

What Dreams May Come

by rhiannon113

Severus is ready to die. When the pain ends, the bliss begins. His only nagging question is: What will come after?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 8

Severus is ready to die. When the pain ends, the bliss begins. His only nagging question is: What will come after?

Disclaimer 1: I would like to say that this whole world is my creation, but it's just not nice to lie. The only compensation I receive are the amazing reviews that kind readers might leave.

Disclaimer 2: The title is not my creation either. It's the title of a really wonderful film from a few years ago. Highly recommend.

Chapter One

The pain was unbearable. No matter how he tried, Severus could not block it out. He was sweating, actually sweating. If it would all just end, he would be free. The filthy floor of sagging, nearly rotted wood was to be his slab. This was the end for the great spy. Paralysis, pain, and then the real bane...the air in this damnable place was so bloody thick with dust that his allergies were acting up. One cannot sneeze while paralyzed, but that does not stop the urge.

Gods, hadn't he been through enough? Severus couldn't understand why he couldn't just die. He'd never expected to live, but he'd rather hoped it would be less drawn out.

The weak, silver light of morning pressed against the grimy glass of the window. He'd lain here since before midnight like a turtle on his back, though at least he'd had peace. The 'Golden Trio' had lingered only for a few moments. He'd given Potter the memories, his last official duty. After that, for the first time in his life, Severus Snape belonged to himself. It was a state he'd only thought to have for a few minutes. As it was, he'd spent the longest portion of 'free time' he'd ever been given in this rundown hovel, waiting to die.

Really, it should be over by now. That great, foul snake's venom ought to have taken only seconds. What's happened? He hadn't taken any antidote; in point of fact, there was none to be had. He'd spent years secretly researching it, but he had come up empty-handed. Score one for Golpalott.

As the pain once again surged through him, the tremors began. He fought for control. His last contact had been with Potter and his lot. Pathetic.

Weasley, the walking argument for birth control, had looked as though his worst nightmares had been coming true. This was, of course, working on the assumption that the git possessed the mental capacity to dream.

Potter had looked truly mournful. The boy had followed Snape's instructions without question for once. The boy had genuinely seemed to want to help him in spite of the ire that had existed at their last meeting.

As Severus had looked into those mesmerizing eyes, he had remembered Lily. That night on her parents' roof, the first night he'd told her he loved her. She'd hugged him with tears in her eyes. He'd whispered that if he had his way, her eyes would be the last sight he'd have in this life. As well they should have been, if only his body would

realise that the race was run, and it should snuff it.

He'd always imagined that Lily's son would be a dark-haired lad with green eyes. Though in Severus' visions, the boy tall and wiry, with high cheek bones. He'd believed that as long as the lad got Lily's nose, their son would be handsome. Young Master Snape would have earned top marks, and he would have been popular as well. Potter was almost all of that. Almost. If one could overlook a surname and paternity, Snape had gotten his wish.

True, his fantasy son would have never shot Unforgivables at him or looked at him as if he would like nothing better than for the Potions master to bugger off. Still, Potter had at least looked sorry. If he could have, Severus would have grimaced. He'd never know the boy's fate. He sincerely hoped that Potter had succeeded. Snape didn't want his life's work to be in vain, but he also wanted to know that the world was not left at the mercy of a delusional, unstable freak.

Damn this pain. Severus wished he could at least wince. His breathing was shallow and fast. Maybe this was it. Finally Snape was shocked at his response to the thought of dying. If this was truly the end, he'd rather not meet it being bitter and cynical.

The pain spiked again, causing beads of sweat to run down his face, and tears to slide from his eyes. *Right. I only need to think of something happy.*

That's a problem, as I've got next to no happy memories. So, I'll find something intriguing, a great mystery. Yes, that's the ticket. I'll block the pain while awaiting my death by contemplating one of life's great mysteries.

Because that was easy to do. Severus had never been the type to sit around trying to work out the unknown intricacies of the universe. Mostly because he was slightly pre-occupied with keeping his miserable arse intact.

What could he think on? He'd spent his adult life teaching. He didn't want to spend the last bit on Potions or Defence. That was a laugh now, though in all fairness, his Defence curriculum had been shockingly free of ways to combat killer snakes. Snakes.

Merlin's saggy, shaggy bollocks! 'Snape was killed by the Snake.' I'm going to be a bloody nursery rhyme.

That won't do at all. I simply refuse to have spent the better part of two decades building a reputation for being surly and frightening only to be remembered by a load of cheeky little blighters wearing soiled nappies lisping my name whilst skipping.

Gods, immobility was a royal pain in the arse. He had to admit that while he was raging on about a given topic, he could at least ignore most of his torture. Anger was a stupendous weapon in many situations. But that could not change the fact that he did not want to die as he'd lived.

What can I think on that won't annoy me? Ought to be a rather short list.

Casting his mind around, Snape suddenly landed on Miss Granger. She'd been crying as she had knelt over him. She had grasped his hand, unnoticed by the Moron Twins, thankfully. She was a truly compassionate person. Clever, witty, and she must have had a real talent for management as well. She'd managed to keep most of the groups' little capers under the radar on most occasions.

Severus remembered her eyes. He'd never noticed how luminous they were. Like swirls of raw honey drowning in a whirlpool of molten caramel. Sparkling with tears in the dim light, they'd fascinated him.

She's become so beautiful.

If Severus had not been fixed to the floor, he'd have sat bolt upright at that. He didn't think school girls were beautiful. Of all the horrible behaviours he'd indulged in, fancying a student had never been among them. Never.

She's not a student anymore. In point of fact, she's well past the 'age of consent.' He wished he had the ability to shake himself. Perhaps the venom was addling his brains. Funny, it should have been mererly neurological in its effects.

Listen, you sentimental sodding git, it's fair to say that the girl has got lovely eyes. But that doesn't mean anything else. I can find the eyes of a particular person lovely and still dislike the rest of them.

The Granger girl had been a swotty know-it-all since her first year. She'd rather reminded Severus of himself, the difference being she'd eventually found friends. Her intellect was staggering.

I wonder if she reads trade journals at all? It would likely be amazing to discuss new theories with her. As I'm dying, what's the harm in a little indulgence in fantasy?

So Severus began to paint a rather elaborate mental picture of Miss Granger curled on his settee, reading before a crackling fire. He saw himself bringing her a cup of tea. She smiled warmly as she accepted it. He sat opposite her; occasionally, one would ask the other a question or make an observation on their reading.

Severus continued to watch the little vignette he'd created. Just as Hermione had leaned in to kiss him, he was ripped from his musings. The pain was back with a vengeance. Fire tore through his muscles. He'd have vomited, had he the ability.

The pain seared into the marrow of his bones. Mentally, he gave voice to the horrible, agonizing torment. The pain seemed to be made all the worse by his complete inability to rage against it.

Suddenly, a loud ringing filled his ears, and his vision began to tunnel. As the blackness closed in on him, Severus used his last bit of strength to project in thought the only name he wanted to shout. *Hermione.*

All was blackness, and the pain was no more.

SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS*SS

A long time later, or maybe it was only the space of a heartbeat later, Severus became aware that he was now extremely comfortable. *Gods, I must be dead. It feels like I'm lying on a bed.*

Severus shifted his frame slightly and found that he could move. Yes, his bare skin was sliding against soft fabric, and his head was cradled in a down pillow. The smell was wonderful, too. Everything that touched him seemed to emit some strangely intoxicating scent. He began to move his hands, relishing the feeling of the soft sheets beneath his fingers.

His body didn't feel sore at his movements. After a few moments of pleasurable meanderings, his fingers came into contact with an entirely different sort of softness. His fingers met resistance. He ran his fingertips lightly over what seemed to be warm, soft flesh. He smiled to himself. *I'm dead, and this is my eternal reward.*

Severus smiled again. He reached farther to place his hand fully on the silky, soft skin that he'd discovered. He gently squeezed what felt like a hip and then reached farther to palm the buttock attached to it.

As his fingers made contact, he felt the warm body next to him stretch and move toward him. He still hadn't opened his eyes for fear that this dream would end, or that it would turn into the hell where he must certainly belong.

He heard a soft, feminine sigh as a pair of small hands grasped his own and placed them over a full, firm breast.

"Severus," his companion sighed. He smiled, still with his eyes closed. There was something familiar about that voice.

In response, a low grumble rose in his chest. His fingers began to brush lightly over the surface of one nipple. As it tightened into a stiff peak, he heard its owner gasp and felt the mattress shift as her hips began to undulate.

"Mmmmm. Ready for more?" There was a slight mocking tone to the lovely voice. He decided since this was either heaven or his own fantasy that he should make the most of it. His other hand reached out for the juncture of the smoothest thighs he'd ever had the pleasure of caressing.

She understood his intent and moved to help him toward his goal. Both let out slow moans as his fingers began to delicately work the slick and tender flesh of her sex. He could hear her breathing heavily as she was growing ever more aroused.

Thus far, he'd kept his experiences confined to the auditory and tactile realms. But he could imagine what sort of a picture his companion might make in her current state, and he had a great desire to see for himself. His brain conjured a most delectable visage for his lover. He wanted to savour the moment of his first look at her. He was growing harder by the second from mere anticipation.

His eyes fluttered open, and he took in the sight of a young, deliciously wanton body. His face was level with her breasts. They were not the largest he'd ever seen, but they were certainly ample, as well as firm. The tightly budded nipples were a charming shade of rose pink. Smooth skin of the belly stretched over a small frame that was just rounded enough to give the body delectably feminine curves.

Her lovely legs were bent at the knees, hiding the ultimate treasure from his eyes. His fingers continued to explore and stimulate her. Her chest rose and fell with each stroke he took. Her hips were writhing from his attentions; her hands were fisted in the sheets. Her head was thrown back as she moaned and gasped. She appeared to be near her completion.

Severus smirked in triumph and irony. This was the most satisfying sexual experience of his life, and he had no idea who his partner might be. He'd yet to receive any of her attentions, but he found he didn't care. His whole being was focused on bringing the goddess next to him pleasure.

Her tension was building; it wouldn't be long now. "Oh, yes. Severus, you are so good. So good. Yes, I want... Please, now. Now." He felt her spasm around his fingers and sigh in delight.

As she was coming down from her high, he propped himself on his elbow. He could tell her hair was a honeyed brown, and her delicate chin rose from a slender neck. He suddenly needed to see her; he was consumed by the need to see the face of this amazing, sensual creature.

"Look at me, my love. Tell me, did you enjoy yourself?" he purred.

He watched as her breasts bounced slightly with soft laughter. She shifted slightly and slid her head back down over the pillow.

She bestowed him with a seductive smile. "What do you think? Shall I return the favour, my lover?"

His mouth fell open in amazement, and he felt as though all the oxygen had suddenly been sucked from the room. He could only stare in awe at his companion's beauty.

"Severus? Are you all right?" she asked, her brows knitted in growing concern.

His throat seemed to tighten, refusing to allow any sound to escape. He blinked and shook his head slightly. He seemed incapable of any intelligent speech.

Her concern was growing. "What is it?"

He cleared his throat and finally managed to choke out, "M-Miss Granger?"

A/N Thanks to the amazing kizzy7 for her beta skills, and wonderful encouragement. Love U Kizzy!!!!

Thanks for reading! Any and all comments are greatly appreciated!

*Up Next: What else is different for Severus? *evil grin**

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 8

Severus begins to use his formidable powers of observation to try and make sense of his new situation.

Disclaimer: Characters: Not Mine

Title: Not Mine

Plot: Mine

As always thanks to the lovely and amazing kizzy7. She saves me from my own spelling and grammar disabilities. Thanks also to the lovely admins here at TPP for their brilliant work.

For the first time in his life, or whatever this might be, Severus had no thoughts in his head. He opened and closed this mouth stupidly for several moments, his eyes bugging out of his head. This blank state of mind was not a comfortable feeling for him. He stared at her. He stared around the room. He stared down at his own naked body.

His thoughts seemed to come back all at once.

I'm in bed with Hermione Granger, naked.

Wait.

I'm in bed naked with Hermione Granger. I'm diddling a student.

Naked.

I'm naked.

She's naked.

That seems like an awful lot of naked.

Wait.

Wait. Before I did my bit as a codfish, she was quite enjoying herself.

Yes, but she's a student.

Well, was a student.

Naked, though.

Naked. She knew I was naked, and she was happy about it.

Why the hell do I keep thinking the word 'naked?'

"Severus. What is wrong with you?"

He realized he was either dead, dreaming, or delusional. He reached out and poked her in the shoulder.

"Are you feeling alright?"

No, I'm not alright. I'm a bloody pervert. As it turns out, my ultimate fantasy is snogging a student. However, it's not as though there is any reason not to proceed. I did resign, albeit by jumping out a window, but never the less... She's not been at school for a year. I'm dead. This is not real. Why not have a go?

Severus smirked and looked into the lovely face hovering over his. "Are you actually willing?"

Hermione laughed. "Why don't I show you?" With that, she claimed his mouth with her own. Her kiss was rich and full of passion. Her hands were stroking him, her body writhing beneath his. This was better than anything he'd ever experienced.

For the next hour, Severus knew nothing but her hands, her mouth, and all the other delights of her body. At last, they were both covered in sweat. He lay on his back with her body curled over his own. He felt her smile against his chest.

"Severus, gods, that was amazing. That's the thing I think I love most about you...every time with you is like the first time." She raised her tousled head to look into his eyes.

Severus stared back at her. He'd never dared to hope that the afterlife might be so incredibly pleasant. He wondered idly if he could use Legilimancy on a spirit or imaginary being or whatever she was. He'd have to try it later, though. Right now, he wanted to bask in the afterglow of the best sexual experience of his life. He didn't have to pay her. She'd enjoyed it. She hadn't stopped him kissing and touching her to demand extra galleons for extra services.

She rested her head on the pillow again, smiling at him.

"Gods, you are beautiful," he whispered. He meant it. She was so lovely, naked before him and open to his desires. Yes, her body was beautiful to him, but more lovely was the open and luminous quality in her eyes. She was not nervous or guarded here with him; she was not ready to flee. This woman was lying completely relaxed in his arms. If anything, she seemed to be straining to get closer to him.

Hermione leaned in to nuzzle his neck. He felt her mouth move against his skin as she said, "You are too kind, good sir. I wish this could last, but sadly, we will have to get up at one point or another today. There's a staff meeting at three."

Severus pushed her away. "Staff meeting?"

"It's just the typical, end-of-term wrap-up that the Headmaster always has. We should be able to leave as soon as it's finished." She smiled at him. "It won't take long, love."

Severus' brow creased in frustration. He had to teach in the afterlife as well? Perhaps children of the spiritual plain were less obtuse than those of the corporal plain. But still, if he could have a relationship with this delectable young woman, teaching dunderheads was quite a small price to pay. He decided that he didn't want to spend all eternity complaining.

"All right, Hermione. I'll go to the staff meeting. Any clue what Dumbledore will be on about?" Severus asked, hoping desperately that the meeting would be brief.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. She reached out to stroke the top of his head. "Exactly how hard did you hit the headboard? Has it caused brain damage? You should know very well that Dumbledore retired nearly fifteen years ago, and Minerva retired three years ago. Surely you recall that ordeal? She begged you to take the post? You told her to bugger off? Any of this ringing any bells?" She looked concerned and sat up a little.

She continued, "Severus, it was on your suggestion that the post was offered to James when you refused. How can you have forgotten?" Hermione looked half amused, half frightened. "Sev, are your ears ringing at all? Your pupils look normal, but that's not always an indicator. Perhaps we should run up to the hospital wing and have Lily take a look."

"The Potters?" he asked weakly.

"Of course. That's it. I should have gotten Lily involved the moment you tried to break the bedstead with your skull. I'm going to call her down here." She put on a purple satin dressing gown and walked out of the room.

Severus was so stunned that he could only sit and stare. Not only were Lily and James Potter a part of this reality, but he was apparently on semi-decent terms with Potter.

What next?

Hermione had returned, and she was talking, and he was aware that she'd spelled his clothes onto his body. Images flooded his brain, people and places that he'd known. Severus Snape, the horrible Potions master and spy for the Order among Voldemort's Death Eaters, had known the rules and players in his former life. This new existence was horribly unfamiliar. One of the very few things that could make him lose his cool was inconstant behaviours.

When he was gently shaken a few minutes later, Severus was still lost in his own world. There was no way to know why this had happened, but he was sure of one thing. He would not let go of a woman who loved him, no matter what the cost this time.

He was dimly aware of a pair of small hands gently running over his head, accompanied by the occasional rushes of spells flying over his body. After what felt like an eternity of drifting on an empty sea, Severus came slowly back to himself.

He was staring into the most beautiful green eyes. A soft voice was speaking to him, but he was too mesmerized by the emerald pools of light to respond. He let out a slow breath, realising who it must be. "Potter," he breathed, his voice barely audible.

"Well, James will be pleased. Not only have you managed to avoid permanent damage to this remarkable brain of yours, but you've also managed for once in the last twenty-five years to call me by the proper name." Lily's smile was shining on him like sunlight.

"Now, will the two of you please contain yourselves? I realise that you are still in the 'honeymoon' period, but I'm having to invent too many creative, yet plausible excuses for the injuries caused by your acrobatic and apparently marathon sex-life."

Both Lily and Hermione laughed as Hermione showed her to the door. Severus could now only focus on the word 'honeymoon.' He and Granger were married? Just another tick on the list of 'things that seem to make no sense whatsoever.'

Hermione walked towards him after closing the door. He noticed that they seemed to be in his quarters at Hogwarts, only the rooms had been altered significantly. There were photos on the wall across from his bed, a vase of flowers stood on an end table, and a handmade quilt lay folded on the back of the sofa.

It had to be true. She must live here with him. He was vaguely reminded of a song from an old Muggle children's movie. "When the gods send you a blessing, you don't ask why it was sent." This was real. It was a happy home, and why or how he had it, he didn't want to question.

"What am I to you?" He could not meet her eyes, but he had to ask just the one time. He needed to hear her say it, to explain how the Princess of Gryffindor had come to be in a relationship. Married. The platinum band on his left hand winked at him as it reflected the golden glow of the firelight.

He and Hermione were married. Pleadingly, he looked into her eyes, hoping against hope that she would accept his need for reassurance, at whatever level it made sense to her, and answer his question.

She stared at him for a moment, and then she moved closer and sat in his lap. Softly and ever so methodically, she smoothed the hair back from his face. She kissed his lips in a tender yet chaste way. Looking at him in silence for another moment, she smiled at him.

"You are my love. You are my best friend. You are the only one who can tell me when I'm being woefully, stupidly hard-headed. You are the one who made me feel alive for the first time in my life. You are the only one who's ever made me feel like a real woman, not some stuffy bookworm. You are the one who taught me what it was to truly love. You are the one who showed me how hollow and empty the world was when I was alone. You are everything."

Severus was shocked to find a single tear rolling down his cheek. He hated showing emotion. He hated being vulnerable. Yet here sat Miss Granger...his wife telling him that he'd brought forth all her emotional capacities. She was bloody well inviting him to share some deep, personal insight with her. He couldn't do that, at least not at the present.

He continued to gaze into her eyes and let out a slow, shaky breath. "Hermione, we'll be late for Headmaster ~~Potter's~~ meeting." He might learn in time to be sentimental and sappy, but not yet.

A little while later, they were seated in the staff room. Severus was trying his best not to stare, but it was nearly impossible. Many of the staff were as he would have expected, but many were different. Flitwick was still there, same as ever. Hagrid was equally as steadfast. Sinistra was still there. Sybil had even managed not to drink herself to death.

Hooch had been replaced by a lovely redhead. As he stared, Severus realised who it was. Miss Weasley, though a gut feeling told him it would be Madam Potter by now. He cringed, hoping her young husband was not also a member of staff. Longbottom actually tripped and fell as he entered the room. Severus assumed that he would be the Herbology master; after all, it had been the boy's only real talent.

Vector was missing, but that would fit. Hermione was the obvious choice for her replacement. He could imagine that her N.E.W.T. scores had been even higher than her OWLs. Poppy hadn't come in either, but he knew from earlier that Lily had taken her place. Though if Minerva was gone, and Potter Sr. was Head, who taught Transfiguration and Defence?

Just then, an earth-shattering, ear-splitting crash erupted from the door. Everyone in the room jumped in their seats. The door swung open, and two rather dishevelled people stumbled into the room.

Behind him, Hermione said, "Gods above, Tonks. Are the both of you alright?" Severus turned to look at her, and then he followed the newest occupants' progress toward their seats. The light of realisation had just dawned on him when a loud voice, full of laughter, came from the door.

"Well, no way to follow that, Lily dearest. Showed me up again, eh, Moony?"

Severus felt like he'd been hit by lightning. He turned slowly to see James Potter framed in the open door. The wizard he'd hated as a boy had aged extremely well, and though he still brimmed with confidence, something of humility was also present in his wide smile.

He allowed his wife to enter, and then he closed the door behind them. As James made his way around the large, oval table, Lily smiled at everyone in turn. She took the seat on the other side of Hermione, and the two began whispering. Nymphadora Tonks leaned around someone to join in. Severus locked eyes with Remus Lupin, who smiled, seemingly still embarrassed over his less than graceful arrival.

James' voice sounded again, and Severus had to fight to keep his features from sinking into an instant scowl. "As both the Lupins and the Snapes have both had injuries today, I think it was a very good decision not to have gone rock climbing in the Lake District this weekend." Though everyone else laughed, Snape tried to smile, but it was really just a grimace.

James continued. "Now. End of term was surprisingly smooth. I'd like to thank all of you for your cooperation in ensuring that the annual pranks of the winning House were circumvented. I'm also pleased to report that the Board of Governors is very pleased indeed with the exam results. This year is our best ever showing. Higher percentages of Outstanding on both O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s than have ever been recorded..."

Severus allowed his mind to drift off. He looked at the other occupants of the room. No one seemed vexed by his presence; in fact, they all seemed remarkably relaxed, as though none of them had a care in the world.

Hermione looked especially beautiful. Her eyes were shining as James reviewed the academic achievements of the year. She was positively radiant. He looked over at Lily and realised, with something of a jolt, that he didn't find her as appealing as the witch seated to his left.

Snape was startled back into reality as the staff laughed again. "...so as to not keep you all too long. Now, please don't forget, you're all invited to come and stay the weekend prior to the World Cup and attend the game as our guests. I'd ask everyone to stay longer, but if my son doesn't get some time alone with his beautiful wife, Lily and I will be well into our dotage by the time we're made grandparents."

The meeting broke up, and they all stood. Snape heard the excited chatter of holiday plans and anticipation of the World Cup. He noticed how many of them smiled at him, really smiled. Or asked after him since his fall (Lily had apparently chosen a fall to cover the embarrassing truth of his supposed head injury).

He had friends. He had a beautiful wife and real friends, not just colleagues. He stared around at the thinning crowd.

"Alright, Severus?" Hermione asked.

"You've no idea, love. You've no idea."

*A/N: Thanks to everyone who is reading! Please take a moment to leave me a review, I'd love to hear any and all comments! *hugs**

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 8

Severus begins to get comfortable in his new life. Lily asks for his support.

Disclaimer: I don't own the players; I merely made up my own rules for this little game.

Disclaimer: I am borrowing the title as well. I make no money, only pray for reviews!

Severus found his new reality unnerving, yet he managed to find his way in it. He and Hermione had love, something he felt dwarfed by the feeling but also comforted. It was not a fairytale or a storybook. They fought over empty bog rolls, stolen covers, and the like. They debated fiercely their points of view on the newest discoveries in Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration.

He had always enjoyed living a life of snark and biting remarks, but he was amazed to find that he and his wife had formed an affectionate language from his own innate bitterness. She found the humour in most comments, and when she didn't, she called him on it.

Neither one was shy of telling their spouse when they were over the line. Severus hated it, hated that she would dare to tell him when she thought he was unfair or refusing to see points of view other than his own. However, he quickly came to realise that this was true love. Anyone could blow sunshine up your arse, smile, and walk away. What was unusual was to find the one who would tell you the brutal truth and then stay with you through the humiliation, rage, and indignation. Severus found that on the other side of this negative, wound-licking shame was true love.

The man who was kept alive by his ability to conceal the truth of himself finally found peace and happiness in the utter inability to hide anything from his wife.

Aside from his marriage, his life was the same. Well, other than the moments where he discovered the differences in the path this reality had taken. He graded papers, worked in Potions for both the hospital wing and private sales. He avoided the Potters and the Lupins. He nearly fell over when he received an owl from Dumbledore. The former Headmaster merely wanted to ensure that Severus would indeed come to Godric's Hollow for Harry's homecoming and also for the holiday.

Hermione found the letter and responded before he could decline. She and Dumbledore both seemed to assume that he would attend, albeit grudgingly, whilst verbally abusing James and Harry at every turn. He was pleased to note that though he appeared to have built a cooperative friendship with the two of them, everyone would still expect him to scowl in his accustomed manner.

Two days later, they were off. The elder Potters' house was large and impressive without the overdone sense of the Malfoy Manor. He and Hermione had their own suite, including a private bath. They were situated across the hall from the Lupins; Severus supposed it could have been worse. And they were next door to Draco Malfoy and Ronald Weasley, who were sharing a suite. That had come as a bit of a shock.

Hermione was putting her robes into the cupboard, her back to the door. He himself was looking out the large picture window that revealed the grounds. He was thinking over his strategy for surviving the weekend without killing any of the prats who annoyed him.

Suddenly, the door to the hallway burst open, and a tall, ginger blur streaked across the room and swept Hermione into an embrace. Severus took out his wand, ready to begin hexing, but he could not get a clear shot. His jaw was clenching in rage as Hermione was squealing with delight.

"Don't get your wand in a knot, Severus. It makes me a bit jealous from time to time as well." Draco Malfoy was just behind him, smirking broadly at the whirling pair.

Severus' mouth hung open for a moment before he could regain some semblance of composure. "Draco, yes, well. I'm sure it's... I was merely startled. How are you?"

Draco laughed and shook his head. "Just grand. My business is amazingly successful, though I'm afraid Ron is still the breadwinner. I can't say I oppose being a kept man, as long as he doesn't insist that I bring him breakfast in bed."

Weasley finally unhanded Hermione, and the pair of them stood grinning at the Slytherins in the doorway. "Don't worry, love. Breakfast is the last thing on my mind when we're in bed."

Hermione hit Weasley in the chest lightly and laughed. "Well, there's another one you've got over me, Draco." She grinned as she crossed the room to hug Malfoy.

Severus could only stare. It wasn't that he objected to homosexuality. In his opinion, any fulfilling relationship was a good thing; it was just an extremely big surprise to see two men who had hated one another all their lives as a couple. It was comparable to himself and Black... That thought was too nauseating to finish.

He watched as the three of them talked excitedly. Weasley and Malfoy seemed comfortable with one another. Both must have changed a great deal, grown up. He watched the way she spoke with them; obviously, she loved the both of them very much.

Draco began to recount a rather amusing tale of his recent trip to New Zealand when Severus heard something that garnered his full attention.

"...Dark relics are so cliché, aren't they? I'll never understand the draw. Though I'm thankful my father evidently had it. I'd never have gotten into the antiques game had it not been for all that old rubbish he'd hidden around the house. He must have been a real character. One of these days, you're going to have to tell me what he was like." Draco smiled at Severus.

He tried to recover, but he found it next to impossible. Draco had never known Lucius? How odd. Severus nodded at Draco, hoping that if the conversation were to continue, he would glean more useful information from it.

As it turned out, he didn't. But he made up his mind to use his old spying skills to learn about this new world. In spite of his decision not to question this odd reversal of fate, he would still like to better understand his situation. He was, after all, a naturally curious sort of person.

Dinner that evening gave him the opportunity to compile and refine his list of questions. Anytime someone questioned him, he gave brief answers, as vague as he could make them. They all seemed to expect his usual snark, though everyone took his biting nature in stride. They all seemed to think his nastiness was simply a mask for affection.

It came as no surprise to him that Longbottom was as yet unmarried. Apparently, he'd asked someone repeatedly, and the young lady consistently put him off, stating her work as the cause.

The younger Potters had been married shortly after leaving school, and as he'd learned from the staff meeting on his first day, they hadn't any children. Lily and James had no other children either.

The Lupins had a son who was not at Hogwarts yet. They loved teaching and loved each other. Remus had been teaching for nearly as long as Severus.

The most interesting thing he'd learned from Lupin was that there were no longer any Heads of House. Each first year student was randomly assigned a fifth year student as a mentor. Upon entering fourth year, the students chose a staff member as their mentor. The practice had been instituted by Dumbledore and was thought to foster inter-house unity.

Harry Potter was rather muscular and seemed more vulnerable and unsure of himself than Severus remembered. At dinner, Harry sat at Hermione's other side, and the two of them talked and whispered. He tried not to be jealous, but it wasn't easy for him.

Harry played Quidditch for England as the Seeker. Severus couldn't work out how a professional athlete could look so cowed and meek. He wondered if perhaps the national team was substandard, or if they had advanced in the Cup due more to luck than skill. He made a mental note to ask Hermione if Harry was alright.

Dumbledore and Minerva sat close together, looking better than Severus had ever seen them. Retirement obviously agreed with his old friend. Severus had to swallow over the lump in his throat when he thought of the other fate that the white-bearded genius had been dealt. So far, this reality was a significant improvement for almost all parties.

As the puddings were cleared away, and everyone rose to leave the table, Lily beckoned Severus to her. He crossed the room, glancing back at Hermione. She smiled tightly at him and exited the room.

Lily beamed at him. "Sev, I know this is your time off, but I wondered if you'd still be willing to help me with those potions? If we get a good start on them tonight, we could knock them out in only a few hours." She had grasped his forearm with both hands and was staring into his eyes pleadingly.

He looked around for Hermione. He assumed she'd caught up with the girls for a 'witches circle.' She didn't need him hanging around her; she was likely glad to be off with her friends. He smiled at Lily warmly. "I'd be glad to assist you."

As they left the dining room, Severus noticed that the lads seemed to have all gathered around the fireplace in the lounge. Another door off the hall was closed, but he could hear a feminine voice, laughing uncontrollably. *Better to give her time with her friends.*

As it turned out, he quite enjoyed himself with Lily. As they laughed and chatted over their caldrons, he thought of how richer his life must be if he'd had her friendship all along. They understood one another. They worked well together. Her own work was so precise that he could scarcely discern it from his own. She was magical. Literally magical.

He didn't want to alert her to his present situation, but he felt the need to bring up a point that had been niggling him all evening. Ever the spy, Severus cast a nonverbal Muffliato so that no one could overhear and misconstrue what he wished to say to her. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

"Lily, is James ever jealous of us?"

She put down her knife and came around the table to stand next to him. "No, Severus. He's trusted you without question since you saved us that night. You should know that."

I saved them? From what, I wonder? He filed that under urgent. He put down his knife and turned towards her. "But if we spend all this time together and get on so well, it really doesn't bother him? Are you sure?" He suddenly feared he'd given away his position, so he corrected himself. "Only I would never want him to think anything untoward, after all our years of friendship."

Lily stepped closer so that their bodies were just touching. She whispered, "Don't worry. He has no suspicions. Please don't let guilt come between us." She smiled sadly at him.

We've been friends all this time. I must mean a great deal to her. He smiled, nodding at her. He turned back to the table and continued to chop his hyacinth leaves. Lily stayed where she was and let out a shaky breath.

He glanced back at her. Her brow was furrowed, and her mouth had turned down at the corners. "Lily, is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"It's Harry. I've been so worried about him," she whispered. She ran her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes. "He's just not getting past this. He's not. I know my son. He's promised to work through this thing, and he'll try. He will try, but what if he can't?"

Severus felt panicked. He had no earthly idea what she might be on about, but he couldn't let her know that. She'd obviously already confided the pertinent fact to him. He knew he needed to be supportive, so he'd just have to lead her into giving away more than she realised.

"Lily, Harry is stronger than anyone I know. He has survived so much in his life, surely he'll find a way." Severus held his breath, hoping she'd fill in some gaps for him. When he reached out to pat her shoulder, she shocked him by leaning into him and resting her head on his chest.

"Oh, Sev, I know he is. But Ginny is the only woman he's ever loved. You remember what he was like. He was over the moon about her from the time he was thirteen years old." Lily was shaking slightly. She took a deep breath and continued quietly. "I can't believe that she'd betray him like that. They always seemed so devoted. The worst part is, I feel like a terrible hypocrite for judging her. How can I of all people look down on someone for feeling torn between two attractive men?" As she finished, Lily slid her fingers over his shoulder and into his hair. She was looking into his face with her lips slightly parted.

Severus stared at her for a moment, utterly gob smacked. She was coming onto him. Had they had trysts before? He was still reeling from the information that Ginny had been unfaithful to Harry when he learned that he was in almost the same situation.

The truth was, he had no desire to lean down and kiss her. He felt a pull toward her, but it seemed to come more from force of habit than anything else. He could only think of Hermione.

He tried to step away from her as gracefully as possible, given the circumstance. "Lily, what have we done to be ashamed of?"

In a small, quavering voice, she answered, "Nothing. But not for lack of desire. Only for lack of opportunity. I'm a monster, I know."

Severus realised that he was trembling with relief and could barely swallow. He'd done nothing in the past, and he was going to reject her now. Of all the ironies, he was about to reject Lily, who had been his greatest and only desire. "You mustn't say such things. What would that do to everyone? We would be lying to everyone we know. Think, not only of James, but of Hermione. The two of you are friends, are you not? Think of Harry. How would he feel?"

"You're right. My gods! You're his godfather. You're James' best friend in the world. Hermione and I have grown quite close since she lost her own parents. But the heart wants what it wants. I can't deny it, Severus. I still want you."

She stood calmly, looking perfectly composed, as though they were merely comparing brewing techniques. He looked at her closely. Her eyes were wide with desire and alight with pain. *How in the bloody hell have we gotten to this? Must my life include drama and intrigue, no matter what the circumstance?*

"Lily, I love you. I have loved you all my life. But so many stand to be hurt if we pursue this, can you not see that?" he asked softly. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You should look on me as a brother. That is how we must see one another, as strictly out of bounds."

Lily nodded, swiping at the tears that were pouring down her face. He took a deep breath to steady himself. "Now, as far as Ginny is concerned, if Harry wants to work on things with her, I don't see that any of us have a choice but to accept and support his decision. I can't imagine that she would have done such a thing with intentional malice. Perhaps her situation was rather like our own. She's not a cruel person by nature. I'm certain it must be hurting her as well."

Lily sighed. "I know. Harry is hurting so badly. His confidence has never been what it should be. You know that. He's felt all his life that he's been not only in James' shadow, but also yours. Son and godson to the two most powerful and famous wizards in the world. Practically the only people he's ever felt truly comfortable with are Hermione, Ginny, and me."

Severus made an effort to keep listening in spite of his shock at her words. He made yet another mental note to find out precisely why he and James would be so revered. Right now, his focus was on trying to sort out the situation with Harry. "Go on, Lily. You can tell me. You know that," he said, squeezing her shoulder again.

She looked torn, so he spoke again. "Tell me this. If the situation were reversed, how would you want Harry and Ginny to react?"

"I would hope that they would try to understand. They would try, but I know it would tear everyone apart. Gods, I want to kill her. I want to hex Wood's bollocks to the size of grapefruits! Harry should find someone and show her the meaning of the term 'vengeance fuck.'"

"And that would make things better, would it? If Harry compromises his honour and principles just to prove a point?" Severus raised an eyebrow and waited.

Lily searched his fathomless eyes like a drowning man gasps for breath. "No. I would have him like his father, incapable of duplicity or dishonour."

"There you have it. Harry should do what he can to put this behind him. And I will always be here for you, Lily. You are my oldest and dearest friend. In spite of the fact that you chose to marry beneath you." Severus arranged his face into a scowl that quickly melted into a warm smile.

Lily placed her hand on his cheek and sighed. "I love you. Is this really all that can ever be between us? I know it's dreadful, but my door will always be open to you." Tears spilled onto her cheeks and shone in the dim light.

Severus was again dumbstruck. He leaned forward to place his forehead on hers. He closed his eyes and savoured the last moment. He was more shaken by how little he was tempted by her than by her proposal. He put a hand in her hair, running his fingers through the silken, fire-coloured strands for another moment.

When at last he pulled away from her, it was with a sad, resigned smile. "Lily. I love you; I will love you all my life." He took a long, shuddering breath. "But that doesn't mean that I don't love my wife completely. I cannot and will not do this to any of us, James included. Can you understand?"

"Of course, Severus. I'm so sorry."

"You needn't apologise. Part of family and friendship is setting boundaries. We've all known each other too long to let something so simple as this get in the way of our relationships."

Severus and Lily embraced for a moment. Lily then dried her tears, and the two of them went back to brewing. They never noticed that a figure had appeared in the doorway a little ways into their conversation. Because of Severus' long-forgotten Muffliato, the curly-haired witch heard none of the words, she only saw two people exchange loving looks and embraces. From her position in the shadows, she saw the desire in Lily's eyes. Because of her keen eyes and sharp intellect, she lip-read bits and pieces of their statements.

...the heart wants what it wants.

Still want you.

I want to kill her.

I still love you.

...my door will always be open to you.

It's been said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. That statement was never truer than it is in this case. These few words, few touches, and few glances, taken out of context, would bring about more than any of them could ever have known.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this bit. I promise, I do have an explanation for the AU. I can't share just yet, but I promise it will come!

Thanks to the lovely and talented kizzy7, beta extraordinaire. She is truly divine. Thanks also to the admins here, and to all of you who are kind enough to read (and review).

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 8

Severus goes a bit further down the 'primrose path'.

Disclaimer: I can take credit only for the weirdness of the situation. JKR owns the rest.

By the time Severus returned to his room, he had forgotten that Hermione had disappeared. He and Lily had stayed awake into the wee hours of the morning. The bed was empty, though he could tell Hermione had slept at some point.

He entered the bathroom to find her fresh from the shower, looking rather startled to see him. They chatted briefly, and then he went to bed. She never joined him, but at the time, he was so knackered that he slept through until lunch. It never occurred to him where Hermione might have gone. He was equally ignorant of the fact that when they were together, she was almost completely silent.

During the World Cup match, they enjoyed seats in the top box. Severus became aware of the tension between the Mrs. Potters. The female contingent of their group seemed to divide into camps. Again, he failed to see where Hermione was during the match, as the game was truly spectacular. Harry caught the Snitch after four hours of exhausting play.

The young man came into the box to receive the cup with his team. He greeted each of his guests, with kisses for his mother and Hermione. No one but Severus realised that Harry passed over his wife as he thanked everyone for their support.

After the match, they had a bit of a victory celebration at Harry's favourite pub. Severus was drawn into a discussion about an Quidditch match that had taken place between Gryffindor and Slytherin in his school days. He and James recounted James' and Lucius' infamous battle for the snitch. The other wizards present gathered round to laugh and enjoy the moment.

For the first time in living memory, Severus was completely relaxed. Comfort was a heady thing for him. Once again, he failed to realise that a certain curly-haired witch was nowhere to be seen. Ginny Potter sat morosely at the bar, talking despondently to Luna Lovegood. Lily was chatting with a couple of witches that Severus recognised as members of their year at school, though he could not name them.

It had been a wonderful week altogether. He was genuinely sorry to see it end, and he was sure Hermione felt the same way. He thought he ought to apologise to her for all the grief he'd put her through about her friends. He thought better of it, since no one seemed to find his behaviour odd. He would hate to arouse suspicion or undue attention.

Severus was entirely wrapped up in his own feelings. He was excited to get home. He had loved his first few days at home with Hermione and was eager for more. He also wanted to continue his research on the history of this---whatever it was.

When they arrived home, he settled into his research, barely noticing that his wife was quieter than she had been before their holiday. Though as time wore on, she became more animated. They enjoyed the rest of their summer holidays together.

It was not until the week before the start of term that things began to take a turn. Hermione had decided to head to London for some shopping. Severus was going to do inventory on his Potion stores, both his private and the student cupboards in preparation for classes. As Hermione had no wish to take part in the tedious dusting, measuring, and refilling of a myriad of tiny bottles and jars, they'd agreed to a day apart.

His morning was spent industriously, and by lunch he'd gotten his supplies well in order. After lunch, he went to the library. Severus took out several books on contemporary wizarding history as well as a handful of *Daily Prophets* from each of the last dozen years.

He reasoned that this should give him a fairly decent background on the current state of affairs. He was tempted to Legilimize someone, but he couldn't reckon who it should be. Whoever he chose would have to be Obliviated shortly thereafter, and he'd no wish to risk damaging Hermione's brain. He'd thought of James and Lily, but he'd been sick at the thought of inadvertently encountering any of the memories of their sex life while on a tour of their psyches. He'd just have to keep digging the 'old fashioned' way.

He started with the most recent issues of the *Prophet*, and he came up empty. He was ready to take a break when there was a knock at the door. He walked to the door, wondering if he'd ever have any answers.

Lily stood on the other side of the door, looking as pale as a ghost.

"My Gods, Lily, you look like someone took out all your blood and replaced it with milk."

She shook her head wordlessly. Severus reached out to put a steadying arm around her. She looked as though a slight breeze would send her flying. He guided her inside, and in his concern, he forgot to latch the door completely.

He led her to the sofa and Summoned the tea and biscuits he'd prepared earlier. "What is it, Lily? You can tell me. I'm here." He sat next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

She started to shake with sobs, her hands covering her face. He pulled her closer and made soothing sounds in her ear as he stroked her hair and back. He wondered what might have happened to upset her so. She and James seemed to get on well. Harry and Ginny, though still a bit distant, seemed to be on the mend. Severus waited, continuing to hold her and offer support. Slowly, her sobbing eased, and she sat up. Her eyes had an odd gleam to them; her face was red and splotchy, but she seemed normal enough.

"Are you ready to talk now?" he asked kindly.

Lily was just beginning to nod when her body seized violently. She clapped a small hand to her mouth and ran toward the bedroom door. Severus stood and turned just in time to see her lunge through the bathroom door. He walked into the bedroom and waited there. He heard her heave several times. By the time he heard her flush, he Summoned a potion to rinse the taste from her mouth and conjured a cool flannel for her face. He also Summoned several other potions, depending on what the cause of the illness might be. Hangover was the least likely, but the anti-anxiety potion might just do the trick.

She sat next to him on the bed, gratefully accepting the flannel and the minty potion. When she'd taken care of herself, he spoke again. "Now. Do you have something you'd like to tell me?"

She nodded and sighed shakily. "Severus. Something has happened, something wonderful that I'd truly given up on." She was looking at him with unshed tears shining in her eyes. "I'm pregnant," she breathed.

Severus stared at her in shock, painfully reminded of the afternoon they'd 'discussed' Harry's impending birth. He moved cautiously away in case she was thinking he'd be up for a repeat performance.

"Lily, that's wonderful. I know James will be thrilled. And Harry. Oh, Harry isn't going to be happy with this, is he? It's only going to underline the fact that all is not well in his family. Lily, how ever will you explain this? Do you think he can take it?"

Lily shook her head. "Why is it that no matter how much I love him, I wind up hurting him?" She buried her face in her hand, and Severus drew near and put an arm around her shoulders.

"I'm here for you. No one has to know but the two of us, if that is what you wish. I want to be here for you. Don't worry. Can't you remember? Didn't we always say that as long as the two of us were together, there was nothing to worry about?" Severus laughed as he stroked her back tenderly.

Lily leaned into him, her voice becoming muffled as her face rested in his lap. "Severus. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

He chuckled and pulled her upright. "Now. No more talk of that. You must go and tell James. Think how pleased he'll be. We'll tell Harry. Talk to James. Perhaps Hermione should tell him. Sometimes I think they're almost as close as the two of us."

As Lily calmed herself, and as Severus made a final offer of support, neither noticed the quiet footsteps retreating from the bedroom door and out into the main hallway.

Several students turned in shock as Professor Granger stormed down the corridor, looking murderous. Upstairs in the safety of her own office, after slamming the door nearly off the hinges, she threw down her shopping and gave in to her need to cry.

Severus never knew that she spent hours curled in her office chair, her heart breaking. He was unaware that Harry Potter happened to Floo, and Hermione told him everything she'd just seen.

No, Severus was busy in his own little world, innocently pleased for his friends. Mentally planning the time when he and his beloved Hermione would be ready for a child. It would be lovely.

A while later, a house-elf delivered a letter to him. It was from Hermione, though her handwriting looked uncharacteristically untidy. He presumed she'd dashed it off in a bit of a rush. She'd owed to say that she'd be staying at her parents' that night and not to worry.

He accepted this news happily; she really did need to reconnect with her family from time to time. He never dreamed that at that very moment, she was divesting herself of her clothing whilst rapidly using non-verbal spells to strip the dark haired wizard who was holding her in strong arms.

People do funny things in their grief and heartbreak. Harry and Hermione reached out to one another in their time of mutual need. Harry didn't care if Ginny ever found out, as she'd done the same to him. Hermione couldn't even think of Severus at that moment. She reasoned that if he ever found out, she would simply play the trump card...at least she'd not conceived a child with someone other than her spouse.

Severus sighed and sipped his tea, content and ignorant. For the millionth time that evening, he thanked any and all deities who might be listening for his blissful, harmonious life.

A/N: I just want to apologize for not explaining his situation. I PROMISE, I will explain. Please stick with me!

Thanks so much to kizzy7. I get so wrapped up in the story, she's always got quite a mess to contend with. Kizzy rocks!!!!

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 8

Severus and Hermione have to come try to make sense of the state of their relationship.

Disclaimer: I make no money. I am only borrowing the creation of a literary genius.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who has been so kind to review!!

Thanks to the amazing Kizzy7 for her beta invaluable beta skills.

I'd like to share a few things with all of you.

1. Severus is not dead.

2.This is not a dream. This is something he's experiencing to give him a different perspective on his 'canon life'.

3. It will not end on a horribly depressing note.

4. Watch the film "Family Man" with Nicholas Cage. That explains better than I could.

5. I love you all, and I hope no one wants to kill me when they've finished reading.

Here goes...

The sun rose to stream into the enchanted window in the bedroom wall. Severus woke quickly and hurried through his morning hygiene rituals. He really did need to make up for lost time in the lab. He didn't regret talking to Lily, but for one who prided himself on punctuality, he did not want to be behind schedule.

He was pleased to note that he'd developed a business as a custom brewer, a supplement to his teaching wages. He constantly had to remind himself that he'd been trusted and revered for more than two decades in this place... time... whatever. If he allowed himself to obsess over the details and peculiarities his life now included, he'd waste the experience.

As always, Severus lost himself entirely in the process of brewing a complex potion. He revelled in the exactness of it, the need for absolute perfection. Before, this had been his greatest high, most potent joy. Now, that thought was laughable...chopping roots and straining rodent innards couldn't even compare to his feelings for Hermione.

He added the last few ingredients to the cauldron and turned to tidy the lab. The shower was running; she was home. With a grin on his face and hot intensity building in his stomach, he strode through their quarters.

The bath was entirely full of steam, so much that he couldn't make out her form in the glass shower. He quickly hung his robes from the hook on the back of the bathroom door.

The heat and steam of the little room seemed to fuel his desire. He reached the shower and slowly opened the transparent door.

"Hermione?" he asked softly, not wanting to startle her.

He waited, one foot in the shower, for her to respond. He wondered if she were playing with him, wanting her to seek him. But then he noticed another detail.

Over the heat and moisture and the knowledge that his wife's lovely body was only feet away came the sound of erratic breathing and gasping. He panicked. Something was terribly wrong with her. He roughly swung the door open, allowing some of the steam to escape. He could just see her, sitting curled in a ball on the floor of the shower.

He dropped to the floor and reached for her. "Hermione? Love, please, what's the matter?" Severus was trying with all his might to contain his terror. He wanted nothing more than to demand an answer or use Legilimancy against her. He resisted his urges, fearing that he would make her feel more threatened rather than comforted.

She flinched away as he neared, staring gloomily at the floor. He could tell that she'd been crying. A new sort of fear took over.

"Is it your mum and dad?" he murmured, reaching to put a hand on her.

Again, she jerked sharply away from him, shaking her head.

He felt helpless. He tried to calm himself. If he could only get her talking, he had a chance to fix whatever might have happened. He reached out and turned the tap, cutting off the flow of near-boiling water. With a bit of silent, wandless magic, he Summoned a large towel, wrapping it around her shoulders.

She struggled slightly, but he managed to pull her into his arms. He carried her to their bed and set her gently on the duvet. She was shaking, tears still rolling slowly down her face.

He Summoned a towel for himself. He quickly dried himself and then wrapped it around his waist. He studied her carefully. She had no outward sign of injury. She looked as though she were completely hysterical, almost to the point of shock.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I'm fine, just a little emotional." Her voice startled him, not only because he hadn't expected her to say anything, but also because her usually melodic voice was utterly devoid of levity or tone.

If he wasn't careful, she would stop talking. So he banished his own fears and questions in favour of anything that might benefit her.

He sighed, stroking a stray lock of hair away from her forehead. "No need to apologize, my love. Are you alright?"

"I'm not s-sure. I... I don't know anything anymore." Her voice was so quiet that he could barely hear her.

He moved his body closer to hers, leaning her against his side. He draped his arm over her protectively. "Hermione," he began quietly, "I will always love you. You must know that. I know things happen that will be upsetting or that may cause you to call my feelings into question. You must always remember that I love you more than my own life." He kissed her shoulder, feeling her tense under the touch of his lips.

Her tears were flowing faster. He reasoned he must have made a mistake in her past, unknowable to him. He owed her his apologies, hoping against hope that he dared ask her to accept them. He decided his best course was to continue, using care not to expose his dangerous ignorance.

"Hermione, what I've done... What I have done has hurt you, I can see that. I am so sorry. Please know that I will do all I can to make up for my past misdeeds, if that can be done at all. Do you think we can put it behind us and start again?"

She was sobbing quietly now, her slim body shaking with the force of her emotion. "Is it over?" Her eyes were a storm of fear and desperation.

"It's all over; I swear it. You are my one and only focus from this moment on." He lifted her chin so she could see the gravity of his resolve. She looked better for the space of a few heartbeats, and then her face crumbled and her sobs redoubled.

She pushed away from him and went to stand in front of the fireplace, staring into the bright flames. "But you don't know what I... what I've d-done."

"You're right. I haven't got any idea, and do you know what's more? I don't care. Whatever you think you've done to deserve my wrath, I'm sure was only a reaction to the hurt that you felt... You owe me no explanation or apology." He crossed the room as he spoke to her, ending just behind her, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

She still shook with silent sobbing. He continued speaking to her. "I love you too much to allow you to torture yourself like this. Let's start over. We'll make a pact to let go of anything in the past. Can you agree?"

She looked up at him in wide-eyed shock and wonder. He could see that she still had things she'd planned to say, but she seemed to decide to accept his offer. Her face became more peaceful, and she nodded.

Severus wasn't sure how they arrived at the bed or became so frenzied, but he was grateful. She clung to him, tears pouring from her eyes as they came together. He pushed the ever-lengthening list of annoying questions to the back of his mind. Whatever had happened, why ever he was here...he was here. He meant to savour each moment he had with her.

As he drove into her flesh again and again, he felt a tightness in his heart. He loved her completely. He only hoped that she would love him in return, and he would deserve that love.

Some time later, they lay tangled in a mass of limbs, foreheads pressed together. His eyes were closed as he breathed in her scent, relishing the closeness. If he stayed here forever with her, or if he was torn back to another reality, he would never forget this time with her.

She sighed softly. He opened his eyes to stare into hers. The connection was peaceful for a few moments before he noticed that he could not move. Her voice sounded in his head.

Use it. Use Legilimancy, now.

The command was sharp, and he hadn't a hope of refusing.

He looked into her eyes, registering the self-loathing and the overwhelming sense of justice before he was compelled to speak. "Legilimens!" He was sucked into the blackness of her irises with a thrill of disbelief. She'd somehow managed to use a nonverbal, wandless Imperius on him.

He tumbled into her thoughts and was immediately assaulted with a rapid succession of scenes involving himself and Lily. They talked, worked side-by-side, and exchanged glances. He could feel her fear and her doubt. The knowledge that she'd been watching him, observing his interactions with Lily for who could tell how long.

Then, he saw the corridor outside their rooms. She entered... voices. There were two voices. Hermione's pulse raced at the sound of he and Lily, talking quietly in the bedroom. She approached the door, just peering in from that vantage point. The pair seemed to be cuddled romantically together on the bed. He felt her panic and shame rise through the memories. The scene went black.

Snippets of their words had drifted to her ears. The picture changed, and he could feel that he was now viewing her fears and paranoid fantasies. He saw himself and Lily kissing, touching, in various states of undress, and then finally he saw something that made his heart stop.

He'd seen an image, years before. He'd been wandering the school during the Christmas holidays when almost every other student was gone. He'd happened upon a room, and in that room, a mirror.

He'd never forgotten the surprise he'd felt when the reflection in the mirror had changed. It had shown a happy family. Himself, tall and strong with his arm around a radiant Lily, who was cuddling a baby.

Now, in his wife's greatest fears, he saw almost that same image. She believed the child Lily was carrying to be his. She truly believed he wanted a family with another woman.

Before he could spend much time on this, another scene began to develop. Hermione ran full tilt through the halls of the ancient school. When she reached the Room of Requirement, she ran three times back and forth before pelting through the door. The room was tiny, empty, and featureless but for a fireplace. She tossed the Floo powder she found on the mantel into the flames as she shouted, "Grimmauld Place!"

As the scene materialized, Severus recognized the familiar lounge of Grimmauld Place. He noticed that the image seemed to be stretching and pulling in odd directions. He realised this was Hermione's stress at what she was showing him.

He tried to comfort her, but under the Imperius, she forced him to keep looking.

She seemed to pull away from him, as though he were dangerous. He turned to see a surprised Harry Potter cradling a sobbing Hermione in his arms.

Harry patted her soothingly and murmured calming sounds into her hair. Her body was tense and shaking in her anxiety and grief. Severus wanted them to speak, but he feared what might be said.

"Hermione, what's happened? Don't cry. Has someone hurt you?" Harry's voice was heavy with his own pain as well as empathy for his best friend.

"Harry, oh, gods! I s-saw them together. Oh, Harry! I never thought..." She was again choked by sobbing.

He waited while she regained a bit of composure before pressing on. "Who did you see?"

"Severus. He was with... Oh, why didn't I let myself believe sooner? It must have been going on for an age... I always knew I could never be enough for him. I knew it!" She sounded humiliated; the defeat in her tone was almost unbearable.

"Hermione, what exactly happened? What did you see? And who was Severus with? I can't believe he'd do anything to betray you, honestly." Harry sounded worried, but his tone carried an edge that said plainly, 'there must be a logical, non-dramatic explanation for this.'

"He was with you mum, Harry. Your MUM! He's always loved her.... He must have taken me as a substitute. Now, they're having a baby."

"What!?! There's no way that can be right, Hermione."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Something's been off with Severus for months. I've been watching him. He stares around like he's amazed at his surroundings. He and your mum have been spending loads of time together. He told me it was all because of, well, you and Ginny. Your dad was ready to forgive and forget much quicker than your mum. Severus said he was helping her deal with all that.

You know what they've always been like...brewing together, private jokes, all that sort of thing? Well, I thought so too. When we stayed at your mum and dad's place before the World Cup, I watched. They kept looking at each other. They brewed together over night!"

Harry looked truly shocked at this and started to respond. Hermione raised a hand to stop him and continued. "Then last night, he said he'd be brewing. I came home to find the door open. I heard voices, sounded like gasping... or panting. So I came in quietly, and they were lying out on MY bed. They were talking about having a baby. He said he would love her and be there no matter what. They talked about how they hoped you would be alright with it and made jokes about what great big-brother you'll be!"

At this point, Harry looked a little faint. He shook his head several times, as though to clear his thoughts.

"I don't know what to say. Maybe it's just not possible to be faithful to a Potter." His laugh was without humour.

He stood and took to pacing in front of the fire. His face was twisted with pain and rage. As Hermione slid to the floor and hugged her knees, Harry seemed to come back to himself.

He dropped to his knees and immediately took her in his arms. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. You come to me for support, and all I can think of is myself. I guess I really am as self-centred as Malfoy used to be.

"I know, or at least I've got a good idea, what you're going through. But you have to focus on the fact that it's nothing to do with you. If Severus is that fucking stupid, if he'd throw away his marriage and most of his friendships...he's not who any of us thought he was." Harry studied her for moment and then continued softly. "You are beautiful and smart. You are passionate and strong. There's no way you aren't enough for him; you are more than enough for any man."

Harry was stroking her back now, and she raised her face to meet his gaze. "Your hair is so soft."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Your eyes are lovely and warm." He placed a gentle kiss on each of her eyelids.

His voice was very quiet and soft now. He was leaving a trail of kisses along her jaw line. "Your skin is deliciously smooth, and your scent is intoxicating."

Her hands were beginning to run over his shoulders and upper back. He shifted on the floor to pull her on top of him, straddling him. They were face to face. "Harry," she whispered, "I don't know why Ginny would have done that to you either."

Her lips were brushing his ear. "You are so strong and thoughtful. You know... I meant never to tell you this, but considering everything else, I may as well."

She took a deep breath. "Remember just after we left school? Our camping trip? Well, we lived in such close quarters... I accidentally peeked once when you were changing." A blush coloured her cheeks.

"And?" Harry prompted breathlessly.

"And if Ginny wasn't satisfied by that, I don't think she'll ever be." She seemed embarrassed, and yet she continued kissing his neck and shoulders. His shirt was mysteriously unbuttoned.

Harry laughed. "As long as we're baring our souls here, I supposed I should tell you something. Do you know how many nights I couldn't get to sleep because of the little

moans or sighs you'd let out while you were sleeping? I was afraid you would wake up and think I was some sort of pervert."

They both laughed and then looked into each other's eyes. The moment lasted, and Severus wondered if they were using Legilimancy to read the other's thoughts.

"I don't want this to be about vengeance," Harry whispered.

"I don't want it to be about avoiding pain." Hermione's voice was calm, but there was tremulous quality to it.

"Will it ruin our friendship?" His green eyes flashed.

Hermione considered him for a long time. "I thought of you first. Whenever anything bad happens, I want to share it with you. Because you'll know what to do. So can't we share something good?"

"I don't know. It seems like we're stooping to their level." Harry stated this in an off-hand manner.

Severus realised he'd been holding his breath and was now getting a headache. This was too much for him, and he wondered if he would be sick. He took several deep breaths.

Harry and Hermione seemed to have talked themselves out of going down that road.

They sat still, Hermione sitting atop him, for a long time. He pulled her into an embrace. As he rested his face on her breasts, Hermione started to cry.

"What is it, love?" Harry asked quietly.

Hermione wouldn't look at him. "I was just thinking I know why he did it."

"Why is that?"

Hermione whispered something entirely unintelligible into the top of his head.

"I hardly ever let him see me naked. I mean, sometimes, yes. But I can see he's disappointed in what he sees. I bet he finds me unattractive."

Harry laughed out loud at this. "If that's what he thinks, he's a bastard. You're beautiful and perfect."

"Harry, you don't understand. He's sensual and erotic and virile to the extreme. I'm awkward and unsure. He is forever having to tell me what he wants. There are things he wants to do that I don't even know what they are." She broke into sobs again.

"Hermione, don't. You are sexy. You are the smartest person and so very perceptive. I'm sure you're an incredibly capable lover. I know you must be." Under his breath he muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, 'I'd like to know for sure.'

Staring, she said nothing. Finally, in a soft, shaky voice, she asked, "Harry, would you tell me the truth even if you thought it would hurt my feelings?"

"Of course, Hermione."

Her face changed, became resolute. She stood, disentangling herself a bit awkwardly. She stood about three feet away. She looked Harry straight in the eyes and raised her trembling hands to the buttons of her robes.

Harry sat as though he'd been Stupefied until she was more than half way out of the robes. He stood quickly, placing his hands over her own to stop them.

"Hermione, I thought we agreed that this wasn't the way for us to comfort one another." He frowned at her, his brow crinkling and his jaw clenching with the tension in his face.

Hermione took a slow, steadying breath. "Harry, I'm not doing this out of grief or even out of attraction. I want to do this because I need to know if I really am rubbish when it comes to making love. I trust you to give me your honest opinion."

Severus felt as though he was standing in a rising pool of ice water. He watched the rest of their discussion and the two of them disrobing in mounting horror. He felt nothing but an empty blackness filling him as his young wife gave and took pleasure with his godson.

He wanted to shut out the truth; he couldn't bare the reality of the memory, but his head would not turn, his eyes would not close. He couldn't look away from the horrible nightmare. The contents of his stomach churned and lurched with his anxiety.

Worse even than the physical act was the conversation that followed it. Though he'd missed many of the finer points, Severus was sure of one thing beyond all else. His wife was acting out of two exceptionally misguided beliefs: firstly, that he was displeased with her sexual potency, and secondly, that he had had an affair with Lily.

His insides were frozen solid and sinking into his knees. His happiness and the peaceful state of the world had blinded him. He'd been utterly unaware of her state of mind. He had allowed love to slip through his fingers yet again.

He broke the connection with her mind and quickly turned away. He couldn't bear to tell her she'd been wrong both about his affair and his satisfaction with her. If he did, she would think better of him, but she would hate herself.

He made the choice to say nothing. Hermione walked out of the room, closing the door to the bathroom behind her.

A/N: PLEASE don't hate me. I am NOT a Harry/Hermione shipper. The inspiration for this comes from an experience that a friend of mine had (the running to a friend for comfort bit). I know that this is horrible, and gut wrenching. I promise that it will come out alright in the end. I believe in my heart of hearts that Severus and Hermione are meant to be. Please trust me, and review (though please don't verbally crucify me), and keep reading.

Chapter Six

It's time for memories, advice, and a letter.

A/N: I want to thank everyone for their amazing reviews and for staying with me! You've all been wonderful.

Disclaimer: Not JKR, damn it! Have you seen her amazing shoe collection?

Severus sat unmoving until the shadows grew long and the sky burned in orange and pink fire. He could not get the pictures out of his head.

Hermione's wide, haunted eyes as she postulated that he found her an unattractive prude.

Harry's face when she'd sat naked in his lap.

The tears that ran down her face as another man entered her.

Worst of all had been the end. They had fallen in a tangle of limbs on the hearthrug, sweating and panting. She'd rolled until she was curved around Harry's supine body, her head resting on his chest.

That memory gnawed at him more than any of the others. Hermione curled around another man in post-coital bliss, seeking comfort.

Harry had given her that comfort. Unlike Severus, he had asked questions. The younger man hadn't assumed he could fix everything. He hadn't even tried. Harry had simply given what she'd asked for.

Severus looked down and noticed that he was sitting with a lap full of sick. He was disgusted with himself, but he could not find the will to vanish the mess. He surveyed the bed and realised he must have been sick several times. He didn't care. As though he would ever want to sleep in this bed again. He actually considered setting fire to it. He decided against that simply because he didn't want all of the house-elves pouring into the room when the fire bell went off.

Rising, he walked stiffly to the shower. He peeled off the disgustingly sodden robes and Banished them to the hamper. He stepped into the hot shower, wondering idly if he would ever feel anything again.

I've been given a second chance, and I've managed to piss it away. She was right in front of me, and I managed not to see her.

I let her feel unworthy; I let her doubt herself. If I had treated her the way I should have... but I don't even know, do I? Other than the last few months, I've no idea what I have or have not done in relation to Hermione.

I need to see. I have to know.

His first thought was to go to Lily for information, but that was impossible now. He never wanted to be in the same room with her again. It was not Lily's fault per se, but still, he didn't think one of their cozy chats would do at this point.

He realised the next best source of information at once. He jumped out of the shower and towelled off rather inexpertly. In his frustration to pull on his robes, he nearly rent one of the sleeves from the garment.

A moment later, he stalked the halls, thankful for his venomous reputation. No one spoke to him; in point of fact, students and faculty went scurrying to avoid the unusually livid Potions master.

He spat the password at the ugly gargoyle and took the moving stairs three at a time. He burst through the heavy door to the Head's office, ignoring the Griffin knocker.

"Potter!" he shouted.

James Potter entered from the balcony with an amused grin on his face. "Role playing for old time's sake, are we? Very wellBugger off, Snivellus!" James grinned wickedly for a moment, and then he noticed that his old friend seemed to be sagging under an invisible weight.

Concern lined the Headmaster's face at once, and his entire tone changed as he approached Severus.

"My Gods, what's happened?" James asked, looking worried.

Severus shook his head. He desperately needed his friend's help, but he could not force the words out. He shook slightly, his breathing heavy and ragged.

James directed Severus to an armchair near the fire and sat opposite him. He waited patiently for whatever bad news Severus was holding.

"I don't belong here," Severus whispered.

James looked confused and opened his mouth to speak. Severus raised a hand to silence him.

"I woke up here just before the summer holidays began. Let me tell you my perception of things, and then I want you to tell me what's real to you."

James nodded and listened quietly. His face contorted in shock as Severus recounted the details of his 'other existence.' Severus continued in a soft, monotonous voice through all that he could remember.

He'd begun with the Potters' own deaths and continued up to his own.

James sat looking like he'd seen a ghost. When he was sure Severus was finished, he said softly, "If it turns out that you're mad, they'll have to put us in a padded room for two in St. Mungo's. I believe you. Are you ready for me to highlight the differences for you?"

Severus nodded.

James took a deep breath. "Voldemort did come to Godric's Hollow when Harry was just a little over a year old. I was in the lounge. Lily was feeding Harry his porridge.

That monster entered our house quietly and just stood with an evil grin on his face, looking at me. I screamed at Lily to run with Harry, and Voldemort just laughed. He raised his wand, and I just managed to duck the curse. He was laughing as I managed to duck his curses.

All the commotion was making Lily nervous. She ran in, carrying the baby. He turned on her and offered her the chance to live if she would stand aside."

At this, James smiled, though there were tears in his eyes. "I'll never forget the look on his face when she called him a 'perverted, psychotic fuck' and told him to bugger off.

When he raised his wand, I threw myself in front of her, and the spell seemed to bounce off the air before us. It hit him, and he fell."

Severus looked puzzled but kept quiet.

"You jumped in front of her at that same moment, only you had my Invisibility Cloak. Dumbledore'd borrowed it. I reckon you nicked it, or he asked you to go. We never talked about that bit of it, oddly enough." James sounded thoughtful.

Severus waited while James was lost in thought. His patience came to an end, and he said, "Then what?"

James looked slightly abashed. "Sorry, mate. Right. So even though a Killing Curse ought to have hit the both of us, it didn't. Lily was hysterical; Harry was crying like mad. It was overwhelming. But you stayed calm.

"You checked to make sure snake-face was dead and then called for Dumbledore. He sent Harry to Hogwarts for safekeeping, and then we told him what had happened.

"He had this theory, though we've never had anyway to check it. Dumbledore believed that it was love that stopped the curse. I reckon that's the same as your version, only it wasn't just one person.

"He said that because you and I had been enemies, and you'd been willing to sacrifice yourself to save my life, the power of the curse rebounded onto the originator.

"The only other big issue is that Sirius went mad with rage. He turned up while we were talking to Dumbledore. He was the only one who knew that Peter had sold us to Voldemort, and he swore he'd get his revenge. He took off on his motorbike.

"The next morning we heard that he'd caught up with Peter in Muggle London. Their confrontation didn't take long. Sirius turned his attention away from Pettigrew for an instant. He yelled at some woman to get her baby away. While his head was turned, Peter hit him with some sort of slashing hex, and he started bleeding out.

"Padfoot just managed to hit Peter with an *Avada Kadavra* before he lost consciousness. They both died, and Sirius was posthumously given the Order of Merlin, First Class.

"Before he'd left that to go after Peter, he'd told me that if he didn't come back, you were to be Harry's godfather in his stead."

Severus could only stare into the fire. It was too much for him. He felt a surge of love and pride for Harry that he'd never thought possible. As he replayed Hermione's memories in his head, the stinging emptiness returned. He needed to know more, and so he turned a questioning face back to James.

James nodded and continued his story. "You have always been close with Harry. The Sorting Hat nearly placed him in Slytherin because he so admired you." James was chuckling softly.

"So you taught Harry and his friends. You were rather strict on the lot of them. Always have been. I taught Defence and let them get away with far too much. Hermione was your prized student. You pushed her harder than anyone else, and she surpassed every one of her peers in every class. Well, Harry still won out in Defence. Not because of any favouritism on my part, I assure you.

"After she left school, Hermione studied abroad for several years. She returned and took up her post here. The two of you fell into a close friendship, and both Harry and I hoped that something would come of it. You denied that you felt anything for her, saying she was 'too young' or 'could do better.'

"I've never been sure what happened exactly, but one morning you came in here... You know, let's let you be the judge."

James walked to the cabinet behind the desk and removed the smooth, stone Pensieve. He carried it to the small table next to the chair Severus occupied.

The Headmaster carefully put his wand to his temple and drew out silvery wisps of memory. Severus watched as he detached each one and placed it carefully in the Pensieve. James' face fluctuated from amusement to concentration as he worked to siphon off the thoughts.

Finally, he finished and gestured to Severus that he could make use of the ancient basin.

Obediently, Severus plunged his face into the swirling vapour. At once, he was falling through time and space. He landed in the same office from whence he'd come.

He noticed James sitting at the great desk, reading. He watched in silence for a few moments and then was rather startled by a loud bang.

He spun to see the office door swinging into the wall violently, and his own figure dashed through it.

"I don't know what in the blue fuck you think you're playing at, but you'd best stop it!" his memory self shrieked.

James looked up calmly, as though this outburst was thoroughly expected. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he replied benignly.

Severus saw himself go purple in the face and slam his fists onto the desk. "You know goddamn, bloody well what I mean. You think you can just wish us together, do you? You and my idiot, sodding godson. I'm too old for her. And even if I weren't, you're forgetting the fact that she's in love with someone else."

"Severus, she's told Harry that she is not now nor has ever been interested in anyone but you. You are underestimating her, old friend. Either this happens with you, or it won't happen at all for her. She will not be dissuaded," James explained.

Both Severus and his memory counterpart looked stricken.

James continued. "First admit to yourself how you feel about her and then tell her."

The scene dissolved. All was quiet blackness for a moment or two. Then, the scene reformed in front of him.

This time, he was in his own chambers, seemingly alone. When a persistent knock sounded at the door, Severus heard his own voice call an incantation. The door opened, and his echoing voice bid James to come in.

Severus followed James through the bedroom and toward the open door of the bathroom. He noted that his bedroom looked as though it had been hit by a storm and smelled oddly.

James was speaking to his memory self, who was shaving. "... that the evening went well. Based on the state of your bedroom, anyway?"

"So you didn't get an owl from you son and his wife this morning?" his other self asked.

James laughed. "Alright, we did. Hermione went over there to let them know that they could stop worrying about her. Ginny apparently drug it out of her." James laughed and shook his head.

"Evidently, you've been declared a 'sex-god' by my daughter-in-law and your new girlfriend."

Severus studied the reactions on his own face. He seemed to want to be angry but was unable to stop the smug grin from spreading over his face. Memory Severus actually blushed and shrugged.

The two men laughed for a moment and then the 'other him' spoke in a soft voice. "I love her, James. I love her so much that it frightens me."

James nodded. "I know. Just spend the rest of your life making sure she never doubts it, and you'll be just fine. Now, about what Harry overheard. You need to explain exactly how you managed..." The room went black.

When he could see again, Severus found that he was standing right behind James and himself at what must have been his own wedding. He watched in awe as Hermione drifted toward the lucky bastard at the altar.

She was a vision of absolute perfection. Her smile was tremulous, as though she was slightly nervous. She had eyes only for the man she was about to marry. Severus was entranced by her, but suddenly, the nervous smile twisted into a grimace of terror. Severus looked at his own figure again, and he noticed that he'd stopped looking at Hermione and was now smiling at Lily.

Her face held excitement and something else as she stood behind Ginny, acting as bridesmaid. The two made eye contact for only a few seconds. No one seemed to notice except Hermione. She seemed crushed.

Severus was furious with himself for even acknowledging any other person on the one day that should have been solely devoted to the woman who was becoming his wife.

Several times during the vows, he noted that Lily gestured or made facial expressions so that the groom's eyes repeatedly darted to hers, away from his bride. Again, Hermione seemed to be the only one who noticed.

The scene changed again, and this time, he was standing to the side of the dance floor, obviously at their reception. He and Lily were dancing and whispering in each other's ears. To his eyes, they looked comfortable and happy. But when he looked to his right, he noticed Hermione, another look of horrified shock on her face.

The next few little vignettes passed in rapid succession, only a few seconds in length each. Different moments of himself and Lily talking, sitting together, brewing together, or laughing. Every time, he looked to Hermione to gauge her reaction. Each time, he could see her more and more shattered.

Severus felt himself rise up through the air at long last and settle back in his chair. He could only stare at the carpets. She'd put up with so much fear and doubt for so long.

James interrupted his melancholy. "I know there was never anything, Severus. I tried to tell her time and again, but she said that it still hurt. Severus, she believes that you've been in love with Lily this whole time and only married her as a consolation prize. Or to please Harry, perhaps."

Severus had not gotten over the shock of the words when his friend spoke again. "I know you must be hurt at what she and Harry have done, but please try to remember that they thought, and not without good reason, that you and Lily had betrayed us all." Severus opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

James stood and clapped him on the shoulder. "Severus, what's happened is complex and painful for everyone involved. But you are no more or less responsible for it than any of the rest of us.

You should know that Harry is sick at what he's done. I'm not trying to make excuses, but what happened with Ginny completely devastated him in a way I'll never fully understand. When Hermione came to him, he just couldn't take anymore."

"And Hermione?" Severus croaked.

"She gone, Severus," James said gently. "She asked me to give you this and to tell you not to come after her." James held out a scroll of parchment. Severus took it reflexively.

He stood and walked slowly from the lovely, circular office. His feet moved of their own volition, and he paid no attention to his surroundings. He realised that at one point, he'd left the castle and was now roaming the grounds.

He broke the seal of the letter and stopped just beyond the gates of the school. He took a deep breath and read.

Severus,

I can't imagine how you must hate me. I know that I deserve it. What I've done both to you and Harry is monstrous. I accept the blame fully and only ask that in time, you forgive him. He loves you so.

Lily was apart of your soul before I was born. The two of you share a history and experiences that I can't compete with. I can understand your inability to let her go.

I have loved you as much as I could, and I will continue to do so until I die. I'm sorry that it wasn't enough. Maybe in some parallel universe, you and Lily are happy together. I'm sorry that couldn't be the case in this one.

I hope that you can at least look back on these last years fondly. They were the best of my entire life.

I love you, Severus. But more than that, I only want you to be happy. If I cannot make you happy, I will remove myself from the scenario in hopes that if I'm gone, you'll be free to find the love and happiness that you so richly deserve.

I love you, forever.

Hermione

A/N: This is NOT the end, two chapters left!

Thanks so much to the amazing kizzy7, beta par excellence.

I also want to thank the amazing admins here at TPP. =]

Chapter 7

Severus takes responsibility for his actions. An old friend returns.

Disclaimer: If you are under the impression that I own anything from the canon universe, please seek professional help immediately.

A/N: I want to thank all of you who have read and reviewed. This is the pay-off. Enjoy!

"NO!" His anguished scream rent the air like thunder. It couldn't be true. She believed he didn't love her. And to make matters worse, he couldn't even blame her for it. He could only blame his own ignorance.

True, mere months ago, in his previous existence, he'd hardly given her a second thought. But now that he'd experienced life with her, living and loving with her every day, it would be impossible to go back to his old, ascetic life.

Severus realised that he'd fallen to his knees on the dense carpet of pine needles at the edge of the forest. His vision was blurred slightly, and he found that tears were falling from his eyes.

He stood slowly and continued to wander, still clutching the crumpled parchment, evidence of her exodus. He gave no thought to where he would go; he simply followed his feet.

Sometime later, he looked up to find himself standing just beyond the reach of the Whomping Willow. Severus allowed his gaze to linger over the knotted and gnarled branches down to the twisted and scarred trunk.

The tree reminded him of his own life. His strength and his defences had left him unpleasing to the eye, and frightening. As he neared the tree, the branches began to whip and swirl. He Levitated a long stick to prod the secret knot, effectively freezing the tree.

Without thought or conscious desire, he strode forward and slipped through the passage into the blackness of the tunnel below.

Severus felt his heart speed up as he neared the scene of his death. It was almost maddening to think about his last excursion in that blasted tunnel. Ordinarily, he'd have felt rage at the indignity involved in walking in such a hunched fashion. Tonight, he could not have cared less.

His head was filled with errant thoughts of Hermione. His brain developed one wild scheme after another, but none would have worked. He couldn't force Potter (either of them) to divulge her whereabouts, nor could he force Lily to tell her that she was mistaken.

They couldn't base their broken relationship on the words or promises of others, be they forced or otherwise. He had to find a way to mend things... but how?

Hermione wouldn't listen to him. She'd spent the last several years believing that he loved another woman. His credibility in her eyes had to be as low, if not lower, than it had been when he was the hated spy.

Severus emerged into the dusty room in which he'd died. He looked around, mentally replaying what he'd believed to have been his last moments. With stunning clarity, Severus realised that his last thought had been of her. In the swirling torrent of blackest agony, his mind and heart had screamed her name.

Hermione.

Bitter tears fell as he made yet another painful discovery. The physical burning pain as the venom permeated his system was nothing to the stabbing woes of his mental anguish.

He'd used his last thoughts to pull the intelligent, strong woman to him. She'd been unwanted, on the conscious level anyway. She'd grown quietly, much as a parasitic vine causes a live oak to split and die. Little by little, she'd crept into his thoughts and reactions, making them crowded.

His disdain could only have come from the fear that he held to, fear of loving and being loved. Severus had seen love as a weakness his whole life, avoided it. Yet, it had come to him, unbidden and unknown.

Surprisingly, a Muggle song drifted through his mind.

...You set up your place in my thoughts;

Moved in and made my thinking crowded.

Now we're out in the back,

With the barking dog.

My heart the red sun;

Your heart the moon clouded.

So what is love then?

Is it dictated or chosen?

If it ever was there, and it left,

Does that mean it was never true?

And to exist it must elude,

Is that why I think these things of you?

There must be a thousand things you'd die for,

I can hardly think of two.

Not everything is better spoken aloud,

Not when I'm talking to you.

He had loved her most likely since he'd met her, recognizing his equal and perfect counter-point in another. She must have loved him as well. For in this life, she'd chosen him. It made him wonder if she'd have chosen him in his former life as well, if given the chance?

Severus looked around again, noticing the shabby, cluttered interior of his final resting place. He wished he was back there.

He was entirely powerless to save himself from the pain, but if he went back, he could save Hermione from the pain and guilt in which she was currently drowning.

True, she would likely wind up married to the youngest Weasley, and while he believed that would be its own kind of hell, he very much doubted the obnoxious, ignorant lout would ever intentionally hurt her. Bore her to death, possibly, but cause her harm? No.

Assuming he could find a way back, even if it meant spending all eternity in the burning torment that had plagued him since the bite of that great rat-killer, he could save her.

No, they would never be together. Though he thought that would be best...he'd already proven that he was not worthy of her.

Tears were falling, thick and fast now. He could form no rational thought other than, *"Please, I'll go back... I'll go back to the pain, if she'll be spared this. She needs someone who will put her first, always."*

Over and over and over again, his mind shouted as his tears continued to fall. Severus felt the room spin around him, and his closed eyelids detected the deepening of the darkness.

There was no sound, no feeling, no time.

Then, quite as suddenly as it had gone, the horrible flames of pain filled him. He could not scream or even move. He felt a different sensation...a heavy, warm weight on the outside of his chest augmented the bitter burn within.

Severus couldn't bear the crushing weight, the burning fire, and now, a trickling down his neck. Through his fevered thoughts, he reasoned that he was bleeding out finally, that his moment had come.

"Please, by all that is sacred, just give her someone who will make her happy, loved, and whole. Whoever he might be..."

The darkness and pain folded in on him, and somehow, became light. Brilliant light, even through his lids were closed tightly. The light had a melody. He felt as though he were being lifted by the sweet lilt of the notes.

It took several moments before he realised that the pain was gone. He was still quite uncomfortable; the mouldy floorboards were rather uncomfortable against his back. His nose and throat became irritated at the strong taste and smell of dust in the air.

Opening his eyes, he at first could not focus on the mass of red and gold that was only inches from his face. He blinked in confusion and found that he could turn his head.

He cautiously raised a hand to what should be an open and gushing wound on his neck, only to find smooth skin and the rough edges of torn, wool robes.

For the first time in his life, he wished he could speak with Binns. Perhaps the pedantic spectral sod could help to explain what it was like to wake up dead.

Severus decided to sit up, curious as to the feeling that would accompany leaving his body behind. As he sat up, eyes still unfocused and full of red, his field of vision became a violent riot of hot colour.

Flinching, Severus moved back, only to see a large red and gold bird land next to him, looking more than a bit disgruntled. The bird eyed him resentfully again, a sickeningly familiar twinkle to its black eyes.

"Fawkes?" Severus stuttered in disbelief.

The bird bowed his plumed head in acknowledgement.

Immediately, Severus' hand went to the recently healed flesh of his neck. "You did this?" It was not so much a question as an accusation.

"Why?"

Fawkes gazed into his eyes and what felt like his soul for a few moments. Then, the graceful bird opened his beak. The most blissful melody issued from his throat.

Severus felt his head and heart swim in the terribly beautiful music. Suddenly, it wasn't only music. It was music to his ears, but when the notes penetrated his mind, they became words.

His thoughts were now filled with a voice that he'd associated with both terror and comfort since his childhood.

"Because, Severus, you deserve to live and be happy." The words of Albus Dumbledore brought fresh tears to Snape's already wet eyes.

The old man's amused chuckle washed over him. "I realise this is not easy for you to accept, but it's the truth, my boy. You have been utterly selfless and passed the little test I'd set up for you. Now, why don't you go and claim the prize that's waiting for you?"

Severus slowly shook his head in denial.

"Severus, caring for others more than ourselves is true righteousness. You were willing to accept pain and even death to save Hermione from pain and from actions beneath her station."

Severus opened his mouth to protest, but the voice of his old mentor cut him off once again. "No, Severus. No, just accept the gift you've been given. I couldn't just let you die here in this shameful place. After all, you've never really lived. How can you die?"

Severus eyed the phoenix suspiciously and could have sworn the over-grown, painted turkey smiled at him.

"Yes, yes. Hermione survived and fought quite remarkably, I must say. But she's mourning someone, someone she's secretly loved since she was thirteen, Severus. Go. It isn't fair to make her wait forever."

Severus jumped up, surprised at how agile he could be after hours on a wooden floor. He dashed for the door but turned back at the last moment. He gazed longingly at his saviour.

In the final notes of the phoenix song, Severus could just make out the words, "Don't worry, son. I'll look in on you from time to time."

As he turned back towards the door, Severus just caught the burst of flame on the edge of his vision. He did not stop; he bolted for the tunnel. On the other side of the tunnel lay his re-given future.

He came up through the roots to see the devastation and carnage that lay beyond. He was stopped in his tracks at the sight of the dead from Voldemort's army, scattered over the rolling lawn of the once proud school.

Hermione's face flashed into his thoughts again, and he took off at a run towards the ruined front doors. He slipped in blood on the flagstone floor of the entryway, but he

managed to right himself.

He slowed as he approached the Great Hall. He entered quietly, hoping not to draw the attention of the partially jubilant, partially mourning crowd. He passed around the perimeter of the room, looking for any sign of her. With a jolt of fear, he hoped she would not be among the wounded, all of whom seemed to be clustered on the platform at the top of the hall.

Halfway to the front of the hall, Severus spied the Weasleys and Potter, grouped together. In the riot of ginger hair, he saw an untidy, black mop. His breath caught as Harry turned to face him.

"How?" Harry choked.

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but he was silenced when the wind was knocked out of him. Potter had thrown himself at Severus and was now sobbing unashamedly into the chest of his former nemesis.

Severus was frozen in shock for a few moments. When he'd recovered both his breath and his wits, he grimaced and looked down at Potter, finally putting his arms around the boy.

"Thank you, Harry."

"Sir, I'm so sorry. We should have..."

Severus spoke over him. "No, there's nothing you could have done. As it turns out, Albus once again came to my rescue. That is something we have in common." He stared into Harry's eyes, willing the boy to have a lucid moment for once.

Harry looked confused at first and then said, "Fawkes." Severus nodded.

Harry smiled for a moment, and then a look of terror came over his face. "Hermione. Sir, she's been..."

"Where?" Severus asked.

"In the dormitory. Go now, sir. She needs to see you... She didn't take it well. I think it's a bit more than sadness..."

Severus noticed Ronald Weasley looking over Harry's shoulder with a resigned look on his face.

Severus nodded at the both of them and tore from the room. As he crossed the threshold, he could make out Minerva's shrill voice, screaming his name. He would have to let Harry handle it.

He had to go more slowly when he reached the upper floors, using his power of flight in a few places where too much rumble and debris littered the corridors to allow foot traffic.

What felt like an eternity later, he stood in front of the Fat Lady, who mercifully was in. "I haven't got the password, but I must get inside."

The old cow gave him a superior smirk and wheezed, "No."

"For the love of God, woman, let me by! It is a matter of life and death that I speak to the lady inside."

The Fat Lady narrowed her eyes shrewdly and asked, "Weren't you just up here, twenty or so years back, with the very same demand? One would think you'd learn to court members of your own house."

Severus felt his rage reaching the boiling point, and he had to clasp his hands behind him to prevent himself from ripping the canvas to shreds. "I am asking you as a survivor of this battle and as a man. Please. It's imperative that I speak with Miss Granger." He used his most velvet, most seductive voice. If he couldn't command the foul hag, perhaps he could charm her.

"No. No password, no entry."

Severus decided that he could, perhaps, guess the password.

"Acromantula?"

"No."

"Dumbledore?"

"No."

"Potter?"

"No."

"Voldy's gone moldy?"

"No."

"Merlin's Pants!"

"Not even close."

"Fuck me!"

"Hardly."

Severus was giving up. The exhaustion was catching up with him. He leaned forward, his left hand resting against the wall to keep himself upright. In desperation, he screamed long and loud. No words...just primal anger and frustration.

He fell silent and closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

At once, the frame swung out violently and hit him square in the face. He fell backward and saw stars.

"Oh my God!" Hermione tumbled out of the portrait hole and fell next to him in a dead faint.

When he regained his sight, and his head stopped pounding, he sat up and looked at down at her. She was sprawled on the floor, as pale as death.

He stared at her, ignoring the verbal abuse they were receiving from the Fat Lady for leaving her hanging open.

He regained his wits slightly, rolling Hermione over and supporting her head in his hand. Pointing his wand at her, he whispered, "Renervate!"

She stirred and blinked her eyes. As she regained focus, her eyes filled with tears and locked on his. "How?" She echoed Potter's question.

He took a deep breath. "Fawkes."

She smiled, sitting up slowly. "Of course." She looked at him for another moment and then launched herself at him. The force of her enthusiasm sent him back to lying on the floor, her body on top of his.

She had her arms around his neck and her head on his shoulder. She sobbed so he could only make out every few words, or so. "Thank God... So guilty... You gave so much... Never told you... Died without knowing... since third year..."

He sat up, shifting her so she was now cradled in his lap. He stroked her hair and whispered soothing words in her ear.

After a few moments, he pulled back to look at her, an odd expression on his bleeding face. She pulled back to gaze at him, and a look of horror fell over her.

"Oh, sir, look what I've done! I'm so sorry. Really." She had her wand out in a trice, pointing it at his face. A few seconds later, she'd mended his nose, siphoned the blood from his face, neck and chest, and mended the tears in his robes, all without uttering a word.

"Impressive," he said, smiling slightly.

Hermione began to smile back, and then she remembered that she was cuddled on the lap of her former professor. She went to pull away and blushed to the roots of her hair. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to accost you." She did not meet his eyes.

Severus tucked a finger under her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes once again, and with his other arm, he tightened his grip on her. "Hermione, I don't mind in the slightest." He smiled.

Some time later, as they ate dinner in the Headmaster's office, Hermione's usual inquisitive nature returned. He'd told her his version of the events of the last few months, complimenting her bravery and cleverness.

After a while, she went quiet. His normal reaction was to leave her to share her thoughts in her own time, but he chose to reach out to her.

"What is it?"

"Your memories," she said, looking in her lap. "Harry showed me. Not to break your confidence, sir. But because I asked, begged, well, threatened him, really."

"What about them?"

"You've loved Harry's mum all your life, and everything you did was for her. I think that's beautiful."

Severus looked at her face as she continued to study her own fingers, squirming in her lap. "Yes, everything I did was in devotion to Lily. But if the last few months have made me realise one thing, it's that we can't get anywhere holding onto the past. Lily was my first love, and I'll never forget her, but I have let her go."

Hermione's eyes snapped to his at this point.

"If I want to move forward with my life, I think that's best." He smiled at her.

She smiled back at him. "I think that's very wise, sir."

"As we are both veterans and war heroes and will doubtless one day be colleagues, you really might consider calling me Severus."

"Severus," she whispered. He smiled at her.

Hermione cleared her throat and suddenly looked nervous. He gave her a questioning look, and she closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and said quickly, "I have told Ron we shouldn't be anything but friends and he's said that he understands."

He said nothing for a moment as he fought down the urge to do a rather obnoxious 'victory dance' around the office. When he'd mastered himself, he managed to say, "If that is how you feel, then it's best that you were honest with Mr. Weasley."

She nodded, and they sat grinning like idiots at one another for the rest of the evening.

A/N: The song is 'Mystery' by the Indigo Girls. Check it out, it's truly amazing.

Many thanks to the awe-inspiring kizzy7. You are an angel, dearest!!

I have an epilogue planned. I only have to figure out where to stop writing. Do you really want to know the names and occupations of their great-grandchildren? LOL

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

Epilogue: Lemons on parade!!!

Disclaimer: My bank account has like \$36 currently, I'm not Jo.

A/N: Right, here is the Epilogue. It's really just an excuse for a massive lemon. If you're not into that sort of thing, skip this bit and continue to picture them sitting in the Head's office grinning!

I earn the rating here!! You've been warned!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Epilogue:

Severus and Hermione's relationship progressed rather slowly by the standards of her peers. They exchanged owls and books all during the next year, as Hermione had decided to come back to Hogwarts to finish her seventh year properly.

Though no one but their most intimate friends knew of their mutual interest, they still maintained a polite distance, even for Headmaster and Head Girl.

Harry made a grand gesture of proposing to Ginny. By special permission of the Headmaster, he flew into the great hall on his Firebolt. In front of the entire student body, he got on one knee and offered her a diamond ring and the rest of his life.

Amid the thunderous applause, two pairs of eyes met and made a silent pact.

Severus broke from her gaze first to congratulate the couple. As he hugged them both, he whispered his words of advice, "Never let your love go unspoken. Never leave questions unasked. Let no one and nothing come between you."

Their wedding was described as the 'social event of the millennium.' Ginny was beautiful; Harry finally got a real family of his own.

Ron and Lavender married and six months later; they had a set of twin boys.

Neville began to apprentice with Professor Sprout. Luna left to pursue a field career in Magical Zoology. Draco married Astoria Greengrass after she'd left school.

Hermione tried not to wish that her relationship with Severus would move faster. She loved that they could talk freely on any subject, both personal and professional. She appreciated his support as she completed her education and chose her career path.

Physically, however, they'd made very little progress. A casual observer would have assumed they were long-time colleagues, or perhaps an uncle and his niece. She could count the number of times he'd kissed her on one hand. On rare occasions, he held her hand or would sometimes sit with his arm around her shoulders, but that was it.

When she'd been accepted as apprentice to Professor Vector, she thought for a moment that he might invite her to share the Headmaster's tower with him. In true 'old-fashioned' Severus style, he'd shown her to the suite of rooms on the second floor after reminding her of the rule against un-chaperoned visits from members of the opposite gender.

In talking to Ginny one day, she'd decided she was desperate. Ginny encouraged her to ask him outright. So Hermione steeled her courage and at dinner that night, she sprung the question upon him.

They sat, in what Severus thought was companionable silence, in Severus' quarters. Hermione suddenly took a big breath. "Severus, do you want me?" she asked.

Looking like he'd recently taken a golf club between the eyes, Severus stared back at her. "Want you?"

She could feel the tears welling in her eyes. "Yes. Do you desire me physically? Do you have feelings for me that extend or might extend beyond friendship?"

Severus sat in silence for 3,258 seconds (Hermione knew this because she counted). She stood and turned from the table. Before she could get further than two or three feet, Severus found his voice.

"Wait." She stopped but did not turn.

"Hermione, I've avoided the physical side of our relationship. Though my feelings for you have nothing to do with it. I do have a desire for you, I swear I do. But..."

Hermione laughed humourlessly. "It's the 'but' that makes all the difference, Severus. I can be your friend. There's nothing more that need be said." Her voice broke on the last word.

"No, Hermione. You don't understand." He spun her around, the force of the movement causing her to collide with his chest. His arm snaked around her waist.

When she was securely pinned against him, Severus spoke, his lips just brushing her ear. "You misunderstand. I do want you. I have wanted you since you were my student. I would never have admitted it, not even to myself. I love you. I have tried to build our emotional bond over these years, convincing myself along the way that you would rather not have a physical relationship with me."

She was frozen, mesmerized by his voice and by the gentle tickling of his lips against her ear. She waited, not daring to breathe, hoping he would continue.

Severus pulled back to look in her in the eye. "I can only ask you to forgive me. You see, I've only ever been with two women in my lifetime. One of them was only one time, and that was years ago. The other 'relationship' was rather short lived, and I'm afraid I didn't gain much experience from it either. So you see, I didn't want you to be disappointed in my... my skills as a... as a lover."

Hermione blushed from chin to the roots of her hair, but she did not look away. "As long as you want me, that's all the 'skill' I require of you. Severus, please."

She knew that he needed reassurance just as much as she did.

Severus smiled at her and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips. "Does this appease you?"

Hermione smiled. "No. One might kiss a relative or a dear friend in just same way."

Severus nodded, taking the hand he held by the wrist and slowly lowering it until it was pressed against the warm hardness straining against the placket of his trousers. Her eyes grew wide, and he claimed her mouth again. This time, he brushed his tongue enticingly over her lips.

His voice was husky, rough, velvet as he spoke. "I assure you, not one of my relatives has ever had anything like this effect on me."

"Then why..."

His lips found hers, and this time, he showed no restraint. When he needed air, he pulled away. His lips just grazed her ear as he said, "Because, my love, I wanted to be sure our relationship was deep and meaningful rather than one based on lust or whims."

Hermione moaned and opened her mouth to allow him access. They tasted each other as their tongues danced and explored. Hermione had yet to move her hand, and she took the opportunity to squeeze slightly, eliciting another long moan from Severus.

"Oh, gods, Hermione. Are you certain?"

"Oh, yes, Severus. Yes."

"Say that again."

Hermione looked at him, her eyes dark with passion. "Yes."

"Say my name," he growled.

Her breathing became even shallower. "Make me."

That was all he needed to hear. He put away his own fears and insecurities and gave free rein to his need for her. "I fully intend to, my love."

Their hands worked feverishly at buttons, pulling garments free and tossing them without design. Severus' shirt landed in the fire, and one of Hermione's stockings landed over the flame of a candle. It melted slowly in the heat.

Hermione felt much the same way. His wicked mouth worked on her right nipple while his hands ran over her backside and thighs. She ground into him and whimpered, still needing more.

Severus felt as though his brain was in a fog. His awareness consisted solely of her body, the sounds she made, and the sensation of pleasure that seemed to emanate from within her.

She pulled away from him abruptly. He groaned in protest, but she ignored him. She smiled at him, rather wickedly. "I've always wanted to try something. You may have to direct me a bit, but I'm a fast learner." With that said, she fell to her knees in front of him, and Severus felt the room spin.

She leaned forward, mouth open. He knew nothing but warmth and wetness. Her moans sent physical and emotional tremors through his body, each landing in his groin.

She pulled back and smiled up at him. "Say my name." She refocused on her task.

He looked down at her and just managed to growl, "Her. My. *Ohhhh. Neeee...*"

He had to stop her, or else this would be over before it started. He meant to make this last; he would worship her, savour her.

"Gods, Hermione, you must stop now." He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled back gently, freeing himself from her mouth.

She was breathing heavily and looked crestfallen. He smiled as he pulled her straight up into his arms. "No, love. I very much enjoyed your attentions. Our first time should be the most earth shattering. Had you continued, I believe we'd be finished, at least for awhile..." His fingers stroked her back as he carried her to his bed.

He had little confidence in his ability to please her, and so he relied on the best tool in his arsenal...his voice.

"Close your eyes, Hermione." She complied, and he set her on her feet, guiding her until the backs of her knees touched the mattress. She was breathing heavily, unable to control her shaking.

He took a deep breath, willing his voice to be still and seductive. "Tell me what you want, Hermione. Tell me what you *need*."

She was gasping now, and he could tell by the goose pimples that broke over her skin that he was affecting her. "I... I want..."

"Yes?" he prompted. "Tell me what you want, Hermione. Tell me what you'd like me to do."

"God, I want you. I want you!" She was shaking now, and he could see the dark stain on the front of her knickers.

"You want me to what? IF you want something, you must ask for it. Now, *Tell. Me. What. You. Want.*"

Hermione was now shaking, her nipples pointing straight out from her chest. The moisture from her knickers had now also coated the silky, smooth skin of her inner thighs. When she spoke, her voice came out in a harsh whisper. "Just touch me, please. I want your hands or your mouth on me. I d-don't care which."

His knees nearly buckled at her declaration, but he couldn't waste what she'd given him. He extended a finger and ran it lightly over her breast, grazing her nipple. She sighed and shifted her weight.

"Yes, you do want me. Oh, yes, I believe you do. Beg me. Beg me and say my name."

She seemed to be fighting with herself, trying to work up the courage to speak. Finally as she writhed, trying to again make contact with his fingers, she screamed out, "Fuck me, Severus. Oh, please, fuck me. I need you so bad."

He was weak in the knees, his head spinning. "I'm going to. Oh, gods, yes..." His resolve broke, and he could not wait and could not stand to continue his game.

He grasped her around the backs of her thighs and dumped her onto his bed. He was shaking as he removed her knickers and lowered his face to her mound.

For the next few moments, the entire world seemed to diminish until there was nothing left but her body, her scent, her taste.

Every voice in his head was screaming for him to show no weakness and keep quiet. However, he could feel her holding back. He needed to do something to put her over the edge.

"Oh, gods, Hermione. Do you have any idea what you do to me?" He breathed the words against her sensitive centre, causing her to utter a sound halfway between a moan and a sigh. "This is better than anything I could have imagined. So much better..."

She suddenly pulled away from him. He was unsettled at her abrupt withdrawal. "I need to feel you. Oh, God, please don't make me wait! I want you. I want you."

And with hitherto unknown strength, Hermione roughly pulled him over so that he was on his back, and she was positioned above him.

As her wetness touched his tumescent shaft, he had to grit his teeth and picture his great aunt Starkers to stop himself from coming all over her.

"A moment, my love." He didn't want to wait, but he also wanted to last more than a heartbeat inside her. When he'd gotten sufficient control, he opened his eyes to look at her.

Seeing her above him, flushed and glistening, with heavy-lidded, lust-filled eyes and swollen lips, he had to restart the cool down process all over again.

He laughed slightly without thinking. Suddenly, he noticed that Hermione was gone. She had moved to the opposite side of the bed with her back to him.

Reality dawned on him like cold water.

"Hermione?"

"You kn-knew I w-wasn't experienced. There's no need to laugh. I am, after all, doing my best." She sounded as though she were sobbing.

Severus immediately crawled to her side and laid a gentle hand on her back. "I'm so sorry, my love. You see, I wasn't laughing at you. Quite the contrary. I was laughing at myself. In spite of my 'advanced age,' I'm reacting to you like a randy, under-sexed fourth year. I have stopped you only to stop myself from ruining the moment by severely

abbreviating our coupling." He looked at her.

She slowly turned her head to the side to look cautiously back at him. "What?"

Severus looked deep into her eyes, and whispered, "You arouse me to the point that I could very easily come just by looking at you. Add that to your voice, your delectable smell, and the way you look right now, and, well, I'm done for."

Severus took a deep breath and gently pushed a lock of hair back from her face. "I pulled away from you not because I lack desire or motivation, but because you overwhelm me."

She leaned in and kissed him. It was slow, searching, and gentle. After only a moment, she pulled away. "Open your eyes, Severus. I want to see you. I want you to watch me."

She kissed him again; this time, he could see the sparks that flew within the deep, chocolate pools of her eyes. He wondered if the black fire in his eyes had a similar effect on her.

Somehow, this newfound intimacy added a new dimension to the sensuality between them, but it had the unexpected benefit of making both of them want to slow things down.

Their mouths parted, and Severus trailed kisses down her jaw line. When he reached her ear, he whispered, "I want to go slow, this first time. I want to remember every second. I want to treasure you."

He felt her chest convulse and a wetness slide down her cheek. He kissed away her tears as he laid her gently on her back.

"I've waited so long," she whispered.

"We have the rest of our lives..." he purred. Their kisses became more passionate, but they were still slow and teasing.

He paused for only a moment, poised at her entrance. He looked into her eyes, mutely asking, one last time, for permission.

She seemed to pierce him with her gaze. "I am already yours. Claim me." And he did.

A/N: I want to thank the amazing kizzy7. She has had to hold my hand, give me advice and clean up a sea of commas for me. Truly, I am lucky to work with her!!!

I want to say a huge thanks to the admins here at TPP. Your hard work has made this the absolute gold standard in fanfic sites. Also, thanks for the 'hit counter.' I might sink into depression without it!

Lastly, I want to thank each and every person who's read this fic. I truly appreciate your support. I love all of you who were kind enough to review. I've tried to answer each and every one. Thank you all!

For those of you who didn't review, please review! Authors love it. I used to be afraid that I didn't know enough to comment intelligently on anyone's writing, so I wouldn't leave anything. Please leave a little note when you've enjoyed a fic, even if it's just a 'wow.' K? All authors love it!!

****hugs* & I'll be back...***