

A Pinch of This, A Dash of That

by starmom

A SS/HG story of food, passion and surly house-elves. In which we take an immediate hard right turn off the beaten canon to Silly Alternative Universe Land. A pinch of parody. A dash of cliché. Toss in a few OC's and stir well. Serve hot.

- originally written for the Summer 2007 HG/SS Gift Exchange -
2008 Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best FanonHet; Best HumorFic; Best Mid-Length Fic

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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I. NOW

If Severus Snape ever doubted the truth behind the cliché 'happiness is fleeting,' he knew it was a certainty the day Hermione Granger, the most annoying student he'd ever had, showed up in his kitchens to be his *apprentice*. It was only his desire to avoid Azkaban at all costs that Minerva McGonagall remained alive after she informed him of Hermione's fait accompli intrusion into his finally peaceful, well-ordered life. The headmistress's office, on the other hand, would require extensive repairs.

A ruddy-looking and very agitated house-elf named Darren was glaring up at him, arms crossed, impatiently tapping one of his elongated feet.

"Weel you please explain ze meaning of thees?" His skinny little arm flailed sideways, indicating the girl that was currently waiting outside of Snape's office. "WHY waz I not informed of zis *intrusion*!"

Darren was not just any house-elf. Formerly from the famed kitchens of Beauxbatons, Darren was Severus Snape's Sous-Chef, his right-hand elf. Unlike the Hogwarts house-elves, there was nothing whatsoever subservient about Darren, as proven by the display of righteous indignation currently being directed towards the Master Chef of Hogwarts.

Severus drew his hand over his face, trying to stem the headache currently gathering like a storm behind his left eye.

"Darren, I was only just informed of..."

"Of course, eef you haf been un'appy wiz my work, perhaps you would prefer zomeone new?" the uniformed kitchen-elf huffed petulantly.

"Don't be ridiculous..."

"I am zertain you will be more 'appy wiz her!"

"SILENCE!"

Severus was on his feet, glaring at the diminutive creature, who was glaring right back at him with a pronounced pout of injury on its pointy-nosed face.

"I was informed of this...development...only this morning," Severus snarled through clenched teeth, ignoring the fact that said clenching only served to worsen his headache. "I was not consulted on this arrangement!" He fell back into the chair at his desk. "Bring her in." Darren's pout deepened. "NOW!"

With a huff, Darren flung open the office door and pointed the girl inside.

Hermione Granger. The annoying twit of his Potions classroom. She stood there with a ridiculous grin on her face, her hair pulled back and mounted upon her head like some wild and menacing bush. Her short, white, Hogwarts-crested kitchen robes pristine and unstained. Waiting with parchment and quill in hand as if it was possible to capture his genius by writing it down! He seethed at her smug impertinence. Her gall at thinking he'd willingly give up any of his secrets, especially to her! Her infuriating presumption that he'd be glad to have her in his kitchens! Suddenly, Severus knew what to do with her. He would devour her, bit by annoying bit. There would be nothing left of her when he was done. After all, gourmands know that every part of the animal is edible. He vowed that this little chit would be made to pay. He'd make sure she was made even more miserable than he was. Which was, he thought, quite miserable indeed.

"Miss Granger."

"Professor..."

"That would be 'sir' to you."

"Yes, sir."

"I am *told* you are to be my *apprentice*." His anger was there, seething, in fact, but under control. Years of suppressing emotions made this possible.

Her face lit up with a smile so bright, Severus felt the need to shield his eyes.

"Yes, sir! It's such a privilege to be able to work with you, sir!" It looked as though she was repressing the urge to bounce up and down on her toes.

"Apparently, I was extended neither the *privilege* nor the courtesy to ask if I *wanted* your presence in my kitchens, Miss Granger. A well-executed plan on your part, I believe? Another Gryffindor-flouting-the-rules move? Bravo, Miss Granger."

"Well... I..." she spluttered.

"Darren!" Severus called sharply to the elf, who scurried to his side.

"Yes, monsieur?" His eyes were slits as he glared daggers at Hermione.

"She's here to learn, so she starts at the bottom. She is yours to deal with in whatever way you see fit."

Hermione's smile faded, and her face darkened with alarm. "But, sir, I'm to apprentice to *you*...."

Severus picked up his quill and turned his attention to the delivery invoices on his desk. "Go. Both of you. Out."

Darren's chin lifted smugly as he took Hermione by the wrist, pulled her out of the office and closed the door behind them.

She tried to pull out of the elf's grasp, but he was much stronger than he appeared. Dragging her to a large sink filled with a dozen, huge, thickly encrusted, grime-filled cooking pots, he let her go and pointed at the mess.

"Scour zem until zey are spotless!" He turned sharply on his heels and left her, missing the look of gaping surprise on Hermione's face.

A gaggle of house-elves stood to the side watching, eyes slanting with malice. Her. They knew about Her. And they were not happy with the presence of this particular witch. Not happy at all.

II. BEFORE

In the days following Albus Dumbledore's death, there were speculations that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry would not re-open for the autumn term. But it did, albeit with a severely reduced student population and a noticeable and shocking decline in the quality of the food that usually graced the school tables. The consensus of opinion at the time was that a general depression had settled upon the school's house-elf population. Indeed, a fog of sadness seemed to pervade every resident of the ancient castle; humans, ghosts, portraits, and even Peeves seemed more subdued. So, it was natural to assume that the elves were as sorely affected as everyone else, and their ability to liven up the cuisine had been impaired.

No one considered for a single moment that the bland and unappealing meals that appeared in the Great Hall at mealtimes might somehow be related to the other absence from Hogwarts' esteemed faculty.

III.

Hermione Granger wasn't called the most brilliant witch of her age...probably of all time...for nothing. In the case of the war against Voldemort, even someone with an intellect less impressive than Hermione's might have surmised that there was far more to Severus Snape than being an ex-Death Eater-Potions Master-Double Spy, if only they had bothered to look. Fortunately for the survival of wizard-kind, Hermione bothered.

It was Hermione who quickly discerned the connection between the reports of a new type of lemon-filled scone being introduced to great acclaim in villages across Great Britain and a sudden surge in the ranks of Voldemort's Death Eaters. Then, when the Order of the Phoenix began to receive parchments from an anonymous source revealing details of Voldemort's movements, it was Hermione who recognised the unique and telltale scent that pervaded the parchment as a signature blend of basil, sea salt and ground cumin.

And so, in the aftermath of the war against Voldemort, when good finally triumphed over evil and the wizarding world righted itself once again, Hermione was not at all surprised to learn that her former Potions teacher had been the culinary brains behind Voldemort's demise. It was certainly not by accident that the Death Eaters present at the final battle were stricken, as a timed spell inflamed their gastrointestinal tracts, and they fell as one in excruciating pain. Nor was it a coincidence that Nagini, the final Horcrux, had been fed a poisoned, pickled rodent, and she died in a hissing, writhing climax. In the end, Voldemort stood alone, his troops a sorry, moaning, hurling mess, and his serpent, a twisted, reptilian corpse at his feet. It was almost anticlimactic when Harry Potter finally cornered his life-long foe and vanquished him forever.

IV.

After the war, it was the testimony of Dumbledore's portrait that acquitted Snape of the nefarious murder before the Wizengamot. That it had been part of the ex-headmaster's plan. More shocking than that was the revelation that Severus Snape had been Hogwarts' secret Master Chef for years. The news rocked the wizarding world to its core. Current and former students who had salivated at the delights that appeared on their House tables were stunned to learn that the inspired epicurean genius behind their favourite meals belonged to their despised, greasy-haired teacher from the dungeons. Finally, they were rapt at the tales of how skilfully Snape had wielded his food-as-weapon against Voldemort, leading to the Dark Lord's final demise. In the end, any lingering doubts about his heroism or his worthiness for redemption were quenched forever when Snape agreed to cater the Victory Feast at Hogwarts. It was such a magnificent feast that, for years after, those who had been in attendance on

that memorable day would recall the experience and how it had changed their lives forever.

V.

It was past midnight, and Severus sat in his spacious office, located in a corner of the vast Hogwarts' kitchens, turning a goblet of well-aged brandy in his hands. He had enchanted one wall to be a one-way window, enabling him to keep an eye on the ever-present hubbub of activity. But at the moment, it was blissfully quiet, with only a few of the kitchen-elves busy with the final cleaning up before it started all over again in just a few hours. He sighed with contentment and smoothed out his black chef's robes, the colour being one part of his former fictitious life that he chose to maintain. As Severus Snape reflected on his current situation, he found himself feeling satisfied...really, truly satisfied...for the first time, ever. It was an unfamiliar, if not unwelcome sensation, and he pondered on the reasons for this surprising turn in his life.

First, he was still alive. Despite the unfavourable odds and his long-held belief that he would not survive the final conflict, he confounded himself by being proved wrong. He still hadn't worked out how to reconcile being happy about being wrong since he had no frame of reference for such an occurrence. The best he could do was to set aside the conundrum and accept that his fate had turned out better than he could have hoped for.

Second, he was pleased that he had achieved both redemption and acclaim from the wizarding world. Both, he thought, were long overdue and well deserved. However, now that he finally had what he'd long desired, he was surprised and delighted to realise that he really didn't give a flying fig about what people thought about him any longer.

Third, he had a job that he loved. It was fine and good to be appreciated and honoured, but there were still bills to be paid. Minerva happily welcomed him back to work openly in the kitchens at Hogwarts, and best of all, he no longer had to teach the mindless issue of former students he disdained in equal measure. Let Slughorn suffer the disgusting, toxic fumes of the Potions lab and exploding cauldrons in the classroom. From now on, he would be surrounded by the sweet perfume of a simmering bouillabaisse, the heady aroma of the purest olive oil and the intoxicating scent of freshly baked bread.

In the end, Severus was alive, employed and free. Free to enjoy a good night's sleep, uninterrupted by needy Slytherins, the call of the Dark Lord or the manipulations of his former headmaster. Free to finally indulge his passion and his culinary muse, terrorise the kitchen-elves to his content and, if he felt so inclined, make the occasional appearance in the Great Hall to receive well-earned kudos from his colleagues and the students.

Yes, all in all, Severus Snape was perfectly satisfied.

VI.

Hermione's love of learning and curiosity had led her to read about and consider a wide variety of career options. On their journey to seek out and destroy the Horcruxes, she would often lie awake at night listening to Harry's nightmares and Ron's snoring. To distract herself, she would try to imagine what her life might be like after the battle. For she never gave up hope that they would, in the end, be victorious. In those moments, Hermione would conjure up pictures of herself as a Healer, a Curse-Breaker, or an Auror. Or she would imagine herself as a champion of the marginalised and downtrodden, fighting for their rights in the magical world. She loved a mystery, so she might become an Unspeakable. Perhaps she might experiment with ways to combine magic with Muggle technology to create new medicines that would help both worlds! Some nights, she'd relax by imagining herself running a bookshop, one bigger and better than either Waterstones or Flourish and Blotts. Sometimes she would see herself in khakis, roaming the world as an archaeomagicologist seeking out sources of ancient magic. Or a teacher! She might take over when Professor Flitwick retired and teach Charms at Hogwarts. Or Ancient Runes. Or Arithmancy. Or Transfiguration. Or Potions. Yes, she had excelled at and loved Potions, too, despite her demeaning and frustrating experiences at the hands of Professor Snape, who had never once deigned to acknowledge her hard work, skill and precision!

One very cold night, as she huddled in her tent, she found herself thinking about her ex-professor and considered his hands... his fingers. They were long, elegant and sensual. In her mind, she could see them wrapping around a phial, chopping dandelion roots into minuscule pieces, or drumming impatiently on a desk before verbally assaulting a student. Just as she drifted off into sleep, she imagined what those fingers might feel like skimming down her arm, trailing a sinuous path along her neck, her stomach, her....

So when the battle was over, with all the choices open to her, it was a great surprise to everyone...Hermione included...that what she wanted most of all was to create cuisine that would dazzle and delight. She had always loved cooking, had subscribed to food periodicals for years and, on the few occasions she was home, enjoyed devising and preparing interesting new dishes for her parents. But with her studies and helping to save wizardkind taking up most of her time, thoughts of cooking as a career had never occurred to her. Until the Victory Feast. It was then that her desires flared to life, awakened at once to full awareness of what she wanted, what she needed to do with her life. And she knew, without a doubt, exactly who it was she needed...who it was she would *get* to make her dream come true.

VII.

There were many perks to being a War Hero, and Hermione was not above playing her advantage at every opportunity, figuring that if she wanted something from a Slytherin she'd best start to think and act like one.

Hermione had a plan. It was, of course, well considered, colour-coded, and typically ambitious. But she was, as always, confident as to its successful outcome. Come September, she would be an apprentice to Severus Snape, Master Chef, and by the following year, Hogwarts would offer a new course in Magical Culinary Arts to be taught by Professor Hermione Granger.

The Hogwarts curriculum had remained essentially unchanged for centuries. Muggle Studies was the most recent addition, and that had occurred more than fifty years ago. But Hermione quickly assessed the opening for change after the war. In the aftermath of the now-legendary Victory Feast, there was a swell of interest in food in the wizarding world. Three new restaurants had opened in Diagon Alley alone, much to the dismay of Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, who was experiencing the pinch of competition for the first time. There was a new cuisine section in the *Daily Prophet*, and several new cookbooks were flying off the shelves at Flourish and Blotts. So, it was in this frenzied atmosphere that Hermione Granger initiated her plan.

First, needing to ensure political support, she convinced the Hogwarts' Board of Governors that it needed a Student Representative in its ranks. Fortunately for them, Ginny Weasley...soon to be Ginny Potter...was interested and would be the *perfect* choice! Then, she proposed her idea to Minerva McGonagall, who was thrilled to have her favourite student back at Hogwarts. It did take some time, however, to convince Minerva not to consult with Severus in advance. Why set him up for disappointment if the proposal was not approved? Hadn't the poor man suffered enough?

Finally, with Ginny in place and Minerva behind her, she made her proposal to the Board of Governors. With a grand presentation that included a table spread with a delectable assortment of flaky pastries, fruit tarts, miniature tubs of crème brûlée and shots of espresso, Hermione's new course was enthusiastically endorsed and unanimously approved.

VIII. NOW, AGAIN

"Scour zem until zey are spotless! Wizout magic!"

There were so many ways in which Hermione was stunned by this turn of events that she couldn't begin to process them all. Darren, the French house-elf, would be her boss? Demanding she clean crusted pots? Without magic? How *dare* he? Who did the little *not* think he was? Didn't he know who SHE was? She was here to learn about food! From Snape! A 'well-executed plan', indeed. Of course she had one, except this had *not* been part of it!

It had started out so well. Yesterday, she had arrived at Hogwarts and settled into her new quarters, which she deemed wholly satisfactory. This morning, she awoke early, both eager and nervous. She had expected, of course, that Profe Master Snape would be upset about having an apprentice foisted upon him. But she had been his student for years and was accustomed to his violent temper and flaming insults. She was certain, however, that she could handle whatever he threw at her. She always had, and this, certainly, would be no exception.

But she hadn't expected *Darren*. To make matters worse, a group of house-elves were staring at her, frowning in evident disapproval. Or suspicion. Hermione put on a smile, thinking she'd ask them for help, remembering her previous visits to the kitchens and how eager they'd been to offer her and the boys' assistance. However, when she turned to them, they scattered away as if they'd been hexed.

Rolling up the sleeves of her robes, she filled the sink with water, grabbed up a scrubber and tried to pick up the first pot. It was so huge and heavy, however, that she had to lean into it to get to the bottom. Grimacing, but refusing to be daunted, Hermione did what she always did. Attacked the problem at hand with determination. If she had to scrub pots, then she'd be the best-damned pot scrubber they had ever seen.

IX.

Darren was a free elf, hired by McGonagall to work at Hogwarts before the end of the war in an effort to revive the spirit and the quality of meals at the school. Upon his arrival, he had quickly and confidently taken control of the leaderless and listless kitchen-elves, and the residents of the school breathed a collective sigh of relief when edible food appeared on their plates once again.

After tasting the power inherent in running the kitchens, it was difficult for Darren to step down in deference to Master Snape upon his return. But, free or not, Darren was still a kitchen-elf, and he knew his place in the order of beings. Which didn't mean it didn't rankle. It did. A lot. And while it helped that Master Snape was a talented chef and Darren still had overall control of the kitchens, he chafed under the knowledge that he had had to relinquish his superior position and that the accolades would never be directed towards him. For he was an *elf* with *ambition*. Being a wizard's Sous-Chef was not enough. And then, there was the girl. The *apprentice*. She was an affront to all that was right and deserving. She just had to go.

He drove the girl relentlessly. For weeks she did nothing but scour pots and pans. For weeks after that she worked sixteen hours a day chopping and dicing and slicing until her hands were raw and bleeding. Using magic on basic preparations was forbidden, as it leeched the taste out of the ingredients, leaving dishes prepared that way with a metallic taste. Darren screamed, yelled and berated her more than he did the other kitchen-elves, but she was stubborn and refused to be provoked, no matter how hard he tried. One time, she had finished cutting twenty-five dozen carrots into rounds instead of juliennes. He had watched her do it and said nothing until she was finished, and then he made her throw them out and start all over again...at half-past three in the morning. He watched her fight the urge to throw a knife at him, but she merely turned and bent over the vegetable basket to scoop up more carrots and threw them down on the cutting table with a defiant glare.

No, she wasn't going to be bested as easily as he'd hoped. But he was as stubborn as she, and he wasn't giving up just yet. He'd just have to find another tack.

X.

She was too tired to take the hot bath her body so desperately needed. With considerable effort, accompanied by several moans and groans, she stripped off her robes and fell into her bed, exhausted. There was not one part of her body that did not ache. Her feet hurt so badly and were so swollen; she'd had to Transfigure her shoes to an extra-wide size. She had pulled several muscles lifting and moving those giant pots, but that Evil Elf never allowed her to go see Madam Pomfrey about them until her shifts were over. Thank the gods she had her first day off in over three months this weekend. She was desperate for a break.

Darren. The Devil's spawn.

She fantasised about taking one of the largest, sharpest knives and chopping him up into salad ingredients. A little virgin olive oil and a few drops of balsamic vinaigrette, lightly tossed. Maybe a few scattered pine nuts on top for a bit of crunch.

The irony of hating Darren, the free elf, was not lost on Hermione. THIS was what she had fought for? THIS was what a free elf was like? She used to think that once they'd experienced freedom, elves would be, well, happy and grateful and... nice. Like Dobby. She recalled berating the boys for not understanding poor Kreacher. She snorted. If she had her way, she'd volunteer to chop off Darren's head herself and happily mount it on a wall. Where she could throw rotten tomatoes at it. Daily. The Tiny Terror was...Evil. Hell, he'd have given Voldemort a run for his money. No wonder the wizarding world needed enslaved house-elves; if they were allowed their freedom, they'd make the Death Eaters look like a troop of Girl Guides.

No, this wasn't working out at all as she'd planned. She'd tried time and time again to try to speak with Snape, to beg for his personal tuition, only to be caught and reprimanded by the Little Tyrant.

"Ze Master ees NOT to be deesturbed! He does not speak to ze servants! You speak only to ME!"

She'd tried to talk to Minerva about it, but she'd not had any luck there either.

"I am sorry, Hermione. I cannot dictate to Severus how he runs his kitchens. He did say, however, that you are receiving the training you require."

One time, she tried to approach the other kitchen-elves, in a bit of worker solidarity, to encourage them to join her in protest of the harsh treatment they all suffered under Darren's hands. She gave that up quickly when it resulted in looks-to-kill from the other elves as they bared their sharp, pointy teeth at her and hissed. Loudly. She hated Darren, but she was *really* afraid of the kitchen-elves, whom she now knew hated her. One signal from the Diminutive Dictator, and they'd be on her in a blink, her life over faster than it would take to sear a tuna rare.

She flopped over onto her stomach, almost too tired to sleep, as her mind raced around the problem, looking for purchase on an idea that would set things to right. She'd been the brains behind the war against Voldemort, for Merlin's sake! She should be able to find a way around THIS, after all! No little Pint-Sized, Pointy-Nosed, Pain-in-the-Arse was going to get in the way of what she wanted. She sighed and punched her pillow roughly before settling her head back down. Certainly, with a day off and a good night's sleep, the solution would surely present itself.

XI.

Severus's actual appearances in the kitchens were sporadic and unannounced, usually made to ensure that the quality of his recipes were up to his exacting standards. He'd drop by the various food stations to test the sauces or the soups, sample the sides, check the consistency of the pastry dough, or correct the technique of the sauté cooks. The actual coordination of meal preparation was left in Darren's capable, if demanding, hands. Severus himself only cooked when he was developing something new or when a dish was being presented in the Great Hall for the first time. He also prepared his own meals. Although he didn't really believe that his own staff would try to poison him, he found it was still a hard habit to break.

He'd been observing Hermione, of course. Surreptitiously, he'd glance over to where she was stirring endless pots of chicken broth to see her face glistening with sweat over the cook top. It pleased him to see her formerly pristine white robes now splattered with grease and her hair escape its confinement; freed and frizzy curls plastered to her flushed face. He noted, too, that she never flinched under Darren's constant bombardment of curses and insults and how she shrugged off the disdain of the other kitchen-elves. He had trained her well for *that* sort of treatment, he thought wryly.

As he made his rounds, Severus was careful not to walk by Hermione, for he knew she was desperate to speak with him. Although he could avoid her, he couldn't stop her from shooting those *looks* his way. Accusing. Pleading. Her unspoken desire nearly shouting at him from those deep, chocolate-brown eyes. He saw them all and pretended he didn't. But he found her efforts strangely... satisfying.

After one such tour of the kitchens, just as dinner was getting underway, he gestured for Darren to follow him into his office.

"Master Snape," said Darren with a small bow.

Severus settled into his large, leather desk chair so he could address his assistant eye-to-eye. "The headmistress has asked me to convey her appreciation to you for the delicious chilled tomato and coconut soup. It was quite the hit at luncheon, apparently."

If elves could blush, Severus was certain Darren would have. He watched as the rare compliment took the elf by surprise, squirming as he tried to decide if this pleased Severus or not.

"You were quite generous in allowing me ze honour of preparing ze recipe, monsieur. I am pleased zat it was well received."

Severus had learned a thing or two about managing people and creatures from the best. Albus Dumbledore had been a master in bringing out the best in his staff by playing to their vanities and reining them back in when their egos went too far. Severus was confident enough to throw Darren an occasional culinary bone and give him free rule over the kitchen staff. But he also knew that his assistant was ambitious and cunning, and more than a little unhappy with his 'demotion' in the kitchen. He also knew that Darren considered Hermione a threat.

"Tell me how Miss Granger is coming along."

It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on the elf, who froze at the mention of Hermione's name. Severus fought to keep the corner of his mouth from turning up into his trademark smirk.

Darren struggled to respond, trying to find something to criticise about the girl's performance. Severus was amused.

"Meez Granger is... she is... obedient."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Does she perform her tasks well?"

"She is... adequate."

"I see. Is she ready to move to sauces?"

The elf was practically shaking, but as he was still a kitchen-elf, he was unable to tell a falsehood. "Perhaps she can beegen next week," he squeaked through clenched teeth.

For the briefest moment, Severus felt a twinge sympathy for the girl, knowing that Darren would unleash his frustrations upon her even more harshly after this.

"Thank you, Darren. You may return to work." The elf stormed out of the office. Severus stood and walked to the doorway, leaning against it as he scanned the kitchen. She was filling the large pots with water, and he watched her struggle to carry the heavy receptacles back to the cook top, careful not to spill a drop.

She was the most stubborn witch he'd ever known. And if he didn't despise the girl so much, he'd have admired her for it.

XII.

It was after midnight when Hermione finally got out of the kitchens. Stumbling in exhaustion down the corridors and up the stairs, down another corridor and then up another set of stairs, she suddenly realised that she was totally lost.

"Bugger those moving stairs to hell!"

Looking to the right, then to the left, she leaned against the wall and sank to the floor with her head in her hands.

"I'm just too tired to care. Might as well sleep right here," she muttered.

"Signorina! Si sente male?"

Well-honed instincts had Hermione up on her feet in an instant with her wand out. She whipped her head around for the source of the voice, but saw no one. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

"Qui, signorina. Il dipinto!"

Looking up, Hermione saw a worried look on the painted image of a young man in its portrait on the wall. It was dressed in knee-length medieval robes over leg breeches, a soft, four-cornered hat on its head, and held a glass phial in one hand. With a sigh of relief, she walked towards it and saw, at eye level, the nameplate of the portrait: *'L'Apprendista 1512'*. She took a step backwards, which helped her to better address the portrait without straining her neck.

"I'm sorry...um...scusami. I...do you speak English?" asked Hermione.

The portrait smiled, "Si, Signorina, capisco! Eh... yes... I have some English, but no chance to much use! You are lost, eh? And it is so very dark... er... in the evening?"

Hermione sat down in the middle of the corridor, not giving a thought to how odd it was to be having a conversation with a painting. In fact, she felt oddly comforted to have someone to talk to. She had been back at Hogwarts for almost three months, and she realised she hadn't had a single, real conversation with anyone, aside from some infrequent interactions with Minerva or Poppy. She was feeling particularly lonely at the moment, so if some ancient pigment wanted to chat, who was she to complain?

With her legs out in front of her, Hermione bent over to reach her toes, stretching her lower back, and moaned as her tendons resisted.

"Yes, it's ridiculously late," she sighed, releasing her toes and settling back on her hands. "I just got off work." Hermione looked up at the portrait and waved her hand at the nameplate. "Were you an apprentice at Hogwarts?"

The portrait shook its head. "No, Signorina. Not Hogwarts. L'Accadèmia de Pisa, apprendista to Master Simonetta in Alchimia." The portrait looked wistful. "Ah, Master Simonetta, a great man. A... genius! He come later to be Master at Hogwarts. He have my portrait painted from... how you say?" It pointed to its forehead.

"Memory?" suggested Hermione.

"Si! Si! From memory. To remember me," said the portrait softly, caressing the phial in its hands.

"Your Master must have been very fond of you to do that," she said with a bit of envy. "I'm an apprentice, too," said Hermione with a nod. "To the school's Master Chef. Um, Chef du Cucina." The portrait grew wide-eyed.

"Signorina is ... *un'apprendista*? Com'è possibile? Una donna?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, women are permitted to take apprenticeships nowadays." Then she scowled. "We are now lucky enough to be abused as equally as men or elves by our Masters.

"So, what was your name, Signore L'Apprendista?"

The portrait chewed its lower lip, looking somewhat fearful. It looked to either side of its frame and bent down on one knee, appearing as if it was leaning forward, and gestured for Hermione to come closer. Hermione stood and walked towards the portrait.

"Non sono un uomo," it said in a whisper. "Mi chiamo, Lucia." And as the portrait swept off its hat, a cascade of long, dark hair fell to Lucia's bent knee.

"Lucia?" Hermione gasped with a jolt of understanding and empathy as the portrait revealed its secret. "You had to pretend to be a man to get an education, didn't you? How frightening that must have been. You could have been killed..."

Lucia nodded, jutting out her chin defiantly. "Sì, era molto pericoloso... dangerous. But assolutamente necessario!"

"Did your Master know?"

A sly grin fell across the portrait's face. "Sì, Signornia. My Master know I am woman. I am... *his* woman. He teach me many things. Alchimia. Astronomia. Amore."

Hermione didn't know whether to be scandalised or entertained. This was better than one of Ginny's romance novels! "You were *lovers* with your Master?"

Lucia sucked in her lower lip and nodded, eyeing Hermione with speculation.

"And you... nome?"

"Hermione."

"Her-mi-o-nee," Lucia pronounced slowly, "you are lovers with your Master? Un grande amore?"

"What? Amore? No! No!" protested Hermione as she felt the heat rush to her cheeks. "It's strictly a professional relationship, nothing more."

Lucia laughed. "I think maybe you want more?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, as if that would stem the embarrassment she was feeling under the portrait's questioning. "No! I do NOT want more. The only thing I want is to have a chance to actually cook! If I make one more pot of broth, I think I'll scream! I can't even have a conversation with the infuriating man to try and convince him that I can do it! That I'm worthy to have him teach me himself!"

Lucia shrugged. "Eh, he is man. You are woman. Men no like talk. Men like see and do." Lucia lifted one painted eyebrow and said, "So, give him show."

An idea took root in Hermione's prodigious brain, began to sprout and blossomed, fully formed. "Of course!" She laughed, enormously relieved. "Lucia! You are brilliant! Thank you! If I could, I'd give you the *biggest* hug!"

"Prego, signorina," said Lucia as she tucked her hair back into its hat. "You come again here to visit Lucia, eh?"

Hermione felt more confident than she had since before coming back to Hogwarts. "Once I figure out where here is, I'll certainly come back. You and I have so much to talk about, Lucia. Ciao, amica mia!"

Lucia stood up in her frame and waved with a warm smile after Hermione, who took off at a run down the corridor.

....to be continued

Part 2

Chapter 2 of 2

A SS/HG story of food, passion and surly house-elves. In which we take an immediate hard right turn off the beaten canon to Silly Alternative Universe Land. A pinch of parody. A dash of cliché. Toss in a few OC's and stir well. Serve hot.
- originally written for the Summer 2007 HG/SS Gift Exchange -
2008 Quill to Parchment Nominee: Best FanonHet; Best HumorFic; Best Mid-Length Fic

XIII.

Now that she had a plan, all was right with Hermione's world. Nothing, not even the Pernicious Pipsqueak, could get under her skin.

The first week, Hermione focussed on her work, labouring even harder at the mundane tasks that Darren assigned her. This time, however, she stopped trying to get Snape's attention or to catch his eye as he made the rounds of his kitchen. Watching him covertly, she noticed that the more she ignored him, the more attention he paid her.

In the second week, she had to force herself not to squeal when she noticed him walking down the aisle in her direction. As he drew closer, she focused on the brown sauce she was stirring, making no move to acknowledge his presence. She felt him pause behind her for a fraction of a second before he moved on without saying a word.

By the end of the second week, she nearly jumped when she heard him speak.

"Taste!" he barked. She stepped aside and handed him a clean spoon. He did not look at her as he leaned over to check for consistency and taste. She hadn't been this close to Snape since... well... since never. Her eyes were drawn to the sharpness of his cheekbones, then to the bend of his fingers holding the spoon. Unbidden, memories of lying in a tent, thinking of those fingers, appeared in her mind. She must have made a sound because Snape suddenly turned, his tall frame looming over her.

"Is there something wrong, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir! I mean, I hope the sauce meets your expectations, sir."

"A bit less salt next time," he said with a dismissive sniff and walked past her.

The following week, he spoke to her briefly for a few seconds each day to suggest improvements in her sauces. She took care to never speak to him directly, unless he asked her a specific question. And she never, ever made direct eye contact.

In the fourth week, she was ready to escalate her plan to Phase Two.

Timing was important. It had to happen just as dinner preparations were getting underway. This was a time of great activity in the kitchen, making it easier for Hermione to

spend a few extra minutes standing over the steaming soup pots without being noticed. She let the steam waft over her for as long as she could stand it, until she was as wet as if she'd just stepped out of the shower and hot enough to bake a roast. She watched Snape begin his rounds and, at the last possible moment, returned to her station. Then, as Snape turned into her row, she thrust an entire South American salamander chilé into her mouth and swallowed it. In the next moment, she swooned with a great moan and dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, her spoon clattering to her side.

The activity in the kitchen came to an unprecedented halt until Darren's shrill voice screamed at them to keep working.

Severus was by her side just as she fell to the kitchen floor. Lifting her onto his lap, he saw that her face was red as a beet and heat emanated from her in blasts, as if he had just opened the cooker to test the pasties.

"Get me a cold flannel!" he barked to the nearest kitchen-elf, who leapt into action at his command.

"Miss Granger!" he snapped. She moaned.

"Breathe... can't... breathe... hot...." Her arm flailed as if to tear off her robes.

Severus quickly unbuttoned her cooking robes to bring her some relief. As he opened them, he was startled to see that above her trousers, her upper torso was barely covered by a small bit of fabric, held up with a pair of very thin straps at the shoulders. He was distracted from her moans and her heaving, well-rounded breasts by the arrival of the aforementioned cold flannel. Suddenly, realising they were both still on the floor, he grabbed the cloth, lifted Hermione into his arms and carried her into his office. Once inside, he quickly Transfigured a chair into a small sofa and laid her upon it.

"Miss Granger, can you hear me?" he said, applying the compress to her forehead, cheeks, mouth, chest....

As the cold compress hit her chest, Hermione arched her back and moaned and began to flail her arms, catching Severus by the neck and pulling him towards her.

"Must finish sauce... too hot... less salt..." she moaned in a low voice directly into his ear.

Ignoring his body's unfortunate reaction to the gusts of her breath in his ear, he disentangled himself from her grip, applied a stronger Cooling Charm to the flannel and applied it to her face once again. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, and she looked confused. He noted, once again, that her eyes were the colour of dark chocolate.

"Sir?" she croaked. "What happened? Dinner... I...." She tried to sit up but Severus gently pushed her back down on the sofa.

"You have a fever, Miss Granger. I'll need to get you to the hospital wing immediately."

She grabbed his hands and brought them to her chest. "I'll be all right, sir. I just need a few minutes, really. Then I'll get back to work."

The heat flew from her hands to his and then straight to his groin. He quickly put this out of his mind.

"You'll do no such thing, Miss Granger. I want you to return to your quarters immediately. If you still have a fever in the morning, you are to report to Madam Pomfrey. Is that clear? I cannot have ill workers in the kitchen!"

He noticed that his hands were still in her grasp, and he quickly pulled them away.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm sure I'll be fine by morning. I I don't want to disappoint you."

"Can you stand?"

Hermione wobbled a bit as she rose from the sofa, but managed to remain upright.

"I I think so, sir. Yes, I'll be all right."

Pulling her robes closed with a shy smile, Hermione left his office, ignoring Darren who was standing in the doorway as she passed by him.

"What happened to ze girl?" Darren demanded, angry that she had disrupted his well-ordered routine.

"Miss Granger is not well. I sent her back to her rooms for the evening," Severus replied briskly, straightening his tunic and, turning away from his assistant, adjusting his trousers. "You may continue with the dinner service, Darren."

Darren scowled as he left Snape's office. There was something going on with the girl and Snape. He had noticed they had both been acting...differently...lately. And he didn't like it. Not one bit.

Hermione carefully made her way out of the kitchens, ignoring the stares of the kitchen-elves, and stopped to sway every now and then. It wasn't until she was well out of the kitchens and up the stairs before she burst into a huge smile and nearly skipped back to her rooms.

XIV.

Severus hummed his favourite aria from *La Traviata* as he packed his valise, imagining himself in his villa, Chianti in hand. He was spending the first week of the Christmas holidays in southern Italy, sampling the region's best cuisine and finest wines.

He had always wanted to travel, but his duplicitous former life was never conducive to making long-term plans, least of all travel itineraries. It was terribly inconvenient, not to mention difficult, to explain the need to break off a dinner engagement or a tour when one's left forearm tended to erupt in excruciating pain at unexpected times. "I'm so terribly sorry, I'm being called away to grovel at the feet and kiss the hem of a psychopathic maniac in a cold graveyard. Please, enjoy your pâté without me."

With all that finally behind him, Severus had a long list of places to see around the world, and Italy would be the first of many. The kitchens would be well taken care of by Darren, what with its reduced needs over the hols. Even Granger would get a break, given the terms of her agreement with Minerva.

Granger. He stopped mid-fold of his dinner jacket. What made him think about her? Well, he was thinking about her. Had been, in fact, for quite a while, now that he came to think about it. Despite his original reservations, she had turned out quite well in the kitchens, especially since she'd finally dropped that terribly annoying habit of constantly asking irritating questions. He winced as he recalled her younger self, practically standing on her desk as she furiously waved her hand to get his attention. Yes, she'd grown up fairly well. Quiet. Obedient. Seemingly competent in basic kitchen skills. Fairly pretty, in a not-flashy sort of way. The hair was still a disaster, of course.

But, she was definitely not a child anymore, as he recalled that skimpy...whatever it was...she was wearing under her robes the day she fainted. Good lord. He'd never imagined that she wore so little under her kitchen uniform. It was hard to even look at her these days without wondering what might be underneath those robes. It was practically indecent, actually. Probably not at all appropriate for a professional. Probably. Not that he was a prude or anything. He'd been with plenty of women in his past. In a manner of speaking. If the price was right. And he'd seen them wear...or not wear!...all sorts of things.

He wondered what her legs looked like.

His thoughts on Hermione Granger's legs were interrupted by a rap on his door. He frowned, hoping there wasn't a problem in the kitchens. He had a Portkey scheduled to depart in an hour, and he'd be very cross if he was delayed.

"Enter!"

He heard the door to the anteroom open and was more than surprised to see the object of his reverie appear in his sitting room.

"Granger."

She was clearly nervous, demonstrated by that childish, biting-on-her-lower-lip habit of hers.

"I know you are preparing for your vacation, sir, but I was hoping for just a few minutes of your time before you left." She kept her eyes downcast. He knew that she did this as a mark of deference, but Severus found it somewhat disconcerting.

"Please look at me when you speak, Granger. You are not an elf, and I do not expect you to behave like one."

She raised her eyes to meet his. He was struck again by their colour. He could almost taste them. Chocolate. Bittersweet.

She was struck by how he looked. She had never seen him wear anything other than his teaching or kitchen robes. He stood before her, long and lean, wearing an uncharacteristic open-necked, silk maroon shirt, exposing a soft patch of chest hair that just tickled at his throat. For a moment she forgot herself. And then she remembered. "Thank you, sir. I am honoured by the privilege."

There was an awkward silence, as he felt trapped by her eyes. He blinked rapidly and turned away from her to fuss with his valise.

"Go ahead, Miss Granger. You have five minutes of my time." He moved to his desk and sat, folding his arms across his chest.

She licked her lips in her nervousness. "I want to cook you a meal, sir," she blurted out.

He stared at her, finally understanding. From the beginning she'd tried to get to him, to speak with him. Wanting to impress him, to be permitted higher-level kitchen tasks. She'd been manipulating him all along. And here she stood, successful in her mission. A small smile appeared on the edge of his thin mouth.

Well done, Miss Granger. Fifty points to Gryffindor.

"And why would I want to have you cook for me?"

She looked at him without flinching, all deception gone, enjoying her victory. She knew that he knew, and she was going for broke.

She slowly crossed to his desk. "Because, sir," she started slowly, "I can make your mouth salivate with desire. I can stimulate your palate with sensations it has never experienced before. Your tongue will feel textures that will delight you. Spices and savouries that will heighten your senses." She leaned over, her face just inches from his own, her eyes latching onto his. "And when you're done, sir, you'll be begging for more."

The silence hung thickly in the air.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "There is that, I suppose," he conceded.

She pushed away from his desk and took a step back.

"I have one other offer, sir."

"And that would be...?"

"If you aren't completely satisfied with my work and don't agree to give me your personal tuition, I will resign my apprenticeship and leave Hogwarts."

Severus contemplated both offers in silence. He let her wait for his response and watched as she struggled to remain calm. A few minutes passed and she began to squirm. He decided that he liked watching her this way, as each little movement revealed something about her. The way her chin tilted, defiantly, her upper lip thrust forward while she bit on her lower one. Her small, delicate fingers, clenching and unclenching. She was wearing a mauve-coloured Muggle jumper; he watched the rise and fall of her breasts, visible to him in the way they weren't under her usual work robes. Yes, she was proving quite...interesting...and he was both intrigued and appalled by her brazen approach. In the end, he decided that he had nothing to lose. He'd enjoy a nice meal, watch her grovel for his approval, and then he'd send her packing. Darren would be delighted, and she'd be out of his hair for good. It seemed to be a reasonable proposition.

"Darren!"

With a loud *Crack!* his diminutive assistant appeared, a look of wide-eyed surprise crossing his face as he took in the sight of the girl in his Master's quarters.

"ow can I be of assistance, monsieur?" he said with some hesitation.

"Miss Granger will be preparing a special meal for me in twelve days time. Between now and then, she's to be permitted use of the kitchens and whatever stores and supplies she requires."

He saw that the girl was suppressing a yell of glee, but permitted herself a wide smile instead.

"Miss Granger, will you be requiring any assistance?" he asked.

She paused, clearly not having considered this before.

"Yes, sir. That would be wonderful! A kitchen-elf would be very useful in helping to prepare and serve."

Severus raised an eyebrow, glancing at Darren, who looked as if he was ready to explode. "Just one?"

She nodded, trying not to gloat at Darren's discomfort. "One will be sufficient, if you think you can find one who will be willing to work with me, Darren."

Darren's little head swung back and forth in a panic between the girl and his Master.

"I'm sure Darren can make it so. Can't you, Darren?" she asked sweetly.

"I...I weel try my best!"

"I'm sure you will," said Severus. "Now, both of you get out of my quarters. I am looking forward to having you all out of my sight for the next ten days, and I'd like to complete my preparations."

Darren popped out of sight. And, just as Hermione turned to go, she paused and turned back.

"Thank you, sir. You won't be sorry. And have a wonderful vacation!" A moment later, from the corridor, he heard the sound of a high-pitched squeal.

XV.

Hermione's head was spinning as she made her way to the fifth floor. Ingredients and ideas for delectable dishes flitted through her head one after the other, competing for attention in her mental recipe card file. Intermittently, flashes of Master Snape also appeared: the curve of his throat, the sharp point of his chin, the softness of his charcoal hair (had its former greasiness been part of the ruse?), the flash in his dark eyes when he looked at her, and those fingers....

Again with the fingers. *Don't get distracted, girl!* she berated herself. Hermione, knowing everything, knew, of course, that she was attracted to the man. That fact had become crystal clear on the day of her 'fainting spell.' The minute he had unbuttoned her kitchen robes and put his hands on her chest with that cold flannel, it had taken every bit of control not to attack the man in his own office. But her career was far more important than some silly infatuation. She wasn't going to blow her one chance to turn her apprentice fiasco into a success.

She reached the fifth floor landing and walked down the corridor to her destination.

"Lucia!"

"Si, Signorina?" the portrait smiled at her appearance with an expectant look.

"We did it, Lucia!" Hermione pumped her fist into the air with glee.

Lucia clutched the phial to her breast. "Si. I am happy to help with you, Her-mi-o-nee! We will make la chena perfetto!"

Hermione laughed. "A perfectly enchanted meal!"

The two girls, one of flesh, the other of pigment, laughed heartily, as girls-with-a-diabolical-plan tend to do.

XVI.

The next day, Hermione went into the kitchens looking for Darren and found him sitting in Snape's office, looking more than a little too comfortable in his Master's chair, she thought.

The Deranged Devil sneered at her, in a feeble attempt to mimic his Master's infamous look. "What do you want, you insipid human girl?"

"My assistant, Darren. The one you were to find for me," she said, not wanting to waste any more of her time dealing with the Horrible Half-Pint than she had to.

He scowled, but got up from the desk and ambled past her into the kitchen. Hermione followed.

"Eet was very deefeeicult to find zomeone weeling to work wiz you. She," he said, pointing to a figure standing, shadowed in a dark nook, "was ze only one. She ees as useless as you, zo she weel be perfect!" He clapped his hands, and the creature stepped forward.

"Winky?"

Hermione was shocked. She had forgotten about the sad little elf, banished to freedom by her former Master and rescued by Dobby to work at Hogwarts. She wondered why she hadn't seen her in the kitchens before now. But she didn't look like her formerly sad, weepy self now. She looked determined.

"I is Winky," squeaked the elf. "I is happy to serve Mistress. The other elves are nasty to Mistress, but you were nice to Winky. Winky is very sorry she was drinking too much to be nice to Miss," said the elf, eyes downcast for a moment before looking back up with a jut of her pointy chin. "But Winky doesn't drink any more, and Winky wants to help Miss now!"

"It's very nice to see you again, Winky. You look so much better since the last time we met! Have things worked out for you here?" She glanced sideways at Darren and noticed that Winky did the same.

"Yes, Mistress. Dobby wanted Winky to go with him to work for Master Harry and Mistress Ginny, after the war, Miss."

Darren snorted, and Hermione looked at him with surprise.

Winky glared at Darren. "But Winky had reasons to stay at Hogwarts."

Hermione decided to satisfy her curiosity later. "I welcome your help. Come with me, now. We have a lot of work to do."

The little elf walked past Darren with a pronounced sniff, but a smile brightened her face as she looked up at Hermione. "Thank you, Miss! Winky will work very hard for Mistress!"

XVII.

The following week, Hermione and Winky did some travelling of their own. While it was easy enough to order basic supplies from local vendors, Hermione wanted the best, the freshest, the most authentic ingredients for this special meal. So, using her connections in the Ministry, Hermione secured international Portkeys to locations all over the world. This was both wonderful and frustrating, as there was no time to linger in these exotic ports-of-call, and Hermione vowed to return to each one of them under more leisurely circumstances.

They would shop one day and prepare and store the next. They worked like, well, house-elves, from early morning, 'till late at night. And by the end of the first week, with all her ingredients either in store or on order to be delivered as fresh as possible, Hermione spent some significant time, not in the kitchen, but shuttling between Lucia's portrait and Professor Slughorn's Potions laboratory.

The meal itself would be served in the Room of Requirement. That way she could pre-set her serving kitchen exactly the way she'd need it and there would be nothing to distract the progress of the meal itself. Presentation, Hermione knew, was as important as the food itself.

One morning, two days before Snape's return, Winky appeared in Hermione's rooms, looking as distressed as Hermione had ever seen her.

"What's wrong, Winky?"

She grabbed the elf by the arm to stop her from diving into the hearth, which still held some burning embers. "No, Winky! Just tell me what's happened!"

"Oh, Miss!" Winky wailed, tears pouring down her face. "Winky has failed Miss Hermione!" Then her tone shifted abruptly and she raged in anger. "That horrible creature!! Winky will make certain he is hurt very badly by his Master!"

"WINKY!" Hermione shouted, trying to get the elf to focus, to make sense of it all.

"DARREN!" Winky shouted back. "He has ruined Miss's special dinner!"

Hermione felt her blood turn to ice, and she was suddenly deprived of breath. She sank to the nearest chair and forced her lungs to work.

"Tell me what happened," she said, trying to avoid flinging herself into the hearth.

Winky had returned to weeping, but was able to explain that she had been keeping watch over their supplies. The food they had bought was being kept under different temperature charms to ensure freshness. Sometime late last night, Winky had spotted Darren creeping out of the kitchens and, when she went to check, many of the cold storage spells had been cancelled and the food in those stores was ruined.

Hermione wanted to sit down and cry alongside of Winky. But Hermione was not just a fighter. She was a brilliant and resourceful fighter. And she knew how to fight back, when necessary. Gathering her wits and her elf, she marched down to the kitchen to face her enemy.

XVIII.

She had him cornered in Snape's office. Creating a Disapparition field around the Terrible Termagant so he couldn't escape, Darren cowered under the full-blown wrath of Hermione Granger.

"Not only will you help me to replace everything that was ruined, *Darren*," she roared, "but you will help me prepare and serve this dinner. Willingly. With a smile on that insufferable, Gallic mug of yours." Hermione had a fondness for old American gangster movies.

"And... eef... I refuse?" he whimpered, trying...and failing...to salvage a shred of his usual pomposity.

"You'll be out of Hogwarts so fast it will make your grotesque ears spin," she hissed. "Out of a job with no references. If you're lucky, you'll get a job in a dive in Knockturn Alley."

She had her wand in his chest, poking it with every word. "*Do. You. Understand. Me?*"

"I...I suppose I can agree to 'elp you weeth thees meal," he squeaked.

"Oh, and one more thing, *Darren*." She poked him again, liking how he jumped when she did it. "You will be nice to Winky *Like-it-was-before!*"

Until that moment, Hermione never knew that elves could go pale. But they did. And this one began to shake as well as he looked at Winky, standing with her arms crossed, head held high and a smile of triumph on her squashed-in face.

XIX.

Severus found himself taking extra care in his pre-dinner preparations. His normally sallow complexion had been replaced by a sun-kissed tan. He noted with satisfaction that his skin glowed after his shower. The light green linen shirt and the black trousers he selected set off that glow nicely, he thought. His hair was sparkling clean and fell loosely to his shoulders. He told himself this was merely a professional evening, but that didn't exempt one from looking their best.

Entering the Room of Requirement at precisely six o'clock in the evening, as requested, Severus was immediately caught up by a light, tropical breeze, the air scented with a hint of honeysuckle. He walked up a rough-hewn granite staircase to find a table set for one on an outdoor patio at sunset. Walking to the edge of the patio, he saw that it overlooked a cerulean blue sea, its gentle waves lapping at the cliffs below.

"Welcome, sir."

He turned to see Hermione Granger standing behind him, offering up a fluted glass of champagne.

She looked like a goddess, wearing a diaphanous sleeveless gown of shimmering white silk, gathered with a slim rope tied beneath her bosom that fell to her sandaled feet. Her hair was gathered in a chignon, with ringlets of curls draping her face.

"Sir?"

Severus blinked and, quickly gathering his scattered wits about him, accepted the champagne and sipped.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said roughly. "A fine vintage."

Hermione nodded, accepting the compliment. "If you are ready, sir, Winky will present the amuse-bouches." Hermione gestured, and Winky appeared with tray in her hands and lifted it up in offering to Severus.

It was empty, until Hermione tapped her wand and a delicate plate appeared. As he sampled one, another small, bite-sized treat would appear in its place, each one arranged on a delicate and unique porcelain dish.

There were daubs of wild mushroom pâté sitting delicately upon small toasted slivers of brioche. Mini rock shrimp cakes, topped with mango salsa. Spoonfuls of miso-walnut chutney floating in tiny cucumber boats. And two fresh, perfectly chilled sea oysters.

Severus sniffed each morsel before placing it into his mouth. He savoured each treat slowly and silently, letting the textures and the flavours lave his palate from the front to the back, and took a sip of champagne between bites.

He watched Hermione watch him eat, maintaining her professional composure as she described each dish. As he tossed the last oyster into his mouth, he had to suppress an urge to open up her lips and share it with her.

Good lord. I think I've died and gone to heaven.

Hermione's heart was beating a wild tattoo in her chest as she watched Snape eat her food. Those amazing fingers delicately caressing her precious creations. That elegant nose capturing their scent. That firm, red tongue reaching out to capture its prey. And his dark eyes, smouldered in concentration, as he savoured their tastes. At one point, he closed his eyes. She never noticed how long his lashes were before.

How am I going to get through this with the man looking like that?

"Well chosen and elegantly prepared, Miss Granger," he said without much inflection. "Is this all?"

Hang on, sir. We've only just begun.

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad you approved of the appetizers. Please have a seat," she said, gesturing to the table. "The soup courses are ready for you."

She stepped aside as he passed her without a glance and sat down at the small round table. Two bowls were in front of him. A glass of a light, red wine accompanied the soups.

Hermione stepped before the table, facing him. The setting sun was behind her, creating a golden aura around her body, her curves made visible beneath the silken fabric of her gown. The goddess spoke.

"The light broth is a parmesan pepper egg-drop soup. And the other is a strawberry ginger soup. As you might have guessed, the first is hot, the second is chilled. Please enjoy them, sir."

And he did. The competing sensations of savoury and sweet, of hot and cold ricocheted in his mouth, and he found that he was able to not just taste the food, but experience them in a way that triggered memories, feelings. A rollercoaster of a sensory experience that sated only when he put down his spoons and sipped the wine.

Before he could think about what had happened, the soup dishes vanished and a new plate appeared in its place. Freshly made linguine with shavings of precious white truffles and extra virgin olive oil. The verbal description for the dish was unnecessary.

The pasta was cooked to perfection. The truffles made his eyes roll to the back of his head as they practically melted in his mouth. The extraordinary sensations, as before, built up into another heady rush until, as he put his fork down, he felt like bursting into tears.

Hermione watched and waited, not moving, aside from the slow small smile of relief moved across her face. He was as delicious as the food he was eating...no...experiencing.

One after another, the courses appeared, accompanied by a different variety of wine. Each one creating a more potent effect than the one before it: A serving of basil-mint pesto covered halibut, sautéed in rice paper with a citrus sauce; a perfect roast pork tenderloin with an Asian marinade; side dishes of lemongrass and bok choy risotto and a dish of slow-cooked eggplant with onions in olive oil.

"The eggplant dish is a recipe called 'Iman Bayeldi,' sir. It means, 'The Priest Faints.'

Severus knew how the priest felt. He was bewitched. He knew it. No normally prepared food, no matter how brilliant, could create this type of sensory experience. He stood suddenly, his fork clattering on the plate, looking daggers at the woman. Hermione took a few steps back, alarmed.

"Is there something wrong, sir?"

He stepped around the table and, before she could move further away, he captured her by the arm.

"What sorcery is this?" he hissed. "What have you done?"

His grip was tight on her forearm, and she thought a bruise might appear there in the morning. It hurt, in a pleasurable sort of way. He stared down at her. She glowered up at him.

"It is a secret part of the recipe, sir. Are you not enjoying your dinner?"

He leaned over her so far; she was forced to lean back, able to remain standing only by the counterweight of his arm holding hers.

"You *know* I am. That is NOT the question, witch. What is it? A spell? A potion? What?!"

Her face was no more than an inch away from his. She could smell the tastes of her dinner on his breath so strongly that it was nearly intoxicating.

"I am not at liberty to share that with you, sir."

"You are my APPRENTICE! You own nothing that comes out of my kitchens!"

"Am I your apprentice, sir?"

She smiled so sweetly, and he knew he'd been beaten. The exasperating chit had him arse over teakettle. She would only have to share her secrets if he agreed to allow her to be a true apprentice.

So he kissed her.

He took her roughly in his arms and ran his lips over hers. Her tongue flicked to taste him, and he opened up to let her. Her lips, her tongue, her taste. His mouth, his face, his hair. Her skin, her fingers. His fingers in her mouth. They devoured each other standing up until the sound of two small pops! made them leap away from each other, chests heaving with desire and exertion.

Two kitchen-elves stood beside each other, startled.

"Monsieur? Eez everyzing all right?" asked Darren, confused by the sight before him.

"Is Mistress and Master ready for their desserts?" asked Winky with some hesitation.

Hermione came to her senses first. "Desserts. Right." She tried to tuck pieces of her hair back into her chignon. "Yes. Please serve the desserts. With a glass of port."

"Will...will you join me, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, recovering some of his decorum.

"Thank you, sir. I'd be delighted," she replied. She Conjured another chair and place setting opposite his, and they both sat.

A bowl of sweet figs and luscious, ripe strawberries appeared first.

"Where in the world did you find ripe strawberries in December?" Severus asked in amazement as he picked up a perfect berry with his fingers. Hermione picked up another one and leaned over so that both she and the strawberry were right in front of his mouth.

"Where strawberries are ripe at this time of year." He leaned forward and captured, in a single move, both the berry and her fingers in his mouth. The juice of the berry squirted divinely down his throat and around her fingers, which he took care to suck and lick clean. Then he fed one to her, and he squirmed as she licked the juices off of his fingers, one by one by one.

Severus picked up a fig and separated it into two luscious halves, lapping up the sweet juices with his long tongue, flicking it in and out of his mouth.

Help me, Merlin. She gasped at the sight of him.

Hermione thought she might just dissolve into a warm puddle of lust right then and there.

Luckily, the next dish appeared: a plate of sweet fritters drizzled with a red wine and star anise sauce. Taking a breath, they ate these with a fork. Severus moaned in delight, and Hermione's heart leapt for joy as the sound of his moan went right through her body.

Then, at the last, two small covered pots appeared, with tiny spoons at their sides. Severus opened his and drank in the heavenly scent of the chocolate pot de crème, topped with two small daubs of crème fraîche. To Hermione's surprise, Severus stood and stared behind her. She looked and saw that a small divan had appeared. The perfect size for two. He picked up his pot de crème and his glass of port.

"Perhaps we might make ourselves a bit more relaxed for the final dish?"

Hermione smiled and stood. "A wonderful idea. I'm sorry I didn't think of it myself."

"A perfect ending to a perfect meal."

She stopped. Her heart stopped. Had he really said that? Was it possible?

"Do you mean that, sir? Really mean it?" Even the heady rush of sexual attraction didn't diminish the importance of his answer.

Severus looked affronted. "Miss Granger, in all the years you have known me, have I ever lied to you?"

"Well, you were a double-spy, sir. I imagine you did."

He huffed. "Well, all right, I did then. But I don't now. Not ever. So if I said it was perfect, then who are you do dispute my word?"

Hermione squealed and ran into his arms, knocking them both onto the divan. He was able to save the dessert and the wine by setting them down onto a table that appeared in the nick of time.

"I knew you would like it, sir! I knew that if you'd give me a chance, I could show you that I had talent, that I'd be worthy of becoming your apprentice! Once you..."

He clapped his hand over her mouth. "Please do shut up, Miss Granger. We have a dessert to finish."

Following another bruising, melting kiss, they did finish dessert. Devouring the chocolate pot de crème and each other in extraordinary, creative ways.

XX. MANY YEARS AFTERWARDS

Le Serpent et Lion was a private restaurant, hidden in the foothills of Provence. Word of its existence was passed from person to person, among wizards and Muggles alike. Some who went in search of it never found it. Some discovered it by accident. Some who'd been there before never found it again. The mystery of the place made it all more desirable, and no one ever minded the cost of a meal there, sometimes equivalent to several months' salary. It was rumoured to be run by two couples: the owners, a tall, dark man, and his younger wife and the odd pair of small beings who worked in the kitchen.

Those who did find it and ate there would remember it for the rest of their lives. They would recall each dish in extraordinary detail. They would remember the lovely woman who greeted them, ensuring them the most wonderful and magical experience. And some of them would dimly recall a remarkable portrait of a young man in medieval dress, holding a phial in his hands, who seemed to smile down at them as they blissed out on their meal.

~*~ **FIN** ~*~

Culinary Apologies and Credits:

I apologize to native speakers of Italian and French for mangling their languages or making fun of their accents. I love both Italy and France and every person living or from therein. For the real foodies out there, I apologize for any blatant food errors.

My thanks to Ken for the 'Iman Bayedi.' The chocolate pot de crème came from www.gourmetsleuth.com, taken from their section on aphrodisiac foods. All other dishes are courtesy of John Ash and can be found in his wonderful cookbook, co-written by my good friend Amy, called **John Ash Cooking One on One**, published by Clarkson Potter (no joke!), New York, 2004. Here's the link on Amazon:

http://www.amazon.com/John-Ash-Cooking-Private-Contemporary/dp/060960967X/ref=pd_bbs_sr_2/104-0521880-2482345?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1178775541&sr=8-2

Go buy it and cook your heart out.

Also hugs and kisses to Katie for her encouragement when I despaired that I'd ever be able write this at all, and to Lindsay for her prompt beta help!