

One Stone

by Anijade

Response to the Astronomy Tower Challenge on GrangerSnape100 Parts 1-4

One Stone

Chapter 1 of 8

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1.

One stone, two stones, three stones, four. Standing at the edge of the fifth stone, she looked down over the edge of the tower. Her life was on the wrong path, but how had it come to this? Was it unrequited love or a broken heart? Neither had brought her to this moment, merely stung pride.

His voice came from the darkness, "Really, Hermione. I thought you were stronger than this."

"Stronger than what, Professor Snape? Do you think as they do? That I have no feelings at all? I am just a joke to them. So what's the point?"

2.

With a flurry of robes, Professor Snape moved faster than she thought was possible.

"If you really think that, then you are more of a silly girl than I originally imagined. You have your whole life in front of you and are on your way to becoming a gifted Healer. Why do their small minds affect you so much?"

Hermione appeared to be thinking about it while Snape wondered to himself about why he was there, why did he care? *This doesn't concern you at all. You came here to avoid the reunion. She just happened to be here first.*

3.

"What do you expect me to do? They are all I have." Hermione's voice was plaintive. Part of her had never recovered from losing her parents those last days of the war, but she had done as she hoped they would have wanted. Graduating and moving on to higher education, she threw herself into studying like a woman possessed – all for nothing. Her friends had no use for her.

"I heard them you know... laughing at me in the bathroom about what a joke I was. A dried up person with nothing to offer anyone... I'm not an island. I have needs."

4.

It was all Severus could do not to curse the harpies in the bathroom. Whether it had been done intentionally or not, Hermione's so-called friends had wreaked their worst in an attempt to make them feel better about themselves.

"I could tell you that they are jealous, but I doubt it would help. For all of your Gryffindor bravery, you have yet to learn to live outside your pack. Don't you know anything about the animal world?"

He sighed. He wasn't there to give her a lesson on pack mentality of women. He wasn't there to teach her at all.

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5.

"Why do you care? As I recall, you used to enjoy making people feel bad. I would have thought you would be proud that someone was carrying on in your footsteps."

Even to her own ears, Hermione sounded childish. There was no reason to lash out at him because he was trying to help her. *But why does he want to help?* After the blows to her ego, a new mystery just wasn't something that she could take right now.

"Does it get better? I know that you couldn't have been liked for being smarter than average. So, tell me."

6.

Her words struck a chord in Severus, and it made him uncomfortable. Uncomfortable in a way that made him want to attack her like a feral animal. It was only that she stood at the edge of the tower that made him bite his tongue.

"I don't care. I came up here to escape from this infernal reunion and lo and behold, I have yet to escape ex-students."

He watched as she flinched at his tone, and at the same time, she wobbled on her ledge with calm eyes. It scared him more that she didn't seem afraid to fall.

7.

"Come away from there!" he ordered. He was pleased to see an answering spark of fire in her eyes. As long as that remained, he knew that there was still a chance that he could talk her down from the edge.

"I came up here to jump. Why would I leave this ledge?" Hermione couldn't help but be impudent when he tried to give her orders. While he did want her riled up, Severus could see her as the type to do things out of spite.

"Fine then, a compromise. Just come back one stone. That is all I ask."

8.

Hermione looked at him, warily debating the compromise in her head. She knew that she wasn't really giving up a lot, just a stone.

"Fine, if it means that much you, I will give you a stone."

Carefully, she took a step backwards to the fourth stone. Part of her felt like she was giving up, and Hermione hated to fail at anything. *But you failed with your friends. They just don't care about you.*

"Thank you," he responded in a calm tone, hoping that his calm would pass onto Hermione. He considered her question carefully. "Sometimes it gets better."

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Response to the Astronomy Tower Challenge on GrangerSnape100 Parts 9-12. Thank you Cilla for your hard beta work

9.

Hermione looked at him seriously, trying to gauge if he was attempting to placate her or he was telling the truth. *Like Snape would ever placate anyone. Granted, you are about to take a flying leap off a building.*

"Sometimes, sir?" Her voice held a pleading quality to it that she hated hearing. Hermione knew that Snape had always thought the other teachers doted on her too much, gave her too many compliments. Once again, Snape only barely managed not to sneer at her.

"Yes, Miss Granger. Sometimes you will do something that will leave everyone else completely in awe."

10.

She couldn't believe her ears. Was he giving her a compliment or speaking hypothetically? Snape seemed to loathe admitting it, so she was almost certain he was talking about her.

"But you, sir... you did things that left people in awe almost everyday during the war and were treated like a pariah."

The glare on Snape's face was formidable and Hermione regretted her choice of words immediately. "My own actions are clouded by the fact that I'm a killer many times over. That sort of thing dissuades awe you know. Besides, we are talking about the greatness you will achieve."

11.

Hermione blinked a couple of times in surprise. "You complimented me... I never thought you would." The shock was laced in her voice, and her mouth hung open. Snorting with annoyance, Snape turned. "Do close your mouth or a gust of wind is going to catch you and send you over before you are ready."

It bothered him that she was so amazed at his words. While not known for giving glowing reviews, he would have thought his feelings were reflected in her grades, which were always exemplary.

"You never failed in my class. What did you think that was?"

12.

Hermione wanted to retort that she had earned her grades, but realized he had a point. It had been well within his power to barely pass her and it could have been written off as his actions as a spy.

"I am sorry, sir... I never thought..."

Bracing herself, Hermione waited for the sarcastic comment that never came. Instead when she looked, up his face was unreadable. Then he spoke softly, "No, I suppose none of you ever really thought beyond what you could see. Did you? You were only children, and we asked too much of all of you."

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13.

His admission shook Hermione. For so many years she'd assumed that her teachers had understood the magnitude of what they had asked of them. It helped knowing that perhaps they had been just as lost as she had been.

"It was bad for all of us, wasn't it? I am still surprised how intact the survivors managed to remain. We lost so much." It hurt to remember all they had lost. After Dumbledore's death things had gone downhill quickly. That they had won the war still amazed Severus.

When he spoke, his voice was thick with pain. "It was devastating."

14.

Looking back up at Hermione, he could see the understanding in her eyes. "Please, Ms. Granger, may I have a stone? Just a stone."

Later, Hermione wouldn't know if it had been her curiosity or the fact that he'd said please that moved her to give him a stone. She stepped back to the third stone.

Snape wasn't like the others. He didn't gloss over the war and the losses; in fact, perhaps he thought too much about those things and had lost the present. The pain in his voice reflected the anguish in his soul, which called to her.

15.

Hermione didn't know how to word her next question, and there was no telling how Snape might react either way.

"I miss them, you know; all of them." The list was too long, but she suspected that he, like her, could name them all if asked. "I know they'd say their sacrifice was worth it, but I hate being this alone all the time."

This was the crux of her problems; her true friends were gone, and those who remained weren't really her friends.

"I guess that is how I ended up out here. I want to be with them."

16.

There was an instance where pain recognized pain, and Severus' breath was knocked from him. When she had been a child, he had recognized their similarities, but she had been blessed with love that had never been bestowed on him. But now they were on equal footing; their loss bridged the gap.

"Your friends would want you to live on for them. Make their sacrifice mean something."

She flinched as his words sunk in. *He's right. They died for me, and I was going to throw it away for what? Two stupid bints in the bathroom?*

"Have you forgiven yourself?"

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17.

He wanted to yell at her, scream at her, anything but answer that question. He did none of those things though, and found himself scrutinizing his shoes with great interest. Hermione had been expecting all the things he wanted to do, so this new reaction was very curious to her.

"Sir? Are you okay?" A crease appeared between her brows and for the first time since the bathroom incident, Hermione's concerns were off of herself and onto this man who was quickly changing from what she thought knew to something... unknown. But she knew that she wanted to know more.

18.

"What do you want me to say?" he finally growled. "Either way, it allows you to damn me, and I don't know why I care!" Unconsciously, Hermione moved back to the second stone out of her concern for him. "You should, you know... forgive yourself, that is." Chewing on her bottom lip, she finally went for broke. "We all forgave you years ago."

He frowned, acting as if her words weren't getting through to his ears clearly. "Why would you do that? I killed your great leader." Even now, years later, that one act left him raw. "I could have..."

19.

"Yes, you could have betrayed us, and even when it looked like you had... you hadn't." Hermione didn't know why it was so important, but she wanted him to know that trust hadn't been lost by all.

"If it puts your mind at ease, I did forgive myself... a while ago. I know I was following orders, and even if I hadn't, he wouldn't have survived. I did him a kindness sparing him that agony." Snape's voice was dry and cool as if the subject he was talking about was the weather. Only the flicker in his eye said otherwise.

20.

Hermione sagged as the tension she hadn't realized she was holding passed. "That's good, sir. Once the shock of it wore off, we looked into it. The truth came out. There were some who didn't want to believe, but calmer heads prevailed." She didn't have to say which heads had flown off the handle. That didn't even require a real guess.

"Let me guess; you slapped them into submission." There was a bit of admiration that tinged his voice.

Hermione managed to flush in the moonlight. "I came close, but Professor McGonagall beat me to it. She's really scary sometimes."

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21.

The idea of Minerva defending him brought a half smile to Severus' face. While he and the Gryffindor head might not have always seen eye to eye on things, he had always known that she was a loyal friend. Hermione's words only helped cement that feeling of safety.

"Yes, Minerva always had a soft spot for me I think. She was also privy to conversations that other Order members wouldn't have been. My true loyalties were never in question with Minerva."

Just saying those words and knowing they were true brought Severus a soothing comfort that he hadn't experienced before.

22.

Hermione could see the subtle changes in her formally dour Potions master. It was obvious that coming out here had brought on an epiphany; one that he hadn't expected to find when he had come to the tower. As she crouched there, Hermione had to decide what was really important that night, her wounded pride or his growing one.

Still she hadn't given up her place on the second stone. It wouldn't be hard for her to go over the edge, but she wasn't sure that was what she wanted anymore. "Perhaps there is more for both of us, sir?"

23.

Severus flinched at her words not because he was insulted, but because he had never been included the way she was doing so now. With a dry voice that masked his own uncertainty, he asked, "And what do you have in mind, Miss Granger?"

Deep in her own thoughts, Hermione answered without censure. "I think that we have been hiding. You, of course, longer than I have, but it is time that we come out of the shadows and take our rightful places." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "We didn't commit a crime for surviving, you know."

24.

A harsh comment flew to his lips, but in those moments he could see that she was expecting that response from him. It did nothing to assuage the guilt that kept his heart beating. "I cannot do this, Miss Granger. I wasn't supposed to survive the war; my sins were too great." There was sadness in his voice that made it perfectly clear that he meant what he said.

Hermione scrunched up her face in frustration. "Then wear your frustration as a medal of honour, proof that you have made atonement and live on as Professor Dumbledore would have wanted."

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25.

He stood glowering at the girl... no, woman, who had the audacity to tell him to get on with his life. Yet he appreciated the irony, considering he had just been telling her to get on with hers.

"Perhaps you are right, and we should both take a page from each other's books and get off the pot, so to speak."

Hermione was still crouched on the wall, and he wondered if she was still thinking about ending it all.

"So, Ms. Granger, what do you think? Should we take advantage of our positions as heroes of the wizarding world?"

26.

Hermione looked over the edge as she tried to decide what she really wanted for her life. Her true friends had passed on, dying for a cause they believed in and for her. *How can I throw such a gift away?* Looking back over at Snape, she wished she could read the darkness in his eyes.

"It's something to consider I imagine. But what about you? What are you going to do? There is no need for you to remain here if you don't want to be. The students here must still be trying. I doubt your temper has improved."

27.

Snape just crossed his arms and scowled at her. "Still the know-it-all I see. Pity, I had hoped that at least that much would have changed since you grew up." Immediately, he wished he could take back the harsh words as he watched with hidden horror—Hermione moved back, further out to the ledge. A stone lost.

Inwardly, he cursed his caustic nature. *I doubt insulting a person considering suicide is considered good form.* Gritting his teeth, he wondered how he was going to get her confidence back. Hermione looked over the edge wistfully and hummed with a sing-song voice.

28.

"It would be easier for both of us if I jumped. You're right, of course. I haven't changed; I am still the bushy haired know-it-all. The only thing that keeps me from being bucktoothed is that I let Madam Pomfrey fix them." Her voice flattened out, sounding dead.

"Leave, Snape. You tried your best, but managed to only prove their point. I am of no use to anyone anymore. I don't even have friends who will defend me." She sighed, feeling the last of her hope seep away. Severus was shocked at the power his words still had on her.

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29.

She turned her back to him and looked over the edge. Once again Hermione's path seemed so clear. Once over, things would be simpler, easier. *I'm coming Harry, Ron; we'll be together soon.*

Snape on the other hand, just gaped at the girl as he was summarily dismissed and realized that she had every intention of going through with her plan. *You can't do anything right can you? Might as well push her over personally for all the good you have done.* Knowing that he had to fix this, stop her, Severus realized he had to let his final defense go: pride.

30.

"Miss Granger, Hermione, please forgive my callousness."

"Don't worry, Snape; it's nothing I am not used to. I should thank you really. Reminded me why I was really up here."

"No, you shouldn't take the words of a bitter old man to heart. I shouldn't have this kind of power over you. You haven't been my student in years."

"Guess that's the irony, isn't it then? The one teacher who hated me the most always had the most power over me. You were the only one I couldn't please you know; made me want to work harder."

"You humble me."

31.

His admission startled her, and Hermione looked over her shoulder to gauge Severus' sincerity. To her surprise, she was able to see a rare openness in his dark eyes. It was unnerving to see a man who seemed so untouchable for many years finally seem human..

"I am just like you, you know. A wounded soul who needs to move on, but I don't want to do it alone, alone hurts more."

There was a pleading in her voice that he understood. The war had kept him from most human contact. It was time to come in from the cold.

32.

His smile was hesitant, mostly due to lack of use. Hers was weak, for having nothing to smile about. Staring back at each other there was a flicker of something that passed between them, perhaps just a shared agony that would never fully heal and required a certain kind of TLC.

No longer fearful, Severus made his way to the ledge and sat with her. The night had been long, longer than for anyone in the castle, but now it was over, life was moving on. Together they could make it. They watched the sun rise again over the horizon.

~Fin~