

# A Living Hell

*by Soul Bound*

Severus has been running from himself for years. What happens when his pain catches up with him in the form of the new Potions teacher, Hermione Granger? My response to the 8th Prompt of Potter Place's Winter Challenge.

## Brick Wall

*Chapter 1 of 4*

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There wasn't much Severus Snape enjoyed more than winding up the Potions mistress and watching her head spin off. Oh, how he loathed her. She'd been the bane of his existence for six years while she was his student, and now, as his colleague, Hermione Granger was even more insufferable, if that was possible.

Severus had been to hell and back since the day Albus Dumbledore had extracted a promise from him to end his life. Killing his friend and mentor...at times his tormentor...had been the most horrible moment of his life. The worst of it was that a part of Severus, however small, had hated Dumbledore in that moment, had *wanted* to kill him. Severus didn't know how to stop loathing himself for his feelings and for his part in the whole affair, and he wasn't sure he ever would.

After a Pensieve testimony of Dumbledore's had been anonymously brought forth, the Wizengamot had granted Severus a full pardon, and he'd been free to live his life...what was left of it, anyway.

The public may have forgiven him...and Severus didn't truly believe they had; he had seen more than a few looks of distrust and disdain sent his way...but Severus would never forgive himself. He tossed and turned so many nights, thinking he should have done this, or he could have done that. There had to have been another way, he thought. The 'what ifs' were driving him mad.

But after a year or so of sleepless nights, the pain began to dull, and he was able to take back some control of his life. Minerva McGonagall had offered him a place at Hogwarts, teaching again. Because the castle was the one place he felt at home, he'd accepted. She'd generously offered him the DADA post. The Dark Lord's curse had been lifted from the position with his death, and for the first time since he'd cast the Killing Curse on the Headmaster, Severus had begun to relax.

He settled into a comfortable routine. He knew he would always have the nightmares, and the bitterness, but keeping himself busy held off the worst of the pain. For three years, he'd allowed himself to live as normal a life as possible. He taught, he snapped at everyone in close proximity, and occasionally, he let himself smile at something clever. Everyone, student and colleague, knew to give him a wide berth. They stayed out of his way; he preferred it that way.

But then, about three weeks before the start of his fourth year back at Hogwarts, his peaceful life had been turned upside down by four little words: Hermione Granger, Potions Mistress. Minerva had dropped the bomb in what he'd thought to be a routine staff meeting.

"We've not had a decent Potions professor since Severus took up the Defense post," she'd said. "Miss Granger has spent two years at Muggle university and the last year as an apprentice under Master Jigger. She's well qualified, and any of you who remember her as a student know what a dedicated worker she is. She'll be a wonderful addition to our staff this coming year."

Severus had only been able to swallow thickly against the bile rising in his throat.

He remembered her, all right. Most unfortunately, he remembered her. He would have been glad to go on forgetting she and her little band of Gryffindor Saints existed. But, no, she would be there at Hogwarts in three weeks time, such a *wonderful* addition to the staff... reminding him daily of the pain he was trying so hard to let go of.

When he thought of Granger, he thought of Potter. When he thought of Potter, he couldn't help but think of every horrible moment of his life. Potter was the personification of the humiliation Severus had suffered at the hands of his father, James, of his promise to kill Albus Dumbledore, of his blind service and later suffering at the hands of the Dark Lord. Hermione Granger was just an extension of Potter. She represented the scars on his soul that would never heal.

Not only that, but she was annoying...a know-it-all. Oh, yes, he remembered her as a student. Bossy, demanding, irritating, her hand constantly waving in the air, begging to be noticed and approved of... all at once sickly sweet and controlling of those around her. He'd loathed her then, and he was sure he would loathe her now. She'd be the same overeager parrot she'd always been; he was sure of it.

He'd left that meeting feeling physically ill.

When she'd arrived at Hogwarts a week later to be greeted so warmly by everyone else, when she'd settled so easily into her new position, Severus had been livid.

The first time he'd stumbled across her, she'd greeted him with a warm, if a bit uncertainly, smile, and all his assumptions about her had somehow been confirmed. Didn't she know that he hated the sight and sound of her? Was she really stupid enough to approach him? Apparently she was.

"Hello, Professor Snape," she'd said. "It's good to see you. It's been a long time."

"Not nearly long enough," he'd snarled. "Stay away from me." And with that, he'd spun on his heel and left her staring after him with her mouth hanging open.

It had only gone downhill from there. As the year began, he'd done his best to keep to his rooms as much as was possible. But he couldn't avoid her all the time. And while she didn't often attempt to engage him in conversation, just being in the same room with her was torture.

If she were different from the child he'd hated, he'd never know. He ignored her as much as possible, thinking that if he didn't acknowledge her presence, maybe she'd just drop off the face of the Earth and he'd be able to go back to his peaceful existence.

But no such luck. She was always there, smiling and laughing softly or wandering around with her head in a book. The longer she was there, the harder he found it to continue ignoring her presence. The worst part of it was that she didn't seem to take offense to his caustic attitude toward her.

On the rare occasion that he did speak to her, telling her to 'get out of his way,' 'cease that bothersome chatter,' or 'take that brainless smile elsewhere,' she just nodded calmly and complied. This should have pleased him, but it didn't. He didn't like feeling insignificant, like nothing he did mattered. So he'd upped the ante.

About three weeks into term, on the 19th of September, he'd been sitting at breakfast when she walked in with a bright smile on her face and took her place next to him. She'd offered him a pleasant "good morning" and begun to eat. He'd been fuming, though he couldn't explain why. All he could think was, *How the hell does she have the right to smile and be happy when I can't be?*

So he'd done something about it.

"Wipe that insipid smile off your face, Granger. You have nothing to be happy about. You are nothing but a bother, a waste of space. You should never have come here."

He'd watched with satisfaction as her smile faded, blood draining from her face. She'd turned away from him and stared at her full plate of food. She didn't answer back, but Severus didn't care. He'd accomplished what he'd set out to do. She wasn't smiling anymore.

She pushed her food around her plate for a few minutes before several owls landed in front of her, carrying parcels of varying size and color. She'd looked at them blankly before shrinking them and leaving the Hall, breakfast uneaten.

Severus had watched as the Headmistress said something to her, patting her on the arm. He briefly wondered what it was, but it didn't really matter. She was gone, and he didn't have to bear her presence any longer; that was the important thing.

After that, Hermione's attitude toward Severus became far more distant. She no longer greeted him warmly...or at all for that matter. She didn't look at him. When they passed one another in a corridor, she stared straight ahead and sped up slightly, as though desperate to get away from him but not wanting to be obvious about it. His snide comments toward her were ignored entirely, much to his consternation.

It seemed that to her, Severus no longer existed.

Once again, this should have pleased him, but it didn't. He wanted to see her glare at him. He wanted her face to flush in anger and know it was because he could get to her, like she got to him.

So after several weeks of her pretending he didn't exist, he decided to up the ante again. She couldn't continue to ignore him if he put himself in her path, could she?

He began to verbally eviscerate her at every opportunity. He would attack her friends, make fun of her hair, belittle her studious nature, anything he could think of to get a rise out of her. And it worked. For several months this went on. He would provoke her, and she would take the bait, swelling in anger and snapping back at him, telling him off. Her hair would whip around her face, and her cheeks would flush. Her eyes would flash, and her breathing would quicken. He loved seeing her like that. He loved knowing that he could break her calm, pleasant, happy facade and turn her into such a bitch. It gave him satisfaction to think that not even the perfect Hermione Granger was infallible. She was just pretending. How he enjoyed knocking her off her high horse...

One Saturday evening in mid-December, just before the Christmas holidays, he was making his rounds when he turned a corner and ran almost straight into a Hermione, deep in conversation with a man Severus didn't recognize. She held his arm lightly and with apparent ease. She smiled shyly and brightly at him...an expression Severus hadn't seen on her face in months.

His nostrils flared in inexplicable rage.

It took a moment for her to notice his presence. Once she did, she halted mid-sentence, and the smile she'd been wearing fell away as though it had never been there.

"Professor," she said coldly.

"Granger," he bit out. He took a look at the confused face of her handsome companion and struck. With a taunting sneer, he said, "Didn't the Headmistress inform you that we have rules against the staff fraternizing? Or perhaps you were simply never taught not to behave like a common whore."

Hermione's face flushed in rage. "How dare you?" she hissed. "How *dare* you?"

Severus smirked. "Spare me your explanations. I know enough about loose women to know when I see one."

"Wait just a second," her companion interrupted, swelling with indignation.

"I can handle this, Mitch," she snapped. "I wasn't going to explain anything to you, Snape. I don't owe you an explanation. I have nothing to prove to you, you arrogant bastard. What I do and whom I do it with is none of your business. I'm not twelve years old anymore, Professor. I'm far beyond wanting your approval. You know nothing about me. You have no right to even speak to me after the way you've treated me. You wanted me to stay away from you? You got your wish. So extend me the same courtesy. I want nothing to do with you and your bitterness."

Severus had listened to her rant with increasing anger. How he hated her... "Are you finished?" he snarled.

"Very," she shot back, looking at him with undisguised hatred.

"Praise Merlin," he said with a vicious smirk. "I hope you don't think I listened to a word you said. You don't matter. Nothing you have to say will ever matter."

She snorted. "Of course not, Professor. You wouldn't recognize truth if someone tattooed it to your forehead."

He narrowed his eyes. "As I told you before...you, Miss Granger, are nothing but a waste of space."

Severus expected her to snarl back, but she didn't. She just stared at him for a long moment, as though seeing him for the first time, finally shaking her head sadly. "And you, Severus Snape, are nothing but a disappointment. You have it in you to be so much, and this is what you've let yourself become."

Severus felt the air freeze in his lungs, the blood in his veins running cold. She fixed him with one last piercing look before tugging on her companion and walking away. Severus stood there, unable to move, feeling as though he'd just been stabbed with a jagged blade, blood roaring through his ears.

He couldn't breathe.

*You are nothing but a disappointment*

He shut his eyes and clenched his jaw.

*This is what you've let yourself become.*

He let out a shaky breath. He felt as if the world had just crumbled around him. Her words were shattering him from the inside out. It was as though every bit of self-loathing in him had been unleashed. Every time he'd told himself those exact words, "You are a disappointment, look what you've become," every memory he'd kept locked away for fear it would destroy him, the knowledge that he was exactly what she'd said...a shell of a man, bitter, hateful, empty, and *disappointing*...it all came crashing down on him in that moment.

He let out a choked breath and moved. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't feel his legs moving or even feel anything but the roaring in his ears and the crushing pain gripping his shattered soul until he found himself in his study, uncapping the most potent bottle of alcohol he owned and downing as much of it as he could at once. When he'd swallowed that, he drank more, and more, and more... until his head swam and his knees gave. He collapsed into a chair, drinking as much as he could as fast as he could. *Go away!* his mind screamed.

But it didn't go away. Even once he passed out, images of a murdered man flying off the edge of a tower plagued him, images of himself, sneering hatefully at the world, of a skull and snake writhing in the sky and on his forearm...all interspersed with the words of a little girl he'd been forced to torture. She was everyone he'd ever hurt. She had blond hair, and then she had brown hair. It was curly. She said, *What are you?* How did she know? How did she *know*?

How did she know what he asked himself every time he looked in the mirror?

The next day was a Sunday. The raw anguish from the night before was gone, but the emptiness remained when he awoke, along with a pounding headache and a horrible taste in his mouth.

The faint light pouring through the window was unwelcome. It served as a reminder that the sun would still rise, whether he wanted it to or not.

He groaned. After several minutes of nothingness, he stood and stumbled into his bathroom. He felt bile rising in his throat and barely made it to the toilet before his stomach turned itself inside out. Repeatedly. After a long time hunched unceremoniously on the floor, gripping the rim of the toilet so that dizziness would not overtake him, he managed to stand and pull a hangover potion out of the cupboard. He immediately felt relief and took a deep, shaky breath.

A hot shower to relax his aching muscles, a large cup of black coffee, and a fresh set of robes later, he looked as he always did, at least outwardly. Inside everything had changed. Hermione Granger's words had forced him to face himself...something he'd been avoiding doing for twenty-five years, maybe his whole life.

It was only the beginning, but it was a start. It would take a long time before he would be able to look in the mirror without hating what he saw, if ever, but he knew it could only go uphill from here. He didn't think he could sink any lower.

And it had been Hermione Granger who had broken him. The woman who represented everything he'd been running from had shoved him against the proverbial wall, and she didn't even know it.

Where could he go from here?

~\*~\*~\*~

Hermione Granger said goodbye to her date, Mitch, and walked into her sitting room, her emotions in upheaval. What was it about that man that got her going like that? All the things that she'd wanted to say to him since her birthday, things that had been bubbling beneath the surface, had exploded the moment he'd called her a whore. But why?

She knew she wasn't a whore, just like she knew she wasn't unintelligent, shallow, ignorant, or any of the other things he routinely accused her of being. So why did she let them get to her? She knew the answer. It was because despite what she'd just told him, deep down, she wanted his approval, his respect. She always had.

She'd always respected his intelligence, his dedication and focus, from the moment she'd met him. Despite how cruel he'd always been, she respected him. And after her fourth year, when she'd discovered his position as a spy and all the things he went through for the sake of what was right, respect had turned into care. She cared about him. She felt compassion toward him for all the things he'd had to suffer. She could see how miserable he was, and even back in school, as his student, she'd wanted him to be happy.

She'd trusted him. When he'd cast the Killing Curse on Dumbledore, her trust had wavered only for a moment in the shock of what had happened. Then she had remembered that on that awful night, he had passed right by her. He could have killed her easily. If he had truly been evil, he would have. And later that night, when Harry had chased him off the grounds, he could have killed Harry, but he hadn't.

She'd known then that something wasn't adding up.

Over the next year, as they'd hunted down and destroyed the pieces of Voldemort's fragmented soul, she'd always known in the back of her mind that she could still trust him. In the final battle, after Harry had defeated the Dark Lord, he had turned his wand on Snape. Hermione had acted on instinct. She'd distracted Harry long enough for Snape to disappear.

After that, everyone had been convinced of his guilt, everyone but Hermione. She'd searched tirelessly for a way to prove his innocence. After about a month, her search had paid off. She'd finally gotten into the Headmaster's office alone and was able to speak to his portrait. After a long conversation, the painting had swung off the wall, revealing a hidden compartment containing a Pensieve and a written testimony proving that Snape had acted only on Dumbledore's orders.

Hermione had wasted no time in delivering the evidence to the Wizengamot. Snape had been given a full pardon.

Hermione had wanted him to have the recognition he deserved. She wanted him to be happy. She'd given him his life back, and he'd never known it. The truth was, she

didn't want him to know she was behind his pardon. She knew how he'd always felt about her, and she hadn't wanted to rub salt in his wounds.

For the next year, her first year at university, she thought of him often, wondering if he'd found a way to be happy. When she'd heard he was back at Hogwarts, teaching DADA, she was glad for him. Over the next two years, as she finished her degree, he'd always been there in her mind. She hoped he was living the life he was finally free to live.

Coming back to Hogwarts had felt like returning home after a long day. The first time she'd seen Snape, he'd looked just as sullen and dark as ever, but that hadn't bothered her. She knew some things about him would never change. He'd seemed quiet, withdrawn, but somewhat less hostile than she remembered. At least until she had come face to face with him and been snarled at. That had confused her, but she'd let it slide.

She knew he valued his privacy, so she hadn't pushed him. Occasionally she would try to speak to him in a friendly way, only to be ignored or rebuffed. But still, that hadn't bothered her as much as it could have. It wasn't until the morning of her twenty-second birthday when he'd told her she was nothing but a waste of space, simply because she'd been smiling, that he had truly hurt her. She realized then that nothing had changed. He was still angry and bitter. He hadn't let go of anything, and he wasn't living at all. He was simply existing. That, as much as what he'd said to her, was painful to her. This man, who deserved so much happiness for what he'd been through, couldn't allow himself to feel it.

It was a simple paradox that would always make her sad.

So she did what he'd asked. She stayed away from him, hurt by his comments and attitude, but unwilling to subject herself to further scorn. She'd hoped he would do the same and leave her alone, but he hadn't. It hadn't been enough for him that he was unhappy. He wanted her to be unhappy, too. And he'd gone out of his way to make it so.

For several months now, he'd been making her life a living hell, never missing a chance to attack and belittle her.

Every comment, every insult, every barb he threw at her had made her angrier and angrier. She was so disappointed in him, in what he'd chosen to become. He'd been given a second chance...a chance at a life free from scorn and distrust, of being hated and hunted and used, a chance to choose happiness...and he'd chosen *this*.

And tonight, when he'd seen her walking with Mitch and called her a whore, something had snapped.

Now, sitting on her sofa and staring blankly at the wall, she didn't know what to do.

Even after the way he'd treated her, continued to treat her, she still wanted him to find peace. She knew that he was the way he was because he was in so much pain, but she didn't know how to help him. It seemed nothing got through to him...not kindness, nor anger, nor indifference. Nothing. It seemed as though he was *unwilling* to let go of his pain, his hate. Like he *needed* it. She was at a loss.

She fell asleep that night on her sofa, fully clothed and more confused than she'd ever been, not knowing that several floors above her, Severus Snape was finally breaking down.

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**Author's Notes:** Thanks go to Southern\_Witch\_69, mah lovely beta. You rock, Sun.

This is a response to the 8th Prompt of Potter Place's Winter Prompt Challenge, which is:

**\*Severus is fed up with his new colleague, Hermione Granger. So, he decides to delve into her life and make her life a living hell.**

When I thought of doing this response, I meant for it to be more light-hearted, but this is what came out. So I hope you enjoy it, all the same.

I'm giving it an R rating for now, just to be safe. I may upgrade or downgrade it later.

## One Small Step

Chapter 2 of 4

Severus makes an attempt to change and it doesn't go so well. Maybe he needs help.

Hermione awoke late in the morning to the sound of tapping on her window. It took her a moment for the tapping to register and another moment for her to realise that she was fully clothed and bent at an awkward angle on her sofa. A moment after that, she remembered why. The events of the previous night slowly began to seep back into her consciousness, and she groaned half out of the pain in her twisted neck and half out of sheer frustration.

Once again, she pondered the words she'd said to Snape, this time without the sharp sting of his baseless and cruel accusations at least to a lesser extent. Being called a whore by someone she wanted to respect would probably sting for a long time. It made it that much worse to know that he couldn't possibly actually believe most of the things he said to her. It hurt to know that Severus Snape wanted to cause her pain. She knew it shouldn't. She knew that deep down he was just a lonely, bitter man and that what he said to her shouldn't matter. But it did. She couldn't understand why, and that frustrated her all the more, but all the same, his words mattered to her.

She felt as though her thoughts were taking her in maddening circles.

The tapping grew louder and more insistent. She slowly extracted herself from the cushions that had swallowed her, careful not to aggravate her muscles even further. She stretched and made a half-hearted attempt to straighten her clothing.

The owl at her window seemed to take every second she wasn't walking to greet him as a personal insult and began to screech angrily.

"All right!" Hermione groused. "You can stop that. I'm coming."

She opened the window, and the owl landed on the sill. He stuck his leg out pointedly and glared at her as if to say, "Took you long enough."

A small, yellowish envelope was removed from his leg before Hermione retrieved a few owl treats from her kitchen for him. He seemed to be slightly mollified by her offering and gave a begrudging hoot of 'thanks.'

"You're welcome."

Hermione opened the letter and smiled at the familiar, barely legible writing of her sometimes boyfriend, Mitch Bagley.

Mitch or, as Harry and Ron were fond of calling him to Hermione's supreme consternation, 'Missionary Mitch' worked for the Ministry of Magic on the Committee of Experimental Charms.

He was a few years older than Hermione. He'd been a Hufflepuff, a fact that only added fuel to the fire in the eyes of Harry and Ron.

"It's not that there's anything wrong with being a Hufflepuff," they'd say. "It's just that, well... he's a bit boring, isn't he?"

Hermione's folded arms and tapping foot usually headed them off before they found their own feet permanently lodged in their mouths, but only until the next time Mitch said or did something in their presence that reminded them of Percy Weasley.

Hermione found that Mitch suited her. She wasn't looking for marriage or even true love. Mitch was reserved, considerate, laid back, and intelligent. She never had to dumb herself down for him. They shared a common love of knowledge and literature that Hermione found stimulating. She'd met him shortly after her short-lived relationship with Ron had tanked. Now, that had been nobody's best idea...

Her schoolgirl crush on Ron had been a strong enough distraction to last until the end of the final battle, but after that... well, to say they'd gone in different directions would be putting it gently. The one time they'd had sex should have given Hermione an early clue that their relationship was destined for the dumps. She'd been so disappointed that she hadn't even bothered to correct Ron afterwards when he'd proudly said, "You're welcome."

She'd met Mitch at a celebration party about an hour after she'd heard Ron making a blatant pass at Hannah Abbott. She'd called it quits, like she'd wanted to do for months, and after a few weeks of awkwardness, things had gone back to normal. They'd been friends ever since.

She'd been cynical about sex until she'd decided to give Mitch a chance to prove her experience with Ron wasn't the standard. He had. Sex with Mitch was... pleasant. It was fun. Mitch would never be the beast of sensual passion that she'd read about in the occasional romance novel, but he always made sure sex was enjoyable enough for her. She had a shrewd idea that the men in those stories were a myth. They had to be.

Hermione began to read the note he'd sent her.

*Dear Hermione,*

*Dinner was enjoyable last night. Thank you for accompanying me. Time spent with you is always worth it. I hope you haven't let Professor Snape's accusations get to you. We both know they are so untrue that they don't even bear thinking about.*

*Christmas is coming up, so I'll have several days free next week, if you find you'd like some company. You know you can owl me at any time for any reason.*

*Happy Christmas, Hermione.*

*Mitch*

Hermione smiled slightly as she tucked the message back inside the envelope and tossed in onto the counter. Mitch was a good friend. She knew he was right; giving thought to Snape's words was letting him win. That's what he wanted after all. She resolved not to think about it, at least for now.

Hermione's morning routine went by quickly, and soon she found herself entering the Great Hall for a late breakfast. Much to her annoyance, she found herself looking for Snape. He wasn't there.

~\*~\*~\*~

He was in his rooms, contemplating the mess that was his life and how to clean it up. Much as it galled him, he knew that the first thing in order was an apology to Hermione Granger. In the light of the morning, he could admit to himself that he'd gone too far. He thought about his anger toward her and felt himself tense a bit, but then he asked himself why he hated her so much. He didn't have an answer.

It just hurt. There was so much that hurt that he couldn't figure what was what or why.

One thing did come to his mind, not an answer, just something that his mind had produced at the thought of his pain. A fact. He hadn't been to the Astronomy Tower in more than four years, not since he'd... well, not for a long time. Even on his nighttime patrols spent catching trysting students, he left that place alone. He'd told himself that it was because it was too much of a bother to go all that way and that the students had learned not to go there, but he knew it was a lie. His mind knew the real reason, and he knew it was time to face it. He'd been running. As hard as it would be to stop running, he knew he didn't want to live like this for the rest of his miserable existence.

One step at a time, he told himself. First, apologize to Granger; then, go to the Tower.

He didn't really know where to find her this late in the morning, but he figured it probably wasn't wise to try to change one's life on an empty stomach.

Several minutes and several properly chastised students later, he found himself entering the Great Hall. He looked for Granger as he walked, though he didn't expect to find her. But there she was. He was careful not to betray the nervous uncertainty that filled him. He really didn't know what he was going to say. She was in her usual seat, seemingly oblivious to anything but her breakfast and the newspaper in her hand.

Severus hesitated only a moment before taking his place next to her. Part of him was slightly afraid that she would drop all pretense of professionalism and hex his balls off. Part of him knew he would deserve it if she did. But if she noticed him at all, she didn't let on. He helped himself to some assorted foods and uncomfortably began to eat.

*Say something to her...* he ordered himself.

*What should I say? What can I say?*

*Anything! Just say something!*

He cleared his throat. "Miss Granger."

She didn't even blink.

Severus scowled, feeling stung. *Of course*, he thought bitterly. He'd known it wouldn't be easy, but still... he was making an effort here. The least she could do was acknowledge him.

*But she doesn't know that* he reminded himself. *She'd be perfectly justified in getting up and walking away or worse. She probably thinks you're going to insult her again.*

As tempting as that was, he was trying to accomplish something here. He gritted his teeth and tried again. Gods, this was excruciating...

"Miss Granger."

She still didn't respond. *Just keep going...* He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Miss Granger... Herm..."

"What do you want, Snape?" she said flatly, still not looking at him.

He bit his tongue...hard. "I wondered if I might have a word."

"Oh?" she asked, arching an eyebrow. "Which word? 'Idiot' or 'whore'? 'Waste of space'? That's actually three words..."

Severus was gritting his teeth harder than ever.

"Whatever the word is, Snape, I suggest you get it out and leave me alone. I'm busy."

*I'd love to.* "Woman!" he snapped, his temper getting the better of him. "I'm *trying* to apologise to you. If you'd close that mouth of yours, you'd know that!"

At this, Hermione turned to him fully, her eyebrows disappearing into her hairline. "You're *what*?"

"You bloody well heard me," he ground out.

She just stared at him. He watched the emotions play out on her face as she went from shocked, to suspicious, to angry.

"I see," she said, lips thinning. "Listen, I don't know what your angle is, but if you think you can just..."

"There is no *angle*, Miss Granger," he said. "I just need to... *apologise* for the way I've treated you." He said it as though it were a dirty word.

"Really." She clearly didn't believe him.

"Yes, really." He sighed. This was costing him. "Miss Granger, I realise that I have been taking some of my... frustration... out on you. I'm... I... perhaps I went a bit too far last night." He fell silent, not knowing what else to say.

Hermione stared at him evenly before speaking. "You call *that* an apology, Snape?"

He narrowed his eyes. "If you are expecting me to get down on my knees and beg for your forgiveness, keep dreaming, Miss Granger. That's the best I..."

She held up her hand. "Just wait a second. Let's assume for a moment that I believe you to be sincere, which I don't; I mean, I don't know what your game is, but how could you expect me to believe you are suddenly feeling remorseful? What, you woke up this morning and thought, 'Gee, I've been a complete bastard to Hermione Granger for no good reason. I should probably apologise.'? I don't think so. Still, assuming I believe you are sincere, that was still the most pathetic excuse for an apology I've ever heard. You didn't even say you were sorry! You *realise* you've been taking *some* of your *frustration* out on me'? *Perhaps* you went a bit too far'? Give me a break!"

*What did you think, Severus? That she was going to take your hand in hers and pronounce you forgiven? That she'd understand?*

Severus had grown increasingly angry as her speech went on and was now breathing heavily through his nose, clenching his jaw. He wasn't about to tell her that the reason for his change of heart was her words. He'd made an effort. If she didn't want to believe him, if she wasn't capable of behaving like an adult, then that was her problem. He stood up suddenly, scowling at her, his food forgotten.

"Fine. I tried to apologise to you, and you've thrown it back in my face. Thank you for proving me right. Good day, Miss Granger." He spun and left the room as smoothly as he had entered, robes billowing, scowl firmly in place. He heard Hermione's aggravated growl as he opened the doors to leave, but he ignored it.

He had more important things to do.

~\*~\*~\*~

Hermione, for her part, stared angrily at her plate, huffing in frustration. She felt as though she'd missed something important, but she didn't know what. There was a tiny, niggling part of her that was saying she'd handled the whole thing badly. It was warring with her anger at Snape, her disbelief that he was truly sorry, and another niggling part of her that said, 'Maybe he is.' She wanted to scream.

She stood and walked out of the Hall abruptly, leaving the few remaining students and teachers to wonder what had gone on to make their professors behave in such a fashion.

Several minutes later found Hermione in her quarters, pacing and muttering furiously.

"*Impossible* man... First, he treats me like rubbish for months, and then he calls me whore. Then... I... Gah!" She threw up her hands in exasperation. "Insufferable... bogus... maddening... bastard!"

This went on for quite a while until Hermione flopped herself down unceremoniously on the sofa and really began to think. That tiny, niggling part of her was still demanding that she think this through. What if he really had been sincere? It was beyond unlikely, considering... everything, but what if he was truly sorry? A part of her, the part that still wanted to respect and admire the man, the part that had been hurt by his comments, wanted to believe he was actually remorseful.

Another part reminded her that he was a bastard who enjoyed causing her pain, and if she believed him, she'd just be opening herself up for another attack, for more pain. She didn't know what to think or do. What if this was the change she'd been waiting for? What if he was really ready to live? Again, it was unlikely she couldn't see any reason for such a sudden turnabout but it was possible. Anything was possible.

After a while of her thoughts taking her in circles, she finally came to a conclusion.

It wasn't safe to accept Snape at face value. If she lowered her defenses too far, he'd most likely use her trust against her. He'd hurt her again. However, if he truly was changing, if he truly was sorry for treating her horribly, it just might be worth the risk. She was still angry, but maybe she could give him a chance. And maybe, if he let her, she could help him.

Mind, she'd be very careful, but she thought she could give him the benefit of the doubt, at least enough to hear him out.

Her decision made, she pulled out a quill and began to write. Several minutes later, a house-elf delivered a small envelope to Severus Snape. He wasn't in, but the elf left it in a place where he would find it.

~\*~\*~\*~

Severus stood at the base of a twisting flight of stone stairs. After leaving the Great Hall, he'd reminded himself of his resolve to take small steps. The first step hadn't worked out so well, but there was nothing he could do about that. The next step was going to lead him to a place he really, really didn't want to be, but he knew he had to take it. So here he was, standing, waiting, battling with himself.

*Just do it, Severus. It's just a place. Just do it, you coward. DO IT!*

He climbed the stairs resolutely and, after taking several deep breaths, pushed the door open.

The Tower was as it had always been. Nothing had changed. Only Severus had changed. He took one step over the threshold and froze as the memories of *that night* slammed into him. His eyes were drawn to the edge, and his mind screamed as it saw Albus Dumbledore fly over, glowing in bright green light.

Severus gasped, stumbled backwards, and ran. He'd been stupid to think he could do this, to think it was just a place. It wasn't just a place. It would never again be just a place.

The further away from the tower he got, the more easily he was able to breathe. But even as the memories quieted and his mind stopped screaming, a feeling of hopelessness enfolded him. He'd been foolish to think he could change. He hadn't been strong enough to face *that place*. He hadn't even been strong enough to force himself to truly apologise. It was all too little, too late, he thought. He simply didn't know how to find the courage to change.

This thought overwhelmed him as he entered his chambers. As he closed the door behind him, his eyes fell upon a plain, white envelope addressed simply to *Severus*. He picked it up and opened it, unfolding the parchment with shaking fingers.

*Severus,*

*I can't say I understand why you've treated me the way you have. I don't know that I believe you are truly sorry. However, I've given it some thought, and I'm willing to give you the opportunity to prove that you are. Forgive me if I'm somewhat skeptical of your motives; you've hurt me, and you've enjoyed it. That's not something I can simply let go of with a feeble attempt at an apology. I hope you'll understand if I'm careful where you're concerned. However, I want you to know something. You may not believe me, but I'm going to say it anyway.*

*I want you to be happy, Severus. I've wanted that for a long time. You deserve it. I truly believe that if you are willing to ask for help, it will be there. You don't have to be alone. So, this is the chance I will give you: If you can treat me with respect, refrain from insulting, belittling, or glaring at me in other words, if you can treat me like a human being for a whole week, I'll believe you are sincere. It may seem like a small thing, but to me, it's not small.*

*At the end of a week, if you've done as I've said, we can talk again, if that is what you want. One more thing, Severus. A burden shared is a burden halved. Needing a friend, needing help, it doesn't make you weak. If you need help, ask for it. There is no need to be ashamed of your humanity.*

*Hermione*

Severus blinked. For reasons he couldn't begin to explain, he felt the weight on his shoulders lessen slightly. Just reading her words, suddenly it didn't seem so impossible anymore. She'd made it sound easy. And she'd given him the next small step to take. Treat her like a human being for a week. He could do that. It was a small thing, and for that reason, he could do it. He could let go of his pride, and he could do it.

He didn't know if he'd be able to ask for help, but maybe after he took this small step, the next one wouldn't seem so impossible.

For the first time in a long time, Severus felt he could breathe.

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**Author's Notes:** First things first. Thanks go to Southern\_Witch\_69 for her awesome beta skills and for her encouraging feedback. I was a little nervous about this chapter, and she put my mind at ease. Thanks, Sun. :)

This story has already gotten a huge response, so thank you all for that. It means a lot to me. I hope that this chapter and the chapters to come do not disappoint.

## Equal Footing

*Chapter 3 of 4*

Hermione is human too.

**SB's Notes:** Yes, I know. It's been a month. I do have three excuses, two of which are good ones. The first is that getting the hang of being an admin has taken some time and effort, and I haven't had quite as much time as I would have liked for writing.

The second is that little monster you may have seen running around in my back yard called "Potions Master For Sale." Once that idea hit me for V-Day, I was consumed, and all else fell by the wayside until it was completely posted.

The third excuse is simple: I have a one-track mind. Even though I'd already written PM4\$, I couldn't focus on writing another story until I had that one over and done with... I have no idea why. Writing and worrying about two or more stories at once is a skill I'm going to have to work on.

Until then, expect this story to be updated often, once or twice a week at least. And now...on with the show!

*Disclaimer: I make no money from this; therefore, it would be pointless to sue me, as I am poor.*

Thanks go to my stellar, boss, and bodacious friend and beta, Southern\_Witch\_69. She does a wonderful job!

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He wrapped his terrycloth robe around himself and stumbled to the bathroom to relieve his aching bladder. He caught sight of his calendar on the way. It was Monday, the 17th of December 2001—the clichéd first day of the rest of Severus' life. He was going to give treating Hermione Granger civilly a shot today. Frankly, he didn't know what the day held in store for him. This was new ground and more than a little daunting.

An hour later found him dressed in his usual robes and headed to the Great Hall for breakfast. He'd briefly wondered while in the shower half an hour earlier if Granger might consider counting his week of civility if he just stayed in his rooms; after all, he couldn't snarl or insult her if he wasn't around to do so. But somehow he knew that she wouldn't think that a true measure of his sincerity.

And so it was with a deep breath and yet another reminder to himself that he could only go up from here that he pushed open a door to the Hall and strolled as confidently as he could to the Head Table.

She was reading the *Morning Prophet*, about half-way through a bowl of oatmeal, but when he pulled out a chair and sat down next to her, her eyes came to rest on him as she surveyed him with polite interest. She quirked her lips, giving him an amused smile, and raised her brows expectantly.

*Here goes...*

"Good Morning, Miss Granger."

When he didn't elaborate and began to serve himself, she nodded almost imperceptibly, apparently satisfied enough.

"Good Morning, Professor Snape."

Severus congratulated himself inwardly on his success and went on with his meal. Fifteen minutes later, he was finished, and he left without another word or glance to go prepare for his first class of the day.

The morning went by unremarkably enough, and it was with a more relaxed air that he entered the Great Hall for lunch. If all he had to do was exchange pleasantries with Granger and refrain from insulting her, it would be easy enough. He could just return her greeting and ignore her for the rest of the meal. Really, he didn't know what he had been so intimidated by.

This belief grew and solidified as lunch went by and Granger didn't even show up. She was letting him off smoothly if she wasn't even going to be there to test his patience. He finished his lunch and strolled out of the Hall confidently, only refraining from out-and-out smirking because there were students who would see.

*Two down, Miss Granger, one to go.*

~\*~\*~\*~

It was as he was taking his first bite of steak that evening, and Miss Granger still hadn't shown up, that he began to suspect that Karma was about to catch up with him. Nothing was ever this easy; he'd learned that the hard way repeatedly. The Law of Averages told him that if breakfast and lunch had been simple affairs, logically dinner should be enough of a headache to make up for them, and he was right.

About five minutes later, the door to the Hall slammed open, and Severus watched, his mouth open to take a bite, as Hermione Granger stomped up to the Head Table and practically threw herself into her chair next to him with a huff, muttering under her breath.

He finished his bite and continued to observe silently as he chewed. He noticed that not only was she in an uncharacteristically foul disposition, but also her normally immaculate appearance was in a state of disarray. Strands or springy, frizzy curls had escaped the bun she was usually so strict with; her robes were not only askew but also appeared to have small holes in random places that seemed to have burned through the fabric.

Realization dawned on Severus. So, Miss Granger had been absent from lunch and almost dinner because she'd been otherwise occupied dealing with the fallout from her first Potions accident. Severus had been through enough of them himself to recognize the signs. He almost felt sympathy for the girl. Almost. He might have had it not been so satisfying to see physical proof that maybe now she would have a better idea of what he'd gone through as Potions master.

Part of what had bothered him since her return was the way the students all seemed to love her classes. They rarely complained about anything more than what they considered to be too much homework over a weekend. Severus hated knowing that the rest of the staff and the student body were watching the seeming ease with which she handled her classes and whispering when they thought he wasn't listening about how they just couldn't see what his problem had been all those years.

Well, those days were over, it seemed. He smirked as he took another bite of steak, listening to her muttering with satisfaction as she confirmed his suspicions.

"Children... immature, dim-witted imbeciles..." She piled mashed potatoes onto her plate violently. "Don't listen... just do what they want." She pulled the plate of steaks over and stabbed one viciously with a fork, dropping it onto her own plate. "I tell them not to mix asphodel with bubotuber pus, but do they listen?" She raised the entire steak to her mouth, not bothering to cut it into pieces, and sunk her teeth into the meat. Her muttering then became a bit harder to understand as she went on through a mouthful of beef, but Severus listened anyway. "No. I tell vem do fop biffering an' liffen do me, but do vey hear me?" She swallowed loudly. "No, they do not."

She stabbed her fork into her mountain of potatoes and began shoveling them into her mouth, punishing them as if they were the errant students she was so irritated with.

Severus couldn't help himself.

"Trouble in class, Miss Granger?"

She turned her glare on him, and he smirked. When she noticed his amusement, her mood turned decidedly fouler if that was possible. "And what are you smirking at?" she snapped.

"You seem to have how is it said? ah, yes, 'spent a day in my shoes.'"

"Shut up," she said, and Severus' smirk turned to a frown. Really, that hadn't been necessary. He hadn't done anything offensive by anyone's standards, least of all his own. He was trying to be civil. If she wasn't going to do the same, then why had she even bothered with her offer?

He became irritated, and his irritation turned to anger as she went on. "I've just had the worst day I've had in a long time. First, *your* precious Slytherins are fooling around in my class. They explode a cauldron through sheer stupidity and send four other students to the infirmary for severe and painful burns. And they actually looked smug about it, too." At this, she glared at him as though it were his fault. "Then, after I manage to get everyone cleaned up, I assign them a detention with me after classes. They show up late, of course, and then, after I specifically tell them not to, they mix asphodel with undiluted bubotuber pus "just to see what would happen." They are also now in the hospital wing, and I am tired and hungry.

"I come here just wanting to eat and get the day over with, but, no; *you* have to take this opportunity, as always, to rub my face in it. Thank you."

"Granger," he snapped. "I did nothing of the sort. I did not rub your face in anything. I was simply amused and found it ironic that you had finally had an experience that proved to you and everyone else that your job is not as easy as it looks. And you, sitting there in your self-righteousness, are proving everything I've thought about you to be right. So thank *you*."

"Oh, well, that's rich. Throw it back on me. I don't know why I thought you were interested in treating me like a human being. I'd say it's clear that you have no interest in doing anything of the sort, and I was wasting my time to give you a chance."

Severus' mouth dropped open incredulously as his eyes narrowed. "Pardon me, Saint Granger. I don't recall asking for a chance in the first place, but I certainly won't make the mistake of asking for one in the future. If this is what comes with your *help*, I think I'd do better without it. If I want to associate with children, I have a school full of students for that."

He wiped his mouth, pushed his chair back from the table, and stood up, feeling incredibly disappointed. He felt like his one lifeline, his first step toward climbing out of the hole he was in, had been nothing more than illusion. Hermione Granger was nothing more than a hypocrite, and he wanted nothing to do with her.



"Of course," she said sarcastically. "Walk away."

He didn't answer, just turned and left. He'd had enough, and apparently there were students in the hospital wing who needed their Head of House.

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Hermione's expression was sour as she watched him walk away. She consumed her dinner without paying attention to what she was doing, her thoughts on her horrible day and the scene that had just taken place. She fumed as she ate, and when she left, she stormed straight back to her quarters and slammed the door behind her.

She paced her living room, muttering under her breath and scowling, replaying the day and his words in her mind. It wasn't until about half an hour later, after she had told herself repeatedly that he was a boorish arsehole and that it was all his fault, that she calmed down enough to realize how unbelievably stupid and childish she'd been. She groaned as she remembered that he'd been trying to be civil and realized that she had made it impossible.

She sat down on her sofa and buried her face in her hands. What had she done? He hadn't even done anything offensive. She'd just been in a bad mood and had taken her frustration out on him. Her face flushed in mortification as she realized how incredibly self-righteous she must have sounded. She was giving him a *chance*? Oh, how big of her. 'Saint Granger' was right.

*Nicely done, Hermione. You just did exactly what he said. You proved to him how childish and hypocritical you are.*

That thought gave her pause. Was she really a hypocrite? Did she really see herself as some angel of mercy who was going to give him the path to happiness on a silver platter? God, that was a horrible thought... She didn't have all the answers. She wouldn't even know how to begin to 'fix' Severus Snape. She just knew that he wasn't happy and that she wanted him to be. She couldn't offer him a miracle, but she could offer her friendship. That's all she'd really wanted. She'd wanted him to know that she could be a friend to him, that she'd listen and wouldn't judge him.

But in her irritation and brashness, she lashed out at him. The first test of friendship, and she'd proven that she wasn't trustworthy. Gods, how ridiculous had she been! She'd woken up this morning thinking it would be a test of *his* sincerity, and it had wound up being a test of hers...and she'd failed.

She'd really made a mess of things. She owed him an apology; she knew that. And she had some serious thinking to do. Who was she to pass judgment on him, and was she really that kind of person? It was a scary thought, but one that needed looking at; however, first, she needed to try to undo the damage she'd done.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she took a deep breath and marched herself to Snape's door. She knocked several times, but there was no answer. She waited for a minute and knocked again, this time harder. "Professor Sn..." The door flew open. "Oh."

He was glowering at her as if she were the lowest form of life...and if she was honest with herself, she couldn't blame him.

"What do you want?"

She forced herself to look him in the eyes. "I owe you an apology," she said quietly.

His expression did not change...he went on looking at her with loathing...but she pressed forward. "My behavior at dinner was inexcusably immature. I was irritated with my day, and I took it out on you. I assumed that you were insulting me, and I lashed back without even thinking. I realize that you did nothing wrong, and I'm very sorry for treating you the way I did and for proving you right."

There was a long pause in which she forced herself not to stare at her feet, even as her face burned and her breath caught.

"Is that all?" he finally said, and she felt like she'd been slapped. But there was no way around this. She knew that she deserved whatever scorn he laid upon her.

"Yes, that's all," she said. "I just wanted you to know that I realize how childish I was, that I'm sorry, and that I'll do my best to make sure I don't take my irritation out on you in the future."

"How big of you."

Hermione cringed. Damn him. Damn her. "About that..." she said. "I know how incredibly presumptuous my offer to help you must have sounded, and I can't begin to tell you how foolish I feel for being such a hypocrite. But despite my behavior this evening, I want you to know that I don't think you need to be fixed."

He snorted in disbelief, but she held up her hand. "I know that's how it came across, but that's not what I think. I don't believe you are defective. I believe you're just... lonely...and angry... and just... in need of a friend. The way I treated you wasn't very friendly, and I'm sorry for that."

"Thank you for that insight into my character. I certainly feel understood now."

Hermione bit her lip, not sure if she should apologize again, yell at him, or just walk away. In the end, she just nodded and turned to leave, not knowing what she was going to do and feeling upset and lost. She'd gone about five steps when his voice stopped her.

"Miss Granger..." he called. "That's one day down, six more to go."

She whirled around in surprise, her eyebrows disappearing into her hairline, and found his door slammed firmly in her face. She stood there frozen, staring, for quite a while before a slow smile crept onto her face. She stared at his door with a grin until she realized how silly she must have looked and walked back to her quarters.

It hadn't exactly been a pronouncement of forgiveness or even an acceptance of her apology, but it had come damned close. If Severus Snape was capable of forgiveness, that had been it.

Later, as her head hit the pillow, she was still smiling. She still had a lot to think about, but as that door had slammed in her face, she'd learned something she'd needed to know. It could have been a bitter pill to swallow, but for some reason it wasn't. It was the knowledge that she was just as in need of growth as anyone else.

Of course, she knew deep down that she wasn't perfect, but this had just pointed it out in a blatant way. Two things occurred to her as she lay there.

The first was that if she was going to have any sort of friendship Severus Snape, they needed to be on equal footing. And now they were. Her immature behavior had accomplished that, and as embarrassing as it was, she couldn't help but think it was a good thing. She didn't think it was right or possible to have a real friendship with someone when she considered herself to be bigger than they were, better. She realized she didn't want to be Saint Granger.

The second thing that hit her was that it was ironic; she'd sent that letter to him thinking that she was going to offer her help and that he would end up having to find out who he was. But if tonight was any indication, she was going to find out just as much, if not more, about herself.

And she laughed as she thought of how sarcastic he was...even in his anger. She could honestly say that she liked that about him. His wit and intelligence, his sharpness of tongue, even when aimed at her, these were things that nobody else she knew seemed to possess. No, she didn't like it when he set out to hurt her, but she could appreciate his quick, dry humor. She'd just have to learn not to take it personally.

She'd proved to be capable of irritating him, and he was obviously more than capable of taking her down a peg or two...

Maybe they'd be good for each other.

~\*~\*~\*~

Severus shut his door and let out a long sigh. He'd listened to every word she'd said, even as he'd given her a hard time. He done so partly because she'd deserved it... but also partly because after her initial apology, he'd wanted to see how sincere she was, how far he could push her and if she would hold her ground. She had. And it appeared she wasn't quite as childish as she'd seemed.

Yes, her behavior had been immature, but if it had only taken her an hour to recognize that, Severus thought that was a good sign. He did find it ironic, interesting... the way they were continually testing each other.

There was a lot to consider...but mostly, he was just relieved.

~\*~\*~\*~

This time, he arrived at breakfast first, and she came in a few minutes later, looking as good as new. Her robes were repaired, and her hair was properly tamed. As she sat down, she ventured a look at him and found him looking back at her.

"Good Morning, Professor Snape."

"Likewise, Miss Granger."

She concentrated on buttering her waffles for a moment. "Pass the syrup, please."

He gave her the jar of syrup, and she gave him a smile.

"Thank you."

He nodded politely, and she chuckled.

"What's amusing?" he asked, frowning a bit.

"We sound like we're programmed on polite."

He arched a brow. "I thought that was the idea. This had better be counting towards my week, Miss Granger, or I'll just keep my civility to myself."

His warning was delivered seriously, but Hermione took a look at his quirked lips and knew he was teasing her.

She was glad he felt he could.

She laughed again. "Professor, about that week of civility..."

"Yes?"

"I think we should forget about it," she said, voicing the conclusion she'd come to overnight.

"What?" he asked with a frown.

"I've realized that it would be very... hypocritical...I seem to be using that word a lot lately...of me to insist that you prove yourself to me in a set time frame like that. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that I have just as much to prove to you as you do to me."

"I see..." he said.

"Do you?" she asked. "I told you that I didn't have anything to prove to you, but the truth is... I'm not perfect."

"You don't say." His tone was completely dry, and she smiled wryly, setting down a pitcher of orange juice.

"Shocking, right? Hermione Granger has flaws." It felt odd to tease herself, but good in a way, and she couldn't help but laugh for a moment at the newness of it. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that friends should be on equal footing. I'd like to be your friend, if you'll let me, and if we are friends, I don't think it would be right for either of us to be holding something over the other's head."

He only stared at her, and she felt like she was being weighed and measured, though his expression gave nothing away.

"What I'm really asking, Professor, is if we can start over. No more insults and cruelty from you and no more self-righteousness and childishness from me. If we're to be friends, we both have to start from now."

Still he only looked at her, and she began to feel uncomfortable. "Professor? Say something. I feel like I'm one of those self-help gurus in monologue mode..."

That made him snort.

"I don't have many friends, Miss Granger. I can't say I know what it means to be a friend. But... your offer of friendship is... welcome. I'll endeavor not to abuse it."

The smile she gave him brightened the room. "I'm glad, Professor. I'll do the same."

## A Right Pest

*Chapter 4 of 4*

Hermione thinks it's time for Severus to start living, but his idea of 'living' is a bit different than hers...

This chapter is titled in honor of Southern\_Witch\_69, who hit the nail right on the head while beta reading like the pro she is. Thanks, SW!

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"Classes are out tomorrow," said Hermione casually over dinner that evening.

"A fact I am blissfully aware of, Miss Granger."

"I think it's a bit pointless to let out school on a Wednesday. Not enough time to follow a lesson for the week, but too much to simply let the students do nothing for three days. Wouldn't you say? But then, I suppose one can't control how the days fall each year..."

"A task I've no doubt you'd take on if you thought you had a chance of succeeding." Severus' grumble was on the ill-tempered side, but not outright malicious, so Hermione ignored it, opting to make conversation...no matter how difficult it proved to be.

The only way to get comfortable with one another was to break the ice, she figured. Granted, the ice with Snape was thick and would probably need broken more than once, but she was up to the challenge. They were already through the thickest of it, she hoped...

"So," she said, mentally casting about for something to say.

"Miss Granger," he interrupted, "must you continue your prattling? If I was interested in having a conversation with you, I would start one." His tone wasn't as vicious as it could have been, but it gave Hermione pause.

"Well, pardon me," she said, trying not to be offended. "I was trying to talk to you because I believe it would help us to be more comfortable with one another. That's what people do, you know. They talk."

"I am aware that people talk. I am also aware that for most people, talking is a way to gain familiarity. I, however, am not a person who enjoys mindless chatter while I'm eating."

She couldn't resist. "So you're saying you enjoy mindless chatter while you're not eating? Goodness, Professor, I must say you are full of surprises."

He put down his fork to glare at her, and she smirked.

"You are not amusing, Miss Granger." His tone could have been very dry or very irritated; it was probably both.

Hermione endeavored to look surprised. "Are you sure?" she said as she tilted her head. "I could have sworn that I am. A number of people have told me so. Are you saying that my friends have been lying to me all these years, Professor?" She was trying to get him to relax, but it didn't appear to be working.

"I do not appreciate being teased," he said, glaring at her for another moment...until he was sure she felt properly censured, no doubt...then went back to his food, ignoring her.

She sighed. "I wasn't teasing you," she said. "I was teasing myself; I'm new at it, so I must not be very good yet."

He gave her a brief look that she couldn't read and went on with his dinner.

She was beginning to be frustrated. She was putting in all the effort here and getting nothing in return. "Look, I don't know how we are going to have any sort of friendship if we can't even have a conversation. I'm trying here, but I need you to meet me half way. I can't do all the work for both of us."

"I wasn't aware that you considered this to be work." He kept his gaze focused ahead, and Hermione stared at him incredulously for a moment, wondering if he was serious. He had to know that his simple unwillingness to *give* anything was making this hard for her. Was he really unaware of it...was he really that emotionally oblivious...or was he messing with her... again? Anything was possible with him, but at the moment, she preferred to think that maybe he really didn't understand.

She paused again before she spoke, and when she did, her words were measured, drawn out, as if to make sure she said exactly what she meant. "Relationships take work. Being a friend to someone and letting a person be a friend to you isn't easy...at least it never has been for me.

"I don't know what to tell you, Professor...other than that I can't do this by myself, and you are making it even more difficult for both of us by refusing to communicate with me."

He finally looked at her, taking a moment to measure her before he spoke. "I told you before that I have little experience with *this*. You are asking me to, in one meal, change the way I relate to others. That is not something I'm prepared or even able to do."

"No, I'm not asking that you change the way you relate to others; I'm asking that you change the way you relate *to me*. And I'm not asking that you do it in one meal. I'm simply asking you to take a step towards it...by *talking* to me. I realize that it is outside of your comfort zone, but I thought that we had reached some sort of understanding, that we were going to at least try to get along, to be friends. I know that isn't something you are naturally comfortable with, so I'm trying to... I don't know... lead you into it."

His gaze pierced hers as though he was trying to turn her mind inside out, and she didn't look away. She began to feel a bit uncomfortable as he looked at her, and she wondered what he was thinking, what he was looking for in her eyes. She looked back at him with as much sincerity as she could find...if it was possible to show sincerity in one's eyes. She wondered how it was possible for any one man to have so much command in his glare, in his whole persona.

His eyes finally narrowed in suspicion, and he broke the silence with one word.

"Why?"

Hermione stared back at him, not understanding. She shook her head in confusion and sent him a perplexed look.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, and his voice gave nothing of what he was feeling away.

"I don't understand, Professor." And she didn't.

"I told you I would be willing to treat you civilly, cease the outright malice, at least ignore you, but you insisted that we try to be *friends*. You offered to help me; you said you wanted me to be happy. Why?"

There was another long pause in which Hermione searched for something to say and found nothing.

"What do you want from me?" he asked quietly.

He waited for her answer, and Hermione thought good and hard about it. What did she want from him? The answer came to her, and it was so very obvious. She spoke honestly and earnestly, making sure to look him in the eye. "I want to know you."

"I just want to know you."

The shock in his eyes was brief, but powerful. It was gone before Hermione could understand it truly, but she was sure it had been there. It made her sad that he could be rendered speechless just by being told that someone wanted to know him. She wondered again what kind of life this man must have lived, but she knew the answer. She

knew very well the kind of life he'd lived. She didn't know the details, but she knew enough to understand that it made sense for him to be caught off guard by her answer.

She offered him a rueful sort of smile at that thought and watched as he gave her yet another inscrutable look.

After a long, heavy silence, he finally spoke, using the same measured tone Hermione had used minutes before.

"I think, Miss Granger, that it might be possible to arrange that."

"What...me knowing you?"

He gave a short nod, and she smiled a bit. She waited for him to expound further, but he seemed at a loss at where to go, so Hermione took the lead.

"Well, then. I suppose there's only one thing for it," she said, smirking.

He arched a brow in response.

Hermione took a breath and went for it. "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger."

She offered her hand and waited for him to react. She was certain he was thinking her very silly, but she was doing the only thing she could think of to bridge the gap between them: offering to start over...completely.

The seconds ticked by as he stared at first her hand, then her eyes, then her hand again, and finally reached forward tentatively to grasp it.

"Severus Snape," he said softly, and she let out a sigh of relief, feeling herself relax and giving him a genuine smile.

"Well, Severus Snape, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. May I ask what has you in Scotland as this time of year?"

That earned her an amused snort and a roll of the eyes. She wondered if he'd continue to play along; he did. He released her hand and picked up his fork again, taking another bite and quickly swallowing.

"I'm a professor at this school, Miss Granger." The *'as you are quite aware, and I find you rather ridiculous'* went unspoken.

Hermione grinned, pleased that he was going along with her game. "What a coincidence!" she said. "I also happen to be a professor at this school."

He rolled his eyes again, and she chuckled. "All right, I'm being silly."

"Quite."

"But you get the idea, and you were doing very well. See? Having a conversation isn't so hard. When you relax, you're quite good at it."

She elbowed him good-naturedly and felt him tense for a moment. She wondered if she'd gone too far, but after a moment, he slowly relaxed, as though making a conscious decision to do so.

They ate in silence for a few moments, easing into one another's presence with a sort of companionable silence. Hermione wondered how far his physical tolerance of her went, and she decided to risk testing it a bit. She scooted her chair a bit closer to him so that her right arm was touching his left. He gave her an odd look, but when he didn't tense or push her away, she settled again and went back to her food. She wondered if simple contact like this was foreign to him, and though he didn't appear to be uncomfortable, she thought it probably was. She hoped it was good for him to be touched.

After a few minutes, it became a bit inconvenient to try to eat her dessert that way...considering she was right-handed...so she moved away again. He glanced at her once more, but said nothing.

When dessert was finished, she knew that neither of them had any excuse to continue sitting there, but a part of her was afraid that if she got up and left or if he did, everything they'd accomplished tonight would be for naught. She searched for something to say that would be meaningful, but nothing came.

Severus wiped his mouth a final time and stood abruptly, and her chance was gone. She only hoped nothing would change overnight. Looking up at him, she offered him one last smile and was reassured a bit when he nodded back before sweeping out of the room.

She finished her glass of wine leisurely, deep in thought, and retired to her rooms with a full stomach and an even fuller mind.

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It wasn't until she was halfway through her breakfast the next morning that Hermione remembered again that today was the last day of classes before the break. She stuffed a spoonful of oatmeal into her mouth and thought about her plans for the coming two weeks...and realized she really didn't have any. Mitch had said he'd be free, and she did want to spend some time with him, but no more than an evening or two...certainly not the whole break.

She didn't really want to stay at the school, but she'd moved out of her flat months ago, and she didn't much fancy staying with her parents for two weeks. Like Mitch, an evening or an afternoon with them would be enjoyable, but much longer than that and she would begin to feel suffocated.

It was as she was contemplated her lack of plans that Severus sat down next to her. Her head snapped up, startled. She hadn't even heard him approaching. She wondered for the briefest of moments whether he would revert back to... himself, but before she could give it much thought, he glanced at her and said, "Good day, Miss Granger. I hope this morning finds you well."

She stared at him blankly, and then she cracked up. She tried to stifle her amusement, but failed dismally, earning her a frown.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not laughing at you. It's just... that was rather formal, don't you think?"

She saw his face go hard.

"Don't!" she said. "Don't close up. I didn't mean to insult you. Please. I just... it was just so... you. I do appreciate the effort. I was honestly afraid that you would go back to snarling at me. I'm glad you haven't. I'm sorry, really."

He nodded stiffly, but didn't say anything else. She bit her lip and tried to think of something to say to put him at ease again. Before she could really consider the thought that came to her mind, she blurted it out.

"What are you doing for the holidays?"

"Doing?"

"Er, yes. You know, doing. To celebrate... or, yes."

She saw his lower lip twitch up before he answered.

"Catching up on my reading."

"That's it?" she blurted again.

He frowned at her, his expression somewhere between annoyance and amusement. "Thank you for pointing out my lack of celebratory plans, Miss Granger."

She chuckled a bit uncomfortably, unsure if he was truly offended. "Well, it's not as if I have any room to speak; I don't have plans either."

"You without a plan, Miss Granger?" he asked in mock wonder. "Shall I inform the *Prophet*?"

"Ha."

He smirked at her. "No, I haven't any plans. I generally use the holidays, Christmas and summer, to catch up on my reading and research. The school schedule rarely affords me time for such things; therefore, I take advantage of any free time available."

She nodded. "That makes sense. I wasn't aware that you were able to do any research now that you don't have a lab."

"What makes you think my research is in Potions?"

"Oh. Oh, well, isn't it?"

He snorted again. "Yes, it is. I do have a lab. It's smaller than my old one...yours...but it is sufficient for my needs."

"Oh. Right." Hermione went back to her oatmeal, pondering in turns what kind of research he did and the coming break...what she would do with her own free time.

An idea was pestering her, and she couldn't get away from it, so she finally gave in.

"Professor?"

"Mmm."

"So you're... So you're not doing anything...with... anybody?"

He pursed his lips and glared at her. "I believe we already covered that, Miss Granger."

"Yes, well, I was thinking, that is, wondering, erm... if you would maybe like to, er, do... something... with me?"

He stared blankly at her. "Something."

"Yes, something. Dinner, maybe?"

"We sit next to one another every for dinner every night of the week...every meal in fact."

"... Well, I know. I just mean, together, you know. I mean, in celebration for the holidays. If not dinner, there's this party at..."

"Are you asking me on a date, Miss Granger?"

"No! What? No. Well, no. I just thought maybe you'd like to come with me on Christmas Eve. See, there's this... get together. It could be, would be, fun."

"Fun?"

"Yes. I, well..."

"Miss Granger, are you aware that you are stuttering? It makes it quite difficult to carry on a conversation when I can't understand half of what you're saying."

She glared at him. "I'm not stuttering," she snapped. "I was simply offering my company."

She turned her glare to her bowl and barely restrained herself from muttering petulantly. That insufferable man... she thought. She couldn't believe he would just...

"Fine."

Her head snapped up, and she arched both brows at him. "Fine?"

"Yes."

"... Fine as in you're admitting I wasn't stuttering, or fine as in you'll go with me?"

"The latter."

"Oh. All right. Erm, well, good. Then, it's on Monday at six o'clock, which is... Right, well, of course I'm sure I'll just remind you before then, but just so you kn..."

"You're stuttering again."

She pursed her lips, irritated with being interrupted, before speaking again in a clipped tone. "Fine. I've got a class in ten minutes, Professor. I shall see you at lunch."

"Inevitably."

She shook her head and huffed on the way out, but couldn't help smiling a bit once her back was to him.

Christmas Eve at the Weasleys' would prove interesting this year; she was sure of it.

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Lunch and dinner that day were much the same as the morning had been, and by breakfast on Thursday, the first day of the break, Hermione found herself looking forward to the company of her new...well, not yet friend, but more than acquaintance...and the jibes, the sarcasm and wit that came with him. The little games they played together kept her on her toes, and she thought it was good that both of them were learning how to take the other with a grain of salt.

She'd left each meal feeling like she'd just fought some sort of battle, but she was never sure if she had won.

He was already sitting when she arrived, and she decided to test how far she could push him; she thought he was getting better at being teased, just as she was getting better at teasing herself.

"Good day, Professor Snape. I hope this morning finds you well," she said as she sat down...with as straight a face as she could manage.

He didn't let her down. "So formal, Miss Granger? Surely you can loosen up in the presence of your old professor. One might think you were uncomfortable with normal human interaction."

Hermione smiled. Maybe he could tease himself after all. "Normal, Professor? I wasn't aware that 'normal' was definable."

"Mmm, perhaps not."

"Then again," she said, "perhaps it is. Would you say it would be 'normal' of me to ask you to get your elbow off the table so that I might reach my spoon? One might say that 'normal' people remember their manners in polite company, even this early in the morning."

"When you point out polite company to me, I shall remember my manners," he said, but he moved his elbow.

She laughed and gave him a friendly nudge. "In that case, I'll keep an eye out. Say, you don't own any red clothing, do you?"

He gave her a look that plainly said, 'You must be joking.'

"I didn't think so."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Well, the party at the Burrow on Christmas Eve...everyone tends to dress festively in either red or green. I'm sure you own enough green clothing to pass by. I was just checking."

He just stared at her. "The Burrow."

"Yes, you know. That's where the Weas..."

"Yes, I am quite aware of what the Weasleys have named their home. I was referring to the part about a party there on Christmas Eve. That wouldn't happen to be the party you insisted I accompany you to, would it?"

"I didn't insist, and yes, of course it is. I thought I'd told you that."

His mouth was set in hard lines. "No, Miss Granger, you most certainly did not tell me that, and you can be assured I have no interest in attending any..."

"What? Why not? Maybe I didn't tell you where it was, but why does it matter? A party is just a party."

"No, Miss Granger," he snapped. "It's not. A party is not just a party. Not when half of the Order of the Phoenix, most of whom abhor my existence, I might add, are in attendance."

"Oh, come now. They do not abhor your existence. No one has even seen you since your trial, and that was years ago. How could anyone hate you after all that, after everything you did?"

"They hate me *because* of everything I did, and they hate me on principle. I'm the Greasy Git, the loathsome Bat of the Dungeons, remember? It doesn't matter anyway. They're right to hate me, but I'm not going to subject myself to their scorn when I can easily avoid it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Professor, self-loathing doesn't become you."

He glared at her, his lip curling.

"Besides, I happen to know that none of the Weasleys or Order have anything against you. No one does, at least not anyone who matters. Well," she conceded, "no one except for..."

"Potter."

She bit her lip. "Well, Harry's always reserved a... special place in his heart for you. He *does* loathe you on principle, but you can't take that personally...it wouldn't matter what you did, good or bad; Harry will always love to hate you. It's his favorite pastime." Her lips quirked up even as she tried not to smile.

"Your casual treatment of this does not amuse me, Miss Granger."

His tone was icy, and Hermione sighed.

"You wanted to know why I wouldn't attend? There's your answer: Potter. I need no other reason."

"Now you're just grasping for excuses. Look, I'm not even sure Harry will be there; he wasn't last year. And even if he is, it is always quite a large gathering. There wouldn't be any reason you would even have to see him. There will be plenty of other people you can talk to, or you can talk to no one. My point is if you want to avoid him, it wouldn't be hard."

"And Potter?" he said. "Something tells me he wouldn't be happy to simply ignore me if I showed up in his sanctuary."

"It's not his sanctuary, and you belong there just as much as anyone else. Listen, I know we've never really talked about your contribution to the war..."

"Then let's not start now," he said, cutting her off with another glare...not that he'd stopped glaring before then.

Hermione sighed again. "I wasn't going to bring up details, I was just going to say that you deserve to have a nice dinner with nice people as much as anyone else, and anyone who has held onto a grudge against you is the one with the problem. You can't let the opinions of others dictate how you are going to live your life, Professor. After all this time and all you've done for everyone, you've earned the right to live your life the way you deserve."

He stared at her for a long time in that piercing way of his that always made Hermione feel like she was being stripped from the inside out. A lesser person might have shrunk away, but Hermione held her ground...as best she could, at least.

He finally relented, and she breathed. "You aren't even sure he'll be there?"

He'd already given in, and they both knew it. His question was just his way of easing his own discomfort.

Hermione decided to let him. She could have rejoiced at her triumph...inside, she did...but she knew he wouldn't appreciate having attention drawn to his concession, so she kept her face straight and answered him honestly. "He might be. I don't really know. If he is, just go about your business as if he wasn't."

"Why are you insisting upon this, Miss Granger? I don't understand why it should be any concern of yours how I spend my holiday or why you've asked me to attend this at all. You surely can't tell me it's just for the *pleasure* of my company."

She smiled at that. "When you aren't snarling at me, I enjoy your company. I honestly do. And I already answered your question. I think you deserve to be able to live your life." Her smile turned wry. "Blame it on my 'Gryffindor sense of fairness.'"

He snorted. "Gryffindor, indeed."

"So you'll come?"

He nodded. "However," he said, "after Potter has picked a fight and I've had to hex him to defend myself, I reserve the right to say 'I told you so.'"

She chuckled, and aloud she said, "Fair enough," but inside she couldn't help but cross her fingers that it wouldn't come to hexing.

She just might have to have a talk with Harry between now and Monday evening....