

Where Nobody Knew His Name

by sc010f

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

I. Last Call

Chapter 1 of 5

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

Special thanks to my betas who made this possible.

I Last Call

Convinced the end was coming, Severus Snape decided he needed a holiday. It would only be for a few days, but he deserved it, and he didn't give a damn what anyone else had to say about it.

He chose an island deep in the South Pacific: small, obscure, and peaceful containing a small settlement that more or less guaranteed anonymity. There, he found a bar.

The building in question had been, at one point in its checkered career, a Quonset hut. When Severus arrived at the ramshackle structure, however, it was most decidedly a bar: palm trees caressed the curved roof, a few tiki torches listed sadly to one side in the sand out front, and a disinterested gecko watched him as, sweating mightily in the oppressive heat, he made his way up the path to the entrance over which hung a sign, lopsidedly lettered, bearing the legend "The Far Side of Paradise: Bar, Food".

If the exterior of the establishment was uninspiring, the interior was an improvement: a lovely view of the beach seduced the drinker, and there were a few tables scattered about the room, but what drew Severus' attention was a corner, made up of an overstuffed bookshelf and a ratty, yet loved couch and armchair. Shedding his long, dark coat, and rolling up his shirtsleeves against the heat, he moved to explore the nook, draping his garment over the couch.

"Drink?" The voice was not particularly friendly, but the word was sweet.

Severus grunted, but did not turn. "What do you have?"

"Captain Morgan's. Green Label. Red Stripe. If you don't like any of that, we also have Green Label, Red Stripe, and Captain Morgan's. But you have to come here to get it." The voice brooked no argument, and Severus made his way to the bar.

"Green Label. Bottle." Severus didn't really care what it was, as long as it contained alcohol. Green was his favorite color, all things considered. He stared at the view of the beach. The gecko moved in a surly fashion to the questionable shade of the other tiki torch.

"That'll be twelve-fifty. American," said the voice. Turning, Severus found himself face-to-face with a pair of light brown eyes, a snub nose, short, spiky blonde hair, and a mouth wider than what would be considered pretty by normal standards. Severus also noticed the face confronting him was young, and the vowels assaulting his ears were American, not English. Grunting slightly, he dug in his pocket, surreptitiously Transfiguring his Pounds Sterling into American Dollars. Without comment he slapped the currency onto the surface.

"So," she asked, "you've got a name?"

"None that you'd care to know," Severus growled. He had not come this far to answer embarrassing personal questions.

"Suit yourself." The barmaid shrugged.

"You've a name?" Severus surprised himself with the question.

"Yeah," came the response as the barmaid wandered off, "you can call me 'Ma'am.' At least, until you start to tip properly."

Severus considered leaving right then and there, but at that moment, the voice of Ma'am wafted back to him from a room behind the bar.

"Nemo! If you're to be lusting after my library, you might as well do it comfortably."

Severus needed no further invitation. The siren call of the couch was too much for him, and the collection of books was irresistible. Eager fingers slid along the spines of the much loved volumes, and from the treasure-trove he drew the *Odyssey*: a little light vacation reading, he thought.

The next morning, Severus found himself in the bar again, slightly hung over, ordering another bottle of Green Label. As before, he curled into the couch, engrossed in a translation of the *Odyssey*, pulling directly from the bottle every so often while Ma'am busied herself with tasks around the hut.

It was not until noon when Ma'am dropped a plate of sandwiches in front of him that it occurred to Severus how pleasingly domestic the arrangement was. With a philosophical shrug, he tucked into the proffered luncheon: what happened here would no doubt remain here, and there wasn't a damn thing anybody...not Potter (curse him) nor the Dark Lord (may a plague of Bat-bogeys obliterate him) ...could do to destroy that.

Severus found himself wondering, just for a moment, what the world would be like if he could stay here in this ramshackle pub. He didn't want to stay for long ... just for the remainder of his miserable existence.

"How long you here?" Ma'am's voice broke through his reading on the third afternoon as she cleared away the plate from his lunch.

"I leave tomorrow morning," he replied, not bothering to look up from the book as he took another drink. His feet, bare, and starkly white, were propped on the coffee table, he was slouched into the cushions of the couch in a manner that no other living soul had seen, and he was at peace.

"More's the pity," Ma'am replied. "You've been here so regularly, I was going to ask you if you wanted a job."

"I've been here three days."

"More than most folk who come through here."

"You've stayed."

"I've no reason to leave, Nemo."

"There's no Jules Verne here." Severus reluctantly raised his eyes and pointed to the bookshelf; he did not want to talk about staying or going.

"That's not why I'm calling you Nemo."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He had attempted the previous day to intimidate the woman standing before him in ratty shorts, tee shirt and sandals with one of his more acerbic speeches, and she had merely rolled her eyes and handed him a bottle of water.

"Why?"

"You're reading the *Odyssey*; you tell *me* why."

"Nemo. Latin for nobody."

Severus rolled his eyes at her retreating form. Rosmerta used to tease him for his gloomy demeanor, but at least she never assaulted him with the Classics. He returned to his book.

"Shouldn't you be going home?" Ma'am asked him. Looking up, Severus noticed that the bar had emptied out: it was late.

"I've overstayed my welcome. I apologize." Severus made to unfold his legs and rise from the couch, but Ma'am waved her hand at him.

"No; stay. I haven't had an intelligent conversation that didn't revolve around crickets, bugs, or fish in the last . . . oh I don't remember how long. Tell me something, Nemo."

"Tell you what?"

"I don't know. Tell me where you live in England I can't tell from your accent."

"I don't live in England. I live if you could call it that in Scotland."

"And what do you do in Scotland?"

"I teach."

"It's April; why aren't you there now?"

"I'm taking a break. The school closed for an . . . emergency. It's not your concern."

"Did I say it was? Fine, ask me a question that I won't want to answer."

"What's your name?"

"Here, it's Ma'am. But my brothers call me Kat, short for Katrina."

"Kat it is, then," he forbore to tease her about the ridiculous moniker: perhaps it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was the fact that she had no idea of who he was, or of what he was capable. "Why do they call you Ma'am here?"

"When I arrived on the island, that's what the old man I bought this place from called me. It stuck."

"Why are you here?" Severus wondered why he cared, and then decided he didn't want to know.

"It's as good a place as any, and I needed a place for my books." She waved her hand at the shelf.

The crickets and tree frogs sang into the night as Severus and Kat chatted about her collection of reading material. Severus, now almost completely sober, wondered if his life had held many more idyllic moments than the one he was experiencing...until his forearm started to burn.

"I must go," Severus said between gritted teeth. "It is time." Sweat beaded on his brow, and his hair, never far from his face, flopped down. He grabbed his boots, lacing them up hurriedly, too aware of the burning summons, and the woman before him. He rose and swept his coat over his shoulders.

"Time?" Kat had made no move to leave her spot, but her eyes were wary. Then she stood and brushed Severus' lank hair from his face. Kissing him gently on the cheek, she said, "Whatever it is, Nemo, take care of yourself," and walked back behind the bar and through the small door. Clutching his forearm, and wondering why his cheek felt as if it had been scorched, Severus looked around for witnesses before he Disapparated into the night.

Three weeks later, he was lying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, bleeding to death and pouring out silver rivers of feeling and memory. His last conscious thoughts were of Lily as he stared into Potter's impossibly green eyes.

Thousands of miles away, in a Quonset hut that had been a warehouse, a nursery school, a pet shop, and was now a bar, a lady named Katrina dropped a bottle of Green Label on the hard, concrete floor. Glass shattered, alcohol spilled, and Katrina decided never to serve the product again.

Prompt Info: #50 I want... Vacation!Snape! Put him on holiday -- on a beach, on Antarctica, on a plane (or two, or three)! It can be gen, het, or slash, but I would love to see what would happen if he met someone from his past..

II. Dying and Living

Chapter 2 of 5

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

Anonymous beta kudos: Special thanks to my betas who made this possible. Also, a scene from this chapter was inspired by odogoddess' brilliant work "Reckoning." No plagiarism or theft is intended.

Chapter II Dying and Living

Severus woke slowly. The first thing he noticed was the narrow, hard bed upon which he was lying. The second thing he noticed was the oppressive heat. The third thing he noticed was that he was alive. This surprised him, but he couldn't remember why it should.

"You're awake," a voice said. Female...should he know it? He couldn't remember. He blinked.

The next time he awoke, the bed was still narrow and hard, but the room wasn't so warm. Now, he was just cold. He also noticed that his head wouldn't move. His eyes did, though, and carefully, he scanned the room. It contained a table, his bed, and a chair. The chair contained a young woman with bushy brown hair. He blinked.

The third time he awoke, he was still in the hard, narrow bed, but the room looked different. It was dark, this time, but he wasn't cold. The woman was gone. Severus wondered where Miss Granger had taken herself.

Miss Granger. He remembered. God, he remembered everything. Except . . . what in the seven levels of hell he was doing in this bed? He thought carefully: the last thing he remembered was being on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Then there had been Lily and James Potter and their son, and then there had been weeping and pain...quite a bit of pain, actually...and then nothing. Severus blinked.

The fourth time he awoke, Miss Granger was staring at him intently as she massaged something into the side of his neck; behind her stood Potter and Minerva McGonagall.

"You're awake! Professor, welcome back!"

Miss Granger's tone was jubilant. Minerva looked relieved; Potter looked awed. Severus opened his mouth. Nothing but a hoarse whisper emerged.

"Hush, don't try to speak," Miss Granger warned him, laying a gentle finger across his lips. "You've sustained rather serious injuries, and you weren't in the best of shape to begin with." Having completed her task, she drew back. "We're glad you're with us, Professor," she said, her eyes shining. "I...that is, we...missed you."

Severus spent several more days in bed, but finally, driven by boredom and frustration, he went against the wishes of his caretakers and rose to explore the confines of his room at Grimmauld Place. He took three steps before the floor rose precipitously to greet him. Severus discovered he liked the feeling of the floorboards on his cheek and decided to stay that way for a while. He blinked.

When he opened his eyes, he was still on the floor, but this time, he was on his back staring into the worried face of Miss Granger. Drops of water fell to his cheeks; he realized the girl was crying. Why should she be crying? What had he done to her?

"Don't do that, Severus!" she was saying. "You've scared me half to death." When had he become Severus to her?

He opened his mouth to scold her, deduct points from her, rant at her for finding him like this, but nothing emerged. There were no words, only a gurgling sound. He tried again; still nothing.

Miss Granger gently cradled his head. "It's all right. Severus, I promise, we'll make it better. We don't know how yet, but we will. We can fix it. You and I, we can do this."

What was the girl babbling about? Why was she pulling her wand on him? In his mind, Severus saw himself leaping from the floor, grasping his wand and holding it to her throat as he pushed her against the door. In fact, his hand twitched as the girl levitated him back onto his bed. Worn out by anger, frustration, and pain, Severus slept.

The next few...days? weeks? eons? how did one measure time in this condition? Severus wasn't sure...were hellish. He couldn't speak: the venom had been purged, but the bite had affected his vocal chords, and he could barely perform the simplest of spells. Miss Granger was his constant nurse and companion, bearing his moods and his fury with an equanimity that made him want to strangle her one day and marry her the next. He learned to walk, but could not walk far; he learned to do non-verbal spells; he even got his wand back, but he could not speak, only whisper, and it was killing him.

"You're a hero, you know," Miss Granger told him one morning. He glared at her.

"Harry wants to thank you." Severus glared some more. "But I told him that you weren't feeling up to receiving visitors. I hope you don't mind." He turned his back on her and stared at the wall, willing her to go away.

"You have to leave, at some point, Severus." Miss Granger was unbuttoning his trousers to bathe him. He closed his eyes. This was always the worst time: as her fingers brushed him, his reaction was immediate.

"No," he whispered.

"Yes," she replied. Did she know what he had said? Her hands slid his trousers down his hips; his y-fronts followed. He heard her draw breath and cringed. He knew he was hardening. He knew she could see it.

"Miss . . ."

"Don't try to talk, Severus; just breathe. One. Two. Three. Four." Gently, she ran the damp sponge down his shoulders and across his chest. Water trickled from it. He turned away.

"It's all right, Severus; sit up, now."

"I can't . . ." Damn his voice! Why wouldn't it work?

"You can. Here we go."

"No, it . . ." Severus slumped forward. If he opened his eyes, he knew he would be staring straight at his erection: his response to the girl who was now washing his back with gentle strokes.

"So thin...oh my, Severus, we didn't take care of you very well, did we?"

Why wouldn't the damn girl stop? Why couldn't she leave?

"Breathe, Severus. Breathe. One. Two. Three. Four. There you go; lie back, now."

As the sponge moved lower down, Severus' body tensed, and he tried to focus on his breathing*In. Out. In. Out. Don't think about where the girl is, don't think about what her hands are doing, don't think, don't feel, don't move, and don't respond. Don't think about Lily, don't imagine it's her there, and don't pretend. Just don't.*

When Miss Granger would leave, he would lie on his side, staring at the wall, stroking his member, remembering her touch, her smell, her voice. But he couldn't come. That was when the nightmares were the worst: he would wake up croaking, drenched in sweat, entangled in his bed sheets, shaking. And Miss Granger would come, would soothe him, and would sit by his bed, holding his hand until he slept again.

Once, after a particularly difficult afternoon, he kissed her. He wasn't sure why, but he did, channeling all of his frustration, fury, anxiety, and rage into motion with lips and tongue. It wasn't until a few moments later that he noticed she was kissing him back just as passionately. Startled, he drew back from her, expecting to be hexed, hit, or worse, and watched in amazement as a slow, satisfied grin spread across her face.

Time went on: days, weeks, months, even a year. At Miss Granger's urging, Severus left his room and rented a flat, using his award from the Ministry. Privately, he suspected that it was a not very subtle bribe to disappear.

One wet Thursday, Miss Granger appeared at his door. Her hair clung in wet strands to her face and neck, her soaked clothing molded itself to her body and her eyes were shining.

"I passed!"

Severus wondered what she was talking about. He stood aside to let her in.

"Severus! I passed my exam! I thought we could celebrate." She waved a bottle of wine at him. "You have glasses, right?" And she hurried off into what passed for the kitchen. Severus heard her rummage for glasses, open the wine and return. Why would she care to "celebrate" with him?

"I couldn't have done it without you, you know," Miss Granger was saying, handing him a glass filled with a red liquid. He assumed it was wine, but upon tasting it, he wasn't sure.

"Sorry...it's a little rough. I'm only a student; I can't afford the good stuff," Miss Granger babbled at him. "Anyway, if it wasn't for the hell you put us through in Potions, I never would have had the discipline to sit through that awful class! Not that *your* classes were awful...they never were." She was on his sofa and patted the cushion next to her. "Come, sit down and help me drink my horrid, cheap wine!"

Severus sat carefully next to her, preparatory to drinking her offering. But before he could, she set down her glass and turned to him.

"Severus," his name was a whisper, "let me." Carefully, she reached out and brushed his hair from his face. Careful fingers traced the lines of his cheekbones, where her tears had fallen when she had found him on the floor. Her lips, soft, full, and warm, followed her fingers.

Desperate to end the contact, Severus grasped her head with his hands. But before he could push her away from him, he found himself pulling the impossible girl closer, capturing her mouth in a kiss. And like before, instead of pulling away in disgust, Miss Granger threw herself upon him, knocking over their wineglasses, kissing him back, matching his tongue stroke for stroke. He found that her mouth tasted of cheap wine and toothpaste.

Much later, he discovered that her body tasted of damnation.

"No," he whispered after as she clung to him, her face buried in his shoulder.

"Oh, yes," came the reply. And Severus was lost.

He could barely speak, he rarely left his flat, but he researched and wrote a little, and every Thursday afternoon between one-thirty and four, he fucked Miss Granger.

It wasn't much. It wasn't particularly enjoyable: merely a release of tension, but those desperate afternoons, when she slipped away from her fiancé and then her husband,

telling him she had a class at university, did a little to ease the slow, burning ache of being alive. He refused to allow how much he needed her.

Miss Granger showed up at his door one sodden afternoon. "He knows."

"Come in."

"Severus! How can you say that?"

"Come in? It's considered polite."

Miss Granger flopped onto his sofa and swiped at her eyes with a shredded bit of tissue. Then she blew her nose juicily. Severus was repulsed.

"Please tell me, Miss Granger, that you did not do something terribly cliché."

"No, I didn't use the wrong name or anything like that." She snuffled and hiccupped. Severus sighed and handed her his handkerchief. "Thanks."

"Keep it. Tell me, why come here?"

"What?"

"Why are you here? Shouldn't you be making up with your Weasley?"

"He said he doesn't want to share me with another man; that I wasn't any better than Lavender had been; that he didn't care whom I was fucking, but I'd better choose. He said that if I wanted our marriage to work, I should go and end it with you, and he'd forgive me and take me back. Then, he said that we shouldn't keep score in our marriage and we could work through this!"

"And you came here to 'end it'? Really, Miss Granger, I've heard this speech before, and I don't believe you now anymore than I did when you gave *before your wedding*."

"But, I'm not trying to end anything! I . . . I want to be with you! Not Ron! Never Ron!"

"No."

"What?"

"No. You don't really want me; I'm merely a convenient and slightly more talented fuck than your husband."

"Please, Severus. Let me make you happy."

"Happiness is an illusion, just like love."

"But what we had . . ."

"Was convenient, pleasurable, and meaningless." Miss Granger cried all the harder. Severus sighed the girl never could take a hint.

"Severus, please...I know that you . . ."

"Miss Granger, you know nothing of me. Do not try my patience further. Whatever relationship you imagine we had is over. Return to your husband. I will not be burdened with your melodrama."

"B-burdened?"

She cried for a long time on his sofa, begging him to let her stay, to let her make him happy. But finally, she left.

And he knew that she was not going to return. That realization was more painful than anything he had suffered since his recovery.

It was March, cold and windy; as he watched her from his window, walking away from him through the rainy streets of London, he reached a decision. Grabbing his wand, he Transfigured some Galleons into American dollars and Disapparated.

III. Wake Up, Dead Man

Chapter 3 of 5

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

III Wake up, Dead Man

Severus was pleased to discover that the Quonset hut had not changed. The tiki torches still listed half-heartedly in the sand outside, and the palm trees still caressed the corrugated iron roof: this was a good sign, Severus thought.

He was not pleased to see that Kat was not behind the bar when he entered. The bookshelf was still there, as well as the couch, the chair, and the tables and chairs littering the interior, but Kat was gone. Severus fought the panic rising in his throat, threatening to choke him. Carefully, trying to control the shaking in his hands, he set aside his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves. Already, the heat...or was it the panic?...was making him sweat.

He stumbled to the bar and croaked, "Green Label. Bottle." The large white-bearded man behind the bar looked at him with polite disinterest.

"She doesn't carry that, anymore, lad. Not since last May," he said and handed Severus a bottle of Tequila instead. "That'll be thirty-five. American."

Severus didn't care what he was drinking and slapped down his money. The barkeeper looked at him carefully, gave him a glass and warned him to go easy.

Four days later, when Severus finally stopped dry heaving into the sand, he understood why the old man had warned him. Feeling brave enough to reenter the bar, he shook out the crab that had settled into his shirt pocket, found his coat, ran his hands through his hair, and wandered back to the bar.

Upon entering the bar, Severus was pleased to discover that at least the hindquarters of Kat were present. The rest of her was behind the couch talking to something.

"Come on, now, give it over! There you go...ouch! You little . . ."

Severus stopped to admire the view. Wrapped up in this occupation, he did not notice that the profanity had stopped. The silence in the bar was deafening. And then he heard, "I'm coming out from behind this couch. And then I'm going to count to four. When I'm finished you better have a very good explanation of why you're staring at my ass, Papa, and not helping me string this cable." Kat wriggled out from behind the couch and stood up. Whirling around, she placed her hands on her hips.

"Hello, Kat."

Kat drew herself up, closed her mouth and grinned.

"Nemo! You came back!" Severus nodded. "I won't ask what happened to you, because I heard about your little episode with Senor Cuervo earlier this week; any man who drinks that much that fast must be in a hell of a state. Let's get some water into you. When was the last time you ate?"

When Miss Granger had done this, Severus had wanted to flee. When Kat did it, Severus wanted to curl up on her lap like her namesake and shut out the rest of the world.

Back in his favorite corner of the sofa, Severus tucked into a sandwich, sipping water from a large, plastic cup. Deep within the recesses of the bar, a Muggle washing machine churned, cleaning sand, crab crap, and seagull droppings from his clothing. Wrapped in one of Papa's bathrobes (which could have belonged to Hagrid), Severus watched the woman watching him.

Kat sat in her chair across from him, sipping from a large mug and observing him. When he finally set the sandwich down, she asked him, "How long are you staying this time?"

Severus shrugged. "I don't know," he rasped. "As long as I have money and can spend my days here."

"Why?"

"This is as good a place as any," he replied, "and I haven't finished working my way through your library." Kat's grin was like the sun coming up. Severus felt a flicker of pleasure.

"Would you like a job?"

"Pardon? You don't know me."

"Do I need to? All I really want is somebody to help sweep up, kill large, nasty spiders, and look threatening when the locals get too enthusiastic about their cricket. Papa's good for some of that, but he's going back to New Zealand in a few days, and it gets a little lonely here. If you keep your hands out of the till, don't try to assault me, and stay relatively sober while you're working, you can work here for as long as you like."

It was the most attractive, if not the most flattering, offer Severus had received in a while. He thought for a moment. "Who's Papa?" he asked.

"Oh, just an old fellow who thinks he's the incarnation of Hemmingway. He shows up periodically, and I usually take the opportunity to go to the mainland to buy things I can't get shipped here." Kat rose from her seat. "Did you want to start today?"

Severus nodded. He didn't really, he reflected, have anything better to do.

"There is one problem, though," he said.

"What's that?"

"I've nowhere to sleep."

Kat grinned. Severus' heart leapt. So did another part of his anatomy. He shifted Papa's robe, hoping that she hadn't noticed. This was a woman, not a girl in a woman's body.

"That's not a problem; you can sleep on the couch. But you should know: I sleep with a shotgun by my pillow."

It occurred to Severus to wonder why he felt disappointed to hear that.

Later that night, stretched out on what was to become "his" couch, Severus drew his wand from its sheath. Kat was obviously a Muggle, and as much as he might have wished it, there were some things that even he couldn't do. *Couldn't do?* asked his brain, *or wouldn't do?* Severus shook his head. It didn't matter; he was here, he would stay here, and even if the reincarnation of the Dark Lord came through the door, there wasn't a power in the universe that could drag him back to England.

Severus found that placing his wand in a box and shoving it deep beneath the recesses of the sofa was one of the easiest things he had done lately.

"Happy anniversary, Nemo!"

"What are you on about, Kat? Is that Green Label?"

"Just for you. I can't stand the stuff myself, but in honor of your first anniversary, I thought it would be nice."

Severus smiled. Smiling came easier to him these days. "I hadn't . . . noticed."

Kat grinned. "I thought you hadn't. No matter, though; I did. Here, drink up." Kat thrust the bottle at him. "I would've baked you a cake, but it's too damn hot. Can you believe it's only March?"

Much later, after the locals had drunk their toasts to "Nemo" and left, and the television was finally silenced, Kat and Severus sat on opposite ends of the couch, each finishing a bottle.

"God, Nemo, I never understood how you used to be able to drink this shit. But now that I've downed what, half the bottle on my own, it has a certain charm," Kat slurred, one hand in her shaggy hair, the other cradling her glass.

Severus eyed the woman: her shirt was unbuttoned one more than it should have been, her legs were tucked underneath her, and eyes were soft: the Green Label was having more of an effect on her than she realized.

"It's an acquired taste, I suppose." He grimaced as he took another pull at the bottle. "Kat, I've been meaning to ask you: why are you here?"

"Mmm?"

"Why did you choose this place? It's hardly palatial. It's not even very nice."

"Hey, that's my bar you're talking about! I like it!" Kat looked as indignant as she could, given her current state of inebriation. She lurched toward him. Severus lurched as well, albeit more deliberately.

They met halfway. Unlike the kisses he shared with Miss Granger, this one had no malice, no frustration, and no pain. Kat's lips were soft and warm. Her mouth opened and Severus followed up with his advantage. She tasted of Green Label...and security.

"Look, Nemo..."

Severus realized that she had drawn back.

"You're sexy as hell. Don't get me wrong, I like the tall, dark, tragic, brooding type, a lot, actually."

"Brooding?" Severus was slightly miffed.

"But the truth is, you and me...it's a bad idea. Drunken sex is fun...I'll give you that...but . . . I'm just not . . . Look, I know you're in love with somebody: I can hear you when you dream of her. Whoever she is, I'm not her. I can't be her, and . . . well, I was a replacement once, a long time ago. I won't do that again."

"Kat . . ."

"I'm going to bed, Nemo. Alone. You should do the same. Let's sleep it off, and in the morning, we'll both be so hung-over, we won't know what hit us."

Kat rose from the couch and somewhat unsteadily made her way across the floor to the back room, where she slept. Severus made to rise and follow her, but at the last moment, he remembered the shotgun. He also remembered that drunk or sober, Miss Katrina was a good shot.

He stood, removed his shirt, and clad in his Bermuda shorts and t-shirt, stretched out on the couch, ignoring his hardness, his longing, the taste of the woman, and the sloshing of the booze in his stomach.

It might have been the alcohol, but for the first time in a year, he didn't dream.

Life continued in a similar pattern: occasionally Kat and Severus would get drunk together, he would kiss her, and she would kiss him back for a while, but before he could get too far, she would tell him to go sleep it off on his sofa, alone. Severus would have been furious with her if it he hadn't recognized that kissing Kat was the only way he could avoid dreaming of Miss Granger.

And then, on the fifth anniversary of his disappearance, the screen door to the bar creaked open, and an English couple entered.

Super-duper thanks to the betas who made this possible!

Challenge info can be found in the first two chapters.

And if you were wondering, I made no money writing this. Only Kat and the bar belong to me.

IV. Get on With the Past

Chapter 4 of 5

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

Chapter IV - Get on with the Past

When the couple walked into the bar, Severus was wiping down the countertop, his back to the door, debating the merits of getting drunk with Kat and a volume of Vonnegut that night, after closing. A familiar voice startled him out of his reverie.

"Ronald, I'm sure they have sandwiches here; you just have to ask."

Severus stiffened and turned around slowly. "Miss Granger...or should I say Mrs. Weasley? So, you've come on holiday at last," he growled. A bead of sweat trickled down his back.

"Severus!" Miss Granger's face grew pale and she fumbled for her wand.

Her companion was quicker, bounding across the room. "You git! What the hell do you think you're doing here?" he demanded, pointing his wand at Severus' throat.

"Ronald! No!" Miss Granger's cry echoed in Severus' ears. Weasley's face was bright red, his eyes angry. Miss Granger looked horrified, but Severus wasn't sure if it was because of her companion's reaction or his presence.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't hex his sorry hide into next week," Weasley growled at his wife.

Miss Granger opened her mouth and Severus closed his eyes. He hadn't touched his wand since he had come back to the island: he wasn't even sure if it would respond to him anymore. Now was not the time to find out.

"I thought so," Weasley grated out. "You say you love me, yet you follow him, you try to defend him, and now you can't even give me a reason why!"

"Ronald, it's been five years! I love you! I stayed with you, remember?"

Severus felt like this was an argument they'd had before. Then, he heard a distinct sound: a pump action .22, the property of his boss. It was music to his ears.

"Okay, stick boy, you don't threaten anybody in my bar."

"Who the hell are you?" Weasley demanded pugnaciously.

Severus, opening his eyes, suppressed the urge to snort: the boy obviously had not changed much. Miss Granger (he still could not think of her as Mrs. Weasley), however, had. Was it his imagination, or was she taller than he remembered? Was her hair softer, silkier looking? Had she filled out curvy in the right places? Severus couldn't believe what he was thinking. It was an effort to force his attention to the confrontation before him.

"Take one more step, boy, and you will be missing several vital pieces of your anatomy," Kat ground out, leveling the gun at Weasley's torso.

"Ron, stop this! Please!" Miss Granger was tugging on Weasley's arm.

The boy lowered his wand and turned towards Kat. "What the hell do you think . . ." he began.

"That's *my* question. What do you think you're doing, pointing your thingy at my employee?"

"Your employee?" Two pairs of eyes flicked to Severus and back to Kat.

"You have a hearing problem, too? Maybe you two should leave. Now."

"Come on, Ron." Miss Granger was tugging nervously at Weasley's elbow. "We're sorry...it was a mistake. My husband thought . . . mistaken identity . . . We'll leave, now." Miss Granger began to pull the boy back towards the door, but he shook her off.

"It had better be *mistaken identity*. I'd hate to think that Severus Snape, the great git, murderer, man who thinks he can sleep with *my* wife, is still drawing breath." And with that, Weasley turned and fled.

"Ron! Wait!" Miss Granger cast an apologetic look at Kat and Severus and followed Weasley out. Severus felt his shoulders lower and his hands unclench...when had they ever been so tense?

Kat lowered the gun and turned to Severus.

"Friends of yours?"

Severus snorted. "Hardly. Former students." He wiped his hands on his jeans.

Kat nodded sagely. "I can understand the animosity, then." And she returned to the back room, where she had been preparing lunch.

It occurred to Severus that the less said about the incident, the better. Vonnegut and rum were in his future, not necessarily in that order, and there was not a force, magical or Muggle, that was going to get in his way.

Lying on his sofa that night, Severus found he couldn't concentrate on either the alcohol or the author. Every time he tried to, Miss Granger's face, Miss Granger's voice, Miss Granger *herself* distracted him.

Five years of dreaming of her, nights of replaying every argument, every episode from their disastrous relationship in his mind: recalling each word, each look, each touch, had not prepared him for seeing her again.

When Severus realized that he was not going to be able to sleep, he began to prepare himself, just in case she decided to return the next morning. As a result, his hair was neatly combed and tied back, his white shirt pressed, and his best pair of khaki trousers cleaned when Kat found him around five, pacing in front of his couch.

"So, she's not just a former student," she observed dryly.

"Leave it, woman," he snarled dangerously.

"Only if you promise me something."

"What's that?"

"I don't care who you were, Nemo; I don't care if you were a tinker, tailor, rich man, poor man, or spy. While you work for me, you control yourself." She paused and thoughtfully amended herself, "At least, try not to make her cry too much."

"How did you . . ." Severus was not pleased. He hadn't made anybody cry in the five years he had been here. Privately, he missed that special ability to reduce a student to a puddle of tears and snot.

Kat smiled slightly. "I've told you before: you're a screamer, Nemo. I can hear you when you talk in your sleep."

"So, you know." Severus sank to his sofa. He almost ran his hands through his hair, but the twenty minutes he had spent cleaning it and tying it back nicely stopped him.

"I don't know everything, but I do know that she is the somebody you once loved. Even if you don't still love her, be nice to her; this isn't going to be any easier for her than it will be for you."

"Kat, you couldn't possibly know what . . ." Severus began to snarl. Snarling never worked on Kat, however.

"Did I say I did? What *was* isn't what matters. What matters is what you're going to say today. And I'm assuming, from the fact that you've rediscovered how to use my laundry room, you're expecting to see her again." With that, Kat took herself off to the kitchen and began to brew a large pot of coffee.

Severus was sipping the coffee and staring out at the ocean when the familiar bushy brown head peeked around the door.

"Are you open?"

"There's no lock on the door." Severus didn't look at her, but he could sense that she was fidgeting in the entrance. "You might as well come in."

"Thank you." Staring at his mug, he heard her close the screen door behind her and walk into the room. He heard her pause before his table. Cleaning himself up and dressing nicely had been pathetic. He felt foolish beneath her scrutiny.

"Coffee?" There was no point in being rude. Yet.

"No, thank you. May I sit?"

Severus gestured with his free hand and looked up. What he saw took his breath away her hair was loose, longer (if that were possible) and definitely silkier than he

remembered. She wasn't taller, as he had first thought, but she carried herself much more confidently. She was wearing a pale green dress, long and flowing, that left her arms bare to the sunlight. Fresh sunburn kissed her shoulders, and it took most of Severus' self control not to caress away the rash. He compromised with his subconscious: he didn't love her, he had never loved her, but by God, he wanted her. That, at least, had not changed. His subconscious snorted: it knew better.

"Look, Severus, I wanted to apologize for what happened yesterday. Ron was out of line; he never should have . . . and I . . . we didn't know."

"You weren't supposed to know. I take it you're still married?" He shifted in his seat, stretching his long legs, and watched her as she sat, adjusting the dress. Severus decided he liked the way the loose cotton draped over her form, still lithe, but curvier, after five years.

"In a sense; we got back together after you left me and have been together ever since. Sort of. Ron . . . well, Ron has issues. But he swears that we're back together permanently. This holiday was supposed to be a celebration of that."

Severus raised his eyebrow. "After I left you? As I recall, it was *my* flat *you* left." He kept his tone as neutral as he could. If he drilled her about her husband's "issues," she'd defend him. Severus didn't want her thinking about her husband right now.

"After you rejected me!"

Ah, there it was. That was the response he had been expecting.

Severus looked up and saw the indignant flush rising on Miss Granger's face. Baiting her was still as easy as it always had been. Mentally, he calculated how many more comments he would have to make before she burst into tears. Now was the time to bring up the Weasley boy.

"And are you . . . *happy*? He obviously cares deeply for you, if he attacks an innocent man without provocation in your... what was that? Defense? Or was it ownership?" *Finish with a smirk, old man, really get her going.*

"He loves me." Miss Granger stared at his hands, draped loosely around his coffee cup. "Your hands, they're still so . . ." she began.

"Love is, as I believe I've told you before, an illusion, Miss Granger," Severus snarled. She was making him fight for control, and he didn't like it.

"No, it's the most real thing there is." Her tone was firm.

What? Was she actually arguing with him? A horrible, sinking feeling crept into Severus' stomach. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

She paused. "Severus, what are you doing here?"

"Working. Reading. Drinking. I'm on holiday. I might ask why you want to know."

"I just wanted to . . ."

He cut her off. "I said *I might*, but I didn't say that I *would* ask you. I don't care why you're here." *Maybe if I insult her enough, she'll run out of here crying; it's what she used to do.* He struggled to maintain his outward calm.

Miss Granger stood up rapidly, pushing the chair back, and slammed her hand onto the table. "Severus Snape, enough! I came here to apologize for Ronald's behavior yesterday, and to see how you are, and you retreat back into your snarky, bastard self. I will not be treated in such a . . ." Now the girl was yelling. But there were no tears. Severus looked down, staring at the rapidly cooling coffee as if it could offer him refuge from the furious girl...no, woman...before him.

"Fine," Severus snapped, "there's the door. Use it. Leave."

She opened her mouth to deliver a stinging retort and snapped it shut. When she did speak, it was a whisper. "I loved you. I wanted you."

"No, Miss Granger, you wanted a project: something to fix" He raised his dark eyes, being careful to keep them as passionless as possible. "Which is why, I assume, you're wasting your life with Weasley." He leaned back in his chair and spread his arms wide, giving her a chance to take in his newly laundered shirt, his tanned arms, his physique: improved after five relaxing years of island living. He had gained some weight, but was still fit. Finally, he filled his clothes properly instead of wearing them as if he was a man-sized coat hanger. *Let her feast her eyes on this!* "Thanks to your efforts almost six years ago, I'm not broken anymore."

Silence. And then, "You're wrong, Severus; you were never broken. You were already dead."

That was enough. He rose. "Excuse me; I have work to do. You can show yourself out, I presume?"

"What's the matter, Severus? Is living still too much for you to handle?"

Miss Granger's tone was biting. Severus knew full well from whom she had learned it. He'd heard his own voice use that tone for almost longer than she had been alive. Severus wanted, for the first time in years, to blast something. His wand hand twitched. "What do you know of living and dying?" he ground out.

"Enough to recognize the difference between the living and the dead. I've known that for years. I knew you were dead from the first moment we made love."

Miss Granger stared at him, daring him to make eye contact with her. Severus refused: he would not get lost in her eyes again. He looked at her hands, clenching the back of her chair, her posture straight, her breasts thrust out, her eyes . . . *no, do not lose yourself. Remember who you are!* "So, Miss Granger likes to practice necrophilia. What a revelation. I'll tell the *Daily Prophet*." Severus forced a smirk, striving to regain control of the conversation.

"Crass doesn't become you, Severus," Miss Granger replied primly, sitting back down in her chair. And then it hit him: she wasn't only arguing with him, she also wasn't crying. God! She was even being sarcastic! The girl who, five years before, would sob noisily if he even looked at her wrong, wasn't crying. In fact, she was sitting at the table in front of him, calmly staring at him.

"This conversation is over," Severus declared. He was damned if he would fight a losing battle. Standing, he picked up his mug and turned, walking back to the kitchen, where he began to wash dishes, ignoring the roiling in his stomach and his clenched jaw. He heard nothing but stunned silence from the other room, and then the door slammed behind Miss Granger. He grasped the edge of the sink to stop his hands from shaking.

Breathe, he told himself. *In and out. One. Two. Three. Four. Like she taught you.*

"FUCK!" he roared.

And then there was the thunder of crockery falling to the floor as he swept his arm across the drain board, and an explosion of alcohol and glass in the cupboard on the opposite wall from a thrown bottle, and blood from a cut, and his knees buckled, and he sank to the floor.

Forty minutes later, Kat came back from her morning walk around the island and found him, head between his knees, rocking back and forth in a puddle of dishwasher and blood.

AN: Super thanks to those special people who made this possible. They know who they are and will be revealed in due time!

I make no money from this endeavor, but it is a lot of fun!

Challenge information can be found in previous chapters.

V. Never Coming Home

Chapter 5 of 5

All Severus Snape wanted was a vacation.

V Never Coming Home

"Nemo, you may be an intelligent man, but when it comes to this, you may be the biggest idiot to walk the planet. You were supposed to *apologize* to her!" Kat harangued him as she bound his hand.

"What the hell do you know?" Severus snarled.

"I'm female; I know quite a bit," Kat replied implacably. "It doesn't matter if it was her fault . . ."

"She's sleeping with Weasley!" Severus was indignant. He winced as she tightened the bandage with a little more force than necessary.

"Stick boy?"

"Yes." He eyed his boss levelly. She stared back at him, taking in the bloodstained shirt, the ruined trousers and disheveled hair for a long moment.

"Did it occur to you that she's doing it on purpose?" Kat asked as she began to clear up the bandages and antiseptic.

"What?" Severus snorted, turning away. "Of course, one would have to do it deliberately in order to have conjugal relations with that creature. She might have been insane, but nobody could fuck that twit accidentally."

"No, idiot." Severus flinched from her tone, but Kat continued, "I mean, did it occur to you that she's sleeping with stick boy because you won't have her?"

"She wanted . . ." He spluttered, turning to confront the harridan's statement. There was no way that he was going to lose *two* arguments that day.

"You. And you were an asshole." Kat finished his sentence.

"She didn't let me . . ." Severus smacked his palm on the table and winced.

"How long have you been in love with her? Does she know?" Kat demanded, leaning closer to him, eyebrow raised. For the second time that day, Severus felt completely wrong-footed. He looked down at his ruined clothing.

"I was never in love with her! She had a deluded, adolescent fantasy." Severus stood. He had the height advantage on Kat, and looming over her, he mustered his threatening scowl. He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

"So you took advantage of her," Kat concluded, completely unmoved.

"No! I never . . ."

Kat's stare rivaled a Basilisk's.

"She approached me," Severus finished lamely, drawing his uninjured hand through the dark hair hanging loose around his shoulders.

"And then, you left her in worse shape than you found her." Kat's tone was icy. "Nicely done, Nemo."

"Kat, I have sat here long enough listening to your inane drivel," Severus roared, losing his temper. "There was nothing significant between me and Miss Granger then; there is nothing now. You will be so kind as to keep your interfering nose out of my business and let my past alone." He shoved the chair back beneath the table with force and stalked out of the bar, flip-flops squelching, hair flopping limply.

"At least apologize to her, you moron!" Kat's last piece of advice was shouted at his retreating form, cut off by the slam of the screen door.

Severus spent an hour on the beach pacing and throwing rocks at crabs and washed up jellyfish before he accepted that the damn woman was right.

His bloodstained white short-sleeved shirt, dishwater damp khaki trousers, and flip-flops did not billow as impressively as teaching robes, but Severus gave it a go as he strode up the beach to the bar and picked up the telephone.

Miss Granger came back the next morning, looking apprehensive. Severus' stomach twisted uncomfortably when he saw the lines of worry on her face. He dismissed the notion; she was just as much at fault as he.

"Severus, I got your message. We're not staying; we're leaving today, but I just wanted to tell you: whatever it is, whatever's going on in your head, it's okay. I accept your apology. I'm sorry, too. And I'll be here for you, no matter what." It all came out in a rush. Severus twitched the corner of his mouth: a noncommittal smirk.

She was twisting her wand in her hands, betraying her anxiety. His heart lurched and guilt choked him. After their fight yesterday, a penitent, apprehensive Hermione was a terrible sight for him to behold. Fiery, angry Hermione was satisfying to fight with; this version made his stomach clench with worry. How could he be the author of this? Kat was right: he was an idiot. Worse, he had been a fool.

"There is one thing, Miss Granger, that I could use. It isn't much, but if you get the opportunity, I would appreciate it." He found his voice was rasping again: years on the island had gone a long way to healing it, but now he was croaking like one of the thrice-damned tree frogs that lived in the scrubland outside.

"Yes, Severus?"

He cleared his throat. "Decent tea."

Her smile made Severus feel like he had won an Order of Merlin.

"I'll see what I can do."

He wasn't expecting her to come back, but she did. It was Christmas Eve, and she was alone.

Kat had disappeared for the holiday, saying that she had to visit her brother in Montreal, of all places, but Severus suspected that she had a lover nowhere near Quebec. He was pleased to discover that it didn't bother him as much as it would have when he'd first come to the island.

Before she left, Kat had set up a plastic Christmas tree on the coffee table in his corner and taught an unwilling Severus how to play Christmas music on their tiny stereo set. The locals seemed to appreciate the trappings of the season, even if the temperature remained well into the nineties.

Severus closed the bar early on Christmas Eve and was lounging shirtless on his sofa with Dickens and brandy when he was roused from his torpor by a tentative knocking on the door.

Irritably, he hauled himself from his couch and opened the door, ready to give the intruder the tongue-lashing of his or her lifetime. Any vituperation died on his lips when he saw Miss Granger standing there in a woolly jumper, jeans, and heavy boots.

"Since you've come all this way, you might as well come in," he grumbled at her. "And take some clothes off before you die of heatstroke."

Severus turned on his bare heel and stalked back to his couch, not waiting to see if she followed. He knew she would: he had seen her appraising look at his shirtless torso before he turned. At least he was wearing knit shorts: it was warm enough for him to consider sleeping nude.

"Weasley did not come with you this time?" he asked, trying to inject as much venom as he could into the question.

"Ronald? No. We've split up. Again." Miss Granger's tone was neither annoyed nor subdued. Severus took it as a good sign.

"How many times does that make it since I last saw you?" He kept his tone neutral, ignoring the flutter of hope.

"What?"

"You said 'again'; that leads me to believe that it's a common occurrence." Pedantic always became him. Had he been teaching, he would have drawn his robes around him. As he was half-naked, Severus settled for sinking elegantly onto the couch, marking his place with graceful hands and closing his book.

"Not that it's any of your business, but this one's permanent. Four." Her tone was snippy but lacked any real force. Miss Granger seemed to be having difficulty controlling the pitch of her voice. *Interesting.*

Severus grunted: there was no need to over-commit himself in this little tango they were dancing. Miss Granger took a deep breath and held out the white cardboard box.

"Look, I brought you some tea." She smiled.

Severus knew she felt incongruous in her winter clothes, holding out a small box in the middle of a tropical bar. "That was kind of you." Severus motioned her to the chair. There was no need to be rude. Yet.

"Kindness had nothing to do with it. I wanted to see you." Miss Granger settled herself, bending down to peel off her shoes and socks and wriggling her toes against the concrete floor. "It's awfully warm here, isn't it?"

Severus ignored the question. "You've seen me. What else did you want? Or do I want to know?" He was acutely conscious of his undressed state, his lank hair, the vast gulf between the two of them.

"I wanted to wish you a Happy Christmas."

"Which you've also done. Was there anything else?" *Does she want to stay? Do I want her to stay? Can I make her stay? It doesn't have to be long, just for the rest of my life.*

"Severus," she began.

"Yes?" he replied. What more could she possibly have to say?

"Severus, why? Why here? Why with *that* woman? Are you sleeping with her?" Miss Granger looked sad, uncomfortable, and curious, all at the same time.

"Is it your business?" He raised an inquisitive eyebrow, designed to intimidate even the most poised of students.

Miss Granger flushed. "Don't . . . I just want to know."

"Still the scholar, then." He smiled gently.

Miss Granger looked thrown for a moment and then recovered. Severus could see her ticking off an item in her mind. Bloody girl had always had a checklist for everything: even fights with ex-lovers. She wriggled out of her jumper; she was wearing a tee shirt underneath it. Not that it helped the situation; the tee shirt left a tempting portion of her midriff bare, as well as flattering her chest. Severus had been celibate for quite some time, and the presence of an ex-lover was, at least on this night, a bit of a strain on his self-control.

"So," she continued.

"Yes." He nodded, shifting on the couch.

"Why here?"

"It's as good a place as any. Kat doesn't ask questions, and nobody here knows or gives a toss about The D- Voldemort, or Potter, or potions, or magic or any of that. The weather's fairly nice, too." Severus ticked the points off on his fingers, hoping she hadn't noticed the slip on the late, unlamented Dark Lunatic's name.

"You mean, you haven't done *any* magic?" Miss Granger's eyes widened in disbelief.

"I haven't since I've come here." He hadn't thought about it since he last saw her. His wand was happy beneath the sofa, and he didn't dare try to use his magic, lest he discover it was gone. He decided that he didn't need to share *that* bit of information with Miss Granger.

"Where's your wand?"

"In a box, under the sofa. I found I couldn't completely get rid of it. Perhaps in another ten years but not now." Ten years from now he didn't wish to contemplate. Surviving the next twenty minutes was challenge enough.

"How?"

"Very easily." That was a lie, but again, she didn't need to know it. "Do you know, Miss Granger, what my name is here?"

"No, I don't think . . ."

"It's not Severus. Here, they've never heard of Severus Snape, bat of the dungeons, spy, Death Eater, murderer, Order of Merlin nominee, snakebite survivor, any of that. Here, I'm Nobody. And I like it that way." Severus sat forward, resting his arms on his knees, staring at her intently.

"Nobody?"

"Nemo, specifically. Latin for nobody." He leaned back against the sofa, stretching his long legs. Miss Granger's eyes followed his every move. *So, she is interested*, he thought. *Good.*

He looked at her, and again he saw the lines around her eyes, the new set to her mouth, the way she carried herself more confidently. Leaving Weasley (or being left by him) had done her good, even if it had harmed her at the same time. Severus cringed internally; he hadn't done the girl any favors, either. *God, will she ever forgive me?*

"Severus?" She held his gaze.

"Yes?" What did she want now? Severus felt his chest tighten as he looked at her eyes: still the color of the decent tea she had brought him.

"I'd like a cup of tea." Miss Granger smiled.

Severus started, sitting up straighter, brushing his dark hair from his eyes. "You . . . what?" That was not what he had expected her to say.

"I'd like a cup of tea. It's Christmas, and you're alone. People shouldn't be alone on Christmas, and I'd . . . like some tea." She finished with a lopsided grin, acknowledging the weakness of her argument. Severus' mouth twitched again.

"You don't have a horde of admirers waiting to greet you?" He snorted, folding his arms across his bare chest.

"No. The only person I want to spend my Christmas Eve with is a crotchety old bastard who answers to a damn fool name." Miss Granger smiled, and Severus, for the second time in his life, was lost.

"Here," he said. "It's too hot for tea, but I do have some Christmas brandy." He rose gracefully and stalked over to the bar to fetch another glass. "I don't have a snifter. Will a highball glass do?" As he turned, raising an eyebrow, he was met with Miss Granger's stare of blank incomprehension. The know-it-all obviously didn't know her booze.

"I've never imagined you to be an island type." Miss Granger was deep into her third glass of brandy.

"I came here years ago: before the end of the war. I needed a break. After . . . I needed a place to go. Kat offered me a job." Severus had mellowed, as well. Still stretched out on his sofa, he rested his dark head on the sofa's arm and watched the woman across from him.

"Are you sleeping with her?" She wriggled back into the comfortable cushions of the armchair. Cupping her glass, she looked vulnerable.

"You've asked me that already." Severus held his drink up to the light, watching the liquid swirl in the glass. Was it his third or fourth?

"And you never answered me." She might look vulnerable, but Miss Granger was tough.

"No." It was too hot to fight. Severus closed his eyes.

"No, you're not sleeping with her? Or no, you're not going to answer?"

He opened his eyes and watched her. Miss Granger's brown eyes were hard. "Yes," he replied peaceably, watching her reaction carefully.

"Severus Snape! You're still an awkward bastard!" Miss Granger smiled at him.

Severus smirked, but there was no malice in it. "Fine. I'll answer your questions if you answer mine. When did you finally get tired of Weasley?" He held his breath; it was a question to which he wanted the answer, but he wasn't sure he had the courage to ask the follow-up question: *Will you ever tire of me?*

"When he made the 'I forgive you' move one too many times. I finally rented my own flat and moved out. So, are you sleeping with her?" She leaned forward, refilling her glass.

Severus followed suit. The girl was still persistent; he was also forced to give her that. Just his sort of woman: brave, tough, persistent, beautiful. "No, I'm not. It doesn't mean that I didn't try. But I haven't tried to sleep with her in years." Severus smiled, recalling Kat's charms. He regretted many things in his life; missing his opportunity with Kat, if he had ever had one, was one of them.

"Do you love her?" She leaned back, waiting for his reply. Was she holding her breath?

"I did, once, I think. I don't know. She's a force of nature: not even I can intimidate her."

Miss Granger giggled.

Severus paused, recalling her earlier statement. If he was going to get out of this situation with any dignity or credit, he needed to change the subject at once. "Rented your own flat and *then* moved out?" he asked.

"I'm a planner, Severus. Anyway, I still work for Arthur in the Ministry. Molly wanted him to fire me, but you know Arthur . . ."

"Not anymore." Severus cut her off, staring moodily at his brandy.

"No, I suppose not. There's no chance of you ever coming . . ." Miss Granger no, that wasn't her name sighed.

"No, Miss Hermione, there isn't." Severus couldn't look up.

"Say it again, Severus." Hermione stood and moved to sit on the other end of the sofa.

Severus sat up and shifted to accommodate her. "What?" Severus raised his eyes.

She was looking at him intently. "Say 'Hermione.' I don't think you've ever done that before." She smiled.

"Hermione," he said again. He decided the name felt nice coming from his mouth.

"Severus . . ." Her voice was a whisper.

"Yes?" Severus was holding his breath. He could smell her shampoo and body wash, feel her breath on his face.

"You've never said 'yes,' either." Hermione brushed his dark hair from his face and kissed him, gently, slowly, tentatively. "You shouldn't be here alone."

"I'm not alone." Severus kissed the base of her throat, savoring the curve.

"But . . ."

Hermione's answer was lost in a gasp as Severus moved upwards and began to nibble on her ear before he grasped her head in both of his hands and found her mouth with his. Her response to his kiss was overwhelming. Severus found that her mouth tasted of brandy and toothpaste.

Later, he found that her body tasted of redemption.

It was later, much later, actually. The tree frogs and crickets were rioting outside the Quonset hut that was currently a bar, which at one point had been a nursery school, a whorehouse, and a pet store. Inside, Hermione's head was pillowed on Severus' shoulder.

On the brink of sleep, Severus whispered into her ear, "I love you."

"Hmmm?" she asked sleepily.

"You were right," he murmured.

"Of course I was," she mumbled. Then she paused and asked, "Right about what?"

"That I shouldn't be here alone." To further his point, he began to nuzzle her ear, making her giggle sleepily.

"Oh. That." Hermione sighed in pleasure as his hand strayed over her stomach and lower. There was a pause as Severus drew a deep breath. Gathering his courage, he whispered:

"Stay. Please?"

AN: Thanks to my superior betas who pummeled this into shape. And thanks to you, oh my reader, for coming along with me on Severus Snape's vacation.