

Cupid's Debt to Dumbledore or Thanks to a Venereal Rat with Wings

by Betz

A response to the 2005 Valentine's Day Carny Ride challenge issued by MsJessicaAllen on WIKTT. Hermione is a lone rider on "The Tunnel of Love" until she is joined last minute by her Potions professor. What does Cupid have in store for our favorite couple?

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The 2005 Valentine's Day Challenge as issued by MsJessicaAllen on WIKTT:

*To celebrate the defeat of Voldemort in Hermione's seventh year, Dumbledore decides to hold a Muggle carnival that coincides with Valentine's Day.

*All the seventh years are raving about the love tunnel ride, and Hermione decides to see what is so special about it. It's a ride through a dark tunnel of sickeningly sweet hearts and angels.

*No one rides with her, so the ride operator yells out, "Lone rider." Hermione doesn't show obvious embarrassment.

*Snape, who is stalking the carnival grounds, is suddenly curious about the ride and takes the empty seat beside Hermione. It is not apparent that he cares whether Hermione is embarrassed in any way. (A/N: I have tweaked this one rule a little to suit the story, and I hope you don't mind.)

*What will occur? What spells does the tricky Dumbledore have in store for the lovers? Did Dumbledore make them both curious on purpose? Will the ride spark something between the two? You decide.

A/N: This story AU as it was originally written in 2005 before HBP and DH were published.

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Since there are no wizarding universities, you should at least try and find yourself a husband or a steady boyfriend before you leave school. Wendy Granger's voice rang

out in her daughter's head.

Hermione growled in exasperation. Tomorrow was Valentine's Day once again, and her headache was starting tonight.

Ever since Hermione stopped seeing Viktor Krum romantically, her mother kept nagging her over the years about other potential boyfriends she might pair herself with. Every Christmas hols and summer break, she could count on her mother grilling her over which boys were suitable for her to pursue. In addition to the usual question of "So are there any nice boys you are seeing?" Hermione could also count on a slew of suggestions to help snare herself a man.

Knowing that an owl would arrive tomorrow, bright and early at breakfast, Hermione could already guess the contents of her mother's Valentine letter. Beside the usual platitudes of her parents' pride in her studies, there would be the standard question from her mother asking if Hermione had found anyone special to be with on the internationally recognized holiday celebrating rampant hormones.

Maybe if I don't answer Mum's letter and ignore it, she'll get the hint this time, she mused.

Hermione was usually a calm and logical being, except when her mother's nagging about boys started up. It was upon such occasions that the Head Girl could be found jumping up and down, screaming at her mother in a fashion that bordered on hysterical, until her father would step in and tell Wendy to back off.

Shoving unpleasant thoughts aside, Hermione went back to the stack of parchments in front of her. Now that Voldemort was dead, she decided to scrap her current post-Hogwarts career plans and go for an apprenticeship instead.

There were many possibilities out there, as she'd had some of the highest O.W.L.s at Hogwarts in over two hundred years. The two strongest prospects resided within the castle. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had both approached her independently, offering her the prestigious position of apprentice to their positions of master. Under their tutelage, she could write her own ticket to anything she desired, be it academic or commercial. The one downside to accepting either offer...from the Head of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw...was dating opportunities.

"Once a woman leaves school, it is very difficult to find a mate," Mrs. Granger had often said to Hermione. "The rigors of the working world tend to take away spare time in which to develop a relationship. In addition, many businesses frown upon dating between associates, knowing inter-office romance can lead to a toxic work environment if the relationship sours."

So if Hermione did take up either professor's apprenticeship offer, who would be around for her to date? She couldn't date a Hogwarts student, especially since she shuddered to think of going out with a younger man who still hadn't mastered the art of shaving. With her duties as an apprentice, opportunities to visit Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley would be few and far between, so meeting anyone there was pointless. That only left the staff at the school.

Putting off any decision about her future livelihood and preoccupied with the letter she knew was to come from her mother, Hermione went through the list of male staff and professors at Hogwarts.

Albus Dumbledore was definitely off her list of potential dates. Not only was the man old enough to be her great-great-great-grandfather, but he was rather involved with Professor Sprout. Professor Flitwick would be unsuitable, especially since he was still significantly older than her and half her height; besides, he might be her superior if she took the apprentice position with him. Argus Filch was a vindictive, bitter, old man, with a face that could stop a clock and teeth to match. Hagrid, though closer to her age than Dumbledore or Flitwick, was just a few years younger than Professor McGonagall and more than twice her height. Also, he was not exactly the shiniest Knut of the lot. Though the half-giant was as sweet and honest as they came, Hermione couldn't see herself with a man who was befuddled with the simplest problems. No, a man with brains would be necessary, or she would go mad with mental boredom. Professor Binns was a ghost and about as interesting as dry toast, and Firenze... Well, let's just say that bestiality was just not her cup of tea.

Hermione could start dating one of the many Weasley men available to her, but there were problems with that, as well. During her fourth year, Rita Skeeter had published a piece of yellow-journalism tripe claiming that Hermione was "toying" with both Harry Potter and Viktor Krum. Molly Weasley had believed Rita's article and was frosty to Hermione for some time on Harry's behalf. Hermione doubted Molly's behavior towards her would be any better if a relationship with a Weasley boy went south, no matter how amicable the split, should one occur. It didn't matter anyway, as she didn't want a Weasley boy. Ron and Luna were a solid item. Percy, the officious, sycophantic prat, was engaged to Penelope. Charlie could be interested in her, but only if she sprouted outdoor plumbing, shaved and changed her name to something like Roger or Buck. And Bill was married to Fleur. There were the twins, but their antics would make Hermione think twice before she would even consider going on a date with them. She was sure their idea of a date would be to slip her untested confections for fun and amusement. If she slept with one twin, the other would probably think it interesting to see if she could tell the difference between them between the sheets.

Of her current classmates, it seemed that most of the boys with at least half a brain had already been snatched up by husband-hunting witches. Even Harry had been claimed by Lavender and was now talking of marriage.

It amazed Hermione how young people married and bred in the wizarding world. Harry's parents had been twenty years old when they had him. Neville's parents had been in their early twenties when he was born. Even Arthur and Molly had married and had children right out of school.

There was only one person left Hermione could think of that she could possibly date. Unfortunately, the idea of her with Severus Snape even in a romantic context was unfathomable. She doubted the man had ever had a date in his life, much less had a single romantic bone in his body. He was so surly and bitter that she was sure he had acid for blood. He never smiled except at the misfortune of others, and she had never once, in all her seven years at Hogwarts, heard him give one compliment. There had been an odd moment when she had caught sight of his frame without his cloak on and thought that, maybe if he had a personality transplant, it wouldn't be so bad to be swept up in his arms. That little daydream dried up faster than a tiny puddle in the Gobi desert when reality raised its head; the man loathed Harry and his friends, including her.

No, it seemed her near future prospects for dating would be just as weak as her current situation. Perhaps if she waited until she was finished with her apprenticeship, some nice wizard might come along.

Tired of fixating on the relentless fact that she still did not have a date for Valentine's Day tomorrow, nor anyone to escort her to the carnival that was being held down on the spacious lawns and Quidditch pitch, she rose and donned her cloak before going to meet her friends in the common room.

Well, at least there won't be a dance to deal with, she mused, thinking a carnival would be a better alternative to a ball. Hermione preferred to participate in a carnival, instead of sitting alone all night long watching couples and wishing someone would ask her to dance.

~oO0o~

Now that the Dark Lord was dead, Severus should have been relieved. He wasn't. It seemed that...now that the looming presence of penultimate evil had been permanently removed from his life...Albus had seen fit to find a new project, namely, to find Severus a wife... or at least a "girlfriend."

It was two months since Voldemort had fallen for the last and final time, and all the remaining Death Eaters were safely locked away in Azkaban after a nice snogging session with some Dementors. Now it seemed the only thing Severus dreaded equally to being summoned by the Dark Lord, was to be summoned by Albus to a blind date. Of course Albus couldn't force him to go out on such an arranged meeting, but the headmaster could make things quite unpleasant if Severus did not go and spend an evening with some random witch of his mentor's choosing.

One of the downsides to being a professor at Hogwarts since 1981, was that Severus knew just about every witch in Britain his age and younger, as they were either once his classmates, students or colleagues. So it was that the witches of an acceptable dating age had their opinions of him already formed and firmly set in their minds. To these witches, he was either a sniveling, scrawny, spotty youth, or an acrimonious, anemic, acerbic, angry adult. Even if he used the Imperius Curse, he didn't feel up to the task of overcoming their preconceived notions of him. He figured if they couldn't accept him for whom he was, they weren't worth the waste of time to convince otherwise. And those that didn't think of him in those terms were not exactly what he considered prime candidates for conversation, or carnal pleasures.

However, his resignation to permanent bachelorhood did not stop Albus from trying to play matchmaker. The old codger had already set loose a few of the female staff on him, under the lie that Severus was interested in them and needed them to "save" him.

Madam Pince had dropped her handkerchief a few times in the library and batted her eyelashes at him on occasion, but Severus had no interest in the witch, who was older than Minerva and was a good few decades out of his acceptable age range. Severus hoped the headmaster had the good sense to not encourage Madam Hooch to think he was pining for her, but that hope proved false when she invited him to an evening at the Three Broomsticks. There, she had tried to drink him under the table while beating him four times at arm wrestling. A woman who could prove she was more of a man than he was had ended any interest he might have had for her. Besides, her yellow eyes were just... unnatural and unnerving. Professor Sinistra had the personality of a grapefruit, with a figure to match. And Professor Vector was certainly not interested in him, especially since she was rather attached to Madam Rosmerta in more than just a friendly, sisterly fashion.

It had caused the Potions master great distress when the headmaster insisted Severus be a chaperone and patrol the grounds during the Valentine's Day Carnival. It was somewhat of a relief that there would be no music, dancing, or other such overly romantic trappings. Still, that wouldn't stop the raging hormones of the student body of finding other ways of publicly expressing their affections. Severus had been ordered to not deduct house points for catching couples caught up in the amorous spirit of the holiday; with that restriction, his mood soured further.

Valentine's Day 1998 arrived at Hogwarts, looking like any other Saturday. Severus had survived seven such holidays as a student, and seventeen as a teacher. He had survived Gilderoy Lockhart's singing Cupid-dwarves a few years ago, and he would survive this carnival. So far, today's worst offenders were caught behind the "Shoot An Arrow Through The Heart" game booth; he was tempted to charm a forceful spray of cold water on a couple of dry-humping sixth years he found there. It was only when he saw Professor Dumbledore speaking with Sibyll Trelawney, that he knew he was in trouble.

The glass-bottle-bottom bespectacled fraud cast a glance his way with a misty and longing look. Severus sent a sneer her way, which only seemed to increase the growing ardent look on her face.

Oh bugger! he thought, frantically looking about for a means of escape.

The Divination teacher began drifting towards Severus while Albus smiled, his eyes twinkling like the damn cheap trinkets being handed out in the game booth he was standing next to.

Walking away from the approaching professor, Severus spotted a long structure that would provide a temporary sanctuary from the amorous advances he knew were to come from Sibyll, who had been no doubt encouraged by the headmaster.

Severus heard the call to his salvation when the carnival ride operator yelled out, "Lone rider!" with a Cockney drawl.

Jumping over the red velvet ropes in haste, Severus ignored the looks from the students and leapt into the bobbing boat just before it took off into what he hoped was a long ride. He wanted it to be long enough so that Trelawney would give up her pursuit of the "misunderstood and tragic hero" Albus had told her about.

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The Head Girl thought the carnival was worse than a stupid dance. At least at a Valentine's Day dance, Hermione could hide in a dark corner, drink punch and not mull over the fact that no one was going to ask her to dance. Instead, here in the bright sunlight, everyone could obviously see she was attending the event stag. Tagging along with Harry and Lavender, and Ron and Luna, she felt like a fifth wheel.

Most of the carnival rides were built for two. So while everyone had paired up, Hermione was left to sit alone on many of the rides or sit next to a nervous first year who hadn't discovered the allure of the opposite sex. It was only with the egging on of Harry and Ron that she even bothered to go on most of the rides. As the contraptions usually involved some sort of cart that spun about too quickly, she almost regretted eating the candyfloss she'd bought for herself earlier.

It was when Ginny, with Draco in tow, came up to Hermione gushing about "The Tunnel of Love" ride that her curiosity was first piqued. They had claimed it was the best thirty minutes of fun they'd had at the whole carnival. After overhearing Neville and Susan Bones recall their wonderful two romantic hours in the watery carnival ride, Hermione seriously considered going on it herself. How a ride could last for different periods of time for each couple intrigued her.

As Harry, Lavender, Ron and Luna got in line, she joined the queue behind her friends.

"What are you doing in this line, Hermione?" Ron asked, puzzled by his friend's appearance.

"What does it look like? I'm in queue for the ride," Hermione stated, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"But... but this is for couples." He looked at her, waiting for her to make a boyfriend magically appear out of the end of her wand, before Luna gave him a rather violent elbow to the ribs.

Hermione felt flushed with embarrassment that Ron had pointed out something she was uncomfortable with, but she didn't let them know it. Squaring her shoulders, she looked about. "Where does it say this ride is only for couples? I don't see a sign."

Harry gave her a small smile of encouragement for her answer. Leaning over, he quietly said, "You know, if it makes you uncomfortable, you can always ride with Lav and me."

Harry's offer was cut short by his very jealous and possessive girlfriend yanking on his arm and giving him a glare.

Seeing the trouble that would erupt if she were to accept, Hermione politely declined. "Thank you, Harry. That's very sweet, but I will ride alone. Besides, I think those boats only fit two at a time. I'm not ashamed of not having a partner for this ride."

It was a lie, but she figured that it would be better to put on a brave face than have her classmates look at her in pity. Recently, while in the girls toilet, she had overheard some girls speak about an underground poll that was being circulated throughout Hogwarts. Through some investigation on Ginny's part, Hermione discovered she had been voted "Most Likely To Become A Spinster... Permanently." The truth of the poll stung even more, as she had begun feeling that it might very well be the case.

The line moved slowly, but eventually, she was near the front.

"I don't know how long this will take," Harry called out as the boat started drifting towards the gaping maw of the ride, "so we'll see you around the carnival later."

Hermione waved to Harry to indicate that she heard him before he disappeared, Lavender's tongue already stuck in his ear.

Ron and Luna climbed into their boat and were quickly gone.

Tilting her chin up defiantly, Hermione looked at the ride operator when he started searching for her partner.

"Where's your beau, miss?" he asked.

"It's just me," she answered in clipped tones.

He shrugged, then called out, "Lone rider!"

Stepping into the boat, Hermione noticed how spacious the seat was; sitting down on it made her feel even more alone. Just before the boat began moving, there was a

flash of movement out of the corner of her eye. Before she could speak, Professor Snape had bounded over the queue ropes and leapt into the boat with her.

"Get this thing moving now!" Snape hissed urgently at the carry.

Without another word, the boat started moving forward towards the engulfing black expanse just beyond the mouth of the cave.

"Professor Snape?"

Realizing that there was indeed another person in the boat with him, his head snapped to his left and fixed Hermione with a piercing glare.

"Miss Granger," he addressed her curtly.

"Erm, what are you doing here?" She asked, hoping he wasn't going to bite off her head or berate her.

"Escaping a fate worse than death," he muttered distractedly while glancing over his shoulder.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing," he said, realizing he was now safe for the time being from the advances of the shawl-draped recluse of Hogwarts. "What is this ride?" he asked, trying to gain his bearings.

"The Tunnel of Love, sir," she said and blushed.

Just before the darkness concealed them, he gave her a startled look of surprise as he realized he was on a romantic ride with a student. He saw her face flush with embarrassment, realizing several students had witnessed seeing him join her.

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Albus hid a secret smile. It wasn't that he wanted Severus to flee into the arms of Miss Granger, but the end result was that he had the brooding younger wizard exactly where he wanted him.

He fingered the letter from Mrs. Granger in his pocket while thinking on how to word a response to the woman's concerns regarding her daughter's lack of a love life. Mrs. Granger did ask for his help in finding a nice young man for her daughter, but he wondered if Muggles were concerned over age differences that the Wizarding world had never thought twice over.

He just hoped Cupid would hold up his end of the bargain. The mischievous deity was indebted to him, as it was Albus' defeat of Grindelwald that brought forth the largest population boom in the Wizarding world since the Middle Ages. That much affection and joy being spread around was bound to catch the attention of the god of love and desire. And now with the demise of Voldemort, though not directly by Albus' wand, Cupid owed the greatest wizard of the age a big favor, as he could sense another large increase in the birthrate was on the rise.

~o0O0o~

Sitting on a ledge high above the entrance to the ride, Cupid spied the latest couple who had drifted into his lair of love.

Ah, so here's the wizard and witch Albus mentioned, the cherubic god thought, appraising the dark wizard and young witch. Surveying Severus and Hermione, he could see his work was cut out for him. From his first look, he could see they were meant for one another. Cupid was a god after all, and omnipotence was a fringe benefit to the position, but after a glance into their minds and souls, he could tell they'd need quite a bit of convincing.

As Cupid looked into Hermione's heart, he could see she already had a penchant for the dark, brooding types with large noses, based on the fondness she still held in her heart for a Bulgarian boy she once had dated. *Well, at least we won't have any physical traits to overcome.*

A quick survey of Severus' heart showed he had no clear idea of what he wanted for a mate. There were many things he did not want, namely no one who was too old, too ugly, too dull or witless. Severus did hope for respect, but it seemed that he had given up on ever getting much of that, if ever he should find a witch to his liking.

Seeing as the two humans were sitting on opposite ends of the boat's seat, Cupid came upon an idea. He would force them into each other's arms, literally.

Flying out from his hidden ledge, he let the reluctant couple see him in his younger, pudgier form, complete with baby fat and dimples. No use in capturing the witch's heart in his true and spellbindingly handsome adult form.

Hermione glanced up and saw the plump little angel floating above her in a sea of darkness, a celestial golden glow surrounding him. Expecting the sickeningly sweet display of hearts and flowers to erupt at any moment, making her ride with the dour Potions master all the more uncomfortable, she was puzzled when the cherubic vision spoke.

"Stealthy as night,

And quick as lightning,

Falling in love,

It can be frightening,

So hold on tight."

Severus turned to look at Miss Granger, hoping she had a clue to what the fat floating urchin was blithering about, when the winged creature disappeared and they were enveloped in darkness once more.

Before Severus could speak and ask if the whole ride was to be spent in the dark, he heard a familiar growl off the right side of the boat where he was sitting. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up on end. He slid his hand up his sleeve and pulled out his wand.

At the same time, Hermione, sitting on the other side of the boat, heard a low throaty chuckle to her left. Recognizing whose laugh it was, she shook her head in disbelief. *It can't be him. He's in Azkaban.*

Hermione grabbed her own wand. Just as she was going to ask Professor Snape if he heard the same laugh, there was a bright flash of movement.

From the right side, a werewolf jumped into their view and lunged towards the boat. To the left, Lucius Malfoy advanced on them, brandishing his wand.

Professor Snape and Miss Granger both leapt backwards toward the center of the boat, their backs partially pressed up against each other. Severus held his left arm protectively in front of her, partially shielding her from the lycanthropic vision. When they both noticed their separate manifestations of terror were standing there, looking at them without further threat, they turned to see what the other was retreating from.

Severus saw the apparition of Lucius wink at him before disappearing while the werewolf off his shoulder winked at Hermione, then disappeared. A pale blue light

remained, bathing the large cavern they occupied.

Looking at her professor's arm still pressed against her body, Hermione noticed how it brushed up against her breasts; the sensation made her nipples tingle and tighten. Trying to regain her breathing from the shock of adrenaline, she glanced at Professor Snape. She saw that his eyes were fixed on her chest, which was still rising and falling dramatically from her fright.

"I..." Hermione began to speak, but was startled into silence when they both noticed the boat becoming narrower and narrower. When the side of the bench touched the outside of her left leg while her right leg was pressed along Professor Snape's thigh, Hermione hoped the boat would stop shrinking, but it didn't. It got so tight that she was forced to sit herself in the Potions master's lap.

"I... I'm sorry, professor," she started to stammer.

The boat teetered a little before righting itself as Hermione wiggled in his lap to gain her balance.

"This is not your fault, Miss Granger," Severus grumbled through gritted teeth.

Damn! Does she have to squirm on my lap? he thought, hoping the boat would not rock any further. Her bottom was pressed into his thighs and groin. Any further wiggling from the young woman in his lap would probably arouse him. *Just what I need, an erection pressing into a student's posterior.* He did note that she had quite a nice bottom from what little he could tell.

Baby Cupid reappeared with a beaming smile. "Ah, that's much better." Hermione and Severus both scowled at him. "See? Isn't it nice to have someone to cuddle with?"

Hermione gasped and Severus growled.

"It's not like we had any choice in the matter," she admonished their host.

"I demand you let me off this ride immediately," Severus bellowed.

"Tut, tut. Once you get on the ride, you have to complete it. There are no exits, except the one at the end of the ride." Cupid gave them a mischievous grin.

"Listen, you venereal rat with wings: you control this ride, so just finish it," the professor barked.

Another insipid smile spread across the chubby deity's innocent-looking face. "Looks like you two haven't learned your lesson, so onto the next one."

After clearing his throat, he said,

"Snuggle close,

Find someone to hold,

Better get comfy,

'Cause it's going to get cold."

Equal looks of dread came across the pair's faces, as they sighted a white blizzard descending upon them. Each took turns casting warming and shielding charms, but their wands had no effect. The winged baby was clearly not a faux Cupid like the surly dwarves Lockhart hired; this was the real thing. And, unfortunately for them, it seemed the Greek god had nullified any charms or spells cast within the ride.

As the cold began to sting Hermione's cheeks, she turned to her professor to ask if he had any suggestions on keeping warm. Looking at him, she saw the white flakes of snow caught in his eyelashes and hair, tiny specks of white on black. If it weren't for the fact the snow and temperature were falling at an alarming rate, she would have liked to gaze longer upon his snow-dusted face, a lovely study of contrasts.

Severus looked and felt defeated, unable to do anything but wait until this latest episode of tribulation was over. Seeing the worry in the young woman's eyes and the cold-induced redness on her cheeks, he wrapped his cloak around her and brought her closer to his body for warmth, tucking her legs up closer to his torso. Encouraging her arms to encircle him as she sat on his lap, he positioned her cloak so that it overlapped with his, and a pocket of warmth filled the space between them. He rubbed his hands up and down her back, encouraging some warmth to return.

Hermione's teeth were chattering and her face stung with cold, so she settled her face along Professor Snape's neck, as he buried his own cold face in her hair for warmth.

"If we come out of this alive without frostbite, I promise to poison the headmaster's supply of lemon drops," he muttered into her hair.

Shivering, she laughed. "Only if you promise to let me help you. And what if we get frostbite?"

Her warm breath on his neck sent additional shivers through him. He wondered if he would have reacted the same way to her breath on his skin, if it wasn't so cold. "Then I'm hexing Professor Dumbledore the moment we get off this infernal ride. I will allow you to assist me on that one for sure, as I know you are more than capable of casting some rather inventive curses."

She clutched onto him tighter, rather enjoying the feeling of his breath seeping through her hair and warming her cheek and neck. The movements of his hands on her back slowed and seemed more like caresses than friction for warmth. Smelling his skin, Hermione was tempted to nuzzle the bit of his flesh that her nose and mouth were pressed against. But that would be going too far, wouldn't it? Surely he was only holding on to her like this for warmth and nothing more. She held on to him, feeling his solid build beneath her hands and the heat radiating from him.

Severus was beginning to enjoy the feel of her body held tightly against his. As a new gust of wind swept through, he held her tighter, hoping the wind would not whip away their cloaks and remove any heat that was trapped between them.

He could smell her hair, as his nose was buried in it, and found himself beginning to wonder what other parts of her body smelled and tasted like. Just as he was contemplating if she would notice in the middle of a blizzard if he moved her hair aside and kissed her neck, he felt lips moving along his own neck. They weren't kisses exactly, but the feel of her lips gliding along his skin was unmistakable. His breath hitched and his eyes shuttered close.

When he was just about to reciprocate with his own lips, the blizzard was gone. The drifts of snow that had piled up to his knees disappeared, and the room was instantly warm. His window of opportunity to kiss her had been taken away. He silently cursed the short, portly god for his timing.

They both removed their faces from each other's necks and gazed about, looking at the results of this sudden climatic change. Severus was so unsettled by her touches that he now had a fluttering sensation in his stomach.

Hermione felt the loss of his skin against her lips. She wanted to damn it all and latch on to that little bit of skin above his high-buttoned collar once more.

Cupid reappeared above them. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not so bad? We nearly froze to death!" Severus hissed fiercely.

"This is the worst 'Tunnel of Love' that ever existed!" Hermione shouted.

"You two still don't understand the point of my exercises, do you? Perhaps one more demonstration is needed before you get the idea."

Clearing his voice once more, Cupid proclaimed,

"Sticks and stone may break your bones,

But these venom-tipped arrows will hurt you.

Kiss away the poisoned cuts,

Or pain and fire await you."

"YOU'RE GOING TO POISON US!" Severus screamed. "Now I'm going to have to figure out an antidote!"

"None of your clever potions will cure you," Cupid assured him. "Your kisses upon the other's wound will be the only antidote you need. Now be a good lad, and protect your lady fair." He gave them one last wink before he popped from sight.

Severus and Hermione were both truly frightened, now that they knew their wands would not work, and "pain and fire" awaited them. Feeling proverbially naked and utterly vulnerable, they still held on to each other.

Their boat began to widen to its original width, and Hermione could finally get off her professor's lap. However, after the last two experiences, she stayed close to his side.

"What do you think he meant when he said, 'venom-tipped arrows?' " she whispered warily.

Under normal circumstances, Severus would have snapped at her, as he was angered at the situation he was in, but the girl was not at fault for their predicament. "I can only assume the worst, as should you."

On both sides of the boat, a forest came to light. Tall, thick trees with shaggy bark and broad branches filled their vision. From between the stout trunks emerged Kilyakai, little forest demons with blowguns and bows and arrows...venom-tipped arrows, if the demented baby Cupid could be believed.

The tiny demons pulled out their arrows and aimed. A shower of projectiles whistled through the air and flew towards the boat.

Severus covered Hermione with his own body, knowing the tips contained poison. Hermione was not completely covered by her professor's body, as she shrieked when several arrow tips grazed her legs and shoulders. The volley of arrows continued for a few moments, and Severus bore the brunt of them.

Just as quickly as they attacked, the demons withdrew. They left Severus and Hermione in the forested cavern, sitting in the middle of a boat that still continued to drift slowly towards an unseen destination.

Sensing their attackers were finally gone, Severus lifted his body and pulled away from Hermione. He sucked in his breath sharply as he felt the arrow points still embedded in his back and arms. Surprisingly, none were stuck in his legs.

Hermione sat up and pulled a few darts from her arms, wincing and hissing as she removed them. Looking at the man next to her, she cried, "Oh, Professor!"

Most of the arrows stuck in Professor Snape were in locations he could not access himself. Slowly and carefully, she began pulling the dozen arrows from his back and shoulders. Once the task was done, they both could feel the poison's fire at each point of entry.

"It burns," she whinged, rubbing the bleeding spots.

"Yes, I know," he gritted in reply. "Since we cannot get to my Potions lab, I think the only thing we can do is..." He paused, contemplating Cupid's recommended antidote to the spreading fire in his body. "Try and kiss the poison away."

He couldn't believe he was being forced to kiss a student who probably would not welcome any sort of physical contact with him other than necessary. Though, she'd had pressed her lips against his neck in a most arousing manner earlier. Still, that had been during a blizzard, so he believed her almost-kisses were due more out of necessity of warmth than willingness to explore her passions with a professor.

"Does this soothe the pain?" Severus asked, and then brought her hand to his mouth. He pressed a light kiss upon the skin. Upon inspection once he removed his lips, he noticed her skin was healed, as if it had never been broken by darts or arrows.

"Yes... much better," Hermione answered shakily. The feel of his lips had made the pain disappear completely, and she was left with a warm tingling sensation where his mouth had been. Her stomach clenched and fluttered in a most pleasant way, much more pleasant than the swooping and spinning rides she had ridden on earlier.

Pulling off her cloak, they took stock of her injuries. They had to pull off her jumper and roll up the sleeves of her blouse to get to the cuts on her arms.

Severus began kissing upwards from her wrists to her elbows. The manner in which he pressed his lips against the skin was perfunctory, but his mouth lingered a little while longer with each dose of the cure.

He had wondered briefly what the other parts of her body smelled like, and now he had his chance. At that moment, he didn't know whether to curse or thank the malignant immortal cherub.

Watching him move his way up her arms, Hermione regarded the man next to her. His mouth on her arms felt wondrous and warm, and she grew reluctantly excited over the fact he would have to kiss other parts of her body. She didn't think he was kissing her for any other reason except to help an injured student, but by the way his mouth glided along her skin, she was beginning to hope for more.

Hermione noticed she had some cuts on her shoulders that were getting quite painful.

Severus tried to kiss the cuts through her blouse, on the area covering her scapula, but it didn't work.

"I think I'll have to... um... unbutton my blouse for you to... um..." She swallowed nervously. "To... erm... kiss me there." The blushing witch was thankful for the cavern's low lighting so that he would not see the flush creeping across her face and neck. Her breathing was becoming quite rapid and shallow, and she wasn't sure if it was from the pain of the poison, or the gentle touch of his fingers on her bare skin.

Being a gentleman, Severus turned away for her to unbutton her blouse and position it in such a way she could still keep some modesty.

Thankful that the cuts were nowhere near any area that required her to remove her bra, Hermione undid the front of her blouse. She dropped the shoulders of the garment while clutching the loose folds to the front of her chest.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

Severus turned to her and restrained a gasp. There were several deep cuts along her shoulders, marring her flesh. Placing his hands on her upper arms, he held her still while he began kissing the cuts away bit by bit. He closed his eyes and reveled in the softness of her shoulders under his lips. On the last wound, he let his mouth linger a little before moving away.

Closing her own eyes, Hermione tried not to fantasize that he was doing this of his own volition and was seducing her. His breath on her shoulders and back made a chill run up her spine.

The fiery burning sensation on her arms and shoulders was gone. "Thank you," she breathed, shrugging her shirt back over her shoulders, buttoning it back up slowly.

"Not at all," he replied, his voice low and soft.

Hermione turned to look in his face and saw his eyes boring into hers. She swallowed hard once more, then said quietly, "I have a few more on my legs."

Slipping from his seat to kneel in front of her, he kept his eyes fixed on her face. Severus placed his hands gently on her knees. "Show me where," he asked slowly, his voice deep and reverberating.

Never moving her eyes from his, she pointed to her ankle. "There."

He lifted her foot up onto his thigh and pushed down her knee-length sock. The arrow had grazed the skin and left a small gash. He bent down his head while bringing up her foot.

When his mouth touched her ankle, Hermione's fingernails began clawing at the upholstery, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop a moan from escaping. Needless to say, the method of delivery for the antidote was highly erotic, but it would have been even better if not given under duress.

Just what I need, to be in the throes of passion when he's just trying to cure me! Hermione scolded herself. *There's nothing more to this, so stop imagining it.*

"There," she said, pointing to the back of her calf on the same leg.

His hair brushed against her leg, and she took a long controlled breath to stop from hyperventilating.

"There," muttering weakly as she pointed to her knee.

The sight of her professor kneeling in front of her, placing tender kisses along her leg, made her squirm. Her legs started to shake with anticipation, as he still had the other leg to do.

Leaning forward, Severus let his hand graze her leg, and he could feel both her limbs shaking. He wondered if she was frightened of him and the situation. Glancing up at her, he saw her heavily lidded gaze directed at him. If he didn't know better, he would have guessed she was aroused and was enjoying this.

Moving her other foot up onto his thigh, he pushed down her sock and began inspecting for cuts with his hand, not waiting for her direction.

After kissing a puncture wound on the inside of her calf, he moved his hand up to her other knee.

"Better?" he murmured.

"There's one more," she said, her voice trembling. Hitching her skirt up just above mid-thigh, Hermione pointed to a spot halfway up on the outside of the leg.

It was a particularly nasty laceration, one that would need at least a few kisses to close up. Bending forward, he let his upper chest rest on her knees while he bent his head to kiss her thigh. He noticed the way her hands were clenching and shaking. Dragging his lips along the length of her thigh, he noticed the fact she was trying not to pant. Once done, he sat back up and regarded her.

Does this man have any idea of what he's doing to me? she wondered.

Hermione returned his gaze and noticed his brow was starting to bead with sweat. "I think I'd better tend to your wounds now, as you were so kind to take care of mine first."

The dark-haired wizard sat back down on the seat, wincing, as the poison's heat had increased during the time his wounds went untreated. The young witch began to help him remove his cloak as he stifled a groan while moving his arms. While trying to undo the buttons of his long frock coat, his fingers began to shake.

"Please, let me help," Hermione said, noticing his tremors. She could tell he was in great pain, so she quickly removed the coat. Her eyes set upon his blood-soaked shirt, and she drew a sharp breath. "We should have taken care of you first," Hermione said with concern, gently peeling his shirt away from his body. She admired his form. His physique was masculine and strong, unlike many of the boys her age who had not finished growing into their bodies.

"Nonsense," he articulated with difficulty, suppressing a grunt. "What sort of professor and gentleman would I be if I let a student and lady suffer while having my own wounds tended to."

Did he just call me a lady? she thought in amazement.

Once the clothes on his upper body were stripped away, she took a quick survey of his body and started her treatments on his back where most of the damage was.

Severus let out tiny gasps as her lips began working their way up his back, removing the pain that had become almost unbearable. He gritted his teeth, trying not to moan while her fingers danced lightly over his skin, as she inspected his flesh after each kiss to make sure it was properly healed. Her soft touch was arousing him, and he fought with all his willpower not to turn around and hungrily kiss her, despite the untreated cuts burning his flesh.

As she reached the top of his shoulder, Severus noticed her mouth was opening just the tiniest bit as she continued kissing him, as he could feel the coolness of where her tongue had tentatively tasted him.

Hermione tried to heal his cuts quickly at first because of his pain, but started to slow down, as she wanted to prolong the moment as long as she could. She hoped he wouldn't notice her licking his flesh, but if he did, she hoped that he would not lash out at her for her presumption. Her kisses were supposed to cure him, not lead to something more, but temptation demanded she take it one step further.

His back finally done, she said tenderly, "Let me see your arms."

He held them out, turning his palms down so she would not have to see his Dark Mark. Starting with his hands, Hermione gazed at his face for some signal that she was taking things too far. As she slowly kissed one knuckle, she saw a cut along the side of his index finger. Opening her mouth, she took in the finger and began to suck at it gently.

Closing his eyes, he let the sensation of her ministrations of his finger wash through him. Severus began imagining her mouth on his neck, his ear, his mouth, his nipples. He opened his eyes to see hers had closed, as she was intent on her single task of the moment.

Severus cleared his throat and pointed to another spot higher up on his arms. She kissed his forearms, his elbows, his upper arms, and the front of his shoulders.

Looking at his neck, she could see a tiny smear of blood. Hopeful for an opportunity to kiss his neck once more, she said, "There's a little spot on your neck there. Does it burn?"

He could feel no injury or burning on his neck, but decided he would let her kiss it regardless so he could feel her lips on him once more.

Licking her lips, she brought her mouth to his neck and moved her mouth along his neck.

"Here?" she asked, moving her mouth to a new spot.

"Uh-huh."

She let her tongue dart out and gently lick the flesh. Severus let out a shuddering gasp.

"Here?" Her mouth had found a spot along his jaw line.

"Yes," he exhaled.

Her nose and lips trailed to his ear. "Here?" she barely spoke.

A small groan of encouragement was all she heard him say.

Licking his ear, she found his earlobe and began to suckle on it.

Not able to restrain himself any longer, he brought his hands up to tangle in her hair, burying his mouth at the base of her neck.

"I think I missed a spot," he mumbled against her skin.

"Better make sure we don't miss anything," she panted in response.

She found the spot behind his ear, and he growled with delight, as her mouth rendered him completely boneless. Severus, spurred on by a fresh wave of desire, ran his mouth up her neck to her ear and gave it the same thorough treatment she was giving his.

When his mouth latched on to her lobe, she threw her head back and moaned in a most unladylike fashion. "Oh, God," she whimpered.

"I think there's one more spot we forgot," he muttered.

"Where?"

"Here." Severus took her by the chin and angled her head before bringing his mouth to hers.

The touch of their mouths was electric, and they both felt on fire, though all the poison had been neutralized. In the wake of the cure was a new fire racing through their bodies, burning a path straight to their hearts.

All the anticipation and desire building made their kiss all the much sweeter, as they both opened their mouths to one another and kissed feverishly. The taste of each other's mouth was heady and addictive. Neither could break their kiss, for their want and desire would not allow it.

Hermione, who had been sitting next to Severus, now climbed back into his lap and plowed her hands into his locks. Severus brought an arm around her back and crushed her to him, feeling her breasts and the cotton of her blouse pressing up against his bare chest. He had his other hand entrenched in her mane, holding her head at the perfect angle for kissing. One of her hands stroked his neck, then grabbed at his shoulder while their mouths hungrily devoured each other.

They panted and moaned, trying to hold on to each other tighter, before the reality of the situation made them both pull back at the same time.

"We can't," Hermione gasped. She saw the look of hurt in his eyes and wanted to cry. "I want to, but..."

"I know," he said, then leaned his head forward so their foreheads were touching, their breaths intermingling.

They heard Cupid clucking his tongue at them. Pulling themselves apart from one another, they looked up and glared at the god, equal parts boon and bane.

"You know, even for mortals, you both can be pretty thick at times," the curly-haired divine being chided them. "What do you mean, 'We can't,'?" he mocked in a breathy voice.

"I think what she means is that I am her professor and she is my student. This sort of interaction between us in an academic setting is not exactly looked favorably upon," Severus lectured.

Cupid rolled his eyes. "And just why not?"

Instinctively, Hermione wanted to clutch her wand, ready to hex the obnoxious gnat hovering above them. "Because those sorts of relations are not allowed," she retorted.

Crossing his arms in front of him, Cupid was getting impatient. "Just answer me this question. If such restrictions were removed, would you still want him?"

Hermione looked at Severus, her face hopeful. "Yes."

"And would you still want her?" Cupid asked Severus.

Never looking away from the woman he wanted, he answered, "Yes."

"Then what's the problem?"

They both glared at Cupid once more, as if he was taunting them with something they could never have.

"Honestly," Cupid sighed with exasperation, "and you two are supposed to be so bright. Let me explain this slowly so you foolish and simple mortals will understand. Hermione, are you thinking of taking an apprenticeship with either Professor Flitwick or McGonagall?"

"Yes?" she answered with uncertainty, pondering how the celestial being knew that, then remembering that he was a god.

"And with an apprenticeship in a field that does not require Potions, couldn't you just drop out of your Potions class?" When she gave him a blank stare, Cupid added, "Is it required for your apprenticeship?"

"No, I guess not. But what about my N.E.W.T.s?" she added.

"You could take them in June without another day of studying or Potions class, and you would still get over one hundred percent on your test. You should learn now there is more to life than just passing tests with flying colors," the god of love admonished her with a waggle of his finger.

"That still doesn't cover the fact she's still a student and I'm still a member of the faculty," Severus chimed in.

Shaking his head at the wizard, his golden ringlets bouncing about, Cupid informed him, "Have you actually read the faculty guide *carefully*? First of all, it says you cannot have relations with an *underage* student. This young woman is eighteen, perfectly adult and legal in the wizarding and Muggle worlds. In addition, if she drops her Potions

class, she is no longer *your* student. Another nice little loophole in your conduct code written on..." A copy of *The Hogwarts Faculty Guide* appeared in his hands, and he flipped to a point in the book. "Ah, right here on page 342."

Severus and Hermione looked at each other for a long moment, both contemplating if they wanted to take things further than a nice snog in the dark.

"I wouldn't be averse to taking things further... that is, if you aren't averse," Hermione stated, looking at him expectantly, praying he didn't think it was a big mistake kissing her.

"I think... that would be most agreeable to me," Severus said with a small smile. "Though if we do intend on pursuing a... relationship, then it would have to be very discreet until you are no longer anyone's student."

"I think I would like that."

Cupid flew about in a small, joyful loop. "Then it's settled. Now that you've gotten the point of our little excursion, I'll let you have one more chance at a nice romantic interlude before I release you back into the wild."

The winged deity disappeared along with the trees. The cavern became a copy of the cloudless, starry night sky, complete with a full moon rising in front of them.

"At least we don't have to suffer through flowers, lace, and fluttering hearts," Hermione said offhandedly.

"I have everything I want to look at right here," Severus purred in a seductive voice.

Severus leaned towards her and brought his lips down to hers, pulling her close to his body, not caring that he never got his shirt back on. Hermione snaked her hands up his chest, feeling the planes of his body before wrapping her hands around his neck so she could play with his hair.

Shifting her body, she straddled his lap and relished the feeling of his body between her thighs. She let out a small moan in the back of her throat as his hands moved up her back to her shoulders and hair. Their tongues did a slow dance, exploring and tasting, both feeling the floating sensation only known to accompany passionate kisses. And so they spent a while longer in each other's arms, savoring and exploring each other's skin and mouths.

Too soon for their liking, they could see the bright light of the outside world approach. Severus put his shirt, coat and cloak back on, then helped Hermione with her own cloak. They both noticed all the damage to their garments had been repaired, as if it had never happened.

Hermione was the first to speak. "I'll speak with the headmaster tomorrow about dropping Potions."

"What will you tell him?"

"That I'd rather do independent study for my Potions N.E.W.T.s," she surmised.

He nodded. "If he asks, I'll tell him you have nothing left to learn in my class. You are more than prepared for your N.E.W.T.s, and your time would be better spent revising."

"We'll have to be careful. It wouldn't do to have your reputation ruined," she said.

"Nor yours," he replied, stroking the side of her face with a single finger before placing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "When can you come to see me?" He hoped she was still serious about wanting to see him.

"I can come tonight after dinner. I can claim to be going to the library," Hermione suggested.

"That wouldn't be far from the truth, considering all the books I have," he said with a smirk.

She gave him a warm broad smile that melted his heart. "I suppose it would be appropriate, considering this is Valentine's Day."

"Yes," he sighed, "I guess today would be a good day indeed."

"Happy Valentine's Day... Severus," she whispered, desire flashing in her eyes.

He trapped her mouth in one last kiss. "Yes, happy Valentine's Day to you as well, Hermione." He coupled his sentiments with a look of longing.

The end of the tunnel loomed large, and the sunlight was too bright for either of them. They sat on either end of the bench, looking as though they had avoided each other during the whole ride.

Severus got out of the boat and extended his hand to help her out. To the casual observer, it looked like nothing beyond common courtesy. To Hermione and Severus, it was their last lingering chance to touch their hands together just a moment longer than necessary before they went their separate ways, not looking back.

Hermione went in search of her friends to see if they had emerged from the ride yet, wishing they would not ask her what she saw or experienced. She hoped she could lie easily without blushing at the memory of the man who had awakened her heart.

Severus went off to find Albus and confront the meddling old fool. As he saw the grand wizard meandering along a grassy path dotted with snowdrops, he was suddenly at a loss of harsh words for the man. Just as he was about to turn around and walk away, Albus turned around and called out to him.

"Severus, my dear boy. How was your ride though 'The Tunnel of Love?'"

The Potions master thought of a sharp and cutting reply, but the words died on his lips. Had Albus planned for him to ride with Hermione? Unsure if that's what the headmaster had in mind, and in some way not wanting to ruin the enchantment of how they found each other, he merely answered, "Adequate."

"Oh, I see." They ambled together down the pathway a little longer in silence before the wizened sage spoke once more. "So I understand Miss Granger no longer has a desire to study Potions. Pity. Ah, well, the things we do for love."

Severus looked at his mentor with a critical eye, but decided it was best to just accept what he had been given by the gods above, and by the chubby golden-ringlet god that guided them in the boat ride: a very happy Valentine's Day indeed.

~ Fin ~

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A/N: A very special thanks to my betas lauren3210 and JuneW for the fabulous work they did fixing this fic. JuneW also helped me with a title and did a few small additions here and there, so a large round of applause to them both.

Kilyakai : <http://www.darksites.com/souls/goth/heartshow/Fae.html>

A threat to be found in Papua New Guinea is the Kilyakai, forest demons who like spriggans steal human babies and then corrupt them with demon energies. In addition, they steal livestock and cause many sicknesses and diseases such as malaria, by firing poisoned arrows at unwary travelers. Kilyakai look like small, wizened, old

tribesmen.