

Baby's Got The Blues

by Minerva

The war against Voldemort is still raging on, Hermione is cooped up in a safe-house with a recuperating Snape, and her fondness for guitar-players complicates things further ...

Part I

Chapter 1 of 2

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Bramble Cottage, St Dyffed, Wales, February 2004

(AN: This story is finished and betaed, by the amazing Dreamy_Dragon. It will be posted in two parts. I am quite sure that I have read about fighting Death Eaters via the link of the Dark Mark in several stories.)

"Bloody hell, Granger! Do you really think this is the right time for that?!"

"What are you talking about, Severus?"

"This!" He pointed at her belly. When his fellow researcher had stretched her aching back, cramped from reading for too long, the curve of her midriff, outlined against the sun from the window, had been unmistakable.

"Who cares if I got a little plump? We've been cooped up in this bloody house for four bloody months! Even you don't resemble a friggin' skeleton any longer!"

"There's no need to get crass. It is unbecoming for a mother-to-be."

"Those potion fumes are getting to your head. Mother-to-be, pah!"

"Face it, Granger, you're pregnant. And as you have pointed out correctly, we have been house-bound for over four months, and I haven't done as much as blowing you a kiss. I'd say you're about twenty weeks along."

Hermione did the only sensible thing and fainted.

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Having dealt with teenagers and young women for nearly twenty years, Severus caught her easily and deposited her on the settee. He did a quick diagnostic scan to ensure her safety but stopped himself before casting the spell to ascertain pregnancy. She should be awake for that.

After getting their NEWTs, Potter, Weasley and Granger had started Auror-training. They finished the three-year course, and while the boys - men actually - did field work

now, Granger had done further legal training after passing her compulsory five-month-stint in the Aurory with distinction. She had been the rising star in the MLE when an attack on her parents while she visited had put a stop to that. The elder Grangers had escaped via their daughter's Order emergency portkey. Hermione would not have stood a chance against three Death Eaters for long, but luckily her parents had been dumped right into a strategic planning meeting of some of the Order's most seasoned fighters. Hermione had been rescued quite quickly, but her attackers managed to escape.

Pensive analysis, however, affirmed what Dumbledore and Moody had suspected for quite a while: Voldemort had changed tactics. He no longer wasted energy on trying to capture Harry Potter, but sought to weaken The Chosen One by targeting his friends. Hermione would not have been captured and held at ransom, but killed right on the spot.

She had to agree that she was the most vulnerable of the Golden Trio as Harry and Ron always worked together, accompanied either by Kingsley or Tonks, but she still put a fight up against moving into a secret-kept location while her parents relocated to New Zealand. When Dumbledore mentioned a lab, a library and a Potions master being in need of an assistant, she acquiesced and packed her belongings.

They were living together rather peacefully - after a few initial clashes - in a secret-kept, triple warded cottage near St Dyffed, Wales. Two years after the Golden trio had left school Severus Snape had been discovered as a spy by Voldemort and consequently been tortured. He would have died surely had not Draco Malfoy managed to alert Kingsley Shacklebolt via Patronus. The Order had attacked Crabbe Manor full force, which had not done the Death Eaters any real harm, but had distracted their leader long enough for the Order to retrieve their spy. Snape was bleeding from vicious slashes all over his body, some of them from Bellatrix' poisoned dagger. If not for Remus Lupin shoving a bezoar down his throat right after finding the unconscious man that alone would have finished him off.

Two thirds of his bones had been deliberately broken, but the worst damage had been done by prolonged bouts of Cruciatius on top of all these injuries. His Occlumency skills had protected the Potions master from suffering the same fate as the Longbottoms, but the effort of keeping them up under extreme duress had burned his magical core down to near Squib levels. After four months of convalescence, his body had healed, but the wizard was still in no shape to defend himself.

Therefore Dumbledore set Snape up in Wales with an extensive library, a fully equipped lab and a long list of potions to brew for Hogwarts and the Order, most of which did not need the brewer to be magically powerful.

Still, Dumbledore worried about his former spy. Severus' self esteem had never been very high, and the head of the Order felt that feeling useless and unable to keep his secret promise to Lily Potter - keeping her son safe - might be a worse punishment than anything Voldemort could inflict on the man. A small voice in the headmaster's head whispered that now Snape would see for himself what it meant to be cooped up in a safe house, watching the Boy-who-might-not-live-much-longer stumble from danger to mortal peril and back, much like Sirius Black had done five years earlier. Dumbledore was fond of Severus, in a way. Like one was fond of well-worn slippers or a favourite dish. But he would toss him aside without a moment's hesitation if he thought it necessary for the Greater Good.

While the Headmaster knew that for research and brewing Hermione and Severus were the most effective team in the Order, he secretly gloated: these two would get on each other's nerves like no one else, they deserved each other. The old mage was quite sure that young Harry was no longer as malleable as he liked because of Granger's influence. She knew no Legilimency, but during meetings he often felt her eyes on him, distrustful and suspicious.

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With a groan, Hermione opened her eyes. When she remembered why she had fainted, she closed them again, mentally ticking off signs that Severus' prediction could be true. She had had a three-week-spell of a queasy stomach some weeks back, not to the point of being sick actually, but bothersome nonetheless. Her breasts were bigger and very tender (which had led to her sleeping with silencing spells after waking up some nights aroused and moaning simply because of the friction her nightshirt caused on her aching nipples). Some days ago she had even felt a little flutter in her belly, like a butterfly tickling her from the inside. (She had put it down to too much baked beans then.) These points were all in favour of Snape's opinion, but Hermione had a big trump up her sleeve. She opened her eyes, looking for her companion. He sat next to the settee, calm and watchful.

"I must tell you that I have had my menses for the last four months like clockwork, just like always since I was thirteen. I even had some cramps. I cannot be pregnant."

"I hope you are right, but it is not unheard of to have something like a period during the first few months of a pregnancy. Were your menses like usual, or maybe a little less strong or shorter?"

"They were shorter the last two months. But it always varies a bit."

"Would you consent for me to check with a spell? I did six months of training as a Healer, part of it for my Potions mastery, part of it for becoming Head of House."

"Of course, I do trust your 'silly' wand-waving."

He only smirked and did an unfamiliar motion over her belly. The tip of his wand glowed green and his mien grew grave. "I am sorry, Granger, you are definitely pregnant. May I?"

He laid his wand aside and made a move towards her midriff. She nodded, fighting down tears. Snape folded the hem of her sweater over her chest and very tenderly prodded her belly. Then he took one of her hands, laying it over her navel and applied pressure. "If you can manage to relax your shoulders, you can feel the top of your uterus here. That confirms my theory that you are about twenty weeks along."

She did as he had told her. He was right. This was neither too much biscuits nor bloated intestines, there was a baby growing inside. The enormity of her situation hit her, and Hermione curled up on her side, hiding her face behind her hands. She heard the Potions master make his way into the kitchen.

A while later the smell of freshly brewed tea made her sit up and search for a hanky. Snape waited for her to blow her nose and handed her a cup of tea. She thanked him with a tired smile. The former spy had been a surprisingly easy housemate, after she had remembered not to talk to him before he had at least two cups of coffee, and after he had learned to drop the 'Miss' before her surname, which went hand in hand with his perception of her as a colleague rather than a bothersome ex-pupil. As researchers they were a really brilliant team, her thoroughness a good base for his more creative approach to problems and his broader overview over magical theories. They had invented a few highly useful spells and charms and were currently working on a spell to incapacitate all marked Death Eaters via their Dark Mark. Hermione also helped with the brewing and had learned to do the more powerful spells needed for some potions with a minimum of fuss because Snape easily went into a snit if reminded that his magic was still not up to par. Thinking of their brewing made the young woman sit up straighter. What if the contact with certain ingredients or the fumes had hurt her baby?

"Did we brew anything that could have been harmful for the baby?"

He went through their list in his mind and finally shook his head. "No. There are a few spores that could have possibly been labour-inducing, but if you didn't have a reaction then they can't harm you now. I will be very careful from now on to warn you. Does your question mean you are going to keep it?"

"Yes, of course. In the Muggle world a termination this late in the pregnancy would only be possible if the mother's life is endangered; I do not know about magical options."

Hermione noticed the Potions master relax slightly.

"There are none, at least none I would be comfortable thinking of. There is a potion a witch can take right after a possible conception before gestation. Later on the magic of the baby fights against any attempts of abortion. There is a rather dark potion that guarantees success, but at a terrible cost for the mother's magic. Did you ever think about why the women in Knockturn Alley look so worn and wane?"

"No, not in that respect. I assumed that their way of life made them look like that."

"That too."

Snape looked at her, as if assessing her state of mind and started to stand up when he tensed suddenly. "Granger, do you have any memory-lapses of the time of the attack?"

It took her a moment to realise why he questioned her thus. "Oh, no. I lost consciousness when Kingsley arrived. Do not worry. I know how this baby came about, and it was entirely consensual."

His mien was still doubtful. Hermione knew she had to tell him. Mainly to appease his worries, but also because he was the only one to talk to around here.

"Did you know that I was sent over to Chicago to negotiate with the wizarding community there for safe houses for British Muggle-born families? Everything went well, and I had the afternoon and evening off before my Portkey in the morning. I hit the bookshops, browsed the Muggle shops and had a leisurely dinner. On my way home I passed a little blues-club. The musicians were doing their sound-check; I liked what I heard and went in on a whim. It was a lovely evening, a marvellous gig, and I had more fun than I'd had in years. Do not look at me like that, I was definitely not drunk! I took the guitar-player back to my hotel-room. I will spare you the details, but I left him sleeping with a smile on his face in the morning. I was on the pill then, but had had a bout of flu before leaving for the States. That and the different time-zones might have made this pregnancy possible."

Snape's eyebrows had risen during her narrative. "You may be right. Furthermore, magic has a way of overriding contraceptive measures, just look at the Weasleys. I know for sure that they didn't plan for a Quidditch team plus reserve players. A condom might have helped, though, and is highly commendable in my opinion when bedding strangers."

He was in full Head-of-House mode, and Hermione didn't like his patronizing tone at all.

"I cast a spell against diseases; I am not a complete idiot! Isn't it ironic? Hermione Granger, spinster and bluestocking extraordinaire allows herself one, just one, moment of levity and fun, and ends up pregnant in the middle of a war?!"

Hearing her self-deprecating tone, the former spy amended his manners. "Stop beating yourself over the head, what's done is done. It is bad enough that this war is fought with children, and that you and your fellow pupils had their childhood and youth overshadowed by it. I will start dinner, if that's all right with you."

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A hearing-augmenting spell told Severus that Granger had finally gone to bed and was asleep. He hadn't told her everything she needed to know yet. Finding out that she would be a mother in four months was enough for one day. He penned a short notice to Potter, spelling the address to look like Hermione's script. For communication they had a wooden box which had a counterpart in Albus' office. Everything they put in there ended up at Hogwarts - potions, books, letters. As the young woman wrote to her friends regularly, Albus might not want to read the letter; something he surely would have done - for the greater good, of course - if Severus wrote a letter to The-Boy-Who-Lived.

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"Ron! Come over here, quickly!"

"What's the matter?"

Harry Potter handed the missive to his best friend.

Mr Potter,

I would appreciate a visit from you and Mr Weasley.

Severus Snape

"What do you think?"

"It is certainly odd. Snape sounds polite. Also he must have realised that Dumbledore sometimes reads the post. My guess is that there's something wrong with Hermione."

"My guess as well. We're going tomorrow, aren't we?"

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Severus had breakfast ready when a calm and composed Hermione appeared in their kitchen. She thanked him for the proffered cup of tea and buttered a toast. "Do you think I need to change my diet?"

"My memory of that is somewhat hazy. I think iron is important. And folic acid in the first trimester. We could send for books on pregnancy."

"That would go over well with Madam Pince and Dumbledore."

The Potions master noticed that only the librarian got a proper appellation. He would have to broach a certain topic soon. "Hermione, there is one aspect of your pregnancy we haven't talked about yet."

"Do you mean the father? I only know his first name, and that he sometimes jams in that club. I could find out more if I had access to the internet and a phone. I plan to tell him, of course, but it's not my first priority right now. That's the other Tom, Tom Riddle."

"So your child is not getting his father's name as middle name, is it?"

"Definitely not. What did you want to talk about?"

"Do you know any unmarried parents in the magical world?"

She thought for some minutes but came up with none.

"There are none. People marry when they are pregnant, however ill-advised. The consequences for single mothers are too dear in our world."

"That may be. But Severus, I am the most notorious 'Mudblood' in Britain; it can't get much worse."

"Do not use that term in my presence!" He visibly tried to reign in his temper. "It can and will get much worse!"

"It is time the wizarding world arrives in the Twenty-first century! I am bloody well fed up with its friggin' Victorian approach to everything!"

"Are you really prepared to bring our world up-to-date on the back of this child?" Severus gestured towards her belly. "Are you familiar with what happened with unwed mothers in Ireland up until the Fifties?"

Hermione shook her head.

"The women had to live in a nunnery. After giving birth, their children were given away to 'upstanding' families with the mothers never seeing them again. If a wizarding

child is born, the ministry records are automatically updated and then checked. Children of unwed mothers are taken away and given to wizarding families, mostly old pure-blood families because they do not have a lot of children themselves. Maybe you can change that practice, but realistically not until your child is in his or her thirties."

Snape left the kitchen table with a huff, ignoring his companion's suddenly pale face. A ping alerted him to somebody trying to Floo in. He admitted Potter and Weasley through the living room Floo and warded it again immediately afterwards. Solemnly greeting them, he gestured towards the kitchen.

Hermione rose and hugged her two best friends tearfully. They returned her embrace. She looked over Weasley's shoulders towards Severus and thanked him with a smile for summoning them.

When everyone was again seated around the table, fresh tea brewed, Ronald asked, "So, `Mione, whatever is the matter? It must be serious. Snape here asked us over with more politeness than a debtor towards the goblins."

She rubbed her face and drew a shaky breath. "I am pregnant."

Seeing her friends turn towards her housemate, wands drawn, she continued hastily, "It happened during my trip to Chicago; Severus is not the father! Calm down!"

Potter looked puzzled as if realising for the first time that his bookish childhood friend was indeed a woman. A woman who evidently had had sex. But obviously he had no clue what this information meant beyond the obvious. Weasley blanched and grew as somber as the Potions master had ever seen him. Staring into space for a few moments he squared his shoulders and offered, "Hermione, I will gladly marry you."

Potter startled at this and wanted to say something, but one look from his red-haired friend stopped him. It seemed that the Terrible Two were maturing finally.

"Ron, I am grateful for your offer. Severus has explained to me what happens to single mothers in the wizarding world."

Snape turned to Harry and explained, "Their babies are taken from them and given to mostly pure-blood families. It is a custom - and the law - and no one has ever questioned it. There is no time to change it before Granger's baby is born."

"But that's barbaric!" Potter exclaimed.

Snape suppressed a smirk. There was still some Gryffindorish impulsiveness in the boy. Ronald looked at his female friend. "Do you accept my offer?"

Hermione had years of experience reading her `boys`, and while both had learned to dissemble during the last few years, she hadn't missed their silent exchange earlier. Cut off from the rest of the Order, she was not in the loop socially, but had got the impression over the last few weeks that Ron had got closer to a much matured Lavender Brown. Besides, she knew deep down in her heart that Ron and she could neither have a marriage of convenience nor a successful real one.

"No, Ronald, I cannot. You are one of my best friends, and I love you like a brother. I know that you will want a few more children, and if I accept your proposal now, I will be responsible for ruining your life. You don't do things by half; you want a real family life. I don't think I can offer you that. What if you fall in love? You won't be able to marry her and then *your* children will be taken away. I can't be responsible for that."

"Could Hermione go Muggle?" Harry threw in.

Snape answered, "No, children of witches will be taken away, whether they live in the magical world or not. Only Muggle-born children stay with their mothers, even if they are single, because of the Statute of Secrecy. Can you think of any Muggle friend with whom you could arrange a marriage of convenience, Hermione? If it is a Muggle it could be explained why you are rarely seen with him in the wizarding world."

She shook her head, "No. I didn't have a lot of friends before Hogwarts, and I haven't made Muggle ones since. I have a gay second cousin who could be persuaded, I think, but he wears make-up and behaves very girlishly. He would not make a very plausible husband."

Seeing Severus' eyes turn to Harry, Hermione quickly continued, "I cannot marry Harry either. Even if Ginny weren't in the picture, Harry is even more of a brother to me than Ron. And being the Boy-who-lived puts him in the spotlight constantly. We wouldn't be able to fake a marriage round the clock."

Ronald appeared deep in thought and then looked at the elder man on the table. "Let's assume we get rid of Riddle. Then let's assume the curse on the Defence-position is broken, and Dumbledore gives the job to the most competent person. Let's assume further said person takes the job. He then would be at a boarding school ten months out of twelve. His wife will be sad, of course, but their child and her studies will keep her busy. During the holidays they travel, doing research in libraries or collecting ingredients, and usually they are so far from home that the `Daily Prophet` can't afford to send a reporter after them. Let's assume they agree on Molly Weasley as a part-time child-minder, which would keep her from pressuring her own offspring for grandchildren, at least for a while."

All eyes turned to Snape. He noted that Hermione looked slightly apologetic that Ron had put him on the spot like this, but she didn't look offended or disgusted. "Weasley makes a convincing argument. Not that it was needed, I would have offered to marry you anyway, were there no other options more to your liking. Will you marry me, Granger?"

Hermione's eyes widened, but not in fright. Her thoughts raced, and she had many questions, but seeing Severus tensely waiting for an answer, they had to wait. "I am honoured by your offer, Severus, and seriously consider accepting it. There are a few things, though, I would like to discuss with you in private."

Ron stood up from the table, "Harry, that is our cue, we're leaving. `Mione, there are a few books on pregnancy and child rearing at the Burrow Mum wouldn't miss; I'll get them to you."

He turned towards Snape. "Don't agree to give her free access to all your books; that would make life rather uncomfortable, even if it's a marriage in name only."

Harry made his farewells, too. "Should we talk privately to Madam Pomfrey and see if we can get her to see you without Dumbledore knowing?"

Severus was again impressed by the two young man and offered his thanks. "Gentlemen, I trust your discretion to do as you see fit. Mr Potter, as you have been raised in the Muggle world, I want to ask you to look into what is needed for a Muggle marriage. As far as I know, one can register them with the Ministry, and they are as valid as wizarding ones. Percy will know about that."

Potter nodded. "Consider it done. And Hermione, we are looking forward to being this little one's favourite uncles."

She had to smile, even if it was a tearful smile, at this.

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After the boys had left, Severus moved to make more tea.

"No, Severus, I don't think I can drink any more tea. Shall we go to the library?"

"As you wish."

They settled in their respective chairs in front of the fireplace and Hermione plunged right in. "What would you expect from our marriage?"

He stared into space for a while. "I must confess I have only thought this through as far as offering to marry you. My guess is that we continue to live like now until the war is over. If the Order succeeds and I am still alive, I will most likely go back to Hogwarts. If you want to go back into MLE, it will be like the scenario Weasley painted. We could

attend a few public functions together and otherwise keep a low profile. If the Dark Lord wins, and we are still alive, I will do my best to take you and the baby with me. I have a hideaway prepared in Canada. Safely there, it is up to you. But, Hermione, I do not expect to survive a final confrontation. I am nearly well again. I can't and won't stay back, the Order needs every wand. Dumbledore's most likely plan is for me to distract Riddle and thus prepare the way for Potter."

Fresh tears shimmered in her eyes. Severus' respect for her rose even higher when she didn't waste time in useless protest.

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They were married four weeks later in a drab magistrate's office in Birmingham with only Harry and Ron as witnesses, as they had agreed to keep Hermione's pregnancy and the marriage secret from the Order for the time being. Poppy Pomfrey had examined the young woman and declared her and the baby healthy. He or she would be born around the end of October.

Returning home to the cottage, the newlyweds were surprised by a lavish dinner their assigned elf had prepared. The four sat down, and Severus poured the wine...only a few drops for Hermione. They clinked glasses rather somberly and started to eat. Suddenly, the groom dropped his fork.

"Winky!"

"Master of Potions!"

"Where did you get that wine?" He pointed to the bottle on the table, *Chateau Malfoy, Private Reserve*.

"Dobby got it from his former master's cellar because there is no wine fine enough at Hogwarts for Master and Mistress' wedding!"

"Thank you, Winky. Dinner is very good."

The elf vanished with a pop, and Severus looked at Ron Weasley, who was beaming. "Blimey! We're always underestimating the little buggers! Draco told the Order that Voldiebutt moves between his parents' manor and three others randomly. When he next takes residence at Malfoy Manor, we can surprise him there!"

The next few weeks were filled with research on house-elf customs and their loyalty, Dobby filling in the blanks. Severus did not want Lucius to be in the picture too early. While the Malfoy *pater familias* was thoroughly disenchanted with the Dark Lord, his Occlumency was not good enough. Draco, having been tutored by his godfather, did his best to prepare his parents without giving anything away. The plan was to use the Malfoy elves to bring Order fighters into the manor without triggering Voldemort's wards. Dobby could tell that the elves suffered with their master and mistress and thought it likely that they would help if they could be convinced it was in the best interest of the Malfoys.

When Voldemort prepared to leave Crabbe Manor, things got frantic as they were not yet ready. Thankfully, the despot moved on to the Lestranges. Snape's health and magic were fully recovered. He took daily walks with Hermione, who was now in her thirtieth week, on the cottage grounds. They talked strategy, potions and names. On the last topic they could not reach an agreement as Severus heavily favoured Roman names while the mother-to-be, struck herself with a mouthful of a name, tended to simple English ones like Jane, Emma, Hugh or Jeremy. Although, Hermione suspected that Severus did only bring that topic up to distract her from grimmer ones. The plan was finalised in a meeting between Severus, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Kingsley and Draco. As the Dark Lord never called full meetings more than twice a week, the day of the attack would be one day after the first full Death Eater meeting at Malfoy Manor. Draco would tell his parents the necessary facts, and Lucius would then order his elves to bring in the fighters. Harry and Ron worried about that part of the plan, but Severus was sure that his old friends would want to be on the winning side. The Malfoy heir had provided his comrades with a detailed plan of his home with the designated spots for the Order fighters to Apparate in via elf.

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Headmaster Dumbledore had put a portrait of a distant uncle in the Welsh cottage, just a precaution. He began to suspect that something was up when said portrait was transferred into the conservatory, a room only inhabited every other day by Severus, who was watering the flowers and herbs there. But other tasks interfered, and he forgot to investigate.

Kingsley Shacklebolt very carefully began to look for allies. He knew that Dumbledore would put up a fight if confronted with a plan from Severus and Hermione. Having observed the inner dynamics of the old Order crowd for decades, he concentrated on Arthur Weasley and Mad Eye Moody. The Weasley patriarch might be mild-mannered, but his family would follow him without hesitation. The old Auror would bring those into the fold who did not trust Snape. If Kingsley could present the plan with Harry's support and no resistance from Arthur and Moody, Dumbledore could not dismiss it without losing face.

Arthur Weasley had heard a bit from Percy and was quite easily persuaded. Moody took a little longer, but he had long since argued that Dumbledore was relying too heavily on the prophecy and that the Order should take proactive measures. And he had been the one to treat Snape first after his near-death. That had gone a long way to make him more trusting towards the younger wizard.

The Order meeting went as expected, Albus' resistance crumbling quickly after he realised that Moody and Arthur were also in favour of the plan.

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Severus Snape tried to stay appropriately cynical but in the end had to admit that daily life with Hermione Granger, pardon, Hermione Snape, was quite bearable a pleasant experience even. He harboured no illusions that a young woman who picked up guitar players in blues clubs would ever be interested in him romantically - he wasn't even sure if he would want that - but he could no longer deny that she truly respected him, and that she enjoyed their debates as much as he did. And that was a rare experience for him. While he was still prepared to put everything on the line in the oncoming battle, he now found himself thinking about life after the defeat of Voldemort. His life. Her life. Their life?

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When Draco's Patronus dashed into Bramble Cottage, Hermione began to panic. The last few weeks - while busy with last-minute-research and brewing potions for the battle - had been an eye-opener. Severus never crossed a line, but being married still wrought changes in the man. His prospects had not changed, but Hermione sensed a new purpose in him. It was her most fervent hope that he would try to survive, now being responsible - even if only on paper - for a new life. The Potions master had had everything ready for weeks but was nevertheless in the process of checking his cloak for emergency potions when his house-mate surprised him with a hug and an earnest, "Take care, please."

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No amount of reading or tea was able to relax Hermione. She knew that it would be some hours before she realistically could expect news and therefore tried to distract herself with reorganising the kitchen cupboards. After more than two hours, she sat down with a glass of lemonade, desperately not thinking of the battle and her loved ones there. The young woman made herself a sandwich to keep busy, but found she could not eat it after all. She tried to walk off her nervous energy by rounds in the garden, but that did not help either. Hermione thought of easing the slight pain in her back with a shower but was afraid of missing a Floo call. The problem was soon enough moot as her water broke.

Part II

Chapter 2 of 2

A baby is about to be born, but that is not the end of the story ...

Winky Apparated to a safe spot behind the pheasant house and stretched her magic to locate the Potions master. As expected, he was in the thick of things. Molly Weasley, however, was available. Winky took her hand and did not lose much time explaining, rather she spirited her away to Bramble Cottage. She would tell Master Severus later, first babies rarely were born quickly.

The Weasley matriarch knew that her children and husband were safe and mostly sound, which was why she lent that odd elf an ear. She told her that Mistress Snape was having her baby right now. Molly knew nothing about a secret Snape wife, but then she did not know a lot about the taciturn man save that he took his tea black with two sugars, and that he needed fattening up.

"I do not know where Severus is."

"I will look for him after; you is to help Missus now."

"All right then, let's go." She took the proffered arm and braced herself for Side-along.

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Mrs Weasley was about to let loose a barrage of questions when Hermione had a particularly painful contraction. This directed Molly's focus onto more important things than how, when and why Hermione had become Mrs Snape. The young woman was bundled up in more comfortable clothing and told to walk around as long as possible while a bath and the bed were prepared.

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Having delivered a thoroughly perplexed Mrs Weasley to Bramble Cottage, Winky left again to look for Severus. After a while she grew frantic when she couldn't locate him anywhere. House-elves usually could find their masters and families and Apparate to their side. The only time this wouldn't work was when the magic of those wizards or witches was failing or suppressed. Which never happened for a good reason. There! Winky detected a very faint signal from the lower dungeon corridors. With a pop she appeared next to the Potions master who was sitting against a wall amidst a lot of rubble.

"Master Snape!"

"Winky! I am glad to see you."

"Is Master hurt?"

"Only scratches. But my magic has nearly burned out again. Please fetch me Pepper-up and a Strengthening Solution from my stores, I have to go back."

"Master, no! You cannot! You need food and sleep! And the Mistress is having the baby right now!"

"Who is with her?" With that he tried to stand up, but failed.

"I brought the Mistress Weasley to her."

He scrambled up again and managed a wobbly stand, trying to reach a decision. "Winky, please help me to a chair. I will then take a Strengthening Solution and wait here. You will try to find out as much as possible about the battle and then take me to Hermione."

"But Master, you will hurt yourself more if you take the potion now."

"It will take a bit longer to build up my magic again if I take a potion now, but I won't sleep while my child is born."

This reassured Winky, and it pleased her to no end to hear master talk about *this* child. The Snapes might think they were married in name only, but the little elf would not give up her dream of serving a real family with lots of children. She popped away to the North tower of Malfoy Manor which would give her a good overview. Seeing only a few skirmishes near the boundaries of the property while on the front lawn people could be heard celebrating, she deduced that the battle was over, one way or another. Concentrating, she Apparated to Dobby's side, who promptly spun her around in circles.

"We won, Winky, we won! Master Harry Potter vanquished the Evil Wizard!"

"I is very glad, Dobby. Please tell me, how are the Weasleys and Harry Potter and the Malfoys?"

"Mr Ronald is being treated for a broken leg, and Mr Fred singed his hair off with fireworks, all the others are well."

"Dobby, tell Master Harry and Master Ron in the morning that the baby is being born."

"What baby?"

"They will know."

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The Strengthening Solution was doing its job, but Severus knew that it would last no more than six hours. Hopefully his daughter or son would be born by then.

Molly Weasley had assured him that all was progressing smoothly and sent him to take a shower after checking for injuries and stray hexes, muttering that no one, not even an expectant father was allowed straight from the battlefield into a birthing room.

He was grateful for the shower. Molly had healed his minor injuries, most were from falling masonry in the dungeon corridors. Theo Nott had alerted his former Head of house to a bomb which would trap and kill all the young Death Eater children who were held captive in the dungeons. Voldemort had ordered his followers to bring their children to Malfoy manor under the guise of establishing a Death Eater nursery and primary school. A few mothers had refused and been punished severely, which brought about the compliance of the others quickly.

During his sprint down to the dungeons, Snape had met his former Slytherins, Vincent, Greg and Pansy. To his great relief they followed their former Head of House and herded the children out of the cellars towards safety while the Potions master cast and held his strongest Shield. Before collapsing, he saw Vincent and Greg running upstairs with toddlers under each arm.

Donning a T-shirt and sweat bottoms, he made his way to Hermione's bedroom.

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Hermione had stopped walking around as the contractions were coming by the minute. Molly beckoned Severus to sit on the bed behind the expectant mother. He took his place and, after seemingly endless hours, when he felt the Strengthening Solution wane, the young woman was told to push by Molly. Forty minutes later the cries of a newborn filled the room. Hermione gathered her daughter, for it was a girl, close with a tremulous smile, and Severus tightened his arms around both of them. The cynic in him knew that the baby looked like other newborns - angry red face, slightly misshapen head and matted black hair - but still something in him broke irrevocably when first setting eyes on the little girl.

Hermione pressed a kiss onto her - their - daughter's brow and settled more comfortably into his embrace.

"What is her name?"

"I was thinking of Victoria Eileen, if that is all right with you."

They had never talked a lot about his childhood, but somehow his house mate had guessed how important his mother had been to him.

The Potions master could only nod. Thankfully, his tears were lost in Hermione's hair.

Molly cleaned little Victoria up perfunctorily and sent Severus into the other room to dress her while the women attended to the afterbirth. Mrs Weasley deemed everything to be as it ought to be and helped the new mother into the shower. Returning, she noticed that Severus was on his last leg and settled father and daughter into his bed as Hermione's was not quite usable. Cuddling little Victoria close, he fell asleep nearly instantly. Twenty-four hours later he opened his eyes to the sight of his daughter being nursed.

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The following weeks were magical. The little family lived in a happy bubble. Due to his magical depletion, Severus' needs were alike those of his daughter: food and sleep. Poppy Pomfrey had come over the morning after the final battle, pronouncing both mother and child perfectly healthy, the father less so. The former spy had protested at first against bedrest but had acquiesced soon after; it came out that Victoria fell asleep best while nestled against her father's chest.

The boys had come as well, bringing a now much used gift, a magical camera.

Although every hand was needed for the repairs at Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore could do nothing else but lending them an elf for cooking and laundry, not if he wouldn't risk a gruesome death at Minerva's and Poppy's (and Molly's) hands.

Little Victoria Snape was no fussy child. While she woke her mother up every two hours for the first days, she soon enough settled into an easy four-hour-rhythm. The family's sleeping arrangements stayed like they had been the first night, Victoria cocooned between her parents in Severus' bed. Slowly gaining his strength back, the Potions master liked the hours of early dawn best when he woke before Hermione at the baby's first stirring. He then took his daughter up for a snuggle, talking to her, sometimes singing in a low voice. If he walked her, he could sometimes buy Hermione another precious hour of sleep.

Severus would walk up and down in front of the living room window, describing the birdcalls and explaining the various smells of herbs drifting up from the garden to the little one. With her shock of black hair, fair complexion and long limbs Victoria could easily have been his biological daughter. Severus tried not to think too much about a future in which he would not wake up next to her.

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Hermione looked out of the window and watched Severus working in the herb garden; Victoria's bassinet was gently bobbing nearby, in the shade of an elder bush. He had his physical strength back, even though he liked to take a nap in the afternoon, together with their daughter. Magically, he had a prolonged recovery before him, but didn't seem to be bothered by it at the moment. Hermione suspected that her usual way of doing things without magic, and both of their conviction that all things pertaining to their daughter's care were best done without magic helped as well. A nappy-changing charm was handy for sure if you were standing with a wet and cranky baby in a queue at Flourish and Blotts, but in day-to-day life she would not want to miss gently washing the little one, talking nonsense to her and listening to her cooing back, blowing raspberries on her belly and tickling her toes. Neither did Severus, apparently.

During the last few years the young woman had dated superficially. Education and later work had always come first. The weeks after Victoria's birth had brought the insight that her life with Severus at Bramble Cottage was very close to how she had envisioned her marriage and family life as a girl: similar interests (books of all kinds and passion for magical theory and research), spirited discussions, a partnership of equality and mutual respect and enough personal space.

She was startled to realise how important Severus' well-being had become to her. Due to his magical depletion his Occlumency shields were non-existent; he had no recourse to stem the effects that the end of twenty years of dual slavery and carrying the weight of guilt, a very climatic battle and the birth of his child had wrought on his psyche. His emotions were all over the place, and he would start to cry at the drop of a hat. For instance, when the corners of Victoria's mouth twitched in sleep. Or when a mocking bird sang in the evening. At first Hermione tried to give him privacy, but soon her instincts won over. She would lay a hand on his shoulder or snuggle up to him or offer an embrace.

This led to several long conversations, mainly about the Potions master's childhood. Little by little did she teach Severus not to be embarrassed by his tears. When her efforts started to succeed, his episodes were already becoming rarer, but not due to new Occlumency shields. He had already told her that he would not employ permanent ones again, now that he was no longer spying. Hermione, who had always thought of herself as the antithesis of gentle and nurturing, found it surprisingly easy to do things Severus would like: making sure his favourite jam was always on the breakfast table, training Winky to dry his T-shirts in the sun instead of with a drying charm, meticulously marking articles in books they discussed as he liked to re-read them after their verbal sparring. In short she did everything to make a whole range of expressions appear on his face she had never witnessed during her school-days: contentedness (relaxed nostrils), mild exasperation tinged with slight mocking (right eyebrow up, lips pursed, eyes glittering), the half-smile (one corner of his mouth drawn up), the real smile (both corners, obviously) and the laughing smile (both corners up, eyes crinkling). The last one was usually reserved for Victoria, but once or twice Hermione had been its recipient and it frightened her a bit how much she craved its reappearance.

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Hermione went to join Severus and Victoria at the window. She took care to approach her husband with enough noise as she had learned early on in their cohabitation not to startle the former spy.

Putting her arm around his waist, she ignored that his posture was stiffening. This had been his reaction to casual touches during the last two weeks. Hermione put it down to their growing awareness of each other as a man and a woman.

"Severus, are you up to a trip to New Zealand? I want to introduce Victoria to her grandparents."

"If we travel by Portkey, it would be all right. But Kingsley might need my testimony."

She pondered this. "The trials won't start for the next two or three months. You do not have any new knowledge about possible whereabouts of fugitive Death Eaters that Lucius Malfoy could not supply as well."

The Potions master was silent. Victoria had heard her mother and had realised that she would rather feed than stay on her father's arm. Hermione followed Severus into the kitchen and sat down, her daughter latching onto her breast. Her husband busied himself with cooking breakfast. His wife used a true and tried interrogation technique -

saying nothing. Finally, he relented and addressed the real issue.

"Do you truly want to introduce me as your husband to your parents? They might prefer a single mother to someone married to a former teacher simply because of archaic customs in a backward society."

"We are married, and we will stay married, won't we? I will tell my parents how everything - Victoria's conception, our marriage and the initial reason for it - came about."

"Initial reason?"

He had sat down across from her, after having prepared her tea and toast exactly to her liking. Hermione thought this moment was as good as any other to talk about her thoughts on their marriage. "We have lived together amicably for seven months now. We complement each other perfectly as researchers. We are Victoria's parents. If I had had time to think about a perfect future relationship during the last few years, what we have together would come very close."

Severus stared into his cup. "Are you sure you would still think so if we hadn't been thrown together in isolation for months?"

She knew she had to tread very carefully now. "I do not think you would have learned to see me as a colleague rather than an obnoxious former pupil quite as quickly if we hadn't lived together. As to my feelings - I have always respected you and craved your appreciation. I even nursed a short-lived crush on you after finding out that you were a spy."

He snorted, but couldn't quite hide his smile. "How long did it survive?"

"Second potions lesson of that year."

"Ah, not so dashing anymore?"

"Ahem. No, 007 wouldn't have eviscerated Neville quite as thoroughly."

"I am not proud of it, but I lived on Ulcer and Fortifying potion in those years." He sighed, stretched and continued, "I will think about it. When would you want to go?"

"There is no hurry, but it will be easier if the trip is concluded before Victoria starts to take solid foods."

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Severus took only two days, or rather nights, to decide. He would accompany his little family. He even suggested travelling to Chicago from New Zealand, to tell Victoria's biological father of her existence.

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An international Portkey dropped them in Christchurch; the rest of the journey was made by taxi. Victoria had been cranky for the whole time, but the hum of the car put her to sleep.

Hermione approached the doorbell while Severus waited a little further away.

"Hermione!"

Mrs Granger hugged her daughter tightly, shedding happy tears. Mr Granger, who had seen Severus, though not the baby in her carrycot, alerted his wife to another person before greeting his Hermione as well.

"Mum, Dad, this is Severus Snape, my husband, and our daughter Victoria Eileen."

Both Grangers stared slack-mouthed until Monica collected herself enough to usher them inside. Severus was prevented from the third grade by his father-in-law by asking Mrs Granger for the bathroom to change the baby. Hermione in the meantime prepared a corner of the settee for laying down her daughter and asked her father for patience and tea.

Oohing and aahing could be heard from the bathroom, and Wendell Granger knew he stood no chance if he wanted to play inquisition with his little girl's former teacher.

With growing bewilderment the Grangers heard about a guitar-player in Chicago, about ancient custody arrangements in the wizarding world and about a marriage of convenience that might have started to become more. Mrs Granger exclaimed, "But we only have the one guestroom!"

"That won't be a problem, Mum. We sleep in one bed with Victoria in the middle. She is used to this."

They settled into their room, leaving the baby with her enchanted grandparents.

"That went rather well, don't you think?"

"Mhm."

Severus seemed to be far away. The Grangers had been shocked, sure, but they had not been shocked by who he was. He did not know how much Hermione had told her parents about the war. Even if they did not know about his Death Eater past, they must realise the age difference between the two of them.

"Hermione, how old are your parents?"

"Mum is 64 and Dad 76. Why?"

"They seem so accepting."

"It would be hypocritical of them, if they were against me marrying my former teacher when Dad was Mum's lecturer at University, plus I think they basically trust my judgement. They have asked me for my opinion from a very early age on, one of the perks of being an only child, I suppose. We will be questioned more later, I think, and separately. I am bound to get a lecture on contraception from my mother."

"They don't know about my past, then?"

"They do. And they wrote to the headmaster about it at the beginning of my fifth year, same as they did after my third, about Remus. My parents are thoroughly disenchanted with Dumbledore; they did try to persuade me more than once to leave the school."

"So I guess it helped that we told them that we kept your pregnancy and our marriage secret from the headmaster."

"It helps for sure, but they would have judged you on your own merit anyway. They are just like that, I suppose."

...-

Over the next few weeks the Grangers and Severus relaxed considerably. Hermione was just glad that she had help with Victoria and got nearly enough sleep. Mrs Granger

never lectured her daughter about contraception but rather embarrassed her with pointed questions of how she thought to convince Severus of more than a mere marriage of convenience. Hermione was ready for more but thought her husband was not. Their time in New Zealand was wonderful for healing, but after all he had been through, he just needed more time.

When they decided on a date to leave for the States, Severus sat himself down and analysed his feelings for his wife and daughter. Towards Victoria he felt like a real father, and he even could say that he was quite confident that he would be a good father to her. Towards his wife he sometimes felt like a fraud. He cherished the time spent with her, he thought with fierce fondness of their debates over magical theory, he desired her body, and he acknowledged that Hermione was one of the few persons whom he could stand being around for longer than an hour. She seemed to read his moods and did not mind them, and he was sure that she understood far more about him than any other living person. His wife was now his best friend by a wide margin, and he would have done nearly anything for her, but he could not be sure that he loved her in the way she deserved to be loved.

After wrestling with that point for two sleepless nights, he tapped into his Gryffindor side and took her for a walk on the beach alone. Hermione sensed the importance of the excursion and grew rather tense. He started to talk twice with a sharply indrawn breath. "What are your long-term expectations from our marriage?"

That was an easy question for Hermione, and she opted to speak her mind without taking possible motives for his question into account. "We continue to live like we're doing now. I might go back to work part-time when Victoria is a little older, but that depends on your plans too. When we are comfortable with each other, we'll take our relationship to a physical level. I hadn't planned on having a child so early but rather in my thirties. If you are amenable we could have one or two more children. I am not comfortable with more than three, but that might change. You know I like and respect you, and that our life together is as close to perfect as I could have imagined. I feel I can come to love you deeply quite easily."

Severus seemed deep in thought and finally answered, "And there is the problem. I desire you. I love Victoria, and I cherish our life together very much. But I do not know if I am capable of love. I would not want you to be trapped in an unequal relationship. I know the pains of unreciprocated feelings. There were moments during the last few months when I could have easily said something unforgivable."

Hermione had already worked out that something along those lines might be at the bottom of his hesitation. "Severus, even a saint would have snapped sometimes during that time. We were living through a war, closeted with very little outside communication and were both in a vulnerable state emotionally and physically. It says a lot about us that nothing more has happened. And I cannot think of anything unforgivable you could say to me."

"You can't?"

She pondered that and choose to reveal something that might ruin any respect Snape had for Ron.

"When I went to the ball in my forth year with Viktor Krum, Ron called me a whore. I was hurt beyond comprehension, particularly as I really fancied him then and was already disappointed that he would not recognise me as a girl. I did not forgive him easily, but I did eventually. And I think he had much less provocation than you had."

He did not respond immediately.

"Severus, could it be that Lily had started to fancy James Potter and was very confused about it? Not listening to your apologies might have been one way for her to make her life less complicated."

The Potions master smiled slightly at this. "You are too kind to Lily. We were already growing apart by then, and she was likely sick of me and my friends as well as the Marauders. Potter Sr. wasn't part of the equation until their seventh year. I still shouldn't have called her that."

"No, you shouldn't have. But you were humiliated and lashed out with the one epithet probably most prominent in the Slytherin common room of that time. Just as Ron used the word he heard in the Quidditch changing room. Harry inadvertently made it worse for me by telling me that Ron had not used 'whore' as a derogative term for girls because he thought it impossible that Krum could be interested in me in *that* way, but that the term was used in the team for the weather, the opposing team, a bludger - you name it."

They had sat down were a formation of rocks sheltered them from the wind. Hermione continued, "The war is over, but I think something fundamentally has changed in you since you were drained of your magic. I may be off, but I sense a lot less tension and anger in you."

"No, you're right. And our talks when I had my weepy spells helped a lot. But the fact remains that I have no positive role-model for being a father or a husband. What if I hurt you or Victoria?"

"You will. And I will hurt you, and I will hurt her as well."

"I meant more than words."

"Severus, have you ever raised a hand at a pupil or any other child or a woman?"

"I threw a jar of cockroaches at Potter."

"It would have hit him if you had wanted it to."

"I gave a five year old Draco a clip round the ear when he snuck into the lab during brewing."

"If Victoria ever does something like that, I will do that as well."

"I backhanded Bellatrix when I was seventeen."

"That shows admirable restraint on your behalf. If Necromancy weren't frowned upon, I'd like to resurrect her and do worse. Love, everyone with more than two brain cells knows that the deed is what counts for you. Most third year students figure that out by themselves. You don't suffer fools gladly, you were a spy and you are the most intelligent person I know - of course you are able to reduce nearly everyone around you to tears of blind anger and humiliation in under two minutes."

"Figured me out then, have you?" His tone had grown colder.

"No. That will likely take decades. But I want you to know that I have thought a lot about us."

"Mhm."

The ensuing silence was not a comfortable one.

"What about you, Hermione? You are passionate about footnotes in homework essays, for Merlin's sake! You cannot tell me that you will be content in a marriage in which your husband might never be able to give you the love you deserve. Intellectual companionship, parenting and regular sex are all well and good, but in a long-term relationship one has to show one's partner that one cares. God knows I have listened to enough bickering, both from males and females, to know how much disinterest can hurt."

"I know you care! I do not need flowery confessions and declarations! You show it daily. The way you nudged the footstool over when I forgot to put my swollen feet up because I was so caught up in something or other. The way you sniff my tea to find the exact moment to pour the perfect cup. How you look at Victoria and me when I am feeding her - as if we were the most wondrous and precious beings in the world. The way you divert my mother because you know her unsubtle hints make me cringe with embarrassment."

She felt him relax and tilted her head to rest against his shoulder. They sat for a while, watching the incoming waves. Severus threaded his fingers through hers. "I am scared." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"I am too. But I am also thrilled."

He angled his body towards Hermione and tilted her chin up. Their lips came together with a sigh on both sides.

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After some time Severus put a little distance between himself and Hermione. They really should be going back. Holding out a hand to help her up, he quipped, "I do not think I can make love to you in your parents house with Victoria in the same room Silencing Charm or not."

His wife had to laugh. "Ah, yes. My mother would be impossible if she happened upon Victoria in a bassinet in front of our bedroom door. Let's find a hotel with a suite in Chicago."

They went home hand in hand. Monica Granger could not put her finger on what had changed between them but was able to let them go on to Chicago without a heavy heart. Of course a lengthy visit to Britain was decided upon soon.

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Mrs Kacerovsky was surprised when her son Tomas turned up on her doorstep with a couple from England and a baby, but she served them dumplings and borschtsh. She listened with astonishment to their tale. Her most prominent fear was that the little girl, Victoria, was not yet baptized, but it was soon put aside when the baby woke up and looked up at her grandmother with a toothless smile.

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Mr and Mrs Snape had found the perfect suite. And they had the perfect daughter: Victoria decided in Chicago to sleep from midnight to seven in the morning, with a nap after her first feeding. Her parents' love life got a real boost from that.

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Hermione and Severus Snape used their Order of Merlin stipends to start up a researching business and were rather successful in tailoring potions and charms to specific needs. They came to love each other deeply and without reservation.

Simon Lucius Snape was born 18 months after his sister Victoria; the twins Milena and Marcus surprised their parents two years later. The Snape family remained in Bramble Cottage as the house had been in the Potter family before James Potter had given it to the Order as a safe house, and now was Harry Potter's belated wedding gift to the couple. Victoria visited her biological father and grandmother regularly. In Chicago, she learned to play the guitar quite well, but her real passion became cooking. She trained in the Muggle and the wizarding world and would later own a highly successful chain of restaurants.

Simon followed in his parents' footsteps as a researcher and joined their firm as Arithmancy consultant.

Milena and Marcus, to their mother's horror, became highly successful beaters for various Quidditch teams and were instrumental in England's win of the World Championship in 2028.

The End