

Unexpected Empathy

by FabGabW

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Chapter 1 of 1

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He needed to get out of there. Away from all those people, away from *her*. As he hurried away, he caught a glimpse of something in Ginny's eyes. Pity. Always bloody pity. He was sick of everyone ignoring him. And when they did spare him a scrap of attention, it was to give him a look of sympathy. Poor, hopeless Neville. Poor, pathetic Neville. Poor, stupid Neville. He was sick of it.

He stumbled blindly into the grounds, the sharp December air stinging his face and piercing his lungs. It calmed him slightly. He'd been on the edge – of tears or fury, he didn't know which, but it would have been ugly and embarrassing if he'd let it out. Just like he was. Ugly and embarrassing.

He threw himself onto a bench, and braced his head in his hands, wishing he could disappear. It wasn't as if anyone would be bothered if he did.

Karkaroff was *really* starting to get on his tits now. Severus blasted another rose bush to dust, wishing it was the idiot's ridiculous goatee. At least he was free of him for now. He'd made himself perfectly clear, that cowardly traitor could run if he wished to. Fat lot of good it'd do him if the Dark Lord *did* return.

A wave of misery and impotent rage swept over him, so strong that it took him a moment to realise that the feelings were not his own. Glancing about, he spotted Longbottom, cradling his head, and silently weeping. Severus slipped easily into the boy's mind, in spite of himself, but also because of himself. He had known despair and anger like this too, and couldn't help his curiosity to learn how he and Longbottom could come to have such feelings in common.

*He had spent the entire double period of Minerva's lesson working himself up to his task. He'd gone over and over his speech in his head – short and simple, less chance of fluffing it – and then, as the class had filed out, he'd caught up with her. Severus felt, second-hand, the thrum of Longbottom's tripping heart as he placed his hand on Granger's arm, indicating she should hang back. Longbottom steeled himself. "Hermione, er, do you..." "No," Severus heard Longbottom saying to himself, "you're doing it all wrong! Be confident!" He gathered himself again. "Hermione. Will you go to the Yule Ball with me? As, erm - as my date?" She looked at him, a little sadness in her eyes. "Oh Neville, I'm sorry, I've already said I'd go with – with someone else." Severus could tell that Longbottom knew what *that* meant. Severus knew it too. She offered an apologetic smile, then walked out of the classroom, hurrying to catch up with Potter and Weasley. He slumped for a moment, letting his disappointment pool, hot and bitter as bile in his mouth. Then he pushed it away, plastered on his good-natured, forgettable, reliable, Just-Neville smile, and stepped out into the throng of students heading down to lunch.*

Severus withdrew very gently. He didn't ever think the day would come when he'd feel sympathy for a Gryffindor student for pains brought upon themselves by their own so-called 'bravery'. And yet, here was Longbottom, whom heretofore Severus tried to think of as little as possible in any terms at all if he could help it, but right now, he was feeling a great deal of empathy for the lonely boy. Almost without realising what he was doing, he delved into his head again.

Ginny looked beautiful, her sky blue dress robes complemented her hair perfectly. It shone, brighter than burnished copper, in waves down her back. He forgot, as he swept around the dancefloor with Ginny, about Hermione Granger. He forgot that he was daft, dull, unremarkable Neville; he forgot, most importantly, that the girl in his arms longed for another, just as he did. As the song closed, he kept hold of her hand, and led her to a quiet corner of the Great Hall. He asked, with confidence in his voice, and light in his eyes, and hope in his heart, if she would go out with him.

And before she'd even opened her mouth, reality crashed down around him, and he'd known her answer. He'd seen it in her eyes. They could all dress it up as much as they liked, with well-meaning words, and sympathetic smiles, but the answer would always be no. It didn't matter what the question was; for someone like him, every important question in his life would always have the same answer. It made him want to curse and rail. It made him want to scream. Instead, he accepted their self-serving pity. He smiled at them as they gave it, so they didn't have to think twice about him, so they could think that it helped and assured him. No wonder they all thought he was pathetic.

Once again with all the gentleness he could muster, Severus removed his presence from Longbottom's mind.

He wanted to go over to the boy, and comfort him. He wished he could tell him it would get easier, or that if he wanted respect, he had to show people that he was deserving of it in order to earn it. But that wasn't true.

Severus wanted to tell him that he had also been angry at the world and himself when he was his age; that he too had grown up with a family who wanted him to be something he wasn't. He wanted Longbottom to know that depression and self-loathing would eat him alive until he was a shell of hatred and anger and regret. But that wouldn't help him.

He didn't have any comforts. He didn't have any advice. He didn't have any explanations.

So Severus said nothing, and he walked away.