

Last Wish

by JestersTear

Short Story, finished with three chapters, ranges from the end of GoF until six years after Harry's 7th year.
AU since OotP

No Turning Back

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter One

No Turning Back

A small rain was falling insistently on the sleeping town, oddly filtered through city lights. It was well past three in the morning, and a tall figure made its way unerringly through the maze-like streets, holding a package. As it walked past street after street the setting grew more desolate, until it was seemingly devoid of life. Small buildings were cluttered against each other, most of them condemned. The few that were still inhabitable had steel bars on every window, leaving no question as to what sort of neighbourhood it was. Even that did not deter the figure, who entered one of the condemned buildings without hesitation. It was not its first time here and it was sure that, unlike many of the other buildings, there were no clandestine occupants in this one. Slowly but determinedly, it opened the package and began to change into a sinister garb. As the last piece was put on, a hood that hid its wearer's identity completely, the figure took a flask, gulped its contents and vanished, leaving it behind along with a bundle that were its previous clothes.

The sun was already high in the sky when the figure reappeared inside the building. Its appearance had changed completely; whereas it had once seemed sure and determined, it now wobbled and twisted oddly, like a puppet on a string. With visible effort, it collected the bundle and the empty flask and disappeared once more.

In a backroom inside the Three Broomsticks, Minerva McGonagall awaited patiently. There were dark lines etched even deeper than usual in her face, betraying her concern. Although she normally attempted to maintain a somewhat calmer demeanour, the events of that night had completely destroyed her self control. First it had been Harry Potter, one of her very own Gryffindors, to disappear along with Cedric Diggory, a Hufflepuf boy who showed such promise... The relief of Harry's return had been short-lived, for it had been followed by the realisation of Cedric's untimely demise. Then the shock of discovering that the Alastor Moody in whom she had trusted for nearly an entire school year with the students' lives was none other than a convicted and murderous Death Eater was augmented a thousand fold by his disturbing testimony, given under the influence of one of the strongest batches of Veritaserum Severus Snape had ever produced. Voldemort had returned. At that point she had pushed all other thoughts aside to concern herself exclusively with Harry's well being. When she was feeling slightly safer again, that idiot, Cornelius Fudge, had waltzed into Hogwarts accompanied by nothing less than a Dementor, and it had... it had... She shuddered involuntarily just by evoking the image of the Dementor's Kiss, the knowledge that it was sucking Barty Crouch's very own soul making her stomach turn inside of her. Not only had Fudge effectively destroyed any convincing evidence of Voldemort's return, he had also willingly she was sure of that done so by committing something worse than murder, only to protect his position. She thanked mentally for Albus Dumbledore, without whom she was sure the entire wizarding world, most likely shortly followed by its Muggle counterpart, would plunge into chaos.

And then, just as she believed things couldn't possibly get any worse, Severus had hurried off to what seemed certain death, putting his faith and fate in some ill-devised plan he and Albus had thought of long ago and that was sure to leave him in a very sorry condition if it even worked at all.

Which brought her to her present situation: here she was, at the Three Broomsticks, hoping against hope that Severus would Apparate there as programmed and that she could take him to Hogwarts alive, if not well. She had been waiting for nine and a half hours, too nervous to even doze, and she had no indication whatsoever as to whether he would arrive within the minute, the hour or at all. She took another sip of water, not really thirsty, and once again reinforced the charms on the room: a silencing charm, a privacy charm and a couple of wards thrown in for good measure. Hogsmeade was, after all, a lot fuller than usual, with all of the people who had turned up to watch the Tri Wizard Cup final parents, friends, parents' friends... She couldn't risk anyone wondering in uninvited.

She had just finished placing the last ward when a faint "pop" was heard behind her, followed by a dull thump. Severus Snape dropped to the ground, unconscious but alive.

Having covered the Potions Master with an invisibility cloak, Minerva muttered, "*Mobilicorpus*," to move him. It was going to be a long walk to Hogwarts.

Poppy Pomfrey paced her ward nervously. She had tended to Severus' more obvious wounds and given him a potion for Dreamless Sleep, but as to the after-effects of the Cruciatus, there was nothing she could do. Even in a sleep she knew to be dreamless, the wizard's body still spasmed from time to time. Her helplessness in face of the situation angered her to no end. She didn't know what exactly had gone through the Headmaster's mind for him to have allowed Severus to go despite Voldemort knowing so clearly of his betrayal how could he not know after living in the back of Quirrel's head for so long? After watching time and time again Severus protecting Harry Potter? And, thinking of Harry Potter, she had better put up some wards, lest he discover his Potions master lying wounded in bed after having attended the first Voldemort-presided Death Eater gathering in fourteen years. How Severus had survived was beyond her.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Poppy Pomfrey paced her ward. She was used to having free rein over her patients, and even the Headmaster usually did not interfere with her decisions, so it came as quite a shock that he had allowed Severus out of bed, requested it even. When she had walked in to discover him nearly dressed, claiming he had to report immediately to Albus, she had hoped, if not believed, a simple reprimand would remedy the situation; seeing it didn't, she had asked the Headmaster, being the only person Severus ever obeyed, to talk some sense into him. The grave and saddened look she received in return wasn't the answer she had been looking for. The weight of the world seemed to rest upon the old wizard's shoulders as he had simply stated that Severus did, in fact, need to report immediately; invaluable information could be lost if he didn't. She could only hope it was worth it.

Sitting with his eyes closed on a chair in his office, Albus Dumbledore removed his half-moon spectacles and pinched the bridge of his nose. He felt old, indescribably old, older than even Nicholas Flamel had been. Although Voldemort's return hadn't been completely unexpected, it had been a hard blow, even harder considering it had meant Cedric Diggory's death. At least Severus had returned alive. They had, along with Professor Flitwick, researched a plan that had taken them two years to be conceived and that was Severus' only chance to be accepted by the dark wizard once more: he had helped Flitwick develop a complicated spell that, combined with the potion he and Severus had created, rendered the recipient immune to any truth-inducing methods, including Veritaserum. He was the only one to know both the potion and the spell, since the two other men had refused to be taught each other's component. It was safer that way. Then Severus had gone to the meeting, arriving extremely late, and had tried to convince what used to be Tom Riddle that the only reason he had protected Harry Potter was his belief that the Boy Who Lived would still be an asset to the Dark Lord and hadn't such belief just been proven tonight? Of course, after trying every spell, every potion and every magical trinket that had ever been rumoured to assure a truthful account, Voldemort had resorted to torture. Hogwarts' Headmaster shuddered despite the warmth of the room. What Severus had gone through, he would wish on no man. Seven hours of Cruciatus, a more than severe beating, and he was sure the younger wizard had left out the more gruesome details of his experience for the benefit of his old heart. Not for the first time, Albus Dumbledore wished fervently he was as omnipotent as he was credited to be, to at least be able to protect everyone he needed to.

Severus Snape lay awake in his bedchambers, almost unable to move. He was reliving the gathering, trying to filter out the important bits of information, but his mind kept going back to what he had endured.

Every nerve end on fire, his skin seeming to melt like wax, every bone in his body being broken and healed, over and over, until the very pain was the only thing keeping him sane...

He knew as well as if he had been told that the only reason he wasn't dead was because Voldemort couldn't waste the chance of having a spy in Hogwarts, couldn't risk killing a well-positioned servant which was, by all accounts, still loyal. His only regret was that he had been unable to learn more of the Dark Lord's plans. 'Oh, well,' his mind retorted sarcastically, 'there's always next time.' He would have laughed had he had the energy to do so. In his present condition, however, the best he could manage was a gurgling sound. He didn't believe he would live to see the end of the war, but that didn't bother him overmuch. His last conscious thought was that he had a wish. He wanted something good to happen to him before he died. He didn't know what, exactly, but he wasn't picky. Anything good would do. Then sleep overtook him and he willingly gave himself to it.

Hermione Granger was having a hard time focusing on her studies, which was utterly unlike her. The previous two and a half years had been completely nerve-wracking, but her studies had never suffered from it. Although Voldemort had been the cause of at least another eleven murders, the Ministry was still refusing to acknowledge his return, partly due to the fact that the Dark Lord trod more cautiously these days. He had no doubt understood that, for the time being, ignorance was his best ally. For the time being. She shivered and absently noted she hadn't lit the fire. Without another thought to it, she pointed her wand at the fireplace in her common room and said,

"Incendio."

Yes, even with the aura of fear that enveloped the school, Voldemort had never been sufficiently important to interfere with Hermione's studies. But someone else was. A tall dark man which she had disliked from the start, then grudgingly came to admire and respect, and that she now... and that she now what? What did she feel for him exactly? Care, concern? 'Do you love him?' she asked herself. She had no answer. The only thing that she knew was that he had been, even unknowingly, steadily gaining her trust, and now he refused to leave her thoughts. Especially since the day before. She closed her eyes trying to block that memory.

She had been down to the Potions classroom, after dinner but before curfew, in hopes of finding him there, since he hadn't been at the dinner table. She had a doubt about her upcoming Potions final, and to be perfectly honest, she wanted to see him. In retrospect she wished she hadn't. The door had been slightly ajar, and she had peeked to see what sort of mood he was in. He had been sitting, almost unnaturally still, behind his desk. Then, without warning, his body had been shook by violent spasms, his face a grotesque mask of pain. She had studied enough about the Unforgivables to recognise the aftereffects of prolonged exposure to Cruciatus, and her heart went out to him. So would have the rest of her body, but something stopped her. He was too unguarded, exposed even, and she was sure any offer of help coming from her would have been an unwelcome humiliation to the proud man.

Her mind set, she had left as silently as she could, but what she had witnessed had been playing havoc with her ever since. She knew, because Harry had told both her and Ron in her fourth year that Snape had been a Death Eater and that he had repented and become a spy. Short months after that, Harry had wondered if the Potions master hadn't gone back to spying at Dumbledore's request. Now it would appear so. She made a decision. If fate was kind and they reached the end of the war alive, she would tell him how she felt. It was likely that he couldn't care less, but she felt in her heart she had to tell him. With that thought aside, she was finally able to concentrate on her Transfiguration essay.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, finalist at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and would be saviour of the wizarding world, hid most ignominiously in a bathroom. After Madam Pomfrey had taken blood from him for the millionth time and he used to say Snape was a vampire. Ha! Snape had nothing on Madam Pomfrey! he had been up to see the Headmaster. He had had another of his Voldemort-induced dreams, and he wanted to tell every detail to the old wizard, lest he forgot something important. He knew the password from a previous visit and had strolled up the stairs unannounced, only to stop dead right at the office's door at the sound of his name. Sirius was there, discussing what he now termed "Voldemort termination plans" and how almost everyone he knew and loved would be there, risking their lives everyone but himself, Ron and Hermione. After listening in for almost too long and nearly getting caught, he had rushed past the gargoyle to calm himself. It wouldn't do to reach the common room in his present state. Especially considering he didn't want his friends to suspect anything. He was going to be a model of normality. And then, in the early hours of dawn, he would put on his father's invisibility cloak and sneak to the back of Sirius' motorbike. He'd be damned if he was going to let Sirius take his place.

Severus Snape lay in his bed, awake as he had been three years ago nearly to the day. On the upside, however, he wasn't feeling any pain this time. He wondered if he would die tomorrow. He probably would, given the complexity of the plan he and Albus had set into motion. He had, for the past three years, been lacing everything Voldemort ingested with a potion based primarily on Harry Potter's blood. Poppy had been taking gallons every month from the boy and that, given the suspicions the Dark Lord had, had been no easy task. He suspected he had become the wizard's favourite toy, and there was no question as to his favourite game torture. With any luck, it would all be over tomorrow. One way or another. He didn't know why, exactly, Harry Potter was so big a menace to a wizard whose very name inspired terror in most, but Albus seemed to have no doubt. Their plan would have a much better chance of succeeding though, if they could have the Boy Who Lived himself on the field, but he was still a seventeen year-old boy, and they didn't want him to become the Boy Who Died. So he, Severus Snape, had a chance of being instrumental in Voldemort's defeat and a bigger chance still of dying in the process. He would have to distract the dark wizard just long enough for a Polyjuiced Sirius Black oh, how he hated that the man had turned out to be innocent to get close. Between Harry's fake looks and Harry's real blood, Albus hoped it would do the trick. What trick, Severus couldn't tell.

He became aware he had a growing headache so much for the absence of pain. Strange, really, how he had become so resistant to physical pain and yet a simple headache could still bother him so much. He wished the final exams weren't already marked, so he could have something to do. He finally decided to go down to his classroom. After all, he didn't know if he would live to return to it.

An hour later, Harry Potter had realised that his plans never went exactly as he conceived them. Hermione had noticed something was wrong and had therefore proceeded to thoroughly question him. He had ended up blurting out nearly everything and been only marginally successful at hiding his own intended involvement. He was partly glad to have told her, though. It felt good to share some of the overload of information that had taken up residence in his chest.

Hermione Granger stood decidedly in front of the Potions classroom, praying to whatever God was out there for the nerve to do what she was about to. After what Harry had told her, she couldn't wait until the end of the war. The possibility of Snape's death was too real and immediate for her to risk not telling him. Not being near him, with him. She had to try. There was light coming from beneath the door, so he had to be there. Gathering up the famous Gryffindor courage around her like a cloak, she lifted her hand and knocked.

A Wish Fulfilled

Chapter 2 of 2

Chapter Two A Wish Fulfilled

Severus was sitting quietly on one of the work benches when he heard the knock. He just wished it wasn't Argus with a student; he really didn't have it in him to deal with school rules just before his upcoming demise.

"Enter."

The door was opened and a brown head emerged. "Professor, I..."

There was a short pause and he allowed himself to feel veritable panic. What could Miss Granger, of all people, be doing in his classroom after curfew? Surely it was some sort of emergency. Had the boy-wonder gotten himself killed?

"Yes, Miss Granger?" His voice betrayed nothing.

"I was wondering if I might come in." There. That was an easy way of getting started.

"Come in? Has something happened, Miss Granger?"

"Not happened, no. But I really need to speak to you, Professor."

'Surely it can wait until the morning', he was going to say, and then realised he wouldn't be there in the morning. "And is your head of House unavailable, Miss Granger?"

"It's not about school, it's... it's personal."

For a few seconds he doubted he had heard her correctly. What on Earth could she have to say... "Personal? And what, pray tell, could you possibly have to tell me that is personal?"

"Well, it would be an easier conversation, Professor, if I weren't standing at your doorway."

"Oh, very well, come in, but be quick about it. I truly do not have much time to waste. And neither do you, seeing as you're out past curfew and my decision regarding your possible detention depends entirely on the importance of your personal business with me."

He had infused the word "personal" with so much venom that she was rethinking her decision extremely fast. And then she remembered it might be the last time she saw

him. And she got in, closed the door behind her and blurted "I know what you're going to do tomorrow."

"What?"

"I know what you're going to do tomorrow." She repeated, not so rushedly. "About Voldemort."

He stared at her, his mouth slightly open. "And you are sharing this knowledge with me because?"

The silence stretched impossibly thin as Hermione tried to think of a somewhat safe way to convey her thoughts. In the end, it was the Potions master who broke it.

"Miss Granger, surely you did not come here risking detention only to say that one sentence and stare gaping at me like a fish out of water."

"You might die."

"Thank you ever so much for bringing that particular point to light. I'm sure I would never have come to such a conclusion if not for your brilliant insight. Now, will that be all, Miss Granger?"

She didn't know what possessed her, but one moment she was standing half a classroom away and the next she was in front of him, slapping him hard on the face.

"Why, you egotistical, self-centred BASTARD!"

Touching his own face in amazement, Severus was hard pressed to find something suitable to say. He felt she was so distressed over what, he didn't know that he shouldn't just punish her and send her on her way.

"A mostly correct affirmation, Miss Granger, but if you would be so kind as to tell me what prompted you to make it?"

Her voice was uneven now. "How can you... how can you be so casual about it? Have you no feelings? Can't you be a bit more considerate?"

"You expect me to speak considerately to you about the possibility of my own death?? What is going on, Miss Granger, and why are we even discussing this?"

And she was suddenly kissing him, a deep kiss he found himself responding to. He became fully aware in one painful instant that Hermione Granger was no longer a child. In fact, she was pretty much a woman. By the time he regained his senses, they were both breathless. For the second time in as many minutes, the Potions master didn't know what to say.

Hermione was exhilarated from the kiss. He hadn't rejected her outright, and that lent her the strength to continue.

"I love you." The minute the words were out, she knew them to be true. "I know it doesn't really matter to you, but I needed to tell you before you went. There. Now you have it. The nature of my personal business." A single tear ran down her cheek. "Do try to come back alive."

Severus was dumbfounded. It was too much, too suddenly, to deal with. How could one of the most promising witches Hogwarts had seen in his time stand before him telling him she loved him? And, most of all, how could he fight the growing desire to bring her lips back to his? He had become so proficient at overlooking his own needs that they seemed to be taking vengeance on him. Without even realising it, he touched his fingers to his lips. His tone was soft but stressed, only the tiniest bit embarrassed as he finally spoke.

"Well, Miss Granger, I'm flattered. Although I can't say I know what is expected of me after this revelation."

It was said without malice, though, and she took no offense. It was a much better reaction than she had ever hoped for.

"Nothing. Nothing is expected of you. I always knew it was one-sided, I just didn't want to regret not having told you. You'll probably disagree, but I would rather regret something I did than something I didn't do." She lowered her head and added quietly "Not that I regret anything I did here tonight. I won't bother you anymore. I know it sounds small, but good luck tomorrow."

She turned her back and made to leave. He could let her go and she wouldn't know how much her words had meant to him, how much they had warmed him inside.

If he died tomorrow, she never would. She was only seventeen; how could she love him? Her words replayed themselves in his head. 'I would rather regret something I did than something I didn't do.'

"Miss Granger... Hermione."

She turned, startled and amazed. Her heart fluttered in her chest. He had said her name, and he had said it with tenderness.

"Yes, Professor?"

Not even recognising himself, Severus crossed the short distance between them and held her hands in his.

"Hermione, I truly meant what I said. I am flattered. And although I cannot say I return your feelings, I have little doubt that, given time, it would be very easy for me to do so. If I were someone else, someone younger and less dark, I would take that feeling you so generously offer. You're seventeen, Hermione. You'll have plenty of chances at love, with men far worthier than myself. It is wasted on one such as I. And you are wrong, it does matter to me. In fact it matters more than I ever thought it could. Thank you." His heart contracted painfully. He could see her head drawing closer and simply couldn't turn away. Her words had awoken in him a complete awareness of his loneliness and a tremendous hunger for contact and affection, both of which she seemed so willing to give... Rational thought abandoned him and he got lost in her kiss and in a sea of emotion.

Hermione freed one of her hands only to pull him closer. It mattered to him, her love was important. She had been so prepared to be scorned, to give up, and, after all, it mattered.

They stood there, in the classroom kissing for a very long time, Severus so engrossed in it that he didn't mind to be seen so needy. Not by her, anyway. When they finally broke apart there was something akin to awe in his dark eyes. Hers were filled to the brim with tears.

"Don't you die tomorrow, don't you dare. Don't you dare."

"I'll do my best. If for nothing else than because you asked." He moved a brown curl from her face and smiled sadly. "Now you should get back to your dormitory. It's very late already."

The knowledge that his smile was meant only for her made her bold. She wouldn't let go, she would fight for him. It was fine to give up because she believed herself an annoyance, but not after what he had told her. He found her easy to love. And she somehow knew, with unerring certainty, that he hadn't been lying.

"Do you wish me to go? Not what you think is best what you want. If you say you'd rather spend tonight alone, I'll leave. But I would very much like to be with you tonight."

Her smile seemed so inviting... By the Gods, she was wreaking havoc on his self-control with her naïve offer to stay for the night! She didn't quite grasp the implications an adult male would perceive especially one so needy as himself. And he didn't trust himself enough not to try and seduce her a thought which appalled him. Given her feelings, she would be easy prey.

If only he had chosen differently so many years ago... If only she weren't so young, if only he weren't so old, if only he weren't her teacher, if only, if only, if only. So many 'ifs'. He knew what he should do, he should lie. But he couldn't. There was a young woman in front of him who, until scarce minutes ago, he had regarded as nothing but a child, and an annoying one at that, on the rare occasions he had regarded her at all. Who had never been worthy of more than two minutes of his thoughts, and that only when considered in the Harry Potter frame. And who, he suspected, would refuse to leave them now that she had gained entry. Who, against all odds, loved him.

"I would enjoy your company tonight immensely." He answered, after a long pause. "But it would be unwise. I'll see you in Potions the day after tomorrow." There. That was better.

Her face fell, her shoulders slumped. In the barest of murmurs, she asked, "Is it me?"

He didn't understand the question, and it must have shown on his face because she elaborated with painful clarity.

"Is the thought of taking me to your bed too revolting, Professor?"

He would have blushed had all the blood in his body not decided to relocate itself elsewhere. Here he had been, trying to think of her as naïve, worried he might try to seduce her, and all this time she had been deliberately trying to coax out of him the very reaction he had been suppressing. No, Hermione Granger was in absolutely no way a child. But she was still regrettably his seventeen year-old student. His usually silky voice was hoarse.

"It is definitely not you, Miss Granger." Better, much better. He had reverted to calling her Miss Granger. That should reset the boundaries. "But surely you can appreciate the irony of the situation. Have you not just addressed me as 'Professor'? That alone should make all the reasons I have against accepting your offer apparent. I am not only more than twice your age as I am also your teacher."

Her confidence reasserting itself, Hermione played her last trump. She leaned as if to kiss him on the cheek but moved past it, allowing her lips to brush his ear ever so slightly before whispering, her voice full of promise.

"Would it make it easier for you to make love to me if I called you Severus?"

He shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature in the dungeons. 'I would rather regret something I did than something I didn't do.' With a strangled sound, he knew he was lost. All pretence of restraint gone, he drew her to him in a kiss that spoke louder than words.

"Yes, Severus. Call me Severus."

Only now, that he actually held someone who loved him in his arms, could Severus appreciate how much he had missed it throughout his life. He wanted the night to be as special as it possibly could, for the both of them.

"Not here. Come with me."

Hermione took his hand and followed, but it wouldn't have mattered had he been leading her to the broom cupboard. As it turned out, it was his quarters that he took her to, saying a password that didn't even register in her mind. The Potions master lit the fire, lending a welcoming atmosphere to the bedroom. Although he struggled not to show it, he was extremely nervous.

She helped him out of his robe, then unbuttoned his shirt. When she saw his naked torso, though, her hand flew to her mouth to half-suppress a gasp and tears came to her eyes once more. His body was a study of pain, so filled with vicious scars it was hard to tell if he still had any unblemished flesh left. She knew that, for a wizard to have that many, it was necessary that whoever had given them had meant to. Magic could heal almost anything and, when it came to scars, there was only two types that it couldn't: the rarest one, Harry's, had happened when there was an unexpected surge of evil power aimed at him that had gone wrong; the second type, the one she was sure she was now seeing, was linked to a curse conceived specifically to prevent any magical attempt of removing them. A cruel curse, designed for the sole purpose of ensuring the victim would never forget whatever punishment had been inflicted. There was no known counter-curse.

Misinterpreting her reaction, Severus closed his eyes in shame. He had been so engulfed in tonight's events that he had forgotten... how could he have forgotten? It served him right. If he hadn't been so weak, if he had sent her away, he wouldn't have had to deal with her disgusted reaction. He had known ever since the week after his 'return' to Voldemort that he wasn't to be seen. Resorting to his familiar method of defense, his voice was ice cold, his eyes still closed shut.

"I trust you can find your way back to your dormitory Miss Granger."

Now that she had been near an ungarded Severus, even if only for a little while, Hermione could see through his façade. In his vocabulary coldness was another term for pain. She placed her arms around him and tried to kiss him, but he turned her away.

"I do not need pity, Miss Granger, now GO!"

"It's not pity! Please, it's not pity, don't send me away. I want to be with you because I love you, not because I pity you. I know what it must have seemed like, but it isn't like that, please. Let me stay with you tonight." She had stopped being able to control her tears and was speaking extremely fast, anything to keep him from telling her to go. Especially when she was sure it would destroy him to think someone who had claimed to love him had been relieved to leave his presence. Especially on a night such as this.

He opened his eyes to look at hers. She seemed so honest... but how could he be sure it wasn't that damned Gryffindor nobility preventing her from walking away? He sounded more human this time, less cold.

"Hermione, I will be alright if you go. There is no need for you to..." And she started gently kissing his shoulders, his back, his chest and he knew he was undone. He closed his eyes once more, this time to better be able to feel. She was kissing parts of him that he would have sworn up to that instant were capable of feeling nothing but pain. Then her lips came up to meet his and her arms enfolded him, reassuring.

"You're the only one I want to be with. I'm sorry if I made you think differently, I just never thought... It had never really hit me what you must have gone through. It makes me love you no less."

"I will put the shirt back on, to make you more comfortable," he said, matter-of-factly, picking it up.

Her heart shattered into a million pieces. His suffering ran so much deeper than what his body showed, to the point where he seemed to think himself repulsive... where it seemed only natural to him others would as well.

"Don't even dare." He couldn't hide the surprise in his eyes. "I want you completely, not by half. The whole of you."

There was a pool of emotion forming in his throat. He had taken her protestations of love as no more than a teenage fancy, an adolescent view of love at best. He let the shirt drop.

"You are the most amazing... you are wonderful, Hermione."

"Make love to me. Show me how."

"Show you... Hermione, have you never..?"

"No, I haven't."

"We can't." His tone was final, desperate. It was one thing to accept an offer to spend a one-night stand with a beautiful willing young woman, but quite another to take her virginity.

Hermione felt a wave of panic wash over her. He could die tomorrow and she would have missed her last opportunity to be with him. "Why? You said I could stay."

"I'm not sending you away. We can talk, you can sleep here if you want, but not that. You cannot give me that, Hermione, it's too precious. Too precious for me. You would regret it later. Save it for someone who can make you promises of love and starlit nights. Even if I loved you I could never be like that."

"I don't care for starlit nights any more than you do. The only thing I know is that I love you and that I want it to be with you." Her voice changed, acquired a mischievous tone and she smiled. "So, please, Professor, teach me."

The first rays of sunlight found Severus still awake. Hermione had fallen asleep not more than twenty minutes ago, cuddled up along his body like she had been made to fit there. It had been the single most rewarding night of his life. Making love to her... feeling her body shudder with pleasure and having the disconcerting sensation that it was all his doing... And, almost in the end, realising that, regardless of what he had told her, he did love her. And then talking all night, revelling in the feeling of having found a soul that was kindred to his own, the same desire to know, the eagerness to learn. He felt his eyes wet with unshed tears. It was time to go and, for the first time, it was important for him to make it through alive. Dark and old he might be but, if she did love him, nothing would keep him from her. Particularly because, if he did come back, then Voldemort would have been defeated and that shadow would have stopped looming over him. He would be free.

He tried to disentangle himself from her without waking her, but she opened her eyes.

"Severus?"

"It's time. I have to go."

"Please be careful."

"I will."

A few minutes later he emerged from the bathroom fully dressed. Hermione's expression was anxious.

"I need you to know something."

"What is it?"

"Last night... I knew what I was getting myself into, I knew the terms. And I don't regret it, it was worth every second. I just thought you should know that I know where my place is. I won't bother you when you come back."

Before she could say another word she was in his arms being thoroughly kissed.

"No, you don't. You don't know a thing. You don't know a thing, love. If I come back, if you still persist on this foolishness of loving, of all people, me, I will do my best to please you. Because I love you too, I didn't know it before, but I love you. I had never thought I could feel... this. I will be yours for as long as you'll have me."

Placing a last kiss on her disbelieving lips, he was out of the door as quickly as he had come to her.

Amazing how little the Potions classroom had changed in two and a half years of being led by a different person, Hermione mused. Maybe it was because she liked to think Severus would be coming back to take over it again. The same reason why she hadn't accepted being Potions teacher and insisted on using the prefix 'temp' with that title. He would come back one day to take back what was his. Hopefully that would include her. So she was a 'substitute', a 'temporary', not bearing the thought that his shoes would be permanently filled. They had never found the body, so he had to be alive, right? Even if Sirius did have reported that he had seen Voldemort hitting Severus with a green light from his wand, the final act of evil from a petty being. A body would have given her some closure, but there was no body. The plan had worked, everyone had come back safely... everyone but Severus. But, she stubbornly insisted, the Killing Curse had never been known to evaporate the body: it could not have been Avada Kedavra. It could not. For the sake of her sanity, it could not.