

Moonlight Flower

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN - I wrote this to satisfy a craving for pure warm-fuzzy fic; the bg music whilst I was writing was usually Glenn Miller's 'Moonlight Serenade'... particularly for the last scene. There's a *possibility* of expansion of this little short, but I'd really like solid concrit before I do; the continuing scene that I cut seemed like overkill... sap as opposed to fluff. Anyhow, I hope y'all enjoy. -Lm. S.

It was an odd sort of gathering. It could not be called a party; recent losses were too great to indulge in anything that might be considered a celebration. But neither could it be called a memorial, for the victory would seem to prohibit excessive mourning. Still, whatever it was, it had called the wizards (and various other magical creatures) of Britain together in a... commemoration... of recent events.

Nobody really seemed to know whose idea it had been as they milled about the Great Hall of Hogwarts, dressed to the nines and swilling dionysian champagne. Still, they were (for the most part) happy to be there, happy to be alive, and happy to prove it. Those who were not so happy created a sharp edge to the proceedings as they tried to pretend they were... and as they tried to put up with the ones who were emerging from whatever holes they had hidden in and acting like they had personally defeated half of Voldemort's army.

One of the not-so-happy, desperate for air (in the metaphorical sense), only managed to escape the castle walls several hours after the proceedings began. She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the edges of the Forbidden Forest unmolested, so grateful to be out of reach that she paid no attention whatsoever to the deplorable state of her robes' hems, nor to the silly, flimsy shoes she had donned. She merely enjoyed the relative darkness and the green scents in the air.

Hermione, whose observation of matters beyond books had sharpened acutely during the final stages of the war, noticed Professor Snape's presence immediately, for all that his black robes melded with the darkness around him. He'd chosen to sit quietly in some faux ruins, placed on the grounds by a neo-classically inclined wizard of yore; it was a place that Hermione had never seen before, but then, how often did students wander this far from the castle?

His eyes flicked to her, then away, back to a contemplation of water that played in a small stream over marble blocks, both raw and carved. "I see that you, too, have elected to flee." Hermione wanted to flinch at the sound of his voice. It was no longer his words that hurt, but the sound of the damage that had been done. What had once been as smooth and rich as dark chocolate was now ruined, a bare whisper littered with weird, unpredictable rasps, hitches, and whistles .

She shrugged, the soft rustle of satin marking the movement. "People are beginning to pair up... some are disappearing into various parts of the castle. I'm not really interested."

"Has young Mr. Weasley proved false, then? Or are you, perhaps, attempting to tease him by making yourself scarce?" There was no mistaking the derisive nature of his comment, though he was no longer able to provide sufficient inflection.

Hermione came up to stand beside him, her gaze also seeking the shifting glimmer of moonlight on water. "Ron is keeping company with Lavender... and possibly Parkinson," she replied. "with my full... dispensation... I suppose. I spent five years waiting for him to see me as a... well, as a girl, if not a woman. I got tired of waiting. Besides, what would I do with him?" Seeing Snape's mouth curl, she hurried to forestall him, smiling herself. "Besides the obvious, I mean. He talks Quidditch, I talk esoteric Runes. We'd devolve into a 'yes, dear-no,dear' relationship. So I gave him my blessing and sent him off to do whatever it is he's going to do."

"Which apparently involves *ménages à trois*," the man interjected drily. "Are there not similar opportunities for you? It is a basic human reaction to prove one's continued existence after a dangerous encounter with sex. And yet, here you are, talking... if one may grace these sounds I make with such a term... with the ex-bat of the dungeons when you ought to be rolling about with some young, muscled thing. Or has no one asked?"

She couldn't see his face well in the dim light, not that she expected to be able to read his expression anyway. Why did he want to know? Why didn't he just send her on her way with a few aptly vicious comments, as he was wont to do? He had sought solitude he just as surely as she had. But Hermione was too accustomed to answering questions to avoid a reply, and she had enough female vanity to answer honestly.

"Oh, there are more than a few who have asked me to dance and complimented me on my robes and hair." Her hand drifted to the piled mass, which had taken no few charms to be put up and made to stay put. "Some rather nice looking blokes at that. Duncan Entwhistle, for one. Sam Wandwell. I danced once or twice, but I'm not really in the mood to 'celebrate' that way. And certainly not with them."

"Why not?"

The man was curiously curious tonight. Hermione sighed and leaned against a sturdy marble rail. "I don't want to go to bed with someone who wants me for my prestige value. It's not brain surgery to realize that this sudden, overwhelming devotion doesn't stem from a mass epiphany of my feminine desirability. Oh, they've finally noticed I'm female, but all that does is make me fair game for boys... and men... who want to bag a hero. Once tonight is over, all they want is the right to brag that they..." She stopped, her cheeks darkening.

"That they bedded one of the Golden Trio," he finished, with more delicacy than she would have expected. She gave a mental sigh of relief that he hadn't caught her full intent. Embarrassing enough to have friends know you're a virgin, entirely unthinkable for Professor Snape to learn that little tidbit. "A comprehensible, if superficial, motive."

"I've felt like a hunted deer for most of the evening. I finally decided that even my own thoughts are a better companion than men lusting after my Order of Merlin." Hermione sighed again. "This isn't how I imagined it would be, being grown-up and going to my first grown-up... whatever the hell this thing is. But then, nothing's the way I imagined it would be."

"It never is."

"I imagined... oh, I suppose I imagined I'd be poised and witty... beautiful was always debatable and I don't seem to have managed it... and I would make intelligent conversation with equally intelligent people." Hermione laughed ruefully. "Adults were all supposed to be smart and knowledgeable when I was a child. Now I begin to see that most of them are as stupid, silly, and self-centred at thirty, forty, and fifty as they were at ten. It's very disappointing. And I thought... perhaps I'll have my Prince Charming by now. Oh, he didn't need to be handsome... at least, not once I got older and realised the handsome ones are usually raving narcissists... but he'd have a good heart. And a good brain."

"But there you are. I'm eighteen, never been on a date, think most of the people I meet are morons, and have spent my teen years fighting a megalomaniac."

"Welcome to the club," Snape rasped. Hermione glanced at him, startled, then giggled. She missed the change in his own expression at the sound.

"Touché," she admitted. "I must be sounding incredibly petty and whiny right now. I haven't the least idea why you're letting me prattle on this way."

Severus had been watching her, but turned away again at the not-question. "I find your 'prattle'," he explained slowly, feeling out his words, "almost... soothing. It is a... relief to hear you being able to focus on the petty worries of ordinary life, when none of us have had the luxury for quite some time. It is a pleasant change to think of matters other than strategy and tactics, life and death. In that, my thoughts are not very good company, and they are all the company I have had of late." He could almost feel her bewilderment radiating from her.

"But... surely... you're a hero, more than any of us. Doesn't anyone talk to you?" Still young, still naïve, in spite of it all. That, too, warmed Severus, to know that she was not as damaged as she might have been. And then there was her clear respect for... well, his work, if not for him.

"I am not a hero," he told her bluntly. "I am a spy. That is the crucial difference, Miss Granger. Spies do the jobs that everyone else is too *noble*, too *squeamish* to undertake. We deal in the knife to the back, not the honorable duel. We cannot be trusted, because betrayal is our stock-in-trade. Everyone wonders how much I really did... and for which side... and whether I might not have ended as a hero under Voldemort instead. Nobody wants to face what I am capable of doing, what I *have* done, because then it might remind them that they benefit from such disgusting, treacherous work. That winning the war has not left their hands as clean as they might like to pretend."

"That's unfair!" The girl's fists had tightened, and she faced him fully. "You've done more than any ten of us put together! You've had to wait and watch and do everything on your own without anybody's help. You deserve more than just a thanks and a dismissal!"

Her indignation made him smile, just a little. "Just as few share your intelligence, Miss Granger, few share your high ideals. But let it alone. I live, and Potter lives, and that is far more than I expected in any case." Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight, warning of incipient tears, and he found himself surprisingly moved. He thought he'd exhausted most of his emotions... if he had them to begin with.

"It *still* isn't fair," she sniffed. "I want to *make* them recognize you."

He wheezed a bit, the remnants of a laugh that he had never used. "But you cannot make them *like* me, Miss Granger. As it is, I can at least irritate and discomfort them with my continued existence. I, too, can be quite petty, Miss Granger, and look forward to this amusement for many years to come."

The girl had started at the sound of his 'laughter'... for which he didn't blame her, the odd sounds were like those of a dying man... but chuckled a little herself when he finished.

It still made her angry, though. How could they ignore him like this? Would his contributions be merely swept under the rug in years to come, hiding the truth from view? In her mind, Hermione decreed that she wouldn't let this happen, even if she had to write the damned history book herself. After all, she was Hermione Granger, war heroine and swot extraordinaire. *Her* words would be taken seriously.

But... what could she give him now?

Her company. He had made it clear that he actually *liked* her being there, impossible as it seemed. She regarded him as the little pocket of silence deepened. Only his face and hands were truly visible; he continued to favour black robes and the formal satin draped and pooled over the stones he perched on. His profile, hidden somewhat by his dark hair, was etched in harsh lines, some she remembered, many of them new... she imagined from the pain of the snakebite and its treatment. Seeing them, Hermione realized... Severus Snape wasn't all that old, really; he couldn't have reached forty yet. And yet, he looked decades older...

It took only a moment to conceive the idea, longer to convince herself to do it. Before she could think herself out of it, Hermione leaned over the stones between them and, cupping his face in her hand, she gently kissed his cheek. "Thank you, sir," she said softly. "For everything."

Shock was the first thing to flood through his system. Severus stared at the girl before realization filtered through and he roughly knocked her hand away. "I don't need

your *gratitude*, girl," he sneered, anger fueling his words so that they almost regained their former emphatic quality.

She straightened, but to his surprise, merely looked at him steadily, though perhaps a tinge of darkness stained her cheeks. "Whether you want it, whether you need it, whether you accept it, *sir*," she replied in a low voice, "you have both my gratitude and my respect. We wouldn't have won without you, and I... know very well what would have happened to me if we had lost." Severus noticed one of her hands unconsciously rubbing her shoulder, and he remembered some of the news that had filtered through to him. He wasn't the only one who had fought, the only one who bore scars. He would do well to remember it.

He sighed, despising the rattling and wheezing that accompanied the action. "I apologize for my quick temper, Miss Granger. It has been a difficult time for us both, and it will continue so as we attempt to readjust to 'normal' life." The stiffness visibly drained from her.

"You're not the easiest man to know... or understand," she replied. "And I'd really like to." Eyeing the options, the girl chose the stump of a column close to Snape's seat. He looked at her incredulously.

"You actually mean that."

Hermione nodded. "I've always respected your knowledge, your mastery of the fields you've chosen. And you can be so... dichotomous. I've seen you be so easily, so casually cruel. And yet you'll risk everything to protect... I don't know. The children? The future? I wonder who you really are, what motivates you. I only know you as my professor, really. I haven't the least idea of the person who exists behind that façade."

"Whereas you, Miss Granger," he replied, "are almost painfully transparent."

Somehow, she recognized humour in his expression and realized that he meant to tease, not belittle, her. She smiled at the revelation. Perhaps... Perhaps this evening could be salvaged after all... and perhaps...

So very transparent... Snape watched the girl's face as they conversed; it became brilliant with interest and enthusiasm. He nearly lost track of what they discussed as he became involved in her animation. Miss Granger was decided in her opinions, but willing to consider new information and ideas; it was fascinating to see her expression change as she weighed his words and formulated her replies. And the eloquence of her hands, which added yet another dimension to her intensity. All of which worked in concert and reminded him that Miss Granger was not one to dissimulate.

Which was something that was very... relaxing.

His voice was beginning to fade; Snape cursed silently, frustrated when his body no longer performed the way it used to... the way he wanted it to. He'd already had to amend several statements to accommodate the intonation he could no longer employ. And now it was in danger of giving out altogether. Damn it all.

"Miss Granger," he interjected suddenly. She blinked. "Would you, perhaps, care to dance? I imagine there is still opportunity." He had managed to floor her; she gaped at him in a manner that brought forward all of his inclinations to sharp, cutting words.

Then she smiled.

"I would love to dance, Professor."

He was tempted to gape in turn, but managed to stand (damn his curse-stiffened joints, as well) and offer her his hand. "You may call me Severus, Miss Granger," he replied. "'Professor'... or, Merlin forbid, 'Headmaster'... seems rather obscene at this point in time."

Hermione nodded in comprehension, attempting to mask her further astonishment at the liberty he was allowing her to take. "And please, call me Hermione." She smiled, a little deprecatingly. "You have the ability to make me feel about twelve years old when you call me Miss Granger." By his lifted eyebrow, she knew she'd just handed him a weapon, but he merely nodded.

It wasn't difficult for Severus to interpret the reaction when the couple crossed the threshold of the Great Hall. He had excellent hearing and the comments were quite clear, never mind the looks. It didn't seem to matter that Ronald Weasley was indeed occupied with both Miss Brown and Miss Parkinson in a darkened corner of the room. Nor that Draco Malfoy was practically mauling Miss Bones in another. And Potter was missing entirely.

No, malicious eyes had turned to them, the dubious ex-Death Eater and the innocent, trusting heroine. Even more malicious tongues were sharing observations of Miss Granger's... *Hermione's*...ruined shoes and mussed hair. (Never mind it was *always* like that.) The inches of mud and damp along her hems were commented on, as well as the damp patches from when she had seated herself on that column. And the flush on her cheeks from their brisk walk back to the castle.

All were given the most salacious interpretation possible. Not a few wondered if he should somehow be restrained to prevent him from corrupting innocents. Others sniffed in derision, claiming they had always known that *Muggle-born* was no better than she ought to be. Look at the time she'd spent... *alone* ...with those two boys; who knew what they'd gotten into? It was the same venomous rot he'd been subject to all his life.

And then Hermione stood before him, her chin high and fire in her eyes. Meeting them, he felt himself agreeing to the challenge, not without a certain amount of amusement. They would do as they pleased, and damn the rest.

His hands were warm. That was somehow the first detail that impressed itself in Hermione's mind. Somehow, she had expected them to be cold, even icy. Yet she could feel a comforting warmth surrounding their clasped hands and radiating from his polite guidance at the small of her back. It was as though, like the vampire he had been rumoured to be, he had surrounded her in his cloak and created a shield between her and the rest of the world. She felt comforted. She felt safe.

Severus had somehow not noticed how tall Hermione had become over the last few years. She lacked perhaps an inch or two of his height; in their formal posture and with her heeled shoes, he found himself naturally meeting her eyes, eyes of a rich, cinnamon brown. Eyes that were older, more guarded than those of the over-enthusiastic child he remembered now with regret. And yet, there was still some spark of... innocence? naïveté? belief?... that inspired an unusual surge of protectiveness. He wanted to preserve that little bit of light that still lived in her. It warmed him; it almost made him believe in impossible things again.

And then she smiled, and drifted just a little closer, and he began to believe in impossible things.

Between them, they barely noticed the music, only enough to realize its absence when the band stopped playing. Vaguely disoriented, they parted, gazing at the nearly empty Hall and the grey dawn-light that misted through the tall windows. Hermione glanced at Severus, her face glowing with humour and delight before stepping close to him again and wincing. Severus blinked in alarm, but was forestalled by Hermione's hand coming to rest on his shoulder as, one at a time, she pulled off her shoes, grimacing. He looked down at the bits of fabric and leather; she showed him the soles, entirely worn through.

She watched the hesitant smile form on his face when he turned his eyes back to hers. Everything... simply *everything* ...was wonderful.