

Quite Enchanting

by selinabl

The Golden Trio celebrates its graduation. Dumbledore has one of his special ideas for the ball, while his Potions master is not happy at all that his participation is highly expected; and soon certain secrets will be revealed. A little piece of fluff.

Just One Dance

Chapter 1 of 5

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Author's Note:

I would like to point out that "Quite Enchanting" has developed from a fluffy little plot bunny that came to my rescue and ran away with me while I was working on a darker story.

So, dear reader, please lean back and enjoy this little (fairy) tale like a cup of hot chocolate, since it has the same intention, to warm the soul and make you smile.

My gratitude belongs to my beta Jadey and to AnnieTalbot for lending this little tale a picky eye and her marvelous flow skills. Thank you, ladies! I would be lost without you :-)

There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning...

The war had taken its toll. The Potions master's eyes wandered across the Great Hall. At each glamorously decorated table, in every House, a familiar face was missing. Death had been blind in its judgement; like the Dementors, it did not possess the ability to distinguish between good and evil.

Severus Snape frowned and was not pulled from his dark thoughts until the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, rose and cleared his throat to deliver the opening speech of this year's graduation ball. The Head of Slytherin watched his true and only master carefully from the corner of his eye.

When did you get so old, my friend?

Since Potter had finally defeated the Dark Lord and the Aurors were hunting down the last Death Eaters, the desperate tension of war had slowly started to drain away from Albus Dumbledore. But it seemed to Severus as if the tension was taking a large amount of the headmaster's vitality away with it.

"... and so I see the final year graduate with intense joy. Today you will leave Hogwarts not only to find your own place in the wizarding world as adults; you will have the chance to start your life as adults in a world without the threat of Voldemort's return looming over it. Take this chance; I know you will. And now, let the celebrations begin."

Thundering applause arose as the headmaster spoke his final words. Observant as always, Severus caught sight of Minerva McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey dabbing their wet eyes. Yes, it was even special to him to see this year leave, to see his godson graduate from Hogwarts.

While the applause was continuing, the Head of Slytherin spotted Draco Malfoy walk across the dance floor of the Great Hall towards Hogwarts' Head Girl, Hermione Granger. She was standing once again beside Weasley and Potter, but the Boy-Who-Survived was completely absorbed in smiling at the young Weasley girl next to him. Draco bowed slightly before leading Granger to the dance floor. It was traditional that the Head Girl and Head Boy performed the opening dance at the graduation ball, and it filled Severus with pride and happiness, seeing that both of them had survived the war unscathed. It had somehow become his entirely private assignment to see to that in these last months.

When the musicians started to play, under the animated supervision of Filius Flitwick as always, Minerva McGonagall stepped up next to him and nudged him softly.

"Ready for your greatest challenge, Severus?" she murmured conspiratorially, causing the wizard to roll his eyes in return.

"I can still not believe that I agreed to this nonsense," he complained quietly.

"Oh dear, it won't hurt you to dance a little bit."

Severus snorted soundly. Minerva was an enthusiastic dancer, even though nobody would have expected that at first sight. But he himself didn't share her enthusiasm. In fact, he had always refused to dance at school celebrations, although a dancing class had certainly been part of his Slytherin education. He was not the person to participate voluntarily in such ridiculous exhibits.

This whole madness had been entirely Albus' idea. His mentor had been besotted by the thought that since the two Head Students were from formerly opposing Houses, it would be a wonderful symbol of unity if, after the war, Draco and Granger each asked the other Head of House to dance.

That old sentimental fool, Severus thought fondly. Certainly the Potions master had protested, but Albus had insisted on it. As always.

Through the curtains of his raven hair, Severus observed Draco and Granger float across the dance floor. His godson did his utmost to give the watching student body an outstanding performance.

Excellent, show these dunderheads what the good old Slytherin House tradition includes.

Granger was smiling at the young Slytherin while he whirled her around. She was quite enchanting when she smiled, captivating everyone around her. It was something that Severus had witnessed many times during Order meetings or at the joint dinners at Grimmauld Place, although he hadn't been able to really appreciate it with the threat of the Dark Lord looming over them all.

Standing at the edge of the dance floor, waiting for the dance to end, Severus took his opportunity to regard the young woman more closely. She had grown up in body and features, although quite before her time. It was something that war did to children, and he had seen it far too often. Her formerly bushy hair was loosely pinned to the back of her head, soft curls framing her face. Granger was no classic beauty, by any means. She was too small, her figure too slightly curved and her features too plain, but there was something very special about this young woman, Snape had to admit. Her spirited eyes and that enchanting smile gave her a certain underlying beauty that outshone the girls next to her.

"Has my precious girl caught your eye, Severus?" the amused whisper of his Transfiguration colleague asked next to his ear.

"You should really spend less time with Trelawney if you are already starting to believe you have the second sight, Minerva," the Potions master sneered under his breath. But he was solely rewarded with deep Scottish laughter and a friendly clap on the back.

"You don't say, Severus, you don't say."

Minerva's laughter died down as the music did; other couples joined the dance floor while he could see his godson and Granger moving towards them. Severus straightened himself unconsciously while his colleague was still wiping away her tears of mirth.

"Professor McGonagall, Uncle. Good evening," Draco greeted them, before performing another slight bow and asking his former Transfiguration teacher to dance, leaving his Head of House finally alone with Hermione Granger.

Damn you, Albus!

He regarded the witch intently as she drew closer to him. Her cheeks were slightly coloured from the dance, but her dark lilac dress still accentuated the elegant paleness of her skin. If Granger felt any nervousness at having to dance with the feared Potions master of Hogwarts, she was not showing it.

How Gryffindor, Miss Granger.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she addressed him politely, a smile caressing the corners of her mouth.

"Good evening to you, too, Miss Granger." He met her eyes, taking a slight bow as Draco had done before.

She answered that ancient fashion with a slight curtsy of her own, raising her glance to him.

"May I have this dance, Professor?" she asked, a sincere kindness in her voice.

"With pleasure, Miss Granger," he replied, his voice lacking its usual mocking tone.

To his own surprise, he had really meant what he had said to his former student. Still astonished by his own words, Severus offered her his hand.

"Shall we?"

Friendly Fire

Chapter 2 of 5

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of fluff.

The young woman nodded and took his hand, giving him another one of those smashing smiles, while the musing wizard tried to ignore how pleasant her small palm felt to his skin. As he led her onto the dance floor, the Potions master could feel far too many eyes fixed on them for his liking, and he swore that one pair of eyes was twinkling quite smugly.

Finally got your wish, didn't you, Albus?

Severus brushed the thought away as they reached the middle of the ballroom. Now he had to focus on the task at hand, dancing with Granger. A slight uneasiness had gripped him, and like Draco, he did not plan on showing any shortcomings in this challenge, as Minerva had put it. The Head of Slytherin had a reputation to uphold. He positioned himself to face Granger and searched her eyes for permission before placing his right hand on her waist. The orchestra was playing a slow waltz; it was a task he could accomplish quite well.

"Ready, Miss Granger?" he asked, keeping his voice serene.

"Ready when you are, Professor," she replied encouragingly, waiting for him to take the lead.

Only seconds later they were surrounded by cheerful couples, dancing in step to the music and holding each other's gaze, while Severus was pleased how easily his initial nervousness had died down.

"You are an excellent dancer, Professor," Granger remarked kindly in a polite attempt to start a conversation. "Although I have never seen you dancing before, sir."

"Generally I prefer not to participate in that kind of sentimental nonsense, Miss Granger."

His stiff answer earned him a soft "Oh!" from her. Granger's smile wavered for a mere moment.

You know how to kill a mood, Snape.

"In that case, I am glad you did today, Professor," she confessed, playing down his offending remark.

"Considering the doubtful glances of your so-called friends, I dare say that not everybody in this room shares your sentiment, Miss Granger." The Potions master directed her attention on to the murderous looks Potter and Weasley were giving them. "They seem to fear that I might snatch Hogwarts' Head Girl and lock her up in the dungeons," he remarked, sneering.

"If you dare, I feel entirely up to cooperating with you, sir. I think their faces would be priceless." Her eyes sparkled with merriment as she spoke. The little minx was teasing him outrageously.

Very well then, two can play that game.

"Your consent in this case is a quite intriguing insight, Miss Granger. I dare say, it reveals a multitude of possibilities that are worthy of consideration, don't you agree?" he replied in a deep voice. And while his Potions master persona was fixing her gaze playful with his dark eyes, Severus' mind was trying hard to neglect the strange sensation that spread in his stomach as her cheeks flushed at his words.

"My, just ignore them, please," she continued in a more earnest tone, one that could not hide her bashfulness. "I don't think they will ever grow up."

"As milady wishes," he replied coolly as he initiated a half-twist to hide the smirk that was twitching in the corners of his mouth.

As they danced with her back slightly resting against his chest, he became aware of how the closeness and the warmth of the witch in his arms was already weakening his emotional lines of defence. He was playing with fire right now.

Nonsense.

Defying his inner voice of reason, Severus decided to continue their spirited banter, bringing his lips next to her ear.

"Although I have to admit, Miss Granger, it has crossed my mind to snatch you away tonight. You are quite enticing this evening."

The wizard turned her swiftly to face him again, preying on her reaction at his words. Brown eyes were holding black ones again, showing the witch's surprise as well as a sort of deep affection he hadn't seen there before. The pleasant warmth that welled up in his chest at the sight was unsettling.

However, all too soon an indignant exclamation from the other side of the dance floor ended the moment, and their joint movements came to an abrupt halt.

"Mr Malfoy! Stop it!" Severus and the Gryffindor witch exchanged a curious glance before directing their eyes to the scene next to them.

A slightly dishevelled Minerva McGonagall was scolding a certain young Slytherin, one hand on her hip. "As I told you before, you cannot twist and twirl me like one of those young witches. Please try to remember that, Mr Malfoy."

"I apologise, Professor." Draco's dismay was plainly audible in his voice.

Everybody in the Great Hall had stopped in their tracks before breaking out into laughter. Even Severus couldn't restrain a deep and heartfelt laugh at the hilarious sight his colleague and godson made.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I suggest everybody pick up again what they were doing before being interrupted by this little interlude. Filius, please go on." He could hear Albus' voice announce from the other side of the hall.

The music started anew as Severus met Hermione Granger's eye.

"May I?" he asked, offering his hand to her to continue their dance, his amusement still glistening in his eyes.

"Only if you promise to twist and twirl me, sir," she replied playfully, giving him an inviting smile that caused the strange sensation in his stomach to return again.

"Do not dare me, my dear Miss Granger, do not dare me," he admonished her quietly.

Momentarily the witch blinked, puzzled at his words, before her large brown eyes regarded him thoughtfully. The Potions master cursed inwardly — so much for his miserable attempt to push her out of his comfort zone again.

"You should do that more often," Granger stated out of the blue, evidently trying to change the subject of their conversation.

"Pardon?"

"Laugh. You should laugh more often; it becomes you and is thoroughly catching," she said softly, averting her eyes as she spoke.

This forthright suggestion stunned him finally into speechlessness. Nobody had ever dared to propose such a thing to the feared Potions master.

As the silence stretched between them, he took the chance to pull the young witch in his arms slightly closer to him, so she was still not able to face him again after that display of particular bravery.

Gryffindor's precious one, indeed

She had charmed him in mere minutes, and Severus marvelled at the woman he was holding.

Her head was resting slightly against his shoulder now, so he was able to savour the scent of almond and vanilla in her hair; her left hand lay on his chest, while the small right one was fitting far too well into his palm. And the sparkle that had been glittering in her eyes as she challenged him earlier had given him a pleasant feeling somewhere deep down in his soul, making his heart ache.

Had her eyes always sparkled that way?

"Professor Snape!" an unwelcome voice from far away came to cut through his thoughts. "Professor, would you mind if I cut in? *Weasley*. The boy was standing next to him, looking at him impatiently.

"Not at all, Mr Weasley," the Potions master replied reluctantly. As he realized the sight they both had made, Severus stepped away, instantly letting go of Hermione's right hand as if he had been burned.

You are a lecherous old fool, Snape.

"Miss Granger." He bowed once again and swept away before she could respond, an unknown feeling of loss haunting him.

Oblivious to his surroundings as he left, Severus failed to notice a certain young man with flaming red hair who had been abandoned in the middle of the dance floor and was shaking his head in disbelief.

Of Punch and Hippogriffs

Chapter 3 of 5

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The Potions master's mood darkened as he noted the curious glances the students were giving him. He had to get away from this ridiculous spectacle. His responsibilities for the evening were more than fulfilled.

"Severus, my boy," Albus greeted him, just as he had turned to leave the Great Hall, placing one hand on his upper arm. "As I see, already on your way back to the dungeons."

Stating the obvious once again, old man.

"I don't think that I can allow that, son. We haven't even toasted your newfound freedom yet."

So much for freedom.

Severus rolled his eyes while the headmaster escorted him kindly but decisively back to the punch bar. "Albus, you know that I don't even like this silly concoction for youths."

"My dear boy, that's nothing that cannot be changed. Remember, I didn't even like sherbet lemons at first."

Severus gave the aged wizard a dramatically pained look, which earned him a slight chuckle.

I am doomed.

When they arrived at the punch bar, they were welcomed by the assembled staff members. "Has your little attempt to escape our company been discovered, Severus?" Rolanda Hooch asked him, leering, as she handed him a glass of punch.

"I would have expected as well a little bit more sneakiness from our master spy, don't you think, Rolanda?" Minerva added, chuckling. Yes, he was really doomed.

The evening was slowly proceeding as Severus nursed his second glass of punch, carefully avoiding participating in the animated chatter of his colleagues, considering the advantages of getting drunk and trying to forget his ridiculous display of sentimentalism in front of the student body. Precisely as he decided that getting drunk was his best choice, he spotted Hermione Granger in the crowd. Hogwarts' Head Girl was standing in a corner of the Great Hall, apparently in a kind of row with Weasley.

Nothing of my concern, he thought, taking another sip of his punch and unconsciously squeezing and relaxing his left hand, the hand that had held onto hers. But the Potions master failed miserably at his attempt to take his eyes off the scene that played out before him.

The Weasley boy must have said something to upset the witch, because only moments later Granger slapped him in the face and ran from the Hall. Weasley followed her shortly afterwards, although the Boy-Who-Lived and his girlfriend tried to stop him.

Interesting.

Maybe now was the time to clink glasses with his godson, who was also carefully observing the nearby drama. Catching Draco's eye across the room, he approached the young man with a few fast steps, handing him a glass of punch.

"Hello, Uncle," Draco greeted him, taking the punch his Head of House offered him.

"To your graduation." The Potions master raised his glass to the young Slytherin.

"To our shared freedom." They toasted each other, their respect for one another plainly visible.

"I think it should interest you that this little quarrel between Weasel and Hermione concerns you, Uncle," Draco informed him quietly while he took his first sip of the punch, his Slytherin traits not disappointing his Head of House.

"Me?" Severus raised his left eyebrow. "Care to elaborate, godson?"

"Weasel didn't take seeing you both dancing together so well. Lavender Brown told me earlier that it was rumoured that he had planned to finally confess his feelings for Hermione to her tonight, that cretin," Draco said, disgusted.

The former spy kept an unimpressed expression, likewise sipping some of his punch and rubbing his chest unconsciously with his left hand.

"He was jealous, and when he called you a greasy git, she told him to take it back, which Weasel surely did not."

"And that's why she slapped him?" his Head of House inquired sceptically, taking another sip of punch.

"No." The young Slytherin smirked knowingly. "That happened when Weasel announced that traitors like you should rot in Azkaban."

Severus closed his eyes momentary at the malicious words. Weasley was not the first person to have that wish. He had barely escaped Scrimgeour's claws after the final battle.

"But be assured, Uncle, I think her words have slapped him more than her hand did," Draco continued nonchalantly while toasting smugly to Longbottom on the other side room. The Gryffindor had finally managed to kiss the Lovegood girl and had been doing so for the last ten minutes.

"Hermione was furious. She informed him rather bluntly that she had never met a more honourable and brave man than you are. Furthermore, should she ever have to decide between the two of you as to who should be the father of her children, it would..." Draco paused dramatically and gave his godfather a rather self-satisfied grin, "...it would be you, Uncle."

The Potions master's glass of punch slipped through his gifted fingers, hitting the floor with a small crack.

Casting a silent *Evanescio*, Draco was quite pleased with himself.

For the first time in his life, his godfather looked as if he had been overrun by a Hippogriff.

Reviews are *love* :o)

Nomen Est Omen

Chapter 4 of 5

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Get out. He needed to get out of this hall. Beneath his composed surface, the world of Severus Snape was in an uproar.

"I thank you for your interesting report, Draco, but you must excuse me now," he declared, keeping his voice bare of any emotions. "I have already overstayed my time at this celebration and I have urgent matters at hand in the dungeons. Good night, son."

Without awaiting the young man's response, the Potions master turned on his heels, finally leaving the Great Hall in a rush and heading for his quarters. Not even Albus Dumbledore would have been able to stop him now.

"Urgent matters, indeed," Draco chuckled quietly to himself. A rapturous smile graced his aristocratic features when he spotted a gorgeous Ravenclaw girl in the crowd.

"Time to conquer new territories, it seems."

And while his bewildered godfather was on his way to the dungeons, the young Slytherin was already heading to capture a second glass of punch, seizing the night.

"Damn you, Ronald Weasley! You and your big mouth," Hermione shouted angrily at the empty room, her clutch hitting the wardrobe with a dull smack. The witch had flung herself on the bed in her Head Girl's room, desperately seeking to calm her nerves.

"Phew! That was good, Crooks," she confessed sadly to the Kneazle, who snuggled in her lap and was trying to comfort his mistress with his mollifying purr.

What a hell of an evening. Nothing had gone as she had planned it.

Since the headmaster...in all his wisdom...had decided last week to burden her with that dance with a certain Potions master, Hermione had tried to brace herself for the inevitable event.

Not that she feared the man; quite the contrary. During her work for the Order, Hermione had been forced to develop her own ways to counter his nasty moods and that unforgiving wit, but in the process of dealing with the ill-tempered wizard, she had also developed a rather unreasonable attachment for Severus Snape.

And while she had concealed it successfully from her friends as well as from the Potions master himself in their daily routine, she had been worried that her hard achieved facade of indifference would crumble in front of the observant spy while they shared something as intimate as a dance.

Her mind had told her from the first moment that wishing for this event to lead to something more than bruised pride was a lost cause. Therefore, the only task she had set herself for tonight was to master this terrible temptation with a certain amount of dignity. Well, not that it had helped.

"But everything has gone so smoothly for a while," she sighed, hugging the orange fur ball next to her.

My dear Miss Granger. Her lips turned into a small smile at the memory of his voice.

Despite her underlying concerns and the continued protest from her inner voice of reason, Hermione had not been able to resist flirting mildly, savouring the feeling of his arms holding her. Just a lovely memory of a silly schoolgirl crush, she had fooled herself during the dance. And a lovely memory it would have been.

"But just count on Ronald Weasley to blow it all." A mix of laughter and sobbing escaped her. Not only had he ruined the moment with his crude interference, but within her enraged outburst at Ron's unforgivable words, Hermione had unconsciously revealed something that she had not dared to admit even to herself before: her supposedly negligible attachment to the aloof Potions master had become rather serious, against her better judgment.

"Oh, Crooks, where do I go from here?" She was at a loss. For the first time in her life, Hermione Granger had no answer to a rather simple question.

The young witch was still sitting on her bed, deeply wrapped in her own thoughts, when somebody knocked.

"I told you to leave me alone, Ronald Weasley," she called threateningly through the closed door. She would hex him into next week if he dared to show up.

"It's me, 'Mione. Ginny. May I come in?" The soft voice of Ginny Weasley drifted through the wood.

"Only if your prat of a brother stays out. Please see to that, Gin." Hermione blew her nose, still slightly sniffing, when the youngest Weasley slipped into her room.

"Hey." She greeted her redheaded friend weakly.

"Hey. Harry sends his love and says I should tell you that my brother is a troll. I quite agree with him." Ginny told her carefully, testing the ground.

"Thank you." Hermione gave a wobbly smile as her friend sat down next to her, laying one comforting arm around her shoulders.

"I have made a complete fool of myself tonight, you know," she confessed quietly, wiping a last stubborn tear from her cheek.

"Oh, really? Well, that makes me the dunderhead who thought you looked drop-dead gorgeous while you were dancing with our sullen old Potions professor." Ginny grinned at her whimsically, causing Hermione to snort in protest. The youngest Weasley sighed quietly at that reaction, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze and gazing at her solemnly.

"Okay, 'Mione, to tell you the truth, you two appeared rather... err... smitten with each other. That's why Ron got so upset."

"We were just dancing, Gin. One ridiculous dance," Hermione exclaimed, an incredulous look on her face.

The one and only dance I will ever get. The thought hurt and infuriated her at the same time.

"But that was not what I meant, Gin, and you know it." The witch closed her eyes, regretful at the reminder of her genuine confession, while the other Gryffindor simply rubbed her back in a compassionate gesture.

"Look 'Mione, this is your graduation night. You shouldn't be sitting here upstairs just because... just because my brother has the emotional range of a teaspoon. And don't let yourself be bothered by what the others might think. Honestly, I don't believe that anyone gives it a second thought. They all took it for what it was, an attempt to hurt the pride of my sorry excuse for a brother," she told her sincerely.

If you only knew, Gin.

Hermione was well aware that she should reply to her friend's attempt to ease her worries, should agree with Ginny on the point, but she found herself unable to speak.

"Or was it not?"

"Well...."

Oh my, say something, Granger.

"Yes... yes certainly it was." It was a lame lie, and she was sure it wouldn't do the trick. She stared guiltily at the floor, escaping Ginny's knowing look.

Moments of silence passed between them, which Hermione spent chewing on her bottom lip and dwelling on her friend's reasoning. It wouldn't do to sit around musing over the irresolvable what ifs in her life. From tomorrow on, there was a whole new world to conquer.

"You are right, Gin," she said eventually, "I really shouldn't hide here for the rest of the evening. Wait a second and I'll be ready to go down with you again."

The youngest Weasley gave her a satisfied grin as Hermione rose from the bed and vanished into the bathroom, her mind still coercing her heart to agree with this decision.

Less than ten minutes later both witches were heading down the stairs to the Entrance Hall. Though as the door of the Great Hall came into sight, Hermione stopped in her tracks, her earlier determination faltering again.

Would he still be there?

"Aren't you coming, 'Mione?"

"I... I can't. I think I need to catch a breath of fresh air before I can deal with your brother again."

And before I can face him for one last time.

Professor Snape... Severus... No name appeared appropriate for the man right now, not even in her mind.

"I will be with you in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay, see you in the Great Hall in a few minutes then," Ginny agreed reluctantly, giving her a last worried look before heading for the ball again.

Neither noticed the dark shadow that followed Hermione Granger as she slipped through the front door of the castle.

Some time earlier, down in the dungeons of Hogwarts, a still bewildered Potions master sat in one of his armchairs, desperately trying to ease his mind as he pensively regarded the glass of brandy in his right hand. His mind had been circling around one single question for quite some time now.

What has come over me?

Severus had lost his usual controlled collectedness twice in one evening: first by displaying his ridiculous infatuation with the Gryffindor witch openly in front of the assembled student body, and then losing it completely when Draco had revealed the content of her argument with Weasley to him. Her words had shaken him to the core.

The most brave and honourable man she had ever met. He took a sip of his brandy, shaking his head in disbelief.

You are a quite foolish Gryffindor, my dear Miss Granger.

Not to mention that other ridiculous comment. He was still frowning at himself for even allowing the thought to enter his mind again when a knock on his door interrupted him in his sanctuary. The Head of Slytherin closed his eyes in an attempt to ignore the undesirable visitor. A second knock smashed his hope of being left alone.

"Go away, Albus!" he called knowingly.

"Severus, my boy, I had hoped to find you here," the headmaster greeted him cheerfully as he opened the door. "Ah, celebrating a little bit in private, I see."

"Stating the obvious as ever, my friend," Severus replied sarcastically, raising his glass to welcome his unwelcome guest.

"Don't worry, son. I will leave you to your brandy again in a few seconds. I just wanted to ask you for some hangover potion for Minerva. Our dear Transfiguration teacher is not taking it well, seeing this year of students leave, it seems." The perpetual twinkling left Dumbledore's eyes as he spoke.

"Yes, that was quite obvious at the graduation celebration. This year of dunderheads was quite special to all of us, Albus," Severus agreed thoughtfully.

Moments of shared silence passed while the younger wizard sat forward in his armchair with his elbows resting on his knees, absently regarding the glossy chestnut-brown colour of the liquid in his hand again. It took an affectionate pat on his shoulder to draw him back to reality.

"I apologize, Albus. Please sit down. I'll go and fetch the hangover potion for Minerva. It will take just a minute." The Potions master was already heading for his potions store as he spoke, the amused gaze of Albus Dumbledore following him on his way.

A few minutes later, the Head of Slytherin returned with two bottles in his hands, passing them over to his mentor.

"The blue-labelled one is the hangover potion and the green-labelled one is a pacifier combined with a small dose of Dreamless Sleep, just in case. Make sure that she doesn't take more than a tablespoonful of each of them," he explained the concoctions in his best classroom manner.

"Thank you, Severus. Cautious as ever, you are," the Headmaster said as he tucked the bottles away in the pockets of his sparkling blue robes.

"You are welcome, Albus," the former spy replied, unspoken fondness swaying in his voice as he watched the elderly wizard heading towards the door. Hell, he needed to do something about this Granger problem; he'd started to sound like a sentimental fool himself already.

"Oh, just one thing more, Severus," the Headmaster of Hogwarts added as he was about to close the door. "Now that you are finally free to enjoy your life, don't deny yourself what you need the most: to be loved. You are a more brave and honourable and, I may add, a more loving man than you admit to yourself, son. Maybe you have just to refresh your memory a bit."

Before Severus even realized it, Dumbledore had closed the door, leaving his Potions master alone in the dungeons again.

"Damn you, Albus! You and your foolish meddling!" he growled angrily, and his glass of brandy hit the wall with a loud crack. It infuriated him beyond measure each time the man did something like that. The wizard groaned, already aware of his dawning headache.

So much for my peace of mind.

Severus closed his eyes as he leaned against the ledge of his fireplace, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Refresh your memory.... What are you trying to tell me, old man?

The Headmaster's words had immediately summoned a kaleidoscope of different memories of the Gryffindor witch to the front of his mind, just a myriad of mediocre episodes.

Granger arguing with Moody in his favour during an Order meeting.... Her small hand touching his shoulder to get his attention as she handed him a cup of tea.... Granger mending Potter's scratches while she wormed information necessary to him out of the boy.... The terror in her eyes during the Death Eater attack in Hogsmeade.... The honest relief on her face as they met in the hospital wing after the final battle....

Certainly, they had interacted as equals, fighting the same evil and experiencing the same fears as all members of the Order. It was the nature of war that it dissolved even long-established boundaries like the ones between student and teacher.

And in these last tiring months the Potions master had learned to value the rational mind and the ardent dedication the witch had displayed, keeping her foolish friends at bay, focussing Potter on his task at hand. She had been his reliable constant amidst the chaos, somehow always at his side when he had needed a helping hand, a balanced opinion or just a silent companion while he composed himself in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place after returning from one of those dreadful Death Eater gatherings.

Why did you do that, Granger?

Oblivious to the fact that he had started to pace back and forth in his living room, Severus was urging his mind to find an answer to this question.

Yes, he had taken her presence as given at that time, just seeing to her safety if necessary and keeping his usual formal distance, even during that fateful incident in Hogsmeade that had nearly cost him his life. And after the final battle he had easily slipped into his teacher role again. It had been an indescribable comfort for him to pick up with this part of his life where he had left it, while everything else was crumbling around him.

But tonight...

He sighed. Well, tonight it was as if he had seen the woman she had become during the war for the first time, and it had taken just one dance and a few words for this woman to open the floodgates of his soul after all those miserable years, making him feel truly alive again.

Why can you do that, Granger?

He stopped in his tracks. Damn, there had to be a reason why she had affected him like this. As much as it jibed him, Severus suddenly knew with a breathtaking clarity that he had to confront the object of his confusion if he wanted answers to his questions...and he needed answers, since his whole being was surrendering to the foreign and irritating sensation he had experienced during their dance. Determined to end this inconvenience for his peace of mind, the Head of Slytherin left his quarters in quite a hurry.

He passed through the hallways of the dungeons as fast as he could, ignoring a rather confused Bloody Baron, who had tried to start a conversation with his Head of House, but the Potions master didn't care.

The wizard reached the Entrance Hall just in time to observe an upset-looking Ronald Weasley secretly follow a young woman on her way through the front door of the castle.

Hermione.

Reviews are *love* :o)

Feelings of a Certain Kind

Chapter 5 of 5

The Golden Trio celebrates its graduation. Dumbledore has one of his special ideas for the ball while his Potions master is not happy at all that his participation is highly expected; and soon certain secrets will be revealed. A little piece of fluff.

The night was warm and starry as Hermione stepped out onto the grounds. But her heart felt far too heavy, like so many times in these last days. Tomorrow she would leave Hogwarts, leave the first place she ever called home in this world. Forever.

Absorbing her surroundings, she took a deep breath.

The grounds were moonlight-drenched, lying quiet and calm in the semidarkness. Even the Scottish summer wind had chosen to take a break for tonight. The castle...everything around her...seemed so at peace, just as the wizarding world was at peace.

Closing her eyes as she leaned her head back, Hermione allowed the realization to sink in.

Peace.

Alive.

Safe.

There had been darker days when she had feared that such a time would never come again.

"But it has," she assured herself in a quiet whisper, smiling and unable to stop a rather giddy feeling from claiming her spirits.

On mere impulse, Hermione pulled off her ball shoes, abandoning them in the grass. Prudence could wait until tomorrow. She wanted to run; she wanted to feel the grass beneath her feet, allowing the sudden indescribable energy coursing through her veins to break free, and nothing would stop her now.

Moments later, she reached the shore of Hogwarts' lake somewhat breathlessly, but inexplicably alive. Three months had passed since the final battle, but somehow the true awareness that the war was really over, that her friends and family had managed to come out nearly unscratched, had reached her heart only minutes ago.

And he has survived, as well.

It still appeared like a small miracle to her. Never in her whole life had Hermione felt more thankful to be on the receiving end of one of his scowls than at the moment she had seen him stalk into the hospital wing after the final battle.

A mere shadow of sadness crossing her features, she bit her bottom lip. He was alive and had a future to claim, and that was all she had ever wished for, all that really mattered to her heart, even if she wouldn't be a part of that future.

And the headmaster was right; there was a future to claim now...for all of them. Hermione clenched her small fist, a triumphant smile gracing her lips again.

We did it!

The insight would make her farewell to Hogwarts easier than she had thought. Her eyes wandered over the surface of the lake, bidding a final goodbye to her shelter for so many years, as a loud rustling in the wood caught her attention. Hermione spun around. Somebody was coming up to her...she could plainly hear the sound of a pair of footsteps. By habit, she drew her wand out of the inside pocket of her dress, just in case the wizarding world was not so totally at peace as she had hoped.

"Who is there? Reveal yourself," she called, keeping her voice steady while her trembling hands betrayed the spell of fear that had struck her.

"It's me, 'Mione. Ron!" His familiar voice made itself known before he came into sight.

"Ronald Weasley! What did you think by sneaking up to me like the bogeyman?" Hermione pointed her wand at him in an angry gesture. "I could have hurt you! Actually, what are you doing out here?"

"Bloody hell, put that wand away, 'Mione. I followed you as you left the castle; I... uh... well, I just wanted to apologize to you for being the prat I was." A rather sheepish look on his face, he ran a hand through his flaming red hair, embarrassment coloring his cheeks even in the pale moonlight. "I am really sorry, 'Mione."

"As you should be. Professor Snape risked his life countless times to keep Harry, to keep us all, safe, Ron. So if there is anybody you should apologize to, it is he."

Ron gave her an unhappy look, murmuring something like, "I know".

Allowing a small smile to tug at the corners of her mouth, Hermione stepped closer to him.

"Well, we all make mistakes; I shouldn't have left you on the dance floor, either," she admitted honestly, searching his gaze and taking his hands into hers. But Ron averted his eyes from her.

"It's just... 'Mione, I was so furious that this greasy git made you smile and beam with happiness tonight, in a way I never did. Although..." he faltered, a sad look on his face, "although, I would like to be the one."

Hermione blinked, a knife-like pain hitting her heart. This wasn't happening.

"Oh, Ron..." she started, only to find that she was at a loss for words at this broken-hearted declaration. Squeezing his hands in understanding, she let them go.

"You like Snape, isn't it so, 'Mione?" Ron asked thoughtfully, suddenly searching her eyes.

Oh Ron, don't ask me that.

"Well..." she trailed off, words failing her again. Everything she was about to say would hurt him further. How was she to explain something so highly complicated and hopeless, something she wasn't able to understand herself?

"Don't lie to me about this, please. I need to know the truth." The imploration in his words gave her heart a painful sting. Ron was right; he deserved to know the truth.

Hermione swallowed and closed her eyes momentarily to prepare herself to speak, unaware of the fact that somebody else was also awaiting her answer in a rather unsettled manner.

What are you up to, Weasley?

Severus' eyes narrowed dangerously as he followed the boy through the front door.

Years of spying had given the Potions master enough experience not to give himself away as he set out to track his former student, his wand already drawn.

The boy was heading for the lake, but Severus couldn't catch a glimpse of Hermione. Only a pair of shoes that obviously belonged to her was lying on the ground. She must have been running, otherwise he should have been able to spot her, too. Running. Of all the foolish things to do, she had settled for running alone through the night.

Where have you gone, Hermione?

Silently moving in the dark, Severus could hear the blood rushing in his ears, his eyes still searching the grounds desperately for a sign of the witch, as he heard her voice down by the lake.

"Who's there? Reveal yourself!"

He exhaled in relief; regardless of what Weasley was planning, he wouldn't be able to catch her by surprise. Severus quickened his steps, and mere moments later, he beheld the witch. He hid himself swiftly within earshot in the shadows of the forest to observe the events to come. It was an amazing sight that awaited him.

The witch was standing barefooted on the shore, still wearing her dark lilac gown from the ball, but her hair was hanging more loosely around her face than before. Unruly curls bounced around her face as she talked heatedly with Weasley, waving her wand dangerously at him.

The Gryffindor's wrath was quite famous, and he didn't envy the boy about to be on the receiving end of it. The Potions master smirked as he concentrated on their conversation.

"As you should be. Professor Snape risked his life countless times to keep Harry, to keep us all, safe, Ron. So if there is anybody you should apologize to, it is he."

Mark her words, Weasley.

"Well, we all make mistakes; I shouldn't have left you on the dance floor, either."

Had she?

Severus frowned. But before the revelation was able to sink in, a rush of icy coldness flooded his stomach as the witch took the hands of the younger wizard gently into her own.

Immediately, he closed his eyes to shield himself from the cozy scene, clenching his left hand in anger.

Indeed, Miss Granger, we all make mistakes.

And he had made a rather foolish one tonight. It had taken him mere moments to witness how ridiculous his fear for her safety had been and even more, his decision to seek her out to get answers to his questions. Well, he had found his answer. Damn, it shouldn't even matter whose hands the witch was holding. This was all Albus' doing. Albus and his insistence on this damnable dance had caused this ludicrous, hopeful feeling to intoxicate his soul. Severus swore quietly, already turning to leave, as Weasley's words hit him.

"It's just... 'Mione, I was so furious that this greasy git made you smile, in a way I never did. Although I would like to be the one."

"Oh, Ron..."

Stopped dead in his tracks, the Potions master dared not to believe his own eyes as he watched the witch instantly let go of Weasley's hands. Only to have his world turned upside down again as Potter's redheaded sidekick continued to speak.

"You like Snape, isn't it so, 'Mione?"

"Well..."

Reason told him to leave, to not wait for her answer that would only hurt his pride, but his eyes never strayed from the witch's face, mesmerized by the emotional struggle that was reflected on her features. He barely noticed Weasley's next words or his own preposterously pounding heart.

"Don't lie to me about this, please. I need to know the truth."

Deafening silence fell upon the unlikely trio, and Severus braced himself for a rejection that was never intended for him to hear, but was as sure to come as Albus' next offer of lemon drops.

Hermione's gaze was firmly fixed on the lake as she finally answered.

"Yes, I like him. I definitely like him."

It was a plain admission, actually whispered for somebody else, and only years of self-control kept Severus from losing ground, as a certain, pleasant warmth knotted his chest with complex emotion. She liked him. She *definitely* liked him.

Well, that was unexpected. Certainly, he had never extended a branch of friendship towards the witch, let alone any kind of affection.

Leaning against the next tree...surely not for support...Severus observed the pair in front of him, searching for signs that she truly meant what she had said.

"Why? I mean, it's Snape, 'Mione," he heard the boy ask, his voice mirroring the Potions masters' own disbelief.

Why? Another rather good question, Weasley.

But Hermione just shook her head at the question, causing the loose curls around her face to bounce merrily.

"A feeling like..." She trailed off, swallowing. "Ron, feelings of a certain kind do not ask why." She looked at the young man before her, awaiting his reaction.

She can't mean... No, certainly not.

Severus struggled for breath, only a quiet, strangled sound escaping his throat.

"Don't lie to me, 'Mione. You have to know why you believe you love the greasy git."

Thank Merlin, at least Weasley has found his voice again.

"I haven't said that I love him, Ron..."

"But..."

"No buts, Ron. This emotion is nothing that you can analyze like a formula in Arithmancy or break apart like the ingredients of a potion. It's just there, okay? That's something I just... uuhmm... well, feel." Hermione shrugged in an apologetic gesture.

"And since when does the resident know-it-all 'just feel', Hermione Jean Granger?" Potter's sidekick simply crossed his arms in front of his chest, glaring impatiently.

Outstanding, Weasley, absolutely outstanding. I wish I could still award you House points for this.

"Ronald Weasley, don't give me that look!"

"'Mione, I want to understand, that's all"

"Can't this wait until tomorrow? I promised your sister that I would go back to the Great Hall again."

No! Simply no! Say it, Weasley.

"No! I don't think so." The younger wizard shook his head determinedly, allowing Severus to catch the breath he hadn't been aware was holding.

"But ..."

"'Mione, please."

The witch sighed in defeat, pointing at the old trunk lying next to them on the shore.

"Well, I suggest we sit down, then. But honestly, I do not really know where to start, Ron," she confessed, taking her place on the trunk. Her voice was quiet but steady as she gazed at Weasley.

Meanwhile, an inner battle raged within Severus. The honorable part of him wanted to leave, not willing to sit in the shadows to listen to her explanation, but his suspicious, doubting side needed confirmation. What kind of Slytherin would he be to leave while a young, desirable woman presented her feelings for him on a silver tray? A smirk curled his lips.

"Maybe you should start with the moment that you 'just felt it', Mione," Weasley said quietly, all the hurt he had shown earlier gone from his voice.

Kneading her fingers nervously, Hermione started to speak. "Do you remember when we were attacked by a group of Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, just before our last Christmas break? Ginny, Harry, you and me?"

"Bloody hell, 'Mione. We thought we had lost you, you know, since Ginny had seen how you had been abducted by one of those monsters."

In the shadows nearby, Severus remembered said fateful incident all too well. It had been a narrow escape that day...for both of them.

"Can't we go to the Three Broomsticks now?" Ron asked impatiently.

"Oh, just stop being such a prat, Ron. Hermione and I need to do some more shopping, you know," Ginny replied, irritated, already heading for Honeydukes and dragging Harry with her, while Hermione was still looking at the window of the local bookshop.

"Girls, you will be the death of me." Ron rolled his eyes as he chased after his sister. "Mate, why don't you say something?" But the Boy-Who-Lived just gave a shrug, smiling broadly.

Ron had just caught up with Ginny and Harry as all hell broke loose. Suddenly, there were loud cracks in the air, and before the small group truly realized it, they were surrounded by nearly a dozen Death Eaters.

"My, my, what have we here?" a sardonic voice called out from under the Death Eater mask.

Instantly, Harry drew out his wand. "Malfoy, if you dare to touch my friends with one of your filthy fingers, I will kill you."

The threat earned him a wave of deep laughter from the hooded men, but Lucius Malfoy silenced them immediately with a gesture of his hand.

"On your way to save the day again, Potter," he snarled. "You are quite lucky that my Lord has other orders for me today." A short, evil laugh of his own escaped the man, while Harry tried to grasp the meaning behind his words. But then nothing but Ginny's despairing scream filled the air.

"Hermione! Noooo!"

Harry spun around, but his friend was already nowhere to be seen, and while he desperately tried to catch a glimpse of her, he was once again surrounded by the loud cracks of Apparating Death Eaters, this time from their retreat.

Hermione Granger was gone.

"Well, I had just set out to come to your aid when I was dragged into a side road," she explained, while Weasley was watching her intently.

"Blimey, 'Mione, you were so lucky that you could overpower the bloke before he could take you to You-Know-Who." Weasley's relief at this favorable outcome was still plain in his words, but then he added nastily, "The whole Order went searching for you...well, except for Snape. Mum was nearly mad with fear, you know."

And Severus felt the sudden urge to strangle him, the ignorant, short-sighted Gryffindor.

"Merlin, Ron, he is dead. Say his name, just for once. V-o-l-d-e-m-o-r-t," Hermione ordered, irritated, only to see him shudder, and went on, "But I have to confess, I didn't tell you the whole truth at that time." The witch took a deep breath.

"I didn't overpower the Death Eater who abducted me. The Death Eater was Professor Snape. That's why he didn't participate in the search." And while she paused, obviously to let the boy grasp this new turn of events, Severus' stomach clenched at the painful memories her words summoned to the surface of his mind.

The Dark Lord had been well informed of the Trio's little Hogsmeade trip, and he had called his followers the night before to reveal his plan; he wanted to break Potter, inch by inch, by finally taking away everything that the boy loved. And Severus' supposed master had decided to start with another thorn in his side: the bright and young Muggleborn witch, who was living proof against his ideology of purity...Hermione Granger.

He had ordered Malfoy to take some of his men to capture the 'Mudblood' and bring her to him. It had been sheer luck that Severus had not been assigned to this task instead. Nevertheless, he had questioned Malfoy over a glass of wine about the blond wizard's plan to get the witch. A quick decision had been inevitable that night, and he hadn't even thought of consulting Albus about his plan.

The voice of Ronald Weasley stopped the flow of Severus' memories, bringing him back to the present.

"Blimey, 'Mione! Why didn't you tell us it had been Snape?"

"The Headmaster insisted that the Order wasn't to know. He was quite angry that Professor Snape had acted without his orders at that time," she explained, a rueful smile playing in the corners of her mouth.

Quite angry, that's an understatement, witch.

The Headmaster had been livid with him, for...how had he put it...*thoughtlessly risking his life and worse, the cause, with this stunt* when he, the great Albus Dumbledore, could have found another way.

Severus snorted quietly.

Nothing but wishful thinking; there had been no other way. But Albus had been right on one point. Severus had not thought; he hadn't even needed to think. He had known...no, just felt...that he had to keep her from this fate.

In an unconscious gesture, he rubbed his chest, his eyes lingering on the witch as she continued her tale.

Hermione heard the cracks of Apparating wizards around her. As she looked around for her friends, she found them surrounded by Death Eaters.

No!

She drew her wand out of her pocket, and just as she was about to set out to help them, two hands gripped her with violent strength, dragging her away. She struggled against the iron grasp that had enfolded her as she was pushed against a stone wall, coming face to face with the iron mask of a Death Eater.

Sweet Merlin. No.

She wanted to scream, but the Death Eater closed her mouth with his right hand while he pressed her body against the wall with the other one, leaning down to her ear.

"Be quiet, Miss Granger. It's me, Severus Snape." She felt his breath hot on her skin as he spoke. The well-known baritone of his voice eased her anxious mind immediately. She was safe.

"I will take my hand from your mouth, if you agree not to scream." She nodded fiercely at his proposal.

He took his hand away at her sign, while his eyes were checking on their surroundings.

"But we have to go back and help Harry, sir," she whispered desperately.

At her words, he grasped the back of her head with one hand, making her look at him; only the vigorous black eyes that bore into hers gave the man behind the mask away.

"No, we won't. They are after you." His voice was low and determined. "Now hold onto my waist, Miss Granger. We have a lot of Apparating to do."

She did just what he had ordered, and only seconds later, they were gone.

The Potions master Apparated them with a loud crack. Hermione closed her eyes, struggling against the nausea that was rising in her stomach, as they Apparated a second and then, finally, a third time. As she opened her eyes again, her mind was still in a daze. Holding onto something solid for support, she became aware of her surroundings in stages. She had been here before. She knew this room. The Shack, they were in the Shrieking Shack.

Thank Merlin! We are safe.

She closed her eyes again at this calming knowledge as somebody somewhere above her head cleared his throat impatiently.

"Miss Granger, although I assure you this is not completely inconvenient to me, I would prefer if you would let go of the upper part of my body, since we have reached our final destination."

The irritated voice of her professor brought her back to reality. It was just then that Hermione realized she was still leaning against his chest, grasping the fabric of his frock coat.

"I am sorry, sir." She stepped away as fast as she could, blushing fiercely.

But Professor Snape did not respond. Instead, he took off his Death Eater robes and started to scan the room for any signs of possible danger.

"I fear we will have to stay here until it gets dark, Miss Granger," the Potions master explained to his student, continuing his search. "From here we have to take the tunnel that ends under the Whomping Willow to get back to the castle, and it would not be advisable for you to be seen in public until I have spoken to the Headmaster."

Hermione simply nodded in response, although she wondered why he had to talk to the Headmaster first, but she dared not ask.

"The Shack should be safe, for a while," Professor Snape declared as he finished his hunt for any suspicious objects and let himself fall into one of the armchairs in the shabby room, pinching the bridge of his nose. For somebody who had just declared that they were safe, he looked rather tense to Hermione.

She walked silently up to where he had placed himself, taking the armchair next to him and regarding him intently.

"Sir, I wanted..." She trailed off, looking at her fingers while she struggled for the right words. The right words. How was she to thank somebody who had risked his life to save hers?

But a sharp hiss from Professor Snape stopped any new thought only heartbeats later, as he clutched his left forearm violently.

"I am being summoned, Miss Granger. I have to go, now. He is very upset about your escape, I fear." His sentences were short and ragged. "Don't leave this room until it is dark outside, do you hear me? And go straight to the Headmaster." He continued his orders while he groped for his robes and the mask, turning to leave.

And even before Hermione's mind could come up with an adequate response, he was gone.

A/N: A huge thank you to Sempra and her indispensable red quill.

Reviews are love :o)