

Silly Little Girl

by Bambu

Drabble series written for the 'compulsion' prompt at GrangerSnape100, Hermione, Harry and Ron have been on the Horcrux hunt for seven months when a letter from Snape lands in her lap ... literally.

Silly Little Girl

Chapter 1 of 1

Drabble series written for the 'compulsion' prompt at GrangerSnape100, Hermione, Harry and Ron have been on the Horcrux hunt for seven months when a letter from Snape lands in her lap ... literally.

~o0o~

Silly Little Girl

By Bambu

Spoilers: Post-HBP

Disclaimer: The characters and universe belong with JKR and her designees; I am merely playing with them, and claim only that which JKR wouldn't recognize.

This is a drabble series written originally for the GrangerSnape100 community on Live Journal; for the initial prompt 'compulsion.'

I have to thank X_weasley, SnarkyWench, and A_Bees_Buzz for their encouragement and keen intelligence. Writing a story with broad scope is far more difficult than I imagined, especially when doing so in one-hundred-word bites.

~o0o~

"Bastard," she whispered into the chill night air.

The owl swept into camp on silent wings dropping an envelope into her lap; right on schedule, every third day. It always found them. They'd considered a Secret Keeper except they were constantly on the move.

Ron and Harry glared at the familiar spiky handwriting.

Two words.

Hermione Granger.

They all knew the identity of the inscriber. The murderer.

Harry had blasted the first missive before either of his companions had drawn a breath. Next time, she'd checked for Dark spells; there was nothing harmful to her.

Hermione Granger.

Her fingers itched.

~o0o~

"Why? Why choose me?" she asked for the hundredth time.

Her fingers hovered. *What had Snape written? What did he want?*

Harry raised his wand to hex the letter into ash.

"Wait!" Hermione cried.

"What's wrong with you?" Ron asked furiously, instinct recognizing competition before it declared itself.

Harry's expression was dark with hate.

"We have to know," she answered Ron.

"No." It was a strangled denial.

Her hand hovered above the envelope, her heart racing. This one was different than the others.

There were still two words, but one was different than before.

Hermione. Please.

She opened the envelope.

~o0o~

Silly Little Girl, the tone of Snape's letter was scathing, *never underestimate an enemy's knowledge of your weaknesses.*

Ron and Harry's faces were harsh masks of shadows in the firelight.

"He's chastising me for opening the letter," Hermione said.

"Git!" Ron groused happily. Second skirmish won.

Harry demanded, "Let me see."

She angled the parchment, reading aloud, *"Surely you checked for Dark spells?"*

Harry squeezed her shoulder in reassurance.

*"Hexes? Jinxes? **Portus.**"*

Simultaneously, three things happened.

Ron shouted, "Drop the letter, Hermione!"

She felt the familiar, sickening tug behind her navel.

And Harry frantically wrapped his arms around empty space.

~o0o~

Portkey travel always left Hermione a bit dizzy and nauseous. Now her nausea was fed by fear, but she dared not let go of the parchment.

She stared at those three little words: *Silly Little Girl*

Her landing wasn't as rough as feared, but her surroundings were eerily, terrifyingly familiar. She'd landed on a bed.

Her bed.

In her home.

Her *Muggle* home.

She gagged and would've vomited, but for the vial thrust beneath her nose ... held by a deft, slender hand.

The mocking tones were almost affectionate. "Silly girl."

For the first time in her life, Hermione Granger swooned.

~o0o~

"I'm going to kill him!" Harry's fury twisted the night air, the fire extinguishing in an instant as if all light had vanished with Hermione.

Ron shuddered, choking back rage and tears. "Tonks! Lupin! Send a Patronus. They can track --"

"As if Snape filed a permit," Harry said derisively.

"Fuck!" Ron cursed, unable to cast the spell. His happy thought had just been taken from before his very eyes.

Harry screamed in primal rage; he would enjoy ripping Snape's heart from his chest.

In the distance a wolf howled in response, it was a good night for a hunt.

~o0o~

The scent of spice and fresh linen soothed her.

She was home.

Abruptly, she remembered the Portkey, bolting upright, gripping the bed's headboard. Her room was subtly different.

Lived in.

The door creaked open; she fumbled for her missing wand, then cried the final death knell of her childhood. "Mummy!"

"You've had a shock, love." Helen Granger opened her arms.

"Where's Dad?" Hermione scrambled off the bed, slipping past her mother. "We must get out of here. You don't know ..."

"No, love, *you* don't know. Severus will explain everything."

Hermione stared, trying to remember the spell to detect an Imperius.

~o0o~

She was trapped. Why hadn't she ever realized how vulnerable she was? That her parents were?

Never underestimate an enemy's knowledge

Snape had been correct. Horribly, sickeningly correct.

She paced relentlessly, ignoring her childhood comforts. Knowledge worked both ways. Hermione knew Snape too.

He held the power, but she didn't have to behave like a Flobberworm.

"Mum, stay here."

"But, Hermione ..." Her brown-eyed, slender mother pulled at her hands, to turn her from the door.

Hermione extricated herself. "It isn't a suggestion."

Helen's eyes widened. "All right."

Hermione flung open the door, shouting, "Severus Snape! Get up here, you coward!"

~o0o~

"Engaging in a bit of melodrama, Miss Granger?" Snape leaned indolently against the far wall of the landing, his cheeks flushed -- the only color on an achromatic canvas: trousers and shirt, hair and complexion.

He was different.

She assessed him, as she'd recently learned how. "Having a morality crisis? Regrettably, you murdered your chance at redemption."

"Hermione!"

Snape ignored Helen's outburst, but his wand made an appearance. "Does Potter know you're such a bitch?"

"It's the influence of present company. Perhaps you should leave."

To her surprise, Snape laughed. "No wonder Dumbledore tolerated you lot. You're amusing. Trite, but amusing."

~o0o~

The kitchen at the Burrow was filled to capacity. Mad-Eye Moody argued animatedly with Shacklebolt while others processed the news and Molly filled Ron's plate; he'd long been full.

Arthur's question sliced through the noise. "You can't tell us what you're doing?"

"No, Dad. We've explained why."

Nods came from several sources: Bill, Tonks, McGonagall.

Harry's anguish had left him hoarse. "Do we tell her parents?"

"No!" cried Lupin and McGonagall simultaneously.

"Not ... not yet," Lupin stammered. "Just wait a few days. Maybe Hermione will ... er ... escape."

Harry and Ron exchanged hard looks.

"Remus? A word." Harry's voice was inflexible.

~o0o~

Her back was to a wall metaphorical and physical. "Malfoy's a double-agent? And you've been living here ... *here* ... for seven months?"

"You always did regurgitate information." Dark eyes traveled over her recently matured features.

"*Severus*," warned Constantinos Granger, his Grecian curls still damp from the shower.

Snape shrugged.

Hermione tilted her chin. "You expect me to believe ..."

"I expect nothing," he snapped, "but your parents do not lie."

Helen tried again. "You can trust Severus --"

"Dumbledore did. He's dead."

"Which is why he left you this." Constantinos flipped over an envelope, sliding it across the table.

~o0o~

"Let me get this straight. Hermione's parents are spies?" Harry crossed the sitting room, kicking an abandoned *Prophet* from his path.

"Not quite. More like a repository of information." Lupin stood tall, nobility clothed in rags. "The battle against He-Who--"

"Just say the bloody name, Remus!"

"We're fighting on more than one front, Harry, and there are things I can't tell you. Confidences --"

Harry interrupted. "Is Hermione safe?"

Lupin faced him squarely, but Harry cut him off before he could lie. "Don't play with me."

"You're more like Lily every year." His expression was strained. "Yes, Hermione's safe."

~o0o~

Miss Granger,

I'll not bandy words. Trust Severus Snape and your parents. They've worked together for years ...

Hermione dropped the letter as if it had burnt her. "*Years?*"

So many lies, she thought.

Helen avoided her eyes, but her father and Snape shared a look.

One she recognized.

Harry and Ron looked at each other like that.

She covered her mouth. "I'm sick."

They let her go.

Hermione stared into the mirror, fingering the coins sewn into her jeans' waistband. She had to protect Harry and Ron.

The window above the toilet opened easily.

Her tears were already falling.

~o0o~

"C'mon, Ron, it's time to go."

The trio had been on edge for months, but this Harry was lethal. Lupin's expression was sad but resolute, and abruptly Ron rose from the table.

Ignoring everyone, Harry strode out the back door.

Ron hugged Molly, and Arthur gripped his son's shoulder. "Be careful."

"I will, Dad. We have to do this."

"I know. Floo if you need anything."

He caught up with Harry in the garden. It looked as if he was crying.

"Hermione?" Ron choked.

"She's all right. We have her. Meet me at Contingency One."

Ron stared as Harry Disapparated.

~o0o~

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Hermione toppled into the flowerbed, tears crystallized on her cheeks. *Betrayed*, she thought.

Percy Weasley appeared above her. "Hermione?" He released her. "What were you thinking?"

"I'm so glad you're here." She gasped, leaning against him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Is it Helen or Constantinos?"

Hearing a commotion from within the house, she whispered, "Sorry," then kneed Percy in the groin, grabbing his wand as it fell.

"Granger!" Snape shouted, barreling through the back door.

Black eyes met brown. Snape looked panicked.

Hermione spun on her heel.

Snape's spell shot harmlessly into the hedge, through where she'd been

~o0o~

"What's going on?" Ron demanded as he Apparated into the crumbling ruins of Harry's infant home.

"They've been working with Snape all along!" Harry shouted.

"Oh, fuck!" Ron's knees wobbled. He staggered against a nearby wall. "What does this mean?"

Harry scrubbed at his cheeks. "It means Dumbledore set this all into motion."

"Games within games within games," Ron mused.

"The whole time."

"What'll we do now?"

"Wait for Hermione."

"She's coming?"

Harry glared. "She'll be here."

"Right." Ron nodded.

They searched for their Disillusioned rucksacks.

Harry pulled out his miniaturized bedroll. "It shouldn't be too long."

"I hope not."

~o0o~

Hermione slipped into Knockturn Alley.

Ten minutes and ten galleons exchanged Percy's wand for one better suited to her at Hawthorne's Wands. Five minutes later, she was emptying her accounts at the BofE.

Afterward, she Apparated from a dank alley.

Pop

Staring down the barrel of two wands, she whispered, "It's all been lies."

"We know." Harry gathered her close.

"You do?"

Ron hugged them both. "Remus told Harry everything."

She clung to them. "Then you know about Snape ..."

"Yeah."

"... and my parents?"

"Yeah."

"Years," she mumbled, numb with disillusionment. "Them ... Snape ... Dumbledore." She glanced at Ron. "Percy too."

~o0o~

The most haunted shack in all Britain was a snug hideaway. Harry stared into the small fire. "It'll be difficult to follow her trail."

Ron chuckled maliciously, then sobered. "Did we make the right decision?"

"We *know* Voldemort's Horcruxes have to be deactivated."

"Yeah."

"Everything else is open to interpretation."

"Hermione will be completely alone."

"What other viable choice was there? Once the Horcruxes are gone, we'll demand the rest of the answers."

"And decide whether to face Voldemort, or if that was bollocks too."

"He's evil, Ron."

"But is he an evil *you* ... *we* ... have to face?"

"Good question."

~o0o~

Hermione's plan to give Harry and Ron time was simple. She'd be a red herring; spotted in strategic locations across the continent.

Snape it would undoubtedly be Snape would have trouble isolating her amongst crowds of Muggles.

The train cost ninety-four Euros and was filled with businessmen.

Fingering the four vials of Polyjuice bloody expensive Polyjuice in her coat pocket, her famous green eyes stared sightlessly at the Chunnel, mind reeling with all she'd learned.

McGonagall, Lupin, Snape, and her parents spearheaded a growing information-gathering network.

Yet, the only question Hermione could manage to formulate was *when had Snape begun living in her room?*

~o0o~

Molly backed Lupin against the wall, wand poking the tender skin of his throat. "What haven't you told us?"

McGonagall said, "Molly, be reasonable."

Molly's glare could've *Incendio'd* stone.

Arthur leaned against the sink. "She's right. I wouldn't bank on seeing Harry again, and that's not in anyone's best interests."

"Arthur," Lupin placated, but stalled when Molly's wand dug deeper.

"Talk to *me*, Remus."

Lupin looked at McGonagall, and she shrugged. "Dumbledore's no longer here."

Lupin sighed. "Fine. Hermione's with her parents ..." Order members exclaimed in relief. "... Percy ... and Severus."

There was a sudden, shocked silence.

Outraged, Arthur demanded, "Explain."

~o0o~

Snape eyed Percy Weasley with contempt. "Is your wand traceable?"

"Of course! I was coming to report -- I thought she was a burglar!" Percy shot an accusing glare at the Grangers. "She's *your* daughter!"

Helen sobbed harder. "Why ... didn't ... we tell her sooner ... before ... before Severus had to ..." She broke down entirely.

Constantinos' face appeared carved from marble, a suitable tribute to his ancestors. "The price will have been too high if she doesn't forgive us, Severus."

Gently, he escorted Helen from the room.

"She'll most likely be killed," Percy stated.

Snape, remembering Hermione's shattered expression, said, "I'll find her."

~o0o~

"Bill said Snape almost caught her as me in Marseilles." Ron gutted fish while Harry surveyed the surrounding forest.

"Snape's relentless."

"They don't understand her, do they?"

Harry laughed harshly. "Snape might."

Before leaving for Albania, Ron had stopped by Gringotts. His meeting with Bill had been volatile yet informative. Snape's pardon had been arranged before *that night*, the proof and Wizengamot memories guarded by goblins.

"I almost hate Dumbledore as much as Voldemort," Harry commented, remembering an old man's pleas within a new paradigm.

"Yeah." Ron stoked the fire.

"We'll know tomorrow."

"It might be another decoy."

"Maybe not."

~o0o~

She evaded Dementors in Paris, but in Marseille, she was eating bouillabaisse when Snape entered the restaurant. He walked like a predator.

Hermione didn't return to the hostel.

A month later, it was paella in Madrid. Their eyes met, and she noticed the smudges under his eyes like hers.

It was then she knew her subterfuge was useless and left the Polyjuice behind.

In Munich, it was Vampires and bratwurst.

His ragged, "Please, Miss Granger," haunted her sleep.

Venice was beautiful this morning.

Snape was on the Bridge of Sighs, his hand rolling in a plea.

Hermione Apparated in broad daylight.

~o0o~

"Harry!" Ron scrambled through the rubble shouting, "Answer me, damnit!"

He saw movement, a filthy hand waving above the debris. He staggered to Harry's side.

"Is it done?" Harry asked.

"It's bloody done." Ron cast several healing spells.

"Thanks," Harry murmured and sat up.

"There's only *Him* left." Ron leaned against a jagged wall, staring at Nagini's corpse.

"I'm glad Hermione took the chase to China, but we need her now." Harry wiped his face.

"Yeah," Ron agreed.

Harry gave him a sharp look. "You're not in love with her, are you?"

"No. Love her, not in love with her."

~o0o~

The Great Wall was magnificent; it was early and Hermione was alone.

She was always alone ... except for her shadow: Snape.

It was almost a game between them.

Almost.

The past six months had been difficult, but she'd had time to think, to plan ... for some wounds to scab over.

To grow up.

Unexpectedly, Hedwig swooped over the parapet. Hermione's heart raced. Harry's last communication had been three months before; a one-word note: China.

She read her letter, oblivious to her surroundings.

"You've led me by the nose long enough, Granger." Snape snarled; his arms encircled her, trapping her wand.

~o0o~

"More peas, Harry?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Granger."

"Another piece of chicken, Ron?"

"I'm fine, Mum."

For a week they'd been cosseted and talked to until their ears rang with voices, both relieved and aggrieved.

"We're not used to all this fussing," Ron explained.

"*Get* used to it," replied Molly, tousling his hair.

The Granger kitchen was sunny, but tension lurked beneath smiles.

"When do you think she'll come?" Helen asked.

"We'll have a better idea when Hedwig returns."

Ron asked, "Think Snape's found her? Or has she hexed him?"

Everyone in the Granger kitchen laughed, although Helen's was a bit shrill.

~o0o~

When Hermione awoke she was in a hotel room, bound and lying on a bed. The room was gorgeous and she was hungry.

Snape leaned into view, voice dangerous. "If you cooperate, Granger, I'll release you."

"All right." She looked past him, remembering Harry's letter. "I'll return without a fuss."

He eyed her suspiciously. "You'll go to your parents?"

Her eyes closed. "If necessary."

The grinding of his teeth was audible. "Do you have any idea what they've suffered?"

Her voice was distant. "I'm sure your presence in their home has more than made up for any loss of mine."

~o0o~

"Your mother is devastated." Snape watched the muscles of her jaw ripple. This wasn't the woman he'd reluctantly grown to admire.

"I'm certain she'll have compensations. It's not as if we were very close," her stare jolted him like an Unforgivable, "is it?"

He leapt to his feet, pacing at the foot of the bed. "Too much was at stake to "

"To what? Trust me?"

"Everything isn't about you."

She laughed bitterly. "Clearly."

"What's happened to you, Granger?"

"You have to ask?" She stared, incredulous. "I believed in my parents ... you! You betrayed me. You *all* played me ... us."

~o0o~

He stopped pacing. "I've obviously overestimated your intelligence."

"An adjustment you're more than qualified to make," she sniped. "Now let me up. I have to use the loo."

"I'm not Percy Weasley."

She didn't rise to the bait. "I'll be ready to leave immediately."

His eyes searched her smooth features. She looked haunted. It was an expression he saw in the mirror daily.

"Look, your mother can explain --"

"Why is immaterial."

He scowled and flicked his wand. Without a word, she crossed the room and shut the lavatory door behind her.

He stared, aghast. What had they created?

~o0o~

"We haven't talked to her in months."

Helen's thin fingers trembled, "It's just ... we didn't have a chance to explain."

Harry entered the cozy lounge. "It's time, Ron."

"Please stay," Helen pleaded. "If you're here she'll have to come."

"Not until after she meets us," Harry stated.

Tears spilled down Helen's cheeks. "She won't?"

"No," Ron said gently.

"But Severus ..."

"... Doesn't understand," Harry said. "Mrs. Granger, if we're not there, Hermione'll disappear. We won't know where to find her."

"Yeah," Ron said. "She's probably changed. Harry and me are different now, and Hermione's been on her own a long time."

~o0o~

"Shall we?"

Hermione's tone acted like a whip and Snape crossed the room, towering over her, his stomach writhing like Devil's Snare

She stood her ground.

"Where are *you*, Granger?"

Her eyes widened, then shifting past his. "I'm ready to leave."

"Not like this, damnit! You will not meet your mother like this?"

"Why, *Paris*, I think your infatuation is showing."

Suddenly his hands were wrapped around her upper arms, tightly.

"You silly little girl." He practically growled the words.

"Does my father know you covet his wife?"

He shook her. "This isn't about Helen!"

And then he kissed her.

~o0o~

Hermione leaned into the kiss ... for a too-fleeting moment before she pushed away, her eyes wide and lips moist.

Snape sucked down air; his eyes bored into hers.

The *crack* of her open hand against his cheek echoed off the walls, but Snape exulted. Hermione Granger, the spitfire, was still there.

Snape stepped back from the wild-eyed virago.

"*What the hell was that?*" She stalked him across the room, her eyes narrowed. "I don't appreciate being toyed with."

"Granger, I" He floundered.

"Bastard!" She turned, striding toward the door.

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"I realize you don't trust me..."

"Untrue."

~o0o~

"You trust me?" He was taken off-guard. Rarely was he adrift in a conversation.

"To some degree."

"Earlier you declared quite the reverse."

"Despite that, you were different after Venice. You gave me time to think." She turned; her expression unreadable. "I needed that time. I saw you in Delhi and Phnom Penh, you know, but I felt safe rather than hunted."

"Granger, your parents ..." Taking a cautious step in her direction, he said, "Your father will never forgive himself."

"As he shouldn't."

"Don't judge them--"

"They will answer for themselves," she interrupted. "You, however, are a different issue entirely."

~o0o~

"Care to explain?" He stepped toward her, recognizing the change in their dynamic before she did.

Unconsciously she mirrored his movement. "What you've done ..."

"My list of crimes is formidable," he said, his voice caressing her spine.

"Your sacrifices."

"I'm not noble." Suddenly, Snape was beside her.

"But you do have a heart."

"Do I?"

"Yes," she whispered. "And you understand being alone."

Involuntarily, he licked his lips, her eyes tracking his tongue. Then her hands were on his shirt, pulling him toward her.

He should care that her isolation drove her, but he'd make the most of this opportunity.

~o0o~

She was driven by need, fear, and loneliness.

Her hands, inexperienced, but eager, slipped behind his belt, under the fabric of his trousers.

Triumphant, Snape pulled her summer dress over her head -- startled momentarily by the weight of coins in its hem.

Their eyes met, an indefinable comprehension blossoming between them.

In the eye of the hurricane, Snape cupped her face. "Hermione."

And then he palmed her breast, its nipple pearling under his touch. She moaned.

They tumbled onto the bed.

Within seconds, they were skin-to-skin, give-and-take, thrust-and-grind.

His swallowed breath, her gasp ... a moan, a whimper.

A climax.

~o0o~

He idly contemplated the young woman draped across his chest.

As if he'd spoken, she raised her head.

"We ... This ... I don't consider it a mistake," he answered her unasked question.

Her eyes traveled his lean torso, resting on a faded scar. "I don't really know you, and this is *not* what I anticipated."

"Truthfully, neither did I."

Her eyes flicked upward. "You hurt me."

"Where?" He leaned up in concern.

"I'm fine. I meant before ... your deception."

Black eyes met brown and held. "It was ... regrettable," he said.

"But necessary?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't accept that before I --"

"Ran?"

~o0o~

She answered obliquely, "We both have commitments."

He traced her mouth with his finger. "We do."

"They might be incompatible." If necessary, she'd stun him.

His fingers snaked into her hair. "Potter."

"Yes." She made no effort to pull away.

"I could stop you."

"You could." She brushed a strand of oily hair from his brow. "Will you?"

"No." He pulled her head toward his until their lips met, groaning as the kiss ripened.

Within moments, he was sheathed deep within her slick depths.

She cried out as a thrust made reality splinter.

"I won't forget."

"Neither will I."

~o0o~

When he awoke, she was gone.

How would he face her parents? What could he say?

Snape would be dead if Constantinos thought he'd trifled with Hermione.

Would Hermione see them? Tell them?

Remember Snape fondly? Want him?

He *wanted* her.

Christ!

He wanted *her*.

Climbing out of bed, Snape noticed a golden galleon on the nightstand. Insulted to the core, he picked it up to hurl against the wall ... it heated on contact.

He'd forgotten she could cast a Protean Charm.

Inscribed on the face were three words which had never been minted on a coin: *I won't forget*.

~o0o~

She Apparated into the Shrieking Shack without a sound, a side benefit of being on the run. It was full dark; she'd forgotten it was night in Scotland.

Suddenly she whirled, wand raised.

Harry and Ron stood in the doorway, disheveled but alert. "Welcome home."

Hermione flew into their arms.

Later, she said, "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"I've drawn up some preliminary plans," Hermione dropped her rucksack, "but I need to know --"

"Can we strategize in the morning?" Ron yawned.

"Sorry." She blushed. "I've had lots of time ..."

"To think," Harry replied. "We understand."

"You've changed," she said.

"We all have."

~o0o~

After three days of debriefing, Ron broached the subject. "Your mum's a mess."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "We've all made some hard choices."

Harry asked bluntly, "Can you live with yours?"

"I've promised ... er ... I had to meet you two first."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look. "We heard Snape found you."

"The morning Hedwig delivered your letter."

"How'd that go?"

She nibbled a scone. "You're a good cook, Harry."

"Don't change the subject, Hermione." Ron glowered.

Hoping not to blush, she hedged, "He was different than I expected."

"He was fairly decent when we met last month," Harry commented thoughtfully.

~o0o~

The garden hadn't changed much, she thought, ringing the bell.

Constantinos opened the door.

"May I come in?" Hermione asked.

Constantinos flinched as if struck, but stepped back. "Helen!" he shouted.

Seconds later, Helen appeared, as transparent as fairy glass.

"Mum!"

Helen grabbed her, sobbing. "We're so sorry."

Hermione began to cry.

"Forgive us," her father pleaded.

"I'll try, Dad. I'll try."

Later, they had tea in the kitchen, Hermione surreptitiously looking for Snape. "I can't stay."

"We know. Severus explained," Constantinos replied. "Hermione, you're the reason we've done all this. To make the world safe for you."

~o0o~

Hex trails lit the night sky. Snape found Harry amidst chaos. "It's your battle, Potter!"

"I never wanted it!" Harry snarled.

"That's irrelevant." Snape watched Hermione run up, his eyes lingering on the bloody streak across her cheek. "*You* must finish it."

Ron yelled from a distance. "He's isolated to the west. It's now or not."

Harry glanced at Hermione, then bellowed. "Now!"

"Now!" Ron roared.

"Now!" Hermione shouted. Her eyes rested on Snape, there was too little time and too much to say.

The three turned west.

Unexpectedly, Hermione called over her shoulder, "I haven't forgotten,"

"Neither have I."

~o0o~

Lord Voldemort was a formidable opponent. Death Eaters outnumbered the Order of the Phoenix two-to-one.

However, when Draco Malfoy turned to his father and said, "I'm sorry, father. This isn't the future," the tide changed.

Voldemort might still have triumphed had he not attempted to kill the young traitor. With a hard shove, Draco landed face-first in the dirt, Lucius above him, hexing all comers. Oddly enough he fought beside Hermione.

Then Snape stood tall and proud, declaring his allegiance, shouting, "Minerva!"

A warrior born, McGonagall heard her cue, leading the Muggle-born legion onto the field.

It was a rout.

~o0o~

Hermione dragged herself among the dead, wounded, and dismembered, searching for Snape.

No one could get her to leave.

Harry and Ron were under Molly's tearful eyes. They were all alive, but many hadn't been so lucky.

"Where is he?" she breathed raggedly.

Percy Weasley trailed her. "Hermione, this is a fool's errand."

She rounded on him, swaying with the effort to remain upright. "Don't! I *know* ... I've learned. *Where is that bastard?*"

"I do wish you'd find another term of endearment, Granger."

"Snape!" There he stood, battered and bedamned, bloody and limping.

All would be right with her world.

~o0o~

After four days, Hermione escaped St. Mungo's. To her surprise she found Harry at the Shrieking Shack, packing.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't really know." He ruffled his hair. "I'm not sure what to do now."

"Me either," she confessed.

"What about your parents?"

"I'll visit, but I can't stay."

He carefully looked at what he was doing. "What about Snape?"

"What about Snape?"

"Don't you think you should see if there's something there?" He felt the heat of her stare.

"You always hated him."

"Yeah, but I grew up."

Hermione snorted. "Haven't we all?"

"So? Will you ...?"

"Maybe."

~o0o~

Hermione returned to her parents' house and they made her feel as welcome as possible, but it was awkward. She explained about Harry's offer to live at Grimmauld Place. They didn't like it, yet they understood.

Of Snape there was no sign. Helen explained that he'd returned home, and Hermione couldn't decide if she was pleased or not. She wandered into her bedroom, deciding to sort her things.

On the nightstand she found a golden galleon. Charmed onto its surface was a message: *I haven't forgotten.*

Neither had she.

The coin heated in her hands. The message changed.

Spinner's End.

~o0o~

It was dilapidated, the community practically deserted, but she found the house with no trouble. She crossed through powerful wards, their magic tickling her skin.

Snape opened the door before she reached it. "Silly little girl."

"Bastard," Hermione replied, her heart racing.

"It's taken you long enough. I have never considered you indecisive." Her eyes were huge, and his pinched expression softened. "Are you coming in or not?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Granger." His voice dropped an octave; it had been weeks.

"I've missed you," she said, crossing the threshold.

The red door swung shut and the wards went live.

~o0o~

"Wow!" Hermione's eyes lit first upon the floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Snape laughed. "You didn't notice the condition of the furniture."

"Furniture?" It was old, it was threadbare, and she'd seen worse in her recent travels.

"My worldly goods."

His breath stirred her hair and she faced him. He looked rested, almost relaxed, and her fingers itched to touch him. "I don't care about your possessions."

"Then what do you care about?"

Uncertain, she bit her lip. "How much of what happened between us was circumstance, and how much was real?"

"Trying to forget?" he sneered, despite her comment about missing him.

~o0o~

"You stupid man! If it meant nothing to you, just tell me. I know it wasn't a normal-"

She didn't get to finish as Snape's mouth devoured hers.

Hermione reveled in his taste and skill.

When she broke the kiss, he said raggedly, "Nothing about this is normal, Granger. I'm too old. You're too young. I was your teacher."

"I don't care about that either."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I expect you to trust me. I don't care about convention. I do care about --" She broke off and cupped his face. "I couldn't forget."

"Neither could I."

~o0o~

Minutes passed into hours.

They hadn't left the sitting room. His voice grew hoarse and Hermione had lost hers entirely. They'd spoken with the same lack of reserve, the same tenderness they'd found that afternoon in China.

"This has been wonderful," Hermione whispered.

His mouth quirked in a lop-sided smile. "You've brought laughter into my home."

She looked at him expectantly.

He brushed her lips in a gossamer kiss. Then uncharacteristically blunt, he asked. "What do you want?"

"To explore the possibilities," she croaked.

He shifted and rose to his feet. "Shall we explore?"

"Oh, yes." She took his hand.

~o0o~

Finite