

New Beginning... A Chance for Love

by ShilohDarke

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Chapter 1 of 7

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This is my first attempt at doing a fanfic. I do hope it is something that can be enjoyed.

I bow to JKR. She is the Queen. I am merely a fan. No money, no copyright... just sharing in something fun...

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### Chapter 1

Five years had passed since the day that had changed all of their lives. For Albus Dumbledore it had been a long five years, an eternity which had aged him more than he would have ever thought possible. He had been old, certainly, but now he felt brittle and somehow robbed of the vital spark he had owned before. To those most deeply affected by the war, the last five years had been a harsh and cruel lifetime.

Ron and Harry, both brilliant wizards in their own right, had succumbed in the final battle with Voldemort. Hermione, who had become engaged to Ron the year before the war, had loved the flame-haired young man more than Albus had believed one so young could love another. Doubtless, they had expected to live a long, happy life together.

When He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had attacked, it had been sudden and with a preternatural violence previously unknown in the wizarding world. Albus remembered how Hermione, normally an uncannily capable witch, had watched helplessly as her best friend and her future husband were both killed.

It was possible she blamed herself for not being able to do something to prevent the mayhem and devastation wrought on them by the Dark Lord, yet in the final analysis, none of them had been prepared for the onslaught which had engulfed them. Dumbledore knew how deeply she had mourned. He had tried to console her; all of those at Hogwarts had tried to help her cope with her pain.

Their best, however, had not been enough to mend the damage. Those scars left unseen in the heart are seldom healed and never forgotten. Inconsolable, the beautiful

young witch had turned from the wizarding world. Albus recollected with regret how she had sworn never to use magic again. In her pain, she had fled Hogwarts. She ran so far in fact, that she left Britain altogether and went to America.

Now she owned a ranch in the southern state of Texas, where she searched for a different life in a valiant attempt to leave her memories behind. She had turned to raising horses and mixing herbal remedies for her neighbors. She had buried her wand in her backyard, out of sight and seemingly forgotten, though Albus feared she was deluding herself. Hermione would never find peace by hiding from her feelings; it was not in her character.

Dumbledore knew she had built a thick, protective cocoon around herself, a gossamer cushion against the world where she thought she would not be touched by the magical way of life again. Part of him hated to intrude on the safe, secure life she had built, but as he thought over his plans, he knew it was time for her to return. She had given too much time to running away. Now it was time for her to put those aches aside and to find herself. He wasn't, however, fooling himself into thinking it would be an easy thing to do.

He considered long and hard who he should send to retrieve her. McGonagall? No, she would dissolve in sympathy the first time Hermione broke into tears. Lupin? No. He wouldn't be able to convince her to return by offering her chocolates. Finally, with his decision made, Albus wrote on parchment and handed it to his trusted companion, Fawkes. The brilliant phoenix took off immediately as Albus sat back in his chair and waited.

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Severus Snape answered Dumbledore's summons with the characteristic scowl, which had become his trademark. "I hope this is important," he sighed.

Albus turned to him. "Indeed it is, my friend. Come," he said as he gestured to the chair before his desk, "have a seat. We must talk."

Severus smirked, but seated himself across from Albus. He waited quietly for the headmaster to tell him why he had been summoned. A new year was beginning at Hogwarts. In less than a month, students would be arriving. As far as Severus knew, he would be teaching two classes this semester, since a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had still not been found. He had preparations to make and he didn't appreciate being sidetracked, even by the headmaster.

Albus seemed to recognize Snape's turn of thoughts. "I have found the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he announced, then paused, adding, "I hope."

Severus cocked his head in response. "What do you mean, you hope?" he asked. It always gave him pause when Dumbledore chose to be vague. "Do we have a replacement, or do we not?"

Albus was silent for a moment before he replied, "I believe we do, but as of yet, I still do not know if the young witch will accept. She has turned away from magic, I am afraid."

Severus raised an eyebrow before expressing his astonishment. He said, "She has turned from magic? You mean to tell me, your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is living as a Muggle?" The very idea was repulsive to him. His jaw tensed at the thought. "What manner of witch would turn her back on magic?"

Albus watched Severus closely. "Hermione Granger," he said softly. His eyes held Severus' as the younger wizard considered what he said.

Snape opened his mouth, searched for words, but none came. He found himself completely speechless. His disgust forgotten, he thought of all the pain the young Gryffindor had endured after graduation. So much had been taken from her, Severus could not find it within himself to blame her for turning from the world of magic. It was not as if this world had given her anything. He found his own emotions in conflict. The darker half of his personality screamed to leave her alone. She had chosen this course of action herself, and in that sense, she deserved what she got. But the sensitive side of him that he kept hidden from so many reminded him what a fantastic, brilliant student she had been and whispered, do you wish her to never move past her pain?

He lowered his head, staring at the floor. Letting Albus see his eyes would mean displaying to the headmaster the emotions boiling within him, he thought. After a moment, if a bit reluctantly, he asked, "What would you have me do?"

Albus reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment. "This is where she is," he said softly. "I trust you can find a way to her. Floo powder and perhaps a distance spell? It shall take some convincing on your part to get her to return. You will have to be careful of her feelings, and try to remember all the girl has gone through."

Nodding, Severus stood and started to leave.

"And Severus?" Severus paused, looking back at Dumbledore. The old wizard spoke even more softly as he said, "Try to be nice."

Severus stared at Albus, aghast. The man was insane. Nice? How in the bloody hell was he supposed to be nice? Straightening his shoulders, he glared at the headmaster for a moment before asking, "Where exactly is she, again?"

Albus gestured to the piece of parchment in the younger wizard's hands. When Severus looked at the writing scribbled on the page, he shook his head and stood in silence for a few moments before looking again at Albus. He respected the headmaster's judgment, but this was not an assignment he was looking forward to performing. Once again, his jaw tensed visibly.

"Texas?" He asked loathsomely, rolling the word over his tongue before turning his eyes from the headmaster. "She went to America?"

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Hermione had spent a long day working. She had fed her horses and let them out into the pasture before she mucked out their stalls and gave them fresh water. She had worked the animals, exercising and riding, then brushing each of them down in turn. In fact, it was well into the evening hours before she finally returned them to their stalls and fed them once again. Having done all the chores she set for herself, she wearily headed for the two-story ranch house where she went to the library and selected a book on Native American magic and its uses. Although she refused herself the expression of her magical abilities, she still had the same old insatiable interest to learn about any and all aspects of the subject.

She moved absently from the library and through the kitchen toward the living room, having grabbed an apple from the bowl on the kitchen counter, then seated herself in a large leather recliner and opened the book to the last page she had read, ate the apple and read on. The house was quiet, she thought after a time. Actually, after considering it more closely, she realized it altogether too quiet unnaturally so. She felt a vague moment of unease as the idea of unexpected company suddenly hit her.

Looking around the room, searching for any sign that there might be a wizard infiltrating her home, she tried to still the sudden tension she felt. Seeing nothing out of place, she let her eyes move unwillingly to the fireplace. Even as she looked, she could see the dust beginning to stir in the Floo. "Oh, no," she sighed dismally. Her voice was small and sounded miserable. The ensuing loud popping noise confirmed her fears. This was the last thing she wanted, but she somehow knew it was inevitable. Her past would return to claim her. Was today the day?

Gradually, she saw a bent form, clad in black and covered with soot, crawling uncomfortably out of the small fireplace. She shook her head, wishing she could awaken from what was most certainly turning into a nightmare. Severus Snape, the professor she had most tried to impress as a student, the same man that she had a secret crush on her last two years at Hogwarts, was standing before her. He had been the only man, besides Ron, that she had ever wanted to kiss. This was the man she had sworn to herself to forget about when she made her decision to leave Hogwarts forever. She closed her eyes, willing him to be a figment of her imagination, expelling a sigh of defeat when she reopened them to see him still standing in her living room.

Gaining his feet, Severus stood at his full height and pointed grimly with one finger toward the fireplace. "That," he said with a sweeping gesture, "is not a decent entryway!" He stared at it for a moment before adding, "It is entirely too small!"

Hermione looked at him, and couldn't help the look of contempt that crossed her features. "Unlike the ancient chimneys of Europe, it is not meant for travel by Floo powder!"

she retorted, tossing her book on the coffee table as she stood, facing him squarely, her hands on her hips. "Why are you here?"

Severus noticed her defensive stance. He admired her brooding beauty, even as he straightened his own shoulders and delivered his message. "I, Miss Granger," he said softly, "have come to take you back with me to Hogwarts at the headmaster's request."

For a moment, Hermione could only stare at Snape, an expression of horror on her face. Slowly, as the meaning of his words sunk in, she shook her head emphatically. "You must be joking," she said, her voice cracking on the words. "I can never go back; not to that life!"

"Please cease your incessant whining," Snape snapped before he could catch himself. For a moment he stood silently as he repeated the mental personal mantra he had begun to practice to refrain from snapping at people for no reason. I can be polite. I am not showing weakness by being kind. I am not losing myself by being considerate of another person's feelings. Sighing, he tried again in a softer voice. "Hermione, this is not where you are supposed to be. This is not what you were meant to become."

Swallowing the lump that had wedged itself in her throat, she edged toward the fireplace. "I am sorry to have wasted your time," she said softly and as unemotionally as she could manage before turning to meet his gaze. "Please give Professor Dumbledore my regrets."

Severus moved to stand a hair's breadth from her, searching her eyes. Finally, he shook himself out of his momentary enchantment and said, "I will do no such thing. You do not belong here." His voice was firm, determined. There was an air of menace to it, however, she thought as he stood mere inches from her. "You will come back with me," he said with a grimace, "or I shall be forced to remain here with you until I can convince you to come." His nose seemed to twitch as he took in the appearance of the cozy, but small living room.

The idea of his being in the same house with her for an undetermined amount of time was appalling, yet her own determination not to leave the place she had made her home for nearly five years now made her raise a defiant eyebrow. She replied softly, "Well then, I suppose you should search out the spare bedroom; it's getting late. I get up to take care of my horses at six a.m." Her eyes boldly met and held his gaze. "If you are going to stay, then I will expect you to earn your keep." A slight smile played on her lips as she added, "By helping." Turning, she made her way from the room, leaving him staring slack-jawed after her.

Unable to resist a parting shot, she looked back over her shoulder and called, "Are you familiar with how to muck out the stalls?" She snickered slightly at the idea of Severus Snape trying to muck out a horse stall. It was absurd. She'd have him fleeing back to Hogwarts and Dumbledore, claiming she was a maniac. She told herself she wouldn't mind being reported a raving lunatic; it would be worth it if they would leave her in peace.

Snape watched after her for a moment. He opened his mouth to voice an angry retort, but caught himself when Dumbledore's admonishing voice rang out in his head. Be nice, he had said. Once again, Severus' mantra repeated itself in his head and he made himself breathe deeply and relax his tight shoulders. Instead, he turned his attention to her beauty. He felt both vexed and intrigued by her appearance as well as her attitude. Instead of the wild mane of hair she had once had, the chestnut brown curls fell in soft tresses, past her waist and almost to her hips. She wore it braided on both sides, and pulled back so as to keep the hair from her face.

He raised one eyebrow as he watched her glide down the hall. Her hips swayed gently with each step, drawing his eyes to center on the faded blue jeans that hugged her hips. Her blouse was snug, and stopped right before they met her jeans. Severus tilted his head as he watched her walk farther and farther from him. This was not the Hermione he remembered. The girl he remembered was not so enchanting. Unable to stop himself, he followed her.

He caught up with her just as she entered the doorway of her bedroom. Her chocolate eyes narrowed at the puzzled look on his face. "Good night, Professor," she said softly before closing the door in his face, giving him no opportunity to reply

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Hermione leaned heavily against the door, staring into the dimly lit bedroom. She felt an unbidden shiver of excitement run through her. Severus was here, in her home. She had longed to see him. It shocked her to admit it, even to herself, but it was true. There had been so many nights she had lain awake crying, so many nights she had wished he would come, kiss the tears from her eyes and tell her he was taking her back where she belonged. Severus had been through so much pain in his own life; she could believe he knew the depth of her own sorrow. She had even thought she might have stayed and not turned her back on magic, if he had only reached out to her. He might be the only man alive who could still the pain that still burned deep inside her at losing Ron.

It had been a useless wish, she thought, even as she had let her mind dwell on it. Professor Snape did not share his own pain with anyone, much less offer to listen to anyone else's. She frowned at her musings, moved farther into her room and began to undress. Her muscles were sore, achy. She left her clothes in a heap by the dresser and walked into the loo, or as they called it in America, the bathroom. She turned on the water and waited for it to warm. With a wave of her hand, she lit six candles, and floated them to the corners around the tub. Crushing some lilac petals, she dropped them into the water. Turning off the light, she sank deep into the oversize tub. Savoring the aroma, she closed her eyes and laid her head on the back of the tub.

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Severus leaned his head against the door she had closed in his face. This had to be the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He was ashamed of his harsh nature. He had wanted to reach out to her when Potter and Weasley had died. He had wanted to be there for her to confide in, but it had been his own self-imposed harshness of nature that had kept him from offering support to her. In addition, he had felt inadequate to be her confidant. He didn't know how, did he? He had never been an approachable person with whom others could share their emotional pain. He was just now, years after the final battle, learning that showing fears and emotions did not mean a person was weak.

He had never cared if he hurt anyone's feelings before, had never wanted to counsel anyone who was in pain. In fact, he'd loathed any display of emotion, seeing it as a sign of weakness. He had never given himself over to it at least, that was the way he had viewed himself. Now, however, he had begun to realize denying one's emotions didn't make one stronger or better than those who expressed and experienced their feelings. Now he found himself wanting to have been there for her, for the pale beauty who had been so crushed by the untimely deaths of her loved ones and her own dreams and plans for the future. He had ached to go to her and lend her his ear. He would have, if he had not felt so completely unfit to offer her what she needed.

He stared at the door, wanting so badly to lend her that ear now. Suddenly, he knew he could not let her dismiss him so easily. They had unfinished business. She had to at least go to Hogwarts and talk to Dumbledore. Taking hold of the doorknob he found the door surprisingly unlocked and walked into the room. He noted the discarded clothes and moved into the adjoining room only to find himself staring at her naked form in the bath. The water covered most of her body, but her nipples stuck out over the water. He found himself staring, speechless. She had been once only a girl, but now was so obviously a woman. Get out of here you perverted old fool! What on earth are you thinking, he thought. Even as his inner voice demanded he leave the room now, his body didn't listen to his mind. Instead, he moved forward and dropped to his knees beside the tub.

She didn't seem to notice he was there as she reclined in the tub, eyes closed in relaxation. He could not help but stare at the beauty of her soft, tanned face. To his complete horror he saw himself reaching out and touching her cheek softly with the palm of his hand. Merlin, you idiot, what is wrong with you? He chastised himself even though he knew he could not help himself.

Hermione's eyes flew open, a surprised gasp escaping her at the sight of him. Sitting up, she grabbed for a washcloth and hunched herself so her damp hair covered the upper part of her body. "What in the bloody hell do you think you are doing?" she hissed. Fury edged her voice, and he couldn't blame her for it.

His voice was quiet, controlled as he spoke to her. "I am deeply sorry, Hermione, for not knowing how to be there for you," he offered softly. His eyes never left her face.

Her fury melted as the tears came to her eyes. "It is over now, Prof "

"Call me Severus," he interrupted quickly. "I am no longer your teacher."

She didn't know how to respond. "Go back to the living room, Severus. I will join you there after I have finished my bath," she managed to say, remembering the forced

formality her relationship with Snape had always demanded.

A moment of silence followed as they simply stared at one another. "Promise me?" he asked softly when he found his voice.

Nodding, she leaned away from him. "I do realize we have much to talk about, but it will have to wait until I am done here and am appropriately attired." she said, feigning a dignity she did not feel under the circumstances.

He stood then and with a fleeting glance at her, turned and made his way back to the first room he had seen upon his arrival. Sitting down on the seat closest to the fireplace, he waited quietly. With no noise in the room, he was forced to listen to the sound of his own heart as it pounded wildly in his chest.

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When Hermione had dried herself and collected her thoughts, she slipped into a terrycloth bathrobe and tied it. Moving down the hall to where Severus waited, she sat in the chair across from him. She simply sat for a moment, considering what to say to him. What he was asking of her was something she was unsure she had the power to do. His dark, fathomless eyes met and held hers. For a long moment, she had to fight the urge to look away. Finally, she shook her head and said softly, "Severus, it has been too long. Too much has happened. Perhaps once I belonged at Hogwarts, but now, I have a new life, one I feel is much better suited to me." She listened to the words as they poured forth from her mouth, thinking they sounded contrived and all wrong, even as she said them with such conviction.

Severus cut her off with his silky, yet malevolent voice. "How can you believe yourself suited to a life devoid of magic?" he asked, leaning forward and capturing her gaze once more. His voice was barely above a whisper, yet it spoke volumes. "Hermione," he continued, "your own parents were Muggles; yet they recognized your potential. They encouraged you to become the best witch you could be." He tightened his jaw and clenched his fists in exasperation. "What would they think? How would they feel to know you had turned your back on everything you had learned, on everything you had struggled to become?"

Hermione fingered the hem of her robe, her eyes downcast as she sat without responding to him. When she finally spoke, it was in a voice filled with pain. "They don't know; they died too. The higher powers saw reason to take even them away from me. For all my magic, I could not save them any of them not Harry, not Ron none of them. Harry and Ron died killing Voldemort, but even that didn't save my parents. They were attacked the next day by renegade Death Eaters." Her voice broke on a sob. "All my wasted talent didn't help protect anyone when I was faithfully using it, did it?"

She stood, tears streaming down her cheeks. Still, she did not meet his gaze. "I am hollow, Severus. I have lost everyone that was ever dear to me. I have nothing left inside me to give the wizarding world." Her voice broke on the last word. "I am sorry, but you have wasted your time." Turning, she made her way back to her room.

Severus was left standing there staring after her. Once again, he was repeating his mantra to himself, furious that this was proving so difficult. "Damn you, Albus," he swore under his breath.

Once inside the safety of her bedroom, she closed and locked the door this time. Moving to her bed, she collapsed on it and let the grief wash over her. She could never go back. Her heart knew that; why couldn't Severus understand it as well?

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## Care of Horses

### Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione Shows Severus how to care for horses. Rating is for later chapters.

I hope that everyone is liking my story. I know that at times this Severus seems a bit softer than the person he is while he is a Spy, but I do imagine that he would be a little softer when Voldemort would no longer be a threat.

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Chapter Two

The next morning, Severus found himself awakened by the sound of a crowing rooster. Afraid Hermione would try to sneak out unnoticed, he had chosen to stay in the living room and sleep on her couch. Raising up, he looked at the clock on the mantle. Six o'clock in the morning.

"Bloody beaked bird," he mumbled sleepily to himself before lying back down. With a sigh he closed his eyes. The time change between continents had wreaked havoc on his system. He had not been able to sleep for most of the night. Now, when his body was finally ready to rest, this side of the world was waking up. Surely there were a few more hours before he would have to once again resume his battle with Hermione.

Almost as if summoned by his thoughts, she walked into the living room. She was fully dressed, once again in a pair of blue jeans and a tight fitting t-shirt. He stared at her for a moment as his imagination reminded him of what he had caught a glimpse of the night before when she lay in the tub. The material stretched across her chest in a way that made his mouth go dry. Gods, I am going insane! Bloody, damn pervert! he thought to himself.

What is wrong with me? he asked himself silently. She was a student, for MERLIN'S sake! But even as the thought touched his mind, his groin tightened as he watched her sit to pull on her boots and then stand, glancing at him, before grabbing her cowboy hat off of the hook on the wall. She placed the odd hat on her head and walked out the door.

In a flash he was up and speaking a hurried refreshing spell with a sweep of his wand. The wrinkles on the fabric of his robes fell away as he moved to follow her. "Miss Granger," he said, "I can scarcely believe you are being so stubborn." He followed her as she walked with purpose toward the stables, her pace brisk and full of an energy Severus found thoroughly disgusting as he dashed along behind her. How could anyone as fragile and small possibly dart about as rapidly as she?

He stopped for a moment to listen to the horses calling for her, aware of her presence. She chuckled at the look on his face. "Whatever do you mean, Professor Snape?" she asked, mimicking his renewed formality. She hadn't missed his calling her Miss Granger this morning when it had been Hermione last night. Was it his conscience, she wondered, ashamed for having followed her into her bath? "I was under the impression you were the one being stubborn," she said with a shrug before turning to continue on her way. "They are hungry, and I need to go feed them. So, if you will excuse me."

He trailed along behind her with a persistence that surprised even him. "Actually, no, I will not excuse you," he said, so busy watching her backside as he walked behind her that he failed to notice where he was stepping. "You really must come with me, and you must come now. Oh my God; what is this?" he gasped in disgust as he stepped in something that squished beneath his foot. His surprised question was accompanied by the sound of his foot coming down on a particularly soft clump of

something much less than solid.

Hermione had to bite her bottom lip to keep from laughing as she asked, "Did I mention you need to watch your step?" Turning, she faced him, a smile on her face. Despite his revolt at stepping in the droppings of one of her horses, he found himself staring at the beauty of that smile. He felt the stirring of a desire he had long since put away when she was in her seventh year at Hogwarts.

"I fail to see the humor in this situation," he said wryly. His voice was deep and warm, seeming to caress her skin as she stood staring at him.

This isn't the Snape I remember, she thought to herself, puzzled. His whole manner was different. He almost seemed what was it? Gentle? Unsure of himself? Hermione found herself at a loss for words as they simply looked at each other for a moment. Finally, she said softly, "I could use some help; if you want, we can talk while we feed them." She gestured toward the horses, headed once more toward the stalls.

A faint look of distaste crossed his features. He looked at the stables with a mixture of disdain and dread and said, "Really, I suddenly almost wish Albus had sent Hagrid to fetch you." He produced his wand from inside his robe and waved it over his shoe. "Purificus Immediante." He spoke the spell softly and sighed with relief when all signs of the horse feces disappeared.

Turning from him, she continued walking to the stables. When she reached the first stall, a horse, a massive beast which stood almost twenty hands high, stepped out of the darkness. His color was indistinguishable in the near-darkness of the early morning, but Severus thought he might be ebony. Hermione reached her hand out to him when he stuck his head over the gate to greet her.

Speaking softly to him, she felt the wizard come to stand behind her. She turned and smiled. "Severus," she said softly to the horse, "meet the man after whom I named you." As it sunk in what she had said, the wizard turned to look anew at the horse. He was black, with the exception of his mane and tail, which provided a striking contrast of silky white mane against the dark shiny neck.

The horse regarded the man with a look Severus thought akin to indifference. He was much more interested in nuzzling Hermione's shoulder. Snape visibly trembled at Hermione's introduction as he asked pointedly, "You gave that horse my name?" He clenched his jaw and his fists and very nearly stomped his foot at the very idea.

The mantra went off in his head like fireworks as he fought to gain control of his temper. This was beyond outrageous. It was ludicrous! Opening his mouth he started to retort, then closed it again and bit down hard on his tongue. This was not something that could be wiped away with a silly mantra. No peaceful, serene saying was going to undo this insult. He felt the blood rush to his head as he counted to ten five times.

Hermione smiled, seemingly unaware of the ire she had provoked in the wizard and continued, "He is as dark in color as you are in personality." She smiled and patted the horse with genuine, stirring affection. Severus felt his anger decrease some at her words. She was showing the horse an affection he himself had often wished could be his, in secret, of course. He supposed in an odd sort of way, she was giving him a compliment.

"You are not the only one I named a horse after," she said and nodded to the Clydesdale in the next pen. "That one is Hagrid."

Severus smirked, not amused. "And where, pray tell, is Weasley?" he asked, his voice low and full of venom. He felt immediately ashamed of his brashness, however, when the look she gave him was filled with pain. Greasy bastard, he chastised himself. That was uncalled for. Now she is going to be that much harder to convince.

His voice softened then and he continued, "Hermione, if you missed us, why did you not simply come home?" Without answering him, Hermione turned to begin gathering up alfalfa and oats to feed to each horse. Her movements were stiff and artificial, and he felt she was angry enough that if he were to push her for answers, she would show him her temper.

He buttoned his lip then and busied himself watching her and the seven horses she attended. They were all male and huge, magnificent beasts at that. She called each of them by name, although there were no others named for anyone at Hogwarts. He observed the affection she showed each animal. She was as diligent in the work she did in the stables as she had been as a student in his class. Only one thing was missing the bright happiness which had once shone in her eyes at Hogwarts was no longer there.

While the other horses were big, Severus and Hagrid were the two largest and the wizard had to admit they were amazing creatures. She saddled and rode each horse in turn, except those two. After she had finished with the others, the horse Severus seemed to know it was his turn to have time with his mistress. Moving with a slow grace to stand beside her, he then amazed Snape by lowering himself gracefully to the ground so she could climb onto his back. He sat patiently and waited while she clipped a set of reins to his halter and then mounted him bareback.

Severus found himself amazed. He watched, slack-jawed, as she rode the black and white equine. The unspoken communication between the two was a form of magic all its own. He found himself not only admiring Hermione, but her talent as well. When she dismounted and began brushing and putting each animal back into their stalls, Severus could not help but ask, "But, why did you not ride Hagrid as well?"

Hermione turned and looked at the great beast which was peacefully grazing and seemed perfectly content where he was. "Hagrid is a horse I rescued," she said softly. "He is very affectionate and a wonderful companion to walk with, but he was injured by the thoughtless brutality of his previous owners." She gestured at his back left foot, which he held at an odd angle. "He is lame, and cannot be ridden anymore."

Severus looked from her back to the large horse. "Then what purpose does he serve? Shouldn't you just kill the animal and put him out of his misery?" he asked, not realizing the pain his words had caused until he looked back at her and saw the tears sparkling in her eyes.

"He is a kind and gentle horse. He would come stay by my side and guard over me the best he could to protect me from danger," she said as she shook her head. "It is not his fault life has been so cruel to him. He didn't choose the life he has been forced to lead; it chose him." A sad look came into her eyes when she looked back at Severus. "I did not agree to have everyone I loved torn from me," she continued softly. "I only want to live my life free from any more pain." Sighing, she moved to lead the huge horse to his stall. "In many ways, he is much like me."

Standing back, Severus considered her words. He didn't miss the hint she had given him. She felt as if she had been abused by the magical community and for that reason, she forbid herself the things he knew she still loved.

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Much later that evening, after she had completed her arduous tasks of the day, he watched her as she wordlessly went into the house and straight to her room. He had started to go confront her once more, but had stopped when he heard the water running. He had noticed she had eaten nothing during the entire day.

Moving back through the house, he went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Appalled by the lack of contents, he quickly searched for something he could use. Examining the contents more closely, he found what he needed to make a decent salad. As he began to prepare it, he hoped it would be something she would like.

He was so involved with the making of a meal for the two of them that he did not notice her return or see the shocked expression on her face upon seeing him in her kitchen, preparing a meal that was better than anything she usually did. By the time he finished, the dinner table was set with two plates, two wine glasses and there was a huge chef salad with sauteed chicken, fresh tomatoes, greens and purple onions waiting to be eaten.

Grabbing a bottle of red wine, Severus drew up short as he saw her standing in the dining room, wearing an overly long, oversized t-shirt. For a moment, he couldn't find his voice as he simply stared at her. Then, he said, almost defensively, "You haven't eaten. If I were to go back and tell Albus how thin you have become, he'd come and whisk you back to Hogwarts himself!"

Looking from Severus to the dinner table, Hermione moved to sit in one of the chairs, her eyes taking in the rather delicious looking meal he had prepared for them to share. When she again met his gaze, she said softly, "Thank you. It looks delicious."

He nodded and poured her the first glass of wine, then moved to take his own seat. Even though he kept reminding himself to stop staring, he couldn't. She had changed in so many ways, but she was still the same. She never noticed, but he never took his eyes off her as they enjoyed their meal.

After she had eaten, she looked at him, a sad smile on her face. "I had no idea you knew how to cook," she observed softly.

Severus shook his head and attempted a smile, which always looked and felt more to him like a sneer. "I am a bachelor, Hermione. I don't always stay at Hogwarts," he replied. "Besides, preparing a meal is a lot like brewing potions; it's all in how you combine the ingredients."

Taken aback, she said, "I had assumed there were house elves in your family home. Wouldn't they prepare your meals?" Although she didn't like the use of house elves, she knew they chose to live as they did, serving wizards.

Snape shook his head and said grimly, "I do not spend much of my time at the Manor." He looked away from her. "Too many unpleasant memories."

Hermione's shoulders slumped as she considered what he said. Of course, she knew that he had his own set of painful memories. Having a Death Eater for a father could not have been a pleasant thing to grow up with, not to mention watching his own elderly mother murdered by Lucius Malfoy before his eyes when the time of the final battle was at hand. Lowering her gaze, she whispered, "I am sorry. It was thoughtless of me not to take your own pain into account." She sighed heavily. "I know why Dumbledore sent you. He knew that you, of all people, could understand my pain." Standing, she moved to start clearing the dishes.

Severus watched as she used the Muggle way to begin cleaning them. Shaking his head, he moved to stand beside her and asked, "Don't you ever just want to use our ways to take care of," he gestured to their surroundings, "all this?"

Forcing a smile, Hermione nodded and replied, "It doesn't take all that long, since I live alone." She turned to him, wiping her hands on the dishtowel to dry them. "When I was home between school terms, I lived as a Muggle, since underage use of magic was forbidden. Sometimes Sometimes I just pretend I am home on extended holiday."

Fighting the tears which sprang all too readily once again to her eyes, she started to move past him. He stopped her by taking hold of one of her hands. Holding it open, palm up, he ran his hand over the number of calluses on the once-smooth flesh. His face an intent scowl, he shook his head and said, "You did not have to run away, Hermione." His silky voice was so soft, she had to strain to hear him.

For a moment, all she could do was stare at the hand holding hers large, strong hands she felt could easily break her if they wanted to. "There was nothing left there for me any longer," she began, then paused a moment before saying softly, "Severus." Her use of his name caused deep pain within his own heart.

Damn Dumbledore! he thought weakly. He always knew how I had felt about this girl in the last years before the battle. He sent me here knowing full well all these feelings would come rushing back. Even as he fought to close himself off from the emotion threatening to overwhelm him, he brought his face dangerously close to hers and his features softened. He said, "I am there." His voice sent chills down her spine. She almost melted against him as he moved to wrap his arms around her smaller form.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she accepted his embrace and hesitantly, her own arms moved to hold him as well. Time seemed to stand still and Hermione began to tremble as his fingers moved in slow circles across the small of her back.

Confusion about what was happening made her pull slightly away from him, "Sever " Before she could finish the word, his mouth met hers, cutting off anything she might have been about to say. The lips that touched hers were soft; the arms that held her tightened and she gasped as her breasts were flattened against his chest.

One hand crept around his neck before she even realized what she was doing. Her eyes closed and she abandoned herself to the feel of his touch. Moaning, she opened her mouth to permit him to deepen the kiss. His tongue sought and found hers, pulling it into a dance as old as time.

For a moment, she relished the feel of him, the way he held her, the way he tasted. It would be so easy just to let herself give over to anything he asked of her. It was so simple, she thought; simple because she wanted him, because he wanted her. For a moment she felt bliss, but for only a moment.

With a strangled cry, she pulled herself away from him, shouting, "No!" Panting, she put distance between them by backing away and holding up her hands to keep him from invading her space when he moved to follow. "This won't make me change my mind," she said on a choked sob. Her voice was bitter when her eyes met his, "What do you think? You believe you can come here, and if I won't go willingly because you demand it, you can seduce me into compliance?"

She shook her head angrily and continued, "I am no meek virgin to be swayed by sweet words and gentle touches!" She shook her head furiously, growing almost hysterical in her anger. Turning, she moved to the living room and pointed to the fireplace. "Get out! Go away!" she sobbed. Wanting him so badly had almost allowed her to forget that to have him would be opening herself back up to that danger all over again.

So what if Voldemort was dead? There would just be another crazy wizard or witch out there at some point in the future who would threaten everything she held dear again. What Severus' kisses promised was something she wanted so deeply but was afraid to be brave enough to claim.

Severus had followed her to the living room and watched as she screamed and demanded he leave. She had accused him of trying to seduce her back to Hogwarts. His anger was slow in coming, but when it hit him what she was accusing him of, he dropped the hands that had been desperately reaching for her, wanting to show her the depth of his emotion for her. Trembling, he gazed into the fireplace.

Not daring to look at her, he spoke softly, "I have loved only one woman in my life, yet I accepted that I could never have her because first she was too young. Then later, because she was engaged to another." His eyes moved to search hers. "I gave any chance with you up not once, not twice, but three times, because you ran when you lost Ron. I told myself that you could never have loved me anyway."

His voice grew cold as he continued, "Now I have been in your arms. I have kissed the lips I have dreamt of on many a lonely night, only to have that same sweet mouth accuse me of trying to seduce you into going back to Hogwarts. I have been sent to collect you, that is true, but just now, I offered you something I have never offered anyone else. I would have given you my entire being just now, if you had wanted me with, or without that damnable school." Moving to the fireplace, he sneered angrily and said, "So be it. If the headmaster still wants you, he can come and claim you." With the speaking of the distance spell and a dash of Floo powder, he was gone.

Collapsing on the floor, she gave herself up to the sobs that wracked her body, becoming one once more with the overwhelming sorrow that consumed her. But now she cried, not because she thought he had tried to trick her, but because she felt she had just lost something so special, no moving of the heavens or the earth would ever bring it back.

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Heartbroken

LEMONSSS!!!!!!!

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Chapter 3

Severus arrived back at Hogwarts just as the sun was rising in the sky. Scowling, he made his way through the halls toward the dungeons. He wanted nothing but to make his way to his private chamber and drown himself in a steady supply of fire whiskey. His mood was so obviously foul, it made anyone in his path immediately stand aside to let him pass.

'Fool!' he cursed himself. 'What an idiot you have become. You let yourself open up to a Muggle-born witch who doesn't even care for her craft anymore!' Once in his chambers, he moved straight to the cabinet and pulled out the bottle of fire whiskey. Drinking straight from the bottle, he winced as the liquid hit his tongue. 'No,' the voice within his head reasoned, 'you don't blame her for hiding herself away from the wizarding world. What unsettled you was that she rejected you.' Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he scowled in an even harder, harsher grimace at the thought.

It was true. Finally, to have had the courage to let her know how deeply his feelings ran; at last, being able to touch her, only to have her pull away and accuse him of something so low as trying to manipulate her decision.

But weren't you? the voice within his mind pried sharply. Would you have been able to let her go if she had given you a night of passion, then told you she was not coming with you?

Closing his eyes, he considered what his mind asked. He was hurt and angry. What hurt him was her rejection, but what angered him was that he believed she considered him a package she could only have if she came back to Hogwarts.

Sighing, he asked himself out loud, "Well, aren't you?" He turned and tossed the bottle, shattering it within the fireplace. He could not leave Hogwarts. He owed Albus too much. Even if he could, what would he possibly do in America help her raise and ride horses? An absurd idea, if ever he'd heard one.

Turning, he moved to throw himself into his most comfortable chair. Occasionally, drinking the fire whiskey helped to dull the unhappiness he forever felt. But now, it just soured within his mouth and made the pain in his heart worsen further more. There would be no comfort in the bottle tonight.

The popping noise alerted him to the Floo being used. He knew instinctively the instant he heard the sound, the older wizard had arrived and was staring at him expectantly; he didn't have to look. "She refused to come, Albus," he said softly. "There was nothing else I could do."

He expected the headmaster to be reproachful in his response. Instead, Dumbledore said softly, "So that is it, then?"

Sneering, Severus turned to look into the eyes that regarded him without any of their normal twinkling. Instead, a deep sadness shone there. "What would you have me do, Albus throw her over my shoulder and bring her back against her will?" He blew out his breath in an angry sigh. "Even I am not that unfeeling. She doesn't want to come back. She doesn't want to re-associate herself with this place." His voice broke when he said the last in a whisper. "She doesn't want me."

Albus shook his head, replied, "No, my friend, I would never ask you to force her. I just feel it is a pity, that is all."

At that. Severus nodded and agreed. "Yes, it is at that. She would make an ideal instructor, and would have been good for Hogwarts." Suddenly, the anger drained out of him as though taking all his muscle with it and Severus slid to sit on the floor, his head sagging. "I am sorry I wasn't able to bring her back, Albus," he said miserably.

Albus knelt beside the younger wizard and patted the man's shoulder. "It is I who am sorry, my friend. It is very sad to watch soul-mates dance around each other, each never finding the other. I thought this time might be different."

Severus raised his head to look at Dumbledore, a puzzled look in his eyes. 'Soul-mates?' he thought. 'Hermione and I are soul-mates?' Severus looked at Albus with an emotion akin to shock gradually turning into surprise. The older wizard's eyes misted over before clearing. "I recognized her soul was meant for yours in her sixth year. It is just sad you both have been hurt so badly that you can't let yourselves try yet again. For each other." That said, the headmaster stood and left the potions master alone.

Severus shook his head sadly. The fight had left him and he felt as if he had lost the one thing more important to his existence than breathing. Yes, he thought in resignation. It is indeed sad.

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Hermione lay on her couch, staring at the empty fireplace, her book tossed aside, forgotten in her melancholy. Tears welled in her eyes as she thought of the last words he had spoken to her. Normally, those words would have brought her great joy, for they meant he had wanted her, too. His confession meant his desire for her was as deep as hers was for him.

However, it was not his confession of love which ran rampant through her thoughts. What broke her heart was he had given up so easily. Worse still, she deserved it. Her fear of losing someone else she loved, yet again, had made her push him away. Now she hated herself for it.

Suddenly, a popping noise sounded and she found herself staring at the fireplace, hoping against hope that Severus had returned. When Dumbledore crawled out of the fireplace, she could not hide her look of disappointment.

"Headmaster," she said softly in respect, as she sat up and regarded him. "How nice to see " she began, but fell silent as he waved his hand to hush her.

"I have not come to exchange pleasantries, Hermione," he said softly once he had moved to sit beside her on the couch. "For once, I intend to talk and you are simply going to listen." His gaze caught and held hers as he paused in a meaningful silence.

Hermione fell silent and nodded her understanding. Dumbledore's eyes had lost their usual sparkle and instead, for once, he looked aged and tired. "I am old, my dear," he said softly in answer to her unspoken thoughts. "There are not many times when I step in and try to correct the mistakes my young wizards and witches make. I usually feel they must clean up their own messes. It is a good way to learn."

"For once, I think in your case, it is warranted," he said with a sigh as he peered over his spectacles at her. "Severus has not left his quarters in three days. He has not eaten. He has done nothing to begin preparations for his classes, and I am beginning to fear for his sanity if this continues." Albus regarded Hermione. She was dressed in a pair of sweats and an old baggy t-shirt. Her hair looked as if it had not been managed in days. Judging by her sallow complexion, he doubted she had eaten much either. He had always looked upon Hermione much as a father would a daughter, and since her parents were gone, he felt himself stepping into the role of guardian. "Enough, my dear child, is enough."

With a wave of his hand, everything inside the house began to move. Pictures flew off of the walls, books sailed off the bookshelves. Everything began to shrink and swirl in the direction Albus sent them, up the chimney; popping noises filled the room as her belongings went to wherever it was he'd chosen to send them.

Hermione gasped, "But but what about my horses? What about my riding lessons?" She stood and faced him. "I can't just leave everything I have worked so hard to build!"

Albus reached out and smoothed the tears from her cheek. "Why not, my dear?" he retorted, "you have done it before, when you left us. Come home where you belong."

Hagrid has already prepared a place for your beloved horses. There are chambers prepared for you where your things are already making themselves at home." The twinkle crept back into his eye as he added softly, "And there is a wizard there who loves you beyond all reason."

Hermione looked into those kind eyes and found herself sobbing uncontrollably. "But I was awful to him, Headmaster. I accused him of trying to seduce me into coming back. How could he ever forgive me?" she asked through her sobs.

Albus reached out and gathered Hermione into his arms. "My child," he said gently, "all he'll need to do is look at you." He smiled and patted her shoulder. "For now, come. Your horses will need to see you soon in order to adjust to their new home without further fear."

Confused, she asked, "What do you mean?"

He smiled and said, "I mean, Hermione, your horses have been in their new home for well over an hour now, and they are none too thrilled with the way Hagrid is trying to keep them calm." His eyes gleamed with mischief as he smiled lopsidedly at her. "I don't know why they have no interest in his singing and dancing a jig for them; they just don't."

Despite herself, she found herself laughing at the image his description gave her. Looking around the room, then back to Albus, she said softly, "Are you sure he will still want me?"

The older wizard tilted his head to search her fearful eyes. She was scared Severus would turn her away. "My dear," he said with a reassuring smile, "how could he not? He has wanted you since before he could understand what it was he felt."

With a gesture of his hand, a window shattered as something flew to him. It landed in his palm and he inspected it for a moment before handing it to her. Hermione's wand fit so well in her hand, she found herself wondering how she had ever been able to pry it out of her grasp to bury it.

"Come, now," he said as he pointed to the fireplace, his smile deepening when Hermione winced.

Waving her wand, she expanded the size of the fireplace. "You know," she said softly. "Severus was right." She shook her head. "That fireplace is entirely too small for travel."

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Upon arriving in Albus' office, Hermione looked around, not greatly surprised to see everything was the same as it had been when she had fled. It felt good to be home. Suddenly, she realized the truth of that emotion. This was home to her; it always had been. She felt something furry winding around her ankles and looked down, gasping when she saw her old familiar, Crookshanks, purring as he looked up at her. He was older and his fur had grey streaks in it, but his eyes still held a wealth of affection for her.

"Crookshanks," she said softly, bending to pick him up. "How could I have left you here?" Ashamed of herself even as he purred within her arms, she looked back at Albus, "Oh, I've been terrible! I abandoned Crookshanks, too? I abandoned everything I knew."

Dumbledore smiled at her as he gestured to the half kneazle and said, "You have no idea how hard it was to convince him and Fawkes to play nicely while you were away."

Hermione smiled at the thought and asked, "Where is he, Headmaster?"

"You remember the dungeons? His quarters are where they always were. Yours are next to his," he replied with a smile and handed her a jar of Floo powder. "Care to take a shortcut?"

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Severus lay on top of the coverlet on his bed. He had dragged himself to the shower this morning simply because he had grown tired of the way he smelled and he had never much cared for the lingering odor of refreshing spells. After bathing, he had dressed in a pair of black trousers and thrown on a white shirt, but had left it unbuttoned. He saw no reason to dress fully when he would not be leaving his quarters.

He was so immersed in his feelings of self-pity and misery, he failed to hear the Floo activate and even missed the soft voice which called to him from the other room. What he did notice a few minutes later was the sound of cleaning spells and other magic being used in the sitting room. Bounding off the bed, he went bellowing toward the sound.

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Hermione looked around the disaster of the sitting room before her. Books were scattered everywhere; bottles of half-drunk fire whiskey, sat in various places; clothes haphazardly scattered around the floor and furniture. There was no fire to warm the rooms, so they were cold and dank.

Pulling out her wand, she began to use it to straighten the chambers that belonged to the man she loved. As she finished putting the last of the books back in place on the shelves, she heard Severus yelling. Turning slowly, she met his gaze.

"Damn it all to Hell, Dobby! I know Albus told you to watch over me, but for the last time, I don't want " The words died in his throat as his eyes met hers. His breathing became harsh as he moved slowly across the room to stand before her.

Angrily he spat, "What? Did you not torment me enough by haunting my dreams? Now you have to prove me truly mad by appearing before me and breaking my heart once again?" he accused, his face twisting into a pained grimace. "I know everyone believes me to be a heartless, greasy git; I know what they say when I am out of hearing range."

His heart was very much alive. He felt it breaking as she stood there before him. She was so close, though he dare not trust himself to touch her. Don't let her have the chance to hurt you again, he thought to himself. Walk away. Send her back to wherever she came from and build your wall around yourself again. You're safer that way.

Despite the warnings going off in his head, he could not find it in his heart to turn away from her. No, he thought. If she has come to cause me further pain, then pray let her deliver the crushing blow now and put me out of my misery. His eyes searched hers and for a moment, she thought he was going to walk away from her.

Reaching up, she touched her small hand to his cheek. Summoning all her courage, she asked in a soft voice, "Can you ever forgive me? I was awful to you and I don't deserve it, but " She heaved a heavy sigh and would have continued, but he pressed his hand lightly against her lips.

When she looked, the black eyes that held hers were shining like onyx with tears. "Is it really you, then?" he asked softly. "Not some image in a dream sent yet again to torment me?"

Tears spilled from her own chocolate eyes as she moved to stand closer to him. Reaching up, she clasped her hand at the back of his neck and pulled his head down in an effort to touch her lips to his. The kiss was gentle, searching. Severus put his arms around her, bringing her closer to him. As the kiss deepened, Hermione found herself reaching inside his open shirt and slowly sliding the garment down his arms.

"Can a dream do this?" she asked softly when she broke the kiss. Touching her lips to his neck, she kissed it daintily. "Or this?" Running her hands over his moderately muscled chest, she tiptoed to place a kiss on his collarbone.

Gripping her hands, Severus pulled away and looked deeply into her eyes. "Hermione," he said quietly, "be sure. I cannot let you go another time." The pain in his



expression tore at her heart. "If you have come to me, I want you to stay with me."

Stepping back, Hermione reached down and pulled her dress robes off over her head, baring herself to his view. She was wearing nothing beneath them. When she had briefly visited her own chambers, she had cleaned herself and washed her hair. Feeling a little desperate not to have him turn away from her when she saw him, she had decided to put on the robes without anything under them. Surely he would be unable to deny her if she stood before him naked.

Severus' intake of breath was sharp. He closed the distance between them instantly and pulled her into his arms. Lifting her, he turned and made his way back to his bedroom. Placing her on the Slytherin-green satin coverlet, he followed her down, positioning himself beside her and pulling her into his arms. "I love you, Hermione," he said softly. "Please don't ever leave me again."

She smiled warmly, ran her fingers down his chest and said, "You are going to have a hard time getting rid of me." Her voice was a whisper as she breathed across his skin. His nipple puckered as she licked and kissed it and he closed his eyes in ecstasy. She began running her hands lower to touch his trousers.

Raising himself off the bed, he helped her ease the pants down his legs, leaving himself naked to her view. Lying back, he pulled her to where her body was half-lounging on top of him. Leaning down, Hermione kissed him with a passion that made him moan. His hands traced patterns across her skin. One hand found her breast and gently caressed her. So feather soft was his touch, Hermione found herself shivering under his hands.

A look of concern crossed his features. "Are you cold? I could start "

She cut him off, kissing his lips in a way that demanded he not only feel her naked passion, but return it as well. Pulling back slightly, she said, "You keep me warm, Severus. Touch me. Warm my body." Sliding down his length, she dipped her tongue into his navel, causing him to shudder, before traveling lower.

When she reached his full and erect manhood, her touch became hesitant. He was larger and thicker than Ron had been, and she found herself feeling a little unsure. Severus didn't give her time to ponder what to do next. Reaching down, he pulled her back up the length of his body before turning to put her between himself and the bed. Shaking his head, he searched her eyes afresh. "Not this time," he said softly. "Tonight, I want to become acquainted with your body."

Sliding down the bed, he found himself positioned over her sex. Gently he coaxed her into spreading her legs for him. Biting her lip, she chastised herself for feeling like a giddy virgin, caught and held her breath when his fingers gently touched and began to spread her nether lips. When his forefinger moved round her clit, she gasped, clenched the fabric of the coverlet. Smiling at her reaction, Severus leaned down and blew gently on her sensitive skin.

Instinctively she tried to close her legs, but Severus patiently stopped her, cooing gently, "It is all right, my love. We will take this slowly."

Despite herself, Hermione smiled at his words. He knew she was not a virgin, but he also knew there had been no one else since Ron. That had been five years of celibacy; five years of not being touched by another person in a manner like this. Of course, she had masturbated on occasion. Funny, but more times than not, his face had been the one she'd fantasized about when she would come. He had been the one she had dreamed of more times than not during all that time.

When his tongue touched her clit, she was unable to stop herself from reaching out and cradling his head in her hands. Moaning his name, she closed her eyes as he worked a magic over her clit with his mouth. When his finger slid inside her warm, aching cavern, she cried out. His mouth moved and suddenly, instead of his tongue, she felt him sucking at her. The fingers of the one hand continued to delve into her depths, while his free hand moved up to stroke and tease one of her nipples.

She felt the tension building inside her and began to pant. Crying out, she begged for him to show mercy. His fingers began to move at a faster pace. His mouth continued the gentle, yet relentless sucking until suddenly she felt herself explode. Crying out his name, she reached for him and was rewarded when he moved over her, his erection finding her wetness. Slowly, he slipped within her tightness, and she arched up to meet his thrust. Their eyes met and held. He was so large inside her, she experienced a moment of discomfort as her body adjusted to the size of him.

Then slowly, he began to move within her. His eyes never left hers as the movement of their bodies became synchronized. Watching each other, they moved in unison. She cried out his name yet again as she felt herself climbing into the heat of another explosion. Her walls tightened around him, urging him on as he began to move faster over her. When at last she screamed out her pleasure, he followed her, spilling his seed within her. Lying still atop her, he propped himself on his arms to keep from crushing her beneath his weight. It felt so good to be inside her, it was hard to remove himself from her silken sheath.

When he did finally turn to lie beside her, she wrapped her arms around him and nestled into his side. "I love you, Severus," she said softly.

Closing his eyes, he held her closely and ran a gentle hand through her hair. "I have loved you since long before I should have, Hermione."

Sated and happy, they fell asleep in each other's arms. Just before he dozed off, he remembered what he had been working on for her. Sighing in his contentment, he turned to breathe in the fragrance of her hair. He would show her. They had time.

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Love Me

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione and Severus learn more about each other.

I realize that there are some of you that are thinking I have really thrown characters OOC. I think this chapter explains alot about the people they have become.

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### Chapter Four

Hermione smiled in her sleep and turned to nuzzle closer to her new lover. She reached to stroke his chest, but her hand came up empty. He wasn't in the bed. Opening her eyes, she looked at the blank space where he had been beside her. Alarmed, she sprang upright in the bed and looked around the room. Where had he gone? Had he changed his mind? What if he had rethought being with her? The fear coursed through her before she could hush them. Getting up, she wrapped the sheet around her body and went in search of him.

Walking through the sitting room, she continued on her quest to find him. Worry marked her features until she saw a light coming from the adjoining room. Severus, dressed only in a pair of trousers, was standing at his potion workbench with his back to her.

Tilting her head, she bit her lip as she watched him. His muscles were well defined; his body beautiful, even though she could see the scars he had suffered at the hands of Voldemort. They took the form of long, nasty gashes down his back. She had not seen them last night, because he had never turned his back to her. Moving silently, she stood behind him. Her eyes began to mist with tears as she looked at each scar. Her hands were shaking when she reached out to touch one. Immediately, Severus went still, and time seemed to stand still as her hands traced each scar.

Closing his eyes, he readied himself for her disgust. He knew his back was badly marred. More than marred, it was grotesque. Well, he thought to himself, at least I have the precious memory of last night. He wasn't fooling himself; she would be repulsed by his scarred and damaged skin. Suddenly, the breath went out of him when he felt her arms go around him. Her lips were soft as she made to kiss each and every scar. He shuddered at her gentleness. Every woman he had ever tried to form a relationship with after his battle wounds were inflicted had been unable to see her way to overlook the damage done to him.

They did not understand why he never would use a glamour spell to camouflage them; even when he explained the scars were his reminder of the freedom he had won from his days as a Death Eater. No woman had ever touched him like Hermione was touching him now. Setting down the salve he had been holding, he turned and wrapped his arms around her. This wonderful, loving woman had just given him complete, unconditional acceptance, even when faced by his hideous scars. Kissing her forehead, he whispered, "Thank you."

Pulling back from him, she asked, "For what?" Her eyes glistened with fresh tears.

"For not being revolted by my hideous form," he returned gently.

Hermione stared at him in surprise and asked, "How can you even think I would be sickened by your scars?"

He shrugged and looked away from her and said, "Every woman in the past has been." He could not meet her eyes as he remembered all the women, from the time he had become a spy, refusing him because of his ugliness. "I am no beautiful creature to look at, Hermione. I do not know how to be a kind and gentle man. Why, I do not even know how to be nice, without constantly coaching myself to do so."

Hermione sighed before reaching out and gripping his long mane of black hair, pulling gently to force him to face her. "Severus, I love your scars," she said softly, "because they are a part of you." She smiled, dropped the sheet and moved to stand against him. Her voice lowered seductively. "And I want you with every single scar. I don't mind them at all."

Her bare skin pressed against his smooth, hairless chest. Gasping from the sensation of her breasts touching him, he let his arms come around her. Lifting her, he turned to set her on the lab desk; he felt her wrap her legs around him, holding him close.

When she felt the cold desk beneath her, she reached down to free him from the trousers he wore. He moaned when her hands closed over his hard, pulsing manhood. His eyes closed at the feel of her hands closing around him, gripping him, stroking him.

Leaning down, he captured her lips with his and ran his tongue across her lips, seeking entry. With a moan, she opened to him. His tongue merged with hers as he deepened the kiss. Passionately, he reached between them and touched her moist heat.

Pulling away from him, she whined, "Please Severus. I need you so badly." Her eyes beseeched him. "Let me feel you?"

Gripping her hips, he pulled her to where her backside was barely touching the table. He slid himself within her heat, even as his finger continued its assault on her clit.

Leaning back, she used her elbows to raise up just enough to watch him enter her. Opening herself up to him, she gave in to the feelings he was bringing from within her. One of her hands reached out and gripped his arm as she moved with him.

Suddenly, she felt herself tightening around him as the first orgasm hit. "Oh my gods, Severus. Please?" she begged for release as he began to move faster within her.

When he began to come, she pulled away from him. At his look of confusion, she simply smiled. Going down on her knees before him, she took his length into her mouth. His eyes widened as he watched her take him.

The feeling was one of intense pleasure as he let her have control of him. His hand reached out and gently stroked her hair as he felt himself losing control. "Oh, Her-MY-o-NE!" he cried out as his seed spilled from him. He watched in amazement as she swallowed everything that had come from him.

Shaking his head, he reached out to lift her into his arms. Carrying her to the bathroom, he waved his hand, and the water began in the large shower that was easily big enough for the two of them. He simply smiled at her raised eyebrow at his wandless magic.

Standing behind her, he used his hands to spread the lilac-scented soap over her body. He washed her arms, her breasts, her belly, her thighs. Then slowly his hand moved to the juncture between her legs. He soaped her gently there.

Watching her reaction and dropping the soap, he began to rub her clit once again. Standing with his chest pressed against her back, he used his other hand to coax her right leg to bend up. Holding her, so that she was very nearly doing the splits in the shower, he rinsed the soap off of that part of her body, before slipping a finger inside her.

She cried out instantly, her head falling back on his shoulder, as he continued, first pressing one, then two fingers into her. Soon, three fingers were within her depths and he used his thumb to stroke her clit.

"Yes, my precious," he cooed softly, "come for me. Scream for me." He smiled before running his tongue around the edge of her ear.

She shuddered at his touch, and he moved his fingers faster within her. Opening her mouth, she half moaned, half purred.

He felt her walls tightening around his fingers and knew she was going to come. His thumb continued to stroke her clit and she began to cry out. "Oh, My! Oh, DEAR MERLIN!" she gasped. "SEVERUS!" She cried out his name before her weight buckled and she started to sink to the floor.

Reaching out, he caught her and smiled as he hefted her again into his arms and carried her to the bed. Setting her down, he grabbed a towel and began to dry her. Speechless, she sat panting, looking at him in awe. "Who taught you that?" she asked, dazed.

He shook his head, smiling, said, "That is my secret, my dear."

Moaning, she leaned forward and rested her head on his shoulder. "That was I mean how do you "

Chuckling, he answered, "Someday, I'll tell you of my days of servicing the Death Eaters' wives."

At her slack jaw, he added, "Well, it was either service them, or join them in raping virgins," he scowled, "and I would NEVER "

He left the rest unsaid as he went back into the other room, only to reappear again, holding a jar of what looked to be a salve of sorts. It was shimmery and smelled of peppermint and clove.

"This is for Hagrid." He said at her confused look. "Your horse? The one you rescued?"

She smiled. "Oh! Yes. For his leg?" A flicker of hope came to her eyes before she asked, "Do you think it will actually help him mend?"

He feigned shock and replied, "My dear! I am the Potions Master. Believe me, they don't call me a Master for nothing." He raised his eyebrow, smiling. "A week of rubbing

that onto his joint, and he will be racing Severus for the chance to be ridden."

Hermione's face lit up as she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him deeply.

A look of longing came into his eyes before he forced himself to step back and drop his hands away from her. Smiling, he said softly, "As much as I would love to keep you here all day, there are others whom I know want to see you."

Suddenly, her stomach growled. He nodded, raising his eyebrow, and said, "I believe your body is in need of sustenance."

Leaning into his embrace, Hermione smiled. "Yes, and from what Albus says, so is yours."

Severus nodded and looked away from her, replying, "I just had no desire to eat or to be in the company of anyone when I returned."

Hermione felt tears fill her eyes at the thought of the hurt she had caused him. "I am sorry, Severus. I was so ashamed of myself when you left."

Reaching out, he placed his hand over her mouth, stopping her words. "You came to me." He said with a smile. "That is the best and only apology you need ever give me."

Looking into his eyes, she lost her smile as she thought of her horses. "Oh NO!" she gasped. "What if no one has fed them yet?"

Confused, but knowing of whom she spoke, Severus asked, "But didn't you get someone to watch them while you are away?"

Hermione turned back to him, tilting her head. "No, they are here, and Hagrid is watching them for me." She said. "But if I don't hurry and relieve him, they may work themselves into a stampede." Moving to her discarded robes, she transfigured them into a pair of jeans and a fitted shirt. He watched her, moving to sit on the bed. "Tell me something," he said finally.

"Yes?"

"Why did you decide to raise horses?" He was curious to hear the answer.

Sighing, Hermione conjured a brush and began working it through her hair. "Well, I didn't really decide it." She said as she smiled at the memory. "It was more like it fell into my lap. I moved to Texas because the land had belonged to my dad. He had owned it, but had never done anything with it. It was where he and Mum were going to retire, when they lost interest in dentistry." She shrugged and moved to sit on the bed beside him. "When I first moved in, I was simply interested in living out my life in peace and quiet. I have a portion of the land sectioned off where I grow herbs and such for potions."

When he raised an eyebrow, she smirked. "Well I gave up doing the actual magic. My potions were for medicinal purposes and such." Her eyes held his. "You can't expect me to give up the part of my schooling that I loved the most." She smiled as she noticed he was still naked. Reaching out, she ran her hand down his chest as she continued speaking. "My nearest neighbor is Dark Feather. She is a Native American Shaman. She raises horses herself, and she and I began spending lots of time together." He was relieved to hear she had found a friend.

"She was with me when I found Hagrid and Severus. She didn't have any room for more horses on her own land, but she promised to teach me what she knew. The rest is history. Anyway," Hermione continued, "she was very interested in my knowledge of herbs. I was interested in her mastery of shape shifting and Earth Magic." Her eyes seemed to light up when she looked at him. "I will introduce you to her when we get the chance. I think she would be able help you find a more permanent way of helping Lupin. Her son was bitten by a werewolf when he was ten, but he has learned how to control the change."

Severus was immediately curious. "How is that possible?" He sat up, looking genuinely interested.

Hermione smiled and replied, "Dark Feather is practiced in the arts of meditation. She taught Little Arrow to use the powers of his mind to control his reaction to the moon." She was glad he was interested. "It really is quite amazing how strong the mind can be, when properly trained."

"These people do not sound like average Muggles," he observed quietly.

"No," she agreed. "Dark Feather was raised on an Indian reservation in New Mexico. Her people are magical in their own right." She shook her head. "I don't think there is a Muggle among them." Falling silent for a moment, she then cleared her throat, asking, "Are you going to come with me? I want you to show me how to apply the salve."

Severus nodded. "Yes, I will come." He stood and moved to put some clothes on himself. When he returned, he was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a black silk shirt.

Standing, Hermione asked, "Shall we?"

Nodding, he took her hand. Suddenly, he found he didn't care if anyone noticed his touching her as they left the dungeons. He found he was not willing to relinquish their contact.

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Please spare me a review. I do like to know if people enjoy what they read.

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## Reunion

*Chapter 5 of 7*

Hermione is surrounded by old friends. She also gets to see her horses.

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Reunion

Hermione and Severus had stopped by the Great Hall to grab a small bite of breakfast. Because there were no students yet, the teachers were just sitting in a group at one of the students tables.

Severus lowered his head, hiding his smile, as she was immediately wrapped in Minerva's warm embrace. "Hermione," she said softly. "Welcome home, dear."

Remus Lupin had also risen upon seeing her, and Severus enter the room. "It is good to see you again Hermione." Although he did not move to hug her, he smiled warmly before turning to acknowledge Severus.

Severus just stared at Remus. The look of warning crossed his features in a way that the other man did not miss. Raising an eyebrow, the werewolf looked away quickly.

Hagrid, who had been sitting talking to Tonks, turned and smiled broadly upon seeing one of his favorite people. Not a word was said as he rose to his feet and moved to stand beside her. He gave her a hug that even after all this time could still render her breathless.

Severus scowled and bowed his head again. Taking a deep breath, he kept a sharp retort to himself. He knew that Hermione had friends here. He knew that all too well. But knowing it and accepting how many of her friends would encircle them were two different things. He added another verse to his ever growing mantra. Hermione can have her friends. She has chosen me as her lover. They are only friends. Easily said, coming from a man who has no friends. His scowl deepened.

When Hagrid released her, they both had tears brimming in their eyes. She had not said goodbye to him when she had chosen to leave. It had hurt too bad to face him.

She smiled before saying softly, "Hello Hagrid."

Hagrid nodded his head, and returned, "Ello 'ermione. It's glad I am to see ya."

Hermione nodded to him, then looked at everyone who now stood before her. "It is good to see all of you again." Looking at all the familiar faces, she said, "It is good to be back." she said softly before turning back to Severus.

He gave a small half-hearted smile before reaching out to grab two pears off the table. He held one out to her and she took it gratefully, smiling. He bit into his before giving her a tight lipped smile in return.

Hagrid cleared his throat before saying, "I fed your horses, but I think they won't have no more of me until after they see you."

With a smile, Hermione nodded, "I think I need to go to them posthaste." She said, "They aren't used to not having me around every day."

Hagrid agreed, "They are in the clearing right past my cottage." He smiled, "I'm thinking they'll be expectin' ya."

Biting her bottom lip, she looked in silent question to Severus. His smile was gone while he remained silent with his jaw clenched. He nodded and moved to accompany her out to see them.

Smiling once they were away from the others, she asked, "That wasn't so bad, was it? I forgot how much I had missed them all."

Severus shook his head, although his smile was absent. He was fighting to not feel threatened by Lupin's presence.

"If Remus is here," she started cautiously, "then why is there a position open for DADA?" She wasn't even certain why Albus wanted her for DADA in the first place. It certainly wasn't her best area of expertise.

Severus was walking beside her as they made their way from the castle. He sighed raggedly as he fought to not feel jealousy over her concern for the werewolf. "Remus is not a teacher, Hermione. His malady does not allow for our tight schedules." He looked out at the grounds, admiring what was left of the sunrise. "However, he is acting as a tutor of sorts for the students that need extra help in their studies.

Understanding dawned, and she found herself thrilled with the idea. "That is a good idea for him. It makes him still able to do something useful and not feel so isolated." She was happy for him. This new situation had to be much happier than the one he had been in before.

Severus nodded, "Yes, but he is only at Hogwarts during the time that is safe to students. During the phases of the moon where there can be a threat, he leaves and goes to a cottage he has on the other side of the Forbidden Forest.

Hermione frowned at that. "So, he still has to live in isolation." she said, almost to herself.

Her companion stopped and his eyes held a certain amount of the usual snarkiness that she had become accustomed to when he was her professor. "What do you expect? Would you have us lock him in the deeper dungeons of the castle while he is under the influence of the change?" His voice held an air of impatience.

"Although the Wolfsbane still does help slightly, he is becoming somewhat immune to it, therefore, it is not safe for him to always remain," he sighed, turning from her, dejected. "I have a friendship with him now. It is hesitant, because we are both still who we are. But I don't like his having to be so isolated any better than you." Although if there were any chance that you saw him in a romantic light I would be investing in some silver bullets, He added silently to himself giving in to a moment of jealousy.

He continued walking even as he spoke, and his pace was gaining speed. "However, my main concern will always be for my students." He shook his head. "Honestly, you must understand why he cannot be here at those times when he is prone to change?"

Hermione had to speed up to match his pace. She hadn't meant to touch a nerve on him, but it was apparent by his quickness of foot that she had. Hurrying to catch up with him, she panted out, "I understand what you are referring to, Severus, I only meant..." she stopped and stared after him. "BLOODY BLASTED HELL! Would you slow down?" Holding her side, she had to bend over to catch her breath.

Rolling his eyes, he turned. He felt immediately contrite for having forced her to race to keep up with him. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "There was no cause for that."

Hermione shook herself off and moved to stand beside him. "Severus," she said in a patient voice, "I know that there is no other choice for Lupin. I know the safety of the students is important, and I would never choose to let him stay during the times that are risky. I only empathize with how isolated he must feel."

Severus nodded. "I do too." he answered. Then squaring his shoulders, he said, "Come now, your horses await." He smiled at her raised eyebrow.

He was right, she reasoned. Her horses had become her children. After Ron had died, she had given up any notion of having any babies of her own.

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When they reached the field, Hermione saw all of the horses standing huddled together as if in a group discussion. They reminded her of a posse forming to discuss potential routes of escape.

Raising her head, she gave a whistle they would recognize. The horses turned, and immediately began to make their way to her. Severus-horse, and Hagrid-horse lead the way. The others followed at a small distance.

When Severus-horse reached her, he bowed his head and butted it against her chest, nearly lifting her off of the ground. She giggled and reached up to stroke his neck, "Whoa boy, here I am." She said softly, "See?"

Hagrid-horse had limped, but had still made his way swiftly to her side. His eyes turned to the man standing beside her, and he looked at him in an accusing way. Severus straightened his shoulders and said indignantly, "I did no such thing!"

Although the horse had no way of saying anything, it was evident he thought Severus had kidnapped his mistress. Hermione reached out and touched the horse's muzzle gently. "There, Hagrid. We are in a magical place now. We can heal your foot better."

As if it was a reminder of the salve she held, she showed the container to the horse, for his inspection. When he didn't shy away from it, she rubbed the closed bottle on his chest, to show that it was no threat to him.

Severus-horse moved away and watched as Hermione showed Hagrid-horse what she held within her hands. Handing it to Severus she asked, "Show me how to apply it?"

Severus knelt down beside the huge Clydesdale and opened the bottle. Hermione crouched down beside him and watched as he spread the salve with his hand to the lower point of the horse's leg with a circular motion.

"The circles are very important. You must use small, counter-clockwise motions to reverse the damage done to the leg," he said, handing her the salve and gesturing for her to do as he had.

Placing his hand over hers, he showed her how to slowly use the circles to work the damaged muscles of the leg.

Her fingers began to tingle from the mixture of the salve and the energy that was being given to Hagrid-horse through her's and Severus's touch.

As they watched, a protective barrier of blue healing light began to glow over Hagrid-horse's leg. He whinnied and shifted his weight, placing more weight than he had in quite some time on that leg.

Rising, Hermione offered Severus her hand to help him stand. He took her hand and rose to look at her, with an affection that made her warm inside. Stepping into his embrace, she smiled.

An unfamiliar bird call drew Severus' attention from the woman in his arms. Turning, he looked at the bird that circled over their head. Hermione gasped, and smiled widely, before looking at him.

"Remember my friend I told you about?" she asked softly. At his nod, she pointed at the bird that soared high above them, "She's here."

Severus looked from Hermione to the large bird that was circling and coming closer by the minute. Some part of him bristled at the intrusion. But more than that, he was curious. Although he was sure he knew what manner of bird it was above his head, he was positive it was not one that was indigenous to this part of the world.

The bald eagle landed a few feet away from them on a rock and gave Hermione a censured look before beginning to grow and change form before their eyes. Soon a beautiful, but naked, woman with dark skin, lustrous brown eyes, and raven black hip length hair stood before them.

Severus raised an eyebrow but stood silent, watching her. She was older than Hermione. 'But still fairly young, compared to me,' he observed. Actually if he were to guess, he would think she was thirty four years old, give or take a year.

Reaching into her mouth, she took a tiny piece of cloth out and began to enlarge it into a buckskin dress. It was tan and had different designs of beads across the collar of the gown. Pulling it over her head, she then turned and pinned Hermione with a stare. "You didn't think to at least leave me a note?" her voice was deep and flowed like warm honey over them. "Shame on you my friend." She tilted her head, then smiled, "I was worried."

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Remus Lupin was interested in seeing these horses Hagrid had been telling them about that had arrived right before Hermione did. He wondered at what would make her choose horses over people.

Making his way down the path towards Hagrid's hut, he was amused to think of Hermione taking care of horses. He wouldn't go too close. He didn't want to startle the beasts. They would sense his true nature. But he did want to look at them. Perhaps he would ask Hermione about them later.

Just as he rounded the corner, he saw the huge eagle land just feet away from Hermione and Snape. Instantly, his hand went to his wand as he prepared for the possibility of an attack. He knew that species bird did not live here. There was no way it could be just a bird.

Standing off to the side, he crept closer and watched as it began to change shape. Holding his wand poised, he waited. If the menace thought it would attack the only one left of the Golden Trio on her first full day back, it had another thing coming.

As the shape became true, Remus lowered his wand. His eyes were wide and his mouth had suddenly gone dry. 'She's a goddess,' he thought to himself as his feet brought him closer.

He watched, fascinated by the newcomer as she pulled her dress over her head, depriving him of the stunning view of her person. He felt a pang of disappointment as she opened her mouth and began to speak.

Listening, he was consumed by her voice as she spoke to Hermione. A smile spread across his face. She was a friend of Hermione's? There were women like this in America? Moving closer, he almost forgot entirely about the horses as he just had to get closer to her.

She was positively the most entrancing thing he had ever seen. His eyes couldn't tear away from her as he stopped just close enough to draw the attention of the three of them.

Severus recovered and turned to take notice of Lupin's allurements. He found himself smiling. If he had an interest in Hermione's friend, then Severus would have nothing to fear by way of him being interested in Hermione. His smile he never let anyone see grew big at the thought. That was, until the horses began to whinny excitedly and dance nervously away from the new man that was now standing just a little too close for their comfort.

Hermione rushed to calm the horses. Severus moved to push Lupin back a little out of the way, and the woman turned and looked from the horses to the man that could not stop staring at her with a look of awe on his features.

Her eyebrow lifted as she seemed to consider this, then looked to Hermione, "Is that the one you have told me of?" she turned without hearing Hermione's answer, "You must be Remus Lupin?"

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## True Happiness

Remus meets Dark Feather. Severus asks Hermione an important question.

Thanks to my three favorite Beta's... JessicaDamien, Qureshishn, and of course, the lady that goes through and double checks any last minute changes that need to be made to make it readable... Notsosaintly.

You are all so great! Thanks for loving my story, even if everyone else doesn't!

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Chapter Six

Remus was stunned. Not only was this stunning creature a sight like he had never seen before, she knew who he was. "I... uhm... Yes, I am Remus Lupin." Suddenly, he felt rather ridiculous. He was not by nature a shy person, but he felt completely inadequate at the moment.

Severus looked from Remus, to the new lady, to Hermione, and asked, "How many times have the two of you spoken of Lupin?" He worked to keep the jealousy out of his voice.

Dark Feather looked from Remus to the man addressing Hermione. A warm smile made her even more beautiful to Lupin. "You are Professor Snape, correct?"

Severus turned back towards her and nodded stiffly. There was, however, no smile on his face. He was still battling a bit of jealousy at the idea of Hermione having discussed another man with this new woman.

"Hermione has told me of all of you," she said gently, and he could feel his anger dissipate at her next words. "I have an interest in Lycanthropy. That is why Hermione told me so much of Remus Lupin."

Remus stood there for a moment staring at Dark Feather. He was speechless. Why would a woman such as she have any interest in Lycanthropy?

She smiled as the two of them continued to stare at each other. "My son has it." she supplied gently.

Remus face became passive, and he nodded curtly. "I understand. I am not certain that there is anything I can do." He gestured towards Severus. "It is he that brews the Wolfsbane potion. Perhaps he is the one that can aid you and your husband better than I?"

Shaking her head, Dark Feather moved closer to Remus, and explained. "My husband died over seven years ago." She sighed, "Actually it is not your aid I am looking for. Indeed," she added, "It is my wish to help you."

Severus exchanged looks with Hermione, who smiled before stepping closer to her friends to explain. "Remus, Dark Feather's son is eleven, and has no fear of the moon. He controls his changes. It holds no power over him anymore." At his astonished look, she added, "I've seen it."

Lupin turned to look questioningly at the woman before him. It seemed as if a waking dream had taken over his waking world. After a moment, he asked, "Is it a new potion?"

Dark Feather smiled, and shook her head. "No. It is a level of consciousness," she explained, "reached through meditation, and relaxation."

Severus moved to Hermione's side and took her hand. Looking to Dark Feather, he spoke to Lupin, "Perhaps you could show Miss... uhm... Feather around the grounds?"

Hermione looked around to see her horses were content to graze. Smiling up to Severus, she moved to kiss his cheek, sending a feeling of longing shooting through him. He too was interested in this form of meditation that Hermione's friend spoke of. But right now, he was more concerned with having Hermione in his arms. He wanted nothing more than to hold her close, and feel her bare skin against his.

Dark Feather smiled knowingly at Hermione before moving to stand closer to Remus. "Yes, please." she said softly. "I would like to become more familiar with the school my son will be attending."

Stunned, Lupin could only nod as he moved to walk her around the property. With a last smile to Hermione and Severus, she turned and followed him.

Looking at Severus, Hermione's eyes lit up. "It just occurred to me. Dark Feather could be a wonderful teacher of the Shaman's knowledge here. That is if you think Dumbledore would be interested?"

Severus shook his head, and his lips twitched as he gazed into her eyes. "You are just going to bring your newfound world with you, aren't you?" Although his voice held the usual dull, unimpressed quality, his eyes flashed with telling interest in the idea.

Hermione clicked her tongue at him before saying, "I think that to those who would be interested, it could be a very useful tool."

He nodded, but gripped her hand tighter as he started backing up, a dangerous look on his face. "We can discuss this further in the privacy of our chambers, don't you think?" His voice was low, and soft, and sent chills down her spine as she nodded in agreement.

Turning he led her back to his chambers where she forgot everything but his touches. Everything else in their world could wait. For now.

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Remus led Dark Feather around the lake, then took her on a tour of the castle. She was amazed at the paintings that spoke. "That is amazing!" she said softly before adding, "But it gives credence to what my ancestors said about it capturing one's soul to let their image be put in photos."

He worked hard to concentrate on her words and not stare too much at her beauty. He found it quite difficult to not stare at her long ebony hair as it fell in soft waves down her back. She seemed not to notice as she took in every special thing about the castle.

"Little Arrow will be amazed at all of this," she said proudly when she turned to face him.

Lupin blushed deeply when a knowing look spread across her face. He knew she had caught him staring at her beauty. She sighed and looked away. "Professor Lupin," she addressed him formally. "I am aware that men see me in a particular way. In fact, I am used to it." Her eyes met his, and there was an angry fire in their depths. "However, what I am offering you has nothing to do with my body, or anything else like that. If that is all you can concentrate on, then I suppose it is no good for me to offer you my tutoring to control your lycanthropy."

Abashed, Remus shook his head frantically. "I am sorry!" he said with a sense of urgency. "I do not mean to make you uncomfortable. I am quite ashamed of myself for not being able to not look at you that way."

He found himself staring again into her eyes. He had never felt this way towards any woman he had ever met before. She was quite stunning, and to look at her carried his breath away. "Forgive me," he said softly. He knew that it must be quite repulsive to have a werewolf stare at you in such away.

She stepped closer to him, putting a hand under his chin, forcing him to meet her eyes. "It is not your admiration that bothers me." she said in a strong voice. "It is my concern that you shall not be able to see past it long enough for my services of teaching you control, to help you."

She sighed, and turned away from him for a moment. "For almost two years, my son and I battled his malediction. We tried potions," she shrugged, "but they have some shortcomings. Then, about six months ago, I decided to try a different approach. So we began meditation."

Remus found himself truly interested in what she was telling him. He stepped closer and asked, "And? What did you find through that approach?"

She looked back to him and smiled a bright smile, before growing serious. Her voice was firm when she again spoke. "It takes a lot of work. You have to focus your energy. Have you ever let your inner child talk to you, Remus?"

Her use of his first name made heat flood through his nether regions. But he clamped it off, and pushed his base desires away to focus on what she was asking him. Not quite able to keep himself from it, he smirked. Inner child? Was she talking about the snot-faced kid he once was before he became what he was now? Merlin, what a crazy thought.

After a moment, he shook his head. "I don't think so. I didn't much like the child I was before Hogwarts."

She nodded, "Well, then that is where will start." She looked at him questioningly, "If you are interested, that is?"

He nodded. "Yes. I am interested, Miss ...? By the by, is Dark Feather really your name?"

She smiled, and shook her head. "It is an English translation of my name." She looked away from his intense gaze for a moment as she fought to quell her own attraction to this man she hardly knew. "In my language, my name is Kokalai. Or at least that is the shortened version of it."

He tilted his head and smiled, "That is a beautiful name. Why do you let people call you an English version of it, when it is clearly so lovely in its own language?"

She smiled at that. "You would be surprised how many people cannot pronounce it in my language."

Remus was about to say more when the Headmaster came around the corner, "Ah, Lupin. I see Dark Feather has arrived." He turned to the woman when he reached them. "May I say, I am looking forward to seeing to which House your son will be sorted into."

Dark Feather smiled warmly at the elderly wizard. "Albus Dumbledore, I presume?" She extended her hand to him in greeting, and he took it, and kissed the back of her hand in greeting.

"It is very good to see you've arrived." he smiled warmly before looking to Lupin with an odd expression on his face. "Perhaps Remus can convince you to stay here as an instructor to students that are interested in learning what is entailed in being a Shaman."

Both Lupin and Dark Feather raised eyebrows in his direction. Lupin had been thinking that exact thing, but had not thought of voicing it. It was unsettling sometimes just how Dumbledore could do that.

He looked at both of them, a sly smile playing across his features. "I have had an interest in the Native American culture for some time now, and I was hoping that you could help us implement some of their practices into our system." He tilted his head, "If you wouldn't mind."

She shook her head, speechless. Although she would love the opportunity to stay closer to her son, she had responsibilities back home. Her horses and the council.

Almost as if she had spoken the thoughts, Albus said, "Of course, we would make room for the stallions you wanted to bring with you, and your classes would not take place during the times you had to attend your tribal council."

Pleased with the idea, Dark Feather nodded. "I will consider it, Albus. Thank you." He smiled at her promise to consider the offer.

"Very good, then." Turning, he moved back toward his offices. "I look forward to seeing you for dinner in the Great Hall."

Once he was gone, Remus smiled and shook his head. "The man is simply amazing. I have no idea how he already knows everything!" He turned back to her, "Since it is almost time for lunch, and Hermione and Severus seem to have disappeared, would you like to accompany me to Hogsmeade?"

Even as he asked, he prepared himself for her refusal. He knew that women did not readily choose his company.

Smiling, she nodded, astonishing him with her answer. "Actually, Remus Lupin I would love to go with you. If I am to live here, I should know all of this place." She shook her head, "And I can think of no one better to show me everything. I rather enjoy your company."

Nodding, he offered her his arm. "Come then, we will walk to the edge of the forbidden forest then apparate to Hogsmeade. Then I will give you a tour of Diagon Alley." As they made their way from the castle, he silently thanked the heavens for this apparent angel that had come into his life.

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When Severus led Hermione back into his chambers, he turned, closing his door and warding it. Before she could speak, he backed her against the wall and captured her mouth with his own. His arms came around her, holding her tightly to him. Feeling his desire, she returned his kisses with wild abandon.

Her hands played with his thick mane of hair. She moaned when his lips left hers, only to travel down her neck in soft kisses to the opening of her shirt. Reaching up impatiently, he ripped the shirt open and laid his lips to her breast. His hand then found the latch to her bra and freed her breasts from it. She gasped as the cool air of the dungeon hit her skin.

"My desire for you frightens me at times," he said softly against her skin. Reaching down, he lifted her into his arms, and moved to the sofa that sat before the fire. "I am terrified of having to exist without you, if you were ever to leave me."

His hands stilled, and he pulled back to meet her eyes. "I don't want to go back to being the lonely, greasy git that the children have come to know me as." Rare emotion glistened in his eyes as he spoke softly to her.

"Severus, I..." she started, only to have him place a silencing finger to her lips.

"Hermione, I need to finish what I am about to say, before I lose my determination." At the tone of his words, she nodded, a worried look on her features.

"I have lived for a very long time, alone. Without companionship, and happily so," he said softly as he moved to sit beside her, and his fingers played absently at a lock of hair that had fallen against his cheek.

"I never thought that anyone could make me feel worthy of love." He shook his head. "In fact, I never felt a need of it. It was something I viewed as a weakness for a very long time. To love someone enough that you needed to have them close to you. That you needed to be a part of their life."

"I am not a good, decent, sweet man. I am nothing like Harry or Ron were." His eyes searched hers. "If you enter into a relationship with me, I could never lose you." His voice broke on the last part. "I have become a co-dependant idiot that can no longer see an existence without you."

Hermione smiled and started to speak, but he again shook his head. "I want more than just having you as a lover." He smiled as his hand cupped her cheek. "Uhm," he

brave, you git! Just ask her! Taking a deep breath, "Hermione, I want you to have my name. I want you to bear my children. I want to wake up beside you every morning. I want to go to sleep with you in my arms each night. I want ..."

Raising her hand she placed her fingers against his lips to stop his words. "Yes, Severus," she said in a whisper.

For a moment, Severus could do nothing but stare at her. Tears were escaping down her cheeks as she smiled up at him. Leaning down, his lips claimed hers in a gentle kiss that stole her breath. It was born of a tenderness that Hermione had never thought possible from Severus Snape.

Giving herself up to his kiss, she deepened it, running her tongue across his bottom lip before pushing it deeper to meet his own questing tongue. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him down to lay on top of her.

Her hands tugged at his outer robes, pulling them from his body. Her hands met with flesh, and she moaned at the feel of his skin against hers.

"I love you, Severus," she smiled.

He pulled away from her gently. "I love you, too." he whispered softly. "You are the light that chased away all of the darkness that lay in my heart."

Moving to sit so that she was straddling his hips, she kissed him deeply. Leaning away from him, she pulled her wand out and murmured a quick spell. Suddenly, they were both completely naked. She smiled at him mischievously. "I know you hate silly wand waving, but I'm impatient to feel you."

His smile joined hers as he raised his hips enough to touch his already swollen manhood against her. She moaned at the contact and slid closer. Running her hand down between them, she took hold of him and guided him inside of her.

Leaning his head down, he captured a nipple with his teeth, and sucked it gently. He flicked his tongue over it and was rewarded when she gasped. Thrusting his hips forward, he filled her with his hardness.

She rode him, moving her hips to meet his thrusts. Her moans grew deeper as she felt the orgasm beginning to rock her to the core.

Suddenly, Severus flipped her over where she was beneath him. Still buried within her, he began to move faster and felt her losing control beneath him. He held onto his own reserve until he felt her reach the top of her climax. Then he released himself and let his own climax come, filling her with his seed.

Later, as they lie together before the fire wrapped in each others arms, she questioned him. "Did you really mean it?"

Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. He then leaned back, and asked, "Did I mean what?"

She smiled, suddenly shy. "Do you really want to marry me?"

He nodded his head, and pulled her closer. "I have never meant anything as much as I meant that." He stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "I will have no other for my wife."

She moved to close the distance between them, a smile spreading across her features, "And I would take no other for my husband."

As they kissed, they both thanked the Fates for giving them each other. It was Fate that had driven her to run away from the wizarding world. Fate that had made him go to get her. And Fate that the two of them had found love. And Fate would keep them together ... Forever....

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## Happily Ever After

*Chapter 7 of 7*

The big day arrives...

This is the final chapter. At least for now. I hope that everyone that has seen fit to read it, has enjoyed it.

Happily Ever After

Hermione stood in front of the mirror. Tears welled in her eyes at the vision before her. The wedding gown held so many sweet memories because of the person related to it. It had been her mother's dress. Severus had demanded that not only should they have a Wizard hand-fasting, but they should also have the ceremony that her parents would have wanted for her.

Dark Feather stood behind her, working on taking the dress up in the few places, because Hermione was a bit smaller than her mother had been. Her face was a mask of concentration as she placed the stick pen carefully in the side seam.

Hermione watched her friend, before playfully gasping as if she'd been stuck. Dark Feather jumped, and then turned to admonish her with a shake of her finger. "Don't do that! What if I really stuck you?" She sighed, "Why don't you just magically shrink it the way you can? My fingers are beginning to cramp."

The two women regarded each other for a moment before Dark Feather leaned closer and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "I know, honey. You want it done the way your own mother would insist on having it done."

Hermione nodded. "Mum always had a way of making things like this so special. I wish she could be here."

Dark Feather got a far off look on her face, and was about to say something when Severus and Remus both walked into the room.

"I am telling you, the reason for the nightshade is because the potion is unstable without it. It must have it in order to keep the other ingredients from becoming volatile." Severus said in a dangerously low, sardonic voice.

Remus sighed, "And if you can't get those ingredients soon, then I shall miss Hermione's wedding altogether." He scowled at Severus. "You planned it that way!" he accused softly. "You don't want me there."



Severus looked insulted. He straightened his shoulders and inclined his head. "I do not truly care if you come or not. However, as my bride wishes you there, I would not do anything intentionally to hinder your attendance."

Dark Feather and Hermione were watching the men's exchange with raised eyebrows. Then they looked at each other and Dark Feather shrugged.

Hermione asked, "What is it that you two are arguing about?"

Lupin sighed, and turned to face Hermione, "Apparently Severus forgot to restock his supply of nightshade, and no one has any, so he can't make the Wolfsbane." He shook his head, "I won't be able to attend your wedding, Hermione. It is the night of the full moon. Since your wedding is in the evening, I would be putting people at risk. Without the potion to help control my baser side, I dare not come."

Albus cleared his throat as he walked into the room. "I was afraid that something of this nature might happen." He held out a vial to Lupin. "I am glad I thought to store some in my own stock of potions."

Remus sighed, and took the vial from Albus. "Thank you so much." He shook his head, "I would have hated missing such an event."

Albus nodded and smiled. "Yes. Frankly I am amazed you could let such a thing slip your mind."

When he left, Lupin looked at the vial and said softly, "I hate that my life is tied to this damnable potion."

The two women exchanged knowing looks before Dark Feather stepped closer to him. "My offer to help you gain control of that part of yourself still stands, Remus," she said softly.

Hermione smiled. Dark Feather and Remus Lupin were so attractive together, but neither even seemed to notice. He was only ten years her senior, and the two of them had such fire in their eyes when they looked at each other.

Sadly, Remus shook his head and turned away, "Your son learned early on how to control his Lycanthropy early. I have suffered with it for a much longer period of time," he tilted his head, enjoying a sidelong glance at the dark beauty before him.

Dark Feather smirked and shook her head. "You are a chicken!" she exclaimed softly.

Remus turned and gaped at the woman. "I BEG your pardon?"

She planted her hands on her hips, "You heard me. You are so afraid of failure that you won't even try!"

He faced her squarely. "I most surely am not!"

Dark Feather opened her mouth to argue, but stopped short at hearing Severus and Hermione's laughter. Both her and Lupin turned astonished gazes their way.

"What, pray tell, is so funny?" Remus asked softly.

Severus faced him with a straight face and Hermione laughed all the harder. "Hermione and I are the ones getting married. But the way you two argue, I would think that it is you that has been married an eternity."

Dark Feather shook her head. "I wouldn't marry him." She threw him a sideways glance, adding under her breath, "He's too stubborn."

Hermione raised an eyebrow in her friends' direction, "I am not good at divination, but I daresay, I see a merger in the future for you two."

Lupin rolled his eyes. "It will never happen," he swore softly.

Severus shook his head and stepped closer to the man that had only recently become someone he would call friend. "Never say never, Remus. Trust me." He turned and looked at Hermione. "I've learned that lesson the hard way."

Hermione looked at Severus with a smile. "Do you know that it is bad luck to see the bride in her dress before the wedding?" she asked softly.

Moving to her side, Severus leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. "That may be true for some, my love. But not us. We live a charmed life." Turning, he and Lupin left the ladies to finish the fitting.

Hermione watched as Dark Feather moved to finish fixing her hair. She studied her friend through the mirror as she worked. "You do like him. Don't you?"

Dark Feather stopped and shook her head. "I did at first. But now that I've gotten to know him, he's an insufferable, know-it-all --- what's the word you use? -- GIT!"

Hermione worked hard to stifle the laughter that bubbled up at Dark Feather's words. Searching to change the subject, she asked, "What does Little Arrow think of the school? Is he ready for classes to begin?"

The other woman nodded. "Yes, he's really very excited. He is enjoying being out here a lot."

After Dark Feather finished, Hermione stood and looked at herself in the enchanted mirror, which exclaimed softly, "Oh, my dear, you will be the most beautiful of brides."

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When the night arrived, everything was magical and special beyond anyone's imagination. The scene beside the lake was one that would not soon be forgotten. Albus had summoned up water lilies to float on the water. Each lily held within it a pastel-hued flame. There were three different colors: pink, blue, and purple.

Along the water's edge were roses of the same colors as the flames within the lilies. The gazebo floated above the water. Severus and Remus stood next to Albus on the steps of the small shelter. There were a row of ivory steps that floated just above the water, leading to the waiting men.

Every wizard and witch in the area had turned up for the wedding. Even the house-elves had all shown up and threw white rose petals in front of Dark Feather and Hermione's feet as they walked the path to the water's edge. Dark Feather proceeded Hermione in the Muggle fashion of bridesmaid.

Little Arrow watched his mother with growing pride in her appearance. Her long ebony hair was worn loose with white feathers hanging from the ends. Her dress was made of soft buckskin that had been dyed a light blue. Beads adorned the collar of the dress, making it even more breathtaking on her person.

Remus felt a catch in his heart as he stared at her. She was, to him, the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He wanted to take her in his arms and demand she bind herself to him on this night as well. But he had no right to that. With an ache in his heart, he turned and smiled tightly at Severus, who watched his friend knowingly.

When Hermione came into view, there were gasps. She looked like an angel. Her dress glowed in the moonlight. Her hair was also loose, and fell in soft ringlets down her back. Tiny roses were scattered in her hair, making it look as if she was wearing a veil of flowers. Tears sparkled in her eyes as she made her way to Severus. Their eyes never left each other's.

When she reached the steps, Severus reached out to her and led her up onto the platform. Albus stood before the couple, and said in his gentle voice. "Once in a lifetime, a love comes along that is so strong that there are no ways to break it. It ties itself around your heart, and you have no choice but to go where it leads." Hermione

squeezed Severus's hand. He looked from Albus to her and felt his heart swell with pride.

"It is not always an easy path one walks to find the love they are meant to have." Albus continued, "Sometimes we come across others who touch us deeply also, but they are just people that pass through our lives and give us sweet memories to always hold dear. Other times we don't see what is right before our eyes. Or when we do, it is very easy to try to push it aside and deny to ourselves that we deserve what we have found." Albus turned, and took a silken cord and held it up for all to view. To Hermione and Severus, he said, "Please clasp your loves' left forearm."

Severus turned and stared into Hermione's eyes as he clasped her left forearm. She smiled as tears gathered in her eyes. "I love you," she whispered. "And I love you," he answered softly. Albus stepped forward and wrapped the silken cord around their joined forearms. The cord seemed to become a part of their skin, and then it disappeared and was replaced with what looked like a matching tattoo of a rose vine around both their forearms.

Albus watched as the tattooed vine seemed to bloom, as if showing to all that their love was everlasting and true. "Only in the case of a forever love will the cord become a mark upon both of your skins. You are bound by more than any simple ceremony could ever offer. Your hearts, just as I have for a long time believed, are One." He paused and smiled gently. "They always have been."

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A/N: Thank you to everyone that read and enjoyed my little story. Reviews are welcome, but not mandatory.