

The Surrogate

by Mugglegirl0908

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The Determined Apprentice

Chapter 1 of 5

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Disclaimer: Oh how I wish it was mine, but alas it's all Jo's...

Disclaimer #2: This story was started about a month or so before HBP was released. I'm not going to totally ignore HBP, but major parts of it must be ignored. I am, however, staying canon compliant through OotP and will make small references to various things in HBP. All future stories by me will follow the "new canon" religiously. ;-)

Chapter 1: The Determined Apprentice

Hermione Granger sat basking in the sunlight on Diagon Alley with a bowl of Florean Fortescue's peppermint ice cream. With the heat and humidity of midsummer London, she hadn't been able to resist when she passed by the ice cream shop. She tutted fitfully as she glanced at her watch. Her two best friends were ten minutes late.

"Bloody typical," she muttered under her breath.

She, Harry and Ron had agreed to meet for some lunch and shopping. Ron and Harry were on a short break before starting their third and final year of Auror training. They hardly got to spend any time together because of their busy schedules. And since her parents had convinced, or rather *'guilted'*, her into taking time away from her adopted world to help them with their dental practice, she didn't get a chance to go in to the wizarding world as often as she would like.

Finally, she spotted a mop of flaming red hair followed closely by a messy dark head. Harry and Ron beamed at her as they approached the shop. In her most teacher-like voice she glared and said, "When will the two of you grow up and learn to be on time?" When they only grinned more widely at her, she couldn't help but smile warmly at them.

"All right then, *Professor*," teased Ron, "if you're done giving us a lecture on maturity and punctuality, do you mind if we go get something to eat? I'm bloody starving."

Harry and Hermione laughed. "Ron," Harry chimed in, "you always say you're starving." The three friends chuckled as they headed towards the Leaky Cauldron.

They entered the pub and quickly found a table at the back. "So, how have you two been? I haven't seen you both in ages. Still enjoying training?" Hermione asked as she tucked in to her corned beef sandwich, which Ron was eyeing with disgust.

"It's going really great. We're still learning loads of cool stuff," said Harry around mouthfuls of his pastrami on rye.

"Yeah," agreed Ron enthusiastically. "We really are learning a lot. And check this out!" Ron pulled up the sleeve of his robes to show off a nasty red scar surrounded by purple and yellow bruises.

"Ouch, Ron! That looks like it hurts!" Hermione exclaimed with a grimace.

"Yeah, it smarted a bit. It's from a hex that hit me during one of our combat simulations. Pretty wicked, eh? I bet after we're done with training I'll be able to get loads of girls with the story of how I got this scar!" Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry laughed.

After eating, they set about their shopping. Hermione coaxed the boys into spending an hour in Flourish and Blotts. They paid her back by dragging her in to Quality Quidditch Supplies. She had to bribe both boys by buying them ice cream to get them to leave.

As they left Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "So, Hermione, have you decided what you want to do about an apprenticeship?"

Hermione gave a loud "Humph," and a slight scowl crossed her face. "No, I haven't decided yet," she said with more than a little annoyance in her voice. "I only agreed to go home to make up for all the time I spent away from Mum and Dad while at Hogwarts, but now Mum is determined for me to stay. I'm also finding that it's difficult to get an apprenticeship when you've graduated two years ago. Not to mention I still just can't decide which field I want to specialise in."

"I always thought you'd go in to something like Arithmancy or Ancient Runes. You seemed to love those two subjects when we were at school," Harry offered supportively.

Hermione just sighed. "Yes, I really did love those subjects. The problem is that the number of careers available is surprisingly limited. I mean, besides working for Gringotts or teaching, there aren't any remotely challenging or interesting careers in either field, and I'm really not interested in either of those."

"Always looking for a challenge, aren't you?" teased Harry with a grin. Hermione gave him a reproving look before smiling back at him as they continued down the street.

"Well, if it's a challenge you want then think about this logically," Ron said taking on an uncharacteristically serious tone. "What subject did you find the most challenging at school?"

A pensive expression came over Hermione's face as she thought about her answer. "Well," she began slowly, "I guess Potions was probably the most challenging for me. You can't just learn it from a book like you can other subjects. It takes intense concentration, control and talent to master it."

"Yeah," agreed Ron, "but having Snape hovering over you doesn't help with that concentration."

"*Professor Snape, Ronald.*" Hermione automatically chided with a sigh. *Honestly*, she thought to herself, *when will they grow up? After all Professor Snape did to aid the Order in defeating Voldemort you would think they would see that he is an honourable man...and a very brave and intelligent one. All three of us would be dead if not for the invaluable information he gathered while putting his life on the line as a spy.* She shook her head to rid it of such fruitless thoughts, as they continued in a companionable silence down the crowded street.

Suddenly, an idea hit Hermione. She inwardly berated herself for not thinking of this before. Of course! It made perfect sense. She could study a very challenging subject which had a vast array of career opportunities attached to it and she would study under one of the most talented Potions masters in England, if not all of Europe. And to top it off, she would get to return to Hogwarts!

Now, all she had to do was convince Harry and Ron how much merit the idea had. Even scarier, and possibly harder, she would have to convince Professor Snape. Yes, she would convince him somehow. He owed her this after all the years of cruel remarks and general rudeness she had endured in his classes.

She had tried hard to prove herself a worthy student, yet he never once let up in his criticism of her and her work in the classroom, even when her work was perfect *which it almost always was*, she thought smugly.

Besides, it wouldn't be all that bad. While higher education took years in the Muggle world, it was much different in the wizarding world. Apprenticeships usually only took about one year. And since there were no such things as universities in the wizarding world, it was considered an honour to be accepted as someone's apprentice. Most witches and wizards chose not to continue their education after seven years at school. With the exception of a few careers, such as being an Auror or Healer, it was not considered necessary to do any training in a specific field. A Potions apprenticeship, especially under Professor Snape, would ensure that she could get any job she desired.

The one flaw in this, of course, was the master with whom she wished to study. She knew he thought her an annoying thorn in his side and he had never been kind to her. She also knew that her being best friends with the boy he hated more than anyone alive, now that Voldemort was dead, did not bode well for her. If she could convince him, she knew he would make her life as difficult as he could. *Hell*, she thought, *I put up with him in class for seven years. How bad could one more year really be?*

She decided right then and there to send an owl to him later that evening, requesting a meeting with him to discuss an apprenticeship the following week. *It wouldn't do to surprise him by just showing up unannounced*, she thought. She would not take "No" for an answer, no matter what he would require to accept her as his apprentice. A slightly evil glint came into her eyes. Professor Snape would never know what hit him when he met with her.

Severus sighed as he looked over the two parchments for the hundredth time since he had received them the previous morning. One was from the wizarding solicitor who handled the Snape family estate, and the other from St. Mungo's. Both put him in a very irritated mood.

It seemed that his father, in a posthumous, yet vicious blow to his son, had irrevocably set the terms of his will in an attempt to ensure that Severus would never get his rightful inheritance. He had been trying for several months to find a way to circumvent the added stipulations with no progress. The wizarding solicitor had written to advise him that the last, and final, attempt had failed.

His father knew he had willingly chosen the solitary life of a bachelor. He had never even considered having a family as his life as a Death-Eater-turned-spy had never been conducive to family life. Now, two years after that bloody Potter brat had finally managed to hold up his end of the prophecy by destroying the Dark Lord, he feared he

might be too old and set in his ways to seriously consider having a family.

His father knew all of this, even though they hadn't spoken since Severus was nineteen years old. At least they hadn't spoken directly. He wasn't foolish enough to think that his father never kept tabs on him. So, his father decided to play one last cruel joke on his son, after he died. When Severus had learnt of his father's untimely, only because it took too bloody long, demise, he had initially felt a glimmer of hope. He knew that, as the last of the Snapes, the family's significant fortune would be all his for the taking. He could retire and do the research he had wanted to do for years.

That euphoria had lasted until the solicitor sent him a copy of his father's last will and testament. It appeared that for Severus to inherit even a single Knut from his father's vault, a direct heir must be produced. It did not specify he had to marry, but simply the child must have Snape blood. He would have considered adoption were it not for that stipulation, but the will made it very clear that the child had to be Severus' biological child. That meant he would have to father a baby.

The prevailing problem here was with whom. He had lived in a self-imposed celibacy since the Dark Lord's reappearance. He hadn't wished to subject any woman to the life he was forced to lead.

Convinced that no woman would want to marry someone with his past history as a Death Eater, he had done the only thing he thought would allow him to meet the requirements of the will. He had visited the fertility clinic located in St. Mungo's to look into the possibility of finding a woman to be a surrogate for his child.

After studying the countless parchments detailing every woman registered with the Surrogacy Service, he had requested meetings with over a dozen of what he believed to be the best witches. Several had refused to meet him when they found out he was single. He had interviewed all of the rest.

Two, whom he had not recognised from his tenure at Hogwarts, had been complete dunderheads incapable of intellectual conversation. Three he had found excessively annoying when they berated him with questions about how he was going to raise a child on his own. One had looked at him in terror and fled when he unintentionally revealed the Dark Mark on his arm. Two had walked out of the interview in a huff when he demanded to know their scores from their N.E.W.Ts.

However, the last one, his final chance, he had held out a little hope for. She had been young, intelligent with slightly above average scores on her N.E.W.Ts and didn't seem all that annoying. However, the parchment from St. Mungo's was to inform him that she had decided she couldn't adhere to the terms he demanded. He refused to compromise. If he were going to have a child, it would be under his own terms and no one else's!

He cursed as he threw the damned parchments into the fire. Damn his miserable father! *He did this on purpose*, Severus thought. He wanted Severus to spend the rest of his life knowing the fortune was just sitting there. His father believed that not even the possibility of a vault filled with Galleons along with the several accompanying estates would be enough to make Severus want a child, but he would not let his father best him in death. He refused to be denied what should be rightfully his, no matter what the cost.

He left his quarters to attend breakfast in the Great Hall, in a flurry of black robes. He entered from the side door and took his usual seat at the Head Table. *will prove Father wrong*, he mumbled under his breath. He would not give up yet. That money was rightfully his and he would get it. He had survived years being a spy against the most evil Dark wizard of all time. How much more difficult could it be to handle a child? After all, now that the Dark Lord was gone, he didn't have to worry quite so much about how he would keep a child safe.

He bid a terse, "Good morning" to his colleagues, as he added eggs and toast onto his plate. The other professors, used to his less than cheerful demeanour, were unfazed by the curt greeting. The Headmaster actually appeared amused by it. Ignoring Professor McGonagall's attempts to rouse him out of his temper and into a conversation, he let his thoughts wander back to his predicament.

He was sick of teaching, but his Gringotts vault was pitifully low with the meagre stipend he received as a professor. He had enough to survive, but without the family inheritance he had little hope of retiring before he was one hundred and eighty. With the inheritance, however, he and his child could have a peaceful and quiet life, far away from Hogwarts, in one of the spacious manor houses his family owned but currently sat vacant. He wouldn't have to teach these damn dunderheads any more.

Besides, it wasn't like having an heir to carry on the Snape name would necessarily be a terrible thing. Perhaps his heir could restore the honour that the name Snape once held. He could teach his child to appreciate beauty and desire knowledge. He would prevent his child from making the same mistakes he had. He would be a better father than his father had been.

Just as he started to push his still full plate away, unable to eat due to the muddled thoughts rolling around in his head, the morning post arrived. An unfamiliar brown owl swooped into the Great Hall and carefully landed with its leg outstretched in front of him. Curious, and brought out of his distracted thoughts momentarily, he carefully reached for the parchment attached to the owl's leg. He automatically sniffed it for any detectable hint of poison and used his wand to check for any signs of Dark Magic. *You don't spend years as a spy without learning to be cautious*, he mused. When he was convinced there was nothing malevolent about the parchment, he meticulously broke the seal and unrolled it.

What he read made his heart stop. What did the foolish girl think she was playing at? She was asking, no telling, him to meet with her to discuss her becoming his apprentice. *Ha!* He thought. *You are deceived, Miss Granger, if you think this is even an option. I have never taken an apprentice and I certainly don't want one now, and certainly not one who would be as bothersome as you.*

It was a sense of morbid curiosity that led him to finish reading the letter. It seemed Miss Granger had opted not to continue her studies after leaving Hogwarts, which admittedly surprised him, and was quite adamant about taking on an apprenticeship now. Using the skills he had developed as a spy to read between the lines, he could sense she was desperate. She had even gone so far as to mention her willingness to accept whatever terms he demanded in exchange for his tutelage.

"Hmmm", he purred. *This could be interesting. She would do anything?* He would only have to put up with her for a year. Shorter, perhaps, if she learnt quickly enough, which he knew she could.

Suddenly, a light went on his head. Nine months could be plenty of time for someone like Miss Granger to learn all he could teach her. Besides, if she agreed to the conditions he had in mind, it could end up taking closer to a year anyway. It was not uncommon for a magical conception to take several attempts before resulting in pregnancy.

Well, she certainly wasn't whom he would have freely chosen to bear him an heir, but he supposed she would do just fine. After all, he admitted begrudgingly, the girl did get good grades in school and demonstrated much natural talent. Surely a child with her genes, as well as his, would have an astounding intellect and be quite powerful. Of course, he would not even consider letting her be a part of his child's life, regardless of the fact that it would, in fact, be just as much hers. The very idea of spending the rest of his life tied down to that annoying witch made him shudder. No, she would simply spend the time during the pregnancy being taught the art of potion making. Then, once the child was born, he would recommend her for her Mastery in Potions. After that she would leave and never darken his doorstep again.

He had told all of the women he interviewed at St. Mungo's that they would be required to live with him. He needed to make sure they were properly caring for *his* child. He had also adamantly held that once the child was born, they were to disappear completely. He would hold Miss Granger to the same standard.

Too caught up in his thoughts to eat or pay attention to any of the conversation that the other professors were trying to wrangle him into, he abruptly rose from his seat, leaving the Great Hall to return to his chambers. He had some planning to do. He needed to ensure all necessary stipulations were in writing without leaving a loophole to back out of. It had to be iron clad.

He knew that her damned Gryffindor morals would not let her accept the idea of having a child and then leaving it easily. He would have to use her desperation to his advantage. He needed to appeal to her love of a challenge to get her to agree to the apprenticeship, without challenging his requirements. It would take all of his Slytherin cunning to get her to sign the apprenticeship contract he would write for her. An evil smirk crossed his face. Miss Granger would never know what hit her when she showed up.

A/N: Thanks so much to my wonderful beta queenp, and to Molly S., and Diaz for looking over this as well. You guys are wonderful and I couldn't have done it without you! :-)

And a huge round of applause for GinnyW for all the advice and letting me "borrow" a titbit from her story To Beget an Heir...with permission, of course. ;-)

Negotiation

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione and Severus meet to discuss the apprenticeship. Will Hermione be able to out maneuver the Master Manipulator or will she get more than she bargained for?

Disclaimer: We all know it's all Jo's...

Author Note: I am so sorry for the delay in this update! RL got away with my betas and me. But, hopefully this chapter (which I worked very hard on) will make up for it. Enjoy! :-D

Chapter 2: Negotiation

Hermione awoke with a yawn and gently removed the orange ball of fur that was her cat, Crookshanks, from her chest. She climbed out of bed, stretching as she made her way to the loo. She had slept a little later than normal. However, her parents didn't need her at their office today, so a short lie in wouldn't hurt. She quickly showered, dressed, and headed down to the kitchen to make herself some breakfast.

As she sat down with her plate of eggs, bacon and toast, she heard a soft but persistent tap on the kitchen window. That could only be the sound of an owl attempting to make a delivery. Since she had just seen the boys (as she often referred to Harry and Ron), she figured it couldn't possibly be them writing to her. With a puzzled expression, she got up to open the window. She took the parchment from the owl's leg, gasping loudly as she read the letter.

Ms. Granger,

I am intrigued by your request to become an apprentice with me. If you wish to discuss this matter and the possible terms for said apprenticeship, please meet me in my office at 9am on Thursday, August 17. If you can manage your own transport to Hogsmeade, I will send a carriage to escort you to the castle from Hogsmeade Station at 8:30. Do not be late.

Cordially,

Professor Severus Snape

She was ecstatic that Professor Snape appeared willing to consider her as an apprentice. However, she couldn't help but be astonished...and a little wary. She had braced herself for a fight. His apparent acquiescence was somewhat alarming. Snape was not known for making things simple for anyone, especially Gryffindors. He was a Slytherin, after all; he wouldn't have said yes if there wasn't something in it for him.

She was smart enough to decide that he must be up to something. A small shiver ran down her spine as she contemplated what the enigmatic Potions master could have in store for her at this meeting. She would definitely need to be prepared for anything. She was determined to get him to accept, but she didn't want to get run roughshod over either. He had risked his life for the Order, however. He had even saved her life a couple of times. Whatever he wanted couldn't possibly be all that bad...could it? A peck on her arm brought her out of her reverie.

"Ouch! That hurt!" she reprimanded the bird. It gave an impatient hoot in response. "Well, all right. But there is no need to be so impolite about it." She gave the bird a bit of toast then retrieved a bowl with some water. After finishing its treat, the owl flew out the window without a backwards glance at Hermione. *It must be Professor Snape's personal owl. It certainly has his temperament*, she thought wryly.

She rose and began cleaning her mess from breakfast. Magic was good for a great many things, but she preferred doing housecleaning, such as washing, without magic. She especially preferred working by hand when she needed to think. She needed to keep her hands busy to prevent the nervousness from overwhelming her. Thoughts of her upcoming meeting with the professor continued to bother her even as she dried the dishes and returned them to the cabinets.

What would he demand in exchange for helping her obtain her Mastery in Potions? Whatever he planned, she knew she was up to the task. The Sorting Hat hadn't put her in Gryffindor for nothing, after all. She needed to be prepared to call on all of her Gryffindor courage. She was determined that her surly former professor would not prevent her from getting what she wanted. She had four days to mentally prepare herself for the meeting and his plans for her.

For Hermione, Thursday couldn't get there fast enough. Time seemed to stand still. She occupied herself with reading every potions-related article, book and scrap of paper she could get her hands on. She needed to be prepared for any questions he might ask regarding the latest developments in the field. Initially, her parents insisted she eat meals with them, but when she continuously babbled about how excited she was about the possibility of this apprenticeship, they eventually gave up.

Hermione awoke at day break Thursday morning. She took time to review all her notes from the books and articles she had read. She also took extra time with her appearance. She wanted him to see her as a sophisticated adult, not a nattering little girl with her hand in the air as she had been at school. She smoothed her hair into soft ringlets as best she could before donning a knee-length navy blue skirt and crisp white button-down shirt beneath her best robes.

She Apparated to Hogsmeade station at exactly 8:27 and began searching for the promised carriage. It arrived promptly at 8:30 and took her to the front door of the castle. She pushed the huge doors open and automatically began descending the stairway that led to the dungeons and Professor Snape's office.

As she walked through the corridors, empty due to the summer holidays, she felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her. She smiled as she thought of her many adventures wandering these corridors with Harry and Ron. It felt so good to be back. She felt as though she were returning home. She loved the school, but she never wanted to be a teacher. Merlin knew she did enough of that with Ron, Harry, and Neville to last a lifetime. She felt giddy at the prospect of spending just one more year at Hogwarts, however. Forcing herself to concentrate on the task at hand, she let out a deep breath as she hesitantly knocked on the door to Professor Snape's office.

"Enter," was the curt reply. She pushed the door open before giving a nervous smile to the man sitting behind his desk as she entered.

"Good morning, sir," she said as she quietly shut the door with a soft *click*. She moved to stand in front of the desk, waiting for him to speak.

"Please, take a seat, Miss Granger," he said, motioning to the single chair in front of his desk. "As we both know why you are here, we shall dispense with the pleasantries. You wish to become my apprentice, correct?"

"Yes, sir," she stated plainly, forcing herself to swallow the nervous lump in her throat.

"Very well," said Professor Snape, interrupting her thoughts. "Are you willing to accept taking my direction as your master? I will not tolerate insubordination in any respect. If I agree to this, I expect your complete obedience. I also expect you to adhere to all the terms I require." He paused to remove a roll of parchment from the top drawer in his desk, which he then handed to her. "This is the contract I require you to sign before I agree to teach you. Some of the terms may seem...unusual. However, I assure you there are legitimate reasons for those requests, and I will not budge on any count. I will allow you some time now to read it so we may then openly discuss any...questions you may have."

Forcing her nervous hand to stay steady, she reached across the desk and accepted the proffered material and unrolled it. He had already written a contract? He was definitely up to something. She knew she needed to be very careful here.

The first half appeared reasonable. She would live at Hogwarts for one year and be under his tutelage as he taught her everything there was to know about the art of potion making. She would also have to actively work on a research project of her own choosing, which would be submitted before The Board of Potions Masters to determine whether she received her Mastery or not.

However, when she got to the second half her eyes became as large as saucers and she audibly gasped. "What does this second half mean, Professor?"

"Surely, Miss Granger," the Professor purred in his most silky voice, "you are intelligent enough to figure it out."

"You aren't serious about this, are you?" she asked incredulously. "Why would you want *this*? You don't even like me. Why on earth would you want to...to...well, why would you want such a thing? And why me of all people?"

He waited for her to finish. "Miss Granger, are you familiar with wizarding customs regarding families? Specifically, are you familiar with social traditions of the upper-class pure-blood families?"

She gave him a bewildered look before answering. "Not really. Being a Muggle-born, I have never felt the need to look into them, so I am unfamiliar with them. What does that have to do with this?" she said waving the contract at him.

"Miss Granger, I am from a very old pure-blood family. The Snapes, at one time, were a very prestigious family in the wizarding world. However, during the last few decades many have been killed, disgraced or simply died off. I am, unfortunately, the last of my line. As such, it is my responsibility to maintain the Snape heritage. As you can probably surmise, witches do not storm the castle to profess their undying love for me." Hermione snorted at that, causing the Professor to pause as he glared at her.

"As I was saying," he continued, "I am not the most sought after bachelor in England, so I must consider...other means if I am to produce an heir."

"Well, that makes sense. But why now?" The dark, knowing look he gave her was all the answer needed. "Oh, I see. It wasn't safe to have a child while you were still spying on Voldemort."

Snape winced when the last word left her lips, and she immediately regretted saying it. "Miss Granger," he hissed in his most dangerous voice, "when you agree to this contract, I will insist that you please refrain from throwing that name around so carelessly whilst in my presence."

"Sorry," she said apologetically. "Er...so how exactly would this work? I didn't finish reading the entire contract. I mean, I know you're not proposing that we get married or anything, so how do you propose we...er, produce this child?" she asked with nervousness in her voice.

Snape sighed loudly before explaining. "There is a clinic at St. Mungo's that specialises in fertility. There is a relatively simple procedure that would allow us to...produce a child, as you said."

"I've not heard about this before. Is the procedure painful?" she asked.

Severus opened his mouth as if to speak, but quickly shut it again. After thinking for a moment, he finally answered. "I believe, Miss Granger, that some women do find it to be...uncomfortable, but only negligibly so. The discomfort is usually said to be momentary. Most recover fully after a day of rest."

"That doesn't sound too bad. For a minute I was afraid you wanted to shag me or something," she said with a nervous laugh. Professor Snape, however, did not seem amused.

"I can assure you, Miss Granger," he said with a scowl, "that I have no desire to, as you so eloquently put it, 'shag you.' I simply desire you to carry a child for me so that I may have an heir."

"What exactly do you mean by 'carry'? Will you be using a donor egg?" she asked.

"I would consider that option, Miss Granger, but unfortunately the procedure used does not work well for donated eggs. To use a donated egg, the success rate for embryonic implantation is less than 25%, whereas the success rate increases to over 90% for the genetic mother's egg. As it stands, the procedure often takes multiple attempts even in the best of circumstances. As you can tell, using a donor egg would only advance the chances of the conception failing, thus increasing the number of attempts made before success is achieved. Using your own egg would make the process much quicker and easier on you as well."

"Oh," Hermione said with a startled expression on her face. "I assumed the procedure would practically guarantee success. So, let me get this straight. What you are saying is that the child would be mine as well, then?"

Snape's mouth went into a thin line as he narrowed his eyes at her. "No, Miss Granger. Let me be perfectly clear. The child is mine alone. You would simply be a surrogate for the child. You would carry the child while I assist you in becoming a Potions mistress. You will live across the corridor from me and take meals in the Great Hall with me. This will allow me to ensure you are taking care of *my* child, which will in turn make the apprenticeship easier, as you will be well-rested and eating properly. This will also allow you to be close to the lab that we will be using. After the child is born, your education will be over. This will leave me to raise the child myself. You will have no part in that. No one, including, and especially, the child, will know that you are the biological mother. There is a secrecy clause in the contract which prevents you from speaking of this to anyone."

Hermione gave him an incredulous look before responding. "And you think I would be all right with that? You think I could allow a child to grow in me, give birth and then just leave, pretending it had never happened? And that I would never be allowed to talk about it with anyone? I can't do that, Professor."

"You will, if you wish to become my apprentice," Professor Snape responded matter-of-factly. "These are the terms I have set. I will ensure you receive the best possible education while you are my apprentice. I am even willing to assist you in securing a job upon completion of your apprenticeship. In return, I ask that you do this one small thing for me."

"How can you guarantee that I will get a job? What kind of job are you talking about?" Hermione asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Well, I suppose that would depend on what type of position you were hoping to acquire. Do you have anything specific in mind?" he asked.

"Not really, no. I do know that I do not want to teach. I would like to do something challenging, something that would allow me to conduct research. I want a secure career, not one where I have to worry about losing my job. It would also need to pay well enough for me to live on, and not just a one room flat. I've considered working for the Ministry, but most of the jobs there are mundane. I'd get bored easily with them. Can you think of anything that might interest me?"

She looked up to meet his gaze and caught a gleam of what could only be triumph in his eyes. "Surprisingly, Miss Granger, I think I know exactly the career that may interest you. I also have the means to ensure you are hired."

"Really?" Hermione said immediately, unable to mask the excitement in her voice. Composing herself, she continued. "What would that be, Professor?"

Professor Snape leant back in his chair as he regarded her intensely before responding. "Miss Granger, are you familiar with the Department of Mysteries?" he said with a cocked eyebrow.

Hermione furrowed her brow at him. "Yes, vaguely." Images of the end of fifth year came to her mind.

"Do you know what is done there?"

"Well, they do all sorts of things, don't they? They keep all of the prophecies made. They analyze any strange artefacts and substances that the Ministry comes across. Am I right?"

"Correct, Miss Granger," Professor Snape began, taking on the lecturing tone Hermione remembered from his classroom. "They also do the most cutting edge research in many fields, including potions. The Unspeakables are behind many of the major developments in potion making. The wizard who created the Wolfsbane Potion even worked for them."

Snape smirked triumphantly at the dreamy-eyed look on Hermione's face. "Really? I didn't know that." Shaking her head, she continued. "If that is the case, it must be extremely difficult to get a job there, though. How can you be so sure they would hire me?"

"Yes, job openings there are rare. They only take on the most talented witches and wizards," Snape said casually. "One must prove they have a strong desire to learn, and an equally strong desire to work hard, to be offered a position there. A love for research and enjoying a challenge are also requirements, as is a sharp mind. I feel, Miss Granger, that you are not lacking in any of these respects. As such, you would be an excellent candidate for the job." Snape levelled his gaze at Hermione and she openly blushed. It was the closest thing to a gushing compliment he had ever offered her.

Before she could think of a response, he continued. "It also helps, however, that I happen to be related to the head of that particular department. Wilfred is one of the only members of my family that I have ever cared to remain in contact with, and so we have always remained on friendly terms. I have no doubt that, were I to vouch for you, he would not hesitate to offer you a position in his department."

"Wait a second," Hermione interrupted. "I thought you said you were the last of your line? If that's the case, then who is Wilfred?"

Snape sighed and explained. "If you must know, Miss Granger, Wilfred *Braxton* is my cousin on my mother's side. He is not a Snape. As such, he cannot carry on the Snape name."

"Oh, I see," Hermione responded. She bit her lip nervously as she thought about everything that had transpired in this meeting. This was definitely *not* how she had envisioned this conversation. She had been determined to be in control. That was definitely not the case. The idea that he was manipulating her suddenly came to her. She felt a surge of anger rise in the pit of her stomach at this thought. How dare he presume she could be so easily manipulated with false praise and a job offer! Well, she would show him. However, she knew that blowing up at him would be the quickest way to ensure she didn't get this apprenticeship, so she forced herself to be calm. She took a deep breath before speaking. "This does sound like a very tempting offer, Professor. I'm just not sure if I can live with some of the...requirements you mentioned earlier."

Snape leant forward in his chair as he levelled his obsidian eyes on her. "I know this may seem rather surreal to you, Miss Granger, but keep in mind that I am not asking this for arbitrary reasons. You would be doing me, and my family, a great service by ensuring the Snape line has an heir. In exchange, I am prepared to offer you an apprenticeship with me and an opportunity for your dream job. I will also provide you with suitable monetary compensation. I feel this is a fair trade."

"But, Professor," Hermione began carefully, "how will you take care of a child all on your own? It's not an easy task, you know. I may never have had one myself, but I've been around enough children to know that they require a lot of attention, and to be honest, you just don't seem the type to..."

"I do know all of this, Miss Granger," Snape interrupted. "I have no delusions about it being easy. I can assure you, though, I am quite capable of caring for a child," Snape responded acidly. Had Hermione not been a Gryffindor, the dangerous look in his eyes alone would have scared her off.

"But..." Hermione began, but was again cut off by Professor Snape.

"Miss Granger," he hissed. "I have answered your questions. I am quite capable of caring for a child. This matter is closed."

"Now," he continued in a somewhat lighter tone, "are you prepared to accept my offer now or will you need some time before signing?"

"I think I need some time to consider, sir."

"Very well. Once you have signed the contract, it will automatically return to me. I will expect the signed contract by the end of next week. You will need to arrive at the school by August 31 in order to be settled in before the students arrive. That will allow you a week to put your affairs in order. Is that acceptable?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," Hermione stammered. "Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to think about all of this. It's quite a lot to take in. I'm still not sure I can accept, but I promise to at least give it due consideration."

Professor Snape gave her a curt nod and stood. "Do you have any final questions before you leave, Miss Granger?"

"Well, yes, if you don't mind," she started carefully. "I was wondering, well...why me? Isn't there a service that can...find someone to do this for you? Why not choose someone you don't know?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh and sat back down in his chair. "Yes, Miss Granger, there is a service that finds surrogates for those who need one. I have attempted to use them, but have had no success in finding a...suitable candidate."

"What made you decide I was suitable?" she asked. She was intrigued by his statement. He had never even hinted at approving of her in any way. Had he changed his mind about her?

"I would very much like to have a child with whom I could hold intellectual discourse and to whom I could teach the love of learning and reading. Your powers are quite formidable, and there is no disguising the fact that you have a far above average intellect. Genetically, you would prove an asset to my child."

Hermione felt as if her chair had come out from underneath her. He wanted her for her good genetics? What a clinical approach to having a child. A part of her wanted to scream at him in frustration for being so cold. Another part couldn't help feeling flattered. She had finally got him to admit she was a worthy student. Twice, actually. Manipulation or not, she couldn't believe it.

Abruptly, Professor Snape stood up. He made his way over to the door. "Unless you have any further questions, Miss Granger, there are some things to which I must attend."

Hermione, recognising a dismissal when she saw one, got up and walked to the door, which was now being held open for her. "Good day, Professor Snape," she said as she reached the door.

"Good day, Miss Granger," he said as she exited.

As Hermione left, she couldn't keep the bewildered expression off her face. She could not fathom what had just happened. Professor Snape wanted her to carry a child for him.

His expert manipulation of the meeting was the most amazing aspect of her visit. He had somehow managed to convince her to consider the offer instead of adamantly saying no, which she knew she should do. He had even managed to keep her from exploding at him...-which she had been tempted to do a couple of times...-or feeling repulsed by his inconsiderate demands.

In fact, he actually made it almost seem...reasonable. Well, reasonable wasn't exactly the word to describe it. After all, she was definitely confused, but he was able to effectively argue his case. *Damn Slytherin mind games*, she thought bitterly.

She knew she couldn't do it. It would be too hard, but the promise of the position in the Department of Mysteries was very tempting. She also admitted that a small part of her was desperate to finally prove her worth to him. She could also understand his need for an heir, although she had never thought he was someone who would want children. If he were indeed the last of his line, it would be necessary for him to have a child to continue the line.

But why would he ask this from me, of all people? And why was he so determined that I not have anything to do with the child? Why do I have to leave immediately after the child is born and never tell anyone that I'm the mother? If it weren't for that, she thought, *I might be able to give his offer serious consideration. However, I did promise him I would consider it.*

She sighed in exasperation as she continued up the stairs to the entrance hall. She had sworn to herself that she would accept whatever terms he demanded, but this was just too much. Perhaps she would be able to make a more informed decision if she were able to talk to someone who knew Professor Snape better and could tell her of his abilities to care for a child. Professor McGonagall had known him since his days as a student. Perhaps she could offer some insight. As Hermione entered the entrance hall, she changed direction to follow the corridor she knew led to her former Head of House's office.

As she walked down the corridor, a possible answer for the situation occurred to her. If she agreed, she would certainly be spending a lot of time with Professor Snape. Much more time than a normal master and apprentice would, for sure. The doctor's visits and such would guarantee that.

Perhaps during that time she could change his mind about keeping the baby from her. If she could do that, she would have the apprenticeship, get the job she desired, and she wouldn't have to give up her baby. *This could work*, she thought. He may have been in control today, but not any more. It was definitely time to develop some Slytherin tactics of her own.

Author's Notes:

Ok, so what did you think? I agonised over this chapter quite a bit. I know it wasn't exactly enthralling, but this meeting had to happen. I also wanted to use the format of the meeting to get all the questions about details and stuff out of the way. Besides, he had to tell her everything. Hermione isn't the type to go into something without knowing all she can. The main struggle was to keep Hermione in character, while getting her to begin accepting the idea of the contract. I think I managed to pull it off...phew!

Also, as far as the creation of Wolfsbane, I am taking some liberty by making the person responsible an Unspeakable. This, of course, doesn't change what we know of the Sorcerer's/Philosopher's Stone. Canon tells us that Nicholas Flamel did create the only known Sorcerer's Stone. It is possible, however, that the DoM discovered the stone, but I am actually assuming here that the stone is so old it would have been discovered long before the DoM was even created.

Finally, lots of cheers and applause to queenp and Molly S. for betaing this chapter for me. More cheers and applause for GinnyW and Southern_Witch_69 for taking a lowly newbie writer under their great wings. Ladies, you are all my muses. *bows gracefully*

Deliberation

Chapter 3 of 5

In which Severus gloats, Hermione has a revealing talk with Minerva, the boys and Ginny give their two Knuts, and Hermione makes a decision.

Disclaimer: If I were smart enough, I would have thought of it first. Unfortunately, Jo did first.

Author's Note: I am SO incredibly sorry for how long this has taken. I promise to be quicker from now on. I do have a decent excuse, though. I'm currently working two jobs AND taking summer school.

Chapter 3: Deliberation

Severus smirked arrogantly as Miss Granger left his office. Oh, how well played that was. Her youth and desperation for his approval, as well as her Gryffindor stupidity, had made her easy to manipulate. He felt very confident she would sign the contract. He had balanced just the right amount of his usual surly demeanour and sarcasm with compliments and praise to keep her off balance. He could not allow her to control the situation or to have time to analyse his motives for appearing civil.

He returned to his seat at the desk, leant back, and propped his feet up on the desk. The thing that worried him was having allowed her to leave without actually signing the contract. His original intent had been to ensure she signed the contract before leaving, but he had sensed that if he pushed too far she would have run from their meeting without considering the apprenticeship. *Well*, he thought, *if giving her a few days to think things over gets her to sign the contract, then so be it.*

A small niggling in the back of his brain worried that her friends and family could talk her out of signing the contract. He was confident, due to the secrecy clause, that she would not reveal the exact details of the contract, especially her being the child's biological mother. He may not have said it plainly, but he knew the girl was smart enough to figure out that telling anyone that she was anything more than just a surrogate was unacceptable. It seemed unavoidable, however, that her two infuriating friends, Potter and Weasley, would find out about her being a surrogate for him. He knew she would refuse to go almost a year without seeing those two blighters, and it would be difficult to hide her condition once the visible evidence of her pregnancy became apparent.

Out of nowhere, an image of Ms. Granger round with child..*his* child...came to mind. He immediately shook that thought out of his head as he continued to ponder the dilemma posed by the two imbeciles. If she chose to tell them now, it could be quite dangerous for him. Those two undoubtedly held sway over her, and if they pled with her not to sign the contract, she may listen to them. *No. She will sign the contract.* Mentally continuing this assuring mantra, he stood, then headed back to his private lab to check on the burn salve he had brewing for the infirmary.

Hermione approached Professor McGonagall's door with a renewed sense of confidence. She was always the type of person who was most confident when she had a plan. Now, she had a plan to deal with Professor Snape. Well, not a plan really. She just had a plan...to make a plan. However, for now, that was good enough.

At the moment, she needed to focus on what she would say to Professor McGonagall. Hermione realised Professor Snape would not be pleased if she told anyone, especially one of his colleagues, that he wanted her to be the biological mother of his desired heir. However, she assumed saying that she would be a surrogate for Professor Snape was safe enough as she would be living at Hogwarts throughout the pregnancy, and she did not intend to allow herself to be locked away in a dungeon for nine months. They would have to know, if they did not already know of the pending situation.

Hermione realised that she needed to discuss the proposition with someone who knew Professor Snape better than she did. While positive that her plan would work, she firmly believed it best to have all available information readily available. Professor McGonagall's opinion would be vital in her research and would help tremendously in ensuring Hermione made the correct decision. Plus, it would provide some comfort, putting her mind at ease over the whole situation.

As she reached the door to Professor McGonagall's office, she pushed all thoughts aside before knocking softly on the door. She heard a swishing of robes, and then the door opened. Hermione smiled at her mentor as Professor McGonagall gave a soft gasp of surprise upon seeing one of her favourite former students standing there.

"Miss Granger! What brings you here?"

Hermione's smile widened. "Hello, Professor. I'm no longer your student, so please call me Hermione."

"Well then, Hermione, come in please, and you may call me Minerva." Professor McGonagall stood back from the doorway to let Hermione pass, and Hermione took one of the chairs sitting in front of her desk.

"Biscuit? Tea?" Professor McGonagall offered, gesturing towards the tea service sitting in the corner of the office.

"Yes, please. Both."

Professor McGonagall bustled about for a minute preparing a cup of tea and a plate of lemon biscuits for both Hermione and herself. When she finally handed Hermione her cup and plate, she settled herself in the chair next to Hermione.

"What have you been up to these last few years, Hermione? Last I had heard, you went home to spend some time with your parents?"

"Yes, I did. Mum and Dad needed some help with the dental office they run, and I really missed them," Hermione answered before taking another sip of tea.

"Well, do you plan on continuing your education and starting a career in the wizarding world, or will you be staying with your parents?"

"Well," Hermione began somewhat hesitantly, "I just met with Professor Snape about becoming his apprentice this year."

"Oh? Well, Severus never mentioned this," Minerva said with a questioning look on her face. "He has always stated he would ~~never~~ take an apprentice. How in Merlin's name did you manage to persuade him?" she asked with a slightly incredulous look.

"Well...I'm not completely sure yet if I'll accept. He wants me to do...something for him in return. I'm not sure I can do all he asks."

Minerva's face suddenly seemed to lose a little colour, and she set her plate and cup on the edge of her desk. "*This thing* he wishes you to do. What is it, Hermione?"

"Well," Hermione began, uncomfortably shifting in her seat, "I'm not sure how much I should say, really. He was very clear he wished for...discretion."

Minerva's face lost more colour at this. Her knuckles became white as she clutched at her dark blue robes. "Hermione, tell me, does this *favour* have anything to do with Professor Snape's recent desire for an heir?"

Hermione dropped her plate and cup, which had been teetering precariously on her knee, at this question. The china smashed loudly against the stone of the floor. "Oh, I'm sorry, Pro-Minerva. I'll clean it up."

"Oh, don't worry, dear. *Reparo*!" The cup and plate immediately righted themselves, and Hermione set them on the desk next to Minerva's. "Now," Minerva continued, "I gather from your reaction that I was correct in assuming Professor Snape asked you to *assist* him in his quest for an heir?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. Her eyes were steadfastly focused on her shoes... all of her earlier bravado having vanished in the presence of her mentor. "Wait!" she said suddenly. "How did you know about this, Minerva? Has Professor Snape told you about any of this?"

"Well, since he plans on the woman he selects staying in the quarters directly across from his own, he naturally had to get Albus' approval. As Deputy Headmistress, I was consulted on the matter."

"Oh, of course. I didn't even think of that," Hermione said, looking down.

"Are you considering this, Hermione?" Minerva asked, worry in her voice.

"Well, I really do want this apprenticeship. I love my parents, but I'm tired of putting my education and my life on hold for them. Apprenticing with Professor Snape is such a unique opportunity and..."

"Hermione," Minerva interrupted, gently placing her hand on Hermione's knee to silence her, "I understand all of that. What I was asking was whether or not you were considering accepting the terms Professor Snape is asking of you."

"I'm not sure. He has made a very tempting offer, and I do really want this apprenticeship. I also completely understand his desire to have an heir as well. He is the last of his line, you know. However, what I'm not sure about is whether I can agree to this. I think it may be too hard, but I just don't know if I can turn down this opportunity. No one else is even giving me an opportunity to prove myself. I know it will be difficult, but I would also gain quite a lot in return." Hermione finally brought her gaze up to meet with Minerva's. The older witch's lips were pursed in a thin line, but Hermione could see the softness in her gaze as she listened to her.

"Prof-Minerva," Hermione continued, "what I really came up to talk to you about...what I really need to know...is whether or not you believe Professor Snape is capable of caring for and loving a child. I tried to talk to him about this. Although he assured me he is capable of raising a child, I get the impression he hasn't properly thought this through. He wants an heir, but he doesn't seem to have fully considered what raising a child means. It is so much more than changing nappies and providing food. What about love, acceptance, and affection? A child needs those things, and I just don't know him well enough to know if he is even capable of giving such things. He was always so cold and closed off in class, but I know I can't base my decision on that alone. You've known him for a long time and have spent time with him outside of class. What kind of a father do you think he will make?"

Minerva leant back in her chair and crossed her legs. She took a deep breath, expression pensive. After a few moments reflection, she looked back to Hermione before speaking. "I have known Severus since his first year at Hogwarts." Minerva's gaze softened, and a soft smile tugged at her lips as she became caught up in her memories. "He was a very small boy when he first arrived. He seemed so fragile. He kept looking around as if he wanted to commit every speck of dust to memory. I admit I was quite astonished when the Sorting Hat saw fit to place him in Slytherin. Of course, any doubts I had about what House he belonged in were quickly allayed when I saw how well he dealt with his fellow students, especially his Housemates," she added with a chuckle.

Her face suddenly became sombre as she continued. "I have always felt horrible about turning a blind eye to the way James Potter and Sirius Black tormented him. I brushed off their cruel treatment as the ordinary foolishness of young boys. However, as he came into his last year at Hogwarts, it became painfully clear how wrong I had been." She spoke with sorrow in her voice. "He had lost all traces of the wide-eyed boy who sat on that stool in front of everyone. All that was left was a bitter, harsh young man...perfect for Lord Voldemort to prey upon."

Hermione fidgeted as she listened to Minerva. She had the very distinct feeling Professor Snape would not appreciate his colleague sharing all of this with her. He certainly would never understand why, but she *had* to know. She needed this information about her enigmatic professor before she could make the hard decision he presented to her.

She also felt a deep sense of loss for the small, wide-eyed boy she heard Minerva describe. What kind of man would he now be if people like James and Sirius hadn't picked on him in school? Would he have been different had people befriended him instead of teasing and tormenting him?

Oddly enough, this reminded her of her first few months at Hogwarts before the incident with the troll that brought her, Harry, and Ron together as friends. Before she came to Hogwarts, she hadn't had many friends. She was constantly teased for her big teeth and bushy hair, as well as for being "bossy" and a "teacher's pet." She had, at first, been thrilled to be going to a place like Hogwarts. When she received her letter, she thought that at a wonderful, magical place like Hogwarts she could finally be accepted for who she was.

When she first arrived, she had been so excited, and this new world seemed so full of promise. She wanted to learn everything she could, experiencing this new and wonderful world in every way possible. However, she had been treated the same as at the Muggle primary school. It was only her friendship with Harry and Ron that had allowed her to open up to people and gain the confidence to make more friends.

What would Professor Snape be like today if he had had his own Harry and Ron? The thought caused her to give a soft, derisive laugh. However, she couldn't help but think that perhaps she and Professor Snape were more alike than she ever realised. Suddenly, she remembered where she was and looked over at Minerva. She, too, had been caught up in her own thoughts. Hermione lightly cleared her throat, and Minerva gave a slight jump at the sudden sound.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. Now, where was I? Ah, yes. Severus was a very gifted student. He always excelled above the others in his year, but he lacked the confidence to succeed socially. Of course, that wasn't surprising considering the home in which he was raised. Tobias Snape was a cruel man who firmly believed that demonstrating emotion made one weak. He never had a kind word to say to anyone, including his son, and I dare say his demeanour transferred itself to Severus." Minerva paused to look at Hermione and gave a small, reassuring smile at the wide-eyed look on Hermione's face. "Don't worry, dear. He never has to know I shared all of this with you. Normally, I would never talk about Severus behind his back like this. However, he has put you in an exceedingly difficult position, and I feel you need to have all the information that you feel is necessary before making your decision."

"Thank you, Minerva. I feel the same way. Before I left his office, I promised Professor Snape that I would give his offer due consideration, and I don't think I could do that without knowing all relevant information about him. Thank you for sharing."

"You're welcome. Now, as I was saying, Severus did not have the most pleasant of childhoods. He always separated himself from his peers. After the incident in the Shrieking Shack with Remus, Sirius and James, he seemed to withdraw from the world even more. He continued to get top marks, of course, but he didn't socialise with the other students, even his fellow Slytherins. Then, not long before he graduated, his mother was murdered. Her murderer was never found. He became even more subdued and unsociable than before. Of course, during his last year as a student, Voldemort was gaining power. I'm not sure of when he took the Dark Mark, but it was around this same time. I don't know much of the details of his time as a Death Eater, as he has only shared those details with Albus, but I'm sure it was not pleasant."

Hermione felt tears prickling her eyes. She couldn't imagine all he had endured. Nearly dying because of a stupid, cruel schoolboy prank was bad enough, but then, to get sucked into the Death Eaters and also have his mother die would have destroyed a lesser man. Taking a deep breath, she reined in her emotions to staunchly return her professor's piercing gaze.

"Minerva, do you believe that someone with such a horrible background could make a good father? Would he even be capable of giving the love and affection a child needs despite not having experienced it as a child?"

With contemplation on her face, Minerva considered the question. "That is a very difficult question to answer, Hermione." At Hermione's dismayed expression, she continued, "However, I will try. Severus has always held others at arms length. His background, as I'm sure you can understand, makes him wary of letting his walls drop. However, I do believe that becoming a father may be exactly what he needs to overcome the dreariness of his past."

When Minerva paused here, Hermione spoke up. "So, are you saying that I should do this?"

"No, no. Not necessarily," Minerva responded. "It is a wonderful opportunity as far as your education goes. Nevertheless, you must consider this very carefully, dear. Trust me when I tell you that bearing a child and leaving it...even if it would not biologically be yours...will not be easy. You must be sure you will come out of this with no regrets. Don't let your desire for knowledge, the need to rejoin the wizarding world, or your compassion for Professor Snape lead you to make a decision you'll regret."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She wanted desperately to tell Minerva that the child *would* be hers, but she knew she couldn't. She didn't even want to *think* about what Professor Snape's reaction to that would be. Instead, she settled on asking, "Do you think I'll regret it?"

Minerva sighed as her expression turned soft and motherly. "I think that with a heart like yours, Hermione, you will find doing what Professor Snape asks to be exceedingly difficult. I have watched you since the day you arrived at Hogwarts, and I know you always look for the good in people. It is an admirable trait, but occasionally, it can lead you astray."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, obviously perplexed.

"I only mean that sometimes looking at the good in people can give a false impression. Professor Snape is a good man underneath his surly demeanour, but that doesn't mean that the surly demeanour isn't also who he is. He has had a difficult life, and it has taken a toll on him. I don't think he will ever completely change. Almost forty years of habit is very difficult to break. However, it should be said that he always does what is right in the end."

At these last words, hope bloomed in Hermione. *He always does what is right in the end.* She felt herself smiling softly as she thought, *Then perhaps he'll do what's right in the end and not keep me from the baby!* With this last, hopeful thought, she rose from her seat and extended her hand to Minerva.

"Thank you, Minerva. You've told me enough to help make my decision easier, and the tea and biscuits were wonderful." Hermione smiled broadly. Minerva stood, accepting her outstretched hand.

"Well, I'm glad I could help you, dear. It was so good to see you again." Minerva suddenly clutched both of Hermione's hands firmly in her own. "Promise me, though, Hermione, that you will think this through thoroughly. As dear as Severus is to me, I just don't know if this is such a good idea. You are one of the best students I have ever had the privilege to teach, and I would hate to see you heartbroken. I'm not going to tell you what to do, but I would urge you to be sure you are prepared for how trying this will be."

Hermione's smile faltered as she listened to Minerva's impassioned plea. "I-I will. I promise," she stuttered.

Minerva released her grip on Hermione's hands and smiled at the young witch. "Good. Well, it was good to see you. I'm so glad you came by to see me."

"It was good to see you too, Professor. Have a good day." Minerva held the door open, and Hermione exited the room.

After saying their final goodbyes, Hermione headed back out the front doors and climbed into the carriage, which was waiting to take her back to Hogsmeade station. On the ride back to town, her mind was still reeling. She was still trying to process everything that had happened over the last few hours. She had been completely bewildered when she first left Professor Snape's office. She certainly didn't expect his particular stipulation. She had been sure that visiting with Minerva would help her make her decision. When she had said that Professor Snape always did what was right in the end, Hermione had felt sure of her decision, but she felt doubt creeping in again with Minerva's final plea. Instead of clearing up her confusion, her visit with Minerva had added to it.

As she descended from the carriage, another thought crossed her mind. *What am I going to tell Mum and Dad?* Panic began to settle in at this thought. She couldn't tell them what Professor Snape had asked her to do. They simply wouldn't understand. Her father would come unglued, wanting to kill the wizard. Plus, she just couldn't bring herself to tell them that she was actually considering his offer. She would just have to tell them that Professor Snape had indeed made an offer of apprenticeship, but that there were certain terms she wasn't sure she was comfortable with. She had the rest of the afternoon to come up with the details of what she would tell them before they returned home from work. Having made her decision and realizing she was getting some rather strange stares from the villagers in Hogsmeade, she shook her head and Apparated home.

Dinner with her parents had, indeed, been stressful. They had wanted to know everything about her meeting with Professor Snape. When she told them she was uncomfortable with some of the terms being asked of her, her mother had pressed her for details. She managed to evade their questions by explaining that Professor Snape had explained that he would not tolerate disobedience in the slightest. He had also made it clear that he would completely control all aspects of her life for the year, and she likely would not be allowed to return home for the duration of the apprenticeship.

Her mother had blanched at this news, but then surprised Hermione by stating that 'it was only a year' and Hermione was 'surely strong enough to handle whatever Professor Snape could throw her way.' Hermione had convinced herself that her parents, especially her mother, would try to talk her into staying. Instead, they told her that they were happy she was getting such a wonderful offer, and they knew how excited she was to get her life back on track.

In the end, they had advised her to sign the contract and do whatever she felt necessary to survive the year with her difficult professor. As she crawled into bed that night, all of the events of the day rolled in her head. She decided her parents had no idea how difficult Professor Snape was really being, and it would stay that way.

On Saturday, Hermione Apparated to the Burrow for the combined birthday dinner for Ginny and Percy. With their birthdays being only eleven days apart, Mrs. Weasley usually preferred having one get-together. As she approached the house, watching all of the conversations going on, she couldn't help but smile.

Bill and Fleur happened to be in London, so they were able to attend. They had been married now for over a year and were in the process of being interrogated by Mrs. Weasley as to when they were going to give her a grandchild when Hermione arrived. Meanwhile, Mr. Weasley was arguing with Percy over a new law that the Ministry had passed, and Charlie, Ron, and Harry were in an intense conversation about the Quidditch World Cup, which had been about a month before in France. Charlie had attended and was regaling the boys with the details of the match. Ginny was the first to see her approach.

"Hermione! Oh, I'm so glad you're here!" Ginny squealed and ran up to hug her. At hearing Ginny's outburst, the conversations stopped, and the boys came to greet her as well.

Once all the greetings had been exchanged, Mrs. Weasley declared that dinner could now be served. "About bloody time, too. I'm starving, and Mum made us wait 'til you got here to eat," Ron said, glaring facetiously at Hermione.

Once everyone, including Ron, had been stuffed to the brim with roasted chicken, vegetables, mashed potatoes, kidney pie, and a delicious chocolate treacle tart for dessert, Percy and Ginny were allowed to open their presents. After presents, everyone moved inside. Hermione and Ginny found themselves in a corner watching Harry and Ron battle in an intense game of wizard's chess while the rest of the men sat at the dining table talking. Mrs. Weasley had Fleur looking at baby photos of all her children, unabashedly dropping more hints about grandchildren.

"So, Hermione, how did your meeting with Professor Snape go?" Ginny asked. Concerned, the boys abruptly put down their chess pieces and turned towards Hermione curiously, ignoring their chess pieces that were creating mayhem on the board.

Hermione shifted in her seat and steeled herself. It had been difficult to lie to her parents, but this could prove even harder. She wanted to tell them that Professor Snape had asked her to be a surrogate for him, but she knew their reactions were likely to get volatile. "Well," she began uncomfortably, "he offered me the apprenticeship."

Ginny gasped excitedly and grasped Hermione's hands. "Oh, that's wonderful! I mean, I know he was cruel during school, and I'm sure that hasn't changed, but if anyone can handle him, Hermione, it's you. This is such a great opportunity for you. When are you starting?" Ginny finished excitedly. The boys just glowered at Ginny, but they kept silent. Hermione knew exactly what was going through both of their minds, however, and she desperately tried to ignore them.

"Well, yes, I'm very excited," Hermione began, "but I haven't really decided yet. I really want to sign the contract he gave me, but I really want to think this through before I agree."

Puzzlement showed on Ginny's face while the boys looked at Hermione with hopeful expressions. "So, you're not gonna do it, eh, Hermione?" Ron said with a grin on his face. "I'm so glad to hear that. I can't imagine how awful spending an entire year with that ruddy man would be." Ron shivered and looked down at the floor.

Hermione's lips thinned, and her cheeks reddened. "Were you listening, Ron? I didn't say I wasn't going to do it. I just said that I haven't made up my mind yet. Honestly, I'm actually leaning towards accepting."

Ron and Harry looked at her sheepishly as Harry said, "Sorry, Hermione. Ron didn't mean to upset you. We're just concerned about what Snape might do to you while you're his apprentice. He was pretty awful to you at school, so it just seems strange that he would want to spend a year with you, that's all."

Hermione's expression softened a bit, and she said, "Yes, I was surprised, too. I expected to have to practically beg him to take me on, but he was actually quite receptive. In fact, I would almost say he was...civil when I met with him." At the startled looks of her three friends, she added, "Well, civil for Professor Snape. I mean, he was still his usual curt self. However, he did compliment my intelligence, and he even said that he would help me get a job at the Department of Mysteries once I completed my apprenticeship," she finished smugly.

Ron, Ginny, and Harry all looked at her, shocked. "Wow, Hermione," Ron said, in a dazed tone. "The Department of Mysteries? It's really hard to get a job there. How did he say he could manage that?"

"His cousin is the head of the department, and he said that if he vouched for me I would be sure to get the job."

All three of her friends muttered "oh" in response.

"Wait a minute," Harry said, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Something isn't right here. This isn't like Snape to be so...nice. What gives? Did he say what he wanted in return?"

Hermione swallowed nervously. *Here goes nothing*, she thought. *I just hope there isn't anything really valuable around here for them to break.* "Well," she began carefully,

"there is one thing. He wants me to...well, you see, he...the thing is..."

"It's okay, Hermione. Just tell us," Ginny said with a reassuring pat on Hermione's knee.

Hermione gave a grateful smile to her and took a deep breath. "Well, Professor Snape is the last in his family, and, when he dies, his family name will have died out."

"Good riddance to the lot of them...probably all just as greasy and horrible as he is," Ron spat venomously. He immediately muttered an apology when he saw the icy stare Hermione was giving him.

"As I was saying," she bit out, trying to ignore his interruption, "Professor Snape is the last of his line. Now that it's been a couple of years since Voldemort was defeated..." She paused to glance at Harry, who was suddenly shifting nervously in his seat. It had been two years since Harry fought Voldemort for the last time, but he was still haunted by the memories. Shaking her head, she continued, "Yes, since it's been two years since...then, he has decided that he needs to do something to keep his family name from dying out. He has been looking for a woman to be a surrogate for him, but he hasn't had much luck, apparently. So, when I wrote to him and expressed my interest in an apprenticeship, he..."

"Wait a second," Harry interrupted, with a look of horrified understanding on his face. "You aren't going to say what I think you are, are you?" She nervously glanced around and saw a matching expression of dawning comprehension on Ginny and Ron's faces.

"Well...er, you see," she began.

"No bloody way, Hermione. I can't believe he would even ask that of you! I mean, you can't honestly be considering having his baby, can you?" Ron said with a mix of anger and horror on his face.

Hermione sighed. "I know it seems strange, but it really is a great opportunity. Plus, I talked to Professor McGonagall. She told me some things about Professor Snape's past, and she also said that he always does what is right in the end, so..."

"What do you mean he always does what's right in the end? Since when has he ever done what's right, Hermione?" Harry hissed. Hermione's face immediately contorted with rage, but when she saw the palpable energy crackling off Harry and the furious expression on his face, she swallowed the angry retort that had been on her tongue.

"Calm down, Harry," she said as she laid a calming hand on his arm. Harry visibly relaxed; the aura around him cooled. "I know you never really forgave Professor Snape for what happened to...Sirius," she glanced at Harry nervously as she saw the fiery expression return to his face, "but that was a long time ago. A lot has happened since then. He was there for you in the end. In spite of how he treated us in school, he stood by you and Dumbledore in the end, and he helped destroy Voldemort. He even saved our lives. I know that doesn't excuse the horrible things he did, but he did do the right thing in the end. It's just like Professor McGonagall said. I have to believe that it will be the same in this situation. No matter what he says now, he will do the right thing *in the end*," Hermione said with more conviction than she was sure she felt.

"Hermione," Ginny chimed in, "what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well, like I said, I would only be the surrogate for the baby. The baby would belong to Professor Snape. So, he made it clear that once the baby was born, my apprenticeship would be over, and I would be expected...required to leave." Hermione suddenly found a string on the hem of her robes very interesting. She couldn't bear to look any of her friends in the eye.

"Hermione," Ginny began softly, "are you saying that he wouldn't let you see the baby at all?"

"Well, it would be his child, so...no." Hermione still didn't meet any of their eyes.

"So, he wouldn't use your...er...egg for the...er...conception?" Ginny asked, nervously glancing at the boys.

"Well, we would use the fertility clinic in St. Mungo's, so we wouldn't have to you...er...you know. He said it would just be a simple procedure. You don't have to use the surrogate's egg if you don't want to," Hermione replied evasively. She would take the same approach here as she had with Minerva. She would tell them the circumstances and let them conclude that the baby wouldn't be hers biologically. That way she wouldn't be breaking Professor Snape's rules, and she wouldn't have to lie.

"I see. Well, I have heard of this procedure before, but I've never actually done one or seen one done. They work on the opposite side of the hospital from me. I haven't ever had to go to the fertility clinic," Ginny offered. She was in her first year of Healer training and still had two years left.

"Really? What all have you heard about this procedure? Professor Snape really didn't tell me much about it," Hermione asked, her curiosity giving her the courage to meet Ginny's eyes.

"Well, I haven't heard a whole lot, except that it's relatively simple. We learnt a bit about it in one of my classes. The way they described it, it seemed simple enough. I didn't pay too close attention at the time they talked about it. It's not like I'll ever need to use the procedure. Plus, I'm not interested in that aspect of Healing. The only thing I actually remember is that it doesn't always work the first time," Ginny replied with a shrug.

"Really? Well, then he must have been telling the truth. He said that most women recover after a day of rest. Do you think there could be any lasting effects? Would I still be able to have children afterwards? I mean, I..."

"Hermione! You can't be serious! How can you even consider this? This isn't like you. You can't do this! It's ridiculous!" Harry stated irritably.

Hermione snapped an icy glare on him and retorted, "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do, Harry James Potter! It's my life! I was only asking Ginny for information about the procedure since she knows more about it than I do. I want to have ALL of the facts before I make my final decision."

Before Harry could come back with his own hot retort, Ginny interrupted. "Actually, I think I can understand why he wants to do this. I mean, so many of the pure-blood families are dying out. If he is the last of his line, he'd be expected to have a child to carry the family name on. Since he doesn't have Voldemort to worry about anymore, it would seem a good time to do it."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked at her, astonished. She rolled her eyes at them and said, "What? I didn't say that she should do it. I just said I can understand ~~why~~ she wants to do it."

"That's practically the same thing, Ginny," Ron spat accusingly.

Ginny looked at him and said incredulously, "No it isn't, Ron! I don't think she should do it. I was just adding to the conversation by trying to play Devil's Advocate. There are, after all, two sides to this. Not just your prejudiced point of view." She turned towards Hermione. "Hermione, it is your life. You have to do what's best for you, but I don't think you should do it. There are plenty of smart, powerful witches out there for Professor Snape to find. Let him find one of them. I know the apprenticeship means a lot to you, but is it really worth this? I know the baby wouldn't biologically be yours, but you would still become very attached to it. It will be very difficult to just leave."

"I know. That's what I mean about him doing the right thing in the end. A baby needs two parents. I just can't help but think that in the end he'll make the best decision for the baby, although he says now that he doesn't want me around. Plus, I just can't see him raising a child all on his own. I think I could get him to change his mind. We'll be spending so much time together, after all, what with the apprenticeship and checkups and such. Surely I'll be able to change his mind," Hermione said in the most confident voice she could muster. It was the first time she voiced these thoughts aloud, and she couldn't help but think how ridiculous they sounded.

"That's a very big chance you'll be taking, Hermione," Ginny said warningly. "Professor Snape seems like a stubborn person. I don't know if changing his mind will be all that easy."

"But, I have to believe it, Gin," Hermione said, pleading for understanding. "I want this apprenticeship so much, and the job at the Department of Mysteries sounds so interesting. It's exactly the type of job I was looking for. How can I pass this opportunity up?"

"Sounds like you are looking to play house with the git after the baby is born. Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed, looking to Harry in horror.

"You can't do it, Hermione," Harry said firmly. "It's absurd. I know you want the apprenticeship, but you can apprentice with someone else. There are other great jobs out there. You'll find something else to do or maybe get the job at the Department of Mysteries on your own. You don't have to have Snape for that. You're smart enough. You can't do it."

Hermione once again felt her ire flaring up. She hated it when people tried to tell her she couldn't do something. Nothing made her angrier than that. *This is my life!* she thought. *No one will tell me what to do with it!* Harry," she began in a warning tone, "I told you, it's *my* life. If I decide it is best for *me* to accept Professor Snape's offer, I will do so. Nothing you, or anyone, says will change my mind. Is that clear?"

Harry scowled deeply while Ginny and Ron just gaped at the scene unfolding. "Hermione," Harry hissed, "you can't do this. You won't. It's completely unacceptable. I won't let you ruin your life like this. Not for that greasy bastard!"

Hermione rose from her spot on the couch, glaring down at Harry. "You will not tell me what to do! I know you don't understand this. I also know you don't like Professor Snape, but that isn't the point! I knew I shouldn't have told you. I knew you and Ron would react like this. Well, guess what? This isn't your decision to make. It's mine! So, if you don't like the decision I make, then that's your problem." She marched over to the coat rack by the door and grabbed her cloak.

Hermione paused after she put her cloak on and looked over at Ginny. Her friend had drawn away from them, trying to avoid the row between Harry and Hermione. "Ginny, tell your mother thanks for a lovely dinner. It was wonderful as always, despite this recent turn of events. I hope you have a happy birthday regardless, and I'll write you later, all right? Good night."

"Hermione, wait!" Ginny pleaded, but it was too late. With a *pop*, Hermione quickly Disapparated.

She reappeared in her parent's living room. Hermione ignored her mother's greeting from the kitchen and marched straight to her room. She slammed the door shut and threw her cloak on her bed. She opened her desk drawer, rummaging around until she found the rolled up parchment she was looking for. She snatched it out and plucked a pen off the top of her desk. With a determined expression on her face, Hermione unrolled the parchment and gave it a quick once over before signing her name at the bottom. As soon as she finished the last letter in her name, the parchment rolled up and disappeared with a slight *pop*.

The sound jolted Hermione out of her anger-induced trance, and she blinked. She sat down heavily on her bed and stared down at the pen in her hand. *Well, I guess I've made my decision.*

Suddenly, Professor McGonagall's words from two days ago echoed in her mind. *He always does what is right in the end.* Hermione swallowed nervously. As she mechanically performed her nightly ablutions, all she could think of was how desperately she hoped Professor McGonagall was right.

Insanely long Author's Notes:

1. I know, I know. She uses a pen. Remember that she is at her parent's house, and they are Muggles. I adamantly believe that pens are easier than ink and quills and that Hermione would take advantage of that convenience when at home. Once she's at Hogwarts, no more pens.

2. The *final battle*: I am not of the opinion that there is going to be some grand General Patton type war to bring an end to Voldemort. I imagine something more like the end of OotP. Just Voldemort, Harry and, of course, the Order and a few Death Eaters. No World War II type epic battle here, though. Of course, I am trying to stick to canon as much as possible here, so I probably won't be going into detail. Just imagine whatever you like for Voldiebutt's demise and then skip ahead two years.

3. There will be more on Severus' childhood as well as what happened to his mother. All in good time...

4. As far as McGonagall, I had something *completely* different planned, but Minerva refused to cooperate. I tried to reason with her, and I told her this was *my* story, but she threatened to permanently transfigure me into a chair for her office if I didn't write the scene the way she wanted. In the end she got what she wanted. *sigh* Oh, well. I think it turned out better her way. I wasn't very comfortable with her sharing so much about Severus with Hermione, but she insisted the circumstances called for it, and she said she would take the heat for it with Severus if she had to. I may still work in the story I had for Minerva at a later date, but it just ended up not working here.

5. Each chapter is getting longer and longer. I'm starting to fear that I've unintentionally started a novel length fic. That isn't what I wanted, so I will try to stick to the original plan of 20 chapters and an Epilogue. If the next chapter ends up being longer than this, however, I may split it up.

6. Ginny's birthday is August 11th and Percy's is the 22nd. The party at the Burrow takes place on Saturday the 18th, two days after her meeting with Professor Snape.

7. Sorry for the lack of much Snapeage in this chapter. All forthcoming chapters will make up for it, promise.

8. A HUGE round of applause to my Beta's and muses, queenp and Southern_Witch_69. Ladies, I could NOT do it without you. Your endless supply of commas and comments are invaluable. And thanks especially to queenp for giving me a kick in the butt when I wasn't writing. Without her this chapter may have sat on my hard drive half done till Doomsday. :-D

9. Now, feed the hungry author: REVIEW...please. *gives readers puppy dog eyes*

Southern's Notes: I happily accepted the chance to join Candace's beta team. It's a lovely story. The thing I like about this chapter is Hermione's talk with Minerva. It would be something that I would expect from McGonagall. I do hope Hermione's funky anger didn't lead her down the wrong path by blindly signing the contract.

Settling In

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione moves into the dungeons.

Disclaimer: I wish I created and owned it, but we all know it belongs to Jo!

A/N: Much thanks, praise, applause, and love go out to the two greatest betas of all time, queenp and Southern_Witch_69. Without their constant nagging and endless supply of commas, comments, and suggestions I would be completely lost. I love you both!

Chapter 4: Settling In

Hermione was lost in thought as she listened to the squeaking wheels of the carriage and clomping hooves of the Thestrals as they traversed the dirt path to Hogwarts. She'd had a very interesting week. Panic had set in the day after she had signed the contract.

She had spent the last week pouring over books about wizarding law to learn what rights she would have as a surrogate. The law clearly stated that a surrogate had rights to the child she carried, especially if the child belonged biologically to the surrogate. However, she had rejected those rights by signing the contract. All three of the wizarding solicitors with whom she had met told her that by signing, she had legally crippled herself. She had considered going to Professor Snape to tell him she had changed her mind and ask that he rip up the contract, but she knew that would be futile. He would never allow her go back on her word.

After giving up hope of finding a legal way out of the contract, she had decided that the best thing she could possibly do would be to follow through with her original plan...finding a way to make Professor Snape change his mind. She had almost a year, so she was confident she could manage it. The rest of her last days of freedom had been spent pouring over old *Daily Prophet* articles and books looking for every scrap of information she could find on Professor Snape and his family. What she found had been mildly helpful, although unpleasant.

There were several articles about him right after the first war with Voldemort. They detailed Professor Dumbledore's defence of him and his somewhat narrow escape of Azkaban. There were even a couple of editorials lobbying for his immediate imprisonment.

The most intriguing ones, however, were about his mother's death. Professor McGonagall had told her that his mother had been killed, and the murderer had never been found. However, what had shocked Hermione the most was the violence surrounding her death and the level of attention it garnered. Professor Snape, who had been sixteen at the time, was home when his mother was killed, but he'd claimed he had been asleep, hearing and seeing nothing. The press had had a field day with the story. She couldn't be sure how much was fact and how much was the *Prophet's* usual exaggerations, but the story had definitely garnered much attention.

She also learnt from these articles that Professor Snape came from a wealthy pure-blood family. *Why is he teaching at Hogwarts if his family is that rich?* she wondered. She added that question to the ever-growing list of things she just didn't understand about the man...this man she had agreed to carry a child for.

With a shake of her head, she brought herself back to her previous thoughts...the information she had gathered on Professor Snape. It was with this information that she was able to arrive at her plan. The Plan, including all her research, was painstakingly drawn out over countless sheets in her notebook, and it included several bulleted points and countless references and cross-references. As the carriage continued to jostle down the path, she read over the list one more time.

1. *Whenever possible, subtly hint at how difficult raising a child alone will be.*
2. *Do everything he asks! A happy Snape is a compliant Snape...maybe.*
3. *Offer to help him in any way you can to show him how useful you can be.*
4. *For Pete's sake, DON'T screw up the apprenticeship! It's the best opportunity you have to change his opinion of you!*
5. *Be supportive. Remember he works with and teaches "dunderheads". Don't be one.*
6. *Remember: Be nice and respectful to him. Don't make him angry. It will give him more reason to keep the contract as it is.*
7. *Tea at the end of the day might help. Show him you are an asset.*
8. *If all else fails, enlist the help of Minerva and Headmaster Dumbledore.*

The carriage finally pulled up to the large oak doors of Hogwarts Castle, breaking Hermione away from her scheming. She felt a small smile tug at her lips...seeing the castle with its towering turrets and many windows never ceased to put a smile on her face. The door to the carriage opened, and Hermione peered out to see who was waiting for her but saw no one. Confused, she poked her head out further. She startled slightly, bumping her head on the top of the carriage, when a small, high-pitched voice suddenly came from below her.

"Hello, friend of Harry Potter! Is Miss needing help getting out of the carriage?"

Hermione smiled while rubbing her aching head. "Hello, Dobby. No, I can manage myself, thanks. How are you? Are you still enjoying working here at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, stepping out the carriage with a hissing Crookshanks under her arm.

"Oh, Dobby is wonderful, Miss. You is kind to be asking after Dobby," the elf replied. "Dobby loves working at Hogwarts. Master Dumbledore is a very kind wizard. He is good to Dobby. Dobby has saved up enough from what Master Dumbledore pays him to buy four new pairs of socks and two new hats!" the elf said with evident excitement.

"Oh, that's...good, Dobby. So, where is Professor Snape?"

"Oh, Professor Snape is in a staff meeting, Miss. He is begging your pardon for not coming to meet you himself. He is asking Hogwarts elves to show you to your rooms for him, but most elves is still not liking Miss, so Dobby is volunteering to do it. Dobby is proud Professor Snape is trusting him to show Miss to her rooms," said Dobby, puffing out his chest in pride.

Hermione beamed indulgently at Dobby, thinking about S.P.E.W. She had never managed to get a single elf to accept wages and freedom; a part of her ached to make one more go of convincing them to at least accept wages. However, she knew she had already bitten off more than she could chew by agreeing to sign the contract with Professor Snape, so freeing house-elves would have to wait for another day.

"Here we are, Miss, your rooms." Hermione looked down at Dobby, who was looking back at her with his big, round eyes gleaming. "Professor Snape has set the password to 'twenty points from Gryffindor,' saying it is easy for you to remember." As soon as the words left Dobby's mouth, the portrait...a life-sized painting of Salazar Slytherin...swung open.

Oh, honestly, Hermione thought as she rolled her eyes. *Why does he consider me to be so concerned over Houses still? I'm here to learn, not hold House grudges!* All concerns about inter-House rivalry brought up by the portrait and password were pushed aside as Hermione took in her new rooms. *Wow,* Hermione thought as she sat a squirming Crookshanks down on the floor. *This is a bit more than I expected.*

The room was not large, but it was very tastefully done and had everything in it she could need. To her right was a small living area with a small dark brown sofa positioned just in front of the crackling fireplace. Next to the sofa, there sat a dark green, squishy armchair. *Perfect for cuddling up in for reading!* Hermione thought with a smile.

Speaking of reading, she took in the sight before her with relief. Her eyes lit even further, taking in the far side of the living area. It was lined with three enormous oak bookshelves that went all the way to the ceiling. There were already a couple hundred books on the shelves, but there was a large enough area at the bottom of the shelving for her books. It was perfect.

Forcing herself to turn away from the bookshelves, she looked right in front of her. There was a writing desk strategically placed in front of a window...obviously enchanted...which currently displayed a beautiful spring day. Continuing her perusal, her eyes found a door off to her right that stood slightly ajar.

"That's the bedroom, Miss," said a high-pitched voice suddenly, startling Hermione causing her to jump.

"Oh, Dobby! I nearly forgot you were here. You startled me!" Hermione said, clutching her hand over her heart.

"Begging your pardon, Miss. Dobby is not meaning to startle you," Dobby said tearfully.

"Oh, it's all right, Dobby," Hermione said quickly. "Don't worry about it. It was my fault. Now, you said that door leads to the bedroom?" Dobby nodded his head enthusiastically, causing his big ears to flap. "All right, well, I guess I'll unpack, but...oh, where's my luggage?" Dobby snapped his fingers, and her trunk appeared. "How did you...?"

"House-elf magic, Miss," Dobby grinned.

Hermione laughed as she continued into the bedroom while Dobby levitated her trunk into the room. It was a rather simple room...just a bed, nightstand, and a wardrobe. The bed was a four-poster that was much like the one she had slept on as a student. The only visible difference was the duvet, which was...unsurprisingly...emerald green with silver leaves stitched delicately throughout. Hermione shook her head at the Slytherin colours. It was obvious the colours and password had been chosen to irritate her.

Next, she entered the bathroom, which was connected to the bedroom. It was fairly simple. There was a tub, a toilet, and a sink with a mirror. Hermione glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was quite out of control. With the rain the U.K. had been getting recently, she was having great difficulty keeping it from looking like a bird's nest. When she gave herself a disapproving look, the mirror snickered rudely. She glared it into silence, shut the door to the bathroom, and began to unpack her things.

A few minutes later, Dobby left after having instructed Hermione to call on him for anything she should need and informing her to be ready for Professor Snape to escort her to lunch at noon. The remainder of the morning passed rather quickly, and before she knew it, she heard the door in the living room open and close, followed by a very distinct rustling of robes.

There was a sharp knock on her closed bedroom door. "Miss Granger, are you ready for lunch?" said the deep voice behind the door.

"Er...yes, sir, Professor Snape. I'll be right out." Hermione bustled around for a few minutes, straightening her hair the best she could and fussing with her robes, which were wrinkled after her trip in the carriage. After making no observable progress, she huffed in resignation and opened the door. Professor Snape was standing in front of the fireplace with his arms crossed, a blank expression across his face.

"Hello, Professor. I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long," Hermione said, mentally admonishing herself to remember The Plan...objective number 6: Be nice to Professor Snape.

Professor Snape's lips thinned a bit as he said, "I left instructions for you to be ready at precisely twelve pm, Miss Granger. It is now twelve fifteen. I do hope you will learn to be more punctual whilst working as my apprentice. I do not tolerate tardiness."

"I apologise, *Professor*," Hermione bit out. "I'm still trying to settle into my rooms. I must have lost track of the time."

"See that it doesn't happen again," Professor Snape responded with equal acidity.

It was most unfortunate that Crookshanks chose this exact moment to make his presence known by jumping up onto the chair where they were standing. He and Severus merely looked at each other with mutual distaste. Crookshanks eyed Professor Snape warily and seemed to decide he couldn't be trusted.

With a look of utter disgust, Professor Snape said, "What is this infernal beast doing here?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "This *infernal beast*, as you call him, is Crookshanks. He's half-Kneazle, half-cat, and he's *mine*."

"Miss Granger, I did not specify that you were allowed to bring a familiar on your apprenticeship. This...thing will have to leave the dungeons. Perhaps you can set it loose in the Forbidden Forest or ask Professor Grubbly-Plank to care for it, but it is *not* staying here," he finished with an air of finality.

Hermione looked at Professor Snape as if he were an escaped patient from St. Mungo's Spell Damage ward. "I'm *not* setting Crookshanks loose in the Forbidden Forest!" She swallowed, thinking of their fallen mate that had given his life to protect the headmaster. "Besides, since Hagrid died, Professor Grubbly-Plank has enough on her hands with teaching the Care of Magical Creatures classes. The contract also said nothing about my not being allowed to keep my familiar. He is staying *here* with me," Hermione said in a tone that brooked no argument. As if to solidify her argument, Crookshanks leapt from the chair and took a great swipe at Professor Snape's legs with his sharp claws before hissing and running into the bedroom to hide under the bed.

Professor Snape looked down at the gash in his trousers, noticed the blood on his leg, and glared at Hermione again. "Get...rid...of...it!" he spat out.

"No. I'm sorry he hurt you, but he stays," Hermione defiantly met his obsidian eyes and straightened her posture.

Severus knew that fighting her over this would only make things...more unpleasant for them both. In fact, the clever witch might even try to say he was breaching the contract. Therefore, he quickly determined that as long as the vile creature was kept away from him, it could stay. "Fine," he bit out, "but I don't want to see that thing you call a pet roaming around the dungeons. It is to stay in your rooms at all times."

For a long minute, master and apprentice glared daggers at each other. Hermione wanted to prove she was a capable adult and not some snivelling first year that he could intimidate, so she was determined not to back down. Her body, however, had other ideas. When her stomach let out a loud growl of hunger, Professor Snape smirked at her.

"It appears that we should go to lunch, Miss Granger. You can finish settling in later." Hermione merely nodded as she followed him out the door. After they passed through the portrait hole, Hermione looked back at the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, who was currently wearing a very arrogant expression.

She narrowed her eyes at him before turning to face Professor Snape with a half-annoyed, half-amused expression. "It just had to be Salazar Slytherin, didn't it?" She shook her head.

Severus looked between her and the portrait a couple of times before responding. "I suppose the password is not to your liking either?" he asked without attempting to hide his smirk of amusement.

Hermione smirked back. "Why didn't you just go with 'Slytherin Rules'? At least it fits the portrait."

He smiled nastily suddenly. "That was the password last month," he answered acridly.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and they continued the rest of their trek to the Great Hall in silence. She wondered briefly why he would need to change passwords on quarters that were never used. Surely, it had been years since an apprentice lived there. Shrugging her thoughts away, she mentally prepared herself to appear in front of the staff at Snape's side for the meal.

When they arrived at the Great Hall, Hermione noticed that the rest of the staff was already eating. Silence fell over the room at the sight of the Potions master and the

school's former know-it-all walking in together. Then, after a moment, as if someone had turned up the volume in the room, there was a rush of noise.

"Oh, Hermione! How lovely to see you, my dear!"

"What brings you here, Miss Granger?"

"When did you arrive?"

"My, how you've grown up!"

Hermione's eyes darted from one person to the next, trying to take in all that was being said as each of her former professors took turns hugging and greeting her. She smiled, greeting them all while Professor Snape watched with disgust evident on his face, which Hermione...and the rest of the staff...promptly ignored.

Hermione noticed that the only member of the staff who did not seem pleased to see her was Professor McGonagall. In fact, she had barely said hello to Hermione and kept throwing saddened looks to the young witch. *She's probably really worried about me. I should talk to her, explain why I signed,* thought Hermione. *She did say she didn't think signing the contract was a good idea.*

Professor Vector's voice brought Hermione out of her musings. "So, Hermione, you haven't told us what brings you back to us."

Before Hermione could answer, a voice at her side said, "Miss Granger has requested to be my apprentice, and I have accepted. She will be living here for nearly a year, and I expect all of you to allow her to fulfill her duties as my apprentice and not pester her with your prattling and inane questions."

"My, my, Severus, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed again?" Madam Hooch asked in a sing-song voice.

"Perhaps he still hasn't had his morning coffee yet," Professor Flitwick offered a bit too cheerily.

"Perhaps he misses terrorizing the students, and he's feeling a bit peckish," muttered Madam Pomfrey, who was unable to hide her smile behind her glass of pumpkin juice.

Severus narrowed his eyes at his colleagues as he snapped, "That will be quite enough from you lot."

Madam Pomfrey just laughed. "Oh, Severus. You do make it far too easy on us to wind you up."

"Yes, you certainly do. Now, quit being so tetchy and sit down and eat," ordered Madam Hooch. With a final glare at all present, Severus sat down and began filling his plate.

Hermione stood motionless, mouth slightly open. She had never seen the professors so relaxed before, and she never imagined that *anyone* would tease Severus Snape and live to tell the tale. She couldn't get over her shock that he had calmly taken the teasing and sat down when Madam Hooch said to.

"Sit and eat, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, setting his fork down. "We have work to do this afternoon, and I don't want to waste that time with your dawdling." With that he went back to ignoring Hermione and concentrating on his food. Mentally adding another item to her list of "Things I Don't Understand About Professor Snape," Hermione sat down and enjoyed her lunch.

The afternoon was spent exactly as Professor Snape had promised...preparing for the students' arrival the next day. The student stores had to be organized and replenished. The ingredients' potency confirmed, and those that had outlived their shelf life had to be thrown out. The classroom had to be cleaned, as well. While Hermione did all of this, Professor Snape watched and revised his lesson plans.

After dinner, they headed back down to the dungeons. When Hermione went in the direction of the classroom, however, Professor Snape suddenly stopped in front of her, turning to face her. He shoved a piece of parchment into her hands.

When she looked at him quizzically, he rolled his eyes, sighing exasperatedly. "If you would open the parchment, Miss Granger, you will see your required reading for the week. Your days will be spent working in the lab on experiments I assign you while I am teaching, and your evenings will be spent assisting me with marking and reading the texts that I assign. You will find all of these books on the shelf in your room. I expect you to have this list completed by Friday at dinner. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. I understand perfectly," Hermione said, trying to remain civil in spite of how frustrated she was becoming with his attitude towards her.

"Good. To the left of your fireplace, you will find a doorway. It leads to my living area. From there, you can access the lab by pressing in on the left third book on the fifth shelf from the bottom and saying 'monkshood.' Immediately upon finishing breakfast daily, you need to report directly to the lab." At that, Professor Snape gave her a curt nod, turned on his heel, and walked off, obviously heading to his private chambers. Hermione shook her head at his retreating back and started toward her own rooms.

As she turned the knob to her door, Hermione suddenly realized something. Neither of them had mentioned the surrogate clause all day. *It's like the proverbial pink elephant in the room...we don't talk about it, even though we desperately need to,* Hermione mused. However, a part of her had to admit she wasn't prepared to address the stipulations in the contract, so as long as Professor Snape didn't push the issue, she wouldn't either.

The next day went much the same as the first. Hermione had neatly arranged and cleaned all the students' desks. The ingredients in the cupboard were neatly arranged and ready for the first potions of the semester. Things were as ready as possible for the student's arrival.

As Hermione sat at the High Table at the start of term feast that night, she couldn't help reminiscing about her days at school and smiling. She had been excited yet scared the night of her own sorting. The smile faded from her face, however, when she thought about the child she would be having for Professor Snape and how she may never even know what House the baby was sorted into.

The next morning Hermione met Professor Snape in the hallway as they walked to breakfast. They politely nodded at each other, but that was the extent of their pre-coffee conversation. Hermione could tell from his facial expressions that conversation before he had had some coffee or tea would be pointless.

During breakfast, several of the professors attempted to include Hermione in their conversations. Every time she would respond to their prodding, however, Professor Snape would glower at her. Finally, after about the tenth time, Hermione glowered back at him, to which she received a raised eyebrow.

Madam Hooch, seeing the exchange between master and apprentice, leaned over to Hermione and whispered, "Don't worry, dear. He's always in his foulest mood on the day classes begin." Hermione smiled at the kind professor, an idea forming in her head. If she was to begin implementing The Plan, she had some thinking to do.

Severus flew through the portrait hole to his chambers. No other day of classes vexed him the way the first day of classes did. It had only been one day...one bloody day...and already three cauldrons had melted. *Insolent dunderheads,* he fumed as he gracelessly fell into his favorite armchair. He let out an exasperated sigh as he

pinched the bridge of his nose and firmly closed his eyes. The first day of classes always resulted in an atrocious headache.

"Good afternoon, Professor," an overly cheery voice called from behind him, startling him.

As he jumped from his seat, he growled, "Miss Granger, what are you doing here in *my* chambers?"

Hermione gave him her best innocent look and said, "I only want to help, Professor. Would you like a cup of tea? Perhaps I could get you one of those vials of Headache Potion?"

"Tea, Miss Granger? Tea is hardly enough to rid me of this headache. I highly doubt a dose of Headache Potion would do much good either," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose again.

Hermione bit her lip and looked around. If he didn't want tea and potion, what did he want? An image of her father coming home after a long day sprang up in her mind. *Didn't he always fix himself a glass of brandy when he'd had a bad day?*

Nodding her head in firm resolve, she headed to the small cabinet in the corner, having earlier noticed a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky on it. She opened the cupboard, and finding a shot glass, poured a generous amount into it.

As she handed him the drink, he raised his eyebrows raised with a mixture of amusement and suspicion. She rolled her eyes. "Just take it. My dad has always claimed nothing helps you forget about a bad day better than a stiff drink."

He reached for the glass, snatched it from her hand, and downed it in one gulp. "That's a bit better," he sighed, his shoulders relaxing slightly.

"So, what exactly happened today?" Hermione asked.

"Two words: third years."

"Oh," Hermione responded. "Which class?"

"Which do you think?" Severus sighed. "Gryffindor and Slytherin, of course. Simmons and Eddington decided to fling Dungbombs at each other through the entire class, and one landed in Simmons' cauldron. We were reviewing the Deflating Draught."

Hermione hissed in horrified understanding. "What happened?"

"The potion let off a noxious gas, which landed Simmons and two others in the hospital wing, and the cauldron exploded, of course. Two more exploded before class finally ended, as well."

Hermione took the empty glass from him and silently refilled it. As she handed it back to him and watched him swiftly knock it back, her mind suddenly wandered to the pink elephant that seemed to be in the room with them. Should she finally bring it up? She didn't want to, but it had been two days since she had arrived, and he had yet to say anything about her contract. They had to speak about it at some point, and the suspense was killing her.

As if reading her thoughts, Severus suddenly looked up at her. "We have an appointment next Saturday at ten am with the head of the fertility clinic at St. Mungo's. You'll be filling out all the necessary forms, and they will be attempting conception. We'll go to breakfast at nine before Flooing to St. Mungo's at nine forty-five."

"Saturday? So soon?" Hermione asked as she felt her throat beginning to constrict.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her and shook his head in exasperation. "Yes, Miss Granger, this Saturday. It is usually the day that follows Friday," he snapped. "We've been over this. It is a relatively simple procedure; I expect you to be ready by eight thirty Saturday morning," his clipped tone let her know that there would be no further discussion on the matter.

"A-a-all right. I'll be ready," Hermione said. Her throat was suddenly dry. As she silently headed for the door that led to her living area, she felt a knot in the pit of her stomach. *Oh, God, what have I gotten myself in to?*

Author's Notes: Why did Severus and Crooks not get along? Poor Hermione. Now she has two tetchy men to deal with. *sigh* Further more, why does Severus let the staff get away with teasing him so much? They must all have a good relationship. ;-) Also, Hermione once again neglected to mention to Severus that Ginny works at St. Mungo's. Let's hope in the next chapter she's in the right frame of mind to remember. ;-) I want to give a big thanks to Fyiagcg and Pearle over at Potter_Place. They helped with the humorous password bit. Thanks also goes to GinnyW for helping via yahoo messenger when I got stuck on the ending. Love ya Gin!

Up next: A visit to St. Mungo's! This was originally supposed to carry through to the St. Mungo's visit, but I decided to break it up and leave a bit of a cliffie. Don't worry, though, as the second part of the chapter is only a couple days behind this one.

Southern's Notes: I don't nag, only tease a bit. I'm glad the chapter is here though, and I'm looking forward to the development of the relationship.

The Head of the Fertility Clinic

Chapter 5 of 5

Attempts at conception and a dilemma.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money off this, so please don't sue. ;-)

A/N: A big thanks to my wonderful betas, queenp and Southern_Witch_69. You ladies are the greatest. Seriously, I mean it. :-D

Chapter Five: The Head of the Fertility Clinic

Hermione didn't sleep at all on Friday night. All she could think of was the appointment the next morning at St. Mungo's. She was nervous to begin with about the requirements of the contract, but the procedure was now worrying her as well. She spent most of the night tossing and turning, worrying over the appointment and what life

would be like afterwards. What would it be like to be pregnant, to feel a life growing within her body? Up until signing the contract with Professor Snape, she had never really considered this, but now, the idea was all consuming. Inevitably, these thoughts would lead to thinking about giving up the baby after carrying it for nine months, so she ruthlessly tamped down on those thoughts. *I will get him to change his mind about that* she thought as she punched her pillow. Then, with a great sigh, she finally let sleep overtake her.

Hermione groaned as she reached over to shut off the alarm clock next to her bed. She hadn't slept for very long, and she ~~was~~ looking forward the events of the day. With a heavy sigh, she pushed a disgruntled Crookshanks out of her way and threw the covers off.

As she was getting dressed, she looked at herself in the mirror, and her hand idly rubbed her stomach. What would it be like to have a baby in there? She had to admit that a part of her was intrigued by the idea of being pregnant. She knew there would be unpleasant things like morning sickness, but it would also be interesting to watch all the changes that her body would go through. While she had been researching Professor Snape to develop The Plan, she had also researched pregnancy. She wanted to know everything that would be going on with her body while she was pregnant. Some of the articles had proven somewhat difficult to read, as they dealt with how the baby developed after birth and the bond formed between mother and child. The knot in her stomach gave an uncomfortable twist at this thought. She worried her lip, staring blankly into the mirror.

"A lot on your mind, dearie? Bloke trouble perhaps? Maybe if you did something with that rat's nest, they wouldn't be giving you such trouble," the mirror said in a snotty tone.

"Oh, shut it, you!" Hermione huffed. Lately, the mirror had been giving her daily advice on fashion, hair, make-up, and her love life...or lack thereof, as the mirror reminded her. Ignoring the nuisance of a mirror, she continued to get dressed for the day.

Once she was washed and dressed, she headed to the Great Hall for breakfast. She was very glad she didn't run into Professor Snape on the way. A slight scowl crossed her face as she thought of him. She had completed every one of his required experiments earlier than he asked her to. After those tasks were complete, she would clean and set up the classroom for the next day's lessons. She had even completed her reading assignments a day early. His responses to all of her hard work had either been a curt nod or a snide remark, such as, "Still the over-achiever, I see." That comment had galled her the most. Here she was, literally signing her firstborn over to this arrogant, smug git, and he still couldn't even be bothered to be civil to her! *Honestly*, she chided herself. *This is Professor Snape we're talking about. What did you expect? A pat on the back?* she thought with a snort.

As she took her seat in the Great Hall between Professor Snape and Madam Hooch, she determinedly avoided meeting Professor Snape's eyes. She was incredibly nervous about their appointment this morning and not in the mood to deal with his attitude just yet.

"Good morning, Hermione. How's old Sev treating you? Not working you too hard, eh?" Madam Hooch asked. Hermione snorted into her tea, and Professor Snape huffed.

"Madam Hooch, I have asked you repeatedly, not to call me..."

"Oh, lighten up, there, Sevvie, I'm only trying to rile you up, is all." She leaned in closer to Hermione and whispered in a voice still loud enough for Professor Snape to hear. "It's best not to wind him up before he's finished his morning coffee. Remember that, dear." She then winked at Hermione as Professor Snape glared daggers at both witches.

In spite of her nervousness, Hermione couldn't help chuckling a little at Madam Hooch's antics. However, when she saw the scowl Professor Snape was giving her, she quit laughing and rolled her eyes at him.

"Miss Granger, I believe we have somewhere to be. Instead of dawdling in conversation with this meddlesome woman," he paused here to give Madam Hooch an icy look, which she openly laughed at, "perhaps your time would be better spent finishing your breakfast quickly."

"Thank you, *Professor*," Hermione replied in a saccharine-sweet voice. "I know we have *somewhere* to be. I will be ready to leave shortly."

"Glad to hear it," Professor Snape answered tersely. Then, he pushed his plate away and rose from his seat. "We will be Flooing from the headmaster's office. Meet me in the Entrance Hall at 8:45."

Hermione nodded and watched him leave. When Hermione looked back at the table, she saw the questioning looks of both Madam Hooch and Madam Pomfrey. Professor McGonagall, on the other hand, was looking at Hermione sadly and throwing nervous glances at Headmaster Dumbledore, who gently shook his head at her in response. For a moment, Hermione wondered if Professor Dumbledore knew of the talk she and Professor McGonagall had had.

"Where are you and Professor Snape off to today?" Madam Hooch asked, bringing Hermione out of her thoughts.

"Oh, we're... er, well," Hermione stumbled, trying to quickly think of a decent reason for their leaving the castle on a Saturday morning.

"I believe that Professor Snape and Miss Granger need some supplies for the Potions store cupboard that can only be purchased in London. Isn't that correct, Miss Granger?" the headmaster offered, giving Hermione a knowing look.

Hermione looked at him gratefully and replied, "Yes, Headmaster, that's correct. We should be back this afternoon, however."

"Good, good," the headmaster said. With a twinkle in his eyes he added, "I hope you have a pleasant time, but considering the company you will be keeping, I wouldn't count on that." Hermione tried not to laugh, but she joined in the chuckles of the other professors. "Ah, and I do believe your travelling companion is growing impatient."

Hermione glanced at the entrance to the Great Hall, and sure enough, Professor Snape was standing there with his arms crossed, glaring pointedly at her from across the way. She could practically see his foot tapping in impatience. *Oh, honestly*, she thought, shaking her head.

"Come, Miss Granger. I'll escort you to my office. We wouldn't want to keep Professor Snape waiting too long. He tends to get rather impatient," the headmaster offered as he rose from his seat in the middle of the table. She rose from her chair as well, following the headmaster out of the Great Hall. As she walked between the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables, several students were eyeing her curiously, but she ignored them.

"Try to hurry, Miss Granger," Professor Snape drawled.

As Hermione followed along with both men to the headmaster's office, her stomach gave another uncomfortable lurch, and she suddenly wished she had skipped breakfast.

As soon as they arrived in the lobby of St. Mungo's, Hermione was still trying to calm her nerves. Of course, it wasn't exactly helping that Professor Snape had shot off down the corridor, refusing to wait for her to step out of the Floo. She practically had to run to keep up with his long, quick strides.

Suddenly, he stopped and gave her an annoyed look. "Are you going to dawdle all day, Miss Granger?"

Forgetting her vow to be nice to Professor Snape momentarily, Hermione huffed and glared at him. "I *am* trying to keep up with you, *sir*. You're walking too fast."

"Incorrect, Miss Granger, you are walking too slowly." With that, he headed down the corridor at an even faster rate. Hermione glared at the back of his head, and a low growl left her lips. *The Plan be damned*. She was going to bloody kill the git if he didn't start being civil.

As she hurriedly dashed around a corner so she wouldn't lose sight of Professor Snape, Hermione suddenly felt something crash into her, and she fell gracelessly to the

floor.

"Watch where you're going!" two female voices yelled.

"Hermione?"

"Ginny?"

For a moment, the two friends sat on the floor in the middle of the St. Mungo's corridor, staring blankly at each other. Then, Ginny started laughing.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Hermione. I didn't see you. You came around that corner quite fast," Ginny stated as she stood and offered Hermione her hand in assistance.

Hermione smiled, took her hand, and pushed herself off of the floor. "Ginny, what are you... oh, that's right, you work here," Hermione said dumbly.

"Of course I work here, silly," Ginny said with a laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"Well..." Hermione began.

"Miss Granger, will you hurry? We are going to be late!" Professor Snape said, coming back from around the corner. When he noticed Ginny, he looked at her with disinterest on his face. "Miss Weasley, how... unexpected to run into you here."

Ginny looked at him quizzically. "Why is it so unexpected? We know that Hermione is going to be a surrogate for you, and I work here."

"Oh, really? How... fascinating," Professor Snape began, giving an icy stare to Hermione. "I'm surprised Miss Granger didn't mention that to me. One would think it might be rather important."

"I'm sorry, Professor. It must have slipped my mind," Hermione said, trying to sound pleasant. She didn't want Ginny to think Professor Snape was treating her horribly. The younger girl would tell Ron and Harry, who would come barrelling into Hogwarts and hex Professor Snape within an inch of his life. She knew Professor Snape was a powerful wizard, but considering the fact that they were almost fully-trained Aurors, she didn't want to take any chances.

"Very well. We are almost late for our appointment. We need to hurry," Professor Snape responded acidly.

"I'll talk to you later, Ginny, all right? I'll write soon, I promise."

"O-o-okay. Good luck with... everything," Ginny said, nervously worrying her bottom lip.

Hermione gave her the most reassuring look she could muster and followed Professor Snape down the corridor.

"Why did you not inform me that Miss Weasley is a Trainee Healer here?" Professor Snape questioned angrily.

Hermione looked at him, clearly mystified. "Why does it matter?"

Suddenly, he stopped outside a large door and turned to her. "Why does it matter?" Professor Snape asked through gritted teeth. "Did it not occur to you in that allegedly brilliant mind of yours that Miss Weasley working here may prove a problem?" At Hermione's bewildered look, he sighed exasperatedly and continued his rant. "As a member of the staff here, she can access the files kept on patients. She most likely speaks with Healers and Trainee Healers from around the hospital. She could, with little effort, find out that we are not using a donated egg for the conception."

"Oh," was all Hermione could say. She hadn't really thought about that, but he was still making too big of an issue out of it. Pulling herself together, she responded. "First of all, Ginny works on the other side of the hospital and doesn't come down this way very often. In fact, when I asked her about the procedure, she only knew enough about it to assure me it was considered relatively simple. Secondly, as far as her having access to files, for Pete's sake, she's a Trainee Healer, not the head of the bloody hospital or something. I doubt she would ever come across my file."

"That may all be true, Miss Granger, but if, at any time, she becomes suspicious, she may be tempted to snoop about. That, after all, what you and your compatriots were infamous for during your time at Hogwarts."

With a deadly glare at the man standing in front of her, Hermione began, "Now, listen here, *Professor*, if we are going to do this, then..."

The clearing of a throat in a nearby doorway interrupted Hermione's tirade. The young woman looked toward the sound to see a dumpy woman who looked to be in her eighties standing there. The woman wore pale blue robes, a white lab coat, and had horn-rimmed glasses hanging from a chain around her neck. The woman's white hair was pulled into a tight bun, and she held a clipboard in her hands, which she looked at before addressing the bickering couple. "Are you Professor Severus Snape and..." She looked at the clipboard once more to verify the name. "Miss Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, we are," Professor Snape answered for them both. "Healer Steward, I presume?"

"Yes, but please, Professor, call me Maureen," the Healer said in an overly-saccharine voice. "Now, please, follow me into my office. We have a few things to take care of before we can begin the procedure." With that, she turned on her heel and walked through the doorway she had previously been standing in.

Hermione followed Professor Snape into the office. He sat in one of the wooden chairs in front of the desk whilst Hermione took the other. Hermione glanced around the office, taking in its posh, yet simple décor. Elegant carpet covered the floor, and a rather expensive-looking vase, filled with fresh flowers, sat atop a shining oak table. *This woman has expensive taste.*

"Now, before we begin," the stern-looking Healer began, "there are a few forms for you to fill out, Miss Granger." She walked around the desk to stand in front of Hermione and handed her a thick roll of parchment. Worrying her bottom lip, Hermione accepted the parchment and reached for a quill on the desk.

She answered question after question regarding her family's medical history. There were some quite personal questions on there as well, which she purposely left blank. Some things were no one else's business after all. When she was *finally* finished, she returned the quill and handed the long roll of parchment back to Healer Steward.

After looking at the form for a minute, Healer Steward looked up, eyeing Hermione with a look reminiscent of Narcissa Malfoy. "Your parents are *Muggles*?" she asked in a tone that left no doubt she found the thought repugnant.

"Yes, they are," Hermione responded defensively. "Is there a *problem* with that, Healer Steward?"

"Oh, of course not, dear girl," she said in a tone that didn't convince Hermione she meant it. "I just assumed with Professor Snape's... prestigious background that he would have chosen someone of the same... calibre."

"And what precisely is wrong with my *calibre*, Healer Steward? Surely you aren't suggesting that a Muggle-born isn't suited to carry a child for a pureblood, are you?" Hermione said, her ire rising at the sheer gall of the witch in front of her.

The look on the Healer's face turned positively contemptuous as she surveyed Hermione's look of astonished outrage. "I did not say a Muggle-born witch is not suited to carry a child for a pureblood. I was merely stating my surprise at Professor Snape's choice of surrogate. However, if you must know, we do find that mixing Muggle

genetics into the magical conception procedure hinders getting the desired result."

Hermione's eyes narrowed while she struggled to keep her voice steady. "Are you somehow implying that Muggle genetics are inferior to purebloods?"

"Now, you listen here, you..."

"Healer Steward," Professor Snape suddenly proclaimed loudly. "Perhaps you could get on with reviewing the form. I have things to attend to this afternoon, and I would prefer not to spend my entire afternoon here."

"Yes, of course, Professor," Healer Steward said sweetly. "I know you are a busy man, and I would hate to delay you."

Professor Snape nodded. *Oh, sure, be nice to him, you cow,* Hermione thought angrily.

"Yes, I am a busy man, and I do not appreciate your questioning my choice of a surrogate. I chose Miss Granger after having interviewed almost a dozen of the witches you suggested, many of whom were purebloods, and none of which suited my needs. I have also thoroughly researched this process myself, and I believe you are greatly exaggerating the importance blood status plays on the effectiveness of the procedure."

"I apologise, Professor, I in no way meant to..."

"That is enough, Healer Steward. I would be very grateful if we could desist with the dawdling and get back to the matter at hand."

"Of course, Professor Snape," Healer Steward said, nervousness showing in her voice.

The room suddenly fell uncomfortably silent. Healer Steward returned to her perusal of the parchment. Suddenly, she stopped reading and looked up at Hermione. "Miss Granger, you neglected to answer several questions." She began to hand Hermione the parchment back but stopped abruptly. Her gaze held sinister glee as she said, "Perhaps it would just be easier if I fill them in for you." She paused to clear her throat. "Have you ever been sexually active? If so, for how long and with how many partners? And are you currently in a sexual relationship with someone?" When she finished, she looked expectantly at Hermione.

Hermione's cheeks turned a deep shade of red, and if she didn't know better, Hermione would have sworn Professor Snape shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I do not believe the details of my sex life are pertinent, Healer Steward."

"Of course they are. It is information we must have before performing the procedure. We need to know how your body will respond to the procedure. Virgins' bodies tend to..."

"Fine!" Hermione bit out. "No, I am not a virgin. That's all I'm telling you. Is that enough to tell you *how my body will react*, Healer Steward? How many partners I have been with, how long I have been sexually active, and whether or not I'm currently involved with someone are not important." Hermione couldn't believe the audacity of this woman, asking her these questions right in front of Professor Snape. There was no way she was telling *this* witch, especially in front of Professor Snape, about losing her virginity to Cormac McLaggan her sixth year...the biggest mistake she'd ever made...or about the two times with Ron when they tried dating seventh year.

Healer Steward gave an exasperated sigh. "I suppose that will do, but it would be easier if I knew how many sexual part..."

"Absolutely not! That is not relevant to this procedure! I've told you as much as I'm going to," Hermione declared firmly, cutting her off.

"Very well," the aggravated Healer bit out. "We will move on then. Miss Granger, do you see this door, right next to my desk? Not the one you came in, but the other?" asked the Healer as if speaking to a small child.

"Yes, I am quite capable of seeing a door, especially when it's right in front of me." Hermione had grown very tired of the condescending treatment by the Healer, and her patience had worn very thin.

"Good. Through that door is the examination room. We will be making the first attempt at conception today. Just go in and put on the hospital gown that has been placed on the examination table. Do not wear anything under the gown. Once you are changed, wait. The Trainee Healer and I will be in shortly to begin the procedure."

"All right," Hermione said, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Wait, what did you mean by first attempt?"

"Well, as I am sure Professor Snape explained to you," the Healer said in a syrupy voice, "the procedure rarely works on the first attempt. A majority of the time, two or three attempts are necessary before conception occurs."

"I see," Hermione said, swallowing nervously. She had been warned this was a possibility, but she hadn't realised that *majority* needed multiple attempts. She wasn't sure she wanted to return to this hospital and put up with this annoying Healer two or three more times. "Is there anything we can do to speed up the process?"

Ignoring Hermione, the Healer directed her response to Professor Snape. "There is a blood test I can perform. It would tell me whether or not you and Miss Granger are genetically compatible enough to ensure an easy conception. If you are not, conception is still possible but may prove more difficult."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked, angered at being ignored. "One would think that using magic would increase the chances of conception greatly."

The Healer sighed in annoyance as she turned to face Hermione. "I apologise, Miss Granger. I had forgotten that there are things you would not be aware of having been raised in a *Muggle* household." Hermione gritted her teeth, clenching her jaw at the derisiveness in the Healer's voice as she made *Muggle* sound like a dirty word.

"What should that matter?" Hermione ground out through gritted teeth.

"Well, had you been brought up in a *proper* wizarding home, you would *know* that there are certain aspects of life which are far too natural for magic to interfere effectively. Childbearing is one such aspect. While we have found ways to successfully enable those unable to naturally conceive to do so, the process has its limits. Sexual intercourse is a more effective means of conceiving in some cases."

Hermione and Severus both shifted uncomfortably in their seats at these last words. Surprisingly, the same exact thought went through both of their heads *There's no way in hell I will consider that!*

Suddenly, Healer Steward stood up and moved towards Hermione. When the Healer brandished her wand, Hermione's eyes grew wide and looked to Professor Snape, who was watching with an amused expression. Giving Hermione an annoyed look, the Healer sighed. "Miss Granger, did I not just tell you I needed to perform a blood test on you?" Before Hermione could even respond, the Healer swished and flicked her wand over Hermione first and then over Professor Snape, who looked completely nonplussed by this. Hermione threw him an annoyed look, which he completely ignored as the Healer returned to her desk.

"The preliminary tests show that you fit into the category we call a basic match. That means that if you successfully produce a child, the likelihood of it being a Squib is very low. However..."

"Pardon me," Professor Snape suddenly spoke up. "What precisely do you mean by *if*?"

The Healer smiled sweetly at Professor Snape and continued. "What I mean, Professor, is that you and Miss Granger are not a full match. That means achieving conception through magical means may prove difficult. If we are not successful after three attempts, I will strongly advise you to consider attempting conception through

intercourse." At the horrified expression on both of their faces, Healer Steward hurriedly added, "However, Professor, we have yet to even make one attempt, so we really would be getting ahead of ourselves to discuss that option at this time." Turning to Hermione, she added, "Miss Granger, please go into the examination room. The Trainee Healer and I will give you a few moments to change before we enter."

Hermione nodded and swallowed nervously. She shakily rose to her feet and silently exited the office through the door to the examination room. There she found a plain white hospital gown set atop a small examination table. As she looked around the room, she was astonished at how similar it looked to a Muggle gynaecologist's office. Of course, there were several magical objects lying around, but all the white and metal reminded her of the office her mother had forced her to visit every year since her thirteenth birthday.

Feeling immensely uncomfortable, Hermione slowly undressed and put on the unflattering hospital gown. When she had securely fastened it in the back, she carefully laid her folded clothes on a table next to the examination table. She hoisted herself onto the table and waited with growing impatience. With each passing minute her anxiety increased. Every second seemed like a minute. She fidgeted nervously, worrying her lip and looking around the room.

After what seemed like hours but was actually only a few minutes, Healer Steward entered the room flanked by a pretty blonde witch in lime-green robes with a badge that read:

KATHERINE

TRAINEE HEALER

Katherine flashed Hermione a reassuring smile, and the Healers turned away to collect the necessary instruments from a drawer.

The Trainee Healer walked over to Hermione and smiled pleasantly while running her wand over her. "She's already ovulating, Healer Steward. Do you think we need to give her the potion as well to increase the chances of conception?"

"No, this time we won't. Since she is already ovulating, we will try without the aid of the potion," Healer Steward responded distractedly.

Without warning, Healer Steward came up to Hermione and grabbed both of her legs, spreading them as far apart as they would go and attaching them to the stirrups at the edge of the table. Hermione let out an indignant squawk at this, but Healer Steward indifferently ignored her. "Katherine, hand me the UEI syringe," she barked at the young blonde woman.

Hermione's eyes grew as large as saucers upon seeing the large metal object that would be inserted into her vagina. *What in the world is a UEI syringe?* Hermione wondered idly.

Seeing her look of confusion and fear, Trainee Katherine walked over and laid a soothing hand on Hermione's shoulder. Katherine bent down and whispered in her patient's ear, "Don't worry, dear, you'll be fine. It's not painful, just uncomfortable. UEI stands for Uterine Embryonic Injection. That's what this procedure is called. It'll be over in just a few minutes."

Hermione smiled tentatively at the kind witch, but she gasped loudly when the cold metal object was suddenly thrust inside her most sensitive area. She instinctively tried to squirm away as Healer Steward manoeuvred the device inside her. The Healer abruptly stopped the action, casting an annoyed look at Hermione. Putting a firm hand roughly on Hermione's thigh to hold her still, she ground out, "Stop squirming. This will go much faster if you *stay still*." Then muttering to herself, Healer Maureen Steward began the procedure again. "It's never this difficult with a pureblood."

Hermione gave the annoying witch her most scathing look, but she obediently stayed still. While squinting her eyes tightly and fighting back tears, Hermione endured as Healer Steward and Trainee Katherine completed the procedure. As a few tears managed to escape, she felt the comforting hand of Katherine on her shoulder again.

"It's all right," the Trainee whispered soothingly. "It's almost over. We have reached the last part of the procedure. You've gone through the toughest part already. We had to harvest an egg. Then, we magically inseminated it with the professor's sperm. Now, we've just got to attempt to implant it in your uterus. We're almost there. You're doing great." Hermione forced herself to open her eyes and give Katherine a small smile.

When the procedure finally ended, Hermione put her clothes back on, and without making a sound, she followed Healer Steward back into her office to where Professor Snape sat, waiting for her return. Hermione desperately wanted to return to the comfort and security of her private room at the castle. She had never felt so violated and disgusting in her entire life. It currently took every ounce of her energy and her focus to not burst into tears. She refused to give Healer Steward or Professor Snape the satisfaction. Neither of them would *ever* see her cry.

Vaguely, through her mental haze, she realised someone was speaking to her. When a warm hand suddenly landed on her shoulder, she jumped. Was it Katherine again?

"Miss Granger? I asked if you are you ready to leave."

Hermione looked up, confused by the voice. It was Professor Snape speaking to her. He looked the same, but his hand was gentle and comforting. For a split second, Hermione thought she saw a hint of concern cross his usually indifferent face.

"Y-y-yes, I'm ready to leave, Professor," Hermione responded in a barely audible whisper. Hermione continued to stand in the middle of the office, barely aware of her surroundings. In the distance, she could hear several voices speaking, one quite loudly, sounding angry or upset.

Hermione barely remembered Flooing back to Hogwarts or the walk to the dungeons from the headmaster's office. She just knew she *did not* want to go back to that awful place again...ever. When she finally became aware of her surroundings again, she realised she was standing alone in her bedroom. How had she gotten in there? Not having the energy to even consider that, she fell onto her bed, clothes and all, and into a deep sleep.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose; his eyes firmly shut. This was not going as planned. He and Hermione had been to Healer Steward's office for three UEI procedures, as they were called, and they had recently learned that, once again, she was not pregnant. He had written a letter to inform Healer Steward of this and had received her reply today. She strongly advised him to begin considering *alternative options* because it was becoming apparent that the UEI procedure was not helping in their situation.

He and Hermione had just discussed their options, and it *had not* gone as he had thought it would. She had told him she did not want to go back to St. Mungo's for another one of the procedures. When he had told her of their only other option, she had visibly blanched, meekly stating, "All right." At that, he had spluttered the tea he had been drinking all over his best robes. Of course, he understood why she was so readily agreeable to the idea, and it had nothing to do with a desire to have sex with him.

When she'd walked out of the examination room after their first visit, he had honestly been concerned for her. She'd looked as if she'd just seen a pack of Dementors and a Boggart all at once. He wasn't willing to let her out of the contract, of course, but he hadn't meant to completely traumatise the girl either. Part of the reason he had chosen her was due to the fact that he felt she was strong enough to handle what was asked of her. However, when she walked out of the exam room, he wondered whether he might have been mistaken.

She hadn't heard a word as he'd tried to ask if she was prepared to leave. Having decided that this wasn't time for his usual acidic nature, he had gently laid a hand on her shoulder in order to get through to her and pull her out of the stupor she was in. When she'd answered, her voice had sounded monotonic. He had practically yelled at the Healer and Trainee, demanding to know why Hermione was acting so strangely. They told him there was nothing to worry about and that she just needed to lie down for a bit. He had taken her back to the castle immediately, glaring at anyone who tried to speak to her on the way back to the dungeons, including Minerva and the headmaster.

That had been nearly two months before, and the two following visits had been the same. In fact, for the second visit, he'd told her of their pending appointment in the middle of the week. She had visibly paled and not spoken for two whole days. The last time, he had decided to wait until the morning of the appointment to tell her, as she had previously become rather depressed once she'd known they were returning to the fertility clinic.

Now, here they were. Three attempts hadn't worked, and now, it was looking more and more likely that they would have to try thing*the old fashioned way*, as Hermione had once called it, in order to achieve success. Two months had seen many changes. At first, the idea of bedding the annoying witch had been completely abhorrent. He still didn't *like* the idea, but he had to admit she had proven less annoying than he had originally believed.

Of course, she still prattled on endlessly when it came to the experiments they were working on, anything she found interesting in the reading he assigned to her, or any articles she had recently read. However, they had actually managed to have several interesting debates over such things as the uses of dragon's blood in potions and its effect when mixed with certain ingredients. She had chosen this topic as the focus of her research project for her apprenticeship, and he grudgingly admitted that her research had been convincing, well thought, and even interesting thus far.

He had also discovered that she made a decent lab partner. She always anticipated what ingredient he would need next and had it ready for him. Another added benefit to having Hermione as his apprentice was that she understood when the crucial point of a potion was. This understanding led to her silence during that time, allowing him to concentrate.

How did I actually come to enjoy her company? No, enjoy was too strong a word perhaps. Tolerate was a better choice. Still, it perplexed him. Thinking back, though, he could pinpoint the day that things had started to change between them. It had been on her birthday. Nearly three weeks after she'd first arrived.

Severus was sitting on his bed grading some fourth year essays when there was a knock on his bedroom door Who could that be? he wondered. Irritated, he got up to see who could possibly be annoying him now.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" the professor spit out, sounding slightly annoyed.

"I just thought you should know, Professor, that I'll be leaving for a while. I shouldn't be too late, but, out of courtesy, I thought I'd let you know that..."

"Where, precisely, do you think you're going, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked at him, surprised. "It's my birthday, and some of the staff are having a birthday dinner for me at the Three Broomsticks."

"Why, Miss Granger, didn't you inform me of this before tonight? I do not appreciate your making such plans without consulting me. You are my apprentice, and you agreed to obey me."

"I didn't ask, sir, because I didn't think that I required your permission to go to a simple dinner with some of the staff."

"Did it not occur to you in that allegedly ingenious mind of yours, Miss Granger, that you may, in fact, be carrying my child right now? Do you honestly think I would allow my child to be exposed to the smoke and ruffraff at that hideous pub? Absolutely not. You will not be going, and that is final."

"I can understand that, sir, but I still don't see how harmful it could possibly be for me to spend an hour there eating dinner. Madam Pomfrey is one of the people attending, and you said she now knows about our... arrangement now. If there were anything to worry about, she would not have allowed Madam Hooch to organise the dinner in the first place."

"You are not going, Miss Granger, and that is final. I will not discuss this any further. Good night." When he went to shut the door, a hand reached out and kept the door from shutting. "What do you think you are doing, you..."

"Listen, Professor. We are going to be spending a lot of time together over the next several months. I refuse to spend that time miserable and away from my friends. I will not allow you to keep me here in the dungeons the entire time. It is my birthday, and if I wish to spend some time having dinner with people I consider to be friends, I will."

Severus glared at the defiant witch standing in front of him. He couldn't believe the audacity of the little chit! How dare she speak to him like that? She had agreed to obey him during this time. It hadn't even been a month, and, already, she was trying to disobey his wishes. "Why you insolent, impudent, little chit! By signing the contract, you agreed to obey me in all things. We discussed this, if you remember, when we met to discuss the terms of your apprenticeship. I told you then that I would not tolerate insubordination of any kind whilst you are my apprentice and the surrogate for my child. I will not..." Miss Granger, what is wrong?"

Hermione had suddenly gone quite pale during his tirade, and her posture had gone rigid. With tears welling in her eyes, she brought one hand to her mouth whilst placing the other on her stomach and said in a voice barely above a whisper, "Oh, shite. It didn't work. I'm not pregnant." With that, she flew through the door leading to her chambers, slamming it shut behind her.

Breaking away from his thoughts, Severus leant back in his chair. He had been at a complete loss when Hermione had gone tearing into her room right then. He had never been good at *dealing* with women and their emotions. His father had always taught that emotion made a person weak. However, he had suddenly remembered her offering of Firewhisky on his first day of classes and just how much that had relaxed him; so he had decided to return the favour. The memory returned, causing his lips to quirk up slightly.

Severus sighed as he balanced two glasses and the bottle in his hand whilst knocking on Hermione's bedroom door. "Miss Granger, open the door. I think there are a few things we need to discuss."

The muffled sobs abated instantly, and silence reigned for a moment before he heard the swish of robes moving across the room. "Come in, Professor," Hermione quietly answered as she opened the door. When she sat down on the bed, he silently poured two glasses of firewhisky, handing one to her. She looked up at him in shock, as if she had been expecting a lecture instead of a drink.

"Here, Miss Granger, drink this. I believe it will calm you enough to talk."

Hermione offered her thanks before taking the glass. He watched her sniff the contents, and then look up in shock. He merely sighed. "You did just say you are confident that you aren't pregnant, correct?" Hermione nodded. "Then there is no harm in it. Drink."

Hermione downed the firewhisky quickly and nearly choked. "Yuck! How do people drink this shite?"

Professor Snape gave an amused snort and sat down next to her. "Why were you so upset when you realised you weren't pregnant?" he asked point blankly.

Hermione bit her lip and stared at the floor. "Because that means I have to go back for another one of those awful procedures," she responded quietly.

Severus sighed heavily. After her reaction the first time, he had been afraid that might be part of it. "It couldn't be all that bad, Miss Granger."

Hermione's expression suddenly turned angry. "How would you know? YOU were just sitting in the office waiting. I was the one in there with... with the..." Her voice trailed

off as she looked back down at the floor.

Severus silently refilled her glass and waited to see if she would continue. Whilst it was true that he couldn't understand what it had felt like, he wasn't about to let her out of their agreement. It would be best to just let her get it all out. He watched as she gratefully downed the contents of a second glass of firewhisky. When she grimaced again, he couldn't stop the small chuckle from escaping him.

"I suppose firewhisky is an acquired taste," she said with a hint of embarrassment.

"Indeed it is, Miss Granger."

Silence filled the room for a good five minutes before she suddenly turned to him with an utterly serious expression on her face. "You know, we could try this the old fashioned way." Severus nearly dropped his glass at her sudden declaration. He looked at her in horror. It was obvious, he thought, that he had given her too much firewhisky. It was beginning to addle her brain. Surely she would not make such a ridiculous proposal whilst sober. Seeing his horrified expression, Hermione sighed. "It was just a thought. Never mind."

Silence once again filled the room. Then, as if she couldn't help herself, Hermione blurted, "Would you consider calling me Hermione and allowing me to call you Severus?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to lash out at her for asking such a question. She was his apprentice, for Circe's sake! However, when he looked down and saw the tear stains on her pillow, he couldn't bring himself to upset her further. "I suppose it would be prudent. We are, after all, going to be spending a lot of time together over the next several months. I see no reason we couldn't use each other's first names whilst in private." The smile Hermione gave him made his shoulders relax. He had never understood women and never really expected to, but perhaps they weren't so difficult to please after all.

"Thank you... Severus, for the drink and... everything," Hermione said nervously, his name sounding foreign on her tongue.

"You're welcome... Hermione," Severus nodded and said, her name sounding just as strange.

After another few minutes of silence, Severus looked around the room, trying to find a way to fill the silence. A small pile of presents caught his eye. "What are those?" he asked lamely, and then mentally kicked himself for asking such a foolish question when she had already told him it was her birthday.

"Those are the presents from my family and friends," she calmly answered.

"What is that large thing in the corner?"

"That's something called a cat condo. It's a sort of playhouse for Crookshanks. It's from Harry and Ron."

Severus snorted, and his face contorted in distaste at the mention of her two friends. Hermione sighed. "You know, Severus," she began, still adjusting to using his first name, "they really are wonderful men when you get to know them."

Severus snorted again. "Men? Hardly. As far as them being wonderful, well, I'll take your word for it," Severus said and finished another glass of firewhisky.

Hermione sighed again and shook her head. She muttered, "Some things will never change." Hermione, obviously trying to steer the conversation away from volatile territory, changed the subject. "Did you read that article in *Ars Alchemia* about dragon's blood? They had some interesting theories about its affect on the Amortentia potion."

"Yes, but they neglected to include the fact that whilst dragon's blood may act as a stabiliser in most cases, in something as powerful as the Amortentia potion, it could prove exceptionally volatile and the effects just as disastrous."

"Yes, but wouldn't the fact that moonstone is used in the potion counteract the more volatile effects of using dragon's blood?"

That night they had stayed up talking until well past midnight. They had discussed every article in *Ars Alchemia* and had a rather spirited debate on the use of crushed versus powdered Ashwinder eggs in the Wolfsbane potion. When he'd gone to bed that night, he remembered thinking that he had never had such a lively debate with anyone before.

Severus rose from his favourite chair and began pacing around the room. Since that day, they had been much more relaxed around each other, especially in private. He couldn't deny that he worried for, and about, her. She was having such a difficult time conceiving, and he wasn't sure she could handle more UEI procedures. Perhaps trying things the natural way wouldn't be so bad. It wasn't as though Hermione was horrible to look at, and it had been some time since he'd had a good shag...or any shag at all to be honest. Not that he expected sex under such circumstances to be a mind-blowing experience, but it just might be better than tolerable.

Severus growled in irritation. It was an impossible situation. Deciding he wouldn't be making this decision right then, he headed to his chambers and, more specifically, to bed with his dilemma weighing heavily on his mind.

Author's Notes: I know. I'm evil. I make no apologies for that. Hey, at least I've given you a nice, long chapter, eh? I know it was a lot later than I promised, but I honestly hadn't planned on things progressing this far in this chapter. I hope you enjoyed it, though. This is by *far* my favorite chapter. I finally feel the story is getting somewhere, and I'm thrilled about that. I also hope you enjoyed seeing a bit of a softer Severus. He's never going to be fluffy, but I thought I'd had enough of nasty!Severus. Oh, and I'm SO glad they are using first names! All that "Miss Granger" and "Professor Snape" stuff was driving me nuts! ;-) Oh, and I've just been *dying* to introduce you all to Maureen. I've had her in my mind since I was first bitten by this plot bunny. What did you all think of her? ;-)

Some clarification:

Amortentia potion: According to the HP Lexicon, the Amortentia potion is the most powerful love potion out there. I have no idea if Moonstone is used in it, but in my world, it is.

Uterine Embryonic Injection (Uterine=uterus, Embryonic=embryo or a fertilized egg): Yes, this was completely made up. However, the lovely Miss GinnyW, who is an OB-GYN nurse, told me this was a good name for it. If it passes Gin's test, it works for me.

There. That wasn't too long, was it? Now, I'm feeling rather ravenous, and I don't have anything in my cupboards. How about some reviews to sustain me? ;-)

Southern's Notes: I'm not liking this Maureen wench. I'm hoping for a "normal" conception. Muahahaha!

Candace's Notes: LOL, Sun! You want lemons next? Hmmm...we'll have to see. ;-)