

I Have A Secret

by ladyofthemasque

Professor Snape is missing, and Hermione is asked to fill in as Potions Mistress until he is found.

Chapters I, II, & III

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Note: This fic was inspired by Elyse Camille's beautiful artwork, "The Tango".

This is also a plot-chihuahua. It barked annoyingly at me, on and off for a couple weeks, exasperating me and demanding my attention. I have decided to stomp on it--several times, in Flamenco style--and put it out of my misery. Enjoy! ~Lotm

I.

I have a secret.

...

I had taken most of the summer off, following our graduation from Hogwarts, to wallow in an utter lack of studiousness. Voldemort was dead, the world was safe, I was going to apprentice as an Auror with Ron and Harry, but we all felt we deserved a serious vacation, first. We went to the beach, attended Muggle cinema shows--Ron's amazement at the workings of Muggle films and the imaginations of their creators was quite amusing--and we hung out at the Burrow. Everything was going fine, until Professor Dumbledore showed up at my parents' house one evening.

Mum received him kindly enough, if with a bit of bewilderment. Ron and Harry had moved into an apartment in London, but I was still staying at home for the moment. Ron and I had tried to date, in our sixth year. It hadn't worked. I pointed him in Luna's direction; she's as mad for Quidditch as he is, and in our seventh year, it seemed to be working out between them, aside from a few bumps and bobbles along the way. Harry and I had tried to date, in our sixth year. It had worked only slightly better--Ginny was a better match for him, and I made sure both of them were aware of that. They still blushed when they held hands; it was very sweet.

Almost as sweet as one of Albus Dumbledore's lemon drops. Which my mother, a dentist, refused with as polite a sugar-free-only smile as she could manage. I sat across from him, happy to see him--I'd greeted him with a hug, which he'd returned with surprised pleasure--and asked him why he was here.

"Er, yes...about. I have a bit of a dilemma, Hermione," the delightfully dotty, secretly sharp as a razor Headmaster told me hesitantly. "You haven't started your Auror training yet, I understand?"

"No, Professor."

"My dear Hermione, I've told you at the Order meetings, call me Albus, please! You're not my student anymore, and I hope we can count ourselves good friends, after all we've been through," he chided me, his beard crinkling a little around his mouth as he smiled. "As I was saying, I'm glad you haven't started your training yet. I, er, need

you for another task."

I loved the old wizard; I'd never known my grandparents, as both sets had passed away before I was three, so I'd always looked on him as the grandfather I'd always wanted. So I opened my big mouth and said, "I'd be honored to help you, Prof--er, Albus..."

"Excellent! Then I'll expect you at Hogwarts on September 1st, in three days!" And with that, the batty old dodger started to rise and leave.

"--What? I don't understand!" I protested. "What do you need me at Hogwarts for, at the start of the next term?"

He settled back onto the sofa with a sober look, most of the twinkle gone from his gleaming blue eyes. "I need you to be a teacher, Hermione. You're the best one for the job that I can find on such short notice."

"Professor McGonagall--is she alright?" I asked quickly. She'd never been as hale and hearty since being blasted in the back by four Stupefaction Hexes at the end of my fifth year.

"Minerva? No, no, she's fine! Fit as a Muggle fiddle, in fact. It's, er..." He floundered a bit, and glanced at my Mum. Being a tactful woman, she discreetly muttered something about fixing tea, and left the parlour to the two of us. Albus gave me a sober look and said, "It's Severus. He's...well, he's missing."

It was a good thing I didn't already have a cup and saucer in my hands, as they would've tumbled either to my lap or to the floor at that point. Pressing a hand to my sternum to try and suppress the pounding of my heart, I stared at the Headmaster, stricken. "...D-Death Eaters?"

"I don't know. The Aurors are looking for him, but he's nowhere to be found. The man is like a clockwork, Hermione," Albus added dryly. "The week before the students arrive, all the teachers gather at Hogwarts to go over their syllabi for the new year, to prepare their classrooms, to order supplies, and to help me compose the course schedules and House-pairings. Every year, Severus has showed up on the dot, sneering and snarling as usual, but I can tell he enjoys his job, despite the, ah, 'dunderheads' he has to deal with every year... That he hasn't come back this year is of grave concern. I need you to teach his Potions classes, until he can be found. You're more than capable."

"I...see." I rubbed at the flat spot above and between my breasts, my palm sliding over the knit cotton of my tee. My heart still hurt. Snape, missing? Possibly in danger? "You're got people trying to find him?"

"Yes, and in the advent he shows up between now and the start of term, well, you can go back to Auror training...or you can apprentice to Minerva," Albus--I had to start thinking of him as Albus now--offered with a return of his twinkling smile. "I know she's looking forward to stepping up after me, once I retire in a year or so, and has expressed great disappointment in your intent to become an Auror."

"Well...it was mostly because Ron and Harry were going to do it, and because we didn't know if we'd be able to defeat Voldemort before the school term ended, so we enrolled before we knew. But...teaching? Wow. That's a great responsibility, Headmaster," I reminded him. "Are you sure I'm up to it?"

"The fact that you know it's a great responsibility alone is assurance enough. See you in a few days, then! Unless you wish to pack and come early?" he offered. "I think it's best if you do *not* take the school train; you'll be coming back to teach classes filled with your friends, such as Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood, and you'll need to assert your authority over them from the first. That, I think, may prove to be a more daunting task than Severus' syllabus. Which, thankfully, is stored in his office; I've been using it to order supplies and such. He hasn't changed the bloody thing in many years by more than a potion or two, so I know it'll work for you."

"I'll pack tonight, and be there in the morning, Headmaster--Albus," I amended, blushing a little. When he rose, I started to hug him, then remembered to be professional and held out my hand. At the hurt look in his eyes, I laughed and hugged the old wizard. *Then* formally shook his hand. "I look forward to the challenge of teaching new minds."

God, I had no idea what I was getting into!

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Harry and Ron didn't take it very well, when I called on them at their flat that night, after packing. They angered me, too, when they shrugged off Snape's disappearance. "Greasy old bat," Ron said as he chewed his way through the dinner Harry had cooked for us. "I don't see how anybody could miss 'im."

"Yeah, I doubt the Aurors are searching very hard," Harry had laughed.

I rubbed at my sternum as my heart thudded again, this time from anger, not fear or worry. I wanted to smack both of them. This was an old, longstanding argument between the three of us, so I chose my words carefully, and spoke coldly. "...I realize the two of you have a gnat's aptitude for gratitude and appreciation, for all the things he has done to help us secure the safety of the wizarding world. You will either speak civilly of Professor Snape in my presence, or say not one single word more--*not one word more.*"

I'd never spoken quite so coldly to either of them, before. Bossily, yes, but then, I have a secret. That secret made me sound like, well, like an adult. They shut their gobs, stared at me, stared at each other, then quickly changed the subject to something more pleasant...for them, if not necessarily for me.

Quidditch. How original.

...

I stared at my course schedule in dismay. I hadn't even been introduced to my quarters, yet, and already the horror had begun. 7th Years' Advanced Potions. First period. Monday bloody morning. The Bastard. Oh, not Severus Snape--that epithet was being reserved for Professor Albus Dumbledore, former Gryffindor and secret Slytherin. First-years, I knew how to handle. Second-years, too, and third. Anyone above that grade knew enough about me, had interacted enough with me in the last few years, to not be intimidated by me. But to dump my former sixth-year friends on my lap, first thing, before I had the chance to practice my Teacher Mode--!

I'd imagined myself as a teacher, of course; it's an appealing line of career for someone as bookish and interested in education as me. I'd be utterly unlike Severus Snape, of course; I'd be kind, and generous with House-points, and ever so patient with my pupils...except these weren't my pupils. These were my friends, and they'd give me hell, without remorse. I imagined a classroom run riot with an utter lack of discipline; I imagined Minerva--who had greeted me with this travesty!--tightening her mouth in disgust, and refusing to take me on as her Transfigurations apprentice...I imagined Severus' disdain for my inability to rule his students with the same iron-tight grip of fear that he had wielded so well...

Severus. I had to call him that now, didn't I? It wasn't as if I was his student anymore. I had to call Fillmore Flitwick by his first name, and Ermengarde Sprout, and Albus and Minerva and Poppy... But thinking about that wasn't helping my dilemma.

"...Is something wrong, Hermione?" Minerva enquired, still standing patiently at my side.

"Er...just revising my mental plan of what I thought would be my course schedule...the bastard."

"I beg your pardon?"

Oh, shite, did I say that out loud?

Minerva McGonagall arched a brow at me. "I realise that Severus was never pleasant to you or your friends, Hermione, but he *is* a teacher, and now your colleague. A

colleague, I remind you, who is missing-in-action."

"No, no, not him, Pr...Minerva," I corrected myself, running a hand distractedly over my curls. Most of them had been squashed into a plait, but a few tendrils always escaped. "It's...Albus. The bearded old bastard put seventh-year Advanced Potions as my very first class. I was kind of hoping to ease into it with one of the lower grades, to start."

"Ah. Well, without Severus' input, Albus has deemed it best to continue exactly as Severus has done so before, and that is to hold the top Advanced Potions class as his very first one of the week." She paused, smiled slightly, and added in a confidential tone, "I secretly suspect Severus likes the challenge of starting off the school year with his toughest class. I...I hope he's alright, wherever he is."

The worry in her voice made my heart kick behind my ribs. I rubbed at it, grimacing. "So do I, Minerva. He's a black-hearted bastard...but after you, he was the best teacher I ever had, and a close second to you, too."

"If...*when* he returns, don't let him know I told you this, but...I've always admired that voice of his," Minerva confessed, an Albus-like twinkle in her eyes. Her laugh-lines made her look a decade or two younger, oddly enough. "If he ever got over being such a sourpuss, I think he'd be perfect for late-night radio. You know, the kind where they play all the romantic songs, and the announcers speak in sultry, bedroom tones..."

"Minerva!" I gasped, and tried to make it a mockery with my hand pressed to my upper chest once again. "For shame, lusting after a fellow teacher like that!"

"It's not like he's one of my students! Nor has he been, for over two decades," she pointed out dryly. "Which reminds me; you'd better not be harbouring any secret crushes among the new seventh-years," the Transfigurations Mistress told me dryly. "Student-Teacher relations are strictly forbidden."

I snorted, at that. "I'm not interested in any student, Minerva, trust me! If and when I date someone, from now on, he'll have to be mature, and as intelligent as I am."

"You're not dating Harry or Ron, then?" she asked me.

I rubbed absently at my chest again. "No. Tried that, and it didn't work. Ron's got a few more years to mature, and Harry's in love with Ginny."

"Good. About Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley, I mean," she amended. "So long as he doesn't try to sneak onto the school grounds to see her, I hope everything turns out alright between the two of them. Well, come along; Albus has arranged your quarters for you. I told him you wouldn't want to sleep down in the dungeons, but he pointed out that you'd need access to Severus' quarters, to access his teaching manuals and such, and that you'd probably be working late each night until you got the hang of teaching."

"I'm...I'm sleeping in *his* rooms?" I managed to ask, though not without an embarrassing squeak as I followed her through the Entrance Hall to the narrow staircase that led down below.

"In an attached guest-suite Albus conjured for you, adjoining his quarters. I'll show you the hidden passage in his office. Oh...Albus requests that you *not* change the password, in case he comes back without warning. He'll not be happy about finding you in his quarters, but Albus is right; his personal library holds references you'll undoubtedly need, in figuring out how to manage your classes."

I contemplated that all the way down to his office. Numbly, I listened as she gave me the password, "*Belladonna*," and followed her into the chambers beyond. Wonderingly, I took in the contents of his sitting room, dark furniture, bookshelves crammed with tomes of all sizes and shapes, and a Franklin stove--not a fireplace!--to heat the space in the wintertime. I nodded as she pointed out the corridor to his private quarters, and to the door that led to my own suite. I'd be sharing his living room, but not his bedroom or bath, apparently. The room was perfumed in a subtle blend of musk, amber, and roses. I loved roses; it was my favourite essential oil. Mixed in with amber and musk, oh my. It felt like I was being wrapped in warm satin sheets, olfactorily.

She left me once she showed me my quarters: a remarkably large bathroom, as ornate as the prefects' bathroom, with a waterfall-shower, a huge tub with a plethora of taps, lots of mirrors and counterspace cluttered with neatly labelled bottles of unguents and lotions; and my bedroom, with an old-fashioned fainting-couch, a portrait of the ancient witch Circe--my favorite, because she hadn't put up with any guff from any man, Muggle or wizard, but I suspected McGonagall already knew that--and a huge four-poster bed, much broader than the narrow student one I was used to occupying in this place. At least it was draped in Gryffindor red. Not every thing out in the living room was Slytherin green, but there was a lot of forest green leather for the sofa and the easy-chair, and dark emerald velvet throw-cushions trimmed in silver-and-green cording.

And his bed, I discovered, was hung with heavy, dark green curtains, though the coverlet was dark red. Oh, yes, I wandered into his bedroom after unpacking my trunk into the wardrobe and bureau and placing my books on my shelves and taking the last of my things into the bathroom. I was mistaken about not sharing the bathroom; there was a door beyond the bathing tub and the little closet-nook that held a sink and a toilet, in addition to the broad sink-counter with all those mirrors. After scattering my toiletries about next to the bottles and such that were already there, I explored through that door, expecting to find a linen closet or something...and found myself in his bedroom. The scent was even thicker, in here; it wafted through my senses like a caress.

"Miss Granger, what the bloody hell are you doing in my quarters?"

I gasped and whirled, searching the shadowy room, with its single, high, recessed window for light. I didn't see anyone. Until the portrait moved, that was. Across from his bed, over the fireplace, hung an imposing portrait of Severus Snape, Potions Master, life-size, from the waist up. Oh, my heart hurt from pounding! Panting, gulping, I calmed myself down as quickly as I could manage. There wasn't anything I could do about my fiercely blushing cheeks, but I could and did calm myself enough to reply civilly,

"...You've gone missing, Severus. And unless you know where the real Professor Snape is located, I'm here to teach Potions Class in his place."

He planted his hands on his hips, teaching robes flared out with his elbows, and glared down at me. "That doesn't explain why you're *in my quarters*. And it's Professor Snape, to you!"

"I'm in here to look for anything that might help me teach your-*his* classes. Which makes me his peer, and therefore within my rights to call him by his first name. And...I'm also in here to look for clues to his disappearance."

"Albus already looked, the old fool," Portrait-Snape returned disdainfully. "He got no more information than you will. And a slip of a girl like you is hardly his peer, nevermind his equal!"

I seized on his words with hope, but wisely did not say anything out loud. The way how he'd phrased that comment about Albus' failure, Painted-Snape *might* actually know where his flesh-and-blood counterpart had gone. I wasn't stupid, though; he'd no more reveal his secrets to me than the real one would. Which meant I was stuck in the unenviable position of trying to outwit enchanted daubs of oil.

"Well, you'll just have to get used to my presence--a mere painting can't take House-points off a teacher," I quipped smugly.

"Miss Granger--"

"--*Professor* Granger, to you!" I snapped, and was astounded when Painted-Snape subsided into silence.

And there it was. My key to authority and discipline within the classroom. I was going to be teaching Snape's classes...so why not teach them the Snape way? Certainly it would have the element of surprise, and deliver a mischief-quelling, lorry-full of shock. Everyone would undoubtedly expect me to first gush all over my students with helpful

enthusiasm, and then distractedly try to boss them around when that failed. True, I'd been respected solely for my ability to tutor other students, not for my knowledge and experience themselves. But if I did what they all expected me to do, I knew I'd fail to teach them. They'd been my classmates last year. I had no credibility among them as a teacher. Yet.

To hell with them! I decided recklessly. It was a good plan! Of course, it was the only plan I had.

Cocking my head, I briefly studied his portrait. I wanted to study him quite a bit, actually, but mindful that wizarding portraits had long memories--and that this subject had an inherently suspicious nature--I did not study him for long. "I expect you have your subject's full range of knowledge up to the moment his portrait was completed?"

He sneered, "--Yes, you silly girl."

"When were you completed?" I asked calmly, ignoring the insult.

"Last year, though it's little concern of yours," he added, dark eyes glittering with the sheen of oil pigments.

"Excellent. You will assist me in answering any and all of my questions about Severus and his teaching methods, habits, and such."

He snorted, folding his arms across his chest. "I will do no such thing!"

"You have three weeks to comply," I warned him grimly. *Might as well take a page out of the 'Severus Snape's Guide to Intimidation' right now* I thought. "Because it will only take me three weeks to brew *Liquifactus*. You *have* heard of the Paint-Dissolving Potion?"

Painted-Snape's hands flew to his hips, scowling down at me through his carved frame. "You wouldn't dare!"

"You have no idea what I'm capable of, Painted-Snape," I retorted quietly. Determinedly. It was one of the most important bluffs of my life, practically up there with that sob-story I'd fed the odious Umbridge, back in my fifth year. Resolving to bring in a table and begin the construction of the potion in front of his oil-based eyes, I left Severus' bedroom. Reluctantly.

I had a secret, after all.

II.

It was with trepidation that I entered the Great Hall for supper, the night the students arrived. My presence at the head table caused a stir among the students who knew me from the previous years. I endured their wondering stares, as the Sorting Hat was brought out and the students selected. I clapped firmly for every child picked for Gryffindor--Professor Sinistral was now the Head of Slytherin, thankfully; that was one of Severus' chores I was glad I didn't have to endure--and nodded politely when Albus introduced me as "filling in for Professor Snape while he is on vacation", a tactful way to explain my presence and not alarm anyone as to what might've happened to their missing Potions Master. Not that most of the students cared. Only the Slytherins moped and sent me dark looks, while everyone else cheered.

No doubt they expected a Gryffindor Potions Mistress would be a lot nicer and easier to bear.

Their shock and dismay on Monday morning was disturbingly delicious.

I'd debated, and hastened down to Diagon Alley early on Saturday morning, while the students were still assembling on the train, and power-shopped through every tailory I could find, until I found the one I wanted. As I suspected, Severus never shopped at Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occassions. He shopped at a place called Flutin's Tailory. Unfortunately, it was a wizards-only tailory, upscale and very tasteful, but with nothing for witches. I didn't want to look exactly like him, so I found myself another shop a little further up the street, a quietly elegant--and bloody expensive!--shop called "Celer Elegans", where I purchased several tailored outfits in a midnight blue.

Not quite black; I was just vain enough to want to appear feminine, and midnight blue is a colour that really looks good on me. But I did get dresses and trouser suits in unrelieved midnight blue, and a couple robes cut professorial-style to match. If in a bit more modern cut than Severus had ever used. It was a good thing Dumbledore had already paid me an advance on my salary--"hazard pay", he'd called it when he'd greeted me after I'd settled in--because most of it vanished under the weight of my purchases; I was forced to Reduce them just to get them home without staggering across half of Diagon Alley to the Floo-ports.

But I was suitably dressed, when I entered my domain. Midnight robes fluttering, clad in slacks and a frock-coat cut with a collarless, sweetheart neckline, I banged open the door connecting my office to my classroom and strode inside, one minute after the starting bell rang. A flick of my wand slammed the door shut again, stifling the greeting on Ginny's, Luna's, and Colin's lips.

"*Sit down.*" My voice hissed through the uncertain quiet of my students, silencing them as they quickly settled onto their high stools, eyeing me warily.

Swirling my robes with the swing I'd practiced several times yesterday afternoon in my quarters, watching my reflection in the bathroom mirror to get it right, I swung into position behind my desk, all my materials prepped and readied from last night. I swept my cinnamon brown eyes over the room with what I hoped was an echo of stygian black, and clasped my hands on the lecturn. Partly to conceal their trembling, and partly to echo the missing black bat.

"You may think that, because you remember me as the little Miss Know-It-All of last year, that I will be an easy, and ~~denient~~ teacher for you," I drawled in a low murmur, projecting my voice to the back of the room without raising it. That, too, I'd practiced all day yesterday, hiding from the students in my quarters, to avoid interminable questions. "You will be seriously mistaken, if you continue to harbour this impression. Potions is the most dangerous class of all those that you will be taking--moreso than even Care of Magical Creatures--"

Someone dared titter. I knew the comparison was funny; Hagrid's reputation had not dimmed once, since he took over the office back in my third year here. I'd planned for it, actually. My gaze bore down on the freckled redhead responsible.

"Something amuses you, Miss Weasley?"

She gaped at me. My drawl was as cold as one of Severus', and my capacity to imitate the Intimidator Himself clearly shocked her.

"...As I was saying, this is the most dangerous of all the classes in your curriculum. You will toe the line in this classroom, for you will find that I am an even stricter disciplinarian than Professor Snape. You are studying for your N.E.W.T. exams, and being in this Advanced Potions class is a *privilege*. One that can be revoked at any time, if I so choose," I told them coldly, secretly enjoying their stunned looks. Perhaps I should've had a choice between Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin? No matter. I had a lecture to deliver. And, after pestering Painted-Snape for his techniques--most of which I learned by carefully studying the way he kept trying to intimidate me--I was thrilled to see I'd subdued the lot of them. "In fact, I will be *worse* than Professor Snape, for I will not tolerate *any* disobedience from *any* House. Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff...or Gryffindor.

"Professor Snape made the mistake of mollicoddling the Slytherins through his years, here. That has led you to perform sloppy work at best, and spoil your characters beyond repugnance at worst. I will not make the same mistake with the students of my own House. Only those students who come up to *my* exacting, high standards will receive House-points from my hand. The rest of you dunderheads will find your scores dipping significantly, should you fail to heed my warnings.

"Now, open your copies of *Brewing Intangibles* to page 17. As promised back in your first year, you will be learning this term how to bottle fame and brew glory--five points from Gryffindor!" I snapped, catching Colin Creevey in the act of unwrapping a piece of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. "Spit it out, Mr. Creevey!"

He reluctantly did as I ordered, plopping it back into the waxed bit of paper from whence it had come.

"...Perhaps I did not make myself clear," I drawled coldly, shifting my gaze from him to the rest of the students. "So that there will be no further mistakes, you will *all* suffer, as a result of Mr. Creevey's mistaken belief that I do not mean what I say. Each one of you will write a yard-long dissertation on why it is *dangerous* to bring foreign ingredients into the Potions classroom. To be delivered into my hands by the start of your next class, Wednesday morning, 9 o'clock sharp. *All* of you. Anyone who fails to complete this assignment will learn how nastily inventive I can be when it comes to detentions. Page 17!"

They jumped at my snapped command. The dunderheads.

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The door to my office burst open that evening, and Misses Weasley and Lovegood strode inside without a by-your-leave. I looked up from the third-year syllabus I was studying for tomorrow, and made both of them stumble to a halt with a look as frigid and foreboding as one would picture Snape would look, if he'd been unexpectedly Apparated to the Himalayas.

"Perhaps you ladies are unaware that this is a teacher's office, not a House Commonroom. You will apologize to me for entering without my permission. Now."

"Sorry, Hermione," both of them stammered.

"Ten points from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw!" I snapped. "It's Professor Granger to you! Now, you will apologize to my door, for failing to knock upon it, too."

They eyed me dubiously. I tightened my gut against the urge to giggle. My face, too. Warily, both turned and mumbled apologies to the door.

"Good. Now, go outside, close the door, knock, and wait for me to bid you to enter."

They exchanged unsettled looks, backed out, shut the door, then knocked. I deliberately waited three beats before calling out that they could enter. They were a lot more subdued as they did so, both girls frowning at me in wary puzzlement. Ginny was the first to speak.

"Herm...er, Professor Granger," the youngest Weasley stated, "we were, um, wondering what's gotten into you..."

"Yeah," Luna agreed, studying me with those blue eyes of hers. "Who spat in your porridge, this morning?"

I couldn't maintain the facade any longer. Smiling, I beckoned them forward. "Sit, both of you! Luna, close the door. What's 'gotten into' me is the need to seize the classroom from the start, Gin, Luna," I told them as the Ravenclaw complied, leaving us in privacy for the time being. "You and I know that *no* one would respect me, a teacher who only a few months ago was a fellow student, if I didn't lay down the lash from the start."

Luna peered around at the bottles of icky, fascinating things floating in colourful suspension liquids. "Are you sure the dank of the dungeons hasn't already seeped into your brain?"

"Quite. I haven't been here long enough for any sort of rot to set in, trust me." Luna sometimes got some rather odd notions in her head, thanks to her father's work at the *Quibbler*, but she was intelligent enough.

"Are you going to continue to be cruel to us outside of class?" Ginny asked me carefully, her hazel brown eyes watching me like a bird on the lawn who's suddenly noticed a cat nearby. "Because if you are, I'm going to end up hating you, and I don't want to, you know."

"I'm not sure. I might not be as strict as in the classroom, but you're one of my students now, Gin," I reminded her, letting regret colour my tone. "I cannot, and will not, play favorites. That'd be detrimental to your studies. The N.E.W.T.s are coming, and you'll need to work hard to pass them at the level I *know* you're capable of achieving."

She blushed at the compliment. I decided I liked being a little softer and more encouraging outside of classroom hours. In the classroom, I'd continue to be a holy terror--I'd managed to subdue my entire schedule of Monday classes, to my relief--but outside the classroom...

"I'll also need a few weeks to get settled into this position," I added with a sigh. A handful of days just wasn't enough to get ready to teach such a demanding subject. "I'm going to have to ask both of you to knock and wait for my permission to enter, as you would any other teacher. But...I want you to know I'll enjoy your visits. And, unlike Professor Snape, I won't hesitate to help you with tutoring if you need it, once I've settled into the job."

"Hermione--Professor Granger," Luna amended at my pointed look. "Sorry, that's going to take a lot of getting used to--do you know what happened to Professor Snape?"

I debated how much to say. In the end, I went with what the Headmaster had said; I knew the two were capable students, and very handy in the last few years of adventuring, but I didn't want them to go haring off and getting into trouble. "He's on vacation. The stress of being a spy for the Order, and the lack of a sabbatical for the last sixteen years he's been a teacher, has probably gotten to him," I speculated, shrugging. "I wouldn't know, however, as I was tapped for this job by the Headmaster at practically the last minute. Which means I've got to send the two of you packing now. As much as I'd rather spend time in your company, I've got to read up on what the plan is for tomorrow's lessons."

"We understand," Ginny assured me, relieving me. "Just so long as you're not going to be quite so nasty outside of class, I think I can bear it."

"Yeah, you did an uncanny impression of Professor Snape," Luna added, shivering dramatically. "Gave me the collywobbles, really."

"Good. It's a very effective disciplinary method, isn't it? Which is precisely why I chose to copy it," I quipped, and smiled as they rolled their eyes and left. My smile faded. Lowering my gaze to Severus' spikey-neat handwriting, I rubbed at my chest, deciphering his notes.

...

I discovered something. There was a potion to ascertain how recently a particular kind of object was accessed; it wasn't in the usual curriculum, but I'd never let the usual sort of curriculum confine my academic interest. Two weeks into the school year, I brewed a bit of it, put it into an atomizer, and squirted every last book in Severus' office, classroom, and private quarters. Interestingly enough, the last few books he'd accessed had nothing to do with Potions.

Intriguingly, the mixture of spritzed tomes was *not* what I'd expected. Those that hadn't been accessed in quite some time glowed into the purple spectrum, while those most recent glowed red. The most reddish books of all were a pair of atlases, one wizarding and one Muggle, several volumes on Latin and ballroom dances--replete with three-dimensional illusions of dancers that popped up over the illustrated step-patterns when touched by a finger--and two other, highly intriguing books: an English-Spanish dictionary, and a tome on how to create translation amulets.

Somehow, I didn't think Death Eaters had anything to do with Severus Snape's disappearance. A pity the potion didn't reveal *which* atlas pages he had looked at, but there it was. Wherever he was, he was probably speaking Spanish.

I debated long and hard on whether or not to share my findings with Dumbledore. I had a secret thought, and I added this one to it, for the time being. And I took the time to replicate the amulet-spell for myself, enchanting it for Spanish, German, French, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and Arabic. Just in case.

By the end of the third week, the amulet was done, and so was the *Liquifactus*. And Painted-Snape still refused to tell me where the real Severus was located. Though, as I lifted a dip-soaked paintbrush to the edge of his canvas, he did break enough to yell out, "--He hexed me not to tell anyone!!"

I removed the brush, though he didn't stop hugging the far side of the frame. "That wasn't so hard, now was it? How do I break the hex, Painted-Severus?"

"God, you're a sadistic bitch!" he snapped, as I lifted the brush again when he hesitated. "I can't tell you that either! I *can't*! Touch that brush to my surface, and I'll make sure the Headmaster sacks you!"

"Hardly!" I snorted. "I'm as successful a teacher as your originator is, and he just got done telling me today what an absolute spiffing job of education and discipline I'm doing!"

Deliberately, I left out the Headmaster's warning that, though I was doing a good job, if I made another first-year break down into tears over a simple mistake again, he'd have to subject me to the same lectures on How to Be Nice he'd tortured Severus with, throughout the years. I was tempted to sit through one, just to see what my counterpart had endured.

"I cannot tell you, Professor Granger!" he snapped--I'd finally gotten him to acknowledge me by my title--and tugged on his painted frock-coat, restoring some of his dignity. "And there is an end to the matter!"

"Not quite. You're going to *hint* to me what I need to know."

His smug, pigmented smile was downright annoying. "He's warned me against giving out obvious hints, too."

"So give me an inobvious one!" I ordered, lifting the brush again.

Oddly, Painted-Snape stared down at me with a sober expression, one laced with something almost...wistful...about the look of his eyes and his mouth. "It's something no one would ever give me--or rather, him. Least of all you. Though it's something he wants from you...and that's all I will say on the matter," he finished, the acerbic tone colouring his voice once more, as I rubbed my breastbone again. "Now, either just torture me and get it over with, or get that horrid stuff out of my chambers!"

I believed him. Bottling up the brew, I cleared away the equipment and the table I'd used to make it. Harry had inherited 12 Grimmauld Place at the end of his fifth year, when we'd lost Sirius, but he wasn't staying there, claiming it was too gloomy and full of painful memories. Not that I blamed him. He was, however, continuing to let the Order use it as their headquarters. Lupin was manning the house, now, and I packaged up the bottles of *Liquifactus* with a note telling him to try using this on the picture of that two-dimensional harridan, Mrs. Black, and any other portraits that got out of line.

All further enquiries of Portrait-Severus resulted in no further answers. I continued to wrack my brains, trying to figure out the riddle he'd given me. *Something Severus wants, but thinks no one would ever give him, least of all me, whom he wants it from? ...Me?*

I hadn't a clue what the man would want from me, other than "silence", "to leave him alone", and other variations on that general theme. To all of which Painted-Snape replied smugly were not correct, and attempted to take House-points from me. Smug, oil-based git.

...

I woke with the scent of roses, amber and musk in my nostrils, about two months later. I'd taken to spending time in his bedroom, studying the ballroom texts in my spare time as I learned the steps, ignoring Painted-Snape's cutting remarks as I twirled around the chamber. I even graded some of my essays there, propped up in his bed, pillows piled at my back and a cushioned lap-board allowing me to scribble commentaries on the piles of scrolls I had to peruse. Even the sardonic company of Painted-Snape was better than nothing, since I'd been forced by my position to distance myself from my friends; it was too awkward, having to maintain the discipline of a teacher and yet trying to bridge the gap of authority that now lay between us. But every night, I had packed up my things and retired to my own room. I did not sleep in his bed.

I had just slept in his bed. Slitting my eyes, I looked down the length of my body, curled up on my side, a book detailing the uses of the Rosaceae family of plants in potions-making abandoned nearby. The house-elves had kept the fire in the hearth blazing all night, for it was still crackling cheerfully when I awoke. Illuminating the figure of Painted-Snape over the mantel.

A painted version of Severus Snape that was studying me with one hand raised, as if pressing against the barrier of oil-based pigments and canvas that separated his two-dimensional world from my three-dimensional one. It vanished, the moment I shifted to get a better look, but had that been...longing...in his face?

Absurd!

Maybe.

I had a secret, after all. Maybe...just maybe...I wasn't the only one.

I was late for class, though. Scraping my hair back into a bun as I hurried through my office, barely given enough time to change into something fresh, stomach rumbling in hunger, I kicked open the connecting door and glared everyone into silent obedience. It was Friday, my top Advanced students. We were still working on Intangibles, and today's lesson was the end of a week-long effort at distilling humor, a most difficult process.

Hunger made me more snappish, and more Snape-ish, than usual. Prowling around the room in my midnight blue dress and matching robes, I loomed here, growled there, deducted several points for a mistake a second-year wouldn't make...by now, I quite agreed with Severus' assessment of the average Hogwarts student's mental capacities, the dunderheads...and overheard a muttered comment from one of the Hufflepuffs.

"...God, she *is* worse than the Potions Master! It's like we traded Snape for *Mrs.* Snape!"

I whirled on the hapless idiot who dared profane my--I paused, subduing him with merely a hard glare, a tumbling whirl of thoughts in my head. Mrs. Snape. Marriage. Longing, and wistfulness.

My secret.

I don't know from what insane well the idea sprang, but I grumbled my way impatiently through several more classes, until I was free to kick the last of my fourth-years out the door of the classroom late that afternoon. Not even bothering to clean up, I locked the classroom doors, ducked into my office and locked those, whispered "*Belladonna*" to the hidden passage, and entered the suite the wall concealed. Striding into his bedroom, I grabbed the chair that sat by the bureau, dragged it over to the hearth, and stood on it. That placed me about level with Painted-Snape, who frowned at me in confusion.

"What are you doing here so early? Classes have barely let out! Don't you have a classroom to tidy?"

I braced my hands on the mantel, staring into his dark-painted eyes. "You told me, under duress, that the hint I needed was something you--he--wanted me to give him, but which he thought I never would."

Painted-Severus eyed me warily. "What of it?"

Lifting my hand, I caressed the daubs of paint that were his face, feeling the pigments shifting uneasily under my touch as he startled, then held himself almost painfully still. Warily still. My forehead almost close enough to touch his, I confessed, "Well, there's something I've been wanting to give to him--though you'll do in a pinch--that I didn't think he'd ever accept from me."

"What would--?"

I kissed him. It felt weird, kissing a painting, but it was what I wanted to do. When I lifted my lips, I was almost surprised to find him still standing right there, rather than having escaped to another portrait elsewhere in the school. He shifted, and I expected him to flee--even the snarky, sour, cruel Potions Master surely had his limits--but not to flee, to my surprise. No, he lifted his hand to mine, tickling my skin with the shift and play of the enchanted oil-paints as he flattened his palm under my own hand. Some trick of the oil-colours made his eyes gleam even more, for a moment, before he whispered the words I wanted to hear.

"...He's in Argentina. A city called Rosario, on the western banks of the Rio Parana, at the edge of the State of Santa Fe. You'll find him under the Muggle listing of 'Sebastian Portio'."

I pulled back slightly with a puzzled frown. "Whatever is he doing down there?"

"Teaching Muggles how to dance," was the dry, puzzling reply. Painted-Severus gave me a wry, impatient look. "It's not that difficult, Hermione. He wanted to do something utterly unrelated to Potions, the Dark Lord, the Order, the School, or anything else dealing with magic. He wanted to get away from all of his memories here, and lose himself in another identity for a while."

"Did he..." I swallowed. Painted-Snape had *never* used my given name before. "Did he ever intend to come back?"

"Yes. He certainly wrote it all down in the letter he gave to Albus. His destination, his identity, his reasons for leaving, and the fact that he was taking a sabbatical, whether or not the old dingbat approved."

I stared at him. "--Dumbledore *knew*?" Painted-Snape smirked. I withdrew my hand, blinking. What was I going to do? Ask some more questions first, I decided, sharpening my wits. "*When* did he plan on coming back?"

"When he was good and ready, of course," was his portrait's drawled reply.

Well, that was just not good enough! *Damn the man, for worrying me so!* Jumping down off the chair, I kicked it back from the flames, grabbed a fistful of Floo powder from the pot on the mantel next to the clock, and cast it into the flames. "Headmaster's office!"

By my secret, I'd have the full truth out of the old dingbat myself, or strangle my employer with his own crafty beard!

III.

I had a secret.

A new secret, in addition to the other one. I had Transfigured my hair to a thick black, tamed the curls somewhat, given myself a tan to blend in more with the locals, bought a pair of Muggle contacts to turn my eyes dark blue, and dressed myself in slinky sapphire blue to match. I had travelled here on two consecutive weekends, via a Portkey given to me by the Headmaster--under duress and a threat to set his beard on fire, replete with spark-singed warning--and had spent three of the last four days looking up all five 'Sebastian Portio' and 'S. Portio' names listed in the local phone book, tracking him down to his school, and learning where he lived and what he liked to do.

He led a quiet, virtually magicless life, living in an apartment over the studio he rented jointly with a married couple who also taught dances. Virtually magicless, save that his apartment and studio were warded against anyone tracing him via his name or his powers. It was a damned good thing I had his Muggle alias, or I'd never have been able to notice the place, let alone enter the building; wizarding eyes would otherwise just slide over it as surely as a Muggle's eyes would've slid right over 12 Grimmauld Place. Now, aware that he had an empty hour between classes at this time of the afternoon, before his partners would come in from whatever it was that they did on Sunday mornings and afternoons--if last Sunday was any indication--and his pupils would crowd the little building, I entered the studio with a confident click of the sturdy dancing heels I'd bought to compliment the gown.

The man sitting at the desk in the office across from the entryway looked only somewhat like the man I'd known for seven long years. The nose was still his, and the black hair still fell to his shoulders, but his sallow skin had darkened considerably with exposure to the South American sun. His body was just as lean and trim as ever, despite the tiny threads of silver beginning to salt his hair at the hairline and temples, but it wasn't clad in forbidding black wool. Not that the climate would permit it; up in Scotland, it was the start of winter; down here in Argentina, it was the start of summer, and Rosario was a sweltering, humid, riverside city.

No, he was clad in black linen slacks and a loose white cotton shirt, one that had been unbuttoned partway down his chest, as the only air-conditioning came from a pair of oscillating floor-fans sweeping the mirror-lined danceroom, and a desk-top model ruffling his hair and the pages of the paperback in his hands with each pass. A paperback. As hard as it was for me to recognize Severus Snape in the tanned, distinguished *zorro argento* before me, it was even harder to recognize him when I realized *what* he was reading.

A bloody paperback romance.

I almost lost it, then. Shock or laughter, I almost lost my plan to approach him in disguise, to sound out his feelings on several matters. Returning to the wizarding world, returning to the school...returning to those few who missed him more than he knew.

My feet carried me to the doorway of his office. He glanced up, blinked, and dropped his gaze over my body. The chiffon-sleeved sheath dress fit my curves like a second, silky skin, leaving little to the imagination. I'd always looked good in blue, but the appreciation in his eyes was too masculine to be merely the result of a flattering colour. He swung his crossed legs from the surface of his desk to the floor, discreetly tucking the book out of sight...but not before slipping a bookmark between the pages.

"Can I help you, *Senorita*?" His amulet was discreetly hidden away somewhere, his Spanish flawlessly local in its dialect and inflection. His smile devastatingly charming, as I'd always suspected it could be, if only the blasted man ever learned how to relax. Well. It looked like he'd finally learnt how.

Mine was Transfigured into a neck-brooch tied in place by a blue velvet band. If he looked really, really closely, he'd see a sketch of his own profile etched magically onto the jet cabochon. I'd carved it based on his portrait's profile, and secreted the amulet behind it. "Si. You are a dancer?"

"Si. You wish to learn how to dance?" he asked, rising to his feet with more grace than he'd ever displayed before. That was saying much, too, since he'd always reminded me more of a hungry panther than a flapping bat. Now he was more of a sensual beast than a ravenous one.

I blushed, hungry to get to know this side of him, and tossed out my carefully prepared speech by saying--as poetically as I could--what was on my mind. "I want to learn how to express my passion...in your arms."

"...You want to learn the tango, *Senorita*?" he enquired carefully.

"Si, *Senor*. And any other dance you care to show me."

He smiled, a masculine smile that made my legs want to quiver, and named a price. I bartered him down to something more reasonable in the local Muggle currency, and he gestured for me to head out into the dancehall while he tucked the money away. Joining me, he asked, "Have you learned how to dance before, *Senorita*?"

"A few times, some lessons in my childhood...and I have practiced on my own, things I learned from books." I confessed as he took me into the classic ballroom starting stance. God, I trembled at the warmth of his hand as it slid over the back of my ribs, at the touch of his other palm cupping mine. I inhaled deeply at the long-familiarized scent of musk, and amber, and roses. Away from the classroom, he no longer smelled like a walking herb-room. I missed him smelling like that, but I could definitely live with him smelling like this. My voice trembled breathlessly as he pulled me close. "But it's not the same...when one is doing it all alone..."

"Mm. For some things, a partner *is* best," he agreed, and that voice slid over me like lust personified. For a moment, the warm gleam in his dark eyes confirmed that we were talking about two things, dancing...and lovemaking; I felt myself grow wet with need, and wondered if he could tell from the trembling of my flesh. A slide of his hand over my back, and he stepped back, humor glinting in those dark eyes. "We will start with a simple dance, the waltz."

Approaching a Muggle portable player in the corner, he inserted a CD, selected a piece of music, and hit play.

"The beat is one-two-three, one-two-three. Do you know the steps?"

I nodded, and swayed to the movements I'd learned through the illustrations in his books. He smiled and approached me, taking me into his arms. A nod of his head, and we began the dance. God, it was heaven! Who knew that so many years of stalking through the school had given his feet the grace of an angel's wings?

"You have been practicing, *Senorita*."

"Please, call me *Belladonna*," I breathed, having picked this name out of the habit of having used it since the start of the term to get into my quarters. His quarters.. He stared down at me for a moment, his expression more thoughtful than wary. A blink, and the mood vanished.

"As you wish, *Belladonna*. You may call me *Sebastian*, in turn."

"*Gracias*."

"De nada," he dismissed lightly, spinning us around the mirror-lined room. The music came to a stop, and he tested my knowledge of the foxtrot, next. An arch of a brow accompanied the compliment, "For someone who claims to have learnt mostly through self-study, you dance very well, *Belladonna*."

"I do not wish to fail. In anything."

He studied me, his thumb caressing the top of my hand a bit absently. "I think I believe you... Come, we shall tango, and test your self-explored skills."

A change of music, and the sultry beat, rocking between slow and quick began. But rather than holding me at regulation distance, he pulled me close, as close as he had at the beginning of the lesson. Lover-close. I gave myself up to the rhythm, to the music, to the guidance of his arms and the passion of his movements as we flicked our legs around each other. Cotton and linen whispered against silk and chiffon. Heat suffused my body, as he made love to me in the only possible, publically acceptable way. I whipped my head with each turn, making the hair I'd bound into a looped knot at the nape of my neck bounce and sway, threatening to dislodge the sapphire-bowed clip holding it in place. He breathed deeply, his chest swelling against mine with each inhalation, as the music speeded in its tempo, increasing the driving movements.

Truly, Argentina was the best place to go, to learn how to tango. I could barely keep up with him, though I had thoroughly studied all the variations I could find. But he was a good dancer--he drew me with him, without dragging me along, or dragging himself down. Lifted me, without having to carry me. By the end of the dance, I was anticipating his every move...and in such a state of heated longing, when the music ended and he flung me over in a dramatic dip, I clutched at the back of his head and pulled us together into a kiss. Lungs heaving, lips panting, I devoured his mouth.

He straightened us both, and I almost cried out in fear that he was going to set me aside--thank god he did not! No, he kept his head bent to mine, kept his lips on my skin, though he trailed them to my ear, to my jaw, to all the tender, vulnerable spots on my neck that made me shiver. His hands clutched as fervently as my own, and the elongated hardness of his loins ground into my belly, making me throw back my head and cry out my secret as he suckled sharply at the base of my throat, marking me with his mouth--

"--*Te amo!*"

His head jerked up from the chiffon-draped neckline of my dress, eyes glazed in shock. They bored into mine as I panted in passion and fear, then he closed them with a soft sound that was somewhere between a groan and a sigh, as if to shake off his lusts. When he opened them again, his gaze was still a little dazed. Then it fastened abruptly at the base of my throat. I tried to stumble back, but his hand came up and broke the velvet band, jerking the amulet away. Demanding without a word the right to a much closer look.

Shite.

I turned and ran. So much for vaunted Gryffindor bravery.

...

It wasn't easy to pack quickly with hands that shook, and eyes that blurred with tears. *What the fuck was I thinking?* I didn't swear often, but I did so now, even if it was only in my own mind. *What the bloody mother fuck was I thinking?* ...I was thinking only of myself, of course. Myself and my own sordid needs. My own sick little obsession.

I had a secret, all right.

I have been in love with my dreaded, nasty, sour, acerbic, greasy-haired, black-hearted bastard of a Potions Master since Day One. That first Friday at Hogwarts, in my very first year. Oh, it probably wasn't love back then, more like puppy love. The kind of damned little rugrat-dog love that yips and barks annoyingly, until all you want to do is stomp on it to put it out of your misery...but you can't. Because it comes with those big, adorable eyes, and you know in your heart it's a fragile little thing. And even when *he* kicks it, reminds you that no one likes a know-it-all, and mocks your teeth, and is cruel to you and your friends for seven long years, you know it's sick, and wrong, and some twisted mockery of the universe that you could be in love with *him*, obsess over *him* for a good chunk of your life...!

And so I pushed it down. Stomped on it. Kicked it out into the back yard of my heart...where I could still hear it yipping and yapping for attention. The damned thing was too stubborn, too persistent, too annoying to die. Too deeply rooted, if it had been a tree instead of a chihuahua or whatever. God knew it wasn't a teacup poodle. That was too cute a metaphor for what I was suffering.

Grabbing my case, clad once again in my midnight blue teaching clothes, my hair stripped of its straightness and curls, my skin reduced to its usual English pallor, I picked up the Portkey and activated it, banging my way back to the entry hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry several thousand miles away. Even though I'd picked a soft-sided carrying case for the journey, to hold my clothes and gown and such, I still had bruises against my hips and thighs as it had flapped along behind me. Pocketing the Portkey, I stonily ignored the startled faces of some of the portraits on the walls and the way they gaped at my tearstained cheeks as I stalked down into the safety and anonymity of the dungeons.

One more week to the Christmas holidays. Just one more ruddy week, and then I could resign and...and go bury myself in the wilds of Polynesian Samoa. I wondered irreverently if lavalava skirt-wraps came in midnight blue. That made me laugh involuntarily, but it was a broken sound, and I was crying again by the time I gasped the password in my office and hid myself away in my lair.

His lair.

I hid in my room.

Maybe I wouldn't wait until the holidays to resign and disappear. He knew my secret, after all.

Sometime later, when I'd been reduced to tears leaking out of reddened eyes and a sniffing nose, I heard his voice, scaring me as he'd once scared me before.

"Hermione, *whyever* are you lying there, crying? Why weren't you at supper?"

Craning my head, I looked over at the picture of Circe, hung over the ceramic stove; my quarters were buried under the castle, so no windows or chimneys for me, in here. The ancient Cyprian was standing in the background, arms folded over her chiton-draped body, mouth pinched, foot tapping impatiently, as Painted-Severus looked down at me.

I buried my face in the damp fabric of my feather-stuffed pillow. "I don't feel like eating."

"...Did my counterpart say something to upset you?"

"No."

"--Well then, what is it, girl?" he demanded with all the impatience of the original owner's temperment.

"I made a lovesick fool of myself. Go away, and leave me to my misery."

Silence. I was tempted to look and see if he'd obeyed, but decided I was too miserable to care. As the clock on the mantel ticked away, I heard the stealthy arrival of a house-elf, come to stoke the fire in the ceramic-and-iron woodstove. I didn't stir; no need to startle the poor thing by having the current Potions Mistress sit up and shriek like a bainsidhe at whichever one it was that dared disturb my desolation.

But even the gloomiest of moods will fade. I'm too damned practical to wallow for long in my own pain, tender-hearted though I might be toward others' suffering. And when it faded, it was replaced by the memory of what we had done. Breasts rubbing against chest, legs tangling with legs, loins rubbing with loins. Such passion and concentration in his face, easing the lines of his brow, making them strangely appealing for they hadn't been creased in his customary scowl. No, they were lines of attention, all of it on his partner. All of it, for just a little while, on me.

Rising from my bed, I shed my clothes and disappeared into the bathroom for a little while, taking a cool, soothing shower, scrubbing my teeth, preparing myself for bed. I was exhausted, emotionally wrung out. And found I couldn't sleep, from the tension still throbbing through my body, after I retired again to my bed.

Emotions were a bitch. So was desire. I lay there on my back, eyes closed, trying to sleep, and could not. All I could think of was the heat of his body against mine, the whisper of our clothes rubbing together as our torsos brushed and my high-slit skirt flapped around his trouserlegs, the scent of him turning my lungs dizzy with need. My nipples tightened and my womb clenched with desire. For him.

Groaning, I rolled over and did what I had always done, since discovering the delights of my own body, and the greatest relaxation method known to womankind. Once in a while I'd been distracted by thoughts of others, Viktor, Ron, Harry, but always I came back to a sexy, silky, disciplinarian sneer, stygian eyes that glittered with tightly reined passion, and a face that while not handsome, was still dear to me. He'd unleashed his passion in the dance, drawing out my own. Baring my secret. Naked in the bed--it was so nice to sleep without the binding presence of a nightgown or pajamas, almost sinfully adult--I parted my thighs, slipped my wrist under my belly, and quested through my nethercurls to the hot, wet folds they sheltered.

A circling slide, and I gasped, shuddering under the gentle pressure of the pads of my fingers. A gentle, rapid flickering of my fingertip, wary of the nails I'd been forced to trim short to keep them out of the way of my potions-work, and I came. Moaning his name. And I did it again, pushing myself back up the slope of desire with more questing, tickling, teasing touches. I rolled onto my back, grasping and gently twisting my nipples with my free hand, and bucked my hips. I scrunched up my body by raising my knees, and plunged a finger into my own depths, a paltry substitute for what I really wanted--*him!*

"Severus--oh, god, I love you!"

My voice echoed off the tapestry-draped walls, hung to insulate the room against some of its underground chill. This time, when my climax crested and fell, it relaxed me enough to let me sleep. Dreamless oblivion was exactly what I needed. Tomorrow would take care of itself, one way or another.

Chapters IV, V, VI, & Epilogue

Chapter 2 of 2

Professor Snape is missing, and Hermione is asked to fill in as Potions Mistress until he is found. - Part II, Severus' point of view...

IV.

I had a secret.

...

The damned thing had haunted me for years. I deserved every epithet thrown at me, by both my enemies and my so-called allies and friends. Bastard. Traitor. Pervert. Well, they didn't accuse me of that last one very often, at least not to my face, but it applied. Oh, it applied to me, alright.

At first, she was an irritation. How dare she pretend to know so much, and on the very first day of school, for her! A Muggleborn--what could *she* possibly know? And yet...she did know. She knew so bloody much. It irritated me for so long, it blinded me to how I felt, thankfully. Until that fateful night, at the end of her fifth year, here. When she fell at the foolish battle at the Ministry, dragged there by that reckless Potter Prat.

I'd insisted on personally brewing all the potions required to help her recover from Dolohov's curse. Damned mediwitches and mediwizards might know how to treat magical injuries as serious as hers, but they didn't know potions-making like I did. I'd sworn Poppy to secrecy, too; no need to let the whole school know I was involved so deeply in her recovery. No need to let myself know, either--for the longest time--how deeply concerned I was for her healthy recovery.

Then she'd returned, the curly-haired little brat...only she wasn't quite so little anymore. What had been a trembling, unopened rosebud had started to bloom, over the summer. I was watching her turning into a young woman right in front of my eyes...and I had a disturbingly hard time looking away. That was when I first suspected the depths of my perversion. I'd turned away from it as forcefully as I could, was as cruel and mean to her as ever, tried to stamp her out of my thoughts, but she had lodged herself inside of me too firmly to root out. A fungus under the skin, I tried to compare her to, but as her sixth year became her seventh, aided by another heart-stopping ride of terror brought on by her friends' foolishness, she became more like my own blood.

Incurably necessary.

The distractions of the final confrontation with Voldemort were sufficient to divert even the most singleminded man, and my mind had been torn in twain for some time now. But afterwards, when I'd heard she was injured, my heart had pounded in my throat until I could wrest the details from Poppy that her injuries were minor, nothing that a day or two in the Infirmary couldn't cure. Piddling, compared to the other escapades she'd survived.

And I knew she would leave me, as easily and as swiftly as she left the Infirmary. Not that she'd notice. Not that she'd care.

I'd once sourly joked to Albus that, when it was all over, I'd go bury myself in a foreign country and take up dance-instruction among the Muggles. He'd joked that he'd never seen me dance, not even at the rare Ball held on the school grounds. I'd confessed it was an idle hobby, an interest of mine to learn ballroom and latin dances. That idea came back to me, and grew, until I spent the last of the post-term days secluded in my quarters learning and practicing every dance I could prod to illusioned life, save for the occasional patrol for unruly miscreants.

And then, I did it. I enchanted my own portrait in the privacy of my quarters to keep silent on my whereabouts, with a charm I knew would never be broken, and swore Albus to equal secrecy. I then made my way to Argentina--I'd always been fond of the tango, and that southern-hemisphered land was renowned for its passionate claim to that dance--and found a couple willing to give me a chance at helping them teach others to dance. My quest for perfection was no less fervent than hers had proven to be; young and intelligent and talented though she might be, I had several more years on her--too many more, perhaps--and it wasn't long before I was given permission to teach others on my own while Rodrigo and Rosita took some well-earned time off each afternoon for a honeymoon-like siesta. I was a teacher at heart, after all, so it didn't bother me. I was also a loner.

I wanted to replace every last memory of her that I could, to root out the perversion in my heart. I even tried dating women, real, adult women. But these Argentinas were too different, too spicy compared to the pale English rose that I coveted. And there was that treacherous voice deep down inside that whispered, *she's an adult, now...and no longer your student*. Yet I knew she'd never see me as I saw her. Not after the way I'd treated her, for all I'd had no other, palatable choice. Not when I knew very well how much older I was than her--old enough to be her father--and how much uglier I was than her young, delicate beauty.

So I stayed, because I could not go back while I still clung to my secret, unable to let go.

...

Until one afternoon, a swarthy senorita walked into the studio, and blushed charmingly as she begged to learn passion in my arms. She had the dark, smooth hair and rich tan of a native, but she wasn't local, for all that she spoke like one. And for the first time in a couple of shameful years, I felt masculine interest in another woman.

Part of me felt shame for lusting after someone else. Part of me felt relief. I couldn't help teasing myself by pulling her scandalously close for a moment, before beginning the lesson. She blushed, but did not seem to mind. The beautiful young woman in my arms was a most able student, for all she claimed little knowledge other than some childhood lessons and some book-learning. I felt confusion, as I compared that to *her*.

I praised the woman in my arms, trying not to think of the one I still wanted to hold. "You have been practicing, Senorita."

"Please, call me Belladonna."

Names were never rendered by the translator amulet. Her name came free of her lips with a lighter, lesser accent than what I'd been hearing. It reminded me of something...my password, to my quarters, that was it. Belladonna what what my password was, back at Hogwarts. Here, now, with this exquisite, exciting woman in my arms, I finally felt like that life was far enough away to forget. But for a moment...for a moment, I couldn't help remembering why I'd chosen that password. Not for the lovely but deadly flower and its poisonous properties...but 'beautiful lady'. Named for *her*, the one proof of my devotion that I could give, without giving myself away.

I had a new beautiful lady in my arms. Fate had given me the chance to forget *her*, and I was going to try. Besides, she was probably married by now, with my sour luck. This woman, here in my arms, was not. So I merely said, "As you wish, Belladonna. You may call me Sebastian, in turn."

"Gracias."

"De nada," and I swirled her around the room in the waltz. A beautiful dance, the waltz, deceptively simple. Her feet flew in time with mine, her body hesitant but willing to comply with the subtle turns of my body and the gentle pressure of my hands and arms. I could not help observing after a little while, "For someone who claims to have learnt mostly through self-study, you dance very well, Belladonna."

"I do not wish to fail. In anything."

How like myself... I studied her as we foxtrotted as well, wondering if she would be coming back for more lessons. Wondering if I could ask her out for supper, in a little bit. Once Rodrigo and Rosita returned, that was; I couldn't leave the studio unattended in their absence. "I think I believe you... Come, we shall tango, and test your self-explored skills."

Heaven, to dance with such a sultry angel in one's arms! I pulled her tight, and tested her boundaries. I made love to her with the rhythm and the steps, with the twists and the turns, the increasingly unobtrusive pressure of my body as her presence in my arms aroused me...and she responded with all the fervor of someone with more latin blood in her veins than her delicate beauty could suggest. There was a hint of innocence about her moves, yes, but also an eagerness to learn everything I could teach her about the passion and rhythm of a body. I savoured the beating flaps of her skirt against my calves, the teasing rub of her silk-and-chiffon breasts against the open vee of my shirt, the tension and relaxation of her hand, caught and released in mine whenever I spun her out and back again.

I wanted her. Such a normal, healthy lust, for a complete stranger of a woman! When the music ended, I flung her back over my arm, striving hard not bury my mouth in the bodice of her gown, struggling for air. I found my lungs cut off from that precious oxygen as she clutched at me, and sealed her rose-red lips to mine. Lust slammed through my body; I had two choices, drop her to the ground and cover her with my body...on a hard-polished floor in a dance hall where anyone could walk in on what we were doing...or move both of us upright, and stave off that drastic of an action for just a little bit more, in the hopes I could recover some semblance of civilized sanity from her impassioned ambush. Upright it was.

Her hands gripped and caressed me with as much fervor as my own. I plundered her mouth, duelling with her tongue, savouring every taste--her lipstick tasted faintly of cherries, more of a flavoured gloss than anything--and nipped my way to her ear, where she cried out and held me closer. I bit and licked my way down her throat, inhaling the subtle scent of roses perfuming her skin, and a feminine musk that was her own heady aroma. I ground my hips into hers, suckling hard at that tender little hollow just above the juncture of her collarbones--

"--I love you!"

Shite.

My head jerked up. For a moment, I couldn't see anything but another woman in my arms. One with a riot of honey-chestnut curls, cinnamon-brown eyes, and pale, perfect skin, not this black-haired, blue-eyed, swarthy latina. I even imagined for an impassioned moment that underneath those listed differences, she looked identical to the woman I...*dammit*...to the woman I still loved.

I had to close my eyes at that admission. Passion was great; this much physical lust I hadn't felt in a very long time, and it was a refreshing drink of water after a long wander through the desert of disinterested celibacy. But without a heart free to accept it, it was just a single cup's worth, not an unending well to draw from for the rest of my life. Opening my eyes, I drew in a breath to apologize to her...and saw it.

My face. My own face, etched in profile, on the polished oval surface of a piece of jet. I had to be mistaken. But no, she pushed to get out of my arms, and I--I, who was suddenly more angry than I'd ever been in my entire life at this...this...whatever it was!--I ripped the brooch from her throat, snapping the velvet band.

She stumbled back, eyes wide with fear and dismay--so wide, I thought I saw a slim crescent of something other than dark blue at the edge of one of them--and bolted out the door. It took me a stunned moment to make my legs move, unsure what to think, how to react to her rapid retreat. I finally lunged at the door, only to hear the sharp *crack!* of someone Disapparating away.

A glance down at the back of the velvet-strung pendant proved my suspicions correct. A translation amulet. A complexly enspelled one, I realized, reading the rune-marks for several different languages. Either an expensive model had been purchased by 'Belladonna'...or she was an overachiever by nature--

My heart slammed into my ribs. I rubbed at my sternum, dislodging the low-hanging chain that contained my own pendant, marked first with common Spanish, then with the local dialect runes, so I could speak to and be understood more clearly by those around me. A complex translation pendant on one side...a carefully replicated engraving of my profile on the other. Carefully...and maybe lovingly, from memory?

It was a foolish, pitiful flight of fantasy to hope so, but I was still caressing the edges of the carving when Rodrigo and his bella Rosita returned to the studio. They were my own age, mid-forties, but glowed with the happiness of lovers in their second honeymoon.

"What have you got there, Sebastian?" my Argentino friend enquired, peering at the cabochon in curiosity.

"A...gift," I lied carefully, for it wasn't a gift; it was a theft that had brought it into my possession. A self-righteous theft, but a theft all the same. "From...from the woman I love."

Another lie...? Perhaps. *Perhaps not*, said the thudding of my heart in my chest. I didn't know if it was *her* or not. I rubbed at my sternum again. Whoever Belladonna truly was, she'd taught me the most important thing I'd left Britain to learn. Passion could be found elsewhere, but love could only be found in one place...and Hell was found everywhere else.

You didn't have to be in Gryffindor to be able to gather your courage. Lifting my head from the polished-and-etched, semi-precious surface--infinitely precious to me, if it was *hers!*--I looked at my partners, the couple who had taken me in and kept me employed for the past several months in this foreign land.

"I have to go to her...and I don't know if I'll return. I...I hope not. You have been very good friends to me--"

"--We understand," Rosita reassured me, patting my arm. I'd learned how to endure such casual touches, down here among such friendly Argentinans. "When love calls, you must go. It is the way of the heart. I had wondered why no other woman could stir your heart, Sebastian..."

Rodrigo nodded.

"Gracias," I breathed, clutching the gemstone to my chest. "I must hurry--thank you for letting me rent the rooms next to your own!"

"Just promise to come back with her, some day," Rodrigo ordered me gruffly, clasping my hand. "Woo her. Dance with her! Let her feel the rhythm and stamina of your love--ow!"

His wife smiled, extracting her elbow from his ribs. "You treat her nicely, Sebastian. She will not be able to resist you, I promise you that!"

Nodding, I headed for the stairs to pack. I had so much to do. I'd have to buy a spot on the next Portkey to England, whenever that would be, and drop my things at the school--Merlin alone knew what poor sap Albus had conned into taking up the Potions position, but he'd promised me my job back when I was ready for it, if and when I ever returned. Not that I'd take it up instantly; if I held out through the holidays, I'd have half a month or so to search for her--*God! Let her not be married to some other prat!*

That was my greatest fear, and as I fetched my wand, reduced everything I owned, everything I'd bought in this land to tiny parcels that could fit into a single handbag, my hands trembled at the thought of her belonging to another man. She was mine--mine! I just had to find a way to convince her of that.

My beloved.

My secret.

My Hermione.

V.

Luck was with me. It was about time, too, given the lousy status of my life until now. Apparating into Rio de Janeiro's wizarding district, I literally caught the next Portkey to London within five minutes of its departure. Squashed in next to a sunburnt holidaying family with a squalling child and an older wizard who had the neatly dressed suit of someone who probably worked for the Ministry of Magic, International Affairs division, I bounced and bumped my way halfway around the world. Relieved to escape the squalling brat--and dismayed at the disconcerting thought of holding my own squalling child someday, because for a moment of besotted insanity, I wanted to have my own children with her--I Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts.

It was a tiring walk up to the school in the icy cold drizzle that poured down around me in the smallest hours following midnight. I had to find and Transfigure my long-abandoned cloak back into a size and shape that would shelter me from the bitterly cold Scottish weather, for I hadn't bothered to change out of my summer-weight shirt and slacks, though I had buttoned up the front in an effort to tidy myself in the last few minutes before the Portkey had activated. Taken from paradise to this dismal place wasn't the sort of welcome-home I wanted to experience. At least for once in my life, didn't I deserve something better?

Fortune has a way of twisting itself time and again, though; I rounded the corner to the stairs, and bumped into something that wasn't there. Quick as a thought, I grabbed and yanked off what was indeed an Invisibility Cloak, revealing a blushing, mortified Ginny Weasley. She had a plate of food cradled against her chest, and had apparently nipped down to the kitchens to filch a middle-of-the-night snack.

Weasleys couldn't afford Invisibility Cloaks. Given I wasn't entirely ignorant of the overly hormonal swirlings of teenaged relationships in this place, there was only one feasible explanation for whose Cloak, exactly, it was. My lips curled in a sneer that made her shrink back from me and stammer, "P-P-Professor Snape! I, er...you're back from holiday, are you?"

I frowned slightly, wondering exactly how the Headmaster had explained my absence, when I'd sworn him to secrecy, wanting to escape anything and everything remotely connected to the wizarding world. Deepening it into a scowl, I growled, "Miss Weasley. How astute...when you have blatantly failed to remember that the curfew for seventh-years is 10 p.m., not...2:37 a.m.," I warned her, stepping back a little to peer at the clock face visible over the House points-hourglasses in the entry hall. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, for being out and about so late...and twenty *more* for possessing Mr. Harry Potter's infamous Invisibility Cloak."

Something bothered me out of the corner of my eye as I spoke. The pile of golden coins occupying the Gryffindor hourglass hadn't dropped. *Oh, bugger. I forgot I can't take points off until I'm officially on the job, again.*

I made a mental note to take forty points off of Gryffindor as soon as I was employed by the school again. Returning my attention to Miss Weasley, I saw that her face had paled, stricken, until her freckles stood out like stark splotches of cinnamon against the ghostly pallor of her skin. Oh, yes, she knew how long I'd been coveting getting my hands on this nefarious piece of fabric. Several bloody years. Most of the past seven years, to be precise, though I hadn't known of its presence until Potter's ill-advised and utterly unauthorized trip to Hogsmeade in his third year.

"Please, Professor--I promise I won't use it again--"

I envisioned telling her I was confiscating it for good, that Potter would never get it back, ever...and realized that if Potter heard that, so would ~~she~~ *he*. I wasn't foolish enough to think she wouldn't take it personally. But the bloody thing was useful, for the time being; I could use it to spy on her, once I found her, to determine if she was married, or in love with someone else, what sort of job she'd taken...

"Cease your begging, Miss Weasley. I have neither time nor the patience to listen to you whinge, this late at night. I will confiscate it until the start of the new year...and then summon Mr. Potter to pick it up himself. In the meantime, consider yourself on probation. Any acting-up between now and the start of the new term, and I will increase the length of time I keep this Cloak by one day per House-point you lose. Now, get to bed!"

She scuttled off up the stairs, probably relieved I was going to give the Cloak back, and relieved I wasn't going to give her a detention. Forgetting conveniently--for me--at the moment that I couldn't assign detentions, or take House-points off. Oh, yes, I definitely would have to remember to take forty points off the freckled girl's House, as soon as I was reinstated as Potions Master.

...

"Thank Merlin you're back! What the bloody hell did you do to make her cry?"

I glanced up at my portrait, irritated by his presumptive tone. Normally it didn't bother me, but my painted self's irritation was mixed annoyingly with babbling nonsense. I unTransfigured all of my miniaturized clothes with a flick of my wand, dumping them into the hamper for the house-elves to clean. "Whatever are you babbling about?"

"Hermione! She came back from Argentina crying!"

My heart slammed against my chest, bruisingly hard. I rubbed at my sternum, and glared at my portrait, trying to give myself enough time to think. "She's...she's *here*?"

"In the other bedroom!" Portrait-Me snapped, tipping his head towards the bathroom.

I scowled at him. "That's a bathroom, you oil-based idiot!"

"Not anymore," he returned smugly, folding his arms across his chest in that infuriatingly superior way. I admired it for a moment, before he continued, explaining himself. "Albus added a bedroom, beyond the bath, connected to your front parlour. She's been living in there."

"Since when?!" I demanded.

"Keep your voice down!" my image hissed at me. "She's finally just fallen asleep. After frigging herself senseless to the thought of you, I might add."

I staggered back to the foot of my bed, collapsing on the padded lid of the chest that served as a bench. "F..f..."

"Why are you so shocked?" Portrait-self demanded of me, flipping one of his hands my way. "She was smart enough to figure out the trick of breaking the geas you placed on me...though it was more like lovesick than smart. The girl's madly in love with you!"

"You...you *lie*!" I protested, rubbing at my chest, which now ached with the strain of hope, not the strain of shock.

"Would you like me to drag Circe in here, so you can ask her whose name she shouted out, not once, but twice in the throes of her ecstasy?" my portrait drawled mockingly, refolding his arms. "Who shouted out the second time, and I quote, 'Severus--oh god I love you!', not more than ten minutes ago?"

Lust slammed through my body. But I was puzzled. And I wasn't about to go charging into her bedroom without scouting out the territory around her a little more carefully. I'd spent too many years as a spy to give up on my caution now. "...Circe?"

"The portrait of Circe from the old Ectomancy classroom on the second floor, south wing. Albus thought she'd like seeing it in her chambers, since she's always admired the witch. Do me the favour of getting her portrait painted as swiftly as possible, so I can have someone with a *real* intellect to converse with in this suite, will you?"

"Hermione...Granger...is the new Potions Mistress?"

"In your absence. And doing a fair job of replacing you in nearly every way, too," my painting smirked. "Careful, Severus, or she just might take your job. Though with luck, you'll be able to replace the DADA instructor, Kirby--the pompous old fool!"

I knew Argus Kirby, and he was a pompous old fool who had no business teaching the students anything worth saving their hides.

"*Neville* knows more than him," Painted-Me added in a sneer. "The wisest thing Kirby's ever done was stick to strict theory, and let Longbottom handle the practical applications.

"--Neville?" God, my mind was reeling! Hermione was here--she'd kissed my bloody portrait, disguised herself and danced with an utterly undisguised passion in my arms, confessed her love, then fled--and she was here, in my job? Miss Weasley had Potter's Cloak, which I myself now possessed, Neville Longbottom was apparently apprenticed to become the next DADA instructor--I didn't know what to think!

...Yes, I did. In the next room was the love of my misbegotten life. Asleep...with the perfume of her passion undoubtedly still upon her fingers. The brewing of a potion that potent was one I wish I'd seen. Forcing myself to rise, I finished redistributing my belongings about my bedroom, and stripped off my clothes. Padding into the bathroom, Cloak in hand, I showered and dried off, then donned the shimmering fabric and eased open the door on the far side of the chamber.

A single, glowing, glazed white ball the size of a shooter gobstone lit the room softly, providing a tiny source of light in the otherwise windowless chamber. I could make out a tangle of curls against the pallid contours of the pillows at the head of the bed. Silently, I padded closer. There was barely enough light to see her, but I did. She looked different, a little older, less baby-faced. Of course, it had been nigh on half a year since I'd last laid eyes on her. More than enough time for the last traces of her womanhood to bloom. I also knew well that teaching class after class of dunderheads could age and mature anyone. I wondered how well she was managing; I could see her overflowing with information, talking everyone's ears off their heads...and scowled at the thought of anyone taking advantage of her kind and generous nature.

I wanted to join her in her bed. I wanted to drag her into mine. I wanted to claim her, body and soul and heart and love. Instead, I checked her alarm clock silently, padded back into my own room, set my alarm for half an hour before hers was due to erupt, and forced my mind into calm tranquility so that I could sleep. Doing my best to ignore the erection I'd been plagued with more or less since the moment I'd taken her into my arms.

It didn't work. All I could remember was how perfectly she'd fitted against me, how passionately she'd waltzed and trotted and tangoed in my arms. I envisioned a quick-step, a cha-cha, even the passionate swirls of a passo-doble, flinging her around my body like a matador's cape--I touched myself at that image; the passo doble was in many ways more intense than the tango. It was an expression of the man's control over the woman's presence, and I wanted to make sure I controlled our next encounter, more carefully than our last. But the tango--she was made for the passion of the tango.

Hermione was made, I finally began to believe, for the passion of my embrace. Stroking myself under the covers, I remembered the feel of her breasts brushing my chest, the earthy gasps and cries I'd elicited in suckling her throat. It was when I remembered the stinging spot of red I'd made at the base of her throat that I felt my scrotum tightening with impending release...for I wondered if the mark of my mouth still remained on her flesh.

I came with her name on my lips, a hiss of shuddering satisfaction. A whispered charm cleaned up the resulting mess, and then all was silent. Except for a disdainful sniff,

and a murmured, "--Wanking yourself to sleep, when you could be shagging the girl until both of you were rendered senseless? Really! Where are your bloody priorities?"

"...Sod off. I'll court her in my own time, and in my own way," I ordered my oil-based self. One 'wank' wasn't enough, but it would do for now. The next time I came, I wanted it to be buried inside her body, with my name wrung ecstatically from her delicious lips.

...

I watched her, with all the intensity of a perverted voyeur, as she rose, showered, and dressed for the day. I grew hard when I noticed that she did indeed have a little love-bite mark purpling her skin at the base of her throat. I bit the knuckles of my first two fingers when I saw her hands gliding the foamy washrag over her breasts and between her thighs, bit them until I tasted blood, to keep from going to her and scaring the living shite out of her by attacking her lustfully in the middle of her morning ablutions. I watched, secretly disappointed at the confinement of such beauty, as she sat at a padded stool she'd brought in to use at the mirrored counter in the bathing room, brushing out and binding up her hair in a severe knot at the back of her head. It seemed like such a shame for her to bind back the glorious ringlets that her old bushful of hair had become, with the advent of sufficient length and maturity.

A few tendrils had escaped her efforts to quell them, by the time she finished applying a sparse amount of makeup and tugged her way into a deep blue, tailored trouser-suit that hugged her curves in a mesmerizing manner--exactly how I'd hug her, if I were a piece of publically acceptable clothing. I would've cheerfully maimed one or two people, to have the chance to be one of the publically indecent scraps of fabric on her body. Between the smartly fashionable cut of her clothes and those curling wisps of cinnamon-honey hair, she was no longer nearly as severe in appearance as she probably hoped she was.

When she shrugged into the midnight blue, sleeveless teaching robe that complimented her outfit, I applauded silently as she practiced moving in it for a moment, twirling in front of the mirrors in the bathroom, swirling and snapping the folds of fabric in a dramatic way. It reminded me very much of how well she'd danced, and I hoped fervently she'd continue those lessons. With myself, of course, as her sole instructor.

I followed her up to the Great Hall for breakfast, carefully avoiding the other students, and watched as she maintained a remarkably mature and unsettingly quelling presence--a single flash of those cinnamon eyes was spicy enough to sear a pair of miscreants over at the Hufflepuff table who were about to launch spoon-propelled food over at their rivals, the Ravenclaws. A tightening of her lips subdued a Slytherin trying to juggle apples over his plate, the moment the boy realized he was pinned under the weight of her stare.

Most impressive... What the bloody hell has she been doing in my classroom, to have developed my Killing Curse Glare? I thought I'd patented that for myself...

I almost forgot to snag some food to eat, but managed to snatch something before hurrying down to her classroom to await the start of her first round of classes. Monday morning, first period. Seventh-years, Advanced Potions. Miss Weasley would be among that lot, given how her previous year's grade had been. Along with several other of Miss Granger's friends and acquaintances. Finding a quiet corner to munch on the egg muffin and the apple I'd filched, I *evanesco'd* the core and waited patiently for the students to come filing into the room.

Sure enough, they trickled in, starting with ten minutes to spare. With two minutes to spare, everyone was in their places, whispering to each other, as subdued as any well-behaved class. Wondering at what magic had overtaken these unruly children, I watched as the door to my office opened and banged shut with just a touch of magic, spitting out the curly-haired Potions Mistress I loved.

"Textbooks!" she snapped. "Page 613! You'll find the instructions for the Breath of Life draught in there, and repeated on the board!" Her wand flicked at the chalkboard, scribbling the required steps in a double-heartbeat with her beautiful, looping handwriting, so much more graceful than my spiky version of copperplate. "Pay particular attention to the third and sixteenth paragraphs--and if anyone melts their cauldron or blows up their lab-partner due to their lackwitted inattention, you'll be scrubbing the toilets with your toothbrushes all throughout the holidays!"

I blinked. Aside from the fact that her voice had settled on the light side of alto, she sounded like...*me*. Me in a particularly foul snit, that was. Not even I usually started off a Monday morning with such harsh, toothbrush-latrine threats. Thursdays and Fridays, maybe, but not Mondays in general. It usually took me until late Wednesday to get that crabby.

Apparently her students thought she was being an unconventional sourpuss, too, for the back row had a mutter of discontented voices. A very quiet mutter. I was almost sure my hearing was deceiving me when one of the Ravenclaws seemed to mutter, "Yes, Mrs. *Snape*..."

I rubbed at my chest as I processed the odd insult. The boy couldn't have meant what I'd thought I'd overheard. Aside from the thumping, which caused my heart to think of my secret love being my openly acknowledged wife someday, the implication in the boy's words was that, rather than being an effusive, bubbly, know-it-all teacher, she'd somehow transformed herself into something as mean and sour as me...

Impossible...right?

As the period progressed, I discovered...wrong. Not impossible. That was exactly what she'd done. It was very disconcerting to watch her glide up behind a couple of the students on such remarkably quiet feet, observe them for a few moments, and with a few well-chosen words, chide them out their foolish mistakes in a way that left them flinching each time she swept past them after that. It was effective, in a perverse sort of way, as I'd discovered long ago for myself. After the third chastisement, no one else dared make any further mistakes.

She was, I noted with a touch of awe, just as hard on her own House-mates as she was on everyone else...and no more hard on the Slytherins than she was on the others, either. I flushed at the thought of all the years I'd been forced to coddle and favour my House members, in order to remain in good stead with their Death Eater families...and all the years I'd picked on Gryffindors left and right, for the slights and insults and fights I'd suffered with their predecessors--troubles only slightly more serious than she'd faced with some of these very same Slytherins, here. She was a far better teacher than me.

I loved her all the more for it, even as I wondered what had turned her so bloody hard. I'd been counting on her perennial softness to blunt the edges of the harder aspects of my nature. I hadn't realized it until I saw her stalking around the classroom like a nymphly nightflyer. Surely the passionate but blushing young woman in my arms from yesterday, down below the Equator, still existed within the shell of this hardened, calculating teacher?

"Jeffries!" her voice snapped. "What does it say on line thirteen?"

"Er...add two teaspoons of powdered bicorn horn?" the Ravenclaw in question quickly replied, checking his textbook since he was some distance from the chalkboard. He was the same one whom Severus had wondered if he'd heard correctly, earlier.

"What is that *thing* in your hand, then?" Her disdain was palpable, her diction scornfully clear from two desk rows away.

"Erm...oh, shite," I heard him mutter under his breath. "A, er, tablespoon measure?"

"Five points from Ravenclaw--I wonder if the Sorting Hat was in its right mind, the day it settled on your head," she added scornfully. "There is a clear and distinct difference between the two, in size. Do try to remember that!"

"...Yes, Mrs. Snape. Of course, Mrs. Snape. Anything you *say*, Mrs. Snape," the seventh-year muttered under his breath as he bent his head to his work, tossing down the wrong measuring spoon and picking up the right one.

I hadn't misheard, before. I shifted away from my corner of the room, deciding I'd had enough. I wasn't the only one with good hearing, though, and in four swift strides, Hermione was at his lab table, bracing her hands on the edge as she leaned over the alembic and distillation coils between them. Giving the lad a slight but distinct view of her cleavage at the edge of that collarless, stylish neckline, I discovered for myself as I moved up behind him.

"What did you say, Mr. Jeffries?"

"...Nothing, Professor," the teenager mumbled.

"Oh, you and I *both* know what you said. You will now say it out loud, for the whole class to hear. *Now!*"

Gulping, he repeated himself loudly, face flushing in embarrassment. "Yes, Mrs. Snape! Of course, Mrs. Snape! Anything you say, Mrs. Snape!"

The rest of the class tittered and snickered behind their hands. Hermione's cheeks darkened, and I could feel my own heating under the concealment of the Cloak draped over my frame. I watched as her fingers clenched on the edge of the table for a moment, then she pushed herself upright, tugging her tailored jacket straight.

"...Do you think that is funny?" she asked the Ravenclaw with remarkable, if crisp, calmness. "Do you think I am amused? Do you think *Professor Snape* would be amused, when he returns from his sabbatical? *Do you?*"

I couldn't resist. Timing was everything, in the fine Art of Intimidation. Yanking the Invisibility Cloak from my body, I growled even as her eyes snapped wide. "I assure you, I am *not* amused, Mr. Jeffries!"

The boy all but gave himself whiplash, jerking around on his stool as fast as he could move. So did every other single student in the classroom. From the stricken terror in the boy's face, I suspected we were both lucky, Professor Granger and I, that Gerald Jeffries didn't wet himself out of sheer fear at my sudden apparition right at his back. Lifting my gaze to my replacement, I gave her the tiniest of smiles. For a moment she returned it, those cinnamon-brown eyes warming in equally wicked amusement. Then she blinked and the warmth was gone, replaced briefly with what looked like nervousness as the last of the flush in her cheeks drained, leaving her a bit pale. A second blink, and her demeanor was calm and cool, collected and poised despite my unexpected appearance.

"Welcome back from your vacation, Mr. Snape. Will you be resuming your classes tomorrow, or at the start of the next term?"

I was aware of the whole classroom holding its breath, at her semi-subtle reminder that I was not, at the moment, Professor Snape, Potions Master. I wondered which of us the young men and women around us would prefer, caught as they were between the proverbial rock and hard place, between the continuation of this unholy terror that had blossomed in my absence, or the immediate return of my own acerbic, unpleasant self. "At the start of the next term, Professor Granger."

She blushed a little; I guessed with all probable accuracy that it was in relief that I was not only not challenging her right to finish out the term that she had started and was apparently managing quite well, but not belittling the title she had clearly earned in my absence. A nod of her head gracefully and graciously acknowledged the subtle compliment in my words.

"..If you do not mind, Professor, I would like to stay, and observe," I murmured, holding her gaze.

"As you like," she acknowledged, tucking her hands behind her back--to hid any betraying trembling? Nervous or not, she stung my pride lightly with her next words. "Just stay out of the way."

Set in my place by a woman who not half a year ago had been my very own student. Had been, but clearly was no more. I said nothing in rejoinder, though I knew the whole room expected me to give her a dressing-down for her daringly brusque order. But she wasn't a fool like Lockhart, nor a toad like Umbridge, nor a fake like Trelawney, and I was very careful to never disrespect my fellow teachers where any of the students could hear it. Especially the ones I respected.

Retreating to my corner, I watched her resume her sweeping course through the room, and her singleminded pursuit of scholarly perfection in her students. Folding up Potter's Invisibility Cloak--invisible side in, since I didn't want to erase the existence of my groin, just hide my erection--I held it on my lap as the last few minutes of the period ticked away. Lusting after the curly-haired woman in midnight blue. I'd put the Cloak away in my--in *our* quarters, after the class was through.

Presuming the secret in my lap went away soon.

VI.

I have a secret.

Not only do I love Hermione Granger, meddlesome know-it-all and holy teaching terror--oh, was a delicious combination! She's smart and sexy and utterly delectable as a colleague and fellow adult, far moreso than she ever was as a forbidden student!--I know that she loves me, too. My portrait would have no reason to lie to me, after all...and the way she blushes faintly whenever she looks my way is indication enough for proof. I know that she can see my secrets lurking in the warmth of my eyes, in the ever-so-slight curve of my mouth; whenever our gaze meets for more than a few moments, she blushes even harder.

I sat next to her at lunch. Albus cheerfully welcomed me home, Ermengarde praised the healthy darkness of my tan, and Fillmore quizzed me as to where I had gone in the tropics, to wind up looking so delightfully fit. If I didn't have this other secret beating in tandem with my own inside my chest, I might not have said anything, but I murmured, "I was down in Argentina, in a city near the Rio del Plata."

"But whatever were you doing down there for so long?" the head of Hufflepuff demanded. I knew Ermengarde liked me--she was a motherly sort who liked nearly everyone--but she sounded genuinely concerned for my long absence.

"Relaxing, of course," was all I cared to reply. I made it a point to not look at the curly-haired young goddess next to me. Ermengarde blinked, seated on Hermione's far side.

"Oh. Well. I suppose that makes sense, given you turned out to be a spy for our side, and all... I imagine the stress you were under was horrific, prodding you to be so cruel and mean."

"Don't whitewash me, Ermengarde." I warned her mildly. "I find a certain level of terror in the classroom very useful for keeping order...and very entertaining, too. Wouldn't you agree, Professor Granger?"

She blushed deliciously, though she took the time to primly finish the bite of steak in her mouth and set her silverware down before answering. "Discipline is absolutely necessary for a student to succeed. If they haven't the fortitude to apply it to themselves, it behooves the serious educator to apply it for them, until it has been ingrained as a work-habit."

I shocked the whole of the Great Hall, I think, when I threw back my head and laughed. Heartily. I know I shocked the woman at my side, for when I lowered my chin, grinning, she was still gaping at me with wide cinnamon-brown eyes. She met my gaze, the warmth of my regard--damn, where did my acting ability from my spying days go?--then flushed and grabbed her napkin from her lap, dabbing at her mouth. She moved to place it on the table, and my instincts prickled, warning me of a hasty desire to retreat on her part. Quickly snagging the corner of the napkin, I tugged it into her lap, along with her hand. Then shifted my arm and covered her shock-cooled fingers with my own.

"...I am delighted to know why you've chosen to teach the way that you do. And I heartily agree." Lifting my goblet--water only; I'd been six or so months out of the habit of drinking pumpkin juice--I saluted her with it.

Ermengarde Sprout, on my still-staring beloved's far side, blinked at me in equal shock. "...Well! You'll have to tell me everything you can about Argentina, Severus, if that faraway land can relax you *this* much!"

Chuckling, I kept my own counsel, sipping from the crystalware used at the staff tables. I also kept my hand on Hermione's for a little while longer, rubbing her skin gently until it felt warm and supple. A sidelong glance at her showed her blushing and glancing at me, too, out of the corner of her eyes.

Such a shy thing, I thought bemusedly. *To be so bold in the classroom--and on the dance-floor--yet all but tremble under the simplest touch of my hand*..I pictured her trembling under much more complicated and publically indecent touches, and made up my mind. I wanted to kiss the woman at my side, and I didn't want to wait until the end of the day.

"If you're finished eating your lunch, Professor Granger, I'd like to retire with you to your office for a discussion, before your next class." I removed my hand from hers--see, no pressure--and waited with carefully concealed impatience for her reply. I'd eaten my fill of food, but now I was hungry for something else.

A tiny jerk of her head got it moving in a nod, and she placed her napkin on the table. "I'd like to have that discussion, too."

I was fairly certain she didn't have the same sort of discussion in mind that I did, but I rose and held her chair for her--never let it be said a Slytherin pureblood wasn't taught manners as a child, even if it had to be beaten into me--and then followed her as she strode out of the Great Hall. I was just as aware as she was of the eyes that followed our progress out of the hall, she looking deliciously beautiful as she strode through the double-doors in midnight blue, myself following behind in robeless, stark-suited black, a shadow of her loveliness. And I let her keep the lead, though this time last year, I would have pushed to the forefront, leading the way as a teacher should--what a fool I'd been! Or perhaps wisely cautious; her robe fluttered enough on the turns to give me a glimpse of the sway of her hips in that well-cut trouser-suit. Making a mental note to remind myself to compliment her on her wardrobe, I followed her into her office. My office.

I took a moment to look around, the same as I'd done when putting the Cloak away between classes. The slimy things in jars--not even I knew what all of them were; they were mostly gifts and curiosities mailed to me by former Slytherins and fellow Potions professors around the world--were still slimy things in jars, and the arrangements of my personal equipment were more or less on the same tables, though some of them had been moved all over the place. About the only other thing that had changed was either the replacement or the Transfiguration of the leather chair that had been placed at my desk. It was now thickly padded, not thin and stiff. The chairs for the students were still thin and stiff, though. "You haven't changed much, in this room."

"Albus said to expect you back at any time, and not to make too many changes. I...you... You knew it was me, didn't you?" she asked quietly, her voice trembling as she warily sought my confession.

"Not in Argentina," I dutifully confessed, trailing my finger along the copper coils of a condenser pipe. Polished, and dust-free. I loved her all the more for the care she had obviously taken with my equipment. My stroll through the lab tables had brought me back to her.

Without warning, I slid my arm around her waist, bringing her flush against my body. She gasped and stiffened a little, no doubt uncertain of my intentions. Catching her right hand in my left one, holding her in a parody of a dancing stance, I dipped my head and kissed the base of her throat, bared by the slightly sweetheart-shaped neckline of her coat-top. She shuddered, her breath catching in her throat as her head dropped back. I kissed a slow, seductive path down to that neckline, which had given Mr. Jeffries the thrill of his impertinent, hormonal young life earlier this morning, before straightening both of us upright again. Meeting her gaze, I didn't bother to smile. I was too serious, and too seriously aroused, for that.

"You confessed your love to me, in the throes of the tango...a most impassioned dance," I murmured quietly, holding her as close as the pounding of my heart would allow. Ensuring that she could feel from the waist down, even as her upper body strained away in uncertainty, the hard readiness of my loins against hers. "But you did so while I wore a different name. You confessed your love for me a second time, in the throes of your lonely passion last night, under the watchful eyes of my portrait--for which I should rightfully dissolve his painted eyes, since that should've been a sight for mine alone," I added, watching her turn beet red in mortification. She struggled to get free of me; I held her tighter, and shifted the hand in my grasp to my mouth, holding her gaze as I first kissed, then licked her fingers. "...But again, that was to only a facsimile of me. Now I would hear you confess your love to me, to my face, as Hermione Granger to Severus Snape."

She hesitated, still looking a bit panicky, and inclined to flight. Or denial. I was feeling a bit panicky, too, if I were honest. So I closed in for the kill, still holding her gaze as I brought her hand to my sternum, and flattened it against my hard-thudding chest.

"...Do you feel that? The rhythm of my heart? How fiercely it pounds at your touch?" I whispered, as she slowly relaxed in my grip. "It beats this hard for you, Hermione. I am envious of a dance-floor, that it has known the passage of your feet, and ragingly jealous of a portrait, that it has seen you in the grip of your pleasure, and the gentle composure of your sleep." I held her gaze as I leaned in close enough to rest my forehead lightly against hers, submerging myself in those cinnamon eyes. "I have a closely guarded secret I would share with you... I have loved you forever, and while I do realize that's not for very long at all, I would also love you for all of eternity, too, if you will let me..."

Liquid glittered in her eyes, spilling over in crystal-clear drops that cut into my heart even as I reached up quickly to wipe them away with my thumb. *Shite, I made her cry!* That wasn't my intent. I realized how tightly I was holding her, how I could have frightened her by refusing to let her escape, and loosened my grip. An apology hovered in my mouth; I parted my lips to deliver it--

She startled me by devouring it, throwing her arms around my neck and pressing herself tightly to me. The woman in my arms swallowed the surprised sound that escaped my throat, and the satisfied one that souged out of my chest a moment later as I wrapped my arms around her, too. Lower around her body than her neck, of course. Just as I had done in our previous kisses, I held her close and ground into her, burning with need. She whimpered and ground back, firing my blood even higher. If the door to the hallway hadn't been open, if we hadn't heard the approaching voices of students coming for their post-lunch Potions class, I might've lost my head--and about seventy Galleons' worth of equipment--by clearing off the nearest table, spreading her on it, and feasting on a post-lunch dessert, followed by a prolonged bit of horizontal dancing.

As it was, we both pulled back, lust dazing our eyes, breathing hard, cheeks flushed, and in need of straightening our clothing. Well, straightening on her part, and an adjustment on my own. Damned trousers were too tight, too constrictive. I'd grown used to the looser-cut styles of a much warmer climate than the frozen heaths and hills of Scotland.

Reaching up, she startled me by laying a finger against my lips. A shy glance downward of her eyes accompanied another blush, enchanting me, before she summoned her courage and looked up again. "...I do love you, Severus Snape. I always have. And we'll talk more about it tonight, after supper. Right now...I have a class to teach."

I caught her hand and pulled her close one last time, murmuring in her ear. "Have I told you yet how much it turns me on to see you bossing around our hapless students?"

A brush of my lips against her ear, and I spun her out of my arms as if we'd been merely dancing, not halfway to making love only moments before. She straightened from her spin, blinked at me, blushed, and squared her shoulders, turning towards the door connecting our office to our classroom. I let her stride through, taking the time to compose myself, then closed the outer office door and followed her through. Determined to torture myself for a few hours more, watching her command and control the many dunderheads who could never compare to her.

My brightest. My best. My own.

My love.

...

I made sure we lingered through the trifle that followed supper, mostly ignoring the news that there was going to be another Yule Ball this year--I'd heard Albus' reasoning at the staff-meeting at the end of the previous year, that it was high time the school started celebrating the passing of its seasons more often, now that the Serpentine Menace had been destroyed for good. I brushed my beloved's thigh with my fingers, under the cover of the table, stroked and soothed her whenever I sensed impatience on her part. I knew that impatient excitement of youth; I met it with the tempered patience of maturity.

Once she made it past the age of thirty, the difference in our ages as members of the longer-lived wizarding world wouldn't matter as much as it often did, out in the Muggle world. I knew that most of the students and all of the staff were quite aware that only half a year ago, she'd still been one of my pupils, but that it would only take a couple

years at most to establish her place at my side...if she wanted to remain a teacher. She did have the knack for it; despite the way she'd taught them to cower in her too-young presence, they *did* undeniably learn how to craft their potions by the end of each class that I'd witnessed. She might, I conceded privately, even be a tiny bit better at it than me. Partially, I think, because every once in a while she'd slip up, and slip a student a bit of genuine praise.

I wanted her to succeed, if she liked teaching. If she did, that would mean more hours that we'd get to see each other, than if she went on to some other career. Not that I'd hold her back; she was certainly smart enough to do anything. But I'd been apart from her too long, to my way of thinking. My sojourn in Argentina had taught me that.

So I controlled my own impatience under a calm demeanor, and even lingered to speak--briefly--in Albus' ear about my--our--options for the coming term. I wanted to know if he still wanted me as his Potions Master, or if I could give him the satisfaction of sacking Kirby and taking over the Defence position, so that Hermione wouldn't have to lose her job. He murmured back that he didn't want me and Longbottom placed together in another training situation--damn; I'd forgotten about that bit of awkwardness--and murmured back that Minerva was salivating over the chance to take Hermione on as her apprentice...though the senile Head of Gryffindor apparently thought she should try to tone down Hermione's "too tough" stance on how to maintain discipline in a classroom. I concealed my snort of disgust, refraining quite politely from commenting on that, and finally allowed myself to be led back down to the dungeons by my sultry English rose. To our office. To our quarters. To a night that had me trembling with the possibilities.

Now, as she flared several candelabras to light with a flick of her wand, I saw the other changes she had wrought. Some of my books had been shifted out of a couple racks of shelves and crammed into other spots...though I thankfully noted that she'd kept them grouped as much as possible by category. Her books, I presumed, filled the emptied shelves to near-bursting. She'd brightened up the dark green furniture with jewel-tone pillows, and added a squashy sapphire blue easy chair next to my leather recliner, situated as it was facing the black and silver bulk of the Franklin stove spreading its warmth throughout the front chamber. A smallish side-table had been set with a tea service, replete with teapot ready to be placed on the stove at a moment's notice, and her teaching things were scattered across the main table in a semi-disorganized pattern of neat little stacks arranged in an incomprehensible pattern. I looked forward to deciphering the teaching system she'd developed, and proffering a few pointers if she wanted them.

She wanted something else, right now. That much was clear, by the way she caught my hand with hers, and drew me without hesitation into my own bedchamber. I caught the oil-based eyes of my portrait, and jerked my head out of the chamber. Wise man; Painted-Severus fled...well, strolled...out of his frame. I wished him gone for the next several hours. Much as I admired the man--I couldn't resist the admittedly ego-stroking pun--I wanted to be the only one to feast visually on the flesh of the woman tugging me determinedly towards the delights of my own bed.

I gave praise to vaunted Gryffindor bravery, as she reached for my frock-coat buttons as soon as we stood together at the side of my bed. I did so with my fingertips, unfastening her own midnight coat as we exchanged sweet, slow, yet impatient little kisses--a press of our lips, a parting pressure, a sampling little lick, and a teasing withdrawal, only to angle our heads and do it all over again. Each new angle seemed to bring a new scent, a new flavour--definitely better than the brandy-soaked, vanilla-and-chocolate trifle cake served at the heat table. With kisses, with caresses, we brushed away each others' coats, my shirt and the chemise and brassiere she wore, our shoes and socks, trousers and so forth. When I pulled her back up against me, savouring the feel of her naked flesh against mine, she shied away from my erection a little.

Warning spells went off in my head. Breaking off our kiss, I rested my forehead against hers, ducking a little to compensate for the difference in our heights. She was holding herself a little stiff, her touch rendered a little hesitant, a little unsure. I guessed what the problem might be, and sought confirmation in what had to be the gentlest, most coaxing tone I've ever bothered to use.

"Hermione, are you...inexperienced?"

She blushed and nodded hesitantly, a little jiggle of her head with lowered eyes that wouldn't meet mine. Lust shot through me, possessive lust, that the first plucking of this beautiful, thorny rose would be mine. That all successive pluckings would also be mine. Mine, mine, mine! But I forced my touch to be gentle as I soothed her nerves with stroking hands, encouraging her to press herself up against me one more time.

"I'm *not* going to wait for our wedding-night," I warned her quietly. That snapped those beautiful eyes up to mine, wide and spicy brown. The feel of her heart beating in her chest drew my attention to how rapidly it pounded, at my possessive words. "I am going to claim you tonight, Hermione. You swore that you loved me--in two languages, no less. You are mine, now. As surely as I am yours."

She swallowed, licked her lips--divine opening that it was, I could already see her in my mind's eye applying that mouth to all the parts of my body, from my elbows to my prick--and offered hesitantly, "You've...you've only sworn your love in one language, to me."

That curved up the corner of my mouth. "Te amo, bella donna," I whispered, and kissed her. "Te amo, mi querida..."

I wasn't wearing my translator amulet anymore, but a man doesn't live in romantic, sub-tropical Argentina for half a year without picking up a few of that landscape's more passionate phrases. Seductive snippets of Spanish rolled from my tongue as I kissed my way down to her breasts, then scooped her up and laid her on the dark red coverlet of my bed, joining her. Her hands joined mine in the exploration of each others' body. Stroking, caressing, I showed her how much I worshipped her, and she proved herself an apt learner, returning every lesson right back to me. But then, the woman had always been an agile scholar, in nearly everything I'd ever seen her do.

Agile enough to push me onto my chest, to explore its tanned, dark-furred planes. From waist to mid-thighs, my English pallor still showed, but the rest of me had tanned during my southern-hemisphered months. I savoured the feel of her fingers stroking my skin, and shivered when she tasted my nipples, feeling the lightning-like cord of desire tying itself between them and my aching groin. And when she touched me there with her lips--ah, god! Those innocent, but oh-so-talented lips! How many times had I secretly wanted to silence her know-it-all mouth this way?

It was all I could do to keep from exploding, to let her continue her explorations while my heart pounded in my chest and throbbed in my loins, burning my veins with my desire for her. But it was too much, and I didn't want to precipitate things, not when there was so much more to do for her, and to her... Squirming out from under her, I flipped her over onto her back, and returned every nerve-tingling favour. I licked and suckled her nipples, imagining for another, not-quite-so-insane moment the sight of a child, *our* child, suckling for nourishment. I cupped her breasts, nuzzling the valley between. I licked the soft seams at their bases, and the valley of her sternum, then kissed my way down to her navel. She was deliciously ticklish, squirming and giggling in my grasp.

My next destination made her groan; savoury-sweet, musky, an indescribable taste that nevertheless described her capacity for passion quite well. She dripped with dew, before I was done tasting the folds and peaks of her quim; dripped, and sighed, squirmed and screamed--I felt like a god, doing that to her! The God of Making Hermione Granger Cum. Who cared to be a Zeus, flinging lightning bolts about the heavens, or a Neptune controlling the tides and storms of the seas, when I could have control of her overwhelming pleasure...? I could do without having my hair pulled out halfway, under the tugging impatience of her overwrought grip, but the rest of it was undeniably delicious.

I stayed with my head buried between her thighs, meticulously researching all the sounds she made in the throes of her pleasure, every squirm and twitch, until I knew the moment when I'd driven her up to the point of near-insanity once more. Only then did I tear myself away from her ambrosia, rise over her, and position myself for that first thrust. She kissed me heatedly, hesitating only for a split-second at the unfamiliar taste of her passion smeared from my nose to my chin; Merlin, it turned me on unbearably when she moaned and licked my lips, enjoying her own flavour.

A twitch of my hand on my shaft to position myself, and I thrust home, feeling the proof of her innocence tear as her flesh clasped my impaling shaft tightly. She cried out, in pain, not in pleasure; I hated myself for hurting her, and though my body wanted to continue without pause for consequences, I took the time to dust her face with kisses, soothing her as she slowly relaxed under me. Nuzzling her neck, I began to rock gently, with teeth-gritting patience, feeling her flinch under the first dozen thrusts. I distracted her with more sweet Spanish nothings, mixing in English endearments as well, until she sighed and tentatively rocked into my thrusts, letting me know the worst of the pain had passed.

Still, I held on to my masculine sanity with tense determination, until her unsteady sighs shifted into breathy moans, letting me know she was climbing the peak of her desire once more. I was doing my damndest to show her that an attractive young woman should never give up her virginity to the impatient, too-quick fumbblings of some clueless, unskilled, teenaged boy. Maturity has its advantages, after all.

From the way she gasped, eyes flying wide, and trembled violently underneath me, I was pleased to see she was enjoying the lesson. From the way she wrapped her legs around my hips, deepening the angle, I decided it was time to show her a man's strength, and increased the depth and force of my thrusts, prolonging her climax and summoning mine. It boiled up out of my testicles, spurring into her as I ground into her, growling her name--ah, sweet Hermione! The prickle of her fingernails on my back, the sexy squirming of her flesh, the lip-biting, keening cry as she enjoyed the moment, too...heaven!

Though I wasn't much of a gentleman by nature, I kindly did not crush her when I collapsed at the end of my climax. I kept most of my upper body braced on my elbows as my hips continued their post-orgasmic thrusts, milking the last drops of my pleasure, and hers. But I did drop my face to her shoulder, resting it there as I panted, recovering my breath with each increasingly leisurely stroke. So wet, so hot, so tight...

Finally, I was too soft to continue. Slumping to the side after I slipped out, I made sure to gather her as close as possible. Letting her know she was loved, and cherished. We caressed each other gently, slowly, enjoying the feel of the sweat drying on our skin as the fire crackled in the hearth, heating my bedroom. Our bedroom. We could keep the other one for any children that resulted...

I stiffened slightly at that thought, then relaxed into it. With Hermione in my arms, the thought of having a child or two wasn't quite as frightening and unwelcome as it was before; there was no doubt in my mind that she'd make a great mother, nor that she'd keep me in line, and show me how to be a better father than my own. Which, considering neither of us had taken any contraceptive potions, brought me around to another line of thought.

"Hermione...?"

"Mmm?" Her humming was a heart-thumping sound of contentment. I pressed a kiss to the top of her bun-knotted curls, and made a mental note to strip out her hairpins in a few minutes, so I could feel those bushy ringlets caressing my skin.

"I think I can get a special marriage license before the end of the year..."

Her head lifted from my shoulder, and a touch of the tartness of the classroom coloured her voice. "Funny, I don't recall you *asking* me to be your bride."

Mental note to self: to ensure marital bliss, always consult wife, before making any major decisions. Her Killer Curse Glare was all too effective from mere inches away, to let that piece of mental advice slip permanently from my mind.

I kissed her forehead, in self-defense. As I'd hoped, it disarmed her lethal glare. "Hermione Granger, you have turned this bitter, lonely sourpuss into the happiest black-hearted bastard in the wizarding world. Perhaps even in the Muggle one, too. Would you honor my love for you, and yours for me, and consent to be my wife?"

"I'll think about it," she dared to tease me--the termigant!--before flashing me a wicked grin. "...Okay!"

Laughing, I pulled her close for a kiss....and a caress...and another kiss...

I had a secret...and she was going to marry me, because of it!

EPILOGUE

The students and faculty at the Yule Ball barely a week later were still twittering over the gleaming diamond on Professor Granger's finger, and muttering in astonishment at how closely she stayed by the side of the soon-to-be-teaching-again Professor Snape. How closely he stayed at her side, too. The Headmaster had already made the announcement that Professor Granger would be moving over to Transfigurations to apprentice under Professor McGonagall...and the astonishing announcement that they would soon have *two* Professors Snape on the Hogwarts faculty. That was enough to give the current occupants of the castle gossip-fodder for months to come, maybe even years.

But it was the way Professor Snape--the original one--muttered an order to the band Dumbledore had hired, then glared everyone else off the section of the Great Hall floor reserved for dancing, that had them all wondering if the sour-faced man had gone as mad as the young woman who'd agreed, barmy-like, to actually marry the old git.

When Professor Granger joined him in the center of the cleared floor, glaring herself at the last few stragglers to get them out of the way, Professor Snape further astonished staff and student body alike by shedding his professorial robe...and unbuttoning his starched black frock-coat. Taking the midnight blue robe his fiancée passed to him, revealing the high slit at the back of her sapphire blue gown, a black, oval gemstone glittering at the base of her throat, he tossed the garments at a hapless Hufflepuff to hold, and took her into his white-sleeved arms. A brusque nod at the musicians started the sultry beat of a tango, as everyone around the pair gaped.

They danced.

Legs flicked. Shoulders twisted. Hips swayed and brushed. They undeniably made love to each other, twirling across the flagstones of the Great Hall, in the only publically acceptable manner possible. But still, no less than three sets of older siblings slapped their hands over the eyes of their younger kin, and blushes blossomed like a rose garden in June, spreading across the hall on the cheeks of students and staff-members alike.

It wasn't the intimacy of their torsos pressed together that caused so many blushes around the room, nor the flashes of Professor Granger's pale, curvaceous thighs as her sheath-skirt whipped seductively around their calves with each move. No, that wasn't too embarrassing to behold. It was the way they looked into each other's eyes, the entire time.

They shared a secret.