**Blame the Cauldron Cakes**

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Summary

Hermione discovers Snape's greatest secret one afternoon while in Hogsmeade the summer before her final year at Hogwarts. Snape/Hermione challenge. Slightly a/u from DH (Snape lives; the golden trio return for their final year at Hogwarts).

Notes

Obligatory A/N: Haven't written in a while so I welcome any and all feedback, constructive preferred but praise and flames are fine too. Whatever you feel compelled to tell me. If you're interested in submitting a challenge, see my profile for conditions!
Of Spinip Plants & Cauldron Cakes

Hermione Jean Granger could not believe her eyes. In fact, she rubbed them for the third time just to make sure she wasn't seeing things. She blinked again and this time she was absolutely certain of what she saw. Caddy corner to the shop she'd just come out of in Hogsmeade was what she swore was the spitting image of one Professor Severus Snape, but in tiny human form. A boy, perhaps five or six years old, was quietly observing a strange looking plant that had sprouted from between the cracks of the cobblestone next to "Aberdeen's Alchemic Supplies" in a very Snape-like way. He barely moved a muscle and already had that steady, unnerving gaze the Professor wore when interrogating students.

"How peculiar…" the young witch said to no one in particular, tilting her head to one side. The boy even had the same hooked nose and black hair, albeit silken and not greasy. Unable to stamp down her curiosity, Hermione slowly made her way over to the young boy.

"Hello. Are you lost?" Hardly, she thought. The child definitely didn't seem flustered, but she didn't know what else to open a dialogue with.

The boy slowly turned his head to look at Hermione. The young woman suppressed a gasp when he faced her full-on. The whole left side of the child's face was horribly scarred. Ugly burns and lacerations had been poorly tended to, leaving a twisted mangle of pink and red flesh from the crown of his head to the base of his slender neck. It reminded the witch of that villain from the American movies – what was his name? Two-face? – and her heart instantly cried out in pain at seeing such a devastating malformation on one so young. She pushed her pity aside, suspecting that if he was anything like his relative (for he most certainly was related to the Potions Master now that she saw him up close), she knew pity would not be welcome.

The young boy shook his head. "No ma'am. I'm just waiting for my father to return." He said simply, and then turned back to the plant.

Hermione paled. Father? "I see," She said as neutrally as she could, giving the child a warm, friendly smile as she drew up next to him. She was quiet for a moment. "Do you know what kind of plant that is?" she queried, gesturing to the spiny-leafed fledgling flora.

He rose an eyebrow at Hermione as if bored, and then nodded. "It's the Eurabiscus plant, often used in cosmetic potions and salves."

Well, that confirmed it. He definitely was the son of Professor Snape. No one besides Hermione and the Professor himself (and perhaps the late Albus Dumbledore) would have known that. Not to mention he appeared almost offended that she should even ask him something so obvious. Very Snape-like.

"Actually, it's the Spinip plant, commonly mistaken for the Eurabiscus plant because of its spiny leaves. They're very similar except for one rather large difference. The Spinip plant secretes an oil that, if ingested, acts as a fast moving poison. Its leaves, if touched by skin, leave a nasty, pus-infested rash for weeks."

The boy, who'd been about to touch the plant, froze and instantly pulled back. He flushed with embarrassment at the grievous mistake he'd been about to make and tried to cover it with a cough. Hermione spared him by asking his name as she reached into her bag and pulled out a Honeydukes Cauldron Cake, offering half of it to the child, who took it hesitantly, a suspicious look on his face. Hermione pretended not to notice and bit in to her share, proving that it wasn't poisoned.
"My name is Tobias. Tobias Snape," he said, before eagerly biting into the scrumptious pastry. "But 'ou 'an 'all me Toby." He said through a mouthful, before swallowing and giving her his first smile. It was absolutely heart-warming. "Thanks, this is really good." He took another bite, clearly savoring the delicious treat. He obviously didn't get them very often. "What's your name then?"

Hermione smiled brightly. "It's Hermione. Hermione Gr-"

"Miss…Granger." Said an unmistakable silken voice. A voice that iced her name in the frostiest of tones.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear, Hermione thought as she spun on her heel and beheld the Potions Master in all his intimidating glory. "Professor! You startled me." She stated unnecessarily. Professor Snape rose a finely arched eyebrow in a mirror imitation of his son before his eyes moved slowly to Toby and then back to his student. They narrowed dangerously and Hermione knew she was in for it. He opened his mouth but just as she had saved him, Toby saved her from what she knew to be a scathing tirade.

"Dad! This is Hermione. She gave me a Cauldron Cake and saved me from almost touching a Spinip plant. See?" he pointed to the offending plant, and then held up the last bite of cake.

The dark man looked at his son, silent for a moment, then said "And why, pray tell, did you almost touch a Spinip plant, Tobias."

Toby grimaced at the use of his full name, and then downright winced at the impending reprimand. He looked down at his feet, chastened. "Well, I thought it was a Eurabiscus plant. I was going to pick it for you." Snape's eyebrow rose higher and the boy's voice lost a bit of its brightness, making Hermione bristle a little. It was an honest mistake after all! Not to mention he was only five. Or six.

"Please, sir, he didn't-"

Snape shot her a look that told her to mind her business, then slowly moved past her to crouch down to Toby's level. When the boy didn't look at him, he tilted Toby's chin up to look at him. "Toby," the child looked at his father. "Toby, what is the difference between a Spinip plant and a Eurabiscus plant? I know you know it. Think." His tone was softer, gentler. Almost….fatherly. Hermione felt a tug at her heartstrings.

Toby paused, his nose scrunching up a little in concentration. "The…Spinip plant differs in…" he trailed off, thinking hard. It was adorable really. And the patience Snape showed truly was endearing. Then, like a light-bulb, Toby's face lit up and he grinned. "The Spinip plant differs from the Eurabiscus plant in that the leaves shrivel up when touched with a wand! Only…I don't have a wand."

"Correct. And what don't we do if we haven't a wand?" Snape questioned, his hand moving from the boy's chin to gently take hold of his arms, keeping his attention.

Toby, looking sheepish, mumbled "We don't touch things and instead look for you." Snape, much to Hermione's astonishment, smiled affectionately, perking the child up a bit.

"Good boy. That's right," Snape stood and straightened out his robes before turning to Hermione. "And luckily Miss Granger was here to prevent any accident." Somehow Hermione didn't think he was as grateful as a father should have been, given that she'd saved his son from a rather painful lesson. "Now, why don't you thank Miss Granger for your sweet and let's be off. We have more errands to run today before I drop you off at Mrs. Bigglesbee's house."
"Aww, Dad. Do I have to? I hate it there. It smells like…old people. And cat pee. And she tries to feed me rock cakes." The boy made a face that had Snape chuckling and Hermione hiding a smile.

"Yes, Toby. We've been over this a hundred times. She's the only magical nanny in Cokeworth who is able to watch you for the time I need. Come now, we-"

"You live in Cokeworth?" Hermione blurted out before she could stop herself, then turned beet-red as Snape turned to her, a slight sneer on his lips. She continued before he could reply. "Sorry sir, it's just…I live in East Anglia. I didn't realize we lived so near each other."

The silence that met this statement was deafening. "Charming." His tone suggested it was anything but, and Hermione felt her blush deepen. He let the moment stew before holding out his hand to Toby. "Come along. We've go-"

"Hermione could do it!"

Both teacher and student looked at the boy, bewildered. Toby, on the other hand, was beaming like a beacon. "She could nanny. Oh please dad? Please? She could teach me about plants and…things. And she doesn't smell like cat pee."

Hermione's eyes widened. Babysit Professor Snape's kid? She was still getting used to the idea that he even had one!

"I do not think Miss Granger is-"

"Oh Dad, come on. She knows the difference between a Spinip plant and a Eurabiscus. Mrs. Bigglesbee doesn't know the difference between flour and sugar, which you'd know if you tried one of her rock cakes! C'mon, please? Pleeeeeease?" Toby didn't tug on his father's sleeve like most kids would have, instead her used logic and common sense, much like Snape would have.

Hermione smiled affectionately at the young boy and couldn't help but instantly fall head-over-heels for the obviously intelligent child and thus, found herself agreeing with him. "Actually, I'm not busy tonight. I would be happy to look after him if you-"

"Enough. Both of you. Toby, you'll be going to Mrs. Bigglesbee's. End of discussion. Now, take my hand and let's go." Toby sullenly took his father's large hand, throwing Hermione a forlorn, pitiful look that made the young woman ache for him as though he'd been sentenced to some terrible fate. She remembered being that age and having awful babysitters.

Snape turned to her, intent on telling her off when he caught the look on her face as she gazed at his son. It squashed any harsh words he may have had for her and so instead, he said "Good day, Miss Granger," drawing her attention before pointedly giving her a look that plainly said her person would be threatened should she divulge any information about today's meeting to anyone.

Hermione didn't need 'telling' twice.
Later that evening found Hermione perched in the window seat of her room, a copy of "The Decline of Pagan Magic" by Bathilda Bagshot propped against her knees. She had been reading the same line over and over again for the last five minutes before she finally gave up and shutting the heavy tome with a dull thud. She sighed and stared out the window into the gloomy early evening. The street lamps were slowly flickering on as the sun sank lower in the sky, prompting the crickets and cicadas lulling summer music the darker it became. But Hermione paid no attention to the things that usually brought her peace and instead, continued to mull over the events of that afternoon.

Snape had a son. Did anyone in The Order know? Did Harry know? Dumbledore? She doubted it. But how on earth had he kept it a secret for so long? Almost instantly, she scoffed at the thought. The man had been a double agent for pity's sake; he was certainly no stranger to keeping secrets well, so it was quite possible this had been one of them. But surely Voldemort had at least known. Perhaps he'd put the boy into hiding during those dark days, only to bring him back once the Final Battle had ended. That was possible. It was also possible that the boy was merely a nephew of his from some unknown relative and he raised him like a son. Or maybe…

Hermione shook her head. There was no point in theorizing how Snape begot a child. She made a face. Begot. She knew, theoretically if not in practice, how a child was 'begot' and thinking of Snape in that way….she shuddered.

"Hermione, darling, there's a letter that's just arrived for you."

Hermione looked at her door where her mother's voice floated up from downstairs. "Coming mum!" she called before turning back to the window. Hermione couldn't help it. Her curiosity had been piqued and it wouldn't be abated until it had been satisfied.

Luckily, she wouldn't have to wait long.

Trotting down the stairs, she took the letter from her mother and looked at the return address. 62 Spinners End, Cokeworth, B64 5LG. Odd. She didn't know anyone from there. Who could possibly…

Hermione froze as she suddenly recognized the spiky handwriting. With care, she tore open the seal and pulled out a sheet of parchment, quickly scanning its contents.

Miss Granger,

Contrary to our earlier interaction, I now find myself in need of a nanny rather last minute. The woman who usually looks after Toby has taken ill suddenly, leaving me precious little time to procure someone else.

She could practically feel the irritation radiating off the paper.

I would be much obliged if you would consider taking the temporary post if your plans for this evening haven't changed. Your presence would be optimal.

Reading between the lines, Hermione knew that to mean he had no desire for the existence of his son to be spread to any more people.

We would need you here at nine o'clock sharp and staying until I return around two or three in the morning. You will be compensated.
Please send your reply post-haste. I've instructed Sterling to wait. Should you accept, please also include either your Floo number or a location from which to pick you up.

Regards,

Professor S. Snape

Hermione looked up and sure enough the owl, Sterling, sat perched atop the kitchen windowsill, it's lamp-like eyes staring unblinkingedly.

"Well dear? Who is it from?" Her mother asked as she continued washing the dinner dishes, utterly unfazed by the owl in front of her.

"It's from Professor Snape. He's...he's asked me to babysit this evening." Hermione said, still staring at the parchment unsure how to feel.

Hermione's father, John, chose that moment to enter the kitchen, moving to kiss his wife on the cheek before grabbing a towel and helping her dry the dishes. "Professor Snape? Your potions teacher? I didn't know he had a child. How old is he?"

"I think he's forty or forty-one." Hermione replied absently.

"No darling, the child. How old is he? Or she?" Jeanne Granger chuckled as she handed a dish to her husband.

"Oh, um. I think he's five or six. I'm not sure. I just found out- er, I mean met him today. Ran into them both while shopping for Harry's birthday present." Hermione glanced up at the clock and saw that it read 8:15pm. Well, that left her little time to prepare, for she certainly wasn't going to decline the request. Hastily grabbing a quill, she scribbled her acceptance before shoving it back in the envelope and handing it to Sterling, but not before offering the owl a bit of ham from that night's dinner. "Here you go. Thanks Sterling." She said, stroking his feathers before he took off.

"What time shall we expect you home?" Her father asked as she hastily made her way back upstairs to pack a few things.

"Um, he said he'd be back between two and three in the morning so sometime around there." She called back.

Five minutes later Hermione was back downstairs clutching her wand and beaded bag that was enchanted with an undetectable extension charm. Since her parents fireplace wasn't connected to the floo network, she had told Professor Snape to meet her at the old abandoned shed in the field behind her house.

Pecking her parents on their cheeks and leaving them with the Professor's address, Hermione bid them a hasty goodbye and made for the shed.

Twilight had descended by the time she reached it and the chorus of crickets and cicadas had grown louder. She loved the sounds of summer, it was the sound of home to her. Comforting like a well-worn blanket. She peered around the dilapidated wooden structure but found no sign of Professor Snape, so she plopped down on the grass and leaned against an old rusting piece of machinery, content with watching the fireflies blink in and out of the surrounding field. When she was a child, she and some of the local kids used to play hide-and-seek here. It held fond memories for her and soon she became lost in them.

"Do you make it a habit of sitting on the ground or is this location merely an exception?"
In a flash, Hermione was up, her wand pointed at the voice but a split second later, she lowered it as Professor Snape strode out from the shadows. She pursed her lips. "Do YOU make it a habit of sneaking up on young ladies in the dark, professor?" she snapped back before she could stop herself.

Snape merely blinked in response and Hermione felt a blush creep into her cheeks. She hadn't meant for it to come out quite like that. "Indeed." Was all he said.

Silence reigned for a moment before Hermione cleared her throat. "Um, so where's Toby?"

Snape regarded her silently, his head tilting to one side as he took in her casual attire, much different from the school robes he was used to seeing her in. These were far more….fitted, he noticed. "He's at home. He'll be fine for five minutes. I've warded the house against intruders and cast enchantments to let me know if he's in trouble."

"Oh. I see." More silence. Hermione shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Well…shall we be off then?"

Snape "In a moment, Miss Granger. First, I'd like to inform you of a few things before we arrive at my home."

_His home._ It was odd to think she'd be in her Professor's home shortly.

At that, Snape went through a list of instructions that included Toby's bedtime and rules for the house. "And please, no sweets. He's already had some today." He said pointedly. "Now, if you please…" He held out his arm for her to take so he could apparate them to his home. Hermione hesitated, then curled her hand into it's crook, startled to feel the corded muscles beneath her fingers. He pulled her in closer, tucking her smaller frame against his larger one before there was a pulling sensation and she felt as though she was being sucked through a straw, and then it was gone. She opened her eyes to find herself at the doorstep of a cozy cottage complete with a picket fence and a garden to make any herbalist (and Potion's Master) green with envy.

This was Severus Snape's home and it was not at all what she'd expected.

There were a few more instructions and a hasty tour given from the entryway before he gave her what appeared to be a glass paperweight, instructing her that if anything were to go wrong that she was to tap it with her wand and he'd be back straight away. Then, after giving his son a hug, he disappeared back into the night, giving no indication as to where he was going.

Hermione had babysat a handful of times for her neighbors and parents' friends, but she'd never looked after a magical family before and she found she quite liked it. Toby showed her his favorite toys (a child's wand, beginner's potion kit, a few Weasley products and some other odds and ends) and then they went for a walk in the garden where he impressed her with his knowledge of all the plants growing there. Before either of them knew it, his bed time drew near and she took him upstairs to perform the nightly ablutions and then tucked him into bed with a story.

As she descended the stairs she heard movement and found that Snape had returned much earlier than anticipated and, with a stiff nod of thanks, he escorted her home.

All-in-all, Hermione thought, it had actually been a pleasant evening.
Hermione had been tending to her own garden when the second owl came two days later. Once more she agreed to watch Toby and met Snape at the shed behind her house. Things weren’t nearly as awkward this time around, but Snape was still as brusque as ever. He reiterated a few of the rules but Hermione’s competency was clear and within five minutes of bringing her to his home, he was gone.

That night wasn’t nearly as rushed, in fact Hermione found it was fairly relaxed as her and Toby seemed to fall in to an easy routine. After three games of exploding snap, four games of gobstones, one of wizard’s chest and a brief experiment with his beginner’s potion kit (where they made what he called ‘gak’, a sort of gray putty kids played with) she’d put Toby to bed where he’d fallen asleep almost instantly.

Now alone, Hermione realized she actually had time to wander the house. The other night when she had been there Snape had returned so early that she didn’t have time to see anything other than the living room and Toby’s room. Now, she found that in addition to Toby’s cheerful blue and green room, there was a typical hallway closet, a bathroom and another bedroom. Professor Snape’s bedroom. Despite herself, Hermione felt an inexplicable tinge of pink creep up her cheeks as she stared at the closed door before making a hasty retreat. Downstairs there was a living room with squashy armchairs and walls lined with books (she’d definitely be looking through those) as well as an old secretary Hermione wagered was a family heirloom. Adjacent to that was a small but sufficient kitchen stocked with healthy snacks, something that her tummy told her to investigate later, as well as another bathroom, closet…and a locked and warded door. She stared at it for a long while before finally deciding against any attempt to enter and instead, went back into the kitchen for some tea and ginger snaps.

His home was not at all what she imagined it to be. It was cheery and warm, like a home should be. Not like….well, not like the dungeons where she was used to seeing him. It made sense, but it was still strange. Would the surprises never cease? Everything she thought she knew about Professor Snape - even after the revelations Harry revealed - suddenly seemed minuscule in comparison to what she’d learned today. He might have been a snarky, right bastard in the classroom but outside of it in the presence of his son he was….almost human.

Back in the living room, Hermione made herself at home by selecting (with difficulty) one of the books from his vast collection before curling into the over-stuffed loveseat to have a good read as she patiently waited for the dark wizard to return.

Snape pinched the area between his eyes and sighed as he de-warded the entrance to his home and quietly walked inside. Tonight had been exhausting. The war had ended two and a half months ago and they were still conducting raids almost every night. It was exhausting and quite a lot of work. He wouldn’t have even bothered going except for the fact that since he was an ex-death eater, he was the only one among them that knew the locations of each of the other death eaters’ homes. Tonight had been the Mulciber estate. Not an easy target. It had taken them the better part of six hours to clear out the house. Percy Weasley had sustained a mild case of the pinching hex when he foolishly touched something without testing it first but other than that, nothing terrible had happened. It was just….a lot of work. A lot of…memories.
Snape took off his outer robe and hung it in the foyer before heading into the living room where he drew up short. He'd nearly forgotten she was here. Miss Granger was curled up fast asleep on his loveseat, an open book resting in her lap. Snape knew he should wake her, but he couldn't bring himself to, not yet anyway. For the moment he simply wanted to savor the peace and quiet of his home without having to worry about Toby, or his student, or anyone else for that matter. These were luxuries he was no longer afforded, now that he had a child in his care. In a way, he'd traded one master for another, no longer slave to Voldemort or Dumbledore's plans, but rather his own flesh and blood. Not, necessarily, that it could compare - this was a master he willingly served, that of parenthood. But it was new to him, even after a year he still wasn't quite used to it. Being a spy had been demanding, ruthless, and unforgiving; parenting was all of those things but with the added burden of being under the umbrella of love and care. Yet another thing that was new to Snape - he'd only ever had to look after himself. Well, that wasn't entirely true - he looked after his students as well, but they didn't have the affection he held for Toby.

His gaze focused on Miss Granger. She looked so peaceful and suddenly, Snape became aware of the fact that she was no longer a child, but a woman. Seventeen, if he remembered correctly. And, reluctant thought he was to admit it, she was no longer that buck-tooth know-it-all of six years ago. To an extent, he still saw her as that - it was hard not to, having been her teacher for over half a decade - but he was man enough to notice a few things. Her bushy brown hair had finally tamed to sleek waves, her face had lost it's cherub-like appearance to reveal high cheekbones and full lips, and her figure had filled out from the scrawny, stick-thin pole to womanly curves.

Snape bristled before abruptly headed for the kitchen. He was above such thoughts and had little time to entertain them. When he entered the kitchen he was surprised to find a pot of hot tea and a plate of biscuits waiting for him. Had Miss Granger done this?

Briefly, he glanced back towards the entrance to the living room, a peculiar look flashing across his features before helping himself to two cups of tea and three biscuits. He spent the quiet moments enjoying the hot liquid as he mulled over the raid, making mental notes here and there. After a good fifteen minutes, Snape finally felt ready to wake her up so they could disapparate back to her home. Placing the china in the sink, he re-entered the living area and cleared his throat. “Miss Granger, it's time to get you home.”

Hermione woke up slowly before looking owlishly up at her Professor for a moment, dazed and confused as she remembered where she was. “Oh…Prof…essor Sn-Snape,” she yawned, stretching in her seat for a moment. “I'm sorry I fell asleep. I'd intended to stay up all night but-”

“Do not fuss, Miss Granger. It's perfectly reasonable. It is, after all, half past three in the morning,” he took the book from her and placed it back on the shelf, allowing her a moment to compose herself. “Come along, let's get you home.”

Hermione obliged, grabbing her bag and wand and following him outside. She took his arm and he apparated them back to the shed where he insisted on walking her home. Once at her front door, she turned to look at him. “Thank you, sir. You didn't have to.”

Snape waved her thanks aside. “The Dark Lord may be gone, Miss Granger, but there are still substantial dangers out there; there are many people that wish you harm.”

Hermione hesitated. It was a stark reminder, but she didn't refute it. Since the final battle, there had been reportings of attacks on those who'd stood against Voldemort; Neville, Luna, Dean, and the Patil twins had all gone in to hiding after being ambushed at various public places. It was a necessary precaution until things died down more. Herself, Ron, and Harry had all opted to remain in the public eye, refusing to be intimidating and instead choosing to prepare themselves through their
own competency as well as with some aid from the ministry in the form of auror-created wards and secret keepers.

"Still, I appreciate it nonetheless." She gave him a half smile. "You have a wonderful son, Professor. He’s intelligent and sharp as a whip. I really enjoy babysitting him and hope to do so again."

It was Snape's turn to give pause. He was proud of his son - there was no denying that - but it was different hearing it voiced by someone else and it had taken him aback slightly. He didn't know how to react, so he gave a curt nod. “Thank you, Miss Granger.”

Hermione nodded before turning to enter the door to her family home.

“Miss Granger…” she paused, looking over her shoulder to see a strange sight: Snape, hesitating. She resisted the urge to raise her eyebrows, not wanting to make him feel even more awkward or uncomfortable than he clearly was at the moment. He cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. “Miss Granger, the only person who knew about Tobias’ existence was Albus Dumbledore. For the time being, I’d appreciate it if it stayed that way until such time I deem it appropriate to properly introduce him to Wizarding Society.”

Hermione nodded. “Of course, Professor. You have my word.”

He gave another curt nod before pulling out a small purse from a pocket in his frock coat. “Here. This should be sufficient.” He handed Hermione the purse, and then turned on his heel, pausing just before reaching the landing. “I…may call on you again, Miss Granger. If it’s not too much trouble.” Hermione shook her head. “Good. Well, good night then Miss Granger.”

“Goodnight, Professor Snape.”

And with a small ‘pop’ the Potions Master was gone.
The Biscuit Tin Incident

Over the next month, Hermione found herself looking after Toby almost three days a week. Sometimes it was for a couple hours, other times it was for six or seven, and after each time Hermione found herself becoming more and more enamored with little Toby. He was more than just intelligent; he was inquisitive, curious and startlingly observant. Very Slytherin. He reminded her a bit of herself at that age, except where she had been unintentionally bossy and even a tad obnoxious, Toby was careful and shrewd. Much like his father.

At first, upon returning back from the raids Snape had immediately taken Hermione home, however gradually, on the nights when he was back at a reasonable hour they had begun to engage in conversation about anything from Toby’s antics to the latest articles in Potions Weekly. Both of them had begun to discover sides to one another they didn’t know existed and before they knew it, a tremulous friendship had started. He had even invited her to join himself and Toby on a few outings to collect potions ingredients around the countryside. She knew this was partly so she could watch Toby for him, but he also made sure to educate her as well, inviting her to explain the properties of each ingredient to Toby while Snape collected them.

Both Snape and Hermione loved these outings more than either was willing to admit.

One night when little Toby had taken to bed early, Hermione and Snape were sitting in the living room discussing Jade Beetle wings. Snape was sitting casually in one of the over-stuffed armchairs, legs stretched out in front of him as a tumbler of firewhiskey settled easily in his hand. His black eyes were slightly glazed over with the effects of his previous tumbler of the amber liquid, but his senses were still fairly sharp. He watched with a quirk on his lips as Hermione protested the difference between crushed Jade Beetle and chopped. He knew crushed was a better absorbent, but frankly he enjoyed getting the young witch riled up; it was endlessly entertaining. Her brown eyes sparked with the heat of debate and the more impassioned she was, the wilder her hair seemed to become as her gesturing disrupted the already loose ponytail at the nape of her neck. His fingers lazily traced the design on the crystal glass as her voice seemed to fade into the background, his attention now on her mouth. She had lovely lips – soft and heart shaped, plump like a juicy peach. He casually wondered if he bit one, would they taste as sweet? Merlin, it had been so long since he’d sampled such things.

“You are correct, Miss Granger,” was his lazy reply as he took another sip of his nightcap.

“But sir, you must see that chopped simply doesn’t—wait, what?” Hermione’s expression went from almost pleading to complete puzzlement in less than a blink of the eye. Snape chuckled, turning her expression once more to one of surprise.

“I said you are correct. Crushed is indeed better. Naturally.”

Hermione was dumbfounded. “Well yes, I am. But…I don’t understand. You…you admitted it.” She flushed as she said this, earning her another deep rumbling of amusement from her Professor.

Snape sat forward, his elbows coming to rest on his knees as he swirled the contents of his glass absentely. “Miss Granger, I have the capacity to admit when others are correct, I just choose not to inflate egos unnecessarily.”

“And does mine need inflating, sir?” She asked cheekily, her own eyebrow raising. The dark wizard was silent for a long moment, his eyes never leaving Hermione.
“I think, Miss Granger, that you are an incredibly gifted witch. Your intellect rivals even mine at your age and your talent and skill surpasses any student I’ve had the misfortune of teaching these last twenty years.” Snape saw the young lady squirm in her seat, her flush spreading further down her neck. “I also think that you are the only student I’ve had in the last twenty years that is worth my time and attention. I…” he paused, looking away from her. “I regret how I treated you in the past. Circumstances being what they were…” he trailed off, both of them lost in their respective thought for a few moments.

“Potions is my favorite class.” Hermione blurted suddenly, making Snape look up at her in mild surprise.

“Don’t let Minerva hear you say that. She’d turn me into a pumpkin and give me to Hagrid to carve for the Halloween feast.” His voice was even and flat and it took Hermione a second to gather what he said.

She burst out laughing, the sound so pleasant that it made Snape smile, if only partially. “Yes, well it’s true though! Transfiguration is lovely and at times, stimulating, so is Charms, but Potions,” she paused to curl a lock of hair behind her ear. “Well, Potions is the only class that consistently challenges me. It doesn’t require silly wand-waving or frivolous incantations,” He smirked at the turn of phrase. “It requires infinitely more skill and precision. It…” she paused, trying to find the right words. “It challenges one’s mind to find the right ingredients, the right measurements and precise movements.”

Snape rose his eyebrow but didn’t respond immediately as he stood to gather their empty glasses and head for the kitchen. “Potions isn’t a class students tend to gravitate towards.” He replied, hearing her following him with the plate of leftover biscuits. “Understandably, though. Dunderheads like the ones I teach rarely have the aptitude to catch on so quickly, you being the exception.” He placed the dishes in the sink before turning around and folding his arms across his chest. Hermione was currently attempting to reach the biscuit tin with little success.

“No, I’m quite serious Professor. Potions is like one large algorithmic equation, except if all of the components aren’t correct the results could be disastrous. But…still…..” Her blouse rode up a bit, revealing creamy skin as he watched with amusement as she failed to snatch the tin with her meager height, seeming to forget she had a wand. “It’s thrilling, really. You never fail to push us to do more, to be more,” she jumped but didn’t manage to snag it and harrumphed in frustration. “You expect greatness and I’ve seen you pull it from even Neville Longbottom. I mean, by my second year, I was able to brew a polyjuice potion under your tutelage, having never seen a cauldron until the year prior.” He finally took pity on her and moved to assist, when she jumped again. The tips of her fingers managed to dislodge the stubborn container, however she landed on his boot and lost her balance. Not prepared for an unstable woman, Snape lost his balance as well and in a tangle of limbs and cookie tins, they tumbled to the floor, Snape landing with a thud and Hermione with a muffled squeak on top of him. The tin cracked Hermione on her head sharply and she yelped with pain.

Snape quickly became aware that in the commotion, his hands had gone to her waist in a reflexive attempt to stabilize her, but where there should have been fabric, her felt warm skin. Her body was lying pleasantly against his and it felt warm and soft, causing a stir in his nether regions.

“Ohhhh, ow,” came her muffled voice as she squirmed on top of him, trying to dislodge her trapped arms from between them.

It did little to assuage the effects she already had on him, but he grit his teeth, attempting to help her. “Are you all right, Miss Granger?”

“Merlin’s bollocks,” she cursed, making him smirk as she finally freed her arms and went to sit up,
but the motion was interrupted by a dull tug on his frock coat. She yelped in pain again and he realized her hair was caught in one of his many buttons.

She cursed again and wriggled even more. Snape winced and closed his eyes, nostrils flaring. “Miss…Miss Granger,” Snape said in a strange voice. “Miss Granger, might I request that you desist your squirming?”

“Sorry Professor, I’ll get us untangled. You’re okay, right?” she asked, shifting her body along his making him grit his teeth.

“Miss Granger—”

“But a moment, I—”

“GRANGER!”

Finally, he seemed to have her attention and Hermione ceased abruptly when it finally became clear why he’d urged her to stop. “Oh…oh! I…I’m sorry!”

If Snape were capable of blushing, he would have it was only through sheer force of will the he was able to concentrate on the dilemma and said “It’s…fine. Just…let me do it.”

Still as a statue, Hermione gave a tiny nod and allowed his long fingers to gently work out the tangle of hair around his button. After a few moments, she was finally free and managed to clamber up, still clutching her head and blushing furiously.

“I…I’m so sorry Professor I didn’t…that is I should have…oh blast it all, where is my wand?” She was so flustered that she couldn’t even look at him.

Snape rose slowly, a tight look on his face as he attempted to cover his reaction. “It’s in your back pocket, Miss Granger.” He said stiffly.

Hermione made an aggravated noise before whipping it out and with a few somewhat aggressive waves, she cleaned up the mess, placed the biscuits back in the tin, put the tin on the shelf and scourgified the dirty dishes. As he watched her, he noticed that the blush hadn’t receded and her movements were slightly jerky. And her pupils were dilated. He frowned, a small part of him still embarrassed and slightly concerned, but the greater part was intrigued despite himself.

When she was finished, Hermione turned to him, still avoiding looking at his person. “Ok, well, um…I better get going. It’s late.” She busied herself with fixing her hair as she strode out of the kitchen, refusing to meet his eyes. Snape’s frown deepened and it was a moment before he followed her out.

Once in the entryway, Snape caught Hermione’s elbow. “Miss Granger,” he began. Finally, she looked at him and he felt his words catch in his throat. Her face was stricken and she shied away from him and if it weren’t for his years of practice as a spy he might have mistaken her reaction as simple embarrassment. As it was Snape had been trained well to look past the surface emotions on a person’s face to see behind the mask everyone put forth; Hermione’s embarrassment was on an insecure level, not a superficial one.

It shouldn’t have bothered him, after all most of his life was spent around pre-pubescent teenagers who were equal parts randy and bodily awkward, but Miss Granger was different. It appeared she her desire for acceptance on an intellectual level extended towards a physical level as well, and where the former had been achieved her first year, the latter had been grossly underdeveloped. How curious. Hadn’t she had boyfriends? Lovers?
Perhaps he was merely caught up in the moment, or perhaps he’d had a finger too much of that
damnable liquor, either way Severus found himself speaking words of comfort. “Miss Granger,
earlier when I remarked on your skill and intellect I neglected to add…” he paused for a split-second.
“…to add that you have become a extraordinary woman in your own right. I have watched you grow
from a young, bushy-haired know-it-all into a mature, comely young lady. You would do well to
give yourself credit.”

Hermione’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second before her face turned pink…but she didn’t look
away, indicating that maybe, just maybe she believed him. Good. She should believe him. He didn’t
go spouting off such nonsense if it weren’t true.

Finally, Hermione found her voice. “I…th-thank you sir-”

“Miss Granger, we can dispense with the honorifics whilst in each others’ company, I think.” He
gave her a reassuring half smile, which she returned.

“Of course, Professor. I…” she paused, searching for the right words. “…thank you. That’s more
praise than I deserve but it means quite a lot.” He knew she was sincere, even if her words deflected.
The insecurity was still present, but perhaps that was something he could work on.

He released her elbow and after a few words of farewell, Hermione disapparated back home, leaving
Severus to ponder this knew development.
Time flew by and before either of them realized it, the beginning of the school year was a scant three weeks away. This worried Hermione in particular as she wasn’t sure she was ready. It would only be her this final year as Harry and Ron had decided to assist Kingsley Shacklebolt in rounding up stray dark wizards rather than return. Hermione desired to take her N.E.W.T.S. so she might pursue a higher education.

On top of that, this summer had been a much-needed reprieve from the magical world for her, especially after the final battle last May. Along with Harry and Ron, she had been bombarded with press and admirers when word had gotten out about their exploits that year. Letters and packages had begun pouring in from every corner of the world; she had secretly enjoyed it for a while, especially when she received gifts of books and potions materials, but it quickly wore off when she received a few less-than pleasant letters. Realizing the possible dangers then, she wound up filing a request at the Ministry of Magic for her home to become unplottable and for any mail to be redirected towards the Department of Magical Post. It was there that it was sorted and any disparaging or threatening pieces were investigated while all fan mail and gifts were delivered to her once a week by a ministry official. Harry had done the same but Ron refused, basking in the attention as though it were a well-deserved reward, which she supposed to him it was in a way. Besides, he had Percy and Mr. Weasley to help sort through any unwanted post.

Apart from the weekly owls she received and the occasional gathering for a memorial or award, the three of them had come to an unspoken agreement to take a bit of a break from hanging out, each needing time alone to sort through the aftershocks that came with such a cataclysmic event and to be with their families. Hermione found that being able to immerse herself in the muggle world where she was no more interesting than the next person was a relief that no other outlet would have been able to afford her. But in three weeks’ time, she’d be going back to school where she’d be thrust into it all over again and that made her nervous and apprehensive.

What as more, Hermione realized that she would genuinely miss the friendship she’d begun with Professor Snape since she was certain he’d revert back to the snarky bastard that he was once back in the dungeons. Truth be told, his company had become a fresh breeze in the midst of all the smoggy stale air. He was one of the most intelligent people she had ever known, challenging her at ever moment and keeping her overactive brain fed with almost daily musings and conversations. She’d never been happier intellectually. And what was more, he never treated her like a war hero, nor did she treat him that way – they were just two magical beings interested in scholarly pursuits.

But by the same coin, she had never been more physically aware of herself or her Professor, either.

That night – she had dubbed it ‘the biscuit tin incident’ – made Hermione realize something about Professor Snape she’d never considered before: he was a man. A hot-blooded, flesh and bone man who was just as prone to the whims of the body as anyone else. It was peculiar. Of course she knew he was male, but she never saw him as more than just her teacher. One of the adult figures in her life that was somewhat untouchable, sort of like her parents. He had been an authoritative figure in her life for the last seven years who was simply in charge of her education and well-being while at school. Nothing more

But the moment she’d felt his reaction to her, that changed. And it was solidified when he told her
she was pretty.

Suddenly, she now noticed the way he moved, was aware of distances between them when they were together, became distracted by his deep baritone voice and caught herself wondering if he liked what she was wearing or what he thought about her hair. It was foolish and annoying and the minute she caught herself she ruthlessly stamped down those notions before finding something to distract herself with. It was a fluke, that’s all. A product of spending more time with him; she’d get over it after a few days.

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It was an overcast day when Snape had invited Hermione along to assist him in collecting some seaside ingredients along the White Cliffs of Dover. It was just the two of them as it was too dangerous a location for little Toby so he had left the young boy with Mrs. Bigglesbee. They were going to apparate to the edge of the bluffs where they would descend a steep, narrow path that lead them into a cave where he intended on collecting rare Albatross Fungi. To apparate there was too dangerous as the apparition point had too wide a margin for error.

“Have you ever been to the Dover Cliffs, Miss Granger?” Severus asked as he gathered some equipment from his shelves and handed it to Miss Granger.

Hermione took the tools and placed them in her magical bag. “A long time ago. I don’t remember much.”

He led them to the entryway once they’d collected everything. “They are something of a marvel, however the wind is devilishly fierce, so might I suggest securing your hair under a coif of some sort?” Snape advised as he secured his own lose hair into a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Hermione tried and failed to not notice how becoming he looked with his hair back; it made him look younger and quite handsome. She could see his strong, square jawline and followed it to his finely accentuated cheekbones. He should wear it back more often, or perhaps simply style it a little more.

“Miss Granger?”

Snape was looking at her with an eyebrow raised and Hermione realized she was staring “Hm? Oh! Yes. Right, sorry.”

Severus watched with a slightly amused look as the pink-cheeked witch banded the lose strands into a tight bun, and then conjured a kerchief and secured it over her hair. It hadn’t escaped him how, however since that night when he’d told her she was pretty, she’d been acting differently. Suddenly she wore clothes that suited her more, she was blushing more frequently and he’d caught her watching him when she thought he wasn’t looking.

A year ago (hell, four months ago) Severus would have not only rolled his eyes and dismissed the misguided crush as absurd and inconsequential, but he would have firmly stamped it down by using that information to exploit her for both his amusement and her humiliation.

Now, however, he saw potential far beyond that; he wasn’t the same man he was a year ago. War changed a man.

“Do you have the empty vials?” He asked, pulling on his cloak. She held up her infamous bag and
then reached for her own cloak before stopping to reconsider and ultimately deciding against it. Cloaks and wind might have painted a dramatic picture, but they were damned annoying in high winds. She knew they wouldn’t be terribly long so she’d just wear the heavy cardigan she’d brought.

“Good.” He said, and then held out his arm. “Best be off then.” She hesitated, staring at the proffered appendage before curling her fingers into the crook of his arm. He pulled her closer against him - noting the way she fit into his side - and felt her tense then shiver. His smirk broadened. He rather enjoyed this affect he seemed to have on her and stored that information away for later as he concentrated, then apparated them to the cliff-side.

Instantly they both felt the wind whip around them, snapping at their heels and tearing at their hair, but through that he heard her gasp. When he turned, the look of pure wonderment on her face was so intense and infectious that he felt his lips lift in a smile despite himself.

Gently he extracted himself from her grasp and led them uphill through the long grass towards where he knew the path lay hidden.

Hermione followed, taking in her surroundings with interest and amazement. Sure, she’d been here before but not as an adult and this place was utterly incredible. It’s a shame it was so miserable out. As if that thought was heard by mother nature herself, a gust of wind came out of no where pushing against her slight frame and causing her to stumble into Snape, who caught he easily. “As I said, the wind can be ferocious,” he said, righting her and ignoring her hasty apology. “Miss Granger I’d like to also remind you that the cliffs are composed mainly of soft chalk and prone to collapse. You must be cautious of your movements; step where I step and no where else, do you understand?”

“Yes, I know,” she said dismissively as she straightened her rumpled clothes and started forward, more interested in getting to the edge of the cliff. It was chillier than she thought it’d be and the sooner they got there, the sooner she could get home and pretend like she hadn’t enjoyed the way his hands felt on her. Snape frowned but quickly caught up with then overcame her so he was in the lead. Once they arrived it took only a few minutes to find the path, if you could call it a path. It was more like a strip of land slightly matted down more than the surrounding area. As Hermione peered over the edge, she suddenly wondered if this was a good idea.

Snape, on the other hand, wasted no time and carefully began his descent. Every few steps he would turn and offer his hand out to assist her down. The first few times she took it, but soon she became self-conscious and declined any help. She didn’t want him to think her so incompetent that she couldn’t even handle hiking.

Not that she thought that he thought she was incompetent. Clearly he felt she had some competence or else he wouldn’t have invited her along. She wondered if that would extend into the school year. Perhaps he might consider her as an assistant? Maybe some additional lessons? Or, dare she hope, perhaps he’d consider her proposal to specialize in Potions? After all, every seventh year was required to choose a specialty and, although everyone expected her to choose transfiguration, it was in potions that her heart and mind truly lay.

Hermione took another step down and suddenly the ground beneath her foot abruptly gave way and she yelped. Snape turned just in time to see her pitch headlong towards the edge. He reacted fast, throwing himself forward and wrapping strong arms around her waist, yanking her body safely into his as they landed with a hard thud against the cliff face, forcing the air from his lungs slightly but successfully arresting her sudden movement.

The two of them stood still for a moment, Severus bearing the brunt of their weight, but hardly caring. Her body was warm and solid against his, she wasn’t falling, wasn’t struggling. She was here. With him. Everything was okay. “Miss Granger, are you quite all right?” His voice was soft,
but she heard it, she felt the way his warm breath tickled her ear and Hermione’s heart raced with adrenaline as she held on to him, her breath coming fast as she trembled in his arms. It was a moment before she could respond.

“Y-yes, I’m so s-sorry. I…I stepped exactly where you did, I swear! I was paying attention but-”

“Shhh, it’s fine,” he interrupted her nervous babbling. “You’re fine. Everything is okay. You did exactly as I told you, this ground is simply unstable. If you want, we can turn back-”

Hermione shook her head, interrupting him as she pulled back. “No, no I’m fine. We’re almost there, right?”

Snape nodded, releasing her from his steady hold once he was certain she was stable. “Yes, it’s just around that outcropping there.” Hermione nodded and after a moment’s hesitation, Snape turned and continued their descent.

Five minutes later the both of them were standing in the mouth of the musty cave. It wasn’t very large, only extending back about ninety meters and at it’s widest point it could fit about four fully grown adults shoulder-to-shoulder. And although Hermione was glad to be out of the harsh wind, it was just as chilly and damp - if not more so - here as it was out there.

Snape took out his wand and muttered “Lumos.” Illuminating the bleak fissure.

Hermione gasped for the second time that day upon seeing the fungi, or at least she assumed it was the fungi because no rock she had ever seen glowed like that. “Oh wow,” she breathed, stepping further inside to observe the unusual plant.

“What are the properties of Albatross Fungi, Miss Granger?” Came the voice of her professor.

Hermione observed the fluorescent blues, greens and golds, getting as close as she could but careful not to touch them. “The fumes of the steamed fungi acts as a powerful agent that brings the breather extreme clarity. It can be used in smaller doses as part of the most powerful Calming Draught and Pepper Up potion on earth, but if too much is used it can put the imbibers in a deep, irreversible coma. If touched by human skin, the fungi instantly withers and dies, losing all magical properties and instantly knocking out the one who touched it for a period of time. Theorists say that it’s main purpose has yet to be discovered in the potions community.”

“Precisely,” his silken voice came from directly beside her, startling the young woman into turning sharply towards him, a barely suppressed gasp on her lips.

“P-Professor?” she asked in confusion, partly as a way to distract him from her reaction to his unexpected nearness.

Naturally, Snape noticed her reaction and was pleased by it, but he feigned ignorance. “It only grows in a few locations on earth and even then, during a short window of time. I am working on a few experiments myself in order to unlock its….secrets.” He paused, watching her out of the corner of his eye, the double meaning not lost on her as she collected herself and attempted to discreetly step away from his closeness. He didn’t allow her that and instead, moved with her as he pretended to observe the fungi more closely.

“You’ll be the one collecting it.”

Again, Hermione turned to him in surprise and uncertainty, but he detected some excitement in her eyes as well. “But…I don’t…don’t know how,” she said, glancing back at the plant.
“I will instruct you. Now, take out the silver paring knife.” he said simply.

She stared at him, hesitating only a second, before reaching into her beaded bag and fishing out the instrument while he pulled out his dragonhide gloves from the pockets of his robes and pulled them on. “Good. Accio glass jars.” Two large glass containers flew out of her bag and into his large hands.

“Won’t I need gloves as well?” she asked, eying the leather expectantly.

“No, the gloves are too bulky for you to be able to shear the fungi off the rock. You’ll be unable to obtain the proper angle.” It made sense, but it also made Hermione nervous. If she touched the fungi, she’d be knocked unconscious. Still, if Snape trusted her and told her she could do it, then she supposed she could.

Hermione watched him set the bag down then turned to her. “Now, hold the paring knife always at a thirty to forty five degree angle to the fungi and carve it off as close to the rock as you possibly can. I will hold the jars beneath so as to catch the fungi.”

He watched her expectantly and after another moment’s hesitation, she stepped closer to the wall and carefully brought the long handled knife up to the first cluster of fungi. She tilted the knife to her best approximation of a thirty-degree angle and with all the gentleness of giving a baby its first haircut, she trimmed the first bit of fungi from the rocks.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding when she saw the plant fall into the glass jars Snape held expectantly beneath her hands. They still glowed their brilliant colors and Hermione let out a small squeak of excitement. “Oh! I did it!” she exclaimed to herself, but Snape heard it and couldn’t help but smile at the child-like enthusiasm she displayed, a flush rising to her freckled cheeks and making him wish dearly for a single moment that he could kiss them both.

“Yes yes, well done. Now come on, let’s move on to the next bunch. I’d like to be home before sunset,” he said in that familiar sardonic tone she knew so well, jerking them both out of their separate moments and back to the task at hand.

They moved on to another clump and she sheered that one off just as well. “Look for patches that glow more brightly than the others – those are riper and more powerful.” He said and she followed his orders. One clump after another they went through and soon, Hermione became so adept at the task that Snape nearly had trouble keeping up with the jars. They moved around the cave, Hermione looking carefully for areas that shone more brightly than the rest until within two hours they had filled the two jars plus three more.

They were on the last jar when the both of them stepped back and surveyed the cave. “I believe that is all we can acquire. The rest is too far up to reach. Come, let’s depart.” Snape said, rummaging in his cloak for the jar’s lid.

“No wait, there is one more patch I think I can reach. We have a little more room left in the Jar. No point in letting it go to waste,” Hermione chirped, stepping forward before raising her foot to a jagged rock that jutted out from the wall. Her tennis shoes weren’t meant for climbing and the surface of the rock was damp so she had to be careful.

Snape frowned. “No Miss Granger, it is too high. I have enough to last me the year; it isn’t necessary-”

“I can reach it, just hold the jar below me to catch it,” she persisted as she awkwardly raised herself up into a precarious position.
Snape turned just in time to see her awkward position. He felt his heart jump at the dangerous stance she had taken and immediately stood to go to her aid. “Miss Granger, don’t--!” But it was too late. Hermione’s foot slipped and in an effort to try and balance herself, she grabbed hold of a large clump of the fungi that covered the rock she’d tried to steady herself on. Her eyes instantly rolled into the back of her head before her body became limp and she toppled backwards.

Snape had only just enough time to catch her before she hit the ground.
When Hermione woke, it was as if from a mystical dream; there was the sound of distant waves hitting rocks far below and the smell of the sea that wafted in on a damp breeze. It was pleasant and lulling and for a few moments, she did not recall where she was or how she’d gotten there and she did not care – it was so peaceful, so warm.

“Miss Granger.” There it was, that deep baritone. His voice was soft, but firm, causing the peaceful fog to gradually dissipate before quite suddenly, Hermione remembered what had happened.

She bolted upright. “Oh no.” she said forlornly, a heated blush creeping up her cheeks as she slowly turned to where she’d heard his voice near the cave wall. He was leaning against it - no fungi around him - arms crossed and staring at her. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” she said with remorse, her eyes finding his in the soft wandlight.

Snape had been prepared to berate her as soon as she was coherent enough, but seeing the mortified and regretful look on her face, he felt the words die in his throat. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s all right Miss Granger. The important thing is that you are okay.”

“Oh Professor, I’m so, so sorry. Truly. I thought I could reach it! I didn’t think my footing was off and…wait, how long have I been out?” she looked around realizing that the cave had gone from being lit by the grey skies and a lumos charm, to being barely lit at all. She didn’t even know where the mouth of the cave was; that meant it must be quite late.

“Six hours, Miss Granger. I’m afraid we’ll be staying the night.” He stated, beginning to pace along the wall.

Snape had sent a patronus to Mrs. Bigglesbee almost the instant the young girl had passed out, having calculated how much of her flesh had touched the fungi and estimating from that how long she’d be out. He’d been more than a little annoyed, but he was also relieved that she was okay. The properties of Albatross Fungi was still being refined so he couldn’t be one hundred percent certain that she’d wake in the hours he’d estimated, but when she did, he felt the tension ease from his body.

Hermione took in her surroundings a little more and realized she was seated on a mattress he must have conjured with what she recognized as Snape’s cloak draped over her lap. Now that she was sitting upright, it had pooled at her waist, no longer shielding her torso and causing her to shiver a little. Briefly, she berated herself for not bringing a cloak as he began to gather his, intending on giving it back when he shook his head. “Keep it. You have far more use for it than I do at the moment.”

Hermione nodded gratefully, pulling the thick woolen material around her shoulders and huddling in its folds. She inhaled deeply, smelling pine, sea salt and smoke from the many lit cauldrons it had seen. The scent was distinctly Snape and she found she never wanted it to dissipate.

“Are you hungry? I’ve conjured a thermos of tea and some sandwiches for us. It’ll warm you up, no doubt.” Hermione nodded, scooting over to allow him space on the twin-size mattress. He peered at the open spot for a moment, and then seated himself. Hermione instantly felt warmer with him near.
“Professor, can’t we just apparate out of here?” She asked suddenly, accepting the cap filled with hot tea he offered her.

Snape gave her a sardonic look and then shook his head. “I’m afraid not. It would appear that the fungi’s magical properties are so concentrated in the cave that it creates a sort of magical barrier. One can apparate in, but not out.” He handed her a ham and cheese sandwich before taking one himself.

Both were quiet as they each munched on the light fare.

“And I suppose a fire is out of the question?”

Silence.

“You did think of that, didn’t you?”

His lack of response was telling and Hermione tried not to laugh, but failed as a small chuckle escaped her lips, much to Snape’s annoyance.

“I…suppose the weather is still warm enough yet that it wouldn’t cause the fungi to steam.” Snape finally responded, his voice tight.

Hermione set down her meal and stood, tugging his cloak around her as she lit her own wand and found the mouth of the cave. Barely visible on the shoreline below was some driftwood. “Accio driftwood!” she called, directing the floating debris to the open area in front of the mattress where they’d been sitting. The dried wood piled into a neat steeple while the rest lay in a stack some distance away. A muttered ‘incendio’ had the dried wood up in flames within seconds and the place was suddenly cheerful and warm.

Snape watched Hermione move with practiced ease as she went about setting up their little space to make it more comfortable, enjoying the way she looked in his cloak. He suspected this wasn’t so dissimilar to her time with Potter and Weasley during their hunt for horcruxes. “The wards are fine so there is no need for that,” he said when she began checking them.

Hermione blushed. “Oh, sorry. When Harry, Ron and I were off on our own we took turns placing them. Out of habit, I always checked them each night before I went to sleep.” She said apologetically, confirming his suspicions as she took her seat beside him once more and resumed eating.

Sitting in the cave knowing they were to spend the night brought back many memories for Hermione and soon, she became lost in thought, absently chewing and swallowing her meal as she recalled her, Harry and Ron’s year in the wilderness.

Snape couldn’t help but watch her. The light from the fire danced golden steps on her cheeks, caressing the skin there in much the same way he desired to. When had she become so…so pretty? So poised and mature? How had he not noticed before now? Sure, she had been away for a year, but still…to have changed so much in such a short amount of time seemed impossible, and yet the proof was right in front of him. Her hair was lustrous and wavy, no longer that fluffy mess it had once been and her figure was far, far curvier than her remembered it. She did a decent job of trying to hide it beneath jumpers and t-shirts, but he’d felt it more than a few times when he’d pulled her to him to apparate. Her hips flared then tapered to a perfect waist and her breasts we just the right size for her stature: not huge, but definitely not small – they’d fit perfectly into his hands. But above all, he most admired her pert, round backside as he was more of an ass and thigh man then anything else.

But that wasn’t all he’d come to appreciate about her. If he were perfectly honest with himself, the
last month or so had been one of the most pleasant in his life, despite the raids he still conducted with the aurors. His son was happier than he’d ever seen him and, dare he say it, he’d come to know Miss Granger – Hermione – in a way he never thought possible. He was endeared by the way she treated Toby - without judgment or sympathy – and he was surprised at how well she held her own in their conversations and debates. On more than one occasion (a surprising number of occasions actually) she had taught him something; she’d challenged him in ways that he hadn’t thought possible – especially from one so young – and persuaded him to see things from a new angle that he’d never considered before. He’d always thought Hermione incapable of thinking critically; that her intelligence went only so far as what she could regurgitate from her many books, but he was wrong. Very, very wrong. She had an analytical mind that was able to quickly formulate an equation before coming to a decisive conclusion. She was resourceful and thought – what is that muggle phrase? Ah yes – she thought ‘outside the box’ on a regular basis. What was more is that she was able to theorize and was willing to experiment; she was unafraid of answers. More and more he desired to have her beneath him as an apprentice (well, in other ways as well, but mainly as a potions apprentice). She truly was brilliant and in that moment, his attraction to her had never been clearer.

Suddenly, it didn’t matter that he was twenty years her senior; it didn’t matter that in three weeks’ time, he’d resume his post as her hated Potions Master. Right now, he saw her for what she was: a beautiful, intelligent woman who was every bit as strong as the bravest warrior and had the intellectual prowess to rival perhaps even Dumbledore himself.

And Snape was turned on by her. Very, very turned on.

Hermione knew he was watching her. He’d done nothing to hide the fact that he’d been staring at her almost unblinkingly for the last ten minutes, and though she tried to feign ignorance, she’d finally had enough. “Professor?” she asked softly, turning a questioning gaze on him.

He didn’t respond. And in fact, now that she was looking at him head on, Hermione felt her stomach erupt into butterflies. He wasn’t just staring at her in some vacant way one would when simply unfocused, no…he was really looking at her with as much heat and intensity as the fire itself. It made her throat catch in a funny way before it went completely dry and her skin began to tingle pleasantly. She wanted to open her mouth to repeat his title, to capture his attention so that it might move from her person, but she couldn’t do it. The way he looked at her had ensnared her much like he’d promised he would on her first day at Hogwarts, she thought. His dark hair was still tied back but a few strands had come loose in their exertions, framing his pale face and making her wish she had a camera to capture his likeness in this moment. He was so very handsome to her; his glittering black eyes, regal nose, high forehead, square jaw and bow-shaped lips were the perfect combination. But what she was attracted to even more lay between his ears – his mind was always so sharp, cracking like a whip at any moment, ready to sting you if you weren’t constantly on your toes in his presence. It was a challenge, always seeking out those who were worthy and in the last month or so, it appeared he deemed her as such. It made her heart swell with pride and her loins moisten with arousal.

Her lips parted in wonder, silently begging him to do…something. Anything.

“Hermione,” her breath hitched at the use of her given name wrapped so silkily in his voice. “I’m going to kiss you now. Do you understand?” The way he stated it, as if it were fact and there was very little she could do about it if she didn’t want him to made her heart beat faster against her ribcage. Her whole body flushed then seemed to pool at her center, making her squirm a little with impatience. Kiss her? He was going to kiss her? Oh yes please…

Hermione hadn’t known when he’d gotten so close to her, but suddenly he was there, towering over
her like a stormy thundercloud on a hot summer’s eve, promising a reprieve from the unrelenting heat. Would he cool her with his kiss? She licked her lips in anticipation then whispered, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good girl.” He replied, leaning in closer and raising his hand to her face. She held her breath, watching his every movement until she felt his thumb and forefinger curled under her chin and tilt her head up ever so slightly. The look she saw in his eyes was so penetrating, so intense that she nearly wished to look away, but he wouldn’t let her. His black eyes bore into her warm brown ones, giving her a moment to withdraw if she so desired, but she didn’t…and he saw that. It was all the affirmation he needed as he leaned down and covered her lips with his own.

Ohhhh, it was the sweetest kiss either of them had ever experienced in their lives. He didn’t try to deepen it, nor did she force him to – it was sweet and innocent and a perfect beginning to their budding attraction for one another. His lips were warm and dry while her’s were soft and moist, his were firm while her’s yielding. Together, they were a symphony. But it was only a taste. That was all either needed at that moment, and it was enough.

Both pulled away slowly, their eyes remaining closed a few seconds longer than necessary as they each savored their first taste before fluttering open.

Hermione became even more flushed while Snape’s pupils dilated further. His thumb gently swept across her lips, the pad tracing their shape and texture with all the care and precision of an artist trying to capture their likeness in a painting. Hermione instinctively parted her lips just a hair, and Snape’s nostrils flared. She was on fire after that kiss and she wanted more, so much more. Who was he to deny her?

“Again…please…” the words were so soft, so fluid that he almost missed it…but how could he in the perfect silence? Even if she hadn’t said it, her eyes pleaded with him just the same; what she wanted was so clear to him. And he wanted it too; moral code be damned.

His thumb and forefinger slid back to join the rest of his fingers as they swept down her jawline to cup her face while his other hand reached into the folds of his cloak to find the small of her back and as one, he pulled her to him, his mouth descending upon her’s once more, but this time with more force.

It was as if she could anticipate his movements and desires before he even had the chance to suggest them, her body yielding to him almost instantly and he felt himself harden at her willing submission. A need to take her, to envelop her completely nearly overwhelmed him as he pressed her body into his. He began to thrum with need, blood pulsing through his veins to fuel his desire. She gasped at the perfect moment allowing his tongue to slip past her parted lips and into the warm cavern of her mouth. She gave a slight moan that made his cock twitch in his trousers. Her hands found purchase on his broad chest, resting there for a moment before clutching the finely tailored fabric as though he were her lifeline.

She was inexperienced, that much he could tell. Sure, she’d been kissed, but she’d never been thoroughly kissed. Kissed in the way a man should kiss a woman. He could feel how uncertain she was and how she therefore placed herself in his care, trusting him to lead her and to guide her in much the same way a man lead a woman in a ballroom dance. Or a student followed their teacher. What a delicious thought. His tongue placed pressure here and she gave way, his thumb pressed into her jaw and she opened her mouth a little wider – she responded beautifully to all his cues.

When they finally pulled apart, her rosy cheeks were flushed not just from the fire but from his ministrations and her breathing was shallow with arousal. She was so perfect in that moment and it was clear to him that she felt the same about him.
In a single abrupt movement, Snape had jerked away from the tempting sight and stood up so fast it was as though he’d been doused with a bucket of icy water from the black lake. He was staring at her in a completely different way now; his eyes were slightly wide and his expression was so blank that it was obvious even to her he was masking his true thoughts.

He had kissed a student. Not only had he kissed a student, he had kissed Hermione Granger. He could blame the drug-like effects of the fungi, claim that he wasn’t in his right mind, but it was a lie. He’d never been clearer headed, and it was THAT that made him do it. He was torn in his feelings of regret and wanting to do it again. Six months ago…but no. There was no comparison. Six months ago he’d never expected to reach his 39th birthday, now it looked like he would. He had never planned for a future, had never even known he’d had a child. But things changed, and almost without his realizing it. The first shock came when he’d lived, the second shock when little Toby entered his life almost a week later…and now the third shock. Really, he shouldn’t be so surprised at this point. His reality had been so altered since the final battle that his old self wouldn’t have even recognizes his new self now. Was it being a parent that did that? Or was it surviving something he shouldn’t have, and then being recognized as a hero, no, a legend amongst his peers afterwards? He had a suspicion that it was all of the above and then some. Having a new lease on life made him see things in a different life; suddenly he had a life worth living, he had someone – Toby – to live for. His debt to Lily had been repaid and that burden being lifted as it had been left the man breathless. He had seen things, done things, said things and facilitated things in his life no man should have to in ten lifetimes. He owed himself a bit of indulgence.

And the fungi only made that clearer.

“Miss Granger, I—”

“No.” The word was so final, so fiercely stated and unexpected that it took him off guard and for the first time ever a student had silenced him. “Don’t say it. I don’t regret it and neither do you,” he rose an eyebrow at her, partly amused, partly annoyed at her presumption. “And if you’re going to blame the fungi, don’t even bother.” She gestured to a tiny smoldering clump of fungi sizzling on the outskirts of the fire; it was concealed, barely visible because of the way it was growing under a sheet of rock. How had he missed it? And why hadn’t she said anything? “When inhaled, the steam of the Albatross Fungi induces a state of irrefutable clarity…” she quoted, defending their actions with vehemence.

“Miss—” he’d tried again, but she cut him off, standing now, her face flushed with the heat of the fire and her conviction. It was really rather amusing.

“I’m not done,” she interrupted, then paused as she advanced on him. He retreated as though intimidated by the witch, but he was only playing. He wanted to see what she would do. “Clarity can’t create what isn’t there, it only makes what is already there come in to sharp focus.” She said, her voice unbearably soft, yet ringing clear as a bell. Finally, she had him backed into the cave wall, but not touching any fungi.

His eyebrow remained cocked as he let the length of silence stretch out a little. Finally, in a low, calculating voice, he said, “I know what it does, Miss Granger.”

The subtext was that he wasn’t denying her, and once Hermione understood that she felt something swell inside her as a mixture of giddiness and anxiety blossomed in her stomach. She was simultaneously excited and terrified of the man before her. The very tall, enigmatic and seemingly sinister wizard who stalked dungeons, brewed deadly potions and fought alongside the world’s most
powerful and dangerous wizards. Who was a powerful wizard himself.

He watched her with a trained eye. She was trembling a little, but despite that she leaned in bridging the gap between them even more but ignoring the way he tensed with what she thought was trepidation. She paused noticing the way his eyes followed every movement she made as though waiting for her to strike. And then, she did. She raised herself on her tiptoes and lifted a tentative hand to his face. She paused a scant inch from touching him, searching for some reluctance or display of revulsion from him, but nothing came. So she touched him, much the same way he’d touched her, cupping his face before curling her hand around to the back of his neck and pulling him down to her lips. It was the same as the first kiss they’d shared, sweet and unhurried. A taste.

And Merlin help him, he returned it, decision made.

_Run, little girl. Once I’m on this road, there will be no stopping me._
The Secret was Clarity

It was as though they were magnets, neither able to stay away from each other once they’d touched, and yet they’d still managed to part from their third kiss. Neither spoke for a moment. It wasn’t until Hermione valiantly tried to suppress both a yawn and a shiver that Snape realized not only how late it was, but that the fire was slowly beginning to die. He glanced at the small mattress then back at the woman before him.

“Come, I believe it’s time to retire, Miss Granger.” He said softly, reaching up and briefly hesitating before curling a strand of hair behind. Hermione’s heart fluttered, but she nodded and turned around, heading back to the mattress before curling back under his cloak. Snape tended to the fire and had it roaring once more before placing it under an everlasting charm so it wouldn’t go out in the night. He looked around for something he could use to charm into another mattress, but Hermione stopped him.

“Just use an extension charm and sleep here…with me…” she blushed furiously, but didn’t look away.

Snape stared at her for a moment. Hermione thought he was going to refuse on some principle of propriety, so before he could give her a brief lecture on ‘what’s appropriate and what isn’t’ she took the decision out of his hands as, with a cheeky eyebrow raised, she muttered “Latius.” And waved her wand at the mattress, watching with satisfaction as it widened enough to fit two people comfortably. She then transfigured his cloak to become a blanket, which he grimaced at but made no comment. “If it’s appropriate for you to snog me, Professor, then it’s appropriate for you to platonically share a mattress with me.” She said matter-of-factly as she peeled the cloak-turned-blanket back and offered him a spot.

Snape narrowed his eyes at the snarky witch before making an inarticulate noise and striding over to the mattress. He sat, then kicked off his boots and then slowly unbuttoned his frock coat (the damnable thing was too stiff to lay comfortably in). Hermione watched him with rapt attention, unable to help wishing that he would remove more. All those buttons…

Caught up in her observations, she barely registered a swift movement before she found herself flat on her back, her head caged by two strong arms and a long, hard body pressed intimately into hers. A pair of black eyes dancing with both humor and heat bore into her own and made her breath hitch, instantly extinguishing any impertinence she’d displayed earlier. “First off,” Snape said in his deep, halting baritone. “I do not snog, Miss Granger. I am a man, therefore I kiss, deeply and thoroughly,” his left hand gripped her face gently as he tilted it the way he wished. “If you require a reminder,” He softly kissed first one corner of her mouth, then another, making her squirm a little beneath him. “…feel free to let me know.” The same hand trailed down her collarbone and over the curve of her shoulder. “Secondly…” his hand trailed down her arm, then over her ribs before ever-so-slightly brushing the curve of her left breast. Instantly, Hermione’s nipple stood at attention and she gasped. “What ever gave you the impression that my sleeping with you would be…platonic?” He continued to caress the curve of her breast through her jumper, never doing anything more then gently trace and never going north to the stiff peak as she desired him to.

“Oh…” her breathy exclamation made him smirk. And then as suddenly as he’d locked her in place, he was off of her and at a respectable distance from her body. Hermione’s head spun and she felt suddenly far, far too warm.

“Sleep, Miss Granger.” He rumbled, turning on his side and presenting her with his back.
Hermione watched him for a moment before turning away and mimicking his posture. She stared at the flickering cave walls trying to process what had just happened while also trying to reconcile how she felt about it. And what she felt was both hot and bothered; hot because of how he’d made her body react, bothered because of how he made her body react. She wasn’t new to physical pleasure – she had kissed and done some petting with Ron and Viktor before ending things - but she was still a virgin and Snape was most likely not. Plus he was, as he’d reiterated, a man. But instead of intimidating her, that fact merely excited her. She hadn’t consciously put thought to it, but now that it was on her mind, she realized she’d always pictured herself with a man, not a boy. A man whose intelligence rivaled hers and whose sexual prowess (she squirmed at the thought) was far more dominant and…engaging.

“Miss Granger, I would be most obliged if you would cease your squirming.”

Hermione went stiff as a board, not realizing that she’d been moving around so much. She bit her lip. How could she stop though? He was so close to her, his body was right there…warm and solid and masculine. She wanted so badly to touch him, for him to touch her. She craved his hands on her, his lips. Why, oh WHY hadn’t he continued just a little bit ago? It scared the hell out of her, but it had been so exciting, so new and…it felt good.

Suddenly there was movement before a large forearm draped over her midsection and, like one of those muggle games with a claw used to capture a prize, it pulled her back and into a broad chest, then gripped her gently but resolutely to it. “If you will not desist on your own, then perhaps you need assistance.” His voice was muffled, breath warm on the back of her neck as he spoke.

Hermione shivered and Snape smirked lazily into her hair. She felt good in his arms, soft and small, as though a space had been carved out for her. She belonged here, at least for now.

In the morning, however, it would be different.

The thing about a coin is that there are always two sides to it. Clarity doesn’t reserve itself for only one conclusion – other things can be clear as well. For instance, it was clear to Hermione that when she woke wrapped around her professor like a delicate bow, she had never been more content in her life. His body was warm and solid against her, his arms wrapped protectively around her body as though they would fend off The Dark Lord himself. She never wanted to leave those arms because for the first time in over a year, she’d slept soundly – she hadn’t woken up in the middle of the night with a cold sweat on her brow, hadn’t had a nightmare, hadn’t tossed and turned…she had felt safe. So safe she felt tears come to her eyes – she didn’t think she’d ever have that feeling again. Her young eyes had simply seen too much; too much death, too much suffering, too much betrayal, and too much injustice.

What was also clear to Hermione was how foolish she had been. This man, this valiant, undervalued, altruistic wizard who had fought more battles both known and unknown had kissed her, was attracted to her. But there was no future in it. Term would start in a little over two weeks and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that not only could it not continue after that, but he would possibly be ostracized if anyone found out. He’d become a pariah, he’d lose his job; his heroics would be tarnished and all wizarding society would see is a man who preyed on young girls, for there was no other way the media would skew it; her dealings with Rita Skeeter had taught her that much.
She saw, with clarity, that she’d have to stamp out anything before it happened. She’d have to distance herself. But how? She glanced around and saw the fungi. Her words from last night came back to her *...theorists say that it’s main purpose has yet to be discovered in the potions community...*

An idea came to mind, and although it was weak, it was all she could come up with on short notice lest she allow herself to become backed into a corner.

She somehow disentangled herself from the man, immediately mourning the loss of his arms but somehow managing to stand just as his eyes fluttered open. She plastered a look of panic and confusion on her face worthy of any Shakespearian actor just as his eyes found hers. She saw his look of satisfaction instantly turn to one of concern and apprehension.

“P-Professor, what….what happened last night? Why was I…why were you…” she stammered, the blush that lit her cheeks not at all forced.

Snape stood slowly, pressing out any wrinkles in his attire as he kept a steady gaze on the girl before him. She had a deep look of confusion on her face and he had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. Did she not remember?

Slowly, he approached her like he would a cornered animal. “Miss…Granger,” He said slowly. “What is the last thing you recall?” he asked carefully.

Hermione screwed up her face to make it look as though she were concentrating. “I…I remember trying to reach some fungi and then…nothing.” She answered, eyes flitting to his and catching a flicker of disappointment in his eyes before they became impassive. She felt her heartstrings tug.

Snape gave a slow incline to his head. “I see,” It appeared that the prolonged effects of Albatross Fungi should include amnesia. Perhaps it was for the best. “You blacked out. I caught you and when you showed…” he paused briefly, forcing the words out. “When you showed no signs of waking, I transfigured a bed for us to sleep on during the night. Nothing…untoward occurred.” He chose not to bring up how she’d ended up in his arms.

Hermione felt a flutter of disappointment at his lie, but quickly squashed it down. She had done this, not him. She had no one but herself to blame. With a monumental effort she forced herself to appear incredibly relived, not missing the way Snape stiffened and steeled himself. She’d hurt him, she knew, but she took comfort in blaming it on the fungi. He couldn’t blame her that way. How very un-Gryffindor of her.

“I-”

“It appears we’re done here, even if the endeavor proved far more tedious than anticipated,” His barb was not lost on her and she flushed. “Best not waste any more time and be off.”

With rigid movements, he vanished the fire, put his cloak back to rights and transfigured the bed back into a glass vial. Hermione stared at him feeling guilty – he was acting like a man scorned, not that she could blame him. She’d probably be doing the same thing.

“Miss Granger, if you’re quite finished ogling my person…” He snapped, making Hermione jump before quickly coming to his side. The ascent up the cliff was much easier than when they’re first arrived, although she noticed Snape only touched her when strictly necessary, such as when she stumbled or was too short to reach an alcove. And even then, he immediately released her as soon as was appropriate. It was a blow to her emotions, but she reminded herself of why she was doing this in the first place and steeled said emotions.
She had expected them to pick up Toby first, but was surprised – and a little disappointed – when he apparated them to her home first. Standing at the entryway to her parents’ home, she tried to think of something to say.

“Professor, thank-”

“Your assistance was…appreciated. I don’t expect I’ll be needing your nannying skills again before the start of term so I will see you in a couple weeks, Miss Granger. Have a pleasant rest of your holidays.”

And then, he was gone.
Oi! I’m an awful, awful authoress. I apologize for the delay! My only excuse is that I suddenly got two jobs and became overwhelmed with life in general for a while....but now, finally, things are getting in to routine and I have a bit more time on my hands! Yay! Hope I didn’t lose you guys!

Amnesia? Unrecorded side effects of the Albatross Fungi included amnesia? He’d never heard of such a thing; there had been no recorded incidents of such an effect occurring amongst test subjects. True, the properties and components of the herb were still in debate, but after spending a few days researching, experimenting and intermittent correspondence with his contacts in the potion making and herbology world, he’d not run across a single thing that even alluded to memory loss. Which meant that Miss Granger was either the first recorded occurrence or, more likely, she’d lied.

The question was, why?

If she had suddenly had a change of heart about their…interaction, then why not simply tell him? It was very un-Gryffindor of her to manipulate the truth like that. He had felt the fool upon returning home that night. He’d been so sure, so at ease with his decision to allow their attraction to grow that he’d never considered the other factor in the equation – Miss Granger. But why should he have? That night she had been equally receptive to his attentions if not more so; she gave every indication that she was as attracted to him as he was to her.

So in the light of day, why pretend to have forgotten everything?

The only conclusion he could draw was that she was scared. Scared and inexperienced, and in a moment of indecision she’d let that inexperience rule her judgment. Another very un-Gryffindorish trait.

Well, it was a good thing he was so thoroughly a Slytherin. He had absolutely no problem taking advantage of those little nuances and exploiting them to his advantage. She was of age – though barely – so he felt no shame in planning her seduction. He would make sure the young girl would not only regret her actions, but also eventually come to feel just as foolish as he had...before he claimed her as his own. He had made a calculated decision that night and he would see it through. The fact that she’d made him second-guess himself pricked at his pride, so she’d reap the consequences.

He had started on this road and there would be no stopping him.

Three days before the start of term, Hermione was invited to the Burrow for dinner. It cheered her spirits far more than she had anticipated, seeing Harry, Ron, Ginny, George and the rest of the Weasleys again. She’d especially missed her best friends, though, and felt comforted by their
presence. For their parts, Harry and Ron instantly knew something was up with Hermione, but after asking a few times and receiving no explanation, they knew better than to push. If she wanted to, she would tell them.

“Hermione, explain to me one more time why you’re going back for your final year? I mean, what’s the point? Even McGonagall said we had learned more on our own in the real world than we could have ever learned from books.” Ron said, moving his knight to Harry’s pawn and grinning as it decapitated it. Harry glowered at his friend then made his own move.

Hermione sighed and briefly closed her eyes in an attempt to thwart the impending irritation at his asinine question. “Ronald, if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you at least a dozen times now it’s a-”

“Rite of passage’,” he intoned in his best imitation of Hermione’s voice, and then rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know. But seems like not a good enough reason.” Ron said, grimacing as Harry’s Bishop took Ron’s knight.

Hermione barely suppressed a groan. Honestly, there was a lot more to it than merely a ‘rite of passage’ but she didn’t feel like explaining herself to the boys. “Well, it’s not your decision or reason, so it doesn’t have to make sense to you does it?” she snapped. Harry fumbled his piece as both he and Ron stared at her. Hermione never snapped at them. Ever. She realized her error and sighed. “Sorry, I’m just a bit apprehensive about returning and seeing everyone again while… missing others.” She knew it was a bit low to use that as an excuse, but she really wanted them off her back about this.

As expected, both of her friends instantly nodded in understanding, mumbling awkwardly as no one want to dredge up the recent tragedies, and so they forgave her of her transgression before resuming their game. “So, how d’you think Snape’ll be as Headmaster?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know. Now that everyone is aware of his past and what he did, maybe he’ll feel less inclined to be snarky.” Hermione said optimistically, though she had cause to believe he’d be less snarky due to a far more… personal reason.

“Are you joking? I bet he’ll be even more of a bastard. His private affairs are out in the open – would you be nicer to people because of that?” Ron said incredulously, surprising Hermione with his depth of thought.

Harry took one of Ron’s pawns, and then sat back, running a hand through his shaggy black hair. “Hm, maybe. I don’t know, I’m more inclined to agree with Hermione but not for the same reasons. When I had lunch with him a month ago, he seemed different. More… forgiving? Less uptight? I don’t know, I can’t put my finger on it.” Ron scoffed, but said nothing. Hermione rose an eyebrow. “Anyway, I’m actually kind of surprised he’ll remain headmaster.”

“Well, it isn’t as if he can just resign the post.” Hermione said absently as she flipped the page of her book. Silence followed her comment and she looked up to see two blank faces staring at her. “Oh come on, honestly! You two have no excuse at this point not to read Hogwarts, A History – I bought you both a copy for your birthdays!” She exclaimed in that exasperated tone they both knew so well.

Despite themselves, Ron and Harry grinned, enjoying how they provoked her. “Hermione, when have you ever known either of us to willingly pick up a book when there is a broom, a wand or, well, anything else near by? Besides, you’re a walking, talking ‘Hogwarts, A History’. ” Ron said. Harry’s eyebrows rose as if to say ‘He has a point, you know.’

“I….but…you…” Hermione tried to retort it and failed. There was silence, and then laughter from all three young adults burst forth.
“Oh…very w-well then,” Hermione said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye in her mirth. “You’ve got me there. I suppose that wasn’t the most…prudent of presents to get you.” She admitted. “Well, if one day you do find yourself without anything to do, you should pick it up. Chapter thirty-four is dedicated to the role of Headmaster at the school, going in to details about their role and responsibilities and the like,” Hermione closed her book and set it on the end table. “Anyway, the role of headmaster is a lifetime post. It’s a bit like a contract between the school and the witch or wizard who takes up the role. Only under the most specific of circumstances can the contract be broken – death being one of them, of course while the other is labeled simply as ‘specific circumstance’. As far as I can remember in the entire history of the school, there have only been two cases where the headmaster was allowed to resign; the first was because he went completely barking mad and was unfit for the position any longer.”

Harry and Ron had resumed their match while Hermione spoke, but at this Harry looked up. “Wait, so you’re saying that operating as a double-agent for two decades, under going torture, and having a near-death experience during a wizarding war doesn’t constitute as a ‘specific circumstance’? That he has to either die or go completely barmy in the head?”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Well it isn’t like I made up the rules, is it?”

“Hang on, you said there were two cases, what was the other?” Ron asked, moving his castle in line with Harry’s King. “Check.” He said smugly. Harry scowled.

“Well, that one was a bit vague, merely stating that the headmaster resigned due personal reasons but the book didn’t go in to details and I couldn’t find references to it anywhere else.” Hermione shrugged, then stood up and stretched. “By the way Harry, I meant to ask. When is your Auror training supposed to start?”

“Next week. I’m meeting up with Head Auror Robards and a few other candidates at the ministry.”

“How long is it?”

Harry swept his chess pieces into his bag as the game finished. “Um, well since it’s an accelerated training it’ll take six months instead of twelve. I’ll be out and helping to round up the remaining death eaters by January.”

“And Ron? When will you be joining Harry?”

Ron shrugged, stretching with a groan before sighing loudly. “I dunno. I expect George will want me to help at least for a year. I want to…” he paused, his ears going pink and his shoulders slumping a little. “I want to hang ’round a bit longer since…since…he doesn’t have much help these days.” he finished lamely. What he didn’t have to say was since Fred wasn’t there any more. The unspoken statement caused the air in the room to grow somber.

“Harry, Ron, Hermione? Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Weasley’s voice rang up from the kitchen and the three of them left Ron’s room, silently agreeing that some things were better left unsaid.
Hermione had been in school for a month and she had seen neither hide nor hair of Headmaster Snape. Not that she expected to, the man was very busy she was sure – what, with running a magical institution and teaching seventh year potions - something which had surprised the hell out of her as historically, Headmasters only taught classes as substitute teacher.

Still, a small part of her felt not only disappointed, but bereft. She’d missed their time together far more than she wanted to admit. In his presence, she felt challenged; she was treat as an adult and not like some pitiable schoolgirl most of her professors seemed to adopt. But most of all, or at least in equal parts, she missed little Toby. She’d never pictured herself as having a 'mama’ bone that could be tickled, but with him it had snuck up on her. Almost daily she thought about his grinning face and how excited he was over new experiments. She also wondered about that scar and his story. Would she ever know? And who took care of him? Was he here in the castle or did someone look after him while Snape worked. Magical daycare, perhaps?

She never thought she’d say it but she desperately wished the summer had somehow been able to be…prolonged. She almost regretted her decision to feign amnesia. Almost. Her logical side wouldn’t let her regret it completely.

Snape let her stew for a month, making sure to pay her no more and no less attention than he would any other student; it wasn’t hard, being headmaster as well as NEWT Potions Professor demanded much of his time. Add in his parental duties and he barely had a few moments to himself, let alone time to seduce a student. Still, he had a plan formulated, one which he planned to implement this afternoon and had Minerva to thank for, though unwittingly. She had come to him two weeks in to term about Miss Granger.

"She’s bored, Severus."

"And that is somehow my concern?“ he intoned in a bored voice as he continued to peruse the papers on his desk, barely paying her any mind.

The Scot made an offended sound before snatching the piece of parchment from his hands. "Severus Snape, I don't care how busy you are as headmaster, if one of the students is in need, you will attend to it!"

Snape barely witheld a scowl at her hubris, keeping in mind that she was his elder, if not his superior. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "What would you have me do, Minerva?" He relented.

Satisfied that she had his proper attention, the woman continued. "Much of what she is learning she not only used in the real world, but even created a better spell for some of them! I don’t know what to do. Filius, Septima, and Aurora all say the same thing. How is she in potions?"

If the elderly witch weren’t so concerned he would have teased her mercilessly about not knowing
something for once. “She is….much the same way, I’m afraid.” He conceded, reluctantly.

Minerva sighed heavily before turning to look idly at the books on the shelf nearest her. Her face seemed suddenly heavy with lines and age. “Those three children did more for the wizarding world in the last six years then most do in two lifetimes. The least we could do is figure out a way to… to somehow repay at least one of them.” She said sorrowfully.

She was right, of course, and naturally that person had to be Miss Granger. Severus remained quiet, thumb beneath his chin, forefinger stroking the area above his lip, thinking. Repayment aside, this was an opportunity, he knew, but how best to take advantage of it? How could he bend it to his favor while still serving a student and his staff?

The older witch turned and opened her mouth to prod him, then spotted something on the desk. “Severus, when was the last time you ate?” Minerva’s Scottish burr interrupted his thoughts and he automatically looked at the untouched lunch sitting on his desk. It was now past dinnertime and he’d missed two meals. Damn. With slight reluctance, he looked up at the elderly witch’s disapproving face. He remembered being on the receiving end of that many times as a schoolboy, and for much the same reason too. He muttered something under his breath.

“None of that now, young man. There’s no excuse,” she flicked her wand and a French Dip appeared with au jus and chips along with a goblet of Gillywater. “Honestly, why the school governors allowed you to teach AND manage the school is beyond me.” She huffed. He wondered what she would say if she knew about Toby. Luckily he had daycare for that.

And then it hit him.

“An assistant then.”

Minerva stood there sporting a bemused expression. “Well, sure. An assistant might help lighten the burden, but where….oh! Miss Granger, you mean?”

Snape let his mouth twitch into a small smile. “Yes, Miss Granger. What do you think? She could assist me with brewing, take over some of the first, second and third year classes of various subjects as needed, perhaps do some administrative items for the headmaster’s office…and then at the end of her tenure, perhaps she can present a thesis of her own creation and in a subject of her choosing.”

The Transfiguration Mistress stood silently, a thoughtful expression on her face as she considered his words. “Mmm, yes. Yes I think you might have something there Severus. We’ll have to present it to the others but I think they’ll heartily agree.”

The staff had indeed readily agreed, not one person objected and so, after consulting Hogwarts records as well as the school governors, Snape now found himself waiting in his office for the arrival of one Miss Hermione Granger.

It was at times like these that Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if Severus Snape couldn’t perform Legilimancy from a distance somehow, for no sooner had she been wondering about seeing him than she received a summons to his office.
She couldn’t help it; she checked her appearance in the mirror, adjusted her robes and then applied a
taming spell to her hair before she left her rooms. But all the way to his office she rehearsed her face and
practiced her shields in case he did decide to use Legilimancy on her, though it was unlikely. Using Legilimancy on someone without his or her permission was considered a gross breech of privacy and something normally associated with the Dark Lord. Still, she felt more secure having them in place. She ignored the niggling voice in the back of her head that whispered it had something to do with guilt.

She reached the familiar stone gargoyle and spoke the password, waiting for the spiral staircase to appear before ascending it.

Her feet padded on to the opulent red and gold carpet as she entered a familiar yet vastly different room. The Headmaster’s office was quite different from what she remembered. Instead of each and every available space being filled with buzzing, whirling gizmos and gadgets, there were now hundreds upon hundreds of books, dried herbs, a few devices that looks suspiciously like Dumbledore’s own creation and of course, some jarred ingredients that were far less scary looking than the usual ones the current occupant normally housed. She noted that there was a conspicuous lack of personal items like photographs or knick-knacks most people – even Dumbledore – had in their personal space. But what certainly wasn’t lacking was his smell. That smell. The one that she always associated with him: pine, sea salt and smoke, but now that she was in a space where it was far more condensed, she could identify even more smells she unintentionally associated with him: eucalyptus, juniper and some woodsy scents like birch, ash or cedar. It was…intoxicating. In her mind, there was no better smell in the world then those of herbs and plants.

‘They should bottle and sell his scent. It’d make the perfumer a fortune.’ she thought as she moved around the room, her fingers trailing along the spines of old books and leafs of parchment. It reminded her of his home and she pleasantly lost herself in thoughts of the summer.

Snape watched her from the discreet opening in the bookcase a moment before entering. Seeing her in his space and looking so comfortable sent a thrill through him – it was as though she belonged there. Belonged to him.

“Miss Granger,” He spoke in that same taciturn voice that commanded the students’ attention as he strode in to class. Hermione whipped around and froze, a slightly guilty expression on her face. God help her but that tone still slightly intimidated her to this day. “Still snooping around where you’re not supposed to? Some things never change.” She flushed. “Sit, Miss Granger.”

The way he was being so brusque made her feel suddenly cold and very foolish for checking herself in the mirror earlier. “Of…of course, sir.” she said before seating herself in one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

Snape watched her carefully, waiting a full minute before sitting himself; he wanted her to be uncomfortable, to notice his every move and to squirm.

“Right to the point then,” he didn’t even offer her tea. A slight faux pas, but he wanted to get his kicks in where he could – she owed him that much for the lie she was forcing them to put up with. “After speaking with the other Professors we’ve all agreed that you would benefit greatly from an…apprenticeship of sorts during your final year here at Hogwarts.”

Hermione’s eyes widened just a hair but he caught it. Snape steepled his fingers and watched her over the top of them.

“An apprenticeship, sir?” She prompted when he didn’t elaborate right away. Was it just her, or had she suddenly become aware of every movement he made? She didn’t like it. She was trying to
ignore him, not…notice him.

Snape cocked his head thoughtfully, eyes scrutinizing her face and making her feel as though she were under a magnifying glass. “Your primary duty would be to assist me in the Headmaster’s office – mostly research and administrative obligations along with substituting in the occasional class here at there – while your secondary duty would be to assist the school’s infirmary in brewing various potions, salves and whatever else Madam Pomfrey needs. During the course of your apprenticeship you’ll be expected to submit a thesis proposal – before Christmas Holidays – in a subject of your choosing, at which time you will approach whichever teacher is best suited to the subject and work with him or her on executing your final product. For instance you might choose potions with me,” he saw the corner of her mouth tighten just a bit and inwardly smirked. “magical medicine with Madam Pomfrey, or herbal properties with Professor Sprout. Or you can come up with something entirely of your own device and come to me with suggestions on which staff member might best suit you as overseer. It is your choice.”

If he hadn’t come to know her as well as he had over the summer, he would have mistaken her placid expression as one of indifference. Her year away from school seemed to have taught her more than practical magical experience; it taught her control over her emotions. As it was, his talents as a spy allowed him to see the minute facial changes she made, despite her efforts to mask them. She was bursting with excitement and eagerness. He decided to tease her. “Do contain yourself, Miss Granger. I wish to impart on you the gravity of work you will be undertaking here.”

He knew she wasn’t stupid and would realize the magnitude of work she’d be undertaking, but he was obliged to say it out loud.

“In addition to your apprenticeship you must also maintain your current classes, study for your NEWTS, and,” he paused for elaboration. “keep up with the vocational advisory board on post-graduate careers You will have no social life and you’ll be lucky to get five hours of sleep each night, however,” He leaned forward a little to make sure she understood his next words. “If I and the staff didn’t feel you could do it, we wouldn’t have agreed to offer you the position.” He finished crisply, folding his hands in his lap and then leaning back in to the chair.

There was a pregnant pause in the room and he knew she was bursting with questions she was waiting for him to signal her to ask. Finally, he ceased tormenting her and raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

Hermione actually released a breath as though holding in her barrage of questions with it. “Sir, will I have the use of a time turner? Is that possible?”

Snape shook his head. “After the…unfortunate events of your fifth year, time-turners are now nearly an extinct device, therefore all known artifacts are held tightly within the Ministry of Magic. Hogwarts only has access to them in very special situations.” Although as he said it, he realized this was a special situation and made a mental note to inquire about one. It might make this a bit easier on her.

Hermione nodded as though expecting this. He blinked and felt a brief glimmer of admiration for how composed and professional she was being. “About the thesis proposal, I’d just like to clarify. If I chose to come up with a subject spanning multiple areas, is that acceptable?”

“So long as I approve it and the proposal has substance to it, yes, that would be acceptable.”

“May I have permanent access to the restricted section of the Library?”

Snape’s eyebrow rose high.
“Ok, access during designated times?”

He nodded.

“What about my head girl duties?”

“You’ll be expected to fulfill those duties as well, however it would be possible to spread your patrols over the other prefects’ schedules.”

She nodded and he could almost see her mentally checking items off her list.

Hermione shifted in her seat, eyes unfocused as she thought, attempting to foresee as many problems or questions as she could.

“What sort research would I be conducting, sir?”

Ah yes, that. He wondered if she would ask that question. He’d given it some thought himself and the possibilities were endless.

“In short, whatever I need.” He said vaguely, as though it didn’t concern him and neither should it concern her. He picked at one of his nails as though to emphasize this. It was bait.

Hermione took it.

“Whatever you…need, sir?” she wanted to raise an incredulous eyebrow at him, but remembered that he wasn’t the man she knew over the summer, but her professor.

Very deliberately, Snape stopped his picking and raised his fathomless black eyes to her warm brown ones. “Yes, Miss Granger, whatever I need.” He said the words slowly, precisely, daring her to question him further.

Hermione’s mouth went dry and she felt suddenly uncomfortable sitting on that chair beneath such a piercing gaze. She had to lower her own and pretend to pick at a frayed edge of her robe. Why did she feel warm, all of a sudden? It wasn’t as though he meant it…that way.

Snape allowed himself a smirk, savoring the pink on her cheeks and the way she pretended to pick at her clothing before continuing. “Being Headmaster at Hogwarts doesn’t simply consist of monitoring staff, students and school, Miss Granger,” She raised her head and met his eyes, a new but not out of character curious glint in them. “In fact, the position entails a great deal more such as recruitment of future students and staff, collaborating with the ministry and the board of governors on improvements to the curriculum and the school itself, socializing with benefactors – oh yes, tuition, while free for the students, is not actually free – maintaining diplomatic relations with other magical schools and universities as well as leaving a…legacy of sorts.”

At this, he saw her curiosity pique. He decided to indulge her. Standing up, he moved to a shelf nearby and gently removed one of the gadgets from its perch before setting it on the desk before her. It appeared to be a miniature dais with a small magnifying glass mounted on it and encased in a glass dome. The whole thing was about two feet tall. Upon closer inspection, the magnifying glass appeared to have two rims, both of which seemed to be moveable and engraved with small markings and runes. Snape lifted the dome off carefully and set it aside.

“For instance, all of those whirring objects and sparkling trinkets Albus Dumbledore had in his office weren’t merely for show, they were invented by the man for future student and staff use.”

Someone cleared their voice, drawing both Snape’s and Hermione’s attention. “Indeed, though I
quite enjoyed their whirring and sparkling. But believe it or not, my inventions—"

“Albus,” Snape spoke in a voice that was a cross between irritation and mollification. “Shall I continue?”

The portrait of Hogwarts’ former headmaster paused then chortled and nodded. “Forgive me Severus, proceed.”

Hermione barely suppressed a slight giggle while Snape made a ‘hmph’ noise before turning back to the witch. “As I was saying, they aren’t merely for show, they have uses.”

Hermione nodded, having figured this out for herself. Her eyes tracked him as he approached another shelf and returned with a very small potted plant. He placed it on the pedestal beneath the magnifying glass, and then adjusted the moveable rim as though adjusting temperature settings on a muggle thermometer.

“Each one has a magical function that can’t be performed by a wand, at least not sufficiently. They’re very scientific in just how precise they are, something only the most experienced witch or wizard can do with their magic.”

A small bubble of delighted laughter rose then diminished in the direction of Dumbledore’s portrait. Snape ignored it while Hermione bit her lip hard to keep from smiling. Snape replaced the dome lid and waited. After a moment, the small plant inside began to enlarge at a slow, consistent pace. “This one can imbue any sort of charm or spell into an object using a combination of runes, seen here.” He pointed to the first rim on the magnifying glass. “Using the second setting it can also allow you to control how much of the magic is imbued, how long it takes and where specifically on the object it should latch on to. It can also confine the magic to a specific area. It is beneficial because it leaves no tangible magical trace, unlike when using a wand.”

Hermione watched with rapt attention as the plant continued to enhance, the leaves and stem growing so the buds on the end of the leaves bloomed. It looked like it was actually maturing. Aging, almost. “So, if I understand you correctly, then using this particular contraption is far less magically invasive, right?”

“Correct. As I’m sure you can surmise this is important because some things cannot be polluted by magical energy lest we contaminate, tamper with or ruin its natural magical properties. If the object cannot fit on the pedestal, one only has to write it on a slip of raw parchment, attune your magic to it then adjust the settings of the magnifier and place the glass back over it and wait. For this plant, I sped up it’s natural growing process since I need it for brewing later but can’t wait for it to grow on its own, nor can I find it easily in natural settings.”

Hermione’s attention returned to the plant, which was now three times as large as it had been. A sigh of admiration left her lips as she watched Snape replace both plant and device back on the shelf.

“This was Headmaster Dumbledore’s legacy, and it is now my job to make sure that the hundreds of contraptions he left to Hogwarts find a home within the school and a use within the curriculum, wherever possible.”

Snape seated himself back down, not missing the way her cheeks had turned pink with excitement nor the way her eyes sparkled with anticipation and possibility. “It will be your job to assist me in making all these ambitions come to fruition.” He paused. “Well? What is your answer? I warn you, Miss Granger, consider carefully the load of work that will be on your shoulders. It would not do to embarrass both yourself and this school for taking on too much.” More bait. He could almost hear her bristle in response.
Hermione deliberated only briefly.

“I accept, sir.”

Excellent. She was as good as his.
Good Afternoon Everyone,

First, allow me to apologize about the false hope for an update. The bad news is that this isn't a chapter. The good news is that I am thinking of returning to this little ficlet. With that said, I am searching for a bit of help, as follows:

1. Someone to brit-pick
2. A beta/co-conspirator - This role is unique. I'm looking for something more than a beta, less-than a co-author. I would like someone who is interested in brainstorming ideas and story/character development with me, who strives to make my work far better/smoother (but not change it, if you know what I mean), and who is especially well-versed in Snape canon as well as (obviously) HP lore. They also should be grammar/spelling/sentence structure obsessive.

If you are interested in one of these roles, please let me know. It would be worth mentioning that communication and availability are key - if you're barely around and/or don't respond to emails/IMs/PMs, well...it probably won't work for either of us.

I look forward to meeting you. In the meantime, I will be heavily editing this story.

- Astira

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!