

# But Then

*by karelia*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

If only... he'd not been fooled by her ecstatic responses to his ministrations. Had he been more lucid, he'd have recognised it all as fake.

Disclaimer: Never mine.

A/N: Inspired by stefdarlin's excellent "If Only" (you can find it here in this archive) and meant as a sequel of sorts.

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If only... he'd detected the signs that all she'd been after was seduction. But then, hindsight was always perfect.

If only... he'd not been fooled by her ecstatic responses to his ministrations. Had he been more lucid, he'd have recognised it all as fake.

If only... he'd realized the power game; it hadn't ever been about love.

He'd never forgotten her last words that day she'd left. "My work here is done, Severus. I have thoroughly corrupted you. Just as the Dark Lord demanded of me." She'd cackled then, and for the first time, he'd found the sound utterly repulsive.

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"Don't fret, Severus. True love will find you. It does everyone in one way or another." Eileen smiled at him.

He knew it was likely the last time he'd see her alive. "Did it find you? Your marriage didn't strike me as a loving one even when I was a child." He succeeded in hiding the sneer.

"Oh, it found me all right. I have you, don't I?"

When he left, he realized he still didn't know who his birth father was. But his mother's words sufficed to instill some hope at least. He'd get over Bella and move on.

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Days after he'd buried his mother—her death helped him forget Bella rather fast—he vowed to himself to bring down the Dark Lord should he ever return.

His first task was to lock himself up and practice casting a Patronus. When on the third day, a silver, whispery doe danced out of his wand, he breathed a sigh of relief and kept practicing until he was able to cast it at will, strong and filled with light. It reminded him of Lily Evans, who had once been a friend.

He thought it was a shame she'd fallen for Potter.

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When the Potter offspring finally vanished Voldemort—he had nearly died in the process himself—he rejoiced quietly. *One task accomplished. Now, to find—be found by—love...*

Poppy would kill him when she found him gone, but he needed space, no matter how weak he was.

He headed for the lake. Standing on its shore always soothed him.

The walk took forever, and when he finally arrived, he sneered at the figure huddled on the ground on the pebbles.

The Muggle connection of the Golden Trio. Why wasn't she with her two friends or back home with her parents?

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When he saw her again, it was at his trial before the Wizengamot. Apparently, she'd come forward as a witness in his defense.

He couldn't help admiring her stance. "You, Mrs Umbridge, are despicable! You had no qualms making a fifteen-year-old boy write lines on his hand with his own blood, and you happily headed the Muggle-born Commission when Voldemort took over the Ministry. You are nothing but a turncoat, and the Wizengamot should be ashamed to be associated with you!"

Potter supported her with additional words, and the Wizengamot had no choice but to retreat and decide the matter.

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He walked away, not only free but with the promise of an Order of Merlin, First Class, including accompanying financial benefits.

But his only home was Hogwarts, so he returned.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised she'd joined the staff. There'd be no finer Muggle Studies teacher. She knew both worlds, after all.

When she broke down in typical new teacher fashion after a pureblood had said one word too many, he patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"Give them hell, Granger. Show them who's the boss."

The smile, watery as it was, made him feel like he was in heaven. Heaven was bliss.

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Winter had finally departed, the last of the snow melted, and at last he headed for the lake.

Someone had beaten him to it.

She looked up. "Professor Snape!"

"Miss Granger." He hoped his voice was devoid of bite.

She smiled. "What brings you here?"

"Peace."

She nodded. "Yes."

She'd lost her childhood buoyancy, he noticed. There was something else; he couldn't put his finger on it. He'd find out, he decided.

"The Isle of Shetland has a most beautiful beach and is never populated. I've always found it the most peaceful place on earth."

"Oh?" Her smile was beautiful.

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"You know, my mother told me love would find me one day. I had my doubts at the time, but now I actually believe she knew what she was talking about," he said, ruffling her ever bushy hair.

"Oh, Severus," she whispered. "I'm glad you believe her words!"

"How can I not? I thought I was in hell, and then you came along and proved the opposite."

"And I thought, well, I doubted romance after the Ron dilemma, and then you came along and proved the opposite." Her eyes met his. "I love you."

"And I, my witch, love you."

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A/N: Thanks to kittylefish for the quick beta.