

What Now, Severus?

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Bellatrix does Snape a favor, but he doesn't realize it right away.

The Prince Defeated

Chapter 1 of 7

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The Prince Defeated.

A man with long, black hair struggled wearily up the slope behind the Shrieking Shack, a wand clutched in his hand. He was glancing frequently over his shoulder into the darkness. Suddenly, his booted foot landed clumsily between two rocks, and he slipped and crashed down on the slick, muddy ground to lie unmoving under the ancient trees. His face was a frozen mask, but there were tear tracks in the dried sweat and filth that coated his face. The skin over his left cheekbone was slashed open, and dried blood was crusted around the wound. It would soon be dawn on a clear June morning.

As the moments passed, the birds that had gone mute at his approach began rustling again, preparing for their morning cacophony. Time passed in silence while the man lay unmoving - with only the sound of harsh breath signaling that he was still alive.

Suddenly, with a pop, a woman appeared nearby. A light glowed bright as she shone her wand over the slippery ground. When she spied the fallen man on the ground, her eyes flashed, and she laughed triumphantly.

The man seemed unaware of her presence until she stepped up and kicked him hard in the ribs. Clutching his side, he groaned and forced his eyes open to stare dully up at her.

"Well, Snape, this is a strange place to find you, after your glorious acts," she sneered. "Why haven't you Apparated to the Dark Lord to gloat over your impressive accomplishment? Amycus and his band of fools returned hours ago, bursting with tales of your triumph, but you didn't join us. Where have you been?" she said, pausing for breath. "And what have you done with my idiot nephew?" she demanded in a furious whisper.

Severus Snape stirred at last and forced himself slowly into a sitting position in the mud, covering his wand from her sight as he gathered his filthy robes about him. He resembled a living corpse, his nose more prominent than ever, jutting from gray skin stretched tight over the bones of his face. His black eyes were dead and expressionless.

"Why are you here, Bellatrix?" he rasped in a hoarse, disused voice.

"The Dark Lord has ordered all of his Death Eaters out to search for you, in case you should require assistance," she snarled, her jaw working. "He is planning a triumphant return for you and wished to make it clear to us all that you deserve the greatest honor for killing that old fool, Albus Dumbledore. And it is my good fortune," she hissed acidly, "that I have found you first. Now, Snape, no more questions from you; you must immediately tell me where Draco is. Immediately!" She demanded, "I know that he Disapparated from Hogwarts with you last night, and no one has seen him since."

Snape considered standing, but every muscle in his body quivered with exhaustion. He was nearly paralyzed with fatigue - he knew he would collapse at Bellatrix's feet if he tried to rise. Through his weariness and grief, he saw that she was tense with rage and as dangerous to him as a rabid dog. He straightened himself as well as he could

and tightened his grip on the wand half hidden in his sleeve. He sat in silence as Bellatrix loomed over him.

"Did you hear me, Snape? I want to know what you've done with Draco!" She was breathing heavily, and her eyes were bulging. "Did he run from you? Did you do something to him? Where... is... Draco?"

His lack of response maddened her, and he waited resignedly for the last shred of her self-control to evaporate. He wondered dispassionately if he would have the strength to block her spell. He didn't have long to wait - but when her attack came, it was not magical at all, but a series of vicious kicks. The first, to the side of his head, laid him flat on the ground. The second sent his unused wand spinning out of his hand. She shrieked with mad laughter as the wand ricocheted off a tree trunk before redoubling her furious attack, kicking every part of his body that she could reach. Then, she kicked Snape's head once more. Lightning blazed inside his skull, and then there was nothing.

First, he was only aware of the pain. His eyes felt like they had been glued shut, but he had no desire to open them. It did seem that he wasn't dead; however, instead he felt rather like one would after a brisk round of *Crucio* from the Dark Lord. 'If Dumbledore were here, he'd tell me that where there's life, there's hope,' he thought sourly. 'He is the only person I'll tolerate that rubbish from, but right now I would have to....' Suddenly, memory returned ... the Astronomy Tower, Dumbledore, Draco, Death Eaters in Hogwarts, and an Unforgivable Curse. His curse. He shook his head, causing more pain ... but still in his fogged mind, he saw Dumbledore, ashen and weak, slumped against the tower wall, surrounded by his enemies, looking to him for salvation.

Begging to him in that agonized voice, "Severus... please."

A blow stopped the recollection cold. Something hard smacked into his face, making him struggle unsuccessfully to open his eyes and move somewhere, anywhere, else.

"Welcome back to life, Snivellus," drawled the hate-filled voice of Bellatrix. "For a short time, at least," She chuckled at her own wit. "Funny thing, memory. I'd forgotten that my dear, departed cousin Sirius used to call you that. Forgot it for years, but it came to me just now, like a gift. You always were a pathetic brat, trailing after us the way you did," she said. "I don't know why any of us put up with you."

"If you remember," Snape replied, in a voice that croaked, "after all your years of education, you were incapable of passing a single N.E.W.T. exam without assistance from my first year self." He continued. "I suppose you had better things to do at school than learn."

He tried unsuccessfully to shrug, wondering idly why Bellatrix was going on about ancient history. He dimly registered her voice going on, haranguing, insulting, demanding, but it seemed very distant. 'I must have a concussion,' he thought. 'It actually creates a pleasing numbness, which muffles the harpy's demented shrieking. If the pain weren't so annoying,' he continued to muse, 'I'd have concussed myself years ago. In fact, noisy, psychotic bitch that she is...maybe it's even worth the pain not to really hear her.' The hint of a smirk twitched across his bruised face, and in response his head throbbed, causing his mind to drift out of focus again.

'To the well-organized mind, death is... what? What did Dumbledore say? I can't remember...' he thought fretfully, fading in and out of consciousness. 'I'll find out soon though, since Bellatrix Lestrange is going to kill me.' He thought, 'I am going to die tonight.' He formed the words precisely in his mind, but they were unconnected to reality. 'Going to die... going to die. Die.' It seemed, at that moment, that his whole life was a long, dark series of lessons about death - and that this one would be the last.

Without warning a hand seized his wrist, digging fingernails sharply into him, and a familiar sensation of pressure squeezed the breath from his body. Stunned, he realized, "I'm Apparating side-by-side with the bloody woman. What does she think she's doing?" The sensation went on far longer than he thought possible. His head was going to explode, his starved lungs burned, collapsing as the last air left him. As he lost consciousness once again, the last image in his mind was of Dumbledore, looking seriously down at him.

Icy water slapped over Snape's face, blasting his crusted eyes open and rushing into his nose and mouth. Once the sensation of drowning passed, he swallowed a bit of water gratefully and cautiously turned his aching head toward the light emanating from Bellatrix's wand. The sky was pitch black again, and the few stars he could see through the forest canopy were not quite where they had been earlier. He realized that she must have taken him farther than he had ever Apparated before, and that fact, combined with the knowledge that she had not merely killed him in Hogsmeade, started his nerves vibrating with tension.

'There's nothing she can do to me that hasn't already been done,' he told himself defiantly, but in saying that, he felt like a Muggle he'd once watched whistling as he passed by a graveyard late at night. Realizing that what he felt was actually terror, something he had never thought to feel again, escalated his sense of helplessness. A wave of panic swept over him, leaving him chilled and shaking.

"Cold, Snape?" The hate-filled voice startled him. She was standing on higher ground than he was lying on.

He noticed the sound of a running stream very close by, and some very hard rocks underneath him, which stabbed into the bruises he'd gained from Bella's furious attack.

"You probably wonder why you're not dead. You will be, but I'm going to take a hint from Albus-Bloody-Dumbledore first."

In a steady voice that gave the illusion of control, Snape replied, "You confuse me, Bellatrix." His body was racked with chills, which he hoped she couldn't see.

"Dumbledore told the Dark Lord repeatedly that there are things much worse than death. I'm going to test his theory on you tonight, Snivellus, and see if I can discover what some of those things are. You can die afterward." She smiled cruelly. "If the wizarding world ever discovers your fate," she continued, "the Dark Lord can reward you posthumously for your courageous act in killing his old adversary. Not that it sounded difficult. My nephew was perfectly capable of doing the task, and when I find him, I'll be able to ask him why he let a jumped up half-blood like you steal his moment of glory."

"So let's get to it, Snape," she said. "Tell me why I should let you live, and please be convincing."

Snape clamped his shaking lips together to prevent himself from saying the obvious, insulting things that sprang into his mind. 'How stupid does she think I am? Does she ever think? What a life that moron Rodolphus must have, married to her all these years, trapped by her day and night, unable to escape.' He thought, 'Azkaban must have seemed like Paradise to him, if he had a cell to himself.'

Too late, he saw her intense stare and realized that she was reading his thoughts. He must be weak indeed, if he had not remembered that she was a competent Legilimens. 'No doubt she had taken private lessons from the Dark Lord himself,' he thought in disgust.

"As a matter of fact, Snape, I have indeed learned much from the Dark Lord, and you'll pay dearly for your insolent attitude toward me*Crucio!*"

As pain overtook him, Snape cleared his mind of conscious thought and let the pain become his thought. Once more blackness overcame him, this time with Bellatrix's scream of laughter echoing all around him.

This time, he awoke lying on his back with the unaccustomed sensation of cold air on his bare skin. 'It's a dream,' he told himself childishly. 'I'll count to ten and then wake up.'

That pathetic hope was dashed by yet another lashing of cold water, which made him curl tightly into a ball, arms around his knees. He was rewarded for this by another kick, that sent him sprawling onto his back again, arms outstretched. Then Bellatrix immobilized him with a *Body-Bind*, which left him with his eyes wide open.

She walked slowly around him, as he watched her staring boldly at his exposed body, and then laughed and said, "Well, well... not so bad after all, Snivellus. Who knew that there was actually a man under all those dreary black layers?" She stooped and laid an elegant long-fingered hand on his chest, sliding it slowly downward as he stopped breathing. Her hand stopped, and she casually stroked his belly, smiling cruelly as she ran her fingernail lightly down his exposed penis.

Snape wanted to die from the sheer horror of her presence, and her vile touch, but all he could do was strive frantically for the control he needed to clear his mind.

She leaned close to his ear, pressing her lips briefly to his frozen mouth, and whispered gently, "Now I think you must stay awake for this, Snape. I've wanted to do it for a long, long time."

Immobilized as he was, he pulled his soul deeper in on itself, denying the nightmare he was trapped in, while she reached into her robes and drew out a fine bladed knife. Then she touched the Dark Mark on his left forearm tenderly and inserted the knife blade just under the surface of it with surgical precision.

It happened so subtly that at first he felt nothing and couldn't understand what she was doing. Then his arm blazed with pain, far worse pain even than he experienced on the day the Mark had been placed there. She moved the knife delicately, speaking as she worked.

"You were never worthy of this; you lived in comfort while the Dark Lord's true servants suffered for him. You hold yourself so high, Snape, thinking yourself better than the rest of us. But when your Mark is gone, there will be nothing to identify your pathetic remains," she continued while she cut, "and if anyone ever finds your corpse, you can be buried among Muggles where none will know you."

She finished her grisly work, and he felt hot blood oozing down his arm and into the earth beneath him. She dropped the bloody piece of mutilated flesh onto the ground, pointed her wand down and blasted it into oblivion. Then she smiled beatifically down at him, seemingly sated by her gory deed.

"You know, I could kill you now, Snivellus, but then you'd never have the chance to puzzle out the truth of Dumbledore's theory. Death will come soon, and by the time it does, I wonder if you'll find it the answer to your prayers." Her voice, which had been low and intimate, became brisk as she stepped back to look at him again. "But I won't know what you decide because I'll be back with the Dark Lord, helping him to solve the mystery of your strange disappearance and consoling him that although you had great power..." she sneered, "in the end, you betrayed him, and I alone am truly worthy of his trust."

She removed the spell, although he didn't feel it for a moment, then inserted her foot under his back and heaved him over, and his naked body bumped down the rocky bank and splashed into a small, ice cold stream. She shone her wand over him one more time. Then, standing on the bank, she shrieked out her loud, mad laugh, turned and vanished.

Now, when he wished for oblivion, it would not come. The night was black, and there were rustling sounds coming from the trees around him. The icy water on his skin burned, but he couldn't easily climb out. His body was already unresponsive; his cramping muscles were nearly useless from the cold. 'Alone at last,' he thought bitterly, shuddering with sickness at the memory of her hand crawling over his bare skin. "The bitch has won, but I refuse to die in this ditch."

He flung all of his life force into moving onto hands and knees, crawling out of the water, his numb fingers struggling to cling to any handhold he could find. At last, he lurched over the low bank, collapsed under some scratchy branches, and then curled himself up tightly. Eventually, in spite of his pain, he slept.

Severus Meets Zelda

Chapter 2 of 7

Severus is rescued.

Severus Meets Zelda

Zelda inhaled the fresh dawn air and felt a deep sense of joy. "I must be the only human for five squares miles. Finally I can breathe," she pronounced happily to herself. She locked her old blue van, pulled up her socks and started hiking up the trail to the scenic overlook, glancing at the time as she went. "It's 5:20 AM. I'd reckon an hour up to the top; no need to rush. I'll hang out as long as I want, twenty minutes back to the car, and a hearty breakfast whenever I want it. Goddess, I don't know why, but today feels perfect!"

She stopped and turned around just in time to see a doe and twin fawns trot across the road below her. Then she began to climb the trail again. As she hiked she was silent, feeling the forest engulf her. The trees on the slope were enormous, and she thought gratefully that she should have a ceremony to celebrate walking through the last virgin pine forest in this region. To the right of the trail, the hillside dropped away sharply in a spectacular fall of boulders, and she could see Lake Superior's steely water sparkling in the distance. She used her hands to negotiate a particularly steep bit of trail. There was a small stream on her left as she climbed. At times it was almost invisible; then it would fall dramatically for two or three meters, forming a pool where insects buzzed and birds fluttered and sang. The sun had just risen, and the trees cast long shadows across the forest floor. It was dazzlingly beautiful; she spied a comfortable looking fallen tree a few meters above her and decided to stop and sit there for a while.

Her chosen seat was a short way from the little stream and was surrounded by straggly shrubs. No sooner did she sit down than she heard a rustling and an odd snuffling sound. A black bear was poking his nose into a clump of thimbleberry plants with huge leaves. Zelda froze as he looked up at her. She was thinking frantically but knew better than to turn and flee. 'Do I look into his eyes, or will he think I'm challenging him?' she asked herself.

She watched closely as he stayed where he was, wondering if the bear was finding berries on the plants, when something caught her eye. "Oh," she whispered. "I don't believe it." It was unmistakable: a mud-encrusted human foot protruded from the shrubs. A human body, dumped in the woods, was about to be devoured before her eyes.

"No..." She moaned. She inhaled a lungful of fresh air and realized there was no smell of death in the air. That was good... or much worse, she realized in horror, if a living person lay there. In her imagination she saw a young woman, raped and left to die, terrified and alone. She thought of her daughter, and before she could feel fear, she stood up on her fallen tree, as tall as her 5 feet 4 inches would allow. "Go away, Bear," she said shakily. "There's nothing for you here."

The bear raised his head and stared up at her. He didn't look starved, she noted hopefully, and she spoke again, louder this time. "Go home!" She clapped her hands loudly and then drew a deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs.

The bear looked shocked, and backed uncertainly away and then stopped. She drew another breath and gave words to her screams, feeling incredibly stupid. "Go away! Go away! Go! I don't know what the hell I'm going to do, but we'll all be sorry if I have to do something so get away! Now! Go!"

Her voice echoed insanelly over the hillside. The bear shook his head comically and then splashed through the stream and started to run. Zelda jumped down from the log, shaking badly after her ridiculous performance. She waded into the leafy thicket and stared, thunderstruck. A man's naked body was curled deep into the dead leaves. His skin was gray-white, and she thought he must be dead. She drew back at first, feeling panicky, but managed to kneel at his head. His skin was icy cold, but she felt a pulse, and she could see fresh blood oozing sluggishly from a wound on his arm. His face was cut, and there were bruises forming all over his white skin. "Well, this is a fine, freakin' kettle of fish," she said aloud. "There's no one for miles except a bear who could come back any minute. Goddess, help me!" As if on cue, the almost-dead man opened his eyes and looked up at her.

Severus's head hurt, and someone was screaming something about a bear and going away. He thought he'd gladly oblige but realized that he couldn't move. He was delightfully warm, and his foggy brain told him to go back to sleep. A shaky hand touched his neck, and it felt warm. He began to drift back to sleep, when a woman's voice penetrated the fog. Her accent was strange, and her words made no sense. Was she speaking to him? It was so odd that he forced his eyes open and stared into shocked blue eyes, looking at him with such concern that he couldn't look any more, so he closed his eyes again.

Zelda did a quick mental inventory. There was nothing. No help. She had no food, no water, only the clothes on her back and a wounded, naked man suffering from hypothermia and goddess knew what else. Possibly he was insane or an escaped criminal, and now that she thought about it, no one knew where she was. If she left him he'd probably die, and if she helped him he might still die. Her car was a kilometer away, down the trail, with a bottle of water in it. There was a large and excellent hospital in the city two hours away. She sighed resignedly and took off her windbreaker and then the oversized sweater she had put on against the early chill in the air. She thought a moment; then she took off her T-shirt. If she met anyone she'd be embarrassed in her exercise bra, but that was unlikely, and her new charge needed all the coverage she could give him. She put her face close to his, and said, "Can you hear me? I'll get you out of here, but you must help me."

The man muttered incoherently and hugged himself tighter. She thought a moment and then picked up her sweater and bunched up the sleeve as she had done when her babies were tiny. She stroked his right arm and then picked up his arm and inserted it into the sleeve. She moved to his head, lifted it carefully and slid the sweater quickly over it. He groaned, but subsided as she supported his head back to the ground. Then the hardest part: she pushed his right shoulder to get him onto his back. He fought her with surprising strength, but she pushed harder, and he turned completely onto his other side and curled up tight again. She eased the other sleeve over his bleeding forearm and pulled the sweater down over his back and chest. This wasn't working. If he wanted to survive, he had to cooperate.

"Let's try again," she said firmly to his closed eyes and slack face. "My name's Zelda. What's your name?"

"Severus," he muttered obediently. He opened one eye briefly and then closed it.

"Okay, Severus, you need to help me," she said sternly. "I can't carry you, can I?"

"I suppose not," he responded faintly, eyes still closed but sounding slightly lucid. "But I can't hold onto the simplest idea... She kicked my brain loose, I think."

A brief pause followed while Zelda considered that remarkable statement. She said firmly, "You need to stand, and I'll help you over to that log. Then we're going to walk down the trail; it'll be quite difficult. Can you stand up?"

In answer he forced his eyes open and, shivering violently, struggled onto his hands and knees. She knelt in front of him, he put shaking hands on her shoulders, and they staggered to their feet together, her hands supporting his torso. He was taller than she'd thought, almost a head taller than she was. Zelda helped him to lean on a tree and then tied her shirt and her jacket around his waist to cover him. Only then did she see him realize he'd been naked, and he closed his eyes in horror and began collapsing back to the ground. She groaned. Yes, all right, it was awful, but why didn't men have the slightest grasp of priorities? Something snapped in her, possibly her limited supply of womanly compassion, she thought wryly, as she put her hands firmly on the injured man's shoulders.

"No, you don't!" Zelda snarled and pressed him gently back against the tree, enunciating carefully through gritted teeth. "I'm saving your freakin' life, mister, whether you want it or not. You can die of humiliation on your own time. Now, see that log over there? Go there immediately."

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered sullenly, eyes open and fixed firmly on the ground. He looked so defeated, hobbling on bare feet and leaning heavily on her, that her exasperation dissipated. Zelda sat down next to him and took off her boots and then her socks. She then put her boots back on and knelt in front of him.

He was startled enough to look directly into her eyes, and she stared intently back into his. "It's hard to tell with black eyes if you have concussion, but your pupils are seriously mismatched. Try not to move your head too much."

While he considered this, she picked up and examined his numb foot. He noticed that she had curly, bright blond hair, and she was wearing jeans, like many Hogwarts students did. Only a strange-looking undergarment covered her breasts, and he couldn't look away from them. She put a thick, sweaty, white sock on his foot and repeated the action on his other foot. She smiled kindly at him, while he guiltily raised his own eyes and glanced nervously back at her. "I hope this helps a bit," she said gently.

"We're going to walk now." She held out her hands to him and braced herself; he allowed her to pull him to his feet, and they began the hike down the trail.

Severus walked with his eyes closed because the sunlight hurt them. His head was throbbing. The level stretches were fine, as long as he leaned on this strange woman who kept dragging him forward when he'd rather go to sleep. But the steep bit was too much for him to manage, so Zelda helped him to sit down on the edge and then jumped down before him and held up her hands. His confused brain recalled his mother's smiling image, holding her arms up and saying, "Jump to me, Sevvie!" He slid into her waiting arms, and she bore his weight completely for a moment before easing him gently to the ground. His head was spinning, and since he was already leaning against her, it was most natural to put his arms around her and cling tightly to her warm body. He felt her heart pounding against his chest, and her hair smelled faintly of lavender. He sighed as he buried his nose in the bright curls and slid into unconsciousness.

Warm air was blowing on Severus, but he was shivering uncontrollably when he next woke. He was sitting upright in bright morning sunshine and wrapped snugly in several faded blankets. He was seated in an odd sort of Muggle car, and when he looked cautiously around, he saw a blond woman sitting in the next seat, buttoning her faded shirt. She saw him watching her and raised one eyebrow quizzically. When he didn't speak, she smiled slightly and walked to the rear of the vehicle and began rummaging around. He must have drifted off again because suddenly she was standing next to him in the open door of the car. She felt his forehead and then the side of his neck. She poured some water into a plastic cup and offered it to him. His hands were shaking, so she held the cup to his lips while he drank thirstily.

"You need something hot, but this is all I have with me," she told him. "When we get to the hospital, they can help you more than I can, but we're two hours from the city."

The word "hospital" penetrated the fog in his brain, causing him to jerk upright. "No hospital!" he croaked. He was breathless with fear. He knocked the empty cup away and clumsily grasped her hand in both of his shaking ones. "Please." He fumbled in his memory, found her name (at least he hoped it was hers) and said in a low voice, "Zelda. I'm extremely grateful to you, but since I didn't die last night, I must ask more of you. Please, help me. Take me with you."

His brief panic left him drained, but he held onto her hand and stared intently at her, not having really seen her before. Severus saw a small, slightly plump woman with riotous bright blond curls and serious blue eyes. She had a straight nose a bit too large for her face and a wide, determined mouth. He knew she was not young, but he was not accustomed to judging the age of a woman. Around her eyes there were laugh lines a bit like Dumbledore's, and the crease between her brows was deepened by her worried expression.

"I need to know more before I decide, Severus, but if we talk now, you're so addled you'll forget it." Her free hand moved to gently release his grip on her hand. "I can't promise anything, except to think it over. Poor man, you're bruised, bleeding, concussed, and your core body temperature is extremely low. Right now we're driving to the nearest hot drink to try to warm you up."

His strength was gone, but he forced himself to grasp her hand again and whispered, "Please... please."

She looked intently at him, and gradually her expression softened in response to his obvious desperation. She leaned down into the car and pushed his filthy hair back, gazing into his eyes. He didn't look away this time, knowing that if she were a Legilimens, she'd see what he was, she'd know everything... but he was beyond caring any longer. She looked for a long time, and then shockingly, she gave a tiny chuckle and lightly kissed the tip of his nose. She removed her hand from his as she did, saying, "Chin up, Severus, it'll be all right. Close your eyes and rest." She stepped back, seeming anxious to be on the way, and closed the door so quickly that she didn't see the tears that filled his eyes.

What's A Muggle To Do?

Chapter 3 of 7

What should she do with this guy?

What's A Muggle To Do?

Zelda drove toward the highway, relieved to be in an isolated area where no one would ask questions about her companion. The car was too warm for her with the heater on, so she opened her window. She glanced at her strange passenger, but his head was turned away from her. She thought he'd probably passed out again. It was still early; her twilight zone adventure had taken little more than an hour, but the consequences were daunting.

'He needs medical care that I can't give him,' she thought. 'What if his skull's fractured? The wound on his arm looks awful, and he's hypothermic. Oh, gods! I may not be able to get him warm in time. I don't want to end up with an unidentified corpse on my hands.'

She tried to suppress her guilty knowledge that she didn't want to leave him at a hospital, but she was too honest with herself. 'He's barely alive... but there's something remarkable about him. He has amazing eyes, so deep it seemed I could see his soul. But what do I know about him? His accent is British, but he was beaten up and dumped in the middle of North America to die. He's afraid...' Zelda shuddered. 'I don't want to meet whoever did this,' she thought.

A BP station appeared, isolated enough that she felt safe stopping. She decided to fill the gas tank so she wouldn't have to stop later. As she opened her door, Severus turned hastily around. He looked terrible, still shivering convulsively, and she wondered if he thought she'd abandon him. 'I'm going to pump gas, and then I'll get something hot for you to drink,' she said reassuringly. Tension radiated from him, and he closed his eyes, which looked red and watery. She frowned. "Does the light hurt your eyes?" she asked solicitously.

He started to nod, then changed his mind and whispered, "Yes."

She leaned into the car, opened the glove box and found some black wraparound sunglasses for him. He looked different with them on, she thought, remote and intense. He turned toward her while she pumped gas, but with the glasses on she couldn't tell if he was awake. Then she drove under a shady tree and went back to the station.

Severus felt bereft as she walked out of sight. He knew he was acting like a child, but the events of the last day seemed to have broken something in him. When she reappeared, he was relieved. She carried a small cardboard box with four covered paper cups. She inserted a plastic straw into one and held it to his lips so he could drink. It was the worst tea he'd ever tasted, heavily laced with milk and sugar, but the heat of it seemed to ease the chill in his chest slightly. He finished all of it and looked up to see Zelda watching him with a relieved smile on her lips.

"Thank you," he said, sounding and feeling slightly more normal. "If there is more, I should probably drink it soon."

She sat in the doorway near his feet, looking up at him. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "The food's revolting here, but if you're desperate... "

He curled his lip at the idea and then glanced apprehensively down at her. Her mouth was twitching, and when he met her gaze, she smiled merrily. He smiled cautiously and trying not to move his head, he put his shaking hand down to grasp hers. He lifted it to his lips and kissed it gratefully. "Instead, may I please have some more of your delicious tea?" he queried politely.

Her eyes sparkled with amusement, and she inserted the straw into the next cup of tea. As he drank the next two cups, she grew thoughtful and asked seriously, "Severus, do you think your skull is fractured?"

He raised an eyebrow questioningly and tried to think why she would ask, but the hot tea had begun to make him drowsy. He said irritably, "I don't know. My head just hurts."

"You're a moody one, aren't you?" she said teasingly. "Seriously, I want to see if I can tell. Will you show me where to look, please?"

He carefully removed the sunglasses and touched a sizable lump above his right ear. She leaned close and carefully parted the hair. Her hands were steady and gentle as she felt all over the area. She pressed harder, and he tensed but made no sound. She let his hair fall back and stroked his cheek for a moment, and then said, "Where else?"

Reluctantly he touched the back of his head, and her fingers followed his to a knot, low down, close to his spinal column. She realized that if it had landed a little lower the blow would have killed him immediately. She pressed around it cautiously and could discern no depression in the bone, however. That was a positive sign. Severus groaned, and she stopped, somewhat reassured. She looked closely into his eyes again, his pupils were definitely different sizes, and pain had etched harsh lines on his face. "I'm sorry I hurt you. There's probably no fracture, but you must be in terrible pain. I don't know what to do, Severus. You need medical help."

Severus searched her face; he enjoyed seeing her look so concerned, but realized that she would need convincing to help him. "I don't believe I'll die, Zelda," he explained, "I can't explain myself to your authorities; I don't even know where I am. Please... let me stay with you."

She shook her head doubtfully. "Oh, curse it! Severus, if you die on me, make sure you're thoroughly dead... or I'll kill you again myself." She was worried, but it seemed he had won his point.

"Thank you. Now, may I please have some more tea? It tastes repulsive, but it is subduing my little chill," he said smugly.

She picked up the last cup of tea and once more held it up for him. When he had finished, she tossed the empty cups away, reclined his seat, and fastened his seatbelt. The belt seemed to annoy him, but she said, "Please leave it on; you should be immobilized." She wrapped the blankets warmly around him and looked at him for a long while. She closed the car door gently then and began driving home.

The sun was high as Zelda drove the car straight into her waiting garage. The garage door closed; the darkness gave an illusion of safety, and she ran into the house while her passenger still lay sleeping. She kicked off her boots, started a bath and splashed in bubble bath. Next she headed for the kitchen and opened a can of chicken soup. She dumped it into a bowl and shoved it into the microwave. She filled the teakettle and turned the heat on low, then went back to the garage.

Severus slept deeply, and once more Zelda paused to consider whether she was mad. He needed a hospital, not her inexperienced care. She feared that giving in to him might be disastrous. She put her hand on his shoulder gently and said, "Severus, wake up. We're here."

He looked briefly panicked, but relaxed when he recognized her. "Where is here, precisely?" he asked.

"My house," she said shortly, reaching in and unfastening the seatbelt. He sat up too quickly and sank back in the seat, groaning. She gave him a stern look, and said, "Listen to me. You're going to take a warm bath, to raise your body temperature. I'll help you bathe because you'll drown if I don't." Severus glared at her, but she continued, "Then you'll drink more hot liquids. Then you'll sleep. If you've got a problem with my agenda tell me now. I'll gladly drive you and your outraged modesty out to the woods and put you back where I found you. Any questions?"

Severus had raised his head haughtily to tell the bloody woman he was perfectly capable of surviving a bath alone, but the movement set his head spinning again. He leaned back and resentfully replied, "No questions... Ma'am."

Her lips were suspiciously tight, but she remained silent as she unlatched the seatbelt and began removing the blankets he was wrapped in. He caught sight of his arms and looked down at his body, appalled, and said, "What in Merlin's name am I wearing?"

Zelda burst out laughing. Severus stared furiously up at her while she giggled. When she could speak, she said tartly, "You're not wearing much, but it's all mine, so think twice before you criticize my fashion sense."

His traitorous brain treated him to a flashback of himself staring at her breasts as she put her own socks on his bruised feet. Without another word he swung his shaking legs out of the car and stood upright for a moment, but would have fallen if she hadn't caught and steadied him.

"Lean on me, and let's go," said Zelda. "I'm starting to believe you're too cursed stubborn to die, no matter how badly hurt you are."

She led him through a door, through a sunny kitchen, and then down a short hall to the bathroom. A massive, claw-footed tub stood half full of sudsy water. She felt the water, seemed satisfied, and turned to him with an annoying smile, murmuring, "Be brave now, my boy... It's time to see what the damage is."

He froze, outraged at her impudence, but she ignored him and lifted his left arm cautiously to examine his forearm. The sleeve was miraculously not stuck tight to the bloody wound, so she eased his arm out of the sleeve. She carefully pulled the sweater over his head and took it away, and then he was standing close to her, shivering and bare-chested, with only a shirt or something tied around his waist.

Severus noticed that his heart was pounding, and he was feeling suddenly breathless. She untied the shirt and jacket from his waist and tossed them into the corner. Only the fact that she was studiously looking away from him made it possible to take her arm and step into the bath.

Warmth enveloped him, and he lay back in relief. This was all he needed to heal, he thought. But the tub was longer and deeper than he thought, and when a wave of dizziness blinded him, he started to slip completely under the water. Zelda's hand grasped his wrist just in time, and she pulled him back up, steadying him until he could sit by himself. She was obviously amused, and his outraged pride could take no more. He tightened his grip on her wrist and flipped her neatly into the water in front of him, clothes and all.

She flew out of the bath like a scalded cat, water pouring off of her, and said, "Wipe that smirk off your face before I drown you!" But her eyes twinkled, and her mouth twisted into a wry smile as she examined her dripping self.

"I suppose I deserve that," she said ruefully. "I'm sorry. This is so bizarre I can't help making a fool of myself and a fool of you too. I forgot that in your position I might not be amused. I'll be good now."

"I'm going to get a hot drink for you. Try not to drown while I'm gone," said Zelda, as she reached into a cabinet and threw him a towel. "Use this to cover the, um, family jewels... as it were." She stuck her tongue out and flashed a smile at him as she sloshed out of the bathroom.

Careful not to submerge completely, Severus leaned back. The water relaxed his muscles, and the shivering that plagued him began to ease. His head was still throbbing. If he moved quickly, he grew so dizzy he couldn't see, but he was quite sure that he would survive. He began trying to mentally unravel the mystery of what had happened the night before....

Bellatrix Lestrange... he felt again her fingers touching his skin, and a wave of nausea threatened him. He controlled himself, examined his bruises, and cautiously looked at his stinging left forearm. Blood oozed sluggishly into the bath water, and as he stared he realized that the Dark Mark was indeed completely gone. Over the years he had frequently thought of doing to himself exactly what she had done. A 'loyal' Death Eater would never do such a thing, however. Joy flooded through him. The hated thing was gone for good, and a piece of skin gone with it was a price well worth paying... to feel cleaner than he had felt in many years.

He looked up at a sound from the doorway, incredulous joy still transforming his face. Zelda was standing there, wearing a bathrobe and holding a large, steaming mug. She looked startled as she knelt at the side of the tub. As she handed him the mug, she glanced into the bath and raised her eyebrow, directing his eye to the floating towel. He hastily covered 'the, um, family jewels,' and took the mug. This time the tea she brought was excellent. It was Earl Gray with honey and lemon. The heat of it, combined with the bath, really warmed him for the first time. "This is marvelous," he said grudgingly, "What was that vile stuff you gave me before?"

"Floor sweepings," she replied gravely.

He stared at her, and then the sense of her words penetrated his sluggish wits and he smiled.

"I'm sorry if gas station tea wasn't up to your standards," she said mischievously. "But it helped keep you alive, didn't it?"

"Yes, but at what price to my outraged sensibilities?" he responded cynically.

She chuckled appreciatively. "I'll bring you some chicken soup in a few minutes, but first I'll wash your back, if it's okay with you."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" he responded, but he didn't seem to mind, so she soaped up a face cloth and carefully scrubbed the filth off of his back.

She rinsed him clean with a very efficient shower device on a hose. 'These Muggles,' he thought indulgently, conscious for the first time that she was indeed a Muggle, 'how practical they can be.' That reminded him of Dumbledore's affectionate attitude toward Muggles, and then memory came roaring back... He remembered what he had done. He moaned and buried his head in his hands, welcoming agony as he realized that everything had gone wrong. He had killed Albus Dumbledore, the plan was ruined, and with it his chance at redemption. All of his hope was completely destroyed.

"Severus?" Zelda leaned forward and put her hands on his shoulders. He didn't respond, but she put her hand under his chin and forced him to look up. His black eyes were full of tears, and it seemed he couldn't speak. She put her arms around him and held him for several minutes until he began shivering again. She stood up. She attempted to sound practical and said, "Lie back in the water while I get your soup."

He looked shattered by his emotional storm, and while the water warmed him, she stood up and left the room. When she returned she carried a bowl of soup that was full of thick noodles, vegetables and chunks of chicken. She spooned it into his mouth as if he was a child, and he ate obediently. Carefully avoiding his injuries, she washed his hair. Next she washed his face and behind his ears, as if she were bathing a young child. Seeing how passive he was, she assumed an air of brisk efficiency and finished washing him, concerned when he didn't react to her washing his genitals. As she rinsed him, she said, "Let's get you out of here so you can go to bed. I'll wake you in a few hours to check on your concussion. Stand up, Severus," she said.

As he stepped shakily out of the bath, she wrapped him in a towel, and with another she dried him completely. Then she led him to a bedroom, where he sat on the edge of a large bed, and she brushed the tangles out of his hair. Finally she helped him sink back on the bed and covered him with a heavy comforter. She knelt to bandage the wound on his arm and apply salve to the gash on his face. When she finished, she leaned her head wearily on the bed, overwhelmed by everything that had occurred. He opened his eyes then, and he looked exhausted and confused.

"I have to do a few things, and after that I'll be napping on the couch in the other room, all right?" she told him. "Call me if you need me."

'He looks so lost,' she thought. 'As if he doesn't really want me to leave, but doesn't dare to say it.' She leaned over and lightly kissed his lips, saying, "It'll be all right, Severus."

His eyes were shocked, and swiftly he captured her hand to stop her leaving and said in a low, hesitant voice, "Zelda... kiss me again... please."

"Why?" She stared at him, transfixed at his intense expression.

"Because... because no one kisses me," he whispered painfully.

In answer she caressed his cheek and touched her lips briefly to his, but he responded to her hungrily. The kiss grew in intensity until finally she pulled away, stunned. She stroked his cheek once more with a trembling hand. She tried to look in his eyes again, but he smiled sweetly, already falling asleep.

Surprised by Magic

Chapter 4 of 7

Severus and Zelda talk? and stuff.

Surprised by Magic

Zelda moved automatically around the house, closing the blinds and curtains. Her mind was in turmoil, and she was struggling heroically to keep from going back to gaze at the strange man sleeping in her bed. She felt as if she recognized him somehow, but that was pathetic and delusional, she thought grimly.

The cats came out of hiding, and she remembered that Melissa was supposed to come and feed them. She fed them distractedly without speaking. Then she wrote a brief note, taped it to the back door, locked the doors after that, and then checked the time. She was amazed to see that it was only half past noon.

Twelve hours ago, she thought, her life was as it had been for years, completely, magnificently ordinary. Boring, but acceptable. Blessedly free of painful relationships, free of lies. One wretched marriage that ended horribly - devastating her emotionally and financially - was enough. Then there were the sorry, needy losers; men who thought a divorced woman her age would do anything for a little attention...

Zelda had done everything but take a formal vow of celibacy - and that was only because she was superstitious enough to not want to tempt fate. She had simply decided to mind her own bitter, cynical business and found life alone surprisingly good. Now... it was too hard to think about what just happened.

Throwing herself down on the couch, she pulled a blanket over herself. Her last thought, as she dozed off, was that if she hadn't found Severus completely helpless, she would have been terrified of him.

Severus drifted in strange dreams, sleeping deeply and then rousing again and again. Bellatrix LeStrange appeared above him, and she smiled gently at him, as she stabbed him with a knife... over and over. "Noooooo!" he howled, and he woke, confused, to the sound of his own voice.

He stared around a darkened room and saw nothing familiar, but vaguely felt there was something important that he must do. He climbed out of bed, and opened the door. He had no idea where he was, but he followed the short hallway into a larger room where he saw a sleeping form nestled on a squashy old couch. His legs were quivering, and he needed to sit. He sank down on the couch, unfortunately on top of the sleeping woman.

She sat up suddenly, saying, "What is it?"

He slowly said, "Zelda?"

Zelda rubbed her eyes in consternation. She saw Severus there, naked and shivering, staring with unfocused eyes. Wrapping her blanket around him, she led him back to the bedroom. She put him back into bed and tucked the comforter over him. Since it now seemed inevitable that she'd end up there, she slid cautiously into the other side of the bed. She reached over to touch his hand, and he turned over carefully to look at her.

The crease between her brows showed the depth of her worry, and she said resignedly, "I won't leave you again."

He laced her fingers firmly into his. He was not able to reason, but this was important. He needed her to help him understand something. They fell asleep at almost the same time, and still he held her hand. His dream woke them both a few hours later.

...He was running to the Astronomy Tower, wand at the ready, plunging untouched through a group of Death Eaters who were fighting members of the Order. He feared what he would see when he reached the top, and when he got there, he saw that it was worse than he'd thought... Dumbledore was leaning against the wall, and he looked near death. A poison, it seemed, must have protected this Horcrux. Draco was there. He was standing still, but his wand was lowered. Snape was relieved to see that facing Dumbledore had made Draco realize that he couldn't kill the old man.

Snape strode through the Death Eaters and pushed Draco aside to face Dumbledore. He knew what he had to do... but now, at the moment when everything depended on his resolution, he wanted to run. He wanted to attack the lumpish idiots who were clamoring at him to kill his only friend. Then Dumbledore spoke, saying, "Severus... please." Their eyes met, and Dumbledore knew what he was thinking.

Dumbledore always knew, he was always right, and there was no way for Snape to escape this monstrous destiny. He raised his wand, but it vanished. Something was holding his hand. He tried to pull away... He was weeping, and the tower vanished. Warm arms circled him, and he was safe, but Dumbledore was gone forever...

Zelda held Severus against her, as the first sobs tore through him, trying to keep him from thrashing around and hurting himself. Suddenly he stopped resisting and buried his face against her neck. His first passionate anguish eventually gave way to the exhausted tears of a heartbroken child, then silence. He tensed and tried to pull away from her... but Zelda didn't let him go. She smoothed his hair tenderly away from his face and kept stroking his cheek, his neck, rubbing his back, until his muscles began to relax.

She knew her own decision was made when she shivered briefly and deliberately kissed his forehead, his cheeks and his mouth. She knew what would probably follow and hoped it wouldn't kill him.

His anguished dream tore at Severus; Dumbledore's death, Bellatrix's cackles, humiliation, fear and pain, loneliness... but the warm body in his arms soothed him. When he woke again, shamefully aware of his tears, her stubborn refusal to give him his way when he tried to pull back made him feel safe. She held him as he shook from cold and horror. In wonder, he began to touch her face and stroke her hair, gradually surrendering to a deep contentment. His lips tingled as they kissed, and their mouths

opened together... Nothing had ever felt sweeter to him.

As he pulled her body closer against his, he noticed that she seemed to be wearing something bulky... but no sooner had he become irritated by it, it was gone. She was as naked as he now, and for the first time in his life, he reveled in his own nakedness. He was entranced by the touch of her soft skin against his. But it was also too sudden, too much, and he realized that he didn't know this woman - and he had... no one had ever wanted... he couldn't... no one would... Severus gasped and pulled back in terror - flashing back to Bellatrix's fingers crawling like spiders over his skin.

Zelda let go of him at once, and they faced each other in the dim light of the bedroom. He was panting as if he'd run a long way; her eyes were wide, and her lips were slightly parted. He wasn't even sure what she looked like, but he was deeply drawn to her. Unfortunately, he knew perfectly well that no one had ever found him anything other than ugly. He had accepted that long ago. The bitter lines on his face, invisible while he slept, appeared to Zelda. She looked curiously at him, and then she gave a bitter little smile.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she said stiffly. "I really wasn't planning to force myself on you. I may be lonely, but I'm actually not some kind of predator." She started to sit up and realized that her robe was gone. She clutched the comforter to her breasts, looking baffled and ashamed.

Severus stared at her dumbfounded. Was the woman mad? Possibly blind? Through the pounding in his head he thought he heard her apologizing to him, which was absurd. She'd saved his life, cared for him generously, and when he tried to spare her the grim reality of his wretched self, she felt hurt!

"What an asinine thing to say," he snapped nastily. "Furthermore, you took the words right out of my mouth and hearing them from you has made me realize even more that I am an idiot."

Zelda stared at him, completely confounded. Severus decided that he preferred to be the one speaking for a change, so he'd better try to say as much as he could, before she spoke again.

"Cat got your tongue?" he asked mockingly. "Good."

She clutched the comforter closer, looking scared and very vulnerable. He felt an urge to hug her, and while he mastered that impulse his moment passed and she spoke.

"We need to talk when you're strong enough," she said in a subdued voice. "But I'll leave you alone to rest now."

Severus abandoned his fear in the face of hers and said smoothly, "No. I believe you tried that earlier, remember? I am far too weak and pathetic to have to wander around looking for you... You will stay here." He eyed her speculatively, and whispered, "Please?"

Her eyes twinkled slightly, and she bowed her head in acquiescence.

"Zelda, come here." Severus held out his hand compellingly. Her hand was shaking, and seeing it, he found the courage to move closer. She looked up at him, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes and that her chin was trembling - but she did not look away; she simply waited. "I need to rest, and when I wake, I want you here. Will you stay with me?"

She nodded, and he sighed, letting go of the last tension in his body. He sank back, pulling her into his arms, and only then remembered, as skin met against skin, that they were both naked. It was the point of no return, he finally admitted to himself, and his hands moved so naturally over her body that he realized he'd been a fool for hesitating earlier. This was easy... This was wonderful!

"I doubt that this is an effective way to rest," she said skeptically, as her hands caressed him in return, and he caught his breath in surprise.

"Oh, I think it is very effective, woman," he purred, as his mouth found her breasts. She gasped... and abandoning common sense, pulled him over on top of her, face to face... and they kissed each other passionately while their hands explored. Finally, he was inside her... and then there was only warmth and delight, ecstasy... after which, they slept deeply, held tight in each other's arms.

Severus woke first and didn't recognize his own body for a moment. His head hurt. His entire body hurt, but surpassing all of that was a dazzling sense of well-being. His arms were around a sleeping woman, whose head fit neatly into his shoulder. She felt soft and good, and he realized he was becoming warm again and feeling extremely smug. She stirred, and he said, "Zelda?"

"Mmmmm," she answered sleepily. She kissed his chest, nuzzled her face against him, and then finally opened drowsy eyes. She made no move, but smiled sweetly at him. "Do you have any circulation in your right arm?" she asked.

Severus considered a moment and then said, "I don't believe so."

He hugged her closer, and the laughter in her eyes sent happiness rushing through him. It felt unnatural for Professor Severus Snape to be happy, but he thought perhaps it was acceptable. Misery would undoubtedly return in time.

Zelda gently released herself from his grasp, saying, "Let your arm recover, Severus, because... Well, I gotta pee."

She wasn't the only one, he realized, and he asked; "Where is the bathroom?"

"Go ahead. It's in the hallway, first door on the right," she replied. "There's a blanket on the floor next to the bed; wrap yourself up so you don't get chilled again."

The bathroom was huge and old-fashioned. He stared curiously into the mirror, wondering if he looked as strange as he felt. 'Same ugly git,' he thought resignedly. There would be a scar where the hippogriff slashed his cheek, he realized, and blue bruises showed in stark relief on his white skin. He peered closer at an odd mark on his neck, and to his shameful delight he realized it was a hickey.

"Like those hormonal brats at Hogwarts," he said to himself with a smirk. Watching his reflection smile was a bit unsettling. Nothing could make his nose less hideous, and life had carved lines that made him look far older than his thirty-seven years - but there was now a hopeful gleam in his eyes. He decided he couldn't completely hate the way he looked, not so soon after...

A knock on the door startled him, and he clutched his blanket around himself.

"Hey! There's only one bathroom; are you coming out?" Zelda's voice startled him back to the present.

He opened the door and she whizzed past him and closed the door in his face. He went straight back to bed, hoping she would do the same... and she did return. She smiled as he took her into his arms again and responded most satisfactorily when he kissed her. His hands seemed steadier now, as he slid her robe off her shoulders... but he was not prepared for her sudden question.

"Severus, where's my old blue robe?" she asked. "I was wearing it earlier, and it's gone. In fact I remember... Oh, Goddess..." her voice trailed away uncertainly.

He groaned. Now that she mentioned it... he remembered quite well what had happened, although he hadn't lost control before - not since he was very young. Before he could consider the consequences, the words slipped out far too easily, "Zelda, I am a wizard."

She sat up and looked enquiringly at him. He didn't know what he expected, never having told a Muggle what he was before, and he kept talking... babbling really, to fill the growing silence. "And I think I remember that your robe was annoying me. I did not realize it, but I wanted the damned thing gone very badly and lost control of my power... something that hasn't happened since I was a young child. I cannot tell you where it is, and well... I am sorry..."

"A wizard," she said slowly, raising one eyebrow enquiringly. "Real magic?" she asked, "Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble... magic wands, broomsticks... Abra Kadabra... Merlin? That kind of wizard?"

"Erm... well, yes," he answered apprehensively. He wasn't sure exactly what reaction he had expected from her, he thought, but it was not this calm voice.

"Show me," she said, deadly serious.

He said dazedly, sounding stupid to himself, "But I don't have my wand."

"Is it your wand that's magical, or is it you?"

'She is a quick one,' Severus thought. Gathering his wits about him, he kindled a tiny white fire in the palm of his hand, held it toward her for a moment, and then extinguished the little flame.

She grinned appreciatively, but simply said, "Thank you."

"That is all?" he asked in disbelief. "No other questions from you?"

"Am I that obviously nosey?" she asked ruefully. "I have endless questions about you, about magic, about everything. But you're not up to answering them, so let me savor the gift you just gave me."

"What gift?" he asked curiously.

"Ah, Severus," she answered dreamily, "all my life I've wondered, but in my world magic is a cheat, a game, or pitiful self-delusion. Knowing that you're real, and you're magic, I possess an amazing piece of truth. Real magic exists. It's hard to get the truth of anything. So thank you."

She relaxed again, head on his shoulder. His arms closed around her, but he was troubled, and she knew it. "You didn't have to tell me, you know. You could have tried to make up an excuse," she said. "Are you sorry?"

"I have never told a Muggle before," he said pensively. "I never thought that I would. But I do not seem able to lie to you, so when you asked me... I told you."

She thought about that. "Wow. You haven't lied to me, have you? How novel. Fascinating, really... it's as if you knew..."

"Knew what?"

"That offering me real honesty is the way to get anything you want from me," she said.

Severus thought about that and replied, "You haven't lied to me either." It was a statement, not a question, as if he knew.

"Why would I, Severus?"

"Many people have. I don't believe much of what people tell me, and whenever I do hear truth, it is generally unpleasant," he said matter-of-factly.

Zelda pondered that for a moment and then leaned over to gently kiss his furrowed brow, asking, "What's a Muggle?"

"A non-magical person," Severus said quietly.

"It doesn't sound like a very nice word to me," she said disapprovingly. "It sounds demeaning."

"You're right," he responded, thinking bitterly of far worse words he had heard from his former associates. His memories were returning, along with the pain... He wanted to go back in time one hour and still be sleeping in Zelda's arms, blissfully forgetful.

"May we stop talking about this now?" he asked abruptly. "My head hurts, and I don't want to think for the moment."

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry," she said, as she subsided into his arms, and kissed the tender skin of his neck.

He thought briefly about continuing where her question had interrupted them... But he still felt very weak. He went to sleep confident this time that she would be there when he woke again.

Second and Third Thoughts

Chapter 5 of 7

Whatever were they thinking?

Second and Third Thoughts

Zelda woke alone this time; the table clock said 2:25 am. After making sure that Severus was warm and breathing steadily, she finally had time to think. It hadn't been twenty-four hours yet, but everything was changed for her. She needed time to grasp what that meant. She realized that she didn't even know his last name... If wizards even had last names. For all she knew of whatever world he lived in, he might as well be a space alien to her. Yet he was definitely a man, and vulnerable right now, no matter how much power and will she sensed in him.

He was also disturbingly attractive to her, although he didn't seem aware of it. When he had said to her, "No one kisses me," she'd realized that it was a terrible, sad truth, and she had responded instinctively to his honesty.

Aside from the obvious, she thought ironically, she wanted him to get well so they could talk together. It seemed they would have a great deal to talk about. Intelligence had always attracted her, and combined with the loving heart that he seemed unaware of, and the integrity that shone from him, she thought he was probably the most amazing person she'd ever met. She didn't understand how she could know about him, but she thought he was also screwed-up, unreasonable, obnoxious, hypersensitive, and probably cranky, too. And then there was the magic...

Of course, she was no prize herself, she thought wearily. She wondered if she should wake him, but she had no doubt that he would survive his concussion now. The sun would rise soon, so she decided to wait and see what the new day would bring. She smiled sadly, thinking that if his eyes ever re-focused and Severus realized he was sleeping with a haggard old woman, he'd run in horror. But she would wake up with him once, at least. She nestled her face into the fine, black hairs of his chest and inhaled the delicious scent of him, allowing herself drift off to sleep.

Severus woke suddenly from a dreamless sleep, more aware now than before of what had happened to him... and felt warm breath on his skin. His head hurt, and his mind was still rather foggy, but he thought he remembered most of it now. He didn't know where he was, of course, but at the moment, that was fine. On the one hand, he thought sardonically, was an entire world of wizards who wanted to kill him, on the other a kind, quick-witted, happy Muggle woman whose bed he was sharing. Sliding cautiously out of the bed, he carefully tucked the comforter around Zelda.

Wrapped in a blanket, he found his way to the bathroom. From there, he explored the house. It was small with only two more bedrooms, one of which housed a massive desk covered with books, papers, and electronic devices. The kitchen faced east, and through the curtains he could see the brightening sky. He opened a door, saw her van in the garage, and closed it. He turned around and was startled to find that he was not alone. Three cats glared contemptuously at him. Noticing three empty bowls on the floor, he said resignedly, "I suppose you think it's my fault that they're empty?"

In a nearby cupboard, he found a bag of "Meow Mix" with which he filled the bowls. The creatures swarmed through his legs and began crunching busily. He realized he didn't know when he'd last eaten and that he was ravenous. Then, nauseated, he realized it was dinner in the Great Hall on that last terrible day. He collapsed at the table and wept for Dumbledore, for himself, for Draco Malfoy, for all the people grieving now over what he had done. He remembered the devastated expression on Potter's face when they had faced each other afterward...

A sound distracted him, and a young cat, white all over with golden eyes, leapt onto his lap. She pressed her head under his hand until he petted her. Her warm fur was comforting, so he held her lithe, purring body until she'd had enough attention, and jumped down.

He retraced his steps to the bedroom and sank back into the warm bed where Zelda still slept. The light was brighter now, and he looked curiously at this woman who, in an instant, had become so important to him. The lines he remembered were gone in sleep, but he knew she was not young. She was too wise and competent to be young, he thought, remembering the silly girls at Hogwarts. 'This ugly git has gotten extremely lucky,' he thought smugly, dropping a kiss on her tousled hair, pretending he didn't want to wake her.

She woke up, of course, and she beamed up at him when she saw that he was awake and aware of where he was. He wasted no time, but pulled her close and began kissing her. The sun rose, but neither of them noticed.

Conversation Can be Dangerous

Chapter 6 of 7

By now they probably should talk...

Conversation Can Be Dangerous

Severus carried a tray with tea and toast into the bedroom and set it on the nightstand. He kissed Zelda until she opened her eyes, and he pulled her forward, propped a pillow behind her, and handed her a mug of hot tea. Her cats bounded onto the bed, and he pushed them firmly aside before cautiously climbing into bed next to her, stuffing a piece of buttered toast into his mouth and reaching for his mug.

"From being a man who wanted to die of shame at being naked yesterday, you seem to have gone native today," Zelda observed, her blue eyes sparkling as she sipped her tea.

"I was unable to carry the tray, open the door and hold that stupid blanket around me. Besides, I believe you know what I look like better than I do," he said ironically and gulped down some tea, continuing accusingly, "Did you know that there is no food in the kitchen?"

She burst out laughing. "In one day you've gone from virtual corpse to a man of action, Severus. And since I didn't plan to be here for a while, I am aware that there's no food."

"Were you planning to starve your cats?" he asked curiously.

"A friend was taking care of them, but I left a note on the door yesterday, saying I was home but that I had 'a guest.' Of course she'll think I'm, er... oh, curse it. She'll be right, won't she?" And she blushed, bringing a pleased smirk to his face that made her blush more deeply.

Severus, reassured that no one would walk in on them, said, "Zelda," and paused uncertainly. What if she only wanted him to go? He inhaled deeply and said, "I want to spend today with you, Zelda. Somehow, I have to figure out how to go back. I do not know what will happen... Actually I have some idea, but I want one day with you so I can remember what it is like to be here with you." His face grew expressionless, but he didn't look away as he waited for her response.

"Severus, please stay as long as you like. But may I negotiate for two days, rather than one? No one will find you here, and I want to see you heal a bit longer. Whatever you decide, I'll help you if I can," said Zelda, smiling gently. "And do you know, Severus, I think you're amazing. Thank you for the tea, by the way."

He shook his head at that and placed her empty mug beside his on the tray. Zelda kissed him gently, and said, "I'm afraid the answer won't be easy, but will you tell me who you are, Severus? How did you get here? If you can tell me, that is. If you can't, that's okay, too. I've wondered if you're a spy or something."

He was startled at her words but looked into her eyes and said, "My name is Severus Snape, Zelda. I am a teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and I am indeed a spy, Zelda. In fact, I am such an excellent spy that I nearly died yesterday."

He told her. He tried to be impersonal, but at times he wept. The Dark Lord, Hogwarts, the Marauders, his wretched career as a Death Eater and his escape, being welcomed by Dumbledore to return to Hogwarts, teaching Potions, the Dark Lord's return and his return as a spy, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Draco Malfoy's plot, Sectumsempra, the Unbreakable Vow and finally his promise to Dumbledore, and his horrible act in atop the Astronomy Tower. It tumbled out of him, terribly painful in the telling. Finally, he told her how Bellatrix had found him when he was past endurance, tortured him and left him where she found him.

He finished his tale and reached for his tea. Then he buried his face in her breasts, his head throbbing, and wondered if she could bear his presence, knowing what he was. Her fingers smoothed his disheveled black hair, and she was silent for a long time.

"Poor Severus," she said sadly, with complete acceptance in her voice. "It's been horrible for you, and it will be horrible again, won't it? I'm sorry."

She kissed him, paused as if deep in thought, and said, "I do have another question, as if the last one wasn't shattering enough."

Something odd in her voice made him look cautiously at her. "Yes?"

Zelda said carefully, "You believe you're ugly, don't you?"

"I am not the only one," he snarled, shocked and deeply hurt that she would point out the obvious, and furiously self-conscious about caring whether she, or anyone else, thought him ugly.

She was laughing, and said, "Relax. I was afraid of this. You must own a mirror, so I hoped you knew, but it seems you don't. For your information, you're *hot*, Severus. Without doubt you're amazingly sexy, and if no one bothered to mention it to you before, well... now you know.

He gaped at her, speechless.

"Possibly, you like to pretend you're hideous," she continued briskly. "It's a marvelous way to keep people away, but you can't deceive me. You see, I've given it considerable thought in the past twenty-four hours and explored the subject in depth."

He flushed deeply with embarrassment as he considered her outrageous statement. He, Severus Snape, sexy? He covered his face with his hands and laughed helplessly, unable to look at her, but finally he had to glance between his fingers at her. He had to admit, she knew how to distract him from grim reality. He laughed some more, while she watched him with a quizzical expression on her face, and he hugged her close, enchanted by her absurdity.

"I love you, Zelda," he said impulsively. She froze in his arms, and he felt her shrink in fear, then struggle to pull free. When he considered his unprecedented words, he was shocked to know that he meant them, and he was astounded that loving could be so easy.

"Zelda... Zelda," he groaned, holding her tighter until she ceased to struggle. There were tears on her cheeks; he kissed them away and said, "If I can love you, and I am able to say it, please, believe it is true."

He pondered the situation, unable to understand how she could be afraid of this, if he wasn't, and he asked her hesitantly, "Can it be that you love me, Zelda?"

She answered, as if it were a perfectly normal thing, "Sev, obviously I love you. How could I not love you?"

"Well, that is a bloody stupid question," he snapped nastily at her. Every girl and every woman he had encountered at school and afterward could have told her, he thought. "You could join the multitude, darling."

Of course, he thought, none of the multitude was mad enough to tell him he was sexy. In fact, he suddenly realized, none of that old rubbish mattered right now. "What could you possibly love about me, woman?" Severus asked, his voice vibrating with emotion.

Her fear seemed to lessen as she gathered her thoughts and said meditatively, "Well, this is only my take on you after twenty-four hours, Sev, but smart is damned sexy, you know, at least to me. You're honest, brilliant, and although you work hard to hide it, I believe I detect a loving and generous heart."

He was stunned, and he realized that she was just warming up.

"Let me see, I'm guessing you're also high-handed, arrogant, bad-tempered, stubborn, cranky, abrasive, emotionally damaged, witty, brave, and I suspect that your gift for sarcasm surpasses my own, and that possibility delights me. You make a wicked fine cuppa tea. And while hypersensitivity is essential for a spy, it can make other relationships difficult, so you're probably a complete pain in the ass." He thought she had finished, when she added mischievously, "Did I mention sexy?"

Severus was speechless, seeing truth in her glowing eyes. He realized that he trusted this woman he had known for one day, with her piercing honesty and devastating kindness, almost as much as he'd trusted Dumbledore. Furthermore, he thought, Dumbledore would wholeheartedly have approved of Zelda and applauded this outrageous situation. "How can you doubt that I love you, Zelda?" he asked hoarsely, watching her intently.

She sat up and pulled away from him, her blue eyes wide. "That's a different question. I don't doubt you," said Zelda wildly. "I doubt me! I was married for thirteen years, and many of those years were utterly miserable, and it was largely my fault. I was scared to leave, and it was a horrible mistake, anyway, because I never loved him like I love you after one day. Severus, I know myself. I'm mad and selfish and bad-tempered, and the only good time in my life has been when I was alone. If you really knew me, you'd realize how impossible I am."

"Whose self image is distorted now?" he asked coldly, irritated by her sudden and unrelenting idiocy. "As something of a specialist in self-pity, I think you should get over it. Whining does not become you, my girl."

"How old are you, Severus?" she asked furiously.

"Ah, good. So you can be a fool, can't you? I am thirty-seven," he said smoothly. "And a half, if that makes you feel any better. And I am fully aware that you are older than I, and I hope you are not idiot enough to think that it concerns me."

"I'm forty-two, Severus," she snarled at him, "and it concerns me. If you weren't such a mess, you'd realize that you can find a beautiful woman who's perfect for you and not settle for a haggard old crone like me."

"I am, as you say, a mess," he hissed dangerously, "and if you were not such a little idiot, you would realize that you are bloody perfect for me, Zelda!"

He reached out to grab her shoulders and shake her until she came to her senses, but in his mind he saw his father shaking his sobbing mother, whilst his terrified child self cried helplessly, and he stopped, horrified. His hands clenched in his lap, and his face grew expressionless and cold.

Silence grew between them, each sat huddled in cold isolation. Severus waited hopefully for her to relent but realized that she could not help him this time; she was haunted by sadness and fears she had not overcome, as was he. He had no practice at extricating himself from his own anger, but he relaxed his hands and looked tentatively at her. "I am sorry," he said, "Zelda, come here.

She shook her head, and said, "I can't, Severus."

"Two days, my sweet girl, are all we have," he said, grimly. "It is not possible to sort out the accumulated baggage of decades in that time, and there are other things I prefer to do while I am here with you."

"You're right..." sighed Zelda wearily. "Which means that I'm wrong, and I loathe being wrong, although I'm familiar with the condition," she said as she moved closer to him. Nose to nose she asked, "What just happened here?"

"After your outrageous display of insecurity, I nearly became my father when I lost my temper. I was so angry at what you said about yourself, I wanted to shake you." His expression became haunted. "The way I saw him shake my mother when I was a child." Severus continued defiantly, "I am not my father."

"Why do you imagine that you are?" She responded curiously. If I'm not my mother, then you don't have to be your father."

"I look exactly like him, my mother said. I wonder she could bear to look at me after the way he treated her." Severus snarled in self-loathing. "He was a Muggle, cold,

angry, the meanest man I ever knew, and when I found myself thinking of hurting you..."

"A Muggle? You mean like me?" She asked. "Ah... I detect more baggage. Shall we open it and rummage around?"

"He was nothing like you, Zelda," he said firmly, "and I meant what I said about the baggage. But if that monster is in me, and if I could hurt you... I cannot bear it."

"If you don't want to lose your temper with me, you'd better run fast and far because I'm the most provoking woman on the planet." She smiled faintly, and he was relieved to see that her eyes were bright again as she puzzled their way out of this dilemma. "But... upon reflection, I don't think you need to worry about hurting me."

"Why not?"

"Because you didn't do it, did you? Instead you stopped yourself immediately. It didn't take you any time at all, and you chose not to become your father. It's all about the choices we make in our lives, isn't it? I think you didn't expect to have to make that choice, at that moment, and it took you by surprise."

Stunned, he told her, "Dumbledore said it is our choices that show what we truly are. He said it when I left the Death Eaters and offered to help him fight against the Dark Lord."

"That was an excellent choice on your part," said Zelda seriously.

"Thank you. Among my disastrous mistakes, I have made a few good choices," he responded gravely. "I made another excellent one, just this morning. Two in fact," he said. "I choose to love you, Zelda, although I have no experience at loving and almost no time to learn. Also, since you erroneously believe I am too stupid or inexperienced to know my own mind, I choose to disregard your belief because I think you will come to see things my way."

"High-handed and arrogant, Severus." Her eyes met his, and she laughed at his complacent expression, delighted at the clever way he had diffused the tension between them. The dangerous subjects seemed to have retreated for the present.

"Conversation can be very dangerous, can't it?" he said, and amazed himself by confidently caressing her until she smiled devilishly and began to kiss him in places he had never imagined anyone would kiss him. It all ended precisely as he had hoped, with the two of them closer in body and soul than he ever imagined he could be with a woman and completely at peace for a time.

Clothes Make the Muggle

Chapter 7 of 7

Severus finally gets something besides a blanket to wear, and realizes he's visiting America.

Clothes Make the Muggle

The sun was high in the sky; Severus and Zelda were still lying together in her bed. "Zelda," he asked her, "do you have a last name? I never thought to ask before."

She smiled and said, "Isn't it a bit late for formal introductions? Of course I have a last name. It's Larsson. I come from generations of Muggle peasants, dear boy. I wondered myself if *you* had a last name," she added, "but you did tell me without prompting. We seem to have done things backwards."

"Would you like to borrow some clothes?" Zelda asked him. "I'm ravenously hungry, and as you pointed out hours ago, the cupboard is bare. I at least must go out to forage. You may join me, or stay here."

"I will join you, of course, but I seriously doubt your clothes will suit me, my girl," Severus replied, with a grimace. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"You can wear my son's clothes," she offered. "He doesn't live here any more; he's nineteen and off to college. But since the creatures never really go away, I have some of his things." She paused thoughtfully. "Um... I don't know what Professor Severus Snape, Wizard Extraordinaire, normally prefers to wear... but this may be a bit different."

Zelda found her robe and slid into it before walking purposefully out of the bedroom. Severus smiled as he watched her go and stretched luxuriously in the comfortable bed. His head still ached, but he knew that he was recovering his strength. Knowing that Zelda was watching over him, worrying about him, made him feel safe in a way that he found terrifying. If he didn't go back soon, he realized, he would be tempted to simply stay with her. To love Zelda, and be loved by her, was a stunning new sensation to him... especially since it had come at a time when he had long given up all hope of having a normal life.

When she returned, her mischievous smirk warned him that the teenage son she had spoken of was not going to share his clothing preferences. He looked distastefully at the multicolored pile in her arms, which she dumped onto the bed without a word.

His eyes narrowed, and he looked severely at her, which caused her to laugh. She said enticingly, "It's all clean..." She threw him some worn boxer shorts and a pair of jeans, both of which he put on so reluctantly that it made her laugh harder than ever to watch.

"I am sure that this is all you could find, and I deeply appreciate the opportunity to wear masculine clothing," he said coldly, irritated at being the subject of laughter. "However..."

She hugged him, rubbing his back consolingly while she said to him, "May I show you something remarkable? Come with me." She led him to the full-length mirror hung on her closet door. Pointing to it, she said, "You are amazingly hot with nothing on, but a few clothes make the man even more awesome. Of course," she added, "most thirty-seven year old Muggles don't dress like kids... but most of them are beginning to run to fat and have hair loss issues. You, on the other hand, well... look."

Severus looked cautiously at his reflection. The jeans sagged a bit, but seemed in no danger of falling down, and the waistband of the faded red boxer shorts showed above the jeans. For a moment, he saw himself as she did; a striking man, with long, lank black hair and black eyes in startling contrast to his pale skin. His body was firm and lean, and 'the ugly, greasy git' he'd long been described as was nowhere to be seen. He met her appreciative gaze in the mirror and smiled hesitantly at her. He realized for the first time that his much-maligned nose was merely a hooked nose, not actually a deformity, and he felt somehow... reborn.

"Another long-held, mistaken belief bites the dust, I hope," Zelda said flatly.

He said to her, "I wish I could as easily convince you that you are amazingly beautiful," astounded once more by the easy words of appreciation that he had just spoken.

She smiled, but only hugged him for a long time, an embrace that he willingly returned. She then turned back to the bed and said, "You have a choice of shirts. On the one hand," she said, rummaging through the pile, "here's Elijah's former favorite, the turquoise Hawaiian print shirt, paired with this sexy white undershirt, known to the kids as a 'wife beater.' On the other hand, here's a classic black Bob Marley t-shirt. Think about it while I get dressed, okay?"

Severus moved to the bed and looked distastefully at the hideous Hawaiian shirt, then grabbed the black T-shirt. He had no idea who "Bob Marley" was, but at least the color was tolerable. He pulled it on quickly, and felt immediately better. Zelda returned, dressed in jeans and a pale green t-shirt. She carried an odd pair of leather sandals. "No real shoes," she said, "but these are adjustable, so they'll work for you until we can get something better."

When they were ready, he stood apprehensively staring out the window and said, "I had forgotten to ask. Where are we?"

She gave him a wicked grin and drawled obnoxiously, "Welcome to the U. S. of A., Sev... land of the free and home of the brave." She continued more naturally, but with a gleam in her eye, "Everybody wants to come to America, so I'm sure you'll enjoy this visit."

"Absolutely..." he responded dully, longing desperately for Hogwarts.

Zelda beamed comically at him and said, "When all this is over, you can write your memoirs *A British Wizard's Adventure in Muggle America*" she said. "It'll be a huge bestseller; can't you imagine the splash it'll make? But when you write the dirty parts, please remember to make me sound amazing."

Severus couldn't help smiling a bit, in spite of himself. In a flight of fancy, he captured her hands in his, saying grimly, "If I somehow survive what is coming, I would rather you would assist me in dictating the 'dirty parts.' I sincerely doubt that anyone else could do justice to such a story... which I would never actually write."

As they drove to the supermarket, Severus found himself needing to tightly clutch the armrest by his car seat. He felt completely overwhelmed and out of control, and his hand repeatedly reached for the wand he did not have. But he was startled to feel that this human interaction mattered deeply... a feeling that was formerly unheard of for him. He wanted to tell Zelda, but he feared to distract her from her driving.

He found the supermarket to be dreadful, overwhelming and busy, filled with Muggles dressed in hideous, colorful clothing. They rushed up and down brightly lit aisles, pushing metal carriages piled with boxes and cans. He felt his headache returning, and a gripping pain shot down his spine. Mercifully, it didn't take long to buy the groceries they needed. Neither of them spoke, both of them knowing that he would soon be gone.

As they walked back to the car, Zelda suddenly asked, "Do you like pizza?"

"As hungry as I am, I will not turn down a proper meal. How soon will we be eating?"

She laughed and told him, "It'll be practically like magic." Reaching for her cell phone, she pushed a button, ordered, and said, "We'll stop on the way home to pick it up."

When they arrived back at her house, Severus looked at it with some curiosity, having been unconscious when he first arrived there. Two huge oak trees loomed over the little home, a profusion of thick, leafy shrubs giving an impression of privacy. The long, shady front porch held a table and some comfortable chairs, with a large porch swing at one end. Hanging baskets of plants and bright flowers were all around, and a trellis covered with flowering vines created an intimate space. It was cozy and slightly shabby. She drove back into the garage, and Severus noticed that the door closed itself smoothly behind them.

After they put the food away, they took the pizza out to the porch. Zelda brought two bottles of beer, and said as she handed him one, "Here's an American tradition, beer and pizza, fast and filling."

They ate ravenously, and Severus decided that pizza was delicious. The summer day was warm and humid, but the porch was quiet and shady, and Severus relaxed. He looked across the small table where they sat and saw Zelda gazing curiously at him. "Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

"No, I was thinking how adorable you are, Sev," she chuckled. "But the dreamy romance is a bit nauseating, don't you think? It's not actually me at all. I need to get a grip!" She narrowed her eyes in concentration. "So... I do have a few questions for you, if it's all right... and you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

She paused to sip at her beer and asked, "Is there a gene for magic? You're human, it seems, so what makes you magical?" Her brow furrowed in thought. "It would be a dominant gene... You said that your father was a Muggle. Was your mother a witch?"

Severus nodded slowly, intrigued that she had so easily keyed into the subject that obsessed so many in the wizarding world. He remained silent, wanting to see where her ruminations would lead her.

"It must be rare," she said thoughtfully. "Has anyone done studies that show the percentage of 'magical offspring' produced by Magic-Magic, Magic-Muggle and Muggle-Muggle pairings? Can magic lie dormant and skip generations? How do you keep people like me from finding out about all of it? Finally," she said, "what happens to a Muggle... let's say a nosy Muggle woman who asks questions, when she learns about your world?"

"Which question would you like answered first?" Severus chuckled, marveling at the range of her questions and the strangeness of conversing freely with someone. After spending most of his life closely guarding every word and thought, the fact that he was speaking so openly with a Muggle woman was extremely ironic.

"Most of my questions were academic," Zelda added, "and I want to know all of it and much more, but most immediately... What'll happen to me, now that I know? Am I a problem for someone?"

"There are Muggles who know," Severus said calmly. "The Muggle parents of magical children know; they have to, if their children are to attend Hogwarts. When a witch or wizard has married a Muggle, it has usually been disastrous if they tried to keep it secret. If a Muggle may create problems, the Ministry of Magic will send someone to perform a Memory Charm, which causes the person to forget that piece of information."

"Does that happen often?" Zelda asked nervously.

"It does, since at times wizards are not careful, and people see things that frighten them. For instance, a few years ago," he mused, almost nostalgically, "two students missed the train to Hogwarts, 'borrowed' a flying car, and flew there in broad daylight. Half a dozen Muggles saw the car in flight, and it was briefly covered by the Muggle news media. Obliviators were sent out, and once the witnesses lost all recollection of the incident, it was quickly forgotten."

"But you, my girl, shall keep your memory if you want to," he added, looking intently at her.

"I want to," she said, bluntly. "I've thought about it, you know, whether it might not be easier if I didn't have to worry about you and miss you. But if I forgot you... Sev, it would be horrible. Missing you will be wretched, but forgetting about you would be far, far worse."

Severus realized that Dumbledore had been right - as usual - about the power of love. He would soon go back, and play his hated role better than ever after this time of learning to love. But... he needed to remember Zelda, and he wanted also to know that she remembered him.

"I'll still think of you when you're gone," she said, breaking into his thoughts. "If no one loves you there, I'll still love you here... if it helps."

"It helps," he said grimly, and she smiled into his eyes.

"I wonder if you got enough sleep last night," she said, eyeing him appraisingly. "You need your rest, you know, so perhaps a short nap is in order," she said, and smiled invitingly at him. Putting their arms around each other, together they walked back into her house.