

Fallen

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Marriage isn't always what you think it's going to be.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I don't usually like to begin a story with an author's note. However, I do so to warn you that this is a very angst-ridden one-shot. It is the story of one whose life has been trodden upon, whose will has been worn down, whose heart has been utterly broken. I will not say that I hope you enjoy it, but I do hope that you appreciate it. ~nss

She couldn't breathe. Her heart lay like a lump of lead in her chest, suffocating her.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bath, staring at the soap that swirled in predictable patterns. She couldn't bring herself to look away. Not that it was necessary; it was just too much of an effort. She had no more energy left to expend any more effort.

It had been eleven years. Eleven long years and not all of them good. Severus was a challenge from the beginning. More than once she questioned why she had not cut him loose in that first year, but either she truly did not know the answer to that question, or it would have involved looking harder at her own faults.

In a way she thought she could change him and make him into something ... someone he was not. To soften the sharp edges, as it were, if only with her.

There were small bumps in the road, nothing major, until just after their sixth anniversary. Her mother had died suddenly, and Hermione was devastated. She had trudged on, denying herself the feelings, not wanting to admit how much it really hurt.

Severus had actually shown some emotion at the Muggle funeral when he greeted her father. For the first time in her life she saw Severus Snape hug another man and a tear fall from his eye. And then he had taken what little emotion she had discovered he had, locked it up tight and threw away the key. He never spoke of her mother afterwards. He looked uncomfortable when she tried to.

She had a child, hoping a baby would raise her spirits. It did for a while. He was a sweet baby. But Severus would not involve himself like other fathers did. By the time the boy was two years old, her edges had been worn and her patience had grown thin. She needed to get away, but there was nowhere she could really go without having to answer embarrassing questions.

Then Severus had lost his job at Hogwarts. Albus had died and the new Ministry-appointed headmaster had ideas of how classes should be taught that did not coincide with those of her husband. They left Hogwarts, they left their friends, and they left their sanity behind.

It was the worst few months of Hermione's life. Severus came home every day after toiling at the only job he could find, angry and disillusioned. Hermione scraped together what little money they had and tried to make it stretch as far as it could.

Her dread grew every day as the clock hands traveled slowly around the dial until it announced her husband's arrival. By the time he came home, her stomach was in knots. He entered with a scowl and complained endlessly about work, about people, and about life in general.

She could not have a bad day or, if she did, she could not mention it. A frown could never settle upon her face. One slip up and hexes would be thrown, their possessions damaged, the walls scarred.

He never hit her or their son. He threatened a couple times, but somehow it had never gone that far.

Her father came for a brief visit at their wonderful new house. She thought she put on the act well until he pulled her aside before he left and asked if Severus was being good to her. She assured him, through a thick tear-choked throat, that Severus was a perfect husband and would never hurt her.

What she *wanted* to say with every fiber of her being ... no, what she wanted to *cream* was: Things are *not* all right. Severus is always in a rotten mood. His current job is not working out. And yes, Daddy, he *is* taking it out on me, just not in ways that you can see!

But she didn't say any of that to her father. She simply sucked it in and trudged on, knowing that all marriages had their ups and downs and that somehow she would no, *they* would make it through.

After a few months, they gave up and moved back to Hogsmeade. Their friends were happy to see them back, and they reciprocated. Hermione presented a happy face even though things had not returned to "normal" yet with Severus.

What was normal, anyway?

She thought of leaving him a couple times. Seriously thought about it. But the embarrassment it would have caused and the people telling her "I told you so" and, above all, their little boy, made her stay.

She didn't feel wanted anymore. Had she ever felt wanted? She couldn't remember. She supposed she had, but it had always been difficult to decipher Severus's emotions. Sometimes she was just too tired to figure him out.

She began hanging out more with her friends and talking with Remus. Remus had become closer with Severus after their marriage, though it was still a turbulent relationship at best. But Remus knew what Severus could be like, and so she had someone to talk to, someone to commiserate with, especially since Severus was being as difficult with his friends as he was being with her.

Remus always knew the right things to say. Maybe that's why it happened. Maybe it was because she had felt so unwanted for so long that it was nice to have someone pay attention to her. The affair lasted no longer than a few weeks, and it was exhilarating and devastating at the same time. They broke it off not because they didn't want each other any more, but because they were afraid Severus would kill either one or both of them if he found out. And they destroyed the evidence.

She vowed it would never happen again. It killed her that it had; she had always been adamantly against adulterous relationships. Now she was an adulteress, and she would have to live with that realization for the rest of her life.

Then, Hermione got pregnant unexpectedly and had a little girl. Things got better again, and slowly she and Severus climbed out of their depression and got on with life.

She tricked herself into believing everything would be good again, that she could handle everything that came her way now that she had experienced so much. After all, what more could possibly happen in a marriage?

And then one day, Severus came home and announced that his mother was moving in. His mother? She was stunned. They had never discussed such a thing before. She had met his mother once at the wedding, and she seemed nice enough, though a little standoffish. Severus told her that his mother was aging and ill and couldn't take care of herself, and she had alienated the house-elves and had nowhere else to turn.

So Madam Snape came to live with her son and his family. Everything was all right for a while, or it at least seemed that way. Then the problems began. His mother stayed in her room for hours on end then blamed it on Hermione, accusing her daughter-in-law of making her feel like a burden. When she did come out of her room, her face was always grimaced with a pained expression, yet she expected sweet smiles in return.

Hermione put herself out for the woman, always asking after her health, inquiring if she needed anything. The woman was always fine and wanted nothing. Hermione knew the right thing to do was to take care of her mother-in-law, but the stress was killing her. And Severus constantly berated his wife for not behaving the way she should, telling her that she just didn't understand what it was like to be a pureblood, to the point where she did not know how to behave anymore.

And then it happened again: Severus lost his job. It didn't matter why. And his mom, always one to pick the most opportune time for conflict, upped the ante and threatened to leave and pull all her assets out from under Severus and his unworthy bride. Never mind that the two small children, her flesh and blood, would be equally as devastated.

Hermione didn't know what to do. She couldn't let this happen to her husband, to her children. Severus deserved the inheritance, not some second cousin twice removed on his father's side who was suspected of *really* supporting the Dark Lord. She had to make the woman stop.

She was tired of feeling like a fifth wheel in her own house, like she never quite fit in. She was tired of constantly taking out her frustrations upon her children. She was tired of being glared at and frowned upon by her husband and mother-in-law. She was tired of holding her breath, wondering if her husband was going to be angry with her that day or not.

Hermione had finally given up and given him an ultimatum. The night after Severus finished telling her how unhappy his mother was, how she didn't feel as though she was wanted in her own son's house, and how she was going to leave and change her will to essentially disown her own son, Hermione tearfully told him that she would leave if that meant his mother would stay, and he could retain his inheritance. Severus hadn't answered. He had just walked away.

It had been four days. Four days since Severus had spoken to her.

Hermione sat on the edge of the tub, unable to think anymore, unable to mend her broken heart for the thousandth time, unable to care any longer for what other people thought she should or shouldn't do. Her heart beat heavily under the weight of her children who would no longer have to listen to her constant yelling or look upon her sad face.

She lifted the razor blade to her wrist and sliced in deep, watching the soap swirl pink in predictable patterns...

...until she slid off the edge and sank to the bottom.