

I'll Never Take Advantage

by Annie Talbot

The bedtime ritual of a conflicted man.

I'll Never Take Advantage

Chapter 1 of 7

The bedtime ritual of a conflicted man.

December 15, 1998

"Bath time, my dear, and then to bed. How can your face get so gritty after a day spent in your rooms? It's beyond me. Your parents are coming to visit tomorrow; Potter will be here with you and I'll make myself scarce. It's better for all of us if they don't have to be faced with the reality of me. It's enough that they come."

"Here, let me wash your left arm. I'll just hold it in place here against my shoulder, wash it and dry it. Such pretty fingers. Poppy and I keep the nails cut short now, you know, although Miss Brown threatens to visit and give you a "proper manicure." I dislike the thought of others handling you, though. You cannot choose, so only Poppy and I touch you. We hope you will not mind the intrusion."

"Now the right arm. I'll have to rub lotion on your elbows tomorrow morning. Probably your heels too. Your skin does tend to dryness. How ironic, you with your dry skin married to the greasy git. I'm sure that isn't the most striking irony to you, though. I often wonder if you know what has happened, what we had to do. I hope you are not angry about it. Even Potter agreed it was for the best."

"Right leg next, then. Yes, your heels do need some lotion as well. Don't worry, I won't forget. Will you be angry, when you wake, that we didn't allow your parents to take you, to place you in a facility so far from us? We wanted you here at Hogwarts, surrounded by magic and by those who care about you. It was the headmaster who decided... left leg now... that we would keep you. When your parents threatened to go to the Wizengamot, we realized that the only way to fight them was for you to be married to one of us. Potter would have done it, of course, but his affection for Miss Weasley was deep. They are married now. It was between me and Lupin, and the headmaster felt that while your parents might be successful in challenging a marriage between you and a werewolf, we'd exploit the bias for war heroes and marry you to me."

"Now your front... if you are at all aware of what I'm doing you are probably mortified. Please know that I would never take advantage. Our wedding night was the only time, and I only did what was necessary to be legal. I prayed that you were not aware; you didn't seem to be. I left a house-elf to watch you after... Potter and Lupin and I went to the Hog's Head and got drunk. We all three cried that night."

"Let's turn you over and get your back. I know what it's like to be powerless, so I can imagine how you feel right now. That's why I talk to you while I bathe you, so you'll understand that I will never take advantage of the power that the law gives me over you."

"Sit up now, lean against my arm while I put a nightgown on you. Such a pretty white gown... Minerva bought it for you the other day. She's coming in tonight to sit with you while I make my rounds. We never leave you alone, in case you wake up. Even though you haven't awakened at all in six months, we still hope that you will. We are still trying to heal you."

"Here, let me brush out your hair and braid it. They wanted to cut your hair, to make it easier to manage, but I wouldn't allow it. 'All right then, Severus, but then you'll have the care of it,' is what Poppy said. Potter once told me he was glad I'd taken a stand, that you still look like yourself. It's important that you know yourself when you wake

up."

"Minerva should be here soon and I'll be gone for a few hours. They told me I wouldn't have to make nightly rounds after I married you, but I feel I must. It's not to terrorize the students and exert my power over them as everyone thinks. It's for their own good. It doesn't give me pleasure. Maybe, powerless as you are, you will understand."

"Every night I prowl the halls, finding the children in hidden places as they commit acts that will scar them, acts that will leave them more vulnerable than they dreamed. Seduced by appetites older than they into giving power over to another. Losing control. They call it love but that's a delusion. There is no love, only power. I stop them if I can. It's to protect them."

"I was very young when I learned this and I count it the best lesson of my lifetime. My father was a powerful man. He demanded respect, not love. My mother loved him and it made her weak. He exploited that weakness, beating her and forcing her to do unthinkable things. He finally broke her. She never fully recovered from that final beating, delivered a week before I left for Hogwarts. She had attempted to intervene in my punishment for some small failure. I spent that last week scrubbing the bloodstained drawing room carpet and nursing her back to semi-health. She never left her bed again."

"My first week at Hogwarts was a horror show. Oh, the classes were good... I'd always loved learning and there was so much for me there! Potions in particular. On the first day the potions professor talked about restoring health to the invalid, bringing strength to the weak. If I could do that, I reasoned, I could heal my mother. I resolved to learn all I could about potions and their powers. And so I have."

"Outside of classes, though, there was the problem. I'd never interacted much with other children, as my father kept our family to itself. I had no friends, even in my own House. While inter-House rivalries were somewhat less cut-throat than they are now, I quickly felt the sting of the other House members' assumptions about me, a Slytherin. The Gryffindors despised me because I was "sneaky". What they will never understand is that sometimes endurance and subterfuge are the necessary qualities for ensuring survival. The Ravenclaws hated me because I could so clearly see the benefit to myself of learning certain spells; for them the knowledge itself is the goal. What is the use of knowledge if it cannot be translated into action? And the Hufflepuffs feared me automatically because they fear anything they cannot understand. My mother was a Hufflepuff, you know. I meant them no harm. They feared me anyway."

"There, the tangles are finally gone. Prepare to be braided, Mrs. Snape."

"It was the Slytherins who advanced the task my father began, of teaching me about power and weakness. I later learned that it happened every year in Slytherin House and had done for generations. One boy and one girl from the incoming first year class were selected to be the toys of the most powerful seventh years. Thus, for one year, I became the slave of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Black. My first night at Hogwarts was spent in Malfoy's dormitory, learning my new duties. It took me several days to heal from that initiation, so the next several evenings were spent with Lady Bella, as she insisted I call her. The nature of those evenings was such that I actually preferred the time spent with Malfoy. Not that I was naturally inclined that way, you understand, but it was more straightforward than Lady Bella's entertainments and ultimately less damaging. You can be sure that I put a stop to the practice as soon as I became Head of Slytherin House."

"There, all finished. Just lie back against the pillows and I'll pull the covers up. I've told you this so that you'll always know that I will never take advantage, and so that you know you have a little bit of power over me. Nobody else knows about this, only you."

"I won't hold you against your will. When you awaken, you may decide where you'll live, whom you'll be with, what you'll study. I hope you do wake tomorrow; you are the brightest witch I ever met and I hate to see your potential wasted. I never said that to you when you were awake, I know, but it is true. I would be pleased if you were to decide to stay here, with me, but it isn't necessary for you to do so. If you do decide to stay, please know that I'll never take advantage."

"We tried the new potion tonight, so perhaps you WILL awaken tomorrow. That would be a nice surprise for your parents and Potter, wouldn't it? I hear Minerva at the door now, so I'll take my leave. Sleep well, my dear. I'll be quiet when I come to bed. And please, please try to wake up tomorrow."

Author's note: I wrote this a long time ago (between OotP and HBP, actually), so it's seriously AU. This is actually the first fic I ever posted! I hope you like it!

Minerva's Crusade

Chapter 2 of 7

Professor McGonagall has overheard something shocking! Her thoughts on what she knows and what she proposes to do about it.

Minerva's Journal

December 15, 1998

I am guilty of an appalling breach of ethics... I eavesdropped on a colleague's most private thoughts. Yet I cannot apologize, as he would be horrified to know what I had overheard and would never trust me again. I don't know what to do to remedy this transgression, as well as the situation it revealed.

It began accidentally, of course. I was to sit with Hermione while Severus went out hunting amorous students (truly, dear journal, I believe it is his only pleasure, despite his claims to the contrary), and I arrived early. I was eager to learn whether there had been any change in Hermione's condition after they administered the new potion tonight. Poppy must have left the door unlocked when she left; it was open so I just tapped and went in.

Severus was in the bedroom with Hermione, bathing her. He clearly hadn't heard me enter, as he did not stop what he was doing. I was touched and amazed by his tenderness in dealing with her. Poppy had told me that he insisted on caring for her himself, but I never imagined how gentle he could be... I digress. I was so shocked by some of the things he revealed, my mind (and my pen, dear journal) keeps shying away.

That poor boy. That poor, dear boy. I remember his Sorting, how terrified he was. An ugly, scrawny little duckling sent to the House where status was everything. He lacked all outward signs of the qualities that would mark him a true Slytherin, yet he became one. His Sorting I attributed to his mother's heritage as the last pureblooded descendant of an ancient house. As I grew to know him, I could see his hunger to learn and to use that knowledge to advance his own cause. The Hat had seen what I could not; the boy's ambition was immense.

And to think I was pleased that some of his housemates had taken him under their wings. If Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Black were still living, I'd kill them myself for what they did to him! That poor child... even his Head of House is gone, else I'd go looking for him. To allow such a thing to occur. No wonder the boy wept for most of his first week at Hogwarts, earning that awful nickname he carried throughout his seven years. I am ashamed for Hogwarts and for every student and teacher (including myself)

who chuckled when we heard it. Yes, he became a monster, but it was a monster we all had a hand in creating, either through tormenting him or allowing him to be tormented.

The man I heard today, though, was his mother's creation. I remember Eileen Prince. A sweet girl, but not overly bright. She gave him love, though, and it's clear that he loved her as well. All his tender care for Hermione is due to what he learned from her. He may believe intellectually that there is no such thing as love, but his every action, his every word towards his wife shows the lonely, loving boy he remains.

Looking back, I wonder at my surprise. After the battle in the Great Hall, when Harry finally defeated Tom Riddle, it was Severus who assisted the exhausted boy in his search for his friends, Severus who carried Hermione's limp body to the Hospital Wing and kept her alive until the Healers could come. Although he resisted marrying her, pointing out that when she awoke she would hardly thank us for joining her to him for the rest of her life, he did what was necessary to keep her here. And, as it turns out, that is what has preserved her life, as Lucius Malfoy's curse appears to feed off of magic. Had she been removed to the Muggle world, as her parents intended, the curse would have consumed her magic and then her life force. She'd be dead by now.

We had all hoped that, should Severus survive the War, he would have the opportunity to rest. Instead he maintains a full teaching schedule, cares for Hermione day and night, and spends every spare moment researching the curse that Malfoy used on her. Tonight's potion was the first step in what we hope to be a definitive cure. It is designed to lift her from her deep coma. Whether she will awaken is uncertain, although Severus explains that it is more likely that she will merely gain awareness of her surroundings and perhaps be able to respond. While he clearly hopes that she will awaken as a result of the potion's administration (a hope he has been careful not to encourage in any of us), it is unlikely that will happen unless the curse is fully lifted. We do not expect that she will be in pain; if she is, Poppy stands ready to address that. We hope that, at the very least, Severus, Albus, and Harry will be able to communicate with her through Legilimency. If they are able to do so, perhaps I will attempt to refine my very crude skills as well. The poor girl will need a woman to help her cope, and with Ginny Weasley Potter happily gestating and Molly Weasley still recovering from the deaths of young Ronald and Percy, I may be her best option.

Malfoy's curse is designed to renew itself every year, at the same moment of the original casting. It will be at its weakest at that moment of regeneration, and William Weasley has promised to come to Hogwarts on the anniversary of the battle to attempt to break the curse altogether. I pray that he will succeed.

But what to do about Severus? I must somehow make it up to him, that I eavesdropped on his most personal revelations. I could have left at any time, but instead I stayed until he had finished bathing her, then made a show of knocking on the door and calling out to him. I cannot ever betray to him what I know. I suppose the only thing that is left to me is to see that he receives the care and honor that has been denied him since he first appeared at Hogwarts nearly thirty years ago.

Severus himself has begun the process of rehabilitating his image among his peers. His assistance to Harry Potter during and after the battle has been remarked upon approvingly. He and Harry formed an alliance regarding Hermione's care which remains strong to this day. Remus Lupin is the only person from his school days that he remains in contact with; they are not close friends, but Remus could be encouraged to look beyond Severus's defensive cruelties. If he were aware of the injustice that we all perpetrated on this man, he would move heaven and earth to right the wrong.

Of course we must be subtle. Severus always sneers at Gryffindors, saying that we are incapable of subtlety. That may be his weakest point...he will never look for anything other than blunt honesty from any of us (except Albus, who should have been a Slytherin himself). He will reject what he sees as pity, and I cannot deny that pity is a component of what I feel.. pity for the child, married to a profound respect and regret for the man who that child has become.

My greatest ally may turn out to be Hermione herself. She is an intelligent and fair-minded young woman. I know that she will not condemn Severus for his actions on her behalf, regardless of his own fears. I must set in place a plan for her awakening, whenever it occurs.

That is all for tonight, dear journal. I will give this further thought. As always, thank you for being the recipient of my thoughts. Hold our secrets tightly...

MM

Listening In

Chapter 3 of 7

What does Hermione think?

December 16, 1998

Well, this is strange and getting stranger.

Harry and Professor Snape are sitting in the room with me, discussing Quidditch. Civilly.

When I became aware of myself and my surroundings last night, apparently for the first time in six months, I thought I'd gone as far through the looking glass as one could travel. After all, I was being bathed by Professor Snape, a man who had spent seven years finding new and wonderful ways to hate me and my friends. According to him, at some point in the previous half-year, he married me. Bizarre. And consummated the marriage. Gross. And he has become friendly with Harry and Remus Lupin and Professor McGonagall. Inconceivable!

It's a good thing my brain woke up before my emotions, I think. Had it been the other way around, I'd have freaked out and died on the spot. As things stand, I've had a night and most of a day to take stock of the situation and organize my thoughts. Now that Professor Snape and Harry are having this ever-so-fascinating discussion about sport, I'll take some time out from listening and look at what I've learned. Maybe come up with a plan, although my options are limited by this dratted coma.

Fact: I was hit by at least one compound curse during the battle in the Great Hall. Initially, nobody could figure out what the curses were or how to break them. Last night, they gave me a potion that has brought me back to awareness (nice work, Professor Snape, for I imagine it was you who created the potion) but has not given me full consciousness. From what Professor McGonagall said last night, Step Two in the Reviving Hermione Process will involve Bill Weasley - in six months time! When I get really bored I'll figure out how many weeks, days, and hours that is. Couldn't they have waited to give me the potion? No, of course not... they didn't know if it would work. And now they don't know that it DID work. How will they know that it worked? What if they give me something else that undoes what this has done? What if...

Okay, now you're being ridiculous, Hermione. Breathe. I know you can't really control your breathing, but concentrate on feeling it happen. You're getting hysterical. Your brain (Okay, my brain) is your best attribute, USE IT! And DON'T PANIC!

Fact: I am married to Professor Snape. He is a very intelligent man. He is also skilled at Legilimency, as is Professor Dumbledore. They will no doubt be able to sense that I

am thinking, so they will know that the potion did what it is supposed to have done. So I don't need to worry about that possibility. Everything will be fine.

Fact: Harry is alive! And married to Ginny! And she's pregnant! How THAT happened I have no idea. Not the pregnant stupid, the married. She's a seventh year and should be concentrating on her N.E.W.T.s. Oh my God, the N.E.W.T.s! I wonder how I did! It's been six months and I bet nobody will tell me; it's not likely to come up in conversation.

"So, Hermione, you're looking very well tonight, almost as good as your twelve N.E.W.T.s..." or maybe "Gee, Professor, it's a good thing she's still in her coma, she'd die if she found out she only got three N.E.W.T.s."

Okay, breathe... breathe... breathe...

Fact: Ron is dead. I saw that happen. He saved me from Lucius Malfoy's Avada Kedavra curse by jumping in front of me. Mrs. Weasley has had some sort of breakdown, according to what I learned from Professor Snape and Harry's earlier conversation. She blames Harry for Ron's death (and Percy's, which is even more unfair, as Percy was a Death Eater when he died). She hasn't spoken to Ginny since she and Harry got married. According to what my parents said to Harry this morning, she writes to my Mum as though I was dead too. All the other Weasleys are fine, though, and are in touch with my parents, Harry and Ginny, and the professors here at Hogwarts. They're all pitching in to help me. Apparently Charlie gathered the Dragon Tears for my potion by hand from the strongest dragon on the reserve, a very dangerous task. I think they are hoping that if I recover, Mrs. Weasley will as well. It would somehow make Ron's sacrifice worthwhile. My poor Ron...

Fact: My parents still have no understanding of the wizarding world. Apparently, they have visited me here every two weeks since I was cursed; Harry brings them. They have met with Madam Pomfrey, Professor Snape (I'm sure THAT went well), Harry, Ginny, Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and myriad Healers. They still don't get it... that the curse is trying to devour my magic, that my magic is tied to my life force, and that unless I receive regular transfusions of magic, I'll die. How hard is that to understand? If they hadn't made such a big deal about everything, demanding to take me back into the Muggle world, I wouldn't have to be married to Professor Snape. This magical transfusion business is interesting though... it appears that Hogwarts itself is donating sufficient magic to keep my life force untouched. I don't know enough about Magical Theory to have a real understanding of how this is working, but it's a very interesting problem. When I wake up, I'll have to look into it. I hope someone was considerate enough to defer my University acceptance for a year, so that there is a place for me next September. Of course, if I only have three N.E.W.T.s, the point is moot.

Fact: Professor Snape is a very complex man. When Harry told us about what he'd seen in Professor Snape's Pensieve back in our fifth year, I felt sorry for the boy he'd been. But it was pretty clear that he was already a git (as Ron always called him). Last night, what he told me... it was heartbreaking! I'm so glad he stopped the traditional rape and bullying of first-years in his house. That he went through it at all, with no one defending him, is inexcusable. Where was Professor Dumbledore? Where was Professor McGonagall? Did the other students know? Did they torment him about it as well? I've known since the end of my fourth year here that there was more to him than met the eye. A former Death Eater, spying for the Order of the Phoenix within Voldemort's Inner Circle. One of my last memories is of him, fighting side-by-side with the other teachers that day in the Great Hall. You could see, in that fight, he was more than a champion duelist; he was a warrior. I need to think more about this, about who he is. After all, I'm married to him. In our world, marriage is for life. Even if, as he promises, he won't hold me to the marriage, we will have responsibilities toward one another. After I awaken, I'll need to know how to handle him. He was kind to me last night and this morning, he was pleasant to Professor McGonagall, and now he's being cordial to Harry. Maybe he's nicer than he used to be. Maybe I'll be able to deal with being married to him.

Will NOT think about sex. Ever. It's sort of awful, though, that I held out for my wedding night with Ron and ended up losing my virginity while I was completely unconscious. To Professor Snape. Gross. I'm not thinking about it! No!

Funny, I believed him when he promised not to take advantage of me, and when he said I could go free after I wake up. Clearly, he is not the man that everyone believes him to be. At some point that will begin to feel reassuring.

Fact: Voldemort has been defeated. Harry completely destroyed him soon after Ron and I were cursed. I don't know how many of my friends and fellow students died that day. I don't know what happened to the Death Eaters. Everyone is acting as though the world is safe, with Harry zipping my parents in and out of Hogwarts every two weeks. I need to know what happened, even if it is painful.

Oh, wait a minute, they're talking about me now...

"...Hermione's parents? Did they notice any change in her condition?" You know, when he's not sneering with it, his voice is rather nice...

"Actually, her mother remarked that she seemed more responsive. I can't see it myself, though, so I put it down to wishful thinking. Mrs. Granger says that she's somehow more present than she was before."

"I've tried to use a passive form of Legilimency on her several times since we woke this morning. Really? I thought you had to invoke the spell. Hmm, that's dangerous, must guard my thoughts." "I couldn't see anything, although the texture of her mind feels more resilient. I'm sure Poppy will have some diagnostic tools to measure what has developed. For now, though, I believe the potion has worked to some extent."

Wow, he sounds like he cares... but wait, Harry has completely broken down. I've never heard him sob like that.

"Even if Mrs. Granger is correct, Potter, it is merely the first step on a very long road. Six months still remain until we can attempt to destroy the second part of the curse; nothing has actually changed."

"Yes sir, I know. It's just that now I feel like it's reasonable to hope. Losing Ron was hard, but losing them both is more than twice as difficult. If you don't mind, I'd like to tell Ginny and Remus the good news."

"If you believe there is something to tell, do so by all means. I have more end-of-term essays to grade this afternoon, so I'd better get to it. I generally read them aloud to Hermione when I've finished, along with my comments; I hope she is entertained."

This is incredible... Harry Potter snorting at a joke told by Severus Snape. And Professor Snape, while not being kind, isn't being cruel to him either. I never thought I'd see the day. Well, actually, I can't see yet. I wonder why they don't open my eyes? Unless I'm blind. That would be bad. Or maybe it's just really weird to see me staring like I'm dead. That's it. I'm probably weird-looking, not blind.

I wonder what I DO look like? Did Malfoy's curse leave a scar? Am I hideous?

Breathe... breathe... breathe...

Oh, Harry's kissing me goodbye. He held my hand while my parents were here too. That was good, my mum was really fluttery with the touching; it would have been excruciating if she'd been sitting next to me. Daddy didn't touch me at all. And neither of them spoke to me as Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, and Harry did when they were alone with me. It's nice that they talk to me, even if they don't know I'm really there.

I remember Professor Snape saying something last night about keeping people from handling me. Just him and Madam Pomfrey, and apparently Harry as well. That's good. What am I talking about? That means that he takes care of me for everything! Everything! That's so embarrassing. Although it was nice this morning when he rubbed cream

into my elbows and feet. He told me all about what he planned to do while my parents were visiting (grading, preparing materials for next week's classes) and where he would be (the Potions classroom, of course).

He told me about Harry and Ginny's baby, too, and how they are threatening to call it Hermione if it's a girl. So we'll pray it's a boy or, if it's a girl, that it's born AFTER I wake up and can talk some sense into them. A son will be Ronald, of course.

I think my plan for now is just to listen to everything that happens around me. It's clear that I can't do anything about anything at this point, but this is a marvelous opportunity to learn and to develop my memory. Since I'm apparently not going anywhere for six whole months, I'll work on getting used to living with Professor Snape, who has been kinder to me in the past twenty-four hours than in the seven years that I was his student.

I have to figure all of this out so I have a plan for when I wake up. I'll have a lot to do! Maybe six months won't be so long after all... I've got to have a plan.

Breathe... breathe... breathe...

Author's Notes:

Disclaimer: The characters and their settings aren't mine. They are the sole property and creation of the fabulous J.K. Rowling.

Many thanks to my beta, Somigliana!

An Unaccustomed Correspondent

Chapter 4 of 7

Three months later, Severus is writing letters...

March 15, 1999

Dear Draco,

I have received the package and reviewed its contents. Your father's notes on his research into obscure curses and how to bind them synergistically were most interesting. The man had an almost preternatural ability to sense what spells would work best together.

I agree that it is likely that the combination of spells he used on my wife was threefold: a simple Stupefying Charm, followed by *Dormium Perpetuum*, with the tapeworm spell woven throughout. I've never seen anything like that last spell; do you have any idea where he found it? William Weasley, who was visiting when the notes arrived, seems to believe it is Eastern in origin, although he has never encountered it in his travels. He believes, however, that our plan of attack is sound. Using the potion against the *Dormium Perpetuum* curse has the added advantage of weakening the magical tapeworm. It is counter-productive to use spells such as *Ennervate*, because the magic used actually feeds the creature. That is why Hermione essentially lost ground in the first several weeks of diagnostics and treatment; everything was spell-based.

We will continue to administer the potion up to the anniversary of the spell's casting, at which point the entire spell can be uncast. Mr. Weasley is working on crafting the counter-curse as we speak.

The potion itself seems to be working. With each dose, it becomes apparent that my wife is gaining strength. While she is unable to communicate with us, there are discernable changes in her demeanor in response to her company and shifts in the conversation. I don't believe it is my imagination that she understands what is said to her.

Thank you again for your assistance in tracking down these spells. I will forward the original notebook to the Ministry through Auron Tonks-Lupin; she has promised to conceal their provenance, so that you and your mother will not be disturbed. Although Professor Dumbledore and I disagree that you owe a life-debt to us subsequent to the events of your sixth year, consider yourself released of any possible obligation if these investigations lead to the restoration of my wife to full health and vigor.

Please give my regards to your mother. I hope that she is in good health.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

Potions Master

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry

March 15, 1999

Lupin,

I've enclosed the notes that Draco Malfoy found among his father's private papers. Please read them closely. Although William Weasley, Albus, and I have all reviewed them and can find nothing hidden, you and Potter ought to examine them before they disappear into the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. We have, of course, copied them carefully, but we need to make certain they contain nothing more than the written text.

In addition, I suggest that you and Potter make note of a charm located halfway down the fourth page of Malfoy's notes. With some modification, it might assist you in ridding yourselves of the termagant hanging on the wall of your front hallway.

As we discussed via Floo earlier today, we believe that the younger Malfoy's theory about the curse that his father used on my wife is essentially correct. It would have struck Lucius's sense of irony, for a Muggleborn to die, as her magic was consumed from within. Had she been a Muggle, that part of the spell would probably not have

affected her at all. I'm only surprised that he attempted an *Avada Kedavra* Curse initially, although in the heat of battle, it would be quicker to cast. The compound curse requires less of a burst of magical energy, spread over moments as it is, and would have been easier for him as he recovered from casting the Killing Curse.

I am certain that Potter has told you of Hermione's progress. We continue to see signs that she is aware of, and reacting to, her surroundings. The episode with her parents two weeks ago was most encouraging. Despite Potter's contention that her magical surge occurred as a result of her mother's emphatically-stated opinion of me, it is my belief that my wife was reacting to her mother's angry verbal attack upon Potter, without reference to the topic of that attack. Fortunately, no-one was injured and the broken china was easily cleared away. It is heartening, though, to see evidence that her magic is recovering, and her awareness restored. We shall see how matters progress when her parents visit in several days. I may attend the meeting, as Potter, Albus, and Minerva all maintain that my presence calms her. That is rubbish, of course, but I will comply with their request.

When you and Potter have completed your review of the notebook, please give it to your wife to "discover" and deliver to the Ministry.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

March 16, 1999

Potter,

I must ask you to attempt to exert some control over your wife. I have received a request for a response to an upcoming article in *Witch Weekly*. This essay, apparently written as a rebuttal to the *Daily Prophet's* series on my wife and her "unfortunate marriage", was authored by "G.P.", an individual identified as "a close friend to Mrs. Snape who wishes to set the record straight, not only on The Marriage", (their capitalization, not mine) "but also on the heroic nature of Professor Snape, whose loving care has led to Mrs. Snape's imminent recovery". What pap!

To add insult to injury, it appears that Mrs. Potter has abused her visiting time with my wife and allowed Mr. Creevey to photograph her for the article. Such an invasion of Hermione's privacy is intolerable!

Albus and Minerva refuse to intervene; indeed, they appear to approve of the entire exercise. I cannot imagine, however, that you would want such an article published. You are portrayed as being completely helpless in the matter, depending on others to restore your remaining best friend to you. I do not believe your wife serves you well, displaying you in such a way.

In addition, such a depiction of me, as some sort of romantic hero, reinforces questions which would be insulting to my wife should they be voiced. She was my student. There was no relationship between us, other than that of a teacher and his student, and there never would have been, had circumstances not necessitated this marriage. Unfortunately, Mrs. Potter's insistence to the contrary only serves to keep the issue alive in the minds of doubters.

I can only assume that your wife's hormones are leading her astray. I urge you to command her to withdraw the article from *Witch Weekly* and to pay more attention to her N.E.W.T. preparation.

I hope I can count on you in this, if not to assist me or protect your reputation, then to protect my wife from even further embarrassment when she awakens.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

A/N: All standard disclaimers apply...the characters aren't mine, the setting isn't mine, the only thing that is mine is the plot!

Many thanks to my beta, Somigliana, who is a font of positive reinforcement and gentle correction.

Journalistic Integrity

Chapter 5 of 7

Ginny's article and responses to it.

Witch Weekly is proud to present the following update on the condition of Muggle-born witch Hermione Granger Snape, penned by a close friend to Mrs. Snape who wishes to set the record straight, not only on The Marriage, but also on the heroic nature of Professor Snape, whose loving care has led to her imminent recovery. This article presents a very different picture from that drawn by Rita Skeeter's piece in the *Daily Prophet*, which caused such outrage in the wizarding community.

In the interests of journalistic fairness, *Witch Weekly* has invited response from Professor Snape, Ms. Skeeter, Department Head Umbridge, and Albus Dumbledore. While Professor Snape and Ms. Umbridge declined to comment, *Witch Weekly* has received a letter of rebuttal from Ms. Skeeter, and one of confirmation from members of the Inner Circle of the Order of the Phoenix, joined by Mrs. Snape's medical care providers. Both responses are appended to this article.

Sleeping Beauty: The Tragedy and Triumph of Hermione Granger Snape

by G.P.

Few individuals connected with the Order of the Phoenix have aroused more controversy since the Battle of the Great Hall than Severus Snape and Hermione Granger Snape. Professor Snape's many years as a spy among the Death Eaters, coupled with his and Albus Dumbledore's cunning plan to trick Voldemort and his followers into believing that the Order of the Phoenix was headless and weak, perhaps make him a natural recipient of such attention. His wife, however, should be less controversial.

For those who were fortunate enough to miss Rita Skeeter's so-called expose on Professor Snape's unorthodox marriage to Hermione Granger, entitled *Exploitation: The Enslavement of Muggle-Born Heroine Hermione Granger*, I will recap the chief points stated in the article. Following that, I will tell the true story, and I will show where Ms.

Skeeter distorted the facts, either out of ignorance or malice.

I do not pretend impartiality here: Hermione has been my friend for seven years, and Professor Snape, my teacher. I have fought beside them both and have spent many hours since the Battle helping him tend her. I (along with her other friends) am outraged at their treatment by Ms. Skeeter and submit this solely as an attempt to set the record straight.

Ms. Skeeter made the following claims in her article:

1. Professor Snape played both sides in the years following Voldemort's return. He participated in Headmaster Dumbledore's restoration only when it became clear that Voldemort would fail. Had Voldemort appeared to be ascendant, Professor Snape would have left the headmaster for dead.
2. Hermione Granger had more contact with Professor Snape over the years than most other students, seeing him outside of the school during Holidays on many occasions. This exposure led her to form a deep and obsessive attachment to him. The inappropriate relationship was "confirmed by a highly placed Ministry employee, who was in a position to observe the day-to-day interaction between Ms. Granger and Professor Snape."
3. Professor Snape, as a Slytherin and Death Eater, had the utmost contempt for Ms. Granger as a Muggle-born witch, and did not hesitate to exploit her infatuation, to the consternation of her friends.
4. Hermione went against the wishes of her friends Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley when advocating Professor Snape's return to Hogwarts during their seventh year.
5. Ms. Skeeter claims that Ms. Granger was given to Professor Snape, to do with as he pleased by Headmaster Dumbledore, the payment for Professor Snape's return to the Order last year.
6. Hermione Granger was cursed, not by Lucius Malfoy, but by Professor Snape or by Headmaster Dumbledore (depending on which section of Ms. Skeeter's article you are reading), in order to complete her enslavement to Professor Snape.
7. Hermione Granger is kept bound to a bed, helpless, and at Professor Snape's mercy (of which he has none, according to Ms. Skeeter). Her medical and magical condition goes unmonitored.
8. Harry Potter has been completely taken in by the tale that Lucius Malfoy cursed Hermione during the Battle of the Great Hall. Ironically, he is pathetically grateful to Professor Snape for his exploitation of his friend. All other members of the Order are part of the plot, and have completely abandoned Hermione to the evil professor.

The true story is quite different and rather less scandalous, at least where Hermione and Professor Snape are concerned.

Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch, arrived at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry nearly eight years ago. It quickly became clear to her teachers and schoolmates that she had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and the potential to become a powerful witch. After a period of settling in, she formed a deep friendship with fellow Gryffindor first-year students Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley.

Over the course of the following years, Hermione developed friendly relationships with most of her teachers. The exceptions were her Divination Professor, Sybill Trelawney, and Hogwarts' Potions Master, Severus Snape. She dropped Divination midway through her third year, but continued with Potions through the N.E.W.T. level. Professor Snape, who had little patience for Harry Potter and his friends (including Hermione), taught Potions through her fifth year, and Defence Against the Dark Arts in her sixth year. Her Outstanding grades in Professor Snape's classes are perfectly consistent with the marks she earned from other professors, as well as with her O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. results.

There is one other exception to Hermione's record of maintaining good relations with her Hogwarts professors; she despised her fifth year D.A.D.A. teacher, Dolores Umbridge. That situation is discussed below.

At the end of Hermione's fourth year, as we all know, Voldemort returned, and our world was thrown into uproar. The Ministry of Magic, under Cornelius Fudge, attempted to deny that the threat existed, and used the *Daily Prophet* to discredit the testimony given by Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore. Headmaster Dumbledore re-formed the Order of the Phoenix, so that the wizarding world would not lie undefended. Minister Fudge moved to take control of Hogwarts from the headmaster, appointing Dolores Umbridge first to the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, then Hogwarts High Inquisitor, and finally Headmistress. While at Hogwarts, Ms. Umbridge persecuted Harry Potter and his friends, gutted the D.A.D.A. curriculum, led Aurors in physical attacks upon other faculty members (Professor McGonagall was critically injured and hospitalized for several weeks as a result of one such assault), administered controlled substances to students, and threatened them with torture. She admitted before witnesses that she had sent Dementors into Harry Potter's Muggle neighborhood during the previous summer in an effort to silence Harry. When he was successful in saving both his Muggle cousin and himself from the creatures, she attempted to have him expelled from Hogwarts because of his use of magic in his own defence. She forced Harry to stand trial before a closed session of the full Wizengamot at the age of fifteen. Fortunately, he prevailed.

That year, Hermione was pivotal in the formation of the DA, a group of students who undertook to study Defence on their own, in defiance of Dolores Umbridge and the Ministry. Many of these same students formed the core of the student resistance to Voldemort's attack in the Great Hall, ultimately defeating the Death Eaters and assisting Harry Potter to destroy Voldemort forever.

During their sixth year, Hermione's friendship with Ronald Weasley developed into a romantic attachment. Hermione and Ron were deeply in love and planned to marry, although they had agreed not to become formally engaged until the war ended. Both of their families were very pleased with the relationship.

While Hermione had the utmost respect for Professor Snape as a teacher and as a member of the Order, I can state with certainty that she did not have any romantic or sexual interest in him. They were not friendly. Professor Snape does not possess a gregarious nature, and he never displayed any fondness for Harry Potter or his friends. He taught them (and taught them well), he protected them from harm, but he did not like them. He certainly showed no personal interest in Hermione Granger.

When Professor Snape "killed" Professor Dumbledore at the end of Hermione's sixth year, fleeing with the Death Eaters to join Voldemort (and so laying the groundwork for that evil wizard's final defeat), he had the opportunity to capture or even kill Harry Potter. Not only did he intervene, in order to save Harry from the other Death Eaters that night, he also advised him on effective fighting strategy. Far from playing both sides, Professor Snape continued to risk his life in service to the Order of the Phoenix.

Hermione played no part in the restoration of Professors Dumbledore and Snape to Hogwarts in the middle of her seventh year; she, Ron Weasley, and Harry Potter were, at that time, absent from Hogwarts, searching out and destroying the Horcruxes containing the fragments of Tom Riddle's soul. Both men were well established at the school when the three completed their mission and returned to review for and take their N.E.W.T.s.

During the Battle of the Great Hall, witnesses report that Lucius Malfoy cursed Hermione twice. His first attempt was the Killing Curse, which struck her beloved Ron instead. As she knelt beside the body of her fiancé, she was hit by Malfoy's second spell, apparently a combination of a stunner, a sleeping charm, and a magical leeching curse. She has not regained consciousness since that day.

The witness statements regarding these curses are contained in Auror reports on the Battle of the Great Hall, and are part of the public record. I am at a loss to understand how Ms. Skeeter could have not had access to them for her research. No witnesses reported seeing either Professor Snape or Headmaster Dumbledore curse Hermione.

All of the surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix have dedicated themselves to Hermione's protection and ultimate healing. When her parents, at the instigation of certain Ministry officials, attempted to remove her from the Magical world, we knew we had to act. Removal to a Muggle facility would have killed her, as the leeching curse would have drained her completely. Professor Snape married Hermione, not because he desired her, not so he could exploit her, but to keep her alive and at Hogwarts. He has cared for her night and day since that time. A potion of his devising has led to her partial return to awareness, although she is not yet fully awake. The final deed necessary to restore Hermione Granger to health is to un-cast the curse, which can only be done on the anniversary of its casting. All members of the Order plan to be present for that event, and Gringotts' Curse Breaker, William Weasley, will cast the counter-curse himself. We are extremely optimistic that Hermione will be able to move forward with her life from that moment.

Until that time, Hermione Granger Snape will remain surrounded by those who love her. Ms. Skeeter claims that she is kept isolated, and bedridden in horrible conditions. Nothing could be farther from the truth. She receives multiple visitors daily, friends who speak to her, read to her, and care for her. Hogwarts' Mediwitch, Madam Pomfrey, checks on her daily as well. Harry Potter visits at least once a week, and brings her parents to see her every other Saturday. Hermione is not abandoned; in truth we often joke that she can't wait to get better just so that she'll be able to have some time alone!

Were we always so optimistic? No. For the first six months after the Battle, as Hermione lay completely unconscious, most of us despaired at least once. Even Harry Potter, whose hallmark has been perseverance in the face of apparently insurmountable odds, has wept in despair at his inability to help his dearest friend. It was Professor Snape who showed us, every day, how to begin with renewed hope and purpose. And progress was made, great progress.

The photograph which accompanies this article is of Hermione, as we see her every day. She looks much like the old Hermione, merely at rest. We know that when she awakens, she will be the same brilliant, loving young woman that she was before the Battle. And we know that she approves of what we have done on her behalf. How can we be sure, you might ask? A brief anecdote, then I will close.

Ms. Skeeter's article ignited a firestorm of recrimination against Professor Snape. He has received Howlers and threats daily since its publication. Of course, we kept Hermione unaware of this, although it took a terrible toll on the Professor. Cruelly, the Grangers' Ministry contact gave a copy of the article to them. I am sure you can imagine their reaction. When they met Harry Potter in Professor Snape's rooms during their next visit to their daughter, Mrs. Granger demanded angrily that he remove Hermione from Hogwarts, and deliver her to her parents' care. She called Professor Snape a pedophile and repeated the tale put forward by Ms. Skeeter; that Hermione was being artificially kept in a coma so that her husband could exploit her sexually, and drain her magic for his own use. Mrs. Granger was quite graphic in her denunciation of Professor Snape and in her calls for retaliation against him. Suddenly, the tea service on the table before Hermione began to shatter, piece by piece. When Harry cast a spell to locate the source of the magical pulses, he found that they had originated from Hermione herself. Every time Mr. or Mrs. Granger would criticize Professor Snape, another piece of china or glass in the room would explode. This was Hermione's only way of defending her husband, and she expressed herself quite clearly.

Ms. Skeeter's motivation in publishing these lies is murky. Perhaps she is merely misguided. It is a fact that the Ministry confirmation of many of these tales comes from the Department headed by Dolores Umbridge, who can scarcely be called Hermione's friend. In fact, after the episode described above, the Grangers identified Ms. Umbridge as their contact, at which point the glass in all of the room's photographs exploded.

Professor Snape will not thank me for writing this article. He is not looking for praise for his actions. That does not make them any less praiseworthy. The Heroes of the Second War against Voldemort are not perfect, nor are they glamorous men and women indeed, they include a werewolf, a thief, and a Squib. They are Aurors, teachers, shopkeepers, Ministry employees, parents, and schoolchildren. They are the people to whom we all owe our freedom today. Hermione Granger Snape nearly lost her life fighting to protect our world; we owe it to her to protect her from those in the Ministry and at the *Daily Prophet* who would exploit her situation to justify their own actions (and inactions) during the war.

G.P.

March 16, 1999

Gentlemen,

I have read your libelous article purporting to be written by a friend of Mrs. Snape's. When I was conducting my extensive research, I found no such friend. In fact, all of Mrs. Snape's schoolmates appear to have abandoned her to her fate. No doubt this individual (if she even exists), is writing out of guilt for her neglect of the poor woman, unless she is herself, part of the conspiracy.

I attempted on many occasions to speak with Professor Snape, Harry Potter, Professor Dumbledore, or any other member of the faculty of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but my owls went unanswered.

As for Dolores Umbridge, she is a highly regarded Ministry official who attempted to remove Mrs. Snape from an abusive situation. Were she guilty of any of the actions listed in G.P.'s article, she would have been removed from office immediately. Instead, she remained in place for the remainder of Minister Fudge's administration and has charge of the Muggle Liaison Office under Minister Scrimgeour. It is clear that G.P.'s accusations are made in retaliation for Ms. Umbridge's attempt to rescue Mrs. Snape from her husband's abuse.

I urge you not to publish this scurrilous article. *Witch Weekly* is opening itself to major civil damages by doing so.

Sincerely,

Rita Skeeter

Senior Investigative Correspondent

Daily Prophet

Editor's Note: An investigation into the actions of Dolores Umbridge during the period immediately preceding and throughout her tenure at Hogwarts has been launched by the Wizengamot. In addition, Ms. Umbridge's actions as Head of the Muggle Liaison Office are under review, particularly with regard to that Department's statements or actions pertaining to Hermione Granger Snape. Harry Potter and the Grangers are said to be cooperating fully with these inquiries.

March 20, 1999

Dear Sirs,

You had requested comment from Albus Dumbledore on this very fine piece written by G.P. He, in turn, invited us to participate with him in his response. Many of Ms. Skeeter's allegations were offensive to us all, and we all wished to support G.P. in her brave stand.

In addition, we have obtained a copy of Ms. Skeeter's letter in rebuttal to G.P.'s article. We can assure you that G.P. exists and that she is completely truthful in her statements. She is in a position to know all the facts that she has reported. She shows great discretion in her refusal to speculate; would that Ms. Skeeter had shown the same restraint.

Severus Snape and Hermione Granger Snape are true heroes of the war. They both made enormous sacrifices, and continue to do so to this day. Severus is untiring in his efforts to bring healing to his former student, now wife. An intensely private man, he has opened his home to her friends, her family, myriad Healers, and his Order associates; all to benefit her. It is a terrible injustice to accuse him of exploiting her when he has done nothing but act to protect her, often at the expense of his own comfort.

Following publication of Ms. Skeeter's slander, Healer Argento of St. Mungo's Hospital (the Head of the Clinic for Abused and Exploited Women) examined Mrs. Snape to determine whether she has been in any way mistreated. By signing this letter, he attests that this is not the case. In addition, Madam Pomfrey has asked to sign this letter to affirm that, in the course of her daily monitoring of Mrs. Snape's medical condition, she has observed nothing to suggest that Professor Snape has behaved

inappropriately.

Note well that Healer Argento wrote a letter to this effect to the *Daily Prophet* following his visit to Mrs. Snape. That letter was never acknowledged or published.

Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, Arthur Weasley, and Harry Potter met with the Grangers when they last visited their daughter. They explained the full history of these events and gave an account of Ms. Umbridge and Ms. Skeeter's past animosity toward Hermione. The Grangers now stand united with the Order in its quest to heal their daughter and to defend Professor Snape against the terrible accusations leveled against him.

We ask that the wizarding community not attempt to further contact Professor Snape or his wife, but to allow them to move forward with their lives. This does not mean, however, that we do not wish you to take action. These two people have paid a high price for their opposition to Voldemort; please acknowledge their sacrifices by standing up for them with the Ministry and by writing to the *Daily Prophet*, insisting on fair and balanced reporting, not only about these two fine individuals, but in all things.

Thank you to *Witch Weekly* for giving us all the opportunity to right this egregious wrong.

Sincerely,

The Order of the Phoenix

Albus Dumbledore

Remus Lupin

Minerva McGonagall

Harry Potter

Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin

Arthur Weasley

Charlie Weasley

Fred Weasley

George Weasley

William Weasley

and

Healer Argento (St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries)

Mediwitch Pomfrey (Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry)

A/N: All standard disclaimers apply...all the characters mentioned are the creation and property of J.K. Rowling. I just put them in amusing situations for my own entertainment (and, I hope, the pleasure of others).

Thank you, as always, to the fabulous Somigliana, who is the kindest, most competent beta reader on the planet. She makes me look so good!

Tomorrow

Chapter 6 of 7

Hermione's thoughts, the night before the Anniversary.

June 14, 1999

Alone at last! But only for as long as it takes Severus to usher out the last of our guests and reset the wards. Everyone is so hopeful, so nervous. Especially Severus, although he betrays it the least. He works hard at being the Voice of Reason, reminding everyone that if Bill's counter-curse doesn't work tomorrow, we'll try again in a year. And a year after that, and a year after that. Although he doesn't say the words, I know that he will never stop trying.

I do want to wake up tomorrow, though. I want to see my friends, kiss my parents, snuggle with Crookshanks, and hold little Ronald Sirius Potter...he smells so sweet when they press his cheek against mine. They say he looks exactly like Ron, except with black hair. I am clearly suffering from a lack of imagination, because my mind boggles whenever I try to form the picture.

I can't bear the thought of missing the Ministry's Anniversary Ball tomorrow night. That's when the Orders of Merlin will be awarded. Severus has agreed to attend in my place, to receive my Order of Merlin, Second Class. "Such things mean nothing," he tells me, "but I will collect it for you nonetheless and applaud Potter on your behalf." He does not know that he, too, will be receiving a medal, and will be on the dais with Harry and Professor Dumbledore. That took a fair amount of effort on their part; ultimately, they had to threaten Minister Scrimgeour with the fact that the entire Order of the Phoenix would boycott the celebration if my husband did not receive his due. Eventually, faced with a public relations nightmare, the Minister folded; Severus Snape will receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, tomorrow night.

I already have a dress and everything else needed for the Ball. Oh, I know I won't be able to dance, or mingle, or even stay for very long, but still, I want to look nice. Ginny brought it over and tried it on me during last week's visit. As soon as Severus leaves tomorrow evening, Ginny and Minerva will sneak in and help me to change. There's

even a plan to smuggle me in; Severus won't know I'm there until the ceremony begins.

Of course, I can only go if Bill is successful tomorrow. If he fails, if the curse takes hold for another year, I'll remain here with Madam Pomfrey for company, listening to the ceremony on the wireless.

Ah, here's Crookshanks. I often wonder if he can sense my thoughts, where the others cannot. He certainly does appear soon after I think of him. It's ironic that Legilimency is ineffective on me. Professor Dumbledore believes I'm a natural Occlumens. What a useful talent to have, given who my husband is! It served me well when I first became aware. My thoughts and emotions were all over the place. I'd hate for Severus to have seen or heard some of the things that went through my mind during those first few weeks.

It will be nice to communicate without breaking things, although sometimes the crashes are very satisfying to hear. Once it became clear that I was doing it intentionally, the twins began hunting for small figurines ("The uglier the better, Fred!" "Here's a real winner, George!"), which they would place on a small platform on the table before me. They charmed the platform to devour the wreckage, thus sparing the house-elves the trouble of having to clean up after my attempts at conversation. Everyone got into the game. I have become quite adept at answering yes/no questions (one porcelain kitten for yes, two china dogs for no) and interjecting my opinion into more complex discussions (all breakables on the table). Severus is kind-hearted enough to reserve his special supply of Sirius Black ceramic statues ("From the Order of the Phoenix Heroes Collection! Buy yours now!" trumpets the advertisement on the Wizarding Wireless Network – Severus purchased a case of them) for times when we are alone. I believe he purposely asks "no" questions, just for the pleasure of seeing me blast away at his former enemy. He knows it would hurt Remus and Harry, though, so he keeps the figures hidden when we have visitors; he says it's for my sake.

Severus still has not entirely forgiven Ginny for the Witch Weekly article, although he realizes that it was a group effort. He doesn't yet have any idea how much I participated in its planning (or how many tiny crystal dragons were sacrificed in its creation). I suppose I'll have to confess tomorrow. He has received much kinder mail since it was published, however, and my parents have been almost pleasant to him! The Wizengamot has asked him to give testimony in the Umbridge hearings, particularly with reference to her treatment of Harry and her threats against us that last day. I hope to be able to testify there and to the Ministry Board of Inquiry as well. Harry is trying to arrange for me to do so.

Severus is back now. I can hear him moving around the room, putting things in order. He doesn't talk as much as he did in the beginning, but the silences are pleasant, even comfortable. He speaks when he has something to say, I suppose, and it feels less desperate. Unforced, even. He knows I understand.

He has asked me to think about what I would like to do, where I would like to go if Bill is successful tomorrow. Do I want to return to my parents? Would I prefer to move to rooms of my own here at the Castle? He assures me that he knows I'll be invited to join the household at 12 Grimmauld Place, and that he would have no objection to my moving in with the Potters and the Lupins. There is one option he does not voice: my remaining here with him. Yet I remember that first evening, before he knew I could hear him... I remember him saying how pleased he would be if I decided to stay. I will never forget the things he told me, the agonized honesty in his voice. He showed me his soul that night; will I betray that and turn away? Can I?

But I want more than anything to complete my studies. I want to understand what happened to me, how the magic that sustains me came to be. I want to know who whispers to me while Severus sleeps, reassuring me that I will awaken, encouraging me to hope.

In many ways, my life will be easy if Bill fails tomorrow. I won't have to do anything or make any choices, I'll merely continue as I am. My friends and family will visit me, my husband will still care for me. I'll be better off than many other victims of the war, those hundreds who died or whose minds and bodies were destroyed. I am better off, I know, but it's not enough.

I want to live. I want to act. I want to be myself – Hermione Granger Snape. I want to learn. I want to stand up to the Umbridges and Skeeters of the world on my own behalf, and on behalf of those I love. I want to visit the graves of my friends and help Molly Weasley continue to get better. I want to go everywhere, do everything, know all there is to know. And every night, I want to return to Hogwarts, talk about my day and listen to his, sit while he brushes and braids my hair, and hold him as he sleeps.

He is my home. He is my safety.

I want to wake up tomorrow.

A/N: All characters and settings are the property of J.K. Rowling; only the situations are mine.

Many thanks to Somigliana, my wonderful beta.

The Anniversary Song

Chapter 7 of 7

Finally... the big day. The Order and their friends have gathered in the Great Hall to uncast Malfoy's curse.

June 15, 1999

My dearest Molly,

It is done. We gathered in the Great Hall at the exact moment of the Death Eaters' attack. All present today took their places where they fought a year ago, with one exception; Severus would not leave Hermione to lie alone on the floor where our boy fell. Instead, he crouched behind her, holding her in the same position as when she was struck. Only Harry and Minerva stood with Dumbledore today.

You would have been so proud of Bill, my love. Of all of us, only he and Hermione showed no distress. He was as steady as a rock when he stood beyond Malfoy's place, his wand pointing toward the kneeling pair. I feared that Severus's jaw would shatter, it was clenched so tightly, yet the hands that held Hermione upright were as gentle as ever.

As the hour chimed, Albus sealed the doors. Only Order members were permitted in the Hall, along with battle survivors who had volunteered to assist with today's uncasting. I was surprised to see Draco Malfoy standing beside the Slytherin table with several of his former housemates. Bill had not informed me that he was expected, but as matters progressed it became clear that he and Bill had been in close contact. Draco had an essential role to play today.

Albus and Harry jointly cast the *Revelatio* spell on the entire Hall. I have never seen it applied so broadly; it is customarily used on small objects or, in rare cases, children, and requires so much power that it can only be held for seconds. However, the entire Hall and its occupants shimmered with magic for the next twenty minutes. Bill later explained that it was essential that all magic be visible and all spells cast be targeted away from Hermione, lest the curse be nourished while it still resided within her body. I had wondered why she was cared for without magic ... the symbiont was fed just enough to keep it from attacking her basic life force, but not enough to encourage its growth.

Finally, about twelve minutes after the battle would have begun, an eerie glow began to emanate from Hermione's body. It took form as it moved toward Bill, stopping midway between our son and Hermione, where Lucius Malfoy now stood, exactly as he had one year before. The harsh clash of battle, so hard fought, sounded faintly in our ears. Severus flinched when we heard the echo of Hermione's year-old scream, her plea that Ron not be dead. His arms tightened around her still figure. Bill stood straight, gazing at Lucius. The phantom's wand took aim at Hermione, held motionless before it. I wanted to scream at Severus to pull her aside, but I could see that she was still linked to the projection; if she moved, the wand would follow. Malfoy's lips moved, incanting the spell which has become engraved in our memories since it was uncovered six months ago.

Bill's calm voice rose in response, saying the words which would draw the remainder of the curse from Hermione's body and hold it in place, uncast, until it could be destroyed. I saw it leave her, the glow traveling across the floor, leaving cold gray stone stripped of magic in its wake. Hermione slumped, apparently lifeless, in Snape's arms. This, now, was the most dangerous time.

Charlie, Fred, George, and I cast the block to protect Hermione. The *Revelatio* showed it, standing strong where Ron had lain. The Lucius shade appeared to be attempting to cast through molasses. Any portion of the curse which escaped Bill's containment seemed to ooze toward our block and stop. Lucius spun and cast at Bill, a different curse, not one we had anticipated. It cut through the thick barrier and sped toward our son. I was sick with horror, fearing he would be cut down before my eyes, yet I did not dare release the spell protecting Hermione.

Suddenly another block went up, inches in front of Bill. Lucius's spell struck it with a crash, and then dissipated. Phantom Lucius turned to curse the wizard who had saved our son, and froze in place. His own son was advancing across the stones toward him, wand still holding Bill's block, completely vulnerable to attack should Lucius complete the curse.

"It is over, Father." The young man's voice trembled slightly, but his gaze was steady. "The Dark Lord lost the battle, you lost the battle. You can do no damage in this room today, unless you wish to destroy all that remains of the Malfoys."

Lucius's lips moved, but I could not hear what he said. I do not know if Draco did, but he spoke again, calmly.

"Every moment you exist here without recasting yourself, you lose power. You have no way of replacing what you expended attempting to curse Granger and Weasley. You cannot inhabit me; Granger is the only Muggle-born witch here. We can wait here for hours as you weaken and shrivel to nothingness. Or you can allow me to uncast you. It is your choice, Father."

For long moments, living grey eyes met ghostly. Finally, the phantom wand lowered. Lucius stood tall before his son, his glow dimming perceptibly. He lowered his head in submission.

Draco's wand moved toward him and his voice was strong as he began the second incantation. As Lucius's light waned further, Bill's voice joined the younger man's. What had made no sense when I read the spell, transcribed in two colors on a piece of torn parchment, now became clear. The compound curse could not be uncast by one wizard alone. The uncasting incantation was a duet. The colors streaming from their wands brightened, swirling and dancing around the form of Lucius Malfoy as two voices rose and fell in song. Other voices joined, picking up strands of the incantation, until everyone in the Hall, all Houses, sang power into the spell.

At the same time, another, weak glow erupted, this time behind the block protecting Severus and Hermione. I could see the final vestiges of the curse leaving Hermione, drawn to our spell by its greater power. Severus pulled her away safely, placing his body between her and the still-shimmering block.

Finally, Lucius was gone. The last embers of his curse were captured by our block and dissolved; we allowed it to fall. Harry and Albus released the *Revelatio*, and the Great Hall was silent.

Everyone moved toward the pair now huddled against the Gryffindor table, only to be stopped by a single word.

"Severus?"

I was not the only one who wept where he stood.

Poppy has examined Hermione and declares that she is "as well as can be expected". Her eyes are horribly sensitive to light and she is very weak, but she will recover. Those of us who insisted on hugging her had to embrace Severus as well; Hermione would not release her grasp on his robes. He has taken her back to their rooms so she can rest; Ginny and baby Ron await them there.

So, you can tell the Grangers that all is well. I am sure Harry will be happy to bring them here to Hogwarts on Saturday, according to the usual schedule. It doesn't appear that Hermione will be permitted to travel for quite some time (although I did detect an odd look passing between Harry, the twins, and Minerva McGonagall, of all people, when Severus made that pronouncement).

Please give my best wishes to the Grangers. I will meet you at the Burrow at four o'clock so that we can prepare for the Ministry Ball. Although this day will always be tinged with sadness, we have many causes for celebration...your return to health, our beautiful grandson, our brave sons and daughter, and today, our almost-daughter has been restored to us. I know that, wherever he is, Ron rejoices as well.

Your devoted husband,

Arthur

A/N: So that's it for "I'll Never Take Advantage". I know there are many unanswered questions, such as what was Hermione's choice, where did Lucius Malfoy come from, and many more! Never fear; they will be addressed in the sequel, *Gifts*.

Many thanks, as always, to Somigliana, who makes me look good (and who is directly responsible for the readability of what I post).