

Epicurean Delights

by irishredlass

Hermione is disqualified from a Muggle baking competition and is not happy about it.
What happens when she enters in disguise and Snape is one of the judges?

Originally posted to GS100 as a drabble series.

One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Many thanks to Droxy for the inspiration and thanks to Lady Rhian for her beta skills.

"How dare they?" Hermione was incensed. Ban her from competing in the monthly bake off, would they?

Ron and Harry had Quidditch, Luna had her odd creatures, even Minerva McGonagall had taken to chasing balls of yarn in her Animagus form. All the survivors of the war had adopted odd little habits or hobbies to help them deal with becoming that... survivors when so many had not.

Hermione competed in bake-offs as an odd tribute to one they had lost. One who had given them so much, never asking for anything in return. She baked to honor Severus Snape.

"That's it!"

If they wouldn't allow Hermione Granger to compete because she had won too many times and was scaring off the participants, then someone else would present her entries. Since it was a Muggle culinary event, they would never suspect.

Contestants and judges were changing all the time.

She would have to skip this month. There were only two weeks until the bake off, and she would need a month for the Polyjuice Potion to be completed.

She retrieved her caldron from her trunk and started slicing and dicing with a precision that would have made Professor Snape proud.

Setting aside the piping bag, Hermione gazed with pride at her entry for this month. It was February; the challenge was to make a pink, red and white desert.

Gathering her things, Hermione checked to make sure the extra phial of Polyjuice potion was in her bag and Apparated to an alley a block away from the school used for taste testing.

Hermione listened with half an ear... a judge had fallen ill... owner of a new Greek restaurant... as she surveyed the competition.

Then she saw him. His name was Marco, but he would forever be Professor Snape to her.

The contestant's entries were displayed on a long table. Each had a number with the name of the desert and description. Hermione learned early on the description could help or hinder. Though it was contrary to her nature, she had learnt brevity.

She was number thirteen. The tag read:

"Six-layer Strawberry Cake.

Let your taste buds enjoy."

Hermione watched as Professor Snape raised one eyebrow. She wondered if it was in derision or curiosity. All of the other entries seemed to be rather pedestrian by comparison. She doubted she had ever seen so many glazed berries in one place before.

Severus groaned. Glazed berries and whipped cream. How was he to find a desert chef among this lot of inadequate dunderheads? He never should have listened to François. It was ridiculous to think he would find someone to take over for Claudine in a backwater bake off. Maybe he should just slip a non-traceable potion into her fiancé's next drink...then she wouldn't have to leave and get married.

Hermione watched as Snape's...no Marco's...scowl deepened. The last time she had seen that look on his face was the day Harry had dropped the firecracker in Malfoy's potion.

"What's this?" Severus' curiosity was piqued. Not a glazed berry in sight. Sniffing, he did not detect the residual odor of refrigeration and freezer burn that couldn't be covered by sugar and glaze. He did catch white chocolate...and was that Madagascar Vanilla?

Glancing, he noted the number of the entry... thirteen. His gaze darted to the wall locating the participant to match the number. Neatly dressed, she appeared to be in her late thirties, but not in a bad way. Ash blonde hair gathered in a tidy twist.

Hermione resisted squirming when his black eyes zeroed in on her.

Hermione paced the waiting area. This was the worst part. What if they found her contribution lacking? This time was made worse because she knew Severus Snape would be sampling something she had prepared with her own hands.

She was torn between wondering what he thought of her baking and wondering what he was doing at Muggle bake off to begin with. No one had seen him since the night of the Ministry Awards Ceremony honoring the heroes of the war.

He had come, accepted the award as his due, and left before the orchestra had even finished setting up.

Severus was convinced he would be drunk on inferior wine before the sampling was finished. Did none of these idiots realize that berries were naturally sweet on their own and did not require copious amounts of sugar?

So far the only thing remotely palatable had been a berry-filled crepe... had the crepe not been so dry. It was a wonder he hadn't cut his tongue.

Finally, the last dessert. He inhaled deeply as his olfactory senses confirmed the Madagascar Vanilla. He thought back to the woman who had contributed the confection.

He hoped the presentation wasn't misleading... on both accounts.

As Hermione gagged on Polyjuice, Severus' mouth was assaulted by a symphony of flavor and texture so divine he had to stifle a moan of pleasure.

The feather lightness of the cake belied the moistness only fresh ingredients could provide. Berries burst upon his tongue only to be tempered by the richness of Madagascar Vanilla, then soothed by silken white chocolate.

He hesitated to chew...not wanting to waste a moment of this sensuous experience...and let the cake melt in his mouth.

The woman who created this was a culinary witch. He vowed he would have her for his own.

Face washed and breath freshened, Hermione followed the other competitors into the cafeteria. Seating herself on one of the uncomfortable benches, Hermione prepared to be bored for the next while.

Severus watched the woman from the sidelines. She seemed self composed and not the least bit interested in the drivel being spouted by the man speaking.

He came back to himself as the awards were being announced. Each award would be presented, and the winner would shake hands with the judges. If only to himself, he would admit he was looking forward to getting a closer look at the winner.

Hermione allowed herself a small smile of pleasure while internally she crowed her victory. Granted, they had announced Harriett Olson as the winner, but she knew...

As confident in her potion skills as her baking skills, Hermione ascended the platform to greet the judges.

"Miss Olson," the man known as Marco Azar greeted her, "a pleasure. Please accept this voucher as an added token. I hope one as talented as yourself may enjoy dining at my establishment in the near future." With this he handed her an open voucher for dinner for two to the finest Greek restaurant in all of England.

Knowing Polyjuice only altered her appearance and not her voice, Harriet/Hermione nodded her thanks, making a hasty retreat.

Now what was she supposed to do?

If she showed up as herself presenting the voucher, the jig would be up. Severus Snape, a.k.a Marco Azar, would know it was Hermione Granger and not Harriet Olson who had created the Six-Layer Strawberry Cake.

Yet, if she went as Harriet, whoever she chose to accompany her would want to know why she was going Polyjuiced and could potentially recognize Marco Azar as Severus Snape.

She just wouldn't go. It was the only choice.

Severus Snape was in a bind.

It had been three weeks and five days since the blasted bake off, and Harriet Olson had not stepped foot into his establishment... she would know.

Claudine was due to wed in another two months, and he needed her, Harriet, in his kitchen.

After one taste of the delectable six-layer strawberry cake, he was convinced no one else would do.

This meant that Gerard, the local food critic, who would be dining at Azar's tonight, was just going to have to become ill, but not too quickly. Severus did not want any

adverse advertisement.

Hermione looked like she was ready for war, and in a sense, she was... a baking war. She had heard more than a few grumbles the previous month when a new "upstart" had walked off with first place. Now she had a title to defend.

The voucher to Azar's was completely forgotten in her nightstand drawer. She prayed to Merlin Marco/Severus would not be judging this month.

The theme was 'The Decadence of Chocolate.' It had taken her three weeks to come up with what she hoped was the winning recipe. She had haunted the internet and finally Apparated to Vienna.

Severus returned the receiver to its cradle with a satisfied smirk.

It seemed Gerard was under the weather, and they knew it was an imposition, but would he mind terribly covering at the monthly bake off again? It was chocolate decadence month. He wasn't allergic, was he?

Allergic, indeed, he thought. What self-respecting wizard would allow such a travesty of nature? Then again, these were Muggles.

That thought brought him to one of his most perplexing questions of late. What was keeping Harriet Olson from accepting his invitation to Azar's?

Then... I wonder what she can do with chocolate.

Surveying the counter tops, Hermione made sure all of her ingredients were in place. This was not a difficult desert, but it could be fiddly and required precise timing.

She had already baked the cake layers and assembled them with the scant third of a cup of Apricot Preserves required. Until she had tasted this desert in Vienna, she had not been sure of the combination, but it was divine.

Now she needed to prepare the ganache. As she watched and stirred, the chocolate melted with the butter; its texture reminded her of Severus Snape's voice... rich, deep, velvety and smooth, so smooth...

The morning of the bake off found Severus spending more time with his morning ablutions and appearance than he normally saw fit. He would not admit it to himself, but not only did he want Miss Olson for his restaurant, if his dreams were any indication, his subconscious had decided the woman was worth pursuing as well.

Checking his image one last time, he accepted this was the best that could be done. Thought not as skeletal in frame as he had been at the end of the war, Severus knew he would never be considered handsome by traditional standards.

With a soft pop, Hermione/Harriet arrived in the deserted alleyway. Looking about to make sure she had arrived unnoticed, she surreptitiously used her wand to remove the Cooling Charm she had placed on the Sachertorte the night before. This was the only bit of magic she ever allowed herself in these competitions, for it could not actually affect the dessert itself.

Approaching the table, she checked her watch. The timing would work. She would have time to plate the torte before re-dosing with Polyjuice. Good thing, too, because there in all his black glory was Marco Azar, aka Severus Snape.

Pedestrian was the kindest word for the majority of the entries. How could these people not understand the sheer versatility of chocolate? One could make pies, cakes, tarts...the list was endless. What he saw before him was biscuit after biscuit until he reached number thirteen.

It was a deep, dark glossy brown. The cake within appeared velvety in its density; a full two feet away, his sensitive nose picked up the aroma of semi-sweet chocolate, the lightness of cream...and was that something fresh and fruity?

Severus would bet his platinum cauldron Ms. Olson was waiting with the contestants.

Hermione did not bother to pace the waiting area. She had seen what she was up against. Chocolate dipped, chipped, and filled biscuits were not going to have a chance against the torte she had entered.

Or could they? Maybe she had been wrong and gone too far. These were simple people. Could they possibly appreciate the intricacies of such a gourmet dessert?

As doubt clouded her mind, her confidence waiver-ed... surely someone would appreciate her offering. Just then the image of Marcos Azar/Severus Snape flitted through her mind.

She wondered again why he had singled her out the previous month.

Sighing, Severus lifted another biscuit to his lips. If he never ate another biscuit in the next month, it would be too soon.

Hearing the other judge's comments, he wondered at their sanity. If what his keen sense of hearing picked up was to be believed, most were favoring the mint filled biscuit.

They had one offering left.

Breathing deeply, he sipped some coffee to cleanse his palate. Again, his senses were assaulted with the mingled aromas of rich chocolate, fresh cream and the elusive fruit.

He was certain Ms Olson was a culinary witch... this had to be hers.

Looking in the mirror, Hermione patted her face dry as she looked at Harriet Olson's reflection. She did not know where her sudden bout of tears and insecurities had come from. What did it matter if she did not win the bake off? It would not be the end of the world, but somewhere along the line, it had become more than a coping mechanism.

Now with Professor Snape as one of the judges, she was even more tense about the outcome. She had listened to his criticisms and barbed comments for five years in Potions.

Having his approval was paramount.

Severus' fork slid gently through the rich, dense cake, leaving not a crumb to fall. The ganache melted, giving way to the tines of the fork. Severus stroked the fork through the whipped cream, adding just a touch to be experienced with this first tasting.

The scents were intoxicating, but oh, the explosions of flavors on his tongue were incomparable. He let the chocolate melt on his tongue as it gave way to the fruity flavor that had until now remained a mystery... apricot.

He turned his rating card over to the head judge and vowed he would have Ms Olson.

Hermione turned and fled the cafeteria. She did not even stop to gather her things.

Peppermint Patties?

The judges had chosen a biscuit filled with peppermint fondant over her torte.

She stopped to wipe the useless tears from her eyes and catch her breath.

Failed! She had failed herself, and she had failed him! Never mind that he did not know it was her, Hermione Granger; she knew.

"Ms. Olson," Severus called.

She turned as he approached.

"You must not let those peasants discourage you," he began, only to pause when the auburn haired woman before him morphed into Hermione Granger.

It took only seconds for Severus to register the fear on Hermione's face. Thinking she was going to run off, he grabbed her arm to stop her. When he felt the crushing sense of Apparation, he focused his energies with hers to prevent any untoward disasters.

Severus stumbled on arrival and was still gaining his balance when Hermione tore herself from his grasp.

"What do you think you were doing? You could have gotten us both killed!" she shrieked.

"What I was doing? Any self-respecting witch knows you don't Apparate while under emotional distress," he countered, checking for splinching.

I can't do this, she thought. I can't stand here and have a conversation with a dead man, a dead man whom I have once again failed. Scattered thoughts running through her mind, she turned on her heel, going down the adjacent hallway.

"Where do you think you are going?" Severus was infuriated with them both, and he wanted answers. No one else in the Wizarding world knew he lived, and he wanted to make sure it stayed that way.

It was not difficult to follow where Hermione had retreated to. He heard the bang and slam of cupboard doors.

Just as he opened his mouth to demand answers, he stopped, stunned by what he saw before him. His restaurant did not have a kitchen so well equipped and organized, but it did not look industrialized either.

There were counter tops of honeyed marble, copper pots hung from above; herbs flourished in a small windowed green house over the sink, and from somewhere, the sounds of Tchaikovsky provided a melodious backdrop.

Though it was apparent by the flush of her face that she was furious, this witch was poetry in motion as she gathered ingredients on the Butcher Block Island.

Hermione sighed to herself. He obviously wasn't leaving until he got the answers to which he felt he was entitled. She could not deny she wanted answers as well, but her upbringing also deemed manners be shown to a guest, no matter how unexpected or unwelcomed.

Fortunately, she had been to the market yesterday and had all she needed for a full Italian meal from antipasto to tiramisu. More than likely his palate would be more appreciative of her efforts than Harry and Ron's would be, too. They always ate healthily, but did not always appreciate the subtleties of an authentic meal.

Severus leaned against the doorway, watching her work. There were no wasted steps to her movements. She moved with a grace and absurdness he remembered from her days in his classroom as she assembled prosciutto, hard salami, mozzarella, provolone and marinated vegetables on a platter. Then she produced a loaf of bruschetta that, he would bet his wand, had not come from the local bakery.

The bread sliced and antipasto laid out, she added a decanter of olive oil. A bottle of Chardonnay in one hand and wine glass in the other, she gestured to the seating side of the island.

"You may as well be comfortable," she stated as she expertly extracted the cork from the wine with a tap of her wand.

He noted this was the first magical action he had witnessed from her since arriving in what must be her home. Unlike most witches, she had not gathered nor prepared the food with magic. Each item had been carefully sliced, chopped and arranged.

Though many questions begged to be asked, and he desired their answers, the only thing he could utter was, "Why?"

Hermione shrugged, "It is better for digestion if one relaxed while eating."

This was not the attention and approval seeking child of his classroom, but a self-assured woman who was not going to volunteer information.

He indicated the lone dining plate accompanied by linen napkin and cutlery. "You are not going to be joining me?"

She picked up her wine glass, looking at him over the rim as she sipped, "Oh, I will most likely nibble, but I have other things to see to if we are to eat at a reasonable hour." Then she turned her back to him and began what appeared to be the base of bread dough.

Inside Hermione quaked as she mixed yeast, sugar and water for Italian bread. She could feel his gaze on her back, but she would not cave to his silent demands. If he wanted answers, then he would have to ask the questions.

Breathing deeply, she calmed as the scents and routine flooded her senses.

When she turned the dough out onto the floured counter top, Severus couldn't help but watch her hands. She did not beat the dough into submission. Instead, she caressed it methodically, turning it over and over again, encouraging it to take up the needed substance.

Severus watched as each time she pressed the heels of her hands into the resistance of the bread dough, a little more of the tension in her shoulders left. Her eyes were closed as she gently swayed to the music floating on the air. Every so often she would pause in the kneading to run her hands over the dough. He wanted to ask her what she was feeling for, but did not want to disturb the picture she made.

Instead he leaned back into backrest of the stool. He watched, and he wondered what had happened to make her retreat.

She couldn't keep her back to him forever. The bread dough was ready to be set aside to rise, so she greased a heavy ceramic bowl with butter and, with one last pat, covered it with a dishcloth. It would have to rest for a good two hours...in which time she could begin other aspects of the meal.

With the bread resting, it was beginning to grate on her nerves that he just sat there and said nothing. Finally, she couldn't take it any longer; after washing and drying her hands, she picked up her wine glass, turning to face him.

"Why are you here?"

Drawn out of his musings, he arched his brow, "I think that would be obvious. Was it not you who Apparated us?"

Frustration showed on her face as she turned to gather ingredients for a meat sauce. Knife in hand, she returned to the Butcher Block Island. "You know what I mean; don't be obstreperous."

Severus cautiously eyed the sharp knife. Perhaps it would be prudent to be a bit more forthcoming... just in case.

Releasing a breath he did not realize he was holding, he watched as she expertly sliced and diced the vegetables before him.

Scents of crushed garlic, fresh onion and hand-picked herbs began to permeate the air. Hermione had not even put heat to the vegetables yet, and his mouth was watering. For the first time, Severus realized why these items were sometimes called aromatics.

Homey fragrances assaulting his senses and chardonnay relaxing his muscles, he decided to talk.

"I had been taking antivenin since Charity Burbage was killed by Nagini," he stated.

"That is it? That is all you have to say?"

"What do you want, the horrid details? Months spent wondering if I would be caught and thrown in Azkaban?"

Hermione shrank back from the anger in his tone.

"No, no... I... never mind." She sighed. "You wouldn't understand." Silently, she went back to chopping the ingredients before her, but with less joy than before.

Severus let her be as he brought his own anger under control. The girl...no, woman...did not deserve his vitriol. He noted she still wielded the knife with competence and skill, but something had changed.

"Miss Granger... Hermione? Let us try this again?"

She looked up at him. He could see the tears glistening in her eyes though she would not let them fall.

Nodding, she took a shuddering breath and continued her preparations.

Severus could see she still held herself tense against attack, but something intangible had relaxed within her. His mind grappled for something, anything to talk about.

"Why baking and why Muggle bake-offs?"

Unsure of his intent, Hermione glanced up from the sweet peppers she was dicing to gauge his expression.

No one had really asked why she baked.

"For as long as I can remember, the process of baking has brought me pleasure; I do enjoy the end result as well; I am not opposed to biscuits now and then."

"You would be if you had just sampled a dozen of them," he groused in good-natured acknowledgment of her joke.

She moved over to the stove where she set the vegetables to sauté in olive oil. Scents that were only hinted at before exploded in enticement as the heat brought out their potential. Onion mingled with garlic and peppers; his mouth watered in anticipation. Tomatoes and, from the looks of it, homemade tomato paste were added to the sizzling vegetables.

"And the second part, Hermione, why compete?" he asked.

Her answer was almost lost under the music. "For you."

Severus did not doubt his hearing, but he wasn't sure he wanted to pursue this line of questioning any further. How could competing in a Muggle bake-off be for his benefit, especially if he was thought dead?

He was saved asking when Hermione posed her own question. "Why a Greek restaurant? And Marco Azar?"

She had answered his question, so he would reciprocate.

"My mother's family is Greek, and I have always enjoyed the food, though our menu is not limited to only Greek fare." He hesitated. "And Marco was my brother."

Haunted eyes met across the counter.

"Was?"

Hermione was cut short by his answer, and like Severus before her, she was not sure she wanted to pursue the topic further. So, she turned back to the sauce she had left simmering on the stove top.

Once assured of its progress, she retrieved the ground beef from the refrigerator and soon had it snapping and crackling as it browned, its meaty aroma adding to the already perfumed air.

Sensing her discomfiture, Severus let the topic drop. He did not even know why he had mentioned Marco. No one living now knew of his existence and few ever had.

He watched the graceful line of her throat as she swallowed a last sip of wine; her head tilted back only accentuated the arch of her neck, and the hair bundled back in a tie brushed at her waistline.

Drawing his eyes away, he cleared his throat as he said, "I am no gourmet, but I think my Potions skills may be of some help in the kitchen. Is there something I can do?" he asked.

Hermione was startled by the offer, but acquiesced readily when she saw he was in earnest.

Soon he was working on the meal's salad course.

The afternoon passed companionably.

Hermione found herself thinking Severus made a skilled assistant in the kitchen. They had consumed the whole bottle of Chardonnay between the two of them, and they were now sipping iced lemon water as they worked.

All the ingredients had been prepared for the lasagna, and it was now time to assemble the casserole for the oven.

Cooked noodles were spread with ricotta cheese which she had already blended with added garlic, basil and oregano. The mushrooms were as precisely sliced as any potions ingredient. There were mounds of mozzarella, Romano and cheddar grated and waiting to cushion each layer.

Severus resumed his seat at the Butcher Block, knowing he would only be in the way as Hermione put the lasagna together.

He had learned as they worked, side by side, that it was her paternal grandmother who had taught her the joys of cooking and that her mother could not cook to save the starving.

Surprisingly, he also found himself sharing bits of his childhood with her. Oh, nothing significant, unless you considered that Severus never shared anything with anyone unless forced.

She didn't question and badger as he feared she might, but still, he found himself volunteering the information.

Hermione stretched as she stepped back from the oven after having placed the lasagna in to bake. She then shifted over to the bread dough which had risen nicely as they had worked. Glancing over at Severus, she could see he was lost in thought, so with a little more force than necessary, she punched the dough down.

Her actions had the desired result when he jumped in his seat, but she regretted the mischievousness almost immediately when she saw he had his wand in hand and was ready to defend.

The laughter died before it could reach her lips.

He had been lost in thought, marveling at the peaceful afternoon they were sharing when Hermione startled him by punching down the bread. He was in fighting stance before he had drawn a second breath.

On that breath, he was prepared to berate her for her actions until he saw the laughter fade from her whiskey eyes as they rested on the wand he had drawn in reflex.

"I'm so sorry, Severus; I should not have done that. I wasn't thinking." Her eyes and her tone pleaded for him to understand.

He turned, fleeing for the safety of the loo.

Splashing water on his face, Severus called himself seven kinds of fool. What was he doing here? One of the Golden Trio knowing he was alive would mean the end to his peaceful existence of the last two years.

For that matter, he wondered why the Aurors hadn't been beating down the doors to his restaurant already. Hermione had known where he was for the last month. Why had she not brought the Ministry bearing down on him?

He needed answers, and he needed those answers soon. He wanted to know if he would be fleeing for his life by morning.

Hermione, too, was castigating herself. The haunted and battle-ready image of Severus flashed across her mind's eye as she retrieved the ingredients for tiramisu. She had soaked the sponge cake in her left-over morning coffee but still needed to make the mascarpone custard and whip the cream to layer it all together with the cocoa powder.

She worried and fretted, anticipating Severus' return from the loo...or had he gone even farther and left her home all together?

This time, the familiar rhythm of cooking did not set Hermione's heart at ease. She was afraid only one thing could.

Severus stood at the doorway, watching Hermione. She methodically layered espresso-soaked biscuits and mascarpone cheese. He raised his brow when he saw her add a sprinkle of dark chocolate shavings before the next layer of biscuits. He had enough knowledge of the culinary arts to know this was not a basic tiramisu.

She felt his presence, but the ease of camaraderie had disappeared with her ill thought out actions and his hasty exit. Hermione mourned the loss, as she'd not felt so at

ease in a long time. Perhaps since before the war when everything and everyone had changed.

"Do you always do that?" he asked.

Hermione was not sure what he meant. "Do what?"

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. She had not ignored him.

"The chocolate shavings."

She knew the earlier incident should be addressed, but chose to wait... for the moment.

"It's my own little variation," she replied. "This is just about done, but I can smell the bread. Would you mind?"

As he opened the oven door, the aroma filled the air.

The groan that escaped his lips could not be denied. "You are truly a culinary witch."

Her laughter was music to his ears.

Placing the tiramisu in the ice box, she retrieved the salad and vinaigrette along with a chunk of fresh parmesan cheese.

"Not really; cooking is one thing I prefer to do without magic."

He had wondered about that. "Why? I'm sure you learned any number of kitchen charms from Molly Weasley."

"True," she chuckled again, "but I have always enjoyed the process and the joy of creating something from my hands, and I am a much better cook than knitter."

Severus did not doubt her words yet sensed there was more to it as he remembered her words: "*For you.*"

He followed her to the small dining area she had set with linens and dishes and watched her graceful movements as she served salad, nodding at her silent query of grated cheese.

Candlelight flickered, highlighting the burnished hues in her hair as she poured a honey-colored Chenin Blanc into the waiting crystal. With a wave of her hand, she indicated he should be seated, but first he withdrew her chair, seeing her seated.

He did not miss the color that flushed to her cheeks nor her own intoxicating scent. A mixture of the herbs... and was it patchouli?

Severus took one last deep breath before he excused himself to the other side of the table; echoes of her whispered words ran through his mind.

They ate companionably for a time, but Severus could not shake the sound of those two words from his mind's ear.

"Hermione?"

Startled out of her own thoughts, she looked up at him.

"Earlier, you said you entered the competitions for me or rather 'for you.' I have to admit to some degree of curiosity."

Hermione's cheeks flushed; it was clear she would rather not discuss her words or what was meant by them.

She hesitantly reached for her glass, and noting with relief that her hand did not shake, she took a bracing sip. "I think the meaning would have been clear enough."

He met her evasiveness with an elegantly raised brow.

Sighing, she placed her glass on the table and rose to retrieve the main course.

Hermione internally berated herself for her cowardice. If she wished him to be forthcoming, she would have to meet him halfway, it seemed. Resolved, she returned bearing the fruits of her anger and frustration in the form of gently steaming lasagna and crusty French bread.

As she served the main course, she told her story. Hermione told Severus of the time following the battle when she felt lost and alone as Harry and Ron returned to the bosom of the Weasley family: Harry as hero and long desired son-in-law and Ron, the wounded and jilted party in a romance gone sour.

She spoke of discovering her parents' deaths and her struggles to find some way to cope. Returning to the dusty remains of her childhood home and the memories she found there amongst an old recipe box.

Severus listened, captivated by her tale.

By the time she had finished, there were tears staining her cheeks.

She had told him everything: the pain, the heartache and the isolation.

Then she went further and told him how on September first, a year after the final battle, she had gone to Spinner's End. She had broken the wards placed by the Ministry to visit his childhood home.

Hermione had been horrified by what she had seen: the abject squalor and neglect evident in the home.

Then she found the recipe box. It was a match to the one kept in her own family home handed down by her grandmother.

Walking to the curio cabinet, she retrieved a battered, beaten and flowered box.

"I think this belongs to you," she said. "I would apologize for having removed it, but I think that box saved my life."

Severus' hand shook as he reached out to take her offering.

"It was my mother's," he whispered. "Where did you find it?"

Puzzled, she said, "It was just there on the counter under the cupboard where most women keep their often-used recipes."

"I looked for it when I opened the restaurant. I wanted the recipes from Grandma Azar. I could not find it," he explained.

The smile she offered was wobbly. "Your heritage does explain why some of the recipes appeared to be Greek to me... literally."

"Yes," he chuckled, "they would be."

"Severus, those recipes gave me a purpose, a reason to live. I used a translation spell and worked my way through them all, and gradually, I found peace."

He looked at her, puzzled by her confession.

"Don't you see? By cooking and baking the foods of your past I was able to honor you...all you had done, all you'd sacrificed, and all you had lost. So, yes, I bake for you."

Severus looked into Hermione's eyes; they were no longer haunted as they had been when she took him through her days after the war. Instead they held an inner peace he found himself envying.

Unable to hold her gaze, he looked down at the battered box of recipes in his hands. His Grandma Azar, it seemed, had worked another miracle. Even from her grave, she had healed this woman and kept her gentle of spirit when she had every right to be as bitter and tormented as he felt himself.

"Severus," she whispered, "would you tell me about Grandma Azar?"

Hermione didn't know why she asked, but the haunted look in Severus' eyes almost made her retract the question. Instead, she stood and held her hand out to him. "Come, I think we will be more comfortable in the library; we should let our meal settle before pudding."

Like a lost child, Severus allowed himself to be led into the library.

This room alone would comfort the most troubled soul. The center of the room was sunken with stairs leading down. The perimeter was lined with a forest green sofa; from every angle one could gaze into the crackling fire.

Again Severus watched Hermione as she tended to the fire and poured them each a measure of brandy before she returned to his side.

The liquid gently swirled in the snifter, rising up on the side only to flow back, bringing a measure of heat to the pool below with each rotation just as the each spark from the fire sent a soft burst of warmth into the room. Neither, though, would be enough to warm the core of his soul.

He didn't think anything could ever melt the block of ice he had carried for most of his life.

Finally, he spoke. "Yia Yia, Grandma Azar, was my great-grandmother on my mother's side. She and my great-grandfather, the original Marco, came to Britain from Greece when their only daughter married a Prince."

"My great-grandparents were not comfortable in England, but stayed for family. It was said that when my mother married Tobias Snape, Yia Yia wept because she knew her life would be ruined."

For the first time, Severus paused in his monologue and realized Hermione held his hand in her own in silent support.

"What few know is mother gave birth to twins: Marco and myself."

It seemed once he had begun, he could not stop. He recounted how Marco was light in complexion as he had been dark. Marco had always been sickly and died at the tender age of three without ever having shown a single trace of the magic which should have coursed through his veins as it had his own.

Hermione listened as tears tracked her face for both lost boys. Marco had died physically, but with his death, Severus too had died. His father had taken out the loss of their child on the two he should have held the closest.

On occasion, Eileen would bundle Severus off to her grandmother's. His Yia Yia became his one salvation... his one light. At her knee, he learned of the old ways, but always Eileen would retrieve her son and he would be sucked back into the brutality of life with Tobias Snape.

Yia Yia passed away when Severus was ten. There was no longer an avenue of escape. The last year before he left for Hogwarts, Hermione learned, was the most horrid of all.

Eileen tried to comfort her son by baking treats from Yia Yia's recipe box, but nothing could change reality.

Quiet reined in the library save for the rustling of the fire. Looking over, she saw in her musings that Severus had reclined against the sofa. His eyes were closed as though he was exhausted from reliving the past.

She hadn't realized it, but the treasured recipe box had followed them into the library.

Suddenly she felt very sorry she had taken Grandma Azar's recipe box. True, it had saved her in more ways than one, but what must it have cost Severus to find it missing... gone. Was it akin to losing his much loved Grandma Azar all over again?

As she watched, she saw him draw in a deeper breath, and she knew he was not sleeping. Tears filled her eyes, and her soul wept for the child, the boy and the man before her. Before she could gain her composure, he turned his head and opened his eyes. His, too, glistened with unshed moisture.

Hermione's heart and body reacted before her mind could intercede, and leaning over, she brushed her lips against his. Teasing his lips with her tongue, she found he tasted of the smoky brandy they'd been drinking and something more that was only Severus.

Soon he was responding, and his fingers found their way into her riotous curls. The kiss was not hurried, rushed or bursting with the passion romance writers describe. It was a soft, gentle...an almost hesitant exploration. It was healing and overwhelming all in the same moment, and the tears Hermione held at bay could no longer be denied.

Hermione's fingers found their way to his scalp where they kneaded, scratched and caressed in sympathy with the kiss they shared. When they finally came apart, both were content to hold each other, enjoying just a few moments of peace.

Not wanting to press the situation, Hermione finally drew back and settled against the sofa. She could see the wariness hovering in his eyes. Why had she not noticed how expressive his eyes were before? Determined he would not close himself off to her, she chose to change the subject.

"Well, it is not baklava, but I do have a very nice tiramisu waiting."

With a grateful smile, he rose, offering her his hand. Hands joined, they walked back to the kitchen.

"One of these days you are going to have to tell me where you learned to cook Italian."