

An Unexpected Purpose

by blackeyedlily

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 6

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Against all odds, Severus Snape, master spy for the Light and the Dark and presumed murderer of Albus Dumbledore, had survived the demise of Voldemort and the end of the Battle of Hogwarts. No one was more surprised by this turn of events than Severus himself. Ever since the second rise of the Dark Lord, Severus had been resigned to the fact that the role he must play to fulfill his debts and promises would result in his own death, especially after Albus' fatal errors the previous year. His only hope was that it would be enough to bring about his redemption, preferably with soul intact.

Ironically, it seemed that his change in fortune owed much to the actions of Lucius Malfoy and family. The indignities Voldemort had visited on Lucius, as payment for his failures, had finally wrought a change in Lucius' allegiance. It had become apparent to the Malfoy patriarch that the Dark Lord's victory held no promise of the glory days he had so long expected for himself and his family. In fact, there was no promise that Lucius would regain the level of status and power he had held in the Wizarding world prior to Voldemort's return.

Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco all suffered greatly from Voldemort's wrath over various disappointments, especially when Malfoy Manor became the Dark Lord's primary operating base. Severus had watched as Lucius began to resemble a sleepwalker, lost in his own home, while Narcissa kept a close guard on her own fury, and Draco appeared scared of his own shadow. It pained Severus greatly, for despite Lucius' misguided ideals and politics, his friendship with Severus had been one of the few genuine friendships Severus had ever known. From the first day that Severus was sorted into Slytherin, the older boy had acted as a mentor. Even Severus' humble background was overlooked by the bond of Slytherin house loyalty.

Therefore, it had been quite a surprise when Lucius came to visit him in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, under the pretext of bringing Draco back to school at the start of term. Since Draco had disappeared with Snape the night of Dumbledore's death, Lucius could use the excuse of not wanting Draco to travel on the Hogwarts Express with the other students. Hogwarts' new rule under Headmaster Snape would not be established until the students arrived that night. As such, it was easy to see that the train might not be the best way for Draco to travel. After all, most of the students were still unaware that Potter and his sidekicks were not returning to Hogwarts, and in

spite of the political changes over the summer, many of the returning students came from families opposed to the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters.

In spite of Snape's newly elevated position within the Dark Lord's inner circle and despite the natural tendency of most Slytherins to put ambition and power before mundane qualities like loyalty and friendship, Lucius knew that he, Narcissa and Draco were the closest thing to family that Severus had left in his life. He also knew that Severus recognized that the Dark Lord's favor was a fickle friend. In fact, he expected that this had been apparent to Severus long before his own more recent revelations.

Lucius had not been completely oblivious to his young friend's feelings for Lily Evans Potter. He knew that her death had marked a significant change in Severus. While he remained unaware of the depth and breadth of Severus' feelings for Lily and the resulting allegiance with Dumbledore, he knew that her death had marked a change in Severus' affinity for the Dark Lord. Yet Voldemort had disappeared while trying to dispose of the Potter child, after disposing of the mother. The resulting shock and disruption among the Death Eaters left Lucius little time to ponder Severus' welfare.

Almost every Death Eater had attempted to abandon their brethren, distance themselves from Voldemort, and escape a sentence in Azkaban. There were a few notable exceptions, led by his crazed sister-in-law Bellatrix. Lucius had often marveled how Narcissa could truly be Bellatrix's sister. Her fervent lunacy did not fit the typical Slytherin mode of self-survival. Yet, if you took her cousin Sirius' behavior into consideration, it was evident to Lucius that instability lurked in the Black gene pool. He would have to ensure that Draco thoroughly researched the background of any pure-blood witch he might consider for marriage.

Finally at the depths of his own despair, Lucius decided that Severus might be his only hope and had approached him with a plan. They would simply agree to watch each other's backs. Each would take the temperature of the Dark Lord's mood when he was in their presence, watch for threats and weaknesses, and keep the other apprised of Voldemort's current plans. If the Dark Lord decided that either of them had become dispensable, the other would alert and assist, if it was at all possible. Severus, for his part, informed Lucius that he would extend his concern to include Narcissa and Draco. Lucius was grateful. Perhaps it was folly, but he felt a sense of hope and purpose for the first time in a very long while.

Severus was pleased that his old friend had decided to defy Voldemort, even if it was only due to self-preservation. They were Slytherins, after all. He was inordinately pleased that Lucius had not asked for any binding vows or contracts to seal their agreement. It had been such a relief to be free of Narcissa's Unbreakable Vow. The daily weight of fulfilling Dumbledore's plans often made him feel like a drowning man. In light of these burdens, Lucius' simple request to watch out for each other gave Severus a sense of camaraderie for the first time in what felt like years.

So it was that Severus embarked on new efforts that had nothing to do with Dumbledore's plan to aid Potter in Voldemort's downfall. Oh, he still adhered to every facet of Dumbledore's plan on a daily basis. He had puzzled long and hard over how he could convince Potter of the truth Albus had commanded him to tell the boy, "When the time is right." In the end, he decided that he must allow Potter to view his own memories. He could think of no other way for the boy to believe him, or understand what he must do. Damn Albus! Severus refused to feel panic at sharing his personal memories with Potter. From the moment he viewed them, the boy was as good as dead, anyhow. Severus' embarrassment was the least of his concerns. He was still quite sure of his own demise as well, in spite of his new arrangement with Lucius.

In the end, it seemed that Severus Snape's own meticulous nature also played a role in his rescue. His new-found purpose in aiding Lucius and his family had finally spurred Severus to brew the antivenin to Nagini's poison. Having watched Voldemort repeatedly feed Nagini the remains of those who had earned his displeasure, he decided that the snake was certainly the very type of threat he should be working to protect the Malfoys from. He was haunted by Albus' prediction of the time to come when Voldemort would place the snake under protective enchantments. He could not fathom what this would foretell, other than his cue to tell Potter the final truth.

So it was that after summoning Severus to the Shrieking Shack on Voldemort's orders, Lucius held back to see what the Dark Lord was up to. He watched Voldemort leave the shack with Nagini in tow and heard Voldemort's latest address to the castle's inhabitants in his magically amplified voice. Wasting no further time, Lucius entered the Shrieking Shack just in time to see Potter and Granger slip through a trap door in the floor. Severus lay on the floor in a pool of blood, and Lucius sped to his side, fearing he was too late. Laying his hands on Severus' chest, Lucius was able to discern the faintest sense of life force left in his friend. Lifting the dying man, he Apparated them both to Malfoy Manor.

Lucius had installed a fully-equipped medical room in the manor in recent days. He had hired two fully qualified Healers from France, to avoid potential ties to St. Mungo's, the Ministry, or Voldemort. Hearing his call for help, the Healers came running and began to work on Severus immediately. Lucius explained what he could to the Healers, knowing they would administer the anti-venin Snape had ironically brewed along with Blood Replenishing potions. Feeling utterly useless as he watched the Healers, Lucius knew he must find Narcissa and Draco. After a short stop in his suite, to remove all sign of Severus' blood from his skin and change out of his blood-stained clothes, Lucius Apparated back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, intent on finding his own family.

The dawning of the new day found the boy who lived had lived again. Lucius sat huddled in the Great Hall, Narcissa and Draco at his side, a sense of dull relief, as well as uncertainty for the future, flooding through him. While back at Malfoy Manor, unknown to all but the Malfoys and two French Healers, Severus Snape held on to life by a frayed thread.

## Offering Olive Branches

### *Chapter 2 of 6*

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

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Once Harry learned that Severus Snape had actually survived, he knew he would do everything in his power to clear him of the charges being leveled at the surviving Death Eaters. He owed this man more than he could ever repay, and yet, he had left him for dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Guilt did not sit well with Harry Potter.

Between Harry's testimony and Severus' memories, all charges against Severus Snape, the war crimes and the murder of Albus Dumbledore, were dropped. In fact, the Wizengamot was recommending Snape for an Order of Merlin, First Class, for Outstanding Bravery and Lives Saved. It made Harry grin to think about it. That was, until he thought about how Professor Snape would feel about having his memories made available for the Wizenmagot and other Ministry officials to view.

It was for this reason he was currently urging Hermione to accompany him to Malfoy Manor, to return Snape his memories. They were sitting in the kitchen of Grammauld

Place where Kreacher had taken time from his dinner preparations to serve tea. The old elf practically glowed with joy now that Harry had taken up residence there. He had even found a way to get past his prejudice of Hermione's background, treating her with almost as much deference as he did Harry.

"Come on 'Mione," pleaded Harry. "I need to do this before I lose my courage."

"Are you sure you shouldn't wait? Give Professor Snape some time to adjust to all of this." Hermione gestured to the copy of the *Daily Prophet* lying open on the table.

The front page showed a prominent picture of Snape scowling up at them. It was the same picture the Prophet had used last year when they had announced that Snape had been appointed headmaster of Hogwarts. The caption under the picture read: All Charges Dropped: Severus Snape - Latest War Hero of the Wizarding World. The accompanying article highlighted the outcome of yesterday's trial, including the lifetime love Snape was alleged to have for the deceased Lily Evans Potter. It was due to this love, the Prophet continued, that Snape had begun to work for Dumbledore as a spy against Voldemort, so he could protect Harry. It included Harry's quote, "Professor Snape is one of the bravest men I've ever known," and mentioned the campaign to have Snape awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class.

"Harry, he is going to be furious about having his private life so publically revealed," Hermione exclaimed.

"I know," Harry whispered, looking contrite. "At least he's going to get the Order of Merlin!" Harry brightened, and his voice gained strength at the hopeful thought.

"That's what has me worried. Remember how furious he was when Sirius escaped and he lost his chance of getting a medal? He was so angry that he outted Remus as a werewolf. You are well aware of his temper. He is such a proud man, and so intensely private," Hermione emphasized, gesturing toward the paper on the table again.

Harry shot the paper a disgruntled look. "I have to return these memories." Harry's voice had a whining edge to it. "It would be rude to just drop them off. I have to let him know how much I appreciate everything he did, even if he did hate me, and resent having to do it all."

"Okay, okay, you need to return the memories as soon as possible. Tell me why you need me, instead of Ron, to go along. I really don't fancy a visit to Malfoy Manor, especially to visit an angry Professor Snape," Hermione questioned.

"You know Ron always hated Snape, almost as much as I did. Well, his opinion hasn't really changed much, even knowing the truth of Snape's allegiance. One day during the hearing, he even told me he didn't know why I was trying so hard to defend him," Harry explained. "When I asked him if he didn't feel bad about us leaving him for dead in the Shrieking Shack, he said, 'No, I don't.' He said there was so much blood coming out of Snape's neck, and since we still had to figure out how to get a clear shot at Nagini, why would we have stopped to try and help the git? Plus for all we knew Snape WAS a bloody traitor."

Hermione blanched as Harry recalled Ron's tirade. Her own guilt over leaving him for dead was one of the things haunting her nights. "Alright, I'll go, Harry," Hermione said in a rather shaky voice. "Let's just be quick about it, okay? If I have to go back to Malfoy Manor, I want the visit over as quickly as possible."

"Of course. I don't fancy going back there either. Maybe we can erase some demons today while we're at it. Just let me fetch the memories from upstairs, and we'll be off. I knew I could count on you, 'Mione. You always had something to say when Ron and I were bashing Professor Snape, even after Dumbledore's death. I remember when you had a problem with me calling Snape evil. Who would have known you were on to something there?"

Harry smiled as Hermione rolled her eyes at him. What he didn't see was how she dropped her head to the table as soon as he left the room. This was going to be a long day.

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Close to an hour later, Harry and Hermione Apparated to a footpath in the Wiltshire countryside, a couple of miles away from Malfoy Manor. The late summer morning was warm and lush. The country lane was alive with birds, bees and small animals. Bushes and brambles were filled with the riotous color of wildflowers, whose scents drifted through the warm, lazy air. The atmosphere lifted their spirits. They had agreed that the walk would prepare them for the meeting. It was after all likely to be a stressful event.

This was the first time Harry and Hermione had been completely alone in several weeks. A flurry of activity had taken place on the heels of the Battle of Hogwarts. This had included funerals and celebrations, plus a certain amount of accounting to the new Minister, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Others, including the Weasley family, Order of the Phoenix members, and Hogwarts staff, finally learned the truth behind the trio's exploits of the last year.

As soon as the most pressing of these activities were fulfilled, Hermione and Ron had traveled directly to Australia to locate her parents. Hermione had been so grateful when the Grangers were located quickly and their memories were restored. She had often worried that she had done something wrong in the memory modification, or that she would be unable to locate them when everything was over. It had been one of her greatest fears over the past year.

This wasn't to say that everything had gone smoothly. Once the Grangers knew their true identity again, they had become quite angry. They felt that Hermione was wrong to have not given them a choice in the situation. They appreciated the gravity of the danger and why Hermione had taken the actions she had, but they stood their ground on the idea that the ultimate choice should have been theirs to decide. Hermione promised that she would never again act in her parents' interests without their consent. Rebuilding trust in their daughter would take the Grangers time.

Then there was the matter of leaving their new practice and lifestyle in Australia, and re-building in England again. In her fear, Hermione had neglected to realize what a tall order that was. One does not simply sell off a dental practice, built up over many years, to leave the country and then return and pick back up where they left off. Luckily for the Grangers, along with the judicious use of a well placed Confundus Charm by Hermione, they managed to repurchase their old practice back.

Hermione decided to move back to her parents' home for the time being and rebuild her relationship with them, now that she was a young adult witch. She hoped this would help to rebuild their trust in her. After all, they had spent very little time together in recent years, and Hermione needed time to think about what she wanted to do next. Thoughts about her future had been overshadowed while Voldemort lived.

"Hermione, what is going on between you and Ron?" Harry's voice broke through her reverie as if he had been reading her mind.

"I wish I knew," Hermione stated in a sad, quiet voice. "I thought when the war ended that we were finally going to become a couple. He was so sweet about going to Australia and helping me find my parents, but he got so mad when I moved home with them. I explained to him that it wasn't as if he and I had planned to move in together, or get married straight away. Well, ever since then he's just been icy," Hermione sighed. "Then the two of you got those offers for the Exhibition Quidditch Tour, and I've barely seen him since then, EXCEPT in the *Daily Prophet*," Hermione finished. A glance over at Harry's red face told Hermione he knew exactly what she meant by that last comment.

"Harry, you have nothing to be embarrassed about. I know what's going on. Ron's a war hero, best friend of the Savior of the Wizarding World, and now a bit of a Quidditch star. Since the aforementioned Savior can't keep his eyes off a certain red-headed witch who seems to be at every game," Hermione stole another glance at Harry's blushing profile, "Ron has become quite a catch.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but he'll come to his senses. You'll see," Harry encouraged.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Harry. I know Ron thinks I rejected him when I moved home, which is just silly. And we both know how much he loves to be the center of attention, and I..." Hermione broke off. "Mom saw how unhappy I was and introduced me to a good friend of hers. It seems that Mom and Dad have an informal network with other Muggle parents. Mom's friend is a psychologist with a daughter in Ravenclaw."

"I've been seeing her these past couple of months, and it has been a big help. I've talked to her about the war, and I've talked to her about Ron, too. I'm starting to think that Ron and I were never very well suited. We just wanted to think we were. It's probably better this way." Hermione sighed. "I just want us to remain friends. Both of you are family to me."

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry stated. "I had hoped this walk would give us a chance to relax before we arrived at Malfoy Manor."

Hermione looked up to find that the gates to the Manor were looming right ahead of them. She stopped and turned to Harry. "Just answer me one thing, Harry, before we head in there," Hermione queried. "How are things going with you and Ginny?"

Harry gave Hermione an ear-splitting grin, which put the sappiest expression she had ever seen on his face and was all the answer she needed. "Oh, I'm so glad, Harry," Hermione exclaimed. "You both deserve so much happiness together."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry replied. "Whether things work out between you and Ron or not, you deserve someone worthy of you. Don't settle for anything less, okay?"

"Yes, Harry," Hermione assured him. "I know you're right." She stepped forward and gave Harry a quick, tight hug, to show him that she appreciated his concern. "Let's get this over with."

Hermione approached the gates, intent on figuring out how they opened, but they simply melted away. "I'm not sure if this is a good omen or not."

"Think on the bright side. At least there will be no Fenrir or Bellatrix today," Harry offered.

"That's the silver lining I've been looking for," Hermione said as she shook her head.

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Harry and Hermione were both quiet and reflective as they walked up the manor drive. They each had their own demons regarding their previous experience at the manor to battle. On reaching the entrance, Harry reached out to grasp the ornate silver snake-shaped door knocker, but before he could knock, the door was wrenched open, and they found themselves facing an elderly house-elf with a rather fierce expression on his face.

"Welcome to Malfoy Manor. May Baggins help you?" the elf bellowed out in a voice not unlike Kreacher.

"Yes, Baggins," Harry replied to the elf. "We have an appointment to see Professor Snape. My name is Harry Potter, and this is Hermione Granger."

"Follow me, please," Baggins commanded as he turned and trotted down the hall leading away from the foyer.

Harry and Hermione followed the elderly elf down a hallway and away from the drawing room, which was located directly across from the foyer. The drawing room had been the scene of that night of terror, torture and fortuitous rescue. Harry saw Hermione glance across at the closed door, which led to the drawing room, and gave an involuntary shudder. He was relieved that they were not headed in that direction.

The light in the hallway they were traveling was muted, and the walls were lined with the portraits of Malfoy ancestors. As Harry and Hermione continued to follow Baggins, they heard the low rumble of the portrait occupants muttering to each other. It gave them a feeling of unease and discomfort. At last, Baggins stopped outside of an open door, which was flooding the hall with natural light from exterior windows.

"Master Harry Potter and Miss Hermione Granger have arrived, sir," the elderly elf announced, bowing low as he signaled for the guests to enter the room.

"Welcome to Malfoy Manor. It is not every day that we have the pleasure of hosting such lauded war heroes. At least . . . not lately," came the greeting from a chillingly familiar voice.

Hermione had taken several steps into the room and then found herself taking a step backwards, right into Harry, as she realized that Lucius Malfoy was the man addressing them. The room they had entered was a spacious library, light and airy, with floor to ceiling bookshelves filled with leather-bound tomes. It was the type of room that would normally bring Hermione pure joy, except for the man standing in the middle of the room next to an antique burled walnut desk. While Harry was used to seeing the senior Malfoy at many of the war trail hearings and was well aware of the details of his probation and house arrest, Hermione had not had such an adjustment. It felt wrong to see a former enemy, member of Voldemort's inner circle, standing there in his immaculately tailored robes as if no ill had befallen him.

Malfoy's upper lip curled, and his cold grey eyes narrowed momentarily as he noticed Hermione's reaction to him. Yet, he quickly regained the composure of a perfect host. "You have nothing to fear, my dear. I swear I mean you no harm. After all, you won, we lost. It is time to move on and let bygones be bygones. If it is any comfort to you, I couldn't harm you if I cared to. As Mr. Potter is more than aware, I am under constant supervision by the Aurors." At that statement, Malfoy looked up and around the room as if he could see invisible specters watching him.

"We are here to see Professor Snape, Mr. Malfoy," Harry intervened. "I did receive a reply to the owl I sent. It told me that we would be able to meet with him this afternoon."

"Of course, of course," Malfoy continued. "I am ever so grateful to have been of service to dear Severus. He is just like a member of our family to us. It was truly quite a miracle he survived at all, having been left for dead like that. My private Healers have been quite industrious on his behalf. However, his recovery is painfully slow, I'm afraid. Nasty beast, that Nagini was." Malfoy shook his head, looking quite solemn.

"Can you believe you are Severus' first visitors? It's almost as if the entire wizarding world left him for dead, and after all he's done. Well, I expect that will change now." Lucius indicated the current *Daily Prophet* on the desk beside him. "Do you think we will be flooded with invitations for the new War Hero?"

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry spoke up again. "We really can't keep you any longer. If you would just direct us to where we can find Professor Snape, we won't take up any more of your time."

"Certainly," Lucius answered smoothly, as if oblivious to Harry's obvious effort to quit his company. "Baggins will show you to the conservatory."

The house-elf entered the room at the mention of his name, as if he had been waiting for them just outside the library.

As Harry and Hermione turned to follow Baggins, Malfoy had one parting shot. "Harry, when next we meet, I insist that you call me Lucius. You are no longer a boy, now, are you? Ms. Granger, an honor as always."

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"What a horrible man," hissed Hermione as she and Harry followed Baggins yet again. "How could you listen to him and respond without exploding?"

"I've had too much time in his presence lately to let him ruffle me. He is desperate to find a way back into wizarding society right now. He'll say or do anything he thinks may help him, and it wouldn't do any good to rise to his bait about the Professor, either. He just wants us to remember that he rescued Snape."

"Why, Harry," Hermione exclaimed. "I think you are growing up!"

Harry gave her a smirk and rolled his eyes.

Just as they were beginning to wonder if the hallway would ever end, the old elf turned to them and pointed. "Just through there, miss, master." Baggins gave another bow and was gone in a pop.

The conservatory they entered was warm enough to be almost oppressive. The room was so filled with greenery, they saw no sign of human life. Then, from the back of the room, a young woman in Healer robes rose from a wicker rocker.

"May I 'elp you?" she inquired, an air of surprise evident in her decidedly French accent.

"We are looking for Professor Snape," Harry informed her.

"Vell, you have found him." She indicated with a nod toward a reclining chaise longue a short distance from the chair where she had been sitting.

As Harry and Hermione crossed the room, they envisioned the last time they had seen their professor, lying in a pool of his own blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. The invalid before them was pale and gaunt with sunken eyes. In spite of the warmth of the room, he was surrounded with pillows and covered with several blankets.

"Severus," the Healer spoke as she laid a hand on his arm. "You have guests."

Snape opened one eye, focusing it on Harry. He closed it again and rasped out "Potter," in a hoarse whisper, so unlike his customary velvet voice.

"Good to see you too, sir," responded Harry in a friendly manner. Hearing this, both of Snape's eyes flew open. Once properly focused on Harry, he raised one eye brow in such a patented Snape mannerism, Hermione had to fight the urge to laugh out loud.

Instead, she found herself exclaiming with enthusiasm, "It is good to see you, sir."

Snape's focus shifted to Hermione. His voiced squeaked out a surprised, "Granger?"

After a few moments of simply staring at them, Snape managed a raspy, "Where is the third member of the Triumphant Trio?"

"We are not attached at the hip, Professor. Ron is currently touring with a Quidditch Exhibition on the Continent," Hermione stated, a decidedly bitter edge to her voice.

Snape gave her an oddly appraising look before rasping out, "Perhaps you do have the brains everyone credited you with, after all."

Unsure of how to response to this odd praise wrapped in an insult, Hermione stared at the floor to avoid further eye contact. Snape's words were as mean as ever, but they lacked any real edge of anger. Perhaps he was just too weak for such strong reactions, Hermione mused.

"Sir," Harry spoke up. "I've brought your memories so that I can return them to you." With these words, Harry held up the glass container Hermione had Conjured that day in the Shrieking Shack.

If it was possible, Snape paled even further and blinked rapidly several times. Recovering quickly, he responded with, "No one left to share them with?" Yet the remark lacked the caustic sting Harry had expected.

Placing the flask of memories on the table next to Snape, Harry plunged forward with what sounded like a well-rehearsed speech, intent on getting through it as quickly as possible.

"Professor, I can never thank you enough for sharing your memories with me. Without them, I would never have known what I had to do. I owe my defeat of Voldemort to both you and Dumbledore.

"I understand that I had no authority to share your memories, but I couldn't let them convict you of war crimes, or of Dumbledore's murder. I know now how you have constantly put your life on the line for me, for us..." Harry gestured between himself and Hermione, even though Snape appeared transfixed by the memory filled flask, "for the entire Wizarding World.

"You were in no condition to speak on your own behalf. I had to decide if honoring your privacy was worth the price of letting the Ministry send you to Azkaban before you even regained consciousness. Public pressure was calling for the blood of any and all surviving Death Eaters. I doubt you would have survived one night in Azkaban. I'm afraid you have enemies on both sides, Professor."

Upon hearing this last statement, Snape, who was still staring at the glass-encased memories, let out a soft snort.

"I had hoped to share your memories only with Minister Shacklebolt," Harry continued. "He was able to stop all the action the Ministry was taking against you. However, several committees of the Wizengamot insisted on a personal viewing before they would formerly drop all action to convict," Harry finished.

Snape finally drew his eyes away from his memories, looking Harry directly in the eyes. Much to Harry and Hermione's surprise, Snape quietly uttered in his raw voice, "I'm sure you did everything you could."

At that moment, the Healer stepped forward and spoke to Harry and Hermione, who had forgotten her presence. "Mister Snape must rest now. Perhaps you could return another day?"

"I would like to meet with you again, sir, once you've had a chance to gain more of your strength," Harry stated.

"Is there a chance I can stop you?" Snape quipped back, but his barb lacked venom.

"I doubt it," Harry replied with a grin.

Hermione looked from Harry to Snape with disbelief. It was as if the two had forgotten their well-defined roles and gone off script. "Have I entered some parallel universe?" Hermione queried.

"Grow up, Granger," Snape retorted. "The war is over, and I'm tired." Closing his eyes, Snape effectively dismissed his guests.

Harry and Hermione quietly exited the room, resolving to find their own way back to the main entrance so they could avoid any further contact with Lucius Malfoy.

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In the conservatory, the Healer retrieved her wand from her pockets and ran a series of diagnostic spells over Severus. Believing him asleep, she left the room to retrieve various potions for when her patient woke.

After listening to her retreating footsteps, Snape opened his eyes and reached for the container filled with his memories. He examined the swirling mists for a few moments. Then, with all the strength he could muster, he threw the glass container. It landed on the marble floor with a satisfying smash. The glass was splintered into shards, and the gaseous liquid spread quickly, with a portion of the contents evaporating straight away.

Lucius Malfoy raced into the conservatory through a doorway on the far side of the room. Severus realized in an instant that Lucius had been listening to his meeting with Granger and Potter. "Severus!" he exclaimed with alarm. "Aren't those your memories?" It was obvious that there would be no way to salvage the silvery mess on the floor.

"Those damn memories have run my life for too many years," Severus stated with obvious bitterness. "I'm far better off without them." Severus closed his eyes again, and this time drifted right off to sleep.

An Unexpected Opportunity

Chapter 3 of 6

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

Original Prompt: Snape still has some lingering side effects from Nagini's bite. One of them is that he loses his voice easily and often. He and Hermione are having a conversation, when his voice goes out at a very bad/frustrating/dangerous moment. What are they talking about? Why are they even having a conversation? It's all up to you!

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It was one of those blustery fall mornings, when Jack Frost was battling to keep Father Winter at bay. Deep underground, in the dungeon of Hogwarts Castle, Severus Snape was oblivious to the outside world. He was currently sitting in his personal suite before a warm, blazing fire. Fire had become a great comfort for Severus, and he tended to keep his rooms unusually warm.

A full decade had passed since the Battle of Hogwarts, and Severus' recovery from Nagini's attack had been a slow and lengthy process. Eventually, he had made a complete recovery of his strength and abilities. Brutal scarring, which covered the entire left side of his neck, was the only visible reminder of the attack. His customary manner of dress kept these scars hidden to all but his own eyes.

Still, Severus was plagued with a number of lingering side effects, some of which were brought on by stress. His difficulty maintaining warmth was the most persistent symptom and the reason for the constant fires in his private rooms. Outside of his own space, he relied on warming charms to keep the chills at bay, with no-one the wiser. His velvet voice had thankfully returned, but on rare occasions, he was plagued with it breaking, bringing a return of the raw, rasping sound he had suffered during his early days of recovery. There were times a sudden fever would spike, bringing with it delusional thoughts and visions. Thankfully, this was rare, as Nagini played a prominent role in these distressing hallucinations. Most rare of all was an on-set of temporary paralysis. As brief as it was rare, this troubling symptom left Severus feeling extremely vulnerable and fearful, as he was completely helpless. More than anything, these episodes brought the trauma of the attack back in full force.

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About two weeks after Potter and Granger's visit to Malfoy Manor, Minerva McGonagall had come to call. Severus feared he was going to be forced to endure an endless stream of Gryffindors, intent on purging their guilt over their treatment of Severus when they had believed him to be Voldemort's man.

The main source of Minerva's ire, however, turned out to be Dumbledore. She was furious that Dumbledore had put Severus in such a dangerous position with neither back-up or support.

"It is unforgivable, Severus," Minerva exclaimed in her crisp brogue. "I don't know what Albus was thinking. The greater good be damned."

"Albus knew that any additional risk jeopardized the plan. Besides, we didn't expect that I would survive the War. Albus hadn't factored on Lucius, and in truth, neither had I," Severus responded, his bitterness quite obvious.

Minerva had just been appointed Hogwarts' new headmistress by the school's Board of Governors. To Severus' great surprise, she offered him a post at Hogwarts, and the choice between teaching Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Due to the recent revelations, I'm quite sure you would be considered as a serious candidate for deputy head, especially with my recommendation. I don't plan to remain Headmistress for more than a few years, and I do want to help prepare my successor," Minerva added.

To Severus' greater surprise, he found himself accepting her offer, with his own stipulations.

"You can be sure that I have no aspirations for the job of headmaster, ever again. That would allow Dumbledore the opportunity of advising me almost daily. Heavens, Minerva, I have not survived an all but certain death to find myself in that position again!" Severus said with surprising vigor, given the current status of his health.

"Of course, Severus," Minerva exclaimed. "Forgive me. I can't believe, I didn't consider..."

Severus held up a hand to forestall any further comments on the matter. He was eager to have her hear him out. "Let me finish, Minerva, before my better sense returns. It is with much surprise that I find your offer most attractive. That is, if we can come to an agreement about my role and responsibilities. I realize that our youth will continue to need a strong foundation in Defense; however, I've witnessed more violence for violence's sake than I care to admit. I find I would be far more eager to return to my first vocation. The subtle science and exact art of Potions is the balm my soul craves right now. I have been thinking that I would be seeking a place to employ my Potions skills.

"Yet that is not what would draw me back to Hogwarts. What I truly desire is to become the Head of Slytherin House again. I feel there is much purpose in that position, now. It is time for Slytherin House to live up to its noble name. For several generations now, Slytherin House has been misguided from within and maligned from without. I will make it my purpose to lead Slytherin House on a new path."

Minerva had been struck by Severus' new fervor. She could not recall ever seeing such enthusiasm from him. She knew it bode well for the Slytherins. Horace Slughorn had already agreed to stay, but only until Minerva could replace him. He could continue to teach Potions and head Slytherin until Severus was well enough to take over. This would ensure a smooth transition for both students and staff.

So it was that Professor Severus Snape returned to Hogwarts, as both Potions master and Head of Slytherin House. It was the second year of school following the Battle of Hogwarts. The Wizarding World had moved past the initial post-war era of celebration, mourning and meting out retribution to war criminals. Severus began the wholesale effort of rehabilitating Slytherin House. His stature as a war hero validated his ability to lead the Slytherins in a new direction.

With each passing year, he could see and feel the progress. It was evident in how the Slytherin students felt about themselves and their role in the school, and it was evident in how the other houses treated the Slytherins. Their essential qualities, the things that made them uniquely Slytherin, remained unchanged. It was the association with the Dark Arts and the use of underhanded, anything-goes-to-win tactics that was becoming part of the past.

Change was also evident in Severus. He was still an intense and driven wizard with great passion for his work. To the outside world he was still a serious, dour individual, possessing a sarcastic, sometimes biting, wit. Yet, his colleagues saw that he was no longer so bitter and that old petty behaviors had disappeared. He still favored the Slytherins, but no longer unfairly, and his prejudice against Gryffindors, if not gone, was certainly less blatant. He had found a sense of purpose and was no longer being driven by regret and guilt.

When Severus had originally joined the Hogwarts faculty, already under an agreement with Dumbledore, he was one of the youngest faculty members Hogwarts had ever

hired. It was only his status as a Potions master that had given him enough authority to earn acceptance as an equal with the other professors.

Upon his post-war return, it became apparent that many faculty members would retire over the next few years. Minerva had a daunting task ahead, replacing several august faculty members. The first turnover had occurred two years ago, when Professor Vector had vacated the Arithmancy post. While not as young as Severus when he had first joined the staff, Hermione Granger's appointment finally allowed Severus to relinquish the title of youngest faculty member at Hogwarts.

It was no surprise to anyone that Minerva would hire Hermione. There was no question that she was more than qualified for the appointment. In fact, it was considered quite a coup to land her for the position. There had been many attempts to lure Ms. Granger back to wizarding Britain. Few knew that she had long harbored a deep desire to return to Hogwarts as a professor.

After the war, everyone had expected Hermione to play a prominent role in wizarding Britain. Instead, she had remained very low key, living with her parents. For the first couple of years, she simply worked through the post-trauma symptoms of war. Eventually, she devised an independent study regime for herself and moved abroad to pursue educational opportunities. She had studied Charms in Paris and Potions in Budapest. Later, she accepted an apprenticeship under a Master Arithmancer in Athens. Here she assisted in the locating and translating of ancient, lost Arithmancy texts. She was still in Athens when Minerva contacted her about Professor Vector's retirement.

Not long after Hermione's arrival, Minerva asked both Severus and Hermione to serve on a new committee to improve inter-house relationships. Severus was the only Head of House on the committee, but his reforms of Slytherin were model for intra-house improvements. Minerva asked Hermione to represent Gryffindor, while Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were represented by apprentices to Sprout and Flitwick. The first meeting was held at the Three Broomsticks. Minerva stopped by to review objectives and then left the committee to their planning.

After a fairly productive discussion, the two younger colleagues took their leave and returned to the castle. Severus and Hermione began a discussion on recent studies in Alchemy, involving both Potions and Arithmancy. They were quite surprised to find Madam Rosmerta, with a slightly amused expression, standing at their table to announce closing. They were the only two patrons remaining.

Severus had been surprised to find how pleasant it was to spend time in Hermione's company. Others were not at all surprised by the friendship forming between these two kindred spirits. The only question was where their relationship was headed. Hermione had been on staff for around eighteen months, when a new appointment threw the comfortable feelings of friendship Severus had formed for Hermione off-kilter.

The retirement of Professor Sprout, Head of Hufflepuff and Herbology Professor, resulted in the appointment of another Gryffindor alumni from Hermione's class. There was very little surprise that Pomona Sprout had handpicked Neville Longbottom as her replacement. Of course, Longbottom could not take over the duties of Head of Hufflepuff House. This honor was bestowed on the professor who had taken the post of Muggle Studies after the war. This witch was so quiet and non-descript that Severus always had difficulty recalling her name, a problem that amused Hermione to Severus' ire.

Severus had escaped many of his earlier demons and found life in general much more bearable, at times even pleasant, but he still did not suffer fools easily. Longbottom had been an irritant in his life far too long for him to welcome the young man back to Hogwarts with grace. He really questioned Professor Sprout's judgment here, even if he respected Longbottom's stance against the Hogwarts administration under Voldemort, including himself. He was determined to try and give Longbottom a chance.

When Longbottom did join the staff, Severus had to admit that the young man was nothing like the frightened adolescent of his past. What he was not prepared for was how Hermione's easy friendship with her old schoolmate would affect him. Whenever he saw the two of them conversing, he felt a rage slowly simmer in his gut. He found himself pondering what Hermione felt for Longbottom. It was true that he had seen nothing to indicate feelings deeper than friendship. If he was honest about it, he would have to confess that Hermione appeared to seek out his own company more often than that dunderhead. It was the mere fact that any of this bothered him that was truly disturbing. He really didn't want to put a name on the emotions he was experiencing.

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As Severus sat in front of his fire, he pondered the previous night and the revelations from Minerva. He had been celebrating an extremely sweet victory in Quidditch. Slytherin had flattened Gryffindor in the first match of the season, and Minerva was settling their bet, a case of excellent Scotch from her home village. Severus insisted that they open a bottle and drink to their health. He knew Minerva would refuse to drink to a Slytherin victory, so he made that toast silently. The Gryffindor Quidditch team had graduated the best of their talent last spring. They were in a rebuilding year, while Slytherin was at the top of their game. He knew the Quidditch Cup was Slytherin's to lose this year.

Minerva and Severus sat comfortably ensconced in deep, comfortable armchairs in front of the fire in her sitting room. Both of them allowed the warm glow of the whiskey and the fire to seep into their bones.

"We had quite a good turnout from alumni, today," Minerva stated in an effort to move away from a Quidditch dominated conversation.

"Indeed." Severus smirked, his eyes trained on the fire. "Quite the usual suspects on both sides, plus a few notable Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs were present. I believe I even saw Ms. Lovegood. Doesn't she work in the far-flung corners of the earth?"

"You should get used to seeing Luna, Severus," Minerva explained. "I believe she will be a frequent visitor now that Neville has joined the staff."

Severus' eyes flew to Minerva's, his relaxed posture disappearing. "Luna... Neville"? Severus looked at Minerva with confusion.

"You heard me, Severus," Minerva admonished with a bit of a Dumbledorian twinkle sneaking in. "Hermione has been helping Luna keep in touch with Neville. It has been a bit of a conspiracy. I'm afraid poor Neville doesn't stand a chance. Before he knows it, those girls will have him married to Luna. I must admit they do make a sweet couple. What do you think, Severus?" Minerva inquired. "I wonder if Luna will continue to travel for her studies? Severus?"

Severus was still looking at Minerva, but his eyes were a bit unfocused as he processed what Minerva was telling him. He finally realized that Minerva had stopped speaking and was looking at him. "And does Longbottom care for Ms. Lovegood?" Severus tried to make the comment sound as if he was bored with the conversation and merely humoring Minerva. The damn woman began to twinkle again.

"We believe so. Neville has always been so painfully shy, as I'm sure you know," she answered.

"What I know is that he has been painful," Severus retorted, still trying for an air of his usual sarcasm. However his next words betrayed him. "So, Hermione doesn't fancy Neville? She always appears so warm toward him."

Minerva gave Severus a full-on twinkle this time. He felt himself grip the armchair hard to refrain from a nasty remark. "Severus, Hermione has a habit of collecting surrogate brothers for friends. She cares for Neville in the same way she cares for Ron and Harry. We all know quite well who Hermione fancies."

Severus glared at Minerva, willing her to continue. He couldn't bear to ask. "Really, Severus, I think you're as shy as Neville." Minerva teased, but her voice was warm and caring. "It's you, you silly boy. She can't take her eyes off you when you're around. And I imagine from your behavior that the feelings are mutual. Would you please ask the girl out to dinner or something? We are all getting tired of her mooning over you."

Minerva's address of 'you silly boy' didn't even garner a retort from Severus. He was feeling quite gob-smacked by Minerva's pronouncement. Picking up the previously forgotten whiskey, he downed the remaining liquid in one gulp. Then he rose from his comfortable chair and, stepping over to the hearth, he placed both hands on the mantle. He wasn't sure of how he felt except a numbed shock. "She only cares for Neville as a friend," his brain kept repeating.

He knew his concern over Hermione's possible feelings about Neville had bothered him. He felt a deep sense of relief. He hadn't allowed himself to analyze his own feelings for Hermione, but now he had to admit he had formed an attachment to her. He was still unclear about what he wanted from her. Just understanding this was enough right now, but was Minerva right? Did Hermione return his affections? He needed reassurance.

"Minerva," Severus finally managed to address his colleague, who was both his employer and old friend. "Are you certain about Hermione's regards for me?" He felt stupid, like a love-struck teenager, even asking such a thing.

Minerva joined him at the fireplace. "Yes, Severus, I'm quite certain. Not only do I have the benefit of two good eyes in my head, I hear things, as well. Just this morning Hermione had her head together with Luna when you joined us at the breakfast table. She didn't know you were there before you made a comment about what a wonderful morning for Quidditch. If you could have seen her face when she heard you right behind her, Severus. You remained only long enough for a cup of that horrid black coffee you drink, and once you left, Luna asked her straight out about you. It seems the effect you had on Hermione wasn't lost on her either. Hermione replied very quietly, and they had their heads together again. I'm sure she had no idea I could still hear her."

Severus turned to look at Minerva, who was standing to his right. "So, what if I use a little amplification charm at the breakfast table? It is a great opportunity to learn what is going on in the castle," Minerva answered Snape's questioning look with no remorse. "Let's get back to the matter at hand: Hermione told Luna that you have the sexiest voice she has ever heard." Severus had returned his face to the fire and was feeling his cheeks burn, but he knew that the fire was not the cause.

"She also told Luna that you seem to enjoy sneaking up on her in the library, and that when your voice startles her, it does things to her that she feels should be illegal." Minerva's cheeks turned a bit pink as she made that revelation. "Luna went on to tell Hermione that you were perfect for each other, and she'd bet her new Erumpent horn that the two of you would be a couple before the New Year."

"How did Hermione respond to such a comment?" Snape was unsure he wanted to know. Maybe his voice was all that Hermione found attractive. At the same time, he knew he would take full advantage of this new-found knowledge.

"Hermione told Luna that she hoped that Luna was right. She then went on to say that she wished she could work up the courage to ask you out, but found she was too shy to do so. I left them discussing various ways to make you aware of Hermione's feelings. I believe Luna suggested the need to purge any Wrackspurts." At this, Severus made a scoffing noise.

"Severus," Minerva began again, "I know you are a proud man and also intensely private, and you have endured rejection from family, friends, and those who you held in the highest regard." Snape felt a lump in his throat at Minerva's words. "For these past few years, I have seen you more at peace than I ever hoped.

"I honestly feel that if you take the opportunity before you and begin to court a young woman who is obviously smitten with you, your current peace will be a mere shadow of the happiness you may find." Minerva placed her left hand on his shoulder. "Severus, Hermione is nothing like Lily Potter."

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Severus had slept little that night. As he sat by his fire, events and conversations from the previous day kept replaying. He was tempted to borrow Albus' old Penseive and review certain memories with a new perspective. The Quidditch victory kept his spirits high. Whenever self-doubt or just plain old nerves flared, he would remember the victory and the promise of a championship year. He would also remember the conversation between Hermione and Luna that Minerva had revealed, and how this also offered promise. He just had to be bold and seize the opportunity.

He knew Hermione's typical schedule, and it had become a habit of his to join her at the library during the time she set aside for research. It had become a bit of a game to sneak up on her and enjoy her startled reaction when he made his presence known. He had been unaware of the totality of his effect on her. Now he would use it to his advantage.

Severus began to plan what he hoped would be a memorable date with Miss Granger. He had picked up lots of information about her likes and dislikes during their friendship. He wanted to be sure he was correct, down to the smallest of details. He knew he needed an ally who knew Hermione as well as themselves.

"Potter." The name had swum forward in his mind.

"She cares for him like a brother." Severus recalled Minerva saying. Yes, Severus thought. The boy treated him with a bit of hero worship since the war. It always made Severus uncomfortable when it was necessary to be in the same place as Potter. Then Hermione had told Severus how glad she was that he was able to be cordial to the boy.

Well, here was Potter's chance. He could answer questions about Hermione for Severus, and make sure he planned a perfect evening for their first date. It was about time he found a good use for Potter.

Planning and Plotting (or Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday)

Chapter 4 of 6

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

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Monday evening found Severus sitting at the desk in his private quarters contemplating "The Plan." Past experience had taught him that the success of most plans depended on careful attention to detail and knowledge of all possible variables. In other words, Severus knew careful planning increased success, and he wanted to succeed.

Phase One of "The Plan" was already complete. It had been complete before Severus had set quill to parchment. Hermione had developed a habit of working in the Hogwarts library on Sunday evenings. Severus found that more often than not he was drawn there at the same time. He was fond of sneaking up to Hermione as she was immersed in her work and startling her. In fact, it surprised him how much he enjoyed this little game.



Many evenings he would join her at the library table and share a companionable hour or so discussing the upcoming week and other news of the day. This was just one of several little routines the two of them had fallen into. It really was little wonder that Minerva had picked up on something going on between them, now that he thought about it. Severus refused to consider that the rest of the faculty might also be gossiping about the two of them. He knew that thoughts of that nature would bother him and hinder his ability to move forward with "The Plan."

Last night, he had indeed found Hermione in the library, standing before a table strewn with many books, a charmed parchment and quill hovering in front of her, ready to take notes. He snuck forward, but then stopped at a safe distance to observe her. Hermione was paused in thought, the tip of her forefinger tapping her lips in a nervous gesture. Her hair was pulled up in a twist at the back of her head and kept in place by two Asian style ebony hair sticks. As untamable as ever, small curls escaped her efforts at containment and framed her face. Severus found the effect enchanting.

This was a frequent hair style of Hermione's. Severus knew she possessed a number of unique and attractive hair clips and sticks. As he stood there unseen in his observation, he decided to look for such an adornment as a gift when Christmas neared. He wanted Hermione to know of his fondness for her unruly mane. The desire to feel the texture of her curls, so opposite from his own lank, straight hair, had often made his fingers itch. Yet he had always felt it would have been most inappropriate, and probably unwelcome. So he had restrained himself. As he watched her, he admitted that it might be only his own insecurities that had been standing in the way of many things.

With quick, silent steps, he closed the distance between them. Standing directly behind Hermione, Severus leaned forward and spoke in a low, quiet voice, barely above a whisper, "Good evening, Professor Granger". He couldn't remember ever standing quite this close to Hermione. His lips were almost brushing her ear, and he was not disappointed by her reaction. While his previous ambushes had always yielded startled and flustered responses from Hermione, this time he could actually see, and almost feel, the shiver his voice had elicited from her. At the same time, the hovering quill and parchment dropped to the table.

Turning to find Severus mere inches away, a startled Hermione blinked and swallowed hard. "Severus!" she finally managed to exclaim. He was pleased that she didn't take a step back and create distance from him. "You are a wretched tease, startling me like that. And since when have I become Professor Granger again? I thought we were past that long ago." Hermione appeared to recover her wits quickly, yet her smile was shyer than normal, and she appeared to have a faint blush in her cheeks. Severus gave her, what he hoped was a wicked smile, full of suggestions and promises. Hermione's blush deepened and spread in response.

"Perhaps I feel a more formal address is appropriate for my purpose," Severus replied. "Would you do me the honor of joining me for dinner this next Saturday?"

To say that Hermione was surprised was an understatement. As she stared at him, Severus felt a moment of sheer panic. He hoped that he had not misread the situation and that Minerva had not been having a go at him.

Hermione finally found her voice. "Are you asking me out on a date, Severus?"

Hermione's demeanor and expression were both open and friendly. Feeling his panic recede, Severus asked, "Would you say yes if it was a date?" He hoped his demeanor appeared calm and masked the insecurity that prompted the question. Yet the insecurity underlying Severus response was not lost on Hermione.

She gave him a radiant smile and answered, "Yes, I believe I would."

"Then it is a date, this Saturday evening. I will plan to meet you at your rooms at seven. We won't be leaving the grounds, but I would like to keep the location of dinner a surprise for now."

"Alright," Hermione responded with a puzzled expression. "How do you suggest I dress?"

At this question, Severus glanced slowly down at her current dress, allowing his eyes to travel slowly back up the length of her body and then recapture her eyes. This caused the return of Hermione's blush and that shy smile. He could get used to being the cause of that blush, he thought.

"You will be fine in what you normally wear to dinner in the Great Hall. Just bring a cloak that will keep you warm outside at this time of year. I have some essays that still need to be graded, so I will leave you to your class preparations."

Severus then took Hermione's hand and raised it to his lips, all the while maintaining eye contact. Hermione's eyes widened at such unexpected behavior, and Severus leaned forward; speaking into her ear once more, he whispered, "Goodnight, Professor Granger." He was rewarded with another one of those delicious shivers, after which he turned and walked away before his own nerves had a chance to fail him.

Severus had lied about the grading. He knew that these uncharted waters were probably more nerve wracking for him than Hermione, and, mission accomplished, he felt in need of a strong drink.

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The following morning, Severus had taken his usual seat between Minerva and Hermione at the Head table. After an exchanging typical morning greetings, Severus tucked in to breakfast, wanting to behave the same as he would on any other morning. He could feel Hermione making covert glances in his direction, and turning her way, he gave her a brief acknowledgement, but no more or less than any other morning would call for. Minerva gave Severus an almost Dumbledorian twinkle and said, "What a lovely morning! Wouldn't you agree, Severus?"

"Indeed, Minerva," Severus replied. Perhaps by being brusque he could keep her at arm's length.

"Absolutely wonderful, I say. I believe this lovely weather is going to remain all the way through the coming weekend," Minerva continued, placing a special emphasis on the word weekend.

"Really, Minerva," Severus drawled. "Have you taking up forecasting the weather in your spare time? Is Trelawney in need of an assistant?" He tried to infuse his words with sarcasm, hoping to squelch any further insinuations on her part.

A glance at Hermione showed her looking down at her plate with, again, a hint of a blush. It was obvious that Hermione must have told Minerva about their date next Saturday before he had arrived at the table. Since Minerva's confidences had prompted Severus to ask Hermione on a date, he was sure she wanted to gloat.

This was exactly the type of thing Severus hated. With a last gulp of coffee, he excused himself. A final glance back at Hermione showed her looking toward him with more than a bit of embarrassment on her face. He hoped his own expression did not reveal his discomfort.

Severus had walked briskly back toward the dungeon Potions classroom, finding the urge to dock house points growing as he went. He wasn't angry at Hermione. It was only natural that she would share her news with Minerva. He just hated being the subject of any gossip. It mortified him that his personal actions, as well as Hermione's, would serve as entertainment for their co-workers.

He also knew that such fears had made it perfectly acceptable for him to live a primarily solitary life, a life free from ridicule and gossip. If he was truly honest with himself, it was a rather lonely life, after all. If he was going to take a chance and try for more, he'd have to rise above these fears.

The remainder of the day, Severus avoided encounters with other staff members. Now, while seated at the desk in his private quarters, Severus ignored his personal fear to allow for planning a romantic dinner date for Hermione. After all, planning was something Severus knew how to do.

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Wednesday afternoons were free of any student contact for Severus. He had no classes to teach and held no office hours. He considered this mid-week break necessary for his sanity and had negotiated this schedule with Minerva during the early days of his return to Hogwarts. Severus Snape might have become a slightly kinder, gentler

version of his pre-war self, but he still disliked dunderheads and found there were precious few students who measured up to the standards he expected. Typically, Severus spent Wednesday afternoons fulfilling other aspects of his job as Hogwarts' Potions Master, such as preparing for upcoming classes, brewing medicinal potions for Poppy, acquiring ingredients to replenish low stores, and when the stars aligned in his favor, Severus had time to work on his independent research.

This Wednesday would be anything but typical. For today, Severus was leaving the castle to gather information and resources for "The Plan." If all went well today, then the rest of the week could be devoted to the implementation phase of "The Plan." No detail would be overlooked, and no chance for mishap would be left by Saturday.

Severus viewed his first stop with some trepidation. Ever since Potter's first visit during his convalescence at Malfoy Manor, when a truce of sorts was formed, Severus accepted that Harry Potter would remain a part of his life instead of becoming the bad memory he had expected Harry to fade into.

It soon became apparent that Potter believed he had tacit permission to just show up unannounced for a visit with Severus at Hogwarts. Once or twice a year, Potter would appear, acting like it was quite natural and picking up the conversation as if it had been just yesterday, not six months ago, when they had last spoke.

At first, Severus was just too flabbergasted by Potter's behavior to object. Over time, he developed a long suffering attitude toward the boy, after checking on Potter's sanity with Minerva. Eventually, Potter developed something of a pattern for his visits. The War Anniversary celebration at Hogwarts became a sure bet for Potter to visit. Then Potter added an occasional Quidditch match or two, especially the fall games. Over time, Severus could almost predict the weekend when Potter was bound to show up at his office door.

The greatest surprise to Severus was that Potter wanted to discuss Lily with him, and that he eventually allowed it. Initially, Severus felt a sort of morbid fascination with the whole idea. Could he share memories of Lily with Potter for Merlin's sake? Severus had made Albus swear to never reveal these things to anyone, especially Potter. The very idea had made his twenty-one-year-old self ill with bitter shame and jealousy. It had been his most guarded secret, after all.

The first time Potter asked Severus about Lily, Severus had to fight the urge to hex him. He wanted to eviscerate Potter for his impertinence, throw him out and tell him he had no right to ask such things. He had never expected to continue to live after he had passed his memories on to Potter. The boy had no right to take advantage of the situation like that. "Get out and never return!" had danced on his tongue.

Somehow, Severus fought down this initial impulse. The boy was asking him because there was no one else left to ask, no one who had known his mother like Severus. He was forced to admit that his hatred of Harry had been based on what he represented to Severus. Harry had been a daily reminder of his nemesis, James Potter. A daily reminder of what Severus had lost, what his own actions had put into play, and how, in the end, he had failed to save Lily.

Severus had given everything he could to atone for his actions. His final act had been to give Potter those relevant memories. Wasn't it enough? Did he owe Potter anything else? The fact that he had a new chance at life was not lost on Severus. He refused to be driven by his past demons, so he made a decision.

"There are some things you need to understand, Potter," Severus began in response to Harry's questions. "When you brought those memories back to me, I destroyed them."

"What!" Harry exclaimed. "You don't have those memories anymore?"

Severus gave a heartfelt sigh. "Memories are made of complex matter, not unlike the mind. I seem to recall you having difficulty with these concepts during our Occlumency sessions, Potter." The mention of those disastrous lessons caused Harry to glare at Severus. Severus closed his eyes, tilted his head back and pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew this conversation would result in a first class headache. It would be so much easier to just hex the boy and be done with it.

"Memories are interconnected. One memory may spark a dozen more for the mind to skim through. I have numerous memories connected to those I passed on to you. I was prepared, as Headmaster Dumbledore had instructed, to share what I had to when the time was right. I had created something like a file, for want of a better metaphor, to ensure you received everything I deemed necessary for your purpose."

Again, Severus gave a deep sigh. How he hated Albus for manipulating him into giving Potter the final keys that lead to his self-sacrifice. Once again, Albus had withheld vital information from him. It had been a shock, albeit of the positive variety, to learn that Albus had not sent the boy to a certain death.

"The memories I gave you were the strongest versions I had in relation to what you needed to know. While the strongest versions of those memories are gone, they leave a kind of shadow that is still attached to all their related memories. I still know what occurred, but it is as if everything has been blurred, the strength of emotions attached to those memories are dulled. You might consider it similar to looking at a Prior Incantato instead of the actual spell. Those particular memories had driven my actions for more years than I care to consider. It was a relief to let go of them, and I did not want them back," finished Severus.

Harry simply stared at Severus for a time. Then he uttered an emotional, "I believe I understand, sir."

Severus acknowledged his response with a tight nod.

After a few more moments of uncomfortable silence, Harry tentatively asked Severus, "May I still ask you about growing up with my mother? You're the only person I know who knew her in her childhood. Well, there is Aunt Petunia, but I can't see her telling me now what she never has before."

Severus gave a small snort of agreement about Petunia. "I... Yes, Potter, I will talk to you about your mother, but not today. I'm afraid my headache is not conducive for such a conversation," Severus explained.

"Alright, Professor. Thank you for what you did tell me." Harry turned to leave.

"One more thing, Potter." Severus held a hand up to signal Harry, but his eyes were shut, and he was pinching his brow again with the other hand. "I don't recommend discarding memories. The painful ones are there for a reason. An impetuous person, such as yourself, could get carried away with purging bad memories. Unforeseen side effects can occur with the loss of too many memories. To forestall your next question, the answer is no. This headache is from talking to you. It is not a side effect from discarding those memories."

"I'll remember that, sir." Harry smiled to himself, because after all Snape was still Snape, and he slipped out of the office.

The next time they met, Severus gave Harry the other halves of the torn note and picture that Harry had found on the floor of Sirius' bedroom. "I no longer require these," he told Harry.

That was how things had started, and now Severus could predict Potter's visits almost like clockwork. A tentative relationship grew between the two men. Severus was unwilling to name it friendship, but that was primarily because Severus found it difficult to use the word friend in most cases. He remained somewhat uncomfortable with Harry's easy manner and did not understand why Harry enjoyed his company. Severus maintained his aloof manner and refused to call Harry anything but Potter. He did allow Harry to call him Severus. He refused Harry's continued invitations to dinner at Harry and Ginny's home, but tolerated Harry's visits with little grumbling. All in all, Harry was pleased that Snape remained Snape.

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When Severus owed Harry asking to meet Wednesday, he expected Harry would come Hogwarts. The fates were not going to let Severus have it so easy. Ginny Potter was getting close to the day she would give birth to the Potters' third child. She was staying at the Burrow with her mother, and Harry had taken leave from the Ministry to care for the Potters' two young sons.

Severus would have to visit Potter at home for the first time and come face to face with James and Albus Severus. He considered cancelling, but he really wanted to talk to Potter about Hermione. As her oldest and closest friend, Potter should know some of Hermione's preferences for food, flowers, music, and the like. Severus wanted this information to prepare for Saturday evening. If Potter didn't know the answers to Severus' questions, surely he could get the answers from Ginevra for Severus.

Due to Potter's fame, he and his family were the targets of both positive and negative attention. Both were unwelcome and could endanger the family. So, Harry had implemented a number of charms to keep anyone away who was not explicitly invited. He considered implementing the Fidelus Charm as sheer overkill. Instead, several strategies were implemented to provide comprehensive protection for the family.

If anyone tried to Apparate to the Potters' residence without invitation, they would wind up at the Magical Law Enforcement Office instead. Being an Auror helped Harry get this system authorized. They kept the house off the Floo network. If Harry or Ginny didn't want to perform a side-along Apparation with the children, they could use the Floo at the Post Office. That was a benefit of living in a larger Wizarding community. Finally, if someone turned up in Godric's Hollow looking for the Potter residence uninvited, and they had never been to the Potters' home before, they would become confused if they found themselves on the same street as the Potters' home and head off in another direction. Hermione had designed this charm for Harry and helped him set it up. Severus was quite impressed with the diligence Harry used to protect his family.

Despite his trepidation, Severus Apparated right to the gate in front of Potter's cottage. Even though it was late fall, Severus imagined how charming the cottage would be in summer. He pictured how the garden would overflow with roses in the summer, how the trellised vines that covered the entire wall from top to bottom on the left side of the front entry would fill with climbing roses.

A huge picture window was set into the whitewashed wall on the other side of the front entry. A large bench swing hung from a sturdy tree branch in front of the window. Children would play in soft green grass, and as evening settled in, fireflies would flicker through the rose scented air. Ginerva and the children would inhabit that charming garden, making it look as lovely as a picture when Potter came home at the day's end.

Severus tried to sneer at his whimsical musings on domestic bliss, but he failed miserably. Instead, he felt an ache in his chest, accompanied by a sense of longing. To have someone waiting for him to come home suddenly held a new appeal.

Severus opened the front gate and felt a chill autumn breeze blow through his cloak as he strode on the pathway to the cottage entrance. He proceeded to knock, and mere moments later, the door was opened by Harry, clearly glad to see him. He was holding a young boy on one hip. Another boy, barely older than the one Potter held, was standing next to him. "It's great to see you, Severus. Come in, come in. Didn't have any trouble finding us, I see. Follow me: I'll put on some tea."

Severus hung his cloak and winter scarf on two hooks that had appeared on the wall in the hall as he looked around for a place to hang them. The hook under his cloak moved higher up the wall in order to keep the cloak from brushing the floor, as he was a fair bit taller than Potter.

Severus followed Harry's voice into a bright, cheerful kitchen, where Harry bustled around making tea. He set out a plate of chocolate biscuits on the kitchen table and nattered on to Severus.

"I know you've heard their names already, but James is the one who has been staring at you since you got here, and this is Albus Severus." Harry indicated the child he had deposited in a highchair, who was knocking together some colorful plastic cups.

"Charming," was all Severus said in response to the introductions.

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When Minerva had told Severus that Harry and Ginny had named their firstborn James Harry Potter, he had sneered in response to the news. "Of course, Potter must ensure the family legacy." Minerva had avoided the sullen man for a week. He had never seen the "good side" of James Potter that everyone assured him James had possessed. He had only ever known the conceited, arrogant bully who had ironically won the heart of the only witch Severus had ever loved.

Severus dreaded the idea of teaching James' namesake. An entire new generation of Potter brats and their friends would be headed to Hogwarts in a few years. Perhaps he needed to review his retirement plan. He recalled that the years that he had originally promised Minerva he would work at Hogwarts were almost over.

Then the second son was born to the Potters. Hermione was on staff by then, and they were well on their way to a mutual friendship. She was the one to share the news of the child's birth and naming. "Is he insane?" he remembered shrieking. "How? Why? What was Ginerva thinking, letting Potter do that to thier child?" Hermione had laughed at Severus' very real indignation. It did not bode well for their friendship, thought Severus. He had crossed his arms and given her a very disapproving look, vintage 'Snape the Bastard'.

"Severus." Hermione had reached out and placed a hand on one of his folded arms. It was the first time he could remember her touching him. "They meant it as an honor, and they agreed on the name together. Even after knowing how Dumbledore used him, Harry loved the man. He considers him his mentor, and the Weasley clan all held Dumbledore in the highest regard.

"Severus, I don't know if you realize how much esteem Harry has for you? He calls you the bravest man he's ever known. He combined your name with Albus because he said he can't expect Ginny to keep having sons so that he can honor all his heroes. After his own father, you and Albus were the men he wanted to honor. Not Sirius, not Remus, or anybody else. He wanted to honor you. Just think about that before you bite his head off. Will you please do that, Severus?" She had given him a searching look, and after a moment, he had nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Severus," she responded with a little smile. "I rather like the name myself."

Severus had rolled his eyes at her. "You're all fools. The poor boy will pay for this asinine sentimentality."

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"With all the extra security here, we thought it would be best for Ginny to stay at the Burrow with Molly. It's much easier to get people in or out there. Plus, Ginny gets a little break from these two before they get a little sister. Did I already tell you we're having a daughter?" Harry asked Severus.

Before Severus had a chance to reply, Harry cried out, "Oi, Al, phew, that's just disgusting! Excuse me, Severus: your namesake needs a new nappy." When Harry lifted the smiling toddler out of his highchair, Severus got his first direct look at Albus Severus' eyes. He had Lily's eyes. Then Potter and the child were gone down the hall, along with the pungent odor.

He was left alone in the kitchen with little James. The child was around three years old, by Severus' recollections. He was still staring at Severus. He did seem to look like James, Severus reflected. It was hard to tell at that age, there was lots of room and time for change. His coloring was lighter than his namesake. It was as if Harry and Ginerva's coloring had been blended, and the result was a rich medium brown coloring for his hair. It wasn't red, but it had red undertones in it. His eyes were light brown in coloring, more like Ginerva's eye color. The shape was what bothered Severus. The boy's eyes were shaped like James Potter's. Frankly, Severus was getting really annoyed by the child's scrutiny.

So he decided to have a bit of fun with him. Severus narrowed his eyes at the boy, composed his visage into a scowl, and with a low, threatening voice, said, "Go ahead and get a good look, James. Make sure you remember this face. When you start school at Hogwarts, I WILL be there. I will be your teacher, and mummy and daddy can't come to Hogwarts with you. They're not allowed, just you and me."

He knew the child wouldn't understand most of what he said, though he did choose to call himself a teacher instead of professor for that very reason. He wanted to unnerve the boy, because the boy had unnerved him. It was the type of petty behavior Severus didn't engage in anymore. He knew it, and it was a measure of how nervous he truly was to stoop to such tactics.

As expected, James began to sob immediately. Severus picked up a chocolate biscuit, scowled at James, and popped the biscuit into his mouth whole, proceeding to chew while ignoring the boy's distress. Harry skidded back into the room with little Al in his arms. He looked at James, who then increased the noise. "What's wrong, James?" Harry asked. When he got no response from James, except an increase in tears, Harry turned to Severus. "Do you know what happened to upset him so?"

Severus shrugged his shoulders and said, "I was just telling the boy I'd be his teacher when he got to Hogwarts." Harry looked back at James, who was nodding in agreement to Severus' words. His cries had settled to quiet snuffles, as he wanted to hear what was being said by his father and the scary visitor. "Is there some reason

the boy is scared of school, Potter?" Severus asked. These words seemed to bring a return of James' cries.

Harry bent his knees, crouched down, and balanced Al on one knee. James ran and hid his face in Harry's chest, turning back to peak at Severus. This seemed to give Harry all the information he needed about the source of James' distress. "Everything's alright, James. I know the Professor can act really scary sometimes. He was my teacher, too. He is just teasing you. Believe it or not, James, Professor Snape is really a nice guy."

Severus gave a little growl at Potter calling him a nice guy, but James took another peak at him. "See, James, the Professor wants to play. He's growling at you. Can you growl back at him?" Harry encouraged. James turned round to face Severus and gave the biggest growl his three-year-old self could manage. Albus Severus joined in, still sporting a grin, and both boys were growling at Severus for all they were worth.

"You go too far, Potter," Severus complained over the noise.

"Men who scare three-year-olds, on purpose no less, deserve to be growled at," Harry retorted. "James, Al, you two go play while the Professor and I visit." James took his brother's hand, and they scampered off down the same hall Harry had taken Albus Severus to change his nappy.

"I live to scare children, Potter," Severus retorted, trying to maintain his dignity. "You must remember your first year with the Bat of the Dungeons?"

"I'll forgive you on behalf of James this time. I know you aren't around little ones much, and I imagine it seemed like good fun to scare the namesake of someone who did bully you, but really, scaring three-year-olds is beneath you, Severus," Harry admonished him.

"Perhaps," was all Severus allowed, but he wouldn't meet Harry's eyes.

"Would you like some more tea?" Harry offered. After filling their cups, he invited Severus into a masculine looking room where the two men sank into comfortable leather armchairs and sipped their tea.

"So what does bring you here today, Severus? It must be important. I've never been able to get you to come over before. Not even for dinner. Yet, today you were willing to make the trip here, because I couldn't make it to Hogwarts. I expect something important is going on," Harry expounded. "Come to think of it, you've never asked me to meet you before now. It's always been me dropping in to see you." Harry looked quite curious now, as if the uniqueness of the situation had just dawned on him.

Looking at Potter, sitting there waiting for Severus to explain the purpose of his visit, Severus was forcefully reminded of Hermione's words from two years ago. "I don't know if you realize how much esteem Harry has for you."

For years now, he had turned down each and every invitation from Potter. Severus had convinced himself that he was being generous to Potter. He allowed Potter to intrude into his world a couple of times a year. He answered Potter's questions about his mother and her life. Now Severus realized he had only done what was convenient for himself. This was another example of how Severus was still closed off to most of the world, even those who desired his company.

It had been easy enough to get to Godric's Hollow today, when he was the one who wanted something. To top it off, he had deliberately frightened a child because the boy got under his skin by having the name James Potter and the audacity to stare at the strange guest in his home. Severus felt something very much like shame flood through him.

"Harry, if you and Ginerva are generous enough to invite me once more for dinner, I give you my word that I will accept, with the one caveat that I have no prior commitment," Severus announced.

"Really? That would be great! Wait, did you just call me Harry?"

"That is your name, I believe. Or would you have me call you Roonil Wazlib?" Severus couldn't help himself from bringing up that absurd moniker Harry had tried to have him believe was a nickname.

Severus knew Harry was off-balance now. The boy was simply gaping at him. As well as Severus knew Harry, he knew that Harry would want to pick apart and analyze what had just occurred, once he recovered his equilibrium, that was.

Severus realized he needed to get to the point of his visit. He had allowed things to digress today, and Severus knew he was way off track from his purpose. Time was passing, and he still had to stop at Malfoy's before the day was done.

"The purpose of my visit here today, Potter, is that I believe you are one of the few people I know who can provide me with the information I'm looking for. If you don't have the answers yourself, I imagine you can help me find them. In addition, time is critical here. I don't have much time left before I have to move ahead with my preparations, with or without the answers."

Severus' statement caused Harry to compose himself and pay attention. It sounded business-like, and Harry expected Severus would ask something related to his work at the Ministry. "Of course I'll help, Severus. As long as it is not classified information, I'll tell you whatever I know."

Severus tried hard not to grimace. He wondered how Harry would take this next revelation. "I've asked Ms Granger... I mean, I've asked Hermione to join me for dinner this Saturday night. I want to ask you about her preferences for certain items so I can...so I can be a good host."

This time, Harry just stared at Severus. He wondered if Harry had heard him at all, or was too shocked to process Severus' announcement. Just as he was about to inquire if he needed to repeat himself, Harry spoke.

"Are you telling me that you asked Hermione out, like on a date, this Saturday?" Harry wanted to clarify and just make sense of what Severus had said.

"That is correct," Severus answered.

"Well then, that is great news!" Harry jumped up and went to a sideboard. He opened up the cabinet and pulled out some Ogden's Special Reserve Firewhiskey and two glasses. Pouring a generous amount in each glass, he handed one to Severus. It seemed as if it was now Severus' turn to be surprised by Harry's behavior.

"Cheers!" Harry announced before taking a drink. "Really, Severus, that's great news. Hermione's got a real thing for you. Just last week, the night before the Quidditch game, she had dinner here and wanted to talk about you, yet again." Potter sighed and rolled his eyes to emphasize how he had endured.

"You wouldn't believe the number of times we've had the same conversation with Hermione. Well, technically Hermione and Ginny are having a heart to heart 'girl talk', but they inevitably drag me in. They think I can shed some masculine insight on you," Harry continued.

"Potter, how long have the three of you had these conversations?" Severus was getting a niggling feeling from how Harry was carrying on that this was nothing new.

"Well, how long has Hermione been back at Hogwarts now?" Harry asked Severus. "Has it been two years? Well, no matter, I'd have to say it was within a couple of months of her taking the job. She started telling us that your friendship was becoming the best part of living at Hogwarts." Harry grinned. "I have to admit, I thought she was mental at first, but the more time went on and the more I heard her talk about you...What?" Harry realized that Severus looked like he was about to explode.

"Potter, did it ever occur to you to say something to me about this? You were already in my private study trying to get me to share my most personal memories with you. It wasn't as if you didn't have a perfect opening for such a revelation!" Severus mind was reeling.

"Hermione would have killed me!" Potter retorted. "I learned a long time ago to lend her my ear, or a shoulder to cry on if she wants one. I can offer her advice, but she'd never want me to interfere like that!"

"Potter?" Severus had drained his glass and assumed one of his standard headache poises. His eyes were closed tight, and he rested an elbow on his knee as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, Professor?" Potter felt the need to revert back to his student address toward Severus.

"Why would Hermione have ever known you had said a word to me?" Severus just barely refrained from adding, "you Dunderhead".

"So, you're saying that had you known she fancied you, you might have acted before now, and I wouldn't have been listening to Hermione go on and on about how to get you to take an interest in her these past two years?" Potter provided in a quiet voice.

"Precisely!" Just a small hex, Severus thought. Throwing a small hex at Potter would feel so satisfying right now.

"Didn't you say you had some questions I could answer about Hermione for you, Severus?" Potter knew he would be giving Severus all the help he could.

James and Albus Severus choose that moment to enter Potter's study. James had found a couple of silver masquerade style masks, not entirely unlike Death Eater masks, to wear. The boys began to run around the leather chairs where Potter and Severus were sitting, roaring at the men as they passed. Severus held out his glass to Harry, "I believe I'll have another Firewhiskey, Potter."

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It was a relief to find that the Malfoys were gone when Severus arrived at the manor. For the first time since the war, the Ministry had granted their request to visit the continent. Draco currently lived in Vienna with his wife Katalin and their young son, Scorpius. Narcissa hoped to sublet an apartment in Vienna so she could Portkey over, now that the Ministry allowed, and dote on her grandson.

Lucius had considered it a coup that he had managed to obtain a wizarding passport for Draco right after the war ended. Narcissa's aid to Potter in the final battle brought some clout their way. Draco had sat for his NEWTS at Durmstrung and then stayed abroad with the blessing of his parents. They wanted him to avoid the discrimination he would have faced in England during that time.

In England, Draco would have been unable to engage in business or enter into contracts for at least five years after the war. He would have been required to have a parole official oversee his case for at least five years, as well. On the continent, Draco avoided this entirely.

With Lucius' guidance and funding, Draco became involved in European wizarding markets. He married into an old wizarding family in Prague. Narcissa hated missing the wedding, but they didn't want Draco to postpone his life until the British Ministry loosened their leash on Lucius and Narcissa. So, Severus had attended in their stead and stood up for Draco.

The bride was one year younger than Draco, and they had first met at Durmstrung. Later, Draco was in Prague on business and ran into Katalin at a wizarding dance. She introduced him to her family, and it turned out her father knew Lucius and approved of Draco courting his daughter. Two years later, they married in Prague. Severus found Katalin to be a demure, quiet young woman. She was very attractive with soft brown hair and eyes. Severus tried to tease Draco by implying how well his bride would fit into Hufflepuff. Apparently the joke was on him, because Draco gave Severus a knowing smirk and a wink, saying that Katalin was Slytherin to the core.

The young couple settled in Vienna, Austria, due to Draco's business, buying a townhouse. Their son Scorpius was the same age as the Potters' son Albus Severus. It was planned that Draco and his family would move back to England when Scorpius turned nine. All penalties that could negatively impact Draco would have expired by then, so he could take over management of the family resources in England.

Lucius had lifetime restrictions placed on him, due to his significant involvement with Voldemort. These restrictions severely limited his business practices. Lucius' goal was to preserve what was left at home until Draco could return, at the same time advising Draco on his burgeoning European portfolio.

Scorpius would have the benefit of a Hogwarts education, and he could regain the rightful place for the Malfoy family in wizarding Britain, therefore completing Lucius plan to see that his errors did not ruin the Malfoy family or its place in Britain's wizarding society.

The Malfoy house elf, Baggins, took Severus to the wine cellar, where Lucius had put together a selection of wines for Severus, along with a note. "Take any other bottles you fancy, old friend. When I get back you must tell me who she is. Do I know her? Have I slept with her?" Severus sighed and took the bottles Lucius had selected for him.

The Malfoys would always remain part of Severus' life. If things developed with Hermione, he hoped she would give them a second chance, yet he would fully understand if she could not.

## Opening Night Jitters

*Chapter 5 of 6*

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

Original Prompt: Snape still has some lingering side effects from Nagini's bite. One of them is that he loses his voice easily and often. He and Hermione are having a conversation, when his voice goes out at a very bad/frustrating/dangerous moment. What are they talking about? Why are they even having a conversation? It's all up to you!

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Saturday morning, Severus awoke from pleasant dreams that still tickled the edges of his brain. After the war it had taken several years for pleasant dreams to re-enter his psyche, and he savored them. He knew Hermione had been involved in this dream, but the details were growing fuzzy. As he lay there trying to capture the essence of this dream before it was lost, a sense of dread and foreboding washed over him.

He rose quickly and made his way to the bathroom mirror. What was wrong? He saw nothing to cause alarm, just his usual reflection looking back. Although he did notice that his expression appeared nervous, and he commanded himself to relax. He mused darkly that his normal visage should be enough to frighten Hermione and wondered again what she found attractive about him, aside from his voice.

Severus' lack of self-awareness had missed the subtle changes that had enhanced his appearance in recent years. No one would ever consider Severus classically handsome, but the same way his demeanor had changed after the war, shedding his vindictive, petty behaviors, so had his appearance.

Since he was no longer pulled in so many directions, he managed to take much better care of himself. The fact that he no longer played a role he dreaded and was no longer bent to the will of two masters had also made a difference in his appearance.

The distinctive contrast between Severus' pale complexion and his black hair and eyes had always been compelling. He had never realized that his intense black eyes were attractive, whether they flashed with anger or amusement, especially since he no longer required the use of Occlumency to keep his emotions hidden. This fact also saved him a tremendous amount of stress.

He was cognizant of the effect his voice had on members of the fairer sex. It had pleased him how Hermione had reacted to his voice last Sunday, when he had asked her to dinner. He fully intended to use this advantage tonight.

At that moment a realization struck him. The dread he was feeling was connected to his voice. His throat felt swollen and constricted, and when he tried to speak he found that his voice was quite hoarse. Then it squawked and broke like a hormonal adolescent. Of all the times for such a thing to occur, he hadn't experienced a return of the latent symptoms from Nagini's attack in ages.

Feeling a sense of panic, Severus quickly changed from his night shirt and Flooed directly to the hospital wing. The Floo to the infirmary was supposed to be for emergencies use only, but Severus wanted to avoid the possibility of running into Hermione in the corridor.

Madam Pomfrey rushed out of her office in alarm upon hearing the Floo. "Severus, what is wrong?" she exclaimed.

"My voice!" Severus managed to squawk out.

Poppy stood there for a moment while trying to process the situation. It had been at least two years since Severus had experienced any symptoms related to that wretched snake attack. It was certainly not an emergency deserving the use of the Floo entrance, and Severus was well aware that there was no treatment for this ailment, except to rest his voice. A couple of days, and his normal voice would return.

Poppy approached Severus and placed her hand up to his forehead. "Have you experienced any signs of a fever?" the Mediwitch inquired. A fever heralded more severe symptoms, including potential delusions, but that had been the rarest of Severus' infrequent, yet lingering, symptoms.

"No," Severus managed to say in a gruff voice. Crossing his arms and glaring he looked and sounded like a petulant child.

Most of the hospital wing beds were vacant, but Poppy decided that they needed some privacy and ushered Severus into her office. "Have a seat, Severus," Madam Pomfrey directed. Severus complied, but Poppy remained standing, because that brought her into direct eye contact with the Potions master. Putting her hands on her hips, Madam Pomfrey was beginning to make Severus feel like a child. He shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, as he realized that he was probably over-reacting. "Now, what is going on this morning? Perhaps you should start at the beginning," Poppy prompted.

He just glared at her, and she glared right back. In spite of his cracked voice, and in an effort to salvage what he could of his dignity, Severus continued to glare at Poppy as he spoke. "When I awoke this morning, I discovered that I had lost my voice, yet again. It has been a significant amount of time since I last suffered this indignity. I thought that, perhaps, there had been some new break-through in treatment that you were aware of. I know there is no such advancement in Potions, so perhaps you've heard of a charm...." Severus left the sentence hanging in the air and looked quite put out.

"Severus Snape!" thundered Poppy. "I have known you since you were a wee lad of a first year. Once a student, you are always a student in my book, young man, so you can drop your intimidation act, Severus. It won't work on me. You know quite well that I would have shared any news of magical medicinal advancements with you immediately. You come flying into my infirmary in a state of panic and causing an uproar. I have my suspicions as to the cause of your panic, but why don't you just humor me and give me your version? All right, young man?"

Realizing the magnitude of his misjudgment, Severus backtracked. "Forgive me, Poppy," he began. "It has been so long since I've had to deal with this indignity. I'd forgotten what it felt like to have my voice crack like some first-year," he managed to hiss out with an air of injury.

"Hmmm, this wouldn't have anything to do with not wanting to sound like some first-year, during dinner with Hermione this evening, now, would it, Severus?" Poppy inquired enigmatically.

Severus gaped at her. "Does everyone know my private affairs?" he finally croaked out.

"What would it matter if we did, Severus? You want to know something else I know? Hermione has been hoping you would ask her out for ages. She told me so herself. So don't you even think about canceling tonight on account of your voice," Poppy finished.

"She likes my voice," Severus stated dejectedly. Poppy could feel the petulant child returning in Severus' whine.

"Who doesn't like your voice?" Poppy responded to an incredulous Severus. "Oh, come on now, I might be old enough to be your mother, but I'm not dead, Severus. You have a voice that could melt chocolate. That is when you're not cutting those around you to shreds with it. Be assured that Hermione sees far more to you than your voice. Now go... do whatever you had planned for today. Make time for some extra rest and then enjoy your evening, the same as you had already planned. Consider that my professional advice. And Merlin help you, Severus, if I have to lend a kind ear to Hermione because you canceled dinner all over your embarrassment about your voice. That would be just ridiculous of you."

Severus stood up and glared down at the Mediwitch. "Poppy, it seems that both you and Minerva are much too concerned about my friendship with Professor Granger." Severus' voice cracked worse the angrier he got.

"Severus, stop acting like an arse! Haven't you learned by now that your pride is a costly extravagance?" Poppy snapped back.

"I'll keep your advice in mind," Severus spat out with a less than intimidating squeak. With a heavy sigh, he exited Madam Pomfrey's office, headed out the main doors of the Hospital Wing, and ran directly into Hermione, literally. Grasping her by the arms in order to keep them both from stumbling, he looked her in the face with consternation written on his own.

"Severus, it seems you are always there when I least expect it, these days." Hermione managed to say, in spite of her genuine surprise at running in to him.

She hadn't expected to see him before that evening, and Hermione was mesmerized as various expressions passed across Severus' face. He was normally so guarded, and it often took time for Hermione to read his mood. It was obvious that he had left the Hospital Wing in a huff. Their head-on collision seemed to cause Severus surprise, embarrassment and then fear, before he managed a more familiar, if rather guarded expression.

"Is everything all right, Severus?" Hermione asked with concern.

"Just fine," he expelled, while his voice managed to both squeak and crack. Severus felt his hands ball up in fists, and he squeezed his eyes shut with frustration. He knew he had to calm down or it would only get worse and last longer if he didn't.

"Severus?" He heard the concern in her quiet question and forced himself to open his eyes and look directly at Hermione. "Are you ill?"

Rather than answer verbally, he shook his head no. Hermione now looked puzzled as well as concerned. With a sudden flash of understanding, Hermione knew exactly what the matter was.

"Severus, you're having one of those episodes where some of the symptoms from Nagini's attack return. Aren't you?"

He nodded his head in affirmation this time, and the corner of his mouth quirked up a bit in amusement. He knew it wouldn't take Hermione long to figure out what was going on. Hermione's quick mind was a major part of her appeal to Severus. And he had spoken to her about these relapses quite some time ago.

"Are you in any pain?" Hermione queried with a look of concern again. Shaking his head in the negative again, Severus was pleased by the full wattage smile she flashed him. It appeared that Hermione was quite concerned for his comfort and that gave him a feeling of pleasure. "That's great!" she continued. "So there is no need to change dinner plans?"

Well, perhaps Hermione's concern was not totally altruistic but, Slytherin that he was, Severus couldn't fault Hermione's self-serving angle. Plus Hermione's desire to keep their dinner plans told Severus that she was looking forward to the evening he had planned. Still, he felt that Hermione should have the opportunity of a graceful exit, as the dinner circumstances had changed due to his current ailment.

"I doubt that I'll be a good conversationalist tonight. I'll understand if you would prefer we reschedule our dinner." Severus managed to get the words out amongst all the squeaks and squawks his voice was making.

"Nonsense," Hermione retorted. "As much as I love debating the finer points of almost anything with you, Severus, for tonight we will just have to keep the conversation to a minimum." Hermione blushed a deep pink upon realizing the way her comment may have sounded to Severus. In turn this brought a knowing smirk to his face, causing her blush to deepen. "We'll manage just fine, I'm sure. I'll see you at seven."

Severus gave Hermione what he hoped was a warm, sincere smile as his answer. Hermione continued on into the Hospital Wing obviously a little flustered at their exchange as Severus headed back to the dungeons. He briefly wondered what her business was and whether it was with Poppy. For his part, Severus knew that he was returning to the dungeons far happier than when he had left them. He also knew that Hermione was entirely to thank for that.

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Seven o'clock found Severus at the entrance to Hermione's living quarters, which were located on the seventh floor, close by the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Just as he raised his hand to knock, the door opened, and Severus found himself face to face with none other than Neville Longbottom.

"Hello, Professor," Neville greeted in a cordial manner. "Hermione told me that she was expecting you. I was just leaving. Goodnight then." With that Neville took off down the corridor, not waiting for a reply from Severus.

Severus watched Neville disappear down the corridor as he headed around a corner that led to a staircase to the lower floors. He still envied Neville his close friendship with Hermione and was glad that Neville had not expected a verbal response to his greeting. He really didn't want that particular dunderhead to hear his currently impaired speech.

At that moment, Hermione appeared at her door. "Severus, I thought that was probably you. I heard Neville speaking to someone when he left. Will this be warm enough for our mystery location tonight?" Hermione held open her arms so Severus could see the lovely dark green, velvet robes she was wearing. A thick wool cloak in a deep grey color was draped over one arm, and an ivory colored cashmere scarf and matching gloves set were held in her other hand. But Severus' attention was drawn to her hair. She had left most of it down, and it fell in a riot of soft unruly curls. A section of hair from either side of her face had been secured in the back with one of her sturdy hair pins, keeping it from falling forward to obscure her vision, as well as the view of her face.

Severus hoped his smile spoke of how lovely he found her appearance. He fully intended to use as few words as possible tonight. "Indeed," he answered her query.

"Are you going to tell me where we are headed now?" Hermione asked as she slipped a hand through the offered crook of his arm.

"Patience," was Severus' one word reply as he gave her a cheeky little smirk. Enjoying the feel of her hand on his sleeve, he used his other hand to pull her arm through his until they were linked arm in arm. Then he proceeded down the corridor at a much slower pace than usual.

Severus led Hermione toward the north end of the castle while he listened to her one-sided dialogue. Apparently, she would be true to her word from their meeting outside the infirmary earlier that day, and she would do her best to provide all the conversation for the evening.

"Neville just had to bring his latest letter from Luna to share with me. She has been awarded funding from the Ministry to conduct research in the Forbidden Forest. The project will involve Hogwarts quite heavily. Luna will be provided residence here at the castle, and she will work directly with the Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures departments. The Ministry wants a complete catalogue of all the flora and fauna of the forest. Luna is thrilled to have the opportunity of identifying new species through the process.

"It is really quite interesting, don't you think? I wouldn't be surprised if you don't benefit from some of her discoveries, Severus." Hermione looked up to find Severus looking at her with amusement. He raised an eyebrow to communicate his opinion to her. "Oh, you be that way. Just wait, you may find yourself having to take that smirk back," Hermione admonished.

Severus longed to tell Hermione that he doubted anyone could completely catalogue the Forbidden Forest. Only the Ministry would have the presumption to try. Plus he thought the veracity of some of Ms. Lovegood's discoveries would certainly bear a second opinion. Wracksports, indeed.

They had progressed through the castle far enough for Hermione to realize that they were not headed for Entrance Hall with its main exit of the castle. With a curious look, she stopped Severus to inquire, "We're not headed for the Astronomy Tower, are we? Even with these cloaks we'd freeze trying to have dinner up there at this time of year!"

This earned her a raspy little laugh from Severus. "Patience," he repeated. A few minutes later found them at the base of the Astronomy Tower. "Trust me," Severus stated as Hermione again gave him a questioning look. He hadn't realized until that very moment how much her trust meant as he followed her up the tower stairs.

Most people might wonder that Severus would want to use the site of one of the greatest tragedies of his life for a romantic dinner. Severus knew that Hermione Granger was not one of those. Shortly after they formed a friendship, Hermione sensed Severus' aversion to the Astronomy Tower during a shared evening patrol. Hermione had been methodical in facing her post-traumatic war problems and had learned many tools for addressing them. She doubted her chance for success in getting Severus to a psychologist's office and decided to share what she had learned with him, if he would ever let her.

Hermione shared the Muggle concept of post-traumatic syndrome with Severus, and she told him about aversion therapy. The mere fact that Severus had listened to her, even under the context of learning what Hermione had done to move past her war scars, showed her a degree of trust she hadn't expected.

Eventually, Hermione upped the ante. On an evening patrol she had confronted Severus about how she suspected the Astronomy Tower affected him. When he started to bluster and blow, she had reached out to place a hand on his arm and effectively stopped his tirade mid-stream. "Severus, nothing will ever erase what happened that night, or what you were forced to do. You are free, however, to create your own future. You can build new memories on the Astronomy Tower. Good memories. I'd like to help you, if you'll let me. In time you will have both the good and the bad memories, and the tower itself will, hopefully, lose the power to invoke just one emotion in you."

Severus gave Hermione no response that night. She took not hexing her as a positive sign. A short time later, Hermione noticed that Severus was finding many reasons for going to the Astronomy Tower, both with and without her, during the day and at night. Even Minerva picked up on the change. Hermione heard her asking Severus about his new routines. "I thought you avoided the Astronomy Tower, Severus?" Minerva queried one day at lunch.

"Lately, I've found an appreciation for the view, Minerva. Did you realize how well one can follow Quidditch practice from that perspective? You might want to consider looking in on the Gryffindor's practice sometime soon. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I was quite appalled at their efforts last week."

As was his aim, Minerva became indignant at Severus' criticism of her team and took to arguing their merits, the Astronomy Tower completely gone from her mind. Severus turned toward Hermione at that moment to share a small smirk, and she knew that he had taken the matter of the Astronomy Tower into his own hands. It made Hermione's heart glad to see Severus letting go of past demons.

# Purpose and Promise

Chapter 6 of 6

Originally written for 2008 SS/HG Exchange. Severus Snape unexpectedly survives Nagini's attack due to the aid of Lucius Malfoy. Now that he has outlived both his Masters and the promises that drove his life for the past 18 years, what is his purpose? How does he find meaning in life and learn to love beyond his previous life of guilt and penance? A special thanks to Little Beloved for lending her beta skills.

Thank you to everyone who followed and enjoyed my SSHG Winter 2008 Exchange piece. Your kind words and reviews have meant the world to me. This is the final chapter.

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Original Prompt: Snape still has some lingering side effects from Nagini's bite. One of them is that he loses his voice easily and often. He and Hermione are having a conversation, when his voice goes out at a very bad/frustrating/dangerous moment. What are they talking about? Why are they even having a conversation? It's all up to you!

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Standing inside the door to the tower roof, Severus helped Hermione bundle up in her cloak and scarf and then wrapped his own around him. Taking her by the hand, he led her through the door and into the bitter cold of a fall night in the Scottish Highlands. Once they were on the roof, Severus stepped behind Hermione to give her a full view of the tower roof. He was not disappointed by her reaction as Hermione exclaimed, "Oh my, Severus, how beautiful!"

Several feet in front of them and surrounded by softly falling snow and the black velvet night was the result of Severus' hard work over the past few days. Using a time-extended charm, Severus had created a magical barrier to the outside elements. It appeared as though a room, built of glass walls, had been placed in the middle of the tower roof. Inside the room a soft golden light suffused everything in a warm glow. It reminded Hermione of the enchanting effects Flitwick produced for holiday festivities.

Few knew that Flitwick often called on Severus for another pair of hands. Severus didn't want students to know he was proficient at Charms, and that he could create such decorative fancies. He flat out refused to help on Valentine's Day. Yet the fact remained that Severus possessed a good eye for creating attractive, understated environments when he deemed it necessary to do so. Tonight he had done the best he could.

Severus showed Hermione through the entrance to their dining area. It was fairly spacious because Severus wanted to leave enough room for dancing after dinner. The area was comfortably warm due to his skills at Warming Charms. Heating an area so large and against the strong outdoor elements took a lot of energy and would require him to renew the charm periodically.

Severus laid their cloaks over a spare chair as Hermione took in the environment. Plants in the room had a decidedly tropical feel, including a few small palms and Hermione's favorite flowering plant. "Gardenias!" she exclaimed. Potter had told Severus of her fondness for the flower. They reminded her of holidays spent in Spain when she had lived in Athens. "Did Neville help you find these?" she asked.

"I have my own sources," Severus replied rather curtly as his voice cracked yet again.

Candles lit the dining table and were placed artfully on tables grouped with comfortable chairs around the room's perimeter, but the golden light of the room seemed infused into the very air. Real fairies flitted between the plants and the floral arrangements, including a bowl of floating gardenias and candles on the table. As a boy, Severus found he had a talent for coaxing fairies out of their natural environs. It had been his tradition to present Lily with a flower adorned with a live fairy on special occasions. He wasn't about to tell Hermione that he was the one responsible for acquiring the fairies Flitwick used for the Yule Balls.

Winky had scoured the castle and provided for every request Severus had made to furnish a romantic space for dining. The linen, china, crystal and other accoutrements were more suited for Malfoy Manor than Spinner's End, but nothing was ostentatious. To complete the mood, Severus borrowed a charmed music box from Flitwick. It played soft, romantic classical pieces, including composers Potter believed Hermione favored. Severus touched the box with his wand tip, and the music began.

Hermione had moved to stand next to Severus at the table. "Thank you for all of this. It is so beautiful. I'm speechless." Hermione grasped Severus' arm and rose up on her toes to place a kiss on his cheek. Severus was sure he was the one blushing this time, but it gave him great pleasure to know she was pleased by his efforts.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" Severus offered Hermione. As he spoke, a bottle of champagne appeared on the table in a silver ice bucket, accompanied by two glasses.

"That sounds wonderful," Hermione answered. She accepted the glass of champagne and the seat Severus pulled out for her. Then they turned to the serious business of dinner.

Potter had confirmed Severus' notion that Hermione enjoyed French cuisine. "Not that fancy 'Haute Cuisine', but more like you find in smaller towns. She spent a lot of vacations with her parents on the French coasts, both in the north and south," Potter had informed him.

Severus had worked with Winky over the menu and didn't want to push the boundaries of the elf's abilities. He sought to keep the menu simple. They began with a selection of hors d'oeuvres while they enjoyed Malfoy's champagne, including an onion, nicoise olive and goat cheese tart and smoked salmon with capers. This was followed by a seafood stew, quite like bouillabaisse, accompanied by a white wine from Bordeaux that Malfoy had declared "my new discovery" to Severus. The main course consisted of a roasted duck breast in a garlic and walnut sauce, served with seasonal greens and truffle vinaigrette, accompanied by a cabernet sauvignon.

Hermione kept up the conversation throughout dinner with an enthusiastic discourse about her latest project. "It has really been providence how it has all come together. I take it you heard how Harry, Ron and I visited Luna's father when we were trying to solve the Horcrux and Hallow conundrum Dumbledore left us?"

Severus nodded in agreement. Over the years, Potter had managed to regale him with many of the highlights from his year of hunting Voldemort's Horcruxes. Severus' interest in these tales was greater than he would ever let on, at least to Potter. Dumbledore had essentially kept Severus in the dark regarding the Horcruxes, while at the same time expecting complete, blind cooperation in the role Dumbledore assigned him. Severus still found fascination with any information that filled in what Dumbledore



had withheld. It gave him a sense of finally seeing the big picture.

Of course, he had plenty of other reasons to know about the trio's visit to Xenophilius Lovegood's home. The official report had only listed Potter and Hermione's presence, as the Ministry had failed to capture Undesirable Number One once again. Failure on that scale was unacceptable in those days and meant heads rolled, quite figuratively.

Hermione continued to explain her project. "When the subject of 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' was brought up, and I shared the book Dumbledore had left me with Xenophilius Lovegood, he remarked about the book being an original version. That comment literally niggled about in my brain for years. We had so many more priorities that I couldn't pursue a matter of purely academic interest at that time. Finally, I took a serious look at the current version of 'The Tales of Beedle the Bard' sold at Flourish and Blotts, and I was amazed at how the original stories had changed! I began to research the changes, starting with identifying a timeline for when the tales were republished. I had to work backwards, but I think I've determined each publication.

"Then Madam Pince helped me hunt down a copy from each reprint. That's when it got really interesting. I could compare and find what was changed in each story and when. It became a real education in the evolution of social norms in wizarding culture through the centuries. That alone is a great start for an interesting historical perspective, but I've been detoured, so to speak, for the present time.

"Minerva offered to loan me Dumbledore's personal commentary on the tales. His paper was found along with the book, but it was considered a separate article and passed on to become the property of Hogwarts with all his other papers, while the book went to me. I must say, if I'd found any scrap of evidence that Dumbledore had placed information pertinent to Harry's quest in his paper, I would have personally summoned Rufus Scrimgeour back through the Veil to have a go at him." Hermione's fierce diatribe made Severus flinch in mock sympathy, eliciting a laugh from Hermione. "Don't fear for Mr. Scrimgeour, I've found no such thing.

"One idea led to another, though, and I decided to send out letters of inquiry to wizarding publishers. I still had my translations from the ancient runes of the original text and now I had Dumbledore's commentary on the tales. I thought there might be a market for these two things combined. I'm still getting over the shock at how receptive my idea was deemed to be. There has even been a bit of a bidding war over the publishing rights."

Severus was already aware of most of this news. Hermione kept him abreast of all her pet projects, but he had never heard her relate this tale from start to finish. Her enthusiasm was infectious. "When does the gold begin to flow your way?" Severus teased. He was pleased that there was just a minimum of crackling heard in his voice.

Hermione shifted her full attention on Severus as she asked, "Did your mother share any of Beedle's tales with you during your childhood?"

Severus nodded his head and replied, "So did her mother, on the rare occasion we visited the Prince home."

This was the only time Hermione remembered Severus expanding on any information about his family. Her knowledge of his family came primarily from Harry and Minerva, and it was extremely limited. She sensed a feeling of heaviness in his reply and wanted to avoid any negative memories clouding their star-strewn night. So she moved the conversation back to her project.

"Currently, I'm reviewing my early translation of 'The Warlock's Hairy Heart.' Compared to Beedle's other tales, I find this story quite gruesome. In fact, it's rather macabre. Don't you think so, Severus?"

Severus gave a soft snort and a nod to Hermione's question, but it was the twinkle in his eye along with a playful smirk that held Hermione's attention.

"You don't fool me a bit, Severus. I know what you're thinking," Hermione accused as she pointed a finger at him.

"Become a Legilimens, have you?" Snape didn't care how he sounded at the moment. Hermione's conviction that she knew the source of his amusement seemed absurdly funny for some reason.

"You're very funny, ha, ha. No, I haven't become a Legilimens, as you are fully aware, but I clearly remember your reign of terror during my own student years," Hermione retorted.

"Me?" Snape indicated with further amusement at Hermione's indignation.

"Yes, and you know exactly what I'm getting at. You were the 'Bat of the Dungeons'. You ruled the students by use of fear and were the subject of endless speculation about your powers. From Vampire to Inferi, I bet I heard every possible explanation for the extraordinary powers and Dark Magic you were rumored to wield. So, of course I also heard rumors of the Hairy Heart you kept in one of the unused dungeons. I seem to remember connecting this story to Luna, which makes perfect sense now. Not knowing Beedle's tales, I didn't understand the reference, but it was sufficiently odd enough for me to remember hearing it said."

Hermione seemed to have finished with her outburst for the moment, and Severus had worked through his amusement. The music that had accompanied their dinner had ended sometime without their notice, but now the quiet gave voice to a feeling of tension. Hermione met Severus eyes' with hers, but found their intensity was almost painful. She had to look away and found her gaze drawn to the floating gardenias in the middle of the table.

"So what did you believe, Hermione?" Severus finally whispered. His quiet, honest question broke the tension, and Hermione raised her eyes to meet his again with a confident smile.

"I always knew that those tall tales were just silly. You are an extremely talented wizard, highly intelligent and possessing extraordinary skills. You are uncommonly brave and loyal to the end. You accepted the role of protector, which placed you in peril most of the time, at least after Voldemort's return, but in the end you are just as mortal as the rest of us. You always had my respect and admiration. Even when you behaved like a right bastard, I still admired your skill and abilities."

Leaning toward Severus, Hermione placed a hand over his on the table top and whispered in a conspiratorial manner. "I know you have a heart. It is not hairy, and it isn't kept in an unused room in the dungeons. It has been wounded, like all human hearts, but it is whole and it resides here in your chest." Hermione leaned further toward Severus and laid her palm flat on his coat to indicate the location of said heart. Then, straightening back up, she had the temerity to add, "I'll even venture that your heart is just as fair as the one belonging to the maiden in the tale."

This last remark earned her a raised eyebrow and the word, "Insolence," muttered under Severus breath.

Hermione's declarations had touched Severus' heart, and he felt a bit in awe of her and the emotions she stirred in him. For several moments they were able to hold each other's gaze without the usual fear or shyness that crept in at such times. Non-verbal communication flowed between them, and they both understood that their relationship had reached a new depth.

Remembering Potter's words about how much Hermione enjoyed dancing and wanting to feel see how she felt in his arms, Severus pulled out his wand and tapped the enchanted music box to resume its classical selections. The opening notes of Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers" from the *Nutcracker Suite* began to float through the air.

On hearing the first notes of that magical waltz, Severus rose from the table and held out a hand to Hermione. Words were unnecessary to convey this invitation. Taking his hand, Hermione and Severus began to waltz a slow circuit around the boundaries of the Charmed space with the twinkling stars of the heavens above them. After a few turns around the dance area, Severus slowed their steps until they were doing little more than swaying in place together.

Hermione rested her head on his shoulder, and Severus heard her give a small sigh of contentment. He realized that holding Hermione like that felt both excitingly new, yet comfortably familiar. Most of all, it just felt right. He raised his hand from the small of her back and fulfilled his desire to bury his fingers in her hair. It felt soft and springy, like a little cloud of silk, and he wanted to bury his face in it as well.

Raising her face so that she could look directly into his eyes, Hermione inquired, "Didn't you say we could have dessert downstairs, Severus, in your suite?"

"I did." Severus's cracked voice had a gruff quality to it. He was thankful, given the circumstances, that it wasn't making any undignified squeaking sound. "There is a dark

chocolate mousse waiting on us, courtesy of Winky, as well as a lovely cognac. Despite the benefits of Warming Charms, I believe, with the fire in my suite, it will be much warmer there." This was the most Severus had said in one go all evening, and he couldn't help a small smirk as he realized how Hermione could interpret the double meaning about his warmer quarters.

Hermione felt herself warm and realized that she was blushing yet again at Severus. She just couldn't help it when he looked at her like that. Even if his voice was hoarse and cracked, lacking its usual velvet caress, his words and their cadence, along with those black, black eyes, still made her toes curl. She returned his smirk with one of her own.

Severus felt his heart skip a beat when Hermione looked at him like that. He couldn't let this moment pass. He slowly lowered his face to hers, watching closely to judge Hermione's reaction to his obvious intent. Stopping a hair's breath away from her face, Severus hesitated, wanting to be sure that his kiss would be welcome. Ever the Gryffindor, Hermione closed the distance and initiated the kiss. At first soft and sweet, their kiss quickly heated and became more passionate. Once again, Severus was struck with how right this felt, and when they broke apart they were each a little breathless.

"Let's go," Hermione urged. Taking Severus by the hand, she headed toward the boundary of their enchanted dining room so they could leave the top of the Astronomy Tower and begin the long trek down to the dungeons.

"One moment," Severus paused as he grabbed up their cloaks. "It is still snowing out there," he indicated and swept Hermione's cloak over her shoulders. Then slinging his own on, he pulled Hermione close again and gave her another kiss, both gentle and sweet. "Now we're ready," Severus proclaimed.

Crossing the magical barrier that had kept the outside elements at bay, Severus and Hermione were hit with a blast of icy air as snowflakes fell on their winter cloaks. It was just a short distance to the tower door, and they were able to escape through and close the bitter cold behind them. However, it was still quite chilly at this level, and the thoughts of a warm fire beckoned them both.

With Severus in the lead, they descended the staircase with Hermione's arm tucked close to his side. Severus slowed his pace to ensure that Hermione felt comfortable and safe on the long, steep decline, while at the same time his mind was on fire with thoughts.

Here and now was his chance at another new beginning, an unexpected chapter in his life. Surviving the war had been nothing short of a miracle. When he had returned to Hogwarts with a new purpose, one of his own making and no longer a servant to the plans of others, he thought that was the reason for his survival.

Yet for all his success with moving Slytherin House along a new path, Severus had continued to live a life where his past still ruled his actions, actions that had kept him alone. Now he asked himself, "Why?"

When Harry and Hermione had brought those cursed memories to him at Malfoy Manor all those years ago, he had chosen to destroy them. He had yearned to be free from them; free to create a new path for his life. In many ways, he had succeeded, and now it was time to move even further away from his past. It was time to give his heart to another. Lily had not been the guardian of his heart for a decade now, yet his fears had still kept him from action, fears of hurt, pain and rejection.

Could he, Severus Snape, take this chance, this unexpected chance at finding love and happiness with another, with Hermione? Minerva's words echoed in his ears: "Severus, Hermione is nothing like Lily Potter." The full truth of those words finally hit him, and he felt as if a final weight had been lifted from his heart.

Seeing that they had reached the bottom of the stairs and were going to head out into a main castle corridor, Severus pulled Hermione to the side and stepped into an alcove, obscured by a medieval tapestry. Here, he gathered her close and kissed her with a great deal more passion than before.

When they finally pulled apart, a breathless and wide-eyed Hermione exclaimed, "Who are you and what have you done with Severus Snape?"

This earned her enthusiastic, if raspy, laughter. "My answer depends on whether you mean that as a complaint, or a compliment," Severus replied with humor.

"Well, if you are indeed Severus Snape, then you have no complaints from me," answered Hermione as she rubbed a corner of his wool lapel between her thumb and forefingers. "If you are an imposter, then I insist you free the real Severus, after you give him a few lessons."

Hermione was again rewarded with Severus' laughter and the suggestion that they continue on their way. Their cheerful banter continued as they wound their way down to the dungeons, and Severus made a point of stopping for a bit of snogging in the more discreet corners and alcoves along their path. After all, he had new memories to make with the new guardian of his heart.

The End