

Whose Side Are You On?

by Alison

Hermione muses on the fate of the survivors of the war.

Complete short story

Chapter 1 of 1

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Whose Side Are You On?

Alison Venugoban

Hermione Granger rubbed at her neck irritably. The bed was comfortable, the pillows were soft; but it was no use, she couldn't sleep.

The hated collar sat unbuckled on the bedside table, ready to be snatched up and fastened at an instant's notice, but still she never felt really free of it. Not really. It was constantly on her mind, even when she wasn't wearing it.

Physically, it wasn't uncomfortable. She'd seen some collars that were horrendous; the wizards and witches who inflicted them on their unfortunate concubines seemed to delight in making them as cruel as possible, with inward-pointing spikes making it impossible to sleep lying down.

At least Hermione's was soft padded leather with a single magical buckle at the back. Physical discomfort wasn't the problem. She just hated it, hated the way it blocked her magic, hated the way it tightened around her throat if she went to touch a wand. Hated the way it proclaimed that she was no longer free.

"But what do you hope to achieve if you did get hold of my wand?" Severus had asked her the first time she tried it, after bringing her around. She sat huddled on his lap, her bruised windpipe aching. "Do you really believe hexing me would free you?"

"I just want to get this ... this thing off!" Her voice had been hoarse and tight, her throat ragged agony from the way the collar had choked the breath out of her. She'd been sure he'd punish her for the transgression, but the whole time they were together he'd never lifted a finger against her. Instead he'd soothed her, sitting holding her until she calmed, and then gave her a pain-relieving potion for her throat.

But finally, when Severus had found her passed out on the floor for the tenth time after yet another unsuccessful attempt to reach his wand to magic off the collar, he'd begun to allow her out of it, magically unlocking the buckle for her and trusting in her solemn word of honor that she wouldn't attempt to use his wand against him. But he allowed her freedom only at night, when they were alone and the doors of the house were warded against her escaping. He explained away the uncharacteristically charitable deed by saying he didn't want her to harm herself or any future children she might have.

Now Hermione shifted again. Beside her, Severus stirred and opened his eyes. It never ceased to surprise Hermione that he could go from deep sleep to full alertness with

none of the intervening groggy stages of most people. "What's wrong? It's not the baby, is it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I just can't sleep. I don't know why; I feel restless tonight."

"Come here." He put one arm about her shoulders and drew her as close as her swelling tummy allowed, tucking her head against the curve of his shoulder.

Hermione tried to relax. She knew her situation was infinitely better than most concubines. At least Severus was not cruel to her; ironic, that, after the disdain he used to display toward her at school! Not only that, but the fact that he'd used his considerable position as a senior Death Eater to save her from execution was something she'd never been able to fathom.

So many other "traitors to the cause" had been with her in Azkaban, those last horrible months after the triumph of the Death Eaters. She knew what awaited her: she'd seen Ginny Weasley soul-sucked by the Dementors and handed over to Lord Voldemort. Bellatrix was unable to bear children, so the new Emperor's heirs had to come from another source. It didn't matter that Ginny needed a constant team of nurses to keep her fed and clean, the Dark Lord could afford the expense. Ginny had been the first, the girlfriend of the defeated Harry Potter, a prize that only those in the top ranks of the Death Eaters could aspire to.

Severus had informed her recently that Ginny had given birth to twins. They were healthy, and had immediately been given to a wet-nurse and nanny. Hermione had cried at that: Ginny should have been alive, happily married, perhaps having babies with green eyes and black hair. But Ginny, poor Ginny, would never cry again. She was nothing more than an empty shell now, perfect for Malfoy's purpose.

That had been the fate of so many other young witches who were jailed with Hermione. Pure- and half-blood witches and wizards who had fought on the side of the Phoenix were selected by the victors, to be collared to live as concubines. But the Muggle-borns like Hermione were automatically condemned to death or soul-sucked for use as a brood-mare, a state in her mind worse than death.

When Severus Snape had arrived at the prison, flanked by two Dementors, she was sure that Ginny's fate awaited her. She'd cowered next to Molly Weasley, too terrified to scream. The prisoners in the big cell sank to the floor, their strength sapped by the presence of the guards, and Hermione felt the scabrous hands of the Dementors close on her and drag her roughly out.

It was then she'd felt Severus place the collar about her neck. She stared up at him in shock as her fear-fogged mind realized what this meant. His face had worn its habitual sneer, and his dark eyes were inscrutable when he said, "Comply with my wishes and live, Miss Granger."

She'd had no choice at first. To attempt escape meant the collar choking her into unconsciousness. The same thing happened if she tried to use a wand. Everything had to be done by hand now, the Muggle way, but Hermione was Muggle-born and coped. She was a smart girl: she complied. She lived.

Severus she could not work out. In those first months, he'd been as sullen and uncommunicative as he'd ever been in school. But he shared the bed with her every night and allowed her the run of the house every day. And slowly he'd thawed towards her. There were times, in the evenings when they sat talking, or in the mornings after waking up beside him, when Hermione could almost have imagined they were a married couple rather than concubine and master. Curiously the situation was not as unpleasant as she would once have imagined. At least, not when compared with the alternative.

"Why me?" she'd asked once. "Why a Muggle-born?"

He'd seemed uncomfortable and shrugged. "You're young, healthy and reasonably intelligent. I know you can take direction logically and sensibly, without indulging in stupid histrionics. Perhaps I simply have a wish for strong heirs."

But Hermione's curiosity was not satisfied. She'd soon learned he was extremely good at making statements that, while not exactly lies, were not the whole truth, either. The reason he'd chosen her, the "annoying Know-it-All," when he could have had his pick of pure- or half-blood traitors, or even married a pure-blood witch, remained a mystery.

He was gone often, sometimes for several days at a time, on unexplained missions. For the war had not ended. Harry had been killed by Voldemort, and now that the Wizarding world had been sorted into the Haves and the Have Nots, with the Dark Lord firmly at the top of the heap, the war had been carried to the Muggles.

It had become a grim life-and-death struggle between magical power on the one hand and technical expertise on the other. Every day, Hermione listened in avid horror to the reports on the Wizarding Wireless. England was totally under wizard rule now, but in mainland Europe the map changed daily. The United States was busily fighting itself, state against state, while Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Australia were still firmly under Muggle control. Africa, China and the islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans had wizards variously fighting each other and Muggles as historic tribal and ethnic enmities were thrashed out. Magical power dominated the Indian sub-continent, and the Middle East had fallen to the power of the wizards early on. South America and the former Soviet States were blacked out to news and nothing was known of their situation.

The first few times Severus had gone on his extended absences, Hermione had expected to enjoy the run of his house despite the fact that she had to sleep in the hated collar. But reading his books had only made her itch to try out the magic she was no longer free to use. And astonishingly, she found she'd begun to miss his company. He was the only person she saw, and the days were frighteningly long and lonely without him. When he inevitably returned, she was almost pathetically pleased to see him.

She tried to rationalize her feelings of confusion and, yes, of guilt: for she shouldn't feel anything but hatred for this man who had murdered Dumbledore and helped to bring about the state of affairs she now lived in. What was it the Muggles called it when a captive began to feel sympathy, even care for, their captor? Helsinki Syndrome ... no, that wasn't it ... oh, yes, Stockholm Syndrome. It wasn't her fault, she told herself repeatedly; it was a survival strategy brought about by the stress of being totally dependent on her captor for life.

For without him, she was as good as dead. Even assuming she could somehow escape the collar and get outside Severus's fully-warded house to Apparate, where could she go? Reports from overseas said that Muggles had a "shoot-first and ask questions later" policy when it came to anyone suspected of being able to perform magic. They'd even managed to develop a blood test where any magical genes showed up clearly. She might try to pretend to be Muggle, but it would be too risky when they discovered she had no papers, nothing to say where she was from, and her accent unmistakably labeled her as British.

And in the whole of the wizard-controlled world, she was labeled as a traitor, the Mudblood who'd helped the ill-fated Potter in his useless fight against the Dark Lord. Oh, she knew the majority of the magical population had feared Voldemort's reign of terror, but old prejudices against Muggles had again been raised, and this time it was going to be a fight to the death, come what may. One species of human against another, doing what they did best: fighting like animals.

Hermione could hope for no mercy from wizards. She was the eternal meat in the sandwich, neither one nor the other. It had gotten to the stage where she no longer cared who won the wretched war, only that she survive it. And Severus was her lifeline. She clung to him.

It had been last year when she realized just how much she clung. He'd begun to tell her where he was going and how long he expected to be away. What was the harm; she wasn't going anywhere or be able to tell anybody. Besides which, Hermione got the feeling it was a relief for him to be able to tell her of his own fears and uncertainties.

This time Voldemort was sending him to Cuba to try to negotiate an alliance with the Merpeople living in the seas around the island. The idea was that if the Mers could be persuaded to throw in their lot with wizards, they would be a great help in giving early warning of attack from the nuclear-powered submarines Muggles were using to such terrible effect out of Canada. However the Mers were traditionally suspicious of wizards and their motives and so far had held off going with one side or the other. Severus, as the Dark Lord's representative, was authorized to offer them whatever they wished if they agreed to help.

Hermione had been listening to the Wizarding Wireless the day after Severus had left on his mission when she heard that the island of Cuba had been attacked. She had sat frozen to the seat, her eyes fixed in horror on the radio as it recounted how the Canadians had gotten wind of the major Mermish population living there and had reduced the whole island, the surrounding coastal area and a good part of coastal Mexico and Florida too, to nuclear ash with warheads. The area would be uninhabitable for centuries, the report continued, with the loss of thousands of lives, both Muggle and magical...

But Hermione was no longer listening. Severus was there! The feeling of shock was as horrific as it was unexpected, the same ice-cold fear in the pit of her stomach, the same numbing sense of unreality that she had experienced early on in the war when she saw Ron cut down with the Killing Curse, and later when she learned that Voldemort had murdered Harry.

The feeling of unreality persisted all of that day, and she didn't sleep at all that night. She argued with herself as she paced up and down the bedroom, so familiar now, so wrong without him there with her. A nuclear warhead! She had enough sense left to wonder at how desperate the Muggles must be, to use such weapons against their own kind in the hope of wiping out a population of magicals.

She blanched and tried not to think. What would happen to her now Severus was dead? For he must be dead; wizards had no power against the awesome force of nuclear weapons, and he had been right at Ground Zero. Would she be returned to Azkaban? She almost preferred death to being given to another wizard to bear children: nobody else would be as gentle with her as Severus had so unaccountably been. It was that thought that finally broke through the unreal feeling. As the faint light of dawn began to lighten the room, she sank down onto the bed and sobbed wretchedly.

She was in such a state that she barely registered the distinctive cracking sound of Apparition outside. But then she heard the front door opening and closing, footsteps coming nearer, and she looked up as the bedroom door swung open.

Severus had a wan, tired look, but he was otherwise unharmed. For a long second their eyes met; then Hermione launched herself off the bed and flung herself into his arms, laughing and crying at the same time, relief warring with disbelief, needing to prove to herself that he was no apparition or ghost, but real and solid.

From there it had been a whirlwind of joyful welcome on Hermione's part, and surprised but gratified acceptance on Severus's. It was only much later, as they lay together in the sun-lit bedroom, that Hermione learned why he hadn't been in Cuba at the time of the Canadian attack.

"I needed to consult with my Lord prior to leaving. While we were meeting, we received word of an emergency that had arisen at one of our training bases in Scotland," he informed her, staring at the ceiling. "It was serious enough to warrant postponing the Cuban trip. We both Apparated instead to Scotland to inspect the damage." He glanced down at Hermione, who was cuddled close, listening. "It was the Renegade Wolves *again*. They'd disappeared back into the forest by the time we got there, but they'd totally gutted the base. It was then I heard about the attack on Cuba." He smiled without humor. "Lupin doesn't know it yet, but his flea-bitten pack of Werewolves and Animagi saved my life. If ever we meet up, I must remember to thank him. Before I kill him, of course."

Hermione didn't rise to the bait, too relieved to have him back safe with her.

Now she put one hand to her stomach and smiled. The baby was kicking. It was around that time I got pregnant, she thought. She'd heard of the things other concubines had done, resorting to aborting themselves of their hated Master's heirs with knitting needles or kitchen skewers. But Hermione wanted this baby. Severus had promised her that she would care for it herself, it wouldn't be handed over to a wet-nurse and nanny as so many others were. And he'd insisted on getting a house-elf to relieve her of her household chores, a quaint little creature by the name of Poggy. Hermione's days were not quite so lonely now, with Poggy's chattering companionship.

She shifted again, restlessly. She knew Severus wasn't asleep; his eyes were open, and he was staring at the ceiling as if deep in thought. He turned his head to look at her. "If you keep wriggling about like that, neither of us will get any sleep," he rebuked her, but his tone was mild.

"Sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me tonight..."

Severus turned onto his side, one arm supporting his head, and gazed down at her. "I think I know what this is about. You're worrying about the mission tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I've been trying not to think about that," Hermione answered truthfully. "I just keep remembering how I felt, that time I thought you'd died in Cuba. I ... I don't ever want to feel like that again, Severus. I couldn't stand it."

"But it's got to be done. We have a chance of working out how to magically charm those warheads to stop them from exploding. The Muggles have to be stopped before the whole planet becomes a nuclear wasteland, unfit for anything to live ..."

Hermione sat up, wrapping her arms about herself in comfort rather than against the cold. "But to do that you have to steal a warhead from right under the noses of the Muggles," she said. "I can't help but worry." She looked away from him, not wanting him to see the scared tears that kept threatening to overflow her eyes. "Can't ... why can't somebody else lead the mission? Haven't you done enough for the cause?"

He sat up beside her, leaning his back against the headboard. "I have to do it," he said slowly, as if weighing his words carefully. "I need to be seen to be a strong player. If ever I lose my favored position with my Lord, I'll lose too much in the way of status and reputation. There are still those who are unsure which side I really support. They'd delight in bringing me down if they could."

Hermione stared at him for a moment. "Which side do you support, Severus?" she asked finally.

He sighed, rubbing one hand over his eyes. "The winning side." It was said wearily, as if he were tired of the whole situation. "There's no point in taking a heroic stand only to lose everything, including your life, by betting on the wrong team ..."

"But how can you stand it?" Hermione cried in frustration. "What about principles? What about right and wrong?"

"I learned long ago that such concepts are fine in the abstract. But I'm pragmatic." He surprised her by turning towards her and laying a hand on her stomach. "And I have too much to lose now. I won't risk you or the baby."

She met his eyes, which for once were frank and unguarded. "Why did you save me from execution?" she whispered.

"You have a ... a light about you," he answered slowly. "You believe in a cause. You'll fight to the death if need be. You remind me of what I used to be like; I used to believe I could change the world single-handedly. It's not a survival trait, but it's still something I admire." He paused for a moment, staring at the far wall. "When I saw your name published on the Death List, I don't know, I just couldn't let it happen. I couldn't bear to think of that light being snuffed out, like Potter's had been, like Weasley's. Too many of our youngest and best have been lost to stupidity and the hunger for domination. Perhaps I believed I could atone for my sins by protecting you. It was easy to persuade the Dark Lord; he was delighted to be on top and disposed to be charitable to those who'd helped him get there." He gave a brief, twisted smile. "I let him think I have a 'thing' for Mudbloods. But now," he met her eyes again, his voice soft, "after living with you, after getting to know you, I couldn't imagine living without you."

Hermione stared at him. "Severus," she asked finally. "Are you saying that you love me?"

He looked down as if embarrassed. "If you want to call it that," he said shortly. He gestured at the collar sitting by the bed. "This situation, it's not what I want for you. If I could, I'd marry you properly, always assuming that you'd have me, given the choice. But Hermione, I can't. The only way I can continue to protect you is to have you appear to be subservient to me. The Dark Lord would lose face if it became generally known that I ... had fallen in love with my concubine, and that he'd turned a blind eye to it. I have no doubt he'd wrest you from me if he was forced to it. So I go on these dangerous missions, I keep my place in the hierarchy, and my high status as the right hand of the Dark Lord. I intend to see to it that this, my family, survives no matter what the cost."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he continued. "No, listen to me, Hermione. If the mission tomorrow ... doesn't work out, if I'm killed ... I've made arrangements for you and the baby to get to safety. I was going to tell you in the morning, but this is as good a time as any. I used my contacts to have false papers drawn up for you; they're in the attic in a suitcase. There's a supply of Polyjuice there as well, so you can alter your appearance. I won't fasten the collar on tomorrow, although it might be a good idea to put on a fake just in case."

He took both her hands and gazed at her. "This is very important. If I'm not back here in three days time, it means I'm not ever coming home. I want you to take the

Polyjuice, it won't harm the baby, and follow the map I've put in the suitcase. I have a safe house arranged for you. Nobody will know who you are; give yourself another name and you have a fresh start in life. Cuba made me realise just how precarious your situation is. I won't leave you unprotected again ..."

"Severus, no! I won't think of your being killed, not now!" Hermione clutched his hands tighter in her grasp and brought them to rest on her stomach. "This child needs its father! You just concentrate on getting that bomb and getting back here to us safely. I don't give a damn who wins this bloody war anymore; humans can go to hell and let the house-elves take over, for all I care, they might make a better job of things. But you get back here to me, do you hear?" She took his face between her palms, meeting his eyes firmly. "I'm probably mad, or I've got Stockholm Syndrome or some damn thing, but I love you too, and I'm not about to lose you now."

Severus was watching her with an odd expression on his face. "You want me?" He smiled suddenly. "Just whose side are you on, Hermione Granger?"

"I'm on yours," she answered. "For always."

The End.

Author's note: This story now has a sequel, "Inside, Outside, Hidden Away." It's here: <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=2645>

Also, if you liked this story, please have a read of my original story "Love Inhuman" at this link:

<http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=11932>

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