

Silver Bells

by Somigliana

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The morning cold is crystalline, so sharp-edged that it burns in Hermione's lungs as she stands still for a moment and lets the world flicker back into focus after Apparating home. Black night shrouds the cottages of Hogsmeade...they are hunkered down under a thick blanket of snow, bleeding warmth into the winter on grey wisps of smoke that ooze from slender brick chimneys. The stars and the bloated moon are hidden behind a swathe of clouds; the only lights Hermione can see are the twinkling fairy lights in the window of Honeydukes and, in the distance far above the sleepy town, a wink of golden Lumos light in one of Hogwarts' towers.

As she crunches up the garden path through new-fallen snow, her robes flap stiffly against her legs in heavy concertina pleats, like the material has been over starched; she's learned that a Drying Charm never fails to leave a silty residue of loch scum behind.

Just inside the kitchen door, Hermione kicks off her wellies and smiles with delight when she sees that a pair of heavy, black, buckled boots has been set neatly next to her untidy tumble of footwear. Even after six months together, Hermione still cannot predict Severus' behaviour with any degree of certainty. But she understands that intimacy does not come easily to him...he's spent a lifetime holding everybody at arm's length, hiding from even himself, after all.

Sometimes being with Severus feels like she's being tumbled through the wildest rapids, pulled towards the sea on the strongest current imaginable...the sharp intensity of his passion, particularly at the New Moon, makes her feel like she can't think sometimes, let alone draw breath. And at other times she feels like she's wading against an opposing current, fighting a losing battle because her legs are jelly-jinxed, feel like they're going to give out at any moment...that's when she swears that the phrase 'stubborn as a mule' should really be 'stubborn as a selkie'.

But those whirlwind and water times are tempered when his idiosyncratic uncertainties melt away, leaving a mirrored and calm lake...when his quiet companionship and friendship forms the latticework of her days, when his quirked smile reminds her that it is hers alone and more precious to her than magic.

She steps out of her dirty robes and balls them up on top of the washing machine. When she slides into the kitchen on thick, fluffy socks, two coffee mugs rattle excitedly and skitter across the counter expectantly. She glances up at the kitchen clock...almost five 'o clock...and she sighs. "I think you're right," she tells the mugs ruefully, and she opens the fridge to check that the milk is still fresh before Conjuring two cups of coffee.

She pads through her tiny living room towards the stairs, her way lit by the Christmas tree lights and the muted, orange glow of an almost-dead fire. Harry and Ron wave at her from a photograph on the mantle. "Merry Christmas, boys," she murmurs. It's a fairly new photograph...she had to take the old one to her office at B&B because the Harry and Ron in that image didn't know that she and Severus were lovers; they'd threatened and scowled at him whenever he'd come to visit her, almost ruined the romantic mood on more than one occasion.

Until she sees the ink-spill of black hair and a lump under her duvet, her heart doesn't quite reconcile the boots downstairs with the fact that Severus has stayed the night, despite the fact she'd been called out to work on an emergency during Christmas Eve dinner. As she Levitates a cup of coffee to his bedside table, her own heart is soaring, disconnected from her body, yearning and stretching towards him like flowers will reach for the sunlight.

She sets her cup of coffee and her wand down and shimmies out of her jeans and socks before she lifts a corner of the duvet and gets into bed. She sighs with pleasure when she discovers that he's left a Warming Charm on her side of the bed; the tiny, thoughtful gesture makes her smile, makes it feel more like Christmas morning than any of the shiny beribboned presents underneath the tree. Severus shifts slightly, and Hermione finds herself torn between not wanting to disturb his sleep and wanting him awake.

His voice is muffled and full of sleep: "I hope that coffee is not wand-brewed..."

"No," Hermione lies blithely as she slides across the bed and curves her body against the solid warmth of his back and arse.

"Liar...God, woman, your feet are *freezing!*"

Hermione nuzzles the cord of his spine, slides an arm around his waist, lets her fingertips glide up the familiar lines of his abdomen, trace the swell of one pectoral muscle, ghost across a flat nipple. She smiles against his skin when he makes a soft, low sound of encouragement. She presses a kiss to the rise of one sharp shoulder blade and slides the flat of her hand back down his stomach, feels the way his muscles tense against her palm in anticipation.

"Nestor?" he asks. Now that the ragged edges of sleep have smoothed from his voice, the husky notes make the tingle of arousal she's feeling intensify...lust uncoils lazily, low in her belly, and she presses her hips closer against his arse. The fingertips of the arm she's lying on wind through his hair softly.

A flicker of irritation spikes into her mood as she thinks about the Loch Ness kelpie for a moment. "Not this time," she answers, tickling her fingertips from the jut of one beautiful hipbone to the other, just above the waist of his pyjama pants. "The Ruthven kelpies."

She doesn't really want to get into how freezing it was at one in the morning; how the scream of the Muggle boy's mother had echoed far into the empty night; how the equine kelpies' yellow eyes had glowed with sulphurous intent. They'd almost dragged a tiny Muggle boy to a watery grave. Hermione wrathfully hauled the entire Invisibility Task Force out of bed to fix their faulty wards, and although she hated to do it, given her own devastating experience with Memory Charms, she'd called on the Obliviators to finesse the Muggles' memories of the traumatic evening.

It's very easy to distract Severus around the New Moon...unnecessary, even, because his lust is so incendiary around that time of the month she'd be gasping in the burn of passion right now if it were that phase of the moon. He's more sluggish during the Full Moon, takes his maddeningly slow time about making love so that sometimes she just about weeps with relief and fulfilment when he finally fills her sometimes. The lunar cycle fuels a fantastic range of variety in their intimacy...Hermione's never been more aware of the phases of the moon before. Sometimes, she wonders if intense sexual frustration during the New Moon had exacerbated Severus' nastiness when she'd been a student.

The Full Moon is not long past...it echoes the eerie howl of werewolves still...and Hermione knows that a more direct approach with her selkie is prudent. She burrows her fingertips beneath the elastic that spans his hips and caresses down his upper thigh before cupping his balls. Severus shifts slightly to give her better access, *hmmms* with encouragement again. She curls her fingers around his half-hard cock, feels the slide of satiny-soft skin as she strokes up, then down... slowly... up, down. When he's full and heavy against her palm and his breath is becoming shallower and husky with lust, he turns around to face her so that they lay nose-to-nose. He slides one of his long legs between hers; they fit together perfectly like they've come from matched moulds. "Evil woman," he tells her, his lips brushing against hers. "Waking me up at the crack of dawn just to have your wicked way with me..."

Hermione smiles against his lips and flickers her tongue along his lower lip. "Mmmhmm," she agrees, reaching down to squeeze his arse, shifting her hips even closer so that she can feel the ridge of his erection against her belly. Anticipation tightens all of her nerves, makes it hard to breathe.

"Now..." He nips softly at her lower lip. "If you're going to do a proper job of seducing me, you really do need to take that ridiculous t-shirt off." He slides the hem of the shirt up so that it skims her ribs just beneath her breasts.

Hermione pouts. "It was a gift from Harry," she whines softly, but she complies with his request and pulls the red t-shirt with its garish golden text *Have you hugged your house-elf today?...off*.

"Potter," Severus sneers convincingly as he dips his head, slowly circles his tongue around her nipple. It tightens and puckers with want, and Hermione arches her back, encouraging him to lick, suck...just, for God's sake, *touch!*...her nipple itself.

"You... like... Harry," she gasps, reaching between them to stroke his cock again.

"*Not today.*" And then Severus scrapes his teeth against the sensitive bud of her nipple, and Hermione loses all coherent thought as a lightning thread of sensation arcs between her breasts and her groin, setting her nerves and her skin on fire.

And then moments of ecstasy string out along time like tiny blinding lights...the slide of his skin against hers; the warmth of his breath against her hammering pulse point; the tease of his fingertips against her clit; the hard fullness of him inside her; the grind of his hips against hers...until they finally coalesce and explode outward so that all she can see is light, all she can feel is love.

Later that morning, after the sun has risen to squat, shivering, in the sky and their morning coffee has long gone cold and grey, Hermione stretches lazily in Severus' arms. "Merry Christmas, Severus."

Severus half opens his eyes and stifles a yawn. "Merry Christmas." He smirks at her. "I think I've had my gift today already."

Hermione hmmm's softly. "We should really get up," she murmurs, yawning hugely against his chest.

Severus' arms tighten slightly, making her abort her attempt to wriggle into a sitting position.

Hermione sighs. "Severus." Her voice carries an edge of warning.

"But who gets married on Christmas Day, for Merlin's sake? Christmas is a day for..."

"Family and love," Hermione finishes for him, giving him a very pointed look. "Talking about family... Did you excuse me from the Council meeting last night?" One of the reasons she'd been so annoyed at the call-out (aside from the fact that it was Christmas Eve) was that she'd had to miss the Hogwarts Aquatic High Council meeting and a chance to swim beneath the Divide with Severus.

"Yes," he drawls, twisting a curl of her hair around his long index finger. "You did not miss anything of great importance...Conn only requests that Kraken's wards be checked once the thaw begins."

Hermione nods. "It was on my list, anyway."

Severus snorts softly. "Of course."

Then, they lie in silence, entwined and heart-to-heart, for several minutes while the world wakes outside the tiny, frosted window. Squeals of delight from the little witches who live next door carry on the clear air from next door. Severus has long given them early dunderhead status, but Hermione's seen the way he stands for just a moment too long at her gate, watching them play. Children are not something Severus allows himself to consider...Hermione thinks he's too afraid of what they will inherit from him. And his family is a sore point... both the family he has lost and the family he hasn't claimed.

"Did you visit it?" Hermione asks softly.

Severus sighs and extricates himself from her embrace, turning to lie on his back and gaze at the ceiling, a sour expression twisting his lips. All traces of languid relaxation tighten into sharp edges.

Hermione turned the tables on Severus and 'suggested' that he 'might' need to find peace and closure when it comes to Leenash, Eileen, his mother.

"And how am I supposed to find closure when she bloody offed herself years ago?" Severus had asked in high exasperation, to which Hermione had calmly stated that perhaps a visit to Leenash's grave might help and left it at that.

"Yes," he says eventually. He swallows, and Hermione watches the nervous slide of his prominent Adam's apple.

She shifts to sit cross-legged next to him, frowning with concern. As always, she has to stem her stream of questions and wait for Severus to form his thoughts into carefully chosen and sparse words.

"Conn was waiting for me there," he says eventually. Severus' dark eyes (dark like the bitterest chocolate) move to meet hers for a moment. "Meddling, manipulative bastard!"

Hermione's eyebrows wing up; she's always thought the selkie Chieftain was exceedingly pleasant. "Conn?" she asks, surprise infusing her voice and carrying it to higher notes.

Severus snorts. "Not quite, no... Albus." He runs his hands through his hair and clenches the muscles in his jaw tightly, then breathes out slowly in a measured stream like he's distilling his temper. "Conn has known who I am for many years; the Chieftain knows his family in some innate fashion, apparently," he says quietly, steel making his voice rigid and hard. "Albus asked him not to give any indication of such knowledge."

Hermione frowns. Working out the intricacies of Albus Dumbledore's life and lies has always been like trying to unpluck a particularly tangled knot. "Why?"

Severus heaves a long, exasperated sigh. "I can only presume he did not wish for me to become more involved with the selkies than necessary..."

To keep him focussed on his role as a spy, Hermione thinks as she slides down to lie next to Severus again, stroking his chest lightly until she feels his tension bleed away by degrees. "So... Conn will tell them that the prodigal cousin has always been home?" she asks softly.

Severus places his hand over hers and gives her a wry smile. "Eventually, mo ghrá. Syrena is fond enough of Gall as it is; Conn is concerned that if she learns I am Clann, she will become even more curious about Air Magickers and Hogwarts."

"And what's the issue with that?" Hermione would absolutely adore teaching magic to Syrena, showing her a little of the world above the Divide.

"You work for B&B, Cass," Severus says dryly. "I'm sure you are well aware of the Ministry's laws about Beings having access to wands. Albus and Armando hid my mother's heritage from the Ministry when they integrated her into Hogwarts. According to the letter of the law, I would not be classed as any kind wizard at all; I am half Muggle and half selkie!"

Hermione shifts uncomfortably; she does not like to imagine how her department would react if they discovered that Severus Snape (Order of Merlin, First Class) was a wand-bearing half-Being. "You may not technically be a wizard, Gall," she says quietly. "But to most of the wizarding world, you are a warlock of the highest calibre."

"Hmmpf."

Hermione slides her body across Severus' and brushes her lips across his. "Which, in my eyes, makes you far better than any ordinary wizard."

All thoughts of opening Christmas presents or breakfast fade into the background as Severus smiles at her and lifts his hand to cup her cheek in his palm. "Thank you, Cass."

They barely have time to dress, have tea and toast, and open presents...new wellies, a large jar of Gillyweed and a beautiful selkie pendant on a gossamer-thin chain for Hermione...when they have to leave or risk being late for Harry's wedding.

Hermione smoothes her palms down Severus' jacket lapels, and she smiles with delight as he checks his new watch again. "Time to go," she says cheerfully.

His lip curls with mock-disgust. "We're going to provide yet more fodder for the gossip machine," he says sourly.

Hermione rolls her eyes. "Oh, buggler Sprout and Vector... they've got nothing better to do than gossip." She tilts her head to the side and narrows her eyes. "Although... if you didn't provoke them at every turn..."

"Life at Hogwarts would be insipidly tedious." He smirks at her and pulls her closer so that they can Side-Along to the wedding.

Hermione knows why Harry and Ginny chose Godric's Hollow for their wedding...it's where James and Lily wed, after all...but she can't help but feel a tendril of oily apprehension wind through her veins as she gazes around the small village. When they pass the statue in the middle of the square, her unease flutters in wildly in her stomach. The wards shimmer to let them see the true commemoration, and Severus pauses, glances up at Lily Potter. Hermione holds her breath and watches his face carefully as he faces his once-love, his lost friend.

"This is Cass," he murmurs softly, a slight smile lifting the corner of his mouth. "I think... you would have loved her had you met her, Lil." Severus turns to face Hermione. "I certainly do."

And then, without a backward glance, he takes Hermione's hand and leads her towards the small church and the joyful pealing of silver bells.

~Fin~

mo ghrá = my love

Conn = chief

Thanks to Gelsey, as always!