

Human Touch

by orm irian

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One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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He hated being touched had avoided it for years. Touch enhanced his empathic perceptions a hundredfold, making interactions with the cretins that surrounded him nearly unbearable. His empathy was in reality a minor ability, being sharply limited in range and restricted to the receptive side. Thank Merlin for that! It was bad enough to be subjected to an unending stream of emotional baggage from without he had no desire to go about spewing his own sensations! But, oh, how he hated being aware of the uncertainties, worries, dislikes and mistrust that filled the air around him. And the 'positive' emotions were no better. Useless displays of affection, sappy declarations of admiration, self-satisfied exhibitions of pride and superiority he hated them all! All the petty little dramas that played out daily in the psyches of the people in his sphere. Excrement!

He still clearly remembered the day his empathy, along with all his other magical abilities, had awakened....

He had been a scrawny six-year-old: dark-haired, quick-tongued and a bit grubby, as were most of the children in their working-class town. Motivated by his overwhelming curiosity, he had built a model of the nearby mill out of drink cans, a matchbox and lolly sticks. His father, usually reticent, had actually given him a word of praise for the accuracy of his creation. His pride swelled with the rare attention. *If only*, he thought, *it could work like the real mill! How pleased Father would be to see that!* As he stared at the contraption with the ardor of childhood longing, the wheel began slowly to turn. He smiled. "Father, look! It works!" he proclaimed excitedly.

His father dutifully lowered his newspaper and surveyed the spinning water wheel and the rotating turbine that it powered with marginal interest. The wheel kept spinning and the child kept smiling, but as the seconds ticked by Tobias Snape began to scowl. "How is it moving?" he asked gruffly. "You're not spinning it with your hand?"

Sensing that something about his invention was displeasing his father, he asked, "Do you want it to stop?" Abruptly, the wheel's motion halted.

Tobias stared at the model, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How did you do that?" he questioned, sounding angry.

"I... I don't know," he stammered. "I just... wanted it to stop." His father's face looked like a thunderhead and he backed away slightly, afraid of being punished for doing whatever it was that was making his father angry.

Tobias, meanwhile, was doing some rapid thinking. He was a mill worker uneducated but far from stupid. His shrewd mind was assembling various odd occurrences over the last few years: meals prepared in an inordinately short time, a cup that he remembered accidentally breaking being back inside the cupboard the next day, clothing irreparably stained from the mill suddenly looking spotless again. His mind had shrugged off each of these incidents, wanting to believe that Eileen was simply an excellent housekeeper. But now, his son was involved in the oddities. Something was going on.... "Eileen!" he bellowed. "Get in here!"

The fight that had followed was long, loud and exceptionally scary for Severus. Early on, he had backed himself into a corner, watching wide-eyed as his mother first explained, then cringed, then pleaded with her enraged husband. He understood little of what they said, and remembered less. The shouting and recriminations ended only when his father stormed out of the house, never to be seen by his wife or son again. In short, it was the worst experience of his young life.

From that day on, he had lived with the intrusive emotions of others as well as the newly awakened magic that sprang from him so readily. His mother, always reserved, became sullen and withdrawn after his father's departure. And although she began to teach him about his magical heritage and tutor him in basic spells, it did not compensate for the isolation Severus felt. He was different, separated from the other children by more than just magic, and he knew it. He took to thinking of himself as his mother's son only, a scion of the Prince family. But no amount of self-delusion could rid him of his Muggle father's name or the harsh, hook-nosed countenance he had inherited from Tobias Snape.

It was not until many years later that he realized his mother had married his father without telling him that she was a witch, and that, should they have children, they would likely be magical as well. As a man, he understood that the breach of trust his father must have felt was too much to swallow. But still, he hated the man for abandoning them.

His years at school, which he had looked forward to as an antidote to his loneliness, only increased his bitter outlook and solidified his singularity. At Hogwarts, he was looked down upon by the well-born because of his ancestry and poverty, mocked by the good-looking for his hawkish features, shunned by the girls for his poor hygiene, and on top of all that, he was inundated with the ceaseless, melodramatic emotions of a school full of adolescents. In self-defense, he learned how to turn off his own emotional responses, laying the groundwork for his later mastery of Occlumency. He also maintained, in so much as it was possible, a physical buffer zone around himself, minimizing human contact and thus emotional exposure. And so he had remained for many years: cold, bitter, and isolated.

All that, he realized, emerging from his recollections, could very well change now. A shudder passed through his thin frame, causing the book across his knees to shift a bit. That bright joining, that surge of energy and pleasure he had shared with Granger this afternoon was rife with enticing and frightening possibilities. After he had left her, he had returned to Spinner's End to gather information. Information was power and had been his lifeblood as a spy. He had begun by anxiously leafing through the dozen books he'd pulled from the shelves of the sitting room; he intended to find every known fact about the *lunctus Potentia*.

In *The Magic of the Ancients*, he found only the barest reference to the phenomenon. 'The *lunctus Potentia* is a power bond wherein the magical energy of each participant is stimulated and maintained by physical contact.' Yes. He knew that much from his own meager experience with the effect this afternoon. But what had caused it? He searched four additional tomes before finding a substantial section discussing the *lunctus Potentia* in *Advanced Speculations on Magical Theory*. After giving an accurate (if rather dry) rundown on the physical effects of the experience, all of the known pairs were listed and their attributes dissected. According to the author, there was no apparent pattern to the historically validated bondings no way to predict which individuals would be able to bond, or when. The facts were few: pairings had nothing to do with gender, ancestry or age; once a pairing was established, it was permanent. There was some evidence to suggest that the innate magical abilities of individuals were a factor in determining compatibility. Specifically, the author cited the fact that pairs always shared at least two similar magical traits, and furthermore, these abilities were generally closely matched in magnitude. It was speculated that similar wand cores, aptitude in specific magical disciplines or special abilities could be contributing factors to compatibility. But none of those theories had been proved (or disproved). So, *no definitive answers as to why Granger and I are magically compatible*, he thought. *I wonder if we have the same type of wand core?* His own wand had a dragon heartstring, but he had no idea what hers held.

Shrugging, he read the section labeled, 'Establishment and Progression of the Bond'. This was both enlightening and worrisome. His (admittedly limited) knowledge of the *lunctus Potentia* had led him to believe that a single power merge was sufficient to initiate a pair-bond, but this was clearly not the case. A bond was irrevocably established with as few as four or as many as ten merges occurring between the individuals. *Four. Damn Granger's curiosity*, he thought bitterly. *If not for her, we would not have even met the minimum number*. Logically, he knew he was just as culpable. He had agreed to the last joining as well as actually initiating the first two in an attempt to disable the girl, but he was in no mood to be charitable. In spite of the painful nature of the first two occurrences between them, he had no doubt that they were equivalent to their more enjoyable sequels. They had begun with that same ineffable tingle in the hands and arms, followed by a resonating exchange of magical energy. He had no idea why the end result was different, but that really didn't matter. Not now. What mattered was the possibility that they could already be irrevocably bonded. It was a small chance, but he had learned to expect and plan for the worst; it was what had kept him one step ahead of the game in this war.

As he read on, he found that the pleasurable aspects of the power merge did not come without a price. The side effects were considerable: a physical dependency not unlike narcotic addiction (with all the attendant withdrawal symptoms if separation occurred) and the establishment of one partner as dominant over the other. A moment of panic swelled in his chest until his eyes swept down the paragraph to read the stipulation: "The more powerful partner, in terms of magical ability and experience, is always dominant in the pairing." Closing his eyes briefly in relief he thanked the gods that he was so much older than Granger. She was a powerful witch, and given time she would gain in both ability and experience. But he knew his current strength easily exceeded hers and he would retain that advantage by virtue of his greater experience. If they should become bonded, he would be dominant. The possibilities this scenario brought to mind were alluring; she would be loyal to him and his cause! The prospect of gaining the trump card over Potter almost overshadowed his distaste for the idea of being bound to the annoying girl. *Enough!* he scolded himself. It was all too tentative at this point; he would simply have to wait and see what happened.

He moved on to *Magiks Moste Unusual*, finding a contracted version of what he had already read in the magical theory text by Waffling. *Nothing new here*, he thought, perusing the paragraph absently as he sat before the fireplace in his tiny sitting room.

Many miles distant, Hermione Granger sat by her bedroom window in the Burrow, a copy of the same text across her lap, anxiously reading the same paragraph.

"What is wrong with you, Severus?" the Dark Lord hissed, gazing coldly down at the shaking wizard that knelt at his feet.

"A fever, my Lord. It's nothing of consequence," Snape answered shortly.

Voldemort's red eyes narrowed. "If it is of no consequence, then why have you not taken a potion? Surely your skills suffice for that!" he said scornfully.

"I no longer have the necessary ingredients, my Lord. It is difficult to obtain new stock in the present circumstances," he lied glibly. He balled his fists tightly and pressed them into the threadbare hearthrug to control the tremors.

"Bella!" the skeletal figure of Lord Voldemort called. Bellatrix Lestrange left her seat on the far side of the shabby parlor and strode forward to stand before him confidently. "Go fetch your sister. As she is not on the Ministry's wanted list, she can run an errand for us."

"Yes, master," she murmured, whirling at once and departing.

Voldemort turned back to Snape. "You will give Narcissa a complete inventory of everything you require, then you will insure that I have sufficient Healing Potions for my servants. Your brethren are, after all, not likely to be welcomed at St. Mungo's." A twisted grin crossed the Dark Lord's flat, reptilian face as he added in an undertone, "At least, not until it is under more direct supervision from me."

"As you command, my Lord," Snape replied dutifully. As soon as he was dismissed, he retreated gratefully to the back entrance of the Riddle House to wait for the return of the two sisters. *Two and a half weeks*, he thought ruefully. *If the symptoms become much worse, I will be unable to Occlude!*

Standing in the frozen back garden, he drew his cloak about him and considered his precarious position. Since the fateful day in London he'd 'run into' Granger he'd known this was one possible outcome, but hoped that just this once, fate would be kind. No such luck. Fate was a malicious, capricious, son of a bitch. Roughly a week ago he had realized that the worst case scenario was, once again, to be his lot: he was suffering withdrawal symptoms due to his separation from Granger. *Damn! One effing encounter and I'm stuck in an unbreakable magical bond!* he fumed bitterly.

The symptoms had begun subtly. First, there had been an undefined craving to perform the most powerful spells that he had devised, to experience the surge of magical energy that accompanied their working. Obeying the impulse had been satisfying for about five minutes. Days later he had experienced cold-like symptoms, progressing rapidly to bouts of tremors that shook not only his hands but his entire frame. Desperate to relieve the symptoms, he had written to the girl yesterday, asking her to meet him at the same coffee shop in London. She hadn't shown up. *Nothing was ever easy...*

A biting wind tore at the edges of his cloak, rousing him from thought and precipitating another fit of trembling. So far he had managed to conceal the situation from the Dark Lord (and the other Death Eaters) by the simple strategy of avoiding their presence, but he knew this would not work for much longer. If it was discovered that he was involved in a magical bond with Potter's friend and that, moreover, he had concealed it, he would likely be accused of treason. It was vital that he get control of the situation present the entire thing, the *Junctus Potentia*, his dominant role in the bond and its usefulness against Potter, as a fait accompli. The Dark Lord must be convinced that he had planned it all. *It's risky, but my only good option at this point*, he calculated.

After nearly a half hour, he heard the double pop of Apparition; Bellatrix and Narcissa had finally returned. He discerned their voices several seconds before he saw them, emerging from behind the overgrown hedges of what was once a formal garden maze.

"Severus!" Narcissa called, giving him a warm smile.

"Narcissa, Bellatrix," he acknowledged with a brusque nod as the sisters approached.

Bellatrix accorded him her usual small, unnerving frown. The Unbreakable Vow he had made to her sister may have changed her opinion of his loyalties, but that did not mean she liked him. Snape smirked inwardly; his empathy made him fully aware of her attitude, and perversely, it amused him. *Does she actually like anyone other than the Dark Lord?* he wondered. Even her husband seemed to run a distant second to her precious master.

Narcissa, however, came right up to him, a cordial smile still fixed on her face. Ever since he had brought Draco safely out of Hogwarts last June, she had been emanating gratitude and a sense of obligation which manifested itself in an over-friendly manner in his presence. *Once again*, he reflected sourly, *she is awarding me the 'pleasure of her company' in return for my vow*. He tolerated her gratitude, but her assumption that he would automatically be thankful for her attentions to him grated on his nerves. He knew he was unattractive, but he didn't need to debase himself in that fashion!

"Severus," she repeated. "Bella tells me that the Dark Lord wishes for me to assist you. What do you need?"

"Potion ingredients," he answered shortly.

"Oh, is that all? I would be happy to go shopping for you," she replied lightly. "Come, we'll go inside and you can make me a list." Stepping into his personal space, she placed her hand on his forearm.

At her touch, the feeling of gratitude he was receiving intensified into a sense of imminent intimacy. He stiffened in shock, automatically backing up a step and pulling his arm out of her grasp. Ignoring the hurt look she threw at him, he spun on his heel and stalked inside, schooling his face into its usual impassive mask in spite of his anger. *How dare she presume that she has the right to impose herself upon me!* he bristled. In the semi-darkness of the unused kitchen, he rapidly dictated a list of potion components, specifying that she should leave them at headquarters. The last thing he needed was for her to make an impromptu visit to his house! Then he got out as fast as possible and Apparated home.

Shaking like a leaf, Snape entered the coffee shop. If Granger didn't come today, he was as good as dead. His only hope was that she, too, was desperate for relief. After giving his order for two coffees, he concentrated his attention on the shop door.

He saw Granger the moment she stepped inside, terror written clearly across her face. Not only was his empathy completely superfluous, it was hindering his usual objectivity. Her deep fear provoked an almost irresistible reaction in him, and he fought the strong urge to flee. *Am I that awful in her eyes?* he wondered. But then, another interpretation occurred to him: she was likely more frightened of what he represented than she was of him, personally. To her, he was the epitome of the Dark side of magic, the quintessential traitor. She feared what she might become through him.

As she seated herself across the table from him, he quelled his desire to reach for her hands. She had to accept this on her own. Their joining was inevitable and she knew it. She would not have come otherwise. Keeping eye contact, Snape silently placed his hands on the table. After what felt like an eternity, she reached toward him, completing the link.

Ascending. Soaring. Power. Ecstasy.

Finally, he broke the link, shattering the timeless interval. The girl shattered as well, sobbing helplessly, shamelessly for the loss of her innocence. Not wanting to draw attention, he got out fast, taking Granger to the first place he thought of: his home.

He all but carried the distressed girl into his house as she seemed totally oblivious to her surroundings. He let her cry, huddled on his decrepit sofa, her tears soaking the front of his shirt. He tried to be gentle. Merlin knew, this had to be the most traumatic thing she had ever faced. As he stroked her hair, a memory drifted to the surface of his mind. He saw himself crouched down in Moaning Myrtle's toilet, holding up a bloody Draco Malfoy as he staunchly held the boy's wounds. He had felt sorry for the boy trapped between the Dark Lord's threats and his obligations to his family. Stroking the curly head that was tucked under his chin, he realized that Granger, for all her intellect, was scarcely much older. *Do I really feel sympathy for Potter's swotty sidekick?* An undefined feeling prodded at his rational mind, seeking recognition. *No*, he decided. *It's not sympathy*. After a long while, her sobs turned to sniffles. He stroked her hair repeatedly and murmured her name, "Hermione, Hermione, shhh," as if she was a small child. She looked up at him and the fear that still lay behind her eyes made his heart contract. "I won't hurt you," he whispered. "I won't ever hurt you."

"I know," she said softly. "I believe you. You can no more hurt me than I can hurt you." She swallowed. "But you will use me. It's inevitable."

Her words brought the strange feeling into focus at last. Affinity. They were alike in this, and most probably, in other things as well. He was uncertain if the new feeling originated in his own empathic ability or was a product of the binding. But he knew she was right. Beyond a doubt, the Dark Lord would use their bond to his own advantage. And he would obey his master. There was little choice. But he would not allow harm to come to her. He would be cast in the role of her subverter, but he knew, as did she, that it was only together that they could survive. "We will both be used," he said bleakly.

After a moment she nodded, resigned. Snape felt a sudden urge to reach out, to comfort her. The oddness of the impulse struck him forcibly: he hated tactile contact! It was as if an outside force was exerting pressure on him. *The bond then*, he concluded. There was no point in fighting it that way lay madness. "Here, come to me," he said, taking her into his arms once again and caressing her hair. "Your regrets will disappear. This pain will fade away. It is the nature of the bond." She nodded against his chest. *Yes, she sees it too*.

Later, after a calmer, but not necessarily happier, Granger had returned to her parents' home, Snape considered his next steps. They had agreed, for the time being, to meet once a week. That would be sufficient to keep the withdrawal symptoms at bay. Meanwhile, the bonding would deepen, gradually reconciling the girl to her situation, until she no longer had any conscious desire to escape it. And when that time came, when she was fully committed to him, and only him, he would tell the Dark Lord. Already, he had several half-formed plans outlined in his mind.

As he sat in his shabby, darkening parlor, thoughtfully swirling a goblet of elf-made wine, a small, predatory smile crept over his face. He was going to totally eclipse his fellow Death Eaters every last one of them!

Six days after Granger had met him in the coffee shop, Snape knelt before the Dark Lord. The large pharmacopoeia he had prepared had been carefully packed into a crate and was resting beside him. "I have brought the potions you wanted, my Lord," he said deferentially.

"That is good, Severus," the Dark Lord hissed, barely glancing at the container holding nearly a week's worth of his servant's labor as he paced restlessly in front of the hearth. It was clear that his thoughts were focused elsewhere.

Snape stayed silent, eyes downcast and mind tightly shielded as he waited. The Dark Lord seemed agitated impatient even. In the privacy of his innermost thoughts, Snape smirked. He had heard the hushed comments of the young Death Eaters downstairs as he came in. They were disturbed by their master's mood. The Dark Lord was displeased with the slow progress of his agenda. His spies could catch no rumor of Potter. During raids, his soldiers were often detected and forced to flee by the Aurors. And the young recruits knew that when the master was unhappy, everyone around him was generally unhappy. *At least I am not the current target of his displeasure*, Snape thought with relief.

After many minutes the tall, red-eyed being stopped in his tracks, suddenly realizing that his servant still knelt before him. "You may go and sit with the others," he hissed dismissively. "The rest of the inner circle will arrive shortly."

"Thank you, Master," Snape answered calmly as he stood. He swiftly joined the men and women gathered at the far side of the dingy library.

For Snape, the meeting that followed was long and tedious, full of strategic discussions and the usual political maneuvering for the Dark Lord's favor. Snape stayed mostly silent, not yet ready to reveal his own plans. He found his thoughts drifting unconsciously to tomorrow's planned meeting with Granger. Occasionally he was distracted by a tendril of strong emotion from those seated near him. It was like getting a whiff of rubbish as you passed the opening of an alley unpleasant, but quickly over.

When they were finally dismissed, he moved with alacrity toward the door, eager to remove himself before he could be entrapped into any post-meeting 'socializing.' Eyes on his goal, he collided forcefully with Antonin Dolohov, who was also making a beeline for the door. As he righted himself awkwardly, a wave of loathing washed over him. Dolohov pushed past him and exited with a sneer, taking his unfocused hatred away with him.

"All right there, Snape?" a voice asked directly behind him.

It was the younger Lestrangle brother. He felt the man's proximity, the sudden sensation almost nauseating in its intensity. *Don't touch me!*"I'm fine!" he snapped aloud, drawing back slightly. Without another word he whirled away from Lestrangle, striding rapidly through the house and out the door.

The cold air hit him in the face, cooling his anger and nausea almost instantly. *Empty, thank Merlin*, he sighed, surveying the desolate back garden. As he made his way to the Apparition point in the old maze, his thoughts returned to his scheduled rendezvous with the girl. The last of his illness dissipated, replaced by a calm surety. She would be there. They would join their magical powers again perhaps more than once. He remembered the feel of her small hands held tightly within his. *Smooth. Warm.*

Suddenly, the contrast hit him, throwing his encounter with Dolohov and Lestrangle into a new light. *So, the binding has intensified my empathy*, he concluded. *Another unwanted side effect.* A bitter expression twisted his features for a moment, then he shrugged. He had always disliked tactile contact. What difference did this really make? There was only one person whose touch didn't make him flinch with revulsion. The binding had given him that much at least.

"Granger," Snape nodded, taking a seat next to her on the park bench. It was very mild for the first of March. The sun flooded down on them, its warmth belying the still-frozen ground under their feet.

Hermione sighed. "Can't you call me Hermione?" she asked in a quiet but plaintive voice. "We're going to be bound to each other for the rest of our lives. Last names will get a bit tiresome, don't you think?"

"I... Certainly, Hermione," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

She waited a few seconds for him to make the reciprocal offer, but he remained silent. She sighed again. He was so predictable, in a way. She could always count on him to take and maintain the upper hand in these meetings. *As if I have a choice*, she thought resignedly. So far, it had fallen to her to make all the compromises in their meetings, and she suspected it always would. She was tempted to use his given name without invitation. *After all, what can he do other than get angry? Leave and never come back? I wish!* A third sigh escaped her and she slumped backwards, resting her head on the back of the bench.

They sat in silence for several minutes, both enjoying the brief unseasonable weather. Hermione allowed her thoughts to drift. *The sun feels wonderful glorious even*, she thought languorously. *Glorious... like the power merge. Mmmm....*

What am I thinking? She jerked upright, her sudden movement startling Snape into a defensive posture. She regarded him with trepidation not because he was a hair's breadth from hexing her, but because she feared her own deep yearning: this moment, she wanted desperately to join her power with his. Staring, she saw both fear and longing replicated in his eyes. "Sn... Severus," she whispered, extending her hands. "Please." They were shaking slightly.

Snape's eyes widened momentarily before he reached for her, completing the link. It was the first time she had initiated a meld since the day they had discovered it. In seconds, their combined power surged through them, bringing a barrage of intense feelings. He had come to expect the exhilaration and pleasure of the merge, but there was something new, something more this time. Lost in the overwhelming bliss, he did not even attempt to analyze it. Seconds stretched into minutes. Snape became aware of the softness of her hands, held tightly within his own. The girl let out a low moan, and Snape's eyes snapped open. The sight that met his gaze was one he would remember for years to come. Hermione's head was tilted back and her eyes were closed. Her lips were slightly parted and she was breathing rapidly. The expression on her face was the most sensual thing he had ever seen. *Merlin! She looks like....* A sudden surge of lust coursed through him and he let go of her hands in shock.

As the power receded, Hermione opened her eyes. Snape was surprisingly close, gazing at her with naked desire. With a loud intake of breath, she drew back. "I... I should go." She sprang to her feet, eyes still locked to his and backed away a step. "My parents are expecting me back soon."

"Hermione, wait!"

"No! I have to... I can't... I'll owl you!" she said desperately. A moment later, she was gone.

Snape sat on the bench for a while lost in thought. He knew she had fled in fear, but not why. *I wonder... Is it possible that she felt the same jolt of lust as me? Was my reaction an empathic response to her, or just a physical response to the way she looked? What will our next meeting bring?* He had no answers to his questions only the memory of her face, caught in that ineffable moment of raw sensuality.

"Perhaps," Hermione said in a shaky voice, "we should spend some time talking."

"Talking," Snape repeated in a flat voice.

She nodded, not raising her face, which was obscured by locks of wavy hair.

Two weeks she had made him wait, and now she wanted to 'talk.' Unconsciously, his lip curled in displeasure. "We will talk," he declared shortly. "After."

"After?" She shot him a swift, terrified glance.

His irritation flared. "Yes! After we have joined our power. I have no wish to experience tremors again!" he snapped, wondering what on Earth was the matter with the girl.

Finally, she lifted her head, relief evident in her eyes. "Okay," she agreed, reaching for his hands.

As Snape's long fingers encircled hers, he suddenly understood the reason for her apprehension. *Fool girl!* He opened his mouth, intending to tell her that in spite of being a Death Eater, he was not a rapist, but the swelling thrum of power in his chest distracted him, propelling him rapidly into ecstasy.

By the time he was once again aware of his surroundings, his irritation had evaporated. *Blessed relief*, he thought, as his eyes wandered leisurely over Hermione's features. She was leaned back against the cushions of his faded sofa, eyes still closed. Her entire posture radiated relaxation, contentment. "What is it you wished to talk about?" he asked softly.

Her eyes flickered open. The fear was gone, replaced by calm purpose as she regarded him steadily. "I thought... I don't really know you. And you don't know me either..."

She had a wand with a dragon heartstring core, a cat-kneeze crossbreed for a familiar and pair of Muggle dentists for parents. Her favorite subject was, to Snape's surprise, Arithmancy. "Not Transfiguration?" he had questioned snidely. But McGonagall's pet student had not risen to the bait; she'd merely shook her head in reply.

He had probed into her interests and talents, using her desire to 'talk' as a means to discern why they were magically compatible. She had no trace of empathy, and only moderate talent in his two strongest areas: Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. The only point of coincidence seemed to be their wand cores. *Is that enough to explain our bond?* he wondered. Silently, he shook his head. He must have missed something. *Unless... could it be a more general trait, such as magical capacity? We are both powerful.* Again, he shook his head. *If only there was a way to be sure which traits mattered...*

Slumped in the sagging chair of his parlor he recalled her unconcealed fascination with the books that covered every inch of the room's walls. *At least*, he thought with wry amusement, *she understands the importance of knowledge the power it gives. We have that in common.* Then there was her thirst to prove herself. As her teacher, he had found it irritating beyond measure, but now, in his present introspective mood, he could admit that his teenaged self had felt very similar urges. He had simply gone about demonstrating his knowledge in a less obvious manner. *Hopefully, she will grow out of the urge to show off just as I did.*

Wiser heads than his had failed to unravel the basis for magical compatibility in the *unctus Potentia* he was unlikely to find the answer to this puzzle. Sighing, he leaned his head back in defeat, allowing his thoughts to unfocus. *Puzzles. She likes puzzles*, he mused. *Especially logic conundrums.* He enjoyed solving logic problems himself...

The truth hit him suddenly, jerking him upright: their compatibility was NOT based on magical criteria at least not entirely. A satisfied smirk spread over his features. That was why none of the magical theorists had ever found the pattern! Undoubtedly, they had focused solely on magical traits, ignoring the mundane. *It's so obvious now, though. We share several personality traits, especially logical, orderly thought processes as well as the same wand core. Another puzzle solved!* he congratulated himself with a genuine smile. *I will have to present the evidence to Hermione and see if she can spot the pattern.*

She had, of course.

At their next meeting he presented her with a riddle, which she solved in an annoyingly short time. Smiling mischievously, she informed him that the riddle referred to them.

"And?" he prompted.

Hermione frowned for a moment, then her eyes grew wide. "It's our bond!"

At his solemn nod, she bit her bottom lip. "We're probably the first bonded pair to actually know why," she breathed softly.

He watched her with an impartial expression that belied his thoughts. The mixture of intelligence, enthusiasm, talent and naiveté she exuded fascinated him as surely as it irritated him although he was not ready to admit his attraction aloud. He was acutely aware of both her physical proximity and the metaphorical gulf that still separated them. Abruptly, he realized he was staring and that Hermione had caught him at it. She swallowed nervously and fidgeted in her seat. *She is still frightened*, Snape concluded. Deliberately, he relaxed his posture, leaning back against the cushions.

Hermione relaxed perceptibly.

Patience is the key. In time, she will be mine in every sense of the word.

"Severus, look! I've mastered that new hex you showed me last week!" Hermione called as soon as she entered the door of his house. Brow furrowed in concentration, she demonstrated it to the dour man before her.

Over the past several weeks Snape had made a concerted effort to cultivate Hermione's trust, and to his satisfaction, it seemed to be working. He no longer saw flashes of fear when he moved toward her, and the anxiety she had initially radiated had been replaced by a warm feeling that he suspected was friendliness. She was certainly more relaxed and spontaneous in his presence.

"Adequately performed," he commended in a calm voice. Hermione's face practically glowed with pride in response and Severus felt her surge of happiness. The bond urged him to respond to the empathic messages he was receiving. He swallowed hard. It was getting more and more difficult for him to control his desire for her. *This is it!* he decided, rising and taking a scant two steps to reach his goal. As naturally as possible, he lifted his hand to her shoulders, giving them a light squeeze. "Your progress is quite amazing, Hermione," he said smoothly. "I find that I, too, enjoy your success."

She stared up at him, transfixed. He was very close and was giving her that hungry look again. This was a side of Severus Snape she had never dreamed existed. "You're so... different," she breathed. "I mean, different from before when we were at school." She closed her eyes briefly, trying to gather her composure. "Is it because of the bond?"

He nodded seriously. "It is affecting both of us," he agreed. "But the changes remain between us. To others, we appear as we always have."

"Yes, that's true," she replied. Her friends and family saw no difference in her nothing that they felt was worth commenting about, in any case. But in her mind, it was as if she had become another person. A person filled with urges and thoughts she had never imagined or experienced before.

His hand left her shoulder, stroking gently down her cheek and eliciting a shiver. Although her eyes were unnaturally wide, she wasn't emanating fear; she was the proverbial deer caught in the headlights, unable to move. He relished the feel of her skin beneath his calloused fingers, certain that his timing was right. Their physical joining was inevitable surely she felt it too?

Almost hesitantly, Hermione raised her right hand to his chest, tracing the line of his pectoral muscles. He drew in a hissing breath at the contact. "Hermione, will you come upstairs with me? Will you accept this bond in its entirety?" he asked in a low voice.

Wordlessly, she nodded.

Relief flooded his veins, a heady rush of sensation as he lowered his head to capture her mouth in a long, thorough kiss.

Two days later, Snape informed the Dark Lord about his bond with Hermione. He was careful to emphasize his dominant role and the possible scenarios for defeating Potter. To say the Dark Lord was pleased was a ridiculous understatement. The barely-human laughter of his master still rang shrilly in his ears.

They had settled on a slow-acting poison, which would be administered to Potter in several doses. The formulation was Snape's own design, having been created many years earlier and used by the Dark Lord to weaken his enemies before he moved in for the kill. Repeated doses had a cumulative effect, gradually leaching a wizard's magic. Potter would be virtually powerless when the Dark Lord confronted him.

Severus had left the Riddle House assured of his master's favor. To his surprise, it did not give him the victorious feeling he had always envisioned. Even the thought of so final a revenge on James Potter's spawn seemed of little consequence. He had obtained his master's promise that his bond-mate would not be harmed, and that was what his thoughts now dwelt on in satisfaction.

In truth, he no longer cared whether the Dark Lord or Potter triumphed. As long as he and Hermione could remain together, the whole damn world could burn.

Beta read by the wonderful and talented Wartcap!