

# Yuletide Revelation

by *Southern\_Witch\_69*

After a chance meeting in Knockturn Alley, Hermione follows Snape home in hopes that he'll accept an invitation to Christmas dinner. This is my take on the How It Could Be Christmas Challenge that can be found at the Yahoo!Group, Potter\_Place.

## A Chance Meeting

Chapter 1 of 5

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"This is an outrage! A scam!" Hermione hissed in annoyance. She'd been trying to barter with Mister Borgin for twenty minutes on the price of a ring with rumored Time-Stopping capabilities. She knew that Borgin & Burkes wasn't the best place to patronize, but she'd heard about the ring on accident. "You told me last time that if I brought a thick braid of unicorn's hair with me," she lifted the hair in question, "that you'd go down on the price." She sighed in exasperation. "Now, you dare to request even more Galleons *and* the unicorn hair!"

"You can take it or leave it," the oily-haired man said dismissively. He leaned forward, causing a few strands of his lank hair to partially cover his eyes. "Less you be havin' summat else to barter wit' eh?"

Hermione huffed in indignation, fingering the wand in her pocket. "Are you propositioning me?"

"Wha' if I am?" he said, flashing his dirty teeth at her.

Returning his smile with one of her own, she leaned closer. "If you are, Mister Borgin, I assure you that you'll wish that you hadn't. I can do a fancy bit of wandwork if I do say so myself." She lowered her voice. "I can also have the Ministry down here giving you a hard time for many days to come if you don't treat me fairly."

"You don't scare me, Missy," he said, suddenly sneering hatefully. He looked at her in distaste and said, "I've a better offer for it anyway. Get out o' here if you haven't the Galleons. This is a top-rate bit o' merchandise, this is. You'll not find another like it that still works!"

Before Hermione could reply, a silkily smooth voice from behind her said, "Now, now, Borgin, everybody knows that ring isn't worth all that much, considering the age of it and the fact that time can only be stopped once a week for an hour or so."

She turned to look into the hardened expression of Severus Snape. She hadn't seen him since his trial the previous year. He looked much healthier, as his skin wasn't so sallow and his body had filled out to something more than simply a skeleton with skin. "Professor," she said with a nod.

"Miss Granger," he replied, not looking at her, only staring at the shopkeeper.

"Snape," the man said, decidedly nervous. "Haven't seen you about lately. What can I do for you?" he asked, replacing his shocked expression with a hopeful one.

"I believe that she was here before me," Snape said calmly, nodding to Hermione.

"She hasn't the money. She can bugger off."

"Excuse me!" Hermione interjected. "We had a bargain! You're trying to go back on it!"

Snape snorted. "I would advise that you stick to your deal, Borgin. She'll have Potter and the whole lot of Aurors sniffing about in your personal affairs otherwise."

"Potter... Granger... oh." Realization dawned on the man's face. "Oh..." He quickly pulled the ring from the glass case. 200 Galleons and the unicorn hair," he said impatiently.

"No," she said irately. "It'll be the 150 Galleons we agreed upon."

"Fine. Whatever it takes to be rid o' you!" He leered at her as she counted out the Galleons. "Remember what Snape 'ere said. It's not so good of a ring anyway."

Hermione stopped counting. She was on 120. "Is that right?" She pushed the coins across. "I'd say you're lucky to get this much ~~and~~ the unicorn hair then."

The annoyed man began raking the coins across the counter to a large pouch. "Take it, girl, an' get out!"

She quickly snatched the ring and promptly left, not wanting to be in the disgusting man's shop anyway. Once she was down the street, she realized that she hadn't thanked Professor Snape for his help with the arsehole. She hadn't liked Borgin since she'd tried to get information from him about Draco in their sixth year. Backtracking, she went to wait outside the shop.

When Snape finally stepped out, he sighed heavily. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I wanted to let you know that I appreciated your help, sir," she said, smiling kindly. "He was truly being inappropriate."

"Glad I was able to be of service," he said curtly and brushed by her.

She shrugged and began walking in the direction his quick strides were taking him. He'd never change. He'd been horrible to them all at Hogwarts, and even after they'd found out that he'd been magically forced by Dumbledore to follow through with his Unbreakable Vow to Narcissa, he'd still kept his distance from everyone. Unexpectedly, she called out, "Wait!"

He stopped but did not turn around. When she caught up to him, she was nearly out of breath. "I wondered if you'd like a cup of coffee," she said after a moment of awkwardness.

"What is it that you truly want, Miss Granger?" he asked, crossing his arms. "I haven't the time for niceties. Cut to the quick."

"Oh, well, pardon me for taking up your time, sir. I only meant to show my appreciation for your assistance with that arsehole."

"Didn't you establish that already? There is no need for our continued association," he said. "Good day."

"Arsehole," she muttered darkly, watching him stride away. Before she ventured down the path that would bring her to Diagon Alley, she saw him stop and stoop down to talk to a man. She realized that it was the same man who had been begging for a Galleon earlier. She'd ignored him, thinking that he was simply a street opportunist and not really in need of monetary assistance. Was he perhaps truly in need?

Unable to stop herself, she moved closer and heard the man praising Snape. "Bless you, sir. I can get my little one's potion now. The great fat witch wouldn't give it to me until payday, she wouldn't."

"It's nothing," Snape said casually. He pointed his wand at the man's legs and then extended a hand to help him up. "You really shouldn't venture about without your wand. You could have easily fixed the jinx she put on you."

"I 'ad to sell it for a few presents and food for me family."

Snape reached into his pocket and gave the man a few more Galleons. "Go on."

The man nodded and hurried into the small Apothecary to make his purchase. Hermione felt ashamed. She hadn't even given the man a moment of her time to listen to his tale of woe, simply thinking him to be a liar. It was interesting that a bastard like Snape would stop to help someone in need when someone such as herself, a self-proclaimed champion of the lesser, would not even bother.

Her eyes clashed with Snape's hard gaze. She smiled to show her approval, but he simply looked away. The expression upon his face as he did so gripped at her heart. He seemed wistful. Who would he spend Christmas with? Did he have family? She couldn't remember ever seeing anyone in support of him at the trial and hadn't read anything about there being someone in his life. Only Lucius Malfoy seemed to speak with him during the brief breaks that the Wizengamot took. Malfoy had been *reformed* supposedly, as he'd given information that helped Harry and the Ministry find Voldemort's last location, asking only that his son be spared any charges for his part in Dumbledore's demise. It seemed that Narcissa Malfoy's demise caused Scrimgeour to pity him, pardoning both father and son. Hermione imagined a heavy purse also encouraged that decision.

A loud *Crack* broke into her thoughts. Snape had Disapparated away. She quickly cast a charm to trace him, wanting to invite him to Christmas dinner. Nobody should be alone on such a day. Not even Snape. Quelling the nervousness in the pit of her stomach, she quickly Disapparated. When she appeared again, she was on a thick, snowy embankment. Snow flurries were blowing about, impairing her vision slightly, but she could make out a dark form high above her. She began trekking up to the top quickly, not wanting to miss the direction he took.

Once she reached the top, she was startled by Snape's sudden looming presence, wand pointed at her throat. "Why are you following me?" he bit out, gusts of wind causing his robes and hair to billow about wildly.

She stepped back instinctively. "... oh!" Her foot caught on a thick patch of ice, and she began a tumbling descent back down the side of the bank. Near the bottom, her head hit a fallen tree, causing a severe flash of pain and darkness. She felt her body hit the thick ice of the frozen river and felt herself slide about before skidding to a stop. "Bloody hell," she mumbled, barely audible.

Not having the energy to open her eyes, her hearing became more acute. She could hear something crunching in the snow. Was it Snape? Some animal? *He'll probably leave me here to rot, the wanker! Great! Now, I'll have some damn fox...or worse...eating away at my carcass.* When she felt something press against her temple, she tried to open her eyes. Her vision was blurred, and she could make out Snape's face just inches from her own. As her eyes closed, she began to slip into unconsciousness. Oddly enough, she felt secure and tried to snuggle into the warmth at her side and enjoyed the crisp, clean scent that invaded her nostrils.

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Severus placed her upon his couch and covered her with his cloak. He quickly lit a fire, healed her small head injury, and made tea. The idiot girl had dared to follow him home, likely intending to annoy him with her false appreciation. What exactly did she want? Had their meeting at Borgin and Burkes not truly been a coincidence?

He knew that she worked at the Ministry... as an Unspeakable. There was no telling what she had planned. Her handling of Borgin had been impressive, though his assistance had been needed. The man made a living off of pilfering, bamboozling, and abusing his advantage when he could. What need did she have for such a ring? Shrugging, he realized it was of no concern to him. Once she thawed out and woke, he'd send her on her way. "I'm sure she has Potters and Weasleys to pacify," he said in annoyance.

It had been five years since he'd last taught them, but he knew that they were still quite close. He'd read in the *Daily Prophet* about Potter's wedding and Granger's part in it. It seemed that both she and Weasley attended and stood in for the couple. He paused for a moment. Wasn't she Weasley's witch? What did that berk mean by allowing her to venture alone in Knockturn Alley at such a time of day? He continued to pour his tea into his cup and then made his way back to her.

Moving to sit in the uncomfortable armchair across from the couch, he watched her as he drank his hot tea. He'd never had the desire or cause to simply watch her before, and he decided that she looked harmless enough...even attractive, what with her long mass of hair and lush lips. It seemed that the once rat's nest atop her head had calmed somewhat as it had lengthened. He'd not missed her other womanly attributes in town either. Her shapely body had appealed to him until he'd noticed who she was. *What does she truly want?* He'd seen the way she'd smiled at him just before he'd Disapparated.

He had no time to be anyone's hero or deal with some silly girl's crush, though it would definitely be a change from the role of villain that he was currently portraying...mostly by choice but not entirely. Severus sighed. He would give her a chance to explain, he supposed. He grudgingly owed her that much at least. She had given testimony for him at his trial, speaking of the Pensieve memory she'd witnessed. He was uncertain how he'd been exonerated after nearly everyone's call for blood, but he was sure that the few testimonies on his behalf had something to do with it. In truth, the biggest reason was probably some kickback Lucius had given to the Minister, enticing the man to sway things for his release as well.

Granger began stirring. "Mmmm," she mumbled. "Oh..."

Raising an eyebrow, Snape wondered if those noises were from her pain or... some sort of erotic dream? He didn't want to give her any potion for her pain without her consent, so he simply waited, finishing his tea and easing back into his chair to keep an eye on his unwanted guest.

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Hermione stretched until she felt the prickling of pain caused by her movement. "Good grief. What's happened?" she asked aloud, opening her eyes cautiously and sitting up, as she softly touched the side of her head.

There was a low fire in the unfamiliar grate, casting the only light about the room. Where in the world was she? It was dark, cool, and quite gloomy. She suddenly remembered the events that had occurred. Professor Snape must have brought her to his home. Surely he wouldn't just leave her to her own devices and go off to his room or just leave. Her eyes concentrated on the form across from her, and she had her answer. It was Snape, and he was watching her intently.

"Er... hi," she offered tentatively.

"What, Miss Granger, did you mean by following me home?" he asked immediately, his tone causing her to wince.

"Honestly?"

"I'd have it no other way," he stated blandly.

"Oh, all right. I was going to try to invite you to a bloody Christmas meal," she admitted grudgingly. "If you hadn't taken off like that, you could have saved me the trouble of trying to follow you."

He moved to lean forward. "Pray tell, but why would you dare think that I would want to share a meal with you when sharing a simple cup of coffee with you was unappealing? Have you grown so thick over the years to not realize rejection when it's thrust into your face?" he asked coldly.

"Well," she huffed, "now that you mention it, I suppose I can see where I should have just left well enough alone. I would have, but I saw..." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'll be leaving."

"Not so fast," he said, rising. "I have a potion that will alleviate the pain in your head. I wanted to see if you'd approve before I gave it to you."

Since the throbbing hadn't lessened, she agreed, saying, "I'd like that, thanks." As he disappeared from the room, she breathed a sigh of relief. She really shouldn't have followed him. What had she been thinking? *Relax, Hermione. You can take his ruddy potion and be on your way. No big deal. He'll not tell anyone about your poor judgment.*

"Here," he said when he came back, thrusting a phial at her.

She sniffed it, recognized its contents, and downed the strong liquid. "Ugh," she gasped. "Reminds me of a potent liquor."

"I'm certain it will have a like effect. Now," he sat down, "you were saying."

"Oh," she said lamely, feeling her face heat. "Sod it. It's quite ridiculous. I saw that you'd helped that man. I felt guilty because I'd seen him before I went to Borgin and Burkes. I didn't even give him a chance to explain his problem. I just thought that was... noble of you, considering you don't owe anyone in this world any favors. Not with the way you are treated."

"How interesting," he said. "So you sought me out to request my presence at your home in... thanks for helping someone that you chose not to?"

"Not exactly... Well, maybe it is something like that. It doesn't matter, does it? It's a moot point." She shrugged. "Unless, of course, you are interested. Are you?"

"I am not," he said evenly. "And I don't appreciate being stalked." He stood, signifying their conversation was over. "Tea before you go? It might help to warm you further."

"I'm fine," she said in annoyance, throwing the borrowed cloak upon the couch. "If you will show me to the door..." Her voice trailed off as she saw him donning the discarded cloak. "Are you going out?"

He smirked. "I'm not completely malevolent, Miss Granger. I feel that I should escort you back to Diagon Alley and make certain that you are all right." He nodded to the empty phial. "You might feel disoriented or get yourself into more trouble. Besides, an escort at this time of night would not be amiss."

Taken back by his moment of charity, she nodded and remained silent. When he was ready, she followed him out and waited for him to ward his home. The only sounds made as they trekked through a maze of snowy streets and dismal houses were the crunching of their steps in the snow. When they neared the spot by the river where she'd taken her fall, he stopped and pulled her close, causing her to gasp.

"Can't have you getting Splinched," he said, Disapparating them to the dark corner of Knockturn Alley where they'd been before going to his home. He released her abruptly. "Come. We'll go this way." He paused. "This wasn't here earlier." He nodded towards a freshly painted shop next to the Apothecary.

"What in the world?" She gazed about the quiet street. "And where are all the peddlers and people?"

Snape shrugged. "Let's not concern ourselves." He pulled her by the elbow and took a few steps when an older man stepped out of the building.

"Glad to see you, I am. Come on in out of the cold!" he called, eyes shining merrily.

"I think not," Snape said brusquely, trying to pull her forward.

Hermione jerked away from him and asked the old man, "How did this shop get here? We were here not a couple of hours ago and didn't see it."

"It's always here for those who care to look." He smiled kindly, blue eyes crinkling with delight. "I have a lovely piece of art that you'd like, young lady." He held out a hand. "Trust me."

She turned to look at her escort. "Can we go for a moment?"

His eyes narrowed. "*This* is exactly why I felt the need to see you back safely. Had I not been here, you'd have been taken in by the first... swindler!" He nodded to the man. "We will not go in here. Now, come. I've things to do and would see you safe before I can attend to them."

"It will only take a moment," she whispered before turning back to enter the shop. For some reason, she knew that she could trust the shopkeeper.

"Care for some tea? Scones?" the man asked kindly.

"No, thank you. I..."

"We'll have nothing," Snape interrupted, having followed her in. "Show her your art so that we may depart."

"Yes, of course. It's just back here," he said, pointing to the corner. He led them to a large blank canvas. "This is quite a treasure," he boasted.

"Oh, yes," Snape said sarcastically. "I can see its worth and quite enjoy that there is no occupant or scenery depicted." He pulled Hermione's hand. "Come, Miss Granger."

The old man held up his hand. "Patience, Severus. At least allow Hermione to look a little closer, even if you do not wish to do so."

Both Hermione and Snape spun around to look at the man. "How do you know our names?" she asked while Snape pulled his wand. The man simply laughed merrily.

"Enjoy," he said and vanished.

Snape strode forward and was rebuffed by an invisible barrier. "We're warded in!" he said in irritation. "I hope you're happy. This is entirely your fault. If you had one ounce of..." His mouth gaped open as his lecture died upon his lips, and his eyes focused on something behind her.

Hermione self-consciously passed a hand through her hair. "What is it?" She turned round to stare at the large canvas. It wasn't blank any longer. There were words slashed across it now:

*Do you want to know how it could be for you, Hermione Granger?*

"Yes," she whispered, moving forward.

Snape pulled her back against his chest. "Don't touch it," he hissed.

The old shopkeeper appeared in the portrait and smiled reassuringly. "Keep watching," he whispered and sat in a plush chair that appeared out of nowhere.

The canvas suddenly changed backgrounds, depicting an old movie screen that the old shopkeeper seemed to be watching. These were some home movies from her younger years, the soft voices of her parents encouraging her to accept the invitation to Hogwarts. Hermione twisted her head back to stare up into Snape's face. "I'm confused. Who is he? What is this?"

He flicked his wand to move a nearby settee towards them. He led her to it and sat next to her. "We might as well see what he has to show us," he said, attempting to sound annoyed, but his eyes belied the fact that he was truly interested and fascinated.

She turned back to see various scenes from her years at school and the following years.

"That was your past, and you are currently experiencing your present," informed the old man, not turning to look back out at them.

"Really," Severus said dryly. "Who would have known?"

"Here is your future, Hermione, if you continue on the path you are currently treading."

Snape scoffed and made to speak, but Hermione halted him. "Silence," Hermione said, mimicking one of his preferred sayings during her schooldays. He simply raised an eyebrow and said nothing, drawing his attention back to the magical painting.

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**Southern's Notes:** This chapter is short, but I suppose we can chalk that up to being a prologue of sorts. The next chapter will be uploaded tomorrow.

**Christy's Notes:** You can't stop there! What will the future hold? I am anxious to see!

### **Challenge Information**

Southern\_Witch\_69 and GinnyW have been doing some brainstorming. We would like to see some Christmas Stories. We've put together a Challenge and hope to see some of you take us up on it.

### **Potter Place's How It Could Be Christmas Challenge!**

It's preferred if the story takes place after sometime after HBP where Snape has been exonerated of his crimes, but people still shun him no matter that he helped Potter in the end.

The pairing is S. Snape and H. Granger.

A happy Hermione is in Diagon Alley buying last minute Christmas gifts when she notices Professor Snape entering a shop. That one action ruins her festive mood because she feels that everyone should have someone to spend Christmas with.

Hermione decides to ask Snape to accompany her to Christmas dinner.

1. He must refuse her invitation initially.

2.How she persuades him is up to you.

3.He must end up obliging her request.

4.Dinner can be at any number of places:

·a private dinner for two at her flat

·dinner at her parents' home

·dinner at the Burrow

·dinner at Grimmauld Place

·dinner at the castle

The dinner can be detailed or glossed over.

After dinner, Snape and Hermione must go for a walk either in Muggle London or Diagon Alley.

**\*\*Diagon Alley Visit:**

1.They enter a shop where a twinkling-eyed shopkeeper invites them to view a painting in the back room.

2.He locks them in, and they have no choice but to look at the odd, blank portrait.

3.This portrait must suddenly light up as if they were watching a scene from a film; it must show them how life could be if they continue a relationship and how it will be if they don't. What they see is up to you.

4.The door unlocks when it's over. They walk out to find that the shop is gone, replaced by an old, closed down building.

5.What they decide to do is up to you...be it friendship or trying a relationship.

**\*\*Muggle London Visit:**

1.A twinkling-eyed man bids them to enter a theatre to witness a short Christmas film.

2.They take their seats, and the film starts, showing them scenes from how life could be if they continue a relationship and if they don't. What they see is up to you.

3.When they leave, the man is gone, and they find that the building has been shut down for a long time.

4. What they decide to do is up to you...be it friendship or trying a relationship.

Your story can be a one-shot story or have up to five chapters.

The word count for the chapters must be 1000 5000 (unless you do it as a one-shot story...no maximum limit then).

No rating or genre restrictions. (Well, no angst please...)

Post it at your favorite archives and email the group to let us know that you've uploaded it.

It must be completely posted (all chapters) by Christmas.

## The Wrong Path

*Chapter 2 of 5*

Hermione and Severus view how things could be for her if she doesn't change.

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Hermione smiled as she watched the future version of herself scribbling away on a parchment. So far, it had only portrayed her as doing research and casting charms on the ring she'd just acquired at Borgin and Burkes.

"That's not so bad," she said to Snape, shrugging. "I don't see what the big deal is."

"Shhh," said the old shopkeeper from the portrait.

"Yes," Snape agreed sourly. "Stop that infernal chattering." He nodded towards the screen. "What have we here? Could it be a late night tryst with Weasley?"

Hermione's head snapped around as she watched Ron coming through her counterpart's grate.

*Dusting his robes off as he moved forward, Ron said, "Well, I knew you'd lied to us. You just didn't want to come out. All you do now is stay here and work on your ruddy research." He pointed at the offending quill in her hand. "Don't you care about us any longer? What happened to Friday night drinks with the gang? It's been weeks since*

*you've come. You promised," he whined. "Looks like you'd prefer to have your time spent here." He smirked. "I know something else that you can wrap that hand around."*

*"Bugger off, Ron," Hermione said impatiently. "I'm tired. I've not slept in three days. After I write this last entry, I'm off for a bath and bed."*

*He pulled his robes over his head quickly and began fumbling with his clothing. "Sounds like I'm just in time then."*

*"Wait," she said, putting her quill aside and standing resolutely. "We can't keep doing this, you know. You're dating Luna!"*

*"Mmmm," he agreed, bringing his lips to the side of her neck.*

*"Speaking of which," Hermione said, stepping away from him. "Where is she?"*

*"I just brought her home. Thought I'd stop in to give you a talking to," he said huskily, one hand sliding down to cup a breast while the other grabbed her arse and pulled her body against him. "Just one more time. We'll stop after tonight."*

*"All right," she agreed, crushing her lips to his for a brief, passionate kiss. "One last time."*

Hermione's face burned brightly as she watched her counterpart and Ron snog heavily. She felt Snape's eyes upon her and turned to gaze at him. "What?" she asked in annoyance.

"So... Weasley is dating another?" he asked casually, eyes glinting with calculation.

She was not fooled. She could see his pathetic attempts at keeping his lips set in a grim, even line. "Well, they've only just started dating!" she said defensively. "He and I have been separated for a long while, but that doesn't mean that we can't get in a good shag when we need one."

"Oh, indeed," he said, smirking. "Indeed. And I suppose that since he's started seeing this other woman, you've called things off now." He nodded to the portrait. *That's not likely going to happen, the continued fraternization... or is it?"*

She looked away and mumbled, "Only once since they've become official, but we decided to stop. We agreed just the other night." Facing him again, she raised an eyebrow, "You seem quite interested, Professor."

"Yes, of course," he said blandly. "I find your sex life *fascinating*. Why, I've been waiting for years to learn of it."

"I'll bet!" She laughed nervously. "Honestly, though, there is no way that I would continue on with it. This is just some... trickery!"

Even as she spoke the words, she turned back to the portrait and saw that its screen had another scene playing out. She grinned as she recognized Ginny and Harry greeting her at the Burrow.

*Harry hugged Hermione. "Mione! It's been so long."*

*"Oh, I know! I'm sorry." She moved from Harry's arms to Ginny's. "I've missed you all so much. My research has taken another turn... but for the better! I should be finished soon!" She bent to press a kiss to Ginny's protruding stomach. "You look so lovely! And so round!"*

*"Gee, thanks, Hermione," Ginny said, though she laughed. "Come with me. We've my old room set up for you. Luna is with Mum going over what the minister had to say earlier."*

*"You still need to come by and show me those findings when you get time," Harry said, clapping her on the shoulder. "Bout time for Ron, eh?"*

*"Can't believe the bugger is finally getting married," Hermione said jovially. "Ron and Luna will be all right. They do make a great couple."*

*"I agree," Harry said. "I'm going to go out back and talk with Ron. He's with Arthur."*

*"Right. See you."*

"Ha!" Hermione said smugly. "See that, did you? I'm at the Burrow for Ron's wedding! I told you I wouldn't continue things with him. I've morals, and furthermore, I would never hurt any..."

"Before you make an utter fool of yourself, do look at what's going on now," he said, pointing a long, pale finger towards the portrait.

She looked back and gasped. The naked upper part of her body was in full view as she showered, lathering soap throughout her hair. "Bloody hell!" she exclaimed. Noting that Snape was watching unabashedly, she added, "Stop looking!" He dodged the hand that she tried to place over his eyes. "Really. It's an invasion of privacy and unfair."

"You mean to say that this truly depicts what you have beneath those robes?" he queried innocently. "My, my, Miss Granger... And here I thought it to simply *benhanced* to make you more appealing."

"What?" she asked heatedly. Motioning to her breasts, she said, "They are very appealing, thanks, not that you'll ever know."

"Ah, but I do know, don't I?" he replied nonchalantly. "If you don't mind, you are ruining my show here. Oh, and look... if it isn't Weasley... once again."

"Oh, no..."

*Ron clicked the door closed and locked it, quickly tugging off his bathrobe to reveal his naked body. He stroked himself a few times, ensuring that he was hard, and joined Hermione in the shower. "I'm going to miss you," he whispered as he maneuvered her to the corner where she could step up slightly.*

*"I know, but this has to end, Ronald." She kissed him fervently. "I'd never sleep with a married man." She threw her head back and moaned as he pushed into her.*

*"Yes, yes. Just this one last time," he muttered, white arse moving in time with his short thrusts.*

Grateful that Snape hadn't seen the lower part of her body, she whispered, "Sorry about that. I didn't think I would be so..."

"Unscrupulous?" he offered. "Feeling a bit deceitful for fucking a man the night before he marries another?"

"Yes," she said quietly, blanching at his choice of words but daring to look up at him. "This is just likely all rubbish anyway, isn't it? I mean... nothing is set for our future. Nothing is certain."

"Agreed."

The roar of a crowd watching a Quidditch match drew her attention away from Snape's eyes. She was happy to look away from his dark, penetrating gaze. He seemed to pity her for a moment, and compassion wasn't something that she associated with the dark man.

*Oliver Wood was hovering on his broom with his hands raised in the air, signifying his team's victory! The applause and cheering were nearly unbearable, but then, he flew forward and landed next to Hermione, Harry, and Ginny, who must have had her baby already. Once he dismounted, he pulled Hermione into his arms and began snogging her for all to see.*

*"Will you?" he asked hopefully.*

*"I will!" she yelled excitedly.*

*He quickly placed a Sonorus Charm on himself and bellowed, "HERMIONE GRANGER HAS JUST AGREED TO BE MY WIFE!"*

*Nearly the entire stadium went wild at his proclamation. Some of the women seemed quite disappointed, but Hermione didn't care. She watched as Harry shook Oliver's hand before hugging her happily. After that, he pulled her onto his broom and flew off.*

*"Oh," she said in surprise. "Why, I've not seen him in years!"*

*"Interesting," Snape commented. "You literally get swept off your feet, and he even has a broom. I'd say that might be one for the books."*

*"Shut it, you," she grouched. Then, she added, "It was sort of romantic, though, wasn't it?"*

*He glared at her for a moment before nastily saying, "Clearly your idea of romance differs from mine."*

*She grinned despite herself. "Do tell."*

*"Never."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Miss Granger! You are attempting discourse again. If you would kindly shut that mouth up, we can find out why you are picking up clothing with your hands as a Muggle would and not using your wand as a witch would."*

*She turned back to the portrait.*

*Hermione bent over to pick up some clothing strewn about the floor and noticed a pair of red knickers. She pulled out her wand to levitate them and looked at them peculiarly. They did not belong to her. She'd thought to surprise her husband of only two months at his hotel room since she finally had a break, but apparently, he would not welcome her visit.*

*She heard some giggling from a slightly ajar door to her far right. She marched to the door and slammed her way in, stopping immediately as she took in the scene. Oliver was in a hot tub with two younger women.*

*"Having fun, are we?" she asked after an awkward moment passed.*

*"Oh, it's not what you think," he said quickly, rising from the water, not bothering to cover his flaccid prick.*

*"Not at the moment anyway," she pointed out.*

*"Who is she?" one of the women asked.*

*"I am his wife," Hermione announced. When the girl snorted, she flicked her wand swiftly, sending a few nasty hexes her way. "Those will wear off in a few days, but I think the boils might be uncomfortable," she said with mock sweetness. She raised her eyebrow and looked at the other girl. "And did you have anything to add?"*

*"Just that I didn't know this arsehole was married," she said, getting out of the tub quickly.*

*Hermione noted that she still had her underclothes on, so she assumed she hadn't pleased her husband yet. "What are you doing, Oliver? Why?" She was very disappointed and hurt that he would seek other women when he supposedly loved her. Something inside of her withered and died. I know that I am no better for the things I've done in my past, but at least Luna never knew about Ron and me.*

*"It's only for the game," he blurted. "The coach says we need to find a way to relax. This is one of the best ways." Hermione began backing away, not wanting to hear his excuses or the cries of the girl she'd hexed.*

*"Enough," she said before Disapparating.*

*"What goes around comes around," Snape said sardonically. "My father used to say that often."*

*"Thanks for the sympathy," she said angrily. Though she knew this future was unlikely, it still smarted that her husband of only a couple of months would already be interested in other women and seemed to not feel all that guilty about it. They sat in silence as another scene played before them, ending in the same fashion.*

*"Perhaps it might be wise to stay away from him if he does come courting one day," Snape advised seriously.*

*"Agreed."*

*The door slammed before she could get to it. "Oliver! Please come out. We have to discuss this," Hermione yelled.*

*"I'm tired of your discussions. All you do is talk, and you expect me to listen!" The door opened, and he grabbed her by the arm, pushing her away. "I've had enough. These have been the worst two years of my life! I think it's time we end things."*

*"You can't be serious," she whispered fearfully. "You didn't seem to want to end things last night when you were fucking me and asking me to have your child!"*

*"Quite serious, and I had too much to drink last night," he said abruptly. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but I really tried. I have different needs. I'm not some intellectual guy that enjoys sitting around reading periodicals and all that rot." He crossed his arms. "You told me to choose between saving our marriage and Quidditch. Well, I'll see our solicitor tomorrow to set our divorce in motion." He slowly began to close the door, saying, "Quidditch is my life. Go see Potter. I'm sure that he can cheer you up. He's always about, sticking his nose where it doesn't belong!" With that, he shut her out of his life with a snap of the door.*

*Crying, she leaned against the door. "Please don't, Oliver. I have given you two years of my life and even put my research and job on hold to travel with you. Don't do this to me." Sobs racked her body, but he did not open the door.*

*"Fucking bastard!" she hissed vehemently. "Wait until I see him again! I'm going to hex him so fast that he'll not know what hit him!"*

"Is that right?" Snape asked, one eyebrow arched in question. "And what will you use as reasoning?"

"For all those women... Oh." She sneered for a moment. "I'll make certain that this doesn't happen by steering clear of him, but I might secretly hex him anyway for what could have been."

"What have we here? Potter's home?" Snape asked, gazing at the portrait with interest. "It seems some time has passed. You must have put on a stone at least." He eyed her for a moment. "The excess weight wouldn't look bad on you, and I'd wager that your breasts would swell perfectly."

"Arsehole," she mumbled, looking down at her breasts before turning to watch what was happening. *They aren't overly large, but they are a firm handful according to Ron. He's just being a right git.*

*Stooping down to kiss the little boy on the forehead, Hermione said, "Good night, Daniel."*

*"Night," he said, taking his mother's hand.*

*"I won't be long," Ginny said. "I'll just read to him for a bit."*

*"You feeling all right?" Hermione asked, nodding to her round belly.*

*"Oh, fine. I'm just a bit tired here at the end," Ginny said with a sigh.*

*"Want me to bring him up?" Harry asked, putting aside his drink.*

*"No, it's all right." She kissed his extended hand. "I want to put my feet up anyway."*

*"All right," he said, watching them leave the room. Once gone, he turned to Hermione. "Have you done it finally?"*

*She grinned. "Yes! I didn't want to say anything in front of her, but I've perfected it. All of my researching and work has finally paid off. It's a pity that it took so long for only one piece. My next one shouldn't be so tedious to create." She lifted a small chain from beneath her blouse. "I simply point my wand to this and whisper my incantation. It will pause time for about an hour." She pulled her wand out. "After I do that, I say another spell with the person's name that I want to experience the time pause with."*

*"You... er... wanna try that now?" he asked, gazing at her with anticipation.*

*"Here? With them upstairs?"*

*"Yes."*

*Hermione said her incantations, and in moments, time had paused with only her and Harry able to notice it. He pointed to the clock on the wall.*

*"It's stopped," he said, grinning. "You did it. Brilliant."*

*"Thanks," she said shyly.*

*"How are you?" he asked suddenly.*

*"I'm all right. Everything has been finalized." She shrugged. "Oliver is in the past."*

*"I'll still see to it that he pays for putting you through all of this."*

*"Don't. Just having you with me is enough. I don't know what I would have done without you. This has been a hard year for me," she admitted.*

*Harry cupped her face in his hands and slowly devoured her lips in a long, passionate kiss. When they pulled away, he said, "And I don't know what I would have done without you. Ginny and I... We just don't get on the same as we used to. You know how she is now, and the whole not wanting sex bit really bothers me."*

*"Shush," she said, placing a finger over his lips. "Time's a wasting..."*

Hermione couldn't face Snape. If she dared to look at him and saw a raised eyebrow or a sneer, she'd murder him. It wasn't that she was embarrassed by what he was witnessing, although she was on some level, but she was more disappointed in herself and angry at her chosen actions. How could she sleep with Harry who was supposedly happily married to her close friend, Ginny? How could she sleep with him while his wife and child were only a floor above them? Had she lost all respect for herself? Why was she such a horrible person? Was she so bitter that she simply didn't care any longer?

"No," she whispered aloud without realizing it. "Never Harry."

"Apparently, yes," Snape said quietly, not looking at her.

She quickly eyed him to find that he was still eagerly watching the happenings in the portrait. She followed his gaze and watched as her counterpart and Harry quickly divested themselves of most of their clothing and situated themselves on the couch, Hermione straddling him. It was definitely not their first time together. Things were too in sync, and they seemed to know exactly what the other liked.

Fascinated, she continued to watch as Harry used his teeth to nip at her flesh, causing her to moan excitedly and ride him harder. "Don't stop, baby," he whispered suddenly.

"Can't... if... I... wanted... to... s-stop... Oh, Harry!" wanton Hermione cried as she rode out her orgasm, large breasts bouncing as she moved.

"I told you that they'd do well if a bit larger," Snape mentioned, apparently trying to make her laugh and ease the mood.

Suddenly, Hermione had had enough, even though she did truly appreciate what he was trying to do. "I can't watch this any longer." She stood and tried to bolt away, but the invisible barrier wouldn't allow her to pass.

The shopkeeper in the portrait turned around and gazed out at her solemnly. "You must watch this if you are to know," he said simply and turned back to continue watching, stuffing something that looked suspiciously like a yellow candy into his mouth.

She dared not sit down again, choosing to stand with her arms wrapped around her body instead. "I can't believe that I'd have an affair with Harry. I can't believe that I use my intended work for something like *that!* It's not the reasoning behind what I want to do. I thought respectable students could apply to use them for extra studying time!" She shook her head sadly and pointed to the portrait. "Look at this shite!" Time had passed, and Ginny had returned, taking a seat next to Harry on the very sofa that he'd just shagged Hermione on. She watched as they acted as if nothing was amiss. "I don't want to be this way. Ever."

Snape patted the seat beside him. "Might as well get comfortable. It looks as if there is more coming up." He glanced at her in amusement. "Look! It's Potter and a Ministry



function. Oh, joy. I am certain everyone has gathered to pay their respects to Boy Fucking Wonder." He then smirked as she took her seat. "Fear not. I'm certain that there is a closet he can pull you into."

Hermione said nothing, too stung by his words. She watched intently and noticed that she was sitting away from Harry and his family. In fact, they didn't even glance her way. Molly Weasley caught her eye and turned her nose up to snub her as if she was nothing more than rubbish. Fear erupted within her body. Ginny must have found out and forced them to end things. She noticed that their first son was much older, and their second child seemed to be near the age of five. So years had passed then.

Hermione continued to watch the proceedings. After many people spoke, her counterpart ventured outdoors for fresh air during a break.

Snape suddenly blurted, "Of course. How could we not include a Malfoy in this?" His scowl deepened as he crossed his arms.

"What?" It was then that she noticed Lucius Malfoy stepping out of the shadows. "Surely I wouldn't..."

"Well, if it isn't Miss Granger," Lucius drawled. "Out for a stroll, are we?"

"I am," she said curtly, though she didn't move away from him.

"What have you been doing with yourself these days? A few gossiping biddies back by the liquor were saying that you hadn't been to one of these in three years, that you had a falling out with the Potters and the Weasleys."

"And?"

"Interesting," he said. "I find that I'd like to join you and offer you solace."

"What do you really want?"

"Ah, straightforwardness. I approve," he said, offering his arm. She cautiously took it and allowed him to guide her through the garden. "I've heard that you have developed something that a man such as myself might want to sponsor." He raised an elegant eyebrow. "Having my fortune at your disposal would allow you to develop it even further or make more like it."

"I have my own money, thanks," she said haughtily. "Your wealth will not buy me, Malfoy. There isn't much that I care about any longer. I am biding my time before I finalize some things on my gadget. I don't need anything from you."

"I am certain," he gazed down at her body, "that we can come to some sort of arrangement on what you may or may not need. I do believe that we could make quite a team." He leaned forward and whispered, "Floo me."

She sat down on a bench in complete despair. In truth, when Harry had ended things with her in order to keep his family together, she'd lost her financial backing. She'd long before left her position as an Unspeakable, opting instead to develop many Time-Stoppers for distribution among trustworthy students needing extra study time. She'd hoped that maybe even Aurors would take an interest in them. The funds she'd built up were depleted. She truly did need Malfoy's help, but at what cost? Was life even worth living any longer? She'd lost touch with most of her friends and work contacts. Her family always welcomed her home, but she always felt like a stranger there. The Weasleys and the Potters wanted nothing to do with her, branding her as a scarlet woman of sorts.

"I'm so very tired," she said sadly. She watched quietly as a family of three strolled by. After they were out of earshot, she whispered, "I wanted a family. I wanted a life. Where did I go wrong? How did I let my hunger to perfect a line of Time-Stoppers control me? After Oliver left me, everything went downhill." Hermione stood in determination. She would do what must be done. "It's off to Malfoy Manor for me."

Snape's mouth was gaped open. Hermione knew that he didn't know what to say. "Please, sir, I don't want to watch any more of this."

The twinkling-eyed shopkeeper turned round in the portrait to face them. "Don't you want to see if you have success?"

"No," she said, surprised to hear Snape speak up.

"We've seen enough. Release us," he barked, suddenly agitated as he rose from his seat.

"I'm sorry, Severus, but I cannot do that," the cheeky man said. "You see, I have a few things to show you, too."

"Oh, hell, no!" he bit out. "If you think that I'll sit here and allow her to witness something such as this, you are clearly mistaken!"

"Fair is fair," the man teased. "You've been able to see her life and how certain mistakes can lead to bigger ones. Let's see what your mistakes might be."

Face contorting to the color of chalky white, Snape hissed, "Desist this instant!" Instead, the man ignored him, turned round in his seat, popped a candy into his mouth, and watched as a young Severus Snape crawled through the hallway at his home, hoping to sneak by his father's sitting room.

"Miss Granger," he said calmly, "please do not watch this."

"Is that your father?" she asked, unable to tear her eyes away from the hooked-nosed, dark-haired man that was now looming over the younger Severus.

"Yes," he said, sitting down heavily next to her, burying his face in his hands in momentary despair. "I suppose turnabout is fair play."

"It is," she replied. "You got to see my horrible life. Now, I'd like to see yours." She elbowed him. "Perhaps I can see if your breasts need further development, eh?" She'd hoped to lighten his mood, but it simply didn't work. Instead, he looked up at the portrait solemnly.

Wondering about his past and what his future would bring, she remained silent as different clips from his childhood played. She didn't question anything, and when she saw a few disappointing scenes, such as his mother's funeral, rejection by Lily Evans, and his taking of the Dark Mark, she tried not to cry. She was certain he'd not appreciate the sorrow she felt for him.

After a while, the old man said, without facing them, "That was some of your past. You are currently experiencing your present."

"Is that so?" Snape asked sarcastically. "Get on with this mockery so that I can get the fuck out of here," he demanded nastily, likely wondering if a hex would work on the portrait.

Hermione could see his hands shaking with rage. She was simply glad that his wrath was not directed at her. Feeling the need to commiserate, she said, "Let me hex the wanker first if you don't mind."

He glowered at her for a moment, but his expression faded until a light smile touched his lips. "I suppose nothing you could witness in my life will be as disturbing as what we saw in yours."

"Funny," she said in annoyance. "You're always so polite, aren't you?"

He merely shrugged and watched the first scene.

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**Southern's Notes:** Real life is a bitch and has me in a bad state as of late. Apologies! Sorry I didn't post yesterday. Tomorrow evening, I'll have the next chapter for you. (If people are reading anyway, what with it being near Christmas and all that!)

**Christy's Notes:** Poor Hermione! It seems she is desperately searching for something! I can't wait to see what his future shows!

## Trail of Despair

*Chapter 3 of 5*

Severus gets to see how things could be if he doesn't change his current path.

**Disclaimer:** I'm just playing with characters that J.K.R. created and am getting no Galleons for it.

**I'd like to thank my beta for this tale, CocoaChristy.**

*This is an answer to the Yahoo! Group Potter\_Place's How It Could Be Christmas Challenge that was issued by me, Southern Witch 69, and GinnyW.*

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"Who is that woman?" Granger asked, clearly amused.

"I have no idea," he said, leaning forward and squinting as if it would help him recognize the woman next to his counterpart in the portrait.

*Severus had only been in the pub for a few minutes when the woman currently tugging at his arm had approached him. He was quite suspicious, but it had been a long time since he'd had female company. He accepted her chattering, only nodded in agreement now and then while trying to appear interested.*

*"So then," she said dramatically, "I told him to bugger off! I mean, really! He had some nerve to suggest that!"*

*"Mmmm," Severus said in agreement, taking a deep drink. "So... Austrina, what is your exact reasoning for seeking me out this evening?" He looked around the dark pub pointedly. "There are others about."*

*"I have a confession to make," she said, batting her long lashes coyly. "I know who you are, and when I saw you having a drink alone, I wanted to come over and meet you."*

*He nodded. Not many could honestly claim that they did not know him on sight, especially after the papers had plastered his picture on their covers for many years. "Not many people care to meet me, my dear. I'd say you are the first," he raised his brow and gazed at her suggestively, "in a long time."*

*She moved closer and whispered, "My flat or yours?"*

*"A room upstairs will do," he said quickly, pulling her up with him. He tossed a few coins on the bar. "A room."*

*"Three is open," the barkeep said, not looking up from the glass he was wiping.*

*Severus put a few more coins on the bar and led the woman to the stairwell, pausing to begin snogging heatedly as they made their way up.*

He looked over to Granger, and his smug smile immediately faded. "What are you laughing at?" he asked suspiciously.

"That didn't take long," she said in an annoying manner.

"I assure you that my stamina surpasses anything Weasley or Potter could muster," he retorted indignantly. "If you will look to the screen, you can see that I've not even yet commenced my activities."

"No, I mean that it didn't take long for you to agree to shag her." She shrugged. "She could have a disease or be some Polyjuiced ex-Death Eater hater looking for revenge."

"Or she could simply be a woman with a wild streak that is looking for a tumble," he said evenly, enjoying the sudden blush that surfaced on her face. "Besides," he said, leaning closer, "our magic doesn't allow us to have such problems with diseases. That's for Muggles to worry on."

"But it still could be someone out to hurt you!" she insisted.

"Why, I didn't know you cared," he said blandly as he put a hand on his chest and looked back at the screen.

"Of course I don't," she replied, nudging him with her elbow as her eyes moved back to the screen. "Why are you playing with her shoes? Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"I do NOT have a foot fetish!" he blurted, face heating.

"Didn't say you did," she replied, disbelief evident in her voice. She lifted a foot to gaze at her boot curiously.

"Granger, if you..."

"Hermione," she interrupted. When he narrowed his eyes, she said, "Continue."

"Very well," he said with a nod. "Hermione, I would appreciate it if you would stop insinuating things."

"Fine. Oh..."

When he saw her eyes widen, he quickly looked back at the screen.

*It had been far too long. All thoughts of foreplay quickly fled when he noticed how enticingly hot Austrina was for him. They fell to the bed in a tangle with him emerging on top. As his lips ravaged her throat, he pushed off his underpants to join his boots and robes upon the floor. Her knickers soon followed.*

*"Take me... now," Austrina said, moaning when his hands caressed her center.*

*Bracing himself with his hands against the headboard after he'd moved her legs up over his shoulders, he easily slid into her welcoming body, moaning as he did so.*

Severus looked at Hermione. "Are you all right?" he asked, feigning concern and enjoying her astonished expression.

She tore her gaze away from the portrait, yet she didn't look at him directly. "I feel as if I'm watching... pornography with my ex-Potions master. It's a bit odd, especially with you being the actor."

"Is that how you see it? See me?" he asked curiously. For some reason, he wanted her to see him as simply a man, not just a past acquaintance.

Her eyes lifted and met his. "Did you not think the same when you saw me... with Harry or Ron?"

"That I was watching pornography with my ex-Potions master?" he teased. "Never crossed my mind. Sorry."

"Urh! You are an annoying man! You know perfectly well what I mean!" she huffed, jabbing his chest with a finger.

He looked down at her finger for a moment. "I saw *awoman* giving herself to unappreciative and unworthy men," he answered finally.

"Oh," she said, seemingly speechless. When her mouth opened again to say something else, the woman in the portrait began to echo her word of surprise.

"Oh... OH... oh... OH!"

Hermione began laughing. "Someone's happy."

"Indeed," he said, allowing a chuckle. He gazed at her as she pretended to pick nonexistent lint from her robes. She was quite fetching, especially after spending a little time with her. She was able to mock him without being too snide or hurtful, and she seemed honest in all of her statements. It had been a long time since he'd dared to have a friend. Only Lucius was his friend, but that friendship seemed to have a price. He was simply waiting to find out what that might be. "It's safe to look now. They are finished."

"I wasn't avoiding it." She blushed again. "Well, sort of. I mean... It's not that I didn't want to look. I just didn't want you to look at me while I looked." She snickered. "Did that even make sense?"

He nodded. "I understand what you mean. Yes."

*Bringing Austrina to the cusp of reality and back more than once made Severus feel good. It had been far too long, and he was quite pleased that even though he was mostly seen as a stigma in society, one woman still sought him out. He sat at the bar again, thinking of the woman sleeping in the bed upstairs. Perhaps he should go back and wake her for another round.*

*"Hello, my friend," drawled a voice from behind.*

*He turned to see a smug Lucius Malfoy take the seat next to him after dusting it off with a handkerchief. "Well? How was it?"*

*"Sorry?"*

*"Austrina," Lucius said as if there could be no mistaking what he'd meant by his first question. "Was she worth the Galleons I paid her?"*

*"You bought her for me?" Severus asked incredulously. The liquor he'd consumed seemed to suddenly disagree with his stomach. The bitch had been paid to fuck him, to say she desired him, to pretend. He felt ridiculous. In retrospect, he might have known that it was too good to be true. Yes, why would such a charming woman be in such a place and seek out his company?*

*"Oh," Lucius said, feigning surprise, "I thought she told you. I apologize, old friend. I do hope that you aren't offended."*

*Severus wanted to say many things, but he chose not to do so. Lucius had likely paid his way out of Azkaban, and for that, he owed him a boon. Being free was much more important to him than having his ego bruised. What do I care if the woman was paid? It's not like I didn't get anything out of it, and I didn't want anything else. Eyeing his friend, he asked, "And what has forced you into such a giving spirit?"*

*"Well, it is the season," Lucius said, eyeing the dirty glass set before him in disgust. "Let's leave this place and go to my home."*

*"All right," Severus agreed, rising. It was then that he noticed Austrina's return to the room. He glared at her for a moment and saw her wince. It seemed that she wanted to say something to him, but he disappeared to Malfoy Manor before she could do so.*

"Ouch," Hermione commented. "I imagine you felt humiliated."

"Yes, so I was," he admitted in displeasure. "Tell me, Hermione. Does it make you feel good to always...no, *td*think that you always...know everything? Perhaps you should learn to keep your mouth shut! Some of us don't want to hear what your opinion is."

"Snape... Severus, I wasn't trying to..."

"I didn't give you leave to call me by my given name," he interrupted.

"You saw my naked body, and I saw yours, though the means were unconventional. I think that constitutes the ability to call you whatever the hell I want to." She scowled at him. "Right now the name I choose to call you is arsehole."

"Get on with it, girl," he said. "What have you to say? Be done with it!"

"You don't have to take your frustration out on me! I wasn't the one who was paid to shag you!" she retorted. "I only meant to commiserate with you." She jerked her thumb towards the portrait. "We are both being made to look like fools here. You are not alone."

He gazed at her through narrowed eyes. She made perfect sense, and he knew that he was being a tad harsh. However, he didn't like the kinship he was feeling with her, and he wanted to put a wedge between them. When they finally parted ways, he would feel no pang of loss that way.

"If you say so," he allowed, turning to face the portrait. "What the...?"

Severus sat in the back row at Poppy Pomfrey's memorial service. He hadn't seen her in years, but he still wanted to pay his last respects to her. As he gazed down towards her body, he tuned out what the current speaker was saying, opting to remember the different chidings or offerings of advice and friendship she'd given him in the past when he'd worked with her.

After the service ended, he moved to quickly leave before anyone could spot him. Unfortunately, his getaway wasn't fast enough. A voice he knew and loathed all too well sounded from behind.

"You've a lot of nerve coming here, Snape," Potter hissed, pulling his small son up into his arms as if to keep him from his ex-Potions master's clutches.

"Harry, please," his wife said, placing a hand upon his arm. "He's the right just like we do."

Potter shrugged her hand off. "Pomfrey hated you for what you did to Dumbledore. Same as me. Same as all of us. You don't belong here, you git."

"That'll do, Potter. Move along," Minerva McGonagall said. Not wanting to argue with the headmistress, Potter took his wife's hand and led her away. Minerva followed their trek for a moment before looking back to Severus. "Why don't you come back to the school with me for a cup of tea? It's been a long time, Severus."

"I don't think so," he said curtly. "While I appreciate the offer, I am afraid I simply cannot go there. Not now."

She nodded. "My offer always stands. Take care of yourself."

Severus nodded and watched as she slipped into the crowd of people leaving. Before he Disapparated, he spotted a teary-eyed Hermione Granger being guided away by Oliver Wood. Well, at least she didn't end up with Potter or Weasley. Wood was a fair student, he thought.

"He's still bitter," Hermione said softly, trying to explain Harry's actions.

Severus snorted. "Everyone is."

"That will change eventually. We know that you were... forced."

"But it still doesn't change what happened," he pointed out, holding a hand up. "So be it. I prefer things this way." Even as he said it, he longed to speak at length with Minerva once again. He wouldn't mind going to the library and finding out Irma's thoughts on the latest editions of certain books and magazines. Though she was a right bossy woman, she was easy to talk to as an intellectual, and on some level, she reminded him of his mother. Shaking away those thoughts, he shrugged. "Sometimes isolation is better."

"May I ask you a question?"

"A second question, or was that the one?"

Growling slightly, she said, through clenched teeth, "I'd like to know how you are surviving. Where do you work?"

He felt that he could confide in her. "I write."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Really? On Potions?"

"Some, but there are other things that interest me," he said casually.

"I had no idea. I've not ever seen your name on anything, and I do buy many books."

"Seeing as I don't use my true name, I doubt you would have known," he said blandly.

"But you're brilliant! Why hide behind a pseudonym?"

He raised an eyebrow and asked incredulously, "You dare to wonder why?"

"Right," she said, flushing guiltily. "I apologize. I'd forgotten."

"Interesting. It seems you may be the only one that has." He watched as she nodded sadly and turned her attention back to the portrait. When he turned back, he saw the twinkling-eyed fool was watching them, smiling as he did so.

"Don't mind me," he said cheekily.

Severus stood and strode closer to the portrait. "Are you quite finished with embarrassing us?"

"There is still more you need to see, Severus. This could be what happens to you if you continue to follow your current path," the man said wisely.

"Who are you?" Severus asked, noticing Hermione at his side.

"One who cares."

Hermione said, "If you care, then why go about it this way? I would have liked to be talked to privately. Now, someone has witnessed me at my worst. I don't like it."

"Nor do I," Severus agreed.

"There are reasons that the two of you are sharing this viewing. Continue watching."

Rosmerta smiled. "Severus, you are always welcome here. I don't care what anyone says. You know that."

"You only say that because you are looked upon differently these days," he said, rebuffing her invitation. "I'd just like another month's supply of your finest."

"All right," she said, smiling as she patted his hand. She swayed her hips as she sauntered off to her backroom. Severus nearly followed her.

"Ron used to fancy her, too," Hermione said.

"I've never fancied Bess." He nodded as if to back up the truth of his statement. "I shared a few drinks with her in the past, but so has a large number of the Wizarding population."

"Well, Rosmerta seemed interested," she persisted.

Severus snorted. "She was likely put under the Imperio by Malfoy."

Laughing heartily, Hermione nodded. "Wouldn't be the first time!"

Instead of assaulting her with a harsh comment, he found himself laughing along with her. When he finally stopped, he took one look at her attempts to reign in her laughter and started up again. "Enough," he finally said.

They had moved quite close together, and she was looking up at him, bright eyes gazing into his. His head moved down closer as his eyes darted to her lips. Breathlessly, she said, "I'm certain that there are women out there who would find you attractive without being coerced in any manner, Severus."

As she inched closer, licking her lips slightly, he realized that he was about to kiss her. He couldn't allow it. Stepping back abruptly, he broke the spell and feigned interest in the portrait. "What the hell is this?" He gestured in the direction of the canvas. It worked. She simply blinked and turned away.

*He opened his eyes to watch Rosmerta as she dressed. "It's still early," he commented.*

*"Do you want me to stay the night?" she asked hopefully, pausing as she buttoned her blouse.*

*Not once had Severus allowed her to sleep at his side for an entire night. That would signify that there was more to their relationship than what there truly was. "No, I suppose that wouldn't be wise."*

*"What's the difference, Severus?" she asked, moving to sit next to him. "I want to stay. I can Apparate in the morning before anyone notices I'm gone."*

*"Bess, no," he said, though his mind screamed yes. He couldn't afford to get used to having her with him. If he began sharing his bed all night with her, it would be too lonely once she became bored with him and moved on.*

*"Fine," she said, obviously hurt and masking her expression to hide it. "I'll come by tomorrow. I get off early."*

*"I may be busy."*

*"I'll Floo first to make sure you're in," she added.*

Severus didn't know what to say. The woman seemed to be truly interested in him. How exactly did he feel about that? Could she be someone whom he could share a normal life with? He sneered at the thought. Of course not. *I only have myself to look out for. I don't need any attachments.*

His eyes drifted over to Hermione. She seemed upset by the display. He knew it was only a matter of time before she would give her assessment of the situation. "Go on," he said. "I know you're dying to say something."

"Well, now that you mention it," she began, brow furrowed, "you did seem to be pushing her away on purpose! It almost seemed as if you wanted her to stay, but you were afraid to admit it."

"Absurd!" he said. "It was clear that she was imposing and trying to persuade me to let her stay."

"She obviously cares about you. Look!" She pointed to the portrait.

Sure enough, it depicted Bess with him again at his home. They were sharing dinner...her trying to hold a conversation and he trying to read a book, uninterested. Suddenly, she began to cry, threw her napkin into her plate, and Disapparated without saying a word. His counterpart sighed, placed the book aside, and continued eating forlornly.

"Severus, you should never turn away love...in any form."

"You always seem to have, ah, faultless advice. I shall endeavor to remember it if Bess or any other woman should openly give it," he said snidely, moving back to the settee to sit down.

Hermione promptly followed him, sitting roughly beside him. "In my scenes, I wanted love so badly, but nobody would truly give it to me. Here you are... just casting it aside." She shook her head. "It's just so wrong."

"Is that what you are looking for now?" he asked, tilting his head to look at her closely.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I haven't thought about it. I just wanted to do my work, to research, and to begin a project that would help people." She smiled ruefully. "I am very lonely at times. When that gets to be too much, I usually invite Ron over."

"And now?"

"What we saw earlier... That will never happen. It's too destructive... and wrong."

"What were you looking for when you asked me for a cup of coffee?"

"A conversation."

"And to dinner?"

"I didn't ask you to dinner," she said. "You more or less told me to bugger off before I could."

"But what did you *really* want?"

"A friend."

"Perhaps you have found one, Miss Granger," he said silkily.

"Hermione."

"Yes, *Hermione*," he said, emphasizing each syllable in a tone not much higher than a whisper.

A cough from the portrait pulled their close forms apart, halting any kiss that might have taken place.

*A few grey hairs gleamed brightly from the light's reflection on Severus' black locks as he held his head in his hands. He was not crying. No, men normally didn't cry. They tried to keep their feelings locked away, tried to be strong. He hadn't cried since he was a boy, and he wasn't about to start. He simply needed extra help in masking his shock. She wanted to leave him. He'd always known that she would.*

*"Why do you look as if your world is over, Severus?" Bess asked. "I've been good to you for seven long years, and you still don't care about me. You don't want to move things along. I'm ready."*

"I wish you well," he said, voice steady as he looked up at her. "I regret that our association must come to an end."

"Our association." She shook her head and sighed in exasperation. "Our association?"

"Yes, it was nothing more than that," he said coldly.

She recoiled as if slapped. "As much as it pains me to leave you, I know it's something that I must do. Things will never change, and I won't live my life with a man that stopped living years ago! I can't live enough for both of us, Severus. I can't love enough for both of us! I need more."

"I hope you find it," he said dismissively. "Good day." With that, he stood and left her standing in the middle of her bedchamber, hands on her hips, breathing heavily. He slowly made his way out of the pub into the blizzard and dared to venture to Hogwarts.

Severus found his way to Dumbledore's grave and sat down in the snow. "I hope you're happy," he muttered bitterly. "I did all that you wanted. I made certain that Boy Fucking Wonder lived to fight another day, and this is how I'm repaid. Are you amused, Albus? Everyone hates me...including your golden boy, and he certainly didn't vouch for me as you thought he would. Oh, he was forced to testify about the Pensieve memory you left, but I think that was only because Granger held him at wandpoint." He was quiet for a moment and whispered, "I should have just let the Vow take me back then, and I could have saved myself all of this anguish."

He closed his eyes and thought of Bess' hurt expression. Did he love her? On some level, he supposed, but she would never know it. It was better this way. In fact, this day would have come at some point anyway. At least now, he could always act as if the relations he'd had with her were of no consequence to him. She could never drunkenly boast to any sots that she'd owned Severus Snape's heart. As far as she knew, he had none, and that's how it would stay.

Gently, he caressed the tomb. "Rest in peace, my friend."

Severus didn't speak for a long time, and fortunately, Hermione knew to remain silent. They watched as scene after scene showed how Severus slowly stopped writing, not having the urge, and slowly began neglecting his person and the home that he'd finally refurbished. The only person who would occasionally call upon him was Lucius, although Minerva did send letters now and again.

It seemed that losing the woman had been hard on him. He scoffed internally. *Impossible. I would never simply wither away because I lost someone who warmed my bed!* Even as he thought that, part of him knew that she'd been more than that to him.

Lucius looked around, strode to the nearest bookshelf and passed a gloved finger along its rim. He tsked in disapproval. "Don't you clean?" he asked haughtily. "This place continues to fall apart each time I come." He sneered as he looked at the ceiling. "Muggles! They can't build anything to last, can they?"

"What do you want?" Severus asked through a whisky-induced haze.

"I need you to create a potion for me," Lucius said immediately, taking a seat across from Severus. "I have Hermione Granger working for me right now, and she's got something that I've been waiting years to get a hold of. Finally, it's within my grasp, but I have a theory that a certain solution added to the... item would improve it."

"You have a theory that includes something with a potion?" He laughed loudly.

"Well, there are some books in my library that have interesting information on the subject." He shrugged. "Perhaps a few weeks at the Manor would do you some good and get you out of this Muggle dunghill," he said disdainfully.

"I think not, Lucius."

"Severus, you have nothing left." He leaned forward. "I checked. There is no money in your vault, is there? There are no more books forthcoming. You have nothing... except me. Allow me to help you, Severus."

"I cannot accept such charity."

"But you accepted it more than once before if I remember correctly," Lucius said, finally playing the trump card he'd been holding for so many years. "Why, I think that your freedom is greatly because I had direct influence with the Minister."

"I don't know," Severus said, wondering if he could get out of it. He simply wanted to stay where he was. He didn't mind living in such a manner.

"How long has it been since you've had a woman?" Lucius asked, changing tactics.

"Now, is that truly relevant?" Severus asked, thinking of Bess. It had been a long while.

"I can see to it that you have a woman regularly, and fear not, for I shall pay you well for your work." He stood. "You can finally get out of this slum."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"Because after we have what we need, our kind will be back on top again." Lucius smiled. "That's right, Severus. We'll have something truly magnificent on our side, and there won't be much that the Ministry can do to stop us."

Severus barked with laughter. "I suppose Granger will just allow you to use this without running off to Potter or Weasley, eh?"

Lucius grinned wickedly. "She is loyal to me and mine now, Severus. Where have you been?" He held up his hand. "Never mind. Don't answer. You've been holed up here."

"Are you and Granger... seeing each other?" Severus asked, unable to hide his surprised expression.

"Let's just say that we are quite close," Lucius drawled. He strode towards the door and turned around. "You know, Severus, I am certain that all those hours of working closely with her would do you some good. Perhaps you could become close to her... or, ah, join us in our closeness. It's been many years since we've done that."

Severus stood and stretched. He looked down at his rumpled clothing and frowned. "Perhaps a change would do me good."

"I shall see you later tonight then?"

"Indeed."

"Excellent."

"That bloody arsehole! He's going to take my life's work and turn it about to use it for..." Hermione's voice trailed off. "And apparently, I'm just allowing him." She shook her

head. "Surely I wouldn't shag him!"

"He's quite a smooth talker," Severus said, wondering if he would possibly turn out so lonely and bitter. He'd known he'd be alone for his life, but he never thought he'd end up being so desolate. "Always has been. He used to be one of the main recruiters for the Dark Lord. The picture he presented was a lovely one."

"Severus, promise me that you won't allow that to happen to you," Hermione said, suddenly full of emotion. "Nobody should have to live that way. If you have a chance to be with someone, take it."

"What of you?"

"My life will *not* be anything like that!" she replied vehemently.

"I am glad," he said quietly. There were so many things that he wanted to say, but he dared not. He turned to the portrait again. "Old man," he called. "Enough of your tricks! End this immediately."

"Very well," the shopkeeper in the portrait said. "I shall end your scenes, Severus."

"Finally!" Snape said. "Remove your barrier so that we can be free of you and your meddling."

"Yes, of course," the man said. "It did me well to see you both again. I can only hope that you will take what you saw here and make certain that your lives never lead in that direction."

"Definitely not," Hermione said. The portrait went blank, as it had been when they first found it. "Oh, we didn't even get to say goodbye or find out the truth about his identity."

Severus walked forward and said, "The barrier is gone." He turned round to face her. "I guess we should be leaving."

"I guess so."

"I'll still see you home if you'd like," he offered. "For certain, you shouldn't be wandering about Knockturn Alley alone."

Hermione nodded and moved to stand beside him. "Well, at least we've learned one thing through all of this."

"And that is?"

She giggled, leaned closer, and whispered, "Your breasts are quite nonexistent. You *do* need a bit of development."

Severus threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Whatever I thought you might say, Hermione, it wasn't that."

"Oh, pardon me," the old man's voice said from behind. They spun around and faced the portrait again. "There was something else that I wanted to show you." He grinned sheepishly. "If you don't have anything pressing to attend to, you might want to take a look."

"I don't think I could put up with any more of this foolishness," Severus said. "It's bad enough that your tales are going to make us suspicious about every move we make in the future."

Hermione smiled. "I'd like to see."

"Oh, of course," Severus said. He pitched his voice to mimic hers. "I'd like to see." He shook his head. "Haven't you seen enough?"

She shrugged. "What are a few more minutes? You can go on. I'll Disapparate when I'm done."

The portrait's nose occupant interrupted. "I can only show the two of you together."

Resignedly, Severus said, "Oh, very well." He took Hermione's hand and led her back to their settee. "Carry on."

"Excellent," the shopkeeper said jovially, settling down in his chair. "This is how it could be if the two of you decide to stay together... as a couple."

Severus was about to give the meddler a scathing remark, but he felt Hermione squeeze his hand. He'd not released hers yet since they'd sat down. He lowered his head to look at their interlaced fingers and felt his palm dampen as his nervousness made itself known. Moving his thumb lightly, he caressed the side of her hand. She responded by doing the same. When he looked up at her and saw her welcoming smile, he leaned closer and gently pressed his lips to hers.

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**Southern's Notes:** There is one chapter left. We'll finally get to see them together and their reaction to it. Hope you continue to enjoy. I'll post that tomorrow at some point. Cheers!

**Christy's Notes:** How sad! He thinks he deserves to be alone. I cannot wait for the next chapter! Still love the bantering!

## Trekking Together

*Chapter 4 of 5*

Hermione and Severus see how their lives could be if they take the next steps together.

**Disclaimer:** I'm just playing with characters that J.K.R. created and am getting no Galleons for it.

**I'd like to thank my beta for this tale, CocoaChristy.**

*This is an answer to the Yahoo! Group Potter\_Place's How It Could Be Christmas Challenge that was issued by me, Southern Witch 69, and GinnyW.*

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Hermione's eyes widened in shock as his lips brushed against hers hesitantly. *Snape is kissing me!* It wasn't an unpleasant thought. She'd felt that he wanted to kiss her before, but he'd abruptly pulled away from her. His desire was not unreciprocated. She'd wanted to feel his lips against hers. Yes, she knew that those were the same thin lips that normally curled into a hateful sneer when he regarded her, but this evening had been different. She supposed she felt differently because he'd helped her at Borgin and Burkes.

*Shite!* she thought in disappointment. She'd been analyzing things and not paying attention to his kiss. He likely thought that she hadn't intended to respond. His eyes had opened, and he was pulling back.

"Miss Granger, I apologize. I thought... I shouldn't have tried to..." He looked down at their joined hands and tried to tug his away.

"No, please..." she said lamely, trying to think of what to say before he could pull away completely.

"If you don't mind, I'd like my hand back," he said acridly.

Not wanting him to misunderstand, she leaned closer and pressed her lips to his, closing her eyes after making contact. The feel of his thin yet firm lips on hers was exciting... or it would be if he would respond. She opened her eyes and saw that his were wide with shock. She pulled back.

"That went well," she quipped. "Perhaps we should..."

"Try again?" he offered.

"Yes," she said, slightly nervous. She released his hand and looked down at her damp palm. "Whoops." She carefully wiped it on her robes before bringing it up to cup his jaw. Slowly, she inched closer, tilting her face up to meet his descending lips. Hermione smiled as she felt the palm of his hand against her cheek. Her eyes closed once again as their lips met, but this time, she could feel the spark of reciprocation.

Severus pressed two consecutive kisses upon her lips before nibbling on her lower lip. Enjoying the feel of his tongue and teeth, Hermione parted her lips to emit an appreciative, light moan. He immediately deepened their kiss, his tongue moving to tangle with hers and explore her mouth. Of their own volition, her hands moved over his body. The one cradling his face moved behind his head to hold him firmly to her, and the other one slid around his waist to caress his back.

Hermione's stomach tingled, and she couldn't help being fascinated by the man kissing her. His kiss was not too bold; it was simply perfect. The hand cupping her face tenderly made her heart warm while the hand that had found its way to rest just below one of her breasts made her heart beat more wildly. The fresh, clean scent of the soap or cologne he used was quite pleasant and made her want to move closer. Even the feel of his warm nose against her cheek was welcoming. As their kiss continued, faces moving as their passion deepened, she felt her body heating and knew that she could feel something more for him if they ever got to know each other better. *Flooding him on those lonely nights would definitely be better than Flooding Ron... not that Ron is all that bad,* she mused. *But... oh... my.*

His thumb was softly caressing her breast through her robes, causing her nipple to harden and sending jolts of feeling through her. If she didn't put a stop to things soon, she'd not have the will to do so. She pulled back slightly, breaking off their kiss with a chaste brushing of her lips against his. Hermione noticed that he seemed disappointed that she'd halted things, but she also saw the need in his eyes. He wanted her. The best part of that was the type of want that it was. Instinctively, she knew that he, too, would like the chance to get to know her better and maybe have something more. The hot kiss they'd just shared was a testament to the attraction they apparently both felt.

"Well... that was interesting," she said, smiling reassuringly.

"Certainly," he agreed. His dark eyes darted to her lips once more, and he moved closer to press another kiss against them. He then pulled her closer, resting her head on his shoulder as he propped his chin atop her head. "Perhaps we should be careful."

Hermione wondered if he meant that they should be careful to not get carried away and end up shagging, only to have regrets, or if he meant that they should be careful to not fall in love, which could be disastrous for the both of them should it not work out. Only slightly confused by her sudden attraction and the strengthening tenderness she felt for him, she said, "I can be careful if you can."

"While that is an interesting conversation you are having there," the old man from the portrait began, "to have a tea appointment with friends shortly."

Glaring scornfully, Severus said, "Get on with it then." He moved away from her and sat as he had been the entire night.

She wondered if he was simply embarrassed at being caught in the act of snogging by the portrait's occupant or if he was having regrets. "Severus, are you... upset?"

He gave her a sideways glance and shook his head. "Just anxious to be free of him and this place."

"I see," she said, pursing her lips tightly. So it was the latter. He was regretting their lapse of judgment. While miffed, she could live with his decision, but she would always wonder what could have been.

The twinkling eyes of the old, wizened man in the portrait met hers. "You'll not have to wonder long, Hermione," he said quietly, turning to take his seat to watch the unfolding events with them.

Snape leaned closer. "What did he mean by that?"

"Shhh," she said, nodding at the canvas.

"You look lovely this evening, Hermione," Severus said appreciatively as he helped her put her cloak on.

"Thanks," she said, turning to kiss his cheek. "And you look quite dashing." She looped her arm with his. "Where are we going tonight?"

"I thought we might venture to the Greengrass Pub in Diagon Alley."

Hermione smiled. "All right." She stopped. "Look, Severus, you don't have to do this if you aren't ready for it. We can go to Muggle London together."

"No, it's been a while for us, and I think it's time that everyone else knows about it," he said, albeit uncertainly.

"If it's what you truly want," she said with a nod. "I am perfectly content to carry on as we have been and don't want to pressure you."

"Oh, good grief," Hermione said, scoffing. "What's the damn big deal?"

"Apparently, I am not comfortable with being seen with you publicly," he pointed out. "See the trepidation in my eyes?"

"Well, why go then?" she asked with a shrug. "It's perfectly clear that I don't care if we stay in or go someplace inconspicuous."

"Maybe you don't want to be seen with me," he commented.

"If I was worried about something as stupid as that, I would not have come to you today and asked you to have coffee with me in," she gasped for effect, putting her hand on her chest, "a public place."



"Touché," he said.

"Not everyone thinks lowly of you, Severus."

He pointed to the screen. "Apparently, most do," he said bitterly.

*The girl looked down to the book before her and shrugged. "No, sorry. Really. There is no reservation for Snape at this time."*

*"How long will it take before something is open?" Severus asked, eyes narrowing in suspicion.*

*"We're quite booked," she said firmly.*

*Suddenly, Hermione snatched the book from the girl, waved her wand over the pages, and thrust the book back into the girl's face. "We will be seated... right now."*

*"You can't just..."*

*"I just did," she said threateningly. "And if I find out what arse placed a hex on our reservation time so that it wouldn't show on the pages, I'll make his or her life miserable."*

*"Right this way," the harassed witch said, showing them to a table near an enchanted window. She conjured two menus and placed them on the table. "I apologize for what happened," she said. A quick flick of her wand produced two wine glasses and a chilled bottle of red wine. "Please accept this as a token of our regret."*

*"Thank you," Hermione said civilly to the girl as Severus helped to push her chair in. Once he sat down, she reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry."*

*"It's not your fault. It's clear that I am not wanted here," he said. "I've learnt to live with that and the fact that people will never accept me openly, but I despise the fact that I am now tainting you."*

*"You are my choice, and I wouldn't want things any other way," she said before bursting into laughter. "Actually, I would want things to be different... things with you and how you're seen. And I shall have it, because their grudges will fade in time." She winked. "Until then, sir, I am afraid that you are stuck with me, and I am happy to be defiled by you in any way you see fit."*

*"Is that so?"*

*"Oh, yes, most definitely."*

"I'll not have some woman fighting my battles for me," he grouched.

"You were just standing there glowering at her, and you would have turned on your heel to walk away rather than demanding respect," Hermione countered. "That's not the Severus Snape I know!"

"You don't know me, girl," he bit out.

"But I plan on it, and if you want me to stick around, you'd better buck up."

"Who says that I even want you to remain in my life?" he retorted sharply.

Hermione's mouth opened and closed. He was right. He'd not said that. *Not in so many words anyway.* She leaned closer and pressed her lips to his for a quick kiss. Pulling back, she said, "Don't deny that you felt something, too, when we kissed."

Lowering his voice, he asked, "Do you know how long it has been since I've been with a woman?"

Cheeks reddening, she shrugged. "I don't care about that."

"That's not what I mean," he said, facing her and gazing at her intently. "I am but a man...one who has long been without and would accept what is freely given." He smirked when she blanched. "Exactly. Don't read any more into what we did than necessary."

*Hermione wiped her tear-streaked face and accepted the cool cloth from Severus, who knelt before her. "I know that must have been hard for you," he murmured.*

*"I can't believe that Harry and Ron ganged up on me like that and demanded that I make a choice," she said, obviously heartbroken. "I would never do that to either of them." She sniffed. "Ron confided in me the other day that he fancies Luna. I wanted to tell him how happy I was for him and that I knew how he felt because I had you." She laughed ruefully. "I should have known that they'd be like this. I mean, it's been years now since that night, and they saw the memory in the Pensieve. Why can't they just accept things and move on?"*

*Severus moved to sit next to her and held her close. "I understand," he said quietly, "and I refuse to hold this against you. However, I will always resent and hate them... even more so."*

*"What do you mean? Understand what?" she asked, pulling back to meet his gaze.*

*"Will you not follow their advice and choose to end things with me?" he asked.*

*"God, no, Severus, I love you!" She closed the gap between them and squeezed him tightly. "I won't let them bully me into making the biggest mistake of my life."*

*"Do you truly love me?"*

*"Yes, you should know that." She smiled and placed a few kisses upon his face.*

*"You've never said it before." He shrugged. "I was uncertain."*

*"Well, I'm certain that you love me, though you've not said it." Her smile faltered. "Don't you?"*

*"I do," he admitted, rising and walking over to the mantle where he collected a small box from a vase. He made his way back to her and got down on bended knee. "I was going to give this to you after dinner out in the park, but they cornered us before we could get there." He opened the box, revealing a lovely gold ring with a large diamond surrounded by a couple of clusters of smaller diamonds. "It fits into another ring, but that one stays hidden until our marriage." He took her hand. "Will you do me the honor of being my wife?"*

*Tears were flowing from her eyes again, and she nodded. "I will." Once he placed the ring on her finger, and it sized itself, she looked at her hand for a moment, moving it so the light could reflect on her ring. "It's beautiful."*

"As are you."

"I'm quite happy," she said, pulling him to her for a kiss.

"Oh, how lovely," Hermione said, wiping her eyes.

"What the...?" Snape asked, looking at her in confusion. "Why are you crying?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice. So Harry and Ron had tried to force her to give him up, eh *That'll be the day*, she thought stubbornly.

"I would expect nothing less from Potter or Weasley." He studied her for a moment. "I am surprised that you didn't side with them."

"Severus, I'm capable of making my own decisions...good or bad." She scooted closer. "If I would choose to be with you," she held up a hand, "and if you would choose to be with me, then nobody could change my mind." She elbowed him. "And they'd better not be able to change yours."

He shook his head. "I don't know that I could get through a day with you without throttling you. You never keep silent!" He raised an eyebrow. "However, I suppose I could come up with some method of shutting you up."

She followed his gaze and blushed immediately. It seemed that their counterparts were beginning to enjoy each other's bodies. "I'll bet you could," she mumbled. When sparks of desire shot through her body, she shivered slightly. "Good Lord."

"I call that good sex," he quipped.

"With good company," she added.

"Agreed."

The portrait's Hermione moaned and said, "That feels good. Oh, yesssss. Don't stop. Don't stop. Just... like... that." Her lover was thrusting into her rapidly and forcefully while she arched and bucked against him.

Hermione slyly peeked at Snape. He seemed to be enjoying what he saw. She leaned over and whispered into his ear, "I should be utterly embarrassed right now."

"Are you not?"

"Strangely, no," she admitted, eyes lingering on his lips for a moment. "In fact..." She bit her lip nervously.

Severus turned to face her and placed both of his hands on either side of her head to guide her face to his. There was nothing languid about the kiss. Both were completely aroused after seeing how well their counterparts fit together, and the couple on the portrait hadn't finished, so their groans and gasps could still be heard.

"If we don't stop now," Severus said minutes later between kisses, "we'll be doing *that* right here on this settee."

"I know," she said breathlessly, marveling at their new position. Somehow, he'd pushed her to sprawl back against the seat of the settee and was half lying over her, one knee between her thighs and the other leg on the floor for leverage.

He smirked. "I know as in stop... or?"

"Stop, I think." She sat up when he moved off of her. "For now."

"Very well."

"So... What do you think of that?" She pointed to the post coital positions of their portrait selves, who were currently talking and caressing each other.

"I do not know what to think of any of this," he said honestly. "We've no idea who the man in the portrait is or how he knows us. This could very well be some... trickery."

"For all we know, it could be real," she said. "I even hope that it is."

"Is that so?"

"Well, yes," she asserted. "How many people get the chance to see how their lives would likely turn out or how it could turn out?"

"According to Trelawney..." he began.

"Oh, rubbish. I don't want to hear anything about that woman. Stop jesting. I'm being serious."

"I cannot explain this, and that is what bothers me," he said. "What are they doing there?" he said, expression darkening.

She looked to the portrait and saw Harry and Ron speaking with her at what appeared to be her wedding reception. "It looks like they've come round to our way of thinking." She grinned. "I knew they would." She laughed as the portrait Severus came over and glared at her friends, yet he greeted them all the same. "And look who is being civil!"

"Only because it's our wedding day," he conceded. "Otherwise, I would hex the little arses for daring to show their faces."

"Oh, right," she said mockingly. "Whatever you say."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I suppose I could show you." He looked around. "Let's go to the corner there."

Severus said, "Very well." He looked to Hermione. "I shall only be a moment."

"All right." She watched them go and turned to find Ron staring at her. "What?"

"All this time... it's been him, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"So you couldn't see me anymore because he was the one you'd started seeing," he surmised.

"That's right." She put her hand on his shoulder. "It wouldn't have been fair to him or to Luna for us to carry on."

"I just can't believe that you chose him over me," he admitted. "I guess that's why I was so upset when Harry and I saw you with him. I don't hold the grudge on him that Harry does, but it still smarted all the same."

*"Things are as they should be. We can't change anything." She smiled beatifically. "He makes me happy, Ron. Truly."*

*Nodding, he said, "I can see that now. So long as he's treating you right, you'll get no complaints from me."*

*"Weasley matures before Potter. Interesting," Severus said snidely. "I would have thought the sidekick would have waited to see how his mentor thought before making his decision."*

*"Oh, enough. You'll have to learn to accept them one day," she pointed out.*

*"You keep speaking as if you and I will continue this after we leave here," he said in annoyance. "I don't know that I appreciate your presumptuous way of thinking."*

*She reached over and took one of his hands in hers. "You nearly shagged me on this settee. I think that is a pretty good indication of the attraction we feel for each other. We would be mental to not explore that... at least a little."*

*He didn't reply.*

*Severus waved to Madam Rosmerta. "Hello, Bess," he said cordially.*

*"Oh, it's been so long since I've seen you," she said happily. "What can I do for you?"*

*"I'd like to do a bit of stocking up if you don't mind. A month's supply of your finest should do," he said, pulling some coins from his coin purse.*

*"How is married life treating you?" she asked.*

*"I am pleased," he returned, expression hardening. "Why do you ask?"*

*"Only pleased?" she pushed.*

*"Very pleased," he said firmly. "My wife is expecting."*

*"Oh," she said, straightening up. "I'm happy for you, Severus." She smiled. "At one time, I'd hoped that you and I could have something together, but you never came round. Just knowing that your life has turned about for the better makes me happy."*

*"I appreciate that." Severus looked around and noticed that some people still looked upon him warily. "Not many people feel that way." He smirked. "Not that I give a damn."*

*"You tell your wife she'd better treat you right, or I'll have to rescue you," Bess said good naturedly. "Let me set things right. You wanted them Flooded in?"*

*"Yes, please."*

*"She's quite pretty," Hermione said softly.*

*"Meaning?"*

*"Meaning... How could you have turned *that* down when you knew you would be coming home to *me*?"*

*He lifted her chin with the fingers of his free hand. "You are very beautiful, Hermione. I suppose I would be lucky to have you waiting at home for me."*

*She smiled. "Thanks." Her cheeks heated. "How did that make you feel? Hearing that I would be having your child?"*

*"Surreal."*

*"Have you ever wanted children?"*

*"No," he answered curtly. "You?"*

*"At some point, yes, I'd planned on a family, but I thought I needed to situate myself first...career-wise and financially."*

*"And now?"*

*"I have a career, and my finances are in good standing." She looked away. "I wish I could share some of my projects with you, but I can't, being an Unspeakable. However, when I heard about that ring, I wanted to do something on my own." She kissed the fingers of the hand she was still holding. "I'd bet that we could work on it together and have results sooner."*

*"Severus!" Hermione called. "Look!" She pointed to the little one on the mat near her feet. "We'll have to ward everything to make certain she can't hurt herself."*

*"Is she starting to crawl?" he asked in surprise.*

*"Yes."*

*"That's ahead of schedule. The book I read said that she wouldn't start crawling for another three weeks or so," he stated.*

*"What rubbish! You might as well throw that in the dustbin. They have no idea exactly when each child will develop and do something. It all depends." She smiled at their daughter. "Come on, Keira. Come to Mummy and Daddy."*

*When she finally reached them, Severus picked her up and kissed her cheek. "I'm so proud of you," he said to her and handed her to his wife. "I want you both to see this," he added. He pulled something from his pocket and used his wand to expand it to normal size.*

*"A book?" Hermione asked, holding back a laugh and raising an eyebrow. "She's quite bright, I'm certain, but I'm sure that she can't read, Severus."*

*He turned the book about to face her, and she gasped. "That's right," he said. "The manual copies are being printed, and a set will be ready next week. After that, we can go to the Ministry for presentation."*

*"So it seems we do work together on your project," he commented.*

*"Do you think it's wise to write a book about it though?" she asked doubtfully. "You saw how Malfoy acted in that other scene. That might be something that he can't wait to get his hands on!"*

*"I do not believe we'd be stupid enough to print how we developed our own line of Time-Stopping pendants, rings, or what have you, but I wouldn't think that writing a*

manual stating how to use it and outlining all the effects, rules, and such would be amiss. It seems that we did to go to the Ministry for approval of the project." He smirked. "I don't doubt that they would approve such an object, and they'd likely try to incorporate it somehow."

"Especially since the Time-Turners were smashed back in my fifth year of school."

"Haven't they been working to fix that?" he prodded. She simply nodded and smiled mysteriously. "Ah, you cannot divulge such information."

"Right," she said and looked back to the portrait. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"I have to agree."

Hermione saw the soft expression on his face as he watched his counterpart with his family. She longed to give that to him one day. He deserved it. As a matter of fact, she deserved it as well. She'd only been working her life away, occasionally shagging Ron. Why couldn't she have a husband to come home to? Someone to share her nights with and keep her company? Why couldn't she be a mother? The only question was: Could this man be the one for her?

*Hermione rubbed Harry's back comfortingly. "She'll come round, Harry. Trust me."*

*"Since Daniel was born, she's been this way, wanting her own room," he said in frustration. "I've been thinking about doing some... terrible things. I know that I won't, but it's there in my mind."*

*"Have you told her how much it's truly affecting you?"*

*"God, no! Not lately anyway. She just doesn't want to hear it. We argued about it when Daniel was about a year. I wanted to... have sex, and she wouldn't do it. I pointed out that we'd only messed around a handful of times since he'd been born, and she simply said that she needed more time."*

*Hermione nodded. "Is that when she moved to her own room?"*

*"Yes, I guess she thought I was pressuring her. I came home the next day, and she'd set up a room on the other side of the nursery, saying it was easier to access him during the night." He shrugged helplessly. "I went to her a few nights per year after that...usually after we'd been out and had a few to drink. However, the last time she came to me of her own volition was for about three weeks straight nearly two months ago. When she found out she was pregnant, she started sleeping in her own room again. It's like she came only to conceive."*

*"And now you feel used."*

*"I love her, but I don't know if I can live like this."*

*Severus strolled into the room. "Are you talking to my wife about your sex life, Potter?"*

*Harry stood and ignored her husband. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'll be going."*

*"No, Harry, wait. Maybe Severus can help." Both husband and friend looked horrified. She pulled Harry back down and motioned for Severus to sit. "Harry was explaining about Ginny's behavior since she had Daniel. It seems that she is uninterested in bedroom activity. She doesn't like to talk to him about it."*

*Severus nodded. "Hermione had an aversion after she birthed Keira. We were able to discuss things, and we discovered that sometimes a woman's hormone levels change, causing certain aversions or even leading to depression." He smiled at his wife. "In Hermione's case, a week of daily potions helped to right her imbalance, and she was able to take control of herself again."*

*"Right," she agreed. "I did some reading on it, and sometimes it takes more than that. Would you like to read that book?"*

*"Yes," Harry said, seeming to feel more comfortable about the situation. "If I read this and talk her into seeing someone, could you help to make the potion?"*

*"I could," Snape replied.*

*Hermione didn't have the heart to point out that the potion was available at any Apothecary. It was nice of her husband to not mention it either. It seemed that he and Harry were able to get on better as of late. She was glad that Harry's marital problems could be discussed openly.*

*Severus chuckled. "I wonder if that's the tale he gave you the first time round that made you pity him."*

*"Ending with our affair..." She sighed. "I've never thought of Harry that way."*

*"And you never shall. He'll not be touching my wife," he said menacingly while looking at the Harry in the portrait as if he could hear the threat.*

*"Of course he won't," she said, not pointing out that he considered her to be his future wife already.*

*He turned to her, intent on telling her something, but he paused upon hearing Lucius Malfoy's voice. They both looked back at the portrait.*

*"You have such a happy little family," Lucius said. "I am thankful for you, my friend."*

*"Is that so?" Severus asked.*

*"I am here on business."*

*Severus nodded. "I didn't think it was simply a friendly visit. What do you need?"*

*"Ah, well, I do have a favor to ask of you," he stated. "I am quite interested in product that you developed for the Ministry."*

*"That was my wife's work. I simply assisted her," Severus said.*

*"Yes, of course, you did," Lucius said condescendingly. "However, your pretty little wife doesn't owe me anything while you, on the other hand, do."*

*"And what is it that you think I owe you, Lucius?" Severus asked, sneering at the man. How dare he venture to his home and demand things!*

*"You are a free man today because I lined Scrimgeour's pockets with extra Galleons."*

*"Interesting," Severus said in a bored voice. "I thought that I had a trial and was acquitted. Why, there was even proof that I was forced to partake in what I did... by Dumbledore himself."*

"You know as well as I that would never have been enough," Lucius drawled. "I only need one, Severus. I'm certain you could see to it that one comes to me unnoticed."

"I could, yes," he said, and when the man's smile broadened, he added, "but I will not."

"You owe me..."

"Absolutely nothing," Severus finished for him. "You've not been a true friend to me in many years. There is always a price. Well, I'm telling you today that I will never aid you in any way that would be deemed unfit."

Lucius stood. "I see." He nodded. "I will not hold this against you, Severus. I can still get what I want without your help. I was simply trying to go about it in an easier and less costly way."

"He's such an arrogant arsehole," Hermione said. She patted Snape on the back. "You did well to stand up to him. You owe him nothing. Even if he did pay the Minister a little extra to sway the Wizengamot, we still gave testimony about what we saw." She smirked. "Even Harry Bloody Potter couldn't deny what he saw."

Severus nodded. "I suppose you are right. We shall never truly know."

A cough drew their attention back to the portrait. "Have you seen enough?" the man asked kindly.

Hermione answered, "Yes, I'd say so, but please, could you tell us who you are?"

"One who cares, Hermione." His eyes left her and moved to Severus. "Be good to her, Severus, and be good to yourself. Live a little, my boy. It's time." With that, the canvas went blank.

"Do you smell that?" she asked. "It smells like lemon candy." Severus said nothing, simply nodding in agreement and paling slightly. "Are you all right?" She had her suspicions about the man in the portrait, but she dared not speak of them to Severus. He might think her to be mad.

"I'll be fine." He stood. "Come. Let's get you home."

She accepted his hand and stood next to him. Before he could step away, she pulled him to her in a hug. "Thank you for staying with me."

"I am glad that I stayed."

"Will you have that Christmas dinner with me tomorrow?" she asked hopefully.

His lips lifted up slightly in a small smile. "I shall."

"And will you spend the next day with me?"

"Mmmm," he affirmed, touching the side of her face with his knuckles.

"And Boxing Day?"

"Mmmm." His thumb traced her lips.

"Well, you know," she pushed, "you might as well stay the entire Yuletide with me."

"That I cannot do," he said apologetically.

"Oh... well, all right. I won't force you."

"I've things to do at my home," he said, pulling her closer. "However, that doesn't mean that you couldn't come there, and we could continue to... get to know each other in my home."

"That, Severus, sounds as if it could be lovely."

"I guarantee it."

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**Southern's Notes:** I have a very small epilogue to add. I'll do that shortly. I hope you've all enjoyed this tale. I know that the deadline for the final chapter was Christmas Day, but my beta and I were both caught up in other things. I do apologize. Cheers.

**Christy's Notes:** Lovely! I love how he got caught up and started acting like they were already together!

## A Journey Begins

*Chapter 5 of 5*

Hermione and Snape begin getting to know each other, and we find out exactly who was behind everything.

**Disclaimer:** I'm just playing with characters that J.K.R. created and am getting no Galleons for it.

**I'd like to thank my beta for this tale, CocoaChristy. And I'd like to thank my usual beta, Charmed Nay, for taking the time to look this over for me when she had time.**

*This is an answer to the Yahoo! Group Potter\_Place's How It Could Be Christmas Challenge that was issued by me, Southern Witch 69, and GinnyW.*

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Hermione gazed at Severus for a moment. She could see that he was trying his best to remain quiet, but his lips were trembling with the need to say something. "Well, go

on, and say it then," she said sourly, putting her hands on her hips after wiping them on her apron.

"I..." His voice trailed away. Severus took in her appearance, slowly looking at her from top to bottom. "You've invited me over for a Christmas meal, yet I see a disaster before me."

She used a towel to wipe some soot from her face. "Well, you were the one who refused to go to my parents' house! I told you I wasn't very good at this," she grumbled while gesturing to the burnt turkey. "I just assumed if we turned up the heat in the oven, it would cook a bit faster."

"But you're a witch! Why would you cook like a Muggle?"

"It just seems that on occasions such as these, you should use your hands to put in the extra effort to show that you care," she retorted, pulling the apron away.

"Not only is the turkey burnt, but the pudding is hard, the peas appear dehydrated, and the rolls are as hard as bricks. Shall I go on?" he asked, stepping closer.

"Shut it, you," she said. "I'm going wash up and change. We'll just have to go out to eat." She held up a hand and narrowed her eyes. "Not a word. We can find *someplace* hidden away enough to make you comfortable."

"I was only going to say that we can go to your mother's if you'd like," he said quietly, leaning down to kiss her tentatively. They'd stayed up most of the night talking and having heated snogs, but they'd not gone any further, him ending up a guest on her couch. He'd yet to kiss her this morning, and he felt a little uncertain about doing so.

Hermione grinned. "Thank you." She kissed him back. "I really can cook better than this. I guess I was just... er..."

"Trying too hard?" he offered.

"Yes," she said. "I won't be long."

The moment she left the room, he burst with laughter. The sight she'd made trying to extinguish a flaming, smoking turkey was one of the most hilarious he'd ever seen. He'd never forget the horrified expression upon her face when she saw that he was watching. So far, things were going well. He wondered, however, if he'd get on well with her parents. He'd never been good at that sort of thing...meeting new people. If he wanted a shot at the future they'd seen in the portrait, he would do what he must to see it done, even if that meant visiting with Muggles for the holiday. If things worked out with Hermione, it would be worth it.

#### ONE WEEK LATER

"Ha!" Hermione called triumphantly. "That's eight letters total. That brings my tally up to..."

"That's not a word!" Severus barked. "Ifsoever. You're trying to cheat! You've grouped three words to make one!"

"If I'm cheating, why did the magical board not reject it, eh?" she bit back. "It's not used often, but it's a damn word! It means if ever."

"Ridiculous!" He summoned his dictionary to him and began a search for the false word. The twit had dared to make up a word to try to lessen his lead. Well, he'd not stand for it. The only thing that bothered him was that in Wizarding Scrabble there was no cheating allowed. She'd have been disqualified right away, or he would have been alerted that the word was incorrect. His face dropped. "No one uses this word any longer! Why, I don't even know if it is admissible."

"Don't be such a sore loser, Severus," Hermione said, smirking slightly. "I happened to see the word used just the other day, thanks."

"Where? In one of your disgusting romance novels?" he asked, brow arched in a silent challenge.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, that's where I saw it." She sighed dramatically. "The wizard was wooing his witch and used it." She began giggling.

"What is so funny?" he asked, tossing his traitorous dictionary aside.

"I know that you've been peeking in my book."

"Certainly not! I would never read such utter... rubbish."

She rose from her chair, walked around the table, and sat on his lap. "Then explain why I left my book by the sink after my bath, and when I went to retrieve it later...after you'd been in the loo for about an hour...I found it by the toilet."

His face reddened. "Perhaps I mistook it for toilet paper."

She swatted his arm playfully. "You're a horrible man, Severus Snape."

"Indeed," he agreed.

"Well, you can't be all that horrible if my parents approve of you," she said, kissing his cheek softly.

His expression darkened. "I still refuse to allow them to make an appointment for me. I will not have them touching my teeth with their Muggle gadgets."

Hermione started laughing. "Oh, shush. They were just having a bit of fun, is all."

"Hmph."

"Happy New Year," she whispered.

*I certainly hope so*, he thought as she pressed her lips to his.

#### JUST OVER ONE WEEK LATER

"What the hell is this?" Severus yelled from the loo. "None of this was here this morning! Can't even find my phials!"

"Oh, I brought a few things from my flat," she said nonchalantly as she placed a couple of plates upon the table. "Are you going to want a salad before the main course?"

He walked into the room and sat at the table. "Feminine products. I never thought I'd see that in my home... again."

"Well, you told me to make myself comfortable," she pointed out. "Now, about that salad..."

"Yes, please," he said, getting up to open a bottle of wine. He busied himself with filling their glasses with a delicious batch of elf-made wine. It was only when he sat down that he noticed the small wrapped package. "And this is?"

"It's your birthday gift," she said, pushing it over to him. "Oh, blast. I'll be right back." She left the room quickly.

Severus began to open the gift and was surprised to find the ring she'd bought at Borgin and Burkes. He was inspecting it when she returned. "What do you mean by giving

me this?" he asked quietly. He had an idea but wanted to hear her say it.

She placed a container on the table and took its top off, revealing a chocolate cake. "I made this while I was at my flat. No magic." She wriggled her eyebrows. "Didn't burn a thing."

"I thank you," he said. Lifting the ring, he asked again, "What do you mean by this?"

"Well, I intend to spend a good portion of my life researching how this ring was made and trying to reproduce my own while making it better." She summoned their utensils and began scooping salad into their plates while talking. "Imagine all of the work that will be needed. Tracking Spells, spells that will disallow someone to abuse it, and many other things will all need to be added." She paused for a moment. "I want to share that with you. It will take many years. I figure if you accept that, then..."

When she went silent, he spoke, "Is this some sort of backwards proposal?" he scoffed, twisting his lips evilly. "And is this my *engagement ring*?"

Hermione started laughing. "Good grief. I hadn't looked at it that way. Well, I suppose it could be seen that way. Sort of." She stabbed a small bit of lettuce with her fork. "Interested?"

"I admit that I am," he said, eyeing the ring closely. "I don't think this is my size, though, my dear." She simply glared at him while chewing her food. "I shall make one request."

"Fair enough," she agreed.

"When it's time for a true proposal of any sort, I would like to be the one to make it."

She smiled warmly. "Of course."

Severus was pleased that she had given him the ring. It was a sign that she had thought things over and would like to spend her life with him. He certainly felt a growing affection for her and wanted her in his life. She'd come to his house with him the week before and hadn't left yet...aside from running to her place for a few things here and there. When needed, she would Floo to work and make her way back in the evenings. Their relationship was enjoyable...especially the intimate side.

After seeing all that they had on the portrait in the shop, which vanished before the next day dawned, neither he nor she felt it necessary to be shy or prolong any sexual relations. In fact, on Christmas night, they'd made love for the first time. It had seemed natural and felt, to him at least, that he'd waited years to be with an attentive lover such as Hermione. He'd had the pleasure of witnessing a Floo conversation she'd had with Weasley where she'd firmly told him that things were over, as she'd found someone else, and she'd not be betraying him... with *anyone*.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked.

"I'm simply wondering what else you might have in store for my birthday," he said quickly, not wanting to discuss his thoughts with her.

Grinning impishly, she said, "I think that can wait until after our meal, but make no mistake, Severus, I do have something quite special planned."

Simply nodding, he returned to his meal, the ring snugly ensconced on his index finger. *Life is definitely good*. He eyed the portrait of the small girl who read books all day and wondered where she'd gone off to. "Have you seen your portrait's occupant?" he asked curiously.

"No, maybe she's gone over to Grimmauld Place to sit in her other portrait for a while." Hermione pushed her plate aside and sipped on her wine. "I'm thankful that you've let me bring her here. Although she enjoys Harry's company, she truly likes me."

"Yes," he said dryly. "Who else sits with a portrait and discusses literature?"

#### ELSEWHERE

"Who is your little friend, Albus?" Headmistress McGonagall asked, nodding to the young girl sitting in Albus' portrait and eating some of his candies.

"This is my friend, Elizabeth. She is the young lady who is keeping us informed on how Severus and Hermione are faring," replied Dumbledore from his portrait.

"Ah, excellent," Minerva said. "Tell me, dear girl. What are they about today?"

"They are celebrating his birthday. She moved more of her stuff in, and if I've heard right, she asked him for a long-term relationship," the girl replied promptly.

"Marvelous! Was Severus accepting of her suggestion?" the headmistress prodded.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed happily. "He said that the next time a proposal was exchanged, he wanted to be the one to say it and buy the ring."

Sitting back in her chair and smiling smugly before sipping her tea, Minerva said, "Our plan was ingenious, Albus. I knew that they would be good for each other."

An indignant scoff from behind her drew her attention. Phineas said, "How dare you not take notice of my part in this? Why, it was I who let slip about the Time-Stopping ring over at Borgin and Burkes to Potter when I knew she was listening! Had I not heard that despicable Mundungus telling one of those annoying Weasley twins about his selling it to Borgin, you'd never have known about it! It was I who questioned the other portraits and that wretched Kreacher for information when I could have been having a nap!"

"Yes, yes, Phineas," Albus said. "We've told you numerous times that we are indebted to you."

"If anyone did a great deal of work," Minerva put in, "it was me."

"Indeed?" Phineas asked. "All you did was wave your wand!"

"I've a mind to wave it right about now," she bit out.

Another portrait of an older witch cried out, "Insolence! I'll hex him for you."

Minerva waved her off. "Don't worry about it. Phineas, according to legend, was never much for using his wand... or his brain. He doesn't understand that it's quite hard to Transfigure a bit of soil and bricks into an entire building filled with specific contents." She put her tea aside. "That and having to deal with that ridiculous Borgin! He charged me many Galleons to keep the ring from being sold and for finagling Severus' visit to coincide with Hermione's. He claimed to be uncertain if he could keep it in his store until Severus went there, as it had been a long while since Severus had purchased anything there."

Albus interjected, "And don't forget that it was Wendelin the Weird's Chocolate Frog Card that told mine about Severus' impending visit, which in turn enabled you to get Hagrid to send the unicorn hair to Hermione."

Elizabeth commented, "And I kept her at Grimmauld Place until Phineas told me Snape was on his way there."

"All right," Minerva said, holding up her hands. "*We all* can take credit for getting the pair together, but I suppose we should give Albus the credit for being able to solidify himself enough to trick them into thinking he was real... and then all of that speaking he did through the portrait." Her eyes narrowed. "How do you do that anyway?"

"I'm afraid some secrets are my own," he said mysteriously, eyes twinkling. "Perhaps I shall demonstrate it to you at a later time."

"Well," she sniffed in annoyance, "at any rate, putting those scenes together took a lot of planning and spying." She shook her head in distaste. "To think that Mr. Weasley was trying to carry on a relationship of that sort with her while seeing that poor Lovegood girl."

Albus widened his eyes and looked down at the young girl in his portrait. "Perhaps we should discuss that later."

"Oh, indeed, yes," she replied.

"I'm going to leave now," Elizabeth said. "I want to finish reading that book that the librarian's portrait loaned me."

"Remember, dear," Albus said kindly, patting her shoulder affectionately, "you have access to any book from this establishment that you'd like to read."

"Thank you. It means a lot to me." She smiled sweetly. "Hermione is a great friend. I'm glad this has helped her to be happy."

"Indeed it has," Albus said, watching her exit his portrait. *And Severus has finally been able to find the peace he so longed for all this time. It's a pity that not everyone can have such a Yuletide Revelation.*

---

**Southern's Notes:** Well, that's it, my friends. I was only going to put the bit in with all the portraits and McGonagall, but I figured a little more of our couple and their first weeks together wouldn't be amiss. Happy New Year to you all. I hope you've enjoyed this little tale.

**Christy's Notes:** Oh, I loved this tale! Wonderful! I loved all the bickering between our favorite couple! It made things more real, I say! Good job!