

Denouncing the Definitive Days of the Ultimate Demise

by *TempestOfDreams*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes:

This was my contribution to the Winter 2006 SS/HG Exchange. It was a gift for anogete. The prompt was: Hermione discovers a place where Snape goes to be alone and read in private. She spies on him and listens to him read aloud from a book. She comes back several times to listen to him in secret. It's up to you whether it is HBP-compliant or not.

Also, many thanks go out to my beta, dhark_charlotte.

Hermione strode as quickly and quietly as she could through the run-down streets. She was afraid that running would cause the Disillusionment Charm that Harry had cast on her to fail. Or that running would cause her to trip on all the uneven cobbles.

She, Harry, Ron, and Minerva had all seen the piece of rubbish that Rita Skeeter had managed to sell to a publisher about the war, and she and Minerva wanted to get to Severus Snape before he managed to see a copy.

There was no way he would be happy about it. Though the publisher had sent Hermione, Harry, and Ron something they called an Advanced Reading Copy, she had no idea if the newly-reinstated Professor Snape had been warned. And since Rita had been rather unflattering to him at some points in the narrative at this thought Hermione rolled her eyes, seeing as that was just about the understatement of the year Minerva wanted to make sure that Severus didn't take it too seriously.

Finally spotting the sign for Spinner's End, Hermione turned and walked to the end of the street, only to discover that Snape's entire house was dark. *Well, given that it's a quarter past midnight, she thought, that doesn't tell me much*

"Demonstrare Vita," she whispered as she pointed her wand at the dilapidated structure. A pulse of light glowed at the tip and then died. He wasn't home. Yet the Headmistress had been certain that he was planning to work at home tonight.

Baffled, she wandered around the house, wand out, looking for any sign of him. She jumped at a rustling noise before realising there were piles of decaying leaves in back that were shifting in the light breeze.

She peered into the darkness surrounding the house for any hint of his whereabouts. Hermione thought perhaps he had sensed her presence and left, but she hadn't heard any telltale cracks of Disapparition.

She finally spotted a light some ways away it seemed to be coming from just outside what looked like an abandoned mill. Hoping that perhaps he had gone for a walk and she could meet up with him, she set off, though she was nervous about wandering through the neighbourhood at night alone, Disillusionment Charm or not.

Still, she didn't see another alternative. That horrid Skeeter woman had dropped advanced copies of her book to the principals involved just one day before it was going to be released to the wizarding world. She had to find him tonight if she wanted to warn him. If he knew, she wouldn't bother him with her presence for any longer than necessary, but she didn't think it was fair for him to risk him being besieged the next day without any warning. After nearly a year, the media attention had just finally started dying down, and she and Ron at least could walk through Diagon Alley without having everyone ask for autographs (though they still stopped and pointed, and for Harry it was a completely different story). This little resurrection was guaranteed to drive them all insane. Again.

As she got close to the mill, Hermione realised the light was coming from just inside some sort of front office. She slowed her steps and put a Silencing Charm on her shoes before stepping up next to, but not in front of, the broken window. No sense in advertising her presence too soon.

She stood silently next to the window for a minute . . . then two . . . then three. Just when she was about to peek in, she heard the strangest sound.

It was definitely Severus Snape in there, as he was talking. But the odd part: he was also laughing! The shock of that had her checking her movement as she was leaning to peer into the window frame.

"Where did that woman get this tripe? 'And during the height of the battle, Harry Potter and the Dark-turned-light Severus Snape valiantly put aside their differences and together led the crusade of the century against Snape's former master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.'"

Hermione heard him snort in apparent disgust at the patently ridiculous passage of text. And she silently agreed, just as she had verbally agreed with Ron and Harry earlier in the evening. They had used stronger words than "tripe", however. Professor Snape must have been in a particularly good mood not to do so himself.

She was about to turn around and leave, as clearly Professor Snape had a copy of Beetle Woman's book and wasn't overly bothered by it, when he once again began quoting out loud.

"Despite his acts of bravery during the Final Battle, rumour says that Severus Snape clearly turned to the Side of Light during the heaving fighting as a last-ditch attempt to save his own skin from charges of murder.' Well, if anyone hadn't heard that rumour, they certainly will now," he muttered.

Hermione vacillated between wanting to leave him to his privacy and wanting to know who he was talking to. After a quick internal debate, she admitted that her ethics had taken an irreversible plunge over the course of her friendship with the boys. She double-checked her Disillusionment Charm before she tipped her head into a position where she could see between the broken panes of glass.

And promptly screwed up her face in confusion.

He was alone. Or at least, he appeared to be. Certainly no one was in sight. Since no one was answering his commentary, and also since he was still a notorious loner, Hermione assumed he probably was alone. Which meant . . .

Severus Snape *talked* to himself? Read out loud to himself?

Apparently so, as he continued, "'Eyewitnesses on both sides of the battle agree that Snape only changed sides once it was clear that Voldemort was going to be defeated by the Boy Who Lived.' Hmm, I don't suppose I want to know how she managed to interview any Death Eaters after the battle, given that they were all in Azkaban?"

Hermione had to keep herself from snorting at that. She'd wondered the same thing, and in much less flattering terms, until she found out that Rita Skeeter had spent six months in Azkaban herself after confessing to being an unregistered Animagus. Hermione and the boys still didn't know if she'd done the interviews while incarcerated or before she was caught.

While she was enjoying his diatribe, Hermione thought she had better leave before she gave herself away. As quietly as she could, she made her way back through the streets until she was far enough away to opt for speed over sound. When she reached the outer edges on the other side of the small town, she judged she was far enough away to Disapparate without causing undue attention and headed straight for the gates of Hogwarts to report in to Minerva.

Severus paused in his reading and glanced up towards the window when he heard a distant pop like someone Disapparating. If it was a witch or wizard, the person must have been on the other side of town. Not close enough to matter, but he felt a bit of unease nonetheless. He continued to live in this decrepit town specifically because it wasn't anywhere that a witch or wizard would choose to visit. As far as he knew, no other magical beings human or otherwise lived within a twenty-five mile radius. It was strictly an old Muggle mill town, and his house was there as a holdover from when his Muggle father had worked in the mill.

Perhaps it was time to head home for the night. He closed the book what a piece of drivel and looked around to be sure he had everything.

He had taken to this little quiet corner of the run-down mill. There was something about it that perhaps reminded him of himself; out-of-date, tired, and having served its purpose, it had little left to give. It was a perfect reading spot, however, for when he needed at least a little change of scenery. While he had spent the majority of his life living and working in the dungeons, even he had grown weary of the vampire bat impersonation.

He of course had regrets regarding how his time at Hogwarts had ended killing your mentor and long-time employer was hardly a convivial way to end twenty years of service. No matter that it had been planned by that very same mentor and was, in reality, a merciful ending for him. The fact that Severus could carry out the plan gave everyone the requisite excuse to hate him and paint him in the blackest light possible.

He sighed and wondered if these thoughts would ever weigh less heavily on his mind.

Picking up his cloak, and content that he had had everything he came with, Severus strode out of the building, automatically reinforcing the Muggle-repelling charms as he did so. He had no desire to risk anyone noticing that the town should *do* something about the mill. Much better to have them conveniently remember other appointments anytime they wandered close.

Severus jumped when a small black shape darted across his path. He snorted to himself. *I must seriously be relaxing from my time as a spy if a cat can startle me* he thought. He watched it dive into the bushes before continuing on his way.

His thoughts drifted back to the absurd book he had been owed earlier that evening, an "Advanced Reading Copy" provided free of charge as the accompanying letter pompously announced to the principals involved. He vaguely remembered a story that had circulated amongst the staff about Miss Granger holding the Skeeter woman hostage as a beetle one summer. Too bad she hadn't been kept like that indefinitely, as perhaps the wizarding world wouldn't then be saddled with the sensationalist piece of rubbish that was going to be released tomorrow. *The Definitive Days of the Ultimate Demise*, indeed. Severus wondered if she actually talked to anyone, skewing the interviews, or if perhaps she had just made the whole thing up.

Theoretically, he thought he should rather be insulted by her portrayal of him, which suggested that he waffled back and forth and jumped from side to side with alarming frequency. And that he and Potter only worked together on the same side at the end after he had been sure that the Dark Lord would fall. Never mind the little detail that he had been passing information to Potter about the Horcruxes for months via Lupin and some other trusted werewolves. Who also, according to Skeeter, had switched to the winning side at the very end.

He braced his shoulder on the door and shoved as he let himself into his house. He really needed to get around to finding that household spell to oil the hinges. Or he needed to find some oil and do it the Muggle way. He took the book out of his cloak pocket before putting the cloak away. Sitting down in a wing chair in front of the empty fireplace, he leaned his head back and decided he would let himself brood for a while. The book fell into his lap and was forgotten as he pondered its implications.

It was going to be a long few months trying to wade through the resurgence of idiocy it would cause. He had just been getting to the point where he could go out in public, briefly, to visit the apothecary and do other necessary errands without having people come up to him and denounce him in the middle of whatever public location he was frequenting. He'd have to go back to owl order again, which would wreak havoc on what potions he could make. He didn't trust the apothecary to send the best quality stock on the more rare ingredients, so he would only be able to make the more basic things to sell back to the shop. And of course, those were the less profitable items.

Since the war ended nearly a year ago (undoubtedly the upcoming anniversary was the impetus for the publication of the *Tome of Tripe*, as he thought it would be more aptly named), Severus had been quietly brewing potions to sell to apothecaries in Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and a few other smaller wizarding communities. He had reluctantly picked a name and label that he hoped no one would associate with him: simple blue calligraphy stating "Positively Potions" wrapped around mortar and pestle.

It earned him enough money to live simply at Spinner's End, but would never make him rich, so it had been with some relief that he had been re-instated as the Potions master at Hogwarts for the upcoming year. Most of his savings had unfortunately been used between the debacle on the Astronomy Tower and the end of the war. Thankfully, he only had to get through the remainder of the summer before he would be back at Hogwarts. He'd told Minerva that while he would still teach in the dungeons, he needed new private quarters a few floors up. He needed a new start.

Sighing, he picked up the book and dropped it on the closest table, then headed upstairs to get some rest. It would, undoubtedly, be a long next few days.

At least the people who knew where he lived could be trusted to keep it a secret. And his reading place was his and his alone, and Severus would make sure it remained that way.

Hermione travelled by Floo powder back to her room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place after assuring Minerva that, yes, she had seen Professor Snape (she really couldn't think of him as Mr. Snape) with the book, and no, he didn't seem upset. No, she hadn't talked to him, but she didn't want to disrespect his privacy more than she already had by explaining what she had seen.

Minerva had seemed slightly peeved that Hermione wouldn't share the details, but didn't press further. Hermione was grateful, and unexpectedly found herself rather protective of what she assumed was a private place for her former teacher. She had rather felt as if she was intruding on a personal haven at the mill and didn't think he would appreciate it becoming common knowledge.

Fortunately, it seemed that Harry and Ron hadn't waited up for her. It seemed that ever since she and Ron had decided that the explosive attraction between them had just needed to run its course, she was back to being "one of the boys". Hermione wasn't sure if she was pleased or insulted by that. Nevertheless, in this case, it was a relief. She didn't like lying to them and hoped that by morning they wouldn't care beyond a cursory mention that she'd made sure he was forewarned.

It would stay her secret.

She smiled through her evening rituals and was still smiling when she climbed into bed. For some reason, she couldn't shake the memory of Professor Snape's laugh. It just wasn't what she was expecting, she told herself. After six years of experiencing him as a nasty, insulting teacher, and another year of receiving his belittling messages via Professor Lupin, the thought of an honest laugh from him was completely alien to her. A restrained sneer and a "humpf", perhaps, but not a from-the-gut, relaxed-and-content laugh. Especially over something as annoying as the *Annals of Atrocity*, as she had dubbed it.

She fell asleep still smiling over his laughter. And when she woke, she realised she had dreamed of it, as well.

Harry and Ron had apparently completely forgotten about her task by breakfast. They were too absorbed with how the publicity might disrupt their Quidditch training to give it another thought. Hermione read the *Daily Prophet* as they talked.

"I'll bet we have to post guards around the pitch again," Ron said, gulping down breakfast as he talked. Hermione glanced up at that comment, but quickly turned her eyes away that was one of the things that had quickly convinced her that she and Ron weren't compatible. There was no way she could look at that every morning for the rest of her life.

Harry's manners were better than Ron's, and he swallowed before responding. "Probably. But I wish we could just muzzle Rita Skeeter for good. She's a menace. Hermione, isn't there anything we can do about this?"

"Unfortunately, I don't think so. Because of the war, we're all public figures, and for you two it's only compounded by your new Quidditch careers."

She returned to the paper, looking for an announcement about the book release. She was surprised it wasn't on the front page. She frowned as she closed the paper without any sign of "Oh, for goodness sake, look at this," she said, shoving the back page of the paper across the table to her friends.

The entire back page was plastered with an advertisement for the new book.

"And, on that note, I believe we'll take our leave," said Harry, rising from the table and transferring his dishes to the sink. "Leave the dishes," he continued, "I'll do them when we get home." Ron followed suit, and soon enough they were on their way, leaving Hermione to her own thoughts as she finished her tea.

Rather dangerous things, thoughts, she told herself. Though she could, at least, control her waking thoughts. Dreams could be more dangerous. And sometimes good dreams could be more dangerous than bad ones, as she had discovered last night.

She was still thinking of Severus's laughter as she cleaned up the dishes never mind what Harry said and moved down the hall into the library to find something to read. She had a tentative offer of a job in the Department of Mysteries, but as she had missed her own NEWTs and had to wait until the following spring to take them with Ginny's class, she had to wait for the results before she would be officially accepted. In the meantime, she was reading whatever she could get her hands on, working with some of the Hogwarts teachers to learn more about their specialties, and generally doing whatever she could to keep herself busy.

She rather thought today might be a good day to spend inside.

She skimmed the book titles that lined the walls until she found something that seemed promising: *A Treatise on the Fall of Grindelwald*. Pulling it down from the shelf, she pondered what she knew about the topic. She knew the late Headmaster had been the wizard who had defeated him, but realised she didn't know much more than that, other than the fact that his defeat coincided with the end of the Muggle World War II.

Perhaps combined with her knowledge of Voldemort, the book might shed better light on how Dark wizards entice people to follow them. Hermione was rather sure that, despite Rita Skeeter's assertion that it was the *Ultimate Demise*, Voldemort wouldn't be the last Dark wizard to rise to power. Muggle and wizard history had both shown time after time that there will always be another Dark wizard, or dictator, or other power-hungry figure that will try to seize control of the people.

She settled into a comfortable armchair to read and opened the book carefully, unsure of its condition. She was pleasantly surprised to find that it was supple and not at all brittle. Making a mental note to see if there were spells that might have that effect, she flipped to the title page. She didn't recognise the author, so she continued on to the first chapter.

By the time she was done with the first chapter Hermione had nearly thrown the book across the room three times. It was just as bad as the *Annals of Atrocity*.

Sensationalist rubbish, with content so clouded by opinion and ridiculous suppositions that she had no way of knowing what was truth. In fact, it all sounded rather familiar, with the wizard hero defeating the nasty evil nemesis with the help of a reluctant, side-switching spy.

In fact . . .

She smiled as she crossed to the desk and retrieved a quill, ink, and some parchment. She was going to have to see if Hedwig could take something to the Post Office for her.

The owl, a nondescript tawny one, arrived while Severus was at work in the lab, of course. In the middle of something he couldn't take a break from stirring for at least five more minutes. "You'll have to wait," he told the bird impatiently, "though I have no idea who would be sending me a package, anyway. All the other birds that have brought post today have had ridiculously sentimental letters of support from the Hogwarts staff or Howlers telling me to please bugger off and die."

The owl hooted in a rather annoyed way from the window sill and turned its back on him. But it didn't go anywhere. When he could finally retrieve the letter and package that it had brought, he sent the bird on its way without any more of a fuss and sat down at his desk.

"*Severus Snape*" was written on the letter in a handwriting that looked too perfect to be real. A dictated letter, then, but not a Howler. He slid his wand out of its concealed pocket in his robes and cast a series of diagnostic spells to ensure that it was nothing dangerous. When it appeared that the letter was perfectly safe, he opened it, carefully nonetheless, and spread it on the table. It was short and to the point.

"*Do you think Rita Skeeter actually researched the fall of Voldemort, or just rewrote this book about the last Dark wizard? I thought you might appreciate seeing your apparent predecessor in the role of supposedly side-switching spy.*" The note was unsigned.

He opened the accompanying package and found a book he'd never seen before. Interested, he glanced at the table of contents and had to agree with the letter-writer that it looked very similar to the *Tome of Tripe*. Severus wondered briefly how the sender had known he had read Skeeter's work, but supposed it was reasonable to assume that he had. Or that he would if he hadn't already. Shaking his head, he put it aside and returned to his work. Although it looked like it would be at least mildly entertaining, he had batches of various potions that needed to be attended to first if he wanted to continue supplying the apothecary to tide him over until his new stint at Hogwarts began.

He couldn't quite get the thought of the mysterious book out of his head, however. As he worked at the lab table throughout his afternoon's commissions, he found his gaze periodically straying back to where he had left the book on his desk. The binding was plain, but the book itself appeared to be in surprisingly good shape, as if it had perhaps been bought and put aside without ever being opened. There were no pages sliding out or misaligned that he could see, and the spine showed no cracks at all. *Odd*, he thought, but pushed the details firmly away and deliberately turned his back to the desk while he continued his work.

Later that evening, Severus found himself striding quickly to his reading spot with the book tucked under his arm almost without realising he had left his house. Any concerns about the sender had been settled in his mind in his haste to dive into the story.

She felt more than a bit like a voyeur, but she couldn't keep herself from returning. Hermione wanted to see if he laughed over the book *she* had sent him the same way he had laughed over the ridiculous garbage that Rita Skeeter had sent. And so here she was again, Disillusionment Charm in place she hoped and peering in the window.

She had a perfect view of him as he sat in an armchair. If he looked up, he'd be looking directly at her through the window pane. Hermione kept herself as still as she could as she took in the sight of Severus reading the book she had sent. He was smiling. And shaking his head. A snort there, that's more like what she would have expected out of his laughter.

And there it was again. He tipped his head back against the chair and laughed. A deep, rich laughter that packed a punch straight to her gut and made her smile before she slipped off again into the night.

She sent him more books. On all different subjects, but always something that she had found funny, and hoped Severus when did she start thinking of him like that? would, too. And every day that she sent a book, she snuck back to the old mill at night and watched. And smiled when he laughed and frowned when he didn't.

She simply told Harry and Ron she was going to bed with a book to read for a while. They never questioned her, and she travelled by Floo powder out of her room to various out-of-the-way wizarding locations each night before Apparating to somewhere near Spinner's End.

She didn't realise that she had slowly shifted from searching the library for interesting books to pass her time to searching the library for books she wanted to give *him*.

The books had kept coming, two or three a week for nearly a month, though after the first few the accompanying notes stopped. It was always the same owl who brought them. Eventually, Severus stopped checking the packages for hexes. And a few days later, he left out some Owl Treats when he was deep into making something and knew that if the owl showed up it would have to wait quite a while for him to be able to untie the package.

It was certainly within his capabilities to figure out who was sending them, but there was something enticing about the secrecy. The packages appeared harmless enough, and though he never relaxed completely about them, he was pleased to be engaged in a minor game of stealth that had none of the implications or dangers of his former alternative occupation. So he continued to accept the books, and enjoy them, and didn't pursue any attempts to track the sender down.

He was enjoying the game and was in no hurry for it to end.

Ron had promised Harry he would pick up some headache potion at the apothecary while he was in Diagon Alley. They were meeting up shortly at the team pitch for the evening practice. He was running late, of course, as he had once again got caught by fans as he did his other errands, but he had made it just before the shop closed.

He dashed in and ran straight into a wall of black. "Oof!"

"Mr. Weasley, perhaps you could eventually learn to *walk*, rather than *run*," a too-familiar voice bit out.

The war was over and he no longer had to take classes with the greasy bat. Fight fire with fire. "Snape. Out of hiding? Haven't seen you since Skeeter's book came out. Avoiding your simpering fans?"

Snape's reply untwisted his mouth slightly and sounded perilously close to snort. Couldn't have that. Better amend the last statement.

"Oh, no, that's my problem these days, sorry about that."

The sneer slid definitively back into place. "Mr. Weasley, I suspect you are no more pleased to see me than I am to see you, but you might be more convincing in that fact if you *backed off rather than standing in my face*"

Ron jumped to the side. "Uh, yes, sir. For what it's worth, we are glad you didn't take Skeeter's work seriously. She's a witch, and not in the magical sense."

"Excuse me? What makes you think I've read it?"

Ron was perplexed. Hadn't Hermione said she was going to talk to him? "But Minerva sent Hermione to find you the night before it was released. She Minerva was worried you'd get angry about it. Hermione left, but we were asleep by the time she got home, and later on we assumed she would have mentioned something if there was a problem. Minerva never mentioned it again, and we thought everything was fine. Hermione went back to waiting for her NEWT results, and that was that."

Ron rather thought that was the longest direct statement he'd ever made to Snape and was rather surprised that Snape was clearly getting very mad about it. "She did talk to you, didn't she?"

The black robes still snapped menacingly when their owner wanted them to. "She will talk to me, I assure you, boy." Snape strode out the door and immediately Disapparated from Diagon Alley from right in front of the shop, leaving behind several surprised, pointing people in his wake.

Crap. Ron knew he'd never beat Snape to warn Hermione. Checking his watch, he realised he was going to get fined if he was any later to practice. And he still hadn't gotten the headache potion. Hermione could handle herself.

The pieces of the puzzle were slipping quickly into place, but he was missing a motivation somewhere.

If any Muggles had been watching, they undoubtedly would have noticed him appear out of thin air in the middle of Grimmauld Place. He realised he was lucky, because his control was clearly gone. Under normal circumstances, Severus Snape didn't storm anywhere. Slip, glide, even sneak, yes. But only when his temper had reached the breaking point did he storm.

He was storming now.

He slammed the door to number twelve open without knocking. "Miss Granger, get down here at once!"

She had no right, *no right*, to invade his privacy like that. Never mind that he had enjoyed the books she sent. That Disapparating sound he had heard . . . she had spied on him that night. And . . . maybe other nights? He wouldn't put it past her. She knew about his secret

"Yes, Professor?" she asked as she slowly descended the stairs.

It crossed his mind that her Muggle jeans and pink jumper looked decidedly out-of-place in the hallway of this particular wizarding house, before he pulled himself back to his original thoughts.

"How dare you? What kind of a game were you playing? Was this your idea of a *joke*? Who have you told about my reading spot?"

So, *it's time to face the music*, Hermione thought as she stopped on the bottom step. "No one, sir."

"Don't lie to me!"

"I'm not lying! I haven't told anyone, and I wasn't planning to. It's obviously important to you, and I wouldn't tell anyone. I think I only managed to find it because I was desperate that first night."

Severus *damn, was she still thinking of him like that?* seemed to deflate, just a bit, when she said that.

His face contorted in what she thought might have been confusion rather than just his normal angry sneer. "I don't understand, Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley indicated that Minerva wanted you to check on me," a bit of a sneer there, "about the *Tome of Tripe*. That is, Skeeter's book, whatever its proper name is. You apparently came back, though. Why? And why did you send me the other books?"

But Hermione was still caught on the *Tome Of Tripe*. And while she knew he wouldn't appreciate it, she couldn't help herself, and burst into giggles.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, that I do not see this as a laughing matter."

That only made her laugh harder. "The *Tome of Tripe*! I thought I was being original when I nicknamed it the *Annals of Atrocity*!" She had to sit down on the stairs she was laughing so hard at this point. "I'm sorry, sir!"

Severus looked at the laughing young woman before him and felt himself unbend just the tiniest bit. He thought perhaps his mouth quirked up in an expression that was probably a tad closer to a smile than he would perhaps have liked. "Apparently neither of us have, shall we say, an *appreciation*, for Ms. Skeeter's writing. I did find it rather disturbingly reassuring that people were no better at the end of the war with Grindelwald, and I believe I have you to thank for that."

Her laughter calmed, and she smiled up at him. *Smiled* at him? He didn't believe he'd ever seen that from her before, and somewhere in his chest he felt a blooming sensation he didn't recognise.

"You're welcome, sir. Um, if you wait here hold on, just a moment . . ." She dashed off down the hall and returned less than a minute later carrying what appeared to be a wrapped book which she promptly handed to him. "I was going to send this to you later today, but, well, here you are. I hope you enjoy it, sir. I won't follow you to your reading spot anymore. I'm sorry for that."

He looked down at the package, then back at her. "I assume you've already read this?"

"Of course," she replied. "Why on earth would I send you something if I hadn't read it first to see if I thought you'd like it?"

He couldn't help it. It just slipped out. He laughed. He shook his head. Had he expected anything else?

"That's why, sir."

What? "Excuse me?"

"You asked earlier why I kept coming back. But I was too busy laughing to respond. I did hear the question, though, and that's why. Because of your laugh. It was such a surprise the first time. But it's so nice, and I just liked the idea that you were happy. That is, you seemed happy. I hope you are."

Well, that was a surprise. So was what slipped out of his mouth next.

"Give me tonight to read this, Hermione, and then perhaps you'll join me tomorrow? And show yourself, so that we can discuss it?" Did he just say that? Was he losing control of his tongue? First laughing, and now this. But . . . he had enjoyed the game. And perhaps he could continue to put the unpleasant part of his life behind. He'd never be a cheerful man, but perhaps he didn't have to be a completely solitary one. He held his breath as he waited for her answer.

She was clearly surprised, but if the small smile was any indication she was pleased. "I would love to, sir."

He backtracked. He simply couldn't let go of the nasty bat persona that quickly. "Don't get illusions of grandeur I just want to make sure your brain hasn't rotted. When I ran literally into your friend Weasley in Diagon Alley, he said you were waiting for your NEWT results. As much as it pains me to admit it, I'm sure your results will be completely satisfactory. But I commend you for keeping your brain active in the meantime. It might amuse me to see how you've done in that endeavour."

"Thank you, sir." She was beaming now, and he could feel his mouth wanting to give into a smile.

Instead, he looked at her intently for a few seconds, thinking about how he had recently concluded that he needed a fresh start. "You may call me Severus."

It was a beginning.