

# To Be a Hero

*by my little secret*

The war is over, and it is time to move on. But for some, there seems to be nowhere to go...

An SS/HG tale of friendship and love.

## First Steps

*Chapter 1 of 7*

The war is over, and it is time to move on. But for some, there seems to be nowhere to go...

An SS/HG tale of friendship and love.

**Disclaimer:** I own nothing Harry Potter, except a DVD of each movie. I also own some socks and several cats. Yeah, okay, the cats own me.

**Authors Note:** This is my first foray into the world of fan fiction, and the first thing that I have written outside of Christmas cards in at least five years. Please review, and please, PLEASE be as brutally honest as you wish! I welcome any hints, suggestions or disdainful finger-pointing. Thank you SO much!

Rated for later chapters and intended plot development.

This story is dedicated to my husband, who has been telling me to write for many years...and is now allowing me to do so. I will love you forever.

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Hermione stood in front of the mirror in her room looking at herself. She turned this way and that, trying to get a feeling as to how the others would see her.

*Why do I even care?*

Her mahogany curls were pulled back loosely at her neck with a thin piece of white leather. Her dress was modest and subdued... a white button-down blouse, a black knee-length skirt and the high-laced granny boots that had been a present from her parents last Christmas. She remembered the enclosed note card fondly; "We've seen in pictures that these seem to be a favorite among young witches," her mother had written. "We think that you will look simply smashing in them. Then again, we think that you look smashing in everything."

*Will anyone else think I look smashing? Why do I even care? After all that has happened, HOW can I even care?*

She found herself staring into her own eyes as her reflection stilled. In them she saw so much... a child laughing, a young girl learning, a woman loving... and so little... a boy crying, innocence dying, a life ending. Her own eyes looked darker, and she knew why. Before they had held only the light of hope and confidence, unsullied and pure. Today, they were shadowed. Shadowed by betrayal, by hatred, evil and death. By things that she never should have had to see and would now never be able to forget. A familiar Muggle phrase came to her mind; "I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemies." *Pointless*, Hermione thought. She had faced her worst enemies... and they had seen it, too.

*How do any of us begin to care again?*

With a small shake, she stepped away from the mirror. This was not something she wanted to do... but she had to. They all did. Dumbledore had asked, and they would deny him nothing.

She pulled a scarlet robe – one of her dressier ones - from her closet and closed the door behind her. As she stepped into the hallway, a quiet thought drifted through her mind... gossamer and then gone.

*I hope that he's okay.*

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Severus stood in front of his window with a glass of firewhiskey in his hand. It was a magic window, looking out onto the Forbidden Forest that could never be seen from the wall of a dungeon. The sun had almost disappeared, and the night was cloaking around Hogwarts in a swirl of dusky blues and purples. This had always been his favorite time of day... the winding down, the prelude to relaxation. After a long day of dealing with students who tested his patience at every turn, he enjoyed the coming of the night. It was a truly beautiful sunset.

*Why do I even care?*

He knew that Minerva would be on her way. She respected his privacy and rarely flooed him, choosing instead to walk to his door and knock. It was a change that he welcomed, but wished he had never had to. Dumbledore would seldom walk down to knock, preferring instead to just pop in through the fire with a smile, a twinkle and an ever-present bag of candy. Harkening back to a Muggle tale he knew from his childhood, Snape realized that dressed in red, Albus would make the perfect Santa Claus.

A fist tightened inside him.

*Would have made.*

Tossing back the rest of his drink, he grimaced against the pain in his throat and in his heart. The burn from the firewhiskey would be only momentary... the pain of losing his chosen father would last a lifetime. He had known loss... his mother, his friends... his child. Few had hurt this deeply. Only one would last this long.

*How do I begin again?*

As he crossed the room to place his empty glass on the table, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He had lost weight. They all had. The robes of wizards could only hide so much. His eyes seemed older somehow... not cradled in wrinkles, as Albus' had been, but tired in a way that the innocent could never know. His was not a physical exhaustion; it was so much deeper. He had seen and done things in his short lifetime that no Pensieve could bury. They were not just etched in his memory... they went beyond any place of redemption. His soul was scarred.

He had dressed simply for the evening... a silver gray button-down shirt and black trousers. His forest green Slytherin robe lay in wait over the back of a chair. He wanted nothing less than to be a part of this tonight. He would do this for Albus. Even in death, he could not tell him no.

He knew the others believed him now. The letter that Dobby had delivered to Headmistress McGonagall after the war had explained everything. The letter had been opened in the Great Hall as they all gathered, and there had been a collective gasp and muted crying at the sound of Dumbledore's voice.

*Why do I even care?*

The Spoken Letter had told everyone the complete story that until that day had been known to only Albus and Snape. It exonerated him of all predispositioned guilt and presented him as a champion. He could still hear the kindly voice of his friend. "I have learned in my lifetime that a hero – a REAL hero – is the one who holds on to what he knows to be true. What he knows to be right. Severus Snape is a hero. He is my hero."

*Stupid old man. I've never held on to anything. And I've made a life of not being held on to.*

The knock on the door brought him from his reverie. The ache in his chest was there – it was always there – but he could live with pain.

*Could I live without it?*

Hogwart's new Headmistress stood in the hallway waiting for him. A gentle smile graced her face as he stepped out. "Good evening, Severus. Are you ready?" *When did you lose so much weight??*

*"As ready as I'll ever be, Minerva." Oh, love, when did you get so old??*

Their eyes met, and Severus knew she was thinking of him, too. He had long suspected that the feelings between Albus and Minerva had gone beyond friendship, but he was not a man to ask. Their simple looks, their shared smiles and their easy way about each other told him volumes, anyway. A story that he would always be on the outside, looking in at. He could never be a character in such a tale.

*Why do I even care?*

Tucking her hand into his arm, she patted him reassuringly. "It will be fine, dear. They all want you there. This is a new beginning... for you, for me, for all of us. And for this school." She looked around at the hallowed walls, the ancient doors. "We have to keep it a home, you know." The sadness in her voice was palpable.

"I know."

And so they went toward the Great Hall. Toward the party that their beloved Headmaster had asked that they have when they defeated Voldemort. Toward the throngs of people who would now start to feel their way around him...try to figure him out... try to figure out themselves when they were with him. He would go toward the people that he lived with, in the only place he would ever call home.

And he would never belong.

## The Dance Begins

In the wake of the war, emotions run high, and it is hard to move on. Hermione and Severus find themselves forging a friendship...and more.

As she glided down the stairway toward the Great Hall, Hermione could hear the gentle roar of the people milling around the entryway. All of the students whose parents had allowed them to return to Hogwarts were there, as well as the staff and the members of The Order. Dumbledore had insisted that everyone who was involved in the fight against the Dark be present to celebrate their victory.

*Celebrate?* Hermione thought. *Can you celebrate a win when you've lost so much?*

Many came over to her as she reached the bottom of the stairs. Like it or not, she and the others were now infamous, destined to be talked about in these sacred hallways and elsewhere forever. It was a thought that Hermione could not bring herself to look directly at with her mind's eye...It was too big, too crushing to fully wrap herself around. She did not want fame. She did not want notoriety. She simply wanted them back.

As she greeted people with insignificant smiles and impotent words, her eyes scanned the crowd for the one person she knew could help her get through this evening. They would have to be there for each other tonight, as they had always been. Now they were only two.

"Hermione." Turning, she saw Harry, and the noise around her seemed to dissolve into the air, as smoke from an extinguished candle. Silently he took her hand in his and led her toward the entrance to the school.

Once outside, he wrapped his arm around her, and they walked a short distance to be away from the lights that shone on the face of the building.

"How are you?" he asked gently. She turned to face him and saw that even he, Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived and went on to become a hero to the wizarding world, had changed. The hair was still dark and unruly, the eyes were still green, intense and beautiful. But something was different about his face. The angles of his bones seemed sharper, the lines on his face no longer gentle curves but strong and defined. With a start she realized that the shadows on his face were not just tricks of the light, but stubble that had not been removed. *Why, Harry,* she thought, *when did you start shaving?*

*How much did we miss?*

Tears welled in her eyes, and she suddenly did not trust herself to speak. She had thought that being with Harry would give her strength, and it did; but it also demanded that she face every other emotion that threatened to tear her apart. He was her past, and he had written her future. Whether they liked it or not, Harry had decided for all of them what their memories would be.

*It's not fair it's not fair it's not fair...*

She loved him, and she knew that if she had it to do over, she would again be at his side to face Voldemort. But it didn't change the fact that without him, none of this would have happened, and her life would be different. Every time she looked into his eyes, she would know everything that they had won, and remember everything that they had lost.

"Hermione?" He put his hand on her shoulder, and she turned her head away.

"I miss Ron," she whispered. "I wish he was here."

Harry pulled her to him and held her tightly. "I know. I miss him too." He smoothed her hair under his hand and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. "He would really have loved this, you know. Especially now that Remus and Tonks gave him that nice set of dress robes. He would have been chasing after Luna like a niffler in heat."

Hermione chuckled despite herself. Ron. How he made her smile.

*He would have done anything for me. Why couldn't I love him that way?*

Ron's courage was so **real**. Harry was a hero because he had to be. She was bold because her brain told her it was the right thing to do. But Ron...his courage had come from a place that she and Harry had never had to turn to. He was the most frightened of them all, and that had made him the bravest. An image of him came unbidden to her mind...standing taller than she knew he was, the wind from the fires blowing his hair back from his face as he stepped into the clear for Voldemort to see him. It had been foolish, it had been self-sacrificial, and it had been the bravest act she'd ever witnessed. It had given Harry the moment he needed. But what it had done to Ron...*Oh, Ron...*

Harry pulled away and smiled down at her.

"Do you want to go with me the next time I go to see him? He asked about you today."

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Severus was glad for Minerva's hand on his arm, because when he came around the corner and saw the throngs of people gathered in and around the Great Hall, his first instinct was to turn and leave. It wasn't fear of what they would think...it wasn't that he disliked them. Well, not all of them. It wasn't even that he had anything better to do with his time. It was just that spending time with people...almost any people...reminded him of how solitary ( *lonely*) his way of life was.

He was not good with small talk and had no desire to be. If he was going to have a conversation with someone, he wanted it to be stimulating and serve a purpose. He could never be a "Nice weather, yes?" kind of man. He had covered the normal conversational ground with the staff and really did not have much to say to any of them besides the Headmistress.

*Gods, how I will miss Albus.*

The staff was one situation...The students were another thing entirely. They were far more difficult to be around. Ridiculous for his career choice, he knew; it just seemed that each year they grew lazier, cheekier and completely devoid of a desire to learn anything. *Except Granger*. He had no idea how to speak to them other than to chide them for their foolishness and to snap orders at them that they could not ignore. He knew what they thought of him, and in some respects they were right. He was cold and impatient. But what he was not was uncaring. Those who thought him to be did not understand that the constant pressure he put on his students, the demand that they strive to do their absolute best and beyond, was the teaching method of a man who was gravely, gravely concerned about the future of these children.

*You're nothing to them but a great bat, a greasy vampire. One who feeds on breaking their spirits.*

*Gods, how I will miss Albus. It's not fair.*

Headmistress McGonagall turned toward him as he sighed. "Now, dear," she murmured, patting his arm again, "it will be fine. We'll have a nice dinner, everyone will dance...From what I've been told the Weasley brothers will be able to find a very nice musical group to perform for us tonight."

"Excellent," Snape scoffed. "Perhaps as an added bonus they'll be sprinkling their Mystical Mustache Powder into each of the ladies' drinks."

With a warm chuckle, Minerva steered him toward the head table. "Severus, I'm glad you're here."

*It's not fair it's not fair...*

Squeezing her hand gently he lied, "As am I."

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The Great Hall looked truly magnificent. The torches along the wall had been charmed to glow softly across the room. The enchanted ceiling was adorned with an impossible number of stars and a moon that hung slack and pregnant in the sky. In honor of the four houses of Hogwarts that had come together to defeat the Dark Lord, their banners had been raised; one to each wall. Hermione looked around the room approvingly...despite everything, it was so good to be back.

Harry held her hand as they made their way to the Gryffindor table to join their friends. Ginny greeted her with a warm smile ( *and haunted eyes*) and slid down to make room for her. Giving her hand a gentle squeeze, she asked, "Did Harry tell you that we saw Ron today?"

"Yes. I'd like to go see him soon, too. I miss him terribly."

"He would love that. He asks about you all the time."

Looking down at her hands clenched in her lap, Hermione said quietly, "How is he doing? You know, recovering? Is he getting better at all?"

Ginny sighed. "Well, the doctors said that the bones in his arms, hands and upper body are coming along nicely. He's still in a lot of pain, of course, but his spirits are good. He still laughs a lot..." Her voice broke and she looked away quickly.

"His legs?" Hermione asked softly. Ginny shook her head.

Harry put his hand over Ginny's and looked at Hermione. "They said the legs won't get better. He won't be able to walk again."

"Oh, *Gods!*" She covered her mouth with her hand to fight the sudden rising of bile in her throat. Not Ron...Sweet Merlin, not their Ron.

"Hermione. Ron is okay with this." When she shook her head, Harry turned her to face him. "Listen to me! **He is okay.** He's made his peace. You are going to have to do the same, because if he sees you this upset it will do more damage than Voldemort did!"

*He's right. He's right. It's not FAIR!!*

"Harry's right," Ginny said. "Ron is stronger than we tend to give him credit for. He knew the risks going into the war..."

"We ALL knew the risks," Harry interrupted, still staring into Hermione's eyes. "*We all knew.* And what has happened has happened, and now it's time to move on. Ron is doing it, and so will we. We're going to do it," he continued in a softer voice, "to honor the people who didn't live."

Hermione looked away and nodded.

*Why in bloody hell does he think it's going to be that easy??*

When she turned back to face him, she saw that Harry was still staring at her. This time he put his hand on her neck and leaned his forehead against her.

"There's no shame in being alive, Hermione."

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All in all, Severus had to admit that the celebration was not as horrible as he had anticipated. He had been able to keep up a steady and lively conversation with Professor Flitwick and Madame Hooch, as well as the Headmistress. The band that the Weasley brothers had procured, while not his standard taste in music, were actually quite pleasant and kept up a steady stream of music both slow and fast. While his counterparts had been taking the dance floor quite often (and more regularly as the evening wore on and the small flask which Madame Hooch had produced made its way discreetly around the Head Table) Severus remained seated. He enjoyed slow-dancing with a capable partner, but the spirit had not yet struck him.

As he watched, his esteemed Headmistress made her way back toward her seat, laughing and slightly out of breath, her brilliant purple witch's hat askew on her head. Her escort was none other than the Golden Boy, Harry Potter. Snape's lip curled as he looked away.

"Thank you, Harry! That was most enjoyable!"

"The pleasure was all mine, Headmistress." Harry gave a small bow, which made the elderly witch chuckle again.

"Harry," she reminded him gently, "you are no longer a student of this school. I believe that with our history, you may now call me Minerva."

Harry gave her a dazzling smile and planted a kiss on the back of her hand. "Then the pleasure was most certainly all mine, *Minerva.*"

As she took her seat next to him, Severus gave her a small nod. "Did you enjoy your dance?" *I would imagine you did, since it's left you giggling like a schoolgirl.*

"Yes, Severus, I did. Harry is a wonderful dancer, and it's been some time since I've had the opportunity to...how do the Muggles say it?...cut a rug." Dabbing at her throat with her napkin she looked closely at him. "Are you planning on doing any dancing this evening?"

Snape shrugged. "I'd be happy to escort you to the dance floor if you wish, Minerva. As I'm sure you are aware, I do not enjoy the frantic leaping about that these children and others," he looked around the Head Table with a faint sneer, "consider dancing. But I would not turn down the chance to be your partner for a waltz, if you would like."

"Oh, thank you, dear," Minerva smiled, giving his hand a motherly pat, "but I think I've done enough dancing for the time being. Perhaps there is someone else here you would like to accompany?"

Cocking an eyebrow at her in a way that she knew many a young witch - undeniably, a few older ones, too found quite alluring, he drawled, "Am I correct in assuming that you have someone in mind?"

Without a word, his friend turned and looked toward the center of the room. Snape followed her guess and then uttered a sarcastic bark of laughter. "Surely you are joking, Minerva! I am NOT going to lower myself to asking a student to join me in a dance!"

"Now Severus, don't go getting on your high hippogriff just yet. First of all, Hermione is no longer a student here. Secondly, this young woman fought beside you during the war, which must account for something. And lastly...she looks rather lonely."

The Potions master looked back toward the Gryffindor table and saw that Hermione was, indeed, sitting alone.

*It's not fair it's not fair*

Harry and Ginny were clutching each other tightly and swaying on the dance floor, as were several other couples. As he watched, Anthony Goldstein approached and bent

down over Hermione's shoulder. He saw her turn, give him demure smile and then shake her head. The young Ravenclaw shrugged and walked away, obviously disappointed but not looking terribly surprised.

"I believe Miss Granger would be much happier dancing with someone her own age, Headmistress. I would not want to make her the laughingstock of this school by subjecting her to the humiliation of having to dance with a teacher...least of all the one who is most disliked by her peers!"

From a few seats down he heard Madame Hooch snort. "Oh please, Severus! Hermione Granger is not a young woman who could be forced into doing anything she didn't want to. Besides," she continued, her bright yellow eyes pinning him to his seat, "what are you more afraid of? That they'll laugh at her...or that **she'll** laugh at **you**?"

*She wouldn't...she's not that cruel. I've seen her...*

Rising from the table with his eyes flashing and his nostrils flaring, Snape towered over the Flying Teacher and hissed at her, "That will be enough! Whomever I choose to dance with will be no one's business but my own and my partner's. I will not be coerced into something so ridiculous by a lot of inebriated, idiotic dolts! Begging your pardon, Headmistress," he inclined his head in a subtle apology, "but I believe my evening here is at its end. Good night." And with that he swept away from the Head Table in a swirl of green robes.

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*This is foolish. I could be back in my room, reading a book. Writing a letter to Mum and Dad. Gathering the courage to go and see Ron. Anything but sitting here and being a pathetic little wallflower!*

Coming to the party had not been a bad idea after all, Hermione had realized. She had enjoyed being with her friends again in a setting that was familiar and comforting. She had felt the dark shroud of her depression and anguish start to lift slightly as the night had worn on, but now that the dancing had begun she felt terribly out of place. Several of the students had come over to ask her to dance, and both Harry and Ginny had made efforts to coax her onto the floor, but to no avail. "I'm just not in the proper frame of mind right now," she told them. "Please, go. Have a good time. I'll enjoy sitting here and watching. Really."

But the truth was, she was not enjoying herself. Harry and Ginny were obviously anxious to spend some well-deserved time alone together, and without Ron there to keep her company, Hermione felt like a rather sullen and deflated third wheel.

*Oh, enough of this silliness. I will just go and wish Headmistress I mean Minerva a good evening and go back to my room. In any event, he has already left...there really is no point in staying any longer.*

As she put her hands on the table to rise from her seat, a hand suddenly touched her shoulder lightly...almost tentatively. Turning, she found herself staring into the shadowy eyes of Professor Snape.

"Miss Granger? May I have this dance?"

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Disclaimer: J.K Rowling is a goddess. I'm a Pisces.

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## Back to Good

### Chapter 3 of 7

Snape invites Hermione to dance...will she accept? And where will it lead?

"Miss Granger? May I have this dance?"

*Okay. Umm... I most definitely must have heard him incorrectly. For a moment there I thought he sa--*

"Miss Granger, it is customary to give a reply when you are extended an invitation to dance. Furthermore," he snapped, "it is hugely unbecoming for you to sit there with your mouth hanging open. I suggest you close it before people start to think that you have some sort of Muggle-born genetic flaw!"

*Now he's yelling at me?? What is he playing at? What exactly is going on here?*

Hermione's head whirled as she tried to make sense of what had happened in the past ten seconds. She had seen Professor Snape storm off from the Head Table and make his way out of the Great Hall, and from his gait *like he was stalking prey*- she had known that he was angry. She had seen him prowling the hallways of Hogwarts often enough as a student to recognize that it did not herald a friendly greeting, and she was sure that he was leaving the party for the night.

She had been surprised at how disappointed she was by his departure. In the back of her mind she had harbored the thought that perhaps tonight, in this setting that was so different from what they had been living in for so long now, an opportunity might present itself for them to have a real conversation. She wasn't sure what this pull was that she felt toward him; she was one of the few who never believed that he had restored his allegiance to Voldemort. Part of it was that Dumbledore had trusted him, but there was more. In her gut - *my heart* - she knew that he was not an evil man. She was well aware of his past, as they all were. The things that he must have seen and done while serving as a Death Eater were things that in all likelihood were beyond her comprehension, but she could see that they were not things that he was proud of. He carried his past not as an honor but as a burden.

He was courageous; to have been a spy for the Order for so many years was an incredibly dangerous task, and she realized that he had given his entire life to it. She had wondered many times if teaching was his career of choice or one of convenience, due to his loyalty to Dumbledore. He obviously had no rapport with young children. Perhaps he would have been happier being a Potions master in a university, or a Healer, researching new medicinal potions in a vast laboratory somewhere.

*Maybe he would just be happy being a husband and father.*

During the Battle of The End, she had found herself fighting near him on the fields. Although she had always known that he was a powerful wizard, she never had a full appreciation of his gifts until that day. Though she was certainly not in a position that day to stand idly by and observe his wizarding skills, she could actually *feel* the strength emanating from him, like waves of flame swelling outward from an explosion. Renewed by the knowledge that someone so very potent was fighting on their side on *her* side she had found herself fighting with a new fervor and ability.

*His power gave **me** power. His strength strengthened **me**.*

Hermione wasn't daft enough to ignore what the base of that power surge was. She knew that the intensity of it lay in dark magic. She had felt some of its lure as she had fought; it was almost as though exhilaration had mingled with the fear and revulsion coursing through her. She was able to ignore it for the most part, because she was only being lightly grazed by the outer fringes of its area. But even that tiny encounter had left her with an almost painful clarity of vision and a taste in the back of her throat that was - *the taste of murder* - slightly sweet and metallic. And it had also left her with an incredibly intensified appreciation and awe of Snape's true strength of character. For him to have that power... to know that kind of animalistic pleasure and be able to keep it in check and not surrender to it...was astounding...

She wanted the opportunity to get to know him as a person; to leave behind the teacher/student relationship and move on as equals. But would he ever be able to see her as anything other than a child?

*I just want a chance...*

He turned and began to walk away.

"Professor, wait!"

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Cursing under his breath, Snape had stormed away from the Head Table, convinced that his evening was at an end. Brushing none too gently through the knot of students clustered near the entry doors, he stalked his way down toward the dungeons.

"Bloody Hooch! Bloody **lot** of them! What right do they think they have, interfering in my personal affairs! Trying to wheedle me into asking a student, " *but she's not a student anymore*, "to dance; a mere slip of a girl!" *But she fought like a woman.*" And then insinuating that I would be **degraded** were she not to accept!"

*Well, wouldn't you?*

Snape's walking slowed as he continued on through the corridors.

*A woman has a right to decline an invitation. She would not want to dance with me, particularly in front of a room of her peers. It would only humiliate her, and further her dislike of me. I would completely expect her to say no.*

He came to a stop in front of one of the many-framed pictures in the castle hallways. A beautiful young witch with long black hair sat reading a book beneath a lush tree on a quiet hillside. As he watched, a wizard approached her cautiously. As she looked up from her book, he held out to her a single yellow rose.

*But she didn't say no. She didn't have the opportunity. You deprived her of that right.*

Uncertainly, the young witch reached out and accepted the rose.

*I am trying to think of **her** feelings! I am trying to spare her the disgrace she would surely feel if I were to put her in that position!*

Smiling shyly, the wizard motioned to the ground next to the witch.

*You are talking about one of the most powerful, most courageous witches of her time... or of any time, if you are going to be perfectly honest. She fought beside you against Voldemort. She fought well... she fought **exceptionally** well. Do you truly think so highly of yourself that you suppose an awkward moment with you would unnerve the girl?*

*She is no longer a girl.*

After a moment's hesitation, the raven-haired witch looked up from beneath lowered lashes and moved slightly to one side, making room for the wizard to sit beside her.

*There is absolutely no reason why she would wish to dance with me. She declined invitations from young, handsome men; to think that she would accept my request would be utter foolishness.*

Settling into the soft grass, the wizard motioned to the book. The witch turned it over so that he could see the title.

*She would have said no*

The witch said something softly to the wizard and the both laughed, smiling at each other.

*Maybe you should have given her the chance.*

Turning slowly, he made his way back toward the Great Hall. After the argument that he had just been having with himself, his head seemed unnaturally quiet. He thought of nothing, focused on nothing, analyzed nothing. He walked amongst the students without seeing or hearing them; and only as he neared Hermione did he realize, with relief, that the band was starting a slow song.

He reached his hand out toward her just as she began to push herself away from the table. She jumped slightly as he touched her, then turned and looked into his eyes.

"Miss Granger? May I have this dance?"

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The touch of her hand on his arm stilled him. He stopped with his back to her, his head inclined toward her ever so slightly.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I...I would be honored. To dance with you, that is," she stammered and cursed the blush that crawled up her neck and cheeks. For a moment he didn't answer, and she was sure that she had misunderstood him. Everything around her slowed down until all she could see was her pale hand against the gray sleeve of his shirt, and all she could hear was a muted murmur of noise around her, almost as though she was listening to a conversation under water.

*Or to an unborn baby's heartbeat...*

*She said yes. This I was not prepared for.*

Finally, after a fleeting eternity, he turned back toward her.

"Fine," he said brusquely, extending his hand to her. She glanced from his hand to his face, but his eyes were not on hers. She slid her palm over his and watched his eyes flicker down to consider their joined hands. Then, without another word, he led her to the dance floor.

Hermione knew that there were more than a few couples dancing as they approached, and although she could not see past Professor Snape's strong shoulders, she could sense that the crowd was parting for them as they strode onto the floor. Turning toward her, Severus placed his free hand on her waist and pulled her slightly closer to him. Without having to think about it, Hermione placed her hand on his shoulder and they began swaying in time to the music.

Only then did she begin to feel the tiniest twinges of panic ringing gently down her spine. Here was her opportunity... her chance to start the conversation that she had been thinking about for so very long now. And she was going to have only three minutes four, at the most to break this extremely precarious ice.

*Oh, I can't do this. I'm not prepared. There's not enough time... I don't know where to begin...*

"Are you enjoying the party, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked her suddenly. Whether it was the abruptness of his question or the complete lack of ridicule and contempt that usually accompanied his words, she would never know. But it startled her into blurting out a completely honest answer.

"No." He glanced down at her with his trademark, cocked eyebrow, and she floundered yet again. "I mean, the party is lovely, and I like the music, and, well, the food was great, and..." As she trailed off, she found herself staring at one of the buttons on his shirt, which was engraved with a tiny silver snake, and realized that she could see the faint rise and fall of his chest beneath it, ever so subtle, but illogically calming. Taking a deep breath she looked up at him and smiled. "No. I'm not enjoying the party. I wasn't, anyway. I am enjoying this dance."

*Dear gods, she's glorious when she smiles!*

Obviously taken aback by her statement, Snape held her gaze for a moment and then looked away.

*I should not have said that. That is not what he wanted to hear. He was only making polite conversation, and I... I should not have said that.*

They continued to dance.

*I should answer her. She paid me a simple compliment; the gentlemanly thing to do is to return it. Even if it was a lie.*

"You're a lovely dancer, Miss Granger," he stated, and the noncommittal tone of his voice nearly made her laugh out loud with relief.

*Wars are waged, people die, lives spin beyond our control... and Snape is still snarky. Merlin love him!*

"Thank you, Professor, as are you. Do you dance often?"

Snorting rather unceremoniously, he shook his head. "Hardly."

The song that they were dancing to was one that Hermione was familiar with, and she recognized that it was reaching its end. Knowing that an opportunity such as this would likely not present itself any time soon, she decided to charge ahead.

"Professor Snape, I've been wondering... well, I've been thinking about you, and... and I guess I just wanted to know if you're okay."

*Bugger it all! What is wrong with me? Why am I still intimidated by this man?!*

"What exactly do you mean by 'okay,' Miss Granger?" Though the outward tone of his voice was of bored indifference, Hermione knew that she was not imagining the underlying wariness she heard.

"Well, sir, we've all been through a difficult time. I would think that you, especially, have experienced a lot of turmoil and probably some crazy emotions, and, well... I think we're all feeling a bit lost and lonely right now, and it helps to talk to people sometimes; so if, you know, you need someone to talk to..." *Oh, stop blabbering you silly twit!*

She felt him stiffen immediately and knew that she had gone too far.

"Miss Granger, if I felt the need to speak to someone about my 'feelings' which I do not I would do so without the goading of a yammering young woman who purports to know what kind of man I am and even more laughable what I have been through." His voice, like black ice, got even quieter as he hissed, "Don't ever presume to know anything about me or my life, Miss Granger. You will be sadly, sadly disappointed."

As the music ended he gave her a cold nod and said in the most caustic tone she had ever heard, "Thank you for the dance, Miss Granger. It was a pleasure."

And with yet another swirl of green, he was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Harry had managed to dance Ginny off to a corner of the dance floor where he was able to press himself softly against her and move his lips to her neck. He was losing himself in the feel of the delicate small of her back under his hand when he suddenly felt her tense. *Damn, I'm good!* Smiling, he moved his lips up to her ear and whispered, "Let's go for a walk, Gin." Pulling away, he realized that her sudden change had nothing to do with him.

"Harry, *look!*" He followed her eyes and breathed in sharply.

"What the **hell?!**"

He watched as his best friend and one of his greatest antagonists moved smoothly across the dance floor. His mind was a tumult of thoughts and emotions: *How did he get her out there? Why would she be dancing with him? Why must he still be in my life? Why him? Oh, anyone but HIM!*

As he, Ginny, and most everyone else in the hall watched, Professor Snape and Hermione danced, oblivious to the eyes on them. Suddenly, Harry saw Snape's step falter. In the next instant, he bent his head low to Hermione's, and a moment later he left her standing alone on the dance floor, staring after him.

"Ginny," he began.

"Go."

Squeezing her hand gently, he made his way across the floor to Hermione, who was still standing there staring toward the door where Snape had left, her mouth slightly open.

"Hermione?" Harry moved so that he could see her face better and exploded when he glimpsed the tears in her eyes. "Bloody hell, Hermione! What did that bastard do to you?!" He put his hand on her arm, and only then did it seem that she noticed his presence.

She turned her chocolate eyes to his, then looked again at the door. Preparing himself to hold her as she cried on his shoulder, Harry was startled to see a small smile

start to tease the corners of her mouth.

*Young woman.*

"I swear, Hermione, tell me what he did to you. I'll hex him halfway to next week if he hurt you. The bloody bastard! Just tell me--"

"Harry." The quiet control in her voice stopped him instantly. Snapping his mouth shut, he stared at her as the smile became a bit more evident. "Harry, all he did was ask me to dance."

"But, but... it's SNAPE!" he sputtered. "He's disgusting, he's malicious, he's..."

"He's a man, Harry. He's just a man. Like you." Now she turned her full grin to him. *Dear gods, she's glorious when she smiles.*

"And I don't have to be afraid of him anymore."

\*\*\*\*\*

As she strode purposefully down the corridor, she never once thought about where she was going. Had she been asked later what - or who - she passed on her way, she would have had no answer. She replayed only one scene in her mind; the swell of his shirt with each breath he took and the irrational sense of peace it brought her.

Stepping through the door to the top of the Astronomy Tower, Hermione saw him immediately. His back was to her, and he was standing at the precise spot where Albus had been hurled over the wall. He turned his head slightly as she approached, and she heard his sigh of impatience.

"What is it *now*, Miss Granger?"

Walking to his side, she placed her hand on top of his on the cold stone wall.

"My name is Hermione, Severus. And I miss him too."

\*\*\*\*\*

**Disclaimer:** J.K. Rowling owns all the rights to the characters, all the profits, all the good clothes, and a much nicer car than I do.

**Author's Notes:** Thank you so much for all of the wonderful reviews and honest criticisms so far. You have no idea how much they mean to me! Please keep letting me know what you think!

The line, *"I suggest you close it before people start to think that you have some sort of Muggle-born genetic flaw!"* was inspired by one of my favorite 'Will & Grace' episodes, where Karen tells Will, "Close your mouth, honey, you look like you're missing a chromosome!"

As I wrote the dance scene in my head, the song that I was hearing the band play was "Back to Good" by Matchbox 20. And thus the title.

Rated for later chapters and intended plot development.

This story is dedicated to my husband, who has promised to stand behind me and make bad porno music when it's time to write the sex scenes. I will love you forever, you giant freak of nature.

## Then and Now

### Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione approaches Snape with a proposition...and we flash back to a bit of Snape's past...

"My name is Hermione, Severus. And I miss him, too."

Snape looked down at her hand on his for a moment. *Merlin, she feels so warm.* Then he picked her hand up and removed it from his.

"Miss Granger"

"I told you, call me Hermione."

"*Miss Granger*, while I appreciate that we have all suffered losses in this war, I have requested neither your comfort nor your presence here." He was using his best Professor Snape voice, riddled with disdain, and expected it to send her either running for or stamping off toward the door.

To his surprise, she chuckled.

"And I, *Severus*," she snarled back at him, mimicking his tone with extraordinary accuracy, "didn't ask you if you wanted either."

He stared at her for a moment, shocked. This was certainly not how he had pictured her reacting. She was supposed to be scared of him...wary, at the very least. But here she was, holding his gaze, her chin lifted and a smirk on her face.

*Did she learn that from me?*

He kept his eyes on hers for a moment longer, then turned to look back into the night. "Impudent little witch," he murmured.

"Sarcastic, introverted old prat!" she snapped back.

He spun on her, and she took an involuntary step backwards. "I may no longer be your professor, Miss Granger, but you **will** show me respect when speaking to me! Which, if the gods will have it, will not be for much longer!"



She said nothing. Staring into her eyes again, Snape felt his confidence falter. What was this? Why was she not cowering in fear from him? Why was she not close to tears? Was he losing his touch?

*Why can't I drive her away?*

"Professor, I do apologize. My remark was..."

"Rude and uncalled for," he finished for her.

"Well, I'll give you rude," she muttered.

With a deep sigh he turned his head away. "Miss Granger, what precisely is it you want from me?"

*A chance, a chance, just a chance.*

"I would like a chance," she began, and there was a slight waver to her voice, "to be heard."

"Fine," he replied, his face now contorted back to its usual semblance of exasperated boredom. Hermione stifled a nervous giggle at how childlike he could seem.

"I'm waiting, Miss Granger. I would prefer not to spend the entirety of what is left of my evening listening to prattle, so if you could just get on with it..."

With a deep breath, she began. "I am not a child any more. I don't suppose any of us could go through what we've gone through and think that we could come out with our childhood intact. I've learned a lot about myself from this war, and I believe I've also learned a lot about others. What I mean," she continued hurriedly when he shot her a dark look, "is that my perceptions about others have oftentimes not been...well, dead-on." She took a small step closer to him and continued, "For seven years, you scared the hell out of me."

*That's more like it.*

"Don't think I didn't see that smirk, either," she remarked, without missing a beat. "I know that's the way you preferred it. You scared me, you intimidated me, and you made me think that you were a cold, heartless man with no concern for anyone else in the world."

"Splendid," Snape jeered, "insults by moonlight. Personal attacks on my character 'neath a starry sky. Yes, this evening just continues to get better and better!"

Hermione went on as though he hadn't spoken. "Then I found myself looking at you a bit more objectively; I saw the sacrifices you made for Dumbledore and the Order, and I realized that you were making them for ALL of us...and not least of all, for Harry. I know you don't like Harry," she shrugged, "but I don't know why. And I'm not asking why, either. It's not my business. I know that you have sacrificed things that the rest of us have taken for granted in our lives: families, friends, relationships, happiness. And peace. The rest of us have dealt with this for a comparatively short time; you have not had peace in years."

*Longer than you know, Miss Granger. Longer than almost anyone knows.*

"I just find that when I look at you now, I see a very private, very strong, very caring man that I would like to get to know better." *There. I've said it. Oh, bloody hell, I've said it.*

Severus was quiet for a moment, and then, still not looking at her, he asked, "And what makes you think that I would reciprocate those feelings?"

"Honestly?"

He glanced toward her. "Certainly."

"I don't know that you will. But at this point in *lifewhere there seems to be so little left to lose* wasn't willing to forgo the idea without trying." Her voice softened slightly as she added, "And also, because I think you lost damn near every real friend you had in that war."

Taking one more small step toward him, she reached her hand out and put it on his shoulder tentatively, as though she thought he would brush her away.

"I like you, Severus. I would like to be your friend."

\*\*\*\*\*

*Flying from the front doors of the school, Severus tried to drown out the laughter he heard from behind him. He fought back tears that he knew would boil his father's blood and ran blindly toward the Forbidden Forest.*

**Gods**, how he hated them! Oh, the whole fucking lot of them!! Potter, Lupin, Black...everyone else, too! Why must they torment him at every chance? Every fucking chance! **WHY?** He had done nothing but be born a Snape, and he had most certainly never asked for that!

*He was so tired of the taunting, the mortification, the isolation. He wanted to be at this school...he wanted to learn everything that he could about magic, particularly Potions from the best professors in the world. But this was becoming more than he could bear. He could spend all of his time here, amongst these people that were supposed to be his 'peers,' living with them, going to Quidditch matches with them, attending classes with them, but he knew the truth. He would never belong.*

*It was not much better at home. His father could barely stand the sight of him and made it known at every turn. His mother, while he was sure she tried her best to love him, was petrified to her very soul of her husband. She would show no compassion or gentleness to Severus when his father was around; his father had noticed this very early on and made it a point to keep their moments together to a minimum.*

*Gods, he was tired of being **so** alone.*

*He kept moving toward the Forbidden Forest, beyond the point of caring that it was off-limits to students.*

"Severus! Severus, wait!"

*Turning toward the voice, he moaned. 'Oh, not now. No, she saw the whole thing, she must have seen the whole thing, she ALWAYS sees the WHOLE THING!' He ran faster than before, sure that she would never follow him into the Forbidden Forest. A Gryffindor prefect was most likely not even capable of breaking such rules!*

*Bursting into the darkness of the trees, he kept running until the pain in his side told him it was time to stop. He had reached a small clearing and stumbled over to sit on a large, moss-covered rock. His breathing was hard and labored, and the pounding of his own blood in his ears was deafening. For this reason, he did not hear her approaching until she sat down beside him.*

*He again jumped to his feet, but she grabbed his arm and said, "Would you please just sit down for a minute! For Merlin's sake, I can't keep chasing you around!"*

*He stood awkwardly next to the rock, confused and adolescent. He wanted her to leave, and he wanted her to stay. He couldn't take any more ridicule, especially from her.*

Coming from her, it would surely kill him. He was terrified that she would open her mouth - that beautiful, beautiful mouth - and utter words that would be his undoing.

But how could he make her go? This was Lily. This was the girl that he watched every day in classes and corridors and loved every night in his dreams. She was perfection personified...a living goddess whose presence had kept him from fleeing Hogwarts more times than he could remember. He didn't know why she was there, why she was chasing him, but he knew in his heart that they had met here at a crossroads, and she was about to decide the direction of the course.

"Severus, you have to try to ignore them. They're just doing it because they know how much it upsets you."

He looked at her, dumbfounded.

"Ignore them? **Ignore them**?! Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Do you know how hard it is to be the butt of their jokes over and over and **over** again? What am I saying?" he scoffed, "Of course you don't. You're a Gryffindor. You're a prefect, for Merlin's sake! You're smart, you're beautiful, everyone likes you, you're practically the ideal woman..." He blushed brightly as he realized what he'd said, two bold spots of red on his pale cheeks.

"Why, Severus! What a sweet thing to say! But you know, of course, it's not true. Not everyone likes me."

"Perhaps not. But not everyone dislikes you, either. And therefore, you can't know what it's like to be me."

She rose gracefully from the rock and stepped in front of Snape, forcing him to look at her.

"I don't dislike you."

"You don't even know me," he snapped, avoiding her eyes.

"I know you as much as you know me!" she laughed. "You're absolutely brilliant, you're handsome, and I believe you have a kind heart."

He couldn't hold back a derisive snort. "What?" she demanded. "Why is it perfectly all right for you to say nice things about me, but I'm not to return the compliment?"

"Because I **meant** the things I said!" he yelled, taking a threatening step toward her before he realized what he was doing.

Putting her hands on her hips in a ridiculously childish gesture, she held his gaze and replied, "And so did I!"

'She didn't step away,' he thought to himself.

"You are one of the most brilliant wizards of our age, Severus. Even you cannot deny that. And you're a handsome man. Not conventionally handsome," she continued, as he rolled his eyes, "but definitely attractive in a noble sort of way. And I do think you're kind. At least, you've always been kind to me."

Turning away, he tried to collect himself. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Lily Evans...not only was she talking to him, she was complimenting him! He noticed that everything around him, although still encased in the darkness of the forest, suddenly seemed a bit brighter, a bit clearer, and he felt a lovely aching in his chest. His mind and body were under assault from an emotion that he hadn't experienced in years...if ever.

Severus Snape was feeling hope.

'No!' his mind suddenly railed at him. 'No! This is another one of their tricks! This is just another chance for them to laugh at you!'

'But they are not here,' another voice argued. 'It is only she and I. Why would she be saying these things if she didn't mean them?'

'So that she can go back and tell them all how she tricked you, how she had you begging at her feet like a trained Crup.'

He rounded on her suddenly, almost ferociously. "Why are you here?" he hissed.

Again, without shrinking back from him, she held his gaze and replied, "They're all a bunch of wankers, really." If she saw his look of surprise on his face, she did not acknowledge it. "They make fun of you to make them feel better about themselves. That's just a bit sad, I think." Shrugging, she looked up at him with such innocence that he felt his breath catch in his throat.

"I like you, Severus. I want to be your friend."

And with those words, he let her lead him out of the forest and into the light.

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He felt the unfamiliar prickle of tears behind eyes that had been dry for many, many years. He blinked hard, several times, and turned to face her.

She's not Lily, Severus.

"I am not in the market for new friends, Miss Granger. And if I were, I am quite sure I could do better than to turn to a self-important ex-student with absurd delusions of grandeur. Good night."

Without a backward glance he left her in the dark.

\*\*\*\*\*

Disclaimer: J.K Rowling owns all the rights to the characters, but she called me on the phone the other day and told me I can do whatever I want with them. No, really, she did!

Author's Notes: Thank you so much for all of the wonderful reviews and honest criticisms so far. You have no idea how much they mean to me! Please keep letting me know what you think!

A Crup is described as: A magical creature that strongly resembles a Jack Russell terrier, except that a Crup has a forked tail.

Rated for later chapters and intended plot development.

This story is dedicated to my husband, who has had to give up spending time on his own computer while I work on mine. (I don't like to write with anyone else around.) He's such a good guy...maybe he'll get a little wiggle tonight. ;)

# The Laughter and the Letting Go

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione gets a visit from Harry, and Snape learns a bit of a secret from McGonagall.

"I am not in the market for new *friends*, Miss Granger. And if I were, I am quite sure I could do better than to turn to a self-important ex-student with absurd delusions of grandeur. Good night."

Without a backward glance he left her in the dark.

Hermione stood where she was, blinking in disbelief. Emotions ran through her like wildfire: embarrassment, humiliation, hurt, and anger. Of these, anger was the strongest... and the one that chose to stay.

"That *prick!*" she barked to herself. She had known he was an infuriating man, closed off to accepting the advances of others, whether they be friendly or otherwise. She had not fooled herself into thinking that he would wrap her in a warm hug and invite her to his rooms for a spot of tea and a chat; that was not Severus Snape. But neither had she expected such a cutting and cruel response to her offer. *Perhaps*, she told herself, *I was completely right about him from the beginning. Perhaps he is the vicious, heartless bastard that people think he is.* The Snape that she had recently been envisioning in her head would never have reacted to her as this man had tonight. He would never have been so mean, so bitter, such a... such a... "Such a little prick!" she again snapped into the night. "He's a right little prick!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Professor Snape swept into his room and closed the door behind him with a thunderous slam. In a rare fit of anger, he unfastened his robes and threw them across the room, where they fell in a heap on the floor. "*Accio vodka!*", he snarled. He plucked the bottle of Muggle alcohol from the air as it hovered near him and took several long swallows. Grimacing at the harshness, he slumped into a chair and prepared to drink away the events of the night.

Damn her! What right did she have to try and impose herself on his life? And to come in and make him think of Lily again... after all these years.

*Lily.*

Rubbing his forehead, Snape tried to calm himself. He was not a man who often let his emotions get the best of him. He prided himself on being able to control nearly every situation that he was put in... and he conveniently ignored the fact that doing so played a huge part in his solitude. He had learned that forging close ties to others was dependent on allowing them their freedom, and this was something that he was not wont to do. Trust and respect were not gifts that Severus Snape gave easily; as such, he had found that it was easier to avoid relationships altogether.

*Well, that and the fact that those I love tend to die...*

And here was Granger, so sure that with a few nice words he would crumple at her feet and pledge his undying friendship and love. Ha!

*Whoever said anything about love?*

Ignoring this thought, Snape tipped back the bottle again, relishing the soothing burn it brought. Drinking to escape was foolish, he knew. But sometimes even he was not strong enough to fight.

"*Incendio!*" he muttered, and the light from the fireplace flames pronounced the deep lines in his forehead and darkened the circles under his eyes.

He lost track of time as he sat there, eyes staring at the fire and heart seeing memories. Lily, Albus, Granger, Potters, Lucius, Voldemort... they all were there. Unbeknownst to him, a myriad of expressions crossed his face as he sat: contempt, annoyance, amusement, fear. And on more than one occasion, his features were softened by a faint smile. Anyone looking in on Snape during this period of recollection would have found him unrecognizable at times.

*Albus sharing a brandy with him, their feet propped up on opposite sides of the desk, a bowl of lemon drops between them... Lily, her hair pouring over her shoulders, lying on her stomach on the bed with a book in front of her, suddenly looking up at him with an explosive smile... Lucius, his eyes cold and his smile colder, handing him his Death Eater's mask in a darkened room... Granger, her voice soft and her eyes wide and anxious, "I think you lost damn near every real friend you had in that war." Lily crying, her hand pressed to her belly... Voldemort laughing... Lucius knowing...*

Shaking himself suddenly from his reverie, Severus stood and pulled on his customary black robes. *I have to get out*, he thought to himself. *A walk... something...* Opening his door, he nearly trampled over the Headmistress.

"Oh!" she cried, taking a few steps back. "Severus, you startled me!"

"I'm sorry, Minerva. I didn't realize you were there."

Being a friend with genuine affection for Snape, the elderly witch chose not to mention the scent of alcohol drifting around him; nor did she call attention to the very slight slur in his words. Instead, she tucked her arm through his and smiled up at him. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm not really sure," he answered honestly. "I felt that a walk was in order, but I didn't have a specific destination in mind."

"Well, that's just perfect then! I had come down to ask if we might chat for a bit. Would you mind if I accompanied you on your walk?"

Severus sighed internally, but he would not dream of turning her away. "Of course, Minerva. That would be delightful."

They walked slowly through the corridors of the schools, not talking much. Their silence was comfortable and Severus realized that with Albus now gone, the new Headmistress was the only person he knew that he had that level of compatibility with. This understanding both saddened and calmed him, and he turned to her with a warm smile.

*I won't ask him what he's thinking*, Minerva thought to herself, *but, my God, it's so beautiful when the boy smiles!*

On the school grounds they made their way to the lake and sat together on a small bench by its shore. The walk in the fresh air had definitely been beneficial for Snape's mood... His mind was no longer a jumble of alcohol-induced memories. The moon was reflected gloriously in the water, and he found himself wishing that he was with a

partner of a romantic persuasion.

*Fool*, he chided himself. *You killed any days of romance you might have enjoyed long ago.*

"So, Minerva. You wished to speak with me?"

"Yes, Severus, I did. I noticed that you took my advice and asked Miss Granger to dance this evening."

Snape felt the anger and sorrow that had been ebbing inside of him start to build again, and McGonagall immediately reached over and patted his knee. "Now, don't go getting all huffy again, dear," she chuckled. "I'm merely making an observation."

"Yes, I did dance with her," he answered simply.

"She's a lovely young lady. And I believe that she's quite fond of you." Snape snorted, but before he could interrupt, the Headmistress continued, "Did you know that you were one of the first that she asked after when the fighting was done?"

Severus' surprise registered on his face. "Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. She was there, of course, with Harry, and she knew that he was all right. She asked first for Ronald, naturally; he was hurt so badly, none of us were sure how he would be." Snape nodded in agreement. He had seen the hex that the Weasley boy had been hit with, and he was frankly astonished that the damage had not been worse. "The second person she asked for was you."

"I'm sure she simply wanted to make sure that I was apprehended for *mycrimes*, Minerva," he sneered.

"Certainly not, Severus, and you know that!" she snapped. Severus managed to look ashamed, as though he'd just been reprimanded by a gentle grandmother for stealing a cookie. "She has maintained your innocence from the beginning, and I will **not** let you take that away from her! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Headmistress. You are right."

With a deep sigh, Minerva looked out at the lake. *So lovely*, she thought. *It's so interesting how something that looks so dark and deep, so full of mysteries in the daylight, can be so astoundingly beautiful in the night.*

"Severus, I have to tell you something that you are probably not going to like." A quick glance toward him confirmed that his expression was now guarded. "Before Albus died - before you and he came to your agreement - he spoke to me about you."

"What do you mean?"

"He wanted there to be someone here who understood you, Severus. Someone who knew of your past and the reasons why you made some of your choices. He didn't want you to be alone."

"And what," Snape asked in a low, dangerous voice, "did he tell you?"

Turning toward him, she said simply, "He told me everything."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione had almost reached her room when she heard Harry calling her.

"Harry, I don't want to hear any more about Snape right now," she sighed.

"Agreed. Can I just come in to talk?"

"I guess," she shrugged. She wasn't much in the mood for company, but she also was too tired to argue with Harry at this point. Turning toward the portrait over her doorway, she said, "Trembling monkeys."

"What?!" Harry laughed, as the portrait swung open.

"Trembling monkeys. The password is 'trembling monkeys.' Don't ask me why, I've no idea."

Harry followed her into her room, his laughter building as he sat down. "It's not that funny, Harry," Hermione shouted to him from her closet.

"Yes, it is!" he yelled back, gasping between his chuckles.

"For Merlin's sake, Harry, grow up," she admonished, as she came back in and sat on her bed. "It's just some ridiculous password that some boob made up, and now, I'm stuck with it!"

Harry looked at her and tried his best to put on a serious face, but failed miserably. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he finally choked out, "but trembling monkeys make me laugh!"

As he bent over the arm of the chair, laughing hysterically, Hermione felt the corners of her mouth twitching. She tried not to lose her composure, intent on showing Harry just how immature he could be. But the longer she sat there, watching her friend pound on the chair and wipe tears from his face, the harder it became. Finally, after Harry let out a rather loud and unceremonious snort, she gave in and joined him.

"Trembling monkeys! Oh, no!" Harry was laughing so hard his voice came out as a high-pitched squeak, causing Hermione to double over on her bed.

"They make you laugh!" she cried, her arms clasped around her midsection, her mascara running in rivulets down her cheeks.

They laughed until it hurt, and then they laughed some more. They laughed as only best friends can: raucous, unrestrained, vulnerable laughter. They laughed as souls who have been pushed to the brink and had survived must laugh - a symbolic thumbing of the nose at fate and destiny.

Gradually they calmed down. "*Accio tissues*," Hermione croaked from where she lay on the bed, sprawled on her back with her hair in a shambles around her. Still giggling, she took one and passed the box to Harry.

"Oh, I needed that!" she flopped back on the bed, wiping her eyes.

"Bloody hell, that *did* feel good, didn't it?" Harry smiled fondly at her, and Hermione felt some of the weight that had been surrounding her heart for so long lift. They had done it... Voldemort was dead, and the war was over. They had lost friends, it was true; some that were more like family. But the fear that they had lived under - the constant pressure of knowing what was to come - was gone.

"Harry? We really did it, didn't we?"

He looked away for a moment, and Hermione saw his jaw working. She knelt in front of him and touched his hand gently. "Harry?" When he turned to her, she saw fresh

tears in his eyes, but no laughter to go with them this time.

"It's over, 'Mione. It's finally over." His bottom lip trembled as the tears spilled over his lashes, and he looked like such a sad, lost little boy that she immediately gathered him in her arms and rocked him as he wept. It occurred to her that through all of this, he had never cried. At least not in front of her; but if the heart-wrenching sobs that shook him now were any indication, this was the first time he had allowed himself to let go. She knew he was weeping for many things: the parents he would never know, the friends who had fallen, the parts of his childhood that were stolen forever from him, and - not least of all - out of relief.

The responsibilities that had fallen on him would have been unfair and cruel to a man. He had only been a boy; his biggest concerns should have been playing with his friends and thinking about girls. But instead, he had to grow up under the tutelage of wizards and witches who would teach him - among other things - to kill. And at the end of it... even though he had saved the world and countless lives with his courage and conviction... it had brought back nothing that he had lost.

Yes, he was The Boy Who Lived. But for tonight, she would let him mourn The Boy Who Died.

After a long time, the heaving of his shoulders slowed, and he quieted. She continued to rock him gently and stroke his hair until he reached past her for the box of tissues. Wiping his eyes, he looked up at her sheepishly.

"I'm sorry. That kind of snuck up on me."

"Don't apologize, Harry. That was long overdue." She gave him a soft smile and asked, "Are you okay now?"

"Yeah... as a matter of fact, I think I feel better now than I have in a long time."

"Good. In that case," she took a deep breath, "I was wondering when you're going to visit Ron again?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus stood with his back to Minerva, looking out at the water. He felt angry and violated, and he was not yet able to trust himself to speak.

"Severus, you must understand that Albus did what he thought was right. And I think that he was right, also. He did not want you to be alone after he was gone."

"I told him of things that I have told *no one else*," he snarled. "I trusted him."

"And you do not trust me?"

"It is not the same, Minerva. Had I told you my secrets, that would have been by my choice. But I chose to tell Albus, not you."

"Yes, but Albus is not here now, Severus." She ignored the glare he sent her way. "He wanted there to be someone that you could talk to, if you so needed. He wanted to know that you were taken care of."

"I am a grown man. I do not need anyone to take care of me!"

Sighing, the Headmistress began to pace the ground. "That response is exactly what I'm talking about, Severus!"

"Don't speak in riddles, Minerva. I don't have patience for such games."

"Severus, sit back down here with me." She waited until he was seated uncomfortably next to her, then continued. "Have you really thought about what is going to happen to you next, son?"

"I don't understand," he said. "I will continue living here. I will continue teaching at Hogwarts." With a smirk, he added, "I will continue, undoubtedly, to be turned down for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position."

With a deep expression of fondness in her eyes, McGonagall took his hand. "And have you considered, for just a moment, what you will NOT continue doing?"

When he cocked an eyebrow at her, she smiled. "My boy, you no longer have to hide. You no longer have to spy. Your days of living in fear and seclusion are done. Severus... you are free!"

As she watched the truth of what she had said settle on his face, she was struck once again by how young he really was. She thought - not for the first time - how unjust it was that he had been dealt such a hand. A brilliant, sensitive man... and he had given up most of his life to both the Dark and the Light.

*How long has it been since he has done something just for himself?*

Her words echoed over and over again in his head. *Severus... you are free!* He knew it was true. Voldemort was gone. The war was over. He was cleared of Dumbledore's death. Everything that had ruled his life for almost as long as he could remember was *done*. He didn't have to live in shadows ever again.

"I'm free," he repeated slowly. The words felt delicious on his tongue. He thought that he had never heard anything so beautiful in all his life.

"Yes, dear. You are free. Now, you can go ahead and live whatever life it is you've always wished for." Almost before the words had left her lips, Minerva wished that she could take them back. The dark look that fell over Severus' face confirmed that she had said something wrong. Quickly, she turned him to face her.

"Severus, I know about Lily. I know... what happened." She gripped his shoulders firmly as he tried to turn from her. "It was horrible, Severus, I know. And I'm so sorry - so truly, deeply sorry - that you were not able to live a long, happy life with her. But now you have the chance to go and try to find that life with someone else. Someone who will adore you and take care of you the way that you deserve."

"No!" he spat. "I can not - I WILL not - put someone else through what she went through. Do not ask that of me, Minerva!"

"Severus, let go of the past! What happened with Lily was a terrible, tragic accident, nothing more! You cannot give up your whole life to something that happened all those years ago! I knew Lily, and I know she never would have wanted that for you!"

As she watched him shake his head mutely, her heart swelled. Knowing that she was most likely the only person who would be allowed to do such a thing, she put her arms around him and pulled him to her in a stiff hug.

"Albus died because he believed so much in what was right and because he cared so much for all of us. Don't let his death be an empty gesture, Severus. Don't dishonor him by dying, too."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione woke early the next morning to the faint sound of tapping. Pushing her hair out of her eyes groggily, she went to her window and took the piece of parchment from the midnight-black owl that waited for her. Handing him a few pieces of biscuit, she unrolled the note.

*Hermione,*

*I am planning a trip to London this evening to look for some books for my personal library. I would be pleased if you would agree to accompany me.*

*In lieu of my actions of last evening, I would understand if you would rather not. However, I hope that you will reconsider.*

*My owl will await your reply.*

*Sincerely,*

*Severus*

\*\*\*\*\*

Disclaimer: J.K Rowling owns it all.

Author's Notes: I apologize for the delay in this update. My hubby, son and I have been passing a nasty cold back and forth between us for the past few weeks, so when I haven't been the patient, I've been the nurse!

I truly, truly appreciate all the reviews I've gotten. Please, keep them coming!

I stole a couple of things in this chapter, including:

Hermione's recurring use of the phrase "little prick" is lifted directly from the wonderful and hysterical movie "Fast Times at Ridgemont High". Check it out if you haven't seen it. Classic!

Headmistress McGonagall's quote, "...but, my God, it's so beautiful when the boy smiles!" is taken verbatim from the amazing song "Breathe" by Anna Nalick. If you have not heard this song, I suggest you hunt it down. The lyrics are absolutely phenomenal.

A quick explanation on the whole 'trembling monkeys' fiasco...it was a bit of a personal challenge put out to me by my husband. The line, "Trembling monkeys make me laugh," came up in a conversation one day (don't ask) and he said, "See if you can work THAT into your next chapter!" I hope it worked all right with the story!

As always, this story is dedicated to him!

## Fable Hall

### Chapter 6 of 7

We see a little more of what changed Severus' mind about Hermione; they venture to London together.

Snape stood in front of his mirror, buttoning his shirt and smoothing the wrinkles from the front of it. Turning his head slightly, he checked to see that the thin leather tie he had used to secure his hair in a loose ponytail was still in place.

*This is ridiculous, you fool. Why are you concerned about your appearance?*

After escorting Minerva back to her room, Severus had gone back out to continue his walk around the grounds. He had walked slowly, looking around him at times as though he had never seen his surroundings before. Someone watching him might have thought him lost; in reality, he felt as though he had finally found his way.

Freedom was a new animal for Severus Snape. He was not sure how to care for it or nurture it, and even less sure of what it could give back to him. His mind was littered with countless thoughts, ideas and questions: *Would he stay at Hogwarts? How could I leave? Was there something else that he should be doing with his life? My path has lead me here... I have done so much already. Was there a woman out there that could share his life with him? There **was** a woman, but she is no more. There will be no other.*

He had meant what he had said to Minerva; he had no intention to ever again enter into a romantic relationship with a woman. He had been there once before, and because of it the woman he loved was dead...and while he knew that his physical being had survived, he was just as sure that his soul had died with her. Where his heart had once been, he now carried only the burden of guilt and desolation, and he had no intention of disrespecting the memory of his loved one by filling that void. Romantic passion had no place in Severus Snape's life - now or in the future.

Friendship however...now that was a different story. It was a luxury that a Death Eater could not afford, out of concern for himself, and a spy for the Order could not afford out of fear for others. He had known the true friendship of only three people in his life, and now two of them lie beyond the curtain. Tonight, the last of those three had reached out to him, and for that he would be eternally grateful. The Headmistress was right... He had been freed from the shackles that had imprisoned him for so long, and now his future was - wholly and *finally* - **his**. A ripple of excitement had run through him - foreign in itself, because it was not accompanied by an underlying current of fear. *He could do whatever he wanted!* Within reason, of course. But his interests, his desires, his dreams... They were all within reach now!

*Starting tomorrow, I live life the way I want to. This time, for me.*

And there was no use in denying the truth: Severus did not want to be alone anymore.

Yes, he was a man who enjoyed his solitude. He would always savor those quiet moments spent in his lab, preparing potions, or evenings spent in front of the fire with a glass of wine and a book. Now, however, he also wanted to know the pleasure of sharing a drink with a table of friends; of debating the uses of potions ingredients with someone who could hold up their own end of the argument; of discussing his favorite books with someone else who had read and appreciated them. He knew that working up to that type of lifestyle would take some time; after years of isolating himself from nearly everyone around him, he certainly didn't expect to walk the halls of Hogwarts the next day and greet everyone with a beaming grin. Nor did he want to! This transition would be gradual - he would make friends slowly, with those he deemed estimable.

*Granger.*

He had grimaced as he remembered the events of the evening, and he was not proud of his actions. He had treated Hermione as though she were an insignificant student...something that had **never** been true. In actuality, he had more respect for her than any other student he had ever taught, and this had only been heightened as they fought together against Voldemort. He had been aware of the way his Dark Magic had touched her during the battle and was astonished at her ability to ward it off as

easily as she had. He had felt a fierce pride for her at that moment.

Truth be known, he had felt overwhelmingly proud of the whole Golden Trio that day... but that was a fact that would go to his grave with him.

Hermione, he had realized, was everything that he would look for in his search for friends. She was brilliant, talented...

*...beautiful...*

...brave, strong... and he was quite sure that her days of being intimidated by him were over. He found that quality, in and of itself, to be particularly attractive.

He had been far too hasty in rebuffing her offer of amity. The memories she spawned of Lily were simply because of the similarities between the two witches; the situations would not be the same. The only relationship he wished to pursue with Hermione was companionship of the mind. He would never offer her his body, heart or soul, nor would he expect any of those from her.

*Expect whatever you want, fool. You treated her like dung on the heel of your boot. Do you expect her to still be extending an olive branch?*

Wincing, Severus had turned his eyes to the sky overhead. A shadowy form looped lazily toward the Owlery, and he had watched it thoughtfully for a few minutes before standing and heading back toward the school.

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Hermione and Harry had stayed up talking late into the night. Sitting on opposite ends of her bed and sipping warm Butterbeer (gods bless the house-elves!), they had come to realize how much they had to say now that the fight with Voldemort was no longer hanging over their heads. Of course, they had discussed the war, and it had proven to be very therapeutic for both of them. There had been more laughter and more tears, and Hermione had found herself at times crying with the knowledge that their lives - so inextricably linked thus far - would now start traveling in different directions. At the end of the night, as Harry hugged her tightly, he whispered, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but this night has felt like... well, sort of like the *end* of something, you know?" Not trusting herself to speak, Hermione had nodded against his shoulder. With one final squeeze, and a soft kiss on the forehead, he had left.

As she had readied herself for bed, her thoughts returned to Severus. The anger she had harbored earlier had succumbed to the bittersweet finality of the night, and now, all she felt was a tired resignation. She couldn't force the man to accept her friendship; she had put forth the offer, and that was all she could do.

It was a shame, though. When she looked at him, she had a feeling that the parts they played in each others' lives were not supposed to end just yet.

Which is why, when the owl arrived with his invitation the next morning, she accepted with no hesitation.

~~~~~

They met at the front door of the school, and Severus was immediately grateful when she waved aside his awkward attempt at explaining away his actions of the night before and smiled brightly. "Really, Severus, it's fine. I suppose I did blindside you a bit."

"It was rather unexpected," he chuckled, "but I was still unnecessarily hurtful." Not looking at her, he continued, "I should not have said what I did."

Realizing that this was as close to an apology as she would get, Hermione nodded. "Forgotten," she said simply. And, from that moment on, it was.

Severus found their trip to London to be more enjoyable than he had dared to hope. Each time he found himself glancing behind them, or raking the face of strangers with his eyes, he had to remind himself that this was not the way of his life anymore. The paranoia that had ruled him, the *constant vigilance* - he smirked to himself as an image of Mad-Eye Moody's outlandish face flitted through his mind - that had become as much a part of him as his breathing, was no longer needed.

*This will take a great deal of getting used to.*

Being with Hermione, he realized, would not. She kept up a steady stream of conversation, but he found that it was different from the annoying and superior prattling that she had been prone to as a student. Yes, she voiced her opinions on several different matters, but was just as quick to ask for his. She would listen intently to what he had to say, and if their points of view differed, they would argue good-naturedly. But she no longer worried the problem as a boarhound would with a bone. It was a brilliant change. Severus still felt a bit awkward; it had been years since he had had a conversation that didn't include a sizable amount of sarcasm on his part.

The bookstore that Severus had wanted to visit was spectacular. Named 'Fable Hall,' it was a vast building with golden oak shelves filled with books, enormous windows to allow in natural light, and reading nooks set up randomly throughout with huge overstuffed sofas and mismatched coffee tables. A small counter at the front sold drinks, pastries and newspapers.

"Oh. Oh, *Merlin!*" Hermione whispered as they stood inside the doorway. Snape smiled; he had not doubted that she would enjoy this store. Her love of books rivaled - and truthfully, eclipsed - his own. The fact that he had brought such a look of rapture to her face caused a feeling of silly pride to flash through him.

*I would like to show her so many things.*

"I suppose it would make more sense for us to go look for the books we want on our own," he suggested. "Enjoy yourself."

As he turned to go, Hermione touched his arm lightly. "Wait," she said. He turned back to her, and she asked, "Why are we here at a Muggle bookstore? Surely the Potions texts that you use aren't available here?"

"Why, Miss Granger," he smirked, "I do have other interests and indulgences besides Potions and academia."

Blushing lightly, she answered, "Of course you do. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insinuate..."

Leaning down toward her slightly, Severus purred, "All work and no play makes Snape a dull boy." Then he turned and walked into the store.

Watching his retreating back, Hermione couldn't help but smile. This day was going remarkably well, although she sensed some tension on his part. She had expected as much... more, really. She knew that some people had barriers that had to be broken down; Severus had fortresses that would need to be laid siege to. As dark and resilient as he appeared to be, Hermione sensed a type of vulnerability around him, almost a fragility. She wasn't sure why he had chosen to reach out to her, but she knew that she would have to tread carefully on this new ground.

She had never seen him without robes before, much less in Muggle clothing. Today he was wearing a pair of black pants and an emerald green, button-down shirt. Allowing herself a moment, she appraised his form from behind: his shoulders were not terribly wide, but she could see the strength in his back and upper body as he moved. His stride was powerful and graceful, and she realized with a start that her former Potions Master had quite the sweet little rump. Giggling to herself, she looked away.

*Honestly, Hermione...you need to start getting out more if Snape's ass is starting to look good to you!*

Wandering toward the New Release section, she found herself musing about his romantic life. Obviously no one had seen him involved with anyone since she had started Hogwarts, but she doubted that he was as asexual as she had always imagined him to be. Had there been women before he took the Dark Mark? Since? Had he ever been in love? Would he now?

She was not an unperceptive woman. Although she did not think of Snape as handsome, she knew that he did possess a self-confidence that was very attractive. And he wasn't ugly. He didn't have the playboy good looks of Gilderoy Lockhart, or the scruffy attractiveness of Sirius Black, but his features held a type of nobility that she found interesting. Now that the war was over, and he would no longer be living the life of a spy, she was certain that single witches were going to be on the prowl. No, she thought, Severus Snape would not be a bachelor for very long.

After all, she reasoned, when you've lived alone for so long, it's only natural to want to find someone to share your heart and life with.

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Severus found her curled up on one of the couches, a glass of white wine on the table next to her and a Jodi Picoult novel spread open across her knees. She didn't notice him standing there, and he took the opportunity to watch her for a few moments. Her eyes flicked back and forth rapidly, and he realized just how quickly she read. A stray piece of hair kept falling forward, and she would invariably blow a puff of air from the corner of her mouth to remove it from her line of vision. Her facial expressions would change minutely as she read; at times she would scowl, a line appearing between her eyebrows in a way that he remembered from Potions class, when she would be concentrating on her work. At other times, she would smile, and when he saw how it would reach to her eyes, it would bring back memories of her laughing with Potter and Weasley.

*She has such passion.*

The thought surprised him a bit, but it dawned on him that it was true. Whatever she did, whether it was reading a book, helping a friend or fighting for her life, she put everything she had into it. The thought scared and exhilarated him. Would she put that same concentration into a relationship with him? He was willing to give this friendship thing a try, but he was not prepared to allow someone access to all of his thoughts or feelings; if Hermione expected them to become soul-baring mates, then things wouldn't work at all. He had no desire to be her girlfriend.

He cleared his throat, and she looked up at him. Her eyes had a slightly glazed appearance to them, as if she'd just been snogged soundly; with a sleepy smile she moved over to make room on the couch for him.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

"For the most part. Some of the books had to be ordered; they'll have them in another week or so. I see you made out well." He nodded toward the stack of books she had piled on the floor next to her.

"I'm like a kid in a candy shop," she laughed sheepishly. "Some women go in for jewelry, clothes and shoes... My weakness is books."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" The words were out before he even knew he was going to say them. He frowned a little - spontaneity was not in his character - but Hermione didn't seem to notice.

"That would be lovely. I'm getting rather hungry, to be honest. Shall we?" She stood and stretched unhurriedly, and then bent to gather her books.

"Please," Severus said, "let me."

Picking up the pile of books, he motioned for her to lead the way toward the cashiers. As they went, a last unsolicited thought flew through his mind:

*I wonder if she brings that passion to bed with her?*

~~~~~

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I just wanna make them my naughty little marionettes.

A/N: Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews. I appreciate each and every one, and I apologize both for the delay in getting this update done and for the brevity of it. Real life came in and smacked us around a bit. I will get to work on the next chapter as soon as I can... I have to go update "Graduation" for all my fellow horndogs out there. Cheeky little monkeys!!

Jodi Picoult is one of my favorite writers. I made up "Fable Hall", but if anyone finds that it's real, please send me the address so that I can move there. Thanks much.

As always, this is dedicated to my hubby. You da bomb, baby.

## Food for Thought

*Chapter 7 of 7*

Severus and Hermione have dinner, conversation, a slight tiff...and what is that that Snape's putting in her mouth?  
Ahoy, matey! There be a hint of lemons here!

"Mmmm..." Hermione moaned softly. Her eyes were closed, an expression of pure ecstasy on her face. The sensations in her mouth were... *exquisite*. Never in her life had she experienced anything like this! All she could think of was that she wanted more. *Needed* more.

The fact that it was Snape who was making her feel this way only added to the heady experience.

"Do you like that?" he murmured, his voice sliding over her like heated velvet.

"Mmmm..." she moaned again, unable to say anything else. All she could focus on was the warm feelings flooding through her, and her desire for him... to continue.

"Would you like more?" he purred.

Hermione tried to speak, but all that came out was a pleading whimper. "Yes, please!"

Snape uttered a throaty chuckle. "Of course you would," he replied. Hermione felt her body tense; although her eyes were still closed, she could feel him moving closer. Soon she would feel the gentle prodding at her lips... ah, there it was! She opened her mouth to him.



The spoon slid in, and she let her tongue swipe the creamy chocolate confection from it.

"Bloody hell! This is amazing!" Watching Severus scoop another piece from the plate she asked, "What is it called?"

"Chocolate Eruption," he answered, lifting the spoon to her mouth again. "I'd better get some of it for myself before you eat the whole bloody thing."

Giggling, Hermione swatted his arm. "We could have ordered two, you know!"

"We may have to. You're very deceiving, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"I never would have expected you to eat so much," he replied.

Hermione sat back, her mouth hanging open. Severus continued eating his dessert, oblivious to her reaction until he tried to feed her another spoonful. Stopping halfway to her mouth, he finally saw her look of disbelief.

"What?"

"You just insulted me!" Hermione was torn between being offended and being amused. The look of honest consternation on his face told her that any hurt he may have inflicted was unintentional.

"How did I insult you?"

"By saying I ate a lot!" she laughed.

"Well, you did," he shrugged. "You're very small in stature, and I expected you to eat less."

Hermione shook her head, then accepted the bite of dessert. She was still amazed at what a pleasant time she was having. After leaving Fable Hall, they had taken a leisurely walk, stopping only in a candle shop so that Hermione could do some shopping. They had ended up spending more time there than they had planned; she had reveled in the quiet peacefulness of the dark rooms lined with shelves, which held jar candles of every scent imaginable. She had prowled the store happily, pausing frequently to uncap a jar and sniff the contents. Snape wandered about, looking at the wide array of diffusers and candle making equipment available.

"Here, what do you think of this?" she asked him when he strolled up behind her. He took the candle from her and sniffed. "I'll take that as a 'no,'" she snickered when he grimaced.

"What scent was *that* supposed to be?"

"'Evening Rain.'"

"Nonsense!" he scoffed. "That smells nothing like an evening rainfall!"

"Yeah, you probably won't be delighted with this one either," she remarked, handing him one marked 'Black Midnight.'

"UGH!"

The restaurant was one that Severus was familiar with, and Hermione personally thought it was lucky that he was; otherwise they probably never would have entered the building. The doorway, set in a plain brick front, was narrow and nondescript; walking by, you would never have guessed that it housed a fine eatery. In fact, the only thing about the restaurant that made it stand out at all was the bisected cow sticking out of the face of the building.

As they had approached it, Hermione had begun laughing. "What the bloody hell is *that*?" she had asked, pointing ahead of them. The front quarters of a large, fabricated cow jutted out from the front of the building; several feet underneath it, the rear half of the cow was embedded in the brick, the tail hanging limply above the sidewalk.

"That's a cow," Severus confirmed.

"Why is it there?"

Snape cocked his head and considered her question for a moment. Then he shook his head and said, "I have absolutely no idea."

Hermione kept giggling sporadically as they continued walking. However, when Severus stopped beneath the cow and opened the door for her, she quickly sobered.

"What?" she asked, looking at him warily.

"This is the restaurant we'll be eating at."

She looked at Severus, then up to the cow, and back to Severus.

"Are you serious? The cow place?"

"Actually," he replied dryly, "it's called The Kit Kat. And I don't think they'll appreciate us loitering here in the doorway so that you can gawk at their questionable choice of décor. Shall we?"

The inside of the restaurant was tiny and dark. The tables were squeezed so closely together that guests and wait staff had to turn sideways to pass between them. Hermione didn't realize that her skepticism was evident on her face until Severus leaned across the table with a haughty smirk and said, "Trust me."

And oh, he had been right! The food was some of the best she'd ever had, including the delicious feasts that she'd taken part in at Hogwarts. Severus had ordered a bottle of wine that complemented both of their meals, and Hermione had insisted on making a toast. Noting the hint of trepidation on his face, she chose to keep the sentiment brief and innocuous.

"To good books, good food, and good company," she offered, raising her glass.

"Lovely," murmured Snape, touching his glass to hers. Their eyes locked as they each drank, and Hermione felt a small shiver spread across the small of her back.

*Stop it. This is Snape. He's making an effort just to have a friendly outing. Even if you were interested, he most definitely is NOT.*

She did find that she was greatly enjoying his company. He was learned in so many things, yet never monopolized the conversation. He asked her questions about her life outside of school, her family and, finally, her future.

"I don't know what I want to do," she answered honestly. "I had always assumed I would go straight on to university after Hogwarts, but with everything that's happened, I'm not so sure anymore."

"Hermione, you have a brilliant mind. It would be a sin for you to let it grow idle." He took a sip on wine and snorted at the expression on her face. "Don't look so surprised."

You are no longer my student, therefore I find it acceptable to compliment you."

"Well, thank you, Severus. I suppose seven years wasn't *TOO* long to wait."

"It's only one year to a kneazle," Snape shot back, causing Hermione to burst out laughing. She was finding that his sarcasm, while terrifying as a student, lent a fascinating edge to his sense of humor.

"I do intend to continue my education at some point, but I think right now I'd like to take some time off." Not wanting to see the disapproval that she was sure would be showing in his eyes, she concentrated instead on the candle flickering on their table. "I know I must sound terribly lazy, but I just don't want to have to **think** so much for a while."

Severus said nothing at first, and just when Hermione had gathered up the courage to look back up at him, she heard his soft reply.

"It would certainly be a well deserved break."

She smiled appreciatively. "Well, I say now that I'd like to sit idly about, but knowing me, I'll end up back in school in a month!" Snape gave a short laugh and nodded. "What about you?"

He paused with his fork in mid-air. "What about me?" he repeated.

"Yes. What will you do now?"

With his trademark smirk, he tilted his fork toward her and answered, "Right now I intend to finish my meal."

Hermione chose not to reply; instead, she sat and watched him mutely as he chewed, swallowed, and followed it with a drink of wine. She knew he was pleased with himself for his smart remark.

*Snarky, snarky, snarky. I never thought I would welcome it!*

"I will continue to teach at Hogwarts for as long as Professor McGonagall will allow me to."

"Really?"

Severus' eyebrows drew together as he regarded Hermione over their dinners. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, let's face it... Children do not seem to be your favorite creatures. Not that you aren't a great teacher," she amended quickly. "But I never really thought you enjoyed it."

Shrugging, he said, "There are certain aspects of it that I enjoy. I doubt that I would ever find a career that would offer me unparalleled joy. I have been at Hogwarts for almost twenty years. It is... where I should be."

His eyes drifted away from Hermione, and she knew better than to press the issue.

*He feels he owes it to Dumbledore.*

"Would you ever consider taking the Defense Against the Dark Arts position if Minerva offered it to you?"

"I don't believe so," he answered after considering her question. Hermione's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Really? Why not?"

"They might require me to move out of the dungeons."

She began laughing but stopped quickly when he regarded her with calm silence. "You're serious."

"Yes."

Hermione floundered for words, not wanting to offend him. "But I would think that... other... accommodations... would be more comfortable."

"Well, I'm sure to some they would," he agreed, "but it all depends on your definition of 'comfortable.' I happen to find my quarters quite suitable."

"The dungeons, though... I don't know. They just seem to be so... cold, and... well, lonely, to be honest."

*Feel free to come warm them up any time.*

Snape gave himself a mental shake, feeling a burst of anger. These unbidden thoughts were making him uneasy. Since when had he ever thought of Hermione as anything other than a disturbance with a remarkable mind or more recently a possible friend? He had felt ashamed of the question that had flitted through his mind as they had left the bookstore; now here he was having more!

Gazing across the table, he assured himself that a wizard could do far worse than the witch looking back at him. True, she was no raving beauty, but she had definitely grown into her own loveliness. With the candlelight mirrored softly in her eyes, he found it difficult to recall the buck-toothed, frizz-headed child from years past.

*It makes no difference what she looks like, or what you remember, or even what you feel. Contemplating romance is a waste of your time. You have no heart to offer anyone.*

"Again, it is perspective, Hermione. I rather like the seclusion the dungeons offer. I'm not a very sociable man, and I'm happiest being left alone to pursue my own interests. As for the temperature... well, now you know why I dress the way I do."

"I much prefer the way you're dressed today," Hermione admitted with a graceful blush.

Caught off guard by her words when had a woman last complimented him? it took him a brief moment to recover. "Thank you," he said, inclining his head slightly. A common phrase that he had often heard his students use came to his mind, and the Slytherin in him waited until she lifted her glass to her lips.

"So," he purred, "the billowing black robes just don't *do it* for you?"

With a great snort, Hermione began choking on her wine. As she pressed her napkin to her face in an attempt to control the coughing and spluttering, Severus began to laugh. Although he knew it was not the gentlemanly thing to do, he could not help himself. As Hermione slowly regained her composure, his laughter abated to a low chuckle. By the time she was able to meet his eyes across the table, he was wearing a bemused smirk.

"I can't believe you said that!"

"You don't seem particularly upset, if I may say so."

"No," she agreed. "It was funny! Just... unexpected."

Looking at her closely, Severus leaned forward slightly. "Hermione, you must keep in mind that you have only known me in the role of teacher. If you are truly intent on getting to know me better in a more personal capacity, you should be aware that there will be aspects of my personality you have not seen before. Some you may find pleasant. Others you will most assuredly not."

Biting back a snide remark about some of the less favorable aspects that she was already familiar with, Hermione smiled demurely and said, "You should be aware of the same, Severus."

A faint grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, and Snape turned back to his dinner.

"Oh, and Severus?"

"Yes?" he replied, looking up.

"I like your laugh."

After the decadent dessert had been finished, the waiter placed a small leather folder containing their bill on the corner of the table. They both reached for it at the same time.

"Severus, please. I would like to pay. It's the least I can do to thank you for such a lovely evening."

"Nonsense," the Potions master said dismissively. "I invited you, therefore I will pay."

With a giggle Hermione shot back, "Really, Severus, this is hardly a date, is it?"

She regretted it instantly. His face, which had relaxed and softened noticeably during their time together, suddenly stiffened and became cold. Though she knew that the words she had spoken were true, she realized that they were also cutting. Their evening together might not have been of a romantic nature, but to voice it so callously, as if the very idea of a date with him was beyond comprehension, was horrifically tactless.

Snape looked down at his hand on the folder for a few moments, then drew it back. With a tight smile he said, "No. It most certainly is not a date. As such, I believe the proper way to settle this is to share the expense."

Mumbling her agreement, Hermione pulled some money from her purse and passed it across the table to him. Neither of them spoke as they gathered their belongings and left the restaurant. The uncomfortable silence grew as they walked down the street beneath the soft night sky. It was, predictably, Hermione who finally spoke.

"I'm sorry."

Snape glanced at her, then turned his eyes forward again. "For what?"

"For what I said at the restaurant. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"You were correct; this outing was not intended as a date. I'm sorry if I led you to believe otherwise." *I invited you out to dinner, surely not an activity that could ever be misconstrued as a date.*

"You didn't!" He heard the frustration in her voice and was surprisingly gratified. "Still, I didn't mean... that is... it just didn't come out right!"

"And how should it have come out?"

Hermione pressed her hands to her face in exasperation and tried to choose her words carefully. "I just meant that I knew you invited me out as a friend. Not that I think the idea of a date with you is absurd."

Chancing a look at him, she saw a muscle in his jaw working, but he said nothing. When it became obvious that he wasn't going to answer, Hermione opted once more to fill the silence.

"I know you're not interested in me that way, Severus. I don't want things to be awkward between us because of this."

"What if I was?" he asked suddenly.

She was confused. "What if you were what?"

Still looking ahead, Severus said quietly, "What if *I* was interested in you... *that* way?"

It wasn't often that this young woman was at a loss for words. He thought she was lovely when she was.

"Well... I mean... well, if you were..."

She stopped walking and took a deep breath, composing her thoughts.

*What are you doing, Severus? What are you doing?*

Snape stopped and turned to face her. He found he was suddenly desperately curious to hear her answer.

"If you were," she said slowly, "we would just have to see what happened."

*Merlin's knickers, I think she's just given me the go-ahead!*

Looking at her, Severus knew he was at a crossroads. It had been ages since he had been with a woman, and this witch was certainly attractive. He enjoyed being with her and, truth be known, had spent part of the evening thinking about when they might spend time together again. But he was not a whole man; while he had not exactly *sold* his soul to Voldemort, he had definitely allowed him to rent it for some years. To keep himself sane, he had taught himself not to feel. Where some people build walls around themselves, Severus had built an unplottable fortress and placed wards around it that were so complicated he wasn't sure that even he would be able to remove them.

He could admit that when he looked at her, he felt stirrings. But there was something inside of him that remained cold... and no one deserved that. Not even a Gryffindor.

She was sure that she must have imagined the sadness in his voice when he said, "Friendship is all I can offer you, Hermione."

She smiled warmly at him. "Well, Severus... I think that's a wonderful gift indeed."

And as she turned back toward Hogwarts, he knew that he was in trouble.

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*He felt like he couldn't get enough of her. His hand trailed over her hair, her back, her breasts and her hips. He wanted to touch her everywhere, to feel every inch of her soft, flushed skin in his hands at once. His heart raced as he kissed her forcefully, his mouth opening wider, his tongue lapping at hers frantically. Dear gods, he wanted to devour her.*

*She kissed him back just as hungrily, swallowing his throaty moans and feeding back her own impatient, mewling cries. One leg was pulled up and curled around his thigh as her hips rose to gyrate against his groin. Gasping, he curled the hand in her hair into a tight fist and began thrusting violently between her legs. Her gentle cries grew to loud, brazen groans as she felt the length of his cock, hard as an iron rod, rubbing against her sex through the thin material of her jeans. Her level of desire was nearly bringing her to tears; she literally **ached** for this man. The throbbing between her thighs and the weakness of her legs multiplied with every touch of his hands or lips. Dear gods, she'd never felt anything like this before.*

*His free hand suddenly grasped the front of her shirt and ripped it nearly open, save for the last two buttons on the bottom. Pushing her bra up roughly, he attacked her breasts with his mouth, licking and sucking them as ferociously as he had her tongue moments before. She arched her back and cried out to the night sky. "Severus!"*

*Pulling away from her breasts, he moved back up to claim the soft skin of her throat before moving his mouth to her ear.*

*"I can't stop," he panted, still grinding his hips against hers. "If you don't want this, you have to go... NOW."*

*She pulled back, and his heart sank. He had known this was too good to be true; she had realized what a mistake this would be, she had come to her senses and knew that she could do so much better than him... This was the moment when she would say, "No," and life as he knew it would end with that one word.*

*Her eyes met his. His fingers unconsciously wrapped themselves in strands of her long hair. He could feel their hearts beating uneven rhythms against each other's chests. For what seemed like eternity, there was no sound; their breath was quieted, the crickets were silent, even the wind had stilled in the trees.*

*Then she spoke.*

*"Please."*

*And life as he knew it ended with that one word.*

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Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. AND a bag of chips!

A/N: A huge thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed. You guys make my day. I wish that I could be quicker in responding to everyone, and I'm so sorry that I don't update more frequently. Please be patient! I hope my stories are worth the wait!

The Kit Kat is a real restaurant in Toronto, Canada. I've tried to describe it as accurately as I could remember it, and YES, it does have the bisected cow in front!! If anyone wants to see a picture, I'm sure I could dig one up! The food is amazing... if you ever find yourself in Canada, seek them out!

Chocolate Eruption is a real dessert that my hubby and I discovered, also while in Toronto. It was on the room service menu at the Marriott we stayed in. I can't do it justice, but let me just say chocolate, white chocolate, dark chocolate, chocolate mousse, and about 5" high. It's ludicrous how good it is. Orgasm on a spoon, baby!

As always, this is dedicated to my hubby. The Snape to my Hermione. (He's really more like Ron, but who cares?)