I wanted to be - the Master I should be to her. I didn't know how to tell her, to show her the man, the Master I aspired to be. And instead of acting like one, I held back, afraid.

My own self-doubt raised its ugly head, and I pulled away, frightened of being hurt again. I was reverting to the old Severus, the one afraid to risk anything on love. I did not know what could be worse: not allowing myself to love, or loving and not having it reciprocated. I didn't think my heart was up to surviving either of them.

I was skittering around like a Thestral on a skating rink, trying to keep my increasingly amorous thoughts from spilling over into reality. I truly feared saying or doing something so stupidly moronic would be so cataclysmic my credibility would never recover from it. I became a strict censor of my own words and deeds to the point I was rendered practically mute, and started answering Hermione's questions with a series of nods, grunts and glowers.

I saw her eyes grow confused, then uncertain, then accusatory, as I gradually pulled away from my daily support, and withdrew back into my own insecurities. I left her on her own, telling her that she should be grateful that I was generous enough to give her the freedom to make mistakes. My lack of self-esteem has always been my worst fault, and my greatest failing. All my lofty ambitions of being the perfect Master went out the window. I was too close. I wanted too much - more, in fact, than someone like her would ever be willing to give me.

"Labour of love, labour of love, labour of love," Hermione chanted under her breath, as she chopped her fifth batch of gurdyroots. It was approaching noon, and she had been at it for three hours. Four times she'd chopped gurdyroots into precise, quarter-inch pieces for Master Snape's delectation. Four times! And each time, no matter how cleanly severed, how equally measured, how perfect the pungent aroma which was the hallmark of a properly prepared gurdyroot, Master Snape had looked at the batch rather regretfully, without his usual disdain, and shook his head. With a flick of his wand, the undesirable leavings disappeared, to be replaced with a fresh new batch.

In an irony-laced voice Hermione remembered from her school days, Master Snape drawled, "I'm beginning to think this is a willfully deliberate act, Apprentice. Are you sure you didn't develop a masochistic streak during your year on the run?"

Hermione looked at her Master and set her jaw. Anything to keep from losing the temper she held firmly with both hands. "No, sir," she replied tightly. She could feel the familiar bubbling within; a wellspring of anger that was fathomless and rising in urgency with every passing day, like flood waters.

With an exasperated huff, she said, "Master Snape, I have chopped these gurdys to textbook standard. I have followed your written instruction, I have watched your demonstration and I have performed the task while you hovered over my shoulder watching." She could hear her voice rising in pitch and volume, and tried to tamp it down. "I have done everything you've asked, and I have yet to meet your standard." She lifted her shoulders in a gesture of desperation. Through clenched teeth, she added, "Will you please tell me exactly how you want me to do this?"

He looked at her for a moment, then squared his shoulders and gave her a look so level it was almost sympathetic. Hermione watched him intently. If she didn't know better, she would think he looked rather hurt by her comments.

Then, in a tone so clipped it could have chopped the roots for her, he replied, "I merely want you to do. It. Better."

He swept from the room as she sighed and picked up her fifth batch of gurdyroots. She mumbled a hasty healing charm on the blisters and nicks on her palms and fingers. She did not see his remorseful look as he turned to observe her from the door.

One day, I vowed, I would tell her that she'd been perfect from the first batch. I wasn't about to do it anytime soon. Aside from my voice, I do possess very attractive genitals; I'd like to keep them for a while longer. I still felt like a bastard.

In reality, I was failing her spectacularly. I was trying to gain back control over her apprenticeship by asserting my old role as authoritarian. I was going about it the wrong way, of course. I was still learning. There is no book on how to be a good Master. There are if you are into whips and chains, but I'd had enough of those games during Riddle's reign to last a lifetime. I didn't want to hurt her; I wanted to help her. I wanted us to find a ground on which we both could stand and forge this relationship further. But I had only succeeded in throwing our past back into harsh reality, and therefore back to the original ground of the bullying Potions Master and the lowly student.

What had been meant as a light-hearted quip had come out a ham-fisted jibe about her lost year running from Voldemort. One day, I will learn to keep my mouth shut. I hate saying the wrong thing. It makes me feel stupid. I also hate not knowing how to do something. My intentions were there, but we all know what is paved with the best of those.

Chapter Four - Dealing

Chapter 5 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Happy Holidays, everyone! I hope you have a great Christmas and a Happy New 2014. Now that the Promfest fic is done and submitted, I'll try much harder to update more regularly. The usual disclaimers apply.

This story is dedicated to Beffysue, and special thanks to stgulik for her amazing beta work. She really is the best in our fandom.

Later that evening, as she doused healing potions and skin salve on her burned, blistered, cut and scratched hands, Hermione cursed herself that she had ever agreed to enter into this apprenticeship. She longed to just pack and leave, but the ancient magical binding contract of Master/Apprentice was akin to a marital handfasting ceremony; it could only be broken at the behest of the Master, unless the Apprentice died ... or murdered the Master ... or died after murdering the Master...

And in spite of everything, her irrational, sense-stealing anger was still as rampant as ever. She still stewed with unhappy rage and frustration, and what's more she railed against her own gullibility. She'd actually believed Remus' blithe promise that this constant anger would eventually disappear if she found something to do with her life. She was still more or less permanently angry, only now she couldn't take it out on anyone. Even if she was insane enough to vent her spleen on Master Snape, he'd hex her to the moon and cancel her apprenticeship and she'd be back to square one. The real kicker was that he wasn't even all that nasty anymore. He just sat back and waited for her to screw up so he could give her that look of his.

Hermione saw Harry and Ginny every weekend. After the first couple of months of her apprenticeship, Master Snape was surprisingly lenient in allowing her to leave the castle and visit her friends. She would leave Scotland on a Friday, bristling with restless energy, ready to lambaste Harry and Ginny with tales of the hoops Master Snape had forced her through during the previous week. Curiously enough, though, whenever she arrived at Grimmauld Place or the Burrow, once her friends' curious questions started flying, she would find herself downplaying all the incidents she'd fumed over. For some reason, it felt wrong complaining about Master Snape to her friends. It was, she thought defensively, really none of their business, after all.

It also caused a row between her and Harry almost a year into her apprenticeship. She had asked for a break during a Hogsmeade weekend, pleading a need to get away and spend some time with her friends. Master Snape had been reluctant for her to go, but she had pulled out all the stops to finish her infirmary brewing, and with somewhat huffy bad grace, he had finally relented. She'd almost kissed his pale cheek after his martyred sigh, and she grinned as she headed out the door, "I'll be sure to give Harry your regards, Master Snape!"

"Do, and you'll find yourself dissecting Amour Bloodworms without protective gear every weekend between now and Christmas," he growled, but Hermione knew him well enough to know there was no real rancor in his threat.

"I hear and obey, O Great Master of the Dungeons!" she said in a teasing, laughing voice.

"Apprentice Granger!" he shouted.

Hermione froze, and for a moment she thought her silly mood had pushed things too far this time. Master Snape was glaring at her in a way she'd never experienced before. An apology was on her lips when at last he spoke, his voice rather crabbed and hesitant.

"You will require a heavier coat, Apprentice. It is quite cold out. I won't be having you contaminating the lab with infectious germs should you fall ill due to exposure." When she hesitated, he relaxed somewhat, and his features softened. "And don't forget to ask the house-elves to feed that cat of yours. My time is far too valuable to be seeing to the dietary needs of that orange menace you call a familiar."

"Yes, sir," she replied, meekly, and turned away again. "Thank you. Have a pleasant weekend, sir." She felt a little queasy, as if something of import had transpired between her Master and herself, but even the best of pupils sometimes fail to grasp the intention of the most transparent lessons.

She arrived at Grimmauld Place confused, uncertain and rather discombobulated. She sighed. Master Snape was such a study in contrasts at times.

She was just teasing me, I'm almost sure of it. But she called me the Master of the Dungeons. It sounded dirty. It sounded sordid, like I was some sort of degenerate. I didn't want her to think of me that way. Oh, I've heard the rumours over the years that I'm some kink-raunched pervert. Gods, at times I even encouraged them; it frightened the students away from any attempt at familiarity. I couldn't afford allowing anyone to get that close to me then. At times I even perpetuated the reputation. It got me laid on one or two occasions in my younger days.

I am actually not a kink-raunched pervert. That is the last thing I wanted to be, and I never wanted Hermione to think of me that way. But I don't remember anyone actually ever flirting with me before, even during my Death Eater days when I was considered somewhat interesting simply because of a persona and a good costume. I wasn't sure, but she *sounded* a little flirtatious. Ironic, that while I was working so hard to change, hints of those rumoured debaucheries were spoken by the sweet lips of my beloved.

And oh, her eyes when I called her name! I frightened her, I embarrassed her. When would I learn that the simple truth would have served me far more than my clumsy attempt to cover up by suggesting a warmer coat, a reminder to feed her cat?

I was a forty-year-old wizard, Master to a twenty-one-year-old Apprentice. Why did I feel like the inexperienced one here?

Although he had worked very hard to clear Snape's name, Harry still didn't like him, and frequently questioned Hermione's decision to Apprentice to 'the mardy git.' He constantly raised doubts about Snape's suitability, his mental stability, his integrity, even his sexual proclivities...to the point where Hermione felt compelled to defend her Master.

"Honestly, Harry, you seem to think he keeps me locked in the dungeon during the week and only lets me out to brew and eat my stale bread and water," Hermione huffed. Seeing Harry's dubious expression caused her frustration to tip into anger, like a nagging tension nestled beneath the eyes that suddenly flairs into a true migraine. "Look, Harry, I know you don't like him, but he's not evil incarnate. Master Snape is not exactly sweetness and light, but he's not mistreating me or doing anything remotely inappropriate. He's not all that bad once you get to know him."

Harry looked doubtful. "Well, sure you say that, Hermione. But what if he's somehow manipulating you to think that way? He's a skilled Legilimens. He's a skilled Potioneer." Harry's earnest eyes blazed with self-righteous zeal. "What if he, I don't know, *Imperused* you into agreeing to apprentice with him? What if he has some sick agenda you don't know about?"

"Oh, bugging bullocks!" she all but screamed.

Harry remained unrepentant. "You don't know that he hasn't, Hermione! Remember how he treated you when we were in school? He was horrible to you!" His eyes narrowed challengingly. "Why the sudden change? What does he stand to gain from making you his apprentice? What if he's setting you up?"

Hermione actually snarled at her friend, and cried, "Merlin's ballbag, Harry Potter! The only thing that's inappropriate here is your attitude! And I deeply resent your sick insinuations about Master Snape and me. Do you know what that says to me?" She was breathing hard, almost in tears. "It says you don't think he took me on because of my abilities or my potential." Her voice took on a condescending edge. "Oh, no. Hermione's fine as the sidekick or the brain, but really she doesn't have what it takes to become a Master of one of the Magical Disciplines, so Snape must be stringing her along in order to make a fool of her and get back at Harry bloody Potter!"

"Hermione, I don't think..."

"You think he's up to some grand scheme that has nothing to do with my future - but everything to do with your past!" She bore down on her friend with such fury Harry actually took a step back. "Do you honestly think the man has nothing better to do than to sign seven years of his life away for some kind of petty revenge against you,

using me? Fucking hell, Harry, does the world really revolve around you?"

She grabbed her coat, shrugging it on angrily. Her voice dripped with contempt. "If you'll pardon me, O King of Everything, I think I'll return to my little dungeon cell for a nice evening of bread and water." She reached the door and looked around at her stunned friend. "It's probably time for my daily beating anyway. I wouldn't want Master Snape to sharpen his Cat-o'-nine-tails for nothing." She left without looking back.

Stepping through the gates of Hogwarts, Hermione suddenly felt unaccountably upset with Master Snape, as if it was his fault that he wasn't doing all the things Harry suggested. At least if he were, she could honestly commiserate with her friends over her so-called plight.

Hermione grunted as she hung her coat on a peg. So she was stuck with an impossible-to-please Master...no, she amended, in all honesty, he wasn't. He was exacting, yes, and detailed in a way that made her look sloppy, but he demanded the same perfection in her that he required in himself.

Part of the problem was, he demanded a level of concentration that she was afraid she might not have anymore. She would be clicking along just fine, and something would happen, and the old inferior, inadequate, helpless fury would arise. Sometimes she actually had to down tools and leave the room to prevent herself from taking out her wand and blasting away at anything and everything.

The fault wasn't in Snape. Against all expectations, he had turned out to be a decent Master. He actually listened to her; he offered advice, he questioned theories and challenged solutions. She found herself confiding in him about things she simply didn't discuss with anyone. At times, it was almost like talking to herself; she could say those things out loud, and he didn't judge or disapprove. Most of the time, he didn't even respond. He just nodded, and occasionally interjected a brief comment. Sometimes he finished a sentence for her; sometimes she actually knew what he was thinking. He could be comfortable, and almost companionable.

Other times, he was as mysterious as darkest Egypt to her. She believed he did it deliberately to keep her on her toes. She wondered why he bothered. He was Severus Snape; she couldn't be any more 'on her toes' around him if he were giving ballet lessons.

Master Snape had showed no surprise or interest that she'd cut her visit short and returned to the castle early. And most irrationally, that bothered Hermione most of all.

Chapter Five - Intriguing

Chapter 6 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Thank you for all the wonderful comments. Happy Holidays!

Five years, eleven months, four days and sixteen hours left to go on her apprenticeship, and she hadn't *Avada'd* him yet.

Oh, Master Snape still wasn't all that difficult to get along with, but he was inconsistent easygoing and approachable one day, quiet and withdrawn the next. She tried to tell herself that, like her temper, it was his way of dealing with the war, but he never displayed this contrasting behaviour to anyone else, only her.

And there was the other factor that she hadn't planned on. Nope. Not in a million years. After the odd git took her on as an apprentice, Hermione noticed something very disturbing about him and even more so about herself. She was starting to find him... intriguing.

This was not in the seven-year plan. Yes, she had crushed over him as a teen, but... intriguing? Oh, Merlin wept.

Snape had ever been a brilliant and demanding taskmaster. Hermione had earned every good grade she'd made in Potions and in his DADA class. It had been obvious that he didn't like her, but he had bullied and snarked her into learning to think for herself. He had been on the other end of the tightrope of fear she'd always walked at Hogwarts, and he was the only professor who hadn't been dazzled enough to help her across. She'd struggled, foundered, fell and crawled across that tightrope every year in his class, and at the end, she was convinced it had been the best journey of her school life.

But, honestly... intriguing? Oh, *shite*.

The moment occurred thirteen months into her apprenticeship, when she'd been working on a simple Eye Wash Potion to reverse nearsightedness. Every time she had added the carrot root, the potion turned blue and sludgy. Seething, she growled under her breath. "Master Snape? Could you come here for a moment? I seem to have a a problem." She winced, hating to admit a weakness to him. He was still as gleeful as a Niffler snuffling out treasure when faced with one of his students' failures.

He stalked into the lab, chewing; she had obviously interrupted his lunch. After hearing her explanation of the problem, he perused her notes and, finding nothing obvious, asked her to walk him through her procedure. Seeing nothing untoward, he suddenly performed a cleansing and freshening charm around his mouth and nose. At her puzzled expression, he muttered something about 'cleansing his palate.' Standing behind her, Snape peered over her shoulder as she worked, and Hermione became aware of his scent; warm and woodsy, laced with patchouli and cedar and something male. It was an oddly comforting smell.

He reached around her to inspect the carrot root, holding it to his prodigious nose to test its odour. He sniffed it delicately, his nostrils flaring. Something about the quivering edges of Snape's incredible nose made Hermione suddenly feel warm. Then his long pointed tongue snaked out of his mouth and flicked along the root, and Hermione actually blinked and looked away. She'd never actually seen his tongue before.

She watched his mouth work as he analysed the taste. He smacked his lips softly. Finally he produced a handkerchief and spat into it delicately. "Well, here is our problem," he said, vanishing the handkerchief. "These roots have the beginnings of a fungal rot."

Hermione suppressed a groan. "But they looked fine, sir."

He nodded. "It is often difficult to detect this particular fungus unless you have encountered it before." His voice was not unkind.

She snarled, "Damn it! I've wasted a lot of time and ingredients because of it. And I don't even know how to be on the lookout for it."

"I can help you there," he replied, and held a root up to her nose. "Take a deep breath," he said softly. Hermione did as she was told, suddenly aware that his face was very close to hers. He was inhaling the scent along with her. "Smell that slight liquorice scent?" They breathed together, and Hermione, her face pinched with

concentration, shook her head.

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't "

"Close your eyes, Apprentice," he intoned. Obediently she shut her eyes, startling as she felt his hand on the back of her head, pressing it close to the root. "Deep, slow inhale." His voice warmed her ear. They were literally cheek to cheek. "Pay attention, Apprentice." His voice had an almost playful, teasing note dancing on the edge of it.

"Yes, sir," Hermione had replied, and cringed at the shakiness of her voice.

"Deep breath," he purred, so close she could feel his heartbeat against her shoulder. "Under the notes of the carrot aroma, just at the apogee of your inhalation, you should detect the slightest hint of anise."

Concentrating hard, Hermione breathed deeply there! "I smelled it," she said triumphantly, then turned to affirm it, and they bumped noses. For a moment, neither moved, then Snape stepped back.

"We'll acquire another batch of carrot roots tomorrow, Apprentice. You may discard these as a bad lot." He turned on his heel and abruptly left.

"Y-yes sir," she said, watching him sweep from the room. When he was gone, Hermione sat down heavily on her stool. "What was that all about?" she whispered to herself, and was not surprised to find no answer forthcoming.

Things grew even more intriguing later that year. By then, they followed a well-established routine every morning. They would meet for breakfast in his study, to stare at the wall and drink coffee until they were capable of lucid speech. Neither was particularly a morning person, and breakfast in the Great Hall was asking a bit much of both of them. The injury inflicted by Nagini still left Master Snape feeling stiff and sore in the mornings, and although he never actually admitted it, Hermione knew he didn't like to be seen that way by his students. She thought it might have more to do with the confidence he wanted to instill in his students than any real sign of weakness, and she found herself protecting his privacy as jealously as she guarded her own.

He preferred to break his fast in the sacrosanct calm of their rooms, and Minerva didn't push him on the matter as long as he and Hermione showed up for lunch and dinner with the students in the Great Hall. Hermione was just as happy not to have to face a huge room of loudly chattering children first thing in the morning. It had been hard enough as a student; it was nigh unbearable as an adult.

On this particular morning, she had shuffled in, tired, cranky, having slept badly, still in footie pajamas and feeling vile.

"Good morning, Apprentice," Snape said, pouring his coffee.

"If you say so, Master Snape." she muttered at the coffee. She pushed the word Master from her lips as if it were an epithet, before tossing back her first cup without cream or sugar.

He glanced at her, then returned to buttering his toast. A moment's silence, then he murmured, "Cramps?"

"Fucking awful ones. I was up half the night on the toilet," she spat, then froze, looking up at him in horror. He was spreading a thin layer of Marmite on his toast, paying close attention to the corners. She'd just sworn in front of her Master, and talked about period cramps. Brilliant. He seemed to be suppressing a smile, she was sure of it! She felt her face grow warm, and made a production of pouring a second cup of coffee in order to give herself an excuse not to look at him.

He let her sweat for a moment before drawing, "You know, as your Master, your welfare is paramount to me. I wouldn't want it to be said that Master Snape did not take care of his apprentice's needs."

"No, I suppose we can't have that, can we?" she grumbled, sheepishly accepting a plate of toast and the jar of Marmite from his hands.

"When you feel you are able, come to me and I will help you with your menstrual cramps."

She grimaced. "I can brew my own Pain Potions, Master Snape," she sniped, refusing to look at him.

"I'm sure you can, Apprentice," he replied, his voice as glossy as polished mahogany. "But there are massage techniques that are also very beneficial for the relief of the spasms in the uterus. I will be available to administer this massage for you when you feel comfortable enough to request it."

Hermione risked a glance at him, hoping like hell the shock she felt didn't show on her face. If he was uncomfortable with his offer, he didn't show it. Meanwhile, Hermione felt as if the axis of the world had just tilted. Snape, like the rest of her male professors, had seemed asexual when she was a student. To hear him mention menstrual cramps in such a casual manner was enough to send her off the deep end; to offer a pelvic massage was tantamount to asking her to meet in the Astronomy Tower for a snog. It felt strangely forbidden and decadent, and not a little erotic, and she wasn't about to go *there*.

She squared her shoulders. It had been an adult request; she would respond in a like manner, even if she had to bite a hole in her tongue. "Thank you, Master Snape. I will."

He nodded to her plate of toast and added briskly, "Very well. Now eat up. Professor Sprout is expecting us in Greenhouse Twelve this morning before her classes start, and I don't want to make her late."

And off they launched into a conversation of the best times of day to graft hellebore, and the new mandrake cuttings Professor Sprout wanted to show them. By the time they finished breakfast, Hermione's cramps and talk of pelvic massage had thankfully been forgotten.

Until they reached the greenhouses.

Chapter Six - Flowering

Chapter 7 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Hello! I apologise for the delay in updating, and everyone's probably forgot this little PWP by now, but things got in the way, yada yada yada...

Anyway, I hope to come back and complete this story while we're all waiting for the delicious SSHG_Promptfest over at LiveJournal to commence.

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Professor Pomona Sprout was a stout, earthy little witch, with a big laugh like a ratchet and a bawdy sense of humour. She was frank and forthright about the subjects that interested her most: botany, food and sex. Hermione remembered vividly the Herbology professor's almost obsessive fixation with cross-pollination and what she euphemistically called 'birds and bees business'. Sprout had taught basic sex education alongside Madam Pomfrey, and was fearless in her pursuit of the endless fascination with reproduction in all its many varied forms.

"Nature," she would declare with relish, "is natural. Witches and wizards urinate, defecate, masturbate, menstruate, ejaculate and procreate, pure and simple. When you stop pretending you're too magical to fart, you start living like a natural being and you start enjoying life." At times, when she waxed poetic on stamens, pistols and buds, Hermione had a hard time telling the difference between Herbology and Sex Education. Sometimes they seemed pretty much the same thing in Sprout's mind as well.

Pomona Sprout loved growing things, simply put, whether by placing it in the dirt and hoping for the best, or watching the planted seed in the womb grow rich and fertile in that particular environment. As Head of Hufflepuff House, she had often bragged of having the sexiest lot of the school. If the Gryffindors were reckless, the Slytherins cunning and the Ravenclaws studious, the Hufflepuffs were the breeders. She was openly and proudly lesbian, yet she never met a wizard under one hundred she wouldn't consider bedding if given the chance.

As Hermione and Master Snape entered Greenhouse Twelve, Professor Sprout threw up a hand in greeting. "Ah, Severus, Hermione, come in, come in! You're just in time. I'm about to let the butterflies in for their morning orgy."

She opened one of the southern side windows with the wave of her wand and in flew an astounding flutter of butterflies. They were enormous, obviously magical, with lovely pearlescent wings with black markings. In a giddy mass, they flocked over an area of beautiful fuchsias. Master and Apprentice watched in rapt fascination as one particularly fine specimen, as large as Hermione's hand, landed on one of the lovely flowers near where they were standing. It thrust its long black proboscis deeply into the center of the flower. As it delved into the nectaries of the blossom, its wings fluttered rapturously, and the flower itself shivered, as if truly enjoying this blissful violation.

"I see you're watching him having his wicked way with my buttonbush," Professor Sprout said with a wicked gleam in her eye. To Hermione's surprise, Master Snape laughed, and the two professors chatted away like old friends about attracting the butterflies within the greenhouse in order to use the silk from their cocoons in various magical purposes everything from dressmaking to medicines and beauty products. Hermione listened to their conversation while watching the greedy butterflies and their artless snogging of the lovely flowers. It reminded her too much of the fourth-years she used to catch out during night patrols as a Prefect.

"It's the sweet juices, dear," Professor Sprout said, startling Hermione out of her reverie. "He can't resist 'em, and that's why he's sucking at her so hard."

"Excuse me?" Hermione said, her throat suddenly dry. Professor Sprout chuckled and Hermione felt her face grow hot.

"That sexy old beast there. No, not you, Severus," she said, with a lewd wink. She looked delighted at the flush of colour on Master Snape's cheeks. "I mean the butterfly!" she said emphatically, pointing toward the flowers. Oblivious to his audience, the large creature was greedily plundering the delicate little flower. "See how he flutters his wings like that? Those in the know tell me," Professor Sprout said conspiratorially, as she leaned closer, her merry blue eyes dancing, "that the nectar of these flowers is so delicious that the butterflies experience a kind of ecstasy when they drink it! That's why they're so greedy."

Sure enough, the butterfly, having taken his fill of one flower, immediately lighted onto the next and began his earnest, insistent probing. They could actually hear the tiny sipping noises as he drank his fill. "You see? He loves 'em and leaves 'em and goes right to the next without so much as buying the poor girl a drink first. Typical man, always cutting to the chase." She nodded toward Master Snape.

Hermione stepped back and dared a glance at her Master, waiting for the icy wall of disapproval to descend she knew he hated being teased. Perhaps a pointed remark about inappropriate comments would be cited for good measure. Instead, he merely rolled his eyes. "I don't know what passes for typical with you, Pomona, but I think most wizards have a bit more finesse than your lecherous little beasts."

He raised an eyebrow that was as arched and delicate as the feelers on the butterfly fluttering hopefully near his red lips. As it apparently decided that Master Snape's mouth would not hold any delights for him, the large insect disappointedly zoomed away to its next paramour, prompting Snape to declare dryly, "I rest my case."

Professor Sprout responded with her raucous, machine-gun laughter. "Is that so, Master Snape? Well then, allow me to challenge your intellect with this newest batch of magical Bluepea I've recently acquired from Thailand."

Master Snape pursed his lips, pleased. "Now *this* I have been looking forward to." He turned to Hermione. "This is the flower we read about in the latest *Potions Today*. Researchers have been making amazing headway with this plant with regards to enhancing potions like Wolfsbane. The non-magical version of the flower has been used for centuries in traditional Ayurvedic medicine."

Hermione remembered the journal report very well. Ayurvedic medicine had used Bluepea for stress relief, anti-depressants, tranquilisers and sedatives. *Perhaps I could find some help with my own stress relief*, she thought ruefully. The idea of the flower being used in Wolfsbane to enhance the calming effect on the transformed werewolf, however, was a more pressing area of interest.

Whenever Wolfsbane was mentioned, Hermione always thought of Remus. His wife Tonks had not survived the final battle, leaving him alone with an infant to raise. Aside from the fact that he still needed Wolfsbane to curb his lycanthropic urges once a month, Remus was struggling as a single parent, even with Tonks' mother helping.

What if they could find away to help Remus, so that he could function normally for longer periods and have more time to devote to his son? It would surely be worth a bit of blue-skying to research the possibilities.

Lost in thought, Hermione absently followed the professors over to the far edge of the greenhouse, where a small cluster of fragrant blue flowers dangled from vines of lovely flat leaves. The flowers had essentially two petals: a furled and delicate petal curved over a larger, flat one which resembled an oblong blue disk. The top petal, frilly and pretty, looked, to Hermione's widening eyes, suspiciously like

"The magical Bluepea," Professor Sprout said, with a proud little flourish. "Clitoria Ternatea Magus, or Magical Clitoris Flower."

Master Snape peered down into the flower, and Hermione watched raptly as his nostrils flared. What was it about that nose of his that made her feel so warm when he did that? *I swear, if he starts licking that I'm going to run out of here screaming* She knew, of course, she was lying to herself. If Master Snape's long tongue were to slide under that petal, she wouldn't be able to look away if her life depended on it.

Her eyesight was saved by Professor Sprout. "Go ahead, Severus, you'll appreciate this." Rather saucily, she added, "Slide your finger under the hood and give it a little nudge. See what happens."

"I most certainly will not!" he declared, a tint of red returning to his cheeks. With the barest glance toward Hermione, he said in a voice that was fiercely quiet, "Pomona, the last time you said, 'Oh, Severus, just reach in there,' I was in the infirmary for two days."

Professor Sprout's eyes grew huge, and she threw her head back and guffawed. "Oh, I'd quite forgotten about that! The look on your face! Well, it wasn't funny at the time,

but-" She cast a sideways glance at Hermione. "Nimue's trowel, Severus, we're scaring poor Miss Granger! Heaven knows what she's thinking!"

She explained, "Severus was helping me harvest the baby Mandrakes for the potion that unpetrified you and your friends. You know, that year you all were attacked by the basilisk." Her smile faded to something more wistful. "Terrible thing, that."

She brightened. "But you see, I asked Severus to fetch a bucket for me, and as he reached for it, he bumped one of my little darlings and woke it. Poor dear started crying its little head off.

"Well, your Master wasn't wearing his earmuffs like I told him to, was he?" she said, giving him a mock reproachful look. "Down he went, out cold for almost two days. He was fit to be tied when he awoke!"

Master Snape no longer looked indignant, but merely stood, arms crossed, scowling at his colleague. She seemed as impervious to his discomfort as he was to her jolly hockey-sticks humour.

Sprout gave him a friendly pat on the arm. "Nothing like that will happen this time, Severus. Go ahead," she urged, genuinely excited. "Just see what happens. Extraordinary!"

With a martyred sigh, Master Snape grumbled, "What must I do to debase myself this time, Pomona?"

Delighted, Sprout said, "First, hold the flower from the bottom in the palm of your hand." As Hermione watched, Master Snape slid his left hand underneath the flat petal and lifted it until the entire flower sat in his palm. In his large hands it looked even more delicately feminine. "Good. Now take your middle finger and just slide it under the little hooded petal."

With a final skeptical glance at Hermione, Master Snape did as requested. Hermione watched, enraptured, as his long finger eased under the hood of the flower. It was so ludicrously suggestive, she was stunned that he actually agreed to do it in front of witnesses, and she was even more shocked to see that same finger move back and forth as if stroking the flower. Hermione couldn't look anymore. It was too... too...

She forced herself to look at his face. He was wearing a small, puzzled frown, which changed to complete, open surprise, and he looked wonderingly at Sprout. Whatever had happened was obviously not what he'd expected. He made a short barking sound, and Hermione realised it was a laugh. "Well, I didn't anticipate that would happen, Pomona."

Professor Sprout was grinning gleefully. "Just wait," she said, nearly breathless.

His eyes narrowed. "What could possibly-" He shut his mouth suddenly. His eyes were enormous with alarm. "O-oh. I seem to have-" He stopped, unable to finish the sentence, and Hermione was shocked to realise that his previous blushes were nothing compared to the crimson flush that now heated his face. She'd never seen him so disconcerted.

Sprout could not have been more pleased at Snape's reaction if she'd ordered it on the menu. "You certainly did, you sly old snake! I knew you had it in you!"

As Hermione watched, Master Snape withdrew his finger. It was coated in moisture from the center of the flower. "Go on, taste it, Severus," Sprout urged, pointing at his wet finger. "Don't waste it, dear - it's lovely stuff."

Hermione watched her Master tentatively lick his finger. It was so erotically suggestive she felt slightly breathless. He tasted it gingerly, then closed his eyes and sucked the rest of the dew from his finger as if it were the most delicious of juices. Finally, he opened his eyes, and looked around rather sheepishly, as if being caught doing something naughty. His expression was truly a study to Hermione. She had never seen such obviously pleasant surprise on his face. It softened his features and made him look younger, less intractable. "Well, I have to admit, Pomona, you have me there." He looked at the innocuous little flower with new-found respect. "That was an experience I'll never forget."

"No one ever does, do they, Severus?" Professor Sprout said, and a look passed between them, the kind of look that only old friends who know one another's secrets can give. For a moment, Hermione felt slightly jealous and left out.

"What happened, sir?" she asked, unable to contain her curiosity. Master Snape turned to her, as if he'd almost forgotten she was there. He was still flushed, and had yet to school his features back to their customary bland lines. He looked like a school boy caught with his hand in the biscuit tin.

"Merlin's fork'n rake, where are my manners? I'm sorry, dear," Sprout babbled. She grabbed Hermione's hand. "You saw what Professor Snape did, my dear. Go ahead, but don't take that one," she cautioned, as Hermione reached for the flower Master Snape was holding. "Your Master has selfishly worn her out. She's quite spent; won't be fit for anyone else today. Try another." She winked at Master Snape, whose pink cheeks still bore the evidence of his discovery.

Undaunted, Hermione lifted the blue flower in her hand, and with Professor Sprout's instructions, she gently eased her finger underneath the little hooded petal. She nearly dropped it when she felt a tiny little knot beneath, no bigger than the size of a grape seed.

"Rub your finger over it," Master Snape said in a neutral voice. Hermione felt her own blush creeping down her body. With a stiff nod, she circled the little bud, which started to swell. It was just like well, just like touching herself, fingering her own clitoris. She shot a glance at her Master, who watched her carefully, unsmiling. His eyes were intense, too intense to look at for long, and Hermione looked away, concentrating instead on the little swelling bud within the flower.

"Increase the pressure," he intoned, his voice sounding ever so slightly strained. She shot another glance at him, then dropped her eyes back to her task.

As she moved her hand over the little bud, the flower gave a little shudder beneath her hand, and she felt the cool secretions of the nectar moisten her finger. *Bigger me*, Hermione thought wildly. *I've just given a flower an orgasm in front of my Master. Oh, sucking hell.*

As Hermione withdrew her finger from the flower, her blush felt as if it were turning the tips of her hair red. To her divine mortification, moisture dripped from her finger onto the flat petal, and Professor Sprout laughed her earthy laugh again. "You see, Severus, you men could learn a thing or two from this plant! Women are always better at milking the nectar from these flowers." In a stage whisper, she confided in Hermione with a leering grin, "We know what needs to be done, don't we, my dear?"

Hermione could not, would not look at Snape. She merely stood there, with flower nectar dripping from her fingers. Before she could lose her nerve, she sucked her finger into her mouth and tasted. It was sweet, and had a clear, clean flavour, but she could not truly see why Master Snape had seemed to enjoy it so much. It was nice, but-

"It's the same with everyone, Hermione dear," said Sprout, answering her unspoken question. "Women can milk the nectar more efficiently, but it's the men who really love the taste. Story of our lives, isn't it?" she laughed. "Now, let's move on to Greenhouse Number Five. I've got a lovely new batch of flowering mopheads..."

Hermione and Master Snape dutifully followed Professor Sprout to her next point of interest, but Hermione could not get out of her head one particular image the look on her Master's face as she'd sucked the nectar from her own finger. She had the distinct feeling that at the slightest gesture of encouragement, he would have licked her fingers clean.

Chapter Seven - Hair

Chapter 8 of 9

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

At the start of each year of an apprenticeship, an apprentice is expected to submit a proposal for the project they will work on during that year. Hermione chose to use the concepts and theories we discussed regarding the innocuous Bluepea flower, along with Mandrake, to see if she could extend the powers and duration of Wolfsbane. She had a sound theory that, with the addition of these ingredients, she could strengthen the potion's shelf life and its potency. If her Arithmancy calculations were correct, a werewolf would only be required to take the potion once a year instead of at the beginning of the full moon each month.

Although I wanted her to succeed, I told her I truly thought, even with her typical Granger determination, she'd bitten off more than she could chew. Wolfsbane is a tricky and irritating potion to create on its own; adding these new and untried factors could not only prove dangerous but expensive should it fail. Still, I was impressed with the initial findings. I thought if she could pull it off, this one project alone would more or less guarantee her the coveted Golden Cauldron, the most highly sought-after award given by the Consortium. It was only presented to one senior apprentice per year, and while I thought it the most hideously ugly trophy I'd ever seen, it not only assured your place as a Potions Master but it practically promised your reputation was secured, and any job was yours for the taking.

As Hermione's Master, naturally I wanted her to be the best. Any plaudits she received would reflect very highly upon me. Any glory she would obtain from her successes would cement my reputation as well. I want it stated clearly I couldn't give a Jarvey's fart about their opinions of me, but I wanted Hermione to excel, and my reputation with the Consortium was, as you can imagine, spotty at best. It's a shitty type of fame, but I knew my fellow Consortium members. I didn't want Hermione to suffer because of my checkered past with the arrogant bastards.

I also realised that it might be a double-edged sword, with both edges slitting my own throat. She would be highly sought after, both as an instructor and a potioneer; many tempting offers would be made throughout the Wizarding world for her services. It would be supremely ironic if I succeeded in assuring her a place within the Consortium, only to lose her to a lucrative brewing or research contract in another country, where I would never see her again.

Still, I had to give her leave to try. The proposal was accepted, and she began her trials on what she optimistically called Extended Wolfsbane. I provided her with the initial funding for tests and ingredients, and she happily started harvesting mandrakes and milking Bluepeas. The very mention of it made my face burn. I could not get the image out of my head of Hermione watching me as Pomona played that very silly trick on me. I owed Pomona one; I was already scheming how to retaliate.

In the meantime, I was faced with the completely arousing site of my apprentice lifting flower after flower and stroking it until the juices literally ran down her arms. The aroma alone would arouse any male in the vicinity; I was practically awash with it, so I stayed away as much as possible. I was already embarrassed enough about the pelvic massage debacle to tell her that her project was giving me an erection.

I tried to avoid watching her milk the flowers. My own experience with them had made me all the more aware of my apprentice, and the thought of watching her methodically stroking those flowers, imagining that the movements she made were the same instinctual way she touched herself... Oh, Merlin, *Merlin*. By now, she consumed my every thought; she disturbed my dreams. I ate, slept and breathed her. I craved being near her almost as much as I convinced myself to stay out of her way.

During the first two weeks, she met failure after failure with the preliminary formula. I had inadvertently caused one of her test batches to fail by interrupting her and making her lose count of her stirring. The look she gave me was enough to make me feel guilty for days, so I slunk away and let her be. I had provided her with enough funds to make ten test batches, but she had missed the mark, and was still doggedly trying to conjure a success from what seemed to be an unpromising situation. I hoped against hope that she would admit defeat and turn to something else, but I suppose I knew her too well to truly believe that would happen.

I should have been with her in that lab every minute of every failure. I should have put my petty, selfish timidity aside and taken her in hand, been a proper Master. Instead, I was too afraid of showing my insecurities; too afraid she would look push me away and break my heart. In other words, I was as afraid she would succeed as that she would fail.

I was the reason she seriously hurt herself.

"Thirteenth time's the charm," Hermione murmured to herself, as she set out her ingredients once again to brew the Extended Wolfsbane Potion. When she had chosen it as her annual project, she had thought of it as a sort of thank you to Remus for giving her the idea to ask for the apprenticeship in the first place. Some days, she actually was grateful. Other days, though, she was tempted to spike his Wolfsbane with Fungiface Potion to show him what she really thought about her apprenticeship.

The original Wolfsbane was horrifically tedious to brew, and the modifications Hermione's theory called for made it even more difficult and fiddly. Master Snape had warned her of this. He had skeptically given his permission to experiment, but so far her results had been less than encouraging. She knew she was correct; she could feel it in her waters that she was close to a breakthrough. She just needed a little more time and testing.

Twelve batches had to be discarded a waste of valuable time and even more valuable ingredients. Master Snape had given her ten chances on the school's budget. The last two and the present one had come out of her own pocket, and she really didn't have the money for a fourteenth attempt, should this one fail. So far, this one had gone far better than the first twelve; she had progressed four steps farther than any other trial, and the potion was doing well enough for her to feel a cautious optimism.

Snape had left her alone. He had accidentally been the cause of failure number nine when he interrupted her stirring and she got off rhythm, causing a very nasty cauldron incident. There was now a parchment pinned to the door saying "Brewing: Do Not Disturb," and so far he had honoured it. He had actually been helpful, if Hermione was perfectly honest. At the end of each failure, he'd helped her through a 'post mortem,' helping her ascertain where the potion fell over and how to correct it the next time. Rather than smirking over each spoiled batch, he'd been surprisingly supportive, almost encouraging.

Even if he was a baffling git at times, Hermione still felt a warmth when she thought of his remark after failure number eleven. He had looked at the noxious sludge that coated the bottom of the cauldron, gave her an almost sympathetic shrug and said, "It is a learning process, Apprentice. If there is a solution, I'm sure you will find it, but it will not be today. Come and have a cup of tea. Minerva sent us some chocolate biscuits. It would be a shame to waste them feeling sorry for yourself, wouldn't it?" As comfort went, it was the equivalent of a hug, coming from Master Snape.

Step ten of nineteen had just been successfully completed, and Hermione licked the sweat off her upper lip. She was entering the most critical part of the brewing process when it happened. She moved too quickly when reaching for the Bluepea nectar, and she caught sight of the catalyst for her disaster see-sawing lazily through the air: one of her own mad, curly long hairs. It caught and gleamed in the light, and for a moment, she saw it silhouetted against the beam of sunshine coming through the upper window. It floated lazily in the thermals of the warm current of the steam rising from the cauldron.

"Oh, no you don't," she moaned, praying as she frantically grabbed for it, missing it entirely. "No, please, no!" she cried, but the impetus of her own action stirred enough of a breeze to catch it and waft it into the cauldron, where it landed in the middle of the potion with a mocking little hiss. Immediately the contaminated potion started folding back on itself, congealing down to a black, gooey residue that looked like black mud and smelled like compost. She watched impotently as the brew belched like a tarpit, and swelled, spilling over the rim of the cauldron and Hermione heard a horrible, rasping sound; it was her own harsh, sob-choked breathing.

Her stomach lurched, and she felt the sick realisation of another failure she could ill afford, the latest in a long list, and suddenly, it was all too much. The apprenticeship,

Master Snape, Harry and Ron, the Wolfsbane, her own irritating hair; all of it was more than her overwrought nerves could bear, and something literally snapped. It was the stirring rod in her hand.

"NO!" she wailed, then screamed, "Fucking not AGAIN!" She stamped her feet as the smooth black liquid oozed out of the cauldron like a living thing, putrid and viscous. As the cauldron started to melt, Hermione stood still, overtaken by the feeling of her own rising fury. A red mist descended over her senses as if a veil had been lowered, and her personal meltdown commenced.

Magic was forgotten; expensive and irreplaceable items were forgotten. Propriety and apprenticeship and Bluepeas and Snape were forgotten in a mad whirl of failure and helplessness and inadequacy and blinding sweet fury, and Hermione became a screaming, sobbing, flailing mass of destruction.

"I'm never gonna fucking get this right!" she shrieked. She grabbed jars and smashed them against the walls. "Never-" She slung the vile mess across the room with a strength she didn't know she possessed. "-fucking-" Spontaneous bursts of magic caused vials of noxious liquids to disintegrate. "-GOOD ENOUGH!" And all the while the gnawing, snapping animal of anger chewed into Hermione like the carcass of a dead rat.

She was barely aware of Snape dashing into the room, bellowing, "Apprentice, cease this tantrum at once!"

"Nothing I ever do is good enough!" she shrieked. "Say it! Say I'll never be good enough for your fucking standards! Why don't you just say it!" Glass jars of preserved fuck-knows-what spontaneously exploded like bombs across the room.

She saw his wand in his hand, but her magic shielded her, and he had to dodge his own spell as it rebounded. "Miss Gra- Hermione!" he shouted, his voice cutting like glass through the madness in the room. She was only aware of him in the vaguest of senses; all she could hear was her own destructive, blind rage and failure, screeching and cackling at her. It sounded like Bellatrix Lestrange's laughter.

Not that it mattered. Inside her was a machine, overwound, running and running until it either broke or ran down from exhaustion. She didn't even slow down when the imperious voice rang out, "Hermione, stop now!" All she knew was her own voice, her own madness. Tables were overturned, shelves were wiped clean with a swipe of her arm. The acrid smell of solvents and preservatives filled the room, making it difficult to breathe, but she no longer cared. Her hand dragged carelessly across a broken bottle, slashing deep into her wrist. She howled at the pain, but in only served to enrage her further. She wailed impotently, unable to focus on anything but the fury unraveling inside her head. The coppery scent of blood joined the cacophony of odours in the room, clogging her lungs.

Suddenly, a vice-like arm clamped around her waist from behind and lifted her off the floor. She fought and kicked to break the grip, screaming wildly, sobbing, cursing at Snape to put her down. She was barely aware of being carried out of the almost unbreathable atmosphere of the lab and into Snape's study. His grip hurt; he was holding her so tightly she could barely breathe, and he was speaking to her, his voice urgent and close to her ear. A wandless spell healed her bleeding hand while he wrapped both arms around her waist and held on to her thrashing, struggling form.

She finally realised he was urging her to calm down, to breathe deeply, but she could not. White spots were flashing behind her eyes, but she still fought him. She struggled even as he fell back onto his sofa, his arms still tight around her. She landed heavily against his chest, winding him, and his grip loosened. "Let me go!" she shrieked. "Leave me alone!"

Without warning, she was flipped over and pressed face down across his lap. An iron grip clamped down on the back of her neck and squeezed hard, as if she were a cat needing to be contained. The pinching grip hurt and caused her to scream in panic.

"Hermione! Calm down, please!" Snape hissed, breathing heavily, trying to be heard over her mindless wailing. "I don't want to Petrify you!"

"Let me go, dammit!" she screeched, her voice scissoring into the room. "I'm so fucking sick of it a-"

A hard hand came down sharply on her arse and the smack shut off her cries as neatly as if he'd switched off a radio.

Hermione felt her entire body flood with chilling clarity. It was quickly replaced with the abject humiliation of being spanked like a child - for throwing the most childish of temper tantrums. She keened helplessly, a desolate sound that was pitiful to her own ears. It must have seemed so to Snape as well, who relaxed his crushing grip on the back of her neck. A whispered spell, and a cool, soft cloth was pressed against the back of her neck.

"There. Now, take a deep breath." Snape's voice, while slightly breathless from his exertions, was soft, almost gentle, and Hermione obediently breathed in, but a sob escaped. "Shh," he murmured, squeezing her neck gently, almost affectionately. "Calm down. You can do it; that's it. That's a good girl. Shh." He poured warmth into her with his voice. "Oh, Hermione, what were you thinking, working yourself into such a state?"

The tone of his voice was so strange, so foreign to her that it confused and broke her utterly, and she felt as if she'd completely destroyed the only thing in her life that was giving her any purpose. Helplessly, she began to cry monotonously, sick with embarrassment, bawling like a child. She'd never felt so mortified in her life at her own actions. The thought brought fresh tears, and she sobbed in great, braying hiccoughs.

"I know, it's difficult right now. You must relax for me. I've got you. Master has you now," Snape crooned. "I was sure you had seriously harmed yourself," he said, and there was an anxious, placating tone to his voice she had never heard before. He pressed the cooling cloth firmly against the back of her neck, soothing her, and she was aware of his hand rubbing her back gently, like a parent calming a child. She lay helpless, trembling; enthralled by his words and his voice, she gradually relaxed as her tremours lessened. He must have felt it, too, and his hands slowed and became more languid, and she moaned softly.

"Let go, Hermione. Let go of the anger; let go of the tension. Good. Deep breaths. Yes, that's it. That's my good girl." Hermione lay awkwardly across her Master's lap, too exhausted to feel anything but his hands, too confused to be anything but mesmerised by his crooning voice. *Calling her a good girl...* Her body flushed again.

"I'm so sorry-" she gulped, and Snape gently shushed her as he slid his hand beneath her head and raised it slightly. He renewed the Cooling charm on the cloth and used it to clean her face. Her skin felt tight and shiny, as if she had a fever, and the cloth felt like summer rain on her tear-ravaged cheeks. Snape's fingers threaded through her hair, and kneaded her scalp as he bathed her face, all the while crooning soft nonwords of comfort. She did not dare look up at him, but when he placed the cloth over the back of her neck, she dropped her head and let the tears slide down her face once again. She took a shaky breath, then sighed, feeling so tired she couldn't think properly.

"Better?" he said, his voice still gentle. She took this to mean he wanted her to rise, so she nodded and made to stand. Strong, firm hands held her down. "I'm not finished, Hermione. You are still distraught, and I'm here to help you. Merlin knows it's about time." She sensed in him the slightest of hesitations, but then his voice washed over her, strong and deep. "I know I have not given you many reasons to believe me, but I do know what is best for you. Will you trust me?"

Chapter Eight – Trusting

A story of two halves, showing the journey from where we are to where we are going. Professor Snape never wanted an apprentice; Hermione Granger never particularly wanted to be one. But as the old song says, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need. Rating for later chapters like WHOA.

Thanks to everyone for your lovely reviews. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your encouragement, and most of all, patience. I have promised never to abandon a fic, and this is no exception.

As you know, none of these characters belong to me. They are the property of JKR and all the others who have property rights, which doesn't include me.

Thanks to Stgulik, the greatest of all betas, and to my Muse, who has promised, like Severus to Hermione, to never forsake me.

Please note that this chapter contains explicit sexual content.

"Will you trust me?"

The four most important and frightening words I'd ever spoken. I, who had betrayed and frightened and hurt so many, was asking a monumental thing from Hermione. I had tried so hard to earn that trust, but as I waited for Hermione's answer, I felt my arousal betraying my objectivity, giving away my heart's own investment in the question. If she should reject me, I would be left with nothing, and the young witch sprawled over my lap would continue on, as rudderless as I.

I was being as gentle as possible with her. She had truly frightened me when I burst into the lab and watched her, mad with fury, destroying everything in her path. Blood was splashing down her hand, and the wild look in her eyes was so absent of reason I thought for a moment her mind had finally snapped. The thought of my Hermione, gone forever, was enough to make me put away my wand and take matters in hand literally. I was going to save her. It was my duty. As the man who loved her, as the Master responsible for her, it was my right. She had to trust me. I wouldn't survive if she did not. And I was so frightened I was barely aware of what I was saying, and would marvel later, as the story was regaled to me by the woman currently lying across my lap.

As my hands slid over her back, I said, "Hermione, I understand now why Lupin asked you to come to me. Even more so, I suspect, than he understands himself. It was because you need me, and I need you in return. From this day forward, I will provide for your needs as your gentle Master, and you will reward me with your obedience. All I desire from you is that you give yourself to me, and allow me to give myself to you.

"And so I ask again: will you trust me?"

She didn't speak, but I felt her body deflate, and settle against mine inch by slow inch. Something in that motion struck me as both beautiful and pitiful. Then, Hermione relaxed and yielded completely. For a moment, I thought I might weep with gratitude. She had answered my question.

She had surrendered to her Master.

I closed my eyes and prayed to anyone listening to let me, for the first time in my adult life, act and speak completely from my heart, unafraid and un-self-consciously.

His warm hand on her back felt so welcomed, so essential. At that precise moment, Hermione wanted to stay in the haven of his comforting embrace forever. She collapsed, dazed and submissive, against him, and Master Snape sighed, almost as if he'd been holding his breath. His hands moved over her as he whispered a soft cleansing spell. His magic, masculine and ardent, washed over her, removing all the mess. It bathed her in soothing, indefinable power, like healing, and for a moment, they were still and quiet.

When he spoke, his voice was rich and intimate, like a lover, and Hermione's abdomen, pressed against his thighs, grew tight and hot. "Good girl. I'm very pleased with you. Now, all I ask is for you to allow me to give you what you need. Master is here, and I'm going to take very good care of you from now on. As I should have, from the very beginning." For some reason, those words made her feel free, like forgiveness. She floated on a soft current of surrender, and it was so powerful she imagined she was actually aloft. She knew something was going to happen - something that would forever change the way she felt about him—and herself.

As if to prove the point, he gently tugged her shirt from the waistband of her Muggle jeans, and pulled it high up on her back. Part of Hermione wondered if this might be skirting the limits of propriety, but that part of her swiftly lost interest next to the part of her that had previously found Snape so compelling. He gently smoothed the charmed cloth over her bare skin. She made a soft little sound, then froze, afraid he might misinterpret her moans and stop.

But Snape seemed to have no intention of ceasing his ministrations. For a long time he sat, merely stroking her neck and her back with his hands. The cool cloth found every troubled, feverish part of her, and eased it. Without thinking, she reached up, and tugged her shirt over her head. If it surprised or shocked him, he didn't show it; he merely took it from her and laid it over the arm of the chair.

He unfastened her bra, and gently rubbed her neck and shoulders, the pads of his strong fingers calloused but sensitive. His nails glided over her back, and she made a noise that sounded embarrassingly sensual. She had always found the act of someone scratching her back to be hedonistically intimate. Everywhere he touched tingled with pleasure. In that instant, she knew. She wanted him. She wanted him to make love to her. Gods, she wanted him to fuck her-

"Would you-" she swallowed, afraid of the answer before she even asked the question. Hoarsely, she continued, "Master Snape, would you be doing this if... even if-"

His hands stilled, and Hermione wished she could see his face. He didn't answer for a long time. Finally, he answered, "Would I do this even if I weren't your Master? Is that what you want to know?"

Hermione cringed, and closed her eyes. Nails raked slowly over her back. "You must answer, Apprentice," he said, and there was almost a playful note to his softly spoken command. "How am I to favour you if you aren't truthful with me? Is that what you want to know?"

She took a deep breath, and the gentle hands drifted over her body. "Yes, sir."

Another long silence stretched as he ghosted his fingers over her flesh. "Yes, Hermione. I would. I've wanted to for some time. Longer than I should admit." His breathing was even, but there was a raggedness to his lovely voice that told her he was being truthful. "Are you are you allowing this merely because I am your Master?"

She could not mistake the apprehension in his voice. He wanted her, too. She turned her head and shifted slightly, so she could look around her shoulder at him. "No." She swallowed. "I've wanted you, too."

He didn't smile, but his eyes burned, and he stroked her back in ever increasing intensity. "Good. Then I will continue, as your Master first, and then..." he breathed in deeply, and his expression relaxed. "...But I must first take care of your needs. Now, lie back and relax, Hermione."

For the first time since the war, the tightly coiled spring of hair-trigger fury that had taken up residency in her chest loosened. Master Snape had replaced it with a sweeter tension that was no less intense, but infinitely more welcome.

She felt his cool hands moving over her bare back, gently raking his nails over her skin, and she moaned and shifted. "Oh, gods, I'm-"

"I know, Hermione. Merlin, I know," he crooned, his voice whisper-sweet and as soft as the cloth that now lay against her neck. "But this is where I'm going to make it all better. You must believe your Master knows what is best for you."

Hermione shivered. "I do, Master Snape. I do," she whimpered. His hands trailed delicately down the sides of her body, causing her to shiver helplessly and a long, "Ohhh..." drifted from her lips, as if drawn out by his moving hands.

"Oh, yes," he purred, and her breath caught. "You know you're safe, don't you?" he crooned. "That's it. You're so beautiful when you give yourself to me."

Hermione made a soft sound of gratitude as he slid the bra from her shoulders. She rose up on her elbows and allowed Snape to pull the garment from underneath her. She relaxed against him, too stirred to speak. His hands spoke to her skin, a moving Braille of soothing, affection, ease. She had never been so aware of her own body, of another man, as she was at this moment. She was alive down to her fingertips, and she shivered with pleasure.

She reached under her waistband, and with a whispered spell, her jeans were unfastened. His hands stilled. "Hermione-

She turned back to look at him. "I want this. I need this," she pleaded, not absolutely sure what 'this' was only that she was sure he would deal with it in a way she could live with. "You said you would take care of me. Please." She pulled her jeans from her hips and discarded them on the floor. She could hear his breathing quicken, and she knew while he was strictly in charge, he was neither removed from them nor unmoved by them. That thought excited her, and she pushed against his lap, feeling his erection pressing against her ribs. His gasp of arousal excited her like nothing ever had before.

"Good girl," Master Snape crooned, his voice less steady than before. Hermione's body tensed as he resumed his gentle stroking of her back, and she turned her head to look back at him. He was watching her intently, with eyes so dark with liquid fire she felt dizzy.

A soft mewling sound escaped her lips unbidden, as goosebumps pebbled her skin. Her answer was to feel his large, warm hand slide between her knickers and her bare flesh, and ease them from her bottom. "Oh gods, yes," she moaned, as a fresh barb of arousal stabbed into her core. She closed her eyes, praying for him to touch her there, oh, please, yes, right *there*-

His hand drifted across her bottom, ghosting his fingertips over her skin. "So soft. So open, so trusting. I will be worthy of that trust, I promise."

She was moaning with every breath now, and when she blindly groped backward with her hand, he caught it in his, and entwined his fingers with hers. She twisted her arm and brought his hand to her mouth. She feverishly kissed his fingers, touching her tongue to each pad. She heard his soft moan of desire and it thrilled her, knowing she was giving him pleasure as well. It no longer mattered what he did; she would let him do whatever he wanted. She knew he wouldn't hurt her.

Then his hand struck her bare bottom. It was beautiful.

It was not painful, but deliberate and firm, and it felt orgasmically *right*. Hermione's back arched, and her head came up in shock. "Merlin, oh fuck," she whimpered, her voice trembling. Helplessly, she suckled his fingers, and he answered her with a hiss of desire.

"Master," she gasped, trying to rise on her elbows. "You have to-" Immediately he disengaged his hand from her fingers. "Oh, don't stop! It feels so good."

"I have no intention of stopping. You must take your discipline." His voice was sliding over her body while he continued to gently spank her. He sped up slightly, his hand landing on her bottom and staying there, warm and wanted. Hermione had never been so wet, or wanted a man as badly as she wanted him at that moment. She wantonly writhed against his hand.

Suddenly she felt her body change; there was a deep shift within, and she knew she was going to come. "Oh gods," she moaned, as her groin grew hot, and pleasure blossomed from a single point and radiated outward. She automatically opened her thighs wider, moaning for him to touch her. She was so close to the edge it felt as if she would shatter at any second.

"I know," he cooed, his touch so gentle and insistent she began to rock with the motion of it. Snape stopped his rhythmic patting, and stilled, his hands sweeping over her back and the cheeks of her bum. She could feel the cooling wetness between her thighs, and nearly screamed as his long fingers teased over her distended, puffy slit.

"If I touch you, you'll come for me, won't you? You'll come because you want it as badly as I do." His voice was rough now, trembling with his own desire. "Ask me," he whispered urgently. "Ask me for what you want."

"I want you to make me come, Master," she moaned, praying this was not one of those power games of tease and plead. "Oh, gods, don't make me beg!"

Snape responded with a soft growl that made her clitoris pulsate. "I don't want you to beg. I want you to come." His fingers kissed her pussy lips, and she wailed in relief and pleasure.

"Oh, yes," he hissed. "We're going to draw the anger out of you, one spanking at a time, one orgasm at a time, like poison from a wound. Whatever it takes, as long as it takes, until you're at peace again." He took a breath, and his voice, as soft and sweet as sin, crooned. "It aches, doesn't it?"

She could hear the longing in his voice, his own ache like a wandless spell in the air. She keened helplessly as she felt her juices trickling shamelessly onto the tops of her thighs. He hissed pleurably. "I'm going to draw that ache out of you, Hermione, and it's going to feel so good, isn't it?"

Her body thrummed with desire, carried on the wave of his relentless voice. "Please, yes, please!" she cried, heedless of the whining, pleading tone in her voice. She rubbed against him, brushing her hardened nipples roughly against his thighs, trying to find the right friction. A long finger slid into her sodden quim, then unerringly circled her clit as confidently as her own fingers. "M-Master," she whispered, brokenly and began to move against his fingers. All the blood in her body rushed to her clitoris. She sucked his middle finger into her mouth, and he gasped his own pleasure, a sweet, dirty sound.

"That's my good, good girl," he groaned, and she licked his fingers deliriously. He pumped his fingers inside her. Hermione tensed, feeling his words hurtling her toward the edge. His words were a dark, seductive vibration against her body. "You want to please me, don't you? ...that's it... let me hear it come for me like the good girl you are... now, Hermione, now!"

Hermione howled as her orgasm rushed over her, causing her to fishtail in his lap. She held onto his hand, gripping it, feeling her body pulsing, bursting, exploding into heaven. And still he pushed, his insistent fingers slowing, but never ceasing their sweet dance, pumping in and out of her quivering and pulsating core until a second orgasm speared her and sent her screaming over the edge of a madness that made her fury look bloodless in comparison.

She collapsed against his lap, boneless and dazed. His large hands rolled her over, but she was scarcely aware of it. She drifted for a moment, carried on the current of his large warm hands, his beguiling, beautiful voice, urging her to relax and let him take care of her. She was both thrilled and frightened at what had just passed between them. He tucked her against his body, and Hermione clung to him.

Gradually, her head cleared, and she was aware of the state of herself, naked but for her knickers tangled around her ankles, her nose running, her hair in a wretched state, and realised she must look like the pathetic mess Master Snape no doubt thought she was.

She also remembered the laboratory she'd wrecked, and the tantrum she'd thrown that had brought them to this moment. Master Snape adjusted her legs, to make himself more comfortable, and nuzzled against her flushed cheek.

If her Master was displeased, he had a very peculiar way of showing it.