

Doing Time with Hermione Granger

by Kailin

Severus Snape lies dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Or does he? Words of kindness and reassurance are exchanged.

Prologue: Final Battle

Chapter 1 of 7

Severus Snape lies dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Or does he? Words of kindness and reassurance are exchanged.

Prologue: The Final Battle

Consciousness.

It surprised me, if only because I had always hoped for a blessed Nothing after death. Since there was precious little to commend me for a heavenly reward, I had long believed that having my soul snuffed out like the flame on a candle was preferable to roasting in a fiery hell. But this was... What was this?

I cautiously opened my eyes and found milky whiteness everywhere. I was alone, as near as I could tell. There was no sound, no source of light although this place was bright enough to cause me to squint. Did that mean I had eyes? Tentatively, I raised an arm and flexed the fingers of my hand; my skin, I noted, was almost transparent. Surely I wasn't had never wanted to be a ghost... Ghosts *chose* to remain in the physical plane, while I wanted nothing more than to flee the madness that had been my life. The mere thought of spending eternity cruising through the halls of Hogwarts was enough to send me into flat-out panic. Wondering if I could speak, I croaked a hoarse, "Hello? Is anybody there?"

Immediately, I sensed footsteps coming closer.

"Severus?"

I knew the voice instantly. And at once I felt familiar, icy fingers of self-loathing and despair clawing at me.

"Albus?"

At the mention of the name, a smiling Albus Dumbledore came into view. He reached out to grip me by the shoulder. "There, there, Severus, it's all right. Really."

The compassion in Dumbledore's voice sent tears streaming down my cheeks immediately. I hadn't heard anyone address me with sympathy and concern for a very long time.

"I I seem to be dead," I said, my voice cracking.

"It would seem that way," Dumbledore noted dryly.

"I'm not surprised that I'm dead. The surprise is that we seem to be in the same place."

"Ah. Didn't think we'd end up together, eh?"

I shook my head vigorously. Dumbledore sighed.

"The truth is, this place has had a very busy day. I was just chatting with Harry, and "

"Potter's dead?" I blurted in dismay. "There's no hope, then. The Dark Lord will take over immediately!"

"Actually, he's not dead. No more than you."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I suspect," Dumbledore continued calmly, "that Madam Pomfrey would do a much finer job of explaining it to you, but as she's still quite alive, you'll have to make do with me."

"Could we get to it, then?" I felt a bit lightheaded; surely dying should have earned me some straight answers. Blast the old man and his penchant for stringing out a story!

"Apparently, Severus, you were previously exposed to Nagini's venom. Were you bitten on an earlier occasion?"

I stared at the curious blue eyes, and it crossed my mind briefly to wonder why a dead man still wore spectacles. "I I don't I can't remember " But even as I spoke, a vague recollection surfaced.

A year or so earlier, there had been a Death Eater named Purcell, a man who had never completely won favor with Voldemort. He had a short temper and a large ego, which meant that no one was surprised when the Dark Lord killed him; we were merely curious as to why it had taken so long. Voldemort, I remembered now, had just begun to favor using the snake to dispatch his enemies. It was a novelty he seemed to enjoy; apparently, a simple *Avada Kedavra* was too taxing and didn't provide the gut satisfaction of seeing one's victim die a lingering death.

I recalled standing next to the unlucky Purcell, then jumping back when the snake lunged for the man. I had raised my own arm in self-defense, and it was barely grazed when Nagini, fangs bared, launched herself past me. Annoyed at finding the wrong flesh in her trajectory, the snake had to recoil and strike once more. This one was a direct hit on the hapless victim. Voldemort, meanwhile, turned his distorted face toward me.

"Are you bitten, Severussss?"

"No, my Lord, it is merely a scratch."

And I had thought it was, even when the small wound festered for a few days before finally healing. Now, looking back at the incident, I could see where I might have inadvertently received a drop of venom through the scratch.

"I believe that is possible," I admitted.

Dumbledore nodded. "Then you must have achieved some measure of immunity, which explains why you did not die instantly."

"But the blood... There was so much blood..."

"Perhaps not as much as you think. As a Head of House, I'm sure you've been made aware time and time again that a relatively small amount of blood looks like a massive hemorrhage."

I nodded. More than once, I'd had to calm down hysterical Slytherins whose hijinks resulted in minor bloodshed in the dormitory.

"It's just a little blood, for Merlin's sake! Get to the hospital wing and let Madam Pomfrey deal with it!" If I had a galleon for every time I'd said that during my teaching tenure, I could have taken early retirement.

"Then... I'm to live?" I questioned, frowning.

"So it seems." Dumbledore nodded, looking somber.

I sat down, although there was no chair present that I could see. Abruptly, I burst into laughter. My body if you could call it that shook with the effort, and tears streamed from my eyes once more.

"Merlin's sodding broomstick! *Why?*"

Dumbledore regarded me warily. "Why are you still alive? I cannot answer that, I'm afraid."

Still chuckling, I swiped at my cheeks with one hand. "Of all the idiotic, misbegotten outcomes... I've been near to death more times than any man has a right to be, and I'm still *bloody alive?*"

"I don't make the decisions here, Severus."

"Fine! I leave one miserable existence, only to find that it's not yet over?" My laughter faded and was immediately replaced by a fierce scowl.

Dumbledore ignored my question. "The reason I came to greet you is that I wanted to thank you for everything you've done."

Everything I've done. I felt an overwhelming urge to throttle the former Headmaster, although I wasn't too certain that it would be effective in this arena. "As if I had a choice?" I demanded bitterly.

"You *always* had a choice," Dumbledore retorted, his tone suddenly icy. "And I, for one, am extremely grateful that you sacrificed so much for the cause."

Still sullen, I retreated. I muttered, "You're welcome, then."

"It's not too late, you know."

"For what?"

When Albus spoke, his voice was far gentler. "I have no idea. I'm sure you'll think of something."

Riddles. If it wasn't one Riddle, it was another. I counted to ten. "Are you finished with me?"

"If you wish. All you need to do is walk away from me, and you'll find yourself back in the Shrieking Shack." Dumbledore turned to go. "Goodbye then, Severus."

"Wait!" I felt a sudden bubble of panic rising within.

Dumbledore stopped to regard me patiently. "Yes?"

And suddenly, I was at a loss for words. There was much I wanted to say, but given how much I enjoyed berating students with my broad and varied vocabulary, I was completely useless at expressing feelings of affection. "I'm sorry. So sorry..."

"For what?"

"You know exactly for what. You asked me to do something no man should ask another."

"Oh. My death, you mean." Albus looked sublimely unconcerned. "Water under the bridge, Severus. I'm rather enjoying myself here."

"Of course, you are. For me, it was horrible. Quite frankly, it was worse than any task the Dark Lord ever assigned me."

Dumbledore stared at me for a long moment, and then he slowly nodded, his eyes misting over. Once more, he reached out to grip my shoulder. "I'm sorry, too. If I'd seen another way..."

I nodded, then coughed abruptly to cover the bare emotion of the moment. "At any rate," I said, straightening up and composing myself, "I must thank you as well. I earned your trust, and that is no small thing."

There was an enormous lump in my throat, and it seemed that Albus was having the same problem. Dumbledore finally spoke.

"Very well, then. I must be off. It's time for you to return, Severus."

"Wait!" I said again, understanding finally clicking in my mind. "Is there a way to see someone else here before I leave?"

A small, knowing smile stole over Dumbledore's face. "I believe there is."

Immediately, a noise on my right caused me to look in that direction. In my peripheral vision, I saw Dumbledore vanish, while ahead of me another figure took form and substance. Lily Evans Potter, her dark red hair tumbling over her shoulders and her green eyes glistening, stood smiling at me.

"Hello, Sev," she said softly.

"Lily." The lump in my throat was larger than ever.

She stretched out her hands to me, and I took them immediately.

"I'm so glad to see you," she murmured. "How are you doing?"

"I've... I've been better," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

"You're going back, I hear."

"Apparently." Was there actually a silly grin on my face, or did it simply feel that way?

"I want to thank you. For helping to keep Harry safe all these years."

The silly grin, if it had been there at all, vanished abruptly. One scene after another paraded across my brain, an endless, vivid depiction of every occasion on which I had belittled, derided and tormented Harry Potter.

"I didn't do as well as you think," I muttered, dropping Lily's hands at once.

"He's alive, isn't he?" Lily pointed out.

I was tempted to retort, *You'd know if he wasn't*, but chose to let the words die on my lips. "I'm so sorry," I mumbled. "For everything."

"Sev, the past is gone. It does no good to relive it."

Lily truly looked as beautiful as she had all those years ago, I thought. "I may not relive it, but I'll never forget it," I said huskily.

She said nothing at first, her eyes studying me intently. Then a weak smile played on her lips. "Nor will I," she murmured. "The good times, I mean."

It was the nicest, most wonderful thing she could have said to me. I reached up to find that my cheeks were wet with tears once more. "Do you mean that?" I whispered.

"Absolutely." Lily paused to wipe away tears of her own. "You were my first friend in the wizarding world."

"You were my friend," I said slowly. "My only true friend, and I threw that away."

Lily swallowed, then managed an encouraging smile. "It does no good to keep going over this, you know."

"I know."

"Life... happens, Sev. It doesn't follow the paths you expect, and sometimes you get derailed, and sometimes "

"...sometimes you die long before you should," I finished for her. "Or, in my case, you keep living for some godforsaken reason."

"Perhaps you've been given a second chance," Lily ventured.

"Second?" I snorted. "More like a third or fourth chance. It should be you, not me."

She flashed me a tremulous smile, taking my hands once more. "But it's not, is it? Take this chance, Sev. Take this chance and run with it."

I must have looked so doubtful that Lily burst out laughing. She pulled herself up on tiptoe and planted a brief kiss on my cheek. "Be happy, my old friend."

I felt myself being drawn backwards. Or was Lily the one backing away?

"I loved you," I said desperately as the gulf between us widened.

"I know. And I loved you too," she murmured.

Had I heard her correctly? Had Lily Evans actually declared her love for me? My thoughts tumbled over and over within my mind, just as my body seemed to be tumbling end over end through nothingness. I wanted to stay, to find out more, but I was falling faster than ever.

With an enormous effort, I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the filthy floor of the Shrieking Shack, my cheek soaking in a pool of my own blood.

The First Year: The Tutor

Chapter 2 of 7

Severus Snape is assigned an unusual task for his first year of community service.

The First Year: The Tutor

The War Tribunal had to be joking. Could my life possibly become any more bizarre?

I didn't really expect to survive the war, and the fact that I woke up in St. Mungo's two weeks after the final battle was a rather rude surprise. If it hadn't been for what the Muggles refer to as a Near-Death Experience, I would have been downright irate to discover that I was still alive. In a life bereft of happy moments, that encounter with Albus and Lily was like a precious jewel that I would treasure forever.

Even the fact that I went straight from St. Mungos' to a holding cell at the Ministry couldn't dampen that nugget of happiness. My trial before the War Tribunal didn't begin until the end of November, and during those five months I had ample time to think about what Lily had said to me: Be happy, old friend. How? Finding happiness was something that happened to other people, and I didn't have the first clue how to go about it. Of course, if I ended up in Azkaban, happiness might amount to nothing more than finding that they had initiated a well-stocked prison library. I fully expected that Lily's words, while well-intended, would be for naught.

I wasn't terribly surprised when Potter petitioned the Tribunal for my acquittal. I'd given the boy my memories because I was under the distinct impression that I was dying, for Merlin's sake. How was I to know that he would use them to argue for my freedom? What shocked me, however, was the discovery that Harry Potter's word had suddenly become gold, and had it been within the British wizarding world's power, they would have presented the boy with a crown and scepter. It took next to no convincing for the Tribunal to exonerate me of war crimes, although they were rather more divided over my role in the 'assisted suicide' of Albus Dumbledore. For that reason, they felt that I needed to make some sort of restitution.

That was when they hit upon the idea of community service. Each year for the next five years, I would be required to spend two hundred hours working for the betterment of wizarding society. For someone who has never cared one whit about wizarding society, the sentence struck me as ridiculous, unfair, and absolutely the cruelest thing they could have done to me. Two hundred hours a year in Azkaban sounded far more pleasant, as far as I was concerned.

I returned to my home in Spinner's End, wondering what in the world community service would entail. By that time December was half over and the Christmas season was in full swing. I was rather stunned to find that I had received hundreds of Christmas cards from people I didn't know. Most carried the same line of sentiment, something along the order of 'You were a mean bastard to me in school, but I'm glad you helped win the war'. I also was the recipient of a ham from the Derbyshire Witches' Defence League, five invitations to share Christmas dinner with people I didn't know, and a proposal of marriage from a spinster in Cornwall. In the midst of sorting through all this tripe, Minerva McGonagall showed up.

"Happy Christmas, Severus," she said pleasantly.

The woman was wearing the smug look of someone who is pulling strings that I haven't tripped over yet. I scowled at her.

"What do you want, Minerva?"

"May I come in?"

Wordlessly, I gestured her into the parlor. Taking a seat, Minerva announced her intentions without preamble. "The Ministry has assigned you to me for the coming year."

"Excuse me?" What in the world was she talking about?

"I'm in charge of your community service projects for the coming year."

"You're *what*?"

"The Tribunal ordered you to perform two hundred hours of "

" community service, yes, I know. Why exactly have I been assigned to you?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps they didn't know where to put you."

I snorted. Most likely they didn't have anybody who *wanted* to deal with me and pawned me off on Minerva instead.

"I've been asked to provide your projects for the coming new year. And as there is something that's come up rather suddenly, I would like you to take it on."

I was instantly suspicious. "Please don't tell me that you want me back at Hogwarts to teach."

"Would that be so bad?"

"I would sooner move to the tropics and collect coconuts."

Minerva's only response to my poor excuse for humor was a wry look of displeasure, indicating that I was capable of better wit than that. It was immediately replaced by an expression of sincere concern. "I would like you to spend your two hundred hours as a private tutor."

"A tutor!" I gasped in a strangled voice. If there was anything worse than teaching an entire classroom of dunderheads, it was being afflicted with the worst of the worst. "Are you mad?"

"No," she said flatly, "but quite frankly, I think you will not mind this assignment too much. I could have done much worse for you."

"What is it?" I crossed my arms, aware that I probably resembled a sulking child.

"I would like you to tutor Hermione Granger."

"Hermione Granger?" I blurted, astonished. "Why in the world does Hermione Granger need a tutor? The girl's memorized virtually all the texts in the Hogwarts library, and she doesn't miss an opportunity to display it."

"She's having a difficult go of it right now, Severus. She was determined to return to Hogwarts for her N.E.W.T. year, you know."

I had heard. Why was beyond me; after the events of the past year, surely Granger didn't need to prove herself by toiling after a silly piece of paper to confirm her worth.

"Readjusting after the war has been difficult for all the children," Minerva continued. "It's not at all unusual for a student to burst into tears in the middle of a class, and I can't go a week without being awakened because someone's suffered horrible dreams in the dormitory. Now that the thrill of victory is fading, we're all feeling the aftereffects quite acutely."

How odd, I thought: I had been under the stress of the war and my role as spy for the past three years, and no one had been particularly concerned about me. Well, Dumbledore had made the odd remark about my difficult task, but I knew it was usually prompted by how my work affected the Order and its progress.

"Granger, Minerva. Why does she need a tutor?"

McGonagall, who was looking worried at the thought of all those distressed students, snapped back to the present.

"As usual, she is determined to prove herself in each and every subject. This year, however, there are personal matters which have complicated her life. You know she had Obliviated her parents and sent them to Australia to sit out the war? Well, she brought them home straightway and removed the spell, but there have been a few problems. Her father is well, I believe, but Mrs. Granger still has difficulty with her memory and has been unable to return to work yet. The staff at St. Mungo's has been working with her, but they've made only minimal progress. Needless to say, Hermione feels quite responsible for this."

"I should imagine," I snorted. "There's a reason that Obliviators go through an extensive training program before they're allowed to play with people's memories."

"Then there is Mr. Weasley," McGonagall continued. "Ronald, that is. He is suffering mightily after losing his brother Fred. He has chosen to forego a career as an Auror and is helping George Weasley at the joke shop."

"A noble gesture," I said. "Don't say that I'm to tutor Mr. Weasley as well."

"Of course not. But as he and Miss Granger have quite an attachment going, it's one more source of stress for her."

I scowled, waiting for Minerva to get to the point.

"But it was the mock testing three days ago which proved to be the last straw for Miss Granger. You may recall that some of the Board of Governors have long wanted to offer mock N.E.W.T.s to help prepare the students for the actual tests."

"I recall."

"We sent the sixth years and below home for the Christmas holiday a day early so that the seventh years might take the mock test. To make a long story short..."

I groaned inwardly. Why hadn't she done that twenty rambling sentences ago?

"...Miss Granger completely blanked out. She couldn't come up with a single answer, besides which she was not feeling well and coming down with the flu, and "

"The girl actually failed a test?" I interrupted. The devious Slytherin side of me wanted to cheer.

"It was more than failing a test, Severus. It was more a complete emotional collapse."

I tapped a finger restlessly against the arm of the settee. "I suppose you want me to begin tutoring her when she returns from Christmas break?"

Minerva raised an eyebrow. "Hermione has chosen not to return, although she is still determined to sit exams this coming summer. I believe that all she needs is a guiding hand along with some independent study."

So the little Gryffindor know-it-all had finally cracked.

"What subjects would I be teaching? You surely don't expect me to coach her in Divination, do you?"

"Good heavens, no, she dropped Divination years ago. Potions and Defence, of course. Pomona's willing to work with her on Herbology, but I'm certain that you can adequately assist her with the other subjects. As I recall, you did rather well on your own N.E.W.T.s."

There was still a flaw in her logic, and I was so busy looking for it that I nearly missed the flattery. I said, "How, exactly, am I to tutor Miss Granger in Potions if she does not return to Hogwarts? One needs a laboratory to teach Potions."

McGonagall glared at me. "One needs a cauldron and a fire, which can be set up anywhere. I'll make sure that you get whatever ingredients you need."

"Do you really think that Miss Granger's parents want a cauldron bubbling on their dining room table?" I asked dryly.

"You and Hermione may select a location which is agreeable to both of you." She had the look again, the smug expression which implied that I had no say in the matter. I sighed deeply. Winning a fight with Minerva McGonagall was hard enough on a level playing field. With the force of the Tribunal behind her, it was a lost cause.

I shifted the textbooks from one arm to the other before ringing the doorbell of the handsome Georgian townhouse. It was two days after Christmas, and a wreath graced the front door. The pine needles quivered as someone unlocked the door and opened it.

Hermione Granger looked much different from the confident girl who had last graced my classroom. She was more pale than usual, although that could be due to her recent bout with the flu. She also seemed to have lost quite a bit of weight. Her eyes, however, held a sadness that had never been present before.

"Professor Snape," she said, managing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Please, come in."

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

She led me into a sunny, well-appointed parlor. Motioning me towards a sofa, Hermione took a straight chair sitting at a right angle to me.

"As you know," I said, "I wish to discuss your coursework and my expectations in preparation for beginning your tutorial after the first of the year."

"Yes, sir."

Granger was eyeing me with an odd intensity.

"Is there a problem, Miss Granger?" Her cheeks had reddened an improvement from the pallor, I thought.

"I no. It's just that the last time I saw you, you were dying. You look quite well."

Oh, yes. That. "Thank you," I murmured.

"I'm glad that you didn't die, Professor," Hermione said earnestly.

"I haven't quite reached that conclusion myself, yet."

"I've never seen you wearing Muggle clothing before, either."

I glanced down at the Muggle trousers and jumper. "I was not certain how many Muggles would be about in your neighborhood this morning. And quite honestly, my wound still does not take kindly to constricting collars."

Her eyes shifted to my neck where the great snake had bitten me, and she nodded.

"I have a few questions, Miss Granger. Firstly, why did you feel the need to return to Hogwarts?"

The girl looked puzzled that I should even ask. "I wanted to finish what I'd started, sir. I know everyone said that I could probably take my N.E.W.T.s without bothering to crack a book, but I didn't want to shortchange myself."

"And after all you went through in the past year, did you honestly believe that you could pick up where you had left off? That you could go back to Quidditch and Hogsmeade weekends and pranks in the common room, and everything would be as it was before?"

"I thought I could," Hermione said soberly. "I knew that things had changed. I just didn't realize how much I had changed."

"I believe the word you are looking for is 'matured'." I paused, watching her. For all her past loquaciousness, the girl was downright subdued. "What happened, Miss Granger?"

"What happened... what?" she asked, confused.

"What happened to cause you to leave?"

She stared at me, troubled; I suspected that she was trying to determine whether she could trust me. And why should she? She wouldn't have shared confidences with the Greasy Git before.

"I think everything's been coming to a head ever since the start of term," Granger said, her shoulders sagging. "Every time I walked into the Great Hall, I could see the bodies stretched out there, the way they were that day... If not that, then I was constantly expecting to see people I know, and then I would remember that they're dead. And I think some of the teachers deliberately avoided talking about the war just to get us to keep our minds on our studies. And the dormitories were horrible; because of the repairs, there were eight of us jammed into the Seventh Year dorm, and there was hardly any privacy, and most nights someone would start crying. And I've been so worried about my parents... Anyway, it's been a nightmare, and I couldn't concentrate and I I suppose that when test day came I hit the wall."

"Hit the wall?" I echoed.

"It's a Muggle term. It means that you can't go any farther. I started crying and I couldn't stop, and I had to leave the examination room..." Granger swallowed, looking miserable. "Professor McGonagall was very kind about it."

It was a situation which, I was certain, Hermione Granger had never faced in her life. "It must have been very difficult, especially for a war hero like yourself."

Anger flared plainly on her face, and she looked ready to tell me off for what she believed to be my offhanded dismissal of her woes.

"Do not misunderstand me," I continued calmly. "You are a war hero who has been through unspeakable experiences. I suspect that when you fled the test, you were worried less about what other people thought of you than what you thought of yourself."

She stared at me frankly, openly, her eyes welling up with tears. Wonderful. We hadn't officially begun our tutorial yet and Granger was on the verge of a crying spell. At once I reached for the Defence textbook and held it up.

"This is the book you were using this year?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what is your opinion of it?"

Diverted, Hermione cocked her head to one side. "My opinion, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," I repeated. "Your opinion."

"Um... Well, it's... ah..."

"I would suspect that you find it completely inadequate compared to what you have experienced in the past year."

"Yes!" The answer came out in a rush. "It's a load of tosh, frankly!"

"Which is why we will not be using it." I shoved it to the far side of the coffee table. "You may use it as a reference if necessary, but I doubt that you will be needing it much. As for the other texts..." I motioned to the remaining books, "...we will use them extensively. Your Defence assignment for our first meeting is to write an essay about all of the defensive spells you and your companions used last year, along with the reasons for them."

Her jaw dropped. "All of them?"

"All of them. Now then, let us discuss Potions."

When the second of January rolled around, I returned to the Granger home. Hermione was looking somewhat better, healthier and not as pale. Her parents were there, and I was duly introduced to them. To my surprise, her father thanked me for my contributions to the war effort. Since the Dark Lord's fall, I was frequently the recipient of thanks, and it always made me feel both foolish and inadequate. This, however, was the first time a Muggle had offered his gratitude, and I suspected that Martin Granger had a decent grasp of what had gone on these past three years. I also had a hunch that he knew his daughter was often in the thick of things and was grateful that she had been on the receiving end of my protection on more than one occasion.

Lynette Granger, evidently the source of her daughter's riotous curls, seemed perfectly normal when she shook my hand. However, she returned three times during the two hour tutorial to ask me my name. Each time this happened, I could see the pain in Hermione's face as she was presented with the ongoing evidence of her mother's memory problems. As a result, the lesson did not go smoothly. Finally, I put down my quill and suggested that we call it a day.

Granger nodded miserably. "I'm sorry, sir."

I began to gather up my things. "I understand that the Healers say it will take a while for your mother's memory to be restored," I said quietly.

"If I'd had any idea that this could happen..." Hermione began, glancing over her shoulder toward the kitchen where her mother was preparing lunch.

"You did what you had to do. Believe me when I say that your parents' names were on the Dark Lord's list of potential targets."

Her eyes widened. Granger turned away to stare at the surface of the dining room table as if the answers to life were to be found there.

"Is there anything you can do, sir? Any potion that the Healers haven't thought of? When we were preparing for O.W.L.s, there were a number of brain stimulating products that were making the rounds "

I was sorely tempted to take the girl by the shoulders and shake her. "Granger, those things are pure garbage and you know it."

She looked so dejected, so unlike the girl who always had all the answers at her fingertips. An earlier Severus Snape would have told her to stop sniveling and grow up. The current Severus Snape actually felt a twinge of sympathy for her. Was I actually changing that much?

"But," I continued resignedly, "I will look into the current research on legitimate brain-strengthening potions."

"Thank you, sir!"

For one frightening moment, I thought Granger would fling her arms around me and hug me. Instead, she managed a watery smile.

"I promise I'll work twice as hard tomorrow," she said firmly.

Work twice as hard, she did. I had set up a makeshift 'lab' in the kitchen of Hermione's home, and while she toiled away at making antidotes to Veritaserum, I read her essay on defensive spells performed during the Horcrux hunt.

"It appears," I said at length, "that a great deal of your survival last year hinged on the simple ability to Disapparate."

Hermione looked thoughtful at this. "I suppose it did. Not very heroic, is it?"

"On the contrary," I said. "You've mastered the basic rule of Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"What's that?" She stared at me, wide-eyed, and I could read her mind instantly. She was thinking that there was something she'd completely missed during six and a half years of classes.

"That discretion is, indeed, the better part of valor."

She almost sagged in relief, but smiled anyway. "It is, isn't it? All the spells I researched, looking for *something* which would help us defeat Voldemort, and half the time we ended up running away."

"Not running away," I said, writing a comment on her essay. "Retreating in order to regroup."

"It all depends on your point of view, doesn't it?" Hermione gazed down into the pinkish liquid swirling in the cauldron as she stirred it gently. "It certainly felt like running away."

"You were extremely fortunate to have evaded capture as long as you did."

There was a moment's pause. "I dream about it, sometimes. That I'm in that tent, freezing, trying to think how we can do it, how we can find the next Horcrux..." She looked up at me. "I don't think I ever in my life want to set foot in a tent again."

I smirked at this. I had never in my life ever set foot in a tent and had no intentions of doing so. Camping out was not for me and never had been.

"What are your plans, Miss Granger? You intend to sit N.E.W.T.s, and then what?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I want to do something to help people who don't have much of a voice, I think. House-elves, for instance."

"Then I predict that within ten years, a house-elf will be taking over as Minister for Magic. You are a very determined young woman."

Hermione now stared at me outright. "You've changed," she said wonderingly. "You've been polite and civilized and even complimentary to me. I'm not the only one that changed, am I?"

I sighed. "So it would seem."

We met Monday through Friday for the remainder of the winter and through the spring. As I suspected, Hermione Granger had little actual need of a tutor. I merely directed the learning. And when she sat her N.E.W.T.s in June, she went in to the exam room confident and relaxed.

The Second Year: The Wolf at the Door

Chapter 3 of 7

Another year, another two hundred hours of community service. What will Severus be up to this year?

The Second Year: The Wolf at the Door

Christmas brought another ham from the Derbyshire Witches' Defense League and another proposal of marriage from the spinster in Cornwall. This time, no strangers had invited me to holiday dinner. Instead, there were a number of party invitations from misguided souls who evidently had me mixed up with another Severus Snape. I did receive a number of Christmas cards, including one from Granger, wishing me merry and thanking me again for my assistance in preparing for her N.E.W.T.s. She had passed everything with flying colors, she said, something which came as no surprise whatsoever.

I also found a Christmas card from Harry Potter in my post. Although I daresay that we will never be close friends, we seem able to tolerate each other more readily. It is surely a result of the fact that we are linked through Lily, a topic we have barely touched. While I was recuperating in St. Mungo's, Potter came to see me.

"I'd like to rest, please," I said impatiently as the bedside curtains rustled open. I'd been poked and prodded all day, and I was tired of it.

"Hello, Professor Snape."

My head snapped upright, and my mouth went dry. The one person in the world that I least wanted to see stood at the foot of my bed.

"Mr. Potter," I whispered.

Harry approached slowly. "I won't stay long," he said, the hesitation obvious in his voice. "I heard from Professor McGonagall that you were awake and doing well, and I wanted to see you."

"Do I look like I'm doing well?" I grunted.

"Well, you do look a lot better than the last time I saw you," Harry said, wearing a wry smile.

I blinked. "For once," I said cautiously, "I have to agree with you."

Gingerly, as though he wasn't sure he'd be allowed to stay, Harry lowered himself into the bedside chair.

"I uh I wanted to say that I'm glad you made it," he offered. "You didn't deserve to die."

"I've seen the casualty list, Potter. Besides Voldemort, exactly how many of them did deserve to die?"

That startled Harry into momentary silence. "That was a bad choice of words. I'm sorry," he managed.

It was extremely odd for me to champion the rights of the recently deceased, let alone to caution Potter, of all people, about insensitivity. I was definitely not myself, and I didn't care for it one bit.

"The thing is, I wanted to thank you," Harry continued. "We could never have won without you and everything you did."

Which was merely deceit and duplicity of the highest order.

"I did what I had to do," I said simply.

Harry nodded. He studied the ground briefly, then looked up.

"He used us both, didn't he?"

There was no need to define 'he'.

"Yes, he did."

"Although, it all came out right at the end," Harry pointed out.

I shrugged. I had not yet read enough of the newspapers to form a cogent opinion of the aftermath of the war. True, a dead Voldemort was a good thing, but many gaps remained that I simply didn't understand.

"I would like to hear your version of events," I said.

Harry nodded. "Sure. But first..." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a vial. "I believe that these are yours," he said, almost shyly.

I stiffened at the sight of the swirling substance in the vial. I had already grown accustomed to the diminished presence of those memories in my mind, and wasn't too sure that I wanted them and the pain they caused back again. Or, a small voice whispered within, had my encounter with Lily rendered them impotent? I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing emerged but a stutter.

"Are you all right, sir?" Harry looked concerned.

I nodded, unwilling to trust my voice again.

Harry looked at the vial in his hand. "I mean, they're yours. I'm really... sorry. I understand everything now, and I'm just really, really sorry."

Every mocking, contemptuous phrase in my compiled repository seemed to have fled from my mind. I began trembling all over; I wanted to run from the room but my traitorous body refused to cooperate. Even breathing seemed a chore just now. Potter was beginning to speak again, which was a good thing; I was certain that if I tried to talk, a howl of anguish would be torn from the depths of my soul. What in the world was happening to me?

Fortunately, Potter had taken one look at me and decided that perhaps summoning a Healer might be in order. I was given a Calming Draught, and Potter was shown the door. He did return another day when my emotions were not so near the breaking point, and we had a civilized, in-depth conversation about the war. And I found that I could actually look at him and see Lily's eyes without my heart shredding itself.

In early January, a letter arrived from the Ministry of Magic. Minerva McGonagall, it stated, would not be supervising my community service duties this year. Instead, that duty would fall to someone else to be named shortly. I sighed; at least Minerva was a known quantity. Too bad Granger would not require another two hundred hours of tutoring. While tutoring wasn't my idea of pleasure, serving in that role to Hermione Granger had been an easy job. The final year of the war had tempered the girl to the

point where she no longer bounced in her seat to spit out an answer. Instead, she thoughtfully and carefully considered whatever was put to her, minus the underlying begging for approval that had gone on for six long years. Granger had matured, although I suppose that war has a way of doing that to people.

During the time I acted as Granger's tutor, I began to prepare and sell potions out of my home. I had no wish to labor under someone else's direction at either of the two large potions companies, nor did I want to be tied down to the daily grind of pharmaceutical preparation at St. Mungo's. All three had offered me positions, despite the fact that I had not applied for any. It was a result of the continued post-war adulation, a phenomenon so ridiculous that it made me want to scream at times. Certainly if any of the witches or wizards offering me employment had been in my classes, they would have known better. And even if I had not taught them, they surely had heard of my reputation. At any rate, working for myself and by myself seemed a far better choice. While I would not call my enterprise wildly lucrative, it was at least profitable enough that I could eat and pay the bills.

A day after the first letter from the Ministry arrived, a second owl appeared at my window. According to the instructions, I was to report to Miss H. Granger in the Department for the Regulation of Magical Creatures, Being Division. So that was where the girl had ended up, was it? I was right, then the Ministry would be overrun by house-elves before long.

I arrived at the Ministry of Magic on a beautiful spring day. Unfortunately, setting foot inside that tomb of a building has the power to diminish even the most pleasant weather. Spending five months in a holding cell there does nothing to alleviate the feeling that you are walking to your doom the moment you enter. I took the lift to the fourth level.

"Professor Snape!"

Hermione launched herself from her desk chair to shake my hand enthusiastically. She looked much the same as she had when last I saw her, nearly twelve months earlier. There was, however, considerable improvement in her color; she had also put some weight back on and no longer resembled a skeleton.

"Miss Granger," I said, taking the chair she indicated by the overflowing desk.

"How are you, Professor?" she asked eagerly.

"Quite well, thank you."

"I hear that you've started your own potions firm."

"Not exactly a firm," I told her, going on to describe my mail order business.

Unlike most people, whose eyes glaze over after an initial display of interest, Granger listened to every word.

"That's wonderful," she said with absolutely no trace of forced politeness in her voice. "I'm happy that you're able to work at something you enjoy for a change."

"You don't think I enjoyed teaching?" I asked, an eyebrow raised.

"I think you loathed it," Hermione retorted, a twinkle in her eye.

"You think correctly." The barest hint of a smile quirked the corners of my mouth. I gazed briefly around the tiny cubicle which comprised Hermione Granger's office. "How do you like your job, Miss Granger?"

"It's wonderful," she enthused. "I was so afraid that they wouldn't hire me. I thought I'd end up in the Quidditch League Headquarters. Ron was hoping for that, of course."

"Mr. Weasley is working there?" I asked.

Granger looked momentarily confused, then her expression cleared. "No, I meant that he was hoping I would get a position with the Quidditch League so that he could hear all the latest news first. Ron's still working with George at the joke shop."

"And how is Mr. Weasley?" I truly didn't care, but I could make small talk if need be. Besides, there was an odd, subtle darkening in Granger's face when she spoke of Weasley and the remaining twin working together.

"He's fine." She had already turned back to the stack of papers in front of her.

"And Mr. Potter?"

"Doing quite well. Working like crazy at Auror training. He doesn't have much spare time."

"I'm sure. How is your mother faring with her memory problems?"

The last vestige of a smile faded from Granger's face. "Better, although she hasn't been able to return to work yet."

"I'm still keeping an eye out for any news of some potion in development that might help." I had taken on the challenge the previous year, but to no avail. And while I couldn't say that I held any particular concern for Lynette Granger, I still found myself scanning the potions journals for anything that might be beneficial.

"Thank you," Hermione said, not quite meeting my eyes.

"Miss Granger, may I suggest that you rethink the concept of carrying around a load of guilt? Having done so, I can find absolutely nothing to recommend it."

She looked me full in the face then, and I could tell that beneath the chirpy, pleasant exterior, Hermione Granger had developed her own set of inner demons. And abruptly, the shutters closed.

"Well then," she said briskly, "shall we get down to business? I asked specifically for you to help me with my project."

"And what is your " The words had barely left my lips with my eyes lit upon the nameplate on the desk.

Hermione Granger. Werewolf Support Services.

"Werewolves!" I blurted. I had assumed that her job dealt with house-elves. And I remembered why, in all my years as a spy, I made it a practice never to assume anything.

Granger glared at me. "Yes, werewolves. Do you have a problem with that, Professor?"

I scowled. "Do not call me 'Professor'. 'Mr. Snape' will do, and no, I do not have a problem with werewolves."

Not that I would admit, anyway. Given that Saint Lupin was one of the honored war dead, it was folly to say anything else.

"I've been assigned a project, *Mr. Snape*, and given the nature of the project, you seemed a natural to help with it. That's why I requested to direct your community service this year."

I was tempted to rub my hands together and say 'Goody'. Instead, I asked with forced politeness, "What is it that you want me to do?"

"Let me explain. Now that certain people who actively worked against primary rights for werewolves are no longer in charge "

"If you mean the bitch Umbridge, just say so."

Granger cast a sly smile in my direction. "As I was saying, there is finally a chance for werewolves to live a decent life. Already, there is legislation pending which will rescind the laws prohibiting the hiring of werewolves. In a few weeks' time, there will be a Ministry push to make sure that all werewolves in the country have easy access to Wolfsbane potion, and that all unemployed werewolves are registered and enrolled in job training or job search programs."

"Very ambitious," I remarked. "And I fit in where, exactly?"

"You're very familiar with Wolfsbane potion, Pro Mr. Snape. Here's what I'm proposing: first, you need to inspect Wolfsbane production at St. Mungo's, then "

"Inspect Wolfsbane production!" I blurted. "What, exactly, gives me the authority to inspect the Potions Masters at St. Mungo's?"

"It's just for show," Granger said matter-of-factly. "All you have to do is watch them long enough to attest to the fact that they're doing it properly. Then, we do a mailing to all the registered werewolves in Britain, telling them that they'll be receiving a visit from Ministry officials to discuss the new laws and encourage everyone to sign up for the potion and job training programs. Needless to say, the previous regime didn't win any fans among the werewolf population. It's no wonder that they don't trust us. I'd like to think that they'll be willing to sign up immediately, but it may take a bit more convincing than can be done with a letter and one visit."

She'd made the entire speech with barely a breath taken. I felt rather sorry for Potter and Weasley and what they'd had to contend with all those years.

"I still don't understand. Why can't you simply say that the Wolfsbane made there is satisfactory? Why do you need me to " I broke off as the light suddenly dawned. "Aha," I said, my eyes narrowing dangerously, "I'm on to your little game, Miss Granger."

For the first time, the girl looked a bit worried. "Sorry?"

"There's not a thing wrong with the Potions Masters at St. Mungo's, except that they're not *war heroes*, are they?"

Hermione reddened. "I only thought that people might pay more attention if you attested to it personally."

I couldn't help but be amazed. "You think that linking my name with this campaign of yours will actually help? You're positively barking, Granger!"

"You have an Order of Merlin, First Class. The Potions Masters at St. Mungo's don't."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Of all the insane, absurd ideas...

"I don't suppose I have a choice in this, do I?"

"I was hoping you'd like the idea," Hermione ventured, "but perhaps we could drop the personal endorsement."

"Drop the what, exactly, does that leave, then?" I protested.

"Well, I'll need someone to go around with me to visit all the werewolves and their families," she said carefully.

How had Potter and Weasley put up with this girl? I wanted quite badly to strangle her then and there. At least last year's tutoring project was something up my alley. This was... this was...

Before I could come up with a suitable word, Granger had whipped out a calendar.

"Now then, when can you start?"

We spent fifteen minutes standing about in the pharmaceutical laboratory at St. Mungo's while a photographer from the *Daily Prophet* took our picture. The story ran on the front page the next day, under the headline '*New Ministry Initiative Begins*'; and described the program to draw the werewolf population back into society. It depicted the program as daring and insightful, while personally, I believed it to be hopelessly optimistic and naïve.

I spent the better part of two hours, signing my name next to Granger's on the dozens of letters being sent to our 'target audience', announcing our impending visit. I could picture the owls, flying hither and yon across the entirety of the British Isles, dropping Hermione Granger's good news into the laps of the werewolves who had been alienated by Dolores Umbridge and her cronies. If I were a werewolf who had been treated like dirt by the mighty Ministry of Magic, I would probably have stomped on the letter and then throttled the owl before it could escape through an open window. How had Hermione convinced the higher-ups that werewolves would flock to their new benefactor with unadulterated zeal?

I tried to warn Granger about this.

"Don't be surprised if our reception is not what you expect," I said as we approached a lonely farmhouse somewhere in Yorkshire. It was our first stop on what I had christened 'the Werewolf Tour'.

"I'm sure they'll at least be civil," Granger retorted, completely unwilling to entertain the idea that we might be hexed into oblivion with scant notice.

"Fine," I snapped. "Just keep your wand at the ready, won't you?"

Hermione knocked at the door. It was opened by an elderly woman who, predictably, eyed the two of us with suspicion.

"Good day," Granger began brightly. "We are from the Ministry. I believe you received our owl recently, regarding the new assistance programs? I am Hermione Granger, and this is Severus Snape."

There was a brief silence, then the woman smiled graciously and opened the door wider.

"Please, come in! We don't oft get visitors way out here. Why don't you take those chairs in front of the window? They're far more comfortable than the lumpy old sofa. Davey! We've got company!" she called towards the upper floor in a thin, cracked voice. "My son Davey will be down in a moment. Would you like some tea?"

"Please, don't go to any trouble on our account," Hermione told her. "Actually, we won't be staying long."

"No trouble. I just made a fresh pot, I did." The woman tottered off to the kitchen immediately.

I glanced sideways at Granger as we sat on the hard wooden chairs. "This is likely to take forever," I muttered. "How many of these visits did you say we have to make?"

"Ninety-six altogether," she said, and hastily added, "but only three more visits today."

Which meant that I would likely be in tea up to my eyeballs if each visit went like this.

"I don't suppose," I drawled, "that any of the werewolves will offer us firewhisky instead, will they?"

Hermione glared at me. We sat in silence until the woman returned, carrying two china cups and saucers.

"Here you go, then. Would you like some biscuits to go with your tea?"

"Thank you for offering, but we've just eaten," Hermione answered in congenial tones.

"Of course." The woman beamed at us as she settled herself in on the sofa. "Lovely weather we've been having, isn't it?"

Granger shot me a look which suggested that I might want to enter the conversation.

"Very pleasant," I muttered.

"Are you from London, I suppose?"

"Yes," Granger replied. Evidently she saw no need for me to explain that I lived nowhere near London, for she continued on. "It's such a delight to get out of the city. You're fortunate to live in such a beautiful place."

"Aye," the woman nodded enthusiastically. "Bit far away from things, but very beautiful."

Hermione folded her hands in her lap. "Is Davey... the one with the problem?" she asked gently.

The woman's face fell. "Aye. Don't know as the government's ever been interested in him before, though."

"That's why we're here. We'd like to rectify that."

"I know he can be a nuisance annoying the neighbors and such, but I didn't know that many people had complained."

Granger launched into a discussion of the various new benefits the Ministry initiative would provide. I had to admire her enthusiastic belief however misguided that she could single-handedly change the opinions of millions of British wizarding society. Then I remembered: she wasn't doing it single-handedly. She had me.

I hastily covered up what would have been a rather rude snort of laughter, and as I did so, dislodged the file of papers from my lap. I was in the midst of replacing them when something caught my eye. I froze.

"Miss Granger," I said, interrupting her description of the wonders of the newly-enlightened Ministry of Magic. "I need to discuss something with you."

She was in the midst of casting me a scathing look of anger mixed with puzzlement when footsteps on the nearby creaking staircase announced the arrival of Davey.

"What's all this, Mum?"

"These folks are from the government, Davey. They want to help you."

"How do you do, Mr. Cushman?" Hermione rose from her seat to extend her hand.

Too late.

"Cushman? You've got the wrong house," the man told her.

In reshuffling the papers, I had noticed that the werewolf in the Cushman house was named Roger not Davey. The look of shock and dismay on Hermione's face was priceless. She turned to me, gesturing for the file as if the paperwork could somehow save her.

"You're not Mr. Cushman?"

"Name's Davey Bottersley. Cushmans are those oddballs next farm over."

"Oh." Granger's face was beet red. I know that she was thinking of the Statute of Secrecy, and expecting a squad of Obliviators to swoop down at any moment.

"We'll be on our way," I said smoothly, rising immediately from my seat. "Our mistake. So sorry to intrude."

I had taken Hermione's arm and was steering her towards the entrance when she paused to ask, "Just out of curiosity, how exactly do you annoy the neighbors, uh, Davey?"

"Not important, Granger!" I hissed in her ear, loathe to waste any more time.

"Like to give a glimpse of me wares to the girls in town," Davey Bottersley said, a leering look on his face. "Care to have a look, doll?"

I shoved a speechless Hermione through the entrance before muttering a hasty "*Obliviate!*" over my shoulder. Glancing back to make sure Davey and his mother sported unfocused, puzzled expressions, I pulled the door shut behind us.

"I don't believe it!" Hermione muttered furiously. "I thought for sure I'd checked and double-checked the location if I'd only thought to cross-reference..."

"Not a very auspicious start," I said as we retreated hastily down the path, "although it appears that I was correct after all."

"Correct?" Granger blurted, her face flaming crimson. "Correct about what?"

"Our reception was not what you had expected, was it? Although, your friend Davey definitely had wolf-like qualities..."

She looked as though she wanted to take a swing at me. On my part, I was rather pleased: not only was Granger prettily embarrassed, I had actually made a joke a word, it was rumoured, was not even in my vocabulary.

It was late summer by the time we finished the last of the werewolf visits. Once we finally found the correct addresses, we were generally received with a reserved respect. More than a few werewolves and their families told us just what they thought of the treatment they'd received over the course of the past few years and expressed their doubts that the Ministry of Magic could deliver on what Hermione was promising them. It was hardly surprising, and we left those homes with no guarantee that the werewolves would follow up on what we were offering.

Making these visits, I found, was not an unpleasant way to spend my spare time in the spring and summer. I had to admit that Hermione Granger was an impressive force when she was fired up about something. Not only was she enthusiastic in her pursuits, she had the determination to see them come to pass. It was a good thing, I reflected, that Potter had had her along on the journey to rid the world of Voldemort. Without her, Potter and Weasley would doubtless still be sitting in the Gryffindor

common room, scratching their heads and trying to come up with a plan.

I learned whether I wanted to or not that Fleur Weasley was expecting again, that Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley were unofficially engaged, and that Hermione was deeply worried about Ron Weasley and his inability to leave his brother Fred's death behind him.

The Third Year: Granger's Folly

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione has a new project; Severus makes a discovery which may help her mother.

The Third Year: Granger's Folly

Christmas, again, with the usual ham, holiday invitations, and marriage proposal. And again, I received a Christmas card from Hermione Granger wishing me the usual holiday felicitations. Recalling last year's fiasco during our first werewolf home visit, I was seized by a sudden desire to taunt her. Although sending Christmas cards is not something I ordinarily do, I decided to make an exception in her case. I wrote back to Hermione, wishing her a happy Christmas and expressing my astonishment that she had sent her card to the correct address.

It was not long before I received a reply: *"As I recall, both of us knew the address of the house in Yorkshire. Don't try to pin the blame solely on me!"*

Needless to say, I couldn't let that go. I wrote to Granger again, pointing out that she had led the way to the house in Yorkshire, and as her 'charge' during my community service, I was merely following directions. Knowing Granger, she would probably have more to say on the subject but there was no answer this time.

The reason there was no answer, I decided a few days later, was related to a piece of gossip found in the Christmas Day issue of the *Daily Prophet*. I certainly do not make a practice of reading Rita Skeeter, but Granger's name leapt out at me as I was scanning the page.

What a ring! War heroes Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley were spotted last night at new Diagon Alley dance spot, Coven, making lovey-dovey eyes at one another. Although it comes as a surprise to no one that the two are now officially engaged, the ring itself was the talk of the holiday partygoers at Coven: a heart-shaped ruby surrounded by heart-shaped topaz. This chunk of pricey jewelry is definitely a one-of-a-kind for the two former Gryffindors-in-love!

Heart-shaped ruby surrounded by heart-shaped topaz? It sounded gaudy and revolting, not Granger's style at all. As far as the engagement, I suppose it was inevitable. Still, the news disappointed me; Weasley was not even close to the girl's league, let alone in it. Surely Hermione had higher expectations than that.

I thought about her again shortly into the new year, when I read about a study in the latest issue of the American trade journal, *Practical Potions*. The purpose of the study was to evaluate possible uses for a newly-created headache remedy, whose unexpected side effects included boosting one's memory. Hermione's mother came to mind, and I wrote to the researchers for more information. I then wrote to Granger, telling her of this development and congratulating her on her engagement.

Her reply was swift, the parchment weighted down by questions about the study and its possible outcome. I wrote back at once.

"Granger, what part of 'wrote for information' do you not understand? All I know is what was printed in the journal a small blurb about the study beginning. Nothing more, nothing less. Being as Legilimency is of little use against the written page, I can enlighten you no further at the present time."

And when another week rolled by and I received my yearly notice from the Ministry, I can't say that I was terribly surprised to learn that I would once more be doing my community service under the supervision of Hermione Granger.

"I see you've changed departments. Are there no more unemployed werewolves in Britain?" I remarked as I took the chair next to Granger's desk, now located in the newly-formed House-Elf Liaison Office.

"I'll have you know that the project has been very successful," Hermione said, her chin tilting proudly. "Successful enough that I was able to turn it over to someone else and move on."

"How did you convince your superiors that you have no intention of creating a clothing line for house-elves?"

She gave me a filthy look. "I'd like to think that I've matured since I was at school. The only way to beat the system is to work *within* the system."

"Which means what?"

Hermione was saying something about laws and regulations guaranteeing elf rights, but my attention was drawn to her left hand and the hideous ring on the fourth finger. It was every bit as silly-looking as Skeeter had implied. Granger saw where my eyes had wandered and turned bright red.

"I expect Ron was thinking of our years in Gryffindor when he bought that," she said faintly.

"Indeed."

And that one innocuous word burst the dam.

"It's horrible," Hermione moaned, propping both elbows on the desk and covering her eyes with both hands. "It's absolutely, positively "

"the ugliest piece of jewelry I've ever seen," I finished.

She looked at me then and burst into nervous laughter. I chuckled along with her; I couldn't help myself.

Granger's laughter subsided, replaced by a sudden moistness in her eyes.

"Needless to say, Ron bought it without any input from me. I always fancied a simple diamond solitaire," she said miserably.

"I suggest that you tell him," I said. "Surely he would not want you to wear a ring you hate for the rest of your life."

Hermione stared at the ring, and as she did so, I had the impression that there was more involved than an unsightly piece of jewelry.

"He really thought he did a wonderful thing, buying this," she told me.

"Then you have a difficult choice to make, don't you?" I grimaced inwardly. When did I begin offering advice to the lovelorn? I quickly turned the conversation back to the reason I was sitting there. "What, pray tell, is our project regarding house-elves, Miss Granger?"

"This office was just formed two months ago," she said, apparently as eager to abandon the subject of Ron Weasley's taste in jewelry as I was. "Before, there was only the House-Elf Relocation Office which, needless to say, did virtually nothing other than keep track of the whereabouts of house-elves. We want to do more than that. We want to improve the living and working conditions for the elves, not just do a silly, meaningless census every year. And we've already begun to make overtures to them, much as we did with the werewolves last year."

"How many werewolves signed up for your program?" I asked out of curiosity.

"We've had a steady stream of applicants."

Her answer seemed somewhat evasive. "How many? Forty? Fifty?"

"Twelve," she said a bit sheepishly. "But I'm sure more will sign up when they see the program is taking hold."

It was, I decided, a lucky thing for the werewolves that Granger had moved to the aid of a different clientele. She would likely have had me physically restraining the werewolves while she demanded that they sign up for assistance.

"Point taken. What is our elfin project for this year, then?"

"I wanted to start with something simple. The Americans have a holiday called Labor Day, begun when people worked far longer hours and days. It celebrates the working man, so to speak, and involves nothing more than a day of leisure a day for picnics and barbecues and that sort of thing. I thought that a national holiday for house-elves would be a wonderful idea."

She had that look in her eye. Some might call it an expression of dedication and zeal. I call it the Granger Harebrained Bright Idea look.

"Why a national holiday?" I wanted to know. "Why not simply encourage anyone who owns a house-elf to give it a day off?"

Judging by the now steeled glint in her eyes, I knew I had erred by using the words 'owns' and 'it'.

"Because compliance would most likely be non-existent," she snapped. "Until people learn that it's wrong to enslave a sentient creature, proper treatment has to be legislated!"

"And is that in the planning?"

Granger deflated a bit. "Yes, but it will take a long time. I thought we'd start with the holiday. Eventually I'd like to see elves given work contracts specifying duties, hours, working conditions, and so forth."

"No salary?" I asked innocently.

"No salary," Hermione agreed, although I could tell by her frown that she was still displeased with that particular little sticking point.

"And where do I fit in?"

"Well, I'd like you to help with the planning. Then I've already set aside a Sunday in June."

"A Sunday for what?"

"The picnic."

"The *what*?" I choked, a vague feeling of panic starting to well up.

"The first one will be strictly voluntary for the elves and their masters, of course," Granger put in hastily. "I intend to encourage everyone to give their elves the day off so that they can attend. I'm certain that Professor McGonagall will insist that the Hogwarts elves come, and that's the largest single group of elves in Britain."

"You want me to help give a picnic for house-elves," I said.

"Yes."

She looked so hopeful, so impossibly young and idealistic. If I didn't know that a mind like a steel trap lurked behind the bushy hair, I would have laughed in her face and walked out.

It's amazing how much planning goes into a picnic for creatures that aren't likely to appreciate it. Granger headed a committee of four disenchanted, low-level bureaucrats from the Being Division who along with me wrestled with the knotty issues involved.

First there was the menu. What did house-elves eat? Nobody seemed to know for certain, for as soon as elves served food, people were too busy eating to observe what the elves did to feed themselves. Hermione volunteered to check with Minerva McGonagall.

Granger was all for games to be held, as well. She had visions of house-elves in three-legged races and some sort of peg-and-ring game, not to mention elf football. One of the indifferent committee members suggested a game where participants tried to fling a rock-filled sock great distances; he sniggered quietly when Hermione's eyes first lit up, then darkened when she realized that clothing was involved. I could see that her enthusiasm for elf rights was no more widely embraced by others than it had been at Hogwarts all those years ago.

Hermione was also determined to come up with a gift for all attendees, something akin to the commemorative tee-shirts that Muggles tended to dispense for any and every occasion, only suitable for elves. The committee batted around the idea of sun visors for all guests and whether or not they counted as hats. The same man who had suggested the sock fling put forth the idea of souvenir sunglasses with the Ministry logo all in extra large sizes to shade the elves' enormous eyes. Granger turned beet red at that remark, and I couldn't help but feel just a bit sorry for her. She was trying to change the mindset of a lumbering bureaucracy as well as the staid wizarding society, and success was a long shot at best.

Despite the general foot-dragging and lack of animated involvement, the day of the picnic arrived. When we gathered at the picnic site, I discovered that Granger had enlisted more accomplices. I was required to be there by virtue of my sentence, of course. Potter and Weasley were there because of their years of friendship with Hermione and status as war heroes. The other committee members were there because they had been ordered to do so.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Snape. How are you?" As soon as Harry spotted me, he walked over and extended his hand. His eccentric house-elf, Kreacher, trailed in his wake.

"Quite well, Mr. Potter." The boy no, young man standing in front of me was direct and courteous, and I was impressed in spite of myself. Perhaps there was hope for him yet.

"This is Hermione's big day," he said, grinning. "She's been waiting for this for a long time."

"I hope that she's not going to be disappointed when the world doesn't change overnight." There were footsteps, and I glanced to my right: Ronald Weasley was approaching.

"Hey, Professor Snape." He stuck out his hand and I took it, somewhat reluctantly.

"Mr. Weasley," I said coolly. If Weasley thought he could ride Potter's cloak-tails into friendship with me, he was sorely mistaken. It had taken a near-miracle for Potter and me to arrive at the point where we could refrain from attacking each other on sight.

The boy who looked much less a man than Potter appeared to be extremely well-dressed for a Sunday afternoon picnic. In fact, his clothing appeared to be of the latest design and style.

"How are things going at your shop, Mr. Weasley?" I asked, already suspecting that things must be going quite well if he could afford such a pricey wardrobe.

"Great," Ron said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "We're doing great. Profits are up and business is booming. Where's Hermione?"

"Last I saw, she was directing the table set-up," I told him, glancing over my shoulder to where the Ministry people were using their wands to move picnic tables elf sized into position.

"Good. Guess you heard we're engaged."

"I did. Hermione showed me her ring." I managed to keep my face impassive as I said this.

"Real corker, isn't it?" Weasley said, looking utterly pleased with himself. "None like it anywhere."

"I have no doubt." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Potter's mouth twitch. "When is the happy day?"

"Oh, we haven't set a date yet. Got a million things to do at the shop. George relies on me."

"Hello!" Hermione came rushing up, her hair pinned into a frenzied knot on top of her head, her eyes bright, and looking like the fate of the world depended on the outcome of this picnic. "We're about to set out the food. Could you all pitch in and finish up the tables? I expect the elves to start arriving at any moment."

Without further ado, we began conjuring elf-sized chairs and placing them about the tables. We put out plates and specially made goblets 'Elf Fest 2001', they proclaimed and then began to set up the food. As Potter and I wrestled large urns of butterbeer into position, a massive crack announced the arrival of the Hogwarts elves.

It was an odd sight: nearly a hundred house-elves of all shapes and sizes, clad in their immaculate white tea towels bearing the Hogwarts crest, and shifting nervously from foot to foot as though they were lost en masse. Hermione took charge at once, pointing her wand to her throat and welcoming them in a loud, enthusiastic voice.

"Hello, I'm so glad that you all could make it! My name is Hermione Granger, and on behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I want to welcome you to Elf Fest 2001!"

The elves stared at her, some of them muttering. The words 'Dobby' and 'knitted hats' could be heard. There wasn't any overt hostility per se, but to an elf, each one was regarding Granger with frank mistrust.

"Miss Granger!" Minerva McGonagall, who had Apparated just behind all the elves, strode forward. "How are you, dear?"

"Fine, Professor," Hermione said, shaking her former teacher's hand.

"And Mr. Potter," Minerva continued, spotting Harry standing nearby.

Abruptly, the elves' attention was diverted, and they all beamed as one. Awed murmurs of 'Harry Potter!' could be heard. That seemed to break the ice a bit. Granger took advantage of their improved mood to request that everyone queue up at a nearby table to make name tags. That was greeted with general head scratching; finally, one elf tentatively raised a hand to inquire why name tags were needed, as the Hogwarts elves already knew each other.

"It'll make it easier for you to get to know the other elves when they arrive," Hermione said brightly.

The elf still looked dubious. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Potter standing next to Granger and nodding agreement at them in an encouraging manner. The elves shrugged and queued up and made out their name tag. Before long, I overheard Hermione wisely suggesting to Harry that he be the one to make the announcement when the food was ready.

And the food service was yet another fiasco. Unaccustomed to being served themselves, the elves seemed completely unable to grasp the idea that the humans wanted to serve them. Elf after elf would fill a plate and offer it to one of us, only to be reminded that the food was for them. Eventually, they tried to serve it to each other, with the same lack of success.

"How are we doing attendance-wise?" Hermione, looking utterly frazzled, rushed up to where McGonagall and I stood chatting by the name tag table. "How many, other than the Hogwarts elves, have shown up?"

"Only one," I said, gesturing to where Potter's house-elf, Kreacher, sat regarding the Hogwarts elves with something akin to condescension.

Granger's face fell. "None of the others came?"

"Now, now," Minerva said briskly, "this is a good start, you know. It takes time to change people's minds."

Hermione smiled wanly at the older woman's encouragement. "Thank you, Minerva."

One of the committee members wandered up just then to inquire about beginning the games. Granger and Weasley made complete idiots of themselves as they tried to demonstrate the three-legged race. I'm certain that the elves ended up convinced of what they already suspected that humans were insane after all as they watched the physical gyrations of the two as they tried to run with legs tied together. House-elves surely have better means of entertainment than the silly games we offered, but they tried I think simply because Harry Potter was present.

And when the picnic finally ended and the elves Disapparated, I saw Hermione Granger sink wearily down into a chair and cover her face with her hands. Ron Weasley went to comfort her, and I busied myself with cleaning up. I couldn't help but overhear their conversation, however.

"told you this was a barmy idea."

"It *wasn't* a barmy idea!"

"Well, the only elves that showed up were the ones that had to, weren't they? Although, I'll bet if Dobby was still alive, he would have been here."

"Thank you, *Ronald*. You've been very supportive as always."

Granger stormed off. I'm sure that Weasley truly had no idea why.

Eventually, the clean-up was complete, and I remembered the letter that I'd had in my pocket all day.

"I have something for you, Granger. It's from the Experimental Potions Laboratory at the New York Institute for Magical Research," I said. "I took the liberty of inquiring whether your mother might participate in their study for the new drug."

Hermione stared at me, her eyes widening. She snatched the parchment from me and scanned it rapidly.

"Are you serious? They'll take Mum for their study?" she gasped, looking for confirmation that she'd read correctly.

"Yes, as long as she has a wizarding sponsor who " I was cut off in mid-sentence by a slender, bushy-haired body hurling itself at me. Granger threw her arms around me and burst into tears.

"I I don't know how to to thank you," she wailed. "If if this works, it'll b-be so so wonderful!"

"If it works," I repeated, surprisingly uneager to pluck Granger off my person. Having a woman plastered to me was an experience I'd not encountered for a very long time, and I thought that I might as well enjoy it, however brief it might last. "You know full well that it's experimental."

"Yes, but it's a start, Severus!" Hermione let go of me and clasped her hands to her chest, her eyes shining with tears. The loss of the feel of her against me made me feel unexpectedly bereft. She had also called me by my given name, which gave me a bit of a start. It had been years since my days in the Hogwarts staff room when I was addressed daily in such a manner. "What do we need to do? You mentioned a wizarding sponsor?"

"Being as your mother is a Muggle, she obviously would not be eligible without a witch or wizard to sponsor her," I explained patiently. "In addition, I believe that she will have to go to New York for at least part of the study."

"Oh." Granger was thinking hard. "Well, Mum's still not working, of course, so that shouldn't be a problem. I'll have to see about getting some time off to go with her. How long do you suppose she'll need to be there?" she demanded, scanning the letter once more.

"You may write them back and find out the details. I've done my part."

The Experimental Potions Laboratory at the New York Institute for Magical Research was the source of at least a dozen innovations over the past twenty-five years. Their reputation was widespread, and it was for that reason that I had felt no compunction whatsoever in suggesting Lynette Granger for the program. The British wizarding world was still too busy congratulating itself on winning the war to make solid progress in its research.

A week later, I was surprised by a knock at my door, and when I opened it, I found Hermione Granger standing there.

"I hope I'm not intruding," she said by way of greeting.

"And if you are?" I posited.

"Then I apologize," Granger said, beaming. "May I come in?"

Wordlessly, I waved her into the tiny parlor. At once, Granger pulled a letter from the pocket of her robe and handed it to me. "It's from the EPL in New York. They want Mum there on the first of June."

"That's the week after next," I pointed out. "What did your parents have to say about it?"

"They're both willing," Hermione told me. "They trust me and you, being as you're the one who recommended her. I discussed the whole thing with Mum and Dad on Sunday, and they both agree that it's worth trying the new potion. Mum's better, of course, but it's driving her batty that she can't go back to the dental practice."

"How long will she need to stay there?"

"Two weeks, initially. Once Mum begins the program, the Institute will send the drug and the protocol to St. Mungo's, so at least she can have her monthly evaluation done here."

"I take it you're going with her?" I asked, gesturing for her to take a seat in a wingback chair.

Granger nodded. "Yes." At this, she frowned. "My supervisor wasn't terribly happy about giving me the time off just as they're working on the final drafts of the Elf Protection Act, but I have no choice. Mum can't go by herself."

I smiled politely. "I hope it works out for her."

"Me, too. It's terrible, seeing her unable to work in her profession and knowing that it's my fault."

"Stop it, Granger," I said in a low voice. "Put the guilt away, or it will eat you alive."

Hermione studied me, searching my face for what? Caring? Concern? It shocked me then to realize that I actually felt genuine concern for the Grangers.

"I owe you everything," she murmured.

"You owe me nothing," I began, unable to tear my eyes from her face.

Abruptly, Granger took two steps forward until she stood in front of me. Then she reached up to cradle my face in her hands and kissed me, gently, on the lips.

I don't know which of us looked the more startled when she stepped back again.

"I'd better go," she said uneasily, tucking the letter back in her pocket and moving toward the door again.

I trailed after her. "I assume that when you return, you'll have more work for me to do? I still have more than a hundred hours of this year's community service remaining."

"If this potion helps," Hermione murmured as she stepped outside, "you can consider this year's service completed."

The Fourth Year: The Reluctant Bride

Chapter 5 of 7

Cold feet. Hermione's wedding. And more.

The Fourth Year: The Reluctant Bride

I was becoming quite accustomed to the annual ham from the Derbyshire Witches' Defense League, just as the holidays weren't the holidays without my usual proposal of marriage from the Cornwall spinster. One of these days, I thought, I'd write back and put her out of her misery. Meanwhile, it was one of the small things that provided structure to my year.

On Boxing Day, the headlines in the *Daily Prophet* read: **Harry Potter to Marry School Sweetheart**, leading me to assume that it was a slow news day. I had already been alerted to the impending announcement anyway, as Potter had stated his intentions in the Christmas card he sent me. I skipped the article about the pending nuptials in search of what might actually pass for real news of the day. After finding little of substance to hold my interest, I was about to chuck the newspaper in the fireplace and head back downstairs to my lab when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door to find a bundled up, rosy-cheeked Hermione Granger standing in several inches of snow and bearing an enormous basket of holiday sweets.

"You needn't have," I said as she thrust the basket into my arms.

Hermione merely smiled and tucked her gloved hands into her pockets. "I know, but I wanted to. We wanted to."

"We?"

"It's from my parents and me."

"I see. Won't you come in?" Being as it was the holiday season, I thought I would be appropriately polite. Besides, it had been months since I last saw the girl woman, I told myself and I had unexpectedly missed seeing her. Evidently, helping Hermione to right the wrongs of the wizarding world had turned me soft in the head.

"Actually," Granger said, tapping a booted toe nervously, "I wondered if you were in the midst of anything. I'd like to take you to lunch."

"It's a bit early, isn't it? It's just after ten o'clock." The mere fact that I was considering Granger's offer instead of slamming the door in her face was a sign of how much I had changed over the last few years.

"Tea, then?"

There was a note of desperation in Hermione's voice that intrigued me. "I can take a break from what I was working on," I admitted. "Allow me to collect my cloak."

We went to Wands and Wizards, the Manchester area wizarding pub, and found a quiet table. The pub was not terribly busy at this hour; most people, it seemed, were busy returning unwanted Christmas items or recovering from the holiday. As I did the honors pouring the tea, Granger got right to the point.

"Harry and Ginny are engaged," she said. "He asked her yesterday and gave her a ring."

"Old news. Obviously you haven't read the headlines in today's *Prophet*."

"It's in the *Prophet*?" Hermione asked, her expression obviously glum.

"Surely you wouldn't expect news like that to get past the Skeeter woman. Tell me, is there a problem? Don't say that you have secretly lusted after Potter all these years."

"Don't be an arse," she snapped. "Of course I haven't."

"Then you look like this because you're genuinely pleased for him?"

Granger shot me a filthy glare. I'd been about to take a sip of tea; instead, I sighed and placed the cup back on the saucer. "Is this a guessing game?" I inquired. "If so, I'll need a few more clues as to why you seem to be so distressed."

Hermione opened her mouth, seemingly on the verge of retorting to my sarcastic comment. And then her shoulders slumped and she sagged backwards in her seat.

"Harry and Ginny are so happy, they're simply on cloud nine. Meanwhile, Ron and I are engaged, and I'm ready to bite his head off. I don't know what's wrong with me," she said, looking utterly miserable.

I glanced down at Granger's hand and saw, for the first time, that she was no longer wearing her hideous engagement ring. She caught me looking and turned bright red.

"All right, I admit it," she muttered. "I never wear that ugly thing unless I have to."

I smiled. I couldn't help myself and Granger scowled immediately.

"Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing at you. In fact, I rather applaud your move as a mark of good taste."

She took a deep breath. "Look, Severus, I need an objective view of things, and I know that you can provide that. Could you take a stab at it? Please?"

I hesitated, and she took the brief silence for agreement.

"Do you," Hermione asked, evidently choosing her words with great care, "think that I'm doing the right thing in marrying Ron? Is this just simple premarital jitters, or is there something more to it?"

I propped my elbow on the table and pinched the bridge of my nose, groaning inwardly.

"Granger, this is ridiculous. You've told me before that you always fancied Weasley and that it was perfectly natural that the two of you should get together some day, and now you're worried because the two of you aren't mooning over each other like two brainless idiots. You've been engaged for how long, now?"

"A year," she admitted.

"So obviously the first glow of romance is gone. Why not just set a date and have done with it?"

"We have, actually. The third of August."

"You don't say." The news took me by surprise. The fact that a firm date had been set caused a small gobble of dismay to lodge in my gut. I ignored it. "Then I would guess that you are suffering from premarital jitters, as you said."

"I suppose." Granger stared off into space, tapping the scarred wooden table of the booth with the fingers of one hand. She took a deep breath. "But could you possibly tell me what you, personally, think of my marrying Ron?"

"What I think is my business. Why should it make a difference to you what I think?"

Hermione was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry. I only thought that you would understand."

"Why in the name of Merlin's false teeth would you think I know anything about love and romance? I can hardly imagine that " I broke off, a chill trickling through me. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the memories I gave Potter, would it? Did he show them to you?" I demanded coldly.

Hermione's eyes widened. "No, he didn't, I swear it! But he told me some things... He told me that you really loved his mother. I thought... if you knew how that felt... maybe you could help me."

"That doesn't make me an expert," I retorted. "All I learned is this: that when you have something wonderful, you treat it with respect, because once it's gone, it's gone."

She studied me, looked about to say something, then shook her head. Granger sat up resolutely in her chair. "Thank you for listening. Why don't we talk about something else?"

"A good idea. How is your mother?" I asked at once, delighted to accommodate her wish.

"Better. I really do think so. I'll have to take her back to New York for a follow-up visit sometime in this spring, but I believe she might be able to start back to work this summer."

"That is good news, then. Will I be under your auspices again this year? Another picnic for the house-elves, or have we moved on to other abused creatures?"

She ignored the mockery. "I do want to try another picnic; I'm sure that the Hogwarts elves must have told others about it and what fun it was. Surely we'll have a better turnout this year."

The look of overeager, dedicated anticipation to The Cause was back on Granger's face, but at least it was a welcome change from the confused, anxious woman of moments earlier.

I learned soon enough that I would indeed be performing my community service under Granger's direction again this year. It came as no surprise that she remained intent on another house-elf picnic, given what she'd told me on Boxing Day. Whether this year's picnic would be any more successful than last year's remained to be seen.

Planning for the picnic began in earnest in March, but thankfully, I was not forced to sit in on the committee meetings again. Hermione was determined to see attendance increase, which meant soliciting any elves that were not allied with Hogwarts or Harry Potter. It therefore included soliciting the elves' owners, most of whom did not appreciate Granger's enlightened policy toward their servants. We sent out picnic invitations and followed them up with visits to make certain that the owners knew we had their best interests at heart. This meant assuring them that the Ministry had no intention of liberating elves or forcing the owners to start paying wages. The latter was a hard pill for Granger to swallow, yet she kept at it, certain that life for house-elves would improve somewhere down the road.

As for Hermione's state of mind as her wedding drew nearer, she seemed to have reconciled herself to the idea. The only reason I thought this was that she didn't mention the event at all, which from what little I knew of soon-to-be-wed females did not seem to be the norm. Being 'reconciled' to her fate was surely not the best way to begin married life, but again, I had no point of reference.

Meanwhile, Harry Potter's June wedding drew nearer. I received an invitation which was rather remarkable in itself but I had not quite made up my mind whether I would attend. Potter and I might be on something of a friendly basis, but I was still no one's idea of a man who belonged on the A-list of social invitees. I had yet to send my R.S.V.P. when a panicked Hermione Granger knocked at my door one May evening. She stormed inside the house before I had any chance to invite her inside.

"Don't tell me you're having second thought about your wedding again," I remarked, closing the door behind her.

"What? No, don't be silly." Granger slumped down on my sofa. "Severus, I need to ask you an enormous favor."

"A favor?" Surely she knew that I was almost never in the habit of doing favors for anyone.

"I just received word that my mother's appointment in New York is on June first. They won't change it. She has to be there, or she'll no longer be eligible for the experimental potion program. And she's been doing so well with the potion, I can't bear to think of her relapsing in some way!"

I must have looked mystified, for Hermione continued, wailing, "That's the day of Harry and Ginny's wedding. I can't miss Harry and Ginny's wedding, I just can't! I'm Ginny's maid of honor!"

"I see. And you want me to do what, exactly?" I already had an idea what the favor would be, and if so, the answer of whether to attend the wedding myself had just been answered for me.

Granger gulped, evidently steeling herself. "Is there any chance that you could escort my mother to New York?"

I was tempted to point out that I was invited to the wedding as well, but chose not to. Instead, I did some mental gymnastics to determine what potions I had contracted to prepare and when I had promised delivery. The truth was that I was rather interested in the idea of seeing the famed Experimental Potions Lab for myself. This was a golden opportunity.

"I believe that may be possible," I said.

"Really?" Disbelieving, Hermione stared blankly at me.

"I'll need to check my order list, but I think there's a good chance I might be able to help you."

"Severus..." For a change, Granger appeared almost at a loss for words. "That that would be wonderful," she stammered. "I can't thank you enough."

"Let me check first," I repeated, frowning at her.

But she was smiling as though she'd been given the world on a silver platter.

Three weeks later, I accompanied Lynette Granger to New York City for her twelve-month follow up at the Experimental Potions Laboratory. Mrs. Granger was a personable woman, the sort who had developed a knack for making pleasant small talk without nattering on about nothing. I presume it was a result of years of one-sided conversations with dental patients, who were rendered speechless by the presence of her hands in their mouths. At any rate, the long airplane trip passed relatively quickly.

While Mrs. Granger spent the first day of June being poked and prodded and tested by the Institute's researchers, I was given a VIP tour of the facilities. It didn't take long to see that St. Mungo's looked amateurish and backwards in comparison. I then passed a pleasant hour with Leonard Littlelark, Director of Research, and we drank coffee and compared notes on the latest developments in the potions field. By the time Mrs. Granger's testing was completed the following day, I'd been offered a job any time I chose to relocate across the Atlantic.

It was something to keep in mind. Although I was a decorated war hero, even though my small mail order potions business was doing well enough, no one was likely to forget that I had killed Albus Dumbledore. Whether at his request or a result of my own impulse, Dumbledore a wizarding icon if there ever was one was dead, and I would always be known as a man who was capable of murder if the circumstances were right.

Personally, there was little to keep me in Britain. Harry Potter and I shared a strange bond through his mother, but it was definitely not a real friendship. And I'd trod on too many toes during my time as Hogwarts Headmaster to expect my former colleagues to seek out my companionship. Oddly, the closest thing I had to a real friendship was my relationship with Hermione Granger, and as she was getting married, there was little likelihood that we would remain close after my community service sentence ended.

It wasn't as if I'd ruled out the idea of finding romance. Over the years, I'd made various half-hearted attempts at seeking out romantic relationships with women, but was always defeated by the fact that none were remotely comparable to Lily Evans. Ever since my after-death encounter with Lily, I no longer felt the burden of her ghost in my life, but that didn't change the fact that every woman I met seemed remarkably vapid. Muggle women were obsessed with learning if I'd been 'tested', whatever that meant. And every witch of legal age in Britain knew all about me and my sordid past, unless they'd been comatose for the past twenty-plus years. It appeared more than likely that I was not meant to live happily ever after with female companionship or possibly any companionship whatsoever.

Yes, I would definitely entertain the notion of leaving Britain.

Given last year's Elf Fest fiasco, I had low expectations for this year's event. Surprisingly, it went off much more smoothly. Ten new house-elves attended, which meant that all our work in recruiting guests and soothing their masters had not been in vain. The success of the picnic, Granger said, was proof that the wizarding world was changing. She was elated.

Although I spent several interminable days filing reports in a windowless room at the Ministry, the picnic basically marked the end of my community service for the year. One more year, I thought, and I would have completed my obligation to the Wizengamot. Another thought came, completely unbidden: that by that time I began my last year of community service, Hermione Granger would be Hermione Weasley.

She had informed me that I would be invited to the wedding, and in early July I received my invitation. The wedding would be held at the Burrow. The original plan, Granger had told me, was for her to be married in her parents' garden. The logistics involved in hiding a large assemblage of wizards proved to be rather difficult.

"Really?" I had smirked. "Or did you simply not care to have your wizarding guests show up in their bizarre versions of Muggle dress?"

From the expression on her face, I knew I'd hit rather close to the mark.

As they day of the wedding approached, I began to wonder if I should have given Granger my frank opinion last Boxing Day. Ronald Weasley was in no way her equal, with the exception that he was born to ride a broomstick, whereas Hermione was reputed to have blanched on the top rung of a ladder. And while they had shared seven years of adventures with Potter, I couldn't help but wonder what they had in common now.

The speculation left me thoroughly depressed. As one who knows what it's like to throw one's life away, I hated to see that happen to a woman as brilliant as Hermione Granger. And yet, what could I do? She had made her choice, had left the pre-wedding jitters behind, had set firmly on her course.

The August sky was a brilliant shade of blue when I arrived at the Burrow. I was directed to my seat by Percy Weasley and settled in for what should be a thoroughly depressing afternoon. Moments later, Minerva McGonagall was seated in the chair next to me.

"Severus! How are you? You look well."

"Fine, Minerva. How are things at Hogwarts?"

She waved a lace-encrusted arm in the air. "The usual. Getting prepared for the start of term." Minerva rightly assumed that I had no wish to discuss preparations for teaching and launched into a discussion of which Hogwarts graduates had married each other in years past, how she'd known all along that they were meant for each other, and that Hermione and Weasley were the latest proof of her perceptions. I was bored to tears.

All the while, an orchestra played soft music in the background. But when they broke into the wedding march, I found myself having a visceral reaction to what was about to take place. How dare Ron Weasley compromise the life of the brightest witch in a generation, a woman who deserved better than he ever dreamed of becoming? For that matter, how dare Hermione throw her life away like this? Meanwhile, the wedding guests were craning their necks to see the wedding party walk down the aisle, but I sat facing forward, scowling as I hadn't scowled in years.

The music continued eight more beats. Sixteen more beats. A full minute passed. The musicians began to cast quizzical, then nervous, glances at one another. The guests started to murmur.

"What in the world is going on?" Minerva whispered.

Just then, Martin Granger slipped inside the tent.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention for a moment? For those who don't know me, I'm Martin Granger, Hermione's father. She has asked me to give you her heartfelt apologies, but she and Ron have had last minute thoughts about what they're about to do. There will be no wedding today, but everyone is invited to stay and enjoy the wonderful Weasley hospitality."

Amid the moment of shocked silence, I began to chuckle. "Well done, Hermione," I murmured quietly, "well done!"

"What? What do you mean? Whatever could have gone wrong?" McGonagall turned to me, stunned.

"On the contrary, Minerva. I believe things have gone very right."

"What are you talking about, Severus?"

The crowd began to rise and shuffle about in nervous, noisy indecision, sparing me the need to provide an answer. Through the maze of bright hats and robes, one person struggled to move against the tide.

"Professor Snape?" Ginny Weasley Potter, clutching a small piece of parchment, finally pushed her way through to where Minerva and I were standing. "I have a message for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Potter." I took the parchment and opened it while McGonagall peppered Ginny with nosy questions.

I need to talk to you. My flat, 608 Glenwood Close, 6 p.m.

—HJG

The flat might have been charming if it had the appearance that somebody actually lived there. As it was, boxes were stacked everywhere, as the occupant was clearly intending to move out. When I followed Granger into her parlor, I passed at least ten boxes marked 'books'.

"Have a seat," she said, waving in the direction of a sofa.

I sat. Hermione dropped on the far end of the sofa. She was clad in Muggle running trousers, an oversized green tee-shirt that said *Magical Creatures: It's the Rights Thing to Do*, and a pair of fuzzy pink slippers. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, although the carefully controlled ringlets which sprang from it indicated an earlier, elaborate style gone awry. One look at her eyes told me that she had spent the day shedding quite a few tears.

"How are you?" I asked simply.

"Fine," she said, then added with a rather woeful smile, "really. Better than I look, I'm sure."

I hesitated for a moment, wondering how my next remark would be treated. "Full marks on your performance today, Miss Granger."

Granger's mouth twitched. "Things wouldn't have gotten to this point if you'd given me a straight answer back on Boxing Day, you know."

"And spare you the pleasure of reaching your own conclusions? Would you have listened to me then?"

"I would have listened," she insisted. "I might not have agreed with you, but I would have listened."

"What happened today to change your mind?"

Granger leaned back, pulling her legs up and hugging them to her. "I woke up," she said with a sigh. "I've been out of sorts all week, but I still thought it was nerves. Then today, I had just put on my wedding gown and Mum wanted to take my picture, and while she was fiddling with the camera, I happened to glance out the window. Ron and Harry were standing outside, sort of joking around, shoving each other, that sort of thing."

"Rather like a pair of First Years," I remarked.

"Exactly like a pair of First Years. And then Ron made this stupid, revolting comment." Hermione's lips pursed and her eyes darkened in anger. "He asked Harry if Ginny was pregnant yet even though he knows that Harry and Ginny aren't planning any children for a few years and said that the way Weasley men are, I'd probably be pregnant by tomorrow morning."

What did she expect? Ronald Weasley was an ignorant yokel. "A rather crude piece of male bravado," I commented.

"A *completely* crude piece of male bravado," Granger corrected fiercely. "And I thought, 'yes, I know the way Weasley men are, and I especially know the way Weasley boys are.' I was stupid to believe that Ron would ever develop even the tiniest shred of sensitivity. I love him, but certainly not enough to live with that for the rest of my life."

"I see." So she *did* love him. She still loved Weasley, and I was here strictly as an Agony Aunt. The good mood which had begun five hours ago with Martin Granger's announcement evaporated abruptly.

"Anyway," Hermione summed up, "I took the gown off, and then all hell broke loose."

"How did Weasley take the news?" I asked, hoping that he was suffering mightily.

"He thought I was joking. Can you believe that?" Granger's laugh echoed in the near-empty room. "But when I pointed out all my concerns, he suddenly decided that I wasn't good enough, and that he wasn't about to marry someone who was 'settling' for him."

"Not good enough? Please," I muttered, "that is hardly the case quite the opposite, as a matter of fact."

There was a faint glint of something in Granger's eyes. "Thank you for that," she said softly.

"And how has everyone else taken this turn of events?"

"About as you'd expect," Hermione said, sighing once more. "Arthur and Molly are completely bewildered, while my parents are surprised but totally supportive. They've always been that way when I first received my Hogwarts letter, when I came home each summer and told them what I'd been up to, even during the war... They've always trusted me, you see."

"That's because you're a mature, sensible young woman."

"As for Harry and Ginny... I don't know. They're confused, because right now they think they need to side with one of us, and they don't know who's right. In time, I think they'll see that Ron and I weren't that well-suited after all."

Her voice trailed off as she took a long look around the room.

"Meanwhile," Granger continued, "now I'm stuck with this."

"You'll be unpacking, I take it?"

"I can't. The place is already let to someone else. I need to be out by the fifteenth."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll bunk with my parents for a while if there's nothing else immediately available. I'm going to check both the *Times* and the weekend edition of the *Prophet* in the morning." Hermione shrugged. "I suppose this'll make the headlines in Rita Skeeter's column, won't it?"

"A falling-out between two war heroes? She'll be elated. It wouldn't surprise me if they have to do a second printing."

"Thank goodness. I wouldn't want dear Rita to run out of scandals." Granger's smile wavered, and she suddenly seemed afraid to meet my eyes. "Severus, there's something I wanted to tell you."

"Oh?" Out of nowhere, anticipation twisted in my gut. I had no idea where this was going, but I had a feeling that my world was about to be shaken to its very foundations.

And then cruelly, as if the gods had looked down at that very moment and laughed at the hope blossoming in my chest the doorbell rang.

"Damn it!" Hermione cried, hurling herself off the sofa and towards the door.

I could hear voices: Potter's, his wife's. I had no idea what either of them might say if they found me here, and I didn't intend to find out. It was time for me to go. After all, Hermione had invited me here strictly as a sounding board; it wasn't as if I actually had a place in her life.

While Hermione was welcoming her latest guests, I Disapparated to my home.

Fifth Year: Crow on the Menu

Chapter 6 of 7

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. And sometimes things work out anyway.

Fifth Year: Crow on the Menu

In the days following Hermione Granger's wedding-that-wasn't, I managed to convince myself that whatever else she had wanted to tell me was absolutely inconsequential. It couldn't possibly be anything along the lines of 'I've fallen in love with you, Severus'. That sort of thing only happened in Muggle movies or very poorly written wizarding romance stories or so I've been told. At any rate, when I failed to hear back from Granger in the day or two following the big brouhaha, I cursed myself for being an old fool and decided to get on with my life. I plunged back into my work, churning out more potions than ever and making plans to attend a Potions conference in Rome at the end of September.

The trip turned out to be quite satisfying. The weather was sunny and pleasant and the seminars, stimulating. I also managed to make the acquaintance of a female who was pretty, intellectual, and not completely repulsed by me. Celia Pazzesco was an Italian Potions Mistress ten years my senior who, for some reason, found me fascinating. I had no idea why she should think this, but I chose to enjoy it for the time being.

Celia and I spent a torrid weekend together at the end of the conference. She left me with no doubt that she would very much enjoy spending the occasional weekend in my company, and while I could not picture how Celia would fit into my life in the long run, the 'occasional weekend' was at least a diversion. It rather amused me to think that she saw me as a desirable younger man, and I wondered what Minerva McGonagall or any of the other gossipy old maids at Hogwarts would have said to that.

I thought of Granger frequently. She would doubtless find someone more worthy of her than Weasley, but after running the Hogwarts class lists through my mind more than once, I was quite certain that she would have to go abroad to find him. I then pictured Hermione at her own conference in Italy, encountering a handsome wizard named Angelo who would whisk her away to his villa on the Amalfi Coast, where they would debate house-elf rights until the wee hours of the morning when they weren't making mad, passionate love.

The idea not only failed to amuse me, it put me into a foul mood for the rest of the day.

At Christmastime, I again received a card from Hermione bearing the usual sentiments wishing me well, informing me that her mother was finally able to return to work, and expressing the hope that we could work together for my final year of my community service. She finished with a rather vague statement about how she hoped we would be able to talk soon. I ignored the comments, choosing instead to send a Christmas card to her parents.

I spent a pleasant Christmas and New Year's in Sorrento with Celia, and she promised to visit me in Britain whenever spring arrived. I pointed out that spring weather was rather more delayed in Britain than what she was accustomed to, and Celia laughed and called me her *carino Severo*, which I suppose was a good thing. When I returned to Britain, I discovered a note from Hermione in my mailbox: she had come to see me on Boxing Day and was sorry that she had missed me.

I ignored the note as well.

Meanwhile, the anniversary of the Dark Lord's defeat was fast approaching, five years since Voldemort was felled by Harry Potter and his own stupidity. Five years that I had managed to live a life under no one's dictates but my own and the Ministry of Magic and my yearly sentence, of course. In February I received my missive regarding my final year of community service. Surprisingly, it arrived in the form of a personal letter from Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Being as the British wizarding world couldn't allow the five year anniversary to go unrecognized, all manner of events were in the planning stages. They ranged from a somber Service of Remembrance to a festive Victory Ball. I would be working directly with the Victory Ball Planning Committee, Shacklebolt wrote. He went on to offer something of an apology because, Kingsley said, I was a war hero and therefore an honoree, and to be assigned to plan my own party was rather silly.

I owed him back at once, telling him that having spent the last three years canvassing werewolves door-to-door and picnicking with house-elves, planning my own party struck me as rather dignified.

Despite the fact that I hadn't seen Hermione Granger since that August night at her flat, I couldn't help but feel somewhat disappointed not to be in her charge once more. I would never have guessed that I would come to admire her intelligence and her sheer determination, especially the way she worked at social issues like a dog with a particularly good bone. Then there was that fire in Granger's eyes when she was enthused over something, the way she worried that lower lip when deep in thought, and the enchanting tendrils which escaped the upswept hairstyle she frequently wore to work...

I told myself to think of Celia and stop being an idiot.

March came in like a lion and therefore went out like the proverbial lamb. The last weekend of the month was prematurely warm and pleasant, and as a result, Celia decided that the weather was decent enough to make a spur-of-the-moment trip to Britain. She did not like the cold, and I suspected that if we were to continue our relationship, it would remain a commuter romance with me being primarily the one to do the commuting.

And the word 'romance' itself made me uneasy.

Celia and I slept together and talked potions together, but that was the extent of things. What we had was convenient sex and a common interest in magical potions, but it was not what I would call a romance. Something was missing, something I didn't want to investigate too closely, given my cynical nature. The lack of heartfelt involvement in our relationship only added to my belief that whatever romance truly was, it was not something that would happen to me.

When Celia arrived, she was quite keen to visit many of the wizarding sites in Britain. The final day of her visit, she insisted on seeing Hogsmeade, but I was less than enthused. It marked the first time I had been that far north since the final battle, and the mere idea that Hogwarts was just down the road gave me chills. For that reason, I was more than ready to leave as soon as Celia and I had done a few shops and eaten dinner at the Three Broomsticks. There were simply too many painful memories there and not enough pleasant ones to balance things out, I decided. We were just about to leave the wizarding pub when a pair of new customers walked in.

Hermione's escort, dinner partner, whatever, was a gray-haired man whom I judged to be a good ten years older than me. Had she indeed gone abroad to find a new lover, or was he merely someone ahead of my year at Hogwarts? And why on earth did she choose someone that old? I was so busy scowling that I nearly missed the introductions.

"Hello, Severus. How are you?" Clearly unnerved at the sight of me, Hermione recovered quickly, glancing from me to Celia and back again, the unspoken question hanging in the air.

"Quite well, thank you, Hermione." I forced a pleasant expression onto my face. "May I present Celia Pazzesco, a friend and professional colleague? Celia, Hermione Granger."

"How do you do, Celia?" Granger smiled and extended her hand.

"Pleased to meet you, dear," Celia said. She shook Hermione's hand and then, in a gesture of ownership that must be recognized by females the world around, slipped her arm through mine and hugged it to her side. I was seized by a sudden desire to remove her arm from my person and shove her bodily beneath the nearest table.

Celia's action did not go unnoticed. Hermione turned pink and sidled half a step closer to her escort.

"This is Cyril Hart. He's new in my department at the Ministry," she announced. "Cyril, this is Severus Snape."

"Hello," Cyril shook my hand vigorously. I wanted to hurl him underneath the nearest table along with Celia. "I've heard of you, of course, Severus. It's an honor to meet you war hero and all."

"Being a war hero is high overrated, I'm afraid."

"Yes, but what an honor. You'll always be able to look back on that with pride."

Exactly what part of my sordid past did the twit think I was proud of? The already-frozen smile on my face stiffened even further. The four of us exchanged a few more stilted remarks that no one truly meant, and then Celia and I left the Three Broomsticks behind.

We returned to my home in Spinner's End shortly thereafter. Celia had intended to depart for Italy that night, but she appeared in my parlor with her bag packed much sooner than I expected. Before I could ask why her reservation at the International Floo Port wasn't for another three hours she merely smiled and kissed me gently.

"My poor Severo," she said, placing a hand against my cheek. "How long have you been in love with her?"

Taken aback, I stared at Celia, my jaw dropping slightly. There was no need to ask who she meant by 'her' or how she had known this. Surely peacetime had softened my ability to school my features, or I would have seen the green light of the Dark Lord's displeasure early on.

"A while," I managed to say.

"I thought so. It was so very obvious. We Italians invented the amore, you know."

"Obviously we Brits have managed to get a grip on it as well. Miss Granger clearly has affection for her friend Cyril," I said in a pathetic display of self-defense. It was a good thing, I thought, that Celia and I hadn't been wildly in love with each other; she could be trying to hex me into oblivion at this very moment.

"Obviously not," Celia protested at once. "She cares for you, too."

I began, "I don't think "

"Severo!" Smiling, Celia thumped a hand against my chest. "You know so much about the external alchemy and nothing about the internal alchemy. I suggest you make your move before your Miss Granger decides that ugly Cyril is the best she can do, eh?"

I nodded dumbly. Celia kissed me once more, thanked me for the lovely dalliance we had shared, and Disapparated on the spot.

Two weeks passed since Celia Pazzesco Disapparated from my life with her parting words about Hermione, and during that time, I did nothing about following her advice. I told myself that I needed to determine whether my fascination with Granger which I'd managed to tamp down between work and sex with Celia was a result of Celia's observation or my own imaginings. And frankly, it seemed better to wait and do nothing than leap into the fray and make a fool of myself.

I went to my first committee meeting at the Ministry with rather low expectations. It was too much to ask, I suppose, to have been assigned to work on something less frivolous than a ball. I had simply been promoted from picnic planner to party planner the only distinction between the two, as near as I could tell, was that the Victory Ball would be held indoors and there would be no three-legged race.

The Victory Ball Planning Committee was scheduled to meet at ten. I arrived right on time and found that the conference room was already quite full, the huge round table which dominated the room already surrounded by at least a dozen witches and wizards. I made my way to one of the Perpetually-Brewing Teapots stations that could be found in almost every room at the Ministry, poured myself a cuppa, and then found a seat. I was just taking my first sip of tea when I glanced up and discovered Hermione Granger's brown eyes regarding me from across the wide conference table.

I've heard that clichéd phrase 'my heart leapt at the sight of him or her' many times. As any imbecile knows, hearts do not leap. Still, when I saw Granger sitting there, I wouldn't have been surprised to find my heart dancing a jig in the middle of the enormous wooden table had my flesh and bone not been there to restrain it.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," I said, nodding my head.

She didn't speak, only studied me with something akin to curiosity before turning away to focus her attention on the chairman.

I didn't have time to speculate on her strange behaviour. The chairman was already calling the meeting to order, acknowledging my presence and welcoming me to the planning committee.

That done, I amused myself during the meeting by mentally calculating the number of minutes in two hundred hours twelve thousand, actually until my community service sentence was completed. I also spent the time discreetly scrutinizing Granger, an easy task since she seemed disinclined to look in my direction. I had forgotten just how attractive the woman was when she was totally absorbed and involved in what she was doing. By the end of the hour I truly had no idea what was discussed, because I had paid absolutely no attention whatsoever.

As soon as the meeting ended, I tried to corner Granger to talk to her. Unfortunately, a number of the committee members had plans to corner me, and the last I saw of Hermione was her bushy hair disappearing through the doorway while old Hamish MacFarlan talked my arm off about a special Quidditch event to be held as part of the anniversary celebration. It took a good ten minutes to extricate myself from the conversation and make my way to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I found Hermione standing in her cubicle with her back to me, her arms overflowing with parchments.

"Hello, Hermione," I said quietly.

Granger spun around at once, the parchments spilling willy-nilly all over the floor. As she bent down to pick them up, I crouched down to help.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to startle you," I said.

"I should know better than to try to carry that many parchments." Hermione glanced up at me. "How are you, Severus?"

I paused in the midst of picking up parchment and looked into her brown eyes. They were not, I realized, quite as warm as usual. "I am well. And you?"

"Fine."

"How is your job going?"

"Fine, thank you."

Unless I was very much mistaken, there was a definite chill in the air.

"I was surprised to see you at the Three Broomsticks," I said, picking up one last parchment and then climbing to my feet.

"Really? Why should that surprise you?" Granger, already standing, turned to dump the parchments onto her desk. "I've been known to eat before."

Ouch. The atmosphere was worse than chilly; it was downright arctic.

"Is there something wrong?" I probed carefully.

"Wrong? I don't know, Severus, you tell me."

"I don't know what you're getting at."

"No?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Why were you nice enough to send a Christmas card to my parents, yet I didn't rate a single 'happy Christmas' from you? And then I came to see you on Boxing Day, and you weren't there."

"I was out of the country," I began.

"I left you a note," Hermione continued coldly, "yet you didn't care to acknowledge it."

Well, one thing was certainly clear: Celia was dead wrong. Obviously, Hermione Granger could not care less about me.

"You're correct," I admitted with some reluctance. "That was not the best choice I could have made."

"And why did you leave my flat last August? I needed to tell you something, and when I came back, you were gone!"

There was an almost palpable hurt in Granger's voice. I tried to explain at least partially what I'd been thinking that day.

"You had company," I said. "Potter and his wife. Surely you did not want them to find me there."

"Why not? You're my friend!"

"Yes, well, that's the problem, isn't it?" I snapped. *I don't want to be your friend, Granger. I want to be so much more...*

Hermione stared at me, and I could almost see her brain working furiously. I did not want to get into this discussion in front of an entire department of Ministry lackeys. Already, I knew eyes would be peering around cubicle walls and ears would be straining to hear.

As if on cue, Cyril Hart stuck his head around the wall of the cubicle. "Hermione, do you have a mo? Oh, hello, Severus. Nice to see you again."

Damn it to Merlin's piss-pot and back! Were we never to have a complete conversation without interruptions?

"Bugger off," I snarled in Cyril's direction. Sweet Merlin, it felt good to have some of the old anger surging through my veins again! When I turned back, Hermione was looking at me with a curious expression on her face. Exasperated, I demanded, "Is there somewhere more private to talk in this ridiculous place?"

"Later, Cyril," Hermione said to her coworker, her eyes still fixed on me. She beckoned to me to follow her as she led the way to an actual office with four walls and a door. She waved me inside, then closed the door behind her.

"Now then," she said carefully and deliberately, "what is the problem with you being my friend, Severus?"

It was beginning to dawn on me, now that the flash of fury was dying down, that I was mucking this up big time.

"Just tell me," I urged, my voice low, "why you asked me to meet you at your flat last summer. The evening of your wedding."

"To explain why I couldn't marry Ron," Hermione began.

"You told me why. He behaved abominably that day. But there was something else you wanted to tell me," I reminded her.

Granger gave me a withering glare before retorting, "Yes, there was. What I wanted to say was that I couldn't marry Ron because I was in love with someone else. Evidently, however, I was sadly mistaken!"

There was a ringing silence in the room.

"Are you certain that you were mistaken?" I breathed finally.

She looked at me, studying me, calculating. "Tell me about Celia."

My heart sank slightly. "I met Celia in Italy last September at a Potions Conference."

"And?"

"And we had a brief fling and there was nothing more to it than that."

"Really?" Granger was trembling now and trying hard not to show it.

"Really."

"Why didn't you get back in touch with me? Or answer my Christmas card or my note?" The hurt in Hermione's voice was quite clear.

"I was afraid," I blurted honestly. "I was afraid that you saw me as nothing more than an Agony Aunt or a kindly uncle figure, or or something."

"A kindly uncle figure?" Granger giggled now.

"Or something," I repeated, scowling, annoyed at having to bare my soul like this. Discussing my feelings did not come naturally to me, nor was it ever likely to. "So tell me there are no Potters at the door now, I presume you said you couldn't marry Weasley because you were in love with somebody else. Who?"

Time slowed to an absolute crawl. It seemed to take years before Hermione ventured an answer.

"You," she whispered. "You."

And suddenly, I was engulfing Hermione Granger in my arms and the world was totally, utterly transformed. I closed my eyes, breathing in the scent of her wonderful, ridiculous hair.

"It will not be easy," I murmured finally, "to be involved with me. There are still people who loathe me and wish me dead which likely include the Weasleys, once they find out."

Hermione lifted her face to gaze at me. "Don't sell them short. They're reasonable people."

"Does it matter to you that I am twenty years older than you?" It was one of the reasons I had believed for months now that Granger couldn't possibly have fallen for me.

A smile quirked the corners of her mouth. "Does it matter to you that I was once your student?"

I tried again.

"Does it matter to you that I used to be a Death Eater?" Surely Granger could not ignore that dark aspect of my life.

Another wry smile. "Does it matter to you that I'm good friends with Harry Potter?"

I groaned aloud. "Well, there you have me. Potter and I have maintained a truce for five years now, but I don't know that his tolerance of me extends to this."

"Don't sell Harry short either," Hermione murmured. "He's left a lot of his anger behind, just as you have."

"Hmph," I said to this dissection of my character, although I was smiling. "Will you forgive my deplorable lack of manners these past eight months? It was self-defense, I assure you."

"You're forgiven."

The expression on Hermione's face was one of pure joy. She seemed lit from within, and suddenly I wondered what all the fuss had been about. Obviously being in love was not nearly as difficult as I'd always believed.

"I was wondering," she went on, her cheeks a most becoming shade of pink, "if you possibly escort me to the Victory Ball? Cyril keeps asking, and I keep putting him off."

"I would be honored and delighted to escort you to the Victory Ball, as well as anyplace in the known world that you would wish to go," I declared lightly.

"Excellent. And do you have any plans for dinner tonight?"

My mouth was dry as I whispered, "All my plans now include you, Hermione Granger for the rest of the day, the rest of the month, the rest of my life."

There was no need to say more. I placed a warm hand against Hermione's face and pressed my lips to hers.

VICTORY BALL SHOCKER: GRANGER AND SNAPE ENGAGED!

Although heroes Severus Snape (former Hogwarts Potions master and double-agent during the war) and Hermione Granger (close friend to Harry Potter and ex-fiancée of Ronald Weasley) have been frequently seen in each other's company these past two months, no one knew the extent of their involvement until last night. The two were spotted dancing cheek to cheek most of the evening at the Victory Ball. Not only were the two virtually inseparable, Miss Granger was sporting a beautiful diamond solitaire ring on her left hand. No official announcement has been made yet, but it seems that another wedding is in the offing! Let's hope that Miss Granger does not leave Mr. Snape at the altar as she did with Mr. Weasley!

--Rita Skeeter, your On-the-Spot News Hound

Epilogue: Just Desserts, or Canon is Fine if You Like That Sort of Thing

Chapter 7 of 7

What the future holds...

Epilogue: Just Desserts, or Canon is Fine if You Like That Sort of Thing

Concerned that he would hear about her new love interest from other sources, Hermione told Ronald Weasley about us the day after our meeting at the Ministry. She reported that he took it rather poorly, even though he had long since gotten over their broken engagement and was seeing someone new.

"Just how many times did he refer to me as a 'greasy git'?" I asked idly, not surprised in the least that Weasley would react to the news that way.

"Twice," Hermione admitted, and I decided that Weasley was not nearly as upset as she believed. I had expected at least ten "greasy gits" and "black bats," along with a few choice slurs on my parentage.

The remaining Weasleys were more charitable, which was generous considering how many years they'd expected Hermione to become a part of their family. Potter, surprisingly, was not terribly shocked by Hermione's news.

"I never thought I'd say this," he admitted to me later, "but you two actually suit each other in a weird way."

"Thank you, I think," I retorted dryly.

Potter grinned. "It's good, though. Hermione seems genuinely happy, and that's what counts."

"Of course."

"However..."

I steeled myself. "However?" I echoed cautiously.

"I'm an Auror, Severus. If I hear that you've so much as frowned at Hermione the wrong way, I'll have your arse in Azkaban before you can even think about picking up your wand. Got it?"

Potter was still grinning, but I had a feeling that his warning wasn't strictly humorous.

"Got it."

The wedding was small. Besides the Ministry official, there were only two guests and two parents, along with the bride and groom. As Hermione had initially wished, we were wed in her parents' garden and attended by Harry and Ginny Potter. When the three minute ceremony was finished, Martin Granger opened a bottle of champagne and the six of us – the Ministry official declining, saying that he needed to be off as he had season tickets to the Kenmare Kestrels – toasted the new union as well as each other.

Then we were off to America, along with my in-laws. Martin joked that he'd never heard of a newly married couple heading off on a honeymoon with in-laws in tow, but Lynette Granger's yearly visit to the EPL was due, and Hermione and I had decided that we might as well combine our honeymoon with her mother's need for a wizarding chaperone. We deliberately located ourselves on different floors at the same hotel, however; I'm sure that Hermione's parents had no wish to speculate on what was going on behind the door of an adjoining room, nor did the idea appeal to Hermione or me. As it turned out, we saw very little of the Grangers during our week in New York. Hermione and I had our agenda and Martin and Lynette had theirs, so the whole idea of traveling with in-laws was less bizarre than it had first appeared.

While in New York, I admitted to my new wife that I'd previously been offered a job in the States and was prepared to accept it if our relationship hadn't worked out. Hermione regarded me curiously.

"You were interested in working at the EPL?"

"I thought it would be quite stimulating, yes."

She furrowed her brow, deep in thought. "I never thought I'd leave Britain, but if it's something you would really like to do, I'd be willing to consider it."

That caught me by surprise. "But what about your agenda to correct the social ills of British wizardry?"

Hermione shrugged. "It might be a losing battle, Severus. I don't know. Change is so slow."

I tilted her chin up so that our eyes met. "You are a Gryffindor, Hermione Granger-Snape. You do not run from a challenge."

She smiled impishly at me. "Does this mean that you're willing to help out at the Elf-Fest next month?"

I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach that had nothing to do with the fact that we were in a rapidly-descending lift in the Empire State Building.

"But my community service sentence is over," I said faintly.

"But I know you'd like to help me out, wouldn't you?"

I took one look at Hermione's wide brown eyes and innocent expression and knew that I was utterly, totally lost. I would be entertaining and empowering house-elves for the rest of my natural life.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Author's Note:

First, I have to thank my beta, Keladry Lupin, for cheering me on and finding all the missing commas.

Believe it or not, this started out as an angst fic about Post-Traumatic Stress. Because I was depressing myself and getting absolutely nowhere, I gave up and went back to the romantic comedy genre which seems to be my natural inclination.

This story was my first attempt to link Severus with a younger Hermione, a change from my usual M.O. By the end, Hermione is twenty-three – and that's about as low as I can go!

I felt strongly that Severus had to get rid of some of the guilt and anger in order to move on, and that prompted the Prologue and his encounter with Lily and Albus. My intent was to show a Severus Snape that was a bit kinder and gentler as a result of that experience, but could still take great pleasure in slinging his sarcastic barbs hither and yon (whether aloud or simply in thought). There was the very real possibility, however, of Severus sliding out of character due to his 'transformation,' and I hope I succeeded in avoiding that heinous pitfall.

I also thought it necessary for Severus and Hermione to take things rather slowly – hence the five year time frame. One of the reviewers put it best, calling it a 'long, slow slide into love.' It's almost like love has to sneak up on the two of them to stand a chance; given how intelligent they are, they'd otherwise spot it a mile off and throw up defenses that would take years and years to abolish. I had to fool them.

While I knew from the beginning that canon Ron and Hermione were destined for each other (I could just hear Ron telling his child one day that "the first time I met your Mum, she told me I had dirt on my nose"), I maintain that they're really not that well-suited. And I know that if you're reading this, you probably agree with me. My motto is

'Canon is fine if you like that sort of thing...'

Thank you all for reading and reviewing; believe me when I say it makes my day to discover that someone took the time to actually read something I wrote and remark favorably on it.

And by the way – I'm not making a cent off this, and the word 'lexicon' is to be found nowhere in this entire story, so a lawsuit would be really, really a bad idea...