

It's A *Not* So Wonderful Life

by Pearle

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Chapter 1 of 1

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It's A *Not* So Wonderful Life

Severus trudged slowly up the path to Hogwarts from the Forbidden Forest. He pulled his cloak tighter, the freezing wind whipping the tails of his winter cloak around his legs. The warming charm he'd cast less than an hour ago had already worn thin as the frigid air buffeted his body. The basket of freshly cut mistletoe, dangerously filled to overflowing with the fragrant plant, swayed heavily in the wind.

'Ruddy holiday.' Severus swore under his breath as he maneuvered the basket through the front doors of the castle.

In honor of Dumbledore's memory, Minerva had given leave to Madam Granger and visiting Auror Potter to organize a Yuletide dance. Granger and Potter had raided Sprout's greenhouse, requisitioning every sprig of mistletoe in sight for decorations while leaving nothing but stems for Severus to find when he arrived a few hours later. A ghastly new strain of flu had been spreading through the castle of late, barely held in check by a special brew of Pepperup Potion heavily laced with mistletoe berry juice. After discovering the bare plants in the greenhouse, he'd been forced to harvest fresh mistletoe from the Forbidden Forest before he could brew a new batch of Pepperup for Poppy.

Hermione pulled open the heavy wood door as Severus struggled with his basket. "Severus, how did you know? I was just commenting to Harry that we needed more mistletoe for the Great Hall, and here you are with a basket full."

Severus glared at the witch. "Unhand my basket immediately, Madam. Were you to actually use that brain you are rumored to possess, you might have realized you used the entire crop of mistletoe growing in greenhouse three for the sheer frivolous purpose of decorating newel posts and doorways, which also offers the added bonus of encouraging the already raging hormones of randy teenagers to engage in the practice of congregating under the plant for the sole purpose of exchanging bodily fluids rather than leaving the plants untouched so that they might actually be used for their original intended purpose: to treat students currently suffering from the Feriae Flu. I should think you, of all people, Madam, would know just how valuable that particular plant is after spending the last fortnight treating sick children."

Harry stood behind Hermione, his face a study in confusion. "Exchanging bodily fluids?"

Hermione laughed. "I think he means 'kissing under the mistletoe,' but I think the exchange of bodily fluids would only apply if the kiss were something more than chaste. Tongues would most likely be involved," she said thoughtfully, watching in amusement as Snape's eyes narrowed, his annoyance reaching a new peak.

"I assure you, you will be the last to find it amusing when you are up to your ears in sick children tomorrow night and cannot attend the Yule Ball because I cannot produce enough potion to cure the students." With a grand flourish, Severus swept past Hermione and headed for the entrance to the lower dungeons. His tone was snide as he called over his shoulder, "Do shut your mouth, Madam Granger, wounded guppy is not a good look on anyone's face."

Hermione's jaw snapped shut with an audible click. "Oh, he can make me so angry at times."

"I don't know how you put up with him, but it was your decision to return to Hogwarts. You had such a great offer from St Mungo's. I still don't know why you didn't take it." Harry hefted the box of magical decorations he'd left in the doorway. "Where do you want these?"

"Put one wreath on every classroom door. Use a strong sticking charm. I don't want them falling off." She was still staring at the open archway through which Snape had just disappeared.

"Every door? Hermione, there's only four wreaths in this box."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ever hear of magic? The box will refill itself when you remove the last wreath. You have enough wreaths in there to hang one on every door in the castle as well as all of Hogsmeade and probably all of Scotland. Go."

Harry's lopsided grin warmed her heart. "Yes, Ma'am." Hermione shook her head as she turned back to the Great Hall.

"Don't be so hard on him. He's been having a rough go of it." Minerva's quiet voice filled the suddenly silent Entrance Hall.

"Who, Harry?"

"No, child, not Harry, Severus. Since the final battle, he seems to have lost his purpose in life. Albus assures me he will be fine, survivors' guilt he calls it, but really, how much faith can you put in the opinion of a painting?"

"But Albus' Pensieve cleared him? We could not have won the final battle without him."

Minerva sighed. "He knows that. He just doesn't believe he should have survived when so many others lost their lives. I wish there was some way to get through to him."

A third-year Ravenclaw came running down the main stairway. "Madam Granger, Madam Pomfrey said you should come quick, somebody set off a box of Weasley's Wizard Wheeze's Ultimate Holiday Decorating in a Box in the common room."

"Weasley's Wizard Wheeze's Ultimate Holiday Decorating in a Box?"

The lad nodded. "It's supposed to decorate the room for Christmas when you open the box. You know, put a wreath on the door, produce a tree, put tinsel and ornaments on the tree, hang holiday stockings on the mantle; instead the decorations shot out of the box and attached themselves to those standing closest to it. Sarah looks like she's wearing a silver wig. I can't get the tinsel to let go of her hair no matter what I do. The stockings attached themselves to Thomas' ears and won't let go, and Catherine looks like she has a full-grown evergreen growing out of her head. It takes two of us to hold it in place so she can walk." "

Minerva's pace was brisk as she mounted the stairs. "I told George and Ron I didn't want any of their products in this castle. They never listen. Perhaps I can help you and Poppy un-decorate the students."

Hermione followed the Headmistress, wishing it were still Fred and George she was complaining about. Perhaps the Headmaster hadn't been so far off with survivors' guilt after all.

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Wearily, Hermione sipped at her tea as she put the finishing touches on the patient's charts. It had taken more than two hours, but between the three of them, the witches had managed to return all but one of the Ravenclaws to normal. Poppy suspected the girl currently occupying the bed at the end of the row sporting pulsating stripes *and* spots may have already been coming down with Feriae Flu when the Holiday Box exploded. It was the only reasonable explanation for the student to have stripes in addition to the usual spots that had been accompanying the latest outbreak of the flu. And as Snape had predicted, they'd already run out of the doctored Pepperup Potion.

Maybe she could help Severus brew a new batch; she'd earned top marks in potions when she was his student. As if he'd actually let her help! *Well, can't hurt to offer,* she thought.

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Severus set the beaker of clear berry juice to the side, the trick to extracting the juice lie in knowing how to remove the mature seed without squeezing the casing. He felt the wards on his lab shift as Hermione approached the door. *Wonderful, whatever did I do to deserve a visit from Granger,* he thought. The chit had had the nerve to convince Minerva that she should have access to his lab in the event she needed an emergency potion and he was not around to brew it. He'd argued he was always there; when did he ever leave the castle? But the witch was adamant, thus Hermione's magical signature was added to his wards allowing her unfettered access.

"What?"

"Good evening, Severus, nice to see you, too."

"What do you want?"

She could hear the sneer in his voice, his head still bent over his ingredients. "I thought I might be able to help you with the Pepperup Potion. I could prepare the

ingredients for you."

Severus eyed the witch. "You wish to help me?"

"Yes." Hermione stood still, resisting the urge to fidget. She'd turned twenty just a few months ago. What was it about this man that made her feel like a gangly thirteen-year-old again?

"Fine. Leave the castle, never darken my doorstep again," he said snidely. "And take Potter with you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thank you for sharing your deepest desires with me, but the fact is we need more Pepperup. How can I help?"

"Run out of the potion already, Granger?"

"Yes, Professor Snape. You were right and I was wrong," her voice was sickeningly sweet as she mocked him before turning serious. "What can I do to help you?" Damn him, all she wanted to do was get a new batch of potion so she could treat the students still in hospital wing. She'd never make the ball tomorrow at this rate. Waiting quietly, she braced herself for his scathing retort.

"Cut the daisy roots into one inch segments. Do not crush the petals." His scowl said he'd meant what he said, but he wasn't a fool. Granger had been the best potion student he'd ever taught in a long career of teaching nothing but dimwitted cretins. With her help he could cut his preparation time in half.

Hermione set to work, the silence between them almost companionable. As she cut the last piece of daisy root, a bowl of fresh mistletoe leaves appeared in front of her. The smell of fresh mistletoe engulfed her, bringing to mind thoughts of winter wonderlands and past Christmases.

Severus watched Hermione's eyes flutter closed. He envied her ability to pull herself together and get on with her life. While not as strident as his, no one's past was as abhorrent as his was; she'd been forced to grow up quickly under difficult conditions, her childhood over before it began. The death of her parents just before the end of the war only seemed to strengthen her resolve to fight for the Order. She was a powerful witch, but an even stronger woman old before her time. "If you've finished your trip down memory lane?"

Her eyes snapped open; she resisted the urge to roll them at the dour man, but just barely.

He took one large broad leaf from the bowl and gently flattened it on the cutting board. "Cut to the side of the main vein. Slice the length of the leaf, stopping here, to the side where the stem joins the leaf. Repeat this step on the opposite side." His actions illustrated his comment as he deftly sliced along both sides of the leaf. "Put the veins and stems in this bowl, the remainder of the leaf in the bowl on your left."

Hermione chuckled to herself. She must have been doing something right if he were willing to let her dissect the leaf. "You're wrong, you know."

Severus looked up, one brow rising in surprise as he turned toward Hermione. "You know of a better way to prepare the veins? Pray tell, enlighten me."

"Not the leaves, you." The witch shook her head, smiling indulgently. "You're wrong about you. We never would have won the war if it hadn't been for you. None of us would be here today without your help."

One hand stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I've never heard of mistletoe causing delusions, but I suppose there is a first time for everything."

"Stop it. Why do you do this? Why are you so angry all the time? We're finally at peace. Can't you enjoy it? Why can't you be happy? You don't have to spy anymore. No master lording over you. Whether you know it or not, there are people that care about you." She was sure she'd gone too far. His eyes had narrowed dangerously. She could feel a sudden change in the room, as his magic seemed to gather around him. "Severus..."

"Be happy because I no longer have a master? I had two masters, lest you forget, Miss Granger. Albus was my master, too; make no mistake about that. His word was my command. While I might not have killed the Dark Lord directly, there is no question I had a hand in his death. *Both* my masters died by my hand. The Dark Lord deserved all that he got and more. But Albus...Albus was, he was more than just a friend to me, so much more than a friend. I did as he requested. I had no choice, but his death is one I shall *never* find peace with, regardless of the circumstances." His laugh was maniacal. "Tell me what there is to be happy about. There is nothing here for me to *enjoy* as you so innocently put it. I had no right to survive the final battle. It seems fate is just as cruel a mistress as my former master was."

"But you're wrong."

"What do you suggest? I join you at the ball tomorrow and 'celebrate' the world as we now know it?"

He shot out of his seat, snagging his cloak off the peg on the far wall.

"Where are you going?"

"Out, away from here. You're such a know-it-all, you finish the potion." The door slammed soundly behind him.

Hermione blinked owlishly at the closed door. Casting a quick stasis charm on the boiling cauldron, she went to the fireplace to Floo call the Headmistress. After being assured that Severus was prone to fits of high emotion (Hermione would have called them tantrums) and told not to worry about him, she set about finding the instructions for the altered potion and finishing what Severus had started.

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Severus, for his part, was haphazardly navigating his way down the icy path from the castle to Hogsmeade, his anger making his gait uneven, his booted heels sliding on the slick rocks as he maneuvered the treacherous walk.

Who in the bloody hell did she think she was? She has no clue as to what I think or feel. Too many lost their lives for me to 'celebrate' life. I'm sure the world would have been better off if I'd never been born. What does it matter if you worked on the side of the light if people still died? It should have been Albus, not me, who lived to see Voldemort finally destroyed once and for all. Thank God Potter actually lived up to the prophecy. Merlin, what if he hadn't? Severus shuddered thinking what life would be like if Potter hadn't defeated the Dark Lord.

'Be happy,' he thought, snorting quietly at the irony of those words. *A few shots of Rosmerta's finest will erase the chit's words!* A sudden movement to his right caught his attention. Turning too quickly, he slipped on the ice, his feet shooting out from under him as he tried to compensate for the fall. Landing flat on his back, the air knocked out of him, Severus' head made contact with the ground. He barely saw the dark shape next to him take on the features of an old man before darkness claimed him.

He came to with the distinct impression a spider web was moving across his face.

"Are you all right, young man?"

The spider web moved back and took on the form of a beard. It took another minute for his vision to clear enough to see the owner of the beard more clearly. "Who are you?" Gingerly, he touched the back of his head, his hand came away sticky with blood where he'd hit it, his hair wet from the snow on the path.

"You need to get that looked at."

"I'm fine. Been worse. Who are you?"

"I'm your guardian angel. I'm here to help you."

Severus looked at the old man and burst out laughing. "Started celebrating early, have we?"

"No, really, I'm your guardian angel."

"Of course you are. I imagine I've kept you busy these last few years. If you're an angel, where are your wings?" Severus managed to stand and started brushing off the snow that clung to his cloak. Large fluffy snowflakes drifted slowly around the pair, the fresh snow mingling with those flakes already on the ground.

"You have kept me busy, but the whole situation down here has been hard on all of us. You have no idea of the paperwork I've had to fill out." The old man shook his head as he thought of the forms he'd have to fill out now if he didn't accomplish his mission. "Anyway, I'm here to help you. So I can earn my wings. Shouldn't you have someone check that cut?"

"I'm fine. It's merely a superficial wound." Starting back down the path, he dusted the snow off his shoulders again, stopping to rub the spot on his left forearm where his Dark Mark had been. The Mark had faded to a faint silvery outline, twinging every so often to remind him of his past. "I believe I am beyond help."

The old man, surprisingly agile despite his age, fell in step with Severus. "That's ridiculous, Severus. No one is beyond help. Shouldn't you be returning to the castle to finish the potion?"

Severus stopped and glared at him, his wand suddenly appearing in his hand. "Who are you?" he hissed.

"I told you, I'm your guardian angel. The powers that be have noticed you seem to be more and more despondent lately. I was sent here to help you. I know you've thought about ending your own life."

"How could you...?" It was true. He had thought he would be better off dead, but he hadn't told anyone. "I see. I must still be unconscious. You aren't real. In that case, come. We're going to Rosmerta's to get pissed. Granger will finish the potion."

"Lovely witch, Miss Granger. And you do know she cares for you?"

Severus glanced sideways at the man. "Hmp, I must be channeling Albus. You sound suspiciously like him."

"My name's Clarence. I did see Albus not too long ago. He said to send you his best. About Miss Granger..."

"Yes, yes, fine witch. I'm sure she cares deeply for me. I'm sure I can muck up her life as well as I have my own. Make it just as worthless by association."

"That's just it. Your life has value to it. You just don't believe it. You have no idea how many people you've helped, Miss Granger included."

Severus stopped, the lights from Hogsmeade twinkling ahead. "Enough. I don't know what you're playing at or who you are, but I think it's about time you left. All those 'people' you say I've helped, I'm sure they would've been better off if I'd never been born."

"What did you say?"

"I said: I wish I'd never been born!" Severus yelled, snarling at Clarence. *Barmy old coot*, he thought.

"Never been born, of course." Clarence looked to the night sky. "Well, what do you think? Yeah, that will do." A sudden gust of wind shook the trees. "You don't have to make a big deal out of it. All right, Severus. You got your wish. You've never been born."

The Potions master sighed; at this point, he decided if he wasn't unconscious, than Clarence was mostly likely harmless and more than a little delusional. He probably should Floo St Mungo's and let them have a look at Clarence. It's possible someone was missing the old man by now. Maybe Rosmerta knew him. It was a thought. "Are you from around here?"

"No, not really. Your head's stopped bleeding. Your hair's dry, too."

Gently, Severus touched the back of his head. He scowled when he couldn't find a trace of the cut. "As I said, merely superficial."

"No, Severus, your head's stopped bleeding because you've never been born. The snow's stopped falling, too."

The dour man brushed the remaining snow from his shoulders, his hand automatically moved to where his Dark Mark was, expecting the twinge that normally accompanied his previous movements. But the pain never came. He looked questioningly at his left arm.

"There's no Mark there. You were never born."

"Right, I was never born." They'd reached the Three Broomsticks at the edge of Hogsmeade. Severus pushed the door open and motioned Clarence in. "Come on, even without the snow, it's colder than I'd like."

Rosmerta's bartender, Mike, was behind the bar polishing glasses. "What'll it be?"

"Have a seat." Severus gestured to two stools in front of the bar. "Has Rosmerta left already? I wanted to speak to her?"

"Rosmerta? Don't know anyone by that name. She one of the new ones?"

"New ones?" Severus frowned in confusion.

"I don't have all day, what do you want?"

"Oh, my, it's been so long. Maybe some nice mulled wine?" Clarence rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the wine.

"Just give us both an Ogden's."

The bell over the door sounded as the wind blew against it. "Oh, someone made it. Every time you hear a bell, it means an angel got his wings."

"Clarence, I'd keep quiet about the wings if I were you." Severus looked out the front window of the inn, even with the snow covering the window; he should have been able to see the lights of the little village. "Mike, why is Hogsmeade so dark?"

"Hogsmeade? This is Bellaville."

"Bellaville?" An odd chill ran up Severus' spine. He'd figure out what to do with Clarence when he got back to Hogwarts. Something funny was going on. "Come on, Clarence. I want to get back to the castle."

"You're staying up at the castle?" Mike looked thoughtful as he watched Severus fish in the pocket of his cloak for change.

An odd feeling that something was wrong had come over Hermione while working on the Pepperup Potion, more than a feeling, a compulsion, really. The harder she tried to ignore it, the stronger the feeling became until finally, she couldn't ignore it at all. She would take a quick look at the path, a cursory glance to prove that nothing was wrong, and then she could go back to her potion making. But something had been wrong. Her heart had jumped into her throat when she spied the still body of the Potions master sprawled across the snowy path.

Moving carefully, Hermione tried to rouse the unconscious man. "Professor? Can you hear me?"

He could feel the cold ground at his back, the pain in his head throbbing in time with his pulse. The pain? Severus' eyes snapped open. "Hermione? Is that really you? How did we escape? Where's Clarence?"

"You must have hit your head harder than I thought. Hold still and I'll levitate you back to the castle."

Abruptly the agitated wizard sat up, dizziness stilling his movement as the world swam briefly before settling itself once again. "Let me see your neck."

"My neck?"

"Let me see your neck."

The witch, though confused, complied with the odd request, raising her head so he could see her neck more clearly.

"There's no collar. Thank God, there's no collar." Severus' hand stroked the smooth column of her throat. "Is Minerva still Headmistress?"

"Of course Minerva is still Headmistress. You haven't been gone that long. Come on, can you stand? I want to get you back to the castle. You've had a nasty fall. Let me take care of that cut, and then we'll do something for the concussion I suspect you have." Hermione helped him stand, brushing off the clumps of snow that clung to the back of his cloak.

Severus looked up at the night sky. "It's still tonight. That means the Yule Ball is still tomorrow." He stopped on the path and grabbed Hermione's hands. "Hermione, will you go with me?"

"Now I know you have a concussion."

"Will you go with me to the ball? Has someone asked you already?"

"No, no one's asked me. If I agree to go with you to the ball tomorrow, will you come back to the castle with me now?"

"I know you think I've lost my mind. Maybe I have, but you didn't see the world I saw. Thank God, Potter won. Potter, is he still here? I have to thank him." Severus took off at a brisk pace. "Well, come on. We can't stay out here all night. I need to brew more Pepperup so we'll both be free to go tomorrow. What was I thinking, leaving it only half done?"

Hermione stood wide-eyed watching his retreating back.

"Are you coming?" Severus had turned back and grabbed Hermione's hand. He started back up the path again, pulling the unresisting witch with him. "Did you say Potter was still here, or did he leave?"

"Harry is at Ginny's. They'll be here tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? I suppose that will be soon enough to thank him. Ah, here we are." He pulled open the side entrance. "Ladies first."

The door closed behind them with a bang. "Maybe I should just take you straight to the hospital wing." Nonetheless, she followed him down the corridor and back to the lab.

"Don't be ridiculous. I have too much work to do to go to hospital. My head is fine. As I told Clarence, it's just a superficial wound. Clarence, I wonder what happened to him?"

"Before you do anything, I want to look at you. Sit down." Hermione indicated the chair next to his desk.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What do you think happened out there?" He was right. The cut wasn't really that deep. Even his eyes seemed clear.

"I was in another world. Voldemort had won. Potter was dead. Albus... his body was... You were... a slave..." He couldn't bring himself to tell her the details, not now, maybe another time, maybe never. He belonged here; he knew that now. He'd been given another chance at life.

Hermione's hand flew to her throat. "Oh, my God. Thank goodness it not true."

Severus nodded in agreement, gazing deep into Hermione's eyes. Her eyes held hope, and friendship, and maybe something more. "Hermione." He pulled the witch to him, his fingers threading through the curls at the nape of her neck. Softly, he brushed her lips with his before deepening the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance to the hot cavern of her mouth. He could feel her melting against him, his desire for life, for her, heating his blood. His tongue plundered her mouth as his other hand wound its way around her waist, pulling her tightly against him.

Hermione's hands came around his neck as she held on for dear life, her blood pounding in her ears. She moaned, her knees growing weak as lust flooded her veins. Her stomach clenched, she could feel his erection pressed against her, his hand kneading her bum, chasing all thought and logic away.

"Severus."

"I was wrong. There are a lot of reasons to be happy. I'm just not sure I know how to be happy. Will you help me?"

Hermione smiled. "I think I can do that."

A loud thud in hallway, followed by the sound of a bell ringing made Hermione jump. "I'm sorry about that, Severus. I told Harry to use stronger sticking charms. I'll remove the wreath."

"No, it's fine. Leave it. I guess Clarence got his wings after all."

"Do I want to know who this Clarence person is?"

Severus shook his head and smiled. "Just a new friend of mine. Shall we finish the potion?"

"You should do that more often. You have a nice smile."

"Thank you. What's this?" Severus picked up a bright green sheet of paper that was sitting off to the side of the workbench. Details of the Yule Ball, complete with moving images of a band, moved across the paper.

"That's the flyer I had the elves put up in the common rooms. We set up two stages for the ball this year. We'll have the Weird Sisters, of course, they're a tradition at Hogwarts, but Zuzu's Petals is one of the hottest new and up coming bands around. We were lucky to get them."

"If you say so." Severus checked the flame under the cauldron and released the stasis charm Hermione had cast. "It shouldn't take too much longer to finish this."

"And after that?"

"Perhaps we can get to know one another a bit better." Severus leaned over and gently kissed the witch.

"I'd like that."

"So would I."

It really was a wonderful life after all.

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A/N: The story borrows heavily from the film of almost the same name. It seems Frank Capra's holiday story didn't move fast enough when the holiday plot bunny sunk its teeth into me. Bits and pieces of the dialogue are from the movie, as is the character of Clarence, the angel. You can find quotes and a synopsis of the movie here: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/It's_a_Wonderful_Life.

A grateful thank you to my wonderful beta, the amazing Southern_Witch_69 (who is still under the weather hope you feel better soon). The mistakes, however, are all mine.

To one and all: Happy Holidays and a wish for a happy, healthy New Year!

~Pearle

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