

# a melody <l>en passant</l>

by Ladymage Samiko

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## Prologue

Chapter 1 of 4

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### Prologue

When the war was over, the damage repaired, and the dust settled, Hermione discovered that there was one very important element she had neglected to include when she had formulated (and later adjusted and readjusted due to extenuating circumstances) her plan for the future. That element—so ubiquitous, so familiar, and so rarely around when it's actually needed—was money. Education, it turned out, was extremely costly even—or perhaps *especially*—in the wizarding world. (Which was perhaps not so surprising; think of all the equipment and ingredients Professor Snape had gone through with Neville alone.) Hermione shuddered to think about how much her yearly tuition had cost her parents; it was something she'd never particularly considered as a child, and as they had never mentioned the idea, she had vaguely assumed that all they needed to pay for were the supplies they had purchased every year in Diagon Alley.

Looking at the paperwork required for a final make-up year at Hogwarts, Hermione wished she'd paid more attention. And opened up a side business in providing potions to her schoolmates. With her parents in Australia for the next three years until her memory charms wore off, she was faced with school fees that were the equivalent of her father's yearly salary.

It was fucking absurd. But then, that was the wizarding world all over.

Well, it was summer, she no longer had to factor a megalomaniacal revenant into her plans, and for the time being, she was safely ensconced in the Burrow. There was a little time to figure things out. There was even time to pick up some of her old hobbies. Tucking away that little flutter of unease into a mental drawer, Hermione pulled a case out from under her bed and lifted the lid. *'Music hath charms,' as they say...*

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Author's Notes: This was written for the 2015 sshg giftfest for [mundungus42](#), who provided (among others) this lovely little prompt: "In addition to being a gifted student, Hermione has another notable talent. Looking to escape from the pressures of the magical world, Hermione brushes up this nonmagical skill as a means of stress relief, and possibly for book money. She soon discovers that she isn't the only magical person who shares this interest." For this, I thank her, for I have very much enjoyed the result.

As has happened before, there were so many things I could have said when I posted this to the gift comm that I ended up saying nothing. I'll try to remedy this somewhat in my ANs, now that I'm loosing this on the rest of the sshg fanfic world.

# Part One

## Chapter 2 of 4

In which we see what Snape has been up to and watch as his and Hermione's paths begin to gravitate towards each other.

Part One

*Five Months Later*

The thin-faced gentleman scowled at the display case, squinting a little as he sketched out the design on the miniature portrait. Hand-copying the tiny swirls and scribbles was tedious...and more than tedious...but the magic embedded in the picture of the Fifth Marquess of Candlebury was such that a camera, either Muggle or magical, would be unable to capture the information he required. The weak-chinned ninny had been fool enough to store information about a purifying potion within the details of the portraits of himself and his siblings...all eight of them. And after their declining fortunes...and magic...had taken their toll, the miniatures had been scattered to the four winds. Severus had so far located six in places as varied as a minor bedroom in Cardiff Castle, a pub in the Orkneys, and here, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. He'd been able to purchase the one in the pub and the one in the little junk shop in Dover, but he'd spent far too much time staring at the other overfed, self-satisfied faces and committing the travesty of once more producing their likenesses. He had already begun to have nightmares of being chased by large, shrill women with little, yapping dogs and teaching potions to their equally bloated, baffle-brained brothers. How on earth could such a dolt have discovered such a potentially powerful potion, and how could he have then been allowed to essentially lose it?

If he didn't need those portraits and their secrets, he'd burn the lot. And then he would find Candlebury House and burn it for good measure.

His pocket watch, a guilt gift from Minerva, trilled a series of crystalline chimes that stopped only when he pulled it out and drew an arcane symbol on its face. Three o' clock. Tea time. Severus rose, packed his materials, and followed his feet down the stairs and around to the museum's tea rooms. It was a weekday during the bleak winter months, so after fetching a pot and his preferred pastries, Severus was able to tuck himself into 'his' corner of one of the overly ornate Victorian rooms without having to even lift an eyebrow to remove an inconvenient body from his path. With a smile that his erstwhile students would have described as 'horrifying,' Severus set himself to preparing his scones precisely as he liked them (a thin layer of jam, then slathered with an appalling amount of clotted cream that required several additional filched packets) while he mentally calculated the time it would take for his tea to be brewed within a millisecond of bitterness.

With a resigned sigh, he dug into his satchel for the reason he was required to take a tea break: the inhibiting potion that retarded the movement of residual venom further into his bloodstream. Several factors, including the time it had taken before someone realised he was still alive, had pushed his systems beyond the capabilities of the antivenin that had been the salvation of Arthur Weasley. While the antivenin had, in fact, saved his life, it could not purge his body entirely, and Severus was now forced to take the inhibitor three times a day to make sure that the venom that remained did not reach his heart. Which, he often reflected sourly, was a situation rife with black humour, if he could only appreciate it. Another sigh and he downed the contents of the small vial with the smoothness of a barfly imbibing his third shot.

Snape stiffened, not from the potion, but from the glimpse he'd had as his head swung forward again, a glimpse of a very familiar head of hair. Damn it, was the girl looking for him? Had she found him? What did she want?

A mental slap and he calmed. He couldn't even be certain that it *was* Granger he had seen in that split second of the woman's passage across the room's entrance. And if it *had* been her, what of it? It wasn't unthinkable for that know-it-all to visit a *museum*, of all places, purely for her own pleasure. And if she was looking for him? She wasn't one of those who would be baying for his blood, and whatever her purpose, she'd disclose it in short order.

He was no longer a spy. He was no longer at war.

He returned his attention to his tea.

He was just a man having his tea in the company of a favourite novel.

Snape often chose, now, to travel by more mundane means. The pleasure he had taken in flight had soured with the events of the night he did not care to think about. The Floo, of course, only worked between specific points, and Apparition often made him physically ill since it somehow meddled with the delicate balance between his system and the venom that threatened it. Instead, he discovered that he actually enjoyed walking; after a month of near paralysis, he very much appreciated the ability to move his body freely. And there was, oddly, a certain pleasure even in being jostled about by the mobs of people trying to funnel into a single Tube station; it was extraordinary for him to be surrounded by them and know that not a single one of them hated him and/or wanted to kill him. Their complete indifference...*acceptance*, in a way...was practically soothing.

As he strode down the dingy tunnel, swept along by the human currents, his ear picked out the music of a busker in her tiny allotment of space: *If I were the West Wind, I'd blow my way homeward...* Appropriate, he thought casually, and well played. A practiced guitarist and more than passable singer. The music faded with distance and was overwhelmed by the ambient noise of innumerable conversations, and Severus thought no more about it, except to remember his own instrument sitting idle in its case. Long fingers lightly pressed the scarf wound around his neck. Perhaps he could now. Perhaps he should.

"I'm home." Hermione put up her guitar in its corner and banished her various accoutrements to their precise places. Crookshanks, lolling about in front of the fire, merely turned his head and gave a yawning sort of *mmrow*.

"In the lab, Mione!" came the call from behind a closed door, and the young woman nodded to herself before unwarding and opening the door to her own room. It was nearing time for projects to be due and exams were right after, so it was no wonder Adelheid had barricaded herself in her laboratory; Hermione herself was reading Runes, Arithmancy, and Creatures and had quite a bit of work to finish.

Or rather, since this is Hermione we are speaking of, most of it was finished and merely required those final revisions to be certain they included everything she wanted to include in them.

Did her tutors know how frustrating it was to have *limits* to the size of her projects?

Hermione supposed she should be grateful on some level; those limits essentially forced her to have free time, and free time allowed her to play. She flexed fingers that were rather cold and definitely tired from hours of playing for London Muggles. Today's haul had been reasonable, though it wasn't nearly what she had earned during the short trial she'd made in July, when the tourists had tossed in the majority of the coins in her case. November was too cold and grey for all but the die-hard tourists...not that she blamed them...and it was a little too early for Christmas shopping traffic.

Hermione filled the small kettle that hung from its iron hook and swung the old-fashioned contraption closer to the fire to boil. Some good tea would be lovely right now, and Hermione was sure Addie would appreciate it, too; it helped pry the other girl from her work in time to get some decent sleep. And now that she thought about it, Addie'd be sure to have some of those lovely buttery biscuits in her cupboard, which would go nicely with the jasmine tea Hermione was planning on using.

Once the tea was made, it was fairly easy to pop Addie out of her cauldron-composed shell and persuade her to break out the biscuits. The Swiss girl hadn't had a proper dinner and was more than ready to take a break.

"I know it's only our first year," she sighed in perfect English with the heavy accent that was a hallmark of the translation spell she used, "and we've been warned to take it easy, but..."

"But it's our first year," Hermione concluded. "I know what you mean."

The girl mock-glared, thick black brows beetling over incredible blue eyes. "And you, English witch, you spend half your time playing in the streets and still do better than I. You, I despise with every fibre of my being."

Hermione shrugged uneasily at the banter, and her fingers played unconsciously over her forearm. "War puts things in perspective," she murmured. "Changes priorities."

"Just as well," Adelheid said robustly...and with more perspicacity than she was often given credit for. "If you were still by the book, you would still be at Hogwarts this year, pretending you didn't know more than everyone there, and I would have a roommate who would leave their lace underthings on a line in front of the fire, pester me to grow my hair, and throw out the experiments I have in the bathroom."

"As it is, here we both are at Oxford, free to pursue our own fields, and getting along rather well, I think." Adelheid paused and grinned. "Even your cat likes me." Hermione chuckled, as she was meant to, while Crooks grumbled in the back of his throat at uppity young witches. "Anyway, if you *must* know why I work so hard now, it is because of the rumour."

"Rumour?" Hermione, in fact, didn't spend much time in Oxford proper; she didn't see the attraction of 'student life' and preferred to either visit with her friends or play her guitar when she had free time. Besides, the majority of her seniors had spent the war years tucked safely away in the arms of academia, and Hermione had very little patience for them and their points of view.

And so it surprised Adelheid only a little that her friend hadn't heard. "There is a rumour that your Professor Snape intends on taking an apprentice. Maybe two."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Professor Snape is taking an *apprentice? Here?*" she squeaked. "But he doesn't teach anymore! He doesn't *need* to teach! He can barely stand the human race as it is!"

"It's only a rumour," Adelheid temporized, "but he's been seen talking to the deans of both Terranmore *and* Avalon. And so the whole lot of us are all trying to outdo the others to put us in the running. Just in case it turns out to be true."

"I just can't..." Hermione slumped back in her chair, still trying to process the idea. "I honestly can't see why he would take an apprentice," she said finally. "He might go into business, I guess...though he's got more than enough money by all accounts...but he wouldn't start off needing an apprentice. And it'd be a big deal for him to trust *anyone* with even chopping the lettuce for a sandwich!"

Addie shrugged. "Whatever the truth may be, I should very much like to impress him if I can. Do you have any advice for me, Hermione? I have never even met him, let alone taken one of his classes like the rest of my department has."

Hermione laughed. "Consider yourself lucky," she chuckled. "He was an absolute beast in class, though of course, he *is* brilliant at potions." The young woman paused, turning thoughtful, allowing herself to remember. "Professor Snape has always been a... a *hard* man. Hard to know, hard to please. Prickly as a hedgehog with steel-tipped spines and justifiably so." Which was as much as she would say about the knowledge she'd acquired of his past. "From what I've seen of him, I think he's... relaxed a bit since the war, but I wouldn't think he'd relax his standards any. I guess if I were you, Addie, I'd make sure all of my basic skills were perfect: chopping, stirring, timing, and so on. You have the flair already, and *if* he's looking for someone, he'll want someone to whom he doesn't have to teach remedial skills...in his estimation, anyway."

Tilting her head to one side, Addie watched her roommate shrewdly. "Will you be doing the same, in spite of your chosen fields?"

Hermione grinned. "Oh, I'd love to show him up one day, I really would. But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to earn that apprenticeship even if I wanted to. I'm good at potions, and I could polish those skills enough to satisfy him, but I don't have the feel for it that you do, or the passion, either. To use a parallel example, I make a good home cook, but he's a master chef, and you're on the way to that. My strengths lie elsewhere."

"Well, then, I shall rest easy and not plot to kill you in your sleep," Addie laughed. "I'll start practicing; perhaps Ludwald's spectrum of pain potions would do. They're not demanding, but greater precision can enhance their potency ten times or more. It makes the brewer's skill very obvious. And then I can try applying Antonio the Fat's scale of alterations..."

Hermione threw a biscuit at the girl. "Oh, just go to bed, Addie. Don't sit here and bore *me* to sleep with your potions twaddle."

The two bantered a bit longer and shared some more of the day's gossip before Adelheid went to sleep. Hermione remained at the fire, brooding a bit about Professor Snape and wondering what he'd been up to since she had last seen him in hospital. He'd had all of those spines out and the temper of a wounded boar besides...which hadn't improved when she'd confessed how much she now knew about him. She'd felt he deserved to know. She'd offered to give him *her* memories as an evener, which had left him aghast. He'd told her just to promise him never to speak of them again to anyone and to get out. She'd done both, a little bemused that he would take her word without requiring a wand oath or something similar. (After which, she'd gone and researched all the forms of magical oaths she could find and then been rather appalled at their sinister nature. Apparently, *no one* expected a witch or wizard to have any sort of integrity at all.)

Professor Snape had recuperated, as it happened, much faster than anyone would have imagined, given the condition he had been in to begin with, and had reappeared at Hogwarts with his metaphorical sleeves rolled up, insisting on being allowed to do much of the repair work himself. As Hermione had been helping Professor Flitwick with certain charms, she'd had the opportunity to witness astonishing displays of magical power as he pieced together the damage both physical and magical; she had never truly appreciated how powerful a wizard he actually was beyond the specialties he had displayed, and this power had been bolstered, Flitwick had informed her, by the unique relationship between the headmaster and the school. Hermione had been a little sorry to hear that once Hogwarts was back in order, Professor Snape had tendered his resignation. For the best, perhaps, but what a team he and the school would have made! Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that he would have been even more formidable than Professor Dumbledore.

She'd seen little of him thereafter, being busy herself with taking her NEWTs as an equivalency for her final missed year and preparing for Oxford, while he... while he did whatever it was he was doing. There had been a great deal of interest, but very little gossip to be credited. All she could say was that he had looked well enough at the formal ceremony investing all of them with the medals and honours the Ministry had deemed appropriate.

Well, she'd finished off the contents of the teapot. It was time to read a little and go to bed. There was a lecture on Runes tomorrow, followed by an Arithmancy exam. She'd have to be at her best.

Severus placed the last of his clothing in the wardrobe with a sigh, grateful that the task was done and he could begin to familiarise himself with his new accommodations. The first order of business was, of course, the thrice-bedamned pain potion he had to apply to his neck and the nerve potion he had to soak his feet in; both his neck and his toes had ached abominably for the last two hours, but he had been too damn stubborn for his own good and determined on waiting until he had finished unpacking. Now, however, he could admit that he needed them badly. Sinking into his faithful old armchair, Severus summoned the silver cauldron and the bottle and the vial, pouring the one into the cauldron where he placed his feet and smearing the other over his neck. Another sigh, this one of relief, and he burrowed in further, relishing the familiar smell of wood, plaster, old leather and books.

The offer from the deans of Oxford's two magical colleges had been a welcome one. Though immersed in the Candlebury project, Snape had otherwise found himself at liberty for the first time in decades...if ever...and at a loss as to what to do. There were some choices that were obvious: he'd tied up the loose ends at Hogwarts, spent a minimum amount of time coercing Potter into reasonable secrecy, and sold the Spinner's End house to a company that planned to demolish the entire area. (What they did with it afterwards was something he only cared enough about to wish that they would turn it into a nuclear power plant or industrial waste dump.) But after that? He'd felt little attraction to any of the possibilities that presented themselves until old Ferride...the cantankerous old bastard someone had been idiot enough to make dean of old Terranmore College...had offered him a post that involved a little lecturing, less remuneration, adequate lab space, and rooms in the newest College tower. Ferride had even had the balls to present it as some sort of grand favour even though they both knew how valuable Snape's notoriety would be to the Colleges, especially as they had been losing students to the equally prestigious...and until recently, much safer...colleges at the Sorbonne, Heidelberg, and Vatican City. Snape hadn't quibbled over the terms, as they included what he considered important, but in the course of negotiations, he'd made it very clear in a Slytherin sort of way that Ferride and Morwich, his Avalon counterpart, owed him some pretty big favours. It was a sign of Ferride's desperation, Snape knew, that *he* hadn't quibbled too hard over those terms, either.

And so here he was, ensconced...for near future, anyway...in Brummel Tower with a pleasingly large set of rooms, a house elf assigned to his personal use, and the prospect of work that would be minimal and involve minimal interaction with those creatures known as students, most of whom he'd known and loathed but a few years earlier. He didn't imagine that time would have improved them any.

When his toes had stopped feeling as though they'd been wrapped in electric eels, Severus removed his feet from the cauldron and rose, moving to the corner of his library that he'd reserved for his music. A beautiful wooden stand held his music, the score for Saint-Saëns's 'Danse Macabre' currently atop. After some consideration, he decided to start off with something a little lighter. Severus lifted his violin to his shoulder and began to play 'Une Nimphe Jolie.'

Skirting around the edges of Terranmore's campus after one of the Runes teacher's more tedious lectures, Hermione paused to hear music drifting down from above. Not one she recognised, but it sounded pretty and light. With a smile of pleasure, she continued on her way back to Avalon's Arithmancy labs.

It was the week before Christmas, and all hell was breaking loose as lazy students of magic hurried, scurried, and worried to make up for lost time and learn in the course of a day or two things they should have learned over the past several months. The teachers were on high alert, trying in their turn to make sure that none of the cramming led to... *accidents* either visible or fatal. It was a tiresome hazard, Snape noted as he observed the hullabaloo, to have a Muggle university built cheek by jowl with the magical one. Somebody, somewhere along the line, had bungled rather badly on that score. But that wasn't really a problem he had to deal with (*not* in his contract) and so he ignored the annoying creature called a 'student body' and, seeing as his lecture series wouldn't begin until the following term, pursued his own ends.

...which took him back into Town. By an extraordinary stroke of good fortune (so extraordinary that Snape was inclined to view it with a suspicion usually reserved for his former Death Eater colleagues), yet another of that brain-dead Puffskein's family portraits was also held by the V&A; it was displayed in one of the rooms that was tricked out as a period bedroom or drawing room or whatever. He didn't care *what* it was, he only wanted to get in and out as quickly as was wizardly possible. To that end, he had set up a Floo inside a disused, formerly useful, *something-to-do-with-maintenance* chamber that contained an accommodating furnace within South Kensington Station and slipped out to join the masses currently involved in shuttling themselves from one place to another. As he walked the lengths of platforms and tunnels, he underwent a barrage of holiday carols played in any number of styles by wildly varying talents. Gritting his teeth, Snape tried to pretend he was deaf while being assaulted with some sort of atrocious *noise* produced by a young man in a loud combination of red, yellow, and green knitwear, and he devoutly wished he could still hex Muggles without courting official displeasure and that little, niggling voice of conscience. Damned if he knew why...and where...he'd developed such an annoying trait.

Though the museum had begun accumulating the holiday crowds, the comparative silence was heavenly. Once again, Snape settled in with pencil and sketch board (and glasses) and began to copy yet another damned portrait.

Closing time forced Severus back out amidst the teeming hordes, and scowling, he made his way through the crowd. A song that wasn't a carol caught his ear as he passed: a sweet voice bidding her family a bittersweet farewell, then jaunting into a boy bemoaning the loss of his girl to a man who was 'chronologically gifted and bony.' An apt description of himself, Severus thought wryly, but an unlikely situation. Some minutes later, with the ease of practice, Snape slipped out of the stream of people and into his chosen maintenance room, and he was about to Floo when the door flung itself open and a human cannonball hurtled into him. An involuntary grunt of pain escaped him; some sort of hard object had made a beeline for his solar plexus. Instinctively, he clutched at the person, trying his best to immobilize him or her, and wandless magic clanged the door shut once again. Her, his mind sorted out after a moment's analysis, and a fraction of a second later, it sorted out the scents of India ink, tea tree and rosemary shampoo, and parchment along with the hair that was rampantly apparent even in the minimal light leaking through the cracks around the poorly fitted door. "Granger," he hissed, "what the hell are you doing here?"

She stopped struggling immediately. "Professor Snape?" The shock relaxed him slightly and he loosed her; she hadn't had the least idea he was around, so nothing about her presence directly involved him. She giggled, and he scowled. He'd never thought of her as a giggly sort of female. "I'm hiding," she confided in a stage-whisper. Immediately...almost subconsciously...his wand slipped into his hand.

She saw or sensed it, and hissed in turn, "Put it away; it's not *that* kind of problem! I'm only trying to avoid the Muggle police."

"Oh, for... Granger, what in the name of all that's holy have you done now?" Snape caught himself somewhere between a scowl and a smirk, which would have made for a terribly odd expression if she could see it. "And why, precisely, would the Angel of Gryffindor be on the run from the police? Would there be a reward if I turned you in?"

Hermione bristled. "What have I done *now*? What do you mean, what have *I* done *now*? I never..."

Snape interrupted her incipient tirade with the simulation of an angry cat's *mrow*. "Ring any bells, Miss Puss?" he asked dryly.

An aggravated groan escaped her as her face retreated behind her hand. "I was just a kid, and I got the wrong hair! And it's not as if I did it for *fun*. And before you bring up *anything else*, *Headmaster Snape*, I'd like to remind you that I never *did* any of it for fun."

He scowled at the reminder, not of her deeds, but of the appalling mess that constituted his time as Headmaster. While he'd had no ambitions to the job in the general way...Merlin knew he hated children...he knew he'd go down in the history books as one of the worst wizards to ever hold the position, never mind that he'd been trying desperately to keep the metaphorical sand castle from dissolving under the onslaught of the tide. Severus wanted to be able to point to his tenure with pride...rather than with the feeling of everything slipping uselessly through his fingers. Something very like jealousy washed through his thoughts; no one would ever write up *her* war record with feelings of loathing or implications of ambivalence.

The silence had grown large enough to be uncomfortable, and he didn't see any need to hang about and listen to it...or to her when she finally broke it. He broke it himself,

instead, with the crackling and whoosh of Floo flames.

Her annoyance gone and feeling rather deflated, Hermione Apparated.

Addie upbraided her roundly when Hermione told her of the exchange, chastising her roommate for neglecting to pump the Potions Master for information of what...or even if...he was looking for in a potions assistant. "You didn't even find out what he was doing there!"

"For your information, I was just a little preoccupied at the time..." and here Hermione was brought up short. "That's right; what the hell was he doing there? Why would Severus Snape be in a maintenance closet in the South Kensington Tube station?"

At this, Adelheid threw up her hands and made several exclamations that her spell failed...or refused...to translate.

The question plagued Hermione for the next several days, all the more since she had already finished all of her term papers and projects and exams and was free to return to her busking pitch at will. She found herself searching the faces of commuters, and her mind wandered while she played. It didn't help that she hadn't explained herself properly, nor that when she rewound the exchange in her mind, she realised that he could have interpreted her words as an implicit reproach. And given what she knew of him, he probably had, though she had intended no such slur. But he would probably never believe that she had too much respect for him to ever imply that he was anything less than what he was...indeed, that she probably thought him far better than he truly was.

With a sigh, Hermione cast a wordless stinging hex at a grubby teenager who was trying to dip his fingers into her guitar case and decided she'd pack it in for an hour or two at least. It was the Friday just before Christmas, and she'd had enough of the Christmas spirit, which seemed to consist of equal parts of generosity and bastardry. For every person who stopped and smiled and dropped a coin in her case, there seemed to be another who wanted to steal it or make obscene suggestions or disparage her ability at the top of their lungs. Sometimes it was enough to make her thoroughly understand why Professor Snape loathed people from the very core of his being.

After a moment's thought, Hermione decided on going up to the museum for a bit of tea and cake. They were open late on Fridays, and there was nothing like being surrounded by a concentration of knowledge and culture. Besides, people in a museum were a little less mad than they were anywhere else in the city. Or at least she could pretend they were.

Wait, was that...? No. Hermione shook her head to try to clear the thoughts that were obviously becoming a trifle obsessive. Professor Snape had been *somewhat* near her pitch *once*. She had to stop thinking she saw him every time a man dressed in black crossed her path. She should start thinking instead about how she was going to spend the holiday. And about what kind of tea she wanted today. And whether she wanted carrot cake or a scone or something decadently chocolate.

His hands spasmed shut, his fingernails bit deeply into his palm, and Snape wondered distantly if they'd draw blood this time. He was almost grateful for the pain, for it was a mild distraction against the needle-laden fire that seared through his neck, down his arms, and across his collarbone. Under his clothes, the venom blackened his veins, showing through his thin skin in dark, ugly rivulets. He tried to block the memories of the sight, and of the first time he'd seen it. Snape's upper body contracted both in pain and in self-loathing; he pressed his fists hard against the bony ridges of his cheeks. Damn him for forgetting to take that bloody potion on time. Damn the fact that he needed it. Damn...

"Professor Snape, are you all right?"

*Of course I'm not all right, you stupid bint.*

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

*Not unless you can stop the fucking universe from fucking me over every time I fucking blink.*

"Please, sir, at least let me know you can hear me!"

*No. Now, just stop pretending you give a rat's ass.*

"Professor?" There was an undertone of hysteria in her voice...not that he could hear it, but a smallish set of hands was pulling his fists away from his face. What his face looked like, he didn't know, nor did he particularly care, though it was undoubtedly unpleasant. Two more eternal seconds and the inhibitor finally kicked in, forcing the venom back into the concentrated nodule it occupied when it wasn't actively capable of killing him. Something must have changed in his face or posture, for she relaxed slightly. "Are you all right?" she repeated.

Untrusting of his voice, Snape reached up to pluck out the quill he knew she would have in her hair before she could shy away and pulled over a paper napkin. *Well enough*, he wrote, and added, knowing she wouldn't leave it alone, *I was late taking a potion*. He could see the comprehension and compassion flow over her face and detested it. *I do not require an aspiring Florence Nightingale. Leave*. He expected her to protest...she'd always been absurdly sensitive as a child...and was surprised when she smiled impishly at him.

"I haven't had my tea yet," she informed him, "and I'm not about to wander out into the wilderness that is London in the Christmas season without it. I'll leave you alone if you like, but I'm not leaving." Snape scowled horribly, but the girl simply gave his left hand a squeeze...he hadn't realised she was still holding it...and rose, slipping through the tables as she went after her own sustenance.

Facing away from him, Hermione felt safe in allowing her worry to speak plainly in her expression. Professor Snape had been...possibly still was...in pain, and she could think of no hex, jinx, poison, or otherwise that would require regular potion doses. *But face it, Hermione, even your knowledge is not encyclopaedic. There's a reason you carried Manus's Handy Handbook of Magical Damage and Repair while you were traipsing around the forest*. And all of the years he'd spent being bullied, being Dark, being a spy... He'd probably been subject to more nasty magic than a mouse in a witch's kitchen; it wasn't unthinkable that he suffered from something she couldn't even conceive of. And it sounded like he had it under control, or at least as much as it could be under control. Hermione could imagine Professor Snape refusing to go to St. Mungo's for help, but she couldn't see him not finding out as much as he needed to know to keep himself alive and as able as possible.

He was too damn stubborn and ornery to be suicidal, or even to sink gracefully into the grave. He'd stay alive even if it was just to give the rest of the world the two-fingered salute.

Still... she didn't like the thought of him in pain. He didn't deserve it.

Absently, Hermione ordered Russian Caravan and chocolate cake...the gods knew she needed bracing...and tray in hand, debated on where she should sit. To sit in the same room as he would probably be taken as an intrusion, and she didn't want to intrude. On the other hand, to sit in the larger room with its columns and windows would prevent her from keeping an eye on him. And the halls with their grey stools were just... out. Perhaps she could sneak into a seat just inside...

"Granger, stop maundering and get your bloody arse over here and sit down." The command was given in a sharp, gritty voice, and Hermione found herself following it before she could think better of the idea. Old habits died hard. "Presuming you haven't changed, I am aware of your *obligation*," he sneered the word, "to mother hen

anything that looks to be in the remotest amount of distress. As I cannot oblivate you into forgetting all about this, I should rather you stare at me openly than be forced to endure your puerile attempts at surveillance."

Hermione sat, and apologised awkwardly. Equally awkward was pouring her tea under his gimlet eye and beginning to eat her cake. She didn't say anything; she couldn't think of anything other than questions, and she was mortally certain he wouldn't answer them.

"You did not answer my question."

"What?" Hermione stared; had she been wool-gathering to the extent that she hadn't heard him ask? She thought she'd been too self-conscious to be oblivious.

"The last time we... met," he said, steeping his fingers, "you said you were avoiding the Muggle police. I asked you why. You never answered."

To her surprise and annoyance, Hermione could feel herself blush. "Oh. Well. It's nothing much," she prevaricated, suddenly feeling very sensitive. He'd make fun, she knew he would, and while she enjoyed it, she was not so confident in her musical skill that she cared to have it mocked.

He sighed. "Spit it out, Miss Granger. If I *must* have company, I would prefer it to be uncomfortably verbal than uncomfortably silent."

"I busk," she blurted out. "In the tunnel between stations. It's not precisely legal."

He blinked, the only sign of any surprise. "You busk," he repeated. "You are one of those grubby students who cluster in the Underground and whine out music. And it's 'not precisely legal.'"

"I do *not* whine," Hermione bristled. "And I'm not grubby. And a lot of people enjoy it, and bugger the legalities."

Then came a sound that could only be described as a hoot of laughter, as rusty-throated as it might be. "Cheers, little cat," Professor Snape said, lifting his teacup in a salute, "you've grown a claw or two."

She glared at him narrowly until her brain kicked in. "You're trying to distract me," she accused him. "To keep me from asking the questions you don't want me to ask."

An eyebrow lifted, visible above his teacup.

"I wasn't going to ask anyway," she informed him tartly. "I *wanted* to, but I wasn't going to. It was fairly obvious you didn't want to talk about it."

"Indeed." Snape set his cup down. "But you were still prepared to spy on me."

"Keep an eye on you," she corrected. "Just 'til I was certain you were all right."

"You only wanted me off your conscience."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"I'm not a charity case. And you wouldn't have a clue on how to help if something went pear-shaped."

"You're not a charity case; it'd take a hell of a lot more than charity to deal with *you*. And at least *someone* would be here who had *some* idea of what the hell might be wrong with you."

Snape snorted. "Bollocks," he said rudely. "You can't tell me you didn't run through everything that might possibly be wrong with me, nor can you tell me you came up with anything near the correct answer."

"And you can't tell me that there's anybody else who *can*. When it comes down to it, I'm probably one of the only two people on this planet who has a fair idea of what you've been through." His face turned a mottled red, and the small part of Hermione that was neither ashamed nor alarmed found herself fascinated by the sheer size of his flared nostrils. (How did *anyone* end up with a nose that size??) But shame soon superseded any other emotion. "I'm sorry, sir," she said in a small voice. "I shouldn't have brought it up, even obliquely."

He stared, then sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just go, Miss Granger."

She shook her head stubbornly. "No. Not until I see you safely back to Oxford."

That snapped his focus back to her. "How do you know...?"

"...where you live?" she finished. "Sir, my roommate is reading Potions. The whole department is obsessed with speculation on your role in the upcoming term. They're convinced you'll want an apprentice." An incredulous sound escaped him. "They're going mad trying to anticipate what you'll want; you can't deny that having you for a Master would be a feather in any student's cap." This time it was derisive amusement. "If they survived the experience, that is," Hermione added.

"And are you considering nominating yourself for the position, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head. "I've enough to do already, and I'd like to get through university without accumulating any more scars, thank you. If there *is* a position, my roommate wanted me to mention her name to you, for what good it will do. But you're leading me away from the topic at hand again, Professor Snape. You're not well, and while I won't pry, I'm not leaving you here where there's no help to be had if something happens again."

"Miss Granger..."

"No. You can rant at me, you can insult me, you can... well, you can probably hex me out of your way, but otherwise, I'm not leaving you alone."

"For fuck's sake, Granger..."

"Bad language won't drive me off, either."

He glared at her. "Has anyone ever compared you to an anaconda, Granger?" he asked sourly.

"Not yet, but since it's coming from a Slytherin, I'll take it as a compliment."

For the next half-hour, Snape sniped and snarked and jibed, but he could not shake the girl off. Indeed, she held her own, though she was far too nice to give as good as she got. In between pot shots, he discovered that she played the guitar and sang, and he had a sneaking suspicion (which he certainly did *not* mention) that hers was the voice he had noticed on his previous sojourns. It was disconcerting to entertain the notion that this witch, of all people, had managed to touch him on any level of his psyche.

"Why not find a proper job," he asked, "if you're in such dire need of funds? Surely your ego would encourage you to apply for an apprenticeship with one of the Colleges' teachers. You don't have to keep fleeing the long arm of the law, unless you've simply gotten into the habit of it."

"I enjoy it. It makes me happy. I make other people happy. It's simple and straightforward and I don't have to think of anything except how I feel and the song I can use to express that. Haven't you ever enjoyed *not* thinking?"

"Certainly," he replied. " I call it 'Dreamless Sleep.'"

She gave him a glare.

They fetched her guitar and both their cloaks from the cloakroom. He paused to shrink his drawing case into a size that could slip into an inner pocket; apparently, that wasn't an option with her instrument. He'd never considered it before, but she informed him that shrinking spells had a deleterious effect upon the resonance of the wood. Something about the rearranging of the 'molly cools' and their bonds. (His father had given him a bone-deep distaste for most things Muggle, including chemistry, never mind the similarities to his own field. In fact, one reason he'd taken up Potions was to thumb his nose at dear old Dad, who'd cherished dreams of Sonny Boy becoming a research chemist for one of those big pharmaceutical companies and bringing in the money to support him in comfort as a reward, apparently, for treating the boy like shite during his formative years. If he didn't have such a passionate instinct for Potions, the choice would, in retrospect, have been rather pathetic in allowing his hatred for his father to dictate his entire life's work. And the same could be said for his violin, which his father had sneered at with all the fervour of his workingman's soul.)

She left him, finally, in Terranmore's quadrangle, professing an ignorance of the precise location of his rooms, for which he thanked whatever gods were listening. The current situation was bad enough without her haunting his doorstep. Snape vanished into one of the many doorways that did not lead directly to his tower, knowing full well how to navigate the labyrinth of corridors to Brummel and his set of rooms.

He did not see her circle around the exterior of the campus, and never realised that her timing would place her under his windows at the moment he began to play. Nor did he know that she closed her eyes and leaned against the tower blocks to listen to his rendition of 'Mordred's Lullaby' and 'The Mist-Covered Mountains.'

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## A/Ns:

I love the V&A. (Seriously, I once spent an entire day there, only leaving because I wanted to buy teas before I had to fly home the next day. And, you know, eat dinner.) While my favourite is the tapestry room, I've stuck Snape in the small, dimly lit miniatures room this time around. And the tea rooms, which include the original Victorian effusions as well as plainer, more modern sections.

Busking: I had to research this a bit, and based it on what I remember of earlier trips to the V&A and South Kensington. This was some years ago, but I recall more people than there are now, particularly in the tunnel that connects the station to various museums, etc. Apparently, this is due to a law change; buskers now have specific pitches for which they apply to London transit whereas earlier it was universally frowned on but popular anyway.

Brummel Tower is named after Beau Brummel, basically because I could.

Music credits:

"If I Were the West Wind" (Raven)

Saint-Saëns - "Danse Macabre" (Royal Stockholm)

Jehan Planson - "Une Nimphe Jolie" (Baltimore Consort)

Raven - "Chronologically Gifted and Bony"

Heather Dale - "Mordred's Lullaby"

"Chi Mi Na Morbheanna" (MacTalla Mór)

I'm making up a playlist on youtube of the versions I listen to, if they're available, here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgBL0tjCoLKsdWRBluPxSHdyYwWnHtMBF>

## Part Two

*Chapter 3 of 4*

In which Severus & Hermione find themselves thrown together over the Christmas holidays.

### Part Two

#### *Christmas Eve*

Avalon's Great Hall was a riot of conflicting decorating schemes and colours, having been given over to the students to decorate as they saw fit. While one corner was occupied by a conventional snowman in a miniature, perpetual snow shower, the ceiling above it had been annexed by a student who thought a cluster of bats wearing Santa hats and tiny, gold bow ties was more appropriate to the season. The red and green of holly was jumbled together with some confused attempts of menorahs and dreidels (which were done properly on the mantel over a secondary fireplace). The whimsies of girls who did not celebrate either holiday led to, among other things, neon orange jack o' lanterns and purloined traffic cones and yards, if not miles, of purple and yellow garlands looped hither and yon. It was a bit terrifying if absorbed as a whole, but the exuberance of university students who had run the gauntlet of term exams and emerged the other side with only minor bruises was not to be denied. Still, it meant that the few who were left to celebrate the holiday on campus had a tendency to illuminate only the immediate areas that they occupied rather than suffer the full effect of Christmas gone mad.

Hermione had chosen to remain; the memory of what she had done to her parents and their consequent absence from her life had hit her rather hard with the approach of the holiday, and she had no desire to go to the Burrow and make merry. Addie, too, having no family except for some distant cousins back in Switzerland, was spending her Christmas in Oxford. To give the college elves a bit of a holiday, Hermione had proposed to the other witches that, as a lark, the Muggle-borns might forage amidst the Muggle take-aways and they could all have a sort of potluck picnic on the floor of the hall. To her surprise, the scheme was adopted with enthusiasm, and the wizards' dozen of students sprawled over piles of pillows and rugs, eating curries and pizza and lo mein in a melange that echoed the Hall's decorations and would, in anyone of

greater age, have led to severe indigestion. The conversations were equally varied as Mei (final year in Charms) discussed wedding traditions and fashions with Madge (second year Transfiguration) and Eleanor (first year Mediwitch) talked healing potions with Addie. Somewhere, Hermione heard fragments of an argument that involved frogs which were to either be adhered in some fashion to the ceiling of the Defense salle or let loose in the river in a re-enactment of a Biblical plague. Hermione herself, having finished her meal, was somewhat shyly strumming carols and trying not to let her thoughts mire her in guilt and loneliness. Both she believed to be self-indulgent, seeing as how she still couldn't conceive of any alternate plans she could have implemented to keep her family safe.

She felt guilty again when she remembered Professor Snape; she might have considered him sooner if she hadn't been so self-involved. Hermione imagined that he, too, would be on campus, and she very much doubted that he would attend whatever festivities the Terranmore boys had concocted...even if they thought to invite him. Still, she dithered, having a hard time believing that he would welcome any sort of overture she might make, even if it was heartfelt rather than charitable. And the other girls certainly wouldn't appreciate the intrusion of any professor...especially Snape...into their holiday. What to do and *how* to do it? Hermione sighed. Why couldn't she have an easier subject for her altruistic impulses?

Perhaps... Perhaps she would simply walk over there. Terranmore had a lovely potions garden, even in winter, and a solitary stroll might suit her frame of mind better. It wasn't as though the colleges were cloistered orders, after all.

Well, she'd been right in that the potions garden was quite beautiful in the moonlight, and someone with a more poetic soul than is common amongst young men had illuminated it with numerous fairy lights. The unfortunate side to this idyllic environment was that *more* someones with rather more...*earthy* ideas had appropriated various corners to occupy with their witches. There were silencing spells and repelling spells and giggles and more intimate noises emerging from these little nooks, and Hermione was both irritated and embarrassed by the time she gave up the idea and re-emerged through the garden gate. Why couldn't these horny little beasts find someplace *private* in which to conduct their affairs? With an aggrieved sigh, Hermione simply set off wandering.

Eventually...and without any conscious direction of her own...Hermione found herself in the Terranmore quadrangle. The bare emptiness of the cold, stone arches around the perimeter was actually inviting to her, and after some minutes rummaging in her enchanted bag, she produced sufficient cushions to create a cosy little nest on the broad, low wall with her cloak tucked in around her and a warming spell to top it off. Some more rummaging and her bag gave up several volumes of Jane Austen and an illumination-charmed bookmark. A double-check to make certain her spells were properly in place, and Hermione began to read.

Given his track record to date, Severus was never full of what one would call Christmas Cheer and preferred to do all he could to avoid it. However, he had been unable to ignore the overtures Minerva had made (and reinforced with a few ultimatums involving some of Flitwick's nastier endeavours) and been forced to spend the majority of the evening in the company of his former colleagues. On the bright side, they all continued to apologise profusely to him, which was soothing to the ego, and had presented him with sizeable gifts as a more tangible expression of their guilty consciences. They weren't in the least imaginative, but they had the intelligence to consult Sprout, and so his laboratory would be well stocked for some time to come.

When he had endured as much as he could stand without irreparably cursing Trelawney, Severus left Hogwarts for a small monastery somewhere in... Actually, he'd forgotten where it was. But it was small, peaceful, and occupied by a small collection of monks who paid him no mind as they assembled for Midnight Mass. Severus, tangled in his own web of guilt and depression and grief, had explored numerous faiths over the last two decades, and though he couldn't bring himself to claim...or be claimed by...any one faith, he had a great respect for men like these who could devote their lives to something so benevolent and remote. Besides, the chapel was filled with a quiet serenity that soothed his nerves, and their chanting, once begun, was an almost palpable presence that solidified their community without excluding their solitary visitor. By the time the monks finished their ancient rituals, some of that serenity had even seeped into the cracks of Severus's soul, and he brought it away with him when he travelled back to the college.

That serenity vanished abruptly when he found Miss Granger slumped against one of the columns near the entrance to his rooms.

Years of shocks had habituated him to dealing with matters silently, and only the sound of his running feet on mud and pavement and the slight *schh* of drawing his wand accompanied him as he rushed up to find...

...that the cursed girl was only asleep.

At that, a lengthy stream of invective escaped his lips, remarkable for its relative quiet and its creativity. As the minutes passed, his voice rose in volume, and as he was describing some anatomically impossible and likely illegal acts with a camel's mother, his glare hardened. She was still asleep. Fast asleep. And the only redeeming factors of the situation were that she had obviously taken the precautions of warming charms so that she wouldn't freeze to death and that she held a book in her lap, which implied that she hadn't *meant* to fall asleep there on his doorstep. Still muttering imprecations, Snape began shaking her by the shoulder; perhaps she had cast silencing spells as well, so that random idiot voices would not disturb her. Well, he was *not* a random idiot...a purposeful *one*, *perhaps*? snarked his brain...and if she should be such a silly child as to fall asleep outside in freezing temperatures, then she deserved whatever he had to dish out.

But matters would not be that simple, and how could he expect them to be with his history?

All of his shaking and prodding...he resisted the temptation to slapping or even casting a stinging hex...produced very little result. Eventually, Granger *did* open her eyes, but they refused to focus properly, and the twisting of her expression indicated that she was still caught up in her dream. (It *could* have been her reaction to seeing him upon awaking...it was the sort of reaction he expected...but he was very familiar with feeling that expression of helpless horror she was wearing.) Dimly, she seemed to recognise him, and relief and joy flooded over the terror. "Professor Snape, oh my god, you're alive!" And with a sob, she threw her arms around his neck.

And nearly knocked the both of them over.

And she promptly fell back asleep. Leaving him, Severus Snape, in an awkward and damned uncomfortable sort of half-bow with a full-grown girl hanging off his neck. He shoved her arse back onto the masonry just to get her weight from doing something unspeakably painful to the scars on his neck. His invective became much more pointed and a little repetitive, for which he may be forgiven, as he was distracted by the struggle to breathe through the mass of fine wires that seemed to be more conscious than their owner and currently trying to suffocate him. He resumed his attempts to waken the girl with double his earlier force, only to discover that her current state was more accurately described by the word 'coma' and that her grip strength was at least twice that of the giant squid when given a longboat to play with. Reduced to simple growling as well as kneeling on the damned cold and damp stone paving, Snape wished that he could square simple, cold-blooded murder with his conscience. It would have made his life so much easier. As it was, he was reduced to more complicated, more humiliating solutions to his problems.

Drawing his wand again (he'd sheathed it when he realised that she was sleeping, not deceased), he first used a slicing hex to hack off that appalling hair. (She might have been glad he was alive, but her hair had quite a different opinion about it. And if she whinged that badly, he'd give her some damned Hair-Be-Here in the morning.) Then he cast a levitation that had her bobbing in the air at the right height for him to stand like a normal human being, or at least, like a normal Snape. Two options offered themselves to him: he could return her to Avalon, which would necessitate traipsing across the two colleges, likely (knowing his luck) under the eye of all the remaining undergraduates, and attempt to find her rooms. Which could (again, knowing his luck) be anywhere from in college to the outskirts of Muggle Oxford. He knew she had a roommate, but he'd never asked her name, so no luck there. And he'd still have to figure out how to waken the girl sufficiently to detach her carcass from his neck without breaking or dislocating anything in either of them. (*Could* she have had a vampire in the family some time back? Vampires couldn't reproduce *after* a turn, of course, but newly-acquired vampirism could have some odd effects on family [especially descendants] and close friends, particularly if said vampire continued to live at home.)

The whole idea sounded tedious. And unnecessary, considering that *his* rooms were only a few staircases away, were far more private, and far better equipped. A simple bottle of Pepper-soured poured directly down her throat might answer the situation, and he knew precisely where to find his own vials. And if she went into hysterics upon discovering her location? Well, he'd simply enjoy the show as his well-deserved entertainment. Gathering the girl in his arms to keep her limbs in safe proximity (annoying if she smacked her leg into the stone banisters and fractured it), Snape resumed his interrupted journey home.



Hermione awoke on Christmas morning at the precise point when her body hit a very solid floor. Blinking with confusion, she stared at the dark wood she had landed on and beyond it to fuzzy-looking rugs of colours she wasn't quite prepared to process yet, as she was too occupied in trying to reconstruct her evening and thereby extrapolate precisely where she was, how she'd gotten there, and why she had fallen from her bed.

The last question was the easiest to answer: her bed was a sofa, very nice looking with comfortable cushions, but narrow. Her friends had informed her that she had a habit of settling in for the night, staying in the exact same place and position, and then rolling over abruptly exactly one hour before she woke up (assuming she woke naturally, as was her wont, rather than with the offices of an alarm clock). Apparently, she had settled and she had rolled...with the obvious result.

Well, that was explained, but *whose* couch was it? Sitting up, Hermione looked around to find that the room she was in was wholly unfamiliar, but much to her liking. Three of its six walls were entirely taken up with shelves, and with only one or two exceptions that were filled with curios, every shelf was stuffed with books in a library that was of such variety that it was obviously personal. There were massive leather folios, glossy-spined hardbacks, loosely-bound collections of papers, some pigeonholes that fit their resident scrolls precisely... all different shapes, sizes, and probably content, though she could only make out a few titles from here (though she also recognised the distinctive purr of The Practical Witch's Book of Comfortable Householding Spells that Padma had recommended ages ago). A fireplace, hedged round with all sorts of practical and magical cautions, occupied a fourth wall and crackled merrily with heat. A small, decidedly old copper kettle dangled securely from an iron hook and arm very close to a battered, brown leather armchair and a solid, square table upon which rested a tea chest and single service as well as an nondescript, but tempting book. The fifth wall bore a floor to ceiling tapestry of medieval figures frozen in a tableau whose subject she didn't recognise: a woman, bearing a sheaf of wheat and supporting an older woman, while a prosperous sort of man stood a bit apart, bearing a shoe in his hand. Beautiful and interesting, but obviously alluding to a story that she didn't know or recognise.

The sixth wall was plain, painted a foresty green and looking a little... hollowed. Before it, Hermione saw with interest, was a wooden podium with pages laid upon it and filling its niche. A violin lay on a stand nearby. She remembered, now she put her mind to it, that she had been reading in Terranmore's quad. Had she then found the mysterious violinist? Had she introduced herself to him or furthered her acquaintance with someone she already knew? What had happened that she couldn't *remember*?

There was a moment of a little less than panic. Had she gotten drunk? Had something in the Avalon spread been spiked? Had someone given her a potion? She had a little trouble believing that someone with so inviting a room could have nefarious reasons for bringing her here, but then, something could be distorting her perception to create a space in which she would be comfortable. Hermione smacked her hand against her arm and was somewhat comforted to find her wand still in its place. She sighed. Being poisoned was a bit far-fetched nowadays, but not beyond of the realm of possibility. Still, there could be a perfectly ordinary sort of explanation to her presence here that would make all her conspiracies seem absurd. She grimaced slightly in concluding that the assumptions that would be immediately made in a romantic comedy were pretty much out. No fervent swain indulging in drunken antics or vile seducer indulging in more... disgusting... activities would dump her on a couch, fully clothed (and armed).

"Miss Granger."

Hermione stared, owl-eyed, and now very much aware that she was sitting on the floor, mussed, rumpled, and surrounded by a sea of blankets. And her neck was cold. "G... good morning, Professor."

He smiled, thin-lipped and as self-satisfied as a cat, standing in a doorway she hadn't noticed before. "I trust you slept well?" The question was silky, smug, and barbed; he was *enjoying* her confusion.

"I..." she stopped, uncertain of the proper answer. "I... guess so?"

"It was certainly a *deep* sleep," he continued. "I *quite* despaired of you ever regaining consciousness." He had moved, and his hands were busy now, casting a wordless spell to fill the kettle and swinging its arm to position it over the fire.

"I'm sorry to have been a nuisance," she replied in a small voice, feeling once more ten-years-old and wrong-footed.

"As you should be." Agile fingers plucked up the chest and deftly ladled leaves into the pot. "I am no longer accustomed to finding strays sprawled across my doorstep, Miss Granger, and oddly enough, I expected you to have something resembling common sense, which was a mistake on my part."

Why was it so difficult right now to remember that she was a woman grown?

"It would appear that you are more than capable of being as thoughtlessly adolescent as any of your puerile companions. Did you have a bit of a tiff with your chosen Weasley? Molly throw you out for corrupting the non-existent morals of her little boy? Or was it merely that Daddy refused to buy you the ridiculously expensive broom you wanted for Christmas?"

*I see no difference.*

Oh, damn.

And damn again.

It would seem he still possessed the unerring ability to find a person's sore spot and poke it with a sharp, rust-covered stake.

Damn it. He'd wanted to make the girl *squirm* a bit, which she richly deserved for falling so deeply asleep in a public space where anything could happen to her. (And, all right, for that appalling display of somnolent emotion, too.) But his last remark had leached the colour from her face, and her eyebrows had done that squiggly tilt that made him feel like he had punted a small animal across the room...which, despite the rumours, was not his wont. Hell, her eyes were going all watery, too.

He'd missed something. Or forgotten it, which amounted to the same thing and really wasn't all that surprising; most things from the first month or two of recuperation were hazy at best.

Still, he would not apologise, even if he knew how to set about it. Silence fell, alleviated only by the crackling of the fire and the burbling of the kettle as it prepared to boil. Glancing at the tray, Severus noticed the single cup and knelt to fetch the other from its storage-place under the table. The old, solid Brown Betty and its accompanying mugs had belonged to Granny Snape, his only relative with any redeeming qualities whatsoever. She'd given the set to him when she'd moved into that nursing home in Cardiff (where she still ruled the roost even in her nineties, sharp old bat that she was), saying he was the only family she knew who had anything like the proper touch for a cuppa. She'd made him swear never to brew any of that namby-pamby green muck in it, or she'd come back to haunt him, alive or dead. Sometimes he was tempted to do just that; he wouldn't mind her company. One of the most intelligent women he'd ever known, having made only the one mistake, she admitted, of marrying his grandfather. Long since dead...and Severus had his suspicions on how; Granny'd given his first lessons in plant-lore...he'd made her life a misery and continued to cast a pall over it in the form of Severus's father. She described both men as 'half-witted wankers.' But Severus, she assured the boy, had inherited her brains. Unfortunately, allowing for the difference in sex, he felt he'd also inherited her luck, and his mother's, in love.

And Granny's sharp tongue, without her sense of the appropriate.

The water boiled, and Severus filled the pot. A side-long glance, and he saw that Granger had folded the blankets and set them and herself primly on the couch. She stared at the floor, a dire sign for a girl who, he knew, ought to be craning her neck in the direction of his books.

Granny'd probably get a kick out of her.

He shut that thought down quickly.

The tea was ready. He poured. "I..." he began, "I do not *make merry* at Christmas, Miss Granger, but I hope a cup of tea will at least improve the morning." Granger gave him a weak sort of smile and accepted her cup. After a sniff and a moment's consideration, she added a tiny splash of milk to the Scottish Breakfast.

Granny would approve.

What were you supposed to do, Hermione wondered, when you imposed on a person...whom you knew, but only under some very odd conditions and definitions...who then severely (but unintentionally) hurt your feelings and then offered you tea?

What could you do but accept the tea?

Hermione had done her apology. *He* hadn't, but then she didn't really have a right to demand one. Allowing for some descriptive liberties, she deduced from his comments that she'd fallen asleep while reading last night and he'd been unable to wake her. She'd put herself and him in an uncomfortable situation, and she *knew* how he reacted to uncomfortable situations. And he wouldn't know about her parents; very few people did.

That bit about corrupting Ron was kind of funny. They'd tried some more kissing after... well, after. Nice, but not exactly mind-blowing. Molly caught them at it once, and from her overreaction, Hermione would've thought that the Weasley matriarch really had no idea where babies came from; she had been positively Victorian! The one upside was that Ron had had to look seriously at their relationship, and under the shadow of wedding bells, he'd cooled off rapidly. Friends forever and nothing more, thank the Great Wizards.

But that was then. This was now, and she was in Severus Snape's library, and she had slept there, and he was offering her spiky hospitality, and she hadn't the least idea how to behave. Should she break the silence? How? What did you say under these circumstances? *Good morning, merry Christmas...except you've just said you don't do merry Christmases...thanks for having me over in spite of yourself? I wish I'd bought you a present, but I didn't think of it and I've no idea what you'd like? I don't want to intrude, but I will anyway and ask you about the violin?*

"The tea is very good; thank you." *I wish I had something sensible to say.*

"You're welcome."

"I'll go after this. I don't want to impose any more than I already have."

He looked ever so slightly startled at that, then his lip twisted in that familiar way. "Of course," was all he said.

"You're welcome to visit later," she blurted. "Addie and I are going to have a dinner, just the two of us. We can easily make it three."

He snorted. "She would not want my company any more than you do."

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't mean it!"

"Don't practice social courtesies on me, Miss Granger. I find them pointless, tiresome, and prone to nasty conclusions. You do not like me. You do not want to like me. You ask because it is the means by which you may clear your overactive conscience. Don't. You have apologised; that is sufficient. I only ask that you refrain from repeating the performance."

Hermione set her chin. "We've had this conversation before, Professor. And I won the last time." He stared, outrage in his face, before beginning to chuckle. In response, Hermione relaxed and grinned. "Honestly, sir, I *am* being sincere. But if you want self-interest, I can say that I'm only inviting you so you can meet Addie so she can convince you to take her on as an apprentice."

His hand waved dismissively, and he regarded her steadily for a moment. "*Honestly*," he mimicked, "why are you here, Miss Granger? Why did you make me tuck you into my couch rather than cosying up in a proper bed with your friends or family?"

The young witch took a gulp of tea, fortunate that it had cooled. And she began to tell him why.

He felt sorry for her.

To Hermione's mind, it was the only possibility, and yet, it was woefully inadequate. Severus Snape might conceivably feel sorry for people, but in her observation, he had yet to base his own conduct on pity...for anyone, including himself.

And yet here she was, carting Addie *and* their Christmas dinner *and* her guitar *and* her cat onto Terranmore campus under the eyes of the few undergrad wizards remaining, all of whom were intent on making juvenile comments. She was tempted to turn them all into toads. (Trite, but as a little girl, that had been the first spell she'd looked up just as soon as she could.)

He was waiting for them at the entrance to the tower. He greeted Adelheid with brief courtesy and guided them through the layers of wards that guarded his rooms. Hermione knew better than to believe him paranoid.

Adelheid looked about her with approval once they reached the kitchen. "Very good," she declared of the clean, new counters, good-sized fireplace (magical society did not yet believe in kitchen ranges) and ice-charm box. "Larger than ours, a *proper* kitchen."

"Of course," said Snape, giving her one of those lifted eyebrow looks. Hermione decided he was amused.

"You wanted the space for your lab," she reminded her roommate. "We couldn't fit both."

"And we eat in the Hall; yes, I know." Adelheid waved a dismissive hand. "But today we feast. Let us get to work, so that we may feast sooner."

Hermione grinned, and she saw Professor Snape unbend so far as to allow the corners of his mouth to curl upwards. He also, to her shock, spelled up his sleeves to the elbow. She fought the urge to stare; now that she thought of it, she'd never seen anything more than his hands from the wrist down and his head from the neck up. Well, there had been the Dark Mark, but that was *all* she'd seen at the time; the fact that he had an arm to put it on had been an insignificant detail. But he *did* have arms, fairly nice-looking, masculine arms with black hair on them, and it made him seem so much more... *human*. *Not*, she thought as she tried to articulate precisely what she meant, *simply an embodied intelligence, which I think is what he tries to make people believe in, but a proper human, with blood and bone and muscle and a... a heart* A heart that had pumped out his blood all over the filth-laden floor of the Shrieking Shack, leaving it to pool and mix with the dirt and muck to become crimson-tinted sludge. Hermione closed her eyes and focused on breathing the clean, herb-scented air of Professor Snape's kitchen. Real life, normal life. *Life*. She didn't notice, as she turned her attention to scrubbing potatoes, that she was singing, nor did she see the odd look Professor Snape gave her, nor the hushing gesture Addie gave him. She didn't hear the words.

*"Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free.."*

Dinner with Granger and her roommate was surprisingly... tolerable. Adelheid proved to be a serious young witch with a little twinkle in her eye that, thankfully, had nothing of Albus's doddering slyness to it. She didn't natter on incessantly, and fascinatingly, her obvious respect had nothing of the fear he had spent twenty years instilling in the native-born students. She also knew her way quite well around a kitchen, which boded well for her skills in the laboratory. If he did find that he required some sort of assistant, he would certainly keep her in mind. For that matter, he realised as he probed his thoughts, he'd had sufficient faith in Granger's judgment to consider her sight unseen. (Not that he would have *accepted* her, but she would have made the short list of candidates.)

Over the course of the afternoon, they cooked, each to his or her own set of tasks, while Granger's beastie settled in front of the fire to watch the silly human rituals. The goose didn't take as long as it might have...Molly, mother hen that she was, had sent the bird over mostly cooked, then spelled into stasis...and there were potatoes and some sort of vegetable thing Adelheid concocted and pigs in a blanket and his personal contribution, the Yorkshire pudding, just as Granny forced him to learn how to make it. Severus had never dared to experiment with that particular recipe, and judging from its reception, he didn't need to. Granger insisted on a proper hot chocolate to finish off, and by that time, he was mellowed enough not to argue, not even for the sake of personal principle.

He rather expected the two witches to excuse themselves once dinner was done and the dirty dishes untidily stacked by the sink for the distraction of the house elf, but the three of them were deep in a debate about certain transformative potions and their intersection with transfiguration, which all seemed loath to abandon. Severus found that instead of merely outwitting them, he needed to excuse himself in order to take his potion. He returned, and the debate continued on for some time.

The discussion wandered, and by the time Adelheid did excuse herself, Severus was forced to stare at the skies outside; the sun had long since set, and the moon told him it was far later than he would have believed.

Granger had become more and more comfortable as time passed, if he were to judge by her body language. She'd begun properly seated with her feet on the floor and her back straight. She'd slowly listed to one side to lean against the arm. Then her shoes had come off and her feet tucked under to curl her into a comfortable little ball at her end of the sofa. And now that her friend had left, Hermione showed no inclination yet to leave, and indeed, stretched out to take over the empty space.

She was a very pretty young witch, he thought, watching the amber sparking in her hair when the candle flame hit it the right way. Did she have any young wizards dancing attendance? They had good enough eyes, he'd daresay, but that independent intelligence of hers might very well repel the silly morons with the effectiveness of an insect potion. Wizards, young or old, had a tendency to prefer breasts to brains in a witch. But given his situation, he'd come to value intelligent companionship wherever he could find it; it was an incredibly rare commodity and offered to him even more rarely. And here it was in a witch twenty years his junior.

The candlelight was kind to him. It softened his stark lines and glowed gold against skin that looked sallow in the sun. His hair drank the light in and held it close. His eyes were a little intense, perhaps, but his expression was as close to pleasure as she thought he'd ever come.

She wasn't sure what to do now. She'd missed the chance to leave when Addie had, but for some reason, she'd preferred to stay. She'd offer to play if she thought he'd appreciate the music. She'd ask *him* to play if she thought he'd oblige her...and if she had the courage. But as it was, she was here on his couch (and Crookshanks was on his hearth), and they were looking at each other. Her one reassurance was that if he wanted her to go, he'd evict her, verbally and/or bodily. But then, she couldn't really fathom why he'd allowed her to remain this long. Feeling sorry for her would surely only last so long, particularly with Professor Snape. Which must, she thought and warmed at the idea, indicate a substantial level of approval. What alarmed her was the next one: *If we were at Hogwarts, there'd be a magicked sprig of mistletoe somewhere about.*

She nearly lunged for her guitar.

The hour grew late, then later. Hermione played softly, and Severus listened. There were the expected songs: traditional carols and a few that must be more modern. She also seemed to have a penchant for Celtic melodies, and one or two Latin-sounding ones snuck their way in. Her voice was nice to listen to...lower than her speaking voice, somewhere in the alto range...if only partially trained. Her playing was far better; in between songs, she admitted that her parents had sent her off to lessons as soon as she could pick up an instrument, though they had consulted her on what instrument it should be. Her junior guitar, she admitted, still held pride of place at her home; Severus said nothing, but he could hear the pain in her voice at the mention of her parents.

He said nothing because he envied her that pain. His only feeling upon the deaths of Eileen and Tobias had been a draining sort of relief.

*His* childhood instrument had ended up smashed during one of his father's withdrawal sessions. Tobias had always been more violent in those brief periods off the bottle than on. When he'd learned that it was borrowed, and therefore could not be pawned, Tobias had asked what bloody use was it, then, and turned it into kindling. Severus had had to sort out a slew of odd jobs and to filch any number of ingredients for brewing the kinds of potions a twelve-year-old wasn't supposed to know about in order to repay his teacher the loss. Miss Lewis had been very kind about it, though. But then, she'd known very well what sort of father Tobias Snape was.

He said nothing of this to Hermione, only that his violin had been irreparably damaged and subsequently destroyed. She winced visibly and returned to her playing.

The fire was low. Not from any lack of fuel, but from the spell that was meant to remind him that it was very late and even bad wizards should get some sleep.

He didn't want to sleep; he wanted the evening to continue indefinitely. It was Christmas, and the sort of spell that had created the little bubble of serenity would vanish once he sent her home and retired to bed. He would wake up in the morning, and they would return to that slightly stiff, somewhat formal relationship of ex-professor and ex-student. Just now, he was a cat in a window's sunbeam, inching across the floor to absorb that warmth just as long as possible.

Hermione didn't seem to want to leave, either. Her fingers had grown tired, naturally, and her voice a little scratchy. He'd thrust a new cup of tea at her, this time an herbal blend that didn't fight the gobs of honey he poured in. She'd accepted it, sipped, and though the mug had masked the half of her face, he'd been able to see the smile narrow her eyes. He'd very tentatively...and very minutely...smiled back. He'd begun talking...though what about, he didn't really know...and she'd listened. Perhaps he'd mentioned his plans for the coming term.

But now the fire was low. Her hair was dark in the dim light. Had she ever realized how expressive her eyes were? They were large now and slightly bewildered, and she looked so much the child that his heart sank in his chest. He knew where it would have him go; he was too old *not* to know. But Hermione belonged to another sphere, one of youth and energy and optimism, one that had never been his and certainly held no place for him now, except maybe for the tiny, well-defined niche of mentor, or honorary uncle at best. Which was as it should be. But it was one that he knew he would never be content to remain in, should he even be so foolish as to try.

He *had* tried, with Lily. In the end, he had only succeeded in making himself miserable and her dead.

Hermione was not Lily, but that was almost worse. She would give and give and give. He knew he could make her idolise him...it would be so very simple, for she was so very young and cerebral and easy to understand...and though she would still be Hermione, she would make herself over into something that would impress him, win his approbation. Perhaps she would not love him, not in the way that he could allow himself to love her, but she would define herself by her relationship with him. And then he'd probably do something to mess it up after he'd spent all the time messing *her* up.

*Let still the woman take an elder than herself; so wears she to him...*

Bloody Shakespeare.

The room was dark, and beyond the small circle of firelight, shadows clustered heavily. Hermione found herself dreading the thought of venturing beyond that small, safe circle, even just to the wall, let alone venturing further and out into the night. It was silly, but here it was so nice and warm and comfortable and, well, *safe*. Having been screwed up to the sticking point for so long, she hadn't realised just how constantly she felt the necessity of wariness. Even in the first few days of Hogwarts, it had been the childish malice of Draco and the other Slytherins that had kept her looking about her and aware of precisely where her wand was. And then the war, of course, had made it a matter of life and death. It wasn't any more, but the habit of 'constant vigilance!' remained, except for...

...except for here. In this place. With this man.

*That* concept was a bit frightening, but it was... an internal uncertainty. She wasn't afraid of *him*. Hermione knew that she was safer here and now than she had ever been...or ever would be anywhere else. It was the yearning to cement that feeling by being as close to him as was humanly possible that unnerved her. She remembered mooning after Ron (and, if she were being honest, that dreadful bit involving Lockhart, too) and it had never involved these intense physical sensations, which weren't for sex, necessarily, but for the feel of him wrapped around her, solidly present against her back or for his arm around her shoulders while she curled up against him with her cheek against his chest. Hermione was just shy of the reality, and was pulled to complete it like iron filings near a magnet.

And all this for Severus Snape: her teacher, her tormentor, her cipher. One of the last men on earth she had ever even considered building a relationship with. And yet she couldn't turn the feelings off, not now, nor (again to be honest) did she really want to. Except that he was old enough to be her father, if only just, and he was a man of honour. (A non-traditional code of honour, maybe, but one he rigidly adhered to.) He *might* consider a friendship with her, but anything more? Hermione imagined he'd see it as a betrayal of some sort, possibly of Lily (the man had practically *worshipped* her), possibly of his position of trust (even if *it* was over a year and a half gone).

Her tea was all drunk up.

A small sigh and she curled up into a ball, looking wistfully at a possibility in human form from across the tops of her knees.

He could offer her a bed. Not his, naturally, but the couch could be made more comfortable than he'd had the inclination for the previous night.

But that might obliterate her reputation. Last night was understandable, but a second night, and one where her roommate knew of her location, might very well cause a maelstrom of gossip. Adelheid might very well be trustworthy, but it would only take one careless comment or even another student's presence in the wrong place at the wrong time. *His* reputation couldn't be much worse than it already was, but hers was still good.

It was late; he should send her off.

Walking her back to the dormitories would be unthinkable.

He didn't want her to go at all.

Silence had fallen, and though he could feel her eyes on him, he kept his own gaze resolutely on the fire. His feet felt as though he'd planted them in the fireplace itself; excusing himself for the oral potion and the neck salve had been simple enough, but he felt absurdly self-conscious about baring his feet in front of her and sticking them in a cauldron. Not, he thought, biting his lip, that he didn't have fairly nice feet. Normally shaped, toenails in good order, decent bit of hair, no warts or other nastinesses to disgust the ordinary observer. He'd just never thought of showing his feet to anyone, not since he'd grown out of the childish habit of pottering about the house in his nightshirt.

A bolt of pain escaped from his foot and shot up his calf, forcing a grunt of pain from deep in his throat.

"Se... Sir, are you all right?" She unfolded herself from the couch and crossed the intervening space rapidly.

"I'm fine," he answered shortly.

"You're fine," she repeated, and her mouth twisted wryly. "You're so fine, in fact, that your lip is bleeding. Rather profusely," she added. He lifted the back of his hand to the area in question, only to discover that she was right. The minor pain had pulled his concentration away from his feet, but in the moment of shock, he'd reactively bitten straight through his lip. With an amused look of exasperation, Hermione pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and pressed it against the wound. Anxious for her to keep her distance, Severus quickly moved his hand to replace hers, and he quite clearly saw her shiver from the brief contact. "I... I'm sure you have the proper antiseptic and healing potions. Are they in the bathroom cabinet?"

"I'll get them," he mumbled, with some idea of doing his feet at the same time. But when he tried to stand, a thousand rust-covered nails rammed themselves into his soles, and the sound that emerged as he collapsed ungracefully back into the chair was far more audible than a mere grunt.

"Severus!" she exclaimed, and then her wand was poised in her hand and she was crouched beside his chair, her eyes searching his face.

He swore, briefly but inventively, before panting out what he needed her to do. She sheathed her wand, and the panic reverted back to exasperation. A stream of grumbling trailed behind her as she stalked out, primarily, so far as he could make out, concerned with the stubborn, pig-headed, idiotic stoicism of the male creature. Of course, her language was far more colourful, and it might be that she knew quite as many swear words as he did.

"This," she informed him tartly, "is becoming ridiculous. I'm beginning to believe you need a keeper." Her hands were gentle as they unfastened his boots and pulled them from his feet.

"Are you volunteering?" he drawled, an eyebrow lifting.

"And if I said yes?" she snapped back. "Honestly! Do you think I like the idea that you've been sitting here in pain for the past several hours? Do you think I wouldn't understand if you have to excuse yourself, or if you ask me to leave?" She drew off his socks, and he tried not to hiss with the pain and humiliation. "Would it help if I showed off my own collection? It's not as extensive, naturally, but I can tell you it's still pretty damn painful if I forget to take *my* medicines like a good little witch." She lifted his feet over the cauldron, and he half-expected her to drop them in and let them bang against the bottom, which he probably deserved. She didn't, of course. "I'd expect *you* to know as well or better, Severus Snape. Whatever else you are, I've never thought of you as an *enthusiastic* masochist." He shrugged, uncomfortably reminded of some of the scoldings he gotten from Minerva over the years (mostly dating to the period when he, too, called her 'Professor McGonagall'). She glared, hands on her hips, for a brief moment before turning her attention to the hole in his lip. She said more, or he thought she did, but she didn't seem to require an answer, and he, with the lessening of pain as well as her proximity, was increasingly preoccupied with such matters as the curve of her mouth and the intense focus of her great, pansy-brown eyes. And there was her hair, too, with a life of its own. She had yet to make mention of its dramatically shorter length; did she like it, or had she simply not noticed? Here and now, it beckoned to his fingers. He could, if he wanted to, delve into the mass, cup the back of her head, and tug her into a kiss. Gently, he thought, so as not to frighten her any more than the idea already would.

Severus closed his eyes, locked the thought away somewhere behind them.

Hermione finished, looked at his closed face, and sighed. "What times do you have to take your potions?" she asked, not really expecting an answer, and astonished when he recited the list. His voice was drowsy, but knowing him, she had no doubts of its accuracy. He might *lie*...this was Severus Snape, after all...but under the circumstances, it seemed a bit silly. She made a mental note of the schedule.

At a bit of a loss, Hermione glanced around the room. It was a nice enough room, she thought, but one definitely furnished with the idea of company in mind; there were a few more chairs and sofas...nice, but not *too* nice, and not too numerous...and the decor could best be described as British non-committal. Dark wood, neutral colour palette, neatly arranged books in neatly arranged rows. A table with a few decanters and glasses on it. And judging from the wards that fairly bristled about the fireplace and nestled at the base of the doors, the porcelain vase on the mantel would contain Floo powder. A public room. A very different room from the one he had tucked her into last night. His library. Her lips tugged themselves into a grin. In a romantic novel, he would have had the chivalry to put her in his bed (he *did* sleep in a bed, didn't he?) and taken the couch himself. She doubted that he'd felt that generous, assuming that there weren't even *more* wards and spells in his bedroom that she might have fallen afoul of.

It seemed he'd dropped off; his head listed slightly to the side and a soft *hush-sshush* of air gave voice to slowed breathing. Hermione seated herself on a nearby ottoman and watched his sleeping face in the firelight, amusing herself with the thought that his nostrils really were *large*. The word 'enormous' came to mind, but that was probably unkind. After all, they were hardly his fault. Her eyes travelled down. He still wore high-collared robes, though they were not as tight as they had been at school. *Probably to keep the pressure from his neck*. His shoulders were thin; thinking back to her memories of *his* memories, she thought they always had been. Chest in proportion, arms indiscernible as he favoured long, loose sleeves. His hands were curled upon the chair arms, long and long-fingered, perhaps larger than she would have expected? Scarred, too, but nothing that appeared extreme; Addie's hands had some of the same marks from years of knives and rogue ingredients. There was a funny one she'd never noticed before, a squiggly magenta line that circled his thumb like a child's ring. It made her smile to see it, and she hoped it was as benign as it looked. Before her brain could veto the idea, her hand stretched out to trace it.

In a flash, his free hand slammed down on hers with enough force to make her wince. Instinct tried to snatch her hand back, but it wouldn't budge under his grip. Hermione looked up in time to see ferocity melt from his face, transforming into a very brief confusion and then a quirk of resignation. "Granger, did you never actually *pay attention* to the school motto?" He relaxed visibly, but his hands didn't move. Dry, and the tips of his fingers were a little cool. Hermione's mouth opened and closed as she tried to formulate something that didn't make her sound like a complete idiot. The endeavour became absolutely impossible when he smiled, a smile of honest amusement without his innate mockery or cynicism. "Of course not," he answered himself. "You spent your entire Hogwarts career learning how to tickle the dragon without getting irrevocably maimed."

His thumb was moving. Back and forth. At each brush, a frisson tingled up her arm.

He continued. "And now the war is over, and Hermione Granger is still seeking dragons."

"Did you ever think," she asked, "that maybe it's one dragon in search of another?" He stared at her. It was her turn to smile, and hers was broad. "After all, I've never been a damsel in distress, have I?"

He snorted. "You were what Granny Snape would have called a holy terror. Even as a child," and here his thumb stilled, "you were never anything less than formidable."

"There you are, then."

"You're still a child, Granger."

"I'm not a child, Snape," she parroted back at him. "I'm a young woman, old enough to know my own mind and make my own mistakes, however smart or stupid they may be."

"And I'm old enough to know better than to foster those mistakes."

"*Why* would it have to be a mistake?" Hermione cried, exasperated. "What would be wrong about it? Who would be hurt?"

"You would," he shot back. "I hurt everyone I touch, Granger, and even if I didn't, you'd *change*. You haven't grown into yourself yet," and here she scoffed. "You *haven't*," he insisted. "You trust me farther than you should; trust me when I say this. You are young, and associating with me, you would choose to become something closer to me. I would not do that to you."

"Severus, *that is what people do!* You change and are changed by everyone you meet! That's life! And what would be so wrong in becoming close to you? *You are a good man*. And this is from someone who *knows* your past, Severus Snape. I had your fucking memories *in bottles on my shelf* The war is over, Severus; you've completed your penance! I want to be part of your *life!* I want the option to choose *you!*"

"You'd choose *this?*" he hissed, yanking at his collar and baring a neck that bore great, dimpled masses of scar tissue, mottled in grotesque shades of black and ashen grey. "And *this?*" He shook his sleeve back, and the ghost of the Dark Mark lay there, quiescent, but of a grey not far different from the shades on his neck. "*This* is someone you'd model yourself after?"

"Yes!" she shot back, so quickly that he was taken aback. Tears started in her eyes, and his image blurred. Gathering up her courage, she threw herself forward and wrapped her arms around that thin chest. "*Please*, Severus. Please."

"What do you want of me?" and his voice was plaintive. Absently, he pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped her face.

"As much as you will give me," she sniffled, looking up at him. "Day by day."

"Gods," he said feelingly, allowing his head to drop to hers. "You're as screwed up as I am, aren't you?"

"But first," she added, "I want you to give me my hair back, you bastard."

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## ANs:

I love Granny Snape.

Severus's tapestry is a representation of the Book of Ruth. I can't really say why, except that growing up, Queen Esther was my Biblical hero(ine), but when I was older, I appreciated more Ruth's quiet strength and courage.

The Shakespeare quotation is from Twelfth Night. The Count tells his young attendant that because men have short attention spans, they should marry younger women, who are more adaptable than the men themselves. This comes after the boy (actually a cross-dressing Viola) has been dropping hints like mad that she fancies him, an older man. Needless to say, for the Count the penny doesn't drop until the final scene.

The only specific song in this chapter is 'Simple Gifts,' a Shaker hymn. A version has been added to my youtube playlist. I didn't have any particular carols or Celtic music in mind, but I can always recommend the Irish & Celtic Music Podcast if you're curious; I've been listening to it for years.

# Epilogue

Chapter 4 of 4

Wherein we catch up with Severus and Hermione a few years later.

Epilogue

*Two Years Later*

Hermione was a pushy witch.

But Severus was a stubborn wizard.

They were well-matched, their friends and acquaintances agreed, once they'd had a great deal of time to assimilate the idea. And they agreed that when the two were united on anything, they were an absolutely terrifying force of nature.

This was an impression that pleased the both of them.

But the effect of the irresistible force and the immovable object together was a relationship that was slow, deliberate, and anything but dull. Hermione pushed, Severus resisted. She snapped, and he sniped. He made unilateral decisions, which she then countermanded. He banned her from the tower, and she resolutely camped upon his doorstep. (That incident was the talk of the colleges for weeks, especially once a visually fascinating array of hexes began to mark the Terranmores who tried to break into Hermione's tent.) She shut the door in his face, and— well, in that instance, Hermione had to immediately open it again and use her wand to fix his broken nose, all the while apologising profusely.

Severus, at least, had never had quite so much fun in his life, with the added bonus that such a lengthy courtship assuaged his conscience. And he had been quite right: Granny Snape had a ball with Hermione. She teased her grandson a bit about the age difference (not too much, as the boy was more sensitive than he ought to be), but made no bones about the fact that she approved. Hermione's parents were as yet still charmed, so he could only pretend to believe Hermione when she said that her parents would be accepting. Though if they could accept that their daughter had given them a four-year enforced vacation, then Severus thought his chances to be relatively good.

Hermione found everything a thoroughly worthwhile challenge, once she was able to subdue her impatience and come to terms with the fact that *she* needed the time as much as he did. She was an adult, but still new to the status, and she had to feel her way through all of the emotional pitfalls that came along with dealing with such a close-mouthed, labyrinthine man as Severus. What truly frustrated her was the time it had taken to uncover the reason Severus had been going to the museum, for how much time had been wasted when she could have been helping him? She threw herself into the project unreservedly, and when he tentatively offered to recompense her for the monies she lost by not busking, she nearly bit his head off. (After a circuitous inquiry, he learned that her musical income was, in essence, superfluous, as she had effectively bullied, berated, badgered, and guilted the Ministry into paying for her higher education. He was quite proud of her.) But as he did not feel comfortable 'owing' Hermione anything—a feeling he knew she would dismiss as absurd, and maybe it was—he resolved to repay her in other ways. He began to play for her.

She cried the first time, though she tried to hide it by burying her face in the fur of that immense cat-creature she owned. He asked her why, and she answered, "Because it's the first time I've ever heard you speak of hope." He could only stare in reply, as he realised that she was right. And when she asked, he promised her a transcribed score.

From listening to her, to playing for her, to playing with her. He followed this seemingly organic path, and he could think of no reason to deny her request when she made it. So here they were, at Hermione's usual pitch, ready to begin playing for the masses of people hurrying by.

And he found he didn't give a damn. He was here with Hermione, and he was playing for and with her, and looking forward to having a bloody good time at both. If their audience liked them, well and good. If not, it made no never mind to him. He had good music and a good lady, and that was more than he'd ever thought he'd have.

And, well, if their audience hated them, Hermione had a mean collection of hexes. She was protective that way.

With a twinkle in her eye, Hermione began playing 'Sovay.' With an answering gleam, Severus joined in.

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A/Ns:

For those of you reading as I post, my apologies; I never meant to make you wait this long but that RL, as it has a habit of doing, got in the way.

Severus's 'song of hope' is Yoshiki's 'Seize the Light,' a slight anachronism that I doubt anyone would notice except for me pointing it out. But when it comes to music that moves me, Yoshiki is one of the few who can make me cry. And the final song, 'Sovay,' is traditional English folk, wherein the lady tests her lover's affections in a manner similar to Shakespeare's Portia. The version here is performed by Paisley Close, which has some fun with the fiddle accompaniment. Both have been added to the YT playlist.

Thank you all for reading; I hope you've enjoyed this little jaunt. If you feel inclined, please leave a token in the little box below.