

# Six Months, by Severus Snape

*by lady\_of\_the\_refrigerator*

"Up until now, I have held my tongue and let the reports run roughshod over my reputation because I simply do not care what people think of me. There is, however, one topic I would like to address, for it affects people's perception of more than just my character. This topic has gained undue attention in recent months and, since the attention has taken a derogatory turn, I find myself driven to break my public silence at last."

## Six Months, by Severus Snape

*Chapter 1 of 1*

"Up until now, I have held my tongue and let the reports run roughshod over my reputation because I simply do not care what people think of me. There is, however, one topic I would like to address, for it affects people's perception of more than just my character. This topic has gained undue attention in recent months and, since the attention has taken a derogatory turn, I find myself driven to break my public silence at last."

Preface

My name is Severus Snape.

I realise you probably already know my name if you are reading this, but...as I've no clue how to begin this properly...it seems as good a place as any to start.

My name is Severus Snape. I am thirty-nine years of age at the time of this writing. I am a half-blood English wizard who recently recovered from life-threatening injuries received during the Battle of Hogwarts. I taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for sixteen years. I taught many of you who are now reading this, or perhaps taught your children. All of this, again, you likely know.

You likely *think* you know much more about me. About my personality and character. About my loyalties and motivations. About my anger and prejudice. About my *proclivities* and *predilections*.

There have been many varied and contradictory versions of my biography written since the Battle of Hogwarts. Why I've become the tabloid fodder I have, Merlin only knows. They could have repaired the damaged castle solely with papier-mâché stones made from newspaper articles claiming to tell my story. Much of this information has been at worst patently false, at best misleading. The bias of the writers, positive or negative, is clear.

I have neither the time nor the inclination to set the record straight on every issue. Up until now, I have held my tongue and let the reports run roughshod over my reputation because I simply do not care what people think of me. There is, however, one topic I *would* like to address, for it affects people's perception of more than just *my* character. This topic has gained undue attention in recent months and, since the attention has taken a derogatory turn, I find myself driven to break my public silence at last.

But this will *not* be my life story. What you read here is my unvarnished account of the first six months of my relationship with Miss Hermione Granger, and not much more. I will offer you my side of the story to the best of my ability. It is up to you to decide what to make of it.

February

It started, as many things did, with a *bang*.

The front door slammed shut hard enough to rouse me from my writer's blo...er... writing. Luckily, Mrs Black's portrait had lost the will to scream some months before or I'd have been treated to the harridan's wails, as well.

I dragged myself from my writing desk and poked my head round the doorjamb just in time to see Hermione Granger storm past, trailed by her floating trunk. The door to her old room flew open in front of her...she hadn't used her wand...and it slammed closed again behind her. The air crackled with magic.

So, you see, to say she had come blustering back into my life with a bang would not be an exaggeration. She had done so quite literally, indeed.

While I'd never been *truly* shot of Granger...imposing on Potter's guilty conscience by staying at Grimmauld Place far longer than strictly necessary put me in her path, at least theoretically...next to the Weasley boy who was off gallivanting round the world trying to 'find himself', I saw less of her than any of Potter's contemporaries.

Unlike her usual partners in crime, she was hell-bent on sitting her NEWTs and had gone back to Hogwarts after all of the post-war insanity died down to prepare for them. Which is what made her arrival on my borrowed doorstep in early February particularly perplexing. Hermione Granger, without a war to distract her, would not willingly leave school.

I tried to ignore her at first. I truly did. My curiosity was piqued, there was no denying it, but I valued my solitude; it had been hard won and, if she would only be staying for a short time, I was loath to sacrifice it voluntarily. But when the noises coming from across the hallway took a decidedly glass-shattering-against-a-wall turn, I had to investigate.

I crept across the hallway and pressed my head against Granger's door to better identify the noises, but was met with a sizzling jolt of magic across my ear instead. Before I could do much more than flinch, Granger wrenched the door open in front of me.

'Spying again, Professor?'

She stood in the doorway, drumming her fingers impatiently on one of her crossed arms. Anger radiated off of her in waves. I could actually feel the hairs on my arms stand on end.

Instead of coming up with a brilliant retort, I stood there dumbly, cradling my tender ear. Months of leisure had clearly put me off my game.

She quickly lost patience with my silence and shut the door in my face.

When I saw nothing of Granger for the rest of the day, I wasn't surprised. But when she failed to make an appearance the next day as well, I admit I started to worry. Not even the scent of food drew her from her bedroom. I wasn't about to repeat my tongue-tied failure in the upstairs hallway, so I had to turn elsewhere to discover what had happened to my erstwhile student.

As much as I wished to avoid it, I had to contact Minerva.

---

My relationship with Minerva McGonagall was already strained before the war. Being Heads of rival Houses wasn't exactly all sunshine and daisies, especially with the heightened tensions between the Slytherins and, well... *everyone*, after the Dark Lord's return.

After Dumbledore, and after I became Headmaster, whatever tenuous bond we might have had was destroyed.

Her opinion of me did not improve much after the end of the war. She resented me for not martyring myself. Odd, that, considering *she* was the one who found me that day in the Shrieking Shack. She lost some of her compassion on the battlefield, I think. The war left its scars on all of us...I wore my most prominent on my neck...but some scars were more visible than others.

Still, she responded readily enough to my Floo call, and she was more than willing to explain Granger's situation to me.

Apparently, the new Defence professor had the brilliant idea of staging an ambush on a class full of war veterans for the Monday-morning lesson. Granger had the idiotic man clinging to the rafters before he cast anything more powerful than a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

She should have been given full marks, as far as I was concerned. She certainly proved she could handle an unexpected attack. I doubted Minerva would appreciate my assessment, so I kept it to myself. I would not be so considerate with other opinions.

'Truth be told, Severus, I'm relieved she decided to stay at Grimmauld Place. I think it's better she's not on her own right now,' she said.

'You *must* think she's bad off if you consider my company a benefit to her. Tell me, Minerva,' I said...I enjoyed watching the older woman bristle, always have, 'if you were so worried about Miss Granger, why haven't you gone looking for her yourself?'

'Severus, you're being unfair.'

'Am I?'

She lifted her jaw, indignant. 'We know she went through a horrifying ordeal during the war; we've tried to be cautious with the students who were involved in the fighting.'

'Not cautious enough, apparently.'

'As if you were the model of administrative caution,' Minerva scoffed. 'You had a rebellion going on under your nose *and* the Carrows stalking about with free rein over punishments...'

'I kept the students *alive* in an impossible situation,' I hissed. 'If the Carrows truly had their way, it would have ended quite differently.'

I fell silent for a moment as I calmed myself and collected my thoughts. We had had this argument before, and I had not set out to have it again. 'Was she expelled?' I asked finally.

'Oh, no, of course not. She panicked. Todd should have known better than to surprise her like he did. In any case, there was *no* harm done. Afterward, he apologised for putting her in such a situation, but it was no use. She had gone by morning.'

---

After I cancelled the Floo connection, I headed down to the kitchen for tea, taking a short detour to Granger's room on the way. Standing a safe distance from the warded door, I listened. She had the wireless on softly, and if I concentrated hard enough, I could almost make out the sound of pages turning. She was all right, then, even if she wasn't all well.

It was unusual, how Granger ended up where she was. During my convalescence, the others had treated Potter like a veritable demigod and took every precaution to avoid setting off the Weasley boy after the loss of his brother, but Granger was left to her own devices, more or less. Perhaps they thought she was stronger, or further removed from the pain. Or maybe she just... slipped through the cracks. Whatever the cause, the Hermione Granger who stood before me the previous day bore little resemblance to the Hermione Granger I knew before the war. She was broken and nobody had tried very hard to fix her.

The next morning, hunger finally won out over stubbornness and anger, and Granger ventured down to the kitchen in time for breakfast.

'Good morning,' I said, as she started rummaging through the pantry. 'I've made tea.' She ignored me. In fact, she somehow managed to ignore all my attempted pleasantries. Although, she may have taken my 'Lovely day, isn't it?' more seriously if we weren't in the middle of a storm. Pleasantries are obviously not my strong suit.

She lit the hob, melted butter, cracked eggs into a pan...and all the while, she pretended I didn't exist. That is, until I approached her, when she spun around quickly, flinging uncooked bits of egg across my shirt.

'What? What is it? *What do you want?*' she demanded.

'You're burning the eggs.'

'Oh,' she said, before she turned and lowered the flame. 'You can give up the Mr Amiable act, you know.'

'Pardon?'

'Oh, you know very well what I mean. The small talk, the tea. I know what you're thinking. Just say it and be done with it.'

'And what *am* I thinking?'

'That I couldn't handle Hogwarts. I've given up. I've quit. I've *failed*.'

'But you haven't done. You've left school, yes, but so have Potter and Weasley.'

'But it's *different* for me. Expectations are *different* for me. I'm supposed to earn more NEWTs than anyone in a century. I'm supposed to be strong. I'm supposed to be self-sufficient. I'm supposed to get back on my feet without anybody's help. I'm supposed to handle being lonely and scared and isolated, being tortured, taking lives, and just... head back to Hogwarts like nothing has happened.'

'Oh, how wrong those expectations are! I can't even cook a sodding proper plate of eggs. Some self-reliant witch I am,' she said, slamming the pan down on the hob in frustration. 'I know watching one of the Golden Trio fall from grace must be right up your alley, Professor, but please... Try to keep the gloating to a minimum. I'd hate to see all the effort everyone spent saving your life go to waste.'

'First things first, Granger.' I reached out and cautiously pried the egg-coated spatula she'd been gesticulating with from her hand. 'Save the death threats until after breakfast. You sit, I'll finish the eggs.'

She did as I asked far easier than I expected, riled up as she was. She dropped down onto one of the wooden chairs and propped herself up on her arm dejectedly. I went to work salvaging breakfast; I could feel her gaze on me while I cooked, but she said nothing until she bit into the omelette I set in front of her.

She shot me a suspicious glance across the table. 'This is good.'

'Don't sound so surprised.'

'I wouldn't have thought you'd have had much use for cooking, what with the house-elves and all,' she said as she tucked into her food in earnest.

'There *were* summers, you know.'

'Where did you learn to cook?'

'*Chez Lumiere*, the finest bistro in Paris,' I deadpanned.

'*Really?*' she said, taken aback.

'No, not *really*,...I've never been to Paris and *Chez Lumiere* was as pulled-out-of-my-arse as it sounds...' Trial and error, Granger. That's all.'

I watched her eat for a moment, slicing my own egg into precise squares, trying to delay the conversation I knew I must start. 'I spoke with Minerva last night.'

'Oh? And what did she say?' Granger tried for a tone of polite disinterest, but failed miserably.

'That she was glad to hear you chose to stay at Grimmauld Place.'

'So she can be sure I won't do anything more stupid than I already have, I'm sure,' she said, dismissively.

'Yes,' I said.

Her head shot up and she met my eyes, startled. I don't know why she expected me to dissemble. Outside of espionage, it was never my style to blunt the truth.

'What are you planning to do about the NEWTs?'

She looked lost for a moment, devastated. 'I don't know. Professor McGonagall offered to find a tutor for me, but I honestly don't think I could handle having anyone else involved in my life right now.'

'I could do it,' I said, surprising myself. The words left my mouth so quickly, they barely registered with me until after I'd spoken them.

My hasty offer must have surprised her, too, as she'd frozen in place with her fork part-way to her mouth. 'I'm sorry. I don't think I heard you correctly.'

'I could tutor you. It wouldn't take very long for you to prepare,' I said.

My mouth might have got ahead of my mind before I contemplated what I had got myself into, but the more I thought of it, the more appealing it seemed. I was already drawing up revision schedules, mentally. Tutoring wouldn't even cut into my writing time. I hadn't strung more than two sentences together in weeks.

I *could* help her. If she would do it, if she agreed... Everyone else had left her to sink or swim on her own. I knew what loneliness...what hopelessness...that kind of abandonment could cause. I knew it better than I'd care to.

'All right,' she said slowly, after a moment. 'All right, I'll do it.'

She reached out across the table and we shook hands, sealing our agreement.

'Good. But first I think we need to set some ground rules. No more of this Hurricane Hermione business.'

'I'm not going to hurt myself, if that's what you think. I'm certainly *not* trying to.'

I examined her face; she seemed truthful. I nodded, satisfied. 'Three days a week, to start. More, if you're able.'

'Sounds reasonable.' She paused and searched *my* face. 'Why are you being so nice to me?' I must have looked uncomfortable because she backpedaled. 'You don't have to answer, I just...'

'Because I can,' I said simply, and realised it was true.

---

The first week of tutoring went well, if slowly. I spent as much time tiptoeing round Granger's frayed nerves as I did teaching. Although, it did feel good to be teaching again, and with a willing student especially, even if the goings were slow.

After our lessons, I almost always found her holed up somewhere with her head stuck in a book. Which wouldn't have been at all strange, except the books were now cookery books rather than textbooks. She was up to something, but I couldn't put my finger on what, exactly.

I discovered what it was the second Monday of our sessions. I took a short nap after our morning Transfiguration practice...my body might have healed since Nagini, but performing complicated magic still drained my energy rather quickly...and woke to one of the most mouth-watering aromas on Earth: roast chicken.

I can't fully explain the allure of a good roast chicken. It was one of the few meals growing up that my mother never whinged about cooking the Muggle way. I always found excuses to hover when Mum was roasting a chicken. Not even my father and one of his moods could drag me away.

'You shouldn't be responsible for tutoring me *and* cooking all the meals. Just think of it as my way of paying you back,' Granger explained, when she found me in the kitchen doorway, near to drooling.

I didn't care if she was paying back the chicken for the 'Over-Easy Massacre of '99'; if she hadn't carved the bird within thirty seconds, I would have devoured it whole.

Thus began a new part of our bargain. It was mutually beneficial, even though I started to suspect very quickly she got more out of cooking than a sense of pulling her own weight. I could recognise the beginning of an obsession when I smelled it. Even when *it* smelled like roast chicken.

March

Granger and I got on much better than I would have thought, considering the discord between us back at Hogwarts. We appreciated each other's company, for the most part, and knew when to stay out of each other's way when space was needed.

She had been living at Grimmauld Place nearly a month when we hit our first...and only...setback.

Always the the touchiest subject of the lot, the Defence lesson that day had her withdrawing even more than it usually did. I expected her to disappear into the kitchen afterwards, and not show her face again until meal time. What I *wasn't* expecting was for her to disappear...period.

I had a good idea what caused her low spirits. Last year, March had been, well... to say it had been *difficult* would be such a massive understatement; it would trivialise the seriousness of the events. A year ago, Granger and her friends were Snatched from their campsite. A year ago, she was tortured.

(Anniversaries of traumatic events can be extremely trying times, of course. The only reason I have no recollection of the first anniversary of Lily's death is because, in the days leading up to 31 October, I pre-emptively drowned my sorrows and didn't wake up until All Saints' Day.)

I finally found her in Black's old room. And she was not alone.

She knelt on the floor, looking decidedly out of place surrounded by the dead man's 'decor', such as it was, but not nearly as out of place as her companion. The figure next to her on the floor was, for all intents and purposes, me. Me as I was nearly a year before...neck shredded, blood and silvery strands of memory mixing in a puddle under my head. No wonder her face was as white as a sheet. It was even more gory a scene than I'd imagined from my limited point of reference. My scars twinged.

As I stepped between Hermione and...*myself*, I suddenly had to struggle against the growing urge to run from the room. Because as soon as I reached for her hand, the lifeless body at my feet transformed into a hissing, snapping, writhing mass.

'Boggart,' she said, through tears.

'I'd gathered as much. Come.'

I led her downstairs to the kitchen and set about making tea. Hermione was silent throughout, save for the occasional sniffle. That, too, soon disappeared.

I sat across from her and toyed with my teacup.

'I'm sorry,' I said, after a few moments.

'Why are you apologising?'

I shrugged. 'You were crying. Over me. It seemed the thing to do.' What does one say when one's bloody, near-death has traumatised a friend?

'Well... thank you,' she said, and reached across the table to give my hand a squeeze, her cheeks tinged pink. It was good to see the colour return to her face, even if it was only due to embarrassment.

The tension between us didn't dissipate; questions unasked and unanswered hung in the air. The only noises in the room were the ticking of my watch, the tinkling of our teaspoons.

'Your greatest fear is Nagini,' she said. Not a question but a statement, to break the ice.

'And yours is my body exsanguinating on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. It would seem we have something in common.'

She looked at me warily. 'If you're waiting for an explanation...'

'I'm all ears.'

Her brows furrowed as she struggled for words. 'I thought...I thought it would fade with time, that the more time passed since...since I saw you there, the less it would bother me. It hasn't. Faded, I mean. I can...I can still smell the blood. I can still feel it under my fingernails. I don't know why I can't get it out of my mind. I've seen and done much worse. Will it ever be any easier?' A beat. 'Will I ever feel whole again?'

We were clearly talking about more than her boggart, now. 'I don't know,' I said. It was the blunt, technical truth.

'That's... comforting.'

'I'm not very good at comforting.'

'Try,' she said. Her voice was strong, but her eyes shone with unshed tears.

I knew I had to use an example other than Lily...obviously, my twenty years of mourning would not be particularly reassuring. I didn't think Granger would appreciate a round of 'do as I say, not as I do' lecturing. Suddenly, I knew what to say, my own experience after the Dark Lord's first fall flashing across my mind.

'How did you feel, after the war?'

'I...I don't remember.'

'Of course you do.'

'I don't! Everything was so...'

'Think, Hermione,' I said, and gave the hand that still held mine a quick squeeze with my free one.

'All right. I...I felt... lost. Overwhelmed. Confused. Dizzy, even. Sometimes,' she said, picking up speed and confidence, 'I felt... disconnected. From my own body. I couldn't tell when I was tired or hungry...I had to force myself to eat because I knew I *had* to, but even then... even then I had to go slowly. I was nauseated so easily.'

'And now?'

I could see she knew where I was taking my point. 'And now I've taken to cooking and eating like a duck to water.'

'See? Progress.'

She snorted and shook her head. 'You're right. You're not very good at comforting.'

Silence fell upon us again, but most of the tension had left. Companionable silence was so much more pleasant.

'My Patronus changed, too,' she said suddenly, startling me out of my perusal of our hands on the table. She pulled hers back before she continued. 'I don't know when it changed, exactly. I hadn't needed to use it while we were all staying here, but once I was back at Hogwarts...' She trailed off, caught up in the memory. After a moment, she pulled her wand from her sleeve and continued, 'I sent Ron a message on a particularly lonely night.' She cast the charm and a silvery-white spider emerged from her wand and skittered across the table.

I raised an eyebrow. 'I suppose he didn't take it well.'

'He sent me a Howler.'

I tried and failed to suppress a snort of laughter. She smiled sheepishly.

'I don't really blame him. I miscalculated the time difference. Nothing says "good morning" quite like a large, glowing tarantula crawling across your chest.'

April

After the boggart debacle, Granger was a lot less defensive, a lot less on edge. As she became more comfortable during our tutoring sessions, she gradually grew more adventurous in her cooking endeavours. At mealtimes, she would often come and find me, grab me by the hand and drag me back to the kitchen to see her newly-learned techniques in action. When she wasn't learning about Goblin Wars and the best way to turn a cupboard into an ocelot, she was learning how to chiffonade basil or cut bacon into lardons.

Soon enough, the staples Potter stocked the pantry with no longer satisfied her culinary ambitions, and she ventured out into London for new ingredients.

'Professor?' I heard, in the kind of whisper-yell reserved for checking, none too gently, if someone is sleeping. I had been, but not for long, as my reflexes took over and I tried to bound from my bed, ready for attack. Only instead, the sheets tangled round my legs and I toppled over the edge of the bed.

'Huh...Wha...What is it? Is something wrong?' I pulled myself off of the floor, struggling with the sheets twisted around my body. Granger stood on the opposite side of my bed. She looked mortified, but no worse for the wear. 'Bloody hell, Granger. What was that for?'

'I'm going out for a while this morning. I didn't want you to wake up to an empty house and worry.'

I snorted. 'No, it wouldn't do to startle me like that. How considerate.'

'Oh, I am *so* sorry, Professor.'

I sighed and hoisted myself back onto the bed. 'Despite appearances, I am nobody's professor.'

She giggled, just a bit. Tangled up in my bed sheets wearing only pyjama bottoms, I truly *didn't* look like anyone's professor. I blamed my poor word choice on being woken abruptly, and much too early. And seven in the morning was, indeed, much too early. After all, I had nearly two decades worth of sleep-debt to work off. I threw my arm over my eyes to block out the light fighting its way round the window shades.

'All right, well... I'll just be going, then. Enjoy the rest of the morning.'

'Thank you *ever* so much,' I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. When I didn't hear her footsteps, I risked a glance at her from under my arm. 'Did you,' I asked warily, 'want me to go with you?'

'Oh, no, it was just...no,' she said, sounding flustered. She made a quick retreat.

'Good,' I said, and flipped over onto my stomach, hoping for more sleep.

---

With Hermione spending more and more time away from Grimmauld Place, I found myself with quite a lot of free time on my hands once again. Free time inevitably led me back to my writing desk, where I was forced to face the fact that I still knew bugger all about what I wanted to write, or even *why* I wanted to write in the first place.

So I decided to treat my writer's block as I had done before Hermione showed up on my doorstep. Digging through the clothing in my wardrobe, I finally came upon what I was searching for: the stained, tattered robes I had been wearing when Nagini attacked me.

Writers, I had heard, used all manner of foolish rituals and objects to stave off writer's block, so when I decided to become one, I thought I should have a few rituals of my own. Wearing my old robes whilst I suffered writing difficulties was the only one I developed until then.

That particular morning, I discovered two things: Hermione had learnt a thing or two about stealth in our lessons, and I should have taken lessons *from her* about warding my bedroom door.

'Hermione!' I exclaimed, nearly jumping out of my skin as she came up behind me. '...I thought you were out,' I said, my hand over my pounding heart.

She was staring, of course. How could she not? It's not often you catch your house-mate indulging in the superstitious donning of his bloodied, near-death robes in an attempt to stimulate his long-dormant writing muse. It had worked in the past, inasmuch as any silly placebo does, but in the past I didn't have to worry about triggering painful memories in anyone but myself. I'd have been less embarrassed if she'd caught me having a wank.

The tension grew when she didn't speak for a few moments, but continued to stare. She'd been making great progress lately, even finding it in herself to make a joke about the, er... *living chandelier* in the Defence classroom at Hogwarts, instead of calling herself an unstable, hair-triggered failure, as she was wont to do when she first arrived. I hoped finding me here would not set her off.

I'll admit I was wary about what she'd do next for more selfish reasons, as well. I didn't fancy having to *scrapemyself* off of the ceiling if her nerves got the best of her once again.

She reached a hand toward me; I tried not to flinch as she pulled the fabric of the robe away from my neck. It was only when she touched my neck gently, her fingers caressing the scars there, that I began to relax.

'Hermione...' I breathed, not moving, just watching her.

'I'm thankful every day that you survived, Severus,' she said, 'The world would have been a lot less interesting without you.'

May

As the weeks passed, Hermione became friendly with the owner of a small shop she visited often. The older woman fancied herself a matchmaker and insisted that Hermione go out to dinner with her grandson, just about every time they saw each other. Hermione eventually capitulated and left to meet her would-be suitor late one afternoon. To my surprise, I found her in our kitchen, not two hours later, stirring something rather furiously on the cooker.

'You're home early.'

Her only answer was a grunt. She continued stirring.

'I take it dinner didn't go well.'

'Whatever gave you that idea?' she asked sarcastically, with a quick glance over her shoulder.

'What happened?'

'I'd rather not talk about it.' She stirred. And stirred. And stirred.

'What are you m...'

'He called me fat,' she blurted out, and turned around to face me, flushed with annoyance and embarrassment.

'He...what?'

'He called me fat.'

I instinctively looked her up and down, and willed my face not to redden when she noticed. 'He's mad,' I said emphatically. I felt for a moment like a small boy caught stealing sweets, but she smiled slightly and my guilt disappeared.

'Thank you, Severus,' she said shyly. 'I don't think he realised what he said, to tell the truth,' she continued, her tone lighter. 'We were discussing hobbies and of course my cooking came up. He told me his grandmother thought I must be a lovely cook and how he'd love me to make something for him sometime and he went on and on about how you're not supposed to trust a skinny cook and all his other girlfriends had been...'

'Ah. I see.'

'You do? Good. I thought it might have only been me,' she said, as she dipped a spoon into whatever she was stirring and tasted it. She shook her head, and grated some cheese into the pan.

'What are you making?'

'Risotto,' she said. 'It's nearly done, I just need to...' She took another small bite and groaned appreciatively at the flavour. The noise was vaguely obscene, but she obviously didn't realise the effect it had on me. I even felt a bit ambushed by my reaction, to tell the truth.

'That made all the difference. Here, taste,' she said, turning around with a spoonful of rice. Strangely, I found myself bypassing the spoon completely in favour of her lips.

I was entirely too busy panicking over my presumption to savour the kiss. Just because she found the thought of my death disturbing didn't mean she considered me a viable snogging partner. I didn't even consider myself a viable snogging partner. For her or anyone. I pulled back, stomach in knots, and waited for the world to end.

'I *meant* the risotto. But,...she leaned forward and brushed her lips against mine...'this is good, too.'

And then she turned back to the cooker and filled two plates with food before heading for the table. The ground stayed curiously solid beneath my feet. I forced said feet to move and joined her.

The world had obviously decided to stick around a bit longer and I might as well eat.

June

'Harry's coming to dinner on Sunday.' Six fateful, inescapable words if one is to be in a relationship with Hermione Granger. Well, three of the words could vary, but the implication stayed the same. Whether it was Potter for dinner on Sunday or Weasley for breakfast on Saturday, I would eventually have to be civil to one of the two most irritating individuals I ever had the displeasure of teaching.

While I didn't dread Potter's visit, I hardly looked forward to it, but for reasons most would probably never guess.

With Dumbledore gone, the boy was fresh out of people to idolise. Once the war ended and the truth about my allegiances came to light, he set his sights on me, of all people, for the job. His guilt and obligation must have got the better of his good sense, such as it was. The boy was a piece of work, surely.

I had mixed feelings about Potter's hero-worship. On one hand, it was only slightly less annoying than the defiant cheek he used to reserve for me; on the other, it earned me free room and board and forced politeness from whomever Potter had sway over. It made my life less complicated and I could certainly live with it, but...if he continues on this road of adulation...I pity the future offspring he saddles with my given name.

I settled into the armchair I brought down to the kitchen weeks ago, ostensibly to read but truthfully to watch Hermione cook. I had taken to doing so quite often, as she was likely to come and drag me to the kitchen to taste something or other eventually anyway. This way, I saved her the trip and I got to enjoy the view. And what a view it was! It was beautiful, really, to see her so captivated by something. The rest of the world fell away, and all that remained was the food and her passion for it.

After finishing her cake mixture and sliding it into the oven, Hermione joined me in my chair and perched on my lap. Her lips on mine drew me from my reverie.

'Mmm. Sneaking tastes, I see.'

She smiled. 'Thank you for staying, Severus. It means quite a lot to me, especially knowing your opinion of Harry.'

'Yes, it is very big of me, isn't it?' I said, with a smirk as she settled against me.

The sound of the front door closing startled us out of our...*activities*.

'Oh, goodness, he's early. I'll be back in a few minutes,' she said, kissing me and standing up to Disapparate.

Potter descended the steps into the kitchen just as Hermione disappeared with a *crack*.

'Hermione should be down shortly. She's freshening up,' I said, and I did some freshening up of my own to the kitchen and myself with a wave of my wand. If he noticed the floury hand-prints on my shoulders before I cleaned them, he didn't give any indication.

'All right, then,' said Potter. He shoved his hands into his pockets; his body was awash with nervous energy.

'There's coffee on. Help yourself,' I said, and took a sip from my own mug before turning my attention back to my book, hoping he would take the hint and stay silent.

I could feel his eyes on me. It was only a matter of time before he gave in to his newfound fondness for incessant questions and I braced myself for the onslaught. It was unwelcome and uncomfortable and awkward, but it was also inevitable, so I might as...

'You look well, Professor.'

I almost choked on my coffee. Respectful though he might now be, Potter was usually less complimentary as a rule. Especially at the beginning of a conversation, when he was simply buzzing with new questions about Lily or bursting with poorly concealed reverence for my *bravery*.

Thankfully, I was spared any further comments from Potter when Hermione swept back into the room.

'Harry!' she exclaimed, and ran over to hug her friend.

'It's so good to see you, Hermione,' he said, as he pulled back from her embrace. 'How are you? I had heard...'

'I'm fine. More than fine, actually.'

'I'm glad to hear it. I spoke with Professor McGonagall. To hear her tell it, you...'

'Professor McGonagall is entirely too caught up in being Headmistress to worry about her students,' I interrupted.

Potter was brought up short. He had such an inscrutable expression on his face as he looked at me, even I couldn't read it. Clearly, the Aurors were teaching him well.

'All right, then,' Hermione said, drawing Potter's attention away from me. 'We can catch up over dinner.'

Which is indeed what occurred. At least dinner was delicious because 'catching up' had the odd side effect of giving Potter even more ammunition for his campaign of Snape adoration: Hermione told him about our tutoring arrangement. He was ever so pleased with me for being *kind* to Hermione and helping her achieve her dream of sitting the NEWTs. I was sure he would be less than pleased to find out there was more than one mutually beneficial arrangement between Hermione and myself. He thought I was still in love with his mother, after all.

After dinner, I decided to venture out to find Hermione a present...NEWTs began in the morning, and I wanted to commemorate the official end of our tutoring sessions...and, to my displeasure, Potter chose to leave with me. He cited early morning Auror training as an excuse, that he couldn't be late if they had made an exception to accept him in the first place. I found myself trapped with his small talk on the front steps of Grimmauld Place.

'Hermione seems happy,' he said, as we waited for the poor sod walking his dog in the square to disappear from sight.

'Mm-hmm,' I murmured, counting the seconds until the flea-bitten beast finished piddling.

He hesitated a moment before continuing, 'If you don't mind me saying so, you do as well.'

He caught my gaze and held it, another skill he learnt recently, and waited for a response from me.

He'd wrong-footed me again. I disliked the feeling intensely. But he also seemed to be accepting of my relationship with Hermione however quietly, perhaps even approving of it. Something neither Hermione nor I had considered, when we decided to keep it secret, for the time being. For that, he'd earned some of my respect.

I straightened my back and nodded my head stiffly in acknowledgement. He smiled.

July

*Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.*

The noise of an owl's beak striking against the window pane. It sounded to me at the time almost like a death knell. The day I had been dreading had finally come. Hermione's NEWTs results had arrived.

I worked myself into a fit in the weeks since Potter's visit. Everything was going so well my usual pessimistic nature took it upon itself to put ideas in my head at every opportunity.

*Once Hermione finishes her exams, she's going to leave you.* Well, that didn't come to pass.

*Once Potter spills our secret, she'll come to her senses.* Didn't happen, either. Potter actually kept mum.

*Once her results come in, she'll have no reason to stay with you.* This one was not so easy to disprove. Especially when all signs pointed to it being very true, indeed. Why should she stay with me when she no longer needed to live at Grimmauld Place? When she would have her pick of any career she chose? Of any wizard she chose? In my mind, it seemed inevitable. When a letter came heralding Ronald Weasley's homecoming, I felt as though my fate was sealed.

Hermione hardly spent any time at home during the day. While she always returned home at night, I knew she was up to something more than simply shopping for ingredients.

On the day her exam results arrived, I sat in the kitchen, always her first stop at the end of a shopping trip. I heard the front door close and waited for her to enter.

'What's wrong?' she asked, almost immediately. I must have looked dejected, for she abandoned her groceries and rushed over to me.

'Your exam results are in,' I said.

'Oh, no! I've failed them all, haven't I?' she said, horrified. For a moment, I was bewildered by her response, before I realised I wasn't the only one whose insecurities could get the better of him.

'I wouldn't open your post, Hermione.'

'Of course,' she said, eyeing the envelope in my hand. She was itching to open it, I could tell.

'Here,' I said, shoving it into her hand. Standing, I stalked over to her groceries and started putting them away. I heard her tearing open the envelope and unfolding the parchment inside.

'Oh. I did well. Very well. Severus,' she said, and she came up beside me. She placed her hand on my arm before she continued, 'What is wrong, then?'

'Don't act the fool, Hermione. You've been spending so much time away. Did you not think I would notice?'

'What are you talking about?'

'You're leaving,' I said miserably. I continued on in a rush, not letting her interrupt me, 'You've got your NEWTs. You don't need to stay with me and "play house" anymore. You've got your ticket to the real world and who am I to...'

'Severus!' she exclaimed, finally breaking through my tirade. She had me by both arms now and was looking up into my eyes. 'Severus, what do you think I've been doing these past few weeks?'

When I didn't answer, she withdrew one of her hands and rummaged around in her pocket. She took out an envelope of her own and wrapped my hand around it.

'What is this?' I asked, eying it warily.

'Open it,' she said, and waited for me to start. 'I meant it to be a surprise. Over dinner tonight. I meant to ask if you were interested...'

I looked down at the paper in my hand. It was very official-looking. And Muggle.

'You know the shop owner I'm friendly with?'

'The one with a nitwit for a grandson? Yes, I'm familiar with her.'

'She decided to retire and sell her shop. I thought since impulsive choices have actually done me a world of good lately, I might as well continue making them. So I bought it.'

'You bought it,' I said, incredulously.

'With the stipend from the Order of Merlin. My parents helped a bit,' she added with a chuckle. I knew how small the stipend was.

'You were going to ask...?' I trailed off, hope blossoming in my chest for the first time in weeks.

'I was going to ask if you wanted to join me. To be my partner,' she explained. Unspoken words hung in the air. She was asking if I would be her partner in more than just this mad business venture. She was asking if I would be her partner in life, as well.

Epilogue

So, how does this chapter of my life come to a close?

I'm tempted to end with, 'Reader, I married her' and all that rot, but we haven't quite got round to marriage yet. 'Reader, I proposed to her', more like. Or, 'Reader, she proposed to me.'

And I said yes.