

The Battle of Hogwarts Revisited

by fizzabella

Summary: The final battle and its aftermath where the saga's most charismatic and misunderstood hero receives the happy ending which all heroes deserve.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

Summary: The final battle and its aftermath where the saga's most charismatic and misunderstood hero receives the happy ending which all heroes deserve.

Author's Note: I have been working on my own version of the final battle and the epilogue for a long time.

One day a bunch of us were trading e-mails back and forth about how Severus Snape could have been saved, and how unsatisfying it was to think that Albus Dumbledore would have done nothing to protect him in the event that he survived the war. It seemed incredible to us that Snape, brilliant Potions master that he was, would have taken no steps to protect himself against an attack by Nagini, knowing as he did that Riddle often used her as a weapon. That discussion spawned a couple of plot bunnies that would not leave me alone until I'd told the story of the final battle my own way. This story is the fruit of their persistence.

My warmest regards to Sunshine for beta-reading this and for her constant encouragement and support.

Oh, I make no claim that any of these characters belong to me and respectfully salute J.K. Rowling for telling one heck of a tale, even if I disagree with the ending of the saga. When you lose something very valuable, sometimes you have to reject reality and substitute your own.

Text in **BOLD** type is quoted directly from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows."

~OoO~

The final battle raged at Hogwarts Castle. Harry Potter, making his way to the center of the fighting, could hardly put two coherent thoughts together. So many impressions flooded his mind that he was simply reacting, almost viscerally, to everything going on around him.

Harry had laid down his life for his friends, tackled evil head-on, died or something close to it, and been given a chance to come back. Not only that, but finally he had his chance to confront the most malignant wizard the magical world had ever known. Finding out that his scar carried a Horcrux had been horrifying, but Harry knew it was gone. His 'death' had freed him from the fragment of Riddle's soul.

Harry's entire being felt lighter now that he knew he was whole, his own man once again. If he hadn't still been facing the final confrontation with Riddle, he would be giddy with happiness. But that confrontation lay before him now, and he only hoped he would survive it.

As he moved towards the center of the Great Hall and cast hex after hex, his mind kept returning to the Shrieking Shack and the amazing revelation that had occurred there.

~OoO~

Back in the tunnel...**Harry opened his eyes: He had drawn blood biting down on his knuckles in the effort not to shout out. Now he was looking through the tiny crack between crate and wall, watching a foot in a black boot trembling on the floor.**

"Harry!" breathed Hermione behind him, but he had already pointed his wand at the crate blocking his view. It lifted an inch into the air and drifted sideways silently. As quietly as he could, he pulled himself up into the room.

Behind him, he was dimly aware of Hermione, and then Ron, following him.

He did not know why he was doing it, why he was approaching the dying man: He did not know what he felt as he saw Snape's white face, and the fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck. Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak and looked down upon the man he hated, whose widening black eyes found Harry as he tried to speak. Harry bent over him, and Snape seized the front of his robes and pulled him close.

A terrible rasping, gurgling noise issued from Snape's throat.

"Take... it... Take ... it..."

Something more than blood was leaking from Snape. Silvery blue, neither gas nor liquid, it gushed from his mouth and his ears and his eyes, and Harry knew what it was, but did not know what to do...

A flask, conjured from thin air, was thrust into his shaking hands by Hermione.

As Harry opened the flask, Hermione gave a sharp cry and closed her eyes as if she were in pain. Before Harry could say a word, she'd shoved him out of the way, her wand out. She was casting spells even as she knelt beside Snape...spells of healing, spells to suppress pain, to seal wounds.

"Hermione! What are you doing?"

"I'm saving his life, if I can. Don't think about ME, Harry, use your wand to put his memories in that flask."

Hermione had gone mad, but Harry, feeling dazed, did as she commanded. As he siphoned the memories into the flask, Hermione was murmuring things to Snape under her breath, but Harry wasn't listening. The memories had to be important, and he was determined to capture them all. Focusing his attention on his task kept him from thinking of why Hermione was healing Dumbledore's murderer.

He couldn't imagine why Snape wanted him to have the memories, but Harry had seen Dumbledore working with Pensieve memories before, and he knew how to capture them.

He... lifted the silvery substance into it with his wand. When the flask was full to the brim, and Snape looked as though there was no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened.

"Look... at... me..." he whispered.

The green eyes found the black.

At that moment, a terrible sound filled the air, building in volume and intensity until the very marrow in their bones seemed to shake. Harry clenched his teeth, trying not to scream.

"Wot's that!?" Ron's blue eyes were wide with terror, and he seemed to be seeing something that no one else could. Then his mouth dropped open, and he closed his eyes. "Merlin's bloody balls!" he exclaimed.

"What is it? What's happening? Ron, what do you see?"

Harry was frantic now, and he watched in something akin to horror as Ron pushed past him and knelt beside Hermione, helping her with Professor Snape. Harry could only stand and stare at them, wondering why they were working to save Snape, the traitor who had killed Dumbledore.

"Have you both gone mad? What are you doing? He KILLED Dumbledore."

"Harry, there isn't time for me to explain." Hermione spoke tersely, and Harry knew that most of her attention was focused on Snape, who seemed to be clinging to life. His pale skin grew no paler, and Harry could see his chest rising and falling, but very slowly, the breaths shallow.

Hermione was searching through Snape's pockets now, and Harry cringed at the thought of her touching his hated professor, but Hermione simply focused on what she was doing, getting out little glass vials and tipping the contents into Snape's mouth one after another, as fast as she could get him to swallow them. She continued to whisper to Snape, too, but Harry wasn't close enough to hear what she said. He only knew that his best friend was doing everything she could to save the life of the man who had killed Harry's mentor, and he felt bewildered and hurt.

"Harry. Snape's one of the good guys." Ron looked up at him with a reassuring smile. "Trust me, okay? When the wards fell, just now... I saw this memory. Dumbledore put it in the minds of everyone in the Order and some others as well. He gave it to everyone who could help...all the teachers he trusted, all the house-elves. He told all of us to do everything we could for Snape."

"But..." Harry felt bewildered. He'd hated Snape for so long it didn't seem possible that Dumbledore's double agent could truly be on their side. But Ron had hated Snape nearly as much as Harry had, and Ron was helping Hermione. He wouldn't do that if he wasn't sure Snape was on their side. Harry still didn't know what to think or say, but he didn't have to do either one just then.

He focused on his task, hearing, as from a distance, Hermione's fervently whispered, "Thank Merlin!" and watching in amazement as Snape opened his eyes.

Hermione leaned over Professor Snape and hugged him. "You're safe, Professor. Do you know who I am?"

Hermione? Hugging Snape? Harry shook his head. He didn't notice that Hermione was blushing as red as fire and her eyes were full of happy tears.

"Miss Granger." The rich, velvety voice was only a whisper, but Snape's eyes were clear as he acknowledged Hermione. An instant later, those dark eyes focused again on Harry.

"Potter! The Pensieve is still in Dumbledore's office. You MUST look at those memories."

Snape was almost gasping as he spoke, and Harry nearly turned and ran; so urgent was Snape's demand.

"Go, Harry! I'll stay here and take care of Professor Snape. Ron! Go with him, watch his back."

Both boys jumped at the sharp note of command in Hermione's voice, but seven years of friendship with her had conditioned them to obey her when she spoke like that.

"Will you be all right, Hermione?"

"Go!"

With one last backward glance, Harry and Ron raced through the doorway. A moment later, Hermione and Snape could hear the sound of their footsteps running away down the tunnel back to Hogwarts.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

Summary: Severus Snape's real motivations for killing Albus Dumbledore are revealed.

Author's Note: I make no claim that any of these characters belong to me and respectfully salute J.K. Rowling for telling one heck of a tale, even if I disagree with the ending of the saga. With all due respect, JKR, I reject your reality and substitute my own.

Text in **BOLD** type is quoted directly from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows."

Italic text denotes a flashback or memory of another time

Grateful thanks to Sunshine, who beta'd this story for me. I'm grateful for her insights and for herding my unruly commas back where they belong. Mistakes that persist after her beta-reading are to be blamed on me.

~OoO~

As soon as the sound of their footsteps died away, Hermione turned her attention back to Professor Snape. She was misty-eyed, so grateful that this man, who had sacrificed so much for all of them, was alive.

The visions filling her mind had been completely unexpected, and she'd feared herself gone mad as they had rushed by, but Hermione was sure they were true memories.

She recognized number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and found herself sitting on the sofa across a coffee table from Professor Dumbledore. Looking around, she saw the Weasleys, Mad-Eye Moody, Minerva McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt standing or sitting around the drawing room. Headmaster Dumbledore cast a charm that Hermione recognized as a silencing spell, which would ward the room in which they sat. There was no fire in the fireplace, so she knew that nothing could be overheard by Floo.

"I wish, with your permission, of course, to place some memories in your minds, memories that are vital to the survival of the most loyal and undervalued member of the Order."

Dumbledore looked at each of them in the room, his face very serious, his eyes kindly but, for once, not twinkling. "I am referring, of course, to Professor Snape, whom I know all of you disdain to one degree or another."

Dumbledore waved away their protests with his blackened hand, smiling. "It is a measure of Severus's expertise that he has planted doubts about his loyalty even in your minds. This is as it must be, but I tell you now that Severus has done more for the Order than anyone, even me. Yes, even more than Harry."

He waited a few moments while his listeners pondered what he said, then continued, "I have wondered for many months how I can secure Severus' safety after my death, which is now not far off, both because of the curse I bear in my hand, and because of the mission that has been given to Draco Malfoy."

Half a dozen voices filled the room with questions until Dumbledore waved away the babble. When he was certain he had everyone's attention, he continued speaking.

"Please, be patient. Allow me to explain. As you know, my hand was injured over the summer. I obtained a ring whose stone contained a Horcrux. Riddle had protected it well. I determined to destroy it and I was successful, but only at the cost of triggering a deadly curse. That I am still alive is a testament to Severus. He saved my life by confining the curse to my right arm, for now. Please look behind you...I have developed a way to project Pensieve memories."

Hermione twisted to look at the blank white wall, which began to glow, and a moving image appeared on the wall. It wasn't clearly defined, the colors were faded, but she could see what was happening.

She was looking at the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

It was nighttime, and Dumbledore sagged sideways in the thronelike chair behind the desk, apparently semiconscious. His right hand dangled over the side, blackened and burned. Snape was muttering incantations, pointing his wand at the wrist of the hand, while with his left hand he tipped a goblet of thick golden potion down Dumbledore's throat. After a moment or two, Dumbledore's eyelids fluttered and opened.

"Why," said Snape, without preamble, "why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

Marvolo Gaunt's ring lay on the desk before Dumbledore. It was cracked; the sword of Gryffindor lay beside it.

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I... was a fool. Sorely tempted..."

"Tempted by what?"

Dumbledore did not answer.

"It is a miracle you managed to return here!" Snape sounded furious. "That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being..."

Dumbledore raised his blackened, useless hand, and examined it with the expression of one being shown an interesting curio.

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"

Dumbledore's tone was conversational; he might have been asking for a weather forecast. Snape hesitated, and then said, "I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."

Dumbledore smiled. The news that he had less than a year to live seemed a matter of little or no concern to him.

"I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus."

"If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!" said Snape furiously. He looked down at the broken ring and the sword. "Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?"

"Something like that... I was delirious, no doubt..." said Dumbledore. With an effort, he straightened himself in his chair. "Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward."

Snape looked utterly perplexed. Dumbledore smiled.

"I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me."

Hermione heard the sound of sharply indrawn breaths from all over the room as those watching the memory understood what the headmaster had just said. Hermione was watching Professor Snape's face, and she could see the pain in his eyes as Dumbledore calmly spoke about his own death. She turned her attention back to Headmaster Dumbledore once again.

Hermione saw Snape sit down in the chair across the desk from Dumbledore. She could see that he wanted to say more on the subject of the cursed hand, but Dumbledore held it up in polite refusal to discuss the matter further.

Scowling, Snape said, "The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," said Dumbledore. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to do the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"

Hermione's hands suddenly clenched into fists. This was insane. Dumbledore had just told Snape that he expected Snape would have to step in and kill him if Draco was unable to do so.

Even more shocking, Dumbledore seemed to believe that Draco would fail. Incredible. She wondered if she was dreaming and pinched her own arm to make sure she was awake. She turned her attention to the screen of projected memories once again.

There was a short pause.

Hermione saw Snape reluctantly nodding his head.

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."

Snape sighed. "Especially since he knows of the Unbreakable Vow I made to Narcissa. If Draco cannot complete the task, he knows I promised to do so. The thought that I might prefer to die, myself, rather than kill you, does not occur to him at all."

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?"

"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."

"And if it does fall into his grasp," said Dumbledore, almost, it seemed, as an aside, "I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?"

Snape gave a stiff nod.

"Good. Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to others as well as to himself. Offer him help and guidance, he ought to accept, he likes you..."

"...much less since his father has lost favor. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position."

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the boy. Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."

Snape raised his eyebrows and his voice was sardonic as he asked, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

"Certainly not. *You* must kill me."

There was a long silence, broken only by an odd clicking noise. Fawkes the phoenix was gnawing a bit of cuttlebone.

"Would you like me to do it now?" asked Snape, his voice heavy with irony. "Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

"Oh, not quite yet," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight," he indicated his withered hand, "we can be sure that it will happen within a year."

"If you don't mind dying," said Snape roughly, "why not let Draco do it?"

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged," said Dumbledore. "I would not have it ripped apart on my account."

Hermione shook her head at Dumbledore's audacity. What was Dumbledore asking of Snape?

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

Snape's voice was raw with pain.

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation," said Dumbledore. "I ask this one great favor of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year's league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved...I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it."

Dumbledore grimaced. "I am asking a terrible thing of you, Severus. But if you protect Draco by killing me, it will reassure Riddle of your loyalty and further our aims, as well as being a mercy to me. I trust no one else enough to ask this of them, Severus."

His tone was light, but his blue eyes pierced Snape... as though the soul they discussed was visible to him. At last Snape gave another curt nod.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied.

"Thank you, Severus..."

The scene on the wall faded away, and the real Dumbledore commanded their attention again.

"If Severus does have to fulfill Draco's mission, know that he does so at my command, under the geas of the Unbreakable Vow he made to me when he joined the Order. My death at his hands will protect Draco Malfoy, enhance Severus's status with the Dark Lord, and spare me much suffering."

For a moment, Dumbledore's eyes grew cloudy and his mouth tightened. He gestured to his injured hand. "I say little about it because Severus and Poppy are doing all they can for me, but the curse can be exceedingly painful and is destined to become more so as it overpowers me."

He hesitated, then continued, "When Riddle takes over the governance of Hogwarts, Severus is fairly certain of being appointed headmaster. He will then be in the best position to control the other servants of the Dark Lord, who will care little about the welfare of the faculty and students or the quality of their education. Severus and I have planned ways that will accomplish this, even while appearing to manage the school as Riddle would have it run. He has other essential tasks with which I have burdened him, tasks that are of paramount importance, and which will fail if Severus dies. I charge all of you, as Head of the Order of the Phoenix, as well as your headmaster and friend, to protect him as you would Harry Potter and give him all the help in your power if you find him injured or incapacitated. The outcome of the war will hinge upon his safety as much as upon Harry's victory. Indeed, without Severus, there can be no true victory for Harry."

Dumbledore seemed to be tiring. His shoulders sagged and he stroked his good hand over his arm as if it pained him. Hermione noticed that the discoloration in his hand now seemed to extend nearly to his elbow. Dumbledore drew in a deep breath, and continued to speak, though his voice was breathy and weaker than before.

"I want you each to have these memories of mine, but I shall place a Warding Charm in each of your minds. The charm will Occlude the memories I give you without leaving a trace so that you will all be protected even if attacked by Riddle himself. I wanted to be very sure that my protection of Severus cannot be turned into a weapon against him.

"There is one other very significant point you must be careful of. Harry Potter must remain ignorant of Severus's true loyalty. He shares a mental connection with the Dark Lord, and by this means, Severus might be betrayed. It's a matter of great sadness to me that Harry is unable to be told Severus's real situation; it will only increase his hatred of Severus, and this is such a waste."

The old wizard looked so sad that Hermione felt her own eyes fill with tears.

"Well. The hour grows late. I shall perform the charm on each of you, and you will not remember our conversation this evening until the wards of Hogwarts fall or until such time as Severus is severely injured or incapacitated and needs your help. At that time, the final battle will be imminent, and Severus and Harry will both need all your support. And yes, Arthur, I can see your question. I have duplicated my memories and secured them by means of a Fidelius Charm, so that even after my death, there will be no doubt with respect to whose man Severus is. I can't properly express how much I owe him, nor how magnificently he has lived up to my trust in him. Do everything you can to help him, please."

Dumbledore focused his attention on Ron and Hermione. "Take time to learn as much as you can about Healing Charms and antidotes to poisons. It's not only Severus who may need them."

Dumbledore paused and then drew in a deep breath, sitting up straight in his chair and drawing out his wand again.

"Please raise your wand if you are willing to accept the charge I have laid upon you."

Hermione remembered seeing her own wand lift; she was the first one to respond.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

Severus recovers and we learn why Hermione saved Severus.

Author's Note: Thanks to J. K. Rowling for allowing us to play with her characters. I don't profit in any way but creative satisfaction for my use of her characters and settings.

Thanks and {{hugs}} to Sunshine for beta-reading this; my stories are many, many times better for her help.

And JKR, you tell one heck of a story, but I can't accept a reality that includes Severus Snape being dead.

~OoO~

Pushing the memories into the back of her mind for now, Hermione was almost glowing with happiness and gratitude, not just for all that Snape had done, but because the burden of hating him was lifted from her shoulders. Her hands were gentle as she ministered to him.

"Are you in pain, sir?"

"No, Miss Granger." He looked around himself at the dusty floor, now awash with blood. Weak as he was, his face twisted in distaste. Severus had been prepared to die, but found that he was grateful that his life wasn't to be ended on the bloody floor of the Shrieking Shack. He had never allowed himself to hope that he was anything but

expendable.

And now, the final battle was upon them, and Harry Potter had been given an impossible task. Severus wasn't sure he had ever believed in any god, but if there was one, he hoped God was guiding Potter now.

Though he had no idea what lay ahead for him, it was clear that Miss Granger knew what she was doing; the wounds in his neck were knitting together. They itched, which was annoying, but he was not going to complain. She had given him the anti-venom and Blood Replenishing Potion that he carried with him at all times and a strengthening potion that she'd brought with her. Snape hadn't seen where she'd hidden it, but it was the right color and he'd recognized it by its taste. It had been brewed correctly, wherever it had come from.

"I'll get this all cleaned up right away. I just wanted to make sure you were...safe before I did it." It was hard to tell from the expression on his face, but she thought he wasn't unhappy to be alive, at least. "Sir, isn't there something I can put on the wound to help it close and avoid scarring?"

Professor Snape nodded and tried to speak but couldn't. Hermione waved her wand and Conjured a glass and a straw. She murmured *Agumenti* and watched as the glass filled. Ignoring the blood on his robes, she slid her arm under his shoulders and helped him sit up just a little, only enough so that he would not choke. Pulling him snugly against her body, she held the glass for him and had the satisfaction, a moment later, of seeing him take a few cautious sips of water. When nothing untoward happened, he drank more of it. When he had had enough, he weakly waved the glass away, and she Vanished it while easing him back down to the ground.

"I have a bottle of anti-scar serum...Dittany and Murtlap in a base of Vitamin E oil. It's in the left inside pocket of my coat." His voice was weak and rusty-sounding, but at least he could speak.

"I'll find it, sir." She slipped her hand into his coat, which still held the warmth of his body. She ignored the wet feeling of the heavy wool and got the little bottle out, then reached into her own beaded bag for Muggle hand sanitizer and used it to scrub her hands thoroughly.

"Well done, Miss Granger." His breath was coming more easily now and his strength was returning. He noticed her cleaning her hands and complimented her. Hermione smiled shyly, unused to praise from this man. She'd given careful thought at one point to becoming a Healer, so she knew about disinfectants. The last thing she wanted was for the wound in his neck to get infected. She opened the stopper on the little bottle of anti-scar serum and poured a small amount of the oily liquid onto a cotton ball she summoned from her beaded bag. Carefully, gingerly, she dabbed it onto the healing wounds that Nagini's fangs had made in his neck, watching with delight as the wounds magically sealed themselves closed.

"There. With luck, you won't have much of a scar, sir."

"When the Dark Lord set his snake on me, I did not expect to survive, Miss Granger. A scar is small price to pay for my continuing existence."

It was getting easier and easier to speak, and he was truly happy to be alive, when all was said and done.

He was fascinated by her gentleness and the care that she took with him as she tended the wound in his neck. He was grateful for all that she had done but found himself wondering why she'd done it.

He'd heard Ron's explanation to Harry when the wards had fallen, but Hermione had pushed her way into the room and started casting one healing spell after another before they fell. She'd healed him of her own volition. She had no reason to help him, and yet she had done so. While Hermione fussed over him, he thought again of the year just past.

She had not come back to Hogwarts for her seventh year, choosing to go with Potter and Weasley instead. He'd been glad, frankly.

Being Potter's best friend made Miss Granger a target; the fact that she was Muggle-born, female, and the top student in her year would only have been further incentive to any Death Eater to put the Mudblood in her place.

Through the Dark Lord, of course, Severus had been aware of the exploits of the trio. They'd evaded or escaped from every trap set for them. Even when they'd been caught and held at Malfoy Manor, they hadn't given up.

He'd winced at the report of the torture Hermione had suffered at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange. Mad Bella had cast the Cruciatus Curse ten or more times, if what Lucius had said was true, but Miss Granger was made of very stern stuff and clearly had come out of it all right. In fact, she'd gone from being tortured by Bellatrix to helping Harry break into the Lestrange vault in Gringotts to steal Hufflepuff's cup, which he knew contained a Horcrux.

He studied her from under his eyelashes. She was thin and pale, with unkempt hair and Muggle clothes that hung loose on her frame, but she was obviously as bright as ever, with a new maturity in her manner, a gentle, quiet strength that showed she'd suffered pain and loss and had overcome them.

"Has the wound closed entirely?"

This was not the question he was burning to ask. Why had she started helping him before the wards fell and before she could have seen the memory that Albus Dumbledore had placed in the minds of everyone in the order? His own mind had been very clear as death neared, and he remembered all that she'd said in her frantic rush to help him. It would be worthwhile to place those memories in a Pensieve for a second look, to verify what the witch had actually said.

"Yes, it has. I have a mirror, if you would like to see for yourself."

"That isn't necessary, Miss Granger."

"I'm going to make you as comfortable as I can, Professor." She patted his hand gently as she got to her feet, casting her eyes around the interior of the dim and dusty room. A moment later she darted into a dark corner and triumphantly dragged forth her find...an old fainting couch with only three legs. A wave of her wand, and the couch was longer and wider, the broken leg replaced.

With another flourish of her wand, some kind of bubble formed around the couch, and he saw dust and dirt fly from the cushions and get trapped in the bubble. Hermione Vanished the bubble and then moved the couch closer to where he lay. She summoned something out of her bag...something made of white cloth, though he could not tell what it was. A moment later it unfurled from her hands: a clean, soft, white sheet. It was the work of an instant to cover the couch with the sheet, and Hermione turned back to Professor Snape.

"Let me get the blood off the floor, Professor, and then I will clean up your robes, so you'll be more comfortable."

She was trying hard to be matter-of-fact about the 6 or 8 pints of blood making puddles on the floor, and he had to admit he appreciated her calm manner. Hermione whispered *Tergeo* and swept her wand along the floor, and the blood was gone. Then she pointed her wand at his clothes and murmured *Scourgify Sartorius*, and he felt his clothing dry out, smelling something fresh and lemony replacing the metallic tang of blood.

Another wave of her wand, and he felt something move over his skin and into his hair, carrying away all the caked blood. Not as good as a steaming hot shower; nevertheless, it felt marvelous to be clean.

He wondered where the Clothes-Freshening Charm had come from, but then reminded himself that this was Hermione Granger. No doubt she'd read about it sometime in her six years haunting the Hogwarts library. Or perhaps the spell was entirely new and her own creation. She had always excelled at Charms, and Professor Flitwick had, over the years, taught her some Magical Theory; combined with her impressive intelligence and formidable determination, she would be more than capable of creating her own spells.

He realized, as he watched her work, that he was feeling better now; his breathing was easier as his body replenished the red blood cells that carried oxygen to his tissues.

As he felt himself growing stronger, felt the spectre of death receding, his spirits lifted, as well. Dumbledore hadn't expected him to survive the end of the war, but being Dumbledore, he'd taken the time to prepare for it, just in case.

Severus had known for many years that Albus Dumbledore cared for him a great deal, but had never dreamed the old man would take the time to ensure that he would be protected if he did survive. He didn't even really know what Albus had done, but he would ask later. Riddle wasn't yet dead. They had to attend to that little detail before anyone could celebrate.

Still, here and now, Hermione Granger had saved his life. She deserved his thanks and his praise for a job well done.

"You have done exceptionally well, Miss Granger. I am extremely grateful to you." He owed this young woman a life debt, but, strangely enough, he felt no burden from this, perhaps because he knew she hadn't saved him to put him in her debt.

"Thank you, sir." She was leaning over him again, sliding her arm under his head, helping him to sit up. A moment later, she whispered *Mobilicorpus* and he felt himself rising off the ground, but she supported him and carefully guided him the few feet to the couch she had Transfigured, and he suffered no bumps or knocks at all. She set him down as gently as she would have a baby into its cradle and released the spell.

"There, sir. Are you comfortable?"

"Quite. Thank you, Miss Granger." He was comfortable, but the Shrieking Shack was cold, and Hermione had very sharp eyes. She saw the involuntary shiver he gave as he settled onto the couch.

"Are you cold, sir?"

He nodded his head. The Blood Replenishing Potion would have him back to normal in a short time, but he had lost so much blood that his body temperature was unstable.

She reached into her bag again and pulled out what appeared to be a Muggle child's sleeping bag. It was old and faded but very soft when she spread it out over him, tucking it in around his shoulders. The design printed on it appeared to be pastel-colored teddy bears, each with an emblem in the center of its belly...Professor Snape's first ever glimpse of the Care Bears.

"What else can I get you, Professor Snape?"

"Nothing, Miss Granger."

She hesitated, biting her bottom lip. Then, "I hate to leave you here alone, sir, but Harry and Ron will need my help." More mangling of that bottom lip.

"Should I Disillusion you, sir?"

He nodded his head.

"If you could also move my couch back into the shadows, I should be quite safe. I will come to the castle to help as soon as I am strong enough."

"Are you sure you want to stay here? I could take you to the hospital wing... "

"You may be attacked or accosted on your way back to the castle; you must have your hands free. As I don't have enough strength to help you, I would only be a liability. I shall be safe enough here."

He spoke matter-of-factly and Hermione nodded, but it was clear that she was unhappy to be leaving him by himself. She seemed to understand his reasoning and clearly was submitting to the logic of the situation. She wrinkled her nose and grimaced, then looked around the room again with a measuring eye.

"Let me move you back behind the curtains, Professor." And with a few sweeps of her wand, she had moved him, couch and all, back into the shadows of a curtained alcove, turning the couch so its high back was presented to the room and partially shielded by the curtains as well.

"This will do very well." He looked up at the witch again, noting that she was, once again, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

"Professor Snape, will you give me your word that you will stay here? Unless... something gets in here that poses a threat to you, of course."

"Miss Granger, I must do my part. Surely you understand that."

"I think you've done more than your share. And I don't want to see you hurt again. Ever."

Those amber-whiskey-sherry eyes were fixed on his face, wide and hopeful, and Severus Snape felt a little frisson of shock travel up and down his spine. Why did she care? It was obvious that she did, but why? He'd gone out of his way to discourage anyone caring whether he lived or died.

"I have no idea why you are concerned, Miss Granger, but I will be cautious." It was as gracious a reply as she was likely to get, Hermione realized. If the situation hadn't been so grim, she might have smiled.

"Okay, then." She hesitated, resting her wand lightly on the top of his head. He wondered if she remembered the incantation for the Disillusionment Charm and was about to prompt her when she suddenly put her other hand on his shoulder, leaned down and kissed his cheek. When she drew back, he could see tears in her bright eyes.

She saw only surprise in his dark eyes. Surprise...and did his hand rise to brush over his cheek as she drew back?

"Professor Snape, you are the best teacher I ever had, and you've been my hero since I found out about your work for the Order. There's more, which I don't have time to say right now, but you may take that as the reason I care."

There was so much more she wanted to say, but she had to get back to the castle.

And with that, she tapped her wand lightly on top of his head, and he felt an odd sensation, like someone had cracked an egg over his head. He knew that the spell would hide him. He leaned back and pulled the sleeping bag higher on his chest, determined to rest and gather his strength as fast as possible. Hermione Granger said nothing else, merely scrambled across the room and through the door.

~OoO~

As she raced through the underground tunnel back to Hogwarts, Hermione's thoughts were in complete turmoil. She had been horrified at the sight of Snape lying on the floor, bleeding out from the bite of the Dark Lord's pet. Snape had killed Dumbledore, but some part of her heart had refused to believe he could be completely evil. Dumbledore had trusted him and, think what she might about his manipulative ways, Dumbledore was smart. Hermione didn't think the old Headmaster could have been fooled by many. There had to be more of an explanation for his death. There had to be. She had never expressed this conviction to anyone, but she had never let go of the idea, either. She had nearly cried in relief when her mind filled with memories of Dumbledore telling her to save Severus if she could.

The memories were Hermione's vindication, but she couldn't have stopped herself from healing him if her own life had depended on it. Her heart told her to heal him, and that organ was stubborn enough to deny all the logical arguments that would have stayed her hand.

She chastised herself over and over for the kiss she had given him, though. Severus Snape was a very private man, and he had to be a very bewildered man just about now...if he's thinking about you at all, not that you could possibly be that important to him, you idiot!

It was to be hoped that he would not be a very angry man over her presumption.

She didn't know what she would say when he asked her why she'd healed him.

"I'll think about that tomorrow," she told herself. Right now, there were too many other things to worry about.

She needed to find Harry and Ron. They had gone to Dumbledore's office to use his Pensieve to view Snape's memories. She would look there first, and then search the castle if they weren't in the office.

She came to the Great Hall and decided to look there before going on.

The huge room was teeming with people. She didn't see Harry or Ron, but she nodded to Luna Lovegood and one of the Patil twins, who were sitting on a bench at the Ravenclaw table. Luna appeared to be comforting whichever twin it was. Hermione felt her heart sink within her at the thought that either Parvati or Padma had been hurt, but she needed to find Harry and Ron. She went up to the teachers' platform at the head of the room. It wasn't terribly high, but it would give her a better view than standing where she was.

"Miss Granger!" Hermione turned around when she heard Professor McGonagall sharply calling her name.

"Professor McGonagall!" Hermione went to her Head of House, who was standing just inside the door of the Great Hall.

"Are you hurt, child?"

"No, Professor McGonagall, I'm fine."

"And Mr. Potter...has he completed the mysterious task that Professor Dumbledore set for him?"

"Very nearly, Professor. There's only one left." She must be tired for that to slip out so easily. She bit her lip, wishing she could drag the words back into her mouth.

Professor McGonagall's eyebrows rose in surprise. "And may I know what the one thing is?"

Hermione hesitated, then decided to tell McGonagall some of the truth.

"The Dark Lord's snake. Anyone who sees the snake should kill it."

Professor McGonagall's eyes filled with questions, but she nodded her head. "I shall make sure everyone knows to kill the creature if they can. If it's even here. I would think even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named might leave his pets at home on the day of a major battle."

"The snake is here, though. We saw it." Hermione hoped she didn't pale when she thought of the circumstances under which she had seen Riddle's pet.

McGonagall rolled her eyes, and Hermione nearly laughed. Surely McGonagall was right, though...a battlefield was not the place for a cherished pet.

Hermione hesitated for an instant, but then curiosity got the better of her.

"Professor McGonagall..."

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"When the wards fell...Did you..."

"Did I see the memories that Professor Dumbledore placed in our minds? Yes, I did. It's just like that man," Professor McGonagall rolled her eyes again, "to keep something this important secret from all of us, even though we could have helped Severus, had we known. He has some explaining to do, and, I might add, the explanation had better be a good one."

Despite the grimness of their situation, Hermione smiled. What wouldn't she give to be a mouse under a chair to witness Professor McGonagall confronting Professor Dumbledore over his treatment of Professor Snape? One thing was clear...there would surely be fireworks.

Professor McGonagall's face took on a distressed expression as she continued, "I haven't seen Professor Snape, though. And I am worried."

"Professor Snape is alive." Relief sang through Hermione's soul like fresh water in the Sahara Desert, and joy sparkled in her eyes. "I was just with him a few minutes ago."

Hermione was surprised to see Professor McGonagall's eyes fill with tears. "Where is he, Miss Granger?"

"I...he's safe. As safe as any of us, that is."

"I was so relieved to learn that Severus has been working for us all along. I even remember the evening Professor Dumbledore placed those memories in our minds. He was too clever by half."

She paused and her face grew sad. "I heard a dreadful rumor that Severus had been killed. I was heartbroken."

Professor McGonagall dabbed away her tears. Then her eyes lit up, and she smiled as she felt the full weight of Hermione's news. "He's safe, you say?"

Hermione was torn: did she explain to her Head of House what she'd done, or say nothing in order to protect Professor Snape's hiding place? Before she could decide what to do, she heard Professor Snape's voice.

"I am safe, Minerva." The voice came from behind the curtains at the side of the Great Hall, and Minerva whirled around, her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"Severus?"

"Miss Granger Disillusioned me, but I wanted to let you know I am fine. I am so sorry for everything I was required to do. I know you were very close to Albus. I hope you can forgive me, Minerva."

"Oh, Severus! I shouldn't be surprised that you tell me this when I can't see you to hug you. Slytherin git!" There was a world of affection in her words. "There is nothing to forgive. You did what Albus required of you. He made that very clear. Do you need anything?"

"Miss Granger has taken care of me quite admirably, thank you. She's most conveniently failed to tell you that the Dark Lord set his snake on me and left me for dead. She thwarted that plan very neatly."

Hermione heard the gentle humor in his comment and nearly laughed out loud herself.

Before Professor McGonagall could start on the topic of his own health or well-being, Professor Snape changed the subject.

"He has the Elder Wand, Minerva."

Professor McGonagall's brows knit together in confusion. "That's only a child's tale, Severus."

"No, it's considerably more."

"Did Albus plan for this? Mr. Potter...what does he know about the Elder Wand?"

"I don't know, Minerva. But Albus did."

"Where IS Mr. Potter? The...He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...gave us an hour to give him up."

"Minerva, Albus charged me with giving Mr. Potter some memories. I would guess he is in either the headmaster's office, or perhaps my old office in the dungeons. He would need a Pensieve to view them."

Minerva frowned. "What memories, Severus, and why would Mr. Potter need your memories?"

Severus hesitated but then said softly, "They may...I hope they will...hold the key to Mr. Potter's overcoming the Elder Wand. Somehow."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I can't see how the wand could be overcome, if it's as powerful as legend makes it." She looked off into the distance for an instant, then turned back in Professor Snape's direction.

"Severus, you say He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named set his snake on you. And Miss Granger says anyone who can do safely, should kill the beast. Is he using it as a weapon, then?"

"He set the snake on me. I don't know whether anyone else has been attacked by the creature today."

"How did you escape the snake?"

"I didn't. The beast almost tore my throat out. If not for Little-Miss-Know-It-All there, I would have died."

As pet names went, it was rather long, but Hermione was so happy at Snape's gentle teasing that she could have danced a jig right there in the Great Hall.

"Little-Miss-Know-It-All? Miss Granger? Severus, what did she do?"

"She healed the wound with her wand, and had the sense to realize I would be carrying anti-venin with me. She gave me that, and Blood Replenishing Potion, as well as a vial of Strengthening Solution. She cleaned up the mess and Transfigured a couch I could rest on, and Disillusioned me so I could remain hidden. She has obviously been observing Poppy Pomfrey. She even fusses like her."

Snape's voice carried a warmth Hermione had never heard before.

"She carries this small, elegant evening purse everywhere she goes, and I'm amazed at all the things she pulled out of that delicate little bag. I suspect it would probably hold everything in the headmaster's office. I doubt she had time to ask Filius to enchant it for her, and it's more than Arthur or Molly could do. Yet it's as tidy an example of an Expansion Charm as I have ever seen. You should be very proud of her."

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she heard Snape's low, silky voice enumerating all she had done. The man was keenly observant, no doubt about that.

McGonagall was beaming with pride. "Miss Granger has always been an exceptional student. You've heard me boast of her talents often enough over the years."

"Indeed. I have come to realize that, if anything, you understated her accomplishments, Minerva."

Professor McGonagall reached out and drew Hermione into a hug. "Dear child, I am so proud of you. And grateful."

"You should be proud of her, Minerva. Everything she did was at least NEWT level, and done as well as you could have done it yourself."

He paused, and both women could hear the amusement in his voice. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger. For EACH correct action you took on my behalf."

It was too much. Hermione and Minerva both broke out in laughter. Their laughter abruptly stopped when Neville Longbottom stumbled through the great outer doors, covered in blood.

"Neville!"

"Mr. Longbottom!"

Hermione and Minerva both rushed to Neville, but when he looked up he was smiling.

"I'm all right, it's not my blood. I know I look terrible." He pulled out his wand and cast *Scourgify* on himself, and then favored them with the widest grin Hermione had ever seen him wear. "I killed the snake."

"Nagini?"

"Yeah, I saw Potter a little while ago. He told me to be on the lookout for it."

"Well done, Mr. Longbottom."

"Professor McGonagall? A funny thing happened when the wards fell. I saw a memory of Professor Dumbledore, explaining why Professor Snape had to...well, kill him, ma'am. Can that be a real memory?"

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom, it can, and it is."

Neville's face fell. "I only mention it because...I overheard two Death Eaters talking, and one of them said the Dark Lord had set the snake on Professor Snape."

Professor McGonagall nodded. "Don't worry, Mr. Longbottom. Professor Snape was attacked by the snake, but help was available, and Professor Snape is safe."

Severus felt that he had stumbled into an alternate universe, as he watched Neville Longbottom's face light up with the news of his safety.

"That's a big relief. I'm not really brainy like Hermione, here, but I never wanted to believe that Professor Snape was a traitor."

"None of us did, Mr. Longbottom. Now, are you very sure you're all right?"

Neville nodded. "I'm fine, Professor."

Hermione sagged back against the wall, closing her eyes in devout thankfulness. They had done it...the Horcruxes were all destroyed. But where was Harry?

Someone called Professor McGonagall's name, and she turned away. Neville patted Hermione awkwardly on the shoulder, and then hurried to Luna Lovegood, who was motioning for him, leaving Hermione standing with Professor Snape.

"Miss Granger, if you would step into the entrance hall with me?"

Professor Snape's low voice was barely discernible over the noise in the Great Hall, but Hermione heard him. Heart pounding way too fast all of a sudden, she nodded, and then made her way through the doors and around the corner into the nearly dark entrance hallway.

There was the small ante-chamber where the first-years waited for the Sorting ceremony to start, and Hermione forced herself to walk calmly towards that door. The whispering sound of fabric swishing against stone told her Professor Snape was following her.

Once inside the small room, with the door closed, she turned to look in the direction of the sound, just in time to see him end the Disillusionment spell. There he was...tall and spare and dressed all in black, as he always had been.

"Oh, Professor!" She hadn't planned to hug him, but when he became visible she launched herself at him, clutching the lapels of his coat, and crying onto his robes.

"Miss Granger." Awkwardly, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed her head to his chest, stroking her frizzy hair. "Shhhh, Miss Granger, no need to cry. We're safe at the moment."

"But the snake was the last one."

"The last Horcrux? You've found the others?" He backed away slightly and looked down at her, curiosity and something else filling those endless black eyes.

Hermione nodded. "We think so. The diary from the Chamber of Secrets was destroyed second year, and Dumbledore got the one from Marvolo Gaunt's ring. Ron stabbed the one in Slytherin's locket with the Sword of Gryffindor when we were camping in the forest. I killed the one in Hufflepuff's cup with the fang of a Basilisk. The diadem of Ravenclaw was destroyed by Fiendfyre. And now Neville has killed Nagini. That's all of them."

"That is a truly amazing feat, Miss Granger. But there is one more." There was a whole world of regret in Professor Snape's quiet words.

She searched his face with anxious eyes, and then began to murmur, ticking off items on her fingers as she spoke.

"Harry felt that he was the snake when Arthur Weasley was attacked. All the dreams. His ability to feel the Dark Lord's anger, his happiness. The pain in Harry's scar and being able to speak Parseltongue. Harry carries a Horcrux, doesn't he?" Somehow, the horrible truth crashed in on Hermione with the force of a pile-driver.

"Yes, Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore was certain of that."

Hermione dropped her head back on Snape's chest, suddenly without strength to even hold herself up. His arms came around her again, and he held her tightly as she cried. Once again, he comforted her by stroking her hair and just holding her tight. His low, velvety voice was hoarse, but he spoke softly to her, meaningless words, because there were no words that would make the situation better. But he stayed with her and held her, and somehow that was enough.

"What will Harry do? The memories you gave him...they were of Dumbledore, weren't they?"

Snape nodded sadly. "Dumbledore didn't tell me about Harry until last September."

"The memories Dumbledore gave us suggested that there might be some way Harry could defeat the Dark Lord. But if Harry is a Horcrux, I don't see how that is possible."

"I don't either, Miss Granger."

He might as well tell her what he knew, now that they had nothing else to lose.

"The Headmaster told me that I must give Mr. Potter the information that he carries a Horcrux, but not till the final confrontation was imminent. I was uncomfortable with this, but Professor Dumbledore was adamant that Mr. Potter not know until the last minute. If the Dark Lord chanced upon a memory in Harry's mind, it would jeopardize everything. Albus told me the things Harry would need to know. He hoped there would be a way to tell Harry what I was doing, but Draco's attack made that impossible. I despaired of being able to give Harry the memories."

Those dark eyes were so serious and so sad. Hermione could feel his pain and anxiety for Harry, his sorrow for Dumbledore.

"So Harry... must die? Just like that?" Hermione's voice dropped to a thready whisper. "And someone has to come along after Harry and actually kill He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"That seems to be the only available course, Miss Granger. But..." Snape hesitated. "Magic and logic don't always seem to go together."

She nodded her head, understanding his words but not really feeling the weight of them.

"I can't believe that Harry has to die. But that would fulfill the prophecy."

"Many times, prophecies can be fulfilled in more than one way, Miss Granger. I always thought that Professor Dumbledore saw a way for Harry to defeat the part of the Dark Lord that lives within him. I know he put great store on Harry being able to love, despite all he has gone through."

"Earlier, you told Professor McGonagall that He...the Dark Lord...has the Elder Wand. What does that mean?"

"If you read 'The Tales of Beedle the Bard'..."

"I did."

"Then you know that the Elder Wand cannot be defeated."

"So if the Dark Lord has the Elder Wand, Harry will die." Her voice was only a whisper, and her eyes were bleak. Severus didn't want to encourage her to hope. He, himself, could not see what there was to be hopeful about. But he had to comfort this amazing young woman, somehow. Or distract her at least.

"Miss Granger, I know that Professor Dumbledore had faith in Harry. I don't know if he only believed that Harry would make the sacrifices that needed to be made, or there was something else he knew that he never told us. I know he wanted Harry to gain the Elder Wand. We don't know what the core of the wand is. Perhaps there is something Dumbledore knew about Harry's wand which will ensure his safety. You must remember that wand lore is a very inexact discipline, and hardly anything is known about wands of great power. For many centuries, the tale of the Elder Wand was only a child's bedtime story. I...don't want to believe that Professor Dumbledore knew there was no chance for Harry."

Harry Potter looked exactly like his father, James. But he had his mother's eyes. And Severus truly did not want Lily's son to die. He felt as though a great weight had lifted off his shoulders. Lily had chosen James over him, but it no longer mattered. Severus had protected Harry to the very best of his ability. For good or ill, he had done all he could, and now it was time to move on to whatever fate held in store for him. But he could do it, now, without the great weight of hatred on his soul.

Hermione seemed to sense the change in him. She looked up, a question in her eyes.

"You're calling him Harry. Not Potter. And you're not...not so angry now."

"No, I'm not, Miss Granger. I'm astonished at all Harry has accomplished, and, frankly, I'm amazed he has come back to Hogwarts. The Dark Lord recently wondered whether Harry would simply run away, perhaps leave the wizarding community behind. He called him a coward. And Harry has never been that."

"No, he never has," Hermione agreed.

"My changed demeanor is due to the fact that I have seen things from a different perspective recently."

"Sir?"

He hesitated, and then confessed, "Miss Granger...Hermione, if I may? My entire life has changed in the last two hours because of your actions."

She blushed and dropped her eyes, unable to look at him.

"You were casting spells to heal me before the wards fell, Hermione. As I laid there on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, feeling my life drain away, I could see things very clearly. I saw you casting the spells, and then I heard the wards fall. I was your enemy and you healed me, anyway. I...I implore you to explain your actions, Hermione. My curiosity has built up to the point that it is actually painful." He said the last with a rueful quirk of his lips that was almost a smile.

Hermione was surprised by the gentle tone of his voice. He looked down at her and raised his hand to brush her hair back from her face.

"You saved my life. And the things you said in the shack... about me being... your hero. They took my breath away. And then you said... it was only part of what you felt."

He was gazing intently into her eyes, and she felt her chest constrict, her breath grow short.

"You can't do the things you did, say the things you said, without providing more of an explanation." He hesitated, then said softly, but with great certainty, "There's more, isn't there?"

She dropped her eyes, and he was amazed to see her blushing. But she nodded her head.

"Please tell me."

When had she ever heard that voice so soft, so gentle?

"I care about you very much, Professor. You're so...you know so much, and when I used to see you at Order meetings, you always had something interesting to say. You fascinated me. And...you've been so brave. Your life can't have been easy. "

The flush on her cheeks deepened, and she hid her face in his chest again. He heard a few muffled words, including what sounded like "handsome" but surely he was imagining that.

"I have tried to ignore my feelings, because there's just no way that you would ever be... interested in me. I'm not nearly..." She hesitated, biting her lip while she tried to think of how to express her feelings. "I'm not nearly sophisticated enough to be worth your attention."

His arms tightened around her, and he had to stifle a laugh. She thought he would be attracted to sophisticated women? Sophisticated women were elegant, cold, and boring. The female Death Eaters were, nearly all of them, sophisticated women. Before her years in Azkaban, Bellatrix Lestrange had been almost as intelligent as Hermione, herself, but Bellatrix was the cruelest woman he'd ever met. He had to correct Miss Granger's mistaken impressions at once.

"You couldn't be farther from the truth, Little-Miss-Know-It-All. The attributes that I find attractive in a companion have nothing to do with sophistication. Warmth, kindness, a genuine concern for others, loyalty, and compassion are far more important than sophistication. I just haven't met a woman in whom those attributes abounded until you came back. You, Hermione, have all of those qualities in abundance."

She looked up at him in surprise, and he thought her expression was hopeful. Somehow that gave him the courage to reveal a cherished fantasy which had been abandoned when it seemed unlikely that he could survive the war.

"You've become a wonderful young woman, Miss Granger, and I think you would be a delightful companion. The war will be over very soon. If the Light triumphs, and I am cleared...as I now dare to hope I will be...I would very much like to...to court you. I enjoy your company and I think we might have many interests in common. You must understand that I never said anything of my growing feelings for you before now, first because you were too young and my student, but also because I did not expect to survive."

Neutral words. Severus Snape was still a spy, still hated by much of the wizarding world. He would not say more than he had, but his eyes searched her face for some indication of what she was feeling. He was not disappointed. She was staring up at him, her eyes wide, her lips half smiling, but parted as if in anticipation.

Why was her heart pounding so fast? It wasn't from fear...she had never felt more secure, leaning against him, feeling the strength of his arms around her and the warmth that radiated from him.

"Miss Granger... Hermione..." His voice caressed the syllables of her name. "I know this is hardly the time or the place for passionate declarations of undying devotion..." He had to hold her closer, had to experience, if only once, the sweetness of her kiss. Had to show her how precious she had become to him.

He was leaning down towards her now, and she tilted her head up so she could look into his eyes. "Hardly the place or the time..." she breathed, raising her hands to cradle his jaw, to twine in his hair.

"Just know...understand...that whatever else happens today in the midst of this impossible situation...to me, you are perfect."

He lowered his head the last few inches between them, and brushed his mouth over hers. His touch was as soft and light as a butterfly's wing, but Hermione was shaking when he drew back from that chaste, sweet kiss.

"Professor...?"

He put his finger against her lips. "Severus. My name is Severus. Say it...let me hear you say my name."

"Severus..." His name left her lips on a breathy sigh.

Just once more. He could not stop himself. He kissed her again. "Promise me you will be careful?"

She nodded her head, clinging to him as tightly as she could.

He hesitated, then with obvious reluctance, released her and moved back a step.

"I need to speak to Minerva, Miss Granger."

"And I need to find out what's happened to Harry." He raised his hand and swiftly stroked it over her cheek.

"Remember, be careful."

"And you."

Hermione watched until he disappeared into the Great Hall, and then she turned and stumbled out the doors of the castle. She had no idea how long they had been talking, but guessed that it had been at least twenty or thirty minutes since Neville had seen Harry. She had to find him. She had to find Ron.

End Note: Severus's "To me, you are perfect" comment to Hermione was inspired by a lovely scene in "Love Actually." Unfortunately, it wasn't one of Alan Rickman's scenes, but it's still one of my favorite parts of the movie.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

The battle and the (happy) aftermath.

Author's Note: The characters and settings depicted here belong to J.K. Rowling, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. I receive no material or monetary compensation for my adaptation of her work, nor is any copyright infringement intended.

Also, a debt of gratitude to southern_witch_69, Sunshine, for beta reading, herding commas, and corralling unruly verb tenses, as well as for friendship and support. I could not have done this without her.

I said it once and will say it again: JKR tells one heck of a story, but in the matter of Severus Snape, Potions master extraordinaire, I have to reject JKR's reality and substitute my own.

Bold text denotes material quoted from "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows".

~OoO~

Severus stepped into the Great Hall, determined to talk to Minerva, and was surprised to hear Professor Flitwick calling him.

"Severus!" The tiny wizard hurried over, hand outstretched and beaming in welcome. "You're safe! I'm so glad!"

"Filius." Severus bowed to his colleague and extended his hand to warmly clasp Flitwick's. "Minerva has told you of my situation?"

"She did, but it wasn't necessary. Dumbledore is such an amazing Legilimens, he hid the memory in the minds of all the staff here, all the house-elves, keyed to the school's wards. He didn't want to take any chances with your safety, Severus. And given what you'd been doing, I'd say he owed you that and more."

A great sigh of relief escaped from Severus's lips, and he stopped to think a prayer of gratitude that Dumbledore had been so careful and so thorough.

"There's more, Severus. We have heard from Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley. They each sent a Patronus, begging us to make sure of your safety if we had the chance. Everyone in the Order of the Phoenix was given the same memory. When Hogwarts' wards came down, we all knew that you have been on our side all along. We're all very glad you're safe."

"I am grateful that he did so, or I would surely be dead."

Severus looked around and saw others in the room looking back at him. Amazingly, he saw acceptance, even smiles of welcome on the faces around him, and his heart lifted. These people, whom he had served in silence for so long, were not looking on him with suspicion.

For the first time in his life, he felt as if he belonged. And what a wonderful feeling that was. He wanted to share something of his remarkable survival, and who better to appreciate it than the teacher who'd taught Miss Granger so many of the skills she'd used to save his life?

"I owe you a debt, Filius. Miss Hermione Granger saved my life, and she used a number of charms to do it."

He inclined his head respectfully to his colleague and got a wide smile in return.

"Sometime, you must tell me what she did. Right now, though, there is a battle to fight. You'll need to be extra careful, Severus. You-Know-Who is going to be out for your blood."

"I am always careful, my friend."

"You would have had to be, to have managed this long. Minerva asked me to make sure you're all right and don't need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

"I'm well enough to be going on with."

Severus looked around the Great Hall with some curiosity. A great many sixth- and seventh-year students were in the hall, including a few Slytherins. Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode, and Daphne Greenglass were talking with Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, and Ernie MacMillan. Pansy Parkinson was sitting at the Ravenclaw table with Luna Lovegood and Ginevra Weasley. That was certainly something he never would have expected, but he was proud of his Slytherins.

"Is there anyone injured who might benefit from my help, Filius?"

Severus had learned many things about healing as a consequence of his dangerous double life.

"No, I think everyone has been tended from the earlier battle. Poppy has set up an aid station in the Great Hall."

Severus rested his hand on Flitwick's shoulder. "Have we had many casualties?"

"Not in numbers, but the ones we lost are going to be sorely missed."

"Who, Filius?"

Flitwick sighed.

"Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks... Fred Weasley... Vincent Crabbe, from Slytherin House. And there are some serious injuries."

"Oh, no." Severus closed his eyes as grief flowed over him.

"Gregory Goyle has been sent to St. Mungo's. He was badly burned. He told Madam Pomfrey that Crabbe cast *Fiendfyre*, hoping to kill Harry Potter, but Potter and the Weasley boy and the Granger girl got him out. They saved him and Draco Malfoy."

"Where were they? What were they doing? Harry Potter and his friends rescued Malfoy and Goyle?"

Flitwick nodded proudly. "I'm not really sure where they were or what they were doing. They are lucky to be alive; *Fiendfyre* is desperately tricky to control."

"I shan't defend Crabbe. He enjoyed learning the Dark magic the Carrows were teaching the students, and he refused to believe that those Dark spells could get out of hand. I'm sorry for the waste of his young life, though. And grateful that Goyle and Malfoy were saved."

Severus' voice was warm with praise. "Mr. Potter and his friends are quite amazing."

"Come, Severus, I see Minerva gathering everyone. She probably has our assignments for defending the castle."

Together, the two wizards moved towards the center of the Hall.

A commotion outside caught everyone's attention, followed an instant later by the high, eerie voice of the Dark Lord, raised in taunting triumph, gloating that Potter was dead.

Seconds later, though, the outer doors crashed open, and a battle like no other Hogwarts had ever seen filled the open doorway. Death Eaters crashed through the doors, chased by parents and Order members. Teachers and school staff were fighting alongside house-elves and students. Hagrid's half-brother was visible through the windows, and centaurs from the Forbidden Forest accompanied him.

Severus saw Aberforth Dumbledore racing after Augusta Longbottom. Madam Longbottom was remonstrating with Aberforth as they sped by, and Aberforth's face bore a chastened expression. Neville's fear of his grandmother suddenly made perfect sense.

Severus recognized a few Aurors from the Ministry, but within a minute or two, he was too busy dodging hexes and casting protection spells to even try to identify the people who filled the Great Hall.

A whisper was rippling through the crowd as fast as lightning, a rumor that Harry Potter was still alive, that he'd vanished when Hagrid laid his body down on the ground.

With a fervent prayer that the rumor was true, Severus steeled himself for battle and moved to the side of the Great Hall, where he could find some protection behind the upended house tables. He joined several students and Order members, relieved to see that they were being cautious and covering for their bolder colleagues.

A tall, preternaturally thin figure swathed in black moved into the hall, and Severus heard shrieks and whispers as the people in the crowd got their first look at He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Severus saw Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick and Kingsley Shacklebolt engage him, and began edging his way in that direction.

Before he could move even a few feet through the crowd, he heard someone scream, "There's Potter! Potter's alive!" and he lifted his head to see Harry Potter moving into the Great Hall.

Lily's son was casting a hex here, a jinx there, but thus far the Dark Lord hadn't noticed him.

Potter saw Snape, though. At one point the young man twisted around to orient himself and saw Severus. "Thanks, Professor Snape," was all Potter said, but it was more than enough.

The hexes started flying in earnest, and Snape was soon busier than before. Potter was as fast as an electric eel, his young, sharp reflexes honed by years of Quidditch training. Snape was almost as fast as Potter, and what he lacked in speed he made up for in sheer power.

And Snape was taking no chances. If he cast a *Stupefy*, it was followed by an *Incarcerous*, just to be safe. He didn't want any of Potter's enemies coming back a second time when the hex wore off. He hoped he would not have to cast any Unforgivables today, but he was prepared to do so if he needed to.

A high, shrill, maniacal laugh made his blood run cold in his veins, and suddenly Bellatrix Lestrange appeared in his line of vision.

Bellatrix had three opponents, and Severus's heart nearly stopped when he saw that one of them was Hermione Granger. Ginevra Weasley and Luna Lovegood were also battling the insane female Death Eater, fiercely protecting Hermione and each other. The three young witches were overmatched, but they were working together, and Severus could see that they were tiring Bellatrix.

He was proud to see that Hermione was casting wordless spells with an ease that spoke of long practice, but he was also terrified for her and the other two girls. Bellatrix was evil incarnate and would stop at nothing to kill, maim or simply torture.

Ginny Weasley dodged a Killing Curse by a whisker, and Hermione caught Bellatrix with a Slicing Hex that slowed the evil witch down. She rounded on Hermione and cast a Stunning Spell that knocked Hermione back against the wall.

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw Bill Weasley taking a guard position on Potter's other side, and he changed direction, racing across the Great Hall to minister to Hermione.

Molly Weasley brushed past him and faced off with Bellatrix, shrugging off her cape and throwing hexes in quick succession. Severus hadn't realized that Molly knew so many truly nasty little spells.

He turned his attention to Hermione.

He ran his hands down her limbs, checking for broken bones, and finding none, he gathered her into his arms and whispered *Ennervate*, "smiling in relief when she opened her eyes and turned her head towards him.

"Severus?"

"Shhh, yes. I'm here. How do you feel?"

"A little dizzy, but it's going away."

"Bellatrix Lestrange got you with a Stunning Charm. You don't seem to have suffered any other injuries."

She nodded her head. "I remember that. Ginny and Luna... Are they all right?"

"Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley are unharmed. Molly Weasley is now dueling with Bellatrix."

"I'm glad they're all right. Merlin protect Mrs. Weasley," Hermione murmured as she sat up straight, struggling to see what was going on.

"Can you stand? Let me help you."

He got to his feet, casting a quick glance around to make sure no one was paying attention to them, and then when he was certain it was safe, he lifted Hermione to her feet and wrapped his arms around her protectively. He thought he felt her lips brush across his cheek as he helped her up, and his arms tightened around her when she wrapped her own arms around his waist and held on tight.

Mad Bella was capering around Molly, taunting her in a sing-song voice as she cast curse after curse. As Severus and Hermione looked on, they heard Molly scream, **"You...will...never...touch...our...children...again!"**

Bellatrix threw back her head, laughing insanely just as Molly's Killing Curse hit Bellatrix square in the chest. Severus heard Hermione's quick intake of breath at the sight of Bellatrix falling backward, the light going out of her eyes, and wished Hermione would not have had to see that.

The Great Hall vibrated with tension as Tom Riddle screamed in rage over the death of his most faithful servant.

Harry Potter picked that moment to step into Riddle's sight. Severus looked around, imprinting the scene on his memory. Hundreds of people stood around the edges of the Great Hall, watching as Harry Potter and He-Who-Had-Once-Been-Tom Riddle faced off in the center of the room.

To Severus, it felt as if time had stopped, and he knew he would never forget the events of this day, no matter how long he lived.

Molly Weasley was in the arms of her family, being patted and hugged and comforted. Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom watched from behind Harry, Neville standing protectively in front of the dreamy blonde girl. Neville wore the mantle of a grown man's duty, and wore it well. As Severus watched, Neville turned to Luna and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, squeezing her tight, and she turned to him and began to cry into his shirt.

Ron Weasley had moved from the table near his family to the makeshift infirmary, where he sat on the floor near Lavender Brown's cot. He was stroking her hair and murmuring softly to her. Severus didn't know how badly she was injured, but Poppy Pomfrey was there, and Severus realized this was the aid station of which Filius had spoken.

He spotted others...Shacklebolt and Slughorn, Flitwick and McGonagall and Sprout. Sybill Trelawney sat on the floor with tears pouring down her face, but the tears were silent.

Severus looked down again to the witch he held in his arms. She barely seemed to be breathing, so keen was her focus on Harry.

He could feel the tension in her slender frame, knew that Harry had all her attention right now, and yet... it was Severus to whom she clung, and when Harry stopped in the middle of the circle and squared his shoulders, it was Severus whose shoulder she burrowed into.

One thought kept echoing through his mind: "When did I learn to love Hermione Granger?"

He'd long since accepted the fact that he cared for her and thought her exceptional. Since the Yule Ball, if he counted becoming aware of her grace and beauty as the beginning of his feelings for her. Not the grace and beauty themselves; Severus was not much of one to judge by outward appearances.

But that night, she had shown a shy delight in being female and a gentle amusement at the power of her own femininity. From that night on, she had been more confident and yet not at all arrogant, and that was when Severus had really noticed her as something other than an irritating Know-It-All.

Her fifth year at Hogwarts had brought the Ministry's disastrous appointment of Dolores Umbridge, but it had spurred Hermione to entreat Harry to teach a handful of students various Defense tactics. Severus had found out about Dumbledore's Army one night when he'd come across Hermione asleep in the library, and read an entry in her diary that described Harry teaching her how to cast a Patronus. He'd spelled her diary to copy her words to a similar book in his office every time she wrote in it, so he knew what Dumbledore's Army was up to. His knowledge of their activities led to his dropping a bottle of Veritaserum, so it would not be available for Umbridge's use in questioning the students.

At the end of the year, when Granger tricked Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest, it was all Snape could do to keep from standing up and cheering for her. He couldn't do so, of course, but later, after the uproar at the Ministry, Miss Granger's sabotage of Dolores Umbridge had given him a good excuse to personally brew all the potions she had needed to recover from her wounds.

"After all, they are for the young woman who rid us of Dolores Umbridge...I am deeply in Miss Granger's debt for that." Said with his usual smirk, his quip had made McGonagall and Dumbledore laugh and caused Madam Pomfrey to smother her own laughter in a handkerchief.

He'd been appalled at her injuries. Poppy had shown Severus her notes on Hermione's treatment and also the diagram she had drawn of the wound resulting from Dolohov's curse. Miss Granger would carry a permanent reminder of her bravery in the Ministry of Magic, the night of Riddle's return.

Severus's dislike of Antonin Dolohov had turned to disgusted hatred at the thought of what Dolohov had done to Hermione.

Looking back now, he realized that, even then, he had begun to feel something more for her than just the ordinary concern of a teacher for his student.

Time now seemed to be moving in slow motion as Potter and Riddle circled around one another. Potter was giving Riddle every chance to recognize the wrongs he'd done, reluctant to kill him in cold blood, but Riddle was bent on revenge and his own quest for power.

Snape had studied the legend of the Elder Wand. He knew that Draco Malfoy had disarmed Albus Dumbledore on the Astronomy Tower, the night of Dumbledore's death. Snape had also been told of the fracas at Malfoy Manor, and knew that Potter had disarmed Draco Malfoy and taken his wand that night.

If the Elder Wand worked the way Snape suspected it did, and Riddle's comments before he had loosed Nagini seemed to confirm this, then Potter was truly the master of the Elder Wand.

Miss Granger was watching the situation before them with bated breath, but Snape could see her struggling to make sense of the significance of the Elder Wand.

"Severus?" Her whisper was for his ear alone. "Severus, Draco disarmed Dumbledore the night...the night Dumbledore died."

"Yes."

"If Dumbledore had the Elder Wand, and Draco disarmed him, doesn't that make Draco the master of the Elder Wand?"

"If what we know of wands of power is correct, yes, it does."

"So if Harry disarmed Draco at Malfoy Manor, shouldn't that make Harry the master of the Elder Wand?"

"I believe so. I don't think it has ever really been tested scientifically; the Elder Wand has been missing for many years."

"But Riddle has the Elder Wand now?"

"He physically possesses it, but that does not make him the master of the wand."

"So Harry should be safe."

"I hope so. I fervently hope so."

Severus turned his attention back to the youth and the monster confronting each other in the center of the Great Hall. Harry was urging Riddle to allow himself to feel some remorse for what he had done, something he didn't think Riddle could do.

"So typically Gryffindor, to allow Riddle a chance to repent," Snape said lightly, and he felt Hermione relax just a little.

"If the Dark Lord truly felt remorse for all he's done, perhaps it would allow his soul to heal?"

"The remorse for all he's done would be an inconceivable burden, Hermione. The pain would probably prove fatal all by itself, no matter what Harry might do to him."

She nodded. "I don't think he could endure the pain," she whispered. "I think he is going to wind up dead, either way."

"He was once a brilliant wizard. Talented and magically strong, and very, very smart."

She was tense again. "What of the Death Eaters? Will Riddle's death have any effect on them?"

"The Dark Mark is Riddle's own spell. With his death, those marks may go away. There are some Death Eaters with whom he has shared his power in the past. I do not know who they are, but some of them will be weaker than they are now without that support."

She looked up at him anxiously. "Not you, though?"

"Not me. I always had sufficient power of my own."

"Now, how did I know that?" Her lips curved up in a tiny smile.

Exhilarated at her gentle teasing, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, watching the heat flare in her eyes.

Mine, he thought in triumph, *this witch is mine*.

Then, on the heels of his first thought, a second one, much more humble.

If she finds me worthy. I wish I were a better man.

He looked down at her anxiously, wishing he could see into her mind at this very moment, but he was determined not to pry. He would wait.

His attention was drawn back to the confrontation between Riddle and Potter.

"You dare..." said Voldemort again.

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle."

Hermione burrowed closer to Severus, and her arms tightened around his waist. Severus had to remind himself to breathe.

Fate or providence had placed him and Hermione equal with the two duelists and perhaps fifteen feet away from them. They could see Riddle's hand trembling as he held the Elder Wand, could see Harry's white-knuckled grip on the wand he had taken from Draco at Malfoy Manor.

"That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."

"He killed..."

"Aren't you listening? *Snape never beat Dumbledore!* Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort's voice (Severus refused to think of him as the Dark Lord any longer) shook with malicious pleasure. "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against its last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? *The wand chooses the wizard...* The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance..."

Hermione and Severus could both see the tension building between Riddle and Potter. Riddle's breathing was rapid and shallow, his reptilian red eyes focused on Potter.

"The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

A kind of sigh ran through the crowd as Harry Potter said Malfoy's name.

Blank shock showed in Voldemort's face for a moment, but then it was gone.

"But what does it matter?" he said softly. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: We duel on skill alone... and after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy..."

"He really doesn't get it, does he?" Hermione whispered into Severus's ear.

She rested her head on his chest, and he could feel her shivering from tension. His hands moved over her back in big circles, comforting her as he answered her question. "Hush. It will be over soon. You're right, Riddle doesn't understand. But Potter does. Potter knows."

"What's going to happen?"

"I don't know, but Potter is the master of the Elder Wand. And a wand cannot be used to kill its own master."

Hermione moaned and buried her head against his chest, but as Harry began to speak again, she raised her head. She had to look, even though she could not bear to see.

"But you're too late," said Harry. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand from him."

Harry twitched the hawthorn wand, and he felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall upon it.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does... I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

Everything happened so fast after that. Riddle and Potter pointed their wands at each other, and each spell was cast as a shout, a wild yell that held all the hopes of each man as they cast their spells.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

For a moment the Hall was entirely silent, but then there was a bang like the blast of a cannon, and golden flames erupted between them, marking the point where their spells collided. An instant later, everyone saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise showing through the windows, **spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last.**

And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy's shell.

One shivering second of silence, the shock of the moment suspended: and then the tumult broke around Harry as the screams and the cheers and the roars of the watchers rent the air.

Severus could see the shock, disbelief and dawning wonder in Hermione's eyes. Then she stood on tiptoes, pressed a frantic kiss on his lips, and tugged him forward. A moment later, he found himself swept into a many-armed embrace as Hermione and Ron hugged him along with Potter. Amazingly, Potter and Weasley were patting him on the back as they both hugged Hermione in return. Then Ginny Weasley was pulled into the hug, and Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood, then all the Weasleys, and Hagrid, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout.

No one could hear a single word; they could only scream and cry and hug each other, sharing their joy because the Boy-Who-Lived had lived again, had triumphed, and the Dark Lord was dead.

Severus let himself bask in the joy of the moment, tears of relief streaming down his face. Hermione was hugging Potter, but with only one arm. Her other arm was wrapped around Severus's waist.

After a moment, she looked at Harry and smiled, then moved away from him and wrapped both her arms around Severus's neck. Looking directly into his eyes, she shouted, "I'm so happy for you!" then stood on tiptoe and kissed him again, kissed him with complete abandon, in full view of everyone in the Hall. After an instant of shock, he tightened his arms around her and kissed her back.

When they finally drew apart from one another, both of them flushed in embarrassment and pleasure, Potter and Weasley looked at them in surprise, but it was Potter who spoke first.

"Hermione's the closest thing I have to a sister, and if she loves you...and it sure looks like she does...then you have my blessing."

"But don't hurt her. Or you'll answer to both of us." That was Ron, waving his wand around and gaping at it in surprise as it produced showers of silver and gold hearts, and metallic red and green stars. "Never seen it do that before."

The crowd continued to mass around Harry, but after a few more moments, Hermione leaned close to him and whispered something in his ear, and he nodded his head and hugged her one last time. She stepped back from Harry and captured Severus's hand in hers, leading him back through the crowd.

It seemed entirely natural to walk away from the center of the hall with his arm around Hermione's shoulders, and then to sit on the steps leading to the dais, to pull her down onto his lap, to hold her close and lean his head against hers, and feel the wonder of holding this witch in his arms, knowing he loved her, and feeling her love for him in return.

"It's finally over, isn't?" Hermione looked up at him, her melted-chocolate colored eyes sparkling with joy.

"The nightmare is ended. But one could look on this day as a beginning, as well."

Did she understand what he was too diffident to say, that he wanted her in his life from this day forward?

"I hope this is the beginning of our life together." Her fingers caressed his cheek, then traced over his lips.

"Do you wish it to be?"

That Dumbledore had testified of his innocence in the minds of the Order, and in Shacklebolt and Weasley's, boded well for the idea that he had a future outside of Azkaban prison. For now, Severus allowed himself to hope.

"Yes, more than anything."

They sat on the steps in silence, watching the crowd shifting around them. They watched as Harry Potter spoke to everyone in the hall, and then saw Luna Lovegood create the diversion that allowed Harry to slip on his cloak and leave the Great Hall. Without knowing how it happened, Severus found himself lifting Hermione off his lap and helping her to her feet as Potter came over to them, Ron Weasley in tow.

"It's me," Harry muttered. "Will you come with me?" And somehow Severus knew he, too, was welcome to go with them.

Harry turned and together, he, Ron, Hermione and Severus left the Great Hall.

Somewhere in the distance they could hear Peeves zooming through the corridors singing a victory song of his own composition:

We did it, we bashed them, wee Potter's the one,

And Voldy's gone moldy, so now let's have fun!"

"Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn't it?" said Ron, pushing open a door to let the others through.

As he walked with his companions through the deserted corridors, Severus looked around at the damaged stone, the piles of rubble, the bloodstains, and his heart grew heavy. The school had sustained far more damage than he'd expected. It would take months to repair it all.

Hermione, walking at his side, her hand clasped in his, smiled up at him. "I guess we'd all better learn some cleaning and restructuring charms."

He nodded, his heart warmed by her implicit expectation that she would be there to help with the repairs.

As they walked, Harry Potter began to speak.

... He owed an explanation to Ron and Hermione, who had stuck with him for so long, and who deserved the truth. Painstakingly he recounted what he had seen in the Pensieve and what had happened in the forest, and they had not even begun to express all their shock and amazement when at last they arrived at the place to which they had all been walking, though none of them had mentioned their destination.

Since he had last seen it, the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's study had been knocked aside; it stood lopsided, looking a little punch-drunk, and Harry wondered whether it would be able to distinguish passwords anymore.

"Can we go up?" he asked the gargoyle.

"Feel free," groaned the statue.

They clambered over him and onto the spiral stone staircase that moved slowly upward like an escalator. Harry pushed open the door at the top.

He had one, brief glimpse of the stone Pensieve on the desk where he had left it, and then an earsplitting noise made him cry out, thinking of curses and returning Death Eaters and the re-birth of Voldemort...

But it was applause. All around the walls, the headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts were giving him a standing ovation; they waved their hats and in some cases their wigs, they reached through their frames to grip each other's hands; they danced up and down on the chairs in which they had been painted; Dilys Derwent sobbed unashamedly; Dexter Fortescue was waving his ear-trumpet; and Phineas Nigellus called in his high, reedy voice, "And let it be noted that Slytherin House played its part! Let our contribution not be forgotten!"

But Harry had eyes only for the man who stood in the largest portrait directly behind the headmaster's chair. Tears were sliding down from behind the half-moon spectacles into the long silver beard, and the pride and gratitude emanating from him filled Harry with the same balm as phoenix song.

Albus Dumbledore looked from Harry to Ron, to Hermione, and last, to Severus, and tears continued to stream from his eyes. When he spoke, he spoke first to Severus.

"I was watching over you, Severus. When I saw the snake attack you, I...selfishly, I must admit...I looked forward to welcoming you to a better place. And you never appeared. And then I saw Miss Granger." Dumbledore beamed down upon them. "I shall miss you, Severus, but it looks like you will be very busy here for a while."

Severus looked from his old friend to his new-found love and smiled. "I hope I will be busy here for a long while, Headmaster."

"No one deserves it more, Severus. I wish you all the happiness that life can give you. One thing is certain, my boy...Miss Granger will keep you on your toes."

"I'm looking forward to that, Headmaster."

"You have my blessing, both of you. Miss Granger, take care of him, please?"

"I intend to, sir." Hermione snuggled closer into the circle of Severus's arm, and Severus closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

Harry spoke again.

"The thing that was hidden in the Snitch," he began, "I dropped it in the forest. I don't know exactly where, but I'm not going to go looking for it again. Do you agree?"

"My dear boy, I do," said Dumbledore, while his fellow portraits looked confused and curious. "A wise and courageous decision, but no less than I would have expected of you. Does anyone else know where it fell?"

"No one," said Harry, and Dumbledore nodded his satisfaction.

"I'm going to keep Ignotus's present though," said Harry, and Dumbledore beamed.

"But of course, Harry, it is yours forever, until you pass it on!"

"And then there's this."

Harry held up the Elder Wand.

"I don't want it," said Harry. "I know it's powerful, but I was happier with mine. So... "

He rummaged in the pouch hung around his neck, and pulled out the two halves of holly still just connected by the finest thread of phoenix feather. Hermione had said that they could not be repaired, that the damage was too severe. All he knew was that if this did not work, nothing would.

He laid the broken wand upon the headmaster's desk, touched it with the very tip of the Elder Wand and said, "*Reparo*".

As his wand resealed, red sparks flew out of its end. Harry knew that he had succeeded. He picked up the holly and phoenix wand and felt a sudden warmth in his fingers, as though wand and hand were rejoicing at their reunion.

"I'm putting the Elder Wand," he told Dumbledore, who was watching him with enormous affection and admiration, "back where it came from. It can stay there. If I die a natural death like Ignotus, its power will be broken, won't it? The previous master will never have been defeated. That'll be the end of it."

Dumbledore nodded. They smiled at each other.

"Are you sure?" said Ron. There was the faintest trace of longing in his voice as he looked at the Elder Wand.

"I think Harry's right," said Hermione quietly.

She turned to look up at Severus and tightened her fingers around his.

"This wand nearly cost the life of one the bravest men I know." Harry looked back at Severus, standing so quietly next to Hermione, hugging her tight. "Sir, I don't ever want another power-mad monster like Riddle to have any incentive to try to kill another good man."

Severus could hear the genuine respect in Harry's voice, and he took a step towards the Boy-Who-Lived-Again, his hand outstretched.

"I thank you, Mr. Potter. For everything."

Simple words, but as Harry stretched out his own hand and clasped Severus's, their long-standing antipathy towards one another seemed to melt away.

Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," said Harry. "And quite honestly," he turned away from the painted portraits, thinking now only of the four-poster bed lying waiting for him in Gryffindor Tower, and wondering whether Kreacher might bring him a sandwich there, "I've had enough trouble for a lifetime."

"Come on, mate, let's go put the wand back where it belongs. And then, I could do with a sandwich, what do you say?" Ron smiled over at Harry just as his stomach rumbled loudly.

They all laughed. Then Harry crossed the short distance between them and wrapped his arms around Hermione.

"Be happy, 'Mione. Now that it hits me over the head, I can see that you and Professor Snape have a lot in common."

"We do, Harry. And, Gods willing, we'll have as good a relationship as your mum and dad, Ron."

Dumbledore spoke once again from the painting above the Headmaster's desk.

"My dear young people, you have my blessings and my gratitude."

With smiles and a few tears, the quartet of living people bade farewell to the portraits and went out into the hall.

"C'mon, Harry. 'Mione, see you soon, all right?"

Ron slapped Harry on the back and guided him away down the hall.

Hermione turned to look up at Severus. He drew her into his arms and closed his eyes as her warmth and the scent of her hair threatened to overwhelm his senses.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, my dear Professor Snape?" Her sweet voice coated the formal address in honey.

"I don't know what lies ahead for me, but I have had a little taste of heaven, today, and it's made me greedy for more. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes, please." Her voice was barely a whisper, but she was leaning close to him, standing on tiptoe to brush her skin against his, and her hands were clenched around the lapels of his frock coat.

"I love you, Hermione."

"As I love you, Severus."

He drew her closer, bending to kiss her once again. And as they stood in the corridor, the sky outside turned from the sweet tints of rose and gold and cream that signaled the sunrise to the brilliant blue of a new day and a new era at Hogwarts.

~OoO~

Supplemental Author's Note:

Oh, only the Epilogue remains. You didn't think we could get away without it, did you?

Epilogue: Nineteen Years Later

Chapter 5 of 5

What *really* happened nineteen years later.

Author's Note: And so we come to the Epilogue and get a glimpse of how the story ended. The Right Guy ended up with the Right Girl and the Right Job, and they all lived Happily Ever After, which was the point of this entire exercise.

The usual disclaimer that I make no monetary compensation and intend no copyright infringement of J.K. Rowling's BRILLIANT work applies. I also wish to express my gratitude to her for generosity in allowing others to play in the lovely, sunlit world she created.

All my thanks to Sunshine (southern_witch_69) for beta-reading, corralling unruly commas, general friendship, support, and encouragement. I feel blessed to have her help with this endeavor.

And thank you to all who've reviewed or commented on the list(s) that you have enjoyed my work. No sweeter praise can come to a writer.

BOLD text indicates excerpts quoted from "Harry Potter And The Sorcerer's Stone" and/or "Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows".

~OoO~

Epilogue: Nineteen Years Later

Aboard the Hogwarts Express, approaching Hogsmeade Station

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

James Potter, oldest of his family and one of the fifth-year Gryffindor prefects, stood in the corridor outside the compartment in which he had ridden from King's Cross Station to Hogsmeade. Though he lived in Hogsmeade, he had chosen to go to London with his mum so he could ride the Hogwarts Express from London with his family and friends; he wanted to be with them when the train pulled into Hogsmeade station.

He counted heads automatically...there was slim, dark-haired Albus and vibrant, red-haired Lily, his younger siblings. Lily was starting her first year at Hogwarts. Next to them were two strawberry blonds...his cousins, third year Rose and first year Hugo Weasley, the son and daughter of his uncle Ron and aunt Lavender. Behind them were two sleek platinum blonds...Scorpius Malfoy and his very shy younger sister, Anastasia, who was another first year and a good friend of Lily's.

Where were...? Another compartment door opened behind him, and more students joined their group. James flashed a grin at his best friend, Aidan Snape...tall and rangy,

like James himself, and one of the fifth-year Ravenclaw prefects. Aidan had his father's black hair, piercing black eyes, and low, resonant voice. Aidan's hair was curly, though, and he kept it cut ruthlessly short.

Aidan's twin, Minerva, slipped out of the compartment next. Short and slender like her mother, she also had curly black hair, which she wore plaited back in french braids. As brainy as her twin, Minerva had sorted into Gryffindor, which hadn't mattered much to James five years before, but meant a lot now.

James got a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach whenever Minerva looked at him or spoke to him. He found it maddening that she treated him only as a friend, laughing and joking and studying with him, when he wanted to lay his heart at her feet. She had refused his invitation to the Yule Ball last winter and gone with a group of her friends, instead. But he wasn't giving up.

James forced the memory of the Yule Ball out of his mind and looked around for the other two Snapes. Evermind was now standing with Albus and Scorpius, nagging them not to slouch and straightening their robes and ties for them. She had curly brown hair and amber eyes and, according to family legend, was every bit as bossy as her mum had been.

She, Albus, and Scorpius were inseparable. The Unholy Trio, as they'd been dubbed by Albus Dumbledore's portrait, (though he said it with a laughing twinkle in his eyes) were third-year Slytherins, and their parents despaired of them because they were always making mischief and getting in trouble even though they were all at the top of their class.

The compartment door behind him opened once more, and a tall, rangy first-year with curly brown hair stumbled out into the corridor, his height concealed by the stooped posture that a backpack full of books forced him to adopt. No one was taking any bets about which house Austen Snape would sort into.

James only hoped that Austen, his sister Lily, and cousin Hugo would sort into the same house, as the three of them were as close as Evermind, Albus and Scorpius.

On second thought, James almost pitied the head of their house, should they all sort into the same one.

By now, the train had stopped, and James and Aidan had shepherded their charges off the train and onto the platform.

The night air was cold enough to cause them all to shiver, though the first years' shivers were probably nerves and not cold.

Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students... "Firs' years! Firs' years, over here!"

A few of the students, whose parents worked at Hogwarts, recognized the voice as belonging to Rubeus Hagrid, the Care of Magical Creatures teacher.

Hagrid's big, hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me...any more firs' years? Mind yer step now! Firs' years follow me!"

The first years followed Hagrid obediently, slipping and stumbling as they followed him down a steep, tree-lined path that seemed oddly damp. The trees had to be very thick, as the only light they could see was Hagrid's lamp.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

Of course, for Lily, Austen and Hugo, it wasn't their first sight of Hogwarts, but it was the first time they had seen it as entering students, and they were as awestruck as the other firsties.

There was a loud "Ooooooh"!

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore.

Austen and Hugo scrambled into one of the boats, both of them reaching back to help Lily over the side. She plopped down in the middle seat, Hugo in front of her and Austen behind. The boat tipped again as a wispy blond first year wearing a necklace of large, bright, artificial sunflowers climbed in after them. They knew her by sight and greeted her with waves and smiles.

"Hey, Ophelia, we forgot you would be here, too. What house do you think you'll be sorted into?"

Ophelia Longbottom smiled and fingered her garish necklace.

"Probably Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. I don't think I would fit in well with Slytherin. Maybe Hufflepuff, though. I just hope there are no Nargles in the Sorting Hat. Mum told me to watch out for those."

"Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then...FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

Hagrid watched carefully as the students climbed out of the boats.

When he was satisfied that they were all safely on land, they followed his lamp up a steeply pitched path cut right into the rock on which the school had been built. This path opened out onto a smoothly cropped lawn, damp now in the night air.

Hagrid's lamp continued to bob before them, and they followed him up a flight of stone steps to a huge, oak double door.

"Everyone here?"

Hagrid looked around at the new students, appearing to be counting them though they couldn't hear him saying anything out loud.

At last, he stepped up to the door and banged on it three times with his heavy fist. The first years closest to the door could hear an echo coming from the other side.

The door swung open at once.

A short, slender witch with curly, light brown hair, wearing robes of deep violet, stood there.

She didn't smile; her face had a very serious expression, and all of the first years decided that this was not someone they wanted annoyed at them.

"Here are the new firs' years, Professor Granger-Snape," said Hagrid.

Professor Granger-Snape smiled soberly at Hagrid and thanked him. "I'll escort them into the castle."

Not by expression or voice did she give any sign that her own son was in the group of first-year students.

She pulled the door wide open and ushered them in. The students stood in the entrance hall looking around with wide, staring eyes. It was such a big room that the whole of any one of their houses could have fit in it, possibly with room to spare.

Flaming torches lit the room, and they could see a huge marble staircase stretching upwards directly in front of them.

Their shoes made tapping and shuffling sounds as they followed Professor Granger-Snape across the stone floor. There was an open door to their right, and they could hear a hum of conversation spilling out of the room. The rest of the school must already be present and seated, some of them realized.

Professor Granger-Snape held out her arm to usher the new students into a small, empty room that opened off the Great Hall.

"Welcome to Hogwarts."

Professor Granger-Snape moved to stand at the front of the group, where everyone could see her.

"The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room."

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours."

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

She glanced at Ophelia Longbottom's necklace, and the first years thought she looked as though she might smile, but she mastered her expression and turned away with a swirl of violet robes, calling back over her shoulder, "You'll want to wait quietly, so you don't disturb the Headmaster's announcements."

None of the first years had anything to say. Most of them were children of former Hogwarts students and knew what houses their parents had been in, and how the Sorting took place. Instead of chattering, they spent the time looking around the room and, especially, looking at one another.

"What do you think our chances are of sorting into the same house?" Lily spoke in a whisper to Austen, Hugo and Ophelia.

"Austen and Ophelia are so brainy, they might sort into Ravenclaw, though Austen's dad was Slytherin and Ophelia's dad was Gryffindor. My mum and dad were both in Gryffindor, and so were both of your parents, Lily, and your mum, Austen. S'pose we could all end up in Gryffindor," said Hugo. He thought for a moment, and then added, "I don't think any of us will wind up in Hufflepuff."

"Well, wherever we are, it would be nice to be in the same house," whispered Ophelia. "My mum always said she liked Ravenclaw well enough, but it got a bit lonely."

"My dad said that Gryffindors looked after their own, even more than Slytherins did." Austen had spoken to his dad a great deal about the various houses at Hogwarts.

"Well, we'll know soon enough." Lily nodded her head decisively as she spoke, and no one felt like arguing with that.

Then something happened that made all the first years gasp.

About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance..."

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost...I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor Granger-Snape had returned.

One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

The first years formed a line under the sharp eye of Professor Granger-Snape and followed her past loaded tables to the top of the Great Hall, where they stopped in front of the staff table, which was raised up on a dais about three feet high. Nearly the entire class was looking around for familiar faces, since the headmaster had decreed that parents could be present in the Great Hall for the sorting if they had a new student starting at Hogwarts.

The four Snape children had actually been born at Hogwarts and had grown up here. The Potters had lived in London when they were young, until their dad was hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, and their mum became the school's Mediwitch.

Ophelia Longbottom's dad was Professor of Herbology, and her mum was the Charms mistress, so she, too, had grown up at Hogwarts.

Only the Weasleys and the Malfoys hadn't ever lived at Hogwarts, but Ron and Lavender Weasley and Draco and Astoria Malfoy were seated at the back of the hall at the long table for visitors.

Professor Granger-Snape was moving up to the head of the hall now, carrying a stool and a tall, worn, old hat.

This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty.

The huge room was empty for a moment, and then the Hat began to sing.

None of the first years could follow it very well, as they grew more and more nervous with each passing moment. The whole hall applauded when the hat finished, and Professor Granger-Snape stepped forward, a long scroll in her hands.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said.

She began to call names and, each in turn, the child whose name was called came forward and took the hat, placed it on his or her head, and sat down.

The hat Sorted them fast, and before any of them were ready, Ophelia Longbottom's name was called. She trembled as she placed the hat on her head and sat down.

"Hmmm, mum was Ravenclaw and dad was Gryffindor. The brains are here; you're every bit as smart as your mum. But your dad's people have been in Gryffindor for a long time. Make it Gryffindor; you'll find your true self in red and gold."

Blushing, Ophelia glanced at the High Table, where her mum and dad both sat, cheering. With a tiny wave in their direction, she went to the Gryffindor table and sat down.

Anastasia Malfoy was next and it didn't surprise anyone when she sorted into Slytherin. She was warmly welcomed at the Slytherin table by a Malfoy, a Potter and a Snape. Looking back at the visitor's table, she saw her dad smile a tiny smile and then give her a wink, and she relaxed into her seat. She was with friends, and her dad and mum were happy. One ordeal was over.

"Lily Potter," called out Professor Granger-Snape, and the redhead anxiously took the hat and placed it on her head. She'd barely sat down when the hat called out "Gryffindor, for sure!" and Lily escaped to the Gryffindor table, sitting next to Ophelia. She grinned at her brother, James, who sat with the other fifth years, nearer the back of the Great Hall.

More students were sorted, kids they didn't know. In the nearly twenty years since the final battle of the Second Voldemort War (as the history books called it), attendance at Hogwarts had risen every year, and the closing of Durmstrang meant a lot of European children were coming now to Hogwarts.

"Austen Snape." The Great Hall grew silent as the headmaster's son made his way to the stool and took the hat. Austen felt very relaxed. He knew that whichever house he sorted into, he would find friends and support. He took a longer view of things and knew that once he graduated from school, there was a whole big wizarding world out there, containing people who'd never heard of Hgwarts or its houses.

The Sorting Hat was quiet for several minutes, listening to his thoughts, and then it seemed to smile as it announced: "Gryffindor for you, young man. Only in that house will your true worth be revealed."

As he slipped off the stool, he glanced to his mum, who maintained a solemn expression on her face, but winked as she turned her back to the Great Hall to exchange a knowing glance with his dad, who sat in a magnificent chair in the center of the teacher's table, the place of honor for the headmaster of the school.

When Austen had seated himself beside Ophelia and Lily, he looked up at his dad, who didn't smile or wink, but who inclined his dark head in his son's direction. Austen could tell that it was a nod of approval.

This year, Hugo was the last to be sorted. When he sat down with the hat on his head, it chuckled. "Yet another Weasley. Well, well, well. I bet you're expecting to be sorted into Gryffindor, aren't you? I have a surprise for you, young Hugo Weasley. You belong in Slytherin!"

Professor Granger-Snape's jaw dropped when she heard the hat name Slytherin as Hugo's house, and a ripple of amusement ran round the Great Hall.

Face flushed red, but smiling, Hugo Weasley got off the stool and went to sit next to his cousin, Albus, at the Slytherin table.

Professor Granger-Snape looked back at the visitor's table to see Ron Weasley sitting beside his wife with his mouth open in shock, while his brother George punched him in the shoulder and laughed.

And as Professor Granger-Snape moved the stool away, Professor Severus Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts, got to his feet.

The years had been kind to him. He was as tall and lean as ever, and he seemed to radiate power, carefully contained though it might be. His black eyes were as piercing as ever, and when he spoke, his voice was the same velvet baritone that many of the parents remembered from their student days. He was dressed in robes of classic black and still wore a many-buttoned frock coat and black trousers under his robes. Some things didn't change, after all. Some things didn't need to change.

He didn't smile as he addressed the students, (not that anyone expected him to break into a grin) but they all watched him with rapt attention. This man was a war hero; all of the students knew the role he'd played in the downfall of He-Who-Had-Once-Been-Tom-Riddle.

"And so another year begins. To those of you returning, welcome back. To those who are new, welcome. Your Heads of House will explain the rules to you, and your prefects will guide you and help you find your way about the school. I congratulate each of you on the house you have been sorted into. As Professor Granger-Snape explained to you, your house will be your home here at Hogwarts. I hope you will find that your housemates become as close as family to you. But I also urge you to look beyond the boundaries of your own house and take every opportunity to make friends outside of it. Your seven years at Hogwarts are the beginning of your magical education, but there is a big world beyond Hogwarts. Your friendships, as well as your education, are part of the foundation of your adult life."

Headmaster Snape looked over to his wife and nodded. Then his gaze ranged over the hall, from the students at the four house tables, to the teachers, seated at the High Table, and finally, to the parents seated at the back of the Great Hall.

Last, he looked around at the magnificent Great Hall itself, remembering it as he had seen it at the end of the final battle.

The castle had recovered from the damages inflicted on it. Glass had been replaced, the scorch marks of spellflash were scrubbed away, and the broken stones had been repaired. Hogwarts was whole again. More than that, hearts had healed, and old rivalries had been put to rest.

Professor Snape looked around the school he loved, the people he loved, and his stern mouth quirked up in the barest suggestion of a smile.

"A few last words before we partake of our excellent feast, prepared for us by our wonderful house-elves." This with a teasing glance at his wife, who had avidly campaigned for the rights of house-elves during her own Hogwarts years.

"You are here to learn the subtle and varied disciplines of magic, which you will use throughout your lives. You will almost certainly discover gifts and talents which you had no idea that you possess. Those gifts and talents may lead you to your life's work. As important as these things are, remember that your relationships with your family and friends are far more important than any academic course of study. And remember that your ability to see, and to choose, what is right over what is easy is the most important lesson of all."

He paused and his eyes took on a far-away look for a moment. He looked over at his wife again, nodded, and waved his wand in a small circle.

"Now, let the feast begin."

Professor Snape went to his place at the High Table, and by magic, literally, the food appeared on the tables.

As everyone began to eat, and the Great Hall filled with the buzz of conversation, an old wizard with a long silver beard and half-moon spectacles smiled fondly down from his portrait over the High Table at the scene before him.

At the High Table itself, Professor Harry Potter turned to look at his wife, Madam Ginny Potter. She grinned at him, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Well, that was certainly a surprise about Hugo," she said. "I can't even imagine what my mum and dad are going to say."

Harry laughed.

"Your mum will just tell him, 'That's lovely, dear. Remember to wear your sweater when it's cold, and send an owl as often as you can. You know we want to hear from our grandkids.'"

"Yes, and my dad will ask them if they plan to take Muggle Studies."

Her voice was rich with amusement. She looked at her husband carefully, brushing back his unruly black hair to reveal the thin scar, shaped like a lightning bolt, which could still be seen in the center of his forehead.

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.

~ Finite incantatem ~